



Environmental Issues in Select Graphic Novels of Amruta Patil: A Study in Visual Imagery and Verbal Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Environmental sustainability is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of India. Our Hindu scriptures are replete with the environmental philosophies which believe that our very existence is only a small part of this huge infinite multiverse. However, the environmental degradation through mass cutting down of forests, poaching and slaughtering of animals, misuse of natural resources, unprecedented waste generation, etc by the human beings have led us to irreversible environmental crisis. Amruta Patil, a pioneering women graphic novelist of India has made significant contribution towards making people aware of this crisis through her fictional works namely *Kari*, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean*, *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* and *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*. In the proposed presentation I will try to show how in these graphic novels, she has linked our present with our past by using on one hand, patterns of symbolic colours and on the other several familiar mythological narratives from defamiliarized perspectives to reflect on ecological issues that involves the questions of land, memory and human identity.

Introduction:

Our planet is thriving as the breakthroughs in the different fields of science and technology are altering the course of human life. But this long-desired prosperity comes at a cost that is detrimental to our dear home. Running in the marathon of modernization, we often lose track of our surroundings. But when



checked once in a while, the results shock us. Our planet is heading towards doom. A plethora of disasters are waiting to afflict our Earth. One of the most significant among them is climatic disaster. Our future is hanging beneath the slaughter of a multitude of climate risks. Several factors like ruthless exploitation of natural resources by man have already caused havoc in our environment. This reckless exploitation has led our world to the verge of wildlife extinction, global warming, pollution, and other rudimentary problems for the sustenance of living species on the earth. Of late, we have realised this grim reality and are desperately searching for measures to prevent this degradation further.

Several environment-conscious writers have started looking towards our culture to draw useful and ethical ideas that will aid in the reversal of the lop-sided development of modern man. Our Ancient Indian culture believes in the well-being of all the inmates of this world and making a harmonious 'global nest'. The study aims to delve into the power of the graphic novel in the Indian context, for which I will critically examine the mythological graphic novels of Amruta Patil who seeks to assess environmental and ecological awareness taking cues from the Mahabharata and The Upanishads.

Amruta Patil is India's first female graphic novelist who on the one hand is a writer and on the other, she is an outstanding painter. She has authored a few exceptional graphic novels like *Kari* (2008), the Mahabharat-based duology *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (2016), and along with Devdutt Pattanaik, *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* (2019). Patil was a speaker at the Jaipur Literature Festival and London Book Fair and artist-in-residence at the University of Chicago's School of Divinity and La Maison des Auteurs (France). She is the proud recipient of Nari Shakti Puraskar in the year 2016, from the 13th President of India for "unusual work that breaks boundaries" in art and literature. She has perfectly blended nature with the usual human instincts to prove the interdependence and coordination between the human world and the natural world. Particularly her use of colours plays a very significant role in her graphic novels.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Amruta Patil's graphic novels increasingly engages with ecocriticism, particularly how her visual-verbal narratives challenge anthropocentric views and revive ecological consciousness through mythology.

Studies on *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* dominate this discourse. Sarkar and Karmakar (2021) examine multi-modal narratology in the text, arguing it anchors ecological awareness by depicting the forest (*aranya*) as a multispecies "contact zone" that revives pre-urban environmental sensitivity. Sharma and



Rath (2021) explore ecopoetics, analyzing visual-verbal metaphors that blur nature-culture binaries. Ghosh (2020) offers an eco-spiritual reading, portraying Katyayani as a forest-goddess figure that questions hierarchical dualisms and aligns with Indian spiritual ecology. Malieckal (2024) applies ecofeminism, viewing the graphic novel as an ecopedagogical tool fostering ecological literacy and empathy.

Broader analyses of Patil's oeuvre highlight ecofeminist interventions. Bhattacharya (2024) argues that her works, including *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik*, challenge anthropocentric readings of myths while grounding environmental themes in mythology. Research on eco-sensitive mythology (e.g., in Patil and Appupen) underscores the graphic novel's role in interdisciplinary ecological critique, blending environment, feminine experience, and narrative innovation.

