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Reimagining Ecological Literature: Myth as a Counter-Hegemonic Mode of Expression in *The River of Stories*

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Abstract

The River of Stories (1994) by Orijit Sen is based on Rewa Andolan, a fictional people's movement closely based on the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The graphic novel blends two distinct modes of narration, namely, the realistic and the mythical. The realistic portrayal of the protest staged by locals against the construction of the dam is interspersed with the narrative of the mythical folk singer Malgu Gayan, who tells the myth of Creation, explaining the relationship of the inhabitants of the village and the river Rewa. Ben Holgate (2019), in the book *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse,* argues that environmental literature and magic realist fiction have a long history of overlap. He contends that both are characterised by a rejection of colonial values and dominant epistemologies along with a transgression of binaries, such as human and non-human; animate and inanimate, etc. The current paper extends this argument to Sen's *The River of Stories* and argues that myth and magic realism—both the modes that do not conform to the European realist novel—act as a medium of resistance in the text. Literary realism can also be traced to the same positivist philosophy that reduces knowledge to reasoning or empirical evidence and rules out all other culture-specific modes of perception and understanding. The paper is based on Holgate's framework and examines the novel for specific elements that offer an alternative to the dominant understanding of development as well as that of the representation of environmental crises.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Environmental Justice, Culture-Specific Epistemeologies, Mythology, Narrative Resistance.

Introduction

Literary Realism, in the words of Ian Watt (1957), "begins from the position that truth can be

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discovered by the individual through the senses." (p. 12) Thus, while realism implies faithful presentation of reality it has a distinct epistemological underpinning that privileges empiricism and rationalism. The philosophical foundation of realism, arguably, lies in the belief that reality can be understood and represented accurately and objectively. Realist narration in literature, thus, maintains a distance from fantasy, myth and supernaturalism, which rely on intuition and imagination instead of rationalism. Concomitantly, realism also steers clear from alternate, often non-European, epistemologies based on intuition, imagination, myth, folklore and collective memory. Building on the said premise, the paper argues that magic realism and supernaturalism, both of which depart from strictly realist mode of narration, are teemed with epistemological potential, particularly in the case of ecological literature.

Commenting on the inadequacy of realist fiction to grapple with the environmental issues Amitav Ghosh (2017) warns his readers that, "climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination." (p. 5) Since climate issues are mostly sprawled over a long period of time and the violence they inflict is often slow and seemingly imperceptible, realist fiction often falls short of portraying environmental injustice and related issues in their true magnitude and often resorts to apocalypticism. Ecological concerns are inevitably challenging due to the bipartite inadequacy of literary realism, philosophical as well as representational, to account for planetary concerns as their scope is often too vast to rationally calculate. While the paper is, by no means, an attempt to dismiss realism entirely; it is rather aimed at making a case for modes other than realism, as admissible representational modes in the case of ecological concerns.

Closely examining Orijit Sen's graphic novel *The River of Stories*, the paper argues that magic realism, through its synthesis of diverse epistemologies and narrative forms, embodies a subversive potential that functions as a counter-discourse to realism. It offers a triangulated critique of realist representational mode, at the aesthetic, epistemic and ideological levels, particularly in the context of ecocritical discourse. Marking a critical departure from rationalism and empiricism, it embraces intuition and imagination as valid approaches to make sense of the world. Conversely, the predominance of realistic mode of narration in climate fiction, obscures non-Western knowledge systems; this marginalisation is further problematized within the context of colonial legacies. Magic realism in Sen's work not only offers culture-specific epistemologies to understand the relationship between the human and the non-human realms, it also underlines the myopic rationalist vision that governs the majority of the national development plans, as meaning- making at the level of Nation State often differs from the same at the level of people (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 277).

