Graffiti And Myths: A Semiotic Analysis of Graffiti In Bengaluru

Suchitha B
Asst. Professor Department Of Arts Jain University- School Of Humanities And Social Sciences

ABSTRACT: *Graffiti refers to visual art created in the form of sketches, drawings, paintings in public location, outside of traditional venues. It can range from just text to elaborate wall paintings in public places. This works as a form of visual communication for artists to speak out to public in large. Even though its existence can be traced back to ancient Greek times, it gained popularity in the 70's. This art continues to be used prominently as a potent form of political expression, social change or activism. The study will be conducted on five graffiti located in urban spaces of Bengaluru in an attempt to understand the cultural meanings generated by it. Roland Barthes' theory of mythology will be used as a framework of analysis to understand the second order of signification within these graffiti. The color, text and visual imagery will be used to analyze the myth within these graffiti. The study will further aim at establishing the presence of any dominant theme in these graffiti that reflects the cultural landscape of the city.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Graffiti : a form of visual communication The term graffiti originated from the greet word 'graphein' which means 'to write'. Graffiti refers to writings, drawings that have been scribbles, scratched or painted on a surface within public view. It can range from just words to elaborate paintings. The graffiti revolution took place primarily in 1970's and 80's, originating in New York City along with the emergence of hip hop culture. Social spaces became a platform for people to express their frustrations and deep-rooted resentments. The world became their canvas and they began mapping social symbols through graffiti art on public spaces for the geo-specific audiences, with symbols ranging from individual to social perceptions.

Graffiti works as a form of visual communication, a room for dialogue with the world through visual art. It can be a social, cultural or political commentary that links the world to these art forms. "...like the idea of the artist going out in the world and creating a dialogue. So I try to write something I think people need to hear, or rehear. Something to make them think, to be in that moment" (Fleming, 2007), Graffiti art saw its growth paralleling with the hip hop culture which were primarily tools of the marginalized groups of the society. Bengaluru in the recent years has become a canvas for artists to communicate in public spaces. The graffiti around the city are reflection of designs that spread powerful messages embedded culturally into the society. From public walls to buildings, artists have chosen to deliver powerful messages to the residents and visitors of the city, messages that are laden with thought provoking images and text. The attempt to create new meanings in a city like Bengaluru that has been undergoing tremendous changes at a rapid pace needs to be mapped in order to assess the true effects of newer meanings generated in these messages.

Graffiti – a myth making process

Roland Barthes in his book mythologies, states that myth is 'type of a speech', "a system of communication (Barthes, 151). It does not refer to an object but the way in which a message is delivered. Barthes borrows from Saussure's Semiology of signifier and signified and asserts that myth is a system of signification and connotation, which reflects dominant ideology hidden behind any text. Myth is the second-order semiological system, in which the sign, which is the final term of the first semiological system, becomes the first term, a signifier, of the myth system. This signifier is coupled with its connotation to become a myth. Barthes considers the emptying of meaning by form and a continued restoration of form by meaning, what he calls "the constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form" (Barthes, 142) as definitive of all myths. Graffiti, due to its nature of commentary or visual dialogue makes it open for appropriation and open to the existence of dominant ideologies. Through the system of myth, the historical becomes universal.

II. METHODOLOGY

Theoretical framework

The study uses Roland Barthes 's mythology as a framework for analyzing graffiti in Bangalore. Each graffito will be deconstructed and will be analyzed for signs and the myths behind it. The concept of meta-

language Graffiti will be analyzed culturally through this framework to understand the presence of a dominant theme through this commentary.

Sample

For the purpose of this study, purposive sampling technique will be used. Five graffiti around the Bangalore will be used for the study. The photographs of these five graffiti will be studied culturally.

III. METHOD

The photograph of each graffito will be read culturally, it will be deconstructed for its iconic symbols, signs and the hidden myth. This myth will give birth to a 'new langue', which can then be read as an universal sign. The five graffiti will then lead to understanding if there is a presence of a dominant theme in graffiti in Bangalore. This will aid in the understanding of the kind of communication that such art forms cater to.

Analysis & Discussion

GRAFFITO #1

A graffiti of a face with the text " Ignorance is blindness of the soul", located in Malleshwaram.,Bengaluru

Mythological Analysis

The text "ignorance is blindness of the soul" is borrowed from Edward Counsel's maxims written in 1867 that reflects the ideologies of politics, philosophy and morality that people should follow. This signifies the growth of intellectualism and the need for dominant morale ideologies to seep into the daily public life through such rules of conduct. The image of a man's face, devoid of any emotion in grey and black is a reflection of how the movement of industrialization on the world mechanized humans to move towards a society that is determined by the consumption of products. People fit into everyday routines, forgetting the essence of emotional value. The colours used also reflect death, morbidity and boredom. Today, the society is driven by consumption. People work to make money to buy products and services. Identities are created through brands and possessions of materialistic things. The graffiti reflects a message of how people tend to ignore knowledge and real emotions in order to fit into their mechanized custom made lives, they eventually become devoid of emotions making them a person without any soul. A colourful graffito of a face , with the text in kannada " Navu idhivi" , which translates to "We exist" in English , located at Navadhuri underpass, Bengaluru.

GRAFFITO #2

A colourful graffito of a face , with the text in kannada " Navu idhivi" , which translates to "We exist" in English , located at Navadhuri underpass, Bengaluru.

Mythological Analysis

   The image is graffiti of a face of a woman, who has a 'bindi' on her forehead, gold earrings and a gold nose stud on the left side of the nose. But what differentiate this face are few strands of black hair present on the chin, signifying a beard. The different elements studied in combination signify a transgender. The transgender is sporting a 'bindi'- the dot between the eyebrows. This has a cultural and spiritual signification in Hinduism. It a symbol of femininity and spiritually signifies a sense of individuality, representing that one is complete when one can see and perceive things.

