

Use of GOND Art In *Bhimayana*

When tribal artist Durgabai Vyam was asked by a publisher to draw for a graphic book about caste untouchability in India, she leafed through the celebrated titles laid out in front of her — books by Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, Osamu Tezuka and Marjane Satrapi.

She was aghast.

“The books were full of boxes. I did not want to do a book that cages art in little boxes,” said Vyam, 35, recalling her first brush with the literary genre that is slowly taking off in India. “I like to draw in open spaces, where they can breathe.”

Vyam and her husband, Subhash Vyam, just put final touches on “Bhimayana,” a graphic nonfiction book about Bhimrao Ambedkar, a revered 20th-century leader of India’s untouchables, now known as Dalits.

But this book is different in that it jettisons sequential, cinematic narrative style and brings visual magic realism into a new universe. Symbolism tells the story.

The Vyams are renowned practitioners of Gond tribal art, traditionally painted on floors, walls and doorways of mud huts in villages. The indigenous art form made the transition to paper and urban galleries only three decades ago. The edgy graphic book is the latest incarnation of their ancient art.

The lake where Ambedkar agitated for access to water takes the shape of a giant fish; a road winds across the page like a snake; a desperately thirsty Ambedkar at school is shown with a fish inside him. A train runs on wheels that look like coiled snails; trees grow legs and race along as the locomotive’s steam billows like long, flying locks of hair. When Columbia University graduate Ambedkar is thrown out of a motel because he is an untouchable, the Vyams draw prickly thorns all over his body.

Symbolism is central to the Gond art world; nothing is perceived literally. Subhash Vyam, 40, dismisses realistic representations as “ditto art.”

Even the speech bubbles in “Bhimayana” are shaped like animals. “If you speak sweet words of truth and justice, then your bubble is like a sparrow. If your words are going to sting and cause pain, then the bubble is like a scorpion,” Subhash Vyam said.

This year, New Delhi-based architect and writer Gautam Bhatia wrote a graphic novel called “Lie,” using the medieval Mughal miniature painters to tell a tale of modern India’s political and social decay.

“These miniature artists used to portray scenes from Hindu mythologies. It was difficult to try to get them to paint modern politicians, multiplexes and malls,” Bhatia said. “The graphic book is still in its very early stages in India. Writers are testing new ground and new methods.”

Gond (Pradhan Gond) art is an Indian tribal art form (originally used by the tribals to decorate their mud walls). The designers of the novel *Bhimayana* were skilled artists in this art. They used this art to signify the experiences of social discrimination faced by Ambedkar. It uses digna (images originally painted on the walls and floors of Pardhan Gonds' houses) patterns and nature imagery. The speciality of this art is that the images are not bounded within boxes and it uses different images from nature to signify the emotion and feeling. This art is full of symbol. Different images and symbols like fish, lion, bird, snake like train are used to express different meaning

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When asked to be the illustrators, artists Durgabai and Subhash Vyam said, "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." (Natarajan, *Bhimayana*, 102) Durgabai and Subhash draw on digna art as a guideline for how to create structure without boxing in the characters. Pardhan Gond art originates from the digna. "The ecology of Pardhan Gond art is such that even when dealing with urban subjects we see freefalling animals, birds and trees in landscapes without a horizon. The train becomes a snake, the intimidating fort a lion. The happiness of the people of Chalisgaon who receive Bhim Ambedkar is not conveyed through smiling faces but a dancing peacock. An earthmover used by a dalit, who is killed for digging a well, sheds tears as two cows bear witness." (Natarajan, *Bhimayana*, 102) Gond art does not represent what is actually going on, it applies images to signify emotions and events.

The Gond artists believe that when you look at a good image it brings good luck, so they decorate their houses and the floors with these images. By utilizing this style to illustrate *Bhimayana*, the artists surround the book with their cultural beliefs and motifs. This gives the reader some insight into the lives of the people living in India and their values.