

Memory and Memorialising in Graphic Life Narratives - *The London Jungle Book* (2004) and *Drawing from the City* (2012)

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Abstract: The paper focusses on graphic narratives - *The London Jungle Book* (2004) by Bhajju Shyam and *Drawing from the City* (2012) by Teju Behan, produced by Tara Books, an artists' collective and publisher of graphic literature, based in Chennai, India, which lie at the threshold between adult picturebooks and artists' books. These works emphasise the embodied landscape and the performative art traditions of the Pardhan-Gond and Jogi art traditions respectively. The transformation of the personal through the collective art practice and memorialisation of the collective practice through the personal experience enables the artists to articulate a different kind of cultural politics, that questions the conventional frameworks of reception of non-elite vernacular and popular art forms in the contemporary art world. The paper employs the concept of "autographics" as proposed by Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, which suggests a form of engagement with the modes and materiality of representation, the techniques of production, the colours, styles and textures in the art form as necessary means of signification of the self in graphic life writings. The paper attempts to show how these graphic works resist reading and translation into a single medium and instead divert our attention towards the sensorial experience of engaging with graphic life narratives.

Keywords: Graphic Life Writing, Autographics, Folk Art, Memory, Graphic Narrative

Tara Books is an artist's collective and publisher of graphic fiction and non-fiction, based in the coastal city of Chennai, in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. They are known for their experimental and innovative ways of storytelling, deploying not just the synergy between the word and pictures, but also by exploring the material qualities of the book object itself. Based on

the ideas of equal representation of cultural workers involved in the production of the book, whether it is the graphic designer or the illustrator or the professionals involved in the printing and book binding, the collective has been offering its alternative conception of publishing as an artistic process, and the book as a cultural artefact, not limited to its role as a container of text (Wolf “For Tara Books”). Gita Wolf, the founder of the publishing house and the artists’ collective has insisted that the books produced by them must and should be seen in totality as a work of art (Wolf “Tara Books” 80). By bringing into effect, high values of production, fine-printing techniques, book-binding craftsmanship and paratextual devices that indicate the uniqueness and innovativeness of the work, the collective has been able to situate itself within the field of cultural production, that constitutes contemporary art world. The books produced by the collective have been discussed both in terms of popular culture as well as in terms of high-art production (see Parsons “Publishing for Social Change” and Byspalko “The Book as Democratic Art Object”). The ambiguity concerning the genre and the intended readership – of some of the graphic works produced by the collective - whether the concerned books should be read as crossover children’s picturebooks or as artists’ books that are deceptively simple-looking but intended for mature audience adds to the transformational potential of these works. Books like *The London Jungle Book* and *Drawing from the City*, cleverly juxtapose the popular and the fine art, the child reader and the adult reader, the artefact and art as such. In one of the works published by the collective, the founders of the collective proposed that the pages of the book be seen as the walls of the museum – the book as a picture gallery (Wolf et al. “Beginnings” 15)– enabling diverse modes of engagement with the art, made possible due to the multimodal and sensorial process of touching, viewing and reading a book.

The Memory Work of the Artists

Through their collaboration with museums and other institutions for public display of art, the collective aims to intervene into the contemporary politics of display and exhibition of works of non-elite artists and cultural work produced by professionals such as designers, illustrators and graphic artists. The collective interprets their publishing practice as inherently political in its involvement in the production of graphic literature employing works of under-represented artists, contextualising the production of the art work, offering alternative frameworks to the readers for experiencing the artists’ work and questioning the values and meanings embedded in the mainstream art discourse regarding the categories and value-judgments to which such works are usually subjected. While, the materiality of the media and the mediation of the art in the works produced by Tara Books will fall outside the scope of the present article, I shall focus on the process of memorialising, especially the practice of “memory work,” as outlined in one of their brief monograph, *Between Memory and Museum: A Dialogue with Folk and Tribal Artists* (2016), on how the non-elite or folk, tribal and popular artists themselves engage with the institutions and frameworks of display that in turn shape their own cultural identity, artistic practice and means of sustenance. Though written from the perspective of the research