Based on the Rewa Andolan- a fictional people's movement mirroring the Narmada Bachao Andolan, Sen's *The River of Stories* blends two distinct modes of narration. In the novel, the realistic portrayal of the media coverage and the protest staged by locals against the construction of the dam is interspersed with the narrative of the mythical folk singer Malgu Gayan who tells the myth of Creation, explaining the relationship of the inhabitants of the village and the river Rewa. The panels depicting the deity Kuchum Chanu and Malgu Gayan are simultaneously placed with the panels depicting the protest. Furthermore, the myth of the creation of the River Rewa and surrounding mountains parallels the history of increasing governmental control over the tribal land and resources and the ensuing changes in the landscape. The present study argues that the synthesis of mythical and realist representation results in the broadening of the semantic potential of the story and allows for novel as well as diverse perspectives on ecological concerns, in particular, sustainability and environmental justice

Existing research on *The River of Stories* focuses on how the graphic novel offers an

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alternate model of development. A few studies also study the text for its anticolonial rhetoric. As of now there has not been any adequate research on the representational strategies used by Sen. Foregrounding the composite nature of Sen's style in the text, the current study argues that the use of myth in *The River of Stories* is not incidental. Transcending stylistic boundaries, Sen's *sui generis* model of magic-realism is instrumental to his attempt at dismantling the dominant epistemologies of nature, development and modernity. Besides, it offers a novel imaginative horizon to the readers to perceive environmental injustice, particularly in the context of thousands of years of interconnection between the river Rewa and Ballanpur village, thus serving the dual purpose of an artistic style as well as a political stance that critically departs from the centralized developmental paradigm.

In his 2019 work *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse,* Bill Holgate argues that environmental literature and magic realist fiction have a long history of overlap and arrives at four distinct nodes where both intersect. Approaching the broader field of environmental humanities through a literary-aesthetic lens, Holgate contends that that magic realism, through its resistance to epistemological limits of realism, becomes a powerful mode for articulating ecological consciousness. To begin with, he proposes that both modes offer a critique of the institutions and ideologies rooted in colonialism. Additionally, both offer a biocentric view of the world that challenges the dominant anthropocentric perspective and simultaneously foreground culture-specific epistemologies**,** often through *myth, folklore, and local cosmologies,* thus challenging Western scientific rationalism. Moreover, both modes of narration destabilize the binaries between human and non-human, animate and inanimate, which adds to their transgressive nature. Building on Holgate's argument, the study aims to locate the aforesaid nodes of intersection in *The River of Stories through* thematic, narrative and stylistic analysis.

Holgate (2019) presents a minimalist definition of magic realism as a mode of narration characterised by "the representation of the magical or supernatural in a quotidian manner." (p. 17) While this is arguably the quintessential feature of magic-realism, the mode is dynamic and amorphous and has been the subject of extensive theorisation since the term was coined by Franz Roh in 1925. With the seemingly oppositional semantics of real and magical, the term magic realism appears to be a forced juxtaposition of antagonistic modes of narration. Ben Holgate (2019), however, proposes that "they are more like an infinite array of points that lie upon a continuum." (p. 22) This current study also draws upon Ato Quayson's (2009) definition that magical should be considered "an umbrella term to denote elements drawn from mythology, fantasy, folk tales, and any other discourse that bears a representational code opposed to realism" (p. 164), rather than a pejorative marker of an inferior Non- Western epistemology merely suggesting something exotic and irrational.

The repertoire of narrative techniques in Sen's *River of Stories,* while different from representative magic-realist texts such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Midnight's Children*, aligns with Quayson's definition of magical as discussed in earlier. Sen seamlessly juxtaposes the real and the mythical in the narrative as well as in the graphics, compelling the reader to look at the world beyond the lens of positivist empiricism through its immense imaginative potential. The text not only voices a plea for context sensitive modernity but also offers a biocentric rather than an anthropocentric stance. Thus, the text uniquely positions itself in the intersection of magic-realist and environmental fiction- both of which are characterised by a resistance to conventional mode of understanding and representing extra-textual world.

