

“In the Creator’s Image: A Metabiographical Study of Two Visual Biographies of Gandhi”.

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Abstract: *A metabiographical analysis is concerned with the relational nature of biographical works and stresses how the temporal, geographical, intellectual and ideological location of the biographer constructs the biographical subject differently. The changing pictures of Gandhi in his manifold biographies raise questions as to how the subject’s identity is mediated to the readers and audience. Published in 2011, the Manga biography of Gandhi by Kazuki Ebine had as one of its primary sources the film Gandhi (1982) directed by Richard Attenborough. However, in spite of closely following the cinematic text, the Gandhi in Ebine’s graphic narrative is constructed differently from the protagonist of the source text. This paper analyses the narrative devices, the cinematic and comic vocabulary, the thematic concerns and the dominant discourses underlying the two visual biographies as exemplifying the cultural and ideological profile of the biographer.*

Key terms: *Visual Biography, metabiography, Manga, Gandhi, ideology*

Biography, whether in books, theatre, television and film documentaries or the new media has become the dominant narrative mode of our time. The word ‘biography’ literally means ‘life-writing’ from the Medieval Greek: ‘bios’ meaning ‘life’ and ‘graphia’ or ‘writing’. The earliest definition of the term was offered by Dryden in his introduction to the *Lives of Plutarch*, in which he referred to “biography” as the “history of particular men’s lives”. The *Oxford English Dictionary of English* of 2001 defines it as “An account of someone’s life written by someone else”. However, theorists of biography argue that the term needs to be redefined so as to encompass the varied ways in which real-life depiction is practiced – in broadcasting, publishing, television, films and the internet.

The glut of biographies and biopics on the same subject means that the same life can be read in different ways depending on the interpretation of evidence and the approach of the biographer. It was the idea that biographies are wholly factual that led to a belief in a ‘real’ subject whose life could be ‘uncovered’ through verbal and visual expressions. In the 21st century, theories of biography hold that the authoritative, objective and impersonal type of biography is implausible, that the inherent subjectivity of biography makes the possibility of a ‘true’ biography an illusion and the accepted ideal is now that all biography is a form of autobiography. As Denzinger puts it, “there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs and the process of signification” (14). The writer must view his subject from a certain position, constructed by his ideology, nationality, race, gender, class, culture, politics, and prejudice.

The metabiography stems from what is seen as the essentially unstable and contested nature of historical lives. Unlike previous practice when biographers examined earlier works to establish inadequacies and claimed a more comprehensive reading of a life, a metabiography is concerned only with the relational nature of earlier biographical works. None of these works are more authentic or complete than the other, because they are structured and restructured according to the sensibilities and needs of the changing times. Metabiography is, thus, an analysis of biographical writings concerned with the relation of biographical representations to the temporal, geographical, institutional, intellectual and ideological locations of biographers.

In spite of the fact that there are over 400 biographies of Mahatma Gandhi, there is still a proliferation of books on him - more ‘comprehensive’ and ‘definitive’ versions of his life, analysis of his tenets and techniques, reevaluation of his practices and its relevance. More than half a century after his death, his iconic image continues to be pervasive in contemporary culture. Every epoch has appropriated the Gandhi myth and every generation has applied its own standards of taste and morals to his conduct and convictions. This paper attempts to interrogate the discourse embodied in two visual biographies of Gandhi, the graphic Manga biography of Gandhi by Kazuki Ebine, published in 2011, and one of its primary sources, the film *Gandhi* (1982), so as to determine the ideological sub- text in the narratives.