undertaken by the collective to gain insights into the artists' own understanding of the cultural institution of the museum, the concept of "memory work" also resonates with the nature of the art work in graphic life narratives produced by the collective. In the paper, I shall argue that the framework of memory work and memorialising provides an opportunity to study the embodied landscape that the art represents, but also the means through which the agency and identity of the artists are created and negotiated. The emphasis on memory, in the context of the tribal and folk artists, also brings to fore how the artists situate themselves within the community and their allegiances to the art tradition they seem to identify with. More importantly, the framework brings to attention the processes of mediation and creative reconstruction through the memory work of the artists, which is in some senses central to understanding some of these art forms. In the book, *Between Memory and Museum*, Gita Wolf, Arun Wolf and V. Geetha write:

The process involved what we could call "memory work" a way of reconstructing communal memory. This kind of recall of the past is generally associated with oral storytelling, which repeats well-known narratives but updates them for contemporary listener. Memory work through art is unusual. The viewer needs to bring very different associations to work: it requires an exercise of imagination, and often does not have verbal equivalents. The link with past is through traditional elements of style, but the themes the images explore are entirely new. The memory work the artists were engaged in was radical in another sense: it was anchored in a lived sense of community and culture, but was actively looking forward. (9)

The emphasis on community arts and past tradition in the context of tribal and folk artists is not new. Scholars working in the field of the emergent urban graphic literature, especially the ones produced in collaboration with tribal and folk artists have struggled with the idea of balancing the traditional aspect of the artistic form and the individuality of the artist reflected in the form of innovations and creative self-expressions in the art form (see Menozzi "Woven into a Song", Nayar "Literature (Now) Contains Graphic Language", etc.). The difference between the oral storytelling performance and the textual performance within a print based graphic media which present new problems of hybridisation, adaptation and mediation make it difficult to conceptualise the artistic practice of the artists. Roma Chatterji, who has written at length on the artistic practice of tribal and folk artists, especially in the contemporary times of transnational production of art, mediations and adaptations through the use of new emerging technologies and presence of novel opportunities for performances, writes, that "a middle ground" is required between the two positions - "neither rendering folk [and tribal] artists as mute vessels incapable of self-reflexivity or conceptual thought, nor treating them as coterminous with art practitioners in the modern art world" ("Repetition, Improvisation, Tradition" 100). Rather than situating the artistic practice firmly within the community tradition or celebrating the work of the artist as an individual genius, she offers "a notion of artistic agency that is multiple and synthetic rather than autonomous and subjective, conceptualized through an elaboration of the work process which

allows us to think of artists as embodied through their practices rather than their finished artworks” (100). Following on the heels of Gilles Deleuze, she outlines a framework where the agency, novelty and individuality of the artist emerges not as a result of the individual creative disposition but through a series of embodied practices that bring into play the past memories, the skills acquired through repetitive work, the present contextual conditions and; the mode and medium selected for the work. In another sense, rather than focussing on the art work, and the various spheres of values and meanings attributed to the art object, she directs our attention towards the artistic process, as a coming together of diverse practices, forces, effects and situations, through which the artistic subjectivity of the individual is also filtered. The role of triggered memory as such is a crucial element in the instantiation of artistic process. Through recent works on memory studies, it has been made amply clear that memory is not a fixed entity, it is an “activity” and is distributed over “several different [human] capacities” (Foster 23). Further, scholars have emphasised on the reconstructive nature of memory, which implies that the recollection of past events are related to the present contextual conditions of the individual along with his or her implied intention in recalling the memory (Bartlett *Remembering*). There is both a subjective element to the practice of remembering, as much as there are limitations imposed on account of the material conditions and context of remembering. Memory work then encapsulates the processual, contingent, mediated and contextual nature of the artistic practice, that in certain senses describe the nature of the work produced in the graphic narratives by some of the tribal and folk artists. It aligns with the conceptual framework formulised by Chatterji, in taking a middle ground, that is neither completely devoted to a communal or tradition-based reading of the art form, nor does it securely find itself within the individuality of the practitioner, but is rather located somewhere between the two extremes. Moreover, the emphasis on the term “work” shifts the attention away from the cultural artefact or the reified commodity of the art object or even the abstract notion of the text to focus on the “embodied practice” of creating the art.

