

## Propositions for Sustainable Futures in Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam's *Bhimayana*

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**Abstract:** While critically examining the techno-scientific thrust that props the discourse of sustainability, this paper argues for the inclusion of the humanities and the imaginative counterworlds and complex ontological perspectives that literature offers. As Donna Haraway proposes, “we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (2015: 160). The Indian graphic novel *Bhimayana* and the artisanal aesthetic of the tribal artists is read for the ways in which it mediates current debates on the posthuman, offering the possibility of intimate affirmative relationalities that could create sustainable futures.

**Keywords:** Posthuman, Sustainability, Graphic Novel, *Bhimayana*, Tribal, Dalit.

### INTRODUCTION

Hope rests with a non-rapacious ethics of sustainable becoming: for the hell of it and for the love of the world (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 278).

While critically examining the techno-scientific thrust that props the discourse of sustainability, this paper argues for the inclusion of the humanities and the imaginative counter paradigms and complex ontological perspectives that literature offers. As Donna Haraway proposes, “we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (2015: 160).

A fetishizing of the term sustainability, is often seen within contemporary technocapitalism's environmentally conscious policy decisions. It now finds itself inserted as a postscript, to counter-balance the extortive impulses of the developmentalist model—to retrospectively underwrite and manage collaterals of the crisis of the Anthropocene, as it were. So much so, that it has now gained disciplinary acceptance even

within economic growth projections. And yet, all sustainability claims ring hollow when, in deference to environmental constraints, these same projections, are forced to align with lower profit margins—or when states and corporates are asked to limit the use of non-renewable, non-regenerative resources. What is clear in the overwriting of such decisions is that the potential to create an ethical eco-social imaginary, where the whole, that is, “sustainable development” is greater than its parts, does not lie within the model and metrics of the capitalist economy. This is also because sustainability is frequently invoked, as Stacy Alaimo says, in ways that remain depoliticized, and unquestioning of capitalism’s extractivist ideals. “Like conservation, sustainability has become a plastic but potent signifier, meaning roughly, the ability to somehow keep things going despite the economic and environmental crisis” (2012: 560).

What fuels capitalism’s rapacity to keep going is the myth of maximal efficiency, channelized through disciplines like engineering, and the sciences—riding a tacit indifference to what the humanities offer. Aimed at accumulation and infinite growth, the techno-scientific, economic-developmental thrust of STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) subjects axiomatically preclude with this, not just, creativity, modes of reflection, philosophical questioning—but also the rigorous critiquing of existing data, and the ideological underpinning of its assumptions. While these are crucial to the discourse of sustainability, they are not what managerial and instrumentalist visions make room for. In *Death of the PostHuman*, Claire Colebrook challenges this bypassing of the humanities:

The humanities, we might say, has always considered the earth as climate or environment—the home of our being, or our unavoidable terrain and surround—and never as mere stuff, matter or potential energy. The humanities originates both in a unified sense of the human, and in a commitment to the cultural, historical and textual variability of humanity across time and space. (2014: 51)

## THE HUMANITIES APPROACH

The complex epochal change that is the Anthropocene, cannot be reductively relayed through a monovocal reading of undifferentiated data or empirical accounting. A pedagogical engagement that the humanities

create, allows for a contextualizing of social inequities and power differentials that a technocratic objectivity effaces. As Daniel J. Philippon says, “Call it ‘close reading’: humanists care about the details, the minor features, the particulars, the unique qualities of the individual components of sustainability, which necessarily sometimes go missing in the work of the more quantitative social and natural science” (2012: 165). Philippon also highlights the importance of pleasure that the humanities frame—one that makes critical difference for the transition to be made from climate change anxiety to sustainability. Needless to say, Philippon’s framing of pleasure comes from neither narcissistic hedonism nor neoliberal mindfulness—pleasure here is embedded within practices that are rigorously intellectual and politically conscious.

A recognition of these lacunae has made possible the inclusion of art/s, and the forging of a new alliance with the STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, mathematics) approach. The disciplinary focus and the theoretical methodologies of the Environmental Humanities as ecological praxis, has helped initiate a dialogue, and a collaboration between the humanities and the social, and natural sciences, for visions of sustainable futures in the last few decades (Weidner, Braidotti, and Klumbyte: 2019). With this shift in approach, the profound oversights of human centered propositions that ignored non-human claims and agency—imperilling all other creatures, their habitats and larger ecosystems—are sought to be rectified. And the introduction of a non-anthropocentric, multi-species perspective widens the field of long-term sustainability planning—for without it, “sustainability evokes an environmentalism without an environment, an ecology devoid of living creatures other than human beings” (2012: 563).