A graphic novel features a narrative related through a combination of text and visuals often in a comic strip form, with illustrations that significantly add to the meaning or understanding of a work. While both graphic novels/ comics and films are visual, they are different in their mode of animation – animation is sequential in time in films, but not spatially juxtaposed. In comics each frame has to occupy a different space, whereas successive movie frames are projected on the same space. “Space does for comics what time does for

film” (McCloud 7). Mc Cloud goes on to define comics as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (20). This means that, unlike films, where closure takes place continually, closure in comics takes place between panels. In comics, “closure is the agent of change, time and motion” (65). The process of encapsulation (capturing ‘epiphanic’ moments in a story) entails choosing materials to be presented in specific panels, deciding the number of panels for staging action, and the size and layout of the panels which influence how the panels interact with each other and take on more meaning than they have individually. Like linguistic structures can choose between different word classes and clauses, visual representation can posit meaning through different compositional structures. Spatial organization of an image offers clues on the effects it creates. The visual sign is an amalgam of cultural, social, psychological and historical motivations and the sign maker selects particular verbal and visual signs to signify the ‘criterial’ aspect of his object (Kress and Van Leeuwen 7).

An examination of the individual images to reveal how its elements communicate implicit ideas and an analysis of the ‘criterial’ aspects of Gandhi in the two texts discloses how Ebine’s work emphasizes his Indianness and the influence of Hinduism while Attenborough’s film interpellates him into a Western ideology. In visual culture, the ideology is the image and, through an examination of the semiotics of cinematic grammar, and comic panel composition – graphic weight, character positioning, arrangement of panels – and investigation into the text-visual interplay, the paper interrogates three aspects – the opening and closing scenes, the point of flash back and analogy of caste/ colonialism.

Opening and closing sequences

Both the Manga comic and the film incorporate a frame narrative, but the comic foregrounds Gandhi’s values and the belief systems of his culture. The first panel, the entry point of the narrative, laid against an entirely black grid, is a cinematic establishing shot with Gandhi – highlighted and centered (with maximum graphic weight) – spinning outdoors and Manu framed in the verandah of the house. The dichotomy of inside/outside is visually and verbally established. The Mahatma, whose identity is reconstituted from the fragments of images – the loin cloth, the gnarled hand on the spinning wheel, the round-rimmed eye glasses and the bald pate – is strategically placed in nature, like the holy men of India. The next panel shifts rapidly to a canted over-the-shoulder shot from inside – visually creating mystery, suspense and unease in the viewer which is reinforced by Manu’s nervousness and dialogue on death. On the second page of the opening scene, the hitherto uniform gutters suddenly become large and “Manu” seems to hang incorporeal in the air – a disembodied, spiritual utterance. In the last panel, the typography emphasizes “Rama” immediately situating Gandhi in the ambit of Hinduism (Ebine). The final scene of the introduction is a splash – the large full page illustration which introduces the story and captures the reader’s attention – a low angle frontal shot which magnifies the eponymous hero under the speech bubble ending with the cognomen, ‘Mahatma’. In the analysis of a series of images on representations of the Oriental, Lutz and Collins suggest that non-Westerners are represented as traditionally less advanced, closer to nature, using primitive technologies, more spiritual, more in tune with the environment and wearing fewer clothes (cited in Rose 92-93). In the opening scene of the Manga, the long shadows and use of chiaroscuro indicate the closure of day/ life, but, overwhelmingly, the setting, costumes and dialogue enunciate Gandhi’s Indianness and his religious background.

The diegesis of the film, on the other hand, commences with the actual assassination and the funeral procession. The funeral cortege includes close-ups of Nehru, Patel, Sarojini Naidu, Azad, Lord Mountbatten, Madeline Slade, Manu, Abha and Vince Walker (the fictional journalist based on partially on Webb Miller). Perceptually, however, the Occidental is more salient than the Indians in the scene – centered in the frame, larger in size and in focus. The script by John Briley reveals the ideological interests:

We see the throng....Mountbatten, tall, handsome, bemedalled, walks at the head of dignitaries from many lands...and behind them *a broad mass of Indians*. ..In the crowd following the bier we pick out the tall English figure of Mirabeau, dressed in a sari...Near her a tall, heavy-set, Germanic, still powerful of build and mein though his white hair and deep lines suggest a man well into his sixties (Kallenbach) (19, italics mine).

