

Graphic Silence and Political Dissent: Memory, Power, and Resistance in *Delhi Calm*

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Abstract— This paper examines Vishwajyoti Ghosh’s *Delhi Calm* (2010) as a paradigmatic graphic narrative that stages political dissent through what can be termed “graphic silence”: the deliberate use of visual omission, negative space, fragmented panels, and allegorical absence to represent repression, censorship, and the contested production of cultural memory during the Indian Emergency (1975–1977). Moving beyond conventional readings of political comics that emphasize satire or direct allegory alone, the study argues that *Delhi Calm* uses silence as an aesthetic and rhetorical strategy to register trauma, complicity, and resistance. Drawing on New Historicism, cultural memory theory, and graphic-narrative scholarship, the paper performs a sustained text–image analysis of the novel’s major sequences, focusing on its deployment of animal allegory, urban iconography, panel rhythm, and visual metaphors for surveillance. Methodologically, the study combines close formal analysis of panels and sequences with contextualization in historical scholarship on the Emergency and memory studies. The analysis shows that Ghosh’s visual grammar—gutter silence, collapsed chronology, repetitive framing, and the substitution of absent human faces with symbolic animal masks—creates a counter-archive that both bears witness to and critiques official historiography. By staging silence rather than narrating every fact, *Delhi Calm* invites readers to inhabit the affective textures of fear and to interrogate processes of forgetting and enforced amnesia. The paper concludes that graphic silence functions as a mode of political dissent: it exposes the limits of overt protest under authoritarian conditions, preserves marginalized memories, and models an ethics of reading attentive to omission as evidence. *Delhi Calm* therefore expands the formal and political possibilities of Indian graphic literature and provides a vital intervention in debates about memory, power, and representation in postcolonial democratic cultures.

Keywords— *Graphic novel; Delhi Calm; Emergency (India); political memory; silence; visual narrative; New Historicism; cultural memory.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Emergency (June 1975–March 1977) represents a rupture in post-Independence Indian political life that continues to reverberate through historical, literary, and cultural discourse. During that period, democratic institutions were suspended, censorship intensified, and myriad personal liberties were curtailed; yet, the event’s representation in literature and public memory has been shaped by competing narratives of necessity, excess, courage, and complicity. Within this contested field, Vishwajyoti Ghosh’s *Delhi Calm* (2010) emerges as a significant and formally adventurous attempt to represent the Emergency in graphic form. Unlike documentary histories or testimonial prose, Ghosh’s graphic novel foregrounds the sensory and affective dimension of living under authoritarian rule: silence, muffled voices, enforced compliance, and quotidian acts of survival.

This paper proposes to read *Delhi Calm* through the concept of **graphic silence**, which can be defined as the strategic use of pictorial omission, negative space, panel-collapse, non-diegetic gaps, and allegorical substitution to communicate what direct representation cannot—trauma, censorship, and the workings of power. Graphic silence does not simply denote absence; it is

an active representational device. When harnessed within political graphic narratives, it can function both as testimonial practice and as resistance by mobilizing readers' inferences and ethical attention.

The study addresses three interlocking questions: (1) How does *Delhi Calm* formalize silence in its visual rhetoric, and with what political effects? (2) In what ways does the novel's visual grammar produce an alternative memory of the Emergency that complicates official historiography? (3) How might the concept of graphic silence help us understand the politics of representation in other accounts of state repression?

To answer these questions, the paper proceeds in four parts. Section 2 reviews relevant scholarship: graphic narrative theory, memory studies, and critical work on Indian political comics. Section 3 sets out the theoretical apparatus: New Historicism, cultural memory theory, and the visual semiotics of comics. Section 4 details the methodology and offers a close, sustained analysis of *Delhi Calm*'s representative sequences, organized under thematic headings: silence and censorship; animal allegory and depersonalization; urban space as an instrument of control; and the ethics/politics of readerly participation. The paper closes with conclusions about the novel's contribution to cultural memory and political dissent and proposes directions for further research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Graphic narratives have, over the past three decades, been increasingly recognized as serious sites of historiographic and testimonial practice. Seminal theorists such as Scott McCloud have established the formal vocabulary of comics—panels, gutters, closure, and sequentiality—showing how the medium produces time, emotion, and narrative through image-text interplay. Scholars like Hillary Chute and Marianne Hirsch have further demonstrated how graphic forms mediate memory and trauma, particularly in works of testimony, thereby complicating the boundary between visual art and historical record.