Further, in the context of the works dealt with in the present paper, *The London Jungle Book* by Bhajju Shyam and *Drawing from the City* by Tejubehan memory figures as a recurrent theme in the narratives. Similar to the observations made by Hillary Chute with respect to the underground-scene of graphic narratives produced by women in the last few decades in US, the graphic narrative by Bhajju Shyam and Tejubehan “revisit their pasts, retrace events, and literally repicture them” (Chute 2). They insist on the duality within the act of looking, where the figure of the artists appear “as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight” (Chute 2). Even though, the works included in the study are collaborative projects and not produced by a single auteur as was the case of the graphic narratives studied by Chute, and they radically differ in terms of the role, status and reception accorded to the graphic narratives by women artists in US, the work by Bhajju Shyam and Tejubehan is aimed at exploring “the inbuilt duality of the form—its word and image cross-discursivity—to stage dialogues among versions of self, underscoring the importance of an ongoing, unclosed project of self-representation and

self-narration” (Chute 5). Both the artists make use of the tropes of movement, embodied spaces and history in their narrative as outlined by Michel de Certeau in order to problematise the location of the self in the narrative but also the relationship between the self and the place called home (117-18). As noted in the case of Tejubehan’s work by Roma Chatterji, and which can similarly be applied to Shyam’s book that it is not a matter of coincidence that artists from tribal and folk communities choose to represent their urban experiences, focussing on modern means of transportation, high rise buildings and the urban lifestyles of the citizenry (Chatterji “Dotting the Paper, the Town”). The recurrent allusion of the city and the city life is deployed in order to mark their own “contemporaneity,” but also reflect on the pivotal role played by the urban spaces, markets and buyers in promoting and providing opportunities to the artists (Chatterji “Dotting the Paper, the Town”). Often the city narratives of the artists get translated into a contrastive study of two different worlds – the rural and the urban. Both Bhajju Shyam and Tejubehan’s works debunk such assumptions.

Shyam’s travelogue describes his experience of visiting London for the first time, for a commissioned work. The narrative not only describes the nostalgia and longing of the artist for his home, but also the humorous and absurd situations the artist found himself in. As a member of the Pardhan-Gond community, from the village of Patangarh and a practicing Pardhan-Gond artist located in Bhopal, in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India, Shyam brings a diverse range of metaphors, symbols, icons and ornamental stylisations into his art work to interpret his own experience of the vast unfamiliar metropolis. There is an attempt at exaggeration and fabrication by the artist to provide a very focalised view of the city, where the Pardhan-Gond icons, idioms, narratives and modes of stylisation are synthesised with the architectural sites, art works, popular modes of transport, important city icons, etc related to the city of London. The result of the “thought-images” (“How London became a Jungle”) as Shyam calls his art in the book, is not to further emphasise on the differences in the cultural identity of the artist and the citizens with whom he interacts, rather it disturbs and dislocates the boundaries between the self and the other. Similarly, Tejubehan’s graphic life narrative recounts the changing circumstances of the artist’s family that leads to their migration to the city, the artist’s marriage, the chance encounter with the Baroda artist and activist Haku Shah, and the limitless potential that the artist envisages for herself through her art. Tejubehan belongs to the Jogi community which is classified as “Other Backward Caste” in the state of Rajasthan, and like the Pardhan-Gonds of Patangarh, the community to which Shyam belongs, were traditional itinerant singers, storytellers and performers.² Though there are wide differences in how the two communities were situated in the past and the circumstances under which the art tradition emerged (see Vajpeyi “Jangarh Kalam”). The dislocation and movement of the artist not just spatially but also metaphorically from the traditional domestic sphere to the public sphere where along with her husband she came to be recognised as a practicing artist and laying the foundation of an art tradition which is now practiced by other members of the family, indicates the different hybrid subjectivities of the artist as a woman, as a woman and homemaker from an underprivileged background and belonging to