The thesis examines the graphic novel through three interrelated yet distinct critical dimensions. First, it explores his nuanced representation of time characterised by intersecting

temporalities and fluidity, continually shaping meaning and experience co-created by the human and the non-humans. Second, it analyses the eclectic fusion of visual and narrative techniques that characterize his work, highlighting how stylistic experimentation becomes a mode of storytelling. Finally, the study investigates Sen's negotiation between the local and the planetary, demonstrating how his work remains rooted in specific cultural contexts while simultaneously engaging with global philosophical, political, and aesthetic concerns. Together, these three dimensions offer a comprehensive framework for understanding Sen's *River of Stories* as it uses myth to re-imagine ecological concerns.

Reconceptualising time and Memory

A key characteristic of magical realist fiction is the disruption of perceived ideas about time and space (Holgate, 2019, p. 23) which makes the narrative mode is useful in colluding with environmental literature to depict the long duration of environmental degradation. Rob Nixon coined the term "slow violence" to represent the extremely protracted nature of the destruction of environment and its ramifications on socially and economically marginalised groups − a process that continues over years, decades and centuries. Exemplifying Nixon's concept, *The River of Stories* problematizes the conception of time by placing immediate environmental injustice in the context of thousands of years of socio-mythical history of the Bhilala tribe, establishing the close ties they share with the river Rewa and the surrounding forest land.

Amitav Ghosh (2017) argues that since realistic novels are usually set in "a certain time horizo […] they rarely extend beyond a few generations" (p. 11) and do not typically contain a longue durée that is necessary to depict the slow nature of climate change. While *The River of Stories* tackles a contemporaneous issue with immediate as well as long term effects, the conception of history in the novel spans thousands of years dating back to a pre-historic mythical time reminiscent of Australian dreamtime. The novel, thus, juxtaposes human history with natural history, imploding multiple distinct temporalities, moving with different speeds and intensities. In this shift from mythic creation of the world to modern development-oriented intervention, the promise of progress becomes entangled with dispossession, environmental disruption, and the loss of collective memory and agency.

Another contingent theme is that of memory**,** which operates on multiple levels throughout the narrative. Personal memory of displacement and loss of home as experienced by Relku and other Adivasi migrants is juxtaposed with collective memory rooted in local myths and the historical narrative of tribal dispossession. While the memory of Relku and other villagers who had to emigrate to cities mirrors their longing for home and a desire for belongingness, it also becomes a repository of collective socio-historical memory of the stories associated with the River Rewa. The latter actively shapes the relationship the villagers share with their landscape; Relku's testimonial detailing how the male members of her family were gradually forced into alcoholism to facilitate the acquisition of their land by the contractor underscores the gradual dismantling of the community's symbolic and lived connection with the rivers, the forests, and the broader landscape that once sustained their material and affective worlds. Also noteworthy is the juxtaposition of the tribal Creation myth with contemporary events in the panels of the novel along with the collective and personal memory of the villagers.

Furthermore, the lens of the camera plays a critical role in mediating the story of protest, effectively transforming it into a documented act of resistance that contributes to the construction of social memory while also depicting how Vishnu finds himself immersed in the local folklore as he tries to learn more about the protest. The gaze of the camera is as much directed towards the past as it is towards the present signalling that the emotional distress and agitation of the protesters cannot be understood as in isolated event; rather, the protest acquires a deeper meaning only when situated within a historical continuum of lived reality which is

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personal, layered and often not objective. A comprehensive understanding of the protest requires departure from a purely realist interpretive and representational framework. Magic realism, with its stylistic potential to acknowledge and represent the layered, affective history of the Adivasis becomes a powerful tool of resistance in Sen's work.

Collapsed Stylistic Boundaries

Sen's eclectic personality as a graphic designer, cartoonist, muralist and environmental activist reflects in the pastiche of technique employed in *The River of Stories.* that uses journalism, myth, fiction and images to build the narrative. The narrative is intercut with the stories of both – the journalist Vishnu and the mythical singer Malgu Gayan with his rangai (a stringed instrument). As a part of his research, Vishnu talks to his domestic help Relku, who is an Adivasi who has to emigrate from Ballanpur. The story of personal loss is embedded in the history of systemic disenfranchisement and dispossession of tribals. At the end of the novel we see the newspaper article written by Vishnu further blurring the line between fiction and journalism.

