



Traversing the Contours of Rationality and Embodied Consciousness in Amruta Patil's *Aranyaka*

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ABSTRACT

Graphic narratives, often considered under the purview of popular culture, demand serious consideration due to their multi-modal engagement with the visual-verbal dynamics of meaning-making. The semiotics of the graphic medium, which includes the lines, colours, panels, and gutters along with the verbal text, elevates its potential to communicate deeply complex and pertinent issues that are often difficult to articulate through text alone. Amruta Patil's *Aranyaka* demonstrates the ability of this contemporary and popular medium to represent the phenomenological and embodied perception of the world. This is delineated through three powerful female figures: Katyayani (The Large), Maitreyi (The Fig), and Gargi (The Weaver), whose phenomenological awareness is contrasted with the rational perception of Yajnavalkya. Each one of them depicts an interconnected yet distinct embodied way of perceiving the world. Through a close reading of the three female characters, the paper argues that phenomenological perception is not a contrast to rational thought but a complementary and relational way of awareness of the self and the world. The paper further argues that the graphic medium, with its visual-verbal interplay, is integral to communicating the shift from abstract reasoning to embodied consciousness as an alternate way of apprehending the world.

Keywords: Embodiment, Perception, Phenomenology, Rationality, Ecofeminism

Introduction

The post-millennial years have seen a paradigm shift in visual narrative techniques. From the linear storytelling method, clear-line and colourful drawings that characterized the readerly texts such as *Amar Chitra Katha*, graphic narratives have evolved today as a multi-modal writerly medium that invites the reader's gaze to ponder over the layers of signification thrown open to discourse and deliberations. As observed by E. Dawson Varughese, visuality is in fact a dominant way of 'knowing' in the post-millennial world, particularly in the context of Indian visual culture (15). From billboards, serials, reels, stories to blockbuster films, seeing has become an intrinsic way of understanding and perceiving the world. However, unlike the

photorealistic images seen in the mentioned artistic mediums, graphic narratives are wielded and controlled by skillful artists who can direct the reader's attention to the most essential and intriguing aspects of the work. As remarked by Hillary Chute, the visual-verbal images in graphic narratives are often nonsynchronous and require the back and forth of reading and looking at images to capture the complexity of the text (452).

Traditionally considered under the purview of popular culture, its ability to engage with serious experimental styles and its commitment to complex critical issues such as sexuality, class, gender, and environmental justice makes it an important vehicle of political intervention. The confluence of graphic narratives and ecocriticism has had profound implications for



narratives in the ecological domain. The sensory diegetic (depicting physical reality of the story world), non-sensory diegetic (outside the story world), and hermeneutic images (authorial commentary that influences interpretation) offer an insightful and deep commentary on ecological concerns that cannot be captured by the visual or verbal independently.

Amrutha Patil is India's first female graphic novelist. The author of *Kari* (2008) and the Mahabharata-based *Parva* duology –*Adi Parva* (2012) and *Sauptik* (2016), *Aranyaka* (2019) is the author's perception of human fear and hunger. The work was written in collaboration with Devdutt Pattanaik, a highly acclaimed mythologist who served as her script consultant. An author of around fifty books, his introspective intervention connecting mythology to modern times has found its way into many leading newspaper columns. 'Aranyaka' in Vedic philosophy stands for specific texts that bridge the Brahmanas (ritualistic texts) with the Upanishads (philosophical texts). Serving as a transitional text, *Aranyaka* connects the outer rituals with the metaphysical and reflective contemplation on the meanings behind the ritual performance. *Aranyaka*, etymologically meaning 'of the forest', was a Vedic text composed before the Upanishads (philosophical expositions) and contained nuggets of wisdom on the forest as a site of self-reflection and transformation. As noted by Pattanaik, "Vedic thought is essentially about what it means to be cultured and civilized: the journey from hunger and fear, through domestication, towards empathy" (161). Although broadly based on the *Aranyaka* tradition, the graphic narrative draws heavily on the 'Brihadaranyaka Upanishad' for its central characters and concepts. The graphic narrative thus turns out to be an exploration of the forest within and without the characters. Although the graphic narrative is based on the Vedic text, it is, in fact, an imaginative and graphic recreation of the text to ponder on issues such as gender equality, embodied knowledge, and eco-consciousness.

