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Of Superheroes in Ordinary Clothing

Reinventing Biography, History and the Comics Form in *A Gardener in the Wasteland*

Amrita Singh (Delhi)

Introduction

In the opening pages of *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty* (2011), the authors, writer Srividya Natarajan and artist Aparajita Ninan, appear on the page discussing their plan to ›adapt‹ the 1873 work of Jotiba Phule, *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* (Fig 1). As they walk through a New Delhi neighbourhood, they witness a group of children being beaten and abused using references to the ›untouchable‹ caste by a (supposedly) pious upper-caste man for inadvertently kicking a football into his house. Walking past this incident, they halt at a poster of the film *BATMAN BEGINS*, and Ninan exclaims why she understands the need for superheroes: »to swoop down out of the sky and kick the bad-dies to bits« (GITW, 9).¹ This two-page verbal-visual montage sets the tone for the rest of the narrative, introducing four broad concerns: first, Natarajan and Ninan re-inscribe the text *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* through foregrounding Jotiba (1827–1890) and Savitribai Phule's (1831–1897) struggles against caste oppression and their contribution to social reform in India in the 19th century. Jotiba Phule established the *Satyashodhak Samaj* (The Society of Truth Seekers) in 1873 to promote welfare and self-advancement through education, particularly of those sections of society that had been historically denied access to learning like women and the lower castes. Jotiba draws on the influence of anti-slavery movements in antebellum America, the discourses of individuality and freedom coming out of the French revolution, as well as the work of Christian missionaries in British-colonised India to articulate the worthiness and dignity of all people (see O'Hanlon). He challenges the *varnashramdharma* system, which divides individuals on the basis of their caste, as an oppressive and manipulative system that categorizes and denies people basic human rights.² Jotiba's consternation is particularly with the dominant belief that education is the prerogative of the upper caste *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas*, and available to the *Vaishyas*, but

the *Shudras* (the ›lowest‹ caste) must engage in hard labor and are thus kept out of education, lest they wish to move up in class hierarchy. Despite this contextual location, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* is not set in an abstract historical past; it rather has an important link to the understanding of social movements in the present, which this narrative emphasises from the beginning.

Second, the opening pages employ the technique of »breaking the frame«,³ where the authors insert themselves into the narrative, bringing a deep self-reflexivity on their position as ›biographers‹. This is a strategic move by the authors to present a biography of the Phules via their own understanding and critique of the times. They are able to bring the author and reader within the purview of the immediate narrative forcing them to negotiate their points of view within the narrative as well as outside in the socio-political realm. Third, the weaving together of personal responses with accounts of specific socio-historical issues and contexts displays the ability of the graphic medium to uniquely conjunct not just the verbal and the visual on the page but also multiple verbal and visual texts, and with comics features such as cartooning, caricature, and irony is able to talk about traumas such as caste oppression. Fourth, this narrative also alters the western idea of the superhero comic, such as that represented in the figure of Batman, transforming the accepted traditions of the Anglo-American superhero through a posturing that has its antecedence in the mythic representations of *Amar Chitra Katha* in India (henceforth ACK; »the ACKs are a retelling of Indian myths, legends and history in the form of graphic narratives that create a visually coherent *Indian* cultural tradition« [Mathur, 176]). As we turn the page, we realise that this is not going to be a narrative with caped-crusaders, but crusaders who appear in ordinary clothing. The superheroes here are an ordinary man and an ordinary woman fighting for human rights, particularly against the ›supervillian‹ namely the caste hierarchy. This paper will examine how the modes of the comics form are employed in this narrative, but also how they are re-identified to radically alter modes of storytelling and history writing. The graphic narrative, with its ability to be multimodal, intermedial and intertextual, is the medium contemporary times need to draw attention to the follies and lacunae of dominant cultural practices, as it accommodates and recreates plural narratives of history.

Reinventing the Superhero and the Comic

In the opening pages, when Ninan imagines the appearance of a superhero »in spandex and a cape, with unbelievable pecs« (Fig. 1), she's thinking of a vigilante figure, who works a bit outside the law and seeks justice for those who cannot quite envision it for themselves. These Batman-like heroes have strength beyond their human bodies, and very often have



Fig 1: From »The Wasteland of Caste«, *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, p. 8–9.