Within Indian studies, scholarship on the graphic novel is expanding. Critics have examined urban narratives, postcolonial identity, and globalization in works by Sarnath Banerjee, Orijit Sen, and Amruta Patil, among others. Political graphic narratives in India, though less numerous than their Western counterparts, have begun to attract attention for their capacity to intervene in public memory (Ghosh's oeuvre is increasingly cited in this context). Existing commentary on *Delhi Calm* in popular and journalistic forums highlights its satirical edge, visual complexity, and historical ambition, but scholarly engagement with the novel's formal strategies for representing repression remains limited.

Memory studies provide critical tools for this inquiry. Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory, and Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, foreground the mediated and transmitted nature of recollection; both frameworks are useful for understanding how artworks participate in public remembering and forgetting. New Historicism, with its attention to reciprocal shaping between text and historical context, provides a method for reading *Delhi Calm* as both product and producer of discourses about the Emergency.

Finally, the specific critical vocabulary of comics studies—closure, transduction, panel rhythm, and visual metaphor—enables close attention to how *Delhi Calm*'s graphic devices produce meaning. McCloud's work remains foundational here, while contemporary analyses of political comics illustrate how visual form can encode dissent even under constraints of censorship or risk. This paper synthesizes these bodies of work to argue that *Delhi Calm* accomplishes a distinct mode of political representation: it stages silence as evidence, and it transforms omission into a rhetorical instrument for dissent and memory.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three theoretical strands guide this study: New Historicism, cultural memory theory, and graphic narrative theory. Together they allow for a textured reading that attends to historical context, the politics of remembrance, and the medium-specific strategies of comics.

3.1 New Historicism:

New Historicism disrupts any easy separation between literary-textual production and historical discourse. Prominent among its tenets is the assertion that texts and histories co-constitute one another: literature both reflects and participates in the cultural and ideological networks of power from which it arises. Reading *Delhi Calm* historically, therefore, entails both situating the text within Emergency-era cultural politics and recognizing the novel's active role in reshaping memory narratives about that era. New Historicism compels attention to marginal voices—rumors, paratexts, everyday practices—precisely those elements foregrounded in Ghosh's narrative.

3.2 Cultural Memory and Postmemory:

Jan Assmann's work on cultural memory identifies institutionalized forms of remembering (monuments, ceremonies, canonical histories) and stresses how cultural artifacts transmit shared recollections across generations. Marianne Hirsch's postmemory describes how descendants and later generations inherit traumatic memories that they did not directly experience, yet which structure their imaginative lives. *Delhi Calm*, though authored decades after the Emergency, participates in cultural memory formation by reshaping affective recollection through images and silences that invite the reader's imaginative reconstruction.

3.3 Graphic Narrative Theory:

Comics-specific theory illuminates how visual sequencing, framing, and inter-panel gaps create meaning in ways distinct from prose. Scott McCloud's investigation into closure—the active cognitive work readers perform to bridge panels—suggests that omissions are generative: the gutter is where meaning is made. *Delhi Calm* exploits this affordance by strategically withholding explicit events, thereby forcing closure to operate as an ethical and interpretative labor: readers must infer what state violence made unspeakable. This study further contextualizes “graphic silence” within broader comics theory, considering its relationship to concepts like Thierry Groensteen's “braiding” (*tressage*)—the network of relations that gives a comic its coherence—to highlight how strategic omission functions as a deliberate compositional and rhetorical choice.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This is a formal, qualitative study relying on close reading and visual analysis of *Delhi Calm*'s panels and sequences. The analytic method combines:

1. **Close formal analysis** of representative pages and sequences to map recurring visual strategies (e.g., use of negative space, panel density, animal motifs, page layout). Sequences were selected for their thematic centrality to the novel's engagement with silence, power, and memory, as well as for their visual density and innovation.
2. **Contextualization** using secondary historical sources on the Emergency to link visual tropes to historical practices of censorship, surveillance, and propaganda.
3. **Theoretical interpretation** applying New Historicist and memory-theoretical lenses to read how the graphic form mediates memory and dissent, with particular attention to the ethical implications of representation.

The analysis focuses on major sequences that thematically cluster around silence, public space, allegory, and readerly response. While not every page of the novel is examined, the selected sequences are representative of the novel's overall rhetorical strategy and formal innovation. The visual analysis attends to compositional elements—line, shading, framing, and the interplay of text and image—as semiotic units that construct meaning.

V. ANALYSIS

The analysis proceeds in four thematic subsections: (1) graphic silence and censorship, (2) animal allegory and depersonalization, (3) urban space, surveillance and visual claustrophobia, and (4) readerly closure as ethical labor.

