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Visual Rhythms and the Saturated Page: Decolonising Sequentiality through Indigenous Graphic Narrative *Bhimayana*

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Abstract: This paper interrogates the Eurocentric paradigm centered around a “logic of the void” and aims to establish a counter-aesthetic model that focuses on the saturated space. Drawing upon the visual layouts of a contemporary graphic narrative *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) illustrated by Durgabai and Subash Vyam and published by Navayana. The paper demonstrates how the traditional comic gutter has largely functioned as a colonial containment and a mechanical tool to separate space and time. Through this aesthetic of filling the page with continuous folk motifs and patterns, the background of the artwork changes from passive to an active vocal participant in the story.

The formal evaluation of *Dignas* (traditional geometric patterns of Gond art) illustrates how Visual Stacco and rhythmic texture break away from the Euro-American comic grid with strict boxed compartmentalisation. Through dense saturation of the page with repetitive dot-clusters and parallel line-hatching, Durgabai and Subhash Vyam adapt oral folk traditions and indigenous cosmologies into printed graphic format that produces an “acoustic density” that guides the reader’s eye through somatic texture instead of empty gutters and margins. Furthermore, the paper studies how the replacement of traditional comic panels through the use of “organic borders” and “zoo-morphic” speech bubbles deconstructs the Eurocentric dichotomy existing between “Text” (intellectual content) and “Image” (illustration). Ultimately, the analysis concludes that the hyper-saturated canvas of a graphic narrative functions as an assertion of Aesthetic Sovereignty, transforming the printed book into a haptic performance that challenges the secular standard models of graphic sequence and historical representation.

Keywords: *Gond Art, Graphic Narrative, Horror Vacui, Sequential Art, Visual Rhythm*

The Introduction of the “Gutter”

In the established Western canon of graphic narrative discourse, the “gutter”, the white space between panels, is seen as the site of creative transmutation. Scott McCloud, in his seminal work, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), argues that “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). This mechanism of “closure” relies entirely on the void. This suggests that a narrative progression happens when it is sliced and boxed into manageable segments of time. This primacy of the white gap reflects a Eurocentric preference for linear progression, neat categorisation, and the fragmentation of the human experience.

However, this research paper contends that the indigenous surfaces created by folk art forms of Gond patterns offer a counter-narrative to the Western reliance on empty space. This art form do not rely on “gutter” to bridge narrative gaps and rather employs a “saturated space” to maintain the continuity of the visual flow. Through the concept of “Horror Vacui”, i.e. resistance to empty space, the artistic traditions replace the Western empty space with narrative “plenitude”, a story that is always full. Indian folk art styles try to assert their own visual sovereignty by not treating the background just as an empty space. The folk artists fill the background of the artwork with an intricate network of dots, lines, dashes, and a variety of folk motifs. They reject the stiff, mechanical boxes to tell a story and replace them with a flowing visual rhythm that occupies the whole page. The story is not found in the gaps between the boxes but in the artwork’s detailed lines.

This research paper examines how the saturated space of indigenous art forms functions as a counter-narrative to the colonial Western aesthetics. By analysing contemporary graphic novels like *Bhimayana* based on Gond art, it can be seen how indigenous tribal artists reclaim the page with their own culture. The artists use the repetitive digna patterns of Gond art and bring oral folk culture to life. This transforms the standard comic book into a rhythmic experience. Ultimately, the paper shows how the indigenous art space is not a series of separate pictures but rather one unified whole. This challenges how we read time and space in a graphic narrative.

The Gond Plenum: Digna as a Philosophical Tool

To understand the use of “saturated space”, it is important to first dismantle the dismissal of the “horror vacui”, a Western art-history concept that can be translated as a “fear of the void.” Gond artists, rather, use it in their favour and use saturation to portray that the world is a plenum for them. According to the Gond belief, space is never empty but always carries spiritual and ancestral connotations. Everything from the soil to shadows has a life force within it. Hence, an artist cannot leave any blank space

because these invisible participants also belong in the narrative. This ontological shift fundamentally reconfigures the architecture of the page. The Western minimalist traditions conceptualise negative space as a site of aesthetic purity, thus allowing the protagonist to stand in sharp contrast to the silent backdrop. Gond art rejects this vacuum. In *Bhimayana*, an empty background would represent a narrative rupture, implying a disconnection from the community itself. Durgai Bai and Subash Vyam employ digna, i.e. traditional geometric patterns, to ensure every part of the page has a voice. These digna patterns are not mere ornamentation; they embody the ontological density of the Gond universe. Artists use rhythmic textures like hatches and dots to fill the sky and earth and show how the environment acts as an active witness to Ambedkar's narrative.