## POSTHUMAN CORPOREALITIES

Conversations on the Anthropocene in humanities circles, have also complexly engaged with the question of what it means to be human under the many crises of late capitalism and climate change. Rosi Braidotti’s theorizing of posthumanism’s affirmative ethics, strongly influenced by the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, is a take-down of structural anthropocentrism, and its hubristic human focus and privileging. Implicated within this is the assumption of an undifferentiated

humanity—a distributive logic that burdens the ecopathologies of capitalism equally upon countries and people. Citing Protagoras’ dictum that Man is “the measure of all things”, and its later Renaissance representation in Da Vinci’s “Vitruvian Man” (Braidotti 2013: 13), she reflects on how this assertion has unremittingly set into motion a set of “mental, discursive and spiritual values”, wherein man is always—“male, white, heterosexual, owning wives and children, urbanised, able-bodied, speaking a standard language, i.e. ‘Man’” (Braidotti 1991: 86). Astride this, as she says, has been the valorization of Cartesian reason—which produces exclusionary forms of knowledge that keep out gendered, racialized, sexualized others. Instead of seeing the crisis of the Anthropocene as counter evidence for a reinstatement of universal humanist values or an uncritical reassertion of humanism, Braidotti says,

I want to stress that the awareness of a new (negatively indexed) reconstruction of something we call “humanity” must not be allowed to flatten out or dismiss all the power differentials that are still enacted and operationalized through the axes of sexualization/ racialization/naturalization, just as they are being reshuffled by the spinning machine of advanced, bio-genetic capitalism. Critical theory needs to think simultaneously the blurring of categorical differences and their reassertion as new forms of bio-political, bio-mediated political economy, with familiar patterns of exclusion and domination. (2013: 87–88)

In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti also writes of the self-organizing vitality of all living systems that creates conditions for the decentring of man. In her conceptualizing of vital materialism, and its positing of the world as constituted of an infinite, indivisible single matter that is both interactive and intelligent, is the critical idea of shared affectivity—where life does not belong to individual entities, but is of the substance as a whole. The Braidottian affect is not confined to emotions or feelings, but is defined through embodied intensities that charge the subject’s ability to act and respond (Braidotti 2006: 158). Affect is thus transpersonal and relational—wherein reciprocity is not just the exchange between rational autonomous individuals—defined by the discourse of liberal individualism, but an extending of co-dependence among both human and non-human bodies—relayed through an ethics of corporeality. She marks zoe as the transversal, non-human vital force of life that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains— as

against bios, the particular life material which has traditionally been read as the preserve of humans (2013: 60). The posthuman is the non-anthropocentric ontology that deals with how subjects are forged by forces and dynamics beyond their control. In this the pre-eminence granted by humans to their species, and all further hierarchizing, is dissolved to argue for a process that is ever evolving, open ended and interactive. Furthermore, the notion of “life” as an inalienable right organized within, and granted to only the human, and those presumed as “living” is reworked to postulate the idea of the process. As part of the complex network that animates the process, the question of subjectivity is understood as emanating from an expanded, variously entangled, relational self, not limited to the species, but transversally extending from all non-anthropomorphic matter—codified as zoe. For Braidotti, this new-materialist sustainability comes from a non-aggressive ethics that extends beyond the human, “Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism” (2013: 60). With this lies the possibility of organizing sustainability through epistemologies, ethics and politics that are capable of engaging with a materiality that does not consign the non-human to a blank externality.

### GRAPHIC AESTHETICS

A culturally informed and nuanced articulation of the ideals of this new-materialist sustainability exists in, as Hubert Zapf says, “the polyphonic complexity of literary works”, as literature is able to mine rather successfully, an imaginatively complex “counterdiscursive ecopoiesis”—necessary for a sustained ecological evolution of consciousness and culture (2016: 59). It is interesting that in his collection of essays on climate change, *The Great Derangement*, the novelist Amitav Ghosh suggests the graphic mode as one of the ways in which literature can productively represent the crisis, “to think about the Anthropocene will be to think in images, [and] will require a departure from our accustomed logocentrism” (2016: 83). The graphic novel’s discursive aligning of text and graphics has emerged as a significant site for writers to develop methodologies and narratives that engage with catastrophic events. Also, as Laura Perry points

out, the shifts between planetary and domestic time scales for a tracing of environmental impact—critical for anthropocentric narratings—are fluidly negotiable into aesthetic and plurivectoral juxtapositions within the comic/graphic form (2018: 4).

