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GRAPHIC NOVELS: VISUAL NARRATIVE THEORY AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL RELEVANCE

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ABSTRACT

This is an age of new literature, where we have diverged from the traditional culture of literacy and entered into a space where no combination seems odd. It is an age where we whole heartedly accept contrasts over mainstream combinations. Likewise, with the advent of areas like film studies and science fiction, the traditional borders of literacy have met an immense expansion. Though, anything new often faces resistance and criticism, especially if it becomes a part of the popular culture; similar was the reception in case of graphic novels. The welding of words and pictures in this medium creates a deeper impression upon the mind and other senses of the readers. Reading and appropriate understanding of this genre requires basic skill of interpretations and imagination on the part of the readers as well. The present need is to move beyond the monological order of practice and entrench into the world of cross curriculum and multiple literacies. Literature of the twenty first century has adopted the new culture of interdisciplinary practices, borrowing from the other fields such as psychology, arts, philosophy, biology, etc. Graphic novels are an outcome of one such practice, where the unique combination of words and images together contribute in providing meaning to the text. This paper traces the coherence of the genre in the light of visual narrative theory and exploring its pedagogical relevance.

Keywords: Graphic novel, visual narrative theory, multiple literacies, pedagogical relevance.

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With the sad demise of R. K. Laxman came the death of the “Common Man” on January 26, 2015. It marked yet another irreplaceable loss to the field of Arts in India which couldn’t stop the people of the nation from expressing their immense grief and remorse through all channels, print and web. This reveals the presentness and fondness of ‘cartoon’ as an essential part of our daily curriculum, existing somewhere at the conscious or unconscious level in our minds. The debate and confusion over the similarities and dissimilarities between comics and graphic novels seem to be an unresolvable issue as both of them uses sequential art for storytelling. Some people consider both as the same form with different nomenclatures; others believe that graphic novel is an extended and a much serious version of comic books. What is more important in this regard

is that both, comics and graphic novels are premised on same set of ideas through which they come into existence. In fact a bigger obstruction that occurs while talking about this genre is regarding the literariness of this topic.

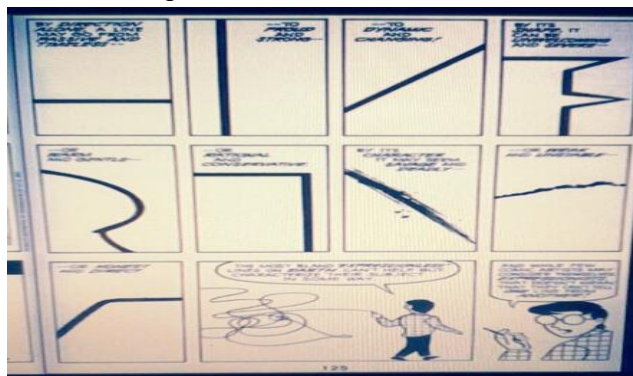
Laudislas M. Semali, as quoted in Gretchen Schwarz's article 'Expanding Literacies through Graphic Novels' states

"Time has arrived to broaden the canons of traditional education and curriculum... using critical pedagogy to integrate the new forms of visual and electronic "texts" represents a curriculum requiring new competencies and a new definition of what constitutes learning as well as how and when it takes place". (Schwarz 58)

With onset of the twenty first century, the dimensions of Literature as a discipline have changed, rather expanded. Adhering to its unique compatibility and credulity, Literature has now become more of interdisciplinary, drawing from other disciplines like psychology, philosophy, fine arts, political science, etc. But the history reveals that anything new and experimental coming in, has always passed through inextricable levels of criticism and condemnation from a majority of people eventually leading to a universal acceptance of the same. This is evident in the case of science fiction, film adaptations, campus novels and also the writing styles of Shobha De and Vikram Seth; which have attracted a lot of academics concerns lately. So is the case with Graphic novels presently, which will have to stand the test of its time to reach that level of universal acceptance. Though with the turn of the century it has developed its own grounds to thrive upon, but in many institutions it has yet not gained that level of acknowledgement. It still stands on that threshold of discourse over its literariness, many a times. It can be observed that the demarcation between literary and nonliterary has become blurred lately, with a positive indication and invitation for new ventures. As a result of which different types of experimental novels are emerging day by day.