By denaturalizing the structure of the visual image, the power interest buried in the text is revealed. Another narrative technique for making or unmaking a public figure in a biography is the use of ‘voices’. The voices validating Gandhi cited by the newscaster are those of Pope Pius, the Archbishop of Canterbury, President Truman, Chiang Kai-Shek and the President of France, the American Secretary of State, George C. Marshall and Albert Einstein. The medley of voices locates Gandhi in the cultural space of the Western value systems and the seemingly neutral image reveals the ideological sub-text of legitimizing Gandhi by association with the West.

In the Manga comic, the assassination of Gandhi concludes the story. The panels that are regular in the first page of the sequence become irregular in the second section. The panel depicting the assassination has a diagonal gutter – visually structuring opposition and creating a sense of precariousness, while the image of

Godse breaks out of the panel – expressionistic of his fury and fanaticism. The final shot is a collage – a set of overlapping frames and embedded images. The final five panels show an aspect- to- aspect transition, where, rather than gutters acting as a bridge between separate moments, the reader must assemble a single moment using scattered fragments and a mood is established, “...time seems to stand still...” (Mc Cloud 79). The slow motion frames closes with the name of “Rama” and Tagore’s lines that interspersed the entire sequence - the voice that eulogizes Gandhi is Indian, not Western.

Point of flash-back

The Manga biography fills the biographical ‘gaps’ and ‘silences’ of the film on Gandhi’s childhood and formative influence and locates Gandhi within the value-systems of Hinduism. In the second scene with its borderless panel, the young Gandhi is introduced to the philosophy of altruism and philanthropy as his mother quotes and explains the lines of “an old Hindu Scripture” (Ebine). Bleeds are a common technique in Japanese comics which compounds the effect of ‘timeless space’ (Mc Cloud 103). This predominant theme of Gandhianism – “dedicate yourself to others”, “wish others happiness” (Ebine) – is constructed as stemming from his Hindu religious doctrines.

The cinematic flashback starts with the railway journey to Pretoria, with Gandhi discussing spirituality with the black porter. He alludes to a book written by “a Christian” (Briley 22), which the script reveals is Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. In the comic, Gandhi is not reading inside the compartment – but *The Gita* falls out of his box while it is thrown out of the train. The speech cloud in the panel with the image of *The Gita* says “Indian” and as Gandhi muses over *The Gita*, the viewer is positioned to align himself alongside and against communities by the use of the pronoun: “Why do *they* have to treat *us* this way?” (Ebine, italics mine). The next panel highlights the *tulsi* beads around his neck – the nation is narrated as religion. The *Gita* and the *tulsi* beads images precede his resolve to “do something” about “this injustice” (Ebine) , the latter functioning as a trope of his values during critical moments in his life. In the last panel which is a low- angled bleed, the open pose, suggesting bodily control, both composed and commanding, and taking up physical space identifies Gandhi with India, more specifically with Hinduism in the stereotyped cross- legged yogic pose. His actions in the novel are “As an Indian man” (Ebine), and he does not need the paternalistic assistance of the West, as in the case of the movie where screen space is constantly shared by English allies of the Indian force. While the major milestones in the film commence with the move to South Africa, Ebine’s novel presents a biographical tableaux – glimpses of childhood and his exposure to the injustices of imperialism and caste, followed by the sojourn in England, where he rediscovers his Indianness and is reintroduced to Hinduism. Both Ebine and Attenborough focus on the sartorial change to Indian wear, but while the film constitutes the change as a political decision to identify with the masses, the graphic novel first devotes a two page spread on Gandhi’s initial attempts to integrate into western culture followed by the reawakening of his nationalism under the influence of *The Gita*. The page has four panels quoting verses from the Gita, one in a parallel combination (word and picture which do not intersect) which becomes progressively larger and brighter. In visual semiotics, “brightness has metaphorical associations of transparency and truth” and the larger panels posit the growing relevance of the scriptural text (Machin and Mayr 205). Interestingly, *The Gita* represented is not *The Song Celestial* by Edwin Arnold the version that affected Gandhi, but *The Bhagavat Gita As It Is* by Swami Prabhupada, originally published in 1968, but the most popular outside India, and with translations in 59 languages including Japanese.

