



Whispers of the Forest: Reimagining the Sacred in *Aranyaka* by Amruta Patil and Devdutt Patnaik

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Abstract:

Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Aranyaka* offers a unique synthesis of mythological storytelling and environmental philosophy. As a graphic narrative inspired by the Vedic *Aranyakas* and *Upanishadic* thought, the book reimagines the forest as a site of spiritual transformation and ecological wisdom. This paper explores *Aranyaka* as an eco-narrative, examining how it weaves ecological sensibilities with myth, gender, and sacred geography. Through its visual and textual layers, the work critiques anthropocentrism and re-establishes the significance of non-human life. It also explores how the novel foregrounds marginalized voices — particularly feminine and non-dominant perspectives - as carriers of ecological wisdom. Drawing on eco-critical theory and Indian philosophical traditions, this study positions *Aranyaka* within the growing corpus of Indian climate-conscious literature and argues for its relevance in contemporary environmental discourse.

Keywords: Forest, Eco-Narrative, Graphic-Novel, Myth, Gender, Appetite.

1. Introduction

In an age marked by ecological anxiety and a growing sense of planetary crisis, literature has begun to reassess the role of storytelling in healing our fractured relationship with the natural world. Indian literature, long steeped in mythic and spiritual traditions that engage deeply with the land, offers a rich yet underexplored archive of ecological wisdom. Among the contemporary works revisiting this archive, *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* by Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik is a significant contribution to the art of eco-spiritual storytelling. Drawing from the *Āranyakas*, a category of ancient *Vedic* texts situated between the ritualistic

Article History: Received: 30 June 2025. Revised: 03 July 2025. Accepted: 13 July 2025. First published: 1st August 2025.

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Published by: Adrija Press, India.

Citation: Khare, S. (2025). Whispers of the Forest: Reimagining the Sacred in *Aranyaka* by Amruta Patil and Devdutt Patnaik. *New Literaria: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 6:2. <https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2025.v06i2.015>

Brāhmanas and the philosophical *Upānishads*, *Aranyaka* is both a philosophical inquiry and a visual meditation on the forest as a liminal space for personal and planetary renewal. Yet, the novel deliberately avoids turning spiritual or philosophical ideas into something overly obscure or inaccessible. It views scriptures not as rigid, untouchable relics of the past but as living traditions that continue to evolve through reinterpretation and storytelling. By presenting ancient wisdom in a modern, relatable form, the book participates in the ongoing rewriting of sacred narratives- making them relevant for contemporary readers while preserving their core essence. As the authors observe: “The book refuses to let things enter the realm of the 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” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.162).

2. *Aranyaka* as a Contemporary Eco-Spiritual Narrative

Published in 2019, *Aranyaka* is the third text in a series of two previous graphic novels of Patil based on Indian folk and mythological stories; *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (2016). It can be viewed as the product of a unique collaboration: Pattanaik brings his deep knowledge of Indian mythology and scripture, while Patil contributes her signature visual style and narrative subtlety. The result is a genre-defying text that blends prose, poetry, and image to reimagine the *aranya*—the forest—as a space of transformation and resistance. Traditionally, the *aranya* in Indian cosmology is not merely a backdrop for ascetic withdrawal; it is a fertile site where ethical frameworks are tested, where silence is valued over speech, and where the interconnectedness of all life is made evident. In *Aranyaka*, this sacred ecology is reinterpreted for a modern audience navigating environmental degradation, urban disconnection, and spiritual dislocation. The forest in this graphic novel becomes a complex ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological space - one that questions both anthropocentrism and epistemic violence: “The forest is a repeating motif in our lore, physically and metaphorically. And rather than being a savage place, it is a site of profound personal and spiritual transformation” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.166).

