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Structure of Conjuncture: Synthesis of Art and Literature in Viswajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm*

Darly Mathew

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sacred Heart College, Chalakudy, Affiliated to University of Calicut

Abstract

The paper examines how the structures of visual art combine with the discourses of history and literature to recreate the Emergency, particularly its impact on the urban landscape of Delhi, as presented in Delhi Calm by Vishwajyoti Ghosh. Graphic techniques incorporated in the novel have a seminal function in effectuating the designated meaning. The study places art in tandem with literature to critique society and individuals. Graphic narratives, through their meticulous depiction of scenes, highlight implied meanings and subtle nuances. The article highlights how graphic literature, unlike verbal literature, provides a close-up understanding of political figures in India, journalists, and the capital city of Delhi. Graphic novels offer rich possibilities for social criticism through their symbolic modes and patterns.

Keywords: Structure of Conjuncture, Emergency, History, Delhi, Panels

Introduction

Delhi Calm is apparently, a graphic conceptualisation of the1975-'77 historical emergency period, in India. The novel provides tremendous scope regarding sensitisation, imagination, and a meticulous understanding of the concatenation of events during the Emergency. In one of his interviews, Ghosh remarks, "While I was working on it, I realized how little we know about the Emergency and how much visual possibility there was with the topic" (Inverted Calm). The visual art employed in the novel, with visual intertextualities, utterances and allusions adds newer dimensions to literature and art. The interface between art and literature has been more than productive and significant, in terms of aesthetic feel and historical contextualisation. The language used in the text is concise, suggestive and imbued with rich undertones. The points of view of the people as well as the authorities are presented so that the reader can acquire a closer grasp of the happenings during the Emergency and those that preceded it

"Structure of Conjuncture" is a phrase borrowed from the American ethnographer Marshall Sahlin, which implies how various historical relationships produce, a new culture. Here, Indian history concerning the declaration of the Emergency has engendered the emergence of a graphic narrative. The paper examines how visual art, coupled with the traditional narrative mode, is connotative in presenting the particularities of the Emergency. The graphic visualisation is centred on political and social landscapes and offers a wide range of characters, including the prime minister, the journalist, the revolutionaries, and the common people. The facial expressions of the characters, the change of scenes, flashcards, and the intermittent descriptions have been highly significant in producing the ambience of the novel. Art and literature share a common realm and, through appropriation, provide a platform for the representation of historical realism.

The narrative of *Delhi Calm* unfolds during The Emergency (India, 1975–1977), declared by Indira Gandhi under Article 352 of the Constitution of India, a period characterised by censorship, political arrests, and the curtailment of democratic freedoms. The incorporation of visual art in the novel makes possible a deeper engagement of the readers with the fundamental aspects of the book. Ayyesawaraya and Punitha remark, "Panel sequencing, spatial composition, and shifts in visual density perform the temporal pulse of the city: elongated frames slow down quiet moments, while clustered panels reproduce the frenetic pace of crowded streets" (511). The form itself, thereby enacts the rhythm of urban life. The proportionate coupling of literary and artistic modes serves to highlight, intensify, appropriate, and exemplify the historical realities from the perspective of civilians. Beyond the historical narrative, the novel reconstructs The Emergency and takes the reader across a broad panorama through graphic techniques such as speech balloons, captions, backgrounds, graphic weight, realistic as well as ironic portrayals, blank spaces, dramatic ambience, bleeds, frames, and gutters. Literary techniques such as polysemy, intertextuality, and hypertextuality have also been employed constructively to enhance the effects of the graphic techniques. The title of the novel is presented with substantial graphic weight in red. The imagery of the two birds clinging together is an ironic portrayal of the romantic and charming ambience of Delhi. The epigraph of the novel echoes Jean Baudrillard's concept of Simulacra and therefore aligns with the novelist's attempt to create an authentic portrayal of history. The epigraph states, "There are no hard distinctions between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false" (Pinter qtd. in Ghosh 5).

At the outset of the novel, the reader encounters a journalist, V.P., alias Vibhuthi Prasad, an emerging writer who delves deeply into the social, political, and economic intricacies of India from cosmopolitan Delhi. The fulcrum of the novel is closely connected to the perspectives, experiences, and impasse of V.P., who is moderate in his approach and both sensitive and perceptive in his observations. The systematic and suggestive dialogues and thoughts produced by the characters add to the richness and polysemic character of the novel. For instance, V.P.'s utterance, "This is not Pakistan, this is not Bangladesh, this is democracy" (Ghosh 24), reflects the political tension of the period. Yet another dialogue, "Muslim,

bachelor, activist are the bullet points of suspicion," points to the prevailing social conditions (Ghosh 48).

Historically, the Emergency imposed certain conditions such as forced sterilisation, censorship of the press, curtailment of civil rights, and a 'committed bureaucracy. The novel effectively does justice to these realities through the inclusion of graphic portrayals. "Even mosquito movements were restricted" (Ghosh 33). Though a little overdrawn, the sentence is effectively written to bring out a dimension of the prevailing social climate. The writer extensively employs the technique of blank spaces to imply the contrast between India before and after the declaration of the Emergency, portraying a society that appears emotionless, speechless, and passive. The dichotomy of the images is remarkable in the juxtaposition of a groaning man and an open blank depiction. The interplay of word and image is pervasive throughout the novel, which is a defining feature of the work.

