

Reconstructing History, Identity and Meaning Through Anthropomorphism in Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir*

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Abstract

Anthropomorphism is attributing human traits or characteristics to animals or other non-human entities. It is an element commonly found in mythological stories, children's stories, and moral stories. Anthropomorphic characters have been an integral part of comic traditions worldwide. However, with the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, there was a paradigm shift in the genre of graphic narratives that also changed how anthropomorphism is used in graphic narratives which deal with serious subject matters. Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir* represents the life of people in Kashmir. The author represents them in the form of Hangul deers, an endangered species in a humanised form. The anthropomorphism exhibited in the narrative is central to its meaning-making process. The anthropomorphic image also symbolises the discourse around identity in the Kashmir context. The study explicates the functions of anthropomorphism in the text, the construction of meaning, and the reconstruction of history and identity in relation to it.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, graphic narrative, comic, reconstruction, history, identity.

Introduction

“Comics in their relentless foregrounding (of the other)... seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought which are policed” (Said ii)

In his foreword to Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, Edward Said discusses comics as a medium for serious political discourse and how it has historically been a space where the politics of the 'other' have been constantly engaged with and disseminated into society. Said attributes the value of seminal texts on Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which redefined the graphic narrative medium forever. Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir* can be located within the graphic novel continuum created by the two seminal texts mentioned above. Intriguingly, Sajad's work shares a fundamental connection with both *Palestine* and *Maus* since it resembles the former in recording events from within a conflicted zone and resembles the latter in using anthropomorphism as the central narrative tool. In *Munnu*, the structure of the narrative and visual aesthetics are built on the paradigm shift created by these seminal texts. However, Sajad defamiliarises the acquired components from the seminal texts and re-contextualizes them in keeping with the local culture, history, and

politics. This study focuses on using anthropomorphism as the central tool for meaning-making and reconstructing the history and identity of the Kashmiris while simultaneously reconstructing the narrative tool itself.

Anthropomorphism is attributing human traits or characteristics to animals or other non-human entities, and it is a narrative element commonly found in mythological stories, children's stories, and moral stories, and anthropomorphic characters have been an integral part of comic traditions worldwide. In mythologies and moral stories, anthropomorphism aids a pedagogic function. The main focus of these stories is to teach morals to their audience, predominantly children. *Maus* shifted the focus by using anthropomorphism to deal with serious subjects, mature themes and social issues. Spiegelman narrates the story of his parents' experiences as Jews under the tyrannical Nazi regime during World War II. He depicts the Jews as mice and Nazis as cats and attributes other anthropomorphic animal characteristics to characters of a few other nationalities. The cat and mouse analogy lucidly establishes the unequal power relations between the Nazis and the Jews and how it leads to the latter's persecution by 'othering' them based on their ethnic identity. Spiegelman paints an elaborate canvas of life in Nazi concentration camps through his parents' life experiences and explores the resulting generational trauma by recording his experiences growing up in a family that faced ethnic persecution. The biographical and autobiographical narrative styles are present in *Munnu*. However, unlike *Maus*, which is primarily biographical, *Munnu* is primarily autobiographical, and stories of other Kashmiris are narrated through the titular character's perspective. The narrative begins with Munnu's school days and shows the significant events in his life, which are parallel with the major events happening in Kashmir. Cynthia and Bhuvaneshwari say, "Storytellers prefer anthropomorphic representation to explain people's daily lives. Malik's *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir* is an anthropomorphic book in which Kashmiri people are depicted as Hangul, their national (and) regional animal. It is to spotlight the Kashmiri people, and Hangul are endangered species" (JS and Bhuvaneshwari 1813). The two-layered (human and animal) identity that comes through anthropomorphism performs contrastingly different functions within and without the text. The nation-state animalises the Kashmiris within the narrative, and the animalisation evokes empathy in the reader. The empathy shown by a reader towards the unfamiliar animalised figures marks the humanisation of the anthropomorphic Kashmiris in their eyes outside the narrative. The contrasting dichotomic function of anthropomorphism "disturbs (the) readers and simulates for them the uncanny and debilitating experience of living in a conflict zone" (Sarkar 105). So, Anthropomorphism serves as the ideal narrative tool to situate the people of Kashmir in an in-between state, reflecting their geographical position and their lived reality of being caught in the middle of a power struggle between India and Pakistan.

Contextualisation through the Human-Animal Hybrid Image

The Hangul deer contextualises the narrative into the culture and history of Kashmir since it is found only in Kashmir and its surrounding regions, and it is also the state animal of Jammu and Kashmir. The living condition under state occupation is represented by deer imagery, making the representation not an association of convenience but rather a nuanced symbolic one. Sajad says,

"Kashmiri characters in this book are depicted as deer—people who are not from Kashmir, like the army, tourists, and so (on). I try to draw them like humans. In 2005 or 2006, there was a news story of how this deer is endangered in Kashmir. The news got a big space on the front page, while as some people had died on the same day, it

was more to the brief section of the front page. So, I made a cartoon placing a Kashmiri and a deer next to each other with (the) tagline ‘endangered species’ ” (“Cartoonist Malik Sajad” 11:41-12:21).

