

Scoping the Eco-sensitive Mythology in the Works of Amruta Patil and Appupen

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: The study aims to delve into the potential of the graphic novel in the Indian context, for which I have used the works of Amruta Patil and Appupen. The paper investigates the concerns of environment, mythology, and feminine experience and its presentation on a graphic-literary landscape.

Methodology: The methodology used in the paper is that of direct observation. The researcher has used the contributions of Pramod K. Nayar and Emma Varughese further to push the boundaries of the graphic novel in India.

Main Findings: The paper's main findings have been to bring to light the complex mesh of interdisciplinary strategies required to scope the medium of the graphic novel. The paper narrows down on the success of the graphic novel as a medium to address the issues of the environment in a much more nuanced manner.

Applications of the study: This research can be used to widen the scope of Literary Eco-criticism. It includes the medium of the graphic novel and seeks to examine its operative strategies when raising attention to the issues that pertain to the environment.

Novelty/Originality of the study: The terrain of the Indian Graphic Novel is still new and developing. While some studies have been done in this medium around the themes of the concerns of the cosmopolitan Indian, little has been done to look into the mythological roots and environmental concerns that this genre also illuminates. This essay is a significant step in that direction.

INTRODUCTION

As the pandemic waves have gripped the world for more than a year, human concerns have changed. To understand the future of humanity and the consequences of the collective impact of our actions, the field of literature cannot stay behind. Keeping in mind the concerns of interdisciplinarity, this research paper wishes to explore the field of Indian Graphic Narrative and contemplate how this specific medium has offered the opportunities to increase sensitization towards the ecological crisis that has permeated the global human community.

Before moving on to the two texts, Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Aranyaka* and Appupen's *The Snake and the Lotus* form a part of the case study of this paper; it would be best to create the primary argument. Interdisciplinarity has become a call of the hour. In this post-pandemic world, the global civilization has entered into a lifestyle governed by a further removal and blurring of boundaries. The workspace is no longer outside the home but inside. We live an existence where our professional and private lives constantly coincide. With the advent of social media, staying in touch with people living across the oceans is no longer impossible. We are increasingly moving toward the idea of global village-like existence.

Keeping this premise in mind, this paper aims to analyze Ecocriticism as a discipline and graphic novel as a medium. The two share a list of attributes that have hitherto been disregarded. As both can be seen as hybrid categories, they offer the opportunity to create a middle ground between what are often considered contradictory or binary and opposite principles. Eco-criticism as a discipline tries to obfuscate and blur the boundaries between nature and culture. Similarly, the graphic novel as a medium of artistic representation pushes its contemplative audience to confront multiple ways the juxtaposed text and the visual space can interact and enhance each other.

In his work, *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton (2012) states:

Ecological thought is a virus that infects all other areas of thinking... It has to do with love, loss, despair, and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. It has to do with capitalism and what might exist after capitalism. It has to do with amazement, open-mindedness, and wonder. It has to do with doubt, confusion, and scepticism. It has to do with concepts of space and time. It has to do with consciousness and awareness. It has to do with ideology and critique. It has to do with reading and writing. It has to do with race, class, and gender. It has to do with sexuality. It has to do with ideas of self and the weird paradoxes of subjectivity. It has to do with society. It has to do with coexistence. (p.2)

Similarly, when we look at the Graphic Novel, it is a medium that constantly avoids the path to a rigid definitional categorization. Artists using this medium are still in the middle of experimenting and coming up with adequate representational strategies. This intention of artists makes the Graphic Novel a fertile ground to test the hypothesis of the possible success of graphic-textual novels in creating ecologically sensitized and critically aware readers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before moving on to the two texts that are the case study of this research paper, it is best to look at the context of the advances and contributions that have been made in the field of the Indian Graphic novel and how the concerns raised in this research paper will further push the boundaries of this art form.

