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Analyzing the Hydro-Violence through the Seminal Graphic Work of Orijit Sen's *River of Stories*

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Abstract

This article analyzes the seminal graphic novel *River of Stories* written by Orijit Sen, through the lens of Blue Humanities and evaluates its rich critical attributes. The objective of this article is to have a critical gaze to the fluidity, agency, and establish the cultural meanings of water, specifically the Narmada River. The focus area is to conduct an aesthetic and formalist reading of how water is literally drawn in the graphic novel. The theoretical framework is to depict it through the angle of Blue Humanities, with the likes of theory of Steve Mentz and Rob Nixon concept of slow violence for the exploration of the concept "hydro- violence" or the physical drowning of lands and villages representing it visually. This article will be analyzed through the methodology of visual and qualitative analysis of the text.

Keywords: Graphic, Fluidity, Blue Humanities, Agency, Hydro - Violence, Drowning, Orijit Sen, Aesthetic.

INTRODUCTION

Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* was published in 1994, it shattered the conventional boundaries of sequential art in the Indian subcontinent, establishing itself as the region's foundational contemporary graphic novel. Created against the volatile backdrop of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement) during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the text stands as a fiery aesthetic intervention against state-orchestrated developmental violence. For decades, the dominant postcolonial narrative of the Indian nation-state conceptualized mega-dams most notably the Sardar Sarovar Project on the Narmada River as the "temples of modern India," a phrase famously coined by Jawaharlal Nehru. However, these monumental infrastructure projects systematically enacted what environmental theorist Rob Nixon describes as "slow violence":

A violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal (Nixon 2)

Protracted, creeping destruction that occurs gradually and out of sight, disproportionately dismantling the ecological stability and cultural fabrics of marginalized communities. Sen's graphic narrative explicitly interrogates this developmental ideology by documenting the material and epistemic violence inflicted upon the indigenous Bhilala and Adivasi populations inhabiting the Narmada Valley.

While previous scholarship has extensively examined *River of Stories* through postcolonial ecocritical frameworks, subaltern studies, and structural political economies, this article shifts the critical focus toward the emergent paradigm of the Blue Humanities. By decentering terrestrial-biased epistemologies, the Blue Humanities championed by scholars such as Steve Mentz, Dan Brayton, and Hester Blum asks how human cultural practices are radically reoriented when water is treated not merely as a passive backdrop or static economic resource, but as an active, fluid agent endowed with its own history and vitality. In the context of the Narmada Valley, water acts as a volatile intersection where state power, indigenous cosmology, and corporate extraction violently collide.

The primary objective of this article is to apply a rigorous qualitative and formalist methodology to Sen's text, examining the specific aesthetic strategies used to illustrate water, silt, flow, and structural submergence. In doing so, this study introduces and unpacks the concept of "hydro-violence" defined here as the deliberate, state-sanctioned weaponization of water through technological containment (dams) to physically drown subaltern lands, sever ancestral histories, and forcibly displace indigenous ecologies. Through a careful examination of panel composition, gutters, shifts in illustrative line work, and text-image dynamics, this article argues that Sen's visual architecture does not merely represent environmental degradation. Instead, it captures the fluid resistance of the Narmada River, positioning the water itself as an unruly, counter-hegemonic force that defies the violent containment of eco-modernity.

To fully grasp the socio-ecological dimensions of *River of Stories*, it is necessary to synthesize the terrestrial critiques of environmental degradation with the fluid paradigms of water-centric theory. The theoretical foundation of this paper draws on a productive tension between Steve Mentz's formulations within the Blue Humanities and Rob Nixon's conceptualization of slow violence. Historically, literary and cultural criticism has suffered from what ocean scholars term "continental bias" – a critical blind spot that views land as the permanent site of history, culture, and politics, while treating water as a blank, unyielding expanse or an empty highway for human transit. The Blue Humanities directly challenges this assumption, asserting that "human experience looks different when we look at the world from the perspective of the water" (Mentz, *Introduction* 2).

