Decoding the Visual Narrative of Atrocity in Sajad Malik's Munnu

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Abstract

This paper is based on the study of Sajad Malik's graphic novel Munnu. The study focuses on the nature of graphic novel, graphic/visual narrative, and its ability to circumvent certain linguistic limitations of narratives. The study significantly locates the discussion of Munnu in the unpacking and understanding of the notion of "space" and "conflict". In a Barthes-ean sense, this paper also examines the idea of "reader-space" which is effectively accessed using visual narrative. This paper futher examines how Sajad Malik employs the graphic narrative to present atrocities on the people of Kashmir. It examines Sajad Malik's portrayal of Kashmiris as victims of atrocity and also evaluates the effectiveness of portrayal of the same using visual narrative. The paper explores instances from the novel to evaluate construction of spaces of conflict used to portray the plight of the Kashmiris from the perspective of the narrator.

Keywords: Graphic Narrative, Space, Atrocity, Reader-Space, Conflict, Cultural Universal

1. Introduction

Munnu, a graphic novel by Sajad Malik, is an account of Kashmir - set in the city of Srinagar – as seen from the eyes of a child. The title of Malik's graphic narrative Munnu, A Boy from Kashmir employs the innocent child's first person narrative mostly throughout the novel. Even when the boy has grown up, the narrative invests a childlike naiveté in him thus making the readers feel that the voice is still of the boy even when it is an adult speaking. The storyline of this coming-of-age novel focuses on the journey of Munnu becoming Sajad.

Figure 1 Cover pages of Sajad Malik's Munnu and Spiegelman's Maus

The plot however zooms in more on the conflict and tension present in the setting of Kashmir and suggests that these could be the formative influence on Sajad's perspectives leading to designing graphic narrative "spaces" focusing on "Atrocities". It might almost be appropriate to suggest that Munnu is not so much a bildungsroman as much as it documents and foregrounds conflicts in Kashmir.

The plot construction is akin to that of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel Maus in which Spiegelman narrates the story of a Holocaust survivor, Vladek who is Spiegelman's father. Spiegelman shows Jews as mice and Germans as Cats and establishes a powerful representation of a predator-prey event Holocaust

In Munnu, Sajad Malik represents Kashmiris as the endangered species of Deer (the Hanguls) thus establishing a potent representation of the fear of annihilation of Kashmiris - by implication Muslims in Kashmir. The cover pages/title pages of *Munnu* and *Maus* both iconize victims using the deer and mice respectively as visual metaphors with atrocity and trauma being the central concerns.

2. Design of Munnu as a Graphic Novel

In *On defining Visual Narratives*, Sherline Pimenta and Ravi Poovaiah examine terms like *films*, *narrative paintings*, *history paintings*, *animation*, *pictorial narratives*, *sequential art*, *comics*, and a *narrative illustration* with the view to examining "visual narrative" and its representational technique. The most significant feature of visual narrative is that it has a story literally visible. A 'story' is then a description of a connected series of events - true or imagined - with very often characters involved (Pimenta and Poovaiah. 2010). Richardson, in *Recent Concepts of Narrative and the Narratives of Narrative Theory,* examines narrative as: "a representation of a causally related series of events". His definition would include verbal as well as nonverbal narratives (in painting, ballet, mime, etc); "causally related" would be understood as "generally connected" or part of the same general causal matrix--a much looser, more oblique, and indefinite relation than direct entailment .."(Richardson, 2010) A "visual narrative" would thus get defined as a visual that might narrate a story wherein 'visual' refers to a sensorial experience perceived (with eyes), and 'story' referring to events that could be linked with "causality, temporality, or sequence of occurrence." 'Narrative', would refer to the act of telling a story. Characteristics of a visual narrative/graphic narrative would then be: "a) Visual narrative essentially has a story and could belong to any genre and that the visual is constructed with the objective of communicating a story to a possible onlooker. b) There is a presence of characters/actors that perform action - static or dynamic. c) Visual Narrative has its own universe and can be presented using any medium, namely stone, paper, electronic device, etc. Furthermore, visuals that get represented in visual narratives would be "expected to be so well known within the context that it does not require an accompanying text."" (Pimenta and Poovaiah, 2010) In this context, graphic narrative would comprise the art resulting in the design and construction of a two dimensional fictional "space" fixated (printed) on paper.