Existing studies on *Aranyaka* have explored the text from ecofeminist, eco-spiritual, and ecopedagogical perspectives, underscoring the deep and interrelated connections between the biotic and abiotic forms on earth. In "Towards a Graphic Ecopedagogy: An Ecofeminist Reading of Amrutha Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Aranyaka*" Malieckal and Nair interpret the text through the ecofeminist lens and emphasize the

ecopedagogical potential of the narrative for the protection of nature and humankind (73–74). In "Whispers of the Forest: Reimagining the Sacred in *Aranyaka* by Amrutha Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik," Khare brings to the forefront the voices of the marginalized and substantiates their role as carriers of ecological wisdom (120–26). In "Ecopoetics and Aranya in the Graphic Novel *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*," Sharma and Rath attempt a critical analysis of the narrative and delineate how the complex interplay of the visual and the verbal reveals the concealed wisdom of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1–2). Sohini Ghosh's "The Art of Revering in Amrutha Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest: An Analysis*" discusses the intricate relationship between cosmos and the individual in the twenty-first century (27). Tanushree Ghosh, in her paper "An Eco-spiritual Reading of Amrutha Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*" brings into dialogue the Indian understanding of nature with the theoretical perspectives of eco criticism (131). Sohini Naiya and Smriti Singh's "Deciphering the Forest: A Journey from an Intellectual Concern to a Lived Experience" explores the spatial dynamics and organizational dynamics inherent in the narrative (Naiya and Singh). While the studies mentioned have made significant contributions to the corpus of studies from ecofeminist, eco-spiritual, and ecopedagogical perspectives, the potential of the graphic narrative as a medium to understand consciousness as an embodied, sensory, and ecological process in self-realization has been insufficiently explored. Through the subtle visual-verbal dynamics, the paper argues that consciousness is always embodied and can foster ecological awareness and finally lead to self-realization.

The interdisciplinary theoretical framework for the study is provided by phenomenology, ecofeminism, and graphic narrative theory. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) renders the central theoretical framework that consciousness is never pure but relies on embodied experiences to comprehend the outside world. Val Plumwood's ecofeminist critique in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) forms the theoretical background for critiquing the dualist oppositions inherent in the world and calls for a relational mode of engagement with nature. Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* (2010) and



Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) are also employed to decipher the potentiality of the graphic narrative medium to deliberate and convey complex ideas that are beyond the scope of either the visual or the verbal platforms.

The study aims to understand how Aranyaka subverts the dualistic oppositions inherent in the narrative; it analyses how the body is never a passive container of emotions and memory but an active site of meaning production; it explores how consciousness depends on embodied perception for actively negotiating with the world; and finally, the study investigates the suitability of the graphic medium to communicate this philosophical reinterpretation. The study adopts a qualitative and interpretative analysis of the primary text, focusing on close reading and the formal analysis of panels, gutters, and visuals in conveying the inherent and sometimes contradictory meanings.

The Anthropocene, which replaced the Holocene, witnessed Man as the centrifugal force that dominated and controlled the biotic and abiotic systems in the ecosphere. Ecocriticism, which emerged in the late 20th century with its triple allegiance towards an understanding, analysis, and political intervention for a sustainable world, poses a serious challenge to the Anthropocene era. The pivotal and groundbreaking works in this field were anchored by Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocritical Reader* (1996).

