

Gardening as Activism: Cultivating Human Minds in *A Gardener in Wasteland*

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Abstract

Jotiba Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873), which is widely translated as *Slavery*, equates casteism with slavery. His book carefully deconstructs the Vedic scriptures, which make up the largest chunk of central religious texts in Hinduism, in order to expose the latent hypocrisy and the conspiracy of Brahminical ideology to dominate a section of society. *Gulamgiri* was the radical manifesto of the social reform society called Satyasodhak Samaj, founded by Phule in 1873 along with his wife Savitribai Phule. Aparajita Ninan and Srividya Natarajan's graphic novel *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty* (2011), by revisiting Jotiba Phule's groundbreaking text *Gulamgiri*, examines the contemporaneity and the continuity of caste issues and thus attempts a conversation between the past and the present historical reality of casteism. The present study focuses on the centrality of the metaphor of the garden in highlighting the gravity of the caste problem and its larger implications in the lives of India's marginalised Dalit community. By focusing on the physical aspects of gardening, this paper touches upon Dalit eco-literary concerns and brings to the fore the role of labour that defines the relationship between Dalit bodies and nature. It also aims to capture Natarajan and Ninan's contribution to Phule's task of metaphorical gardening, thus becoming co-gardeners in distant time and space.

Keywords: activism, dalit eco-literary, caste, gardening, narrative

Jotiba Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873), popularly translated as *Slavery*, equates casteism with slavery. His work carefully deconstructs the Vedic scriptures which make up the largest chunk of principal religious texts in Hinduism and justifies the prevalent inequality while sanctioning the discrimination in a hierarchical caste-divided society. *Gulamgiri* was a radical manifesto of the Satyasodhak Samaj founded by Phule in 1873 along with his wife Savitribai Phule. The graphic novel, *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty* (2011) by Aparajita Ninan and Srividya Natarajan, by revisiting Jotiba Phule's ground-breaking text *Gulamgiri* examines the contemporaneity and the continuity of the caste issues and thus attempts a conversation between the past and the present historical reality of a caste-ised nation.

The graphic retelling of Phule's struggle begins with the authors, writer Srividya Natarajan and artist Aparajita Ninan discussing their plan to adapt Jotiba Phule's *Gulamgiri*. While strolling through a suburb in New Delhi, they witness a group of children encountering casteist slurs and being beaten by an upper-caste man for accidentally kicking a football into his house. They stop at a banner for a movie – *Batman Begins* – a popular superhero movie, as they go past this incident, Ninan (2011) explains why she thinks superheroes are necessary: “to swoop down out of the sky and kick the baddies to bits” (p. 9). The subsequent pages highlight the ideology of the oppressive caste system and Jotibha and Savitribai Phule's struggle to fight it. This incident thus not only sets the tone of the narrative by foregrounding the relevance of Ninan and Natarajan's project but also necessitates the featuring of a contrasting superhero in the figure of the gardener-couple who instead of swooping down out of the sky, remained rooted in the ground and decided to “kick” out the roots of casteist ideology by cultivating young minds with the spirit of liberty and equality. It is in this context that the metaphor of the garden becomes relevant and demands careful attention which the present study outlines.

Literature Review

The text has received wide critical attention owing to its narrative technique and graphic genre in recounting the Dalit trauma and everyday experience. The success of the graphic novel genre in chronicling the historical trauma around the caste system with utmost authenticity has been traced by Promod K. Nayar (2018). Also, Ruma Sinha (2018) investigates how the graphic genre not only visually maps the caste atrocities but by problematizing the very notion of authentic representation argues for the inclusion of everyone, not just Dalits in the anti-caste theorisation and struggle. Again, Deepali Yadav's (2016) focus on the politics of visibility in understanding caste in contemporary Indian society helps her to examine the role of the same in extending *Gulamgiri's* critique of Hinduism and Phule's relevance in current times. Although the politics of representation and the genre have retained sufficient attention, the visibility of the organic metaphor of gardening which is crucial to the title of the novel is often mentioned in the passing and the intricate thematic concerns underlying it are overlooked. The present study aims to fill in the lacuna by focusing on the centrality of the metaphor in highlighting the gravity of the caste problem and its larger implications in Dalit lives. By focusing on the physical aspects of gardening, this paper touches upon the Dalit eco-literary concerns and brings to the fore the role of labour that defines the relationship between Dalit bodies and nature and the representation of this intricate relationship in Dalit self-narratives

