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**MDC**

**GRAPHIC**

**NOVEL**

# *To Kill a Mockingbird*: a Study Guide for MDC-Graphic Novels Students

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, author Harper Lee uses memorable characters to explore civil rights and racism in the segregated Southern United States of the 1930s. Told through the eyes of Scout Finch, you learn about her father Atticus Finch, an attorney who hopelessly strives to prove the innocence of a black man unjustly accused of rape; and about Boo Radley, a mysterious neighbor who saves Scout and her brother Jem from being killed.

- **Written by:** Harper Lee
- **Type of Work:** novel
- **Genres:** bildungsroman (coming of age novel); civil rights movement
- **First Published:** 1960 by J. B. Lippincott
- **Setting:** 1930s; Maycomb, Alabama
- **Main Characters:** Scout Finch; Atticus Finch; Jem Finch; Tom Robinson; Bob Ewell; Boo Radley
- **Major Thematic Topics:** Jim Crow Laws; prejudice; civil rights; racism; defining bravery; maturity; feminine vs. masculine; women's roles in the South; effects of the mob mentality; perception; inconsistency of humanity; gender roles; integrity
- **Motifs:** superstition; Boo Radley; weeds; education in the classroom versus small town education
- **Major Symbols:** mockingbirds; snow; birds; rebirthing fire
- **Movie Versions:** *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)

The three most important aspects of *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

- The title of *To Kill a Mockingbird* refers to the local belief, introduced early in the novel and referred to again later, that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. Harper Lee is subtly implying that the townspeople are responsible for killing Tom Robinson, and that doing so was not only unjust and immoral, but sinful.
- The events of *To Kill a Mockingbird* take place while Scout Finch, the novel's narrator, is a young child. But the sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structure of the story indicate that Scout tells the story many years after the events described, when she has grown to adulthood.
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* is unusual because it is both an examination of racism and a bildungsroman. Within the framework of a coming-of-age story, Lee examines a very serious social problem. Lee seamlessly blends these two very different kinds of stories.

# Book Summary

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is primarily a novel about growing up under extraordinary circumstances in the 1930s in the Southern United States. The story covers a span of three years, during which the main characters undergo significant changes. Scout Finch lives with her brother Jem and their father Atticus in the fictitious town of Maycomb, Alabama. Maycomb is a small, close-knit town, and every family has its social station depending on where they live, who their parents are, and how long their ancestors have lived in Maycomb.

A widower, Atticus raises his children by himself, with the help of kindly neighbors and a black housekeeper named Calpurnia. Scout and Jem almost instinctively understand the complexities and machinations of their neighborhood and town. The only neighbor who puzzles them is the mysterious Arthur Radley, nicknamed Boo, who never comes outside. When Dill, another neighbor's nephew, starts spending summers in Maycomb, the three children begin an obsessive — and sometimes perilous — quest to lure Boo outside.

Scout is a tomboy who prefers the company of boys and generally solves her differences with her fists. She tries to make sense of a world that demands that she act like a lady, a brother who criticizes her for acting like a girl, and a father who accepts her just as she is. Scout hates school, gaining her most valuable education on her own street and from her father.

Not quite midway through the story, Scout and Jem discover that their father is going to represent a black man named Tom Robinson, who is accused of raping and beating a white woman. Suddenly, Scout and Jem have to tolerate a barrage of racial slurs and insults because of Atticus' role in the trial. During this time, Scout has a very difficult time restraining from physically fighting with other children, a tendency that gets her in trouble with her Aunt Alexandra and Uncle Jack. Even Jem, the older and more levelheaded of the two, loses his temper a time or two. After responding to a neighbor's (Mrs. Dubose) verbal attack by destroying her plants, Jem is sentenced to read to her every day after school for one month. Ultimately, Scout and Jem learn a powerful lesson about bravery from this woman. As the trial draws nearer, Aunt Alexandra comes to live with them under the guise of providing a feminine influence for Scout.

During the novel's last summer, Tom is tried and convicted even though Atticus proves that Tom could not have possibly committed the crime of which he is accused. In the process of presenting Tom's case, Atticus inadvertently insults and offends Bob Ewell, a nasty, lazy drunkard whose daughter is Tom's accuser. In spite of Tom's conviction, Ewell vows revenge on Atticus and the judge for besmirching his already tarnished name. All three children are bewildered by the jury's decision to convict; Atticus tries to explain why the jury's decision was in many ways a foregone conclusion.

Shortly after the trial, Scout attends one of her aunt's Missionary Society meetings. Atticus interrupts the meeting to report that Tom Robinson had been killed in an escape attempt. Scout

learns valuable lessons about achieving the ideal of womanhood and carrying on in the face of adversity that day.

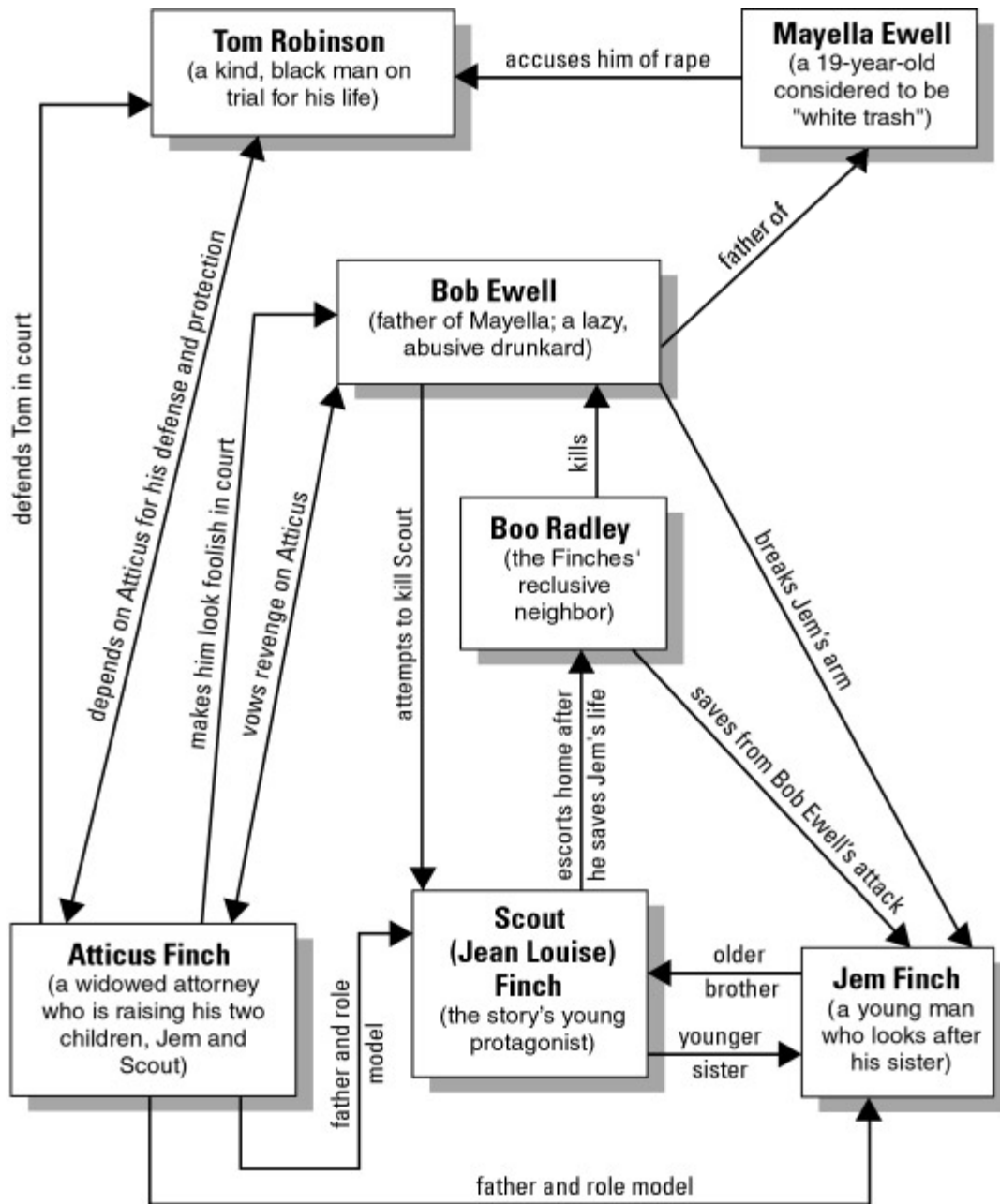
Things slowly return to normal in Maycomb, and Scout and Jem realize that Boo Radley is no longer an all-consuming curiosity. The story appears to be winding down, but then Bob Ewell starts making good on his threats of revenge. Scout is in the Halloween pageant at school, playing the part of a ham. With Atticus and Aunt Alexandra both too tired to attend, Jem agrees to take Scout to the school. After embarrassing herself on-stage, Scout elects to leave her ham costume on for the walk home with Jem.

On the way home, the children hear odd noises, but convince themselves that the noises are coming from another friend who scared them on their way to school that evening. Suddenly, a scuffle occurs. Scout really can't see outside of her costume, but she hears Jem being pushed away, and she feels powerful arms squeezing her costume's chicken wire against her skin. During this attack, Jem badly breaks his arm. Scout gets just enough of a glimpse out of her costume to see a stranger carrying Jem back to their house.

The sheriff arrives at the Finch house to announce that Bob Ewell has been found dead under the tree where the children were attacked, having fallen on his own knife. By this time, Scout realizes that the stranger is none other than Boo Radley, and that Boo is actually responsible for killing Ewell, thus saving her and Jem's lives. In spite of Atticus' insistence to the contrary, the sheriff refuses to press charges against Boo. Scout agrees with this decision and explains her understanding to her father. Boo sees Jem one more time and then asks Scout to take him home, but rather than escort him home as though he were a child, she has Boo escort her to his house as a gentleman would.

With Boo safely home, Scout returns to Jem's room where Atticus is waiting. He reads her to sleep and then waits by Jem's bedside for his son to wake up.

# Character Map



# Character Analysis: Scout (Jean Louise) Finch

That the young narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird* goes by the nickname "Scout" is very appropriate. In the story, Scout functions as both questioner and observer. Scout asks tough questions, certainly questions that aren't "politically correct," but she can ask these questions because she is a child. As a child, Scout doesn't understand the full implication of the things happening around her, making her an objective observer and a reporter in the truest sense.

The reader should keep in mind, though, that *To Kill a Mockingbird* really presents two Scouts: the little girl experiencing the story and the adult Jean Louise who tells the story. The woman relating the story obviously recognizes that her father is exceptional. However, the child Scout complains "Our father didn't do anything . . . he never went hunting, he did not play poker or fish or drink or smoke. He sat in the living room and read." The child Scout marvels that her father knew she was listening to his conversation with Uncle Jack; the adult Jean Louise marvels that he wanted her to overhear the conversation.

Although the story takes place over the course of three years, Scout learns a lifetime's worth of lessons in that span. Here, too, the reader should remember that in many ways *To Kill a Mockingbird* is Scout's memoir — the adult Jean Louise can better understand the impact of various events than the child living through them.

Scout hates school because in many ways it actually inhibits her learning. Her teacher is appalled that she already knows how to read, instead of celebrating that fact. She is bored waiting for the rest of the class to catch up to her skill level, and she doesn't have more than a passing respect for either of the teachers she describes in the story.

The most sympathy she can muster toward a frazzled Miss Caroline is to remark "Had her conduct been more friendly toward me, I would have felt sorry for her." And she is offended by Miss Gates' comments about African Americans after her staunch and moving support for the Jews in Hitler's Europe. As a sign of her maturity, though, at the end of the story she realizes that she doesn't have much more to learn "except possibly algebra" and for that she needs the classroom.

Scout faces so many issues in the duration of the novel, but one of the most lingering for her is the question of what it means to "be a lady." Scout is a tomboy. Sometimes her brother criticizes her for "acting like a girl," other times he complains that she's not girlish enough. Dill wants to marry her, but that doesn't mean he wants to spend time with her. Many of the boys at school are intimidated by her physical strength, yet she is told she must learn to handle herself in a ladylike way. Oddly enough, the women in her life impose more rigid requirements on her than the men do. Scout's tomboyishness drives Aunt Alexandra to distraction; Miss Caroline sees Scout's outspokenness and honesty as impertinence. Ironically, the person she most wants to please — Atticus — is least concerned about her acting in a certain way. In fact she tells Jem, "I asked him [Atticus] if I was a problem and he said not much of one, at most one he could always figure out, and not to worry my head a second about botherin' him." In the end, though, when she explains why the sheriff can't charge Boo with Bob Ewell's murder, she's become the kind of person who makes her father very, very proud.

The other lesson that Scout is truly able to incorporate into her worldview is the necessity of walking in someone else's shoes. Atticus begins teaching her the importance of looking at things from the other person's point-of-view very early in the story. He points out her own failings in this area and demonstrates his point in his own interactions with other people. At the end of the story, Scout can put herself in Boo Radley's shoes, the person she's feared most throughout the story.

## Character Analysis: Atticus Finch

Atticus represents morality and reason in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As a character, Atticus is even-handed throughout the story. He is one of the very few characters who never has to rethink his position on an issue.

His parenting style is quite unique in that he treats his children as adults, honestly answering any question they have. He uses all these instances as an opportunity to pass his values on to Scout and Jem. Scout says that "'Do you really think so?' . . . was Atticus' dangerous question" because he delighted in helping people see a situation in a new light. Atticus uses this approach not only with his children, but with all of Maycomb. And yet, for all of his mature treatment of Jem and Scout, he patiently recognizes that they are children and that they will make childish mistakes and assumptions. Ironically, Atticus' one insecurity seems to be in the child-rearing department, and he often defends his ideas about raising children to those more experienced and more traditional.

His stern but fair attitude toward Jem and Scout reaches into the courtroom as well. He politely proves that Bob Ewell is a liar; he respectfully questions Mayella about her role in Tom's crisis. One of the things that his longtime friend Miss Maudie admires about him is that "'Atticus Finch is the same in his house as he is on the public streets.'" The only time he seriously lectures his children is on the evils of taking advantage of those less fortunate or less educated, a philosophy he carries into the animal world by his refusal to hunt. And although most of the town readily pins the label "trash" on other people, Atticus reserves that distinction for those people who unfairly exploit others.

Atticus believes in justice and the justice system. He doesn't like criminal law, yet he accepts the appointment to Tom Robinson's case. He knows before he begins that he's going to lose this case, but that doesn't stop him from giving Tom the strongest defense he possibly can. And, importantly, Atticus doesn't put so much effort into Tom's case because he's an African American, but because he is innocent. Atticus feels that the justice system should be color blind, and he defends Tom as an innocent man, not a man of color.

Atticus is the adult character least infected by prejudice in the novel. He has no problem with his children attending Calpurnia's church, or with a black woman essentially raising his children. He admonishes Scout not to use racial slurs, and is careful to always use the terms acceptable for his time and culture. He goes to Helen's home to tell her of Tom's death, which means a white man



spending time in the black community. Other men in town would've sent a messenger and left it at that. His lack of prejudice doesn't apply only to other races, however. He is unaffected by Mrs. Dubose's caustic tongue, Miss Stephanie Crawford's catty gossip, and even Walter Cunningham's thinly veiled threat on his life. He doesn't retaliate when Bob Ewell spits in his face because he understands that he has wounded Ewell's pride — the only real possession this man has. Atticus accepts these people because he is an expert at "climb[ing] into [other people's] skin and walk[ing] around in it."

## Character Analysis: Jem Finch

Jem ages from 10 to 13 over the course of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a period of great change in any child's life. Jem is no exception to this rule. Interestingly, the changes he undergoes are seen from the point-of-view of a younger sister, which gives a unique perspective on his growth.

Jem represents the idea of bravery in the novel, and the way that his definition changes over the course of the story is important. The shift that occurs probably has as much to do with age as experience, although the experiences provide a better framework for the reader. When the story begins, Jem's idea of bravery is simply touching the side of the Radley house and then only because "In all his life, Jem had never declined a dare." But as the story progresses, Jem learns about bravery from Atticus facing a mad dog, from Mrs. Dubose's fight with addiction, and from Scout's confrontation with the mob at the jail, among others. And along the way, he grows from a boy who drags his sister along as a co-conspirator to a young gentleman who protects his Scout and tries to help her understand the implications of the events around her.

His own sister finds Jem a genuinely likeable boy, if sometimes capable of "maddening superiority." He very much wants to be like his father, and plans to follow him into law. He idolizes Atticus and would rather risk personal injury than disappoint his father. As he grows older, he begins to do what is right even though his decision may not be popular. For instance, when Dill sneaks into Scout's bedroom after running away from home, Jem can only say, "You oughta let your mother know where you are" and makes the difficult decision to involve Atticus. Afterward, he's temporarily exiled by his friends, but he maintains the rightness of his decision without apology.

Like many adolescents, Jem is idealistic. Even after Atticus' long explanation about the intricacies of the Tom Robinson case, Jem is unable to accept the jury's conviction. In fact, he is ready to overhaul the justice system and abolish juries altogether. Wisely, Atticus doesn't try to squelch or minimize Jem's feelings; by respecting his son, Atticus allows Jem to better cope with the tragedy. Still, Jem turns on Scout when she tells him about Miss Gates' racist remarks at the courthouse, shouting, "I never wanta hear about that courthouse again, ever, ever, you hear me?" His coping skills are still developing, and his family is the one group that gives him the room that he needs to hone them.

