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Performing Indigeneity: Writing Stories through Warli Art in *The Deep*

Review by Sayanti Mondal

Mayur Vayeda and Tushar Vayeda. *The Deep*. Chennai: Tara Books, 2020.

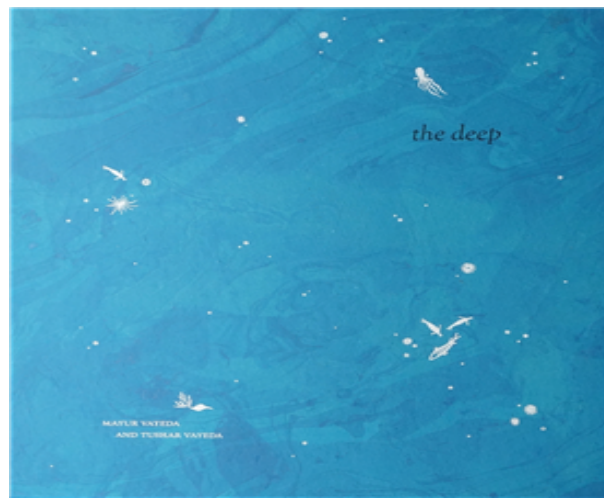


Figure 1: Cover of *The Deep* by Mayur Vayeda and Tushar Vayeda, featuring shades of blue with white speckles and the title in lower case navy letters, top-center right.

The book titled *The Deep* (2020), by brothers Mayur and Tushar Vayeda, recounts the authors' autobiographical journey from their familiar village, Ganjad, India, to the strange land of the Awashima island, Japan, as resident artists. The book is published by Tara Books, a South-India based independent women-owned publisher of illustrated and handmade books for children and adults. Tara Books experiment with the graphic narrative form by incorporating local techniques of folk-art illustrations into their style of storytelling, and this graphic narrative shows a deft use of traditional Warli art in its storytelling.

Warli art, which originated in the state of Maharashtra, India, around 3000 BCE, is practiced by one of the largest tribes living in India known as the Warli Tribe. The main themes of their artwork are rooted in worshipping Mother Nature and in depicting their daily lifestyle, through mundane activities and household chores (Vilhat 2019, under "History"). The paintings were originally made on walls of houses, but gradually shifted to other mediums like textile and paper. This art style uses simple geometric shapes (see Fig.2) to denote aspects of nature, like triangles to represent mountains and human beings, circles to refer to the sun, straight lines symbolizing rivers, and so on. With Warli images being heavily laden with cultural history and tradition, the intended audience of this book is primarily geared towards young adults and adults. Although the storyline for this graphic travelogue is simple and easy for children to understand, given the symbolic use of visuals, they may not understand and appreciate the depth of both the words and the images used.

The story begins with the brothers leaving their village to seek higher education at the University of Mumbai. Upon leaving the familiarity of a place they called "home," and experiencing the city life, a sense of detachment dawns on them and they realize how one's

cultural and natural surroundings can be taken for granted. The artists say, “Warli art was simply there, we didn’t pay much attention to any of it” (Vayeda 2020, 2). The ensuing distance intensifies the longing for their cultural roots, urging them to appreciate and learn more about their autochthonous cultural practices, while seeking ways to conserve them for future generations.



Figure 2: Page from inside the book, featuring a blue surface with white etching-like marks, exemplifying the use of geometric shapes and clean lines used in Warli art. Triangles are used to denote human beings, small straight lines are the water, and longer curvy lines are used for aquatic life, like snakes and fish.

As a result, after the completion of their academic degree, they return to their village, learn more from the elders about their cultural history, and start making their own art. One day, they get invited for a six-month residency at Awashima Island in Japan, as part of a creative community project. Upon their visit to Japan and encountering the strangeness and vastness of the ocean for the first time, their sense of unfamiliarity intensifies. They re-evaluate how their sense of being is shaped by the relationship they share with their surroundings. The unknown land and cultural difference made them feel “both fascinated and overwhelmed by its powers” (Vayeda 2020, 5). In an interview with Mayur Vayeda, he mentions, “we had only seen rivers in our villages, but that was the first time we had come across the expanse of the ocean. We were in awe” (Vayeda Interview, 2021). The vastness they encountered for the first time made them wonder how all life forms, both terrestrial and marine, are (inter)connected by water, and yet, we have only limited knowledge about our own existence— “human beings— whether Indian or Japanese—are like fishermen who cast their nets to fish but can only reach relatively shallow waters?” (Vayeda 2020, 6). Their inquisitiveness, which is at the heart of the story, is beautifully reflected through their artwork. The island, in the shape of a giant jellyfish floating in the water, occupies the center of one of the pages (see Fig.3).



Figure 3: A page spread with the giant jellyfish, representing the Awashima Island, occupying the center of the page, with a house sitting in its middle. The jellyfish and house are rendered in black outlines with some white elements against a blue backdrop.