In his work *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique*, Pramod K. Nayar (2019, p.17) argues that “The Indian graphic narrative demands a new literacy, a new pedagogy, and a new interpretive frame.” According to him, the Indian Graphic Novel is a medium that anticipates and shapes the thematic concerns of the canon of Indian Writing in English. His work has been seminal in charting the common issues vexing most graphic novelists in India. It places their fears as an amalgamation or a product of the multifaceted issues raised by canonical Indian authors writing in English.

Emma Varughese (2018), in her work *Visuality and Identity in Post-millennial Indian Graphic Narratives*, on the other hand, observes that the Nayi Kahani movement has had a significant influence on the Indian Graphic Narrative scene.

While these observations have been highly enlightening in surmising the paramount concerns of this emerging new field, this paper aims to push the area of the Indian graphic Novel a little more and discuss common themes that are yet to be explored.

Most Indian Graphic Novelists have dedicated their art to dismantling and questioning the mainstream myths created about the experiences of modern Indians. The works of Orijit Sen, Sarnath Banerjee, and Vishwajyoti Ghosh, have astutely highlighted the bizarre realities that make up for monumental moments in India’s history. They have primarily explored the lives of Indian citizens as they make sense of the metropolis of which they are a part. The ever-expanding oeuvre of the Indian Graphic Novel includes works like *River of Stories* by Orijit Sen; *Delhi Calm* by Vishwajyoti Ghosh; *Kari*, *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers*, *Adi Parva* and *Aranyaka* by Amruta Patil; *Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers*, *Corridor*, *The Harappa Files*, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* and *Doab Dil* by Sarnath Bannerjee; *Legends of Halahala*, *Moonward: Stories from Halahala*, *The Snake and the Lotus* and *Aspyrus A Dream of Halahala*, to name a few. Because of the new nature of the genre, these writers are often viewed collectively to identify patterns of commonality in their concerns as well as approaches.

While Emma Varughese and Pramod K. Nayar, the two leading figures, have been seminal in providing a comprehensive overview of the prevailing concerns dealt with by Indian Graphic Novelists, the issues of the Indian ecology and India’s cultural landscape’s inextricable relationship with it need to be explored further. In *Adi Parva*, Amruta Patil (2018) proclaims:

Like a good teacher, a good storyteller speaks in the language of the hour. Her only allegiance is to the tale’s essence; the essence safeguarded; she is free to improvise the narrative to reflect the time. There are many stories, and each is an individual thread. The storyteller who wields and unfurls these myriad threads is traditionally known as the sutradhaar, threadbare. (p. 259)

The Sutradhaar, as defined by Patil, can tie pieces of information that are seemingly unconnected and yet, when positioned next to each other, reveal both the new and the old. This dialectical contradiction is the basis of the transdisciplinary method of inquiry.

Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik constantly leer into the collective past of the civilization, bringing in stories from the ancient world as well as its that continually serve us as a reminder about the wilderness and agricultural roots of the country. This niche medium of graphic novels in India needs to be urgently explored and the myriad ways it illuminates the concerns of environment, mythology, and feminine experience and how they are uniquely presented on visual and literary landscapes. She subtly illuminates the open structures of Indian mythical narratives and can offer to her readers how the concerns thematized within them are thoroughly modern. Her works, thus, fascinatingly highlight the present proclivities of the field of Humanities.

Having witnessed the negative repercussions of categorical and closed-off departments within the structures of Academia, there has been an urgent necessity to pave the way for dialectical interactions. One needs to take a cue from the eclectic ancestors, who paid little heed to divisions and were able to see the holistic ways in which concerns of various disciplines interaffected each other. A study of Patil’s work anticipates these needs. Her very concerns charted through the course of her works can become apparent to those who are willing to break the doors down. Patil’s visual and textual cues have the unique ability to be respectful of the archaic yet daring enough to represent concerns of everyday modern existence.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted within the work is one of observation. The text will first establish the nature of graphic narratives and then use Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Aranyaka* and Appupen’s *Snake and the Lotus and the Snake* as examples to argue how the medium itself offers the fertile space for both the readers as well as the creators to explore cross-disciplinary concerns.