the material means to carry through with their ideologies. However, the heroes that Natarajan and Ninan are reimagining are disadvantaged in their position in society and material means; they wear ordinary clothing and would be indistinguishable in a crowd were it not for the propagation of their ideas. Therefore, the biographical details of Jotiba and Savitribai Phule's lives are established in this narrative in connection with the history presented in Phule's book *Gulamgiri* / *Slavery*, and as a larger indictment of the oppressive and exploitative nature of the caste system, Brahmanical attitudes, and Hindu religion, practices and customs. Instead of taking a didactic or polemical approach, Natarajan and Ninan translate this critique in their graphic style and mode of representation. For instance, the fact that Jotiba was born into the Sudra caste, a *mali* (gardener), is extended figuratively, in verbal and visual, in the repetitive use of the flower motif. They empower the caste denomination in the flower, which symbolizes the bloom of Phule's movement. This is indicated in the title as well as the sub-sections: the wasteland of caste is buried under the weed-bed of myth, rooted in tyranny where the Phules sow seeds of change. In that sense, (ironically) he has been depicted ›true‹ to his caste, even as he has attempted to subvert it. Jotiba's own education marked a radical

shift in the perception of caste, enabled by the education reforms enacted by the British government in the latter part of the 19th century, which enabled him to gain access to learning (cf. O'Hanlon). However, Jotiba defied conventions by educating his child-bride Savitribai, and then went on to teach sudra and ati-sudra children with her, including, most shockingly in the eyes of the upper castes, girls. This led to their excommunication from their hometown Pune in Maharashtra, and wherever they went they met with resistance and anger; yet they persisted.

In this larger narrative, the more interesting figure for Natarajan and Ninan is Jotiba's wife Savitribai, doubly disadvantaged by her caste and gender. Belonging to the sudra caste and being a woman she's on the lowest rung of the social system, the one most easily dispensable in social hierarchy. Women's personas and their bodies are often sites on which to locate discrimination and oppression; to insult a woman is to also insult her husband and family. This can be witnessed in the panels that depict Savitribai's commute from home to her school, where she is made to suffer the missiles of the missives from the upper-caste community: men would purposely wait in the streets and pass lewd remarks, sometimes pelt stones and throw cow dung or mud at her in an effort to humiliate and discourage her from teaching (GITW, 14). Savitribai remains resolute in her mission, however, using strategies of negotiation and navigation. For instance, she wears a dirty sari when she steps out of home and then changes into a fresh one at school; her sari is the ›cape‹ of her fighting avatar. Savitribai is conscious that clothes and self-presentation are an important marker of caste and class, and her action also represents her professionalism towards her work, as she does not extend her struggles and challenges to her students (GITW, 14). While Jotiba's enigmatic personality and discourse have undoubtedly made an impact on the mainstream conceptualisations of 19th century caste discrimination and reform, Savitribai has not been entirely subsumed within his movement. With the awareness of women's contribution to reform and the rewriting of history, Savitribai Phule is recognized as one of the most remarkable women in Indian history,⁴ a crusader for women's education who does not hide behind the persona of her husband. She worked hard for the emancipation of girls, women and ati-sudras, and suffered in equal respects as her husband. For instance, in one panel, we see her face on a ›wanted‹ poster being put up by upper caste men, targeting her separately and specifically for the ›crime‹ of teaching sudra and ati-sudra children (GITW, 15). In another sequence of horizontal panelled images (Fig. 2), we are shown Savitribai in the posture of a ›banned‹ poster, one that she breaks out of literally, edging out of the frame of the panel. In an echo of the opening page with Batman in the last panel (see Fig. 1), Savitribai is depicted as a ›superheroine‹ with her arm stretched out ready to fly off to do her good work. Like Batman's actions, the activities of the *Satyashodhak Samaj* (The Society of Truth Seekers) and the Phules may be outside the proscribed frame of Hindu society; they nevertheless seek justice for the disadvantaged and in turn challenge the forces that make up socio-political systems. As figure 2



Fig 2: From »The Wasteland of Caste«, *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, p. 18–19.

underlines, the force of Savitribai’s conviction is such that it cannot be contained within proscribed frames, social or drawing, and that (unlike Batman or other superheroes with secret identities) she is willing to be identified and chastised for her determination and devotion to her cause. Ninan’s drawings suggest that the power of Savitribai’s movement also threatens to exceed the bounds of carefully constructed panels, her story and her work extending beyond what can be represented in a biography. Natarajan and Ninan deploy a »view-from-the-present« strategy (see Nayar 2016, 326), when they present the historical past in a continuum with the present. By using a contemporary idiom of representation via the verbal and visual language of prohibition, they enable contemporary readers to bring about closure.

