

Historicising Asterix and Obelix: A Case for Graphic Literature

Jyotishman Kalita

Assistant Professor

Dept. Of English

DDU College, Delhi University

Delhi

Abstract

In this paper, I propose to prove that the Asterix and Obelix series, created by French artists Rene Goscinny and Albert Uderzo, besides having a strong hold over popular culture, also inculcate deep roots of literary and aesthetic history, or in the theory of T.S Eliot, have a literary “tradition” (Eliot). Besides this, I also attempt to prove that by virtue of allusive references, this comic series attains satirical, subversive and historical sensitivity that can be placed within the larger bounds of historical materialism

Key Words: Asterix and Obelix, The mainstream, Structural approach, Graphic Literature, Art and Literature.

Main paper

In early June 2006, the final of the FIFA World Cup 2006 involving Italy and France was caricatured in a part of the French print media as a battle between Roman Legionaries and Gaulish Villagers. For the sake of a recreational sport, this allegorical print representation carried obvious tones of fun and excitement, but for any analytical purpose, historical, cognitive or perceptive, this idea presents a much more complex picture. By a slight elaboration in the frame of reference for the aforementioned fields of analysis, it is possible to narrow down the “complex picture” to a literary head: the cartoon series of *Asterix and Obelix* created by French artists Rene Goscinny and Albert Uderzo. There has been a fair battle in literary circles if a comic strip translated to a hundred languages worldwide qualifies to attain mainstream literary status. But postulates of post modern culture have given Asterix a place within alternative literature, if not a place within mainstream literature. Hence, the historical, cognitive and perceptive analysis of this “complex picture” deserves a valid defence to be considered as a part of “mainstream” literature.

In this paper, I propose to prove that the Asterix series, besides having a strong hold over popular culture, also inculcate deep roots of literary and aesthetic history, or in the theory of T.S Eliot, have a literary “tradition” (Eliot). Besides this, I also attempt to prove that by virtue of allusive references, this comic series attains satirical, subversive and historical sensitivity that can be placed within the larger bounds of historical materialism.

A large part of this defence depends upon the creation of meaning within a comic strip in relation to the perceptive ability of the readers. This would make compulsory a functional relation between the themes of the comic, the narrative structure, the pictorial representations without any narrative body and the juxtaposition of the images (Meskin). In the *Asterix* series, most of the stories revolve around the conquering Roman legions of Julius Caesar in the year 50 B.C and a small Gaulish village that refuses to submit to Caesar’s might. The rule of the day is to bash up Caesar’s legionaries as well as undertake long journeys to other cities and lands involving hilarious and baffling adventures. The unity of the narrative structure and pictorial representation is maintained by this strand of commonality, so that in events of non textual representation, a cognitive meaning is driveable. Initially, if this satisfies an accepted

definition of educative comic, it is possible to move forward to the literariness of the *Asterix* series.

In the course of the said commonality, a variety of reference is made to geographical, historical, political and literary phenomenon that provide the allusive support in the reader's act of perception. The objective is to provide the reader a location of an event and the



subsequent use of the same in the comic strip that can explain the representation of the pictorial illustration. The event, thus mentioned (and mostly explained in the footnotes) generally presuppose the knowledge of the reader to infer meaning and generate the meaning of the pun intended. A small example of the technique used is illustrated in the figure on the left, where Julius Caesar is about to sit for a circus, flanked by Brutus with a textual representation of clapping all around (Gosciny and Uderzo). The words of Caesar in the speech bubble may seem that of a powerful dictator, but readers are loaded with the meaning of Caesar's last words and the terrible context the same words refer to. The next image in the same story further explains the point of reference and the literary and historical event the fictional illustration refers to. In the narrative unity of the comic book story, the time line follows to include a playwright born fifteen centuries after Caesar but for an analytical purpose, it implies a literary tradition twenty centuries after Caesar.

What the above example illustrates, among numerous similar examples across the thirty- four *Asterix* stories are an impersonal mode of storytelling that acknowledges as well as uses history and literature for a purpose altogether new for the individual artist. The readerly