While *Kari* receives attention for urban alienation and queer ecology (e.g., recent explorations of eco-semiotics), the mythological works receive more sustained ecocritical focus, often linking deforestation, pollution, and human-nature entanglement to contemporary crises. This paper builds on these studies by emphasizing Patil's symbolic colors and defamiliarized narratives across her select mythological graphic novels.

Environment as represented in the mythological graphic novels of Amruta Patil:

At the very outset of the graphic novels *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik*, the colour of the panels is drawn with red colour which portrays the condition of the environment during wars - filled with blood, fire, and smoke on one hand and selfishness, cruelty, and brutality in human hearts on the other. Not only human beings but also Mother nature bleeds due to the bloodshed. In the great epic Mahabharata, Ashwatthama, in the form of being a 'Chiranjeevi', was severely punished for his barbarism by Krishna. Like the human world, a Chiranjeevi's body is also subject to decay, only they remain alive. Nobody ever tried to know about Ashwatthama, since he was a savage antagonist. Patil in her graphic novel *Sauptik*, vividly portrays the miserable condition of Ashwatthama, who cannot utter a word out his mouth, with bleeding wounds, smelling bad, and is treated inhumanely by human beings. In contrast, she has portrayed Nature as having an embalming effect, even on a heinous man like Ashwatthama. Nature never knows any discrimination between a hero and a villain. Hence, he feels safe and calm when he takes shelter in the underbrush. Yet we as human beings are least concerned about our nature. In his words:



“The trees and underbrush have kept me company longer than people have. As the forests grow scantier in the world around me, they grow denser in my narrative. It is easy for me to slip into metaphors of the forest.” (Page 130)

In *Adi Parva* when Shakuntala was abandoned by Menaka at the banks of River Malini, birds sheltered her under their wings. Mother Nature sets her army always at the service of mankind. It is only the people who forget these services.

In *Sauptik*, Patil emphasised the use of our ancient tradition of Ayurveda in treating wounds. Here Guru Dron is seen teaching his pupils - Pandavas, Kauravas, and Ashwatthama, how to treat wounds with poultices, tinctures and using herbs as well as understand the sweetness of nature in the form of flowers, butterflies, and bees.

Forests play a very vital role both in *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Forests serve as a place of transformation. The royals, the kings, and the householders visit the forest as monks. There they have to come to terms with the dark side of life and start realising the true meaning of life. The forest or Aranya is vast in comparison to the limited space of their kingdom, of which they are the rulers. All the societal rules and the moral conduct that guides one in society stand meaningless when one enters a forest. Here Patil has presented her characters to realise their knowledge is limited when they enter the forest. So, they started learning new skills, to bring down mammoths, the time to retreat, hibernate, and save oneself as well as the appropriate time for attack. In *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, Amruta Patil represents the forest as a character that explores dichotomies like nature versus civilization and wild sensuality versus restrained celibacy. The forest is not only a major character but is also used as a metaphor. The forest plays a major role in the story and has many deeper meanings. Amruta Patil says that living in a forest is often seen as a punishment, but that is not true. It's similar to our human society, where some are predators who are feared by the ones subdued, while some become the prey who are killed or ruled over, some form the rival who must be fought off or surrendered, while some may be an ally whom we must give something to get what we need.

Forests are places where most of the tender love affairs unfold. The lush green forests have a peaceful, serene, and captivating environment that is best been portrayed by Patil in expanding the love affairs between Katyayani and Y, King Dushyant and Shakuntala, Bhim and Hidimba, Arjun's sensual affair with the naga princess Ulupi, in the nether worlds, and finally with Chitrangada, heir to the kingdom of Manipur. Even the enchanted gopis' mad rush to meet their Krishna in the grove at the call of his bansuri, Krishna's sensual dance with the gopis on the full moon night which made the braj bhoomi alive, is well



presented by Patil in her graphic novel *Sauptik*. But again in *Adi Parva*, the beauty of nature made Pandu feel attracted to Madri, forgetting the curse, and leading himself to death.