If the caste system is the »supervillain«, it requires a strong challenging force, which paradoxically comes through a simple, yet committed couple. Unlike many of the superheroes of the Anglo-American comics tradition, who are mostly individual, independently-working people sometimes leading double lives, these superheroes enable themselves and enable heroism in people’s movements, both through collaboration and inspiring other ordinary people to take up extraordinary challenges. Ninan is also careful to side-step the larger-than-life representation of the *Amar Chitra Katha* mythological heroes as easily recognizable representative figures rooted in a specific sociocultural context (Mathur, 176). As Nandini Chandra has explained, in the *Amar Chitra Katha* the mythic-heroic individual is positioned at the center of the narrative, and »sequential momentum« is built »through a deliberate

parsing of the mythological story into a bildungsroman« (Chandra 2018, 2). A graphic biography on the other hand presents »the secular tale of an individual...through mythological references, stalling the narrative momentum by introducing a more contemplative aesthetic« (Ibid.). She calls biography a »bourgeois genre« which subsumes »an individual's inspiring life-narrative« under the narrative of the nation itself, and where »hero worship, an integral part of children's literature, is then put into the service of the life narrative designed to foster national feeling« (Chandra 2008, 5). Therefore, while Natarajan and Ninan do look to the popular ACK form, they are conscious of its inadequacies and seek to rework both the Western and Indian forms of heroic representation and biographical rendering. For Mathur, such a depiction also comes close to the (male) protagonist of 1970s Hindi cinema, who is often an ordinary man made »super« in his victory against extraordinary odds, and in »the way he stands head and shoulders above all his contemporaries, in his unswerving integrity, single-handedly fighting against every kind of social evil, which wins him the support of the entire community« (Mathur, 177).⁵ This trope of the disadvantaged taking on the mantle of righting society's wrongs can be adapted to represent the heroism of the Phules, to whom posterity has been much kinder than their contemporary communities. In effect, what we have in this text then is a revision of what constitutes a comic book superhero/ine, and thereby the superhero/ine is also (re)defining the comic book.

In such a redefinition, heroes can be seen climbing into and out of the book (see Fig. 2), offering instruction and direction to Jotiba as well as Natarajan and Ninan. As Jotiba is reading Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, the figure of Paine is shown climbing out of the book, playing an instructive role in developing Jotiba's thought. Ninan's choice in making this moment in Jotiba's intellectual career performative points towards the creators' own efforts in finding heroes and heroines in history. In re-presenting biography, history and the comics form, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* is »a reworking, a writing over, a writing into, [of] the older text« (Nayar 2016, 334). It enacts a palimpsestic relation with *Gulamgiri / Slavery* on the one hand, which can be seen in the reproduction of the older cover in a drawn format as the frontispiece to this text. On the other hand, all the scriptural, philosophical and literary texts that Phule directly or indirectly draws upon (such as *Manusmriti* or *Rights of Man*), as well as other texts from India's cultural history, including those contemporary to Natarajan and Ninan, are also being written with and over. Phule's philosophy angered the powerful of his time, but their disdain and bewilderment linger today in a modern confusion of ignorance and willful blindness. Phule carefully challenges the hierarchy and authority of predominantly Brahmanical texts using other texts of history, philosophy and local, oral narratives. He is also influenced by ideological positions in texts such as Paine's and slave narratives from America, to understand subjugation and persecution, and argue for universal human rights. Natarajan and Ninan take a broad-spectrum view, telescoping the past with the present, revisiting, rewriting, writing through, speaking from and speaking to these other texts, including literary and comics / graphic texts that form a

part of their aesthetic. As readers of *Gulamgiri / Slavery*, the movement and women themselves, and witnesses to oppressive social mechanisms in their contemporary lives, Natarajan and Ninan are seeking ›superwomen‹ in their project. Even as they create an avatar of Savitribai, their research extends to other women reformers they can model their superwoman on. We see them visiting libraries and bookshops where the books / authors they pick up are very important in shaping their work: for example, Ninan picks up Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910), a near-contemporary of the Phules who wrote the tract *The Comparison between Men and Women* (1882), an early example of feminism in India, in which through cutting wit and matter-of-fact telling Tarabai establishes how social norms perform and propagate the difference between the sexes. Natarajan chooses to read Gail Omvedt, who sees caste as akin to racism, which is where we see the connections in Phule’s narrative as well. However, as Andre Beteille says, »The metaphor of race is a dangerous weapon whether it is used for asserting white supremacy or for making demands on behalf of disadvantaged groups« (Beteille). Nevertheless, historically the Dalit Panthers Movement of the 1970s, for instance, uses similar discourse as the Black Panthers movement in America, which opened up the vocabulary to talk about systematized oppression; »segregation« became a useful term in the context of caste discrimination as well. Despite the problems in making these connections, they expand the scope of understanding of caste for a non-Indian reader in particular (Phule also consciously made such linkages). Besides, these correlations could be highlighting the fact that anti-slavery and civil rights movements have been well-documented, are accessible in different languages the world over and are more recognizable than anti-caste movements. So this book is trying to bring caste to the fore through a graphic biography that engages with its own conflicts.

