



---

## **Urban Space, Dystopia, Consumerism and Hyperreality: Reading Satire as Resistance in Appupen's *Aspyrus***

Srijani Dutta

Independent Scholar

---

**Abstract:** The publication of Amar Chitra Katha has been marked as the beginning of the advent of the graphic novel. Amar Chitra Katha is moving away from the traditional, stereotypical stories and is broadening its horizon and scope to become more like graphic novels. The graphic novels are the new instances of visual culture of India. They reimagine and reconstruct the Indian epics and myths. Gradually, the scenarios of the graphic novels have gone through changes. The graphic novel artists do not limit themselves to the representation of the myths but also broaden their venture to the socio-political burning issues of the society. Appupen has taken a satirical stance in his artworks. He formulated his own realistically unreal space, Halahala, that epitomises modern, even the postmodern, India. Out of his consciousness, he has given birth to this simulated and mimetic cityscape in his graphic novels. This essay attempts to shed light on dystopia looming around the urban space of this hyperreal land and celebrates satire as an expression of resistance.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, hyperreality, resistance, satire, urban space.

### **Body of Discussion**

Appupen is one of the prominent graphic novelists who has created his own landscape named as Halahala to attack the negative side of the city life, the modern consumerist culture. His wordless graphic illustration effectively creates the illusion of the incidents of the society as well as India. He primarily deals with the dystopian futuristic land, its dwellers and the relationship among the urban ecology and the inhabitants. He is deeply influenced by the German expressionist graphic artist Lynd Ward's silent woodcut art. Appupen sometimes uses speech balloons but, most of the time, tries to debunk the conventional definition of the sequential art form, the panel form of the graphic novels. He uses sketching, drawings and the black colour in his artworks. Modernist literature primarily focuses on the representation of the cityscapes. Lyn Ward depicts the moral dilemma, evil side of industrialisation in his graphic novels. Taking reference from him, Appupen has placed his characters in his imaginary, hyperreal Halahala land that acts as a warning against the consequences of the capitalist, consumerist postmodern culture. This essay tries to answer the questions: How does Appupen create dystopia in his Halahala land in this graphic novel? How does Appupen depict satire in his work?

**How does the graphic novel become the piece/text of resistance in itself?**



Appupen in his book criticises the urban, modern, capitalist society that allures humans in every possible way. He paints a dystopian city with follies and temptation. This is a lifeless city controlled by the ill-fated dream(s), temptation, lust for consumerist activities. The representation of golf club, café, shopping malls, television screens, billboards, posters of different kinds of advertisements in the book metaphorically depict the capitalist, consumerist culture of the present day of India. The man wears a suit, tie, trousers and, from his clothes, one can get an idea of the corporate employee. It also shows the bureaucratic urban spaces. He is running after the winged, devilish dream. This dream is the metaphor of the bad sides of the consumerist, ultra-modern society. He tries to grasp the dream but he fails. The chase is constant, on-going, depicting the competitive nature of life. Gradually, he becomes fatigued and starts looking like a vagabond, beggar. This chase makes him emotionally drained. This is the ultimate reality of this capitalist life where everything is based on projection, transaction and competition. The third act of this book shows the school-going girl of this man. In the school, the teacher draws the picture of the devilish dream. The students also try to draw the painting. Ironically, it unveils how capitalism runs through the nerves of the society. Then, the visual narration of the story focuses on the girl's face. She wakes up from the dream and starts dressing like a super (wo)man. It shows her entry into capitalism and acceptance of consumerism. Suddenly, she reaches the sea shore and finds the banished, original creator as well as the dreamer of this dystopian city. She fights against the devilish dream and kills it. The book ends with the picture of the devilish dream being exhibited in a room. The reference of factories, Underwoman, and devilish dream hints at the co-existence of humans and machines. These creatures are the metaphors of the degradation of the human aspirations, dream and mentality. Appupen's world is impregnated with conflict, subversion, corruption, fetishism, moral degradation caused by capitalism, ecological crisis, humanoid, awkward creatures. The binary between modern urban space and forest land is a satirical stance to depict the shift from primitivity to civilisation.

