

Role of Comics and Graphic Novels in the Early Developmental Stages of Children

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Abstract: Today, comics and graphic novels serve as two of the most significant sources of learning practices for children because of their vast arena and they being the amalgamation of two important mediums that help children to learn and comprehend faster and better. Both comic books and graphic novels deal with vivid pictures which prove to be the perfect nutrition for a child's early mental development along with the speech bubbles that introduce new words into the child's vocabulary. Graphic novels like the Tintin series, Asterix the Gaul, Persepolis, Maus and Bhimayana not only expand the horizons of a child's imagination but also provide them with worldwide pieces of information thus, expanding their horizons. They help a child get acquainted with new worlds, concepts, individuals and help increase his/her reading appetite simultaneously. This paper deals with the role of comics and graphic novels in the early developmental stages of children with references to certain English and Indian comics and graphic novels, and how they are adapting to the contemporary genres to maintain their position.

Key Words: Comics, Graphic Novels, Learning, Mental Development, Genres, Concepts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Though both comics and graphic novels are considered something new, which constitute a new genre that got added much later to the field of literature, history tells otherwise. The art of storytelling that comics and graphic novels follow is the method of communication through images, one of the earliest forms of communication. It took its shape before human civilization before words came into existence. Communication through images prevailed as can be deciphered through cave paintings and Petroglyphs, and dominated languages like the Egyptian Hieroglyphics. This art, unlike many other forms of communication, never became obsolete as they solely rely on the transfer of messages and ideas without the auditory medium, which is the most vital way of communication during the early developmental stages, when words do not take shape, but ideas already start to exist. Using this idea, my paper tries to explore the role of comics and graphic novels in the early stages of children not only as an instructional medium but also as something that gives them an idea of their own being.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper aims to cover the topic of development of young children via comics and graphic novels. Although many papers attempted to work on the effect of this medium, they could not elaborately explain the factors responsible for the analytical skills development in an intricate way.

- Golding and Verrier (2021) focus their paper more on the pedagogical outcomes than the mental developments.
- Forceville et.al (2017) focuses more the artistic styles and their effort.
- Yildirim (2013) covers the evolution of comics and primarily focuses on their merits in the literature world.

Most of the papers out there though attempted to cover the changes readers go through while reading an illustrated textual medium, they got diverted mostly toward outcomes and the medium in itself.

My paper attempts to bridge that research gap.

3. The Art of Storytelling

Other Forms of Children's Literature

Children love listening to stories. Stories that are comprised of simple words enamour children more as not much complex thinking goes into the building of mental images. These mental images are then arranged into a sequence, thus forming a mental strip which guides the listener to comprehend a particular situation in a story or the story as a whole. However, storytelling is enjoyed the most when simple. If complex and complicated, listeners especially children face difficulties in forming mental images as they are less exposed to different contexts, ideas and concepts.

The learning process first starts when a child learns to associate images and words with the idea of a particular object. For example, a child is taught to associate the word 'apple' with the image of an apple and the image itself to the particular object, that is, the actual apple. During the process, an idea of the object apple gets created in the child's mind to which the associated word and image get referred to, every time they pop up in front of the learner. This principle plays a major part in understanding graphic novels and comics.

Edward Lear, the father of nonsense verse, largely used illustrations to portray the hidden meaning that lies hidden underneath his verses.

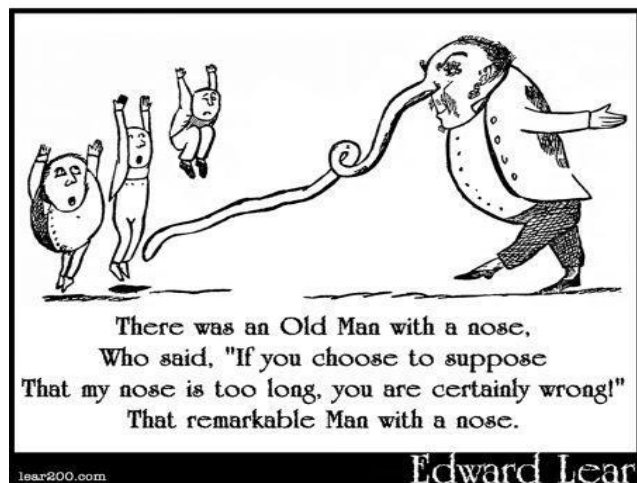


Fig.1.and Fig. Lear, Edward (The Nonsense Verse Illustrations)

The same can be said for Lewis Carol who took the help of illustrations in his masterpiece *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* to connect words with images to give meaning to his nonsense verse, thus providing a visual idea and introducing his readers to a gigantic spectrum of nothingness. Sukumar Ray, following his footsteps also created a world of nonsense, where he deconstructed words and their associated meaning and used illustrations to create new meanings.