Ecofeminism, which is a corollary of Ecocriticism, further became a powerful force that upheld the nature/culture binaries put forward by the enlightenment ideals. Nature became a signifying presence, often associated with femininity, passion, body, primitivity and irrationality. This continued to operate to a disadvantage to both nature and women. Highlighting the devastating violence on women and nature by men, it was Francoise d' Eaubonne who coined the term 'ecofeminism' in 1974. The stereotypical depiction of women as earth mother or targets of patriarchal rage is symptomatic of a society that alienates nature from culture, rationality, intelligence and agency. Ecofeminism rallies for an alternative culture that can transcend the nature/culture binaries to effectively create an ecosystem that is nonhierarchical, inclusive and grounded on ecological

justice, thus effectively dismantling the patriarchal structure that has dominated both women and nature for centuries.

The disembodied, intellectual knowledge of Yajnavalkya is dismantled by Amrutha Patil by introducing three powerful female characters – Katyayani (The Large), Maitreyi (The Fig) and Gargi (The Weaver). Each of the women characters represents a distinct epistemological stance and serves as ambassadors of ecological justice and gender inclusivity. Resisting the linear mode of narration, the narrative calls for intuition, interconnectedness, embodiment and plurality as ways of perceiving and understanding the world. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad presents the conversation between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, where Yajnavalkya teaches the latter that self (Atman) itself is Brahman and this realization alone can affirm immortality (204). Extending this philosophy, Patil and Pattnaik in *Aranyaka* delineate how consciousness is always embodied and through verbal and visual interplay proposes that embodied perception can be the medium for self-realization.

Embodied Consciousness: Katyayani

The dualistic concepts such as reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature and man/woman that characterized the Enlightenment way of knowledge which prompted the ecofeminist scholars to challenge the binaries are discernible in the early pages of the narrative. Katyayani is shown as an outlaw who resists the hierarchical system of the village. She represents her village as a hive that is suitable for those who obeyed without question. The day she challenged the patriarchal authority by eating the food meant for gods, she was expelled from the village. 'This is a stone! It has no mouth! I'm alive! I'm hungry! Who needs food more?' (14). The transformation of Katyayani, the Large into diminutive form overridden by the countless patriarchal figures happens within a single panel page. The objectification of women and the subjectification of male authority happen simultaneously. As Val Plumwood notes, reason was considered the distinguishing quality that elevated humans from non-human world (15). By considering women closer to nature, she was parallelly marked irrational, embodied and polluted. Katyayani's expulsion from the village does not only reflect social ostracization, but also the



very operation of dualistic logic that creates hierarchies on the basis of binary oppositions.

Exile becomes inevitable for her and she is sent to the dark terrains of the forest to occupy a liminal space. For the young Katyayani, this becomes a rite of passage—an entry into the dark terrains of knowledge where the dichotomy of mind/body gets blurred and the body's engagement with the physical world becomes a rich source of embodied experience.

Katyayani's knowledge is visceral; it is entrenched in the body. Through the art of cooking and survival she learns the ways of nature. As Katyayani acknowledges 'Aranya doesn't mind you alive, it doesn't mind you dead. In fact, it doesn't care one way or the other. Here, it wasn't Katyayani the Large, but predator, prey, ally, rival, mate' (22). She becomes the Earth Mother, literally and symbolically feeding Yajnavalkya, the man in a termite mound who later becomes her life partner. Yajnavalkya symbolizes the mind, an intellectual enquiry into the world through renunciation and asceticism while Katyayani represents a more embodied knowledge, knowing nature through tactile experience, flowing and merging with other life forms. While Y tried to feed the minds of his disciples with philosophical discussions, Katyayani's irresistible aroma from the kitchen reminded them that it is impossible to philosophise over a hungry belly. As argued by Merleau-Ponty, perception is never pure, it is structured and contextualized from the very onset (4). As Patil demonstrates in the text, the kitchen becomes an epistemological space where the alchemy of textures, flavours and temperature acted as sources of rich, sensorial experience. Katyayani overturns the strict hierarchical oppositions and channels her embodied experience for understanding the rhythm of the natural world. Ecological wisdom is thus gained not through detached contemplation but through lived, bodily engagement with the natural world.