This fullness directly challenges the colonial grid. The Western grid uses straight lines and empty gutters as a tool of categorisation and separation, pulling the character away from the world around them. In contrast, the Gond saturated space promotes what Laura Marks calls "Haptic viscosity." The rhythmic patterns of digna activate a kind of a haptic mode of looking, where the eye is "more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze" (162). This texturing and graphic saturation changes the act of reading from a simple sequential reading to a tactile performance. She suggests that haptic images make the reader feel "close" to the art rather than just being a passive observer.

In *Bhimayana*, when readers come across a page where the protagonist's clothes blend into the trees, the distance between the protagonist and the world collapses. This happens to be a decolonial intervention, rejecting the Western tradition of centering the human hero and ignoring the landscape.

The Gond Line and the Rhythmic Pulse in *Bhimayana*

Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability (2011) is a powerful contemporary expression of the saturated space in action. The Gond tribal artists Durgabai and Subash Vyam completely changed our perception about graphic novels and sequential art. The Gond artists, Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam outrightly proclaimed to the authors, "We'd like to state one thing very clearly at the outset. We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is Khulla (open) where there's space for all to breathe" (*Bhimayana* 100). This statement by the indigenous artist is not merely metaphorical; it is a rejection of the Western grid as a mechanical tool to separate and contain information. In *Bhimayana*, the story moves with what can be termed a "Visual Staccato." The artists create this rhythm by filling the entire page with varied digna patterns. While Western comic standards have always relied on what Scott McCloud calls the "limbo of the gutter" to signal completion of an idea by leaving empty space on the page (66). *Bhimayana* does not rely on standard panel divisions but breaks this with its highly dense artwork. In Gond art, every subject- from

humans and trees to everyday mundane objects like water pumps- is inscribed with a signature motif and repetition of dots, lines, or waves (see fig 1).



Fig. 1. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, Navayana, 2011, p. 20.

In a standard Western comic or graphic narrative, the background is portrayed as a static setting. This deliberate attempt to fill the canvas allows the artwork to challenge what W.J.T. Mitchell describes as the myth of the rational grid i.e. a structure that “purports to be purely optical, clear, and rational, yet operates as a subtle mechanism of containment and exclusion” (372). However, in *Bhimayana*, we can notice the background is just as detailed and vibrates with the same visual energy as the characters. This creates a sense of state of equilibrium, where the environment is transformed from a passive setting to an active witness to the hero’s historical struggles.

For example, in the chapter “Water”, when young Ambedkar is denied water due to his lower caste, the artwork intensifies. The sky and the earth are filled with a sudden flood of dots mirroring the physiological and the psychological “thirst” of the character. The page doesn’t merely “show” thirst but rather makes you “hear” it with the rich visual density (see fig 2). This functions as a remediation

of oral performance, where the storyteller does not use broken segments to narrate the story but rather maintains one continuous, sustained rhythm throughout. The reader can see a surface that is full of cultural memory and history.

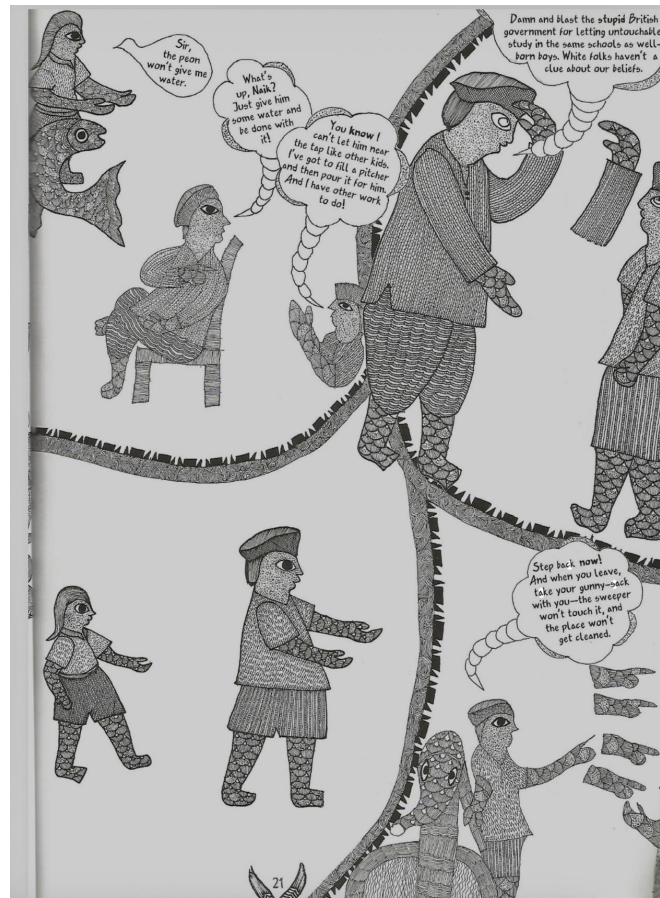


Fig. 2. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, Navayana, 2011, p. 21.