The human-animal assimilation in the anthropomorphic body establishes the perilous lifestyle of the natives and the resulting endangerment of their lives because of the violence perpetrated on them by the nation-state’s army occupation. The anthropomorphic representation is both similar and different from Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. In *Maus*, Spiegelman creates a whole anthropomorphic world to “visually dehumanise both the oppressor and the oppressed in the holocaust narrative” (Ghoshal 128 qtd in. Sarkar 106). In contrast, in *Munnu*, apart from the Kashmiris, everyone else is represented in the human form. The unequal power relations between the Jews and the Nazis are depicted through cat-and-mouse imagery, popular and established in the cultural imagination. In *Munnu*, the image of the local animal representing the Kashmiris is not a part of the popular imagination. Ira Sarma says, “Graphic novels combine different modes and, as we have seen, sometimes different media; they thus require new forms of multimodal and multimedial literacy of their readers” (Sarma 14). The culture-specific image of the deer demands the reader seek historical and geographical literacy to aid in understanding its narrative significance, and it also roots the narrative within the local culture and history while establishing unequal power relations like *Maus*. The recontextualisation of the anthropomorphic body from *Maus* to *Munnu* demonstrates the potential of two texts originating from different geographical, political, and cultural landscapes can be connected within a broader global continuum of graphic narratives which essentially advance the discourse of the historically disenfranchised communities.

Conflicted Identity in Conflicted Space

The physical representation of Kashmiris as Hangul deer symbolises the state of in-betweenness of Kashmir and the author's political stance on Kashmir's autonomy that he does not want Kashmir to be a part of India or Pakistan. He wants the people of Kashmir to decide for themselves, which Sarkar also points out, saying, “the novel proposes... a sustainable non-violent future for Kashmir” through the political and social change from the grassroots level “instead of waiting for diplomatic, political solutions from above after the conflict is over” (Sarkar 106). The duality of the anthropomorphic body extends to their identity; on the one hand, the nation-states want to impose an identity; on the other hand, they want to determine their own identity, which problematises the idea of nationhood. The duality leads to conflict, which is played out on the anthropomorphic bodies of Kashmiris in the form of violence, and the bodies become conflict zones. The Indians, Pakistanis and Westerners are all represented in the human form, and their bodies carry a singular identity. The singularity places them in a safe space as opposed to the duality of the Kashmiri bodies, and the singular bodies either perpetrate violence or remain passive observers of violence perpetrated on the other. Meanwhile, the anthropomorphic body of the Kashmiris is unique and different from the other human and animal bodies within the narrative, symbolising their independent identity. The duality of anthropomorphic bodies does not just showcase the victimhood of the natives. However, it also symbolises their independent identity, which can be considered a show of defiance and irreverence against the identities forced upon them by the nation-states trying to assimilate them. Malik Sajad narrates a mythical story about the origin and evolution of Kashmiris from the Hangul deer, emphasising the need to look at the history of Kashmir as an entity separate from Indian history. The anthropomorphic body reiterates the

autonomy of the Kashmiri identity by evolving into a hybrid state of being. The mythical story of the origin anthropomorphic body deconstructs the dominant historical narrative and reconstructs (retells) it from within (Sajad 198-201).

Despite showcasing defiance and irreverence, the anthropomorphic body remains a conflict zone throughout the narrative in its quest for an autonomous identity. In one of the panels, Munnu goes on all fours, begging the soldiers to let him take his mother to the hospital, which symbolises the reduction of his body to a fully animal state. All the violence directed at the anthropomorphic body in the narrative is to force it into a fully animal state, which can be seen through the recurring images of the Kashmiris on all fours while being attacked or in the aftermath of an attack on them. The incident involving Munnu signifies that the Kashmiris have a remote chance at survival only when they accept the reductive animal state imposed on them. The power struggle between the nation-states plays out on the anthropomorphic bodies, torturing, mutilating and violating them, all culminating in the dehumanisation of the Kashmiris.

Fences, barbed wires, barricades and military checkpoints blend into the narrative's landscape as the anthropomorphic characters are placed within these restricted spaces, and violence is perpetrated on them by the nation-state through the army and the police. With their guns, the army men stay outside the fences, surveilling the Kashmiris, but when they come inside the fence, they hunt them down. The juxtaposition of the 'human' army and the 'animal' Kashmiris creates a setting that functions like a manufactured hunting ground sponsored by the state, where the anthropomorphic Kashmiri stag can be hurt or hunted down at any moment. Various instances of crackdowns are depicted in the narrative, where the army parades the Kashmiri men into open grounds to identify the 'alleged' perpetrators against the state, and these men are either killed on the spot or taken away to be persecuted. In every depiction of these parades, the Kashmiris walk in files with their hands raised above their heads, which has an uncanny resemblance to meat lined up on hooks in the slaughterhouses. The anthropomorphic body is represented as an ever-vulnerable entity while the state has turned their land into a slaughterhouse.