A "cultural" universal by its own definition is an "element, pattern, trait, or institution that is common to all human cultures worldwide" (Learning, 2009). A cultural universal thus allows the creation of "space"- of organizations, control, education, conflict, ideologies, etc. Readers connect with characters functioning in such a "space" due to the global/universality of the pattern or the trait in question; and, this could be violence, atrocity, trauma, or taboo, etc. These cultural universals thus lead to the creation of "semantic" universals – linguistic nuances common to human experiences - thus allowing readers or receivers of communication to assimilate the meaning without ambiguity. If cultural universals generalize the common factors of society and socio-cultural relations comprising "space", it then becomes pertinent to study what might be considered as semantic universals of *space*. "Space" - as one of the seminal elements of art - can be positive, negative, open or closed, deep or shallow, two dimensional or three dimensional and is fundamental to visual art and thus to visual narrative. "Space" gives perspectives and reference for interpretation of a work of art. In this context, art then escapes the idea of being a tool to provide merely 'retinal pleasure' ("Marcel Duchamp" 2011). Duchamp explores art as a medium of chaos and anarchy. However, the most significant movement of Duchamp's perspectives comes in the claim in which he decides that art need not carry the burden of beauty or aesthetics. This perspective allows art then to focus freely and without any hindrance on the construction and portrayal of cultural/human universals especially in graphic novels/visual narratives. Duchamp's theory becomes significant to a graphic novel, because it becomes necessary for the art employed in a graphic novel to not distract the reader with its aesthetics and instead remain focused on the theme of the novel.

In his "The Death of the Author" , Roland Barthes states that a text is not " a line of words releasing single 'theological' meaning (the message of Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes,1990) . Barthes further states that a text is a 'tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture', and says that "the Reader" is the "space" on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost. In this context, if the reader is the "space" in which all content is written indelibly then it is necessary for a text to ensure that the transaction

between the "reader space" and the fictional time-space continuum is not contaminated by the politics of sequencing (narration). However this ideal is mostly discarded rather than implemented. Extrapolating this to the unpacking of the fifth panel in figure 3, it is easily perceived that Malik attempts to literally "shape" the impact of narration through the portrayal of the slain deer dragged on the street. Constructing "space" is akin to the process of constructing existence and puts the author in the position of God. In the physical space of the page in the novel, the author creates a visual narrative in which linguistic and non-linguistic elements interplay continuously and continually. These elements then also constantly interplay with the panels which concretely display the setting, informs of tone, and other para-information which constantly modifies the reader perception. "Space" in a graphic novel thus becomes a dynamic manifest-entity which remains in a state of flux and creates a semantic field capable of inducing the author's payload of ideologies into the reader space that it contacts. *Munnu* thus employs visual narrative to deliver the payload of "Atrocity" discourse to a target "reader-space".