Appupen's graphic narrative is more of a silent novel with imagery and images. Through silence and the mode of invisibility, the creator discusses the bad sides of urbanity, urban habitats and cultures. His land of Halahala is a hyperreal space that is dominated by the evil dragon or a monster. The figuration of the evil monster is a satirical symbol of greed and dreams. He also depicts how human beings can attempt to eradicate the devilish intention, dreams, and aspiration from the mind of the inhabitants and bring forth the sense of stability and peace in lieu of chaos and dystopia. This is a portrayal of a dystopian society that is collapsing down under the threat of the evil of consumerism. In one scene, we can find that the male protagonist is chasing after the evil creature. This is the metaphorical, satirical depiction of incessant chase after success, money, capitalism. Basically, it draws the picture of the harsh competitive nature of the urban spaces. Like him, everyone is running after something that they cannot get.

Aspyrus is the satirical story against the alluring consumerism as well as the capitalist culture. In this book, the dragon like creature is the metaphor of the obsession for harmful dreams. Aspyrus signifies the aspirant souls and their obsessive dreams. The first and second parts show how the dragon like creature enters the city of Halahala and everyone starts chasing after the evil. The last part celebrates the story of the girl who dares to destroy the evil creature. Here, the city of Halahala is marked by shopping malls, tall buildings, television screens, brick walls, factories, galleries, robots. The agglomeration of the television screens projects the harsh reality that we all are living in the whirlpool of images and representations. These "images" blur the division between real and imaginary and create the hyperreal space. According to Baudrillard, hyperreality is a postmodern condition that erases the gap between real and unreal things. The reference of the Underwoman indicates at the stories of Superman and the dystopian Gotham City. Through the lens of hyperreality, he creates the postmodernist version of India by mirroring the doomed future



world. This world is not the real world rather a simulated space just to criticise the modern day scenario of India.

To me, the graphic novel itself is a piece of resistance as it challenges high culture/high art. In any piece of resistance, the suppressed, oppressed, latent entities become the primordial voices as they defy the existing ideas and thoughts. This graphic novel does not follow the pattern of the sequential art forms. It celebrates the triumph of the good against evil. Through its unique visual storytelling, Appupen gives a social commentary on capitalist, postmodern India. This book is a complete package of illustrations and drawings focusing on the realities and possibilities of a doomed India. In his work, he tries to resist the danger fuelled by capitalism, greed, competition and extreme urbanity. Therefore, he gives life to the Underwoman in order to represent her "voice/ activity." She is the figure of a saviour and this land needs to be saved. The end of the dragon like creature brings back normalcy to the society and this becomes the "dream" of Appupen for India.

Satire, a literary-cultural tool of expression, is used in this graphic novel to criticise the ill effects of consumerism, capitalism and aspiration. The dragon like creature is the satirical image of the deep seated evil greed, aspirations, and dreams of the human beings. Satire is primarily used to create awareness along with the tendency of rectification. The reference of the Underwoman is also an intelligent move for satirising the society and how it can be saved. By implementing the figure of the Underwoman, the creator invokes a sense of resistance. She herself is a figure of resistance. The demolition of the creature is a must need for the preservation of the society as well as the human beings. His Halahala land is corrupted. He paints this land in his graphic novel which is devoid of words, speech bubbles. The illustrations, sketching set the satirical tone of the text. Though satire is the main focus of the text, it does not evoke out laughter. It creates a sense of warning and awareness. Thus, his graphic narrative acts as a wake-up call and consequently becomes the piece of resistance in itself.

## Works Cited

Mathen, George. *Aspyrus: A Dream of Halahala*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2014.

Mondal, Kabita, and Joydeep Banerjee. "Silence, Satire and Empathy: Reading Appupen's Topoi in His Wordless Graphic Narratives." *RUPKATHA JOURNAL ON INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN HUMANITIES*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2021.

Nayar, P. K. *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique*. Routledge, 2016.

Nayar, Pramod K. "Appupen's Posthuman Gothic: The Snake and the Lotus." *SOUTH ASIAN REVIEW*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2018.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. 1994.

**Author Bio: Srijani Dutta**, an independent researcher, hails from Chandannagar of India. She loves to express herself through words, colours and images. She writes and paints. Some of her creative and academic works have been published in journals such as SETU, MADRAS COURIER, CONTEMPORARY LITERARY REVIEW INDIA, BORDERLESS JOURNAL, SLC, NEW LITERARIA, CULTURE MATTERS among others.