



Sacred Ecology And Mythopoeic Vision In *Aranyaka: Book Of The Forest: A Vedic Eco- Critical Reading*

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Abstract: *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, a graphic novel, has been created by Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik and graphic designer Amruta Patil. Aranyaka means the forest, and narratives written on it explore mysticism and symbolism. They represent the natural progression of the Upanishads. Aranyaka links the Brahmanas' focus on Karma marga and the Upanishads' emphasis on jnana marga. The graphic narrative is an artistic representation of the Vedas and the environment. The novel begins with the cosmic representation and evolution of the planet Earth and unfurls with Yajnavalkya and Katyayni digging forest for more knowledge and searching for their self.

This article examines how Aranyaka graphically and narratively articulates the underlying environmental consciousness within Vedic cosmology, revealing how the graphic novel functions as a strong medium for learning and appreciating the ecological knowledge buried in ancient Indian writings. The paper investigates the novel through sacred ecology and mythopoeic vision.

Index Terms - Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Mythopoeic, Symbolism, Vedic Cosmology, Environmental Consciousness, Graphic Narrative

I. INTRODUCTION

Forest lore makes Aranya seem clawless and affable, with a human lord-master who tames all chaos while bright-eyed faunae sing his praise. (Patil and Pattanaik, 2019) Aranyaka, denotes 'of the forest', refers to a collection of 3000-year-old Vedic texts filled with intriguing metaphors, created after the *Samhitas* (hymn collections) and alongside the *Brahmanas* (ritual manuals), but preceding the *Upanishads* (philosophical treatises). Aranyaka denotes the fundamental significance of the forest in Vedic tradition. Vedic thinking fundamentally concerns the essence of being educated and civilized: the progression from hunger and dread, via domestication, towards empathy.

The Vedas have consistently captivated Indians. However, these statements are subject to much dispute. They are described as ‘not of human origin’ (a-paurusheya). The majority of individuals think this signifies something supernatural or heavenly. It signifies just that: non-human, wisdom derived from beyond human conception (purusha), which has perpetually been in nature (prakriti). The graphic narrative *Aranyaka* has been taken from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, an authentic mine of wisdom.

The Rig Veda presents Aranyani, the goddess of the forest (with ‘aranya’ denoting a forest that remains untended yet abundant in sustenance). The Sama Veda categorizes all Vedic hymns into ‘settlement melodies’ and ‘forest melodies.’ The Ramayana and the Mahabharata narrate the forest exile of kings who encounter sages and monsters within. The Puranas describe several groves and forests associated with deities: Ganesha’s sugarcane forest, Shiva’s cedar forest, Krishna’s tulsi grove, Hanuman’s banana grove, and Lakshmi’s tamarind grove.

Vedic concepts have been articulated variably throughout history. Initially, they were transmitted orally and materialized through fire ceremonies. Subsequently, they became increasingly visible, as shown in temple culture. Hindus extensively utilize technology in worship, including applications for chanting and livestreaming temple rites and weddings. *Aranyaka*, as a graphic novel, conveys Vedic concepts through word and picture.

Aranyaka is replete with concepts from the Vedic tradition. The notion that deities emerged thereafter originates from the Creation Hymn of the Rig Veda. Food is pivotal in the Vedas: the yagna fundamentally involves nourishing the devas with ladles; the fire on the altar represents the mouth of the gods. The Taittiriya Upanishads characterize brahmans as both sustenance (anna) and the entities that devour sustenance (annada). Flesh (annakosha) is fundamentally food that has been altered in yoga.

Mythopoeia, the process of creating myths, functions as a mechanism for reinterpreting ancient myths in a way that can be related to contemporary audiences. *Aranyaka*, a mythopoeic text, not only retells Vedic tales but also redefines them for readers today. Yajnavalkya, the sage from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, is seeking inner wisdom. His conversations with Katyayani and Maitreyi explore themes of knowledge, detachment, and oneness, reflecting the Upanishadic focus on jnana marga (the path of knowledge).

“Y felt the Ritualist was an insecure man who knew less than he claimed. Disappointed with all human teachers, he walked off to witness aranya.”(Patil and Pattanaik, 2019, pp 40)

The character of Maitreyi exemplifies the synthesis of spiritual insight with environmental consciousness. She is frequently shown with roots extending from her feet and vegetation sprouting from her torso, physically emphasizing the concept of advaita (non-duality).