Sajad Malik's *Munnu* examines the cultural universality of "atrocity", and "trauma" in his graphic novel. Upon delving deeper into the objective of portraying "atrocity" and "trauma" of Kashmiris, Malik effectively creates the most effective "space" of conflict: the deer. As a symbol, the deer has always been associated universally as a victim - something that is always hunted by a predator. The deer then becomes a "space of conflict" by itself. By placing a deer in a setting where perpetrators of atrocity (Indian Army) and the hope for liberation (Western Agency) are humans, the deer becomes the symbolic space of conflict designed to declare that the people of Kashmir are victims. From the point of view of narrating the "deer" as a space of conflict, the reader gets to see how the pictorial size of a deer killed occupies most space in a given pane. The graphic content thus interacts with the consciousness of the reader thereby making the reader's consciousness the "space" with which the deer interacts.
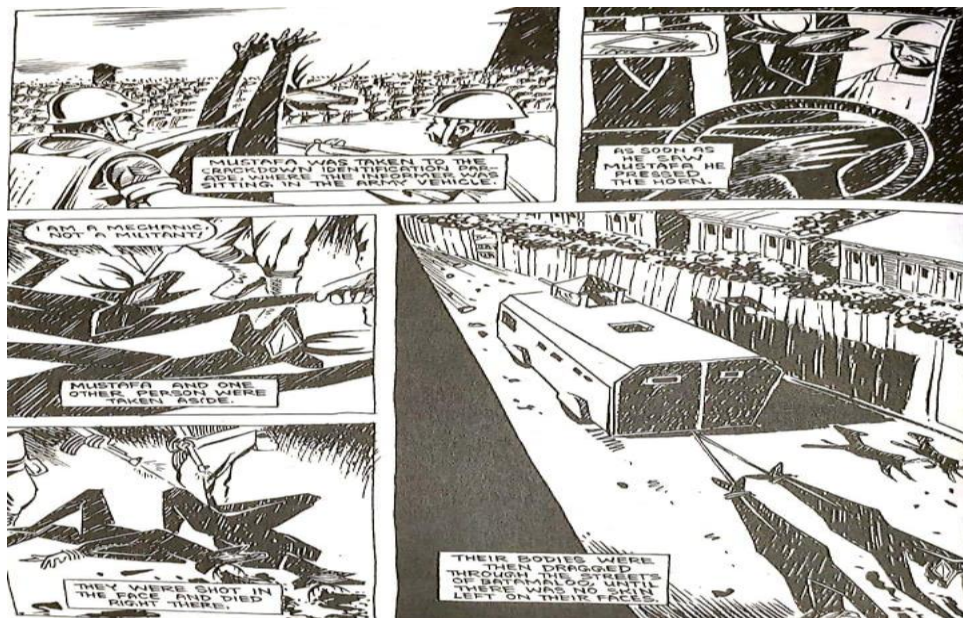

Figure 2 Sajad, Munnu : A Boy from Kashmir,38

The physical space on a page allows the reader to "read" the graphic content and the linguistic content together as an experience of simultaneity, thus also allowing the reader to actually see the conflict on the page. In figure 3, the fifth panel becomes of particular interest: the panel depicts a military vehicle dragging the bodies of the slain deer (Kashmiris) through the streets. The voice over in the panel informs that "there was no skin left". If this panel were to be considered as an exemplar of construction of "space of conflict", then the cultural universal of a prey that has been hunted and paraded gets established through the picture of the deer. The slain deer occupies a significant amount of visual space in the foreground of the panel and that the military vehicle has been placed in the mid-ground. The manipulation of graphic weight instantly draws attention to the deer in black in otherwise an overtly white background. The panel thus becomes a singular segment of "space" in which the pictography of the graphic novel thus essentially draws the reader's mind into the position of an eye-witness of the conflict forcing the reader to take a stance. The visual thus gains access to the "reader space", and the voice over in the panel begins to play in the mind of the reader who participates more as witness than a reader. The entire action thus gets transferred to the psychological "space" in the reader's mind/consciousness. One only needs to estimate the collective impact of several panels in the entire novel which manipulate the reader-"space".