The comic strip's architectural unconscious, its close aligning with urbanization and anthropogenic environmental destruction has been a source of interest for critics like Jared Gardner and Santiago García, who draw a parallel between the panelling that comics use, and the lined modularity of apartment blocks (Gardner 2016: 42), and also the visual similarity between the speech balloon and vehicular pollution (García and Campbell 2015: 47). In *Posthumanism and the Graphic Novel*, Edward King and Page draw on posthuman ways of reading—and they see the graphic form of comics as being “impossible to analyse as an autonomous, ‘unified’ and dematerialized entity in the humanist manner” (2017: 7). This is also relayed through contemporary western posthumanist thought's acknowledgment of the prior existence of diverse and heterogeneous indigenous knowledge systems that have always accommodated an ethics of sustainability through older cosmological interconnections.

## THE TRIBAL LIFEWORLD

In response to these productive discussions currently taking place, this paper is an attempt at exploring the cult Indian graphic novel *Bhimayana's* use of the artisanal aesthetic of the Pardhan Gond tribal artists, Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, in narrating Dr B.R. Ambedkar's experience of caste violence—to see how it effectively cross-references questions of anthropocentrism and sustainability with those of caste. There have been critical readings that have challenged *Bhimayana's* singularising of oppression, its conflation of the social experience of the tribal with the Dalit—a flattening of caste violence by the aesthetic of the Vyams. Nandini Chandra in “The Fear of Iconoclasm” reads *Bhimayana's* decorative graphic art as creating a loss in narrative traction in the framing of a Dalit discourse against untouchability (2013: 11–33). Similarly, Nandini Ramesh Sankar and Deepshikha Changmai while acknowledging the comparable historical disadvantage faced by both, the “untouchable” Dalits, and tribals in India, in “Between Solidarity and Complicity”, also write of their discomfort with the artisanal framing of *Bhimayana* for

constructing an “[i]maged solidarity between the lower castes and the tribes of India [that] presume[s] a mythic purity on behalf of the oppressed” (2020: 304–305). However, this paper reads the artisanal graphic as a politically conscious gesture, a critically attentive mode—one that offers the possibility of imaginative counterworlds where intimate, affirmative relationalities can create sustainable futures. For this, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s reflective praxis on conceiving intimate solidarities by ‘speaking nearby,’ as opposed to speaking for or about, offers a constructive methodological approach,

a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition (Chen 1992: 87).

The tribal lifeworld, as also the Pardhan Gond’s aesthetic investments in the natural world, give it a capaciousness beyond the human centric—a transcending of the nature versus culture anthropocentric binary. This widening of the lens brings in an ecological imaginary that dehierarchizes humans—infusing even the non-living with a livingness, putting into play the enmeshment of a planetary ecosystem that is both dynamic and continual—and beyond their own special life span. *Bhimayana*’s mytho-epic visualizing of an ecocentric space, creates the possibility of a “post-anthropocentric shift away from the hierarchical relations that had privileged ‘Man’” (2013: 88). In a similar acknowledgement John Berger in his foreword to *Bhimayana*, writes of the prophetic answer that the book holds to

a global economic system which reduces the whole of History and every horizon of life to the pursuit of profit... No more rectangular framing or unilinear time. No more profiled individuals. Instead a conference of corporeal experience across generations, full of pain and empathy, and nurtured by a complicity and endurance that can outlive the Market. (Vyam et al 2011: 9)

*Bhimayana*’s artists, the Vyams, belong to the Pardhan Gond tribe—a subset of India’s largest tribal grouping, the Gonds. Traditionally, they bore the role of bardic genealogists to the larger Gondi community—and

it was only with the “discovery” of the work of Jangarh Singh Shyam in the early 1980s that their decorative wall art, *bhittichitra*, came to the attention of the art world, both locally as well as internationally. Jangarh’s meteoric rise to fame inspired artists like the Vyams—providing the creative impetus they needed for the transmission of their narrative traditions to a pictorial art form. As Roma Chatterji points out in *Speaking with Pictures*, Jangarh’s fame also paved the way for the shaping of, “a collective imagination inherited by successive generations of Pardhan Gond artists” (2021: 108). Pardhan Gond art has evolved from the expansive decorative muraling, and patterned motifs that traditionally adorns their walls and the peripheries of their homes—typically done using locally found charcoal, limestone, seasonal clay, and dyes, and colours from flowers and other natural sources. According to the Indian writer and cultural activist, G.N. Devy, who gave up academic life in the mid-90s to work on the ground for tribal causes:

every tribal artist conceals his individual identity by foregrounding the medium itself. In their exuberant love for the materials used, tribal creations seem almost like prayerful offerings to the elements that make this world such a mysteriously beautiful place (2002: xiv)