Ironically, Jem, who so strongly identifies with Tom Robinson, is the only person in the story who is left with physical evidence of the whole event. More ironic still is the fact that Jem's injury leaves "His left arm . . . somewhat shorter than the right" just like Tom Robinson's, and Tom Robinson sustained his injury at approximately the same age. That the man responsible for breaking Jem's arm was also responsible for sending Tom to prison (and indirectly, responsible for his death) serves to drive the irony home.

The adult Jean Louise doesn't provide much insight into the adult Jeremy Atticus Finch, but from the fact that the story begins with their disagreement over when various events started, the reader can assume that they maintained a similar relationship into adulthood.

## Epigraph of the Novel

Lee begins *To Kill a Mockingbird* with an epigraph (a brief quotation placed at the beginning of a book or chapter) by Charles Lamb: "*Lawyers, I suppose, were children once.*" That she chose this epigraph is interesting on several levels.

A good part of this story's brilliance lies in the fact that it's told from a child's point-of-view. Through Scout's eyes, Lee is able to present the story objectively. By having an innocent little girl make racial remarks and regard people of color in a way consistent with the community, Lee provides an objective view of the situation. As a child, Scout can make observations that an adult would avoid or sugarcoat. Readers, too, are likely to be forgiving of a child's perception, whereas they would find an adult who makes these remarks offensive.

Much of Harper Lee is in the character of Scout. Lee's father was an attorney, as is Scout's. Importantly, Lee herself studied law. Because Scout's personality is loosely autobiographical, the epigraph makes sense. Lee proves through the telling of the story that she was also once a child.

Also significant in understanding the epigraph is Atticus' answer to Jem's question of how a jury could convict Tom Robinson when he's obviously innocent: "They've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it — it seems that only children weep." At various points in the story, Jem expresses his desire to become a lawyer, following in his father's footsteps. The lessons he learns during the course of the story will ultimately shape not only the kind of lawyer he will be, but also the kind of man he will become. Readers see this future lawyer as a child first.

# Symbols in the Novel

## Mockingbirds

The title of *To Kill a Mockingbird* has very little literal connection to the plot, but it carries a great deal of symbolic weight in the book. In this story of innocents destroyed by evil, the “mockingbird” comes to represent the idea of innocence. Thus, to kill a mockingbird is to destroy innocence. Throughout the book, a number of characters (Jem, Tom Robinson, Dill, Boo Radley, Mr. Raymond) can be identified as mockingbirds—innocents who have been injured or destroyed through contact with evil. This connection between the novel’s title and its main theme is made explicit several times in the novel: after Tom Robinson is shot, Mr. Underwood compares his death to “the senseless slaughter of songbirds,” and at the end of the book Scout thinks that hurting Boo Radley would be like “shootin’ a mockingbird.” Most important, Miss Maudie explains to Scout: “Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but . . . sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” That Jem and Scout’s last name is Finch (another type of small bird) indicates that they are particularly vulnerable in the racist world of Maycomb, which often treats the fragile innocence of childhood harshly.

## Boo Radley

As the novel progresses, the children’s changing attitude toward Boo Radley is an important measurement of their development from innocence toward a grown-up moral perspective. At the beginning of the book, Boo is merely a source of childhood superstition. As he leaves Jem and Scout gifts and mends Jem’s pants, he gradually becomes increasingly and intriguingly real to them. At the end of the novel, he becomes fully human to Scout, illustrating that she has developed into a sympathetic and understanding individual. Boo, an intelligent child ruined by a cruel father, is one of the book’s most important mockingbirds; he is also an important symbol of the good that exists within people. Despite the pain that Boo has suffered, the purity of his heart rules his interaction with the children. In saving Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell, Boo proves the ultimate symbol of good.

## Front Porches

Throughout the novel, front porches appear again and again as a symbol of the liminal space, or transitional space, between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of the streets of Maycomb. Almost every character’s house is adorned with a front porch, and many of them, such as Miss Maudie, Mrs. Dubose, and Mr. Avery, spend significant amounts of time sitting out on their porches. As a result, the front porch becomes a space where the tensions between personal beliefs and public discourse become particularly evident. Mrs. Dubose publicizes her critical opinion of Atticus from the comfort of her front porch, a group of men, including Mr. Tate and Mr. Deas, question Atticus’s decision to take the case while he stands on his own front porch, and Miss Stephanie spreads gossip about the children’s presence at the trial on Miss Maudie’s front porch. All of these scenarios represent a mixture of opinion and actual events, giving way to a form of public gossip that feels deeply personal. Perhaps the most significant front porch scene occurs in the final chapter of the novel when Scout walks Boo Radley back to his home. She explains to the reader that “just standing on the Radley porch was enough” to learn who he really was, a man who, despite his invisibility, never failed to look out for Jem and Scout. In this instance, the space of the front porch helps Scout decipher the relationship between Boo’s public actions and his private life.

# Issues of Racial Relations in the Novel

## Jim Crow Laws

The racial concerns that Harper Lee addresses in *To Kill a Mockingbird* began long before her story starts and continued long after. In order to sift through the many layers of prejudice that Lee exposes in her novel, the reader needs to understand the complex history of race relations in the South.

Many states — particularly in the South — passed "Jim Crow" laws (named after a black, minstrel show character), which severely limited how African Americans could participate in society. The U.S. Supreme Court paved the way for these laws in 1883 when the court ruled that it couldn't enforce the 14th Amendment at the individual level. The first Jim Crow law appeared in 1890; the laws increased from there and lasted until the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Many whites at the time believed that instead of progressing as a race, blacks were regressing with the abolition of slavery. Southern churches frequently upheld this racist thinking, which also helped give the Jim Crow laws some of their power.

Ironically, African American churches were as likely to uphold the Jim Crow laws as white churches were. The continued oppression of one group over another is largely psychological. The dominant group first uses force to obtain their power. Slowly, the group being oppressed begins to feel hopeless that the situation can change and begins to unwittingly buy into the oppression as the norm. Before the civil rights movement gained momentum, many African American churches concentrated on helping their congregations deal with the oppression rather than trying to end it.

Jim Crow laws extended into almost every facet of public life. The laws stipulated that blacks use separate entrances into public buildings, have separate restrooms and drinking fountains, and sit in the back of trains and buses. Blacks and whites were not allowed to be served food in the same room in a restaurant, play pool together, share the same prisons, or be buried in the same cemeteries. African Americans couldn't play professional sports with white teammates or serve in the armed forces with white soldiers. Black children were educated in separate schools. Black barbers couldn't wait on white female clients, and white female nurses couldn't attend to black male patients. Not every law applied in every state, but the Jim Crow laws were demoralizing and far reaching, all in the name of protecting white culture and power.

## Interracial Marriage

At the time Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*, white people had control over the communities they lived in, but many members of the elite class feared that African Americans would make inroads into the white world by marrying and having children with whites. Thus, interracial marriage was outlawed in many states.

Biracial children were referred to as "mulatto," a word derived from "mule," because, like mules, these children were thought to be the offspring of an unnatural union. Ironically, biracial children born to black mothers were not seen as a threat to white superiority, so most people looked the other way when a white man — like Dolphus Raymond in the novel — chose to marry a black woman.

The fear of interracial unions reached its apex in a widely held, unrealistic fear that African American men would rape and impregnate white women as a means of penetrating white society and, worse, white power.

This sort of crime virtually never happened. However, the frenzy that characterized the "rape complex" led to drastic and deadly results: Lynching became the primary means of dealing with any accusation of rape of a white woman was pinned on a black man. When the mob comes to lynch Tom Robinson at the jail, Lee alludes to the reality of black men who lived on the receiving end of this treatment.

## **Scottsboro Trials**

Lee may have gotten the inspiration for Tom Robinson's case from the Scottsboro Trials of 1931, which were a result of the ideals and laws discussed in the preceding sections. In the Scottsboro case, two white women accused nine black men of raping them as they traveled from Tennessee to Alabama. Both of the women, the nine black men, and two white men hopped a freight car and headed south. (During the Great Depression, jobs were scarce, and the unemployed frequently rode from place to place in empty boxcars in search of work. Although unemployment among blacks was much higher — and in spite of the Jim Crow laws — blacks and whites ultimately competed for the same jobs, a fact that whites greatly resented.)

During the train ride the two groups of men fought, and the white men were forced off the train. When the rest of the hobos arrived in Alabama, they were arrested for vagrancy. Both women were of questionable background; one was a known prostitute. They used the ideal of Southern womanhood as their "Get Out of Jail Free Card" and accused the nine African Americans of rape.

Although a doctor's examination revealed no signs of forced intercourse or any sort of struggle, eight of the nine men were sentenced to death. The Supreme Court ordered a second trial for the Scottsboro "boys," during which one of the women recanted her testimony, denying that she or the other woman had been raped. Nonetheless, the eight men were convicted a second time. The appeals process continued for several years. Some of the men escaped prison, others were paroled. The last man was released from prison in 1950; one of the men received a pardon in 1976.

Because of deep-rooted anti-black sentiment, two white women with skeletons in their own closets were able to deprive eight men of several years of their lives.

## Civil Rights Movement

The black community had shown spurts of enthusiasm in pursuing civil rights since the end of slavery. By the 1950s, however, the latest interest in the civil rights movement had lost a good deal of steam. Many African Americans seemed resigned to accepting the Jim Crow laws and living within the existing system. Educated blacks in Alabama were looking for something to rekindle the interest in civil rights amongst the black community. They found that "something" in a woman named Rosa Parks.

On a December day in 1955, Parks boarded a full Montgomery, Alabama bus, tired after a long day's work. She sat at the back of the bus's white section. When a white person boarded, the bus driver ordered Parks and several other black riders to move, and she refused. Her subsequent arrest mobilized the African American community into a yearlong bus boycott that ultimately ended segregation on public transportation. Parks was an educated woman who was concerned about the plight of Southern blacks. Although she did not board the bus intending to take a stand, when the opportunity arose, she accepted the challenge.

When the Supreme Court overturned Alabama's segregation laws regarding public transportation, the civil rights movement gained momentum. Martin Luther King, Jr., a Montgomery, Alabama minister, rose as the recognized leader of the movement. Several women worked behind the scenes organizing the boycott and keeping the movement alive.

Concurrent with the Montgomery bus boycott, another civil rights issue came to the forefront at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. There, a young black woman named Autherine Lucy enrolled in an all-white school. Because of racial tensions, the Board of Trustees expelled her from the campus after only a few months; however, the stage was set for more skirmishes with civil rights' issues. (Lucy received her master's degree from the Tuscaloosa campus in 1992.)

In 1957, schools in Little Rock, Arkansas underwent desegregation. Resentment and resistance ran so high and the threat of violence was so great that federal troops were sent to maintain order.

Harper Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the midst of these developments. Her story was informed not only by the laws and attitudes that were part of her youth and her culture, but also by the civil rights movement. The civil rights struggle continues today at various levels, making *To Kill a Mockingbird* a timeless novel.

# Short Questions & Answers

## How is Tom Robinson a mockingbird?

The phrase "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" refers to intentionally and pointlessly destroying something that does no harm. The mockingbird is a songbird, not a pest, and it isn't a game bird. Killing a mockingbird serves no purpose, and therefore is an act of unnecessary cruelty. When the jury convicts Tom Robinson of rape despite the absence of physical evidence and despite Atticus's compelling defense, the jury is guilty of the same unnecessary cruelty. The jury specifically, and the town of Maycomb generally, destroy a good person who has never done harm simply because of the color of his skin. Though Tom is the symbolic mockingbird at the heart of the novel, he is not the only character who fits that description. Heck Tate also specifically describes Boo Radley as a mockingbird, in that he is a harmless person who is the victim of pointless cruelty. Unlike Tom Robinson, Boo Radley is not destroyed, though he does suffer greatly.

## What does the rabid dog Atticus shoots symbolize?

In Chapter 11, Atticus shoots a mad (rabid) dog in the street. This episode serves two important purposes in the novel. Before the incident with the dog, Scout and Jem saw their father as old, reserved, and not particularly powerful. When Scout and Jem learn that their father is known as the best shot in the entire county, they learn to see Atticus with a greater sense of respect. In a larger symbolic sense, the dog, because it has rabies, is a dangerous threat to the community. In shooting the dog, then, Atticus is trying to protect the community from its most dangerous elements. Similarly, in defending Tom Robinson, Atticus tries to protect the community from its most dangerous, racist tendencies. Later in the book, in Chapter 22, Miss Maudie tells Jem about Tom Robinson's trial, "I simply want to tell you that there are some men in this world who were born to do our unpleasant jobs for us. Your father's one of them." Atticus's killing of the dog and defense of Tom Robinson both reflect that he is willing and able to take on things that the rest of Maycomb is unequipped to face.

## How did Jem break his arm?

In the first sentence of the novel, Scout says that Jem broke his arm. She starts to explain what happened but says that she needs to go back and provide the necessary context in order for the story to make sense. The rest of the novel is the background context for Jem's broken arm. At the end of the novel Bob Ewell, who has suffered as a result of Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson, attacks Jem and Scout on their way home from the Halloween pageant. Jem breaks his arm in the struggle. The story of a broken arm serves as a narrative device, bookending the entire novel with Scout's telling of the story. While initially the reader might assume Jem broke his arm through innocent childhood games, by the end of the novel we understand the darker, more complicated truth behind the accident.

### **What is the significance of the gifts Boo Radley leaves in the knothole?**

In the early chapters of the book, Jem and Scout find several small items, ranging from sticks of gum to a pocket watch, left by Boo Radley in the knothole of a tree on the Radley property. These gifts are the first of several kindnesses that Boo extends to the children, ultimately culminating in Boo killing Bob Ewell to protect Jem. The gifts also represent one of the ways that Boo tries to engage with the world around him without giving up the secrecy and privacy that he requires. Despite his reclusive nature, Boo engages the Finch children in a more generous and kind way than many of the other adults that they encounter. But because of Boo's limitations, his interactions must take a remote form.

### **Why does the jury find Tom guilty?**

The jury's decision to convict Tom Robinson for a crime he clearly did not commit plagues Jem (and many readers) as an intolerable miscarriage of justice. The most obvious reason justice isn't served is because the jury's overwhelming racism prevents Tom from getting a fair trial. Another reason the jury finds Tom guilty is because both Mayella Ewell and her father, Bob, both perjured themselves on the stand. In addition to the presumption of an impartial jury, the justice system operates on the assumption that witnesses will tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" after being sworn in to testimony. But both Mayella and Bob lied rather than admit that Mayella tried to kiss Tom. Tom's race, combined with the Ewells' lies, proved enough for the racist jury to find Tom guilty, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of Tom's innocence.

### **What role does Calpurnia play in the family and in the novel?**

Calpurnia is a surrogate mother to Jem and Scout who teaches them about good manners, hard work, and honesty. She takes care of the family's needs, and Atticus trusts her unequivocally. She is also the narrator's window into Maycomb's African American community. She takes the children to her church one Sunday, and, because of this, Scout and Jem can sit in the "colored" balcony during Tom Robinson's trial. She helps Atticus comfort Tom's wife, Helen, and she knows how to read and write, which is uncommon in her community.

### **Why is Dill an important character?**

Charles Baker Harris, the boy also known as Dill, is an important foil to Jem and Scout. His imagination kindles theirs, and his youthful enthusiasm contrasts with Jem's budding serious maturity. As children, Dill and Scout pretend that they are engaged to be married. He visits Maycomb every summer, and as it becomes clearer that his own family is erratic and insecure, readers understand that the Finches and his Aunt Stephanie are, in fact, his true family. He represents both childhood innocence and friendship.



### **What does Mrs. Dubose teach Scout and Jem?**

Although she is a mean, racist neighbor, Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose teaches the children a lesson in courage. As Jem reads aloud to her every day for a month—a punishment for destroying her camellia bushes after she harshly criticizes Atticus—she weans herself from her morphine addiction by refusing her medicine for longer and longer each day. When she dies a month later, Atticus tells Jem that she was “the bravest person [he] ever knew.” The whole episode teaches Jem and Scout that people are not always what they appear to be and that even despicable people can have heroic qualities.

### **Why does Dolphus Raymond hide Coca-Cola in a brown paper bag?**

Dolphus Raymond, a white man who prefers the company of African Americans, uses a brown paper bag as a theatrical prop to act like a drunkard. He has mixed-race children and lives among the African American community as one of them. During the trial, when Dill feels sick, Mr. Raymond explains to Scout and Dill that he pretends to be drunk all the time so that people can explain away his behavior. “It helps folks if they can latch onto a reason,” he says. He admits that he even staggers sometimes to reinforce his charade.

### **How does Maycomb react to Tom Robinson’s death?**

The citizens of Maycomb react to Tom’s death in many different ways. The African American community feels angry and upset, but they cannot show it in public. Many racist white people feel that justice was done because a Black man is always guilty, no matter what. Some white people are ashamed and sincerely saddened by the injustice done by the jury. The editor of the local newspaper feels angry because Tom was a “cripple” and should not have been shot. Bob Ewell is satisfied because his lie worked, and Jem is furious and incredulous.

### **What happens on Scout and Jem’s walk home from the harvest pageant?**

When Jem and Scout set off through the woods to the high school for the harvest pageant, they begin a journey that is “long” in a figurative sense, for the events that occur that night will change their lives forever. As Jem and Scout walk home that night, two figures emerge from the shadows, each with their own intentions. First, Bob Ewell violently attacks Jem and Scout, but then Boo Radley appears and saves the children. This climactic night unites the novel’s two major plot lines: the mystery of Boo Radley and the second tragic outcome of the trial—another senseless death.