Steve Mentz argues that water challenges the rigid categories of Western Enlightenment thought by prioritizing fluidity, instability, and relationality over fixed boundaries and permanent settlements. Water possesses a complex, non-human agency; it erodes, floods, sustains, and dissolves. In *Ocean*, Mentz introduces the idea that "humans must learn to navigate a world characterized by plural, watery ecologies, recognizing that our interactions with the aquatic are always fraught with vulnerability and unpredictability." (Mentz 4). When applied to a riverine system rather than an oceanic one, Mentz's theories highlight the unique cultural and spiritual dimensions of river networks. Unlike the vast, indifferent open ocean, a river like the Narmada mythologically revered as Rewa is deeply entwined with localized human histories, seasonal agricultural cycles, and indigenous cosmologies. The river functions as a living archive of community memory. Therefore, any attempt to dam, divert, or industrialize its flow is not just an engineering feat; it is a violent disruption of a dynamic, multi-species relationship.

This disruption is best understood through Rob Nixon's foundational theory of *slow violence*. Nixon defines slow violence as

"A violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2).

Traditional representations of violence favor immediate, explosive spectacles wars, explosions, immediate natural disasters. In contrast, environmental degradation, toxic drift, and climate-induced displacement operate on a delayed timeline, making them difficult to visualize and politically mobilize against. In *River of Stories*, the construction of the Rewa Sagar Dam embodies this slow, creeping catastrophe. The violence of the dam is not completed the day the concrete is poured; rather, it unfolds across years of rising reservoir levels, the slow waterlogging of topsoil, the gradual drowning of sacred groves, and the painful, multi-generational dispersal of displaced peoples into urban slums.

By merging Mentz's watery agency with Nixon's slow violence, this article conceptualizes the specific phenomenon of **hydro-violence**. Hydro-violence refers to the tactical exploitation of aquatic systems by hegemonic forces to execute eco-social erasure. In a terrestrial framework, violence typically involves the physical removal of bodies from a territory via military or police force. Hydro-violence, however, reengineers the landscape itself, turning the vital element of water into a lethal weapon of erasure. By blocking the natural flow of the river, the state causes a slow, permanent inundation that forces communities to choose between physical drowning or total cultural displacement.

The graphic novel format is uniquely suited to capturing this form of violence. Because comics rely on spatial layout to represent the passage of time, the medium can make slow violence visible. Through the tactical use of the *gutter* (the space between panels), panel borders, and variations in shading, the graphic artist can compress years of slow environmental inundation into a single page, allowing the reader to witness the catastrophic intersection of human hubris and aquatic devastation.

Orijit Sen constructs *River of Stories* through a brilliant dual-narrative architecture that contrasts two distinct worldviews, each rendered in a highly specific visual style. The first narrative track follows Vishnu, an urban, middle-class journalist from Delhi who travels to the Narmada Valley to document the rising Adivasi resistance against the dam. The second narrative track explores the rich oral mythologies of the indigenous Bhilala people, focusing on the legend of Malgu Gayan, a mythical singer who preserves the memory of the earth's creation and the birth of the river Rewa.

Sen maps this ideological divide directly onto the formal elements of the comic page. The contemporary world of Vishnu, bureaucratic state officials, and police violence is rendered in a linear, hard-edged, pen-and-ink illustrative style. The lines are clean, rigid, and clinical, reflecting the mechanical, hyper-rationalized mindset of modern engineering and state-led development. In these panels, the river is drawn with uniform, parallel lines that signify how the state views it: as a predictable, measurable quantity of cubic meters of water, a resource to be mathematically partitioned, capitalized, and tamed behind massive concrete walls.

Conversely, the mythical sequences featuring Malgu Gayan break free from these rigid geometric constraints. Sen renders the indigenous creation myths in a heavily shaded, tonally rich, and organic style that mimics the fluid textures of woodcuts and traditional folk art. Here, water is drawn with swirling, chaotic, and undulating black lines that reject strict panel borders. The Narmada is not captured as a passive blue line on a topographical map; it overflows the panels, spilling into the gutters and weaving between the text blocks. This stylistic choice embodies Steve Mentz's concept of watery agency. The river is visually alive, dynamic, and uncontainable, filled with fish, spirits, and ancient memories that refuse to be compartmentalized by modern cartography.

This aesthetic split becomes critically apparent during the depiction of the creation myth involving the goddess Kujum Chantu. In these beautifully rendered pages, the river Rewa is born from the dirt and sweat of the goddess's body, establishing an unbreakable bodily connection between the land, the water, and the Adivasi people. Sen's visual strategies accentuate this connection by blurring

the boundaries between human figures and the river flow. The hair of the characters often flows directly into the currents of the river, and the tree roots are indistinguishable from the ripples of the water. This formal choice underscores the tribal ecoconsciousness that views humanity not as a master of the natural world, but as an interconnected thread within a wider planetary fabric.

