



# Hangul-Man: Therianthropic Imagery in Malik Sajad's Graphic Novel *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to analyze the role and purpose of animal imagery in Malik Sajad's graphic novel, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*. The novel depicts the everyday uncertainties of life in an occupied territory such as Kashmir through its somber panels, and stark black-and-white images that predominantly feature acts of violence and grief. Like Spiegelman's *Maus*, Sajad too uses the man-animal hybrid to represent the vulnerable position of the Kashmiri identity within the novel. Moreover, an examination of representative texts within the graphic medium confirms that theorizing the animal has become essential to sequential narratives of identity and otherness (Chaney). By reading the animal in the novel in the light of theoretical concepts such as "becoming-animal" (Deleuze and Guattari) and "Animetaphor" (Baker), the paper explores the symbolic, subversive and emotional impact of this visual rhetoric.

**Key Words:** identity, sequential narratives, hybridity, animal imagery, subversive.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Animals figure in human culture in profound ways. In many religious systems across cultures, animals are both revered and sacrificed; suggesting the intricate and often conflicting dynamics of animal-human relationships. Animals find their representation in all forms of art and literature and are used to express and negotiate complex ideas about what it means to be human. Recent philosophical trends in areas such as Posthumanism and Anthropocentrism have underscored the ubiquitous nature of animal imagery within human cultures and have pushed scholars to look deeper and understand the nature of animal representation; how they are imagined, experienced, and given significance within various literary forms.

Comics and graphic narratives is a literary genre that has dealt with the depiction of animals in various forms. From superhero comic series such as Batman and Spiderman to graphic memoirs such as Spiegelman's *Maus*, the comics genre has theorized the animals in different ways over decades. In fact, according to critic Michael A. Chaney, "an examination of representative texts within the autobiographical graphic medium shows how theorizing the animal has become essential to one's understanding of visual narratives of identity and otherness" (129).

Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir* is a semi-autobiographical graphic novel that functions both as a kunstlerroman and a graphic witness. The somber panels, stark black and white sketches that predominantly feature acts of violence and grief reflect what it means to live in a land seeped in conflict. Perhaps, the most powerful visual technique used by Sajad in the novel is therianthropism; the depiction of humans with animal features. In this case, the illustration of Kashmiris as humans with hangul heads. This study examines how the portrayal of Kashmiris with Hangul heads serves a symbolic and political function in the text.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Critical scholarship on animal representation in graphic narratives suggests that animal imagery often serves as a way of engaging with questions of identity, otherness, trauma, and power. Scholars working at the intersection of animal studies and visual narrative have helped shape an analytical framework to understand how these figures operate in texts, particularly those dealing with conflict or marginalization.

Michael A. Chaney asserts that the appearance of animal forms "almost always accompanies the strategic and parodic unveiling of the human" (134). Chaney's work highlights how animal depictions in graphic narratives like



Speigelman's *Maus* or Sajad's *Munnu* function as critiques of dominant identity formation and lenses to view the human subject from a distance.

Akira Mizuta Lippit extends this line of thinking with his concept of "animetaphor" (165). Animals in this sense are not passive stand-ins for human experience. Instead, they embody it. When the animal imagery in a text is looked through this lens, the distinctions between literal and figurative becomes blurred and the rendering becomes a site of both semantic and affective complexity.

Steven Baker's *The Postmodern Animal* explores how animal imagery in contemporary visual art and narrative functions as a mode of symbolic equivalence. He notes that such representations project qualities that are not necessarily visible but are socially and culturally inferred (103). According to Baker, therianthropic forms are especially potent because they encode layered meanings that invite the reader to infer internal states and cultural conditions.

Further, Julia Kristeva's theory of "abjection" as presented in her work *Powers of Horror* is particularly useful in analysing how hybrid human-animal figures disrupt normative identities. Kristeva describes the abject as that which is "neither subject nor object" and which threatens the stability of the self (4). Deluze and Guattari's notion of "becoming-animal" further enriches the study. The concept argues that the animal imagery features in a text is not a metaphorical or mimetic act but a process of deterritorialization. It resists linear or biological notions of identity and instead signifies a movement across categories through "contagion, not filiation" (274).

Recent scholarship in animal studies and posthumanism continue to explore these ideas. Scholars like Ann Sofie Lonngren and Erica Fudge have emphasised the importance of reading animals as figures with their own narrative and ethical force. Together this framework offer a powerful tool for interpreting the therianthropic imagery in the graphic memoir.

### 3. OBJECTIVES :

The study proposes that the animal-man hybrid featured in the graphic novel serves three purposes. Firstly, serves as a powerful symbol in the novel that positions the Kashmiri identity within the context of occupied Kashmir. Secondly, it serves as a subversive tool in the hands of the author to express dissent. Thirdly, it functions as a visual rhetoric, fostering empathy from the readers toward the plight of the Kashmiri community. The paper proposes to undertake an examination of the same.