Begoña Simal (2009), a scholar of magical realism maps the interconnections between ecocritical writings and magical realist motifs and argues that magical realism concurs with environmental criticism by deconstructing assumed normative conventions owing to its characteristic "fluidity of realms." (p. 199) *The River of Stories* breaks down boundaries between human history and natural history; past and present; myth and journalism. Human and non-human elements are de-hierarchized in Sen's world; meaning and knowledge are not imposed on matter by human actors who stand outside of the obverse but are rather co-created by human and non-human agents as they coexist inseparably. The novel additionally conflates geological and mythical time and places the present in a continuum rather than a break away from the mythical past as discussed in earlier. Furthermore, it uses a multiplicity of narrative voices including the collective voice of the protesters, the mythical voice of Malgu Gayan and the framing voice of Vishnu creating a defocalised narrative polyphony.

The paper argues that by tearing down of hard boundaries between distinct representational, epistemological, ontological and temporal realms, the text offers alternative modes of understanding nature and the role of human beings in the world, foregoing the capitalist model of seeing natural as well as human resources as quantifiable commodities that can be rightfully used for profit-making. The text additionally underscores the inadequacy of the profit-driven model of development that often fails to take into account the implications of such development for marginalised and/or ecologically precarious social groups.

Confluence of the Local and the Planetary

While the focus of Sen's work is local and culture-specific, it points towards global concerns of tribal rights, inclusive development and alternate modernities. Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) offers contextualised meanings and practices that emphasise reciprocity, and long-term sustainability. In the wake of immediacy of global environmental crises coupled with a growing awareness of how vulnerable populations are more prone to ecological injustice, there is growing recognition that integrating TEK with scientific approaches can enrich sustainable development models and promote more culturally grounded solutions. This model aligns with UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim at ensuring that development meets present needs without compromising future generations.

Displacement for the villagers is not simply a monetary loss, or a dispossession of land but also an affective loss emanating from the departure away from the River. While government promises to compensate for the former the latter is irreparable. Besides, the rational-empirical

model of development, which is unquestionably driven by the capitalist profit-based ethos, offers a grossly myopic view of the Project. While the immediate benefits, namely, roads, electric power and modernisation are reified, the short-term temporality masks pervasive oppressive structures that ensue displacement and injustice. Thus, the blend of seemingly oppositional epistemological and representational modes in the magic-realist narration of the text becomes a compelling tool that foregrounds alternative meanings.

Affective Geography

The mythical stories of the changing mountains that eventually caused the conception of the rivers Ganga and Rewa is inset in the same panel that depicts the contemporary changes brought about in the mountains in the wake of Rewa Dam project. Anand, who is one of the activist leading the Narmada Bachao Andolan in a tone of wry humor suggests that Vishnu was possibly drawn to Ballanpur by Malgu Gayan's song, thus collapsing the distinction between temporalities. Whereas the mythical transformation of mountains symbolically generated rivers abundant with fish and fertile vegetation capable of sustaining numerous communities, the construction of the dam represents a starkly contrasting narrative threatening large-scale submergence of settlements, the forced displacement of already vulnerable populations, and the systematic silencing and erasure of their cultural, economic, and ecological rights.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) discusses the collapse of the "age-old" humanist distinction between natural history and human history (p. 202). In the distant past, natural history involved a relatively slow-changing environment that evolved over thousands or tens of thousands of years, or even millennia, and was widely regarded as being separate from human activity. Sen's novel inverts this and situates human history as a subset of natural history where echoes from the past still reverberate in today's world (fig. 1), thus blurring the distinction between natural and human history. This view of time problematizes the official stance on Rewa project as evident from the conversation between the government officials enroute to Ballanpur who talk about it in terms of the benefits India can reap from it while brushing aside the concomitant implications such as the flooding of villages and the dispossession of tribals who see the river not as a resource but as a living entity whom they see as a mother figure.