Such an intertextual approach suggests that texts make sense not in themselves but in relation to other texts, and not merely as references, allusions or *quotations* but as part of the larger aesthetic and cultural heritage. The creators echo these intertexts and use them to form the basis of their aesthetic practice. As »author avatars«, they are able to achieve at once intimacy and critical distance (cf. Hatfield, 115), and instead of merely »revealing the view«, they are also allowing themselves to be put on view (cf. Chaney, 23-24). Thus, they bridge the difference between the ›factual‹ information of linear sources such as reports, newspaper accounts and factoids, and their reconstruction of that information as (extra)ordinary heroism connected to lived social experiences. They revel in knowing that the depiction has a closer indexical relation to the real, using the mode of documentary realism that calls attention, as Lars Ole Sauerberg has argued, to »social construction of that ›normal‹ knowledge that even supposedly self-sustaining narratives must assume their readers to possess« (Sauerberg, 27). Using the documentary as a mode of address, drawing upon secondary material, and presenting the narrative in multiple frames they reconstitute the real not recorded as in a documentary film, but through »drawn, hand-rendered visual mediation« (Mickwitz, 9). According to Nina Mickwitz, this mode »does not invite us to imagine, but rather to imagine that we ›see‹ and ›hear‹, and in so

doing to understand a statement, proposal, or position in relation to its subject matter« (Mickwitz, 20). Although not a »documentary comic« per se as Mickwitz classifies them, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* does employ what she calls »performative aspects of production« (as seen in Paine’s posturing in Fig. 2), which draw »attention to the subjective aspects of both experience and communication« (Mickwitz, 27) characteristic of the documentary. The multiple frames allow the Phules to emerge as witnesses offering a testimony of their times through their work, and Natarajan and Ninan recover that history and in turn are also presenting their own witness account. By recovering recent past events like the Mandal riots (in 1992 and 2004 to protest the introduction of caste-based reservation in higher education through demonstrations, strikes and self-immolation), demolition of Babri Masjid (in 1992 the 16th century mosque of Babar, on the claims that it was built on an existing Ram temple in the holy city of Ayodhya), Gujarat riots (of 2002, the most widespread communal riots after Babri demolition), and interspersed newspaper reports of Dalit exploitation in the country, makes the reader-viewer aware of the »widespread nature of oppression«, forcing us to see links by putting diverse histories on the same panel (Nayar 2016, 329). Yet the »cosmopolitan« reading does not call for a universalism of victim narratives but, as Pramod Nayar argues via KA Appiah, »a shared narrative imagination... a human capacity that grounds that sharing. The Other is not abstract or imaginary but very real. The merger of socio-political contexts calls us to be witnesses to historical trauma in the present« (Nayar 2016, 331). They may be biographers, but they are not survivors, unlike their subjects, so have to be alert to not exoticize or trivialize the trauma of caste-based oppression. The documentary mode enables them to keep the narrative at an observational distance, prevent them from ventriloquizing their subjects, and keeps their own caste affiliations and identities at bay.

Drawing Life, Drawing Caste

Natarajan and Ninan are conscious and specific about choosing the graphic form both as a medium and vehicle for storytelling to re-present *Gulamgiri* / Slavery and the Phules, specifically connecting Phule’s wittiness, sarcasm and use of caustic humour to indict the oppressive caste system with such characteristics of both comic and cartooning. The style of *A Gardener in the Wasteland* is bold black and white, thick outlined drawings in A4 book format. Although it doesn’t strictly adhere to the format of the *bande desinee*, for reviewer Indrajit Hazra the style is reminiscent of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* books (Hazra). Ninan plays with the design of the panels, not necessarily following a strict template throughout: some images are in boxed, sequential panels, others are individual panels figuring within the larger narrative; in some others the visual exceeds the gutter spaces and refuses to be *boxed* in. A number of panels use full black with smaller irregular panels in between, and some panels are also