only to subvert it by Phule's act of metaphorical gardening. Besides, Natarajan and Ninan's contribution to Phule's task of metaphorical gardening and thus becoming co-gardeners has been illustrated.

Scott McCloud's (1993) critical engagement with various aspects of the visual communication and technical components of the comic art form informs the analysis of the metaphor. The technique of "amplification through simplification" (McCloud, 1993, p. 30) which promotes the artist's stripping away of detail in order to heighten its meaning, has been extremely pertinent here, especially in the discussion of the author and artists' contribution towards the mission. The focus on simplification, exaggeration, and repetition is partly borrowed from Kai Mikkonen's (2017) significant revision of narratological concepts through the study of narrative comics. By allowing for its subversion rather than ideal romanticism, the Dalit eco-literary tradition, which records the strong relationships between Dalits and nature, has provided the necessary theoretical framework for tracing the organicity of the metaphor in the Phules' lives. The first section of the paper concerns itself with the symbol of gardening and its connection with Jotiba and Savitri Phule's lives, while the latter part will deal with the extension of the metaphor in the lives of the authors of the text.

Analysis and Discussion

The assertion that "[k]ey incidents, especially those which lend themselves to visual presentation, do receive multipanel treatment" (Witek, 1989, p. 83) helps to deduce the symbolism of the flower. Instead of any incident, the image of a flower with its dense symbolism has received multipanel treatments. The flower becomes a crucial aspect of Jotiba's characterisation besides contributing to the larger thematics of the graphic novel. Kai Mikkonen (2017) stresses on repetition of any aspect of the character's external feature, behaviour, speech, thought, gesture, or even "a word, phrase ... forms of graphic style, such as colour and the graphic line" (p. 184) as having the potential to be an indication of personality which is served by this ever-present flower. Jotiba Rao Phule is introduced in the panel following a crowd of Brahmin's resentment and consequent threatening of his father, Govindrao for allowing his son and daughter-in-law, Savitri Phule to teach the "untouchables"¹ (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 15) by admitting them to his school. The panel depicts a threatened Govindrao pleading with his "children" in the following words: "Joti, Savitri, my children. This is the final straw – our lives are being threatened. Either give up the school or stop living under my roof" (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 15). To which, Jotiba identifiable by the flower marked behind his left hand, replies, "This is my life's work, father" (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 15). His surname, Phule which contains the word "phul" is the Hindi translation of the word flower not only just identifies him throughout the novel but also

¹ "Untouchables" was the derogatory term used to refer to the members of the Dalit community. They came to be known as the Dalits in more recent years. Dalit is a term that literally means "down-trodden" or "oppressed" in Marathi. However, "Scheduled Caste" is the word designated for this particular group of people under Article 341 of the Indian Constitution, and as a result, they are referred to as such in official papers. They have historically been given the lowest position on the social echelon of Hindu society. Upper castes, more recently known as Caste Hindus or Savarnas, were those awarded a high rank in the caste system.

emphasises his role as a gardener. The flower on him acts as a marker of his Mali² caste besides being a constant reminder of his success with respect to what he has achieved. It distinguishes him visually from others and stands for the blossoming that is at the heart of his egalitarian project. Savitri is also marked by flowers in the form of prominent earrings in almost every panel. Even in the wanted poster where Savitri is targeted “for educating sudra³ and atisudra⁴ girls” (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 13), the flower is noticeable on her left ear, peeping out of her veil covering the head. The enlightened consciousness symbolised by the flower has become an intrinsic part of their social and individual identity.