Figure 3 Sajad, Munnu : A Boy from Kashmir,264

In figure 3 the author depicts a deer (Munnu) kissing a lady named Paisley. Multiple aspects get narrated simultaneously here: a) the reader "reads" the kiss and understand a relationship b) the reader also sees a deer kissing a human lady c) the reader also sees that the lady is a westerner d) the reader at the same time also perceives the subtext of the endangered deer's appeal to the representative of the West. Thus in the physicality of the panel the reader perceives semantic multiplicity. Munnu – the deer - feeds the lady with a narrative about Kashmir, infatuated with the idea that the West will come in as a savior. It is in this discussion, Munnu makes a passing reference to why Kashmiri Pandits fled. Munnu explains (Fig 4) how "thousands of Kashmiri Brahmins converted to Islam" in the shrine visited by a Sufi saint, Syed Mir Hamdani who preached Islam (Sajad,257). Furthermore, Munnu narrates to Paisley: "We hardly cared who was Pandit and who was Muslim", (Sajad,281) and that after the eruption of the armed struggle against Indian "occupation", the Pandits erroneously thought that it was Kashmiri Muslims versus Kashmiri Pandits. Munnu further informs Paisley that Kashmiri Pandits left because they were a minority and that they felt insecure and vulnerable. He also goes on to describe an instance of a Pandit family having stayed with his family for a few weeks.
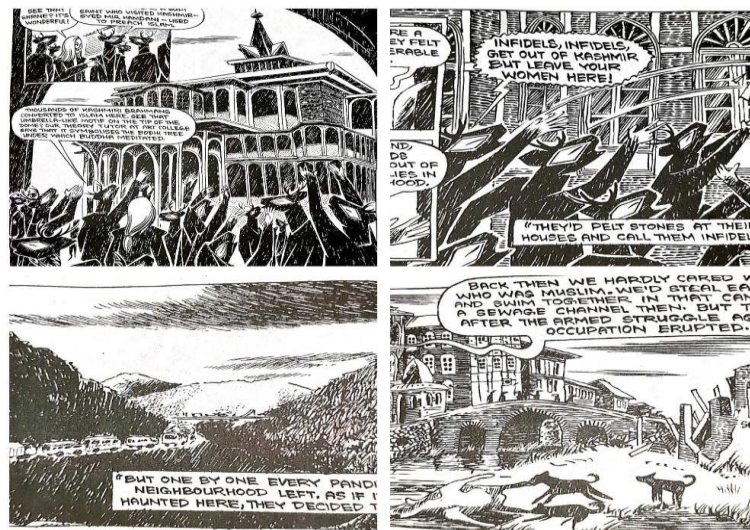

Figure 4 Sajad, Munnu : A Boy from Kashmir,283-284

In a non-graphic narrative, this act and the accompanying ideas and ideology would need detailing using

1277

Figure 5 Sajad, Munnu : A Boy from Kashmir, 300

complex metaphors or descriptors. However, the graphic narrative allows the narration to "icon-ize" content, and creates visible metaphors. In this instance from the chapter "Memories", the visual narrative not only captures the anxiety and tension of the turbulent times in Kashmir, but also betrays the atrocities faced by the Kashmiri Pandits (brahmins) who had to flee Kashmir and were reduced to refugees. Interestingly, Malik does not choose an alternative icon to represent the plight of Kashmiri Pandits. In a single panel, the visual narrative also depicts Kashmiri Pandits as the same deer used to portray "other" Kashmiris (interpreted as Muslims). From the point of view of designing a "space of conflict", this particular panel is significant as it camouflages the identity of a Kashmiri Pandit. One may interpret that Munnu is a tale of a Kashmiri victim in which both Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims are victims and hence both get iconized a deer.

However in the chapter "Installation Art", Malik employs the representation of Islamophobia by representing Hindu (Brahmin looking icons) characters that are intolerant of a Kashmiri. The iconized Hindu wears the look of a Brahmin (Fig. 5) with a *tilak* on his forehead. The space of conflict created in this chapter is communal. In this space, Munnu is seen defending himself piteously as a victim of being alienated by Indians who demand to see his passport and assume that he (stereotypically) is a terrorist.

As a graphic novel, *Munnu* employs all aspects of conventionally written novels, such as elements of narrative, characterization, and setting. However, the form of graphic novel allows development of ideas in a very short reading time thus making it a potent tool for propagandist agenda. Graphic content in the form of comic art is always available to the readership of newspapers and requires no erudition to understand and appreciate it. In creating a character using art, it is possible to create a recurrence of the same character with which readers begin to identify. Readers also gain a cumulative familiarity with the character's personality and his contexts which will remain static at all times.