Another notable feature of Sen's work is the map of Ballanpur that sprawls over two entire pages 48, 49 and 50. These panel insets completely blur the boundaries between past and present; myth and history; fiction and journalism, in a magic-realist manner. Malgu Gayan's voice exists in the same shared discursive space as the collective voice of the villagers as well as Vishnu's narratorial mediation, each mutually enriching the meaning of the others. Pramod K. Nayar (2016) in his extensive volume on graphic novels comments that:

> Myths and narratives of the river and the tribes are written into the *landscape* as tiny texts as well, suggesting the stories that make (up) the land. The dam alone has no stories, but a bland pronouncement: 'Rewa Sagar dam under construction', almost as though this leviathan requires no stories, and has no stories, unless, of course, it has absorbed all the stories of how it came about into itself. (p. 112)

The map alters the idea of a village as merely a politically demarcated space where landforms sit passively. Rather it is rich in stories which are shown to be physically inscribed on the landscape (Fig. 3) suggesting the existence of multiple temporalities and narratives that give meaning to a space. The map suggests that Ballanpur is the site of traditional knowledge, not only metaphorically but also geographically, in which humans and the environment exist in a continuum as parts of the same stories. The said panels additionally make us acknowledge the socio-political conflict around Rewa project and suggests that the contest is not merely over the land but over the stories of this land (Nayar, 2016, p. 112). The paper argues that this tension

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between conflicting stories, reinstates the text in the continuum of magic-realism and environmental criticism.

The myth of the changing mountains which led to the creation of river Rewa is superimposed, literally and figuratively, on modern construction machinery disfiguring the mountains, suggesting that the age-old alternative ontologies and epistemologies are still meaningful. This is arguably an attempt to reclaim space for indigenous knowledge systems that often stands in stark contrast to the transplanted Enlightenment empirical rationalist philosophies that underpin the official idea of progress. Additionally, as Gyan Prakash (2002) argues in his discussion of Rudyard Kipling's short story, "The Bridge-Builders" the control over nature is intimately connected to the exercise of domination over people who see nature in mythical terms (p. 30). Likewise, the State sponsored Rewa development plan is justifiable only at the expense of the erasure of culture-specific modes of meaning making and local knowledge systems.

While the symbolism of the river is used throughout the work to represent an ecosystem, the people dependent on it and their wishes, and inter-subjectivity; the meanings of stories and visuals employed by Sen often exceeds a mere symbolic meaning. The shared perception of villagers about the river and the surrounding land, aquatic life and trees is mediated by and materially affected by Malgu Gayan's story. In the words of eminent historian Dipesh Chakrabarthy (2009), the task of placing the crisis of climate change historically "requires us to bring together *intellectual formations* that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital." (p. 213) Thus the ideas of development and environmental justice also require redefining and reimagining in a manner that dismisses the overarching positivist rationality.

As a representational mode that marks a critical departure from European Realism, magic realism cogently proposes an alternative imagination of the aforementioned issues. The problems faced by the people of Ballanpur village and the pervasive insensitivity on the part of government are deeply local, global and planetary at the same time. While the text obliquely questions the rationale behind policy-making, it also offers a visual critique of the predominant capitalist environmental ethic that places profit-making above all environmental, sociological, moral and ethical qualms.

Endnote:

1. Dreamtime refers to the Aboriginal Australian worldview that explains the origins of the world, the creation of life, and the spiritual laws that guide human existence. It is not just a mythic past, but a living system of meaning that connects the past, present, and future.

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Bio-note

Sumegha Vaid holds a PhD in English from Panjab University and works extensively with literature, communication studies, and cultural theory. Her academic interests include Indian English literature, particularly graphic novels created by Indian authors. In her research, she explores the intersections of historiography, narrative form, identity and ecology. She currently teaches communication skills to undergraduate students at Panjab Engineering College, Chandigarh.