Graphic novels are gradually overshadowing the conventional comic series form because they provide stand-alone stories with a more complex plot, owing to the impatient and chaotic age. Anything as simple and humorous like Chacha Chaudhary and Champak, or the superhero tales like Phantom and Nagraj would seem inappropriate in the contemporary age. Today, we are living in an age of re-presentation, an age revival of myths and culture, where the artists are exploring the conventional and traditional myths in an unconventional form. Now it is delving into all sorts of social, political and psychological issues.

Graphic novels become a powerful medium to interact with the society at large because of its advantage of using both, visual and literary devices. One can also say that it incorporates the best of both the worlds because novel as a genre offers 'the highest contact zone to the readers' (as suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Epic and Novel*) and visual devices or anything visual for that matter has greatest impact on our senses. "All lines carry with them an expressive potential" (McCloud 125). The language that we use is also a modified form of those lines into meaningful structures. Scott McCloud demonstrates it as:



As a result of this compatibility between words and pictures, there is no possibility of any chasm between what the author wishes to convey and what the reader perceives out of the presentation. If we observe, at the inception of our formal education, we enter the world of language. We begin with the alphabets with which we are further trained to associate words and pictures/images, creating a natural

sensory impact on our minds. We generally start with the 'show and tell method' (McCloud 138) where words and images are interchangeably used to transmit a connected series of ideas. Hence, the process of identification comes into play. Gokul Gopalkrishnan in his article Art in Comics suggests that comic art "has always been considered a low art, a poor cousin to both literature and other art forms, guilty of catering to a relatively infantile reader base." Today, the graphic novelists are breaking away from such conventional practices, entrenching an experimental world of varying contents with a bold and contemporary outlook.

Storytelling has been an integral part of Indian culture since a very long time. Much before epics and mythologies came into existence, Indian culture was passed on from generations to generations in the oral tradition of storytelling. Most of us have been brought up reading mythologies in graphic art form, implanting the seeds of religion and morality in us through the figures of the Devas and the Asuras. This is why Anant Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967) can be seen as a complete comic-art series, which appeared in India much before Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1991) came in the west. However, Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994) is seen as the first Indian modern graphic novel. It deals with the theme of 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' not only as a social commentary but as a bold anti-government statement. In the recent years graphic novels have set an unconventional landmark raising the standard and expectations of its reader one after the other. Sarnath Bannerjee's *Corridor* (2004) earned enormous praise and tremendous popularity. In the Indian context, it is even said that "to not know Corridor or Banerjee is a sheer blasphemy" Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2006) takes us back to 1975 Delhi when PM Indira Gandhi declared emergency in the state, it is an odd mixture of facts and fiction. The first Indian female graphic novelist, Amruta Patil through *Kari* (2008), takes a huge leap and chooses the subject of a young adult caught up in the web of psychological and social rubrics. It highlights the difficulty of the homosexual protagonist in order to survive in the 'smog city'. And the list goes on with number of eminent and notable works like *Kashmir Pending*, *Harappa Files*, *Hush*, etc.

The world of graphics has come out as a color palette which offers us a wide range of colors and mixtures of all sorts. Like all other fields of Literature, this genre or rather sub-genre has also undergone 'novelization'. The popularity of graphic novels has rejuvenated the dying comic culture. Aniruddha Sen Gupta in the introduction section of the magazine *Marg* Dec'14 issue says "In India, particularly, comics are particularly poised. We're a country with a rich, strong tradition of storytelling through images. Visual narrative forms are perhaps more diverse (like everything else) here than anywhere else in the world. In the friezes of temples, the rockfaces of caves, the borders of saris, the mud wall of homes, the bark of trees, the plates of copper, the crackling surfaces of dried palm leaves- in such diverse media have our traditional artists and storytellers found the vessels for their offerings. In a country where the written word is not within the grasp of many, pictures and spoken words have formed the channels through which stories have flowed from era to era." The artists wouldn't have found a suitable platform to showcase their talents, had there not been publishers like HarperCollins, Campfire novels, Penguin, Sage, to name a few who have provided them with an opportunity to break the shackles of convention and give voice to their intentions as well as imaginations. As to bring in anything new and different is no less than a challenge, especially in a country as diversified as India, where almost every individual owns a completely different set of ideologies (owing to the different cultural roots).