The symbolic order of human settlement once again finds its parallel in Aranyaka through the faceless figures of Y and his disciples. Here Katyayani's embodied knowledge takes on a visual representation—Katyayani merging and becoming one with nature. Her symbolic birth in the womb of aranya makes her a true aranyaka. Katyayani's transformative journey through the forest and the resultant kinesthetic

and proprioceptive awareness brings in a renewed relationship between consciousness and the world around her. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, attention is never passive but has the power to restructure the entire perceptual field (33). Katyayani establishes a coherent, perceptual space in the forest and this is visualized by Patil by dissolving her and making her one with branches, trunks and elements of nature. The colour palette in these pages takes on rich earthly, green, mauve and ochre shades to suggest the organic integration of life in nature. This interrelatedness of all life forms is pointed out by Gary Snyder who affirms, "We are living so as to speak, in the midst of a great potluck feast to which we are all invited guests, and we also are eventually the meal" (34). The visual space of the narrative is indicative not just of the protagonist's ecological consciousness but is also indicative of the lived, embodied perception of the world around her.

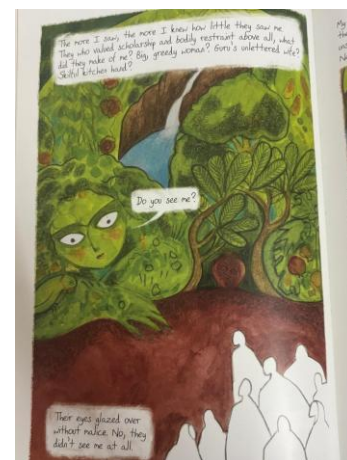


Fig. 1. Katyayani dissolves into the forest, her form merging with branches and undergrowth. (Patil and Pattanaik 45)

In Aranyaka, nature is projected as a sentient being and not as a passive stage drop for the events to unfold. Nature turns out to be a compelling force that orients the psychological and philosophical perspectives of Katyayani, Maitreyi and Gargi against the disembodied and rational understanding of Yajnavalkya. It provides an ecological perspective to suggest how geography becomes a determining factor in not just sustenance or livelihood but also in the emotional and poetic expressions.

Katyayani's philosophical reflections and deliberations are tactile and embodied; emerging from her close association with nature. Her proximity to blood, decay and food make her a polluted figure in the Brahmanical



discourse. From her liminal space, she challenges the dominant ways of knowledge by proving that knowledge can be sensual, visceral and tactile. Even in her role as the wife of Yajnavalkya and the cook of the large household, she asserts her agency. She says, 'To be unfettered and voluntarily feed others; this is love, not servitude' (58). Food is not just a commodity in the text, on the other hand it is an initiation into the abundant source of esoteric knowledge. The aromatic fragrance of roots in sizzling ghee or the essence of the turmeric leaf in the flesh of the river fish provided a visceral understanding of the cycles of nature or the rhythm of interconnectedness. Katyayani emphasizes 'Food demands violence, but violence is terrifying. Every part of a felled tree and culled animal satisfies a need' (83). Katyayani, through her silent communication with nature, embodies embeddedness in its purest sense. The very 'Nature' that was considered impure, polluted and inferior by the patriarchal order was transformed into a source of wisdom and knowledge by the female figure. The reversal echoes Plumwood's idea that overcoming dualism requires rejecting instrumentalization, recognizing others as independent beings with their own values and identity (143).

Relational Knowledge: Gargi

Unlike Yajnavalkya, who tries to transcend the natural world in his search for the infinite, his disciple Gargi yearns for a dynamic and fluid understanding of the cosmos. The weaver metaphor succinctly describes Gargi; the warp of the loom with its rigid, conservative and traditional ways of knowledge is contrasted with the weft that suggests the back-and-forth movement of questioning and introspection. Weaver thus becomes an interplay of fixed truth with dialogues, deliberations and debates. Like the forest without boundaries her search for infinitude is also non-linear and rhythmic. She is concerned with the knots and the layers of meaning it embodies, seeking the multitude of significations possible in each and every knot. Unlike other seekers of truth who shunned kitchen work, Gargi considered the place as a source of wisdom without either glorifying or shunning it. 'Her favourite kitchen implement was a grinding stone on which resistance was broken, truth extracted from grain, seed and fibre' (108).