### 3. ANALYSIS:

The trajectory of power holds a significant position in conflicted geographical regions. The interplay between those affected by the events and those who influence the flow of events unravels a complex narrative of agency and control. Animal forms (anthropomorphic, therianthropic, non-anthropomorphic) in Graphic novels on war, genocide, and conflict can therefore be read as providing insight into human identity. Therefore, Michael Chaney's remarks on the appearance of the animal in graphic novels as one that "almost always accompanies the strategic and parodic unveiling of the human" holds true (134). In the novel, Sajad uses the therianthropic illustrations of a humans with a hangul heads to depict Kashmiris. The novel begins with a family photograph that features the narrator, Munnu, at age seven, and his three brothers and one sister who are all ender to him. The peculiarity of this family photograph is that the human is portrayed using animal features (**Figure 1**). Further, in the following panel, the author uses a human hand to introduce each character (**Figure 2**) by their name, inviting the reader to look closely at the deer-like features that mark their identity.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Animal metaphor is the linguistic comparison of a human character to an animal. In this case, it encompasses the possibility of a metonymic representation, that is, the substitution of a uniquely associated animal for the human character. Akira Lippit rightly points out,

“One finds a fantastic traversality at work between the animal and the metaphor - the animal is already a metaphor, the metaphor an animal. Together they transport to language, breathe into language, the vitality of another life, another expression: animal and metaphor, a metaphor made flesh, a living metaphor that is by definition not a metaphor, antimetaphor- “animetaphor.” (165)

An animetaphor is, therefore, not just a visual comparison but that which symbolises something more profound. In Baker’s words, “It is not, for instance, that a thing (an image, an animal, or whatever) somehow is simply metaphoric, but rather it stands in a metaphoric relation to another thing.” (88) In the chapter titled *The Rhetoric of Animality*, Steven Baker states that illustrations always typically involve some kind of “projected equivalence” (103). He states that the visual identity devised by the author connotes certain non-visual qualities that the author desires to communicate. He further adds that one of the most common visual techniques by which this ‘equivalence’ is achieved involves the symbolic use of animal imagery (Baker). In this light, it can be noted that, by employing a therianthropic representation of a human figure adorned with the head of a Hangul deer, Sajad imbues the Kashmiri community depicted in his novel with characteristics associated with the Hangul deer. This includes the significance of the deer as Kashmir’s state animal, its status as prey within the predator-prey hierarchy, and its perilous position as an endangered species.

The therianthropic form in art or narrative often exemplifies Julia Kristeva’s notion of *abjection* which is characterized as a threat to the certainty of self’s identity. She draws on the connotations of the word *l’impropre* to signify both unclean and that which is not the self. But Sajad tilts this notion of a prejudiced representation of the Other using the troubling in-between-ness of therianthropism by using the same visual imagery to ‘pollute’ the dominant narrative constructed by the Indian occupation on the Kashmiri identity (Baker). Apart from highlighting the vulnerable position of the Kashmiris in the conditions of a necropolitical occupation, the author uses the animal imagery to subvert attributions of terrorism that Kashmiris are often associated with. By representing Kashmiris as small-horned endangered creatures, *Munnu* reverses the attributions of feral otherness often attached to colonized populations by the colonizers. Moreover, the attribution of human status to the Indians is an ironic visual narrative device as it underscores their bestial brutality against an occupied population portrayed as an alter species.

Occupying the status of minority who are “oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, and always on the fringe of recognized institutions”, the position of the Kashmiris in the novel opens up “the space for becoming” (Bell). The hybrid representation used to illustrate Kashmiris in the novel could therefore be read as a visual representative of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-animal”. Read in this light, it shows how the therianthropic image of the hangul serves as a subversive tool to challenge established norms and power structures in the novel. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that becoming is not a shift from one identity to another, but rather a process of deconstructing identity itself. They further emphasize that becoming-animal occurs through “contagion, not filiation.” (Filiation, or reproduction through hereditary descent, does not allow for the multiplicity of difference that contagion allows) (Bell). In the chapter titled, Footnotes, Sajad illustrates the history of Kashmir beginning with the death of a certain water demon that the great Sage Kashyap vanquished. It is interesting to note that the story illustrates the ‘traditional’ identity of the Kashmiris as that of a Hangul (**Figure 3**). Therefore, the hybrid version- that which challenges classification, that we encounter pages of the novel can be seen as a deconstructed and reimagined identity in the context of occupation.





Figure 3

Further, this Hybrid self is not one that is fixed. It is not a transformation from one to another. In a spectrum between being exploited and achieving high ground, the Kashmiris are in a perpetual state of “becoming”. This liminal position gives them the unique power to challenge power and authority while being exploited. This “becoming” self, defies notions of regression and progression which imply that some forms are higher or more central than others (Deleuze and Guattari). Although through the presence of therianthropic and human figures, the author could be presumed as constructing a hierarchical world in the novel, the characteristics that they exhibit disrupt the hierarchical framework of the State by blurring lines on perceived notions of animality and power. For instance, therianthropic characters like Munnu are portrayed as being capable of thought, negotiation, and emotion while human portrayals of Indian Army men and foreign diplomats exude cynicism, crude behavior, and inhumanness.

Sajad’s visual metonymy, the therianthropic hangul form stand in for the survivors and martyrs of a conflict zone such as Kashmir. Within the narrative framework of the novel, depiction of mourning and grief is predominantly conveyed through somber panels. In fact, it ironically becomes the overarching atmosphere of the place the narrator refers to as “home”. The humanoid hangul form imbue these scenes with a sense of animality (**Figure 4**) that fosters a shared emotional connection. One such illustration is the funeral of Rehman. Sajad shows Rehman’s father clasp the decomposed body of his son and vocalizes an animalistic lament (**Figure 5**). Here, one witnesses how the animal form interacts with the setting to facilitate an intimate connection with the audience.



Figure 5



## 8. CONCLUSION:

The utilization of animal imagery, especially the therianthropic representation of Hanguls in Malik Sajad's graphic novel "Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir", therefore, serves a purpose that goes beyond the limits of visual aesthetics. The animal-human imagery operates as a symbol that positions the Kashmiri identity within the complex context of occupied Kashmir, a narrative tool that challenges repressive forces of the State all the while enabling readers to emotionally resonate with the plight of the characters. Through this complex interaction, Sajad invites his readers to engage in a deeper understanding of the Kashmiri experience within a larger socio-political landscape.

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