Some of the Indian graphic novels have also made a notable use of cultural and folk tradition. For instance Gond art, which is a traditional art form of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Odisha, has been used by the artists in Srividya Natarajan's *Bhimayana* (2011) to depict Bhimrao Ambedkar's experience and struggle as a dalit in the social community. Meghan Maier in *Bhimayana: Thirst for Khulla* observes that:

"They (writers) combine text and images to discuss social and political issues and deliver this information to the reader in the quickest most descriptive way possible. Graphic novels allow authors to provide their readers with a multi-sensory slap in the face. The combination of picture and text forces the reader to come face to face with the social issues these authors are portraying."

This visual confrontation is something textual novel, which just features text, cannot provide to the level graphic novel does. Another significant landmark has been set by Bengali comic series, with its popular

characters like Batul, Handa Bhonda and Nonte Phonte, who have marked their existence from past several decades.

Considering the scenario in the West, by the last quarter of the 20th century, the term comics had suddenly become anachronistic. In 1985 Will Eisner used the term sequential art to describe the medium in his influential book *Comics and Sequential Art*, and in 1993 critic Scott McCloud offered this definition in his book *Understanding Comics*: comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response.” This academic interest was paralleled by a growth in production of comics for adults in Britain and the United States. As cultural critic Roger Sabin explains in his book *Adult Comics* (1993), ‘there had always been comics for adults, and adults had always gained enjoyment from comics regardless of the material’s supposed audience, but in the late 1970s those children who had embraced comics boom of the 1960s were now older and sought more realistic and mature comics.’ The major American comic publishers responded with more violent material and, sometimes, more intelligent comics—many of them in the form of books and albums, mimicking the marketing of comics in Europe. These were the immediate precursors of what would come to be known as graphic novels. (Murray 7)

Hence, the scenario in the West is not that typical as in India. The term “graphic novel” was first used in the late 1970’s after the successful publication of Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978). One of the earliest major graphic novels, *Maus* (1991) by Art Spiegelman uses postmodern techniques to talk about Spiegelman’s father as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor, was awarded the Pulitzer in the following year. Alan Moore and David Gibbons’ *Watchmen* (1986), and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) are listed among the most popular ones in the West. Though long considered as a less serious art form they have started acquiring a mainstream position somewhere in the last decade of 20th Century. This subgenre is a vibrant admixture of a plethora of subjects where the creators believe in giving wings to their imagination. It permits the artists to emancipate creativity in the best way possible as art demands liberation of thoughts and feelings, and this genre in particular allows to probe into those complexities to the highest level possible. Representation of the theme becomes the key factor in this case and the writers have an advantage of using text and picture to convey their message, creating a deep impression on the minds of the readers. Gopalkrishnan in the article ‘Art in Comics’ talks about the plight of comic art in other parts of the world and states, ‘French hail it as “ninth art” and their every third book is a comic.’

East and West have always existed in terms of polarity with each other. Although with reference to graphic novels they are still in developing phase across the world. The real variation exists in themes taken up by artists and the way they are represented in East and West, owing to the cultural differences and social practices. With the advent of graphic novels, there is an evident interdependence and intertextual (coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966) references across boundaries with an additional global treatment. Also as Children’s literature in contemporary time has gained a lot of attention in the field of literary discourse and criticism, similarly sequential art form is no more limited to the concerns of the kids. With the turn of century to the twenty-first, graphic novel is witnessing its golden age. It has successfully intervened in the arena of adults drawing their concerns towards multilateral flaws in the society.

A visual narrative is a story primarily told through the use of visual media like graphics, photographs, illustrations, etc. The term ‘visual narrative’ has been used to describe certain genres of visual storytelling from photo essay, documentary film to comics and graphic novels. The basic characteristics of visual narrative include- a persuasive plot with a view, a subject with pressing social, environmental or spiritual value and an appeal (explicit or implicit) to bring the change in attitude and behavior of society.