### **Why does Atticus take Tom Robinson’s case knowing that he’ll lose?**

Atticus accepts the case out of personal integrity and a firm belief that the racist ways of the deep South will slowly but surely change over time. He sees this trial as an opportunity to help make that historic shift of attitude, even if it is just a small step. When he takes the case, Atticus assumes that they will lose the trial, but he believes they have an excellent chance in the appeal

process. The people of his community trust him to do the right thing, and he does. After the trial is over, Atticus feels discouraged by the outcome, but he is not beaten by it.

### **Why does Mayella Ewell lie on the witness stand?**

Mayella Ewell lies on the witness stand because she is afraid of her father, Bob Ewell, and because she is humiliated by her own attraction to Tom Robinson. She tells the jury that Tom beat and raped her when, in fact, it was her father who beat her when he saw her hugging and kissing an African American. Her father told her what to say while on the stand and likely threatened to hurt her more if she refused. She told the jury what they wanted to hear, so it was an easy lie to tell. She lied to protect herself.

### **What qualities make Atticus a good father?**

Although Atticus is an “old” father according to Scout, he dearly loves his children, Scout and Jem, and offers them a role model of integrity, wisdom, trust, and honesty. He lets them be children by giving them their freedom, but he also insists that they work hard and take care of each other. Atticus provides a good home and a strong caretaker in Calpurnia. He is a pillar of the community who is elected to the legislature every term unopposed. He values education and justice above all else, and he is open-hearted and open-minded.

### **Why does Aunt Alexandra move into the Finch household?**

When the trial is imminent, Aunt Alexandra shows up at the Finch home and announces that she’s there to stay for the benefit of Jem and Scout. She and Atticus agree that Jem and Scout may need round-the-clock supervision during the public spectacle, and she believes that the children need more exposure to the propriety and traditions of their upstanding family. Aunt Alexandra also believes that Scout needs to be taught to be a perfect Southern lady who knows how to wear a dress, serve tea, and converse with other women.

## *The Dark Knight Returns*

Author: Frank Miller

Publication: 1986

### Main Characters

- Batman
- Jim Gordon (Retiring Commissioner of Police, Gotham City)
- Ellen Yindel (New Commissioner of Police, Gotham City)
- Carrie Kelley (Robin)
- Two-Face (Harvey Dent)
- The Mutants (a gang of criminals)
- Joker
- Superman

*The Dark Knight Returns* is widely considered to be one of the greatest and most influential Batman stories ever made, as well as one of the greatest works of comic art in general, and has been noted for helping reintroduce a darker and more mature-oriented version of the character (and superheroes in general) to pop culture during the 1980s. It tells the story of Bruce Wayne, a 55 years gentleman who returns from a decade of retirement to fight crime while facing opposition from the Gotham City police force and the United States government. The story also features the return of classic villains Two-Face and the Joker, and culminates in a confrontation with Superman, who is now a pawn of the government. The story introduces Carrie Kelley as the new Robin and the hyper-violent street gang known as the Mutants.

### PLOT

*The Dark Knight Returns* is set in a dystopian version of **Gotham City** in 1986. **Bruce Wayne**, aged 55, has given up the mantle of Batman after the death of Jason Todd ten years prior. Crime is running rampant throughout the city and a teenage gang calling themselves "**The Mutants**" has begun terrorizing the people of Gotham. After watching news reports about the Mutants' crimes, Wayne decides to return to his role as a vigilante. On his first night as Batman, he stops multiple assaults – including one on two young girls, **Carrie Kelley** and her friend Michelle – and targets the Mutants.

While foiling an armed robbery, Batman learns that the criminals are working for **Harvey Dent**. Previously known as **Two-Face**, Dent underwent extensive therapy and plastic surgery to reenter society before disappearing. Batman informs close to retirement Commissioner **James "Jim" Gordon** that Dent may be planning a larger scheme. Soon after, Dent announces his intention to hold Gotham ransom with a bomb. After Batman defeats Dent and his goons, he discovers that Dent's mind has completely warped into his Two-Face persona.

Inspired by Batman, Kelley buys an imitation Robin costume and searches for him. Batman attacks the Mutants at the city dump with the **Batmobile**, but the Mutant Leader goads him into a hand-to-hand fight. Batman, due to his age and a decade of physical inactivity, is beaten and almost killed. Kelley creates a diversion that allows her and Batman to return to the **Batcave**, where Wayne's butler **Alfred Pennyworth** tends to his wounds. Impressed with her bravery, Wayne decides to make Kelley his new protégée. Batman strategically defeats the Mutant Leader in a fight surrounded by the Mutants. Seeing Batman defeat their leader, most of the Mutants disband into smaller gangs. One of these gangs renames itself the "**Sons of the Batman**", using excessive violence against criminals.

At the White House, **Superman** and current President **Ronald Reagan** discuss the events in Gotham, with the latter suggesting that Batman may have to be arrested. **Clark Kent** talks with **Wayne** and is then deployed by Washington to the Latin American country of Corto Maltese, where he fights Soviet combat forces in a conflict that may escalate into World War III.

Gordon's successor as commissioner, Captain **Ellen Yindel**, declares Batman a wanted criminal for his vigilante activities. Batman's return stimulates his archenemy, **Joker**, to awaken from catatonia at **Arkham Asylum**. Joker manipulates his caretakers to allow him onto a television talk show, where he murders everyone with Joker venom and escapes. Batman and Robin (Kelley) track him to a county fair while evading a Gotham police pursuit. Batman fights Joker, vowing to stop him permanently, feeling responsible for every murder the villain has committed. Batman paralyzes the Joker but is unable to take his life. Disappointed with Batman's refusal to kill him, Joker breaks his own neck and dies.

A citywide manhunt for Batman begins. Elsewhere, **Superman** diverts a Soviet nuclear warhead which detonates in a desert, nearly killing him in the process, and survives only by absorbing the sun's energy from the plants in a nearby jungle. The United States is hit by an electromagnetic pulse as a result and descends into chaos during the following blackout. In Gotham, Batman and Robin turn the remaining Mutants and Sons of the Batman into a non-lethal vigilante gang, making Gotham the safest city in the country. The U.S. government orders Superman to take Batman into custody. Superman demands to meet Batman, and Wayne chooses Crime Alley.

Superman tries to reason with Batman, but Batman uses his technological inventions to fight him on equal ground. During the battle, Superman compromises Batman's exoframe. However, an aging **Oliver Queen** manages to shoot Superman with a kryptonite-tipped arrow to weaken him. Standing over the defeated Superman, Batman has a sudden heart attack, apparently dying. Alfred destroys the Batcave and Wayne Manor before Bruce suffers a fatal stroke, exposing Batman as Bruce Wayne, whose fortune has disappeared. After Wayne's funeral, it is revealed that his death was staged using a chemical that suspended his vital life signs. Clark attends the funeral and winks at the disguised Carrie after hearing Wayne's heartbeat. Some time afterward, Bruce Wayne leads Robin, Queen, and the rest of his followers into the caverns beyond the Batcave and prepares to continue his war on crime.

## THE BACKGROUND

The time period the story was written in (it came out in 1986) was the heyday of the “American crack (drugs) epidemic.” Long story short, there was a massive surge in crack cocaine sales and usage throughout the US, but especially in large cities. Crime, which had begun to rise severely in the 70s, spiraled out of control- especially among poor minorities in urban areas. The homicide rate for black teenagers more than doubled in between 1984 and 1989. While cities like Detroit and Chicago had been steadily growing poorer and more dangerous since the 1960s thanks to the decline of manufacturing jobs and other complex socioeconomic issues it was nothing compared to the all out pandemic of the 80s. In 1982, nearly half (48%) of Americans said they were afraid to walk alone at night in their neighbourhoods. New York got hit especially hard as crime rates spiked in the 1980s. Vast swaths of the city were dangerous concrete wastelands, and Times Square was a sleazy dump. The graffiti-caked subway trains, the mountains of garbage, the rats, the junkies, the blackouts, the citywide strikes, the inescapable stench of piss and the rampant street crime- this was the environment that Frank Miller (who was repeatedly robbed on the streets) was living in.

American politics and culture became dominated by discourse surrounding crime and the best way to respond to it. New "tough on crime" policies like stop and frisk were implemented- conservative proponents claimed that they would reduce crime rates by cracking down harshly on criminals, but liberal opponents claimed that they would allow police to infringe on civil liberties (especially the ones of minorities). Needless to say, both sides had a point. Crime was out of control and there was no end in sight.

It's hard to say if the story takes a definitive stance on the Cold War, but Miller depicts international politics as a distraction from domestic issues like crime. Reagan's invasion of Corto Maltese is shown to be a dumb, antagonistic move that simply infuriates the Soviets even more. It's heavily implied that the federal government has largely abandoned Gotham in order to focus on other agendas.

### Bruce Wayne, “Batman”: the superhero

The genre of Superhero comic books is characterised by the conflict between a superhero and the dangers that threaten society. Superheroes such as Batman, Green Arrow and Iron Man operate with a great concern for justice and “what is right, often taking to the streets only after they have seen their local law enforcement failing time after time” (Russell, 2013: 123). The superhero fights against the injustice selflessly, willing to sacrifice his/her life regardless of the social orders and norms of society. However, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) is not a simplistic superhero comic book but a complex debate with the current ideas about Human rights, correction of prisoners, and Fascism. *The Dark Knight Returns* illustrates the journey of Bruce Wayne in search of justice. Even after his retirement, he is still engaged in what he must do to

make things right within himself and within the city of Gotham. He has a complicated character: he stays in the shadows, away from sight while he flies over Gotham to see all. He comes to help victims at a time of disappointment. He receives no money for his efforts and yet never runs out of money. These features make him an ambiguous character. Critics also have different opinions about Batman. Nathan Tipton (2008: 321) states “What are readers to make of an old man who is often described as a socialite, a confirmed bachelor, or a millionaire play boy with a propensity for adopting young boy as his wards.” On the other side, Booker (2015: 65) explains that, although Batman used to be a vicious punisher of criminals, his motivation was to fulfil his “patriotic duty”. Further, Axelsson observes:

Miller’s Batman has gone from the old school stereotypical detective to a nihilistic anarchistic vigilante. At first glance, when he uses all means to get to his goal, he is no better than the villains and criminals he is fighting, but he has to do this to clean the streets and re-establish law and order. This is what separates this new hero from the old school heroes, or the heroes of the golden age. We see that Batman is this ambiguous person when he wants to save Two Face and the Joker but also when it comes to Superman.

Axelsson sees no clear borders between crime fighter and villain, good and bad. Although Batman sometimes goes beyond the law, he does not consider himself above it. In *The Dark knight Returns*, Bruce Wayne’s “character” or “self” could be understood by recognising (1) the blind anger deep within his mind, the “subconscious” and (2) how other people, including the politicians and TV channels interpret his actions. In this graphic novel, we see Batman’s “character” as not fixed or stable but constantly changing as the protagonist keeps on brooding on his future course of action, and impulsively jumps into action all of a sudden. From living the life of a wealthy socialite enjoying his drink, he can suddenly burst into violent activities like car-racing and vigilantism. On the other hand, TV anchors keep on talking about him in almost every alternate page, judging him according to the current social standards, especially human rights of criminals and children’s well-being. We see that his “character” is not seen by others as ethically correct as it was a decade ago but undergoing a public debate about his Fascist or right-winger mode of justice without legal procedure or human right concern.

Batman’s enemies welcome his retirement since it gives them freedom to commit crimes easily. However, his fate is uncertain, “Today also marks the tenth anniversary of the last recorded sighting of the Batman. Dead or retired, his fate remains unknown,” the TV narrator says. No one is sure about Batman as he does not allow any news release about his life. His character is mysterious to the outside world: “younger viewers will not remember the Batman. A recent survey shows that most high schoolers consider him a myth,” says the TV narrator.

However, sitting inside the dark cavern of the Batcave (which symbolises the unconscious) Batman broods over the crime news of the new Mutant gang. . Unconscious phenomena are tensions, passions, repressions and desires that cannot easily accessed by consciousness; however, they express themselves through actions. Two recent developments in particular

trouble Bruce Wayne. The first is the appearance of the Mutant Gang, a group of young people ravaging Gotham City. The other is the alleged recovery of one of his worst enemies, the lawyer and criminal Harvey Dent/Two-Face. Miller builds up parallels between the two characters. Harvey's mental illness has apparently been healed and his face, with its burnt skin, has been cured. Bruce Wayne is no longer Batman, and has made the decision to be accepted as just another normal citizen. These characters, however, can't stop being who they fundamentally are. When Bruce puts on the Batman cape anew, he responds to a call for justice, and to an inner impetus. Like Harvey's illness, Bruce's traumas – his parents' murder, the bond with bats and darkness – and the way he has found to handle them can't be erased. When Batman chases down Two-Face, who is committing yet another crime, and catches him, he pities him and himself. He sees a reflection of his own obsession. Despite his disappearance and retirement, Batman returns when his nation needs him the most. However, the new generation considers him from their own point of view: "Wild animal growls. Snarls. Werewolf surely. Monster! Like with fangs and wings and it can fly."

The young generation, mayor and police consider Batman a threat to their safety, "the council of mothers today petitioned the mayor to issue a warrant for the immediate arrest of the Batman, citing him as a harmful influence on the children of Gotham" (*TDKR* 59). Batman's individuality cannot be contained by a single system, but can be shaped and reshaped through other people's points of view. For older generations, Batman was a hero, but the new generation consider him as a threat – although Batman himself did not change in person, his subjectivity is being shaped and reshaped by people's observations. From one side, the reader encounters a citizen who observes Batman "[a] ruthless, monstrous vigilante, striking at the foundations of our democracy" while, from the other, some citizens state that "a thousand people are fed up with terror – with stupid laws and social cowardice. He's only taking back what's ours."

This duality is the basic tension in Miller's story. He continues that Miller presents "a cautionary figure whose conflicted relationship to the rules and order he protects has a lot to tell us about the complications surrounding authority and its expression in a modern democracy." Miller's Batman sticks to his personal codes of morality and justice beyond the orders and laws governing society. Richard Reynold illustrates the fundamental characteristics of the superhero genre through seven basic principles of the genre. His third law states "[t]he hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law." Miller illustrates a provoking character who challenges the government's authority and laws. The use of force by the government is often unsuccessful and unable to guarantee that crime is controlled. Moreover, Batman reflects a powerful symbol of justice, beyond the law. The reader can understand Batman's values and norms of justice through his relationship with Superman. In their final battle, Batman tells Superman, "You sold out Clark. You gave them the power that should have been ours... We could have changed the world, now look at us. I've become a political liability, and you... you're a joke." Miller shows that Batman has a mind of change with "political liability" opposed to Superman's use of force and adherence to the US government.

In conclusion, Batman is a grey character and what makes him more complicated is the doubt and anxiety in social justice in Gotham where there is no longer a distinct border between good or bad; binaries are blurred in this postmodern graphic novel.

## BATMAN AND SUPERMAN

In *Superhero: the Secret Origin of a Genre*, Peter Coogan describes a superhero code, a set of unwritten rules governing the conduct of superheroes. One element of this code is “reactivity,” the idea that superheroes only use their incredible powers in response to active threats. In the rare occasions where a “superhero attempts to be proactive, he essentially becomes a villain.” Coogan argues that a proactive superhero, one who attempts “to better the human condition” in the absence of a direct threat, “risks becoming a ruler, savior, or destroyer.” The traditional role of the superhero is a vigilante loosely allied with the police. Those who deviate from this role by taking active role in government violate the superhero code and risk crossing the line into villainy.

This is the source of the conflict between Batman and Superman in *DKR*. The two characters have long epitomized the superhero in the popular imagination, but Batman has always been darker and more rebellious. David Leverenz compares him to Tarzan: “An avenging hero, half animal and half human, fusing beast and patrician, descends into an evil underclass to save a helpless bourgeois civilization.”

Superman, on the other hand, has long embodied Truth, Justice and the American Way. In Carney’s view, “Superman has always functioned as a flag, as a myth.” Umberto Eco describes him as “kind, handsome, modest, and helpful; his life is dedicated to the battle against the forces of evil; and the police find him an untiring collaborator.” Eco further argues that Superman is almost solely concerned with crimes against private property but never government corruption. He thus represents the political and economic status quo.

Miller heightens the dichotomy between these characters in *DKR*. Superman becomes “the prime supporter of the dominant power,” “an order-obsessed Reagan-tool,” “the mere lackey of corrupt officials.” At one point in the text, **the Gipper** condescendingly refers to the **Man of Steel** as a “good boy.” Batman, on the other hand, is “libertarian,” combating “the forces of rigidity and anarchy, which have unwittingly combined to make the life of the Everyman oppressive and terrifying.”

In Frank Miller’s world, Batman is more controversial than Superman. In a talking-heads-style television debate, a Batman critic describes him as “an aberrant psychotic force—morally bankrupt, politically hazardous, reactionary, paranoid—a danger to every citizen of Gotham!” In the eyes of the critic, Batman is a “kind of social fascist.” Batman’s defender, Lana Lang, describes him “as a symbolic resurgence of the common man’s will to resist . . . a rebirth of the



American fighting spirit.” Miller’s Superman is not spoken about at all, having become officially invisible. His exploits are described by a reporter “as an atmosphere anomaly—or a UFO sighting.” Mentioning, or even hinting at, Superman’s existence invites “trouble with the F.C.C.”

