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## Embracing Graphidemia

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### Discussing the role of graphic novels and comics in Academia



The Centre for Language Studies (CLS) at ULAB hosted an academic conference on graphic novels and comics and their role in academia on June 12. Ahsan Habib, Editor of Unmad magazine was present as chief guest and keynote speaker at the event, along with other influential figures in the comic book and academic community, who came together to discuss the possibilities of introducing comic books into the classrooms in Bangladesh.

Habib started his speech by depicting his journey as a comic artist. He mentioned how a revolution had started in graphic novels and Bangladesh is falling behind. He talked about how it does not matter if the comics were drawn poorly, as long as the story was worth reading. He also suggested that one does not need to have a graphics background or an academic background to

become a comic artist or a cartoonist – that it is a universal language that can surpass all language and cultural barriers.

“Today we’ve made history,” said ATM Sajedul Huq, Director of the CLS programme, while presenting the first paper of the day. He spoke about how this was the first ever conference showcasing the value of comics in education, the importance of attracting mainstream academics, and how they could introduce graphic novels and comics into their classrooms, as well as how modern day classrooms could use different mediums to deal with all the different cultural drawbacks. “It’s high time for comics to be accepted into Bangladeshi academic culture,” he added.

He also spoke of some of the common misconceptions people have about comics, such as comics being only for children, are not being 'real' books, that they are only for reluctant readers and that they are full of violence and explicit sex. He proved these misconceptions wrong by talking about how comic books address much more mature topics that help people to think more critically when absorbing information, and the fact that superheroes are only one of the 48 genres of graphic novels. Comics are now being published for students and scholars – for example, *The Power of Comics*, *Economics*, *Manga guide to the Theory of Relativity*, etc. These comics take complicated topics and interpret them in such a way that it makes them accessible to a huge part of the population.

After this the event broke up into concurrent sessions, where a number of renowned academic figures presented their papers: Ahmed Bhuiyan, a lecturer from North South University spoke of the importance of urban environment in the Superhero Narrative and related it to how some books used by academics are based on cities; Nasreen Sultana Mitu from Rajshahi University presented science comics as a tool for promoting science literacy and discussed its status in Bangladesh. Simultaneously, in the parallel session an amazingly informative workshop on generating ideas and drawing cartoons was conducted by cartoonist Morshed Mishu from Unmad.

After lunch, the event moved on to a panel discussion among some eminent academics and cartoonists. They discussed how comics had shaped or influenced their lives, why it could be considered as a good medium of self-expression and why it could be useful if integrated into academics. The panel consisted of Dr Sayeedur Rahman (IML, Dhaka University), Juditha Ohlmacher (Advisor, Communications and Student Affairs, ULAB), Samir Asran (CEO, Mighty Punch Comics), Mehedi Haque (CEO, Dhaka Comics), Shahriar Khan (Chief Reporter, The Daily Star), and Syed Rashed Imam Tanmoy (Staff cartoonist, Dhaka Tribune). The discussion was moderated by ATM Sajedul Huq.

First, Juditha Ohlmacher spoke about how she read comics as a child. She did not speak from a teaching standpoint even though she was a teacher. She also spoke about how there is a lack of engaging characters that women can latch on to. She mentioned that more women need to start making comics and more men need to open up to making empowering women characters.

Samir Asran from Mighty Punch Comics spoke about how as a child as he would sneak into his cousins’ room and read their stacks of comics. He mentioned how he was more of a visual

learner and comics helped him out a lot. He also stated that comics had come a long way and now had a literary claim.

Shahriar Khan, the first published graphic novelist in Bangladesh, mentioned that he started drawing from the age of 6 or 7. "I made what I loved," he said. He talked about how so many people in Bangladesh do not appreciate art and how graphic novels can convey very complicated ideas through to the students. He also mentioned how text is powerful, but when imagery is added, it becomes even more powerful.

Dr Sayeedur Rahman spoke of how his son developed his English skills significantly through comics. He mentioned that initially he believed that introducing comics into the curriculum would reduce his role as a teacher, but it turned out that it had actually motivated both the teachers and students.

Mehedi Haque talked about the comic book industry and how it is not yet developed in our country. "There are only a handful of comic book houses and that they are not being able to distribute to the target audience properly," he said.

Syed Rashad Imam Tanmoy, talked about how difficult it is to be socially accepted as 'just a cartoonist'. He also stated that working on the comic 'Mujib' had made people furious since they related cartoons with mockery. He stated how most people from the older generation still thought that comics were just for fun and not meant for adults or formal subjects.

Then there was a round of questions that the eloquent panelists answered gracefully. Questions like, "how do we develop language with comics?" was wisely handled and it was suggested that we have to find the proper material to teach language and Dr Sayeedur also added that we have to have faith in our people; we should not judge them on their standard of literacy and that the comics are there to help us achieve proficiency.

After the panel discussion, there were parallel sessions. Kashfia Arif, a senior publishing manager at the Bengal Foundation talked about stereotyping in Japanese Manga and how character traits keep emerging.

Tahseen Salman Chowdhury, an NSU graduate and an NGO worker talked about the reflection of Bangladeshi culture in original Bangladeshi comic books. Amiya Sadman Chowdhury, a lecturer of CLS at ULAB made a wonderful presentation on "Batman: The True Villain of Gotham City", while Arzoo Ismail, lecturer of Business Studies at ULAB talked about Graphic Novels in Academic Studies in Bangladesh and if it could be the Road to Sustainable Learning, and many more. Syeda Tahmina Ferdous, lecturer of IUB spoke on the representation and eroticisation of Arabians in graphic novels. A B B Alam Niloy, an undergraduate student from IUB made a presentation on Reflecting Religions- Power in Panels. Hamim Al Ahsan, lecturer, BRAC University talked about Flipped Classroom with comic book Materials; Flipped classroom being a famous method used all over the world. Finally, Mehedi Haque from Dhaka Comics brought the event to an end with a beautifully discussed History of Bangladeshi Comic books and Cartoons, and its socio cultural journey with a bitter sense of humour. The event ended with a vote of thanks.

