

Towards a Graphic Ecopedagogy: An Ecofeminist Reading of Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Aranyaka*

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Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's 2019 graphic novel *Aranyaka (Book of the Forest)* is inspired by Vedic scriptures and explores the forest's role in humanity, particularly the journey from hunger and fear to domestication and empathy. Furthermore, the book delves into the lives of Katyayani the Great, Maitreyi the Fig, and Gargi the Weaver, the novel's three rishikas, and their relationship with mother nature. This paper attempts an ecofeminist analysis of *Aranyaka* and explores how the graphic novel, as a form, acts as an ecopedagogical tool, promoting ecological literacy among readers who are in the process of becoming eco- and gender-conscious, and thus contributing to the protection of the environment and mankind. Environmental Science and ecocriticism gained prominence in literature during the previous century's final decade, owing to the ongoing threat the environment posed to humans and mother nature. Ecocriticism arose as a result of man's anthropocentric attitude of elevating himself above nature. In the contemporary milieu, characterized by heightened awareness of environmental issues, the field of ecocriticism has witnessed a substantial and expeditious expansion within a brief span subsequent to its inception. In this context, ecofeminism emerges as a distinctive strand of feminism, concentrating on the intricate interplay between women and the environment. By advocating for a

collaborative ethos grounded in communal care and love, ecofeminism champions the preservation of the delicate tapestry of natural life.

Keywords: ecology, ecofeminism, ecocriticism, ecopedagogy, environment, anthropocentrism.

Introduction

Graphic novels serve as a prolific medium for delving into the intersection of visual art and literature, pushing the boundaries of human subjectivity and narrative discourse. While a significant portion of existing research on ecofeminism and ecocriticism revolves around conventional novels and films, the inclusion of graphic novels presents a unique opportunity to address environmental issues that often defy conventional visualisation due to their inherent, beyond-human scope. A notable aspect lies in the graphic novel's capacity to encapsulate complex environmental challenges, providing a visual representation that extends beyond the confines of human perspective. This paper aims to delve into the multifaceted role of the graphic novel as an ecopedagogical instrument, actively fostering ecological literacy among its readers. By engaging with graphic novels, individuals are empowered to cultivate a heightened sense of eco and gender consciousness within the prevailing anthropocentric milieu. Through careful exploration, this study will unveil the various mechanisms through which the graphic novel facilitates this transformative pedagogical process, thus contributing to a more ecologically aware and gender-sensitive societal framework.

Ecofeminism in *Aranyaka*

Ecofeminism, an interdisciplinary intellectual and socio-political movement that gained prominence during the 1980s, amalgamates the realms of environmental studies and feminism. At its core, ecofeminism embodies a perspective that recognises the intrinsic interrelationship between societal and ecological dilemmas. Ecofeminism understands that the “position and treatment of women, animals, and nature are not separable, ecofeminists make connections among not just sexism, speciesism, and the oppression of nature but also other forms of social injustice – racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and colonialism – as part of western culture's assault

on nature” (Gaard, 1993, p. 12). In her work *Aranyaka*, Patil utilises the character of Katyayani to illuminate the prevalent bias in forest narratives, predominantly authored from a male viewpoint, focusing on male experiences. Through Katyayani’s discourse, Patil underscores the significance of the female perspective in establishing a comprehensive link between animals, the natural environment, and women, thereby facilitating an enhanced comprehension of the interplay between patriarchal norms and the treatment of women and nature. The graphics in page 122 shows the two main female characters of the graphic novel- Katyayani and Maitreyi -The Fig , engaged in a dialogue concerning the sage Y who ‘isnt a man stirred by listening’, this is indicative of a prevailing attitude among men who may not be receptive to women’s perspectives and contributions. The first bubble in the panel points out that stories about the forest ‘ are mostly about men -their setbacks, triumphs. One never hears of the ill-equipped women, because those stories do not last long or end well’(Patil & Pattanaik, 2019).