Again, it is noticeable that the visual retelling of Jotiba Phule’s life and beliefs is adorned by Dalit labouring bodies in the field under extreme weather conditions (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 11, p. 107, p. 113). Mukul Sharma’s observation is particularly relevant in this context. He takes into account an eco-critical dimension of labour by examining different environmental questions: “What does it mean when work, rather than leisure, is your central ecological experience?” (Sharma, 2019, p. 1013) and thereby marks the centrality of labour in explaining relations between society and nature in Dalit autobiographies. The idea of labouring bodies as their form of interaction with nature is pertinent in the context of gardening as well. Gardening is a physical activity that involves weeding, tilling the land, watering, mulching, trellising, and harvesting without being affected by harsh weather circumstances. Often perceived as a leisure activity or a hobby, it is interesting to note that gardening is not merely a choice for the Mali caste, but rather a profession ordained to the community by hierarchical caste order. Therefore, Phule’s act of metaphorical gardening instead of physical gardening subverts the traditional occupation imposed on them, and consequently, marks a rejection of physical labour that has become indeed a defining parameter to gauge the relationship between Dalits and Nature. The lack of physical labour in favour of mental work in Phule’s garden can be interpreted as his activism where he urges the Dalits, so long forcefully denied their right to education, to take up the pen as their strongest weapon. The blossoming of his garden implies the awakening of their consciousness as human beings capable of enjoying equal rights and opportunities, following his reading of Thomas Paine’s “Rights of Man” as depicted in the text (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 19). He realised that empowerment can be achieved only through education which has been visually depicted as pens with their nibs as flowers in the illustration of the chapter titled “The seeds of change” (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 99).

The lower half of the page is depicted in dark shades from where the pens are raised and the direction in which they are pointed is left uncolored, thus pointing to the journey from darkness to light that the pens alone can make possible. He revisited the “The Weed-bed of Myths” (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 29) by questioning the absurdity of glorifying myths as preached by the Brahmins through their sacred texts like the *Manusmriti*. He attacks the very root of the

² Mali is a Hindu caste who have historically worked as florists and gardeners, predominantly found in all of North and East India, as well as in Maharashtra and the Terai region of Nepal.

³ The four castes that make up the traditional Hindu social structure are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Shudras are placed in the lowest rung of the hierarchical caste order.

⁴ Apart from the four castes, there is the fifth category called the Atishudras which exists outside of this caste structure.

ideology of casteism by exposing the historicization of myths to uphold the superiority of the Brahmins over the lower castes which finds admiration in Ninan's words, "I love how deliberately outrageous Phule is when he walks the borderland between mythology and history. He reminds one that history is story too" (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 63). His weeding, dedicated to the elimination of the poisonous roots of casteism, is thus not a physical activity but rather an intellectual exercise of deconstructing and demythologizing what is held as sacred and sacrosanct. Accordingly, the process of seeding has a distinct connotation in Phule's gardening. The seeds of emancipation from enslavement are sowed by educating young minds (Sinha, 2018). The joy of harvesting finds expression in the gardener couple's conversation: "Jotiba, do you remember 14-year-old Muktabai after three years in our second school for atishudra girls? Do you remember her brilliant essay on caste?" and the adjacent panel shows a young girl reading passionately: "Oh, Mahars and mangs, you are poor and sick. Only the medicine of knowledge will cure and heal you. Let that religion where only one person is privileged and the rest deprived perish from the earth, and let it never enter our minds to be proud of such a religion" (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 93) with the spotlight on her. Their aim as nurturers of minds taste the fruits of success in the end with the fragrance being spread among all as evident on the last page.