The history of graphic narratives shows that it often has a didactic quality in the way they seem to moralize and rationalize about the actions they present in order to either lionize a virtue or demonize a people, an idea, or an ideology. Furthermore, graphic narratives predicate themselves on the cognition of the reader on how (s)he makes sense of the known world. Given this, the visual element or the aesthetic, iconic and the representational aspects in a graphic narrative become objects on stage which are charged and animated with potent signification, adopting meanings beyond what might simply represent in the routine worldly affairs. This leads us to the most significant difference between graphic narrative and stage performance. The difference lies in that:

the drawings that make up the story are not at all dependent on being real objects in real space and real time to establish the story; rather, the images are compiled in the reader's mind, and inferences are drawn from the similarities and differences between the available visual forms and how that information correlates to real experience. Graphic narratives not only describe the real world, after a fashion; they tend to be figurative, focusing especially on ways of describing a body in motion. The human figure provides the reader with a vehicle for emotional empathy. Bodies can also give a story a kind of spontaneity and allow the reader to see the action represented as if it is happening or unfolding before the reader's eyes. Bodies, and especially faces, communicate this spontaneity through the way they are intimately connected to our perceptions of body language. Readers naturally look to bodies and faces for clues to determine expression. (Petersen,18)

3. Iconizing Atrocity and Trauma in Munnu

Conventionally, 'conflict' in literature has always dealt with a struggle or a state of incompatibility, and it can be either "internal" (Man Vs Self) or "external" (Man vs Society, or Man Vs Nature, or Man Vs Technology, etc.) or both. In this context, it might be easier to view Atrocity as a resultant of external conflict, and Trauma as internal conflict. However, it would be inappropriate to say that each of this conflict-type is exclusive of the other. When it comes to trauma, it is something that is owned by a character or a person and is recreated as an artistic creation by the author. For atrocity, the reader gets to see mostly the intentions of the forces that subjugate a character into a victim. Atrocity thus becomes a human universal in a given 'space of conflict' by presenting not only a summation of collective pain as experienced by a community or a people or a race, but also showcasing individual trauma. According to Harriet E A Earle, narratives of conflict is a "*genre that gives voice to traumatic experiences, the difficulties faced in recovery, and a multitude of small things that combine to create a conflict experienced by the individuals who recreate it in narratives and art.*"

The interplay between "Atrocity" and "Trauma" is clear visible in the chapter "A Shoe and A Nylon Bag" in which Munnu recounts the incident of being molested by a soldier.
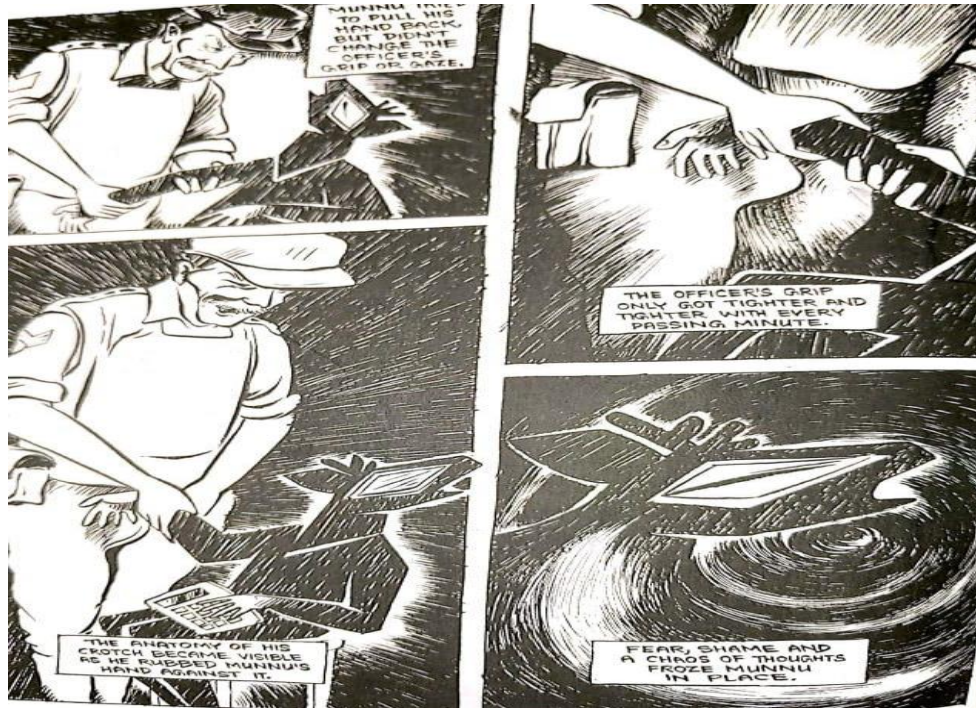
Figure 6 Sajad, Munnu : A Boy from Kashmir,142