Superman defends his decision to submit to government authority. In an imagined dialogue with Batman, he explains:

*They’ll kill us if they can, Bruce. Every year they grow smaller. Every year they hate us more. We must not remind them that giants walk the Earth.*

He further blames Batman for the shift in public opinion:

*You were the one they used against us, Bruce. The one who played it rough . . . “Sure we’re criminals,” you said. “We’ve always been criminals. We have to be criminals.”*

He concludes:

*I gave them my obedience and my invisibility. They gave me a license and let us live. No, I don’t like it. But I get to save lives—and the media stays quiet.*

Batman, not surprisingly, has a different perspective:

*you’ve always known just what to say. “Yes”—you always say yes—to anyone with a badge—or a flag.*

He blames Superman for the political climate, while also highlighting how the characters’ origins shaped their respective worldviews:

*You sold us out, Clark. You gave them—the power—that should have been ours. Just like your parents taught you to. My parents taught me a different lesson . . . lying on the street—shaking in deep shock—dying for no reason at all—they showed me that the world only makes sense when you force it to.*

*The Dark Knight Returns* culminates in a battle between the two. In Geoff Klock’s view, Batman plays the role of “[t]he rebel threatening a new hegemony,” while Superman represents “the old hegemony and the status quo.” Klock sees these two conflicting aspects as “inherent in the superhero comic tradition.” From a purely physical perspective, Superman holds a distinct advantage, with nearly godlike powers while Batman is, in his own words, “just bone and meat,” a man whose extraordinary abilities have degraded with age. Although Batman fakes his own death, he triumphs as a rebel superhero.

## The Joker

In Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), the Joker comes out as perhaps the most iconic villain in comic book history. His look is, in its own way, at least as iconic as Batman's. If we could place him on a scale and measure the factor of his immediate recognisability among non-comic book fans, he'd be right up there, sitting comfortably next to his nemesis and Superman.

Like a circus, the Joker's schemes are loud, grand, goofy affairs, suffused with danger and deadly possibility. He wears a large purple fedora hat, with its ridiculous two-foot wide brim and giant, improbably orange feather. He wears a well-tailored purple pinstriped zoot suit, an orange tuxedo shirt and an incongruous black jacquard silk long string tie. His iconic white skin, the red lips, the mop of green hair above the too-long horse face wracked with twisted glee, and the wide yellow of the eyes mapped with angry red veins make him visually striking.

In *The Killing Joke*, we learn that the Joker was once upon a time a lab assistant who quit his job to pursue a career as a stand-up comedian. He is not successful or even, it appears, the least bit funny. Struggling to support his very pregnant wife, Jeanne, he tells her she's married to a loser and then collapses into her arms, crying: "Jeez ... I have to go, I have to go and stand up there and nobody laughs ... and you think, you think I ... Oh God. Oh God I'm *sorry*." He is evidently not a criminal, but hoping for some quick money nevertheless, he falls in with a group of crooks, and becomes their patsy in the robbery of the playing card company (it is next door to the chemical plant he used to work in). The crooks have a distinctive gimmick for their crimes, one they've apparently repeated: they recruit a new patsy for each robbery and dress him in a flashy red hood/helmet and tuxedo to draw the police's focus and media attention away from themselves. The same day the crime is to be carried out, the comedian's wife and unborn child are killed by—of all things—an electrical short from a bargain basement baby formula warmer she is testing. Utterly destroyed, he tries to back out, but the crooks force him to carry out the robbery in the chemical plant anyway, which is foiled by the police and Batman. Dressed in this red hood/helmet—he can barely see, and he sees double, through those "red, two-way mirrored lenses"—and absolutely frantic to escape, he jumps off a catwalk and into the polluted river and once again, or actually for the first time, he falls from a great height into liquid. Scrabbling to the river bank, he takes off his helmet, and in a reflective puddle, sees that the chemicals have turned his skin white, his lips red, and his hair green. He starts laughing, and the Joker is born. And this cycle of fall from a height, apparent death and resurrection becomes a repetitive cycle for the Joker in Batman stories.

In *The Dark Knight Returns*, we are given our first real access to the Joker's brain, and these bits of internal monologue would seem to indicate that the Joker, at least, understands what it is he's trying to accomplish, even if we don't. Early on, the Joker emerges from a ten-year-catatonic state at very nearly the same moment Batman emerges from retirement. An indulgent, namby-pamby psychologist obsessed with the media spotlight seizes on this and turns the Joker into a product of the culture of victimization, arguing that the Joker has long suffered from "Batman Psychosis" and gets him a booking on the "David Endocrine [read: Letterman] Show." The Joker steps out on stage, looks at the audience, and thinks: "So many faces—so different from one another ... so few *smiles*..." When asked by host Endocrine how many people he's killed—some estimates place the number well over 600—the Joker replies: "I don't keep count." (There is a deadly seriousness, and a flatness, to his delivery that is reminiscent of his very first appearance in *Batman* #1—"I'm going to kill you" and "Prepare to die"). He gestures with his

cigarette at the studio audience and says, quite evenly: “I’m going to kill everyone in this room,” (22) which he then proceeds to do, kissing another guest—a certain sex therapist by the name of “Dr. Ruth Weisenheimer”— full on the mouth (his lipstick is poisoned) and dosing everyone else (Endocrine included) with his lethal laughing gas (he is apparently immune to the effect of his own chemicals) and bringing the death smile to their faces. If we consider that the Joker first appeared in the 1940s, the reference to Hitler and the mindless death of a large number of people using industrial gas.

From there, the Joker moves to the country fair, where he hands out his poisoned cotton candy to hundreds of children. It is here, again, that we move inside his brain: “They could put me in a helicopter and fly me up into the air and line the bodies head to toe on the ground in delightful geometric patterns like an endless June Taylor dancers routine—and it would never be enough. No, I don’t keep count. But *you* do. And I love you for it.” The Joker’s referencing of June Taylor reinforces the notion and importance of spectacle, of *show*, while the “you” in the Joker’s reverie, of course, is Batman (or God, if the Joker is the Devil), who arrives on the scene and has determined, finally, that he must kill the Joker. It has taken the Batman precisely this long to acknowledge consciously what some part of him has known and resisted all along: the Joker is in control of his actions. The Joker *is* responsible. We learn this through Batman’s own internal monologue: “From the beginning, I knew ... that there’s nothing wrong with you ... that I can’t fix ... with my hands...” Their no-holds-barred fight terminates in the “Tunnel of Love,” with the Joker stabbing Batman repeatedly in the stomach with a knife held just below the level of his abdomen, and Batman clutching the Joker’s head in his massive hands.

To conclude, the Joker in a way becomes the symbol of the never-ending blind violence threatening, and rising out of the modern civilization. The demon of death and destruction rises from its own ashes to offer a fresh threat. Apparently we see the end of Joker in the Dark Knight, but one never knows, given the pattern of his resurrection in the past.

River of stories, published in 1994, is credited as being one of the first Indian graphic novels. It is drawn and written by Orijit Sen, inspired by the struggles of Adivasi people involved in Narmada Bachao Andolan. It's a social, political as well as environmental and at times philosophical commentary on the reality of a big project such as the construction of a dam on the Narmada river. It's inspired by Sen's observation based upon his participation in the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and he also incorporates these experiences in the narration of the novel. It's a graphic novel that talks about displacement and destruction of the culture of Adivasis that comes as an unthought consequence of modern development in places where there is no modern culture, so to speak. Or instead, as one may observe in the novel, this total annihilation of the cultural identity of Adivasis is not an unthought consequence but a fact that political leaders and others involved in the construction of the dam choose to willfully ignore in exchange for fattening their wallets, in the manner that this annihilation is inconsequential and of no value to them.

This brazen attitude is emboldened by the unsympathetic attitude or sentiment of the general public who may be unaware of all the implications of such a construction as well as being disillusioned by the promises of development. In the novel, it's not until the article is published and gains traction that the general public gives a thought about the ongoing struggles of their nation and their people. The greed of man knows no boundaries, and it might also be the reason why the general public just chooses to go along with the unreliable promises of development by the political leaders.

One of the major themes of the novel is the social class and the divide between them. There exists an unsaid division between the Adivasis and the said general public. The physical distance, no or few interactions- most of which may be unsavoury, as well as the mental distance, or the perceived mental distance, essentially creates a mental wall between the two. This leads people to think they are very different from each other somehow, which can be true, but it overshadows in their mind, the fact, that at the end of the day they are all just humans.

This mental wall thickens due to stereotypes perpetuated by the mainstream society about Adivasi people being backwards and since they are uneducated, it must mean that they are unintelligent. These stereotypes take away from the credibility of their protest and the reason behind it. They also make it easier to brush away the concerns of people who 'don't know any better'.

Such a negative image perpetuated against the Adivasis also effectively 'otherise' them. It strengthens the mental divide, which in turn also broadens the gap of unequal resource distribution. This divide also helps people in power to justify the destruction of the lives of Adivasi people, as said destruction is just a by-product of the development that will benefit 'you' and 'your group', so you shouldn't worry about 'them'.

Right at the beginning of the novel the theme of class divide is introduced as the character Relku, an Adivasi who works as a domestic helper in the house of the journalist Vishnu. This job, among other menial jobs, is usually associated with poverty, which shows us that even displaced Adivasis who turn to cities, are never able to settle down in peace and almost always get trapped in the cycle of poverty, Relku even sadly proclaims in this scene itself that due to poverty, her children have to work as well. So, in such cases, interaction and somewhat assimilation is present between the two classes, but their lives are quite literally worlds apart.

In one of the very first scenes of the novel, the reader sees a Sarkari Babu talking to the Adivasis from Relku's village, and the Babu questions the Adivasis if they know what development even means, to which he supplies his answer as well — '...your own son can get education..' and earn money, i.e. your son can become modern. There's an obvious literacy gap between the two groups represented here, where one group feels superior to the other group, simply because they had formal education.

In the same sequence, a young Relku is told by one of the policemen's that she should tell her older sisters to cover up or else he'll teach them with his own hands. In other words, tell them to cover up or he'll molest them, plain and simple. This is not unlike instances in real life, where men in power will subjugate someone to harassment. If we peel one more layer, we can see that it also happens because the policeman feels that Adivasis are a class below him, and thus he can do as he pleases. He knows that nobody would hold him responsible for his actions and words, and thus he can say whatever he wants without being liable for such things. There are no repercussions for his actions and thus he does as he wants. He wouldn't dare to say such a thing to someone who was a non-Adivasi. The novel is littered with such instances with people calling Adivasis stupid and ignorant, dismissive of their ideology of being one with nature, even saying that if development is to be done, then it's justified if few suffer for the greater good of the mass.

The divide, as mentioned before, justifies this destruction of Adivasi culture in the name of development. This also justifies the violence they bear when they oppose this tyrannical system of rigid oppression and taking away their power and rights. In Relku's childhood, the Sarkari people and Thakedars etc. effectively take away their lands and livelihoods and introduce the vices of modern men, such as gambling and alcoholism, into their community, at the end of which the community is dispersed and separated. Their culture is essentially lost, never to be recovered. As the novel progresses, one learns that this is precisely what the Adivasis are trying to stop from happening through the Narmada Bachao Andolan. They are trying to protect their cultural identity which is closely linked with the nature around them. The knowledge passed down through generations makes them aware that such structures like that of a big dam cannot assimilate with nature, and can bring about many problems, which the modern man- even through all his modern education- cannot understand.

“Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recalls, longer than knowing even wonders.”

(Faulkner 64)

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Such is the power of belief that even though Faulkner, in the statement mentioned above, simply develops the setting for a flashback sequence, in reality, it speaks volumes about how the notion of coloniality works and how it is not just limited to a specific time-frame but applicable to human nature itself. Colonial relations depend vitally on the role played by memory in framing belief systems and hence, in hegemonizing the minds and actions/bodies of people belonging not only to a specific period but across numberless ensuing generations. This chapter engages in an understanding of the said colonial tension through visual representations in comics within the context of Indian urban-tribal conflicts and is divided into two distinct sections. The first section briefly traces the scholarship around coloniality, differentiating it from colonialism and situating it as the con of modernity (which itself is defined in entirely Eurocentric terms), consequently understanding how decoloniality operates as an emancipatory tool for the victims ensnared by coloniality. The second section introduces Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (hereonwards as *RoS* for convenience) as a site where coloniality is practiced. It deliberates on how the graphic novel itself, both formalistically and structurally, takes a decolonial stand through quadruple pillars of myth, memory, voice, and topography—where decoloniality, as will be discussed below, is to be understood as a continual struggle and a constant state of resistance to agents of coloniality/modernity. These agents include, among others, all capitalist structures of thought, institutions, and episteme. While taking the stand, the chapter establishes how purely material terms are directly proportional to regression in the human element of what is understood as capitalist transactions.

### **From Colonialism to Coloniality**

From the point of view of factors like temporality and *con*-sequentiality,<sup>1</sup> the differences between coloniality, colonialism, postcolonialism, and colonization need no further elucidation, given the extensive modernity/rationality/coloniality debate among decolonial scholars like Walter D. Mignolo (“de-linking”) (451), Anibal Quijano (“coloniality of power”) (540), Nelson Maldonado-Torres (“coloniality of being”) (248), and Enrique Dussel (“trans-modernity and liberation”) (35) among others. The arguments of these scholarstake root in the ego-centered rationality of renaissance and enlightenment thinkers like Descartes and Kant, trudging through Heidegger (“*dasein*”) (27) and Levinas (“face-to-face and the other”) (89) to wind up in the territory of Fanon (“*damnés*”) (245), and waThiong’o (“dismemberment”) (5) holding the hands of Horkheimer (“critical theory”) (9). To put otherwise, this tracing of epistemic traditions

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suggests how a divisionism made historically between two or more intelligent beings/races/communities based on power, which is sanctioned by capital, and how exploitation is possible with the lure of liberation and modernity. While colonialism is an established historical and time-specific phenomenon born out of European colonization and its subsequent colonial practices, Maldonado-Torres defines it as “a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire” (243). Coloniality, on the other hand, “refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism” (Maldonado-Torres 243) and transcends the restraints of time and place, being born and thriving in zones of conflict.

### **Coloniality, Modernity, and Decoloniality**

Evaluating the relationship between modernity and coloniality, Mignolo traces the roots of modernity to the introduction of new drugs like tobacco, caffeine, and glucose to replace alcohol in the European upper classes by referring to the works of Anthony Giddens on modernity and empire, respectively. To quote Giddens, “Modernity refers to modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence. This associates modernity with a period and with an initial geographical allocation” (1). Mignolo adds that “the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality are...two sides of the same coin” (464), moving on to establish that “there is no modernity without coloniality” (Mignolo 466). While modernity claims the quality of bringing forth the emancipation of sorts, Mignolo focuses on a darker side or a con aspect of modernity as being a “constant reproduction of coloniality” (450). The said reproduction addresses the beginning statement of this chapter about coloniality being subject to human relations, which are timeless and therefore not “stowed away in a black box” (Giddens 1). This is further confirmed by decolonial scholar Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, according to whom “[i]t is the continuation of colonial-like relations after the end of direct colonialism that has come to be termed as coloniality” (30). Since coloniality is integrally tethered to modernity and continually transpiring irrespective of time and space, —to phrase it in the words of Maldonado-Torres, “we breathe [e] coloniality all the time and every day” (243). It is not a surprise when Habermas exclaims that “the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled” (12).<sup>2</sup> On that note, Quijano clarifies that “[i]f the concept of modernity...refers to the ideas of newness, the advanced, the rational-scientific, the secular, (which are the ideas normally associated with it) then there is no doubt that one must admit that it is a phenomenon possible in all cultures and historical epochs” (543).

The possibility, as mentioned above, hints at the numerous “non-Western

concepts of Totality” (Mignolo 451) pitched against an “imperialist concept of Totality” (Mignolo 451)<sup>3</sup> which claims ultimate authority — “transmodern pluriversality” (Dussel 41) as against the imperial core. Mignolo elaborates how it is a postmodern (hence heavily Eurocentric) critique of this “Totality” (451– 455) which leads to post-coloniality. In case the same analysis is implemented from the perspective of coloniality, it leads to decoloniality—which is a synthesis of “Quijano’s project on *desprendimiento*” (Mignolo 452)<sup>4</sup> and Samir Amin’s “economic de-linking” (435–444). Mignolo later used these concepts to develop his idea of “epistemic de-linking” (450). Since the clash of the multiple Totalities entails a power struggle with the economy as the basis of discrimination, Mignolo argues how Quijano’s notion of “coloniality of power” (536) which embraces “world capitalism” (Quijano 536) and Eurocentrism, has two sides—the “analytic” (Mignolo 452), which affirms itself and the “programmatic” (Mignolo 452), which reacts to the analytic. To conclude, it may be said that “the analytic of coloniality and the programmatic of decoloniality moves away and beyond the postcolonial” (Mignolo 452). Thus, it is clear that the scope of resistance via decoloniality transcends the postcolonial. Taking the argument further, Ndlovu-Gatsheni expounds how “decoloniality is ranged against imperialism, colonialism, and coloniality as a constituent part of the modernist politics of dismemberment, alienation, exploitation, and alterity [and] attempts to make sense of what is happening, actually being faced, and being experienced, particularly from geopolitical sites that were the recipients of the negatives of modernity” (23–24). Thus, in narratives of decoloniality, these “geopolitical” sites (Gramsci 304) become the subject of deliberation and action, hence setting examples of staging “counter-hegemonic” resistance (Hunt 310).