The core conflict of the graphic novel intensifies when the rigid lines of the "modern" world invade this fluid space. The introduction of the *Sarkari Babu* (government bureaucrat) and the corporate *Thakedars* (contractors) signals the onset of hydro-violence. In a pivotal sequence, a bureaucrat arrives in the village of Jamli to lecture the Adivasis on the benefits of "development" (*vikas*), promising electricity, roads, and modernization. Sen designs this page with stark structural ironies. The bureaucrat stands stiffly, holding blueprints composed of hard, straight lines that completely slice through the organic landscape. Behind him, the background panels display the early construction phases of the Rewa Sagar Dam—a monstrous block of gray cross-hatching that visually suffocates the flowing lines of the river.

As the construction proceeds, the text documents the transition from structural coercion to physical drowning. Here, Sen masterfully illustrates Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence. Instead of a singular, dramatic splash, the submergence of the villages is depicted through a series of progressive, claustrophobic panels. The water begins to creep upward, panel by panel. In one haunting sequence, the lower half of the comic page is steadily consumed by a dense, dark wash of ink representing the rising reservoir. The top half shows the daily lives of the villagers—children playing, women gathering mahua flowers—completely oblivious to the fact that the very ground beneath their feet is being digitally and materially erased by the state's hydraulic engineering.

The visual representation of this "drowning" constitutes the aesthetic peak of hydro-violence. In traditional prose, drowning is described as a sudden lack of air. In Sen's graphic grammar, drowning is visualized as the slow, terrifying loss of negative space on the page. The black ink of the dammed river slowly accumulates, filling the panels and swallowing up the houses, the trees, and the ancestral burial grounds. The water, once a symbol of life and spiritual fluidity in the songs of Malgu Gayan, is transformed by the dam into an oppressive, stagnant weight. It becomes a gray shroud that smothers the landscape. This stark transformation demonstrates that hydro-violence does not simply destroy; it perverts the fundamental ecological functions of water, turning an agent of vitality into an instrument of state terror.

Yet, *River of Stories* does not end in total despair or complete submission. As the two distinct narrative styles begin to intersect and meld together toward the climax of the book, the visual representation of water undergoes another dramatic shift. When the Adivasis organize under the banner of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, launching mass protests and standing waist-deep in the rising waters of the river in a defiant act of *Jal Satyagraha* (water protest), Sen's illustrative styles merge. The rigid, hard-edged pen lines used to draw the activists begin to fracture and dissolve, taking on the swirling, organic textures of the mythical sequences.

By standing directly in the rising waters, the bodies of the protestors become visually unified with the river itself. The Narmada reclaims its fluid agency, no longer acting as the passive tool of the state's drowning machinery, but as a space of collective political resistance. The text demonstrates that while the state can build concrete walls to trap the river, it cannot contain the *stories* of the river. The water carries the songs of Malgu Gayan down the valley, filtering into the consciousness of urban observers like Vishnu, and mutating into a trans-local critique of eco-modernity.

Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* remains a crucial document of eco-social critique, offering a profound exploration of how developmental projects dismantle subaltern lives. By readapting the text through the twin frameworks of the Blue Humanities and slow violence, this article has illustrated how the graphic novel visualizes the hidden, protracted horrors of hydro-violence. Through its unique formal

elements including deliberate shifts in linework, panel construction, and the manipulation of negative space Sen's masterpiece makes the invisible processes of environmental displacement visible, tracing the transformation of the Narmada from a sacred source of life into a weaponized force of state displacement.

Ultimately, *River of Stories* argues that water cannot be completely understood through the sterile lenses of state engineering or corporate exploitation. By emphasizing the fluid agency of the Narmada, Sen champions a deep tribal ecoconsciousness that views the river as a living kinsman, an active historical participant, and a site of enduring political resistance. In an era increasingly defined by global climate chaos, rising sea levels, and severe water scarcity, the fluid lessons of *River of Stories* are more urgent than ever. The text forcefully reminds us that when we drown the rivers and the communities that guard them, we ultimately drown the stories that keep us human.

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