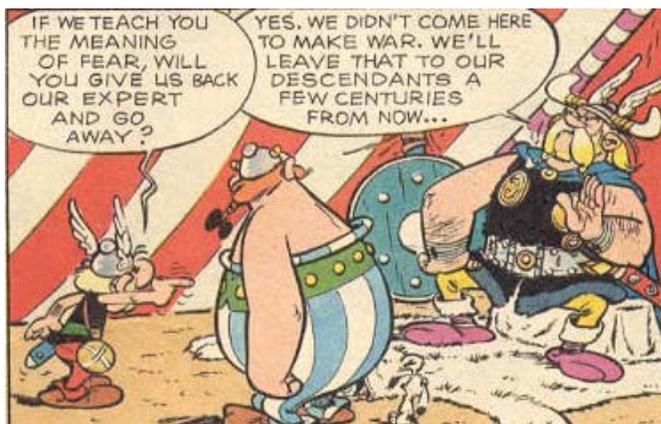


activity is not simply confined to interpreting a pictorial story amusing for its action and variety, but also to think about the larger literary implication of artistic word play. The above example certainly poses a chronological problem and hence the textual reference to a "prophetic" view of events yet to occur in

human history. Elsewhere, for example in *Asterix and the Normans*, as depicted in the figure on the left there is a direct reference to events yet to happen, but depicted from an authorial position of knowledge where the event has already happened and irreversible. Of course, for the characters in the text, the Norman invasion of 1066 cannot have happened and hence the textual manoeuvre of suggesting peace. In the text, the Norman invaders have to leave without success, thereby maintaining the unity between fact and fiction.

The use of such methods in the structure of narrative provided the authors room for the creation of humour through puns. This was in addition helped by the fact that the characters in the stories and the time depicted in the stories were separated from the audience by a period of twenty centuries. This provided the authors even more historical material to be used as sub- themes and situation settings, which could be rich in the relative allusive information as well as be true to the context of the facts. Such a base of composition makes it easier for a comic series such as Asterix to be used as a literary as well as an educational tool. The content and context of the Asterix series, so enumerated, place the comic series within the postulates of teaching multiple Literacies to school going children as well as adults according to the model theorised by linguists and psychoanalysts (Jacobs).

The themes and sub- themes used in the Asterix series have allowed the authors to explore delicately into literary genres like the satire, where events and people have been caricatured to suit a subtler mode of criticism. The most commonly used characters for such a purpose are of course Julius Caesar and Cleopatra across various stories. The general idea, derived through a simple analysis of character portrayal, is that the criticism and fire is directed towards autocratic ambitions which nullify benevolence and basic human ideas like freedom and sovereignty. We have already established the fact that the Asterix series has been used as

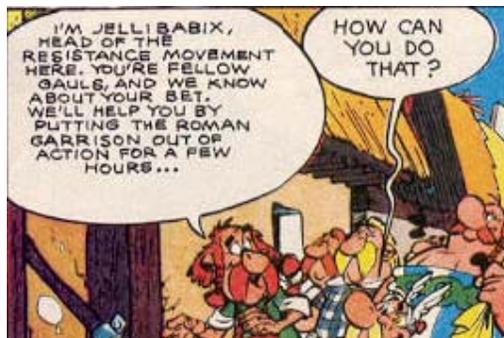


a powerful tool of historical analysis. The series, as the following paragraphs will try to prove, has also been used as a strong tool of historical subversion as well.

By virtue of the self-explanatory, use of history and literary tradition, the texts of the Asterix series have

placed the critical gaze into a more formative structure of historical materialism. The famous little Gaulish village of resistance in the face of an imperial force was bound to ring certain alarm bells in the decades following the Second World War. In a more systematic way, the allusion begins from Hitler's Third Reich, by itself a reference to the Roman Empire, and the occupation of the larger part of Europe between 1941 and 1944. The second point in contention is the word "resistance", linking both the Gaulish village of Caesar's times and the French Resistance of the 1940's. This parallel relation, more than being a speculative theory in the initial strips of the Asterix series, is developed to a serious theme in the adventure *Asterix and the Banquet* where as a bet against the dominating Centurion by Julius Caesar, Asterix and Obelix undertake a risky trip throughout all the occupied cities of Gaul (Goscinnny and Uderzo, *Asterix and the Banquet*). The cities that the two brave hearts visit, namely; Rouen, Rheims, Lyons, Nice, Marseilles, Toulouse, Agen, and Bordeaux etc. can all be located on the map of Nazi occupied Europe between 1941 and 1944.