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Figures

Figure 1: The myth of changing mountains embedded as subtext in the depiction of modern day construction in the mountains surrouding the river Rewa (Sen, 1994, p. 30)

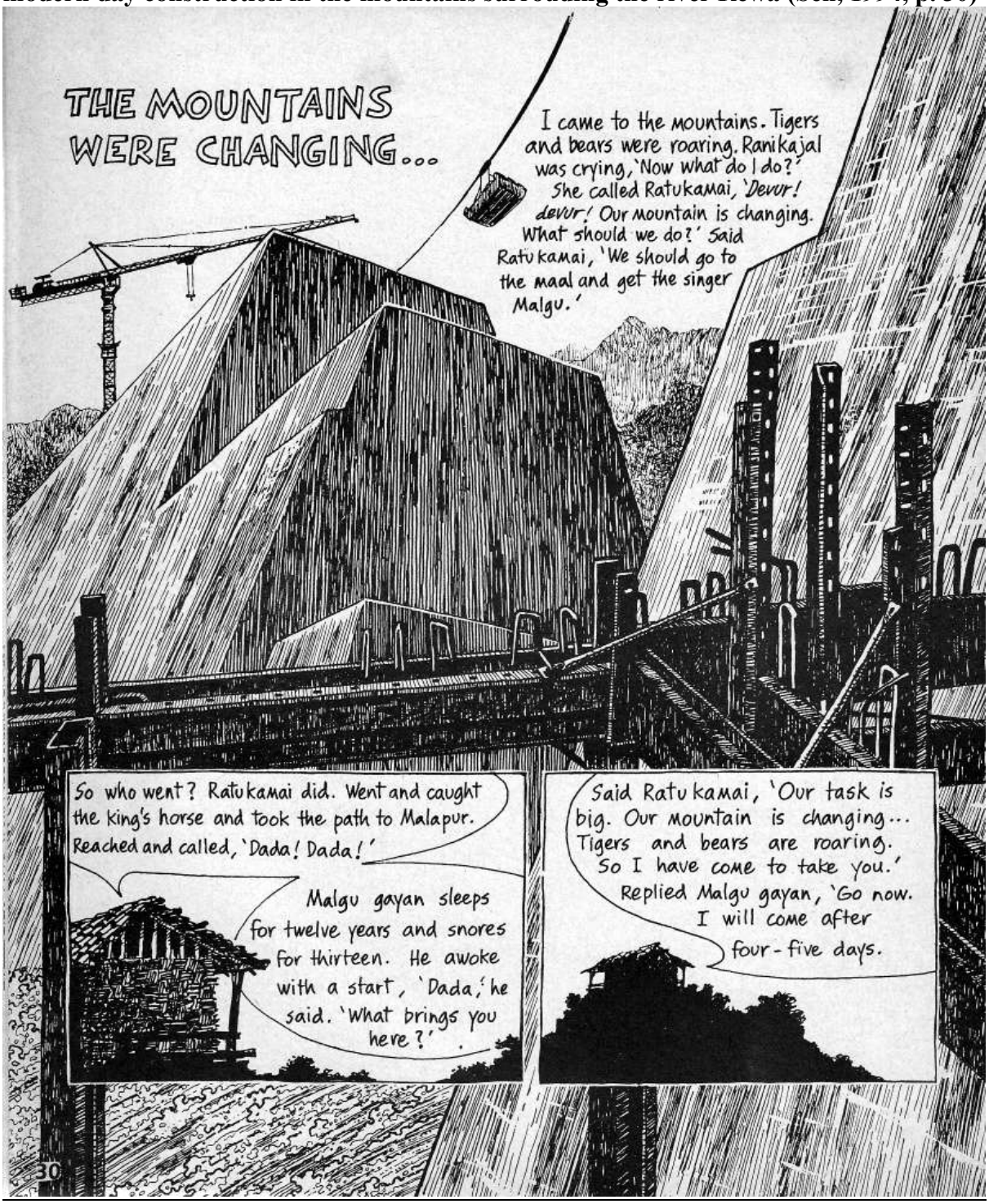

Figure 2: Cultural memory of Malgu Gayan's song transcends temporal boundaries (Sen, 1994, p. 48)