In rendering the atrocity of the act of molestation, Malik employs four panels prominently (Fig 6) with graphic of these panels depending on the use of back tone: the voice over describes the simultaneity of the soldier grabbing Munnu's hand and the corresponding experience of horror and shame that Munnu experiences. The visual narrative achieves captures "Atrocity" and "Trauma" in a moment-to-moment transitions through panels. The voice over in the fourth panel in figure 6 informs that "Fear, Shame and a chaos of thoughts froze Munnu". The camera angle in this panel zooms in on the symbolic spiral in the background in the process of making the reader imagine that Munnu is getting sucked into it. The gyration effect created by a prominent black graphic weight of the panel and a prominent white of the deer's eye allows a reader witness Munnu's trauma without being distracted by aesthetics of artistic processes. The black gyrating figure thus becomes the proverbial rabbit hole in which Munnu is dragged into due to the act of molestation. Additionally, the gyrating black also allows the reader to connect with the psychological universal of a nightmare. All the four panels with a pitch black background create the nightmarish sequence of Munnu's violation. The molester present in the third panel occupies a complete panel space –from top to bottom – almost breaching the walls of the frame. The representation amplifies the monstrosity of the act and by implication of the act of "Atrocity". In this case in the black background, the molester presents himself in a towering and prominent white tone: almost a photo negative of the evil black tone. From Barthes-ean perspective, the gyration of the fourth panel in the figure hypnotically suggests to a reader to internalize Munnu's trauma creating a certain singularity of consciousness between the character and that of the reader. The visual narrative thus succeeds in integrating "reader-space" with "fictional space".

Sajad Malik's *Munnu* is localized in Srinagar, the main city in Kashmir, against backdrop of clashes, curfews, and arbitrary detentions as the Indian army suppressed a separatist insurgency that reached its peak in the 1990s. Malik presents Kashmir as a heavily militarized zone.

In the chapter "Koyas, Koyas" (Fig 7), Munnu tries to chide his peers who are shown spitting on Lord Shiva's idol – a clear affront to Hindus. However, the rest of the narrative assumes the stance of a child's innocent-eye-view to sound genuine and innocent about vilifying the Indian government and the Indian Army.

Figure 7 Sajad, Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir, 92

The clearest reason as to why Sajad Malik's *Munnu* qualifies as "Atrocity Literature" is that the novel not only weaponizes art/graphic techniques in creating "spaces" showcasing "Atrocity, but also more significantly does not present a counter-narrative except for those instances wherein the narrative wears secular tones. There is no counter narrative in the novel that portrays the Indian perspective (almost a conclusion doubting what kind of counter narrative could have been included in Art Spiegelman's Maus that portrayed the Nazi and German perspective of the Holocaust?), and the act of Munnu's protest at spitting on Lord Shiva's idol is far from being an innocent protest. It seems more of a suggestion to be wary of being caught in the act than that of condemning the person spitting on the idol of a Hindu god.Malik's *Munnu* then seeks to portray "atrocities" committed by the Indian Army and suggests that an intervention from Pakistan could be a solution. The narrative depicts several characters crossing the line of control to get trained for the "Azad Kashmir (Free Kashimir)" revolution

(Fig 8).