As an extension of the allusion and the reinforcement of the parallel situation, the clip on the left shows what the heroes encounter in the city of Lugdunum, which, as the authors explain, is an ancient name for the city of Lyons. The direct reference to "resistance", a revered word in the culture of subversion would not be missed by many. This could, in more practical terms, translate into an icon of national ideal and the fierce spirit of subversion that the authors put into a little hero could soon step up. Thus, apart from all literary structures and historical allusions, the political ideology of the day captured the figure of Asterix and from being an animated strip; this little man was seen as a national hero (Verdaguer). This theory is a close approximation of the idea behind the depiction of a modern day soccer game in the form of an ancient battle. Beyond the ancient historical and recent historical borders too, fictional depiction, combined with the established icon of national identity has helped the authors satirize global under currents like the cold war in *Asterix and the Great Divide*, where

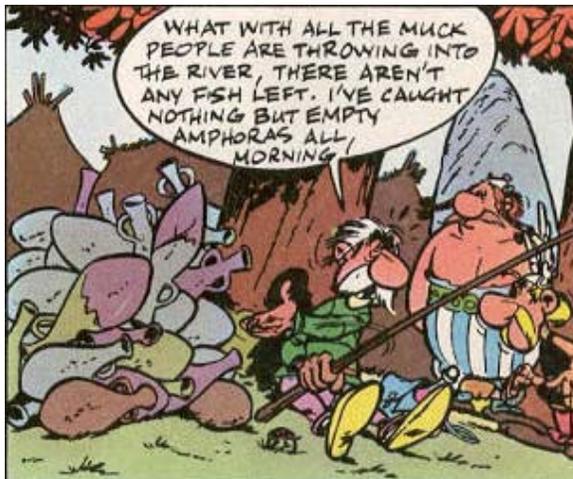


a ditch is dug out between a village, symbolizing the Berlin wall, until Asterix and Obelix can unite the village again.

The subversion of historical facts, by the method of caricature and literature did not stop at political boundaries, but also encompassed themes of

modern day life like environmentalism, economic globalisation and pollution, etc. For the purpose of this analysis, it is safe to suggest that Gosciny and Uderzo both had poetic missions to fulfil within the possibilities offered by their creation. Like the old masters like Sidney or Shelley, they probably saw themselves with a tool to change what they saw about them. They could succeed too, with the circulation, they have received over the years. A few examples like the following clip from *Asterix and the Golden Sickle*, where a fisherman is unable to catch fish due to the pollution in the river stands out. In numerous adventures Obelix remarks that he does not like uprooting trees because it upsets his dog Dogmatix terribly. Elsewhere, in the adventure *Asterix at the Olympic Games*, Gosciny and Uderzo deal with drug abuse, where the Roman contingent consume magic potion laced with blue dye and are barred from competing. Women's issues and feminism are not left behind as the whole issue of *Asterix and the Secret Weapon* is devoted to the advancement of women.

Apart from enumerating examples and satisfying postulates to examine the literariness of the Asterix comics strip, it is essential to consider that pictorial representation, with or without a narrative text has been a historical source of communication that was associated with mainstream literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth century as Dickens choose to follow Hogarth. In the Asterix series, word, image and text come together in one plane with a definite background of literary postulates and a definite foreground of literary intentions. Nevertheless, the comic series does not abandon the visual medium for the written in a pursuit of literariness. That is only a part of the critical activity. Imitation, which could work on both the planes of fine arts and literature in the true Aristotelian sense, is not lost on the Asterix series. Keeping in tune to the nationalistic ideals, the authors- cum- artists have paid a visual tribute to Theodore Gericault, compatriot and icon of French Romanticism in *Asterix*



the Legionary. Gericault's popular painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819) was in its time considered as moving beyond the neoclassical influence towards the high romantic as well as subversive and anti establishment since it depicted a captain abandoning his ship- wrecked mates to die. Gosciny and Uderzo reproduced the same painting and a comparison of both the

original and the imitation, after associating the commonalities associated with the contexts of both, provides an interesting inference of imitation by caricature, as we see below.



The captain also alluded that they have been framed and the reference to frame is not much different in formation, as we see below,



The Raft of the Medusa (1818- 1819)

The only difference being that Goscinny and Uderzo treat the theme more comically as their genre would allow. The narrative text and the speech bubble once more allow the space for an anachronistic relation between the actual and the imitation.

Thus, we arrive at the understanding of a more “complex picture” than what meets the eye and what is usually understood. This picture is a cumulative effort at combining history, ‘tradition’, the classical culture, literature and art to produce a literary phenomenon that moves beyond the limitations of simple animation towards a more complex literary unit. As it moves beyond the solitary boundaries of a visual medium, it increasingly attains a more literary characteristic and can be gentrified according to the multitude of themes that each text dignifies on its own. This “complex picture” defines a particular moment in literary and artistic history and can blend the word, the image and the text according to the perceptive qualities of the reader and result in a better cognitive experience. Hence, *Asterix and Obelix* are more than alternative literature.

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