On the last panel, we witness how all of them are marked by flowers, be it Ninan or Natarajan or those who are listening to the poem, "Rise to Learn and Act" being read (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 123) amidst a garden full of flowers. The facing page illustration suggests a breaking of the panel and the spreading of flowers all over the pages (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, pp. 122-123). Jotiba is pictured here as holding a book containing phrases like, "lack of education leads to lack of wisdom, which leads to lack of justice, which leads to lack of progress, which leads to lack of money, which leads to the oppression of the lower classes. See how lack of education can affect society!" (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 122) in the backdrop of flowers without any restriction of the panel. This indicates brilliantly how ideas and principles are free to circulate irrespective of time and space and the oppressive attempts to throttle them. Hence two flowers do escape from one page to another highlighting their impacts on the lives of Ninan and Natarajan along with others in a different space and time. Closer attention to the panel shows a flower defying the margins of the panel reaches the corner-most space of the page, therefore indicating how from Ninan and Natarajan's pages, its journey would continue to the days to come.

Moreover, the transformation of a deserted flies-infested wasteland littered with garbage and broken objects along with wild plants into a garden full of flowers inhabited by people of all ages, reading and listening at the end of the chapter "The Seeds of Change" is truly a welcoming change that has been brought about by the power of education. Likewise, the organicity of the metaphor runs through the titles of the chapters as well. While the first chapter "The Wasteland of Caste" depicts garbage-littered wasteland to symbolically represent the ugliness of casteism (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 7), the second chapter titled, "The Weed-bed of Myth" traces the ideological underpinnings of the caste system that is rooted in ancient Brahmin scriptures. The image on the title page illustrating the wild growths of shrubs and thorny bushes implies how the myths function as weeds and thus prevent the healthy growth

of plants (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 29). Therefore, in order to ensure proper growth of seedlings, the weeds have to be uprooted first, hence Phule's countering of the scriptural logic by writing *Gulamgiri* is the first step. Moreover, the third chapter, "The Roots of Tyranny" visually demonstrates how the physical map of India is strangled by thick wild roots and almost choking the nation (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 66). The subsequent pages trace the nakedness of ideological and physical manifestation of upper-caste violence from ancient ages (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 67) to modern times (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 78), even not sparing the Indian Freedom Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, Savarkar, V.D. Savarkar, M.S. Golwalker (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 91) and thus preventing the attainment of equality for all. The final chapter, titled "The Seeds of Change" as previously discussed, showcases the nips of pens as flowers marking the change that can be ushered in with the power of education (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 99).

In fact, Ninan and Natarajan almost after 138 years resort to visuality to uphold Phule's logical argument in *Gulamgiri* by highlighting the absurdity of the Brahminical logic. As Yadav observes, how "contrasting images meant for deconstructing the Manusmriti myths are widely spread out on entire pages of the novel offering ample space and time for their internalisation" (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 51) to the readers which "leads to an awakening of our consciousness in a way that is difficult for a verbal description to achieve. When we see a body of a human and fish forcefully put together to form one being we come to appreciate the absurdity of the story" (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 53). The juxtaposition of Brahman's perspective with that of Phule's in a single panel makes space for both sides of the narrative thus allowing readers to choose the one that appeals to their sense of rationality.

Besides, the caricature of the greedy, lusty, cruel Brahmin as a hairy, heavily moustached, obese man with another twisted lock of hair points to the very function of caricaturist in not seeking the perfect form but the perfect deformity, "thus penetrating through the mere outward appearance to the inner being in all its littleness or ugliness" (Gombrich & Kris, 1938, p. 320). The readers hence witness not merely what they see but how Natarajan and Ninan interpret the stereotypical Brahmins through their artistic vision (Douglas, 2007). Moreover, the bringing together of the caricature and human-like characters enable us to identify with one and reject the other. Dalits are individualised therefore allowing us to think of them as convincing life-like characters. This distinguishing thus allows a better identification with the plights of the Dalits, unlike the typified and caricatured Brahmins that arouses ridicule and contempt. The individuation and typification have been achieved by the carefully drawn expressions on their faces. Phule and Savitri can be seen experiencing a range of emotions – resoluteness in being asked to stop their work as detailed in the panel immediately after being threatened (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 16), anger while explaining the use of "absurd mythology" to keep a hold on all the people (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 72), scepticism about laws prescribed in the *Manusmriti* (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 78), joy at recounting how a 14-year-old from their school has excelled (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 93). On the contrary, the unnamed Brahmin figure is depicted mostly with a constant expression of anger and disgust towards the Dalits except on occasion being sly with the British in conspiring against the masses (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 105).