Fig. 3. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, Navayana, 2011, p. 22.

Furthermore, *Bhimayana* replaces the traditional “gutter” with organic borders. This ensures that the narrative is never sliced into pieces and remains fluid. The viewer’s gaze is invited to move across the page, flowing in a smooth continuity instead of sudden jumps. This repudiation of the “box” allows the artists to create a “holistic sequence.” Here, time is not measured by counting squares but by the actual physical distance the eye travels across the patterned landscape.

By using digna patterns as a visual metronome. The Vyams demonstrate that narrative sequentiality can be achieved through haptic texture rather than temporal gaps. The transition between narrative segments can be witnessed in the shift of the artist’s Gond patterns. A shift from high-density dot motifs to wide wave patterns can denote a change in mood or a difference in speed or tempo. This is a sophisticated form of “graphic oracy” in which the narrative space is reflected in the density of the artist’s hand movements. Ultimately, the graphic novel *Bhimayana* proves that “saturated surface” is not just a decorative element. It becomes a functional tool for the narrative, facilitating a more communal, rhythmic storytelling style that operates entirely outside the confines of the European grid.

To disregard the saturation of the page is to silence the “voice” of the tribal Gond artist. Every dot acts like a drumbeat, and every motif serves as a musical chord that demands multisensory engagement from the audience. By saturating the surface, the tribal artists Vyams reclaim the graphic novel as a site of indigenous power and resonance. They transmute the silent book into a living space.

The Haptic Breath: Animals, speech, and the Living Word

To fully comprehend the use of saturated surface, it becomes imperative to understand the use of speech bubbles in *Bhimayana*. In Western comics, a speech bubble is typically a plain white oval container that is placed on top of the art, often creating a visual disruption on the page. In the Gond art by Vyams, the speech bubble is drawn as a living being. The replacement of traditional comic panels through the use of “organic borders” and “zoo-morphic” speech bubbles deconstructs the Eurocentric dichotomy existing between “Text” (intellectual content) and “Image” (illustration). They have used bird-bubbles where the words are placed inside the bird, and the tail points to the speaker (see fig 4). This brings a radical remediation of orality. In the indigenous episteme, the spoken word is not a silent object. It is a “breadth”, a physical entity that travels through space like a bird. This treatment of dialogue enhances the overall “acoustic density” of the graphic plane. Since the speech bubbles are like living organisms and patterned with Gond motifs, they do not disrupt the visual flow. They collapse the ontological difference between the word and image through Gond art. This represents a subversion of Western hierarchy that prefers text over image. Within the saturated Gond art page, the graphic-text is woven into patterns that create a unified field of meaning. When a character in the story speaks, the dialogue adds an extension to their voice and adds a new layer to the page’s visual rhythm. The “bird-tail” functions as a rhythmic pointer and guides the reader’s eye along a melodic, organic trajectory, creating a sharp contrast to the angular Z-path of the traditional Western comic grids.

Furthermore, the use of animals as narrative symbols- such as birds for speech, lions for power and snakes for danger ensures that the saturated surface never feels static or empty in the background (see fig 5).