a patriarchal community to an independent self-taught artist of repute and published author. The textual narrative in the book while supplements the art work, they in no way interfere with the viewing experience or anchor the picture in the traditional sense of the term. Instead, as explained in another context by the members of the collective, the book is “set in the form of a dialogue among three voices: an image, the artist’s commentary, and our [editors’] narrative” (Wolf et al. “Beginnings” 14). It is suggested that there are multiple entries into the graphic narrative, with the different voices working together in the form of a musical composition (Wolf et al. “Beginnings” 14). The statement also points at the different approaches used by the collective in the production of the art work and in framing the identity and authorship of the artists. As noted by Roma Chatterji regarding both the “mode of presentation” and “mode of representation” in *Drawing from the City*, the high value of production, the layout and the arrangement of words and images, and the dialogic exchange between the two modes of communication in itself becomes “a part of a larger political discourse” (Chatterji “Dotting the Paper, the Town”). In the case of *Drawing from the City*, the publication of the book went into two different editions – the handmade edition and the riso print edition. The handmade series of books produced by Tara Books are one of a kind. The books are printed, assembled and bound manually through a time-taking and resource intensive process. The screen-printing technique used for the handmade series, requires the application of single colour on the sheet, one at a time, manually for every colour on a single page (Ramanathan “The Making of a Book by Hand” 21). This results in vibrant prints, with a tactile-embossed quality of the images, which are not only beautiful to behold but also create a sensory experience for the reader who is able to touch and feel the art on the pages of the book. The technique also heightens the detailed nature of the work done by the artist using the minute patterns, motifs and designs almost resembling the delicate filigree work done on gold and silver ornaments. On the other hand, the layout and arrangement of the words and images in Shyam’s *The London Jungle Book* mirrors the pattern of Shyam’s storytelling “short pithy tales and anecdotes held together by the larger narrative of Shyam’s journey” (Ramanathan “Folk Author” 135). Rathna Ramanathan, the graphic designer for Shyam’s book explains: “the images did not function as editorial illustration but more as authorial illustration, having their own individual voice and a sense of authorship. Therefore, it seemed fitting to envision the book as a conceptual gallery space, with the pages framing the images and captions” (Ramanathan “Folk Author” 139). Ramanathan in fact, devotes a considerable amount of time to elaborate on the concept of “authorial illustration” and why it should be seen as different from other modes of illustration.

Furthermore, the paratextual devices in the two books such as the epilogue, blurb, jacket cover, biographical notes, etc accord cultural capital, bestow recognition and value on the works of the authors, while at the same time legitimise the cultural identity and authority of the artist in representing her or his cultural heritage and the alternative perspectives that they bring about to the mainstream society (Daozhi 380). Hence, not just the mode of the narrative but also the form of presentation, the discourse and the paratextual devices surrounding the graphic narratives aim

to materialize the memories of the artists. Thus, I have retained the term “graphic life narrative” for these set of works because in spite of the collaborative mode of production where the art was provided by the artists and the text was sourced by the editors from the translation of oral commentaries by the artists, the texts strategically emphasise on the “memory work” done by the artists, whether it is mediated and adapted into another media or filtered through the different stages of publishing, printing and circulation.

By the Hand of the Artist

So far, we have not touched upon the actual art works included in the narrative or talked about the different techniques, strategies, figurations and representations of the self in the graphic narrative. Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, noted in the introductory essay of the special issue on graphic life narratives of the journal *Biography* that the material signification of the self in a narrative can take diverse forms and complex representations across available modes and media (“Self-Regarding Art”). As such, scholars working in the field of life writing and life narrative need to be well versed with textual, graphic, aural, oral and material representations of the self, but they also need to be aware of the various ways in which these modes of communication interact and intersect to signify the self (Whitlock and Poletti vi). Any act of signification employs not just the material conditions of its articulation but also an active participation and engagement of the reader in reading the sign as a representation of the authorial self. Whether it is the grain in the voice of the playback singer or the heavy brush strokes and specific choice of colour variations in the painting, or the selection of certain words and references in the text, or even the deliberate attempt at recording the irregularities and errors in a DIY project – the signs that constitute the figure of the authorial self are present everywhere. These signs are in another sense, left as traces of the changing and evanescent identity of the subject, preserving a moment in the transition of the self from the past to a future self. The notion of “autographics” thus offered by Whitlock and Poletti offer to understand the material practices and reading strategies under which the sign of the self is sustained (Whitlock and Poletti v). The term captures the process of signification, which is neither complete nor fixed, as it changes depending on the reading strategies and translation of the signs from one mode into another.