Navjot Altaf Mohamedi, whose work is on the anthropogenic environmental degradation of the planet and cultures of unsustainability, writes of his experience of working in the tribal belt of Chhattisgarh. According to him, the culture of the tribals, their symbols, and ritualistic practices maintain a belief in the integration and connected nurturance of all living beings, and the cyclical processes of nature: “They have associations with nature that explain how the natural world offers an insight into the maintenance of being” and “I see this as a process of communication and listening, being mobile with the possibilities of exposing oneself and exploring all the way around ... a continual (self)-transformation” (2016: n.p.).

## AN ETHIC OF INHABITING THE WORLD

For the Vyams as artists, taking on the graphic mode was a novel and challenging experience. Commissioned in 2008, they were introduced to



the graphic illustrations of Joe Sacco, Will Eisner, Osamu Tezuka, Art Spiegelman and other greats, by the publisher S. Anand of Navayana—who along with Srividya Natarajan also co-wrote the text of *Bhimayana*, culled from Ambedkar's autobiographical notes, "Waiting for a Visa". The unlettered Vyams, not familiar with the details of Ambedkar's life, or with western sequential art and framing, were quite categorical with regard to their approach to the graphic page, "We'd like to state one thing very clear from 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 *kbulla* (open) where there's space for all to breathe" (Vyam et al. 100). Unfamiliar and unused to canvas and paper as media, they create an unpanelled spread using the geometries of the *digna*—the auspicious design pattern taken from their wall art, and one that Jangarh had greatly improvised upon. In *Bhimayana*, the snaking tubular *digna* limns the pages, forming narrow pathways that the Vyams fill with intricate grain, mustard and grass patterns. What this does to the alchemical gutter space is interesting, since the artwork here eschews the tyranny of sequential panelling:

There is an inversion of the traditional comic gutter space. The *digna* patterns, which are traditionally marginalia or borders, are enlarged to become panel-like. The resultant empty space outside this *digna* then would seem by default to be the gutter space" (Chandra 2018: 23–24).

A large part of the tribal population, or *adivasi* as they are also referred to here in India, still continues to live in forested tracts—now fast depleting, owing to the large scale takeover by corporate investments into the fossil fuel economy. The word *adi* translates as original, and *vasi* as dwellers—even as ironically, their original dwelling in these forests has not guaranteed them ownership of their lands. As Devy says,

Most tribal communities in India are culturally similar to tribal communities elsewhere in the world. They live in groups that are cohesive and organically unified. They show very little interest in accumulating wealth or in using labour as a device to gather interest and capital. They accept a worldview in which nature, man and God are intimately linked, and believe in the human ability to spell and interpret truth. They live more by intuition than by reason, they consider the space around them more sacred than secular, and their sense of time is personal rather than objective. The world of the tribal imagination, therefore, is substantially different from that of the non-tribal Indian society. (2002: x)

The tribal lifeworld constitutes a universe in which humans are not unique, and in which their corporeality is recognized as coextensive and interconnected with the non-human environment. The pages of *Bhimayana* are teeming with non-human life enmeshed in bodily form and integratively imagined with human living: “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” (Vyam et al. 2011: 102). Thus it is not entirely counterintuitive that there are dancing peacocks, and not smiling faces, that signify the joy of the people of Chalisgaon on meeting Ambedkar; also when Madhukar Ghatge, a Dalit, is attacked and killed for digging a well, it is the earthmoving machine that is shown shedding tears, with cows standing as horrified witnesses (2011: 46). Speech balloons are creatively imagined as birds and scorpions, and there are even amoebic, microorganisms that float through the artwork. Hand-pumps are drawn with elephant trunks (2011: 20), and during Ambedkar’s speech protesting the prohibiting of Dalits from using public water bodies, microphone speakers become sprinklers (2011: 48). There are clocks that look like peacocks (2011: 36) and automobiles and trains have animal faces with wheels coiled as snails (2011: 27). A bus that carries Ambedkar’s followers, tellingly, has his face on it (2011: 75)—signifying the complex interrelational ensemble that is the human subject. The Vyams own love for portraying aquatic life forms was noticed by the publisher early on, and they were encouraged to use the motif of the fish, which they modify and use extensively (2011: 102).

