

## Role of Translation in the Rise of Asian Graphic Novels

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### Abstract

Accessibility is the key that unlocks the diversity of world literature and translation is the cornerstone upon which accessibility depends. Translation has been and still is a nexus between varied cultures, traditions and land, which paves the way for cultural synthesis. Graphic novel is one among the harbingers of this cultural synthesis. Mini stories illustrated through animated sketches and dialogues, graphic novels, a rising genre in literature, with the aid of translation, pass on histories, cultures, traditions and also foreground many social issues which exist within different nations. This work focuses upon the history of graphic novels, the contribution of translation in the genre's rise, and the analysis of two representative graphic novels, "Grass" originally written in Korean by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim and translated by Janet Hong and "My Brother's Husband" initially written in Japanese by Gengoroh Tagame and translated by Anne Ishii. Through this, the paper provides a better understanding on how translation assisted the growth of Asian graphic novels and thereby carried across the voices of the unheard. The fact that a broader picture of culture, histories and social issues are illustrated through translation is portrayed in the analysis, thereby stating its importance in a reading public and growing economy.

**Keywords:** Translation, Graphic novel, Asian, Japanese, Korean, social issues, culture, manga, manhwa

### 1. Introduction:

"Images are a way of writing. When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw, it seems a shame to choose one. I think it's better to do both", says Marjane Satrapi, a famous graphic novelist. The truth is that we rarely consider graphic novels as controversial materials. While the genre's perceived triviality has helped it slip under the radar of censorship, the act of translation was able to bring it back into popular consciousness. Through skillful translation, the contents of graphic novels, written in a certain language, can be extracted and converted into a different language without losing its real essence. This function of translation in a multilingual world makes any work accessible to a larger public despite the regional disparities, thus enabling the fruits of reading to reach world-wide. Further, by making the work accessible to a larger

audience, translation acts as a courier, for the transmission of knowledge about the cultural and social issues, as well as a preserver of cultural heritage. A brief analysis of graphic novels like *Bad Friends*, *Grass*, and *My Brother's Husband* which address social concerns like child abuse and gender issues aim to shed light on their relevance and why their voices need to be carried over to the global audience via translation. The analysis also draws a contrast between Asian culture and the rest of the world with special emphasis on the East-West dichotomy. Through this, the paper provides a better understanding on how translation helped in the rise or growth of Asian graphic novels, around the world, to date. The fact that a broader picture of culture, histories and social issues are illustrated through translation is portrayed in the analysis, thereby stating its importance in a reading public and growing economy. However, in the field of translation, the graphic novel still stands as a diminished genre mainly due to the complexity of reconceptualizing images and a dearth of proper publishing houses which value translated graphic novels. Most importantly, every graphic novel should be seen in its own particular way and they depend mainly on the creator and the culture of the country of origin.

## **2. History**

The narration of stories employing pictures instead of prose, was something habitual since the primeval age. Graphic storytelling hence stands to be an efficient way of conveying ideas and thoughts, which is evident right from the cave paintings of Cro-Magnon men to the hieroglyphics of Ancient Egyptians. Daily or weekly periodicals, mainly joke books or humour publications, began to emerge by the Industrial age, with the working-class getting leisure hours to indulge in reading. Slowly with time, political cartoons, comics and graphic novels also began to make an appearance. The most controversial among them, the graphic novels, or book-length comics in comic strip format, commingled comic images and words and was connected to broader genre's which included fiction, non-fiction and anthologized works. They were presented as a book and not a periodical, unlike other comic strips available in the market. The term 'graphic novel' was highly controversial, right from its initial stages, for the scholars and comic readers were reluctant to give it an individual existence, separate from traditional comics.

Thought to have been originated in 1828 under Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer titled *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois* and later appearing in an American edition by Wilson and Company in 1842, *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* is often recognised as the oldest example of graphic novels. Although western graphic novels are believed to have pioneered the genre, its origin can be traced back to even earlier times from East Asian regions. Graphic novels are generally defined as book-length comics that originated in the West, but all comics published in book form around the world can be rightly called a graphic novel. Asian countries like China, Taiwan and Myanmar are believed to have had graphic novels that existed in various forms which can be traced back to even earlier times. However, this school of thought remains marginalised due to a lack of documentation and other supporting evidence. A connection to East Asia can be seen in *Citizen 13660* published in 1946, which illustrated the Japanese internment during the second World War, which indeed is a graphic novel that got published in the west. The graphic novels in

Japan, termed ‘manga’, developed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Manga were initially published as individual issues and later as fully created album type comic books. Manga stands out from the rest of the comics as being published in multiple genres, each one aiming at a specific age group or the kind of readers. ‘Manhwa’, highly influenced by the manga, is a Korean term for comics which got popularised in the 1920s. The term ‘manhwa’, in English, is identified as manga inspired comic-strips. Japanese language and culture got incorporated into the Korean culture while Korea underwent colonisation by Japan from 1910 to 1945. This can be considered a major reason for the origin and development of graphic novels in Korea, popularly known as manhwa. The popularity of the manhwa peaked during the 1950s and 60s, consequently gaining the same level of audience and popularity that the manga has controlled over the years.