the size of what they are representing – e.g. the panel talking about the civil rights movement is in the shape of the USA (GITW, 13). As Karin Kukkonen has remarked, the structuring effect of the layout is an integral feature of narrative production and does not remain merely extra-diegetic (Kukkonen, 50). The reader-viewer is not lulled into complacency or is allowed to be passive but rather is compelled to engage with the dynamics of the page. The artist actively manipulates the page and its features »on the level of discourse and presentation« (Drucker, 121), compelling the reader-viewer to both enact and become privy to strategies of negotiating and navigating. Johanna Drucker uses the term »navigation« to point towards a transactional, reader-based production of narrative, to suggest that the graphic placement of the images »plays a crucial part in the way they produce meaning within the text« (Drucker, 122). This can be seen in the more evocative, iconoclastic scenes where the images are spread out across a page or multiple pages. For instance, on a double page spread Jotiba is depicted discussing the story of the birth of the Brahmins (the uppermost in caste hierarchy) with his friend Dhondiba (Fig. 3). The spread is composed in black negative space around the white figure of Brahma, from whose mouth Brahmins claim to have been born. Jotiba tests each claim, finding this version »full of holes« (GITW, 33), especially by questioning how Brahma would have fared menstruating from his various orifices in the process of giving birth. The muddled nature of the origin story is reflected in the non-panelled images of Brahma, whose perplexed facial expressions add to Jotiba's ostensible confusion and the gaping holes in dominant Hindu texts. Jotiba's blasphemous declarations rendered visually are very effective in communicating the need for distrust in dominant stories. Phule's attack on cherished beliefs or institutions through mocking Brahma-the-creator's myth through a parody of menstruation is comical in itself (as is the deconstructing of Vishnu's avatars as not Godly or transcendental but manipulative; see GITW, 36-49), but the use of the sanitary pad by Ninan to cover all the menstruating orifices renders it even more so, and adds a contemporary idiom to the story from a gendered perspective as well. Jotiba's irreverence for myth as well as native texts that propagate biases and discriminations is translated in Ninan's visuals as a kind of »revisionary myth-making« (Nayar 2016, 332–33).

Emma Dawson Varughese, arguing via Christopher Pinney and Kajri Jain, proposes that such a visualizing of sacred texts with inauspicious looking is a distinctly Indian representation in the graphic medium and subverts how seeing is perceived in the Indian context. The domain of the visual in India has traditionally depicted ›sacred‹ images of divine, spiritual and religious in positive and ›proper‹ ways (especially on posters and calendar art). This type of depiction also reflects upon the visualisation of the nation – »just as Gods wouldn't inhabit an inaccurate, ugly or imperfect image, the state will not tolerate visual representations that are not putative to the depiction of the nation« (Jain, qtd. in Dawson Varughese, 110). However, Indian graphic narratives challenge such an expectation from the visual, depicting the unfavourable and uncelebratory; »through the deployment of sketch-like images, stark line



Fig 3: From »The Weed-bed of Myth«, *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, p. 32–33.

drawings, muted colours, blurred and indistinct characters, monochrome colourways, multimedia and collage-like approaches to storying, the narrative and characters invoke a visual inauspiciousness« (Dawson Varughese, 17). Ninan's play with the visuals in this narrative is a visual translation from Jotiba's questioning to a contemporary questioning. To do this, she uses identifiable tropes and types, such as ›cartooning‹, which includes simplification, exaggeration, invention.⁶ The Brahmins, the heroes of traditional texts, are presented as fat, hairy, with huge moustaches, with looks of disdain on their faces, unlike the pink-skinned, fair, strong-bodied representations in the ACK or calendars. In fact, their representation is akin to that of the Rakshasas (evil forces) in the ACK, which in turn reflects the »Brahman's perspective« of the ›other‹. As Chandra has pointed out, it is usually the saints and deities in the ACK who occupy full page single panels (2018, 12). Technically the Brahmins deserve to inhabit that space, but here the creators subvert this expectation by posturing them as the ›villains‹. Ninan's inversion forces the reader-viewer to de-recognize and then re-recognize the representation, where the familiar is being made unfamiliar so that a new set of associa-

tions that challenge the norm can be evoked. For example, the sacred hair knot on a Brahmin's head, a distinguishing mark of the Brahmin, is used here to symbolise a mark of the ›villain‹ figure thereby altering recognisability. This is set up in contrast with the flower motif which is meant to be identified with Jotiba Phule, his perspective and by extension a position contrary to the dominant Brahmanical versions of history (see Fig. 4). Ninan deftly employs cartooning and caricature in the graphic form, which also affords *grotesquerie* very well. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, the lowering of all that is abstract, spiritual, noble, and ideal to the material level (Bakhtin, 18–19). Exaggeration, hyperbole and expressiveness are all key elements of the grotesque style. It particularly plays on the elements of the body – protruding parts, apertures or convexities like the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the pot-belly, the nose. For instance, the images in figure 5 focus attention on the fat mouths of the Brahmin figures, whose top knots are taut and secure, but their open mouths may suggest laughter or verbosity, and the spit drooling out of their mouths is symbolising ›the venom‹ they spout. The long tongue of the