### **Situating Orijit Sen’s *River of Stories***

Indian graphic artist and designer Orijit Sen, in his first and only graphic novel, *River of Stories* (1994), reproduces one such geopolitical site, which presents itself as a breeding ground for economic and regional conflict and exploitation using the affordances of the comics medium. *RoS* is considered to be the first graphic novel in India which “opened the door for long-form comics work” (Stoll 329) in the country, despite the next graphic novel hitting the market almost a decade later with Sarnath Banerjee’s *Corridor* (2004). *RoS* is the account of a reporter from the magazine *Voice* named Vishnu, who decides to cover the history of the Rewasagar Dam and the protests against its construction by the local villagers, urban and suburban activists, and tribal communities whose lands are at stake for the government project. However, there is a parallel narrative of a villager singer who sings about creating the universe and the laws of humankind and animal-kind. The rural singer’s tale stands in stark contrast to the world’s western/rationalist/scientific history. It follows Vishnu from the comforts of his home in the city to a village named Ballanpur, where he seeks to excavate unheard stories about the protests against the building of the dam



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and as a journalist, writes an article that captures all the perspectives that he can garner in his time on the field. Thus, the text qualifies as expressive journalistic writing, albeit interspersed with history and local mythology. Mignolo's concept of Totality offers an exciting way of understanding the structure of *RoS* where it is a safe top to perceive the mythic voice of the village singer, Malgugayan, operating as one (perhaps the most significant) of the many silenced Totalities with the government officials playing the vocal Totality. The graphic novel is divided into three parts and an epilogue which marks the journey of a voice, initially unheard and speculative, gathering traction as it flows and then bursts out into the open world, thus transitioning from being "The Spring" (Sen 8) "The River" (Sen 29) to "The Sea" (Sen 50). Coincidentally, the medium through which the voice gets conveyed is a magazine named *Voice*! The first part constitutes the homework that Vishnu does before venturing out into the field. This again marks his knowledge or episteme of the issue at hand and a extremely limited or stifled by the other voices and his dependency on them for a truth of the Totality he seeks. The second part throws him during the action, where the silent Totalities are audible, and the spring of episteme grows into a river of stories narrated on both ends of the stream—the local and the global. The third section is where the "programmatically" (Mignolo 452) union of the silenced Totalities lashes at the "analytic" (Mignolo 452) sea of vocal Totality and myriads of voices merge to create possibilities of decolonial resistance, reactions, and independent co-existence. However, this journey ends with realizing the silenced Totalities being finally heard and acknowledged begins with a problem.

### **The Problem**

The problem is actualized by a rift in lifestyles between city-dwellers and bureaucrats on the one hand and village-folk and tribal communities on the other. The conflict takes on proportions of a politically, legally, and economically charged power struggle, which is undeniably the reproduction of coloniality. But under domestic circumstances, it is deprived of any imperialist urges, whose workings are manifested as soon as Vishnu commences interviewing his housemaid, Relku, for his story. When Vishnu questions Relku about the village, which happens to be Jamli, a place 3 kilometers away from Ballanpur and by the river Rewa (the recollection of this detail is crucial and will be discussed later), Relku narrates the story of how her family was evicted. They had to move toward the city to find work and shelter. This meta-narrative begins with an encounter between a government official and the members of Relku's tribe. As soon as the natives address the "sarkari" people (Sen 15) as "sahib" (Sen 16), the discourse of coloniality is established and what ensues is that "[u]nder the spell of neo-liberalism and the magic of media promoting it,

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modernity and modernization, together with democracy, are being sold as a package trip to the promised land of happiness," (Mignolo 450) when the official lure sthenatives' imagination with promises of "pucca roads," "proper means of transport," "proper houses," and "factories" (Sen 17). By the time the subject veersto their children receiving education and being intelligent, getting a job, and earning money as a reward, thenatives believeallof this to be a joke and wonder, "how is it possible to live without farming or hunting?" (Sen 16) To the tribal communities, the very idea of such a Totality is inconceivable. As much as they are hesitant about the changes, they clearly would not mind, given no encroachment on their lifestyle. But little do they know that "[t]he outside of modernity is precisely that which has to be conquered, colonized, superseded and converted to the principles of progress and modernity" (Mignolo 462). Hence, the tribal people are meant to become targets of oppression and exploitation.

However, there are always a few who are either brave or foolish (giving adequate space to both parties concerned) enough to raise their voice and ask questions to which the bureaucratic administration responds by slamming "a crackdown on the more vocal ones" (Sen 21). Since it has to be clarified that "when people do not buy the package willingly or have other ideas of how economy and society should be organized, they become subject to all kinds of direct and indirect violence" (Mignolo 450); otherwise, there is a constant risk that if "the geography of reason shifts," (Mignolo 462) the entire system would be compromised. Reason and judgment belong to the economically and materially superior classes, and such parties would faingive up their position of comfort to create room for other minorities with credible voices. Subtle counter-measures, as a self-defense mechanism against the geographical shift of reason, act as snares for the less careful among the repressed—for instance, carving out areas of land and punishing those who trespass on it, marking those who skip providing gifts to the corrupt officials while revoking their permission to graze cattle, and in consequence constraining their freedom of movement, setting debt traps by selling alcohol on credit and countless other such maneuvers. Despite all the oppression, the officials' statement remains the same throughout — "All of you can benefit from these schemes, provided you learn to cooperate" (Sen 16) as if providing a choice, whereas there is no natural choice involved. This is how the "myth of modernity" (Mignolo 481) operates, being a "justification for genocidal violence" (Mignolo 482) behind the mask of emancipation. Coloniality, being the dark side or con of modernity, "exists as an embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernization, and being good for everyone" (Mignolo 6).

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Relku's father, Anriyo, complains at the police station against Rathore Saab, the alcohol distributor, who encourages Anriyo's brother, Maaru, to drink as much as he wishes on credit thus ensnaring him in a debt trap. The police (bribed by Rathore) beat up Anriyo, who has no idea as to what wrong he did, and the next day Relku's house is set on fire while the entire family has to move to the city to work as "landless labourers... with no money or possessions" (Sen 28). It is a fact that violence is perpetrated. But, without the strictly colonial imperialist drive to conquer an area that is already on the brink of being evacuated by the inhabiting natives, how is violence being made possible at all? An answer to this question may be attempted by revisiting before the first encounter, where Relku is seen picking *mahua* flowers. At the same time, her brother, Somariyo, shoots an arrow and misses a bird — an idyllic image of the hunter-gatherer tradition (see Figure 1.1). The utopic atmosphere is ruptured with the sound of a motor engine. As soon as Somariyo (who is climbing the tree to fetch his arrow) notices the locomotive's sound, special attention is given by the author to the breaking of a branch and Somariyo falling through in-set panels. The tearing of the branch indicates what wa Thiong'o calls "dismemberment" (5) or the fragmentation of the self of a colonial subject. The sound of the motor engine is a clarion call to the imminent dismemberment of the natives and hence a moment of dramatic irony graphically represented. The dismemberment also breaks the being and sends the "*damnés*"<sup>3</sup> (Fanon 245) into a zone of "non-being" (Heidegger 177) where there is no face to show. "[T]he face speaks" (Levinas 87), and when it does, it "forbids us to kill" (Levinas 86). But when there is no face, there is meant to be violence, hence given the bureaucratic nature of the government officials, no one can be blamed, and how can one without a face accuse or be inculpated at all? The impossibility of what Levinas calls "face-to-face" (85) is, therefore, how violence is possible even without any spur or intent. Voice and visibility are markers that acknowledge the presence of a human being. Still, when the concerned human is deprived of both, there is a regression towards a sub-human stature where the choice of identity itself is snatched and controlled by materially developed humans, referring to the bureaucrats in the present context. They use the economy to claim mastery and control over the non-beings.

The comics' form, as seen above, not only visually represents a setting but situates and anticipates a time in a single frame. The comics form is known to be a reductive art form where the artist eliminates all redundancies until every scratch on the panel is significant in some way, thus providing novel artistic agency to the creator and, in the words of urban scholar Dominic Davies, becoming an engaging weapon in the hands of those residing and writing from the Global South. In his book *Urban Comics* (2019), Davies examines the comics of five southern cities — Cairo, Cape Town, New Orleans, Delhi, and Beirut — to argue that "comics are engaged with a range of decolonial projects" (Davies 4)

and how comics are depicting the multiple divisive crises “in both their form and content with radical revisioning of violent, neocolonial urban space” (Davies 4). Davies also quotes Orijit Sen calling himself an “infrastructural engineer” (Davies 181) who crafts his comics with panels, gutters, and all its attendant components just as a planner would design a city but can re-see and re-show the established structure by de-establishing it and re-inventing components. However, decolonial practices are not limited to cities and urban spaces alone. Sen’s *RoSis* is a solid testament to this contention as the same structures are being broken but in the backdrop of a rural grassroots movement.



Figure 1.1: Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (14-15)

### The Decolonial Stand

Given the decolonial potential of comics and perhaps because of the problems mentioned above, the text itself takes a stand in resistance to the coloniality/modernity framework. It does so by invoking visual aids that subtly indicate how the plot and the characters break the colonial/capitalist fabrications. The narrative allows both the ensnaring and the redemption of the *damnés* and relies primarily on four mighty pillars to initiate the decolonial

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movement that aims to negate completely and discard all foreign (here capitalist) influence—be it in thought, actions, or reactions. The first pillar of resistance is the mythical narrative of Malgugayan, with which the graphic novel begins. Instead of giving in to the rational/scientific/Western understanding of the world, *RoS*, while paying homage to the age-old tradition of oral storytelling, pays tribute to the local legend of the birth of the rivers Rewa and Vijali. The myth follows the story of creation “as believed in the ApaTani tribe in Arunachal Pradesh” (Elwin 5). Although the actions supposedly take place by the banks of the river Narmada in Madhya Pradesh, Sen somehow links the two geographically distant and distinct cultures, fusing them into a singular force having roots in shared consciousness. Such a connection is meant to deal with heavy damage to the colonial stratagem of divisive policies that maim the ability of the repressed community to connect and heal.

According to the myth, before everything else, Kujum Chantu, a selfless mother figure who realizes that any movement she makes would mean catastrophe for the world to be. Hence, Kujum Chantu rubs the dirt on her chest to create life and sustenance for the life she creates and sacrifices herself so that the world may live. Sen’s employment of a North-Eastern folk tale in a narrative that is based in Central India is justified since multiple similar myths, where elements procreate, or a sacrifice is made, can be found in various other cultures with different names—

for instance, “Phangnalomang in the Dhamma tribe” (Elwin 13), “Khupning-Kuam in Singpho tribe” (Elwin 20–21), and the “myths of the Hrusso tribe” (Elwin 15) among others. The reader can hear the tale of Kujum Chantu through the songs of Malgugayan, who goes on to sing of how he came in possession of the *rangai* (the instrument he plays while singing). The yarn that follows is a digression from the creation story and assumes the proportion of an epic in the making, where Ranikajal sends Ratukamaito wake up the singer of *maal* (Malgu), who “sleeps for twelve years and snores for thirteen” (Sen 30) breaking all notions of western reason, and when called to the urgency of “our mountains are changing,” responds “Go now, I will come after four-five days” (Sen 30). Malgu then sends a letter to Relukabadi, tasking him with making his instruments, who promptly goes across the mountains with his two daughters—Relu and Revli. The daughters were not meant to go with Relukabadi. Still, following the epic tradition, fate causes them to accompany him. By accident, both girls may become rivers (Ganga or Rewa and Jamna or Vijali) that flow freely throughout the land. Malgugayan delivers his instruments as promised. In this way, severe divergences are drawn between the local mythology, which views the resources and the life forms with a sustainable lens, and the rational/utilitarian opportunism, which draws on the false notion of development to hide the egocentric western vision of coloniality. Malgugayan symbolically also represents the dismembered self that stays behind, calling out to the other-

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selves lost amidst cityscapes hoping that “the river of stories which rises from the soul can flow out...to the far corners of the world, and people everywhere awoken to its sweet music” (Sen 31). The very existence of such a world at the backdrop, the beginning, and the end of the narrative is a bold statement of decolonial pride on the face of modernity/coloniality.

The second pillar of resistance is memory. According to wa Thiong’o, “[m]emory is the link between the past and the present, space and time, and it is the base of our dreams” (39). One of the primary agendas of the coloniality project is to uproot the memories so that they become nothing more than mere footnotes to be forgotten with time. As discussed before, dismemberment plays a significant role in this operation. The plot of Vishnu’s journey starts with Relku’s story about her childhood, and, as mentioned before, she recollects every detail about her childhood home and the harsh experiences that scarred her youth. Here, in the very beginning of the narrative, right after being introduced to the local myth of creation, the reader comes across a dismembered being in the process of remembering herself. Even before narrating her story, Relku is found singing a rural song, which is a point of connection with her mythic roots as the oral tradition is one of the primary sources of retaining memory and consequently music (which is the only weapon of resistance for Malgu) may be imagined as the cultural artifact that anchors myth to memory. When Vishnu reaches the village of Ballanpur, he meets Anand, an educated local activist involved in the protests against the construction of dams. He decides to join him and other protesters in the rally at Manigam to understand the other side of the story better. While on the bus journey towards Manigam, Vishnu and Anand chat about Malgu, the singer and evoke his memory in the hope that “[m]aybe this time Malgu’s song will be heard not only by his people but by people all over the world,” (Sen 43) all while Malgu is seen overlooking them from atop a mountain peak (see Figure 1.2). This frame is significant as two worldviews can be seen colliding and harmoniously celebrating an imminent victory of memory (that keeps a culture and a lifestyle alive) over indoctrination and subjugation.

Figure 1.2: Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (43)

The third pillar of resistance is the host of silent stories, which find a voice in the second part of *the River of Stories* titled "The River" (Sen 29–49). When Vishnu reaches Ballanpur and meets Anand, the readers showed an alternative side of modernity and development in the form of ecological awareness, sustainability, and humanitarians sentiments. Later, when Vishnu's eye-opening article is published in the magazine, particular focus is given on the face of the natives so that their voices do not simply remain random anonymous sounds but are graced with visible visages, showcasing human expressions, hence inculcating them with emotional value and authenticity. Thus, visibility and

voice—which have been earlier stated as markers of “being” (Heidegger 22)—are returned to the bodies erstwhile rendered invisible and unheard, in the process attacking the integrity of the project of coloniality. On that note, the comics form uses the element of visuality to demonize the facial expressions of the oppressors like Rathore, the *sarkari* people, and the police, while showing an empathetic side of the oppressed through mostly innocent and surprised or happy and scared faces with no scowl of malignancy on them (see Figure 1.3). This humanization of what Fanon calls “wretched sheep” (Fanon 232) is best made possible through the comics form as visuality is the primary approach of communicating sensitive concerns like human dignity and value for life.



Figure 1.3: Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (22)

The fourth and most striking pillar of resistance is how Sen reproduces the topographical map of the Rewa valley, going beyond how a western cartographer would imagine the topography of an area of cultural as well as material significance. The map is drawn on a triple spread (therefore not possible to display as a single image) and covers the entire distance of the river Rewa to the dam site. Although it is not an accurate cartographic depiction with longitudes and latitudes, it shows a cultural and ecological perspective of understanding a landscape. The triple spread is also where the narrative plot



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and the mythic plot intersect and co-exist, thus creating sites of “pluriversality” through “border thinking” (Mignolo 498). That is to say, multiple totalities co-exist based on the premise of being marginal to the so-called capitalist mainstream Totality, hence nullifying the impact of the latter and creating individualistic and innovative codes of understanding physical space. This aspect is a fine example of a successful and straightforward attempt at decolonial thought and representation. Such re-imaginings of structured maps are exceedingly common among Indian graphic novelists and can also be found in Bhagwati Prasad and Amitabh Kumar’s *Tinker, Solder, Tap. A Graphic Novel* (2009) where Delhi is visualized as a circuit board; or in Amruta Patil’s *Kari* (2008), where a part of Mumbai is depicted as a hand-drawn dreamy carved-on-unplanned-lines sheet. Changing a topographical area in the mindscape becomes the first step of getting rid of the structures forced by colonial influence and aids in creating independent identities. Altogether, the four pillars stated above support Sen’s graphic novel as an exercise in decoloniality with an eye out for breaking the chains of coloniality/modernity once and for all.

#### **Coda: Under the Mahua Tree**

The last section of *River of Stories* titled “Under the Mahua Tree” (Sen 57) is perhaps the most powerful in its critique of modernity and coloniality. A villager, who looks like Malgu, is playing his *rangai*,<sup>9</sup> sitting idly under a mahua tree. A helicopter “wups” (Sen 57) out of nowhere, and a stout person wearing a Nehru cap (clearly a politician figure) comes out and charges him for sitting idly. They have a short conversation where the administrator is emphatic that he should stop idling around and do some manual labor, which would earn him some money to afford luxuries, gain a profit, and then relax to enjoy the fruits of his work. Malgu, on the other hand, is disinterested and retorts sarcastically how that is what he was doing until the “noisy bird” (Sen 58) came along, destroying his peace. The bane of the Western reason is that it can only be applicable where reason is somehow forced. In a place where happiness and simplicity are considered more important than capital generation and wage against labor, logic does not have a place at all. Decoloniality strives to go out of the duality that reason offers and search for a third alternative that would suit its interest, irrespective of dependency. Speaking of other options, it is clear how comics, despite/ because of being “a form once considered pure junk” (Chute 452), offers a potent amount of representation to a combination of both voice and visibility, thus proving to be ideal instruments of staging decoloniality and undoing the human regression perpetrated for the sake of material development.