Specifically, through her and Devdutt Pattanaik’s work *Aranyaka*, this paper will present how ancient Indian mythology is deeply troubled with the outcomes of man’s interactions with nature. The Indian Vedic tradition abounds with so many diverse kinds of Aranyakas, giving the people the opportunity to interpret and understand these forest spaces vis-à-

vis different perspectives. Amruta pushes her readers to not look at nature through a unidimensional lens, which presents nature as a reservoir of exploitable resources. In their work, novel nature or forests, whose bounty various intellectuals reap and can draw thoroughly diverse conclusions about the man's purpose on earth. As such, the readers encounter a kaleidoscopic nature that is variegated. Their work also allows the readers to visualize and ultimately imagine the practices of indigenous people and how they cohabitate with nature and its bounty; they are seen as forces of both consumption and production and, by extension, they preserve wilderness and, as such, give their readers a peek into alternative forms of human existence different from the present conditions of moderns existence. When talking about her book *Aranyaka*, Amruta Patil (2019) states:

The book refuses to let things enter the realm of abstruse. Scriptures are not – and should never be! – flash-frozen in some bygone era. They are being rewritten all the time. In a sense, that is what is happening here. It is an ambitious project.” It is a trope that she has applied religiously throughout her works, especially those books which have been retellings of stories from our ancient texts.

Aranyaka, meaning “of the forest,” is inspired by *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which means ‘Upanishad of the great forest,’ one of the first Upanishadic scriptures within Hinduism. It is believed to have been composed around 700 BC. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad investigates the intricate complexities of the processes through which knowledge can be attained. Like all the other Upanishads, it has been severely contested by various scholars who have attempted to arrive at its meaning. The mysterious nature of the text is what accounts for its appeal because the text forever remains within the realm of debate and interpretation. The purpose is thus never arrested nor concretized into definitions that offer limitations instead of opportunities.

The graphic novel's plot is loosely based on a story found in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. The story is situated around four characters, Yajnavalkya (Y), Katyayini (same as the main text) and Maitreyi (M or Fig), and Gargi (the Weaver). In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the Rishi Yajnavalkya is the primary and uncontested speaker, but in Patil's *Aranyaka*, it is the scarcely mentioned Katyayini who becomes the storyteller. We thus get to see the perspective of the ignored wife, who quickly notes that “forest stories are mostly about men ... Rarely one hears of aryanis, women who contain Aranya within them.” But it is essential to observe that Upanishads are not the only source of inspiration.

The primary event on which this novel is based is situated around an episode in the Upanishad in which Yajnavalkya tests his two wives to whom he gives the choice of either inheriting his knowledge or his wealth. In the Upanishadic story – Katyayini, the housewife, is seen as inferior for choosing wealth, and Maitreyee is seen as superior for choosing the path of knowledge.

However, as a text, *Aranyaka* is not concerned with the rationalizing hierarchy; it instead shirks the impulse of prioritizing perspectives. The story allows for a more nuanced understanding of the different kinds of intellectual capabilities. Katyayini, the Fig and the Weaver, and Yajnavalkya are four people whose intellectual inclinations and modes of inquiry are different. The text does not attempt to prioritize any preference over the other. Instead, the text leads by example to show how different ideologies can coexist peacefully. The story is thus a hypothetical example of the potential benefits that can be achieved if only one were to discard the rigidified structures of coded knowledge. As the story shows by model, such rigidity only works toward creating exclusive domains. It also tells the readers that scientific inquiry can only have merit when it is invested in human concerns. Within *Aranyaka*, each system or knowledge is informed and open for contestation.

Barring Upanishadic references, this graphic-literary text is enumerated with various cross-cultural references that further add to its complexity. There are examples of Biblical lore in the form of the image of the tiger and the goat painted on the flag of King Janaka, which reminds the viewers about the biblical myth of the lion and the lamb existing in harmony with each other. The image of the Jaguar was inspired by Meso-American iconography. The Weaver resembles the dancing girl statuette found in excavated sites of the Harappa civilization. The Fig's terrifying form when she is introduced in the narrative is also an apparent reference to the South Indian goddess Karaikal Ammaiyar.