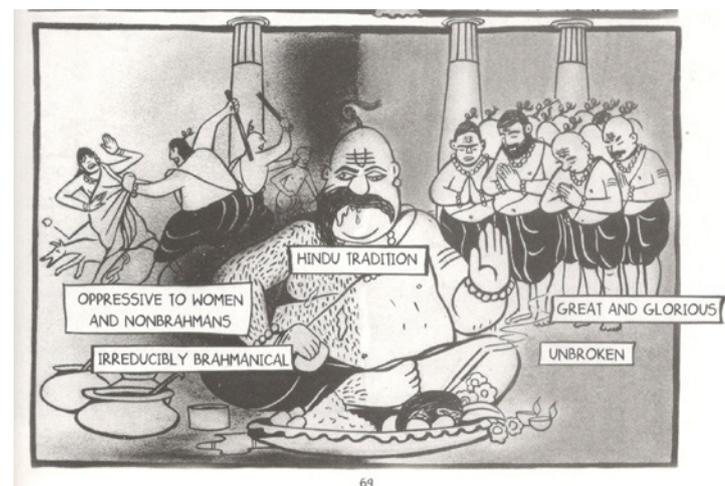


Fig 4: From »The Weed-bed of Myth«, *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, p. 67, 69.

Brahmin, like a long ream of paper coming out of the typewriter symbolises the far-reaching effects of their version of history and Hindu tradition that has held hegemonic power over Indian society. Thus, visuality draws attention to the need for change, and also perhaps visually enables change too, and as Christel Devadawson has also remarked, »pictorial anger has the potential for social change if deployed sensitively« (quoted in Dawson Varughese, xi). The visuals do not just mock, but unleash what Bakhtin saw as the people’s power, to renew and regenerate the entire social system by using the power of the people’s festive-carnival, a way to turn the official spectacle inside-out and upside down, just for a while, long enough to make an impression on the participating official stratum (Bakhtin, 26).