The graphic narrative unfolds through the following panels: (i) forest, (ii) others, (iii) field, (iv) grove, (v) rivals, (vi) classroom, (vii) exchange, and (viii) ladle. The section titled as the “forest” familiarised Katyayani to the concepts of nature. In *Aranyaka*, the graphic narrative is supplemented with a dialogue between the two authors in order to convey their interpretation of the *Vedic* philosophy. According to Pattanaik, “Vedic thought is essentially about what it means to be cultured and civilised: the journey from hunger and fear, through domestication, towards empathy” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.161). The undercurrent motifs in the graphic narrative such as hunger and kitchen play a significant role in the tale. As Patil observes, “Beneath its surface are many native undercurrents – the ecological one, the feminist one, the one where food is really a stand-in for many other sorts of human appetites” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.171).

3. Ecofeminism and Gendered Landscapes

The novel’s visual metaphors are based on the intimate stories of the famous Indian Vedic sage Yājñavalkya, his wives Katyayani and Maitreyi, his dialogue with his disciple Gārgi and his conversations with King Janaka. Yājñavalkya, prominently mentioned in the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad* (7th–6th century BCE,) and *Tattiriya Upanishad* (6th century BCE), was a profound scholar and priest in the court of King Janaka. His first wife Maitreyi, being inclined towards spiritual knowledge, is mentioned as “one of the most learned and virtuous women in ancient India” (Mani, 1975, p.469). His other wife, Kātyāyani is described as “*striprajna*,” which translates to “woman-like knowledge”. As a traditional homemaker, and the mother of Yājñavalkya’s children she has to “undertake the burden of all material affairs” (Mani, 1975,

p.399) since his other wife is of a deeply spiritual nature. She remains the other, the marginalized in the saga of brilliant seekers of spiritual knowledge. According to Pattanaik, “it bothered me that Kātyāyani was always seen as inferior because she chose material wealth (cows) over knowledge. (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019,166). So, he decides to subvert the ‘mainland India’ hegemony of traditional representations and retell the story in a subversive mode:

Forest stories are mostly about men- their setbacks, triumphs. One never hears of the ill-equipped women, because these stories do not last long or end well. Rarely, one hears of *aranyanis* like me, women who contain *aranya* within them” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.122).

Instead of *rishis*, we have *rishikas* in the foreground: Katyayani, the large, Maitreyi, the Fig and Gargi, the Weaver. In the patriarchal landscape of Vedic philosophy, the inclusion of the three *rishikas* in itself is subversive. Here, the *rishikas* are not ethereal, spiritual, but worldly, elemental figures as represented by Amruta Patel. She portrays them as “*mukta-veni* (free-flowing) rivers braiding together into a *yukta-veni* (merged) river” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.167). The female cast differs drastically from each other temperamentally and physically. The virile and hirsute, instinctive and non-cerebral Katyayani becomes the narrator and the protagonist. Katyayani holds deep symbolic significance as the voice of the forest—intuitive, untamed, and fiercely compassionate. She represents a feminine consciousness rooted in nature, resisting rigid systems of knowledge and power. Unlike the structured, patriarchal wisdom of the male sages, her knowing is bodily, cyclical, and organic, echoing the rhythms of the earth. As a nourisher, she doesn't just provide sustenance but offers a healing alternative to dominance—suggesting that true wisdom flows not from control, but from communion with the living world. She is introduced in the novel as, “Katyayani the Large” with a “bottomless appetite” and a “grotesque” stomach. She further says, “The warp of my story has always been hunger” (Patil & Pattanaik p. 13). She exiles in the forest for eating food that was offered to the gods. In the forest she has nothing but food. The forest plays a pivotal role in the transition of Katyayani, who transforms into a “predator, prey, ally, rival, mate” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.22). In fact, she becomes one with nature and calls herself ‘*Aranyani*’: “one hears of *aranyanis* like me, women who contain *aranya* within them” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.122). For Katyayani, the forest is the symbol of elemental life governed by the basic instincts of hunger and sex, a place where only “the fit and the fortunate survive, hopefully with a full stomach. Until hunger rises again” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.22). She seems to be completely enamoured with nature, “you see my fears. You offer me relief” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.25). Often seen engaging in rituals with deep focus, she brings to light the interweaving of care and discipline- a synthesis vital for ecological stewardship. When she meets Y (The authors have used the abbreviation of “Y” for Yājñavalkya as a casual fictionalised expression), she gives him everything she has (food and sex) to satisfy his appetite. Y tries to convince her to join classes, but she doesn't seem interested because she desires to feed the hunger and prefers the kitchen (her identity) and her grove (nature): “if everyone is busy with prayer and philosophy, who will plant the potatoes? (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.66), and “You can't philosophise on a hungry belly” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.69). She is grounded and sees the spiritually oriented Fig as her rival: “She would've liked me to intellectualise *aranya*, but I couldn't. She'd have liked me to romanticize it, but it wouldn't. When you've known real danger, you don't romanticize it. You only work to avoid it” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.121).

