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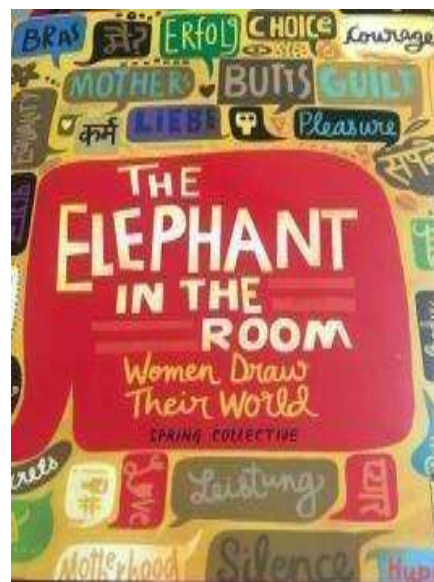
The Book Review

The Elephant in the Room: Evaluation of Taste and Value of Contemporary Women's Narratives



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“What do women want?”

Answering this question would mean navigating through the labyrinth of women's experiences and approaching those answers akin to revolutionary and iconoclastic. Women's narratives have changed. Women no more accept unified identity, instead, individual experiences now hold more importance. We have come far ahead of the caveman's narrative of women's position in society. The literary evaluation of women's narratives in the past was from the perspective of the male gaze. Feminism has been viewed either from the elitist perspective or with disdain. The literary academia has assigned a set of values to the entire narrative of women and that has led the general readers to have a distorted view of feminist ideology in particular and women's narrative in general. This review explores the culture of dissent concerning conversations around women's narrative in the 21st century and contingency of value through the graphic narrative *The Elephant in the Room* by Zubaan books and spring collectives.

The graphic narrative *The Elephant in the Room* is an anthology by women artists from India and Germany. It is about their experience of coping with gendered expectations in the 21st century and deconstructing the ideology behind modern women. This graphic novel attempts to subvert the singular narrative that women are stereotyped into even in the contemporary world driven by the patriarchal society.

In the past, the entire concept of graphic narratives was not valued as literature but with the popularity of narratives like *Persepolis*, graphic narratives have found their way into the taste of literary critics. While individual experiences of women were taken into account in artistic expressions, the taste for an idiosyncratic and personalised narration of these experiences has found its way into art only in recent times. But one should observe that the 21st-century consumers of art are not born with this sensibility but have acquired it. As Bourdieu states, judgments about art are cultivated and derived from; it produces 'cultural capital' that is tied to economic and social advantages. The conversations around women's narratives gained further ground, as giving 'voice to the voiceless' became a necessary part of the intellectual and academic discourse.

The graphic narrative *The Elephant in the Room* addresses this 'elephant in the room'- that of women's stories of legitimising their existence, identity, and their susceptibility to the male gaze. One observes that the illustrators leave their narratives to their readers. Each narrative merely remains a story about women. An illustration by Archana Sreenivasan named '*Otherly Urges*' presents motherhood as a choice than a necessity. This graphic narrative shows that society expects the protagonist to bear children but the protagonist takes a stand and firmly abides by her decision of not having children. Such a narrative is progressive in the world where everyone explored motherhood as a necessity that completes women's identity. Through this narrative, one can also see that the protagonist also does not respond to questions like, 'when will you have children', but at the same time she is held back by her conditioned mindset and begins exploring her options of adoption.



Aesthetic judgment is a kind of sorting process through which modern societies produce and legitimise social inequalities. Through Sreenivasan's graphic representation, we can use our aesthetic judgment in understanding that though women in the 21st century have the privilege of seeing motherhood as an option, the normative understanding of motherhood as a necessity is so deeply ingrained that one cannot separate it from one's consciousness. Another graphic story named *Temples* by Nina Pagalies brings an outburst of perspectives related to the female body and subverts stereotypes about the vagina. As even Lucy Irigaray says that female sexuality is always conceptualised based on masculine parameters. This work of art through various perceptions of the vagina presents vivid imagery of vaginas and their power for women and how society perceives the vagina. Through the satirical representation of the vagina, the readers are made to connect with their own experiences of epitomising the vagina as a symbol of female sexuality. *Bum Power*, another narrative by Larissa Bertonasc explores motherhood in the manner that it helped her character reclaim her body as she struggled with body image because she did not conform to the limiting ideas of beauty standards.

These narratives constantly dismantle women's need to conform to androcentric worldviews. It tries to fight notions around women as objects without agency and women who have no control over their bodies. These narratives reflect an aesthetic taste that contemporary readers have acquired. With the upsurge of the 'Me too' movement, social media, and awareness, the readers are now willing to explore the flip side of the dominant narrative. Through the consumption of art, therefore, one tries to unravel and decipher meanings with their education and judgments. Readers, short of this cultural competence to unpack the signified meaning of the ordinary, will be unable to gauge the polysemy of women's experiences presented in this book.

The encounter with a work of art is not 'love at first sight', it is acquired with time. The mode of representation is more important than the object of art but when the same object of art is handed over to the common people, they are unconsciously drawn into observing what their education has taught them of the context of the object of art. Popular taste functions on a scheme of popular ideologies created by literary elites that dominate any work of art. One can refer to the example of the Amazon Prime show, *Four More Shots Please* where it shows the popular narrative about how they take charge of their lives and reclaim their narrative and their identity but it is still the projection of upper-class, privileged women. The problematic aspect of this web series and the book lies in not acknowledging the fact that the portrayal of women as subversive, rebellious, and rule-breakers does not guarantee women's equal status in society. Likewise, just by recognizing the elephant's existence in the room does not mean resolving and addressing the problem of its existence in the room.

Nevertheless, there has been a periodic shift in the understanding of feminist theory and women's position. To recall Terry Eagleton, culture is on the side of dissent and not of harmonious resolution. In today's world, these values related to narratives of women in society are contingent- they are constantly changing, evolving, and challenging patriarchal norms. The narratives presented in contemporary times look for a dialogue with the dynamic self and the 'other'.

Notably, the value associated with a particular text will change according to the meaning the readers attach to it based on their contexts. Hence, the value associated with any literary text is contingent as the reader's interpretations are not natural but acquired with practice and training. Every graphic narrative in *The Elephant in the Room* is not just a product of the illustrator/artist's imagination but more so about the interpretation of the reader and the reader's engagement with the narrative.

We can compare the book *The Elephant in the Room* with the Bollywood movie *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*. This movie, just like the book attempts to de-stigmatizing conversations around gender issues and merge them into the mainstream narrative. It makes a point that values and tastes are contingent and breaks apart the notion of normative. One cannot shelter art and its reception from worldly concerns. Contrary to Kant's evaluation, art cannot be perceived as disinterested engagement; rather, sensibility is cultivated with the influence of culture and training of the mind. The book and the Bollywood movie come from a particular sensibility of the writer or the illustrator but the reader's engagement with the art form, his/her experience, and training is also crucial in developing an understanding of art.

The judgment about women's narratives cannot be restricted to either submissive and oppressed or victimised. Neither can we say that women's narratives are bold, empowered, and free from bonds. One cannot compartmentalise narratives and see them as a whole. It should be a self-evaluation of individual experiences and be focused on the reader's evaluation of the text. One cannot provide a definite answer to 'what women want', as it is completely subjective to individual experience and is contingent just like the reader's engagement with any work of art. The 21st century poses a culture of dissent and exposes individuals to multiple narratives. Theory, in that sense, is no more within its boundaries. It accepts intersectionality and has blurred the line between art and pleasure; gender and sexuality; normative and abnormal.