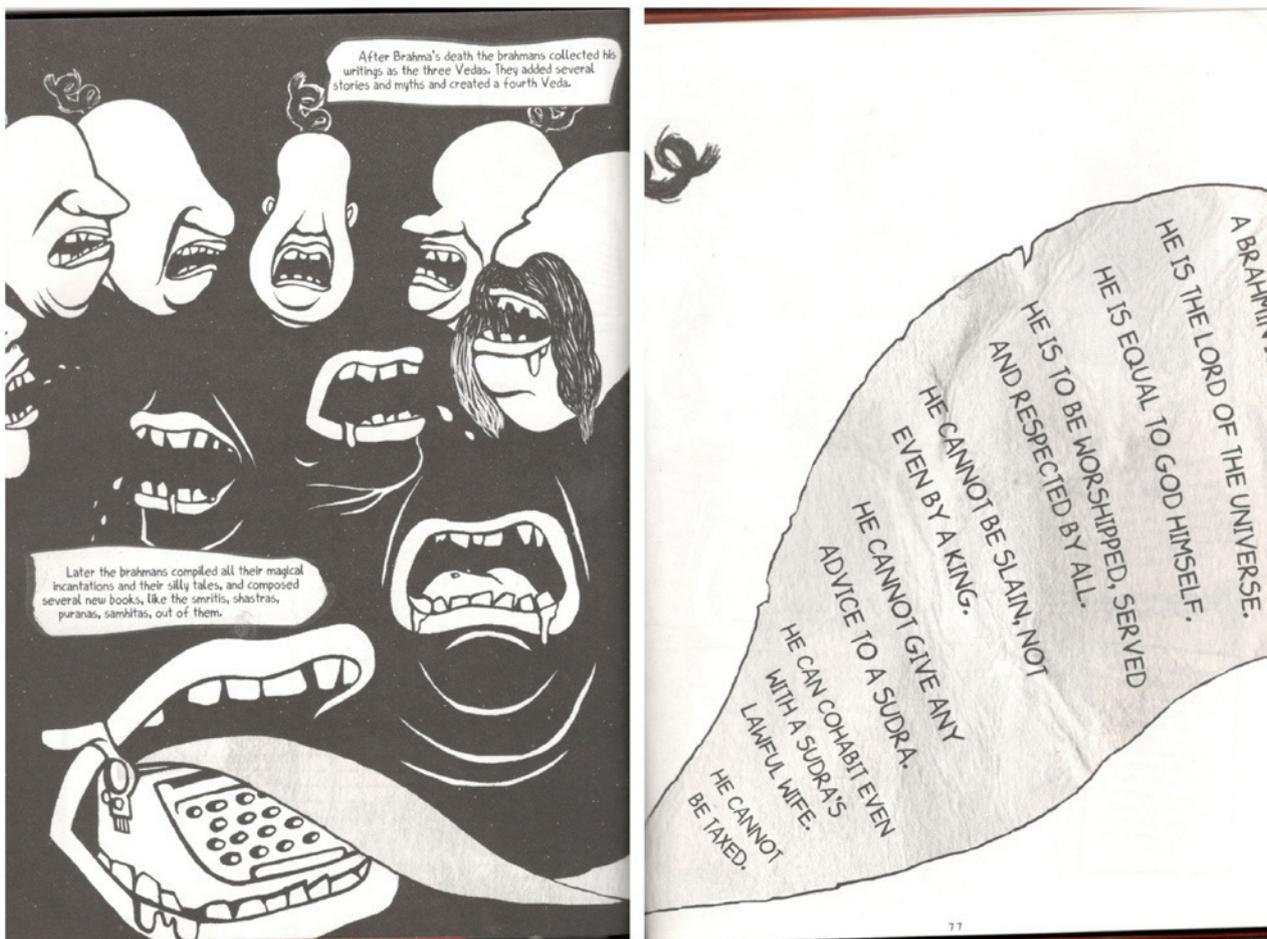


Fig 5: From »The Weed-bed of Myth«, *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, p. 76–77.

Natarajan and Ninan enact their roles as primary readers of Phule’s book *Gulamgiri* and anti-caste movements and then present them to their own contemporary readers. The view-from-the-present strategy, according to Nayar, can also be identified in the use of mixed registers in the vocabulary of the text. For instance, the 19th century land-owning Brahmin is given

the register of contemporary yuppie culture who calls tough labour »grunt work« and his life a »breeze« (GITW, 10). By telescoping the temporal frames and the use of »the contemporary jargon accesses a historical reality believed to be in the past« (Nayar 2016, 326). In addition, diatribes against Savitribai (Fig. 2), the law in the wanted poster, the icon for prohibition (GITW, 17) lend an everydayness to the struggle, to suggest that social reformers in the 19th century were as hunted as activists in the 21st (censoring, banning is quite the rage in India even in 2019). In figure 3 the use of sanitary napkins is also a way of contemporizing Phule’s witty remarks against caste beliefs. In the last panel of the book, where Ninan is shown reading Savitribai’s poem to Natarajan, four college students, a woman in a sari and a balding man are also in the vicinity overhearing the recitation (Fig. 6). This motley crowd mimics/metaphorises the readers, who are partaking Natarajan and Ninan’s narrative of the Phules, and with them unpacking the contemporaneity of Phule’s movement. The panel is overrun by the flowers that represent Phules’ movement, provoking »rise up now, to learn and to act« (GITW, 123). The listeners/readers/viewers of this story reach out into the past, but their past also resonates powerfully for an entirely different and varied generation of people by evoking their knowledge of events and points of reference. They become collaborators, engaging in an active process of working through Phule’s text *Gulamgiri / Slavery* and *A Gardener in the Wasteland*. As McCloud has remarked, the reader-viewers consciously and willingly participate as »agents of change, time and motion« (McCloud, 65). Like the opening pages, the last page brings us to the present, forcing the reader-viewer to engage more productively with history. According to Nayar, critical literacy on part of the reader-viewer enables them to »see texts as situated within