The two other *rishikas*, Gargi the Weaver, and Maitreyi the Fig, represent the deep philosophical and spiritual agency of women in Vedic thought. Maitreyi embodies the inner quest for immortality and self-realization, questioning the nature of love, wealth, and eternal truth. Her dialogue with Y challenges the soul-body dualism and reveals the essence of *ātman* as the true object of desire. She is represented as a bright scholar and a skilled artist, “a trophy spouse for one or many” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.116). She is “the ultimate synthesiser, alert

and unseen). As Katyayani observes: “So rare was her beauty and finesse, she was kept unencumbered and taught the best of sixty-four arts” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.116). Appreciating her grace, she further says:

Her garlands, like her analogies, were open-ended. They would generously scent your hair and body all day, but in a possessive first they would simply wither away and perish in minutes. To know this was to know M. She herself was not a brazen flower. She resembles the subtle flowers of a fig, secret and hidden, pollination happening out of sight (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.120).

Maitreyi is keen to be noticed for her mind, not her body and so she starves herself day and night until “her beautiful breasts withered and her ribcage gutted out” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.117). When Y decides to embark on a spiritual quest, leaving Katyayani behind, it is the Fig who accompanies him. Ironically, in the course of her journey with Y, the realization of Katyayani’s immense contribution to their lives dawns on her: “She saw what no one else saw, the imagined hungers of the teacher, the Weaver and the Fig. ...I know so much more than before- from her field, her grove and her kitchen” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.156) and she decides to return to Katyayani: Who feeds the one who feeds everyone? I must return to hold the ladle to Katyayani’s lip” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.157).

Gargi, one of the nine jewels of King Janaka’s court, has been historically revered for her fearless debates with Yājñavalkya in the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upānishad*. In the novel, she is portrayed as, “a philosopher with a metier, independent woman” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.102). She prefers wisdom - “but like all animals, she saw only opportunity or threat” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 107) and stands as a symbol of intellectual audacity and metaphysical inquiry. Her aggression and her autonomous thinking make “the classroom too confining” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.132) for her. Her dominating nature is not liked by her teacher or her fellow-disciples and this leads to continuous debates wherein “Y and the Weaver sparred, barely listening to each other” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.133). At the *sabha* in King Janaka’s court, Y and Maitreyi engage in a philosophical debate which goes on for hours. She interrogates the very fabric of existence, asking profound questions about the unmanifested substratum of reality. Y, despite winning the debate, begins to see her as a potential threat.

Thus, women in *Aranyaka* are not passive observers but active co-creators of meaning. Together, they shatter patriarchal assumptions by occupying central roles in philosophical discourse, asserting that wisdom and liberation are not gendered pursuits but human aspirations. Their presence reframes the forest as a gendered landscape- fertile, nurturing, and deeply resilient. This challenges the binary of male rationality versus female intuition and proposes a more holistic eco-epistemology. As the authors observe:

Aranyaka’s women shine in the classroom (there is no gendering the mind!) and its men work a grinding stone, play with the babies and shed a tear. None of these details are heavy-handed. Food fundamentalism, body and sex-positivity are all addressed with a light touch. There is the diversity in body type and skin colour; there is, too, a glad-hearted celebration of hairy chests on men; unibrow. Frizzy hair and unwaxed armpits in women (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.171).