The earth or 'Bhoo' is allegorically represented as a cow who is tortured, bruised, and bleeding due to the brutality of the world seizers. Through this episode, Patil tries to make people aware of the fact that our earth too needs love, gentle touch, and kindness. Even in our scriptures, the goddess Earth is said to have feminine attributes and is named Sree and Bhoo. Women like the earth have the tenderly benign approach, but if tortured or forced they can be dangerous. The episode is well crafted in the novel by Patil when rishi Vishwamitra wanted the Kamdhenu from Vashishth rishi forcefully. Finally, when the serene cow turned into a terrifying form, Vishwamitra had to fall to the ground, begging for mercy. Through this episode, Patil wanted to bring the fact to the world that anybody who tries to exploit nature has to face her wrath. In *Aranyaka*, the forest is a modern parable that represents Mother Earth as both terrifying and nourishing. The story is loosely inspired by the Upanishadic story of rishi Yajnavalkya and his two wives, Katyayani and Maitreyi. It explores the fears and hunger that underpin all human interactions through the stories of three spirited rishikas: Katyayani the Large, Maitreyi the Fig, and Gargi the Weaver. Here Katyayani like Devi Annapurna is presented as Mother Earth who is ready to distribute her bounties with the others. Again, in *Sauptik*, we can visualise that when the vicious serpent Kaliya poisoned Yamuna and turned her water oily and opaque, Krishna punished him by dancing on his hood until he squashed all his pride. Even Gods are not spared. The mortals on the earth were avoiding their cows and pastures to prepare lavish offerings for Indra, of whom they were afraid. When prevented by Krishna to stop the unnecessary praying of Indra and to look after their cattle, Indra brought a huge deluge to make the people aware of their existence. Krishna sheltered the people under Mount Govardhan by lifting it from its roots and perching it on his little finger.

Human beings have brains and so are more powerful than many other creatures of this world. Yet that doesn't give them the right to devoid themselves of their basic characteristics, that is humanity. Nature always punishes those who try to hurt her inhabitants to satisfy their selfish nature. The story of Mandavya as narrated by Ganga in *Adi Parva*, focuses on the fruitlessness of his pence in his adulthood, just because he used to impale insects on blades of grass when he was a boy. Even the detrimental effects of Janmejaya's great sacrifice, the sarpa sattrā, have been pointed out by the author in this graphic novel, as an act of vengeance, due to the pitiless fire raging throughout the year. The heat of this fire has made the soil chapped, ultimately leading to the death of the birds who fall off from the trees like dry leaves. To take revenge against Takshak the fire burnt several serpents, and the screams of the helpless serpents pierced the sky. This episode is again drawn in red to showcase the atmosphere to be bleeding at the



merciless slaughter of the innocent serpents. Human beings are selfish and self-centered, but Nature is always benevolent. The words of Ganga give a proof to this fact:

“I am Ganga, queen of celestial and earthly rivers. I feed your land, I raise the fish. I cleanse you of soil and sin, I carry the remains of the dead.”

Nature and Humans are entwined with each other. The characteristics of human beings are interlinked with the other nature fellows which proves the fact that we are only a part of this huge world. The metaphor of pomegranate is taken by Amruta Patil which defines our entire existence. When Vyas rishi arrives at Hastinapur to warn his mother Satyvati and her daughters-in-law not to cling to palace life anymore and witness the suicide of her race, Patil wants to focus on the aged stage of their life, which means time for detachment. The life of Satyavati and her daughters-in-law are compared to a pomegranate. When the pomegranate is about to transform into fruit from the flower state, the author has termed that stage to be childhood or the first stage, Brahmacharya. When the fruit is within the reach of everybody, it serves as a nurturer, which is the second stage of life, Grihastha. This is the stage of youth, when one chooses a life mate, leads a family life with whom one shares the table, and even helps people in need. Then comes the final stage, which queen Satyavati and her daughters-in-law were in, is the third stage, Sanyasa. When the pomegranate detaches itself from its twig and falls to the ground, that is the time to shift one's role from being the lead actor and learning to be a supporting cast. The author has brilliantly used the metaphor of an ant to showcase the characteristics of human beings, how delicate people like the delicate ants, collect food and make their place clean. On the other hand, the leaf-cutters and sentinels have menacing overdeveloped jaws to hunt and search for food, in close similarity to the Pandavas, Kauravas, and Ashwatthama under Guru Dron, who were groomed to lead men and fight.