Ecofeminist scholarship critically examines oppressive frameworks and delineates a triadic progression termed the “logic of domination,” encompassing alienation, hierarchy, and domination. This philosophical perspective underscores the interplay between patriarchal societal norms and the treatment of both women and the natural world. The term “ecofeminism” was introduced by Francoise d’Eaubonne, a French author, in her seminal work *Le Féminisme ou la mort* in 1974. In her groundbreaking work, d’Eaubonne asserts that ecofeminism holds the potential to dismantle patriarchy and safeguard human civilization from ecological degradation, nuclear hazards, and the profit-driven structure that underlies conflicts and exploitative practices worldwide.

A comprehensive grasp of ecofeminism necessitates a firm comprehension of the term ‘ecology,’ originating from the Greek words ‘oikos’ denoting ‘house’ and ‘logos’ connoting ‘study’ (Haeckel, 1866). In 1972, Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess introduced two pivotal concepts, ‘deep ecology’ and ‘ecosophy,’ which subsequently entered the lexicon of environmental discourse. Deep ecology constitutes both an environmental philosophy and a movement, asserting parity between

human and non-human entities and emphasising the inseparability of human existence from the natural milieu. Conversely, ecosophy embodies a philosophical framework centred on achieving ecological equilibrium and harmony within the interrelationship of human beings and the environment. ‘Shallow Ecology,’ characterised by anthropocentrism, contends that environmental preservation should be pursued solely to cater to human interests. In contrast, ‘Ecological Marxism’ adopts a Marxian lens to study nature, offering a perspective that challenges prevailing notions of sustainable development and conservation.

The development of feminism overlapped with the arrival of discourses on ecological concerns and feminists seized on the politics and expansive developments of ecological concerns. The reason behind the identity politics was obvious, women related to the way nature was being exploited by men- “Forest stories are mostly about men-their setbacks. triumphs. One never hears of the ill-equipped women, because those 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). According to Noël Strugeon “Ecofeminism as a term indicates a double political intervention, of environmentalism into feminism and feminism into environmentalism” (Strugeon, 1997, p. 169).

As asserted by Vandana Shiva, a prominent figure in Indian ecofeminist scholarship and activism, women and the natural environment share a profound and interconnected rapport, characterized by a shared history marked by exploitation, degradation, and subjugation, often perpetuated by prevailing androcentric perspectives. In the context of India, a substantial body of literature addresses ecological concerns, with writings on nature constituting an integral component of the country’s literary heritage dating back to ancient times, including the Vedas.

Aranyaka (Book of the Forest) touches upon the 3000-year-old Vedic scriptures that are full of metaphors. The narrative derives inspiration from the story of the Vedic sage Yajnavalkya, alongside his two wives, Maitreyi and Katyayani and reimagines their story

from Katyayani's perspective. The book is inspired by the role of the forest in shaping the Vedic lore and juxtaposes Nature and Culture, Savage and Civilized, thereby giving us a dual perception. Patil states that "the forest here isn't romanticised- it is a place that is as unmaliciously violent as it is beautiful " (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 162). The novel displays a strong ecological consciousness and nature sensitivity. The graphic novel initiates its narrative by tracing the historical trajectory of the origin of life, attributing its genesis to the primordial forest. The central narrative intricately weaves the experiences of three female figures, denoted as rishikas-Katyayani the Large, Gargi the Weaver, and Maitreyi the Fig-whose collective roles serve to illuminate the complex relationship between humanity and the natural world. Within the graphic exposition, each protagonist establishes a profound connection with the forest, a dichotomous realm characterised by dualistic dichotomies including affection and antipathy, spiritual contemplation and material pursuits, as well as enlightenment and ignorance.

Aranyaka, through its visual and textual discourse, not only engages with the external forest landscape but also delves into the metaphorical wilderness intrinsic to human consciousness. The graphic novel is meticulously partitioned into eight distinct segments—Forest, Others, Field, Grove, Rivals, Classroom, Exchange, and Ladle. These segments collectively traverse a spectrum of pertinent issues spanning from gender dynamics and socio-political power struggles to the intricate interplay between human and animal domains, including the contentious matter of forest land encroachment. The thematic undercurrents encompass diverse topics such as Predation, Rivalry, Infinity, Zero, and the transformative trajectory from Dependence to Independence, subsequently culminating in a return to Dependency—a thematic framework resonant with the socio-philosophical milieu of the Vedic era.

