

Are Images Enough?: On the Importance of Textual Narrative of *Rongmon*

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Abstract

The academic merit and seriousness of comics have always been questioned time and again. However, with comic book scholars like Thierry Groensteen, Robert C. Harvey, Will Eisner and Scott McCloud amongst others, comic book studies have been gaining serious momentum in the academic sphere. In the Indian context, comic books like *Amar Chitra Katha* are influenced by heroic figures and mythological deities pertaining to the subcontinent. The story is known beforehand by many readers, since they are of national importance. But stories included in regional comic books and magazines, like the Assamese *Rongmon*, incorporate the various specific nuances of the society where it was created. *Rongmon* is an Assamese-origin comic magazine similar to the typography of *Tinkle*, a nation-wide phenomenon which is still enjoyed by the readers. The words in *Rongmon* are Assamese; not a single English word is used. The prominence of word in comic books can be witnessed in this Assamese comic-magazine, where most of the importance is given on the genesis and identity of the comics, which is witnessed by the words inscribed within the panels. The narrative of the stories included in *Rongmon* are not only dependent on the panels where the images are contained, but also on the Assamese words which helps in moving the narration of the story forward.

Keywords: Comics; Images; Narrative; Panels; *Rongmon*.

Introduction

Known as the first Assamese monthly comic magazine to be printed in colour, *Rongmon*'s first issue was published in the year 2005 and has continued since then. Before the genesis of *Rongmon*, the readers were introduced to the comic book genre either through *Amar Chitra Katha*

(ACK) or Tinkle. With a literal meaning of joy and happiness attached to its name, Rongmon was seen as a medium through which the readers will find options of comic books other than English and translated works. In fact, "By the late 1970s, ACKs were being translated into several other regional languages, e.g. Bengali, Assamese, Malayalam etc., and were selling about 3.5 million copies annually" and around 1984 "8000 in Assamese" translations of ACK were sold (Guha 43). This shows that there was a vast network of readership of ACK in just Assamese language in the state.

In general, North East India ranked third in ACK sales in India, out of which Assam had the maximum readership of the comic book (Guha 49), thereby proving that Amar Chitra Katha as well as Tinkle had immense popularity in the state of Assam. In this backdrop, Rongmon was quite innovative and revolutionary, since it presented stories completely in the Assamese language; there were no translations involved at all. In comic books other than English, especially comic books which incorporates several stories depicting socio-cultural realities, it becomes quite difficult to decipher the narrative plot of such stories without any prompts. It is particularly noteworthy that 'Rongmon' added these prompts in the Assamese language, showing that the words used in the stories are significant. This paper will try to deconstruct the importance of the images and the words included in the panels of 'Rongmon', thereby proving that in comic books particularly the ones written in languages other than English, the text and the imagery exists co-dependently to form meaning. For the purpose of this paper, a few recent editions of 'Rongmon' will be analyzed.

Several scholars of comic books have been partial to the pictorial narrative of the genre. In fact, many critics prefer "...labels which emphasize the visual aspect of their language" (Romero-Jódar 121). Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comic Books*, is a scholarly text on the language of comic books. It is a semiotic analysis of comics, thereby reading all that is included in this genre as symbols and icons. He accepts that "comics are essentially a mixture of text and images", however he believes in the primacy of the image over the word and intends to demonstrate it as such (13). The iconic language therefore finds supremacy over the verbal language in Groensteen's study. In a similar way, Will Eisner conducts his own study of comics. He terms this genre as a sort of "sequential art", where the language "relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience" (Eisner 8). Like Groensteen, he accepts that the language of comics is an amalgamation of the visual and the verbal, therefore "the

reading of comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit" (9). However, he imposes visuality on the verbiage of comic books. He states that "lettering, treated 'graphically' and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery"; therefore the main function of the verb is to provide a mood, "...a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound" (11) and nothing more. This notion of the function of text in comic books is quite regressive and redundant, since it completely removes the role of words in comic books by delineating them as a sort of imagery.

Taking the idea of McCloud's study of the role of verbiage in comics, Scott McCloud also gives primacy to the pictures or "icons" in comics, and labels the words as "abstract icons", thereby stripping off the importance of the text included in the panels (28). McCloud lays the onus of making comics successful on the graphics, rather than finding a balance between the verbiage and the drawings contained within panels in a particular page of a comic book. A few disparaging remarks are also given by him directly on the words of comics, including that the genre "...doesn't have to contain words to be comics" (8). Even though there are words included in the panels of comic books contained by word balloons, the genre is "...an exclusively visual representation" (McCloud 89). The vocabulary of comic books, therefore, is mainly iconographic according to Scott McCloud.