These references convert this simple story in *Aranyaka* to lead the readers to ruminate over the co-existence of contradictory possibilities. The novel clearly articulates the argument prevalent in *A K Ramanujan's essay “Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?”* *Aranyaka* as a text brings together pedagogical modes of analysis that often appear to challenge each other but, if dealt with sensitivity and openness, can be converted into ways that interanimate each other.

The form of Katyayini and how she perceives the world represent her insatiable appetite. This appetite for food, sex, intimacy, and appreciation is presented in its unapologetic dimensions. Instead of being described as base, this unquenchable desire is at no point shown as base, but a natural human inclination, which is an essential component of how we have evolved from animals and yet are also sometimes similar to them.

The Weaver is introduced in the text as one of the female disciples of Yajnavalkya. Her training in the profession of cloth weaving and its trade ingrains in her the tendency to be exacting and calculative. She values precision, and her worldview is informed by it. She is the Gargi Vachaknavi in *Brihadaranyaka*, who challenges and questions Yajnavalkya in the assembly of Janaka. In this scholarly debate shown at the novel's very end, she is the only one who continuously tests Yajnavalkya's claim of superiority over the other scholars.

The Fig represents the second (scholarly) wife of Yajnavalkya, Maitreyee, who is the theologically minded compatriot of Yajnavalkya, whom he ultimately chooses to endow with his teaching. While the Upanishadic lore creates a hierarchy

between the housewife Katyayini and scholarly wife Maitreyee, Patil and Pattanaik's *Aranyaka*, on the other hand, attempts to show the coexistence of the Epicurean and Platonian impulses. Both can learn from the other; there is no hierarchy but a mutual and complementary coexistence between the two.

ANALYSIS

The text neglects binary impulses and welcomes the possibility of complex contradictions, and, by its example, drops any attempt to close the story off with a decided conclusion. The figures of the rishi and the rishikas created by Pattanaik and Patil offer the readers to use them as mouthpieces for open multiple disciplinary encounters. These different worldviews are presented to be at par with each other; Simultaneously, Katyayini is the official mouthpiece of the text; the readers are not forced to accept her vision of *Aranyaka*. Instead, she is both the interrogator and the interrogatee as a character.

The book is a set of parallel yet different concepts instead of a straightforward story with a simple structure. The writers created the novel with caution. Even the choice of color and material was eco-friendly. As repetitive tropes, Nature and forest constantly try to depict different facets of Indian and aboriginal mythology. The forests are presented in a chameleon-like fashion and offer different interpretations. For example, the epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana are both places of exile and learning. As opposed to that, the Vedas provide a different *Aranya* to the readers; the forests are a terrifying terrain where might and hunger are a key to survival. They can also be spaces that are ideal for meditation and seeking sannyasa. Whatever their portrayal, they are ever-present in the mythology and their constant evolution offers the readers a powerful lesson that change evolution is a part of life, no one way is the best, and the world is ever-changing. Hindu Mythology has a different *Aranya* for everyone. Within Hindu mythology, there are as many forests as colors.

Amrita and Pattanaik ring the alarm for her readers through her story, *Aranyaka*: one can see that complicit Urban India is tragically ignorant and delusional about its devastating impact on nature. Multilayered Vedic thought becomes that strategy that brings us closer to the countryside and the forests and interrogates the Aranya or instead lets the Aranya question us, as it existed for those who contributed and consumed the Vedas. They record this as an urgent responsibility of the creator. The text sensitizes the readers to understand the scope of man's dependence on nature, not just for resources but also for life skills and every aspect of their character. The text thus offers a very innovative and fresh strategy to tackle and verbalize the ecological crisis threatening the world's future. It rejects the much-popularised narratives, which function at the level of alarming the readers with their urgent tones; she instead uses or rather adopts Vedic thought to elucidate man's connection with nature, which can never be severed. The civilized world often misconstrues or obfuscates the acts of violence prevalent in nature that allow for the species' survival. This is the root or reason for man's existence as a collective species. One's awareness of this kind of survival-oriented violence opens that path to better temper and understanding it. The narrative poses more questions instead of giving steady and clear-cut answers, a powerful strategy to avoid limiting answers and paving the way for solutions that carry the possibilities of evolution and transformation.