Central to Katyayani's imagination is her encounter with the Forest after being exiled from her village for daring to consume the food reserved for deities. Venturing into the wilderness, she absorbs fundamental life principles by observing the flora, fauna, and natural world, from insects to larger animals- ' I was so unprepared for this.

But of you can withstand the blows and not cry foul at every adventure gone wrong, aranya opens itself to you' (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 18). Patil's portrayal of the forest offers an ecological perspective that avoids the typical tendencies of idealising nature or viewing it as a place of punishment. The natural world serves as a source of empowerment for the female characters, enabling them to transcend societal constraints and find strength in their connection with the environment. This empowerment aligns with ecofeminism's emphasis on the healing and liberating potential of nature. Katyayani is seen arguing with her hive when she justifies her act by saying that the stone (God) has no mouth, while she's alive and hungry and thus needs food. While in exile, in the vast forest, Katyayani is no longer 'large' but 'insignificant'. Later, Katyayani meets Y, a sage in the forest, and takes him as her husband.

The exploitation of nature is felt and experienced by women, especially in third world countries. In these countries, we can see women as primary nurturers, caretakers, and life-givers. They are mostly involved in domestic work, due to which they are very close to nature and depend upon it for food, fodder, and fuel. It is for these women that the direct effect of deforestation is felt. In this context, it is apt to understand Ruether's line of thinking. According to Ruether, "Deforestation means women walk twice and three times as long each day gathering wood; it means drought, which means women walk twice and three times farther each day to find and carry water to their modest houses" (Reuther, 1997, p. 40). A significant portion of women have historically engaged in agricultural activities; however, the advent of corporate-driven agriculture and modern technological advancements has resulted in the erosion of their traditional means of livelihood. As Vandana Shiva observes, "Peasants and farmers are thus robbed of their means of livelihood by the new technology which becomes an instrument of poverty and underdevelopment" (Mies & Shiva, 1993, p. 29).

From a multitude of traditional practices, beliefs, and customs, the profound integration of nature within Indian culture is evident. This concern for the natural world is not a recent development; rather, it traces its origins back to the era of the Indus Valley civilization.

During the Vedic age, the Aryans displayed a profound intrigue for the enigmatic intricacies of nature, bestowing upon them a divine significance. In *Aranyaka*, we can see how the characters seem to be one with nature, understanding that unison with nature is the way to live “To eat is to stave off death. To kill is to stave off death for a while. To reproduce is to stave off death in futures to come” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 9). Katyayani understands the importance of nature and the forest she dwells in. Mutual respect is given, and man doesn’t place himself above nature. She understands that “only someone who has never known real hunger will make villains of all predators and victims of all prey” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 23). *Aranyaka* underscores the profound connection between women and the natural environment, emphasising their shared history of exploitation and subjugation.

In the process of preparing the land for agricultural cultivation, Katyayani demonstrates a considerate approach towards nature, refraining from adopting an anthropocentric stance. “You can kill a tree unsubtly or subtly. You can over-water it till the roots rot, or starve it slowly. You can kill it with flame or axe or poison at the roots” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 49). Katyayani is guilty after clearing the fields of their natural greenery and says, “Filled with remorse after clearing the field, I ran back to the forest and ate the fruit of the largest banyan tree. All of the aranya seemed to rumble and stir inside my belly. I knew then that the field would rejuvenate after the destruction” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 51). Katyayani perceives and analysis other characters in the story by likening them to trees, animals, or natural processes, even after transitioning from forests to open fields.