It was from the 1990’s that the manga truly flourished and gained unparalleled popularity among the western masses. Keiji Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen* is considered to be the first manga translated into English and it was widely marketed in the United States. It left its impact upon the reader’s culture and altered the readers’ perception about the Japanese culture. Manga often deals with multiple genres like love, relationships, adventures and supernatural, thereby targeting a varied demographic of readers. Manga are divided into ‘shonen’, ‘seinen’, ‘shojo’, ‘josei’ and ‘kodomo’ according to the age groups they target. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, skillful translations by translators like Anne Ishii, Ryan Holmberg and Jocelyne Allen led to the rise of the manga as the largest comic culture, consequently influencing national and international comic cultures and spurring on the development of the graphic narrative in other comic cultures around the world. For instance, taking inspiration from the manga, graphic narratives originated in many parts of the world especially in China (“manhua”), Taiwan, South Korea (“manhwa”).

Accessibility is the keyword when it comes to Asian graphic novels and accessibility is a result of scanlations and translations. The resultant availability in regional markets aided these Asian counterparts of the Western graphic novels in reaching a wider section of the reading public. Elettra Pauletto, writer and translator, in her article “Graphic Novel in Translation” remarks about the difficulty of translating graphic novels due to the ‘reconceptualizing images’. According to her the act of translation will be able to bring back popular consciousness along with promoting cultural awareness to the audience. The initial style of graphic novels was not able to reach the mainstream audience until the rise of the Japanese “manga”. Today the vogue of this genre has expanded along with their accessibility in libraries and bookstores.

A surge in the demand for the graphic novels has also led to its digital release, popularly known as Web manga. The digital popularity has been ascribed to smartphones and computers as a major part of today’s readers prefer digital platforms over printed forms. Similar to the digital manga, South Korea launched a website known as Webtoons in order to publish manhwa digitally. The important feature of these East Asian comics is that their content is designed specifically for their target audience, generally based on gender and age. In addition, the content made by these East Asian comics are usually contemplative of their actual values and customs. For instance, in manga we can see supernatural stories based on the death god – ‘Shinigami’ as

in *Death Note*; on the other hand, manhwa stories often depict stories based on the concept of beauty and its culture.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century indeed proved to be the culmination of years of unfair denigration that the graphic novels faced despite the favourable public reception. Critics and scholars alike are at present looking to the medium of graphic narratives to give form to ideas and sensibilities that could potentially be beyond words and graphics taken alone. A harmonious union of the realm of words and graphics could potentially open up new areas in literary research and give form to many new ideas. The new found freedom of the book market also contributed to this acceptance and the graphic novels have finally evolved into a crucial and salient part of the comic book publishing industry. The recognition of the graphic novels as a form of literature will continue to spread, as the current media trends and interests centres around comic books and series, and will undoubtedly place it among valid literature.

### **3. Analysis**

Asian graphic novels that gained critical acclaim on account of skillful translations to English include *Grass*, originally written in Korean by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim and translated by Janet Hong; *My Brother's Husband*, originally written in Japanese by Gengoroh Tagame and translated by Anne Ishii; and *Bad Friends*, originally written in Korean by Ancco and translated by Janet Hong.

Keum Suk Gendry-Kim is a South Korean manhwa artist who gained critical acclaim for her graphic novel *Grass*. Though well-known among a specific set of audience for her innovative graphic novel, she does not even have a Wikipedia page in her name. The history of South Korea and the tragedy that befell it as a result of its Japanese occupation from 1919 to 1945 remains unknown to a sizable portion of the global population. The biggest colonial power that is the British and its vast history of conquests has overshadowed the Japanese colonial administration and the atrocities it committed against the backdrop of World War II. When *Grass* was translated from Korean to English by the award-winning translator Janet Hong, the voice of the oppressed finally found an outlet. Through its protagonist Lee Ok-sun, the world was finally made aware of the cost of war, and the comfort women whose very existence have been denied, ultimately found that their sufferings and pain were valid.

*Grass* opens up discussions on 'administered' history and cultural appropriations of history. Japan has for long denied the existence of 'comfort stations', but this anti-war graphic novel retells the real story of a survivor, laying bare a dark chapter in the shared history of Japan and Korea. The story follows Lee Ok-sun who is forced into hard labour as she is taken away from home in the pretext of sending her to school. She is treated like a slave and put to work in a state of near-starvation. She is kidnapped later and taken to a 'comfort station' where she is forced into sexual slavery. These 'comfort stations' provided the Japanese soldiers with young women like Ok-sun who were known as 'comfort women'. The graphic medium becomes in many ways the only medium that could do justice to the abominable actions of the soldiers and the disturbing events that unfold. The brushwork of Gendry-Kim is striking, as she only uses

black strokes against a white background; and in particularly graphic scenes of violence, the black strokes dominate, plunging the panel into shadows of unspoken terror. Words cannot always carry over the emotions and despair behind such a trauma. The despair of these women is silent as their voices are already hoarse from screaming into deaf ears. The anguish of their souls that can never be translated into the tangible medium of words thus finds respite in the honest, controlled art of Keum Suk Gendry-Kim. A graphic novel is unique because, where words stop, the art begins and the true craftsman effortlessly creates a harmonious blend of both these mediums.