Gargi reciprocates the lessons she learned from Katyayani's kitchen with a vibrant purple saree, a colour produced by mixing dry cochineal beetles with alum and lime. The transformative power of nature, dried beetles turning into a rich explosion of colour further underscores the interconnectedness of all life. Nature forms the edifice which sustains life and all its transactions. The muddy coloured dress of Katyayani is replaced with this beautiful grape-stained saree spun by Gargi. The mundane kitchen space here becomes a place of higher consciousness, wisdom and spiritual depth through its association with Katyayani and the connotations of purple.

The court of Janaka, which hosted the philosophical debates among the best minds display the gendered dynamics of knowledge prevalent in the society. Yajnavalkya who is revered as the preeminent intellectual in philosophical debate is here challenged by his own disciple, Gargi. The court turns out to be a battlefield where the best of minds engages in sharp, precise and unending intellectual debate. The linearity of Yajnavalkya's arguments was countered with the back-and-forth questions of Gargi who considered his answers as just filaments that needed further introspection and clarity. Her arguments are not just a challenge to Yajnavalkya but also against the rigid dominance of the phallogocentric language of dominance and finality. Her modes of inquiry which are metaphorical and open-ended reflect the need to foreground 'women's language' by challenging the logocentrism of the male language. Once again, the need for blurring the boundaries between man/woman and mind/body is underscored through Katyayani. She says, "They could have fed each other instead of behaving like predators" (149).

In the initial phase of Gargi's association with Yajnavalkya, she was a seeker of metaphysical truth and far removed from the sensory, visceral or embodied form of knowledge. She was more focused on hair-splitting arguments that centered around the complex ideas of warp to attain a deeper understanding of the cosmos. Katyayani's kitchen acted as a point of departure and transformation in Gargi. She learned to get attuned to a new way of learning—through touch, smell and through the alchemy of ingredients in the kitchen. She turns out to be a philosophical inquirer in the truest sense, weaving the warp of laws and abstraction with intuitive, cyclical and rhythmic weft



gained by her ecological embeddedness in nature. Gargi's transformation from a rational seeker to a more ecologically tuned contemplator exemplifies how felt perception can have profound and everlasting effect on the thoughts and ways of living of the individual.

The colour progression in the narrative is a further indicator of the transformation to a deep, embodied consciousness in the female characters. From Patil's use of the earthly green, brown and ochre shade to indicate the embodied consciousness in Katyayani, the narrative takes on rich mauve and purple shades in the gift-giving scene of Gargi. The purple-stained saree spun by Gargi out of the dry cochineal beetles along with alum and lime is suggestive of the shared epistemological stance between the two female characters. Gargi's relational understanding of the world is at once philosophical and also an extension of Katyayani's lived experience of the body and this is effectively communicated through the visual register. As Hillary Chute has rightly remarked, graphic narratives are "cognitive mappings" as the combination of words and images help to decipher complex personal, historical and social realities that otherwise remain inexplicable (27).

Reflective Embodiment: Maitreyi

Unlike Katyayani, who represents the bodily understanding of the world or Gargi who interlaces rigid truths with metaphorical understanding, Maitreyi (The Fig) embodies a knowledge system that is rooted in nature. Contrary to popular belief, the fig is not a fruit but a syconium—a bulbous stem with many flowers and seeds inside. The metaphor aptly describes Maitreyi and her contemplative nature. It directs the reader's attention to the reflective and inward-looking aspect of Maitreyi whose inner evolution remains hidden to the outward eye. It also points to the non-hierarchical and a centered nature of interconnectedness of the ecosystem which is dynamic and resilient. Similar to the wasp-fig relation that thrives on symbiosis for its survival and reproduction, Maitreyi has a rhizomic relation with nature. She does not assert her presence on nature but is one in its dimensions in the ecology. The complexity of Maitreyi's wisdom which is deep and hidden is suggested in the lines, 'She resembled the subtle flowers of a fig, secret and hidden, pollination happening out of sight' (120). Like the fig-wasp

metaphor, where the wasp has to sacrifice its wings to dive within the fruit, it requires effort and humility for one to enter her terrain of understanding.