The influence of *The Gita* is represented as the impetus for his adopting Indian clothes with the ideological squaring is built visually and verbally – the top- hated Gandhi in a narrow panel “A fine English gentleman” is reflected as a large close- up of Gandhi in a topi- “I am an Indian man” (Ebine). The word “Indian” is over-lexicalized throughout the novel.

His vegetarianism and its resultant respect for all creation are also seen as stemming from his religious beliefs. He promises his mother to “...hold fast to the Hindu teachings. I will not drink, nor eat meat. I swear” (Ebine). If Gandhi’s nativism and religiosity are imbricated in the Manga, the film explicitly sets out to construct him as a universalized figure palatable to a Western audience – “...so it is not ‘spiritualism’ or ‘nationalism’ – we’re not against anything but the idea that people can’t live together”, says Gandhi to the fictional Vince Walker (Briley 39).

Further, in the film, Gandhi quotes extensively from the New Testament and predicates his non-violence on the Biblical lines, “If your enemy strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the left” – “I have thought about it a great deal and I feel it means you must show courage, be willing to take a blow, several blows to show you will not hit back nor will you be turned aside... I think Christ grasped that” (*Gandhi*). He explains his beliefs to Margaret Brooke- White, “Personally, I have always believed in leaving punishment to God” (*Gandhi*) – reminiscent of the Biblical “Vengeance is mine”. While he speaks of the lines in the Bible, “the simple things that catch your breath – ‘Love thy neighbor as thy self’ ...It’s something we Hindus could learn a lot from” (*Gandhi*), *The Gita*, is a lexical absence, fleetingly referred to once. Attenborough’s Gandhi himself is

reminiscent of Christ, “a man who made humility and simple truth more powerful than empires” (*Gandhi*). While the film interpellates Gandhi into Christian spirituality, Ebine rewrites him through his Hindu culture.

Caste/ Colonialism

Caste and race are structured in the graphic novel as analogous – the cruelty shown to the subaltern is paralleled by the callousness exhibited towards the native. The first spiked speech bubble in the comic is the vociferation of the high caste “Hey, look where you are going”, followed immediately by the English carriage driver’s bellow, “Move, move away” which is typographically larger, and therefore, louder. The untouchable trampled underfoot is the fruit/ native squashed by chariot wheels/ European (Ebine). The comic takes up these social polarities in the panels on Gandhi’s return from South Africa. Gandhi’s travels and observations of “the real India” shows the cruelty of the British and the suffering of the Indians as a montage of two panels, larger and longer relative to the others and thus, metaphorically more important. This is juxtaposed with the rebellion of the ashram inmates against the inclusion of untouchables into their community. Significantly, the two people who vocally protest are a Muslim, identified by his beard, skull cap and *sherwani*, and a man in European clothes to symbolize that discrimination cuts across religion, race and literacies. However, the film makes caste about the prejudices of Indian culture alone in the rebellion of Kasturba, “It is the work of untouchables” (*Gandhi*) and Gandhi’s attempt at reformation a version of the Western philosophy of ‘dignity of labour’. Attenborough introduces Gandhi’s aversion to caste without reference to the White’s attitude of hegemonic superiority.

Conclusion

An analysis of practices of the two visual biographies of Gandhi reveals that in investigating a life, multiple versions can be constructed because of divergent political and ideological vantage points of the biographer. Even in a linear, chronological, unified narrative, textual layout and content can interface to compose its cultural and discursive ideologies. The discursive framing of the film presents associates of Gandhi as more European than Indian – Charles Freer Andrews, Madeline Slade, Hermann Kallenbach; Indians are largely nameless and faceless. In the comic, apart from Joseph Doke, the first biographer, only the major White political leaders are named. The narrative devices of the two texts on Gandhi inscribe him in different discursive spaces – in one he is a globalized citizen, situated within the cultural matrix of Western liberalism; in the other, he is deeply and over-lexically ‘Indian’ and more specifically Hindu, with major events of his life punctuated by reference to one or both of these terms. The selection of data for representation of a life is determined by the biographer’s judgment and values, and diverse selections results, as Shapin puts it, in one person having “many lives”.

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