*Bhimayana*’s aesthetic annotates the Pardhan Gond’s pre-capitalist ecologically aligned structures of engagement with the world: “This kind of animistic excess and fluidity of morphing forms tells us something about the nature of imagination in Gondi artwork, in contrast to the void-fixated imagination-defying Vedic cosmos” (Chandra 2011: 22). In this, *Bhimayana* is able to reconfigure human subjectivity as entangled and evolving from the non-human and not separate from it—forging multiple transformative connections, making for “biophilic pleasures” through material intimacies (Alaimo, 2016: 39). Further, as Alaimo says,

If we begin with our first mode of inhabiting, that of inhabiting our own bodies and then experience those bodies as permeable, as open to surrounding human and nonhuman bodies, we can conceive of a corporeal ethics: an ethics that is always ‘in

place' and never a disembodied or free-floating Cartesian affair. This ethics-in-place counters the unsustainable romance of wilderness fantasies and the lure of ecotourism, which may lead us to neglect the beauty and worth of the wildness that exists in the actual places we inhabit. (2016: 30).

Tribal memory extends from the sensory rather than a cultivated imagining, and is thus marked by a certain flexibility of framing—what the Vyams had asserted as their need for *kehulla*—the openness that defies rigid framing and its boxing in. Tribal imagination has also been described as “dreamlike and hallucinatory”, fusing beings and entities and “various planes of existence and levels of time in a natural and artless manner” (2002: x). In this lies a recall of an ancestral time of trans-special kinship—not restricted to the past, but ongoing and continuous. It is future retrospective and also forward looking, as Gary Snyder, in *The Practice of the Wild*, says:

“Dreaming” or “dreamtime” refers to a time of fluidity, shape-shifting, interspecies conversation and intersexuality, radically creative moves, whole landscapes being altered. It is often taken to be a “mythical past,” but it is not really in any time. We might as well say it is right now. (1990: 91)

The question of memory is also crucial, for as Braidotti writes, the “MajoritySubject” holds the key to the central memory of the system they rule—one that renders all other alternatives insignificant (2013: 347). Subjugated memories, in this case that of the Dalit’s suffering and adversity, must also envision more humane and sustainable social systems which would help generate counter actualizations of collective transformation, “The corollary of this notion of time and of the political is that the specifically grounded memories of the minorities are not just static splinters of negativity forever inscribed in the flesh of the victims of history” (2013: 347).

*Bhimayana*’s indigenous mythopoeic imaginary is read here as a radical political act performing the Braidottian call for an alternative social imaginary. In this it requisitions the foundation for more sustainable practices of relationality and cohabiting—an approach that initiates “a questioning of both human exceptionalism as well as the violent hierarchies that constitute our world” (Braidotti 2013: 86). The post-anthropocentric turn is also an opening out of a different order of

posthumanist affective relationality—premised on an imagination of intersectionality that is not nostalgically pseudo-romantic, in a yoking together that might even seem violent in the present. In *Bhimayana*'s employing of the Dalit-tribal as aesthetic collage there is an attempt to look beyond the sterility of a static, self-replicating present—and in this the artisanal graphic is not a myopic homogenising that transposes a discordant aesthetic over the narrative of caste violence. For the Vyams, it is an intentional move, a deliberate solidarity of hope, an intimate allying and a coming together. In citing this as counterfactual or disingenuous, is perhaps the mark of our own liberal behalfist politics that attempt an overriding of the conscious political awareness that imbues the Vyam's telling. *Bhimayana* forges an intentional intersectionality, which while being wishful—is also not unmindful of history and difference. In this it straddles that same romanticism that marks posthumanist thought, one that also structures Devy's approach. The constant hankering for subtlety haunts our secular intellectualizing—within which an imagination of a Utopia will always, already, remain thwarted. Beyond the limits of our knowingness is the dream that *Bhimayana* offers—of a sustainability not disambiguated from history, but imagined as it were retrospectively, for a future forward.

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### **Bioprofile**

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