Aranyaka as an Eco Pedagogical Tool

The term ecopedagogy, was coined in the late 20th century to represent the joining of ecology and pedagogy. Ecopedagogy, a multifaceted and evolving pedagogical approach, emerges at the intersection of ecological consciousness, critical pedagogy, and sustainability education. Rooted in the recognition of the intricate interdependencies between human societies and the natural world,

ecopedagogy endeavours to foster a profound understanding of ecological systems, environmental challenges, and the ethical imperative for ecological stewardship. According to David Gruenewaldin, ecopedagogy fosters an understanding of the intricate connections between human and natural systems, encouraging learners to recognise their role as active participants in shaping and preserving the environment. It promotes critical thinking, ethical engagement, and a sense of responsibility towards the planet. At its core, ecopedagogy seeks to transcend conventional educational paradigms by cultivating a holistic ecological worldview and engendering a sense of interconnectedness among learners, their communities, and the biosphere.

Comics have become a popular tool for communication, and they have been shown to influence people's perceptions of complex matters. The utilisation of comics in educational settings holds the potential to foster deep connections with ecological concepts, inspire critical thinking, and empower learners to become active stewards of the environment. The United Nations (UN) (2017) has their own website 'Comics Uniting Nations' that states 'transformative power of comics to educate people in every corner of the globe and empower them to create positive and lasting change in their communities and worldwide.' Comics possess several inherent attributes that align with the goals of ecopedagogy. The visual nature of comics engages diverse learning styles, facilitating comprehension of complex ecological relationships and concepts. Visual narratives enable the depiction of intricate ecosystems, environmental processes, and the consequences of human actions, making abstract ideas tangible and relatable. The combination of images and text encourages interdisciplinary thinking by connecting scientific knowledge with the social, economic, and ethical dimensions of environmental issues.

Aranyaka: Book of the Forest presents a compelling case for its analysis as an ecopedagogical instrument, functioning as an environmental literary work that underscores the imperative for active environmental engagement. Positioned within the framework of ecopedagogy—a comprehensive discourse, a dynamic movement, and an educational approach—it endeavours to recalibrate human

consciousness towards heightened environmental attentiveness. At its core, ecopedagogy constitutes a pedagogical paradigm seeking to reorient and enlighten its audience, fostering an acute sensitivity towards ecological concerns. Within its pages, a spectrum of critical issues is examined, ranging from the intricate interplay of gender dynamics within ecological contexts to the burgeoning conflicts between humanity and the animal kingdom. Furthermore, the narrative critically dissects the encroachment upon forested lands, a salient manifestation of the broader societal and economic dynamics perpetuating environmental degradation.

Ecopedagogy, as an instructional approach, emphasises the imperative of practical engagement and active participation, advocating for a proactive stance rather than a passive disposition. This sentiment is epitomised in the assertion, “The seed was not of my making, but I did ensure the soil wasn’t too rocky and no louché grazers caused damage. That there was enough water but not so much the roots would rot, there was shade when shade was needed, and no untimely frost or caterpillars” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 60). Here, ecopedagogy underscores the role of responsible stewardship, whereby individuals undertake deliberate actions to create conducive conditions for growth while mitigating potential disruptions.

Central to ecopedagogy is the cultivation of empathy towards the natural world, even in the face of the inevitability of resource utilisation. This sentiment is poignantly captured through the narrative, “Filled with remorse after clearing the field, I ran back to the forest and ate the fruit of the largest banyan tree. All of aranya seemed to rumble and stir inside my belly” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 51). The graphic narrative as an ecopedagogical tool instills a sense of interconnectedness and emotional resonance with the environment, prompting individuals to acknowledge the consequences of their actions and fostering a deeper cognizance of their ecological footprint.

Aranyaka conveys the imperative of reciprocal nurturing between humanity and the earth, envisioning a symbiotic relationship that extends beyond mere resource extraction- “We worked hard. Rules slowly came into being. Tasks were clearly defined, evenly

distributed, tidily executed. I fed the earth with as much care as I did my beloved” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 55). Through this lens, eco-pedagogy encourages a paradigm shift in which individuals adopt a mindful and conscientious approach to their interactions with the natural world, resembling a mutualistic exchange that ensures the well-being of both parties involved.