Fig. 3 Tenniel, John. *Alice with the Duchess, Cook, Baby and Cat* (left), Fig. 4 Ray, Sukumar. *Tyashgoru* (right)

As can also be seen in Satyajit Ray's work, he used drawings to provide his readers with faces and body types of his characters as can be seen in his attempt to revive Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury's book, *Goopy Gyen, Bagha Byne* :



Fig. 5 Ray, Satyajit *Costume Design Sketches for Goopy Gayn Bagha Bayn*

4. Their Influence on Comics and Graphic Novels

Children's literature with drawings and illustrations saw a huge success in reading rates as they could successfully attract and hold a child's attention for a prolonged period. With the advent of illustrated children's books and nonsense verse, a new genre merged in the second half of the 18th century which later in the mid-20th Century strengthened its position with the arrival of comics and graphic novels. Comics and graphic novels borrowed from the idea of words and images side by side, as used by the writers of children's literature as it proved to be the best and effective way to communicate intriguing ideas to young readers.

Inspiration of Comics and Graphic Novels

History

Will Eisner used the term 'sequential art' to describe the term comics. Even the sequence of two images can become more than just images, they transform into comics (McCloud, *Making Comics* 5). Sequential art can be traced back to cave paintings 50,000 years earlier and its earliest examples can be seen in Greek friezes, Maya script and Trojan columns, though words were never a part of it. A very significant example can be a manuscript containing a piece of an epic story that was discovered from the pre-Columbian area which can even be read (McCloud, 10). During the 17th and 18th centuries, printing came into prominence and focus shifted from religious aspects to the social and political life of the people.

Then in the early 19th Century, Rudolphe Topffer (considered as one of the first comic artists and the father of comic strips) illustrated stories in a sequential manner where compartmentalized texts used to be below the illustrations. His work *Histoire de Mr. Vieux Bois* later got published in America as *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* in 1842 which is considered to be the precursor of every comic and graphic novel today. Modern comics trace back their origin to the satirical drawings called 'cartoons' which came into prominence in 1845.

Types

Based on the drawing and presentation styles, comics and graphic novels can be categorized into two types: one that follows geometrical patterns and one which follows a free pattern. The comic style that uses geometrical panels and gutter is considered to be the usual and traditional style which is used in most comic illustrations. The traditional style comprises of a series of illustrations arranged in a sequence which is also responsible for the 'flow' of the comic, depending upon the character actions the comic artist wants to focus on.