“Her garlands, like her analogies, were open-ended. They would generously scent your hair and body all day, but in a possessive fist 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 and Pattanaik, 2019, pp 120)

These characters highlight that people are not distinct from nature, but rather a part of nature. The incorporation of vivid earth tones and symbolic motifs like fire, water, and trees amplifies the spiritual and ecological themes, rendering the intangible principles of Vedic philosophy perceptible and attainable.

India has always followed the concept of *Vasudheva Kutumbakam*, i.e., humans, plants, animals, and every creature on this planet are a family. The significant relationship between the Vedas and the environment in the Indian subcontinent has existed for ages. Indian mythology encompasses rites that endure in many regions of the nation. The environment is considered a construct of humanity. Rituals become entrenched in society over time. Consequently, it is infeasible to separate myth from culture. Most ancient societies are permeated with mythology. Mythology permeates both their culture and personal lives. Typically, the term 'myth' refers to a singular narrative. A mythology produces several myths. Operationally, it may be characterized as a compilation of interrelated myths (narratives, whether factual or fictitious) articulated by any cultural group to delineate their understanding of the surrounding environment or to communicate with individuals sharing similar beliefs. Consequently, it is a belief system that sometimes incorporates superhuman or extraterrestrial forces, functioning as a foundation for culture, religion, and varied behaviors, while also mirroring interpersonal interactions in daily life. Each culture's mythology tries to elucidate the evolution of the cosmos. This description of flora and fauna is intricately woven into a narrative or collection of narratives. All mythologies endeavour to explain the cosmos's beginning or account for the universe's emergence.

Myth in Aranyaka

Myth is not only a collection of old tales but also a way of understanding the world, organizing meaning, and passing cultural values between generations. Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik in *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* have combined modern visual narrative with old Indian knowledge. Rooted in the Vedas and Upanishads, the book presents a thoughtful and immersive dive into Vedic knowledge, stressing myth not as fixed in time but rather as a live, breathing conversation. *Aranyaka* is fundamentally about the reinterpretation of Vedic stories for contemporary audiences without compromising their spiritual core. *Aranyaka* pulls from Vedic literature, which are less story-driven and more reflective than the more well-known Itihasa-Purana narratives like the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*.

The book revolves around Yajnavalkya, a respected sage and philosopher of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, he is portrayed as a seeker, teacher, and listener. Though subdued and meditative, his voice grounds most of the story.

The people living in forests are philosophers, travellers, ascetics; they are neither soldiers nor rulers. Yajnavalkya, a respected sage and philosopher of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, is portrayed as a seeker, teacher, and listener. In *Aranyaka*, he, along with other characters, is conquering oneself instead of fighting with the outer world. This decentering brings the text into line with the knowing tradition of Indian philosophy, in which enlightenment is not theatrical but rather quite intimate.

Eco-criticism in *Aranyaka*

Eco-criticism is a study of the relationship between literature and the environment. *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* traces the mythological and spiritual motifs that were portrayed in the context of the environment anchored in Vedic awareness. *Aranyaka* deals with the Upanishadic concept of interconnectedness that flows from its core. The ego, a microcosmic mirror of the world, is not apart from it. According to this, damage to the environment is exactly like damage to oneself. Earth itself is a temple, one need not to go to any man-made scripture.

As a graphic novel, Patil's graphics enhance the story's ecological consciousness. Humans, nature, and other elements convey oneness visually. Maitreyi's figure, sometimes represented with leaves flowing from her limbs or roots under her feet, not as metaphors but rather as visual philosophies, stating that humans are never separated from the earth.

Conclusion

Aranyaka: Book of the Forest is a graphic novel, the retelling of puranic tales. The novel states how old Indian knowledge can be translated using contemporary creative approaches. Pattanaik and Patil have explicitly combined Vedic philosophy with eco-critical issues, and the graphic novel emphasizes the importance of sacred ecology in modern discourse. Through mythopoeic narrative and symbolic imagery, it states that the relationship with the forests is spiritual and not as a resource, threat, or retreat. This study also shows that revisiting ancient philosophies using modern technology can provide deep insights into the concerned issues. In *Aranyaka*, the forest is not only a setting but a mentor, a mirror, and a symbol of universal interconnection. In an age where environmental degradation is a major threat to human existence, *Aranyaka* offers a vision of ecological harmony based on spiritual awareness. It encourages readers to look beyond superficial environmentalism and toward a more comprehensive understanding of life's sacred interconnection. As so, it makes an important contribution to both literary and ecological discourses, underlining old wisdom's long-term importance in managing present issues.

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