

Aranyaka: A Study on Modern Recreation

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Abstract

Recreation is a process wherein old ideas are dispensed anew for new audiences allowing classical texts to resonate with contemporary contexts. It works as a bridge between the past and present, ensuring the continuity of literary tradition. In India, literary recreation certainly grabbed the attention of a wider audience particularly, in the field of film and graphic mediums. *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, a graphic novel by Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, exemplifies such creation, drawing from Upanishads' Yajnavalkya, a Vedic literary work. The study examines how *Aranyaka* reimagines ancient Indian metaphysical thought through multimodal storytelling. It highlights the symbolic representation of images, colours and character construction that motivates the readers to read more which increase the readability and facilitate accessibility to complex Indian philosophical thought. By presenting alternative perspectives and marginalised voices, recreation encourages interpretative plurality. The novel not only reimagines the Upanishadic Forest but also interrogates human relationships with nature, gender roles, and epistemological hierarchies. Through this analysis, the paper explores how such recreations foster new dialogues between tradition and modernity in Indian literature.

Keywords:

Recreation; graphic novel; Aranyaka; visual narratives; Indian literature; gender; ecology

Introduction

Textual recreation is an interpretative act that generates new meaning by recontextualizing existing narratives. Often termed as adaptation, retelling, or refashioning, recreation addresses both historical and contemporary perspectives (Iser; Snell-Hornby; Berkowitz and Packer). The re-telling or the re-versions of the same narrative thus presents the story in a format that suits

the present audience. It is the author's attempt at creating an existing story in a new form which suits contemporary readers' expectations. Moreover, recreation expands the lifespan of ancient texts to survive after years and generations. According to Stephens and McCallum (2013), retellings and reversions of literary classics question and revise the canonical by foregrounding alternatives and cultivating dialogic tensions between the original and the new." This reflexivity reveals the multiplicity of meanings embedded in classical texts and opens avenues for marginalized voices and perspectives to emerge.

Any retelling is oriented towards those meta-narratives and their informing meta-ethic instances which are usually legiti-mating but may develop interrogative positions. Retellings and reversions of texts which are literary classics of modern high culture and can be identified as the work of particular, canonical authors have the potential to throw this process into sharp relief. They tend to be more self-conscious about the ways they elaborate their dialogic relationship with their pre-texts and more overt about their reproductive or interrogative purposes. This enhanced openness is characteristically visible in the tendency to cultivate an alternative or contrasting register, foregrounding a dialogue between the characteristically demotic mode of the reversion and