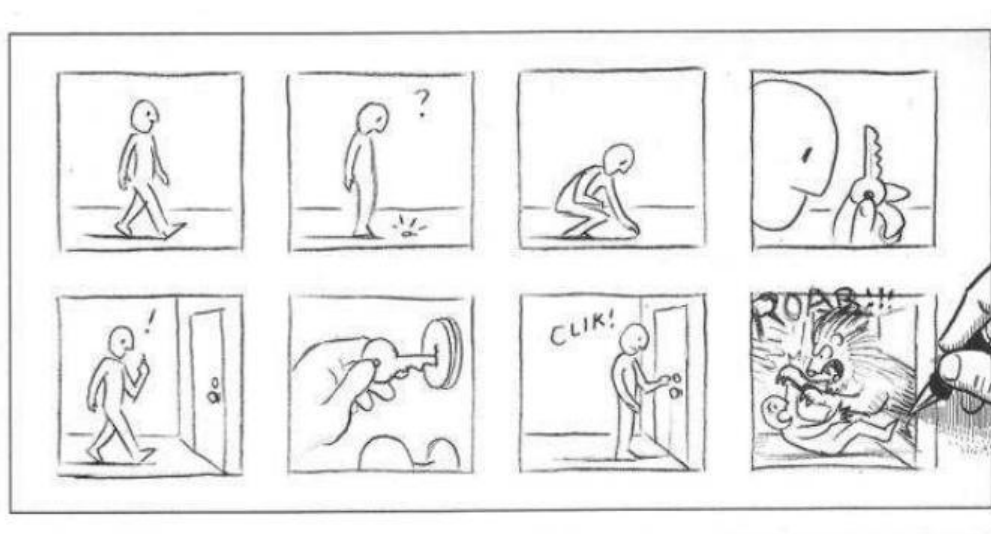


Fig. 6 McCloud, Scott *A Comic Strip from Making Comics*, 2006, p. 12, panel 1

Each of the panels portrays an action which pushes the reader to move to the next one so that a continuous thread of actions forms in the reader's mind thus, creating a storyline. This process enables a young reader to learn to follow a sequence in a rhythm to achieve a continuous action. Many actions take place between each gutter which is omitted by the artist to control the desired flow of his work. Therefore, the artist is providing his readers with certain actions as dots that are supposed to be connected by the readers thus, putting them to the practice of sequential arrangement (McCloud, *Making Comics* 20).

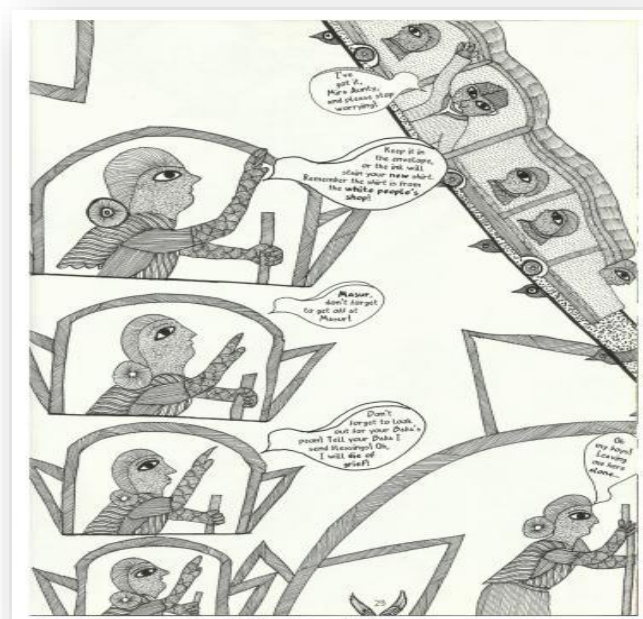


Fig. 7 Vyam, Durgabai & Subhash Vyam *A Strip from Bhimayana*, 2011, p. 29

On the other hand, graphic novels like *Bhimayana* use 'Khulla' or free art forms where illustrations and speech bubbles are not compartmentalized with panels. The images and speeches are meant to flow, following a sequence of their own that is controlled by the artists the way they want to.

As the 'Khulla' art form is followed in the above image, there is no traditional 'Z' patterned sequence followed in the illustration where the readers are supposed to follow the images from left to right and then top to bottom. However, the reader is given the freedom to figure out the sequence of events to comprehend the plot. This poses a challenge to

the readers to arrange the illustrations using their previously acquired knowledge like a jigsaw puzzle for which they are forced to look at all the images together at the same time. This proves to be an exercise for the young readers to understand how the sequence works and that each action must be inspected carefully before arranging to make a meaning. In the above extract, the same illustration of the waving woman is used with different sizes arranged in descending to ascending order to capture the real phenomenon of a figure gradually becoming smaller when moving away. This portrayal is only possible because of the free-flowing 'Khulla' art.

Their Arrival into the Mainstream

Graphic novels are also a storytelling form that differs from comics in terms of length, format and narrative technique. Its appearance in the mainstream is much later than the comic strips and books (usually considered in the late 1980s) and it is known to deal with serious issues like biographies, racism, politics and gender issues.

Richard Kyle, a historian and an avid reader of comic books, coined the term 'graphic novel' for the first time in the November issue of fanzine *Capha-Alpha* (1964). The term became famous worldwide after Will Eisner's publication of *A Contract with God* (1978) and came to mainstream in the late 1980s.

Another reason for comics and graphic novels to come into the mainstream is the ease of reading them. Comic strips, books and graphic novels mostly use illustrations and very few words to communicate a situation or a plot. Though initially, the illustrations used to be in black and white, colour first made its appearance in 1894 through Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper named 'The New York World'. Further, the trend was strengthened through the arrival of *Marvel Graphic Novel Line* (1982-1993) with the first graphic novel of the series, *The Death of Captain Marvel* (1982).