As this genre is a productive result of the condensation of visual and literary devices, it thus becomes inevitable to trace the history and compatibility of words and images. Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* has given an elaborate account on the same. Starting with the 1400’s, words and pictures were used together in German comics. They stayed separate, refusing to mix... like oil and water. The written words were becoming more specialized, more abstract and more elaborate and less and less like pictures. Pictures, meanwhile, began to grow in the opposite direction- less abstract or symbolic, more representational and

specific. By the early 1800's, western art and writing had drifted about as far apart as was possible. One was obsessed with resemblance, light and color all things visible; the other, rich in invisible treasures, senses, emotions, spirituality and philosophy. In a way, pictures and words had reached the end of a 5000 year long journey. Now they could only thrive individually. With the onset of Impressionism, western art moved towards the abstract vertex which was nothing else than culmination of the old forms, the ultimate study of light and color. It was soon followed by an explosion: Expressionism, Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, Fauvism, Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, Neo-plasticism, Constructivism, and with these art returned back to the realm of ideas. Meanwhile, the written word also underwent tremendous change, poetry began turning away from the elusive towards a more colloquial style. In prose, language was becoming even more direct and expressive like pictures. Thus they again headed for a collision. (McCloud 146)

Various individual artists of the modern era attempted to breach the frontier between appearance and meaning. And in the popular culture, the two forms collided again and again. Nowhere is this collision more thoroughly explored than in the graphic art forms. The unique combination of words and pictures has had tremendous influence on its growth. It has firmly identified itself with the art of storytelling because of its capability of expressing human experiences to the most.

Every novel, whether textual or graphic, follows a certain pattern of framework contributing to the development of the plot. In the contemporary age however the writers have diverged from the traditional pattern of a beginning, middle and end. The story nowadays, often start with a particular event in the life of the protagonist gradually providing the readers with an overview of the past, present and future events. This highlights the interwoven impact and inseparability of the three.

The first page, usually referred to as 'splash page', functions as an introduction. It sets the stage and hints the readers about the events to follow. In the word of Eisner, "it sets the 'climate' and is a kind of launching pad for the narrative" (Eisner 62). Generally, it introduces the reader to the protagonist of the graphic novel, as in case of Amruta Patil's *Kari*, the splash page introduces us to the main characters of the novel, Kari and Ruth, and the image depicts end of their relationship. It reads "There are two of us, not one. Despite a slipshod surgical procedure, we are joined still."



Splash page, *Kari*

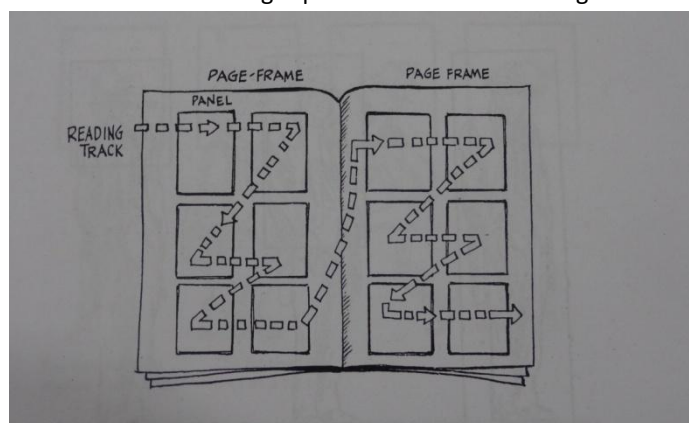
Thoughts, ideas, action and setting in case of graphic novels are revealed through the sensible arrangement of pictures. The images are broken up into sequenced segments, called panels or frames. The frame's shape becomes a part of the story itself and provides an additional sensory dimension to the story. It involves a constant interplay of words and image, and demands less in terms of exercise of imagination on the part of the readers. The illustration of the story requires the commonality of human experience so that there are no fissures as such between what has to be expressed and what is perceived/ understood. It 'communicates in a language that relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience'. (Eisner7)

The arrangement of images in a sequence which generate a meaning and communicate ideas is the fundamental function of any sequential art. The rendering of the elements within a frame, the arrangement of

the images therein and their relation to and association with the other images in the sequence are the basic 'grammar' from which the narrative is constructed. The movement of reader's eyes thus plays a key role in reading and understanding of the same. There are three different types of eye movements:

- Vergence movement: It involves the cooperation of both eyes to allow for an image to fall on the same area of both retinas. This results in a single focused image.
- Saccadic movement: It is the type of eye movement that is used to rapidly scan a particular scene/ image.
- Pursuit movement: It is used to follow objects in motion.