The forest dwellers in the graphic narrative have complex and in-depth ecological knowledge that comes from careful observation and intuitive knowledge of nature, they know that “In human settlements, the best way to be safe is to threaten no one” (Patil & Pattanaik, 2019, p. 27), which includes animals and plants. *Aranyaka* through its elaborate narrative helps in understanding nature and the pressing environmental issues we face in the contemporary world.

As an eco-pedagogical tool, the graphic narrative aspires to bridge the gap between human understanding and ecological harmony, fostering a broader cognizance of nature’s interwoven tapestry.

Patil’s artistic expression deviates markedly from the conventional animated style commonly observed in comics. Instead of employing a sharply defined and bounded approach, Patil’s technique adopts a painterly quality reminiscent of watercolor and water-soluble pencils using ecological hues. Her ecological vision is seen in her art, which is ecologically and eco pedagogically conscious. Throughout the expanse of the aranya, every visual frame teems with flora and fauna, invariably occupying a prominent stance rather than receding into the background. Characters, in their unrelenting quest for survival, are perpetually depicted engaging with the ‘aranyaka’ or forest, thereby compelling readers to acknowledge the symbiotic interrelationship between man and nature or the dichotomy between anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic existence. This visual hierarchy underscores the artist’s thematic intent, reinforcing the primacy of ecological interconnectedness while inviting contemplation on the divergence between human and non-human forms.

Conclusion

This paper attempts an ecofeminist analysis of the graphic narrative *Aranyaka* while exploring the ways in which it acts as an

eco pedagogical tool to educate and impart knowledge about the environment to its readers in order to inculcate values regarding the environment that will urge us to develop a more ecocentric viewpoint. Ecofeminism brings together feminism and the environment and explores the way women and nature are connected. This study uses ecofeminist theory and looks at how the graphic narrative uses environmental indicators such as setting, forests, water bodies, etc, while connecting it with its female characters. Comics have emerged as effective ecopedagogical tools due to their unique ability to seamlessly blend visual imagery with written content. This integration of images and symbols, as articulated by Scott McCloud (1993), involves a deliberate juxtaposition of visual elements in close proximity to textual components. This strategic arrangement serves to elicit an aesthetic response from the reader, facilitating a profound engagement with the conveyed information. With the gaining popularity of the graphic narrative in the 21st century, it has proven to be an apt medium that can prioritise emerging topics, especially environmental damage problems.

Creating awareness about our environment and its protection is an essential part of any kind of education. The world today faces imminent environmental crises caused by industrial and technological advancement. According to Fassbinder, ecopedagogy combines “the philosophies of teaching of the critical pedagogy movement...with the urgency of an environmental education dedicated to the current environmental crisis”(Fassbinder, 2012, p. 2). This paper looks at how *Aranyaka*, can be analysed as an ecopedagogical tool in literature, that educates the readers of the graphic novel about the various hazards of exploiting the earth and how immediate action to preserve the environment is warranted. The graphic narrative highlights the importance of the coexistence of air, water, animals, and birds with human beings, which is central to maintaining harmony within the ecosystem. It shows how the anthropocentric viewpoint has posed an existential threat to the ecosystem. Environmental writing urges a holistic understanding of the human relationship with the environment and the development process. *Aranyaka*, considered as an environmental graphic narrative aims to increase the readers’

awareness of their natural environment and the issues it faces to promote ecological protection. *Aranyaka* emerges as a potent ecopedagogical tool within its narrative framework, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of ecological consciousness and nature's interconnectedness. Through its exploration of the evolution of life from the forest and the subsequent shift towards anthropocentrism, the graphic novel serves as a didactic instrument for readers to grasp the intricate relationship between humanity and the environment. The reimagined perspectives of the three rishikas - Katyayani, Gargi, and Maitreyi - offer a lens through which readers can unravel the multifaceted dynamics between nature and human existence. The graphic novel's thematic duality, exemplified by concepts such as love and aversion, spiritualism and materialism, and knowledge and ignorance, provides a nuanced foundation for ecological education. By delving into these contrasting elements, *Aranyaka* encourages readers to critically assess their own attitudes and behaviours towards the environment, fostering a heightened ecological sensitivity and awareness.

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