The comic books and graphic novels successfully captured younger readers through the usage of bold action, strong characters, intriguing plots and not to mention, radical colours. Colours played a huge role as they made the illustrations bold, added depth to them and also carried meanings. For example, the character of Spiderman is shown in a red and blue combination (signifying bravery, boldness, courage and valour) on the other hand the Goblin is shown in green colour (symbolizing evil, shrewdness and cunning qualities). Similarly, black Spiderman stands for the inner conflicting bad personality traits. The artists use visual cues like colours to make readers associate with personality traits, words to associate with sound effects and speech bubbles to denote an actual conversation and imagination of characters thus, creating a whole new vocabulary for the readers to be acquainted with.

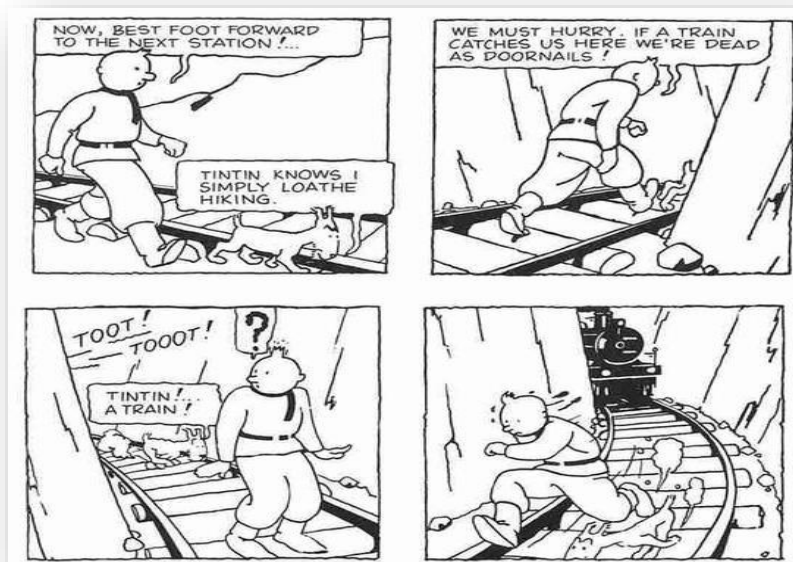


Fig. 8 Herge *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets*, 1929, p. 27, panel 1-4

The above illustration shows how the word 'Toot' followed by an exclamation mark denotes an auditory effect and a small speech bubble with a question mark in the third bubble denotes the character's astonishment at the situation.

Thus today, in the 21st Century, both comics and graphic novels managed to have a significant effect, especially on young readers by not just focusing on fictional and fantasy worlds, but also dealing with complex topics like race, gender, culture and social topics thus, making it interesting, easier to comprehend and indulge more.

5. Role of Comics and Graphic Novels in the Early Developmental Stages of Children

As an Instructional Medium

Illustrations and texts when juxtaposed with only text prove to be more effective in making an impression on the young minds. Anything is easier to understand and remember when observed in the form of pictures. A text just provides clear concepts and information but for that to be effective, the reader already has to be acquainted with words and their meaning. On the other hand, drawings and pictorial depictions do not come with any such challenge. Since birth, the human mind is able to associate context, situations and emotions with visual cues. This is what the entire comic and graphic novel industry is based on.

Comics is more a medium and less a genre as considered by scholars. Its format focuses on a clear separation of content and form. The medium can be imagined as a vessel which can contain various types of images and ideas (McCloud, *Understanding Comics* 6).