Conflicting forces are at work in the novel, in which Naya Savera Band calls for the mobilisation of people for total revolution and total freedom. A hue and cry is raised against the Maintenance of Internal Security Act and the Preventive Detention Act, as well as against the organised brutality against the Naxalites in Bengal. Corruption, food crises, rising prices, unemployment, and paramilitary surveillance are strongly criticised. Thus, history functions as a context as well as a co-text for the literary work. The "Propheterian democracy" of Parvez visualises a classless and casteless system emerging out of the consensus among Gandhian, Marxist, and socialist ideologies. They insist that the inculcation of constitutional morality is not at all an achievable target under the Emergency. The novelist does not miss exploring the culture-specific status of Delhi, with its street golgappas and movies. The job culture, sections of the population, and the attitudes of people are taken up and analysed with the aid of visual elements and a tinge of humour. "I am happy as long as I am in Delhi, not complaining. My silence is my passport" (Ghosh 56). This is the impression maintained and conveyed by the novel, nonetheless, various social and political happenings complicate it.

Nayek rightly comments that "the book is scattered with figures of people who are broken down with despair as well as the faces of "smiling survivors" (23). These undaunted survivors are individuals appointed by the government to carry out undercover surveillance on citizens, monitor any form of protest or revolt, and suppress such voices of dissent. The "Saviours' Society" comprises both affected and unaffected patriots who claim to serve the nation either for its sake or on behalf of their own personal safety. Stalwart bureaucrats comprise the organisation, and the polysemic structure of the novel becomes apparent here. Their paramount concern is solely to acquire the "certificate of the responsible Indian" (Ghosh 56). The novel presents two extreme categories within the population. V.P comments on the grim life "Sometimes, the road can be long and winding" (Ghosh 218). Parvez expresses his existential dilemma, "At least I never disappeared" (Ghosh 218). On the other hand, the beneficiaries of the existing system are those who can categorically acknowledge their subservience to the regime.

The novel converts political history into visual memory. The Emergency, though historically documented, acquires renewed immediacy through images, fragmented dialogues, and symbolic representations. Pramod K. Nayar observes, "This barbaric space of panels, with the tensions of the extreme and the everyday that generate the demo-graphics of the graphic novel, has its own aesthetic of traumatic realism" (132). The panels serve as mnemonic devices, preserving not only facts but emotions — fear, anxiety, helplessness, resistance, and irony. The visual composition becomes a metaphor for surveillance and fragmentation. Characters are often shown within confined frames, suggesting restriction and control. The narrowing of space parallels the narrowing of democratic freedom. The gutters — the spaces between panels — signify interruptions, silences, and gaps in historical narration. These blank spaces invite the reader to participate in constructing meaning, thereby making the act of reading an active political engagement. The technique of juxtaposition is especially remarkable. A cheerful public announcement may be followed by a dark, silent image. This contrast exposes the discrepancy between state propaganda and lived reality. Irony operates as a subtle but powerful device in the novel. The very title "Delhi Calm" functions as a satirical comment on enforced silence. The calmness is artificial — it is imposed rather than organic. Through understated humour, the novelist critiques authoritarian power structures. Bureaucrats seeking the certificate of the responsible Indian embody blind conformity.

Satire is also visible in the portrayal of official slogans and public speeches. These are often presented with visual exaggeration, revealing the hollowness behind grand declarations. The novel suggests that language itself becomes manipulated during political crises. Words such as "discipline," "national security," and "development" are stripped of democratic meaning and repurposed to justify repression.

Beyond political analysis, the novel delves into psychological dimensions. Fear is not portrayed merely as a social condition but as an internalised state. Characters constantly evaluate their speech, behaviour, and associations. Suspicion becomes normalised. Identity categories such as religion, occupation, and ideology become grounds for surveillance. The recurring depiction of open blank panels intensifies this psychological atmosphere. The absence of speech balloons in certain frames reflects suppressed expression. The reader is made to experience discomfort — a deliberate aesthetic strategy to recreate the emotional climate of the Emergency.

The narrative also incorporates intertextual references that enrich its cultural context. Political slogans, references to popular cinema, street culture, and everyday urban life contribute to a layered representation of Delhi. These references situate the Emergency within a broader socio-cultural framework rather than isolating it as a purely political event. Street scenes, food stalls, cinema posters, and mundane conversations coexist with police raids and censorship notices. This coexistence underscores the paradox of normalcy amid repression. Life continues. Markets function. People laugh. Yet beneath this surface lies systemic control. The integration of cultural markers strengthens the argument that history functions as both

context and cotext. The Emergency was not confined to parliament or prison cells; it permeated domestic spaces, workplaces, and public streets.

Revisiting the concept of "Structure of Conjuncture," one can observe how the novel embodies this theoretical framework. The Emergency, as a historical conjuncture, altered social relationships, political discourse, and cultural production. In response, artistic forms adapted to articulate resistance and remembrance.

This synthesis of art and literature challenges hierarchical distinctions between "high" and "popular" art. The novel demonstrates that graphic storytelling can effectively address complex ideological debates. It becomes both archive and critique — documenting events while interrogating their meanings.

A recurring concern in the narrative is constitutional morality. Characters debate the meaning of democracy. The tension between legality and legitimacy becomes apparent. Although the Emergency was declared within constitutional provisions, its implementation undermined democratic ethics. Through V.P. and Parvez, the novel stages ideological discussions on governance, civil rights, and moral accountability. V.P.'s moderation contrasts with Parvez's revolutionary zeal. However, both recognise the fragility of democratic institutions. The depiction of forced sterilisation campaigns and preventive detention laws highlights the misuse of state machinery. These policies are not described in purely factual terms but through human experiences. Faces of anxiety, queues outside clinics, and whispered conversations capture the human cost of political decisions.

Ultimately, *Delhi Calm* functions as a form of resistance literature. By revisiting a politically sensitive period, the novel challenges collective amnesia. It resists simplified narratives that portray the Emergency as merely a phase of discipline or administrative reform. The synthesis of art and literature thus achieves a dual purpose. It aestheticises history while politicising art.

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