In Aranyaka, the forests are compared to women who have great powers within themselves but are forced to be domesticated by society. In this graphic novel Katyayani who is an aranyi, the one who feels solace in the lap of nature is forced to get domesticated when married to Y. Y not only tries to domesticate a free-minded aranyi in his field but also, tries to domesticate a part of the aranya, the place where his knowledge has nurtured. This is common among the city dwellers who mercilessly cut down trees to develop their human territories. While settling down, human beings behead hundreds of fields, burn field after field, and destroy countless micro-habitats like the Kandav Forest carnage in Sauptik. In the words of Amruta Patil:

“Humans fear and mistrust what they cannot control - until they are evolved enough to be self-reflexive, and to overcome the need to dominate. Prakriti (Nature) resists control and does not indulge



any anthropocentric claims to specialness, which can make her a daunting ‘adversary’. The Indian subcontinent had an equation with Prakriti that was neither sentimental nor adversarial. Here, nature manifested both as the wild Kali who consumes and kills, and gentle Gauri who nourishes.”

Human ruthlessness has been exposed by the words and paintings of Amruta Patil in the Khandav forest episode. The agony of the forest inhabitants due to brutal carnage is wonderfully exposed in the scene. Along with it the words between Arjun and Krishna reveal the higher aspirations of human beings, under which the innocent, timid forest dwellers fall prey to it. The words as depicted in the graphic novel are:

“Is there no gentler way to get this done?”

“But if empire you want, forest must burn!”

Water Pollution is another devastating element in recent times. It is the cause of several waterborne diseases. The menace of water pollution in the modern generation is portrayed when Ganga herself narrates her pitiable plight, that staying underwater these days has become quite uncomfortable for her as the water is quite dense, riddled with toxins, and starved of oxygen. Hence, nowadays she gasps for breath underwater.

Conclusion:

Literature is the mirror of a society. Graphic novels are no exception to it. Graphic novels with the aid of vibrant colours like green, red, orange, sepia, black, and white, etc., and words make readers feel the situation intensely. Right from our childhood, the epics and shastras form an integral part of our lives. Our entire upbringing, ethical views, and moral judgments depend on the lessons we learned from these sacred texts. Hence, nowadays there is a general trend in Indian writing, of using mythological stories and retelling them with the issues suffered by the modern world to aware people of the negativities that they might face shortly. By blending the mythological plots with the sub-episodes constructed with the theme of environment, Amruta Patil has beautifully presented the human interaction with the environment. She has not only pointed out the problems of deforestation and water pollution but also the negative effects they have on our society. By reading the graphic novels of Amruta Patil one can get a clear and explicit view of the role of trees and nature in our life. One can easily be motivated to plant trees, conserve water, and stop the harsh exploitation of nature. The readers will get a clearer statement about how a tree supports an ecosystem and by cutting/burning the forests we are ultimately approaching our doom. Trees should be treated just like our children as not only do they provide flowers, fruits, shade, etc. but also provide shelter to devas, Gandharva-s, yakshas, birds, micro-habitats, and sages through the



ages. Graphic novels as a medium have the power to reach both children as well as the mature. To environmentally educate ourselves, we must represent the problems related to the environment along with solutions, to help readers gain eco-literacy and develop positive environmental ideals, attitudes, and ethics. Indeed, we are struggling to achieve and maintain sustainability, and finding it hard to balance our needs and the demands of our ecology. The ideologies about the environment in the accompaniment of the cultural texts will surely help the youth of the modern generation in the positive development of their cognition, perspectives, attitudes, and actions.

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