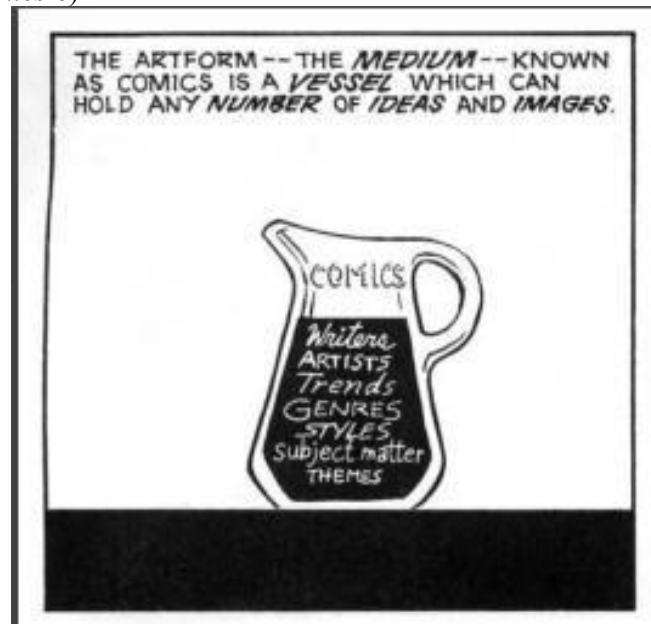


Fig. 9 McCloud, Scott *Understanding Comics*, 1994, p. 6, panel 1

It is a medium in which both visuals and texts are entirely integrated. In each panel, the artist chooses to use the negative space, the frame, the angle and things to be incorporated to portray the subject of his panel as important or trivial. These factors play the most crucial role as they guide the readers where to focus.

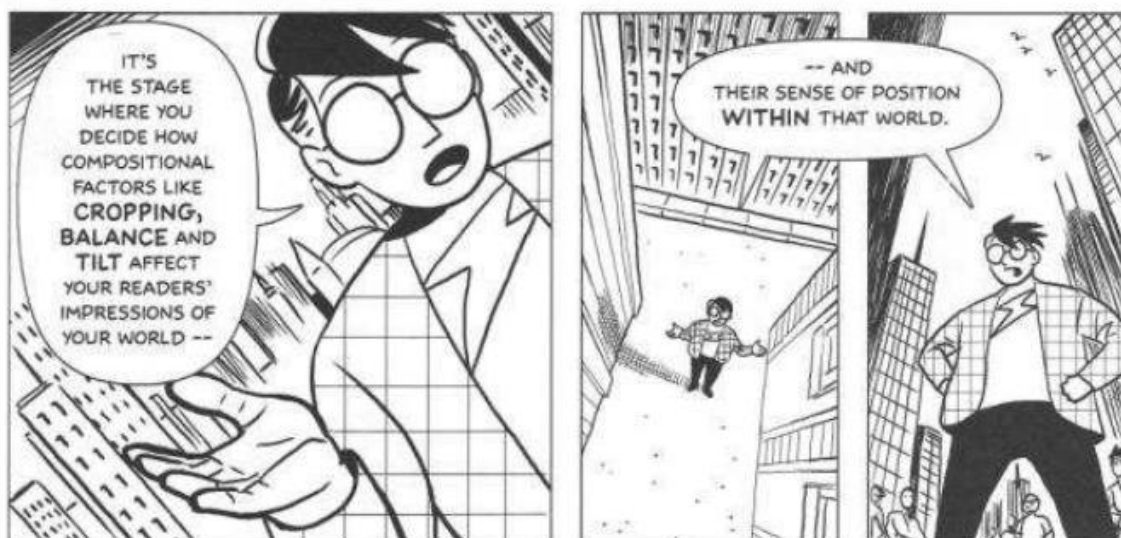


Fig. 10 McCloud, Scott *Making Comics*, 2006, p. 19, panel 3,4,5

When reading comics, the readers are challenged to read and inspect at the same time. The effect is much like watching a movie with subtitles where the audience has to observe the movements of the characters and also read the text to make a complete meaning of the entire scene.

Different kinds of speech bubbles play a significant role in providing a character with a distinct tone. A speech bubble with a lightning tail denotes its character to be screaming or speaking loudly whereas, a speech bubble with a normal tail indicates a normal or regular speaking tone. A chain thought bubble is known for depicting its character's thoughts. A fuzzy thought bubble is a speech balloon with disconnected edges and no tail which was first used in manga to depict a fuzzy thought.



Fig. 11 Speech Bubbles Lightning Tail, Usual Tail, Chain Thought and Fuzzy Thought (from left to right)

Style in comics and graphic novels typically refers to the particular visual dimensions of the illustration, including painting techniques, monochrome versus polychrome and abstraction versus realism. For example, comic styles include 'Ligne Claire' (clear line), Japanese 'Manga' and American underground 'Comix'. Each is different in their own way depending on the outcome effect they produce.