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## CONSTRUCTING A DECOLONIAL ECOLOGY: RESISTING MATERIAL MODERNITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN ORIJIT SEN'S GRAPHIC NOVEL *RIVER OF STORIES*

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### Abstract

The research paper examines ecology as a form of resistance in Orijit Sen's graphic novel *River of Stories*. The paper attempts to highlight the regressive ideas of development and modernity as an embodiment of coloniality. The paper investigates the undermining of the local knowledge of the tribal communities in Rewasagar Valley and the prominence of the Western knowledge system that justifies and protects the existing structures of coloniality in postcolonial India. The paper utilises Scott McCloud's theoretical framework of iconicity in graphic novels to further understand the cohesive relationship between tribal communities and ecology. Bridging decolonial theory, graphic narratology, and postcolonial ecocriticism, the paper demonstrates how Sen's graphic novel attempts to bring humans and ecology into one unifying existence that resists and rejects the demarcation of nature and wilderness propagated by coloniality. The paper highlights how Sen challenges the material and discursive violence inherent to capitalist modernisation and extractivism. The paper demonstrates the different ways through which ecological struggles and philosophy of indigenous communities in Rewa Valley find similarities with ecological struggles in South America and the ecological philosophy of Ubuntu in Africa.

Keywords: Decolonial, Ecology, Coloniality, Modernity, Indigenous.

### Introduction

*River of Stories* by Orijit Sen situates itself in a post-colonial India, highlighting the urban-rural tensions that eventually become binary frameworks of development and backward regression. An urban lifestyle is often associated with modernity and development, and the rural populace is perceived as underdeveloped due to a lack of materiality, consequently determined by technocracy. The

graphic novel contextualises forced indigenous displacement to pursue development and social justice that not only demands justice for the people but also highlights ecological degradation and capitalist expansion. The graphic novel entails the narrative of Vishnu, who attempts to cover the story of the Rewasagar Dam Project and the displacement of indigenous communities. Thematically, the graphic novel entails another narrative in which, through the voice of village singer Malgugayan, the

readers are presented with mythic stories and knowledge of the community. Therefore, Malgugayan and the journey of Vishnu simultaneously personify the binaries of urban, which schematically pertains to reasoning, knowledge, development, technological advancement and modernity and the rural underdevelopment state, which showcases non-knowledge, non-reasoning, unscientifically operating communities. However, Vishnu covering the injustice of the dam project breaks the binaries and a just consciousness emerges not only for justice but for acknowledgement where an urban voice, which is perceived to be developmental and equipped with tools of modernity and rationality, is purposefully assimilated into a local knowledge system, thus making the context of Vishnu decolonial.

*River of Stories* moves beyond the boundaries of constructing decolonial ecology and the struggle against modernity. In contemporary times the expansion and an emergent race to become a first world nation through development has contributed to the destruction of the ecology and cultures of indigenous communities worldwide. For instance, the extraction of the Amazon Forest in Brazil has displaced indigenous communities. Similarly, graphic novels such as *River Stories* become an artistic tool for preserving indigenous groups' cultural and historical memories. Different climate treaties worldwide are a testament that there is a need to construct a relationship between humans with ecology which is distant from the capitalising and expansive behaviours of mere profit. The research paper explores the structures of colonial modernity that reside in postcolonial context through the journey of Vishnu and structures that protect and safeguard the principles of modernity, interlinking the process, epistemology and knowledge system together, making it impossible to think beyond the structures of coloniality. Meanwhile an alternative decolonial ecology is presented in the graphic novel, which functions as an assimilating force that unifies humans and nature.

Orijit Sen's graphic novels are characterized by their intricate narratives, vibrant artwork, and

profound explorations of contemporary issues. His works have consistently challenged dominant narratives and given voice to marginalized communities, often drawing inspiration from his own experiences and observations of Indian society. A prominent aspect of Sen's work is his engagement with themes of decoloniality, a critical approach that challenges the lingering effects of colonial power structures and advocates for the recognition and empowerment of marginalized groups. In his graphic novel *River of Stories*, Sen delves into the impact of colonial exploitation on indigenous communities and the environment, highlighting the interconnectedness of social and ecological justice.

The concern of ecology becomes evident in the graphic novel through its content division and Chapterisation. The spring, The River and The sea, the subsequent naming of the sections in itself, highlights the gradual progression pertaining to patterns observed in immediate nature. Simultaneously, it also captures the content of the graphic novel in which Vishnu's exposure gradually shifts and the voice of the indigenous community becomes a resistance movement. The voice of the indigenous community through the figurative language upholds the characterisation of a sense of ecology and habitat. Orijit Sen's division of the graphic novel stems from the figurative language of nature and ecology, which consequently inclines towards creating an ecology immune from uncontrolled capitalisation. The *River of Stories* stems from nature itself, 'I was really trying to look at everything and understand it through a visual language. I had to categorise types of trees, plants, agricultural landscapes, water bodies, architecture, layouts of villages and houses, placements of things, objects, everyday life, etcetera' (Sen 2023) Orijit Sen's emphasis alludes to the body and ecology attempting to create an equilibrium where humans and nature form a coexisting- correlation and the body along with biodiversity identifies the naturalness of its equilibrium. 'Wherever you see the building of roads, railways – they're not done in order to make life better for local people. The local people never asked for it. It is done in order to take the resources from that place.' (Sen 2023)

Coloniality and modernity fuse and become the same side of the coin, as elaborated by Mignolo. Similarly, the technocracy imbues itself along with modernity to sustain its power structures. According to Torress (243), Coloniality refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged due to colonialism but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. As elaborated by Sen, the tools and technologies operating and functioning in these structures rarely provide for the indigenous communities; the technocratic approach that has become a perceived prevalent solution for every problem contains a side of coloniality that has consequentially emerged from modernity. Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) appropriately demonstrates the idea of capturing and domination of nature through technological metrices. Bacon's vision was not free of ambiguity regarding the relationship between power and knowledge, he conceived of a new social order dedicated to the expansion of modern science and progress in human achievement through dominion over nature. Therefore, coloniality, modernity, and technocracy aid in a regressive and depleting ecological state; hence, the indigenous resistance against developmental ideology also becomes an alternative to illustrate a different state of living that includes ecology more than modernity.

### **Knowledge Systems of Coloniality and Developmental Depletion**

The opposition of modernity at the cost of human life is one of the central themes in *River of Stories*. The narrative uses various character voices to highlight the structures that govern and protect modernity and, at the same time, provide enough scientific probability that could trade humans for profitable statistical outcomes. During his travel journey to Ballanpur to cover the protest against the dam construction, Vishnu undergoes conversations, discussions and debates regarding the dam construction in Rewa Valley. The unnamed character eagerly asks Vishnu about the Rewa Valley dam construction. Consequently, both the characters indulge in a long conversation where the arguments against the dam construction and the exploitation of

humans are equally presented. Vishnu argues that 'people in the past have not received fair compensation during migration, and they have merely moved in urban areas in search of a living' (Sen 34). However, the fellow traveller debates with Vishnu that this time, the government has elaborated a rehabilitation programme, which is more than enough as he sees the dam construction as an integral part of government developmental policies, which is statistically, mathematically has the probability of helping millions. The conversation between Vishnu and the unnamed traveller highlights the knowledge system created through modernising missions to regulate and substantiate the discourse of development.

Mignolo (361-427) highlights the problem of binary opposition created in knowledge systems where one form of gaining knowledge and predicting future is given superiority to other forms of knowledge. The estimation of Rewa Dam providing water and irrigation facilities to millions utilises the methods of scientific discourse which overpower the benefits of the Dam through numbers and mathematical certainties. Therefore, the knowledge system, through numbers and probabilities, constructs a narrative that aligns in harmony with the developmental narratives of modernity. Contrarily, the same knowledge system becomes absent when the estimation and cost of migration of indigenous communities come into play. Throughout the novel, the figures and facts, which are backed by modern scientific and technocratic methods, are utilised to measure the benefits and functionalities of the modern structure. The measurement of the dam and the project centres around numbers, cumulatively aiding in profit and loss statements for the corporations and contractors.

For instance an unnamed protestor highlights the corporate-driven argument after Vishnu attends the protest in Ballanpur, 'why things will not happen in an alternative way is because contractors want profits and politicians want to line their pockets' (Sen 47) The train journey of Vishnu in itself derives various metaphorical and symbolical associations as, during the journey, Vishnu and fellow traveller argue about the pros and cons of the

Dam project meanwhile, travelling in the train which for many reasons became an integral symbolism of modernity and technological advancement during the industrial revolution in Europe as well as a litmus test to measure the civilisational progress during colonialism. 'The train, with its perpetual forward motion, functions as an emblem of progress, a concept often rendered in artistic form through the image of the journey' (Aguilar 66-85). Therefore, Vishnu's debate with his fellow traveller on dam construction provides an inert contradiction and structural oppression where Vishnu can oppose the developmental and regressive developmental-driven policies but somehow needs to adhere to the conveniences and advancements provided by modernity.

A form of resistance and an alternative knowledge system emerges in the narrative when Vishnu undergoes a similar discussion after reaching Ballanpur and attending the village protest. This time, however, village people provide an alternative and comprehensive rationale for the traditional form of irrigation and its effectiveness (Sen 47). One of the characters highlights that indigenous people are not as foolish as the government thinks; their knowledge is based on real-life experiences and history. Characters do not attempt to discuss the importance of the river through figures and numbers. Rather, the importance of the river is situated in their history and living experience. Compared to the discussion Vishnu undergoes in train, the discussion on the preservation of river highlights an alternative where a discourse and debate on the preservation and juxtaposing views can be negotiated without any structural interference such as police officers and governmental officials. The knowledge system that is based on living experiences resists the knowledge system where numbers and figures are constructed and manipulated to strengthen a narrative.

The superstructures created by colonial modernity which operate in a manner that never allows an opposition of corporatism, which later capitalises through exploitation. When Vishnu and his fellow traveller reach the end of their discussion, a police officer arrives in their compartment for ticket verification, it again reverberates the

structural imposition that protects and safeguards corporatism, capitalism, technocracy, developmental policies and modernity altogether. Discussing an opposition against developmental principles inside the symbolic engine of modernity results in forms of checks and balances where one structure of modernity (train) is protected by another (police officer)

A similar instance in the graphic novel is illustrated when Anriyo, Relku's father, files a police complaint against Rathore Saab, the alcohol distributor, for encouraging Anriyo's brother Maaru to consume as much alcohol as he wants on credit, trapping him in a cycle of debt. The officers (bribed by Rathore) beat Anriyo, who is unaware of his wrongdoing, and Relku's house is destroyed by fire the next day, forcing the family to relocate. to work in the city. Ghosh describes it as voice and visibility, 'Voice and Visibility are markers that acknowledge the presence of a human being. Still, when the concerned human is deprived of both, there is a regression towards a sub-human stature where the choice of identity itself is snatched and controlled by materially developed humans, referring to the bureaucrats in the present context. However, they use the economy to claim mastery and control over the non-beings (Ghosh 9-10). The overconsumption of alcohol becomes integral in the contextualisation of materiality and development. The consumption of alcohol rejects the assumption that materiality involves anxiety of technological and modern sustenance, however, the anxiety and excessive need hides in the most available materiality's. Colonial modernity and its structures reside within it and protect the structures of colonial modernity and imperialism; these similar structures safeguard each other's existence while modernity, technocracy, imperialism and scientific knowledge system interacting with each other creates materialistic pervasiveness as an integral aspect in the postmodern condition. These structures consequently attempt to project development and modernity as a progressive step meanwhile hiding the self-consuming and parasitic nature of excessive materiality.

The significant argument for colonial modernity and viewing development and structure

transformation as a progressive idea is propagated by specific systems in place. Foucault (1961) dissects the controlling nature of discourse in the context of madness and insanity. Social structures and knowledge systems around modernity breed material rewards which might be used as obfuscation and as a defence to protect the institutions of modernity. The role of journalists and media in *River of Stories* comprehends and comments on the institutions around the discourse of development and modernity and whether these institutions realise the impact of ecological loss or propagate the colonial discourse of modernity. Therefore, social activism not only appears to question the institutions but also sees institutions in a decolonial light where institutions can dictate and refurbish their roles regardless of the superstructures above them. When Vishnu publishes the articles bringing the voices of the marginalized in front, the institute of media metaphorically moves away from the structural hegemony. Therefore, the structure of media discourse becomes decolonial through the vocalization of indigenous voices.

The village of Ballanpur becomes a space of alternative knowledge systems, where experience and myths are equally significant. After arriving in Ballanpur, Vishnu's exposure towards the Rewa river becomes less about mathematical potential of the river and more about the experience of the communities. Ballanpur becomes a form of resistance as it incorporates the many silent voices and stories. The readers showed an alternative side of modernity and development in the form of ecological awareness, sustainability, and humanitarian sentiments. (Ghosh 13-15) The village in itself provides an alternative through the individuals. Therefore, the monolithic and universal form of knowledge, as argued through developmental policies, is opposed to the experiences of individuals living in the village. The universal measuring tool of science and mathematics fails to measure the experiential knowledge of individuals living in Ballanpur. For instance, a poor weaver receives Vishnu and narrates the problems faced by the villagers due to the government official's aggressive stance (Sen 35-

36). He describes the importance of Rewa Valley through the same mythical story elaborated by Malgugayan. Thus, illustrating the importance of the river through experience, memory and myths instead of numbers and mathematical figures.

Anand elaborates to Vishnu the journey through which he ended up in Rewa valley as an activist. Anand describes that he observed himself becoming a 'thinking machine' where he realised the exploitative methods of capitalism and corruption overpowering his individuality. (Sen 36-37) Anand's realisation and the ability to willingly remove himself from colonial modernity elucidates an example of a decolonised mind. Gandhi formulates a similar argument against the machinery where the individuality is often overtaken by the machinery, only producing more needs. The involvement of machine should stop where it poses a thread over individuality. 'The machine should not be allowed to cripple the limbs of man' (Gandhi 4-5). During the Protest demonstration, another unnamed character calls for an opposition against capitalist economy and government regulation of those economic conditions.

'The planet is seriously endangered, yet development continues to be based upon economic system that regards all forms of humans and resources as goods that can be bought and sold. It continually seeks to transfer resources from poor to rich' (Sen 46)

Through the narrative, Sen illustrates the exploitative economic condition that has been presupposed to be natural and common, where a commodity needs to be traded for capital; meanwhile, everything from humans to natural resources could be traded. The following economic condition rests upon colonial modernity that has naturalised this economic condition. The economic condition yet again rests upon the knowledge system that regards profit and loss outcomes as the most logical of the approaches. These conditions consequently allow for the dominance of modernity and technocracy that demand certain economic conditions, and these conditions can only exist with conditions of colonial modernity. Antoni Gramsci's

emphasis on cultural hegemony demonstrates the naturalisation of knowledge which reduces the resourcefulness of humans into mere commodities while making this exploitative condition appear like a common sense.

Anand (Sen 42) demonstrates to Vishnu an apparent similarity between the occupation of the land and marginalisation of indigenous communities and the Australian colonisation of the land. The dam project and displacement of the communities propagate Western ideas and methods of environmental narratives. A binary between nature and wilderness is constructed to purposefully eradicate and capitalise the land by labelling it as wild. The British administration introduced the concept of forest reservation, which rationalised the process of taking over the land, and Indian politicians and governmental policies continued the same process. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (98-102) elaborates that Bolivia implemented liberal reforms after the creation of the modern state-nation, but they did not have liberal practices in the economic and political sphere, instead, the governor elite created an oligarchical group that in the practice was more coloniser than Spaniards before.

Colonisation and modernity in its essence change its shape and form and conceal itself. Coloniality, being the dark side or con of modernity, "exists as an embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernisation, and being good for everyone. (Mignolo 6) The economic system combines with the western knowledge system and its universal aspect of civilisation and definition of development. The nature of economic condition and materialistic association with modernity establishes an exploitative and aggressive principles of development, technocracy and materialistic pervasiveness. Therefore, the colonial modernity and economic condition treats the resources and humans as something that can be captured, expanded or needs to be civilised. Hence, modernity's principles contradict the concepts of sustainable ecology and finds a way to bend and capitalise on resources, humans and ecology.

Sen attempts to establish the artificiality constructed lives of local people in the name of modernity which later translates to occupation and forced migration unveiling an unjust approach to ecology; removing an integral equilibrium element such as humans from ecology and forming structures exemplifies a capitalising approach that hides colonial understanding of ecology that separates nature and wilderness consequently justified by the knowledge system. The argument for the extraction of resources in the context of corporate law becomes evident; the premise rests upon what conditions and circumstances indigenous communities can claim the resources that belong to the nation their own. However, the extraction and exploitation of resources, such as in the construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam, elucidates the rejection of a harmonical state of affairs with the indigenous community and extreme emphasis on capturing the resources. Therefore, the unjustifiable approach, even if it does not agree with corporate laws, is still unjust because of the imposition and forced destruction of the existing ecosystem.

#### **Unification of Humans and Ecology as a Decolonial Approach**

The graphic novel initially begins with an elaborative and comprehensive mythological telling of the birth of the universe. Malgugayan sings the mythological tale by stating that the universe laid on Kujum Chantu, and the original humans lived on the back of Kujum Chantu. However, it occurred to her that if she ever got up, everyone would be killed. Therefore, she rubbed the dirt and out of dirt and gave life. She created all living creatures with enough resources for all.

Trisos and Katti (1205-1212) suggest five practices for anti-oppressive and ethical ecological practice, which contain practices of knowing one's history and decolonising the material needs. Knowing one's history becomes significant in the context of *River of Stories* in two thematical instances, primarily the tribals are forced into displacement where loss of ecology will erase the familiarity of their history from their memory, which subsequently takes place because colonial modernity has successfully forced and manipulated

people such as government officials, contractors and police officers to disregard and forget their history in pursuit of material gain. Therefore, forgetting the history of one's ecology paves the way for more exploitation and capitalist expansion.