This iconography that has been propounded severely by traditional comic scholars has been criticized by many. Robert C. Harvey's criticism stands apart because of his continuous search of an interdependent relationship between the image and the word in a given comic book. Images are dependent on the words in comics which exists in word balloons and captions, and without pictures and images, the genre is going to fall apart. The success of comics lies in its ability to blend two mediums into one (Harvey 25). The notion of Harvey is correct, no doubt, but when it comes to comic books of regional languages particularly in India, the main focus is on the textual narrative of the comic book. The interpretation of this multimodal genre requires "knowledge of linguistic, audio, visual, gestural and spatial conventions" of a particular comic book (Jacobs 24), therefore this "linguistic" knowledge of comic books varies according to the region and the language of the creator. In a frame containing the panels, if the words are removed, then the pictures does not make much sense to the readers. Of course, meaning-making might be achieved when the gestures of the characters are noted. An example from Rongmon vol. 10, issue 12 is depicted below.



**Fig.1. Panels without words from: “Oghaitong Ghitilair Oghoton’.
Rongmon, July-August-September 2020, p. 10.**

Without the inscription of words as captions and word balloons, the action of narration falls completely on the images included in panels. Since the characters are all humans in the frame shown above, the plot can be interpreted to a degree through their anatomies since “...the human form and the language of its bodily movements become one of the essential ingredients of comic strip art” (Eisner 101). In the first panel of the frame above, the first boy’s facial emotions lets the readers realize that he is probably bored and irritated. A second boy wears a surgical mask in the fourth and fifth panel, giving us an idea that the story is probably related to the pandemic. The last panel shows the second boy looking at another boy probably of his age being beaten by an angry-looking policeman because of his refusal to wear a mask. Therefore, the panels can be interpreted with the relationship that they have with each other.

The inclusion of Assamese words in the panels as captions and in balloons, however, provide a completely different dimension to the strip since the interpretation and meaning-making of the textual narrative can be done by people who are able to read Assamese. For example, the same frame in Fig. 1 with words looks as such:



Fig.2. Panels with words from: ‘Oghaitong Ghitilair Oghoton’. *Rongmon*, July-August-September 2020, p. 10.

The words inscribed within the panels are in Assamese, therefore the textual narrative of the comic book is meant to be understood by people fluent in the language. Of course, the images give us a sense of what the story might be about, but “the presence of verbiage in the same view or field of vision as the pictures gives immediacy to the combination, breathing the illusion of life into the medium” (Harvey 28). This presence is greatly felt when the verbiage is in a language which might not be understood by many readers who wish to delve into it. The images are the only aspect that they might understand and therefore interpret the panels accordingly, but the text gives “nuance to the pictures” (Harvey 30). With the inclusion of Assamese words in the panels shown above, this nuance is realized to a greater extent. We get to know the names of the two boys who want to go out during the pandemic, and the father of one of the boys ironically tells his son to go out so that he can get beaten by policemen. The words

within the panels can only be understood by a few, making the textual narrative a critical part of Rongmon.

In Fig 1, we witnessed the emotions of the characters through their gestures and anatomies, thereby allowing the non-Assamese readers to understand at least a part of what the story intends to portray. It is true that “in comic book art, the artist must draw upon personal observations and an inventory of gestures common and comprehensible to the reader” (Eisner 102), where the comprehensible gestures are mainly those of human beings. The same however cannot be said for characters who are non-humans, especially animals. If we remove the language from the animals, we are left with very few directions to interpret the story since human emotions on animal faces are difficult to sketch out. For example, let us take a look at a frame which includes panels narrating a story involving animal characters, where the words have been removed.

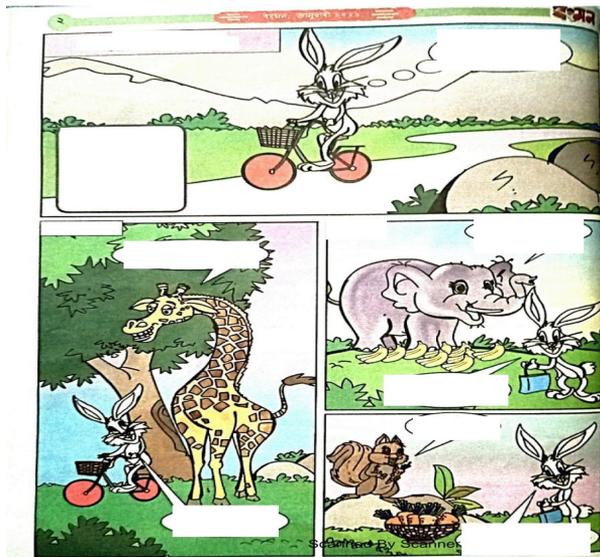


Fig.3. Panels without words from: 'Buddhiyok Xoha'. Rongmon, January 2021, p.2.