Drawing from E. M. Forster's conception of "flat" and "round" characters in the context of a novel, David Fishelov's (1990) development of Forster's model with regard to the comic genre holds significance in our discussion. Fishelov distinguishes the characters' flatness and roundness on the two levels of textuality and the reader's construction. Flatness on the textual level refers to the amount of space and literary or linguistic attention that is apportioned to a particular character (Fishelov, 1990). The character's textual flatness typically amounts to limited and one-dimensional attention so that a character is portrayed only from one perspective, always saying the same things, repeating some pattern of behaviour, or is associated with only one trait. Contrarily, roundness of a character is attributed to multidimensional representation which involves, for instance, the presentation of consciousness and inner life, varied points of view on the character's action, behaviour, and perception through narratorial strategies, focalisation techniques, speech and thought representation (Fishelov, 1990). The caricatured Brahmin with his constant hostile behaviour towards the lower-castes ascertains him a flatness of character. On the other hand, Dhondiba, the Brahmin friend of Jotiba Phule is portrayed with a roundness of character by highlighting his thorough transformation. The dialogic argument between the two friends shows his metamorphosis from being someone who believed in Hindu mythology to the one who realizes at the end: "Ah! Well at least you opened my eyes to so many things I never saw before, my friend" (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 121). This differential treatment of two kinds of upper-caste people, the Brahmin type and the Brahmin ally through Dhondiba helps us to understand the motive behind the book, which is to raise awareness and make upper-caste people see the roots of the problem by acknowledging and accepting the accountability.

Besides, techniques like visual simplification as well as exaggeration, as elaborated upon by Kai Mikkonen are used here to focus on certain themes. Exaggeration helps to emphasise a trait, mental state, idea, or the nature and impact of an action (Mikkonen, 2017). For instance, the twisted hair lock and the distorted speech bubble of the Brahmins are an indicator of their distorted perception of humankind. Again, the illustration of faces without eyes and other facial features, but only the mouth reminds us of McCloud's "amplification through simplification" (30) technique. The absence of accurate facial features allows focus on the mouth that spreads the false narrative of caste purity through the interpretation of their sacred texts and justifying their words as the ones being spoken by God (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, pp. 76-77). Moreover, it allows us to see how master narratives are constructed and validated by a powerful community, not an individual. It is a commentary on the fictionality of the narrative and rejecting distinct features provides for the "universality" (McCloud, 1993, p. 31) of the typified characters. Thus, by employing all the necessary visual and narrative techniques in raising awareness about the caste problem in the 21st century, Ninan and Natarajan become co-gardeners along with Jotiba and Savitri in their mission.

Conclusion

In this paper, the significance of the metaphor of gardening along with other organic metaphors that prove themselves vital in the narrative space of the novel and the lives of its protagonists are explored in greater detail. In the course of the exploration, the transformation of the Phules

from being merely the “cultivators of earth” (Natarajan & Ninan, 2011, p. 16) to the cultivators of minds by subverting the social hierarchical caste order that reserves manual work for the lower-castes is noticeable. Not only by choosing metaphorical gardening they challenge the pre-ordained profession, but they also become the torchbearers of the anti-caste movement which still holds considerable weight in our contemporary society as evident from the incident that marks the opening of the text. Gardening thus assumes a proportion of social activism in the lives of this firebrand couple. Education becomes the principal tool of their form of gardening thus proving instrumental in Dalit empowerment. The couple’s vision finds its allies in the 21st century writer and illustrator, Srividya Natarajan and Aparajita Ninan who takes it upon themselves to expand Phule’s argument in a timely fashion, thus making it more appealing with pictorial description and increasing its reach among all ages. By roping in incidents of caste discrimination taking place on a daily basis even in today’s India, Natarajan and Ninan makes a strong case for Jotiba and Savitri’s relevance in independent, democratic India and point to the society’s failure to uphold ideals of liberty, justice, equality for all its citizens.

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