Resistance to development becomes an alternative, with ideas of myths and histories being central aspects against the notions of progression and development. The mythological telling demonstrates the relation of ecology, knowledge, history and memories. The relation between the indigenous community and ecology highlights a consciousness regarding other living creatures and consciousness towards others existence. Kujum Chanta being conscious about creatures living on her back and regard towards other existence is evidently translated in the ways of living of the indigenous community. The consciousness for a sustainable ecology emerges as a resistance against the exploitative and capitalising nature of colonial modernity and resisting developmental policies that cater to only few.

Colonial modernity for its expansion and dominance rests upon an anthropocentric view of the world. Bera and Singh (536-553) contend that Sen's narrative reflects the Anthropocentric worldview, which perpetuates the exploitation and marginalisation of indigenous communities and ecosystems. They further argue that the narrative's posthumanist elements and themes juxtapose diverse temporal frames, allowing it to capture the crises of the anthropocene and highlight the interconnectedness of all life forms, thus fostering consciousness and posthumanist perspectives among readers. Therefore, the anthropocentric worldview is portrayed as the view with little or no consciousness towards the other forms of living beings and the consciousness of Kujum Chanta emerges as a primarily alternative that constructs a

decolonial ecology that demands a consciousness that refuses to disregard the interconnectedness of the all living forms. Therefore, a paradigm of resistance is created, where certain philosophies regarding the ecology fuse together and demand a holistic understanding of the world rather than materialistic and developmental praxis.

The iconicity in the graphic novel aids in a construction of ecology that attempts to illustrate a positive assimilation and integration with the ecology rather than a division between wilderness, nature and development. The philosophy draws similarities with the philosophy of Ubuntu, African idea of Ubuntu is 'being human through other people'. It has been succinctly reflected in the phrase 'I am because of who we all are' Mathew Bukhi (92-102) elaborates that the African philosophy of ecology of Ubuntu makes humans an integral part of the ecosystem instead of creating boundaries between humans and nature. The iconicity in the graphic novel attempts to break the boundaries between human and nature, the village singer Malgugayan and the visual iconicity aids in the construction of ecology that promotes integration of humans and nature.

According to McCloud (36) iconicity is based on the physical similarity between the image and the object it represents. For example, a cartoon drawing of a dog with floppy ears and a wagging tail is highly iconic because it resembles a real dog in appearance. Iconicity is based on a conceptual similarity between the image and the object it represents. It is also based on a shared understanding between the creator and the viewer of the image. For example, the red stop sign is iconic because it is a universally recognized symbol of danger. Through iconicity, McCloud creates a triangular framework moving from abstraction to reality and towards meaning formation.





Figure 1.1

Figure 1.1 illustrates the level of iconicity moving towards the hyper real visuals but the it remains in the middle. The deployment of the level of iconicity demonstrates an important philosophical understanding, the character of Malgugayan and the surrounding nature does not appear to differentiate from one another. The character of Malgugayan and the figures of birds and sky appears assimilated with the ecology, in complete harmony with each other. In the graphic novel, the darker monochromatic colours are used to portray the ecological and terrain of the indigenous region, attempting to illustrate a level of confusion, lack of exposure and lack of understanding that is associated with the land and ecology of indigenous community. However, the level of iconicity which seems to move towards the hyper real plane moves back in the upward direction primarily in the paradigm of abstraction. Fig 1.2 illustrates the iconicity moving towards the right side of the triad. The iconicity It draws similarities with Joe Sacco's graphic novel Palestine which undertakes a similar method of graphic journalism to bring forth the voices of victims, however, Sen's utilisation of the monochromatic colours allows for a space that provides selective importance in the



Figure 1.2

visualisation of the indigenous community and the ecology.

Malgu Gayan, the village minstrel in the graphic novel plays a pivotal role in mediating the temporal continuum, safeguarding oral traditions, and amplifying the voices of the marginalized within the narrative. Throughout the novel, Malgugayan's musical renditions function as a conduit between historical epochs, invoking communal recollections and upholding cultural legacies. His melodic expressions transcend mere artistic performance, emerging as a potent mechanism for social critique, providing an articulate discourse on contemporary issues, and affording resonance to those traditionally marginalized within the community. In his inaugural appearance within the novel, Malgugayan is emblematic of the custodian of the village's oral heritage. His rendition of an archaic folk melody prompts a narrative divergence, unveiling the genesis of the song and the historical epochs it memorializes. This narrative maneuver accentuates Malgugayan's integral role as the archivist of knowledge and the conduit for the transmission of cultural memory.

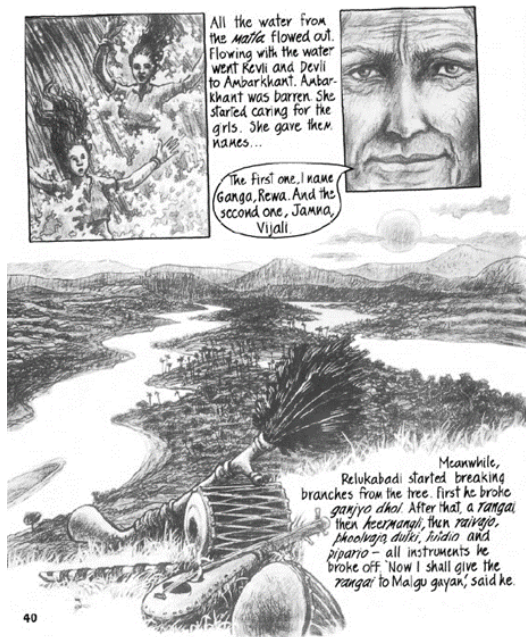


Fig 2.1

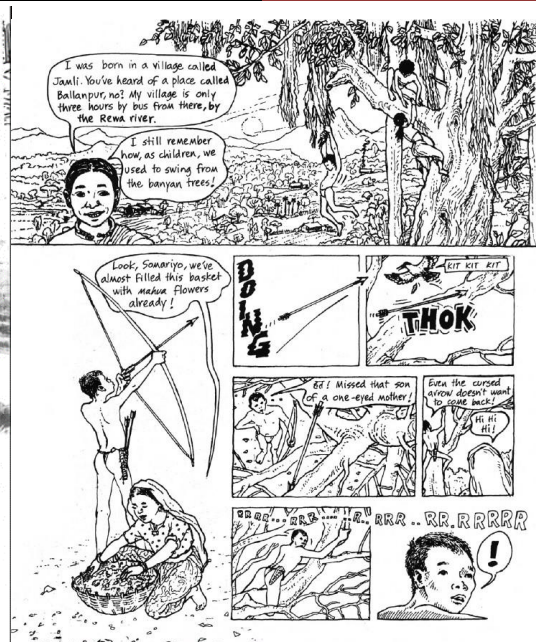


Fig 2.2

The resonance of Malgugayan's musical compositions extends beyond the aesthetic realm, acting as a catalytic force for societal transformation. His lyrical narratives often interrogate prevailing norms, articulating the grievances of marginalized factions within the village. A poignant example of this transformative potential is evident when Malgu vocalizes a composition detailing the tribulations faced by marginalized communities, thereby instigating a communal dialogue. This musical intervention prompts a collective confrontation of injustices, galvanizing the community towards a more equitable social order. Malgugayan's musical oeuvre, beyond its societal impact, exerts a transformative influence on individual psyches. In a particular juncture, a young villager wrestling with isolation and despondency finds solace and rejuvenation through the melodic strains. The harmonious resonance of communal history and the collective resilience of the village community, encapsulated in Malgugayan's music, becomes a catalyst for the individual's psychological convalescence and the renewal of a sense of purpose.

The visual construction of Malgugayan assimilates with the terrain and ecology represented in the graphic novel. Fig 2 illustrates Malgugayan's

musical equipment visually being in complete harmony with the landscape that is constantly being capitalised. Malgugayan's absence from the frame elucidates the movement of philosophy away from the anthropocentric view towards ecological consciousness and harmonical view of the world. Meanwhile fig 2.2 demonstrates the complete harmony that indigenous community manages to establish with ecology. Agarwal (413) advances a pivotal argument centred on the imperative deconstruction of the schism that has historically separated Indigenous knowledge systems from their scientific counterparts. The central contention underscores the necessity for bridging this epistemic chasm to facilitate a more harmonious and equitable coalescence of these two cognitive frameworks in service of advancing sustainable development and addressing multifarious contemporary global challenges.

Vishnu, Anand and Malgugayan represents an assimilation of two knowledge systems, these characters provide an alternative where local knowledge system can be integrated within the dominant paradigm of economical modes without causing harm to indigenous ecology and the indigenous community. Characters of Vishnu and Anand highlight the argument where the existence of a minute possibility of people rejecting the

materialistic pervasiveness of modernity and power structures of coloniality can lead towards a decolonial process. A future where individuals can understand the knowledge of indigenous community that form the meaning of their surroundings, environment and ecology through unification instead of categorization.

### Conclusion

*River of Stories* posits the long struggle of marginalized voices against the power structures of coloniality. The novel's narrative uses multiple perspectives to emphasize on the importance of understanding diverse viewpoints and experiences. By presenting the story through the eyes of various characters, including humans, animals, and the river itself, Sen breaks down the human-centered narrative and invites readers to consider the broader ecological context. The novel however, because of excessive utilisation of unnamed characters appears to be becoming a mouthpiece of the author. However, this gross theoretical simplification which appears polyphonic is deployed to highlight the unknowability and the distance that urban populace is at with the suffering of the marginalized voices. Furthermore, Sen ensures to never name the politicians, contractors and police officers as well which elaborates the loss of individuality in the structures of coloniality that undertakes everyone, from people that adhere to these structures to people who refuse these structures, a sense of individuality is always at a loss due to modernity. It also highlights the journalistic utilisation of narrative of ensuring the anonymity of the characters.

The characters in the novel present alternative as well as decolonial thinking and approach, however, the ecology becomes decolonial through the assimilation of Rewa river's history, its habitant, mythology and memory. The resistance movement which appears a leftist propagandist tool, moves away from ideological formulation of a classless or capital-less society and economic system. The deconstruction of river as a living entity that incorporates the needs of everyone acts as a force of unification, that remains immune from ideological, political and capitalist categorisation. The resistance movement in itself becomes an act of

decolonial praxis due to its attempt to not only preserve the river but also preserve the memories of the indigenous community, memories that hold the pot of knowledge systems, eco-consciousness and immunity from materialistic perversions.

The decoloniality that reverberates in the visuals of the graphic novel establishes ecology and humans as an integral aspect of each other, which colonial modernity and capitalist exploitation attempts to overlook. The importance of Malgu Gyan's songs establishes a form of resistance that brings forth the history and memories of communities past meanwhile the poetic tradition that equates with living experience of the community resists the western scientific knowledge system that is established to expand and conquer the wilderness of the nature. The ecology under threat from developmental and modernity driven structures and policy becomes a force that restricts and segregates humans from ecology and wilderness from nature. Sen's critique of material modernity extends to the notion of progress itself, which is often associated with economic growth and technological advancement. The novel challenges this linear narrative, demonstrating that progress at the expense of the environment and the displacement of communities is not true progress.

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Inducing of Readers' Empathy through the Representation of History in Graphic Narratives with

Particular Reference to Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories*

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**Inducing of Readers' Empathy through the Representation of History in  
Graphic Narratives with Particular Reference to Orijit Sen's *The River of  
Stories***

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**Abstract:**

The present paper aims itself as an investigation whether a historical graphic narrative with the help of its engaging representation of history might be able to induce a reader's empathy or not. It attempts to highlight and explore the empathic details in Orijit Sen's historical graphic text, *The River of Stories*. Though it is a debatable issue whether every work of art should have an objective or not, the reader finds Sen's social and political purpose of making people aware of the details of the protest and its horrific and crude consequences against the construction of a dam on the river Narmada and the consequent inducing of empathy into them. Hence, heart-rending details of their protest and the adverse effects which induce readers' empathy are portrayed artistically and proficiently by Sen through the entire gamut of the story.

**Keywords:** *empathy; social-realism; history; aesthetic; experience; visual-narrative; interdisciplinary; humanity.*

**Introduction:**

In this age of post-modernism and technological development, there is an increasing trend to interpret art and literature from interdisciplinary perspectives. The widespread and

interdisciplinary use of the term “empathy” in the nascent of the century has a tremendous impact on the evaluation of literary and cultural texts. Susan Lanzoni (2014) comments, “At the turn of the twentieth century, empathy was best known as an aesthetic theory that captured the spectator’s participatory and kinesthetic engagement with objects of art” (p.5). Numerous studies regarding empathy have already been done related to several disciplines such as neuroscience, philosophy, social psychology and so on. Yet, research work on empathy from the perspective of literary studies remains unexplored to a great extent till date. Graphic novel that is “visual-verbal literacy” (Hirsch, 2004, p. 1212) is a rising phenomenon in cultural studies which have recourse to images accompanied by words and captions. As a form of dynamic representation, graphic medium has been increasingly developed in India since the 1990s. Its use of dual media of the verbal and the visual makes things more pertinent, authentic and credible. It helps people to think deeply, and to feel an excitement while experiencing the facts and incidents visually. The dominant mode and its “visually interesting textures” (Reynolds, 2016, 9) match up easily to the cognitive demands of the subject-matter for a learner, and because of that it becomes increasingly motivating. These graphic narratives have been gradually flourishing as a novel literary genre in global literature ever since the publication of the American cartoonist and comics advocate Art Spiegelman’s groundbreaking *Maus*. In India Orijit Sen’s *The River of Stories* (1994) is a pioneering text to introduce the graphic culture in literature though he gained recognition after the publication of Sarnath Banerjee’s *Corridor* (2004). Mimi Mondal in an interview with Orijit Sen on this book, on Kindle Magazine (Backlisting, 1 November 2013) states:

Graphic novels in India have a chequered and not very long history. The medium came into widespread appreciation only after the publication of Sarnath Banerjee’s *Corridor* in 2004 by Penguin Books India. It was around the time when people started asking about *River of Stories* again, Sen tells me, but when he wrote and published the book—more than ten years before—there was little awareness and lesser to look forward to.

The present paper aims to analyze Sen’s *The River of Stories* which is noteworthy as an influential graphic presentation of history. Though Sen sets the text within a critical historical juncture of the 1990s, the paper focuses that the text could be fraught with empathic details while one tries to grapple the significance of such moving and poignant commemoration of the past, and to entail the text as a rich empathic one. Analysis of genre, form of literary texts and close reading of the same may help a reader in this respect to learn whether the book pertains to induce empathy or not.

### **Sympathy and Readers’ Empathy:**

Empathy is an umbrella term that encompasses diverse opinions. To put the term simply in relation to art and literature, it means feeling with others that may take place within literary spectrum or as a necessary result of reading literature. Lyuten et al. express same views

regarding the relation of arts and empathy in their article "Participant Responses to Physical, Open-ended Interactive Digital Artworks: a Systematic Review":

Listening to your favourite song can make your day, while a modern art sculpture can provoke thoughts on ethics or the lightness of being. In non-interactive art, the artist is the creator. He/she shapes his/her ideas until he/she is satisfied, and then shares them with the world. The spectator, in turn, looks at the work and interprets it.

Among various significant reasons regarding the inducing of empathy or the effect on it, the socio-historical situation and crisis deserves critical concern. Though the concept of empathy is deep rooted in different arenas other than literature, the relationship and connection between literature and empathy is almost a new phenomenon. The term "sympathy", derived from the Greek *sumpatheia*, means "suffering together" which is conceived as the precursor of the word "empathy". In English it is only in the eighteenth century that sympathy is theorized by influential critics such as Adam Smith and David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" (1759) respectively. While according to Hume, sympathy signifies internal experience of a person of others' passion which induces "an equal emotion, as any original affection" (p. 368), Smith argues that it is the necessary consequence of "changing places in fancy with the sufferer" (p. 4). The concept of sympathy began to flourish in relation to diverse disciplines including art and literature. On one hand, sympathy was the focal point to the moral value of literature to the Romantic Poets, and sympathetic instinct was so common in the nineteenth century fiction. So, sympathy was not merely a device of literary endeavour; it rather appropriately proves to be a vehicle of literature dealing with the contemporary social evil. Afterwards the term sympathy is replaced by "empathy" which comes from German *einfihlung* meaning "in-feeling" or "feeling oneself into", and Robert Vischer made the initiation of the use of the concept in 1873 in his *On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics* though Edward Bradford Titchener translated the German term and coined "empathy" in 1909. One can find difference between the two terms as Hammond defines these in his *Empathy and the Psychology of Literary Modernism* that sympathy means "feeling for" and empathy stands for "feeling with". I. A. Richards, Rebecca West, Edith Stein, Sigmund Freud and the like are some influential critics theorizing empathy during the butt end of the century. In the twentieth century empathy has broadened its arena as it has been discussed not only in philosophy, phenomenology and psychology but also in neuroscience, arts and literature. Empathy is such a faculty of the mind and consciousness which may be divided as the lower and higher level of empathy; higher level of empathy is defined as "perspective shifting" while the lower level type is called simply a "mirroring" one.

It is almost impossible to endow "empathy" with a straitjacket interpretation. An Austrian-American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut identifies it as a kind of "vicarious introspection" coupled with "active participation" of the subject although his contemporary psychoanalyst, Christine

Olden states empathy is identification of the other with the self. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker gave useful definitions of empathy. Both of them observe that reading literature helps one to cultivate positive qualities and to empathize with others. The understanding of empathy becomes facile and helpful with the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1980s and the scientific research flowing parallel with its literary exploration. Negative connotations of empathy come in the forefront too. Since empathy studies often neglects the marginals and the poor and prefers ableism, it is sometimes inducive to social and political estrangement and the like as Ann Russo and Cherrie Moraga put forward in their study. Lauren Berlant and Richard Delgado express same views too. However, in recent decades studies show that literature and empathy have been intricately related to each other. While reading a piece of literature, one certainly faces the issue of perspective taking or role taking. To observe others' viewpoint is central to this periphery where narrative empathy is prioritized. Suzanne Keen (2012) is noteworthy in this arena who defines the term as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (p. 2). The connection between literature and empathy is critical. In this connection, it deserves mention that form and style, method and genre of narration are so significant in probing through the relationship.