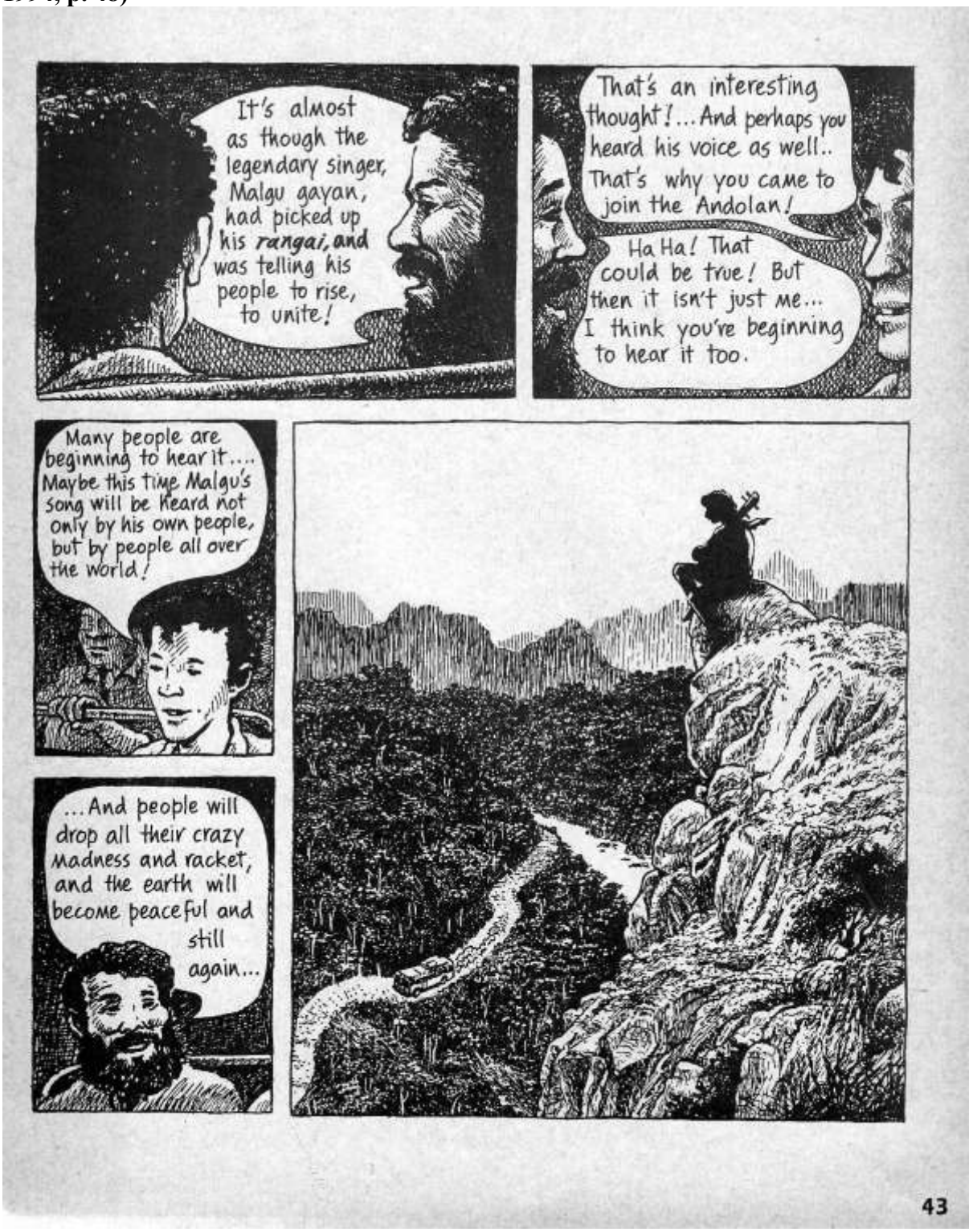

Figure 3: Map of Ballanpur with myth and folklore sprawled upon it (Sen, 1994, p. 50)