Every graphic novel follows a certain reading track which guides the movement of eyes. Generally graphic novels follow the conventional left to right pattern where the reading track is somewhat like:



This form of narrative because of cross breeding of words and images require the readers to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. In the textual novels, the author usually directs the imagination of the readers but in graphic or any form of sequential narrative due to the presence of visual elements the interpretation becomes simpler and universal. When the two are "mixed" the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages. (Eisner 122)

Graphic novels require an active participation of the readers. They ought to comprehend that each and every image, included in the panel, contributes to the meaning and development of the plot. As we look at the images, physical waves hit our retinas and our brains decode them as meaningful structures. This decoded structure is what we call as 'graphic structure'. The sequence of images used in order to narrate the story draws the reader's attention of the flow of narrative. Thus 'navigational component' become an important aspect of the graphic structure which tells us where to start and how to progress through it. The images are then arranged in a sequence, into a conceptual structure which generates the meaning out of it. (Cohn 3)

Another important aspect of any graphic narrative is the spatial structure 'which combines geometric information with our abstract knowledge of concepts' (Cohn 3). It talks about the 2D images which are used to represent 3D objects, and so there are certain variations in the perspective as in the case of aerial view and lateral angle of the image. Cohn further states that the arrangement of panels creates the narrative structure which guides the presentation of events. He asserts on the importance of an existing semantic relation between the adjacent images.

Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1993) calls comics a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images. He regards Rodolphe Topffer as the father of Modern comics, though Topffer himself could not realize the scope of development of the icons he started to work upon. According to him the images in the comics become an icon for representing anything that it signifies and highlights the essential need for considering the importance of 'icons'. He further emphasizes that all things we experience in life can be classified into two realms: the realm of the concept and the realm of the senses. Our identities belong permanently to the conceptual world. They do not possess any sensual existence. Gradually with interaction

with the outside world, we encounter the sensuality of our own bodies and soon we begin to realize that the objects of the outside world possess an identity of their own... 'Inanimate objects may seem to possess separate identities'. (McCloud 41)

"The potential of comics is limitless and exciting" (McCloud)

The artists of this sub-genre have a universe of icons to choose from which keeps on expanding with time. Our society is inventing symbols regularly because 'ours is an increasingly symbol-oriented culture.' Comic artists have successfully responded to this change of times. It was many decades back when McLuhan observed that "those people growing up in the late 20th century didn't want goals so much as they wanted roles. And that's what 'visual iconography' is all about" (McCloud 58).

For McCloud the grammar of the graphic novel is the closure. He emphasizes on the fact that the comic panels 'fracture' time and space offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But the closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous and unified reality. The real essence of the comic or any type of sequential art hinges on the arrangement of elements in an order which creates meaning out of it. Reading this genre is all about creating sense out of the seen and the unseen and the visible and the invisible. Closure between the panels is a powerful tool which engages all our senses in the task of interpretations. It asks the mind to work as a sort of in-between-filling in the gaps between the panels.

Timeline in case of the graphic art becomes negotiable as both the words and the pictures convey the sense in a combined way. A series of images can replace the enormous speech and also preserve the essence of what has to be conveyed. In the world of this type of art, time and space become one and the same and so we learn to perceive time spatially. The movement in time and space is indicated by the arrangement of different panels in a sequence which creates meaning out of it. This motion in comics is produced between the panels by the mental process called closure. Also, the continuous background is another tool that conveys the movement of time and space. It is also a valuable tool for representing the invisible ideas with special regards to the inner state of the characters. The readers can always identify the characters with those feelings in order to understand them better in relation to the physiological, psychological, sensual or emotional effects created through the background.

What is vital to the art of comics is that a picture can evoke both, an emotional and a sensual response in the reader. With this we can take a note of the Impressionists and the Expressionists. The Impressionists emphasized on accurate depiction of light in its changing qualities, ordinary subject matter, inclusion of movement as a crucial element of human perception and experience and unusual visual angles. Whereas, the expressionists believed in presenting the world solely from a subjective perspective, distorting it radically for emotional effect in order to evoke moods or ideas. The graphic novelists in a way make a sensible and balanced use of both these form of art in order to convey their message.

A great variation that exists between different graphic novelists, pertaining to the level of independence allowed to the artists of this genre, is in the ratio in which they make wise use of images and text. Some prefer making an equal use of texts and illustrations; others use them in varied ratios.

McCloud has divided these different combinations into different types:

Word-Specific: It is a combination where pictures illustrate but do not significantly add to a largely complete text.

Picture-Specific: It is a combination where words do a little more than add soundtrack to a visually told sequence.

Duo-Specific: The words and pictures send essentially the same message.

Additive combination: In this type of combination, the words amplify or elaborate an image and vice versa.