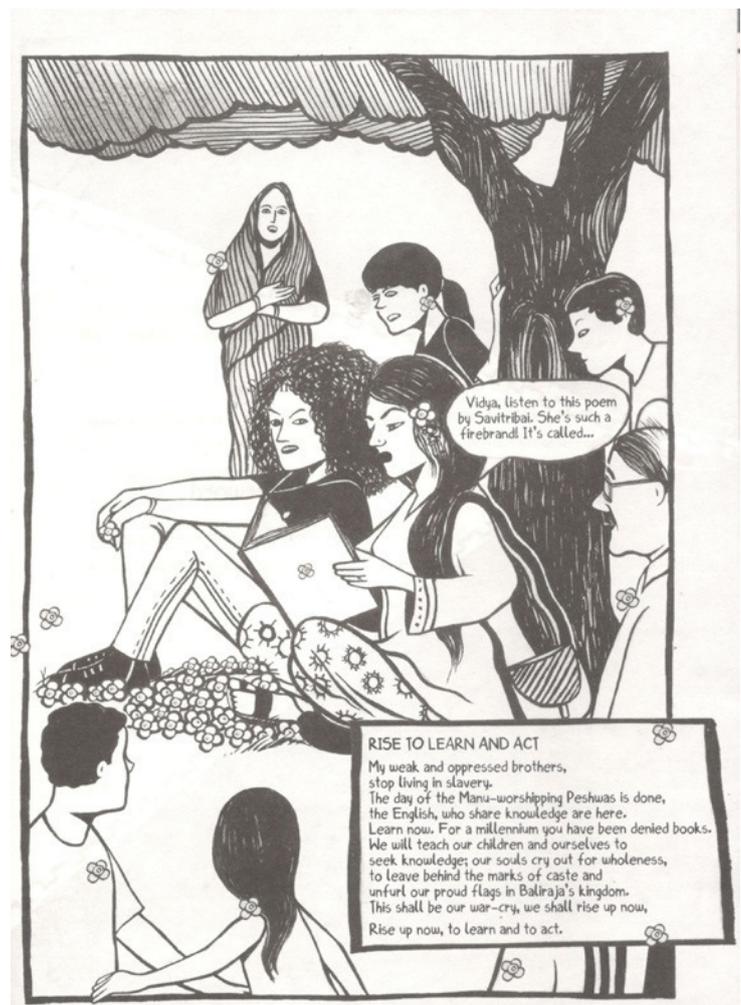


Fig 6: »The Seeds of Education«, *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, p. 123.

unequal social fields of caste, patriarchy, capitalism and demands that the reader becomes alert to the position he or she takes vis-à-vis not just the text but the social domains represented in it« (Nayar 2017, 8).

Thus, as Ninan exclaims in the text, »history, like myth, changes depending upon who writes it, who reads it« (GITW, 66). Jotiba wrote and spoke in order to shock, to have people do more than listen idly to a mild voice of reason, especially since there is no *deus ex machina* in the real social domain which would come to save humanity from codified exploitation, but rather an ordinary crusader calling for upliftment through education. Through a brief engagement with the story of the life and work of the Phules, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* offers a historically situated critical representation of caste exploitation in India, one that also reflects upon other kinds of oppressions and discriminations that plague its social and cultural systems.

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Fig. 5: Natarajan; Ninan, *A Gardener in the Wasteland. Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty*, p. 76–77.

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- 1] Hereafter GITW. All page references to the text are from Natarajan, Srividya (W) and Aparajita Ninan (A): *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2016 [2011].
- 2] The socio-political history of caste in India is complex, and I provide only a bare-bone idea here, while *A Gardener in the Wasteland* itself adeptly brings the conflicts to the fore verbally and visually (see, for example, GITW, 32–61). For detailed explanations and discussions, refer to Raj Kumar, Louis Dumont, Gail Omvedt, Rosalind O'Hanlon, in addition to the writings of Phule and BR Ambedkar. The *varnashramadharma* is a system of social stratification that institutes caste as a hierarchy based on exploitation, dated to the later Vedic period of 1400 BC (see Kumar, 115–125). One of the most quoted books *Manusmriti (Writings of the Sage Manu, 1000BC)* elaborates how Hindu society is divided into four *varnas*/castes: *Brahmins* – the upper-most caste of priests and scholars (mythically said to be born of Brahma-the creator God's head), »according to the *Shastras*, the Brahmin is appointed to be the Guru for the three *varnas*« (Ambedkar, 10). *Kshatriyas* are upper-caste comprising of rulers, warriors and administrators (born of Brahma's arms), while *Vaishyas* are mostly traders and businessman (born of Brahma's thighs). The *Shudras* are the worker caste, mostly labourers (who are born from Brahma's feet). *Ati-Shudras* – literally, beyond or outside *varna*/caste – were vehemently kept out of all civil society functions, pejoratively referred to as »untouchables«, prohibited from even coming near a member of the upper castes, denied dignity and basic human rights (see Ambedkar, 12). According to Ambedkar, the stratification of occupations which are the result of the caste system are »positively pernicious« and »not a division based on choice« (Ambedkar, 16–17). Social reform movements continuing in to the twentieth century have re-identified *ati-shudras* as *Dalit*, especially by Ambedkar to raise solidarity and create a political identity among those oppressed and persecuted by caste divisions.
- 3] Marianne Hirsch borrows this term from Shoshana Felman, who uses it to discuss the dissonance in a seemingly straightforward narrative, particularly of trauma. Hirsch suggests that in a graphic narrative, such dissonance can take on many visual forms.
- 4] See Susie Tharu and K Lalitha's *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*. Savitribai's birthday on 3rd January is now celebrated as National Teachers' Day in India.
- 5] The ›Angry Young Man‹ figure of the cinema of the 1970s, ubiquitous with the characters portrayed by Amitabh Bachchan, featured a new hero emerging from the bowels of the

city, representing the anger of a generation whose dreams lay shattered. He was ordinary in looks and attire, flawed, yet the perfect lover, the best friend of the helpless and the devil to the evil.

- 6] Scott McCloud uses the term cartooning to refer to a way of seeing to link past, present and future. He is perhaps thinking of Ernst Gombrich on caricature who discusses how style is deployed to make a drawing funny, crude, indignant yet *simple*.