The artist can also achieve a desired effect by using frames in a certain pattern. If he uses one frame three to four times by zooming into the character's face, it creates an intense feeling in the reader's mind. This is equivalent to the effect that is caused by staring at somebody or something in real life. As it is a 2D medium, only visual cues (both words and illustrations) are used to create other sensory effects like audio, tactile, olfactory and gustation. However, the artist can create only half of the required effects through his style and skills. The other half is completed by the participation of the readers. A message through comics and graphic novels can be received by readers based on the power of imagination the reader has. Thus, when first given a comic strip to decipher, the imagination horizon of the reader expands along with other improvements in vocabulary, quick association to ideas, words and objects and familiarity with complex concepts which would take way more duration to be comprehended via other reading mediums.

Children with reading disability find it extremely helpful to study using comics and graphic novels. Pictures help them to associate ideas with concepts more readily than a text could.

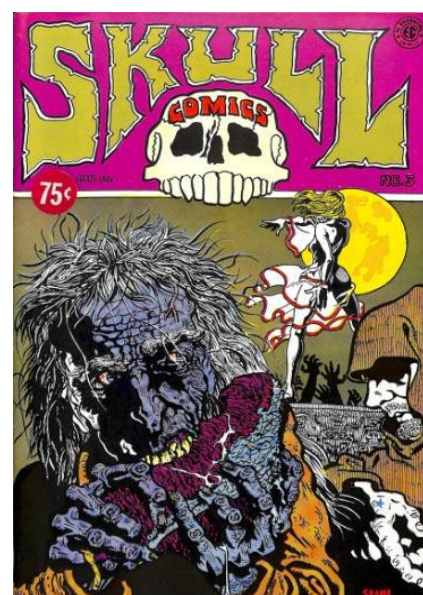


Fig. 12 Herge *The Black Island*, 1938 (left) [an example of Ligne Claire] and Fig. 13. Rodriguez, Spain *Skull*, 1971 (right) [an example of American Underground Comix]

As a Portrayal of Life within Panels

The art of comics enables young readers with higher imagination to experience another realm consisting of the same situations and provides them with an opportunity to tackle their personal problems, thus acting as a mirror. They introduce the readers to a more comfortable surrounding where their favourite superheroes fight for them, thus familiarizing them with the sense of justice which is not always present in the real world. Graphic novels like *Persepolis* (1994), *Maus I* (1980), *Tintin* (1929) and *Bhimayana* (2011) introduce the concepts of discrimination, racism and genocide, adventure and diverse culture and last but not least, casteism to their younger audience.

1. Discrimination- Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is an autobiographical graphic novel where the struggles of women are shown from Satrapi's lenses. The book is a wonderful depiction of social discrimination and extreme misogyny that Iranian women have had to go through since 1979 when the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran. The novel provides the reader with a clear picture of the struggles the protagonist had to go through since the age of ten because of the changes in laws and society, how free will was given a tag of capitalism and how she struggled to fit within both her country and the western world.



Fig. 14 Satrapi, Marjane *Persepolis*, 2008, p. 3, panel 3,4,5

2. Racism and Genocide- Arthur Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survival's Tale* is another example of an autobiographical graphic novel that depicts the struggles of Spiegelman in his younger years, his depression, his mother's suicide and lastly, his parents' escape from the concentration camp. He belonged to a Polish Jew family and the entire novel is about him interviewing his father, Vladek, about the discrimination, racism and genocide he had to face in his past. Spiegelman paints the Nazis as cats, the Jews as rats, the Poles as pigs and the French as frogs, to serve the purpose of motive and segregation. It is the only novel to receive a Pulitzer Prize for its strong and raw portrayal.