Parallel Combination: The words and pictures seem to follow very different courses without intersecting.

Montage Combination: Words are treated as an integral part of the pictures.

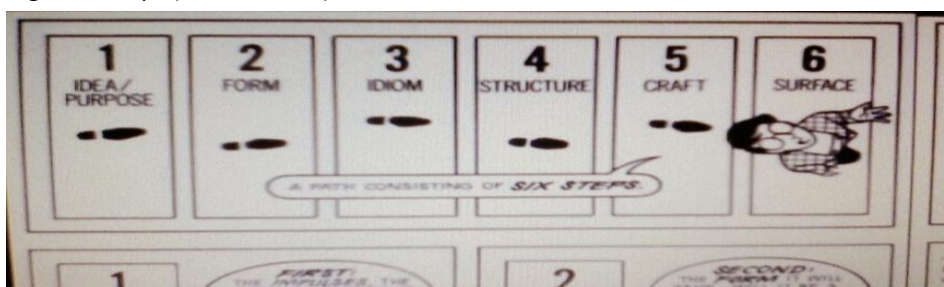
Interdependent Combination: Words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea, which neither could convey alone.

The graphic novelists generally exercise an independent choice of using more than one type at a time, as per their convenience. Language of comics (or other graphic art forms) continues to evolve as all language must evolve because embedded in all pictures of the visible world are the seeds of invisible-the seeds of expressionism and synaesthetic (union of different art forms which appeal to our different senses).

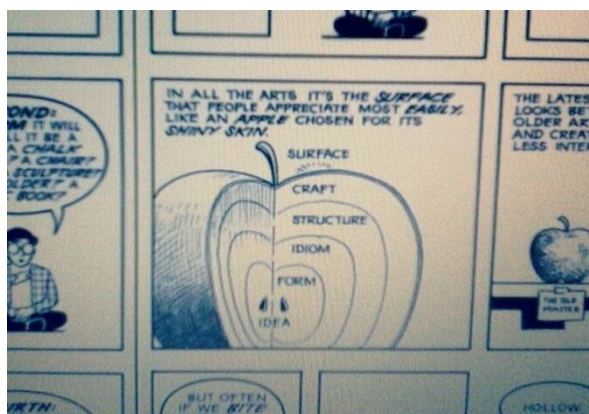
The process of creating any art work requires a specific path or series through which the intangible thought gets converted into a visible and tangible form to exist in the physical world. It is the process through which an idea or condensation of idea gets converted into reality and finds an existence in the physical world. In case of graphic novels:



It starts with birth of an idea in the mind of the artist who, through his hand, gives it a shape on paper. When it is perceived by the readers, the physical waves hit the retinas and symbols are decoded into meaningful structures, eventually invoking sensual and emotional response in the readers (as explained earlier). This journey of an idea from the mind of the artist to the mind of the readers goes through a path, a path consisting of six steps (McCloud 170).



The artist ought to have an idea or a purpose (content of the work) in his mind which is further developed into a form (the form that it will take). With the employment of idiom (which deals with the subject matter, the genre of the work), it forms a structure (the arrangement of required elements into a form). At the next step, it includes constructing the work, applying skills, problem solving, etc. the last step is all about the appearances, production values and finishing, the apparent traits at the superficial evaluation of the work. This structure has been compared to an apple-like structure:



This structure well portrays the centrality of an idea in order to provide a suitable platform to art. The outer most layer i.e. the surface plays an important role in seeking attention of the readers usually. Between these two layers come the other overlapping levels of form, idiom, structure and craft respectively. Every graphic novel is based on such strategized structure.

Conclusion

Graphic novel as a genre holds immense potential of expression of ideas and provides a suitable platform to voice the inner realities and concerns of the artists. It can also be said that it is one of the most emancipating form of art, as it gives a certain sense of freedom and liberty in the expression of its themes. The

only barrier existing between the message coded by the artist in the form of graphics and the decoding done on the part of the readers is the one of understanding, which McCloud asserts is 'not an easy task'. It requires certain skills and involvement on the part of the readers to follow the right path and attempt to understand what is being conveyed. As both words and image convey the message of the artist, it creates a deeper impression upon the mind of the reader. The modern graphic novelists are making the best use of this medium by depicting social, political and cultural flaws via this medium. It can be thus deduced that sequential art needs serious attention in the academic curriculum.

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