DISCUSSION

Their characters and the very visual ways they are created offer the scope of visualizing their worldview. Katyayini, with her endless capacity for consumption of nature around her, doesn't remind the readers of a stereotypical representation of the activity of consumption as a necessary evil act. Her large, beautiful body placed and juxtaposed with the two other women creates a prismatic effect, where the world view of all the three women is altered by interacting with each other. Katyayini is not a figure so engrossed in the act of consumption that she is portrayed in an essentially monochromatic text. Instead, her subtle transformation as the novel progresses tells the readers of her capacity to change and alter as she interacts with the world and nature around her. Similarly, both the Weaver and the Fig as characters are women who illuminate upon and are illuminated by each other. We are allowed to tap into a feminine consciousness that provides for and always has room for contestation through these three characters.

As a medium, the graphic novel has often challenged the traditional modes of story-telling. Similarly, in *Aranyaka*, we see that the text does not imbibe or work with the usual structure of necessary beginning, middle, and end; in the Aristotelian sense of the word, instead, the characters from the beginning up to the very end of the text are making space for and reacting to newer stimulus that allows them not only grow their knowledge but alter it significantly as well. The quest for self is never-ending; the world can just as much inspire it out of Aranya as within. A fantastic example stems from the relationship between Katyayini and Yajnavalkya. Both the married couple encounter each other within the forest, where Katyayini is in a state of exile, enjoying and surviving in the limited resources within the forest. At the same time, Yajnavalkya has come to the Aranya to attain knowledge. After some time exploring and learning about the forest, Yajnavalkya establishes a school for his disciples to impart his wisdom to them. Initially, as his wife, Katyayini is unhappy about the change and cannot separate herself from the forest. Still, eventually, she comes to value her time in the grove that she creates for herself. As their relationship culminates, both the characters realize that their quest for growth is still incomplete; At the same time, her husband goes back to the forest he thought he had learned everything from, and Katyayini comes to enjoy and learn from the world outside of the Aranya and no longer considers herself to be an outsider. Thus, the journey of both the characters takes them to places they had previously left behind.

The text is an interesting speculative and philosophical experiment for the readers, who do not require the elaborate vocabulary and history of previous philosophical treatises to understand the purpose of Patil's vision. Instead, the visuals help the readers and viewers of the text tap into its juxtapositions and layered meanings introduced in the story.

While Amruta takes her cues from the past myths and re-nurtures them with her modern sensibilities, artist George Mathen aka Appupen, pushes his readers to enter his busy labyrinth-like fictional world of Halahala, which serves to function as a kaleidoscopic mirroring of earth. For this research paper, we will be looking at Appupen's critically acclaimed work *The Snake and the Lotus*. The graphic novel presents to the readers a post-apocalyptic post-human world where the once master race of humans is now enslaved by technology. In this topsy-turvy scenario, they are commanded by a "Voice" and continue their work as slaves to the city's gigantic machinery. While the humans in the story lead a robotic existence of repetitive tasks, the massive machinery they are enslaved in seems to capture real essence. The city's tunnels seem like veins and arteries and resemble an ecosystem that could exist within a gigantic natural form. It is within this environment that the heroine is introduced. She moves to the city to become its unlikely savior.

As noted by Pramod K. Nayar, Appupen is one of the few artists who takes a recourse into the grotesque as well as the monstrous to visually create for his readers a biting satire of contemporary human existence and create the opportunity for its readers to enter a futuristic terrain only to bring them back to their all too gruesome future. The parallels made between the 21st-century Urban world and the prophetic vision of Halahala are impossible to ignore. They push the readers to ponder the mechanized existence of people living a life in the industrial world where dependence on machines is increasing daily.