Figure 8 Sajad, Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir,209

It would be reductive and inadequate to say that *Munnu* is a story of a boy in Kashmir; it presents a story of Kashmir using a narrative involving a modified omniscient narrator with a "child's eye view" in order to claim reliability, and possibly create a sense of pathos by showing Kashmiris as victims. The humanoid "defamiliarized" deer present themselves as victims at the hands of the erpetrators of atrocities. While the form of the novel allows Malik to detail minutely the narrative only becomes more iconic and representational in its

Figure 9 Sajad, Munnu : A Boy from Kashmir,333

anti-India rhetoric. The author cleverly uses the child-eye-view to present the alleged atrocities committed by the Indian government and the Indian Army so as to create a situational irony and pathos to influence a western readership.

If *Munnu* is a coming-of-age novel in a graphic form, the icons (endangered deer) seem to maintain a stasis instead of growth. Physical features or appearances do not seem to change or evolve in the fictional time and space. A pertinent reason here seems to be the (unconscious) need to retain the "innocent" child's view to maintain reliability. The novel also presents Munnu growing up to become a political cartoonist who is very inspired to construct a narrative of victimization for a western audience. In the chapter, "Endangered Species," Malik undertakes to publish a graphic novella in the fashion of Joe Sacco. He speaks of using the "'national' animal of Kashmir" referring to the red stag (Hangul) as the icon to portray atrocities. The chapter champions the cause of constructing atrocity literature aimed at demonizing India as Munnu eventually considers using terms like "Kashmiri *Intifada*" (Fig 10)as the title of the book as it might make it "easy for the international audience to understand" his story. *Intifada*(s) refer(s) to the Palestinian uprising against Israel and mean an "uprising" or an act of rebellion. While the first *Intifada* was spontaneous in 1990s with demonstrations and non-violent protests, the second intifada (2000–2005) called for violent means to protest again Israel (Beauchamp, 2014).
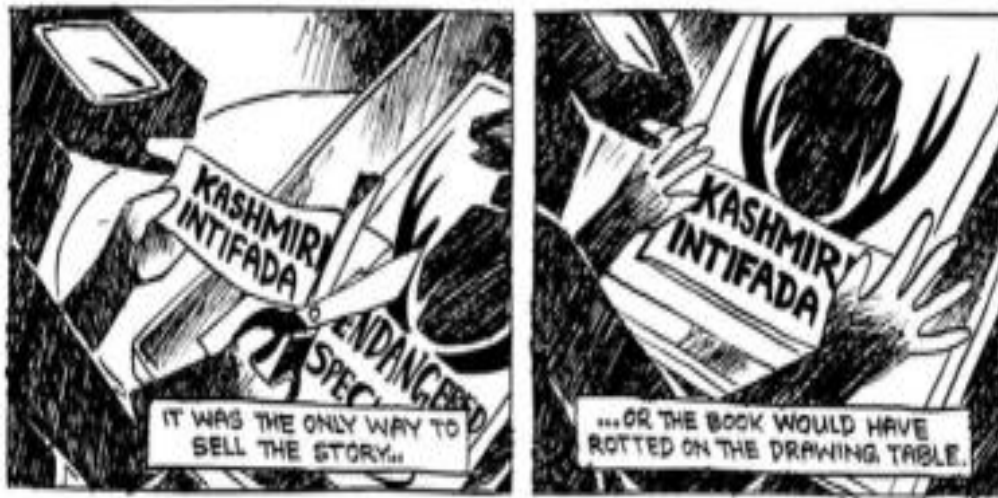

Figure 10 Sajad, Munnu : A Boy from Kashmir,335

Malik's (Munnu's) willingness to use the term "*intifada*" gives the narration of atrocity a journalistic quality creating a sense of pathos through the innocent child's eye-view. However, the reliability of the narrative tends to lose credibility once again due to lack of credible counter-narrative pertaining to the role of religion, radicalization, and the political crisis with Pakistan. In an attempt to appeal for an (Western) intervention, Malik depicts Munnu "innocently" inquiring with his sister on her act of painting a swastika on the door. The graphical allusion to the swastika (Fig 11) effectively let a Western readership equate atrocities in Kashmir with that of the cultural universal of the Holocaust.