5.1 Graphic Silence and Censorship:

A central visual strategy in *Delhi Calm* is silence rendered visually. Silence in the novel manifests not merely as the absence of speech balloons but as a complex of representational choices: pages where panels shift from dense text to blank gutters; faces rendered as voids; public noticeboards with words redacted; and sequences where the soundscape is indicated by icons of microphones and loudspeakers more than by human voices.

This formal silence performs several functions. First, it enacts the experience of censorship: state suppression during the Emergency frequently manifested as the removal of newspapers, the interdiction of speech, and the planning of public auditory spaces. Ghosh's depiction mimics this by literally removing speech from the page, thereby making the page itself a site of censorship. Second, silence becomes affective: repeated visual quiet invites readerly empathy with characters whose capacity to protest is curtailed. Third, silence constructs a historiographic argument: what is missing on official pages of history—individual grief, small acts of defiance, the slow erosion of daily freedoms—must be attended to through indirect representation. Silence thus becomes argumentative: the novel claims that absence is evidence.

Consider a sequence in which a public plaza is shown across several panels. Early panels depict a montage of faces and conversation balloons; subsequent panels collapse into rows of identical, faceless citizens under a loudspeaker's shadow. Speech balloons shrink, then vanish; gutters widen; the recurring visual motif of a redacted poster—rectangular black bars replacing text—appears repeatedly. The reader experiences a transition from communicative plenitude to enforced muteness. This formal move mimics the historical transition from a free press to imposed silence and thereby critiques the mechanics of state censorship.

Importantly, graphic silence is not a retreat from politics—it *is* political. By leaving gaps, Ghosh shifts the burden of meaning-making onto the reader, requiring active engagement. This practice aligns with Hillary Chute's observation that graphic narratives often produce memory through presence-and-absence dynamics: what is omitted can be as telling as what is shown.

5.2 Animal Allegory, Depersonalization, and Satirical Humor:

Delhi Calm frequently substitutes human characters with animal masks or full-bodied anthropomorphic figures. This allegorical strategy has multiple effects. On one level, animalization satirizes power: bureaucrats become office-owls, policemen become mastiffs, and technocrats take on reptilian features. Satire here performs a distancing function: by rendering officials as beasts, the text unloads the theatricality of authoritarian rhetoric while disarming it with ridicule. This use of dark humor and irony operates as a survival strategy and a means of critique, exposing the incongruity between state propaganda and lived reality.

But animal allegory also accomplishes a darker task: visualizing depersonalization under authoritarianism. When entire populations are reduced to “sheep” or “cogs”—literal or figurative animals—the graphic novel illustrates the flattening of individuality and moral imagination. Faces vanish behind masks or are replaced by animal snouts, making it difficult to attribute agency or accountability in a straightforward way. This formal depersonalization captures the paradoxical experience of the Emergency: while the state attempted to homogenize citizens into a manageable mass, acts of resistance remained dispersed and fragmentary.

The use of animals also enables coded critique. In contexts where direct naming of perpetrators could be risky or where direct realism might trigger defensive contestation, allegory allows ethical censure while retaining plausible deniability. This is a classic function of fable and satire, but in *Delhi Calm* it acquires a visual particularity: animal heads are often drawn with exaggerated, caricatural features that suggest cruelty or buffoonery; their speech balloons, where present, reproduce slogans and clichés rather than dialogue, indicating the substitution of propaganda for human discourse.

5.3 Urban Space, Surveillance, and Visual Claustrophobia:

Delhi, in *Delhi Calm*, is not just a backdrop but an active architecture of power. The novel's urban imagery repeatedly emphasizes grids, fences, loudspeakers, and repeating façades. Panels often constrict movement: characters are framed in narrow vertical panels that mimic corridors or holding cells; birds-eye views show people as tiny figures in regimented rows; repeated use of shadow and bar-like motifs suggests bars and optical surveillance.

These visual decisions map onto historical forms of surveillance deployed during the Emergency—neighborhood informants, press monitors, police checkpoints—and they establish the city as both instrument and locus of control. The novel's formal architecture invites a comparison with Michel Foucault's description of the panopticon: built environments that organize behavior through the constant possibility of observation. However, whereas Foucault's model emphasizes internalized discipline, Ghosh's visual strategy foregrounds the external apparatuses of control—loudspeakers that instruct citizens not only what to do but how to feel.

Moreover, the spatial configurations in many sequences produce a sense of visual claustrophobia. Dense panels, crowded frames, and repetitive imagery compress the reader's field of view, reproducing the oppressive sensation of living in a monitored city. This compression is politically legible: it stages the ways in which public life shrinks under authoritarian rule, and how private interiority becomes the only remaining space for dissent.