Maitreyi's ability to stir different flowers and herbs together with an unerring sense of proportion is also suggestive of her non-linear, intuitive and subjective way of perceiving the world. The essence of knowledge is gleaned by this female sage not by transcending the world but by becoming one with it in the true Deleuzian sense. Subtly imbibing nature within her, she is never a passive entity but a powerful force to be reckoned with. The garland metaphor continues in the description of Maitreyi's receptive attention to the dialectical arguments between Yajnavalkya and Gargi. Unlike the masculine knowledge that asserts itself through dominance and argument, Maitreyi's epistemological stance based on rootedness and contemplative listening enables her to churn the arguments into a garland of great wisdom.

Visual Grammar and Semiotics

McCloud's understanding of comics as a sequential art form that constructs meaning not through individual panels but through the voluntary participation of the readers is particularly relevant in analysing Aranyaka (69). In many panels that depict women's embodied engagement with nature, the neat panel divisions are absent and the readers perceive a coherent, unified relation between the human and non-human life forms. However, in scenes depicting the philosophical engagement of Yajnavalkya with his disciples or with his brilliant disciple, Gargi there is the neat demarcation of visuals through panels. The visual grammar succinctly sums up two modes of perception; a relational, embodied engagement with the world in contrast to a rational, compartmentalized mode of thought. The graphic form, therefore not only illustrates the phenomenological perspective of knowledge but actively participates in the meaning-making process.



Fig. 2 & 3. Panel-free, unified visual space depicting embodied engagement with nature, contrasted with framed philosophical dialogue. (Patil and Pattanaik)

Conclusion

Aranyaka explicitly critiques the phallogocentric mind/body dualism which prioritises the mind as the only rational site of knowledge, thereby relegating the body and by extension nature as a passive and a subordinate receptacle in the hierarchical structure. Through the depiction of three significant female characters—Katyayani (The Large), Maitreyi (The Fig) and Gargi (The Weaver), the narrative challenges the fixed binaries where the second term is always considered in opposition and in conflict with the first. The female figures exemplify a different epistemological stance that reiterates the idea that transcending the material world is just one of the many modalities of gaining knowledge. The text emphatically posits the idea that an ecological intimacy with nature is a conduit for profound understanding and knowledge. If Maitreyi internalizes nature and Gargi theorises it, Katyayani embodies nature by being a part of it. Further, nature becomes a powerful presence in the text by being inextricably intertwined

with their thoughts and actions. Katyayani's pragmatic philosophy, shaped by her insights from nature, channels her relation with human and non-human entities. Katyayani's ecological wisdom is respected and internalized by both Gargi and Maitreyi. Gargi supplements her rational understanding of the cosmos with the sensory perceptions of the world, thus opening space for an intellectually rigorous but rooted epistemology.

If the women characters are perceptive to the receptive power of the ecosystem, it is not because they are closer to nature but because of their awareness of the human embeddedness in the earthly realm. Like the women sages, Yajnavalkya too was influenced by the transformative power of nature. However, instead of acknowledging the receptive power of nature he chose to transcend it through detachment and rational philosophical inquiry. The narrative does not vilify the sage but presents the gendered dimensions of philosophical inquiry, showing the coexistence of the rational and the abstract with a more embodied, earthly and visceral form of engagement with the world.

The visual-verbal interplay of the graphic text makes it an effective medium to deliberate on the complex and multifaceted aspects of knowledge and truth. The readers are left to contemplate the relationship between the logical and transcendental nature of the epistemic wisdom with a more eco-centered understanding of truth by highlighting the various modes of ultimate realization. The subtle interplay of gender, ecology, transcendence and materiality calls for a nuanced and rich, multilayered understanding in the pursuit of true intellectual awakening.

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