A significant critic Wayne Booth made a survey in *Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* about the effect of reading literature on the readers. Wayne studied whether reading a piece of literature helps readers to reorient their actions or reactions or these are for sheer entertainment. Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* (1938) and Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* further developed the study and made a significant contribution to the evolution of the theory of narrative empathy. Many instances of the past of banning several novels or texts of other genres fix our conception that reading of literature may have a bad impact on the society. Similarly, it can be inferred upon after numerous empirical studies that reading perhaps instigates its reader to do something valuable. Character identification is necessary for that purpose though the character need not be human in every case. Keen (2012) observes, "empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization" (p. 69). Aristotle described the role of tragedy in inducing pity and fear; pity and fear may be described to be the precursor of the feeling of empathy. In this respect Aristotle is the forerunner of the attempts to investigate "how we feel for art, and how we respond to the feeling of others" (Martin, p. 2). Kristy Martin (2013) makes valuable comments in the discussion of sympathy which might be equally pertinent in the context of observing reader's empathy:

It seems to bind the nature of our attention to art to ethical benefits in the world: through feeling for literature we might learn to feel for more people, be prompted to help others, or be enabled to contemplate moral decisions more clearly and tolerantly. (p. 2)

Though Bertolt Brecht's epoch making theory "alientation effect" does not go at par with the idea of Brigid Lowe (*Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An alternative to the*



*Hermeneutics of Suspicion*) or Suzanne Keen (*Empathy and the Novel*) or Wayne Booth (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*), readers find it difficult to agree with him. Emotion is something which a reader cannot be bereft of. Noel Carroll (2001) insightfully defines that emotions are "intimately related to attention" (p. 225). Kant's view of the exercise of emotions in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is a little bit different to Carroll. He is of the view that emotions have nothing to do with morality; it is only actions which is associated and responsible for a person's ethical conduct. Nussbaum is directly in opposition to Kant's anti-emotion responses. Nussbaum's view of forming one's ethical attitude corresponds to or depends upon one's feeling for others. Nussbaum emphasizes on the power of literature capable of humanizing a person; it teaches us "how to live." She (1990) says:

...there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it [...] that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional prose [...] but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars. (p. 3-4)

According to Nussbaum, literature refines one enabling him or her understand other's pathos and illuminates him or her to the darkness of other's mind. Nussbaum states in his *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (2001) that with an exposure to mere subtle amount of morality must "make room for mutual respect and reciprocity; that it should treat people as ends rather than as means, and as agents rather than simply as passive recipients of benefit" (p. 12). Keen (2007) says too supporting her in *Empathy and the Novel*, "novel reading cultivates empathy that produces good citizens for the world" (p. xv). Feeling for others is central to this discussion which is vital to human beings and literature helps this to grow within them. Christopher Butler's *Pleasure and the Arts: Enjoying Literature, Painting and Music* (2005) recounts this further. Audrey Jaffe adds to these a valuable perspective from the standpoint of Victorian fiction and Victorian spectators. She observes that sympathy or fellow feeling is associated with or corresponds to spectatorship as she states that it "is inseparable from issues of visibility and representation because it is inextricable from the middle-class subject's status as spectator and from the social figures to whose visible presence the Victorian middle classes felt it necessary to formulate a response" (8). She emphasizes that a sympathetic spectator is of immense importance in the exercise of feeling towards others but from a distance. Martin is in direct confronting to Jaffe as the former shows that not only vision is of sole importance in the exercise of compassion but also all the senses are involved in that exertion. Probably that is why the showing or exploration of empathy towards others differs from person to person. It is a debatable issue whether ethics is related to respect and care of others or not. An American psychologist Carol Gilligan correlates the two positively: "...ethics should be based on the idea of mutual human dependency, of care rather than justice" (Martin, p. 9). Empathy is as if like sympathy, "a distinctively human mode of understanding that dissolves the boundaries of the self, and unites humanity" (Lowe, p. 222). Empathy is such an abstract quality which may be defined as a shared sentimentality grounded on interchangeable necessity.

Empathy is necessarily distinguished from other forms of abstract qualities of human beings such as sympathy, altruism, compassion, pity and the like. Sympathy may be defined as the precursor of empathy and similar point of comparisons exist in the discourses corresponding to sympathy and empathy. Yet a subtle distinction may be found between sympathy and empathy. Keen observes while sympathy is “feeling for” others, empathy is “feeling with” others. Empathy is a recent term came into use in the early twentieth century, and previously authors use those terms interchangeably. British literary critic John Carey makes a debatable comment while arguing in the context of modernist literature that literature in the modern times has been dissuaded from its exploration of humanity. Carey (1992) comments:

...the principle around which modernist literature and culture fashioned themselves was the exclusion of the masses, the defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity. (p. 21)

Michael Whitworth’s observation is worth mentioning in this context:

Modernist writers distinguish between abstraction and empathy, often claiming to prefer the former. In the novel, the means by which earlier generations of writers would have allowed readers to identify with a character are eschewed or radically revised; in poetry, the identifiable speaking voice of lyric poetry is avoided, or framed in unfamiliar contexts. For example, in narrative, the use of complex time schemes tends to disrupt continuity and thus disrupt our identification with a character. If events which belong late in the chronological sequence are presented earlier in the narrative, then the reader views the chronologically earlier events with ironic detachment, knowing more than the participants. In some writers, notably Wyndham Lewis, the narrator’s language may also block empathy, presenting the characters as cultural constructs rather than as free agents. (quoted in Martin 12)

In direct contrast to these observations, Martin (2013) empirically proves that “modernism does indeed offer original descriptions of particular forms of feeling that emotion matters to modernism” (p. 12). Irish American philosopher Shaun Gallagher suggests that to show empathy on others one should know the very person’s mind which may include their beliefs and customs, rituals, emotional shape and so on. But another set of critics such as British writer Vernon Lee and others assume that this theory is not sufficient as one person needs to learn more in order to understand others. Empathy has a delicate sense which might be capable of apprehension or comprehension of others’ mental state. Different complex philosophical theories develop regarding the interpretation of one’s mind. Among these the most influential ones are “Theory Theory” and “Simulation Theory”. The first theory explicates that a human being should have a general perception or consciousness of how mind functions in different situations. By the help of these general formal rules and trajectories one may be able to perceive others’ mind. Simulation theory is more reasonable than the previous one which describes that by recreating others’ experience or feeling one might be able to understand the person’s emotional states. Revamping of others’ experience is central to this latter philosophy, and theory of empathy is close to this

Particular Reference to Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories*

one. That emotion is a higher faculty of our mind is empirically proved and accepted by Nussbaum. In her *Upheavals of Thought*, she states that emotions are not mere "energies" or "impulses" rather they are "cognitive", fraught with ethics, logic, and reason. There is a necessary connection between rationality and emotion. Hence emotion in fiction proffers a reader a form of knowledge.

**The River of Stories, an Empathic Text:**

The compelling narration of *The River of Stories* centers round the 1989 Narmada Bachao Andolan. The book is written and illustrated by Orijit Sen, an artist, designer and founder of the iconic People Tree brand, and is hand-lettered by Amita Baviskar. *The River of Stories*, a sixty-two page long book with gripping narrative, was published with a small monetary assistance from Kalpavriksh, an NGO on environmental issues. The text is an upshot of the author's direct involvement in the Narmada Bachao Movement which was a protest against the construction of a dam over the Narmada River. Hence, this semi-fiction is an invaluable text representing the historical truth within the garb of a graphic narrative that is through the correlation of images and text. Making use of the dual medium that is verbal and visual, Sen tries to register and imprint the historical fact into the readers' mind: "the visual dimension of the graphic novel contributes substantially not only to our understanding of history but also to a larger question of how history can be represented" (Nayar, 2016, p. 14). Sen is not the only one graphic novelist to make use of a historical situation stirring readers of graphic texts. Srividya Natarajan, Durgabai Vyam and S. Anand deal with the lives of the subaltern in their groundbreaking graphic text *Bhimayana* (2011) which is primarily built on the life of the social reformer B. R. Ambedkar who campaigned against the discrepancies against the dalits. Other well-known instances are Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010) which enlivens the Emergency period in the 1970s; Malik Sajad's *Munnu* (2015) based on the critical situation in Kashmir and so on. In the recent times fraught with the breakthroughs of technological modernism, artists and writers are continuously searching for new media that can reach to the readers in the most effective and efficient way possible. Probably the retake or representation of history and developing the narrative empathy through the entire gamut of it is one such way. In modern times while critics are bent on discovering the subtle connections of empathy and literature, one can surely find the author's attempt to induce reader's empathy through the heart-rending narrative of the social, environmental and political issues pivoting round the construction of the controversial dam on Narmada. In the context of the relation between empathy and literature, Colin G. Johnson comments in his article "Fitness in evolutionary art and music: a taxonomy and future prospects":

An important aspect of many works of art is their engagement with the outside world – artworks frequently comment on the world, either in a very direct way, but also via indirection, connotation and allusion.

### **The Negotiation of Reader's Empathy in Sen's *River of Stories*:**

“*River of Stories* is a succinct and visually sumptuous work on the subject of the Narmada Bachao Andolan,” says Monidipa. Nayar (2016) eulogises that Sen’s text “possesses all the qualifications of a literary text (the construction of self-contained worlds, character development, plot, metaphoric use of visual and verbal language, among others) but adds the visual dimension to the narration” (p. 7). Two narratives within the guise of a single story grow side by side, and they are intricately related to each other. With the help of the frame narrative the main story develops and reaches the climax. Mohor Ray beautifully portrays:

Within the book, two distinct streams of story and style merge, in response to the crux of the Andolan’s questions on two developmental models—one indigenous and self-sustaining, the other modern and large-scale.

Vishnu, probably the fictional representation of the author’s self, is a Delhi-based young journalist; he is about to start a new journey to Ballanpur to cover a story regarding reactions and after-effects of the protest. The book opens with a prologue which is subtitled “A Dream”. The opening of the book aptly portrays the contemporary situation of India, its progresses and failures as Vishnu while watching the television swings the channels and listens to the Republic Day lecture delivered by Khapi K. Soja, the Minister of Sports and Youth Welfare. “The Prologue” itself is a satire towards the prevailing circumstances of the country as it brilliantly posits two pictures of upgrades and degradation: the first one is characterized by the indifferent speech of the minister while the people outside Vishnu’s window berating scathingly who are suffering due to their wretchedness despite the so called improvement of the nation characterize the second. Sen’s magnum opus looks back to the crucial period in the past when people of the country went under great torment due to the government’s rash decision and the consequent great environmental hazards. Sen deftly depicts by the help of his skilled graphic art the suffering of the all and sundry against the prevailing government. “The Prologue” epitomizes the significance of a river and the dependence of the original habitat of that county on it. Sen satirizes the view of the government to abolish the “adivasis” with a highly advanced social life by making a dam on the river replacing the natural habitat there. The government ignored completely the agonizing situation of the villagers that they have to endure after the construction of the dam. The building of the dam does not only mean the abolishing of adivasis and the deprivation of their lands but it also prospects of some far-rooted and dangerous consequence of it such as their economical hazards. It must be questioned, and Vishnu seems to appear as a saviour of them. Sen’s satiric style of portraiture strengthens the reality of the people under great threats. In the context of using individual style of portraiture and painting, Heijer and Eiben cogently comments in their article ‘Using scalable vector graphics to evolve art’:

When we take a wider view, and regard different artworks of centuries, it is evident that artists over centuries have experimented with art materials, layouts, subjects, techniques, etc. All this has resulted in a wide variety of visual output.

The Minister continues his lecture emphasizing on the advancements the country has made in the previous years in different fields - social, political and economic. Vishnu murmurs on the darker side of our country in spite of the so-called civilization and life: "But then I keep on hearing of people who are hungry, jobless...illiterate" (p. 5). This dark reality is of much significance in order to understand the real situation of every people in this country. The government certainly neglects this as is understood by the words of Soja: "It's all a matter of national priorities...If we all wait for every adivasi to leave the jungle and adopt a civilized way of life we shall be left far behind in the global race" (p. 5). Soja's remarks satirically show the unempathetic situation on the part of the government: "In any case, it's only a question of time! You say they need food and water? We'll give them potato chips and Pepsi cola..." (p. 6). There is not a single effort by the government to understand the need of the common folk and to fulfill them. On the other hand, Vishnu, a young journalist grows more and more empathic towards their situation.

Part One is entitled "A Spring" emblemizing the juxtaposed ancient and modern world. This part is divided into "Kujum Chantu" and "Relku's Story". Sen weaves those stories by the help of indigenous myths and stories. Malgu Gayan in the first section sings with the help of "God's wisdom" and "a rangai" the story of the making of the world, its inception. Kujum Chantu made the world out of the dirt rubbed off her chest, and then made trees, lizards, tigers, bears, snakes, birds, and humans in succession: "And so, the entire world, with all its creatures, with enough food in it for all, she created" (p. 12). This section symbolizes that the ancient world was lavish and abundant, plentiful and copious. The other section of this part introduces the main story of Relku. Vishnu as a journalist is going to cover a newspaper report on migrant workers, Relku seems to tell the whole story while giving the interview to Vishnu. Relku's description terribly brings out the deprivation, dispossession and withdrawal of their whole tribe from their native land. The poignant description leaves readers baffled and perplexed. The central story pivots round the village of Jamli, near to Ballanpur and by the bank of river Reya where Relku lived. Nature was fresh there and rich with trees and birds. They made their livelihood often by hunting. The forest department took the horrible initiative to make an end to their living in that area as "The very existence of people living in such a primitive way is an obstacle for modernizing the country" (p. 15). The adivasis are deprived of their rights, of cultivating land, grazing cattle, taking wood and hunting on forest on that area as the "sarkari people of Ballanpur" made the declaration that these are "the lands which belongs to sarkar" since the government has already declared the area as a reserve forest. It is satiric that development may only worsen their situation; it cannot evolve their condition as an adivasi protests to the scheme of government, "This land is our mata. She gives us food and shelter. She takes care of our needs. We worship the trees, the river, the hills..." (p. 16). But as the jungle has come to develop, the roads are being completed, and shops are being built, the people gradually began to lose their homes, the right on their land. A fine symbol of snake for road is used here to represent how vicious the situation began to turn afterwards when the place gradually developed. They have been now stooped to "landless labourers with no money or possessions." Life has been

synonymously used here as a river. Alongwith these fictional voices, the protests of factual characters like Khursheo are quoted by Sen here:

“Our village will be submerged forever....The government says they will resettle us. But our community will be broken up. For countless generations, uncles, cousins, clan relations have lived close to each other....When they shift us to different places, we will all be cut off from each other. Our ancestors and spirits, who reside in the forests and hills, will be abandoned. Our music, our festivals, our gatherings, will all come to an end. Will there be any point in continuing to live after that?” (p. 52).

Buribai is another real figure who protests against the “bazarias” who disturbed the local people. In an interview with Paul Gravett, Sen states that due to his father’s transferrable job he has developed in himself “an empathy for ‘outsiders’ and people who didn’t fit in.” Sen has also said happily that his text has done a lot in changing people’s behaviour towards nature. He avers, “I still meet people who tell me they read *River of Stories* years ago and it helped change the way they look at development, ecology and the rights of indigenous people in India.” Moreover Sen asserts that this graphic text is at least able to spread the message among the people, students and activists who were ignorant of the environmental movement regarding this and the massive impact of this project on environment, people and nature as well. Sen has also taken the step to publish it in Hindi and distribute among the activists.

### **Conclusion:**

*River of Stories* focuses more on the mental processes of the characters and their relationships. Though their minds are portrayed in a way, readers are engaged in the study of the characters’ mind, and are compelled to comprehend their wish and desire, impulse and mental state. Thus the book is able to teach moral values and social behaviour. The text exhibits a collective experience of the tribal community in a certain critical juncture of time and their momentous struggle; it is not a saga of an individual, though both the cases need serious concern and feeling of the masses. Surely millions of people will get privileges after the completion of the dam, but the situation will also put the nearby villagers into great difficulty which the government is overlooking. As Sen was directly in touch of the local tribal communities, he was plagued by the adverse impact of the construction of a dam on nature and the resultant plight of its habitants. As a consequence Sen took the initiative to lodge a literary protest, and *River of Stories* is the consequence of it which is “intimate, complex and rich with observed detail” (Interview). The construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada in Madhya Pradesh led to the dislodging of the local tribe and their consequent undergoing of hardship, pain and distress. Sen’s attempt to humanize their situation portraying their terrible struggle through this sixty two pages graphic text is a good step in this regard. Though the construction of the dam began in 1987 in spite of all these protests, the text is a literary protest which is a part of those attempts which stirred the prevailing government. As it is now proved that there is a positive correlation between reading literature and empathy, *River of Stories*, a qualitative fiction, may certainly have affective

benefits on its readers which beautifully depicts a crisis of humanity. Sen cogently remarks, "The relationship between art and social change isn't a direct cause-and-effect one. It isn't a short-term thing. Art speaks to the heart as well as the mind, and the way it impacts us as individuals and societies can be very powerful and lasting, but is not necessarily measureable" (Interview with Rukminee Guha Thakurta and Nityan Unnikrishnan).

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