Eisner mentions that “in comics, body posture and gesture occupy a position of primacy over text” (104). This is a generalized perception of comic books where the characters are primarily humans. From the panels above, the emotions on animal faces are not easily captured, therefore the readers have no idea what the panels are trying to narrate. “The face...provides

meaning to the spoken word” (Eisner 112), thereby letting the readers know what the images might be trying to say. The linear narrative of imageries can easily be interpreted by the readers when the panels portray human characters. However, when the panels showcase other-than-human characters, this idea of the face as an appendage breaks down, thereby making the words an integral part for understanding what the images are trying to tell the readers. This codependency of the image and the word in comics of animals turns more complex when the words are in a non-native language. For example, when the same panel above contains words which are Assamese, a huge section of the readers will still have very limited idea regarding what the strip might be trying to enact.

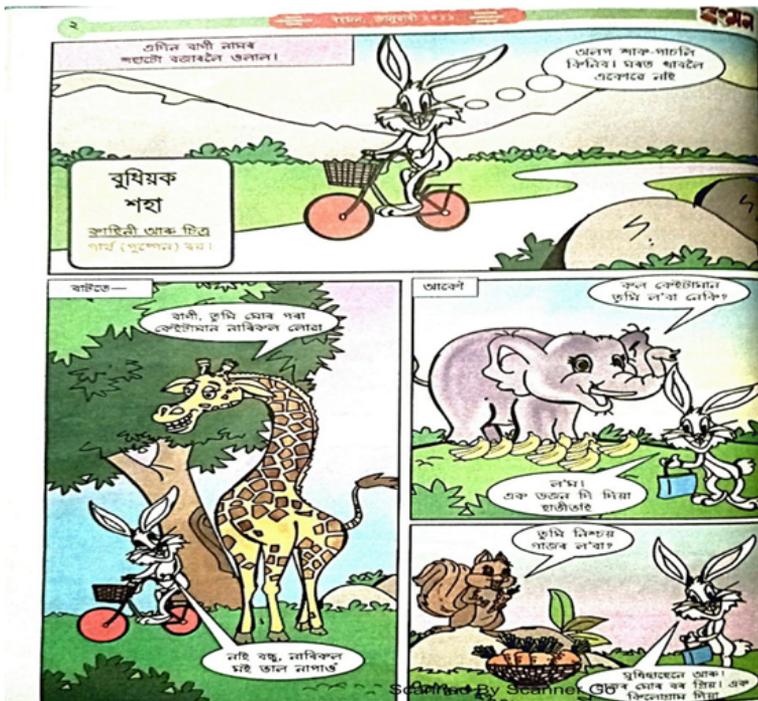


Fig.3. Panels with words from: ‘Buddhiyok Xoha’. Rongmon, January 2021, p.2.

The panel can now be interpreted by Assamese readers. The rabbit’s name is Bani , who heads towards a market to get a few things. The elephant, giraffe and squirrel are trying to sell food items to the rabbit. This interpretation of the images in the panels is possible because of the knowledge

of Assamese language. This is not possible for readers who have no idea how to read or write in Assamese, thereby making the textual narrative of the panels above a special code which can be understood by a few. This therefore makes the words in this particular comic magazine a crucial element in the narrative technique of the stories.

Conclusion

The amalgamation of pictures and words make comics a unique medium. What the pictures might be lacking is provided by the words and vice versa. The notion that the visual presides over the textual is quite redundant. Of course, there exist comics without words that portray a certain story. But the long narrative plot which is embedded in comic books as well as graphic novels is possible to interpret only by understanding the blending of these two mediums into one. The multimodality of comic books is successful only when both these two modes of narration complement one another. In the case of *Rongmon*, for example, we have seen that panels can be interpreted only by the words available as speech, thoughts and captions. But, since the verbiage exists in a different language – a language that is known to a few- the complexities between the word and the image increases, giving a certain authority to the verb present in the pages of the comic magazine.

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