The Animal Hierarchy

The stray dogs are the only animal bodies represented in the narrative apart from the anthropomorphic deers, and their constant but subtle presence throughout the narrative helps the author establish an animal hierarchy in the narrative. Baishya argues, "The mobility of stray dogs stands for encounters with quotidian, minuscule modalities of survival and interspecies relationality in states of terror. Simultaneously, through the contrast with the mobility of the stray dogs, the restrictions on the mobility of the Kashmiris as they move through occupied space are emphasised" (Baishya 11). They are seen moving freely through the streets and the ruins of the buildings in the towns and also seen treading through the army fences as opposed to the Kashmiris who fear that they are as good as a deadman if they go to the other side of the fence, whereas the dogs come out unharmed. The mobility of stray dogs through barbed wires and other restricted spaces is repeatedly juxtaposed with the restrictions the Kashmiris face. In one instance, the newspaper reporters are shown holed up inside their office for fear of breaking the curfew, whereas the dogs roam freely on the town's empty streets.

A placard in the background of a panel reads, "WE EVEN SAVE THE BIRDS - INDIAN ARMY" (272), the context of which is not explained in the narrative, but its

placement is ironic, as it is seen right after Munnu narrates the atrocities committed by the Indian army. In the larger scheme of things, the poster subtly emphasises the animal hierarchy even more, where the anthropomorphic bodies of the Kashmiris are placed at the bottom of the pyramid of power, possessing lesser dignity and rights than the other animals in the narrative. The stray dogs are treated more humanely and enjoy freedom of movement. They are also not affected by violence within the narrative, so they can be considered to occupy an advanced position in the animal hierarchy compared to the human-deer hybrids. Sajad represents the same in another part of the narrative very disturbingly. In a panel, a group of stray dogs pull out the carcass from the river, which vaguely resembles the body of an anthropomorphic Kashmir stag, suggesting that they will consume the body eventually. Both the army and the stray dogs have access to the bodies of the Kashmiris, and they both can brutalise them, though the latter do it posthumously. A clear hierarchy of animal bodies is established within the narrative, which tilts the power equation against the anthropomorphic Kashmiri bodies, placing them at the bottom of the power structure, and anthropomorphism stands as the marker of the unequal power relations throughout the narrative.

Positioning the Text in the Global Graphic Novel Tradition

The anthropomorphism particularises or positions the narrative within its local contexts but simultaneously generalises it for the global reader. Scott McCloud says that lesser the details on the face, the more people can identify with it. In a way, stripping the characters of markers which signify particular identities makes them relatable to a wider audience, as people of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds relate to very simplistic characters. In *Munnu*, anthropomorphism performs the same function without compromising on the 'particular' (McCloud 30-36). Nayar puts forth the idea of situating the text within a global continuum of graphic narratives by saying, "Sajad locates his work in the tradition of Art Spiegelman's celebrated *Maus* by representing the Kashmiris as deer and the Indians as humans, and this serves as a meta-commentary for the culturally literate reader because the Kashmiris, like the Jews in Spiegelman, are hunted animals." (Nayar 2). The idea of anthropomorphic characters looks like a direct inspiration from *Maus* on the surface level. However, it is more complex and nuanced as Sajad elaborates on his creative process and the conditions of production, which influenced his work through his graphic novel and his interviews. He mentions how the news about an endangered deer in Kashmir got more importance in a newspaper than the death of Kashmiris, which got a small panel in the newspaper. Sajad also records his awareness of other seminal graphic narratives produced by Spiegelman and Sacco. So, it is a combination of the conditions of production and inspiration from other similar works that led to the creative decision to represent Kashmiris as anthropomorphic deers. While the association with *Maus* creates more exposure to the work, it also undermines its originality. So, the creative decision to place anthropomorphism at the centre of the narrative has merits and demerits in the larger scheme of things.

Conclusion

Anthropomorphism, while helping the text to locate itself as a part of an international graphic novel tradition, also opens up the potential to explore and experiment with new visual aesthetics in the Indian graphic novel scene. The narrative element is central to the meaning-making process in Malik Sajad's *Munnu*. Its varied facets and functions add layers of meaning and construct the narrative in a certain way. It contextualises the narrative within the history and culture of Kashmir, problematises the idea of nationhood, and creates an animal hierarchy through which unequal power relations are critiqued within the narrative. The

hybrid animal-human body is the site where history and identity are reconstructed. The dominant historical narratives and the contemporary portrayals of Kashmir through various media are challenged through the graphic novel, which tries to legitimise the voices coming from within the land. Anthropomorphism is also pivotal in the making and breaking of identities within the narrative. Thus, studying anthropomorphism's various facets within the text elucidates the potential of graphic narratives to retell history from below, its potential as a visual technique to produce new visual aesthetics which can effectively convey complex political ideas through a multimodal medium like the graphic novel. It also marks the paradigm shift from using animal images for simple pedagogic functions to being a central meaning-making tool in complex multilayered texts.

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