Both the graphic works undertaken for the study attempt to emphasise on the artistic practice of the artists. *The London Jungle Book* in fact, on various instances discusses the author’s choice of visual metaphors, the technique of representation, the use of certain motifs and the visual vocabulary of the artist. There are enlarged sections of the art work in the book which provide a close-up of the outlines, borders, shading techniques, brush strokes, choice of colours and intricate details of the artist. The reader can almost trace the hand movement of the artist, notice the breaks or joints in the outlines, observe the spilling of colour outside the border and even point at the places where the hand of the artist trembled or hesitated while working on the art. In the case of *Drawing from the City*, the title of the book refers both to the drawings made by the artist as well as to the act of obtaining, extracting or drawing out from the city - the

inspiration for the work. Tejubehan uses black pen drawings with dense patterning, stippling, hatching and elaborate details in her art. The time-consuming technique provides a sense of texture and optical illusion in her art. It also makes her canvas pulsate and acquire a sensation of movement and activity. She populates the entire canvas with figures of men and women, buildings, trees, vehicles, fields, streams, etc with virtually no area of the canvas left blank. There is a childlike simplicity to her drawing style, though the simplicity often masks the profundity of the meaning behind the images. As was the case with Shyam, there is no use of perspective, or light and shade or any attempt at realism; rather the fabulous nature of the representations creates a surrealistic, out-of-the-world experience. Ordinary things are imbued with fantastical properties and the most commonplace object assume an extraordinary luminosity. The reader cannot leave the book without noticing the sheer amount of effort, time and resources involved in the production of the art work by the artists. The high production quality of the books further underscores the dexterous labour behind every stroke or line in the work. In his analysis, of the work Filippo Menozzi comments: “Drawing is presented by Teju herself as a kind of ‘magic,’ which is opposed to all forms of labour and occupation she had known before.... Drawing is different because it is still a form of labour – she has to draw for a living – but it is, at the same time, a kind of work with extraordinary potentialities” (Menozzi “Graphics of the Multitude” 11). Menozzi seems to opine that Tejubehan’s art should not be reduced to a biographical fact or an instance of commercialization of the work of a non-elite artist from the Third World, rather one should conceive of the art in its transformative potential for articulating a new kind of politics of the multitude. In my reading of the text, the autobiographical, the commercial, the political and the transformational aspect of the text are not distinct but rather they transgress the different spheres of meaning and valuation. The effort of the publishers in articulating the concept of the memory work, the creative labour of the artist and the signifying practices that assembled under the aegis of graphic life narrative supplement my argument that it is not the art as such but the artistic practice of the artists that hold a potential for transformation of how the identity, memory and work of the artists is conceived and evaluated.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to delineate a framework for engaging with the work of non-elite artists, especially folk and tribal artist who seem to have discovered a new readership and novel sites of performance within the emergent field of cultural production of graphic literature. The concept of “memory work” as articulated by the members of the collective at Tara Books seem to capture the traditional-skill based practice of community arts as well as the innovations made by the individual artists who find themselves experimenting with new media and techniques. The contemporary debates and discussions on the works of these artists often seem to ground their discourse on the art object, whether it is seen as a commercial object, cultural artefact or unique work of art. The paper argues that the by taking into account the memory work of the artist, one

can instead focus on the artistic process rather than the art object as such, which provides further opportunities for the researcher to study the modes of engagement, mediations, negotiations and signifying practices through which the identity and work of the artists emerges. The signifying practice of reading the self in the work of the art cannot be separated from its material practices of production of the sign and the reading strategies that engage with the signs to create a narrative of the authorial self. The emphasis on the work and the artistic practice, the paper argues, provides an opportunity to renew our engagement with the changing conditions of the production of art and the values and meanings ascribed to the different genres of the art work.

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