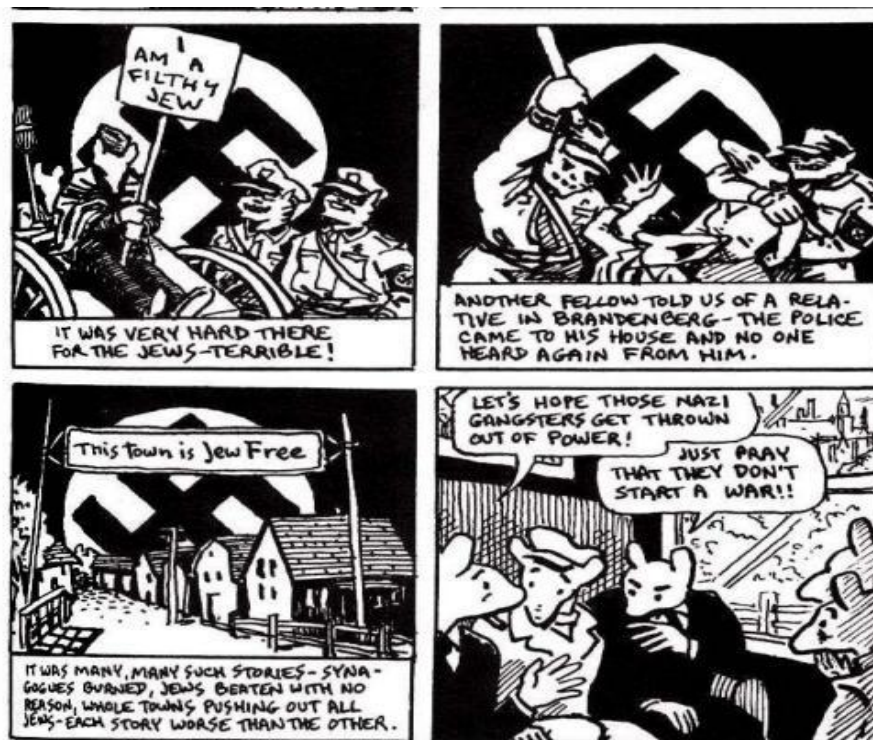


Fig. 15 Spiegelman, Arthur *Maus I*, 1980, p.33, panel 3-6

3. Adventure and Diverse Culture- Herges' fictional graphic novel, *The Adventures of Tintin* is known worldwide for its adventurous theme whose protagonist, a teenager named Tintin is shown to travel to different parts of the world, exploring diverse cultures and people, making friends and fighting antagonists. His dearest companion in all his adventures is his dog, a white fox terrier named Snowy who even saves him in various situations. Other characters like Captain Haddock, Chang Chong-Chen, professor Calculus, Thompson and Thomson and Bianca Castafiore are later additions to the series who also add the desired effect of companionship, intellectuality and humour.

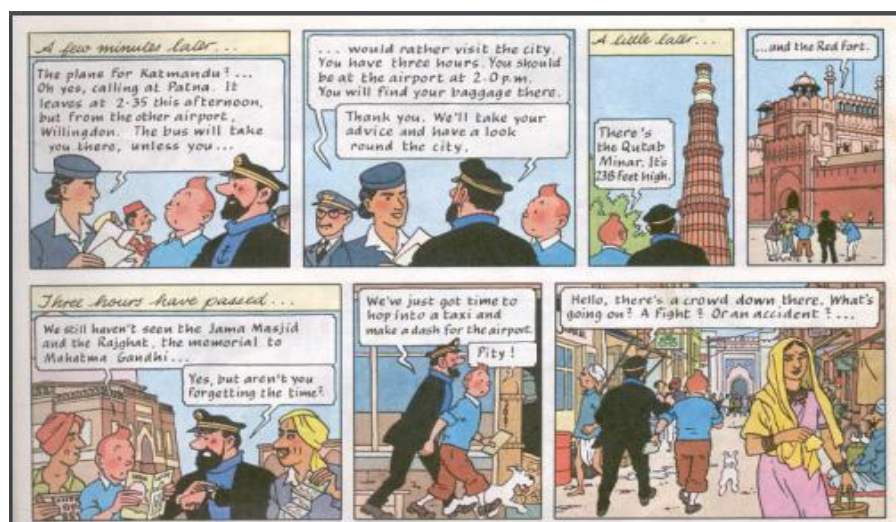


Fig. 16 Herges *Tintin in Tibet*, 1959, p.75, panel 1-6

4. Casteism- *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* by Durgabai Vyam, Subhash Vyam, Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand is a biographical graphic novel about the experiences of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar since childhood and the atrocities he had to go through for getting education and basic human rights. Being a Mahar (an untouchable class who were supposed to live on the outskirts), Ambedkar's struggles of getting a haircut and water to drink, a proper accommodation after his return to his country, his revolt against the rigid Hindu casteism through Mahar Satyagraha and Manusmriti Dahan Divas is spectacularly displayed by the 'Khulla' art

form. The book also covers how people still suffer from the plague of casteism through incidents like the Khairlanji massacre to show how deep prejudice runs even in the 21st Century.