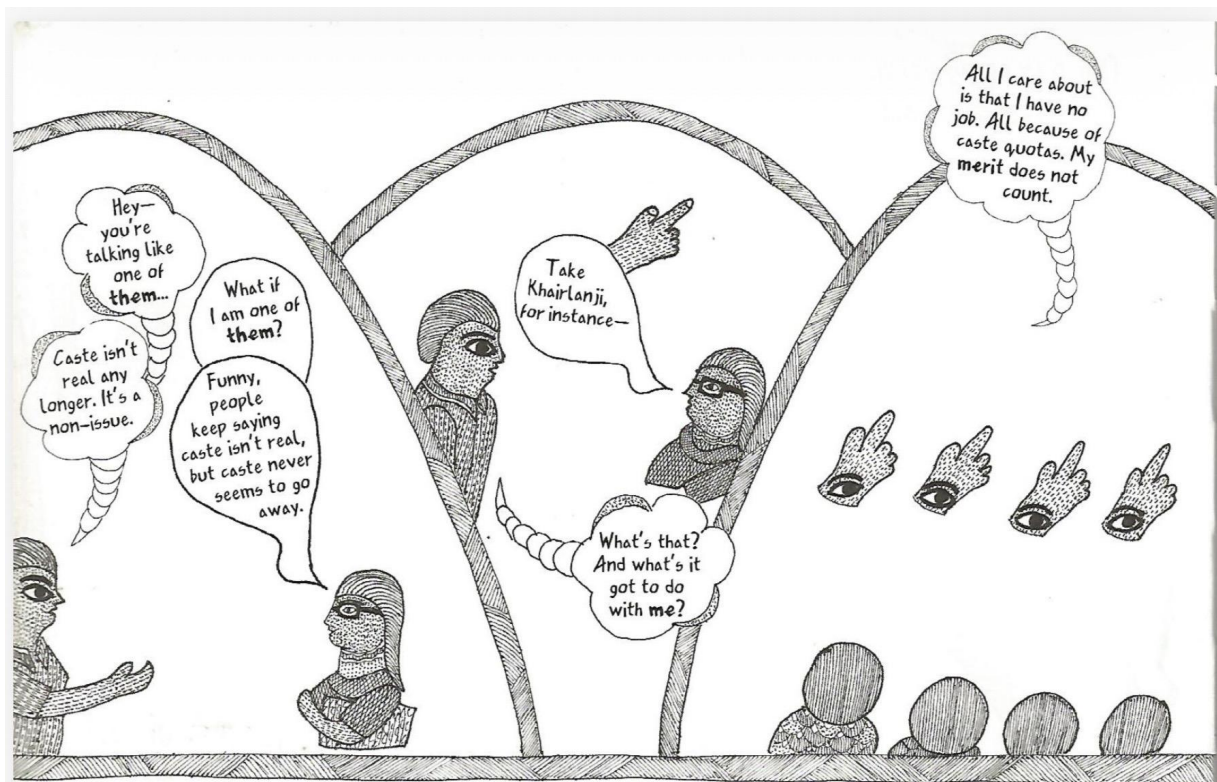


Fig. 4. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, Navayana, 2011, p. 12.

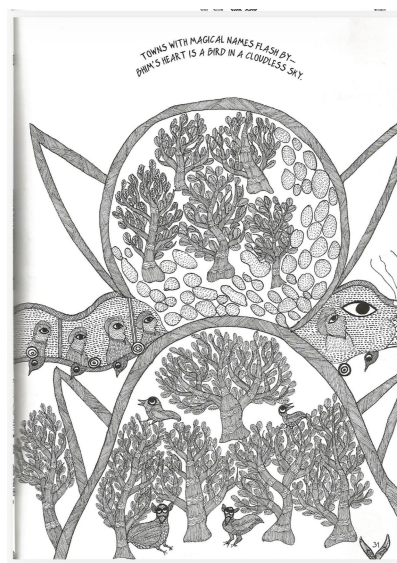


Fig. 5. Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, Navayana, 2011, p. 31.

This establishes a kind of animist sequentiality. In Western art, time is measured by the spatial distance between panels, whereas in Gond tradition, time is measured by the vibration of life, as Gonds believe in animistic philosophy. The saturation of the graphic plane with animal symbols and organic speech balloons suggests a “thick time”, where the past, present, and the present moment and natural environment all speak at once. By filling the page with these living shapes, the artists ensure that the reader does not remain a distant observer. The artwork forces the reader to enter a plenum and hear the story. And thus, in Indian indigenous narratives, the page is always alive and full of sound.

Conclusion: the Future of the Resonant Page

The saturated surface of the Gond art is more than a stylistic choice or a folkloric aesthetic. It functions as a profound reclamation of the graphic page as a site of aesthetic sovereignty. By refusing to follow the silent grid of the Western comic tradition, indigenous tribal artists like Durgabai and Subash Vyam have successfully demonstrated that sequentiality does not require fragmentation or compartmentalisation of time. As seen in *Bhimayana*, time is not a series of isolated instances trapped in the white lines of a comic gutter. Rather, it is a continuous flow of communal memory and history. This “plenitude” challenges the readers to transcend the detached gaze of the West and engage with the surface and “feel” the art. This haptic engagement with the surface prioritises the rhythmic frequency of graphic line over decoding literal text.

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