The style of paintings here is geometric abstraction, which is an abstract form of painting initiated by avante garde artists in the 20th century. The form of art is non-illusionistic and non-representative in nature. The style of painting is considered to be experimental, radical and unorthodox, breaking from conventional forms. The usage of this style signifies the attempt to break free from the shackles of the conventional society and its norms.

The text in kannada 'Navu idivi' , which translates to we exist, signifies a call to the society to acknowledge the presence of their existence and not to marginalize them or objectify them. People in the society, despite the change, still continue to look at transgender in a negative, disrespectful way. The dominant colours used here are orange, yellow and red reflecting confidence, passion, warmth and fun. Society has always been fighting for the rights of LGBTQ community. Even though there is always a lot of activism and awareness, a major chunk of the society continues to disapprove of their existence. They are considered to be un natural and non conventional therefore not fitting in the rigid social laws of the society. The mere size of it reflects the importance of the cause. This graffito is highly social commentary in nature and is rebellious, revolutionist and is an attempt to transform the norms of the society.
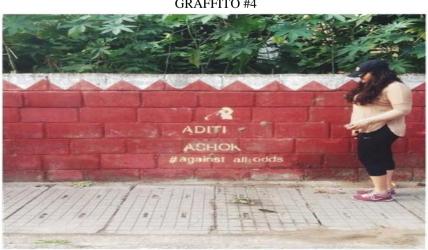
GRAFFITO #3

A graffito of a group of snail moving towards one particular direction, located in Infantry road , Bengaluru

Mythological analysis

Snails have had cultural significance in our society from a long time. They are known to be self reliant and carry their homes on their backs. They have two types of slime- one for moving and the other for protection. During the era of Christianity they symbolized sin. They are known to be slow paced and carry their defense mechanism on their backs. This graffito is a reflection of how the society bears the burden of everyday life on its back. People move from one place to another in search of a better life to fulfill their needs, living like nomads, moving slowly in the direction of the crowd, with no mind of their own. This is a consequence of a society that is dominated by consumeristic society and capitalism. The dominant colour used is black reflecting death and morbidity.

GRAFFITO #4

A graffito of a golfer with the name Aditi Ashok and #against all odds, located in Church street, Bengaluru

Mythological Analysis

The text Aditi Ashok is the name of a teenage Indian golf player who participated in the Rio Olympics of 2016. The visual image is a representation of her playing golf, signifying her shot towards bringing fame to the nation. The text here along with the #Againstallodds signifies the obstacles that she had to face to reach the Olympics. The odds are emphasized on further because she is a girl and the Indian society doesn't encourage a woman playing sport as opposed to a man playing any sport. This reflects the need for our culture to acknowledge the gender disparity that is so prominent within the society. This becomes a sign for a need for change, that irrespective of all the odds, woman still have the ability to reach great heights.

Graffito #5

A graffito of a woman with long hair reaching to her knees, located in majestic, Bengaluru.

Mythological Analysis

The graffito is a sign of Aka Mahadevi, a woman who played a prominent role in Kannada literature. She was medieval kannada poet and important figure in the Bhakti movement of the 15th century, influential social reformation in Hinduism, and provided an alternative path to spirituality regardless of one's caste of birth or gender. She accepted Lord Shiva as her husband and abandoned all worldly pleasure in quest of moksha. She embraced nudity at a time when only male ascetics were accepted for not adorning any clothing. Thus making her revolutionary figure of female emancipation. The colours used in this graffito are earthly colours of brown and green, reflecting logical and pragmatic traits. The wooden rosary in her hands signifies devotion. The large bindi one her head is sign of the third eye, that is spoke about in hindu texts, through which one can see through the mind's eye.

In today's context, Aka Mahadevi has become a symbol of feminism. Women are condemned and mistreated everywhere, labeled as the weaker sex, incapable of intellect functions equal to men. Women are tied

down to the conventions of the society. This representation of Mahadevi functions as a symbol of courage, rebellion against the norms of the society and the fight for freedom and safety at the same time.

	Discussion
GRAFFITO	DOMINANT THEME
Graffito 1	Effect of capitalist society
Graffito 2	Gender equality-Inclusion of transgender in the society
Graffito 3	Effect of a capitalist society
Graffito 4	Gender equality- fight for equal appreciation
Graffito 5	Gender Equality- Feminism

Table 1 showing the dominant themes presented in the graffiti across the city.

The above table shows that 3 out of the 5 graffiti studied reflect the theme of gender equality. The graffiti focus on the fight for gender equality for transgender and women. The graffiti work as a form of rebellious communication to disseminate the message of need for a reformation or change through art. The graffiti use different colours, pictorial representations and text to emphasize the importance and the dearth of gender equality in our society. 2 out of 5 graffiti talk about the effect that capitalism has on our society. The society had been transformed into a mechanical one, where people aimlessly work in order to buy consumer goods to fulfill their needs. This message works as a reflection as to the pathetic condition that the society has brought itself to due to this. The colours used in both the graffiti are dominantly black, that in itself reflecting death and morbidity. The graffiti attempts to grab people's attention to acknowledge the living condition of the society.

IV. CONCLUSION
The study shows that graffiti a powerful source of visual communication that works like social commentary. The most dominant theme in this study is gender inequality, the messages that are disseminated through these art forms focus on feminism, women rights and transgender. Graffiti works as an alternative discourse providing a strong platform for rebellious communication that is open for public viewing.

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