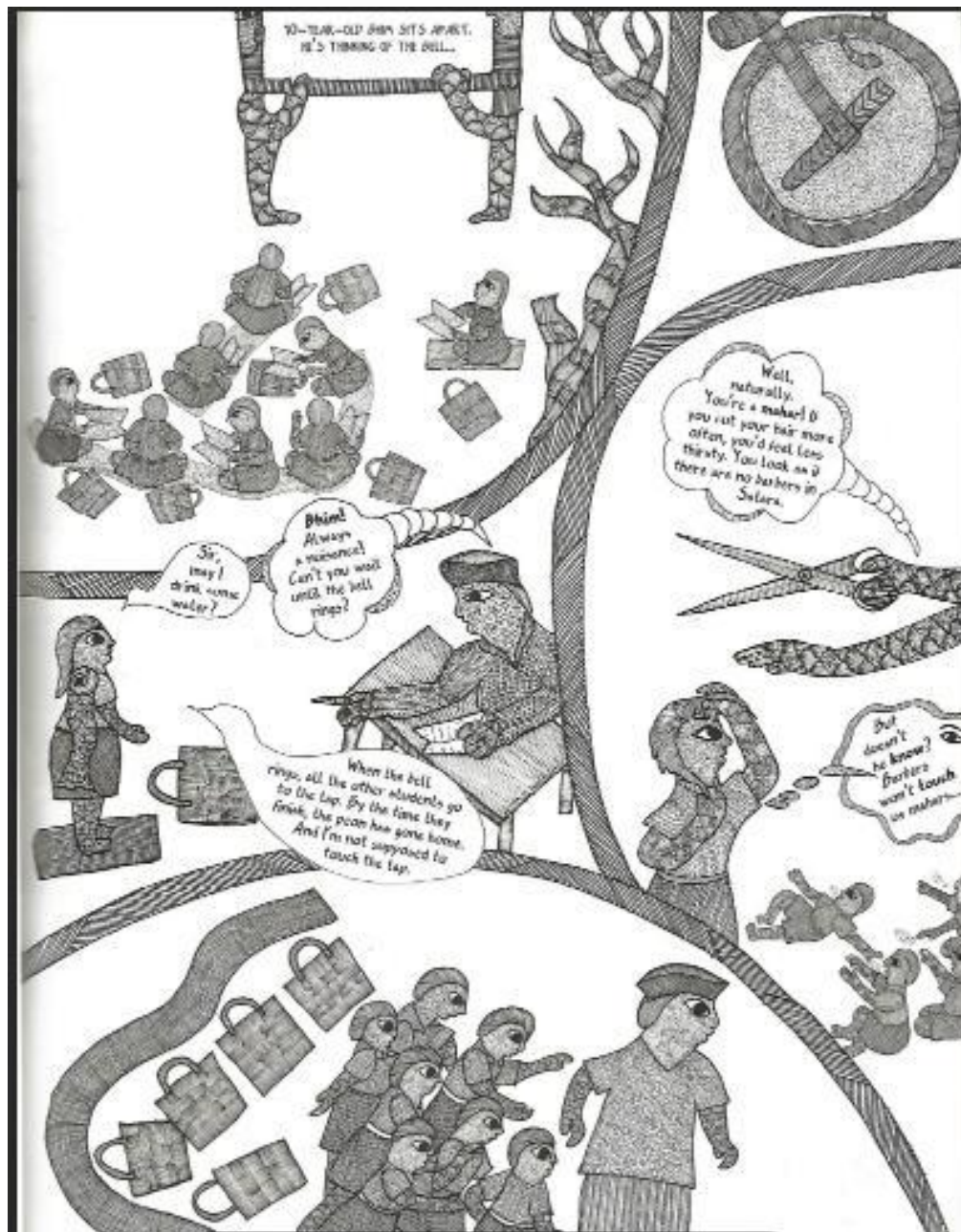


Fig. 17 Natarajan, Srividya et.al *Bhimayana*, 2011, p. 19

All these examples show how graphic novels can make their readers acquainted with diverse themes and topics from all over the world at the same time provide them with accurate historical facts and events.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper shows how different genres, styles and themes in comics and graphic novels help young readers comprehend subjects better and inform them about diversity all around the world. Children who read graphic novels and comics have shown a rapid learning pace in comparison to children following the traditional method of learning through textbooks. This happened because of a longer attention span, interest and thorough enjoyment of young readers while reading. The paper also deals with the evolution of comics, it getting influenced by children's literature and its reception by various generations over time. Lastly, this paper attempts to show that comics and graphic novels are not casual reads, but a vital genre which in the 21st Century proves to be a very significant medium of storytelling.



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