Kavita Daiya states that Appupen's *The Snake and the Lotus*' focus on "environment, urban degradation, and sexual violence invents an ecocritical Gothic, whose critical posthuman ecology contains coexistence and mutual dependence." (2018, p.7)

The artwork has been created in the form of woodcut panels. At the outset, the work seems monumentally different from the artistic ambitions of Amruta Patil. However, many similarities bring similar themes to their diverse creative scapes. The very form of the graphic novel creates room for bodily visual elements and, by extension, makes this medium ideal for ecocriticism's study of various relations between matters that are both human and non-human. The combination of the visual and textual creates an 'effect' that helps the readers ponder ideas that sometimes escape textual explanations. For example, in Appupen's *The Snake and the Lotus*, sex and violence are grotesquely presented in the text via a means that intelligently escapes voyeurism and allows readers to critically analyze this form of violence within the scope of an ecological metaphor.

With the lack of words, readers are constantly engaged in the process of filling in the lacunae that images create. This creation of a lacuna begins the process of the beginning of a contract between the reader and the work. The reader enters the text through this interactive engagement as a meaning maker. While the process of making meaning is not removed in the case of reading a text, visuals create the opportunity for nuance. The readers interrogate the world they live in through the images created by the artist. The graphic novel operates by giving voice to stories lurking under the surface, whether to represent the subaltern or to narrativize the impact of human activity on geological spaces.

Ecological literary criticism has been around for decades, with many writers contributing to its expansion. The graphic novel, however, is a relatively newer medium, especially within South Asia and its content and structure and their impact on the cannon of Graphic Narrative at large.

CONCLUSION

In the end, I would like to add that a lot of scholarly work has been done to address and compose pedagogical tools to assess the medium of Graphic literature in the past few years. Yet, there is still a need for a sustained engagement with the Indian graphic narratives in the form of a platform for environmental representation. Even in its more popularised form, the comic medium has never shirked from shedding light on issues of the environment.

Both Appupen and Amruta Patil are comic bricoleurs, bringing together diverse, disparate, cacophonous imagery only to tell the most intriguing stories. Interestingly, all their stories carry kernels of mythic lore that bring their readers closer to a sustained understanding of an eco-sensitive existence.

Aranyaka is an age-old story of the forest, with its forever-changing dimensions helping the readers open their possibilities toward an eclectic worldview. In all her mythologically inspired works, her characters constantly step inside and outside the forest or the *Aranya*; as an ecological space, it performs constantly shifting roles of benevolent teacher and terrible monster. The *Aranya* is not for the faint of the heart.

Appupen, in his fantastical world, constantly brings through his wooden panels the larger patterns of which we humans, in our fast-paced urban life, woefully become the victims. The unnamed female protagonist of the story is the one whose perspective helps the readers become consciously aware of their own trapped and technology-dependent existence. The landscape of Halahala is an awful reminder of the minefields and wastelands of the urban world. By bringing these visuals out in the very first pages of the novel, the readers are forced to face the reality of the not-so-distant future that we as a race are currently moving towards.

While Amruta Patil peaks into the recesses of the past, cuing in ancient stories and visual traditions that continually serve as a reminder of the wilderness and agricultural roots of the country, Appupen presents a challenging and thought-provoking visualization of futuristic India. Amruta's treatment of the archaic is just as contemporary as Appupen's treatment of the modern is archaic.

The Indian graphic novel thus is fast becoming a medium with which many artists are experimenting. Interestingly, this medium can easily incorporate the demands of an online readership that most actively deals with all things visual.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

Due to the limitation of the length of the paper, one could only use the works of a few authors as a case study to illuminate the possibility offered by the form of the graphic novel in presenting dealing with issues of ecology and mythology with nuance and sensitivity required in the 21st century. This paper opens up the possibility of following the approaches illuminated within this paper to delve into other works produced in this category.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

There exists no conflict of interest with the current organization, and no unethical practices were followed during the study. Everything has been referenced according to the standards of the APA formatting guide.

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