5.4 Readerly Closure as Ethical Labor:

Building on Scott McCloud's notion of closure—the interpretative work readers do between panels—this paper argues that *Delhi Calm* deliberately designs its gutters and elisions to transform closure into an ethical act. Where conventional narratives might fill gaps with explicit exposition, Ghosh's novel often stops short of showing acts of violence or naming perpetrators. Readers must infer what happened in a blank panel or a redacted stanza. This enforced inference has ethical

implications: to close the gutter responsibly is to acknowledge the reality of repression rather than to gloss over it. The act of making sense from visual silence thus becomes a form of bearing witness.

Consider a sequence where a character disappears between panels. The first panel shows a domestic scene; the next panel shows an empty bed with a newspaper headline partially visible and redacted. There is no depicted arrest, no caption; instead, the reader's knowledge of historical context guides the inference: the State intervened. By never showing the act directly, Ghosh maintains the emotional weight of disappearance and avoids spectacle while ensuring the event's testimony remains legible.

This strategy both respects traumatic privacy and refuses a closure that domesticates suffering into consumable spectacle. The reader's labor is required, but the reward is a deeper engagement with the ethics of remembering: one does not merely consume a narrative of victimhood; one participates in reconstructing and acknowledging erasure.

VI. DISCUSSION: MEMORY, POWER, AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION:

The analysis above shows that *Delhi Calm* stages an alternative mode of historical knowing—one where absence, allegory, and readerly inference constitute memory work. What are the implications of this mode for broader debates about political representation and cultural memory?

First, the novel challenges the hegemony of official historiography by positing memory as fragmentary and affective. Official accounts often privilege chronological causation and named actors; Ghosh's counter-archive privileges sensation and small acts. In doing so, the novel advances a New Historicist claim: texts are not mere reflections but interventions in historical discourse. *Delhi Calm* rewrites the past not by correcting facts but by shifting the parameters of what counts as historical evidence—silences and omissions become sites of inquiry.

Second, the novel models a politics of representation attentive to ethical risks. Direct, graphic depictions of violence can sometimes instrumentalize suffering for rhetorical effect. Ghosh's use of omission avoids spectacle and preserves human dignity, suggesting an ethical aesthetic that resists commodifying trauma. This restraint is itself political: it refuses to let state violence be spectacularized into entertainment; instead, it asks readers to slow down and attend, aligning with ethical considerations in trauma studies regarding representation.

Third, the graphic novel form is shown to be particularly apt for this kind of memory work. Comics' sequentiality, closure mechanics, and combined verbal-visual channels enable nuanced representation of simultaneity (public rituals vs. private fear), temporality (repetition and arrested time), and affect. *Delhi Calm* exploits these affordances to create a textured public memory that is layered, participatory, and resistant to totalizing narratives.

Finally, graphic silence also raises questions about reception and pedagogy. How do readers unfamiliar with the Emergency decode the silences? The novel expects some historical literacy; without contextual knowledge, many of the inferential gaps may remain closed. This observation points to an important limitation: counter-archives like *Delhi Calm* both rely on and contribute to public memory circulations; their efficacy depends in part on cultural contexts and pedagogical infrastructures.

VII. CONCLUSION

Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* offers a compelling model for thinking about how graphic narratives can engage political trauma and memory when direct representation is ethically fraught or historically contested. By enacting **graphic silence**—the deliberate, formal production of absence—the novel performs dissent: it documents repression without rendering it spectacle, critiques authoritarian rhetoric through allegory and urban mise-en-scène, and invites readers to participate in the often-difficult labor of remembering.

This paper has argued that graphic silence is not a failure of representation but a tactical, ethical choice that enables a deeper engagement with the politics of memory. *Delhi Calm* thereby contributes to evolving conversations in comics studies, memory studies, and postcolonial cultural critique—showing how form and politics are mutually constitutive. The concept of graphic silence provides a new critical lens for analyzing how comics can articulate resistance under constraints, making a distinct contribution to graphic narrative theory.

Areas for further research include comparative studies of graphic silence across global contexts (e.g., comparing *Delhi Calm* with *Persepolis* or *Maus*), empirical studies of reader reception and pedagogical use in teaching modern Indian history, and archival work tracing the afterlife of such graphic counter-archives in public discourse.

Ultimately, *Delhi Calm* demonstrates the capacity of the graphic medium to sustain political memory in democratic societies where forgetting can be legislated and dissent suppressed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declare no conflict of interest.

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