Gengoroh Tagame is an openly gay mangaka who is known for popularising gay comics in Japan. *My Brother's Husband* (*Ototo no Otto*) stands out for its realistic portrayal of the veiled homophobia that pervades the seemingly progressive Japanese society. The current era of acceptance has broken down the binary conceptions regarding gender and sexuality. However, the queer community faces discrimination in different forms even today and some of these issues remain concealed and vague. Writers have a responsibility to criticise life as they perceive it and Tagame having faced the brunt of the homophobia that persists in his country, pens a story that deserves to be heard and acknowledged. Originally written in Japanese, *My Brother's Husband* first reached the global audience through amatuerscanlations. A professional translation into English by Anne Ishii and later into French by Delcourt augmented the global spread of this manga as readers around the globe found the internal conflicts of Yaichi relatable. The story, though set in Japan, was able to resonate with the global audience because it addresses an issue that is at the core of all discussions concerning homosexuality and the queer community.

*My Brother's Husband* portrays the inner conflict of a generation trying to unlearn all that they had been taught about sexuality and gender. The binary concepts that cling to the minds of people like Yaichi refuses to be erased, however as the story progresses the readers are presented with hope as Yaichi slowly comes to terms with his brother's marriage to a Canadian man. Tagame's writing as well as his art is controlled and though he employs irony and sarcasm, these elements are subtle and usually presented through the innocent dialogues of Yaichi's daughter Kana. Kana's character proves that stereotypes and prejudices about queer relationships are a product of social conditioning. For instance, when Kana first meets Mike, she is curious about the marriage between two men and Yaichi's answer to her question of whether it is possible is a vehement "No" but Mike replies in the affirmative. When Yaichi explains that in Japan they can't but in some other countries they can, Kana replies with "That's weird". The fact that a child finds the contradiction 'weird' is aimed at mocking the adults who apparently cannot understand what even a child understands. According to Yaichi Kana is oversimplifying things, but as the story progresses, he asks himself whether the 'adults' are fruitlessly complicating things that are genuinely simple. Social conditioning limits one's perception and prompts a continual search for femininity and masculinity in every queer relationship. When Kana asks Mike who is the wife in his marriage, Yaichi is appalled as he unconsciously relates her question to the sex life of his brother. When Mike replies that they are both husbands as they are both men, Yaichi is struck by the simplicity of it. The tendency that persists in people to associate

‘wife’ to submission and ‘husband’ to domination does not exist in the mind of the child for whom ‘wife’ means a woman and ‘husband’ means a man. The pertinent question *My Brother’s Husband* raises is, “If a child like Kana can understand and accept Mike, what justification can an adult offer for withholding their acceptance?” Apparent bigotry and homophobic violence make the news and grab widespread attention but veiled, passive homophobia escapes the attention of the masses. This issue is deftly dealt with in works like *My Brother’s Husband* and *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness*. These graphic novels have been fortunate enough to get translations and hence gain exposure, but many graphic novels that deal with socially relevant issues are often overlooked as they are not commercially viable.

For a disinterested onlooker Japan may appear progressive and modern but a close look at its literature makes one wonder. The term ‘literature of Japan’ may conjure the surrealist works of Murakami to an average reader’s mind but Murakami’s work is in no way definitive and it should not be treated as a microcosm of the many layered culture of Japan. Countries like Korea and Japan take pride in their culture and their governments often promote their native culture and language. Globalisation may have spurred on the significance of the English language but like the French who prefer their language over a foreign language, these Asian countries are holding on to their own languages. Consequently, the literature of these nations is largely written in their own language and hence the need for translations takes paramount importance. The undertone here is that graphic novels are also to be considered as literature. The distinctions between high and low cultures have collapsed since the beginning of the modern age and graphic novels do not deserve to be called a ‘low form of literature’ merely because it is popular. If anything, it must be considered an amalgamation of visual art and literature which combines the best of two worlds.

## **5.Conclusion**

Translation has played a significant role in the development of comic culture around the world, redefining the sphere and globalising its content. The process of translation singlehandedly brought about the height of popularity of the Japanese manga in the 1990s and added representative works of the East to the genre of graphic novels. Graphic novels are gradually evolving as a type of literary form or genre however, many works are still overlooked as they are not commercially viable. A plethora of translated works are available these days nonetheless, if we scrutinise the background of the works it can be found that most of these are either best sellers or works from award winning writers. It can therefore be rightly assumed that many graphic novels are still inaccessible to the global audience. Works of artistic value deserve to be translated as much as those that enjoy commercial success, despite the unpopularity of the authors and their previous works. Aided by skillful translations that decode both the visual and verbal layers to retain the essence of the original, these works can finally gain the attention they deserve. As with other forms of literature, these works should be studied and critiqued to secure their place among other genres as a legitimate genre of the literary tradition.

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