While the island is adorned with images of local flora and fauna, it has at its center, a house. This abode signifies how in an unknown land, amidst an unfamiliar culture, the brothers find love and respect. The story is not only about these two young men encountering unfamiliarity within a foreign nation, but also about their individual exploration as artists, interrogating the two cultures they are navigating—that of India and Japan. In other words, the narrative is a two-fold journey, both outwards, beyond the known limits, as well as an inner plunge into who they are, as artists and as individuals. The journey the brothers undertake also invites readers to probe their own existence and connection with nature and each other.

The Vayeda brothers, who belong to the traditional Warli artists, find their source of inspiration in nature, as do most other Indian Indigenous artists. During the interview, Mayur adds an important detail to this conversation—“the Warli art should *not* be referred to as a painting, instead it is a form of writing. We write the stories we experience in our daily lives as paintings” (Vayeda Interview, 2021). While the Tribe speaks the Warli language, it lacks a written script, and the symbols used in the art become the essential mode of expression in writing. The symbols used in Warli art *become* the language for storytelling. The art becomes a medium for sharing and documenting cultural memory. It acts as a heavily coded language comprehensible only to people with a contextual understanding of its cultural history.

Engaging with the text thus becomes a celebration of the autochthonous cultural practices of both the Warli artists and of the Warli Tribe. As Edward Said observed, “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (Said 1994, xv). According to Said, culture is the source of identity, and by opting for the communal practice of storytelling, the Vayeda brothers not only confirm their identities as artists, but by associating this cultural practice to their community—the Warli Tribe—they also perform their communal identities. However, the Vayeda Brothers, who are aware of the evolving nature of Warli art and its fluid nature, try to embrace the modernity as part of traditional cultural practice. Keeping this in mind, Mayur mentions in an interview that the biggest challenge the brothers faced while working on the book was “explor[ing] new shapes and formations while maintaining the traditional aesthetics—by keeping the Warli grammar intact, we aim[ed] to share stories of the modern evolving world. You see, the Warli did not have symbols for underwater life, and we are the first artists to do it following the Warli grammar. It is an aspect that did not exist within the artform” (Vayeda Interview, 2021). With nearly no engagement with marine life, the artform did not include symbols for aquatic creatures. The brothers are also the first Warli artists to experiment with color tones to show various textures, as is evidenced in the book cover (see Fig. 1). Traditionally, the background for the artwork is set in monotone, preferably, as Mayur mentions, a brown color. But the brothers deviate from this norm and use handmade cotton paper to render the contextual textures and depths of the ocean.

Alongside the simple yet exquisite Warli art, through which its story is expressed, the book design plays an important role. It is a handmade fold-out book (see Fig.4) with the pages sewn together in a Japanese style. The length of the pages grows longer and deeper in color, as the reader proceeds into the narrative, giving an impression of different layers of an ocean.

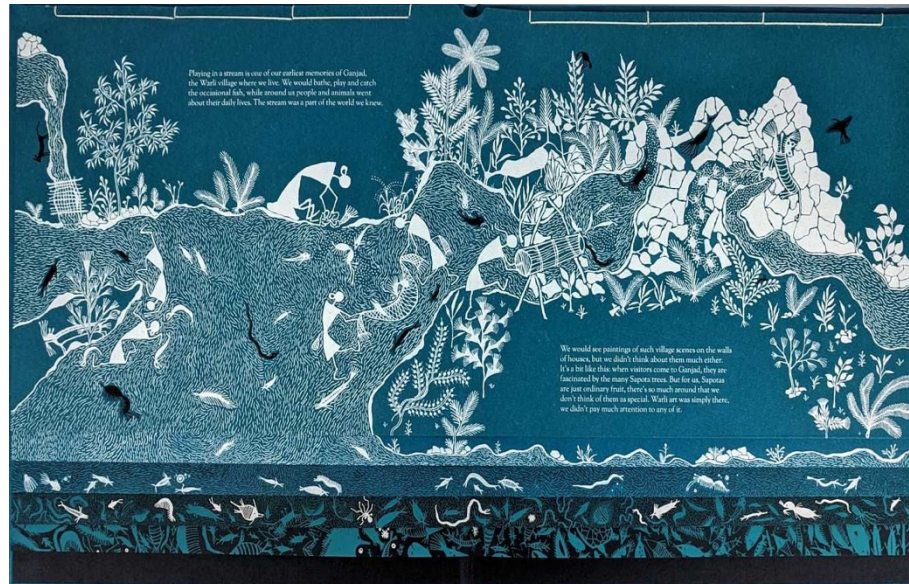


Figure 4: This page spread shows the pages of the book hand-sewn in Japanese style. Against a blue background, white and black etching-like drawings show the layers of the ocean.



Together, the book design and the art style signify a blend between local Indigenous Indian tradition and Japanese culture. The idea of the interconnectedness and confluence of cultures in the contemporary transnational twenty-first century is aptly expressed, both textually and materially, in this image-text book. With the flipping of each page, the reader dives deeper into the sea, only to finally encounter the wide blue expanse at the end, brimming with known and unknown water life, leaving us to wonder about the depths of mysterious knowledge simmering beneath the ocean. The form of the book reflects its content—that of a journey delving deep into something, seeking mysterious knowledges. The book is an artifact that not only celebrates and documents Warli cultural practices, but also showcases the emerging Indian experimental and collaborative graphic narrative publications of the twenty-first century at its finest!

References

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