Figure 11 Sajad, Munnu : A Boy from Kashmir, 13

Reading a graphic narrative, such as a modern comic, requires some translation of coded images into real experience. However, the images are remarkably transparent in their meaning and do not need instructions or a lexicon for their comprehension. (Petersen 1961) In the chapter "Footnotes" Malik attempts to present the history of Kashmir (though atrocities!) which might need confirmation of a historical register. Through the chapter, Malik continues to take the reader through sight of graves, the Indian army firing at Kashmiris, and a covert rationalism of the "freedom movement." The point that comes to the fore is that Malik does not refrain from interfacing the history of militancy as the mainstream history of Kashmir. Quite typical of "Atrocity Literature," the narrative of such a genre also seeks to portray certain ambivalence, very often to sound non-offensive, neutral, and "secular" about the *intifada*. Malik's choice to portray the history of Kashmir by predicating it on Indian "excesses" makes the graphic narrative militant and weaponized. A little portrayal on how militant outfits did not unify for the cause of "Azad Kashmir," meets with only a little censuring of a betrayed Kashmiri who expected much more from the militants projected as fighting against atrocities perpetrated on Kashmiris.

According to Rajiv Malhotra in "Atrocity Literature" or a discourse, the narrative gets decided first to fit into a pre-decided media campaign supported by twisted "facts." Not providing a counter-narrative is a passive way of allowing the "facts" to get twisted. The reference to mourners and protesters "battling" with the army inform the readers of Malik's perspectives as a narrator.

Furthering the perspective on "Atrocity Literature," Rajiv Malhotra informs that the community generating it plays the victim; and, expects the community towards which the literature is targeted to be defensive and feel guilty.

This genre of literature thrived on half-truths, selecting items from here and there, and stitching themes together into a narrative that played on the reader's psyche with preconceived stereotypes. It sought to create a sense of heightened urgency in dealing with savagery. Once a target culture is branded and marked in this way, it becomes the recipient of all sorts of untoward allegations. It becomes impossible for the leaders of any such branded culture to defend themselves against the bombardment of false charges and depictions. In order to defend oneself, one has to first acknowledge the false allegations, which legitimize them and make a victory for the other side. (Malhotra 2011)

In this light, Malik's narrative draws Indians as perpetrators of savagery and creates a sense of urgency for foreign intervention.

4.Conclusion:

Sajad Malik's *Munnu* is a visual narrative of "atrocity" especially in the light of Rajiv Malhotra's perspective of the term. Sajad Malik's *Munnu* could've also been written in a conventional narrative style of prose given

that visual narratives often invite the ire of critics for not being literary enough due to linguistic complexity and abstraction being substituted with graphic content. Additionally, visuals carry the burden of representation, and that the metaphor in language is done away due to the visual aspect being more literal than a complex metaphor constructed using language. Such perspectives are not wholly wrong because there is ample scope to draw a sharper psychographic representation of a traumatized character using linguistic content. However, upon examining the ability of visual narrative of interfacing with the "reader space", one recognizes that a visual narrative is actually more complex as the reader not only has to read the graphic and linguistic elements, but also has to read the complete fictional space in any given panel. "Space", its design, and use become a very significant aspect in a narration. A graphic novel thus also gets labelled as a static movie wherein each frame/panel remains static on a page. It is necessary to recognize that the reader or the reader's consciousness is the most important space for any plot to occur. Even when a plot is constructed with a specific design of conflict it is the reader participates in the several "spaces" that an author creates. A space can be physical, abstract, and philosophical. In this space an author constructs conflict using icons and representations graphically.

Given Sajad Malik's intention of constructing Munnu as a piece of "atrocity" literature, it can be surmised that the visual medium allows the symbolism of a deer belonging to an endangered species to be more accessible to a common reader incapable of intellectual sights developed through unpacking complex metaphors and linguistic devices. The visual narrative of *Munnu* by allowing accessibility to a mediocre reader acquires a certain propagandist value. The trauma experienced by the deer constantly interfaces with the consciousness of the reader thereby seeding Sajad's intentions in the readers of Munnu. The visual narrative thus becomes a a code or a linguistic algorithm that programmes a reader.

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