3.1. The Custodians of Patriarchy: The Male in *Aranyaka*

The authors of *Aranyaka* reimagine and rewrite the character of the great ancient sage Y(Yājñavalkya), who emerges as a complex and contemplative figure—a sage who straddles the realms of household duties and profound philosophical inquiry. Far from being a distant ascetic, Y is deeply human—capable of love, doubt, and introspection. However, as we delve deeper, we find undercurrents of entrenched patriarchy in his character, subtly reinforcing

hierarchies even within spiritual discourse. Though he engages in philosophical dialogue with women like Maitreyi and Gargi, his interactions often carry an undertone of control and finality. He "teaches" rather than truly engages, positioning himself as the sole custodian of ultimate knowledge. Even though Katyayani (nature) offers him (human) everything she has, sex and food, Y deserts her and prefers Maitreyi. Likely, even though nature offers everything, humans are likely to take advantage of it. Katyayani sees both herself and Y as equal, "I (nature) thought we were equals, bilateral symmetry of leaves. He (human), the fire of enlightenment. And me (nature), the fire of the microcosm" (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.93). But, ironically "Y (human) thought we were halves, not equals. *He, above. Me, below*" (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.93, italics mine). Y's decision to renounce the world is unilateral, with Katyayani and Maitreyi given no real say- only the option to follow or remain behind. While the text allows women a voice, Y's authority underscores how even in spaces of apparent equality, patriarchal structures persist, shaping who gets to speak and who is ultimately heard.

Upakoshala, Uppi, the other male character in the novel, who left her wife and came to Y for learning, acknowledges the true wisdom taught by nature, so he admits, "I judged her harshly for not being me. I must go back now. My big lesson came from the kitchen, not from the classroom" (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.99). He also recognizes the importance of nature to fulfil human's needs: "the cows didn't really need him, he needed them" (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.97).

Thus, the role of men in *Aranyaka* is both pivotal and problematic. They are often positioned as the keepers of knowledge, structure, and authority, framing the spiritual and intellectual discourse while occupying roles of power and possession—over land, women, and wisdom. Figures like Y represent the patriarchal tendency to control and define both nature and the feminine, reflecting how male authority often mediates access to both. Yet, *Aranyaka* subtly critiques this dominance by juxtaposing it with the intuitive, relational wisdom of the *ṛishikās* like Katyayani, Maitreyi and Gargi, who embody a deeper, more integrated connection with the cosmos and also Upakoshala, who gets to understand this connection. Ecofeminism in this context reads the male figures not as villains, but as representatives of a system that often prioritizes abstraction over embodiment, control over coexistence- a system the *Aranyaka* itself seeks to question and reimagine.

Aranyaka can be read as an ecofeminist text, wherein the female voices of Maitreyi, Gargi, and Katyayani foreground alternative modes of knowledge and being. Ecofeminist scholars like Vandana Shiva assert that "the recovery of the feminine principle is key to healing both the planet and ourselves" (1989, p. 45). In *Aranyaka*, the feminine is not reduced to biological determinism but elevated as a mode of relational, emotional, and embodied wisdom.

4. Deconstructing the Fluid Boundaries of Selfhood

The authors of *Aranyaka* seek to deconstruct the popular understanding of the *vedic* thought which is predominated by monastic themes such as the *atman*, *brahman*, autonomy and detachment which "seems at odds with the celebration of colour, fragrance, taste, texture and *rasa* (aesthetic life-sap), to be found in Hindu temples" (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.162). In the novel, the soul-body binary is deconstructed through a deeply symbolic and narrative exploration of the forest as a liminal space where spiritual and corporeal dimensions coexist and intersect. It challenges the traditional dichotomy between the material body and the metaphysical soul by presenting characters, especially the *rishikas*, whose ascetic journeys are not about denying the body but about embracing it as a site of sacred experience, "keeping in line the larger Vedic thought where *deha* or body is as important as the resident of the body, *dehi* (*atman/brahman*)" (166). The recurrent motif of the forest blurs the boundary between the internal (soul) and external (body) realms, illustrating that enlightenment is not attained by rejecting the physical but by understanding its integral role in spiritual growth. According to Patel, "the forest, is a repeating motif in our lore, physically and metaphorically. And rather

than being a ‘savage’ place, it is a site of profound persona; and spiritual transformation” (2019, p.166)

4. Visual Storytelling and Layered Meaning

The choice of the graphic novel as the narrative vehicle for *Aranyaka* allows Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik to evoke a dense philosophical and ecological universe that would be difficult to express through words alone. Scholar Scott McCloud notes that graphic novels allow for “polyphony and simultaneity” (McCloud, 1994, p.102), and Patil leverages this to depict the forest as a multi-sensory, multi-voiced environment - one that resists mastery. The medium’s ability to integrate image and text, to collapse linear time, and to embody layered meaning makes it a carefully crafted visual meditation, where form becomes content, and aesthetics become ethics. As Hillary Chute suggests, graphic narratives can “embody the temporal and emotional rhythms of memory, loss, and reflection” (Chute, 2010, p.5). The interplay between word and image in *Aranyaka* operates on multiple registers. On the surface, the story unfolds through the narration of the three *rishikas*, but beneath the text, Patil’s art carries its own language - a semiotics of color, gesture, and spatial design. According to Patil,

As the story unfolds and characters reveal themselves, the habitats and colour palette of *Aranyaka* transform too. The Bottle -green and burnt umber of the deep forest give way to the red ochre and burnt sienna of cleared field. This, in turn, gives way to the purple and pink-inflected grove, and the crowds and bustle of Janaka’s *sabha* (2019, p.166).

In this sense, *Aranyaka* can be read as a graphic *darshana* - a “seeing” that is also a mode of philosophical reflection. In Indian epistemology, *darshana* refers not only to philosophical schools but also to the act of sacred viewing, especially of deities or holy landscapes. Patil’s forest, rendered with reverence and ambiguity, functions as such a sacred landscape. Finally, the graphic novel’s hybrid form allows *Aranyaka* to speak across audiences and registers. It bridges the gap between traditional *Vedic* knowledge and contemporary environmental discourse; between textual rigor and visual intuition. This aligns with Devdutt Pattanaik’s broader project of “mythological democratization,” making ancient wisdom accessible without oversimplification. And yet, Patil’s images ensure that the text retains its mystery - its sense of the unsayable.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, *Aranyaka* is a remarkable contribution to Indian eco-literature. Through its philosophical depth, aesthetic beauty, and ecological awareness, it invites readers to reconsider their place in the web of life. By reimagining *Vedic*-forest wisdom in contemporary form, Pattanaik and Patil create a compelling eco-narrative that speaks to our times of climate crisis and spiritual disconnection. It reminds us that the forest is not only a physical space but also a metaphor for ecological being and becoming. In an age where industrialization and consumerism have distanced humanity from the rhythms of the natural world, *Aranyaka* serves as a reminder of our intrinsic connection with the forest — not just as a physical space, but as a symbol of harmony, humility, and introspection. Through the journeys of the *rishikas* and their engagement with the forest, the text bridges this widening gap by portraying nature as a living, breathing entity deserving of reverence rather than exploitation. The forest becomes a teacher, a mirror, and a sanctuary, urging readers to rediscover a more sustainable and sacred relationship with the earth. By weaving ecological consciousness with spiritual insight, *Aranyaka* invites modern readers to heal the rupture between human existence and the natural world:

Our ancient stories and visual traditions continually remind us of the elements, of wilderness and our fellow sentient creatures, of our agrarian roots and of the human being's place amidst (not atop) that schema. ... To be divorced from Vedic thought. To put *aranya* back in people's consciousness seemed like an urgent responsibility at this time in our collective history. I see this as 'earthing' and 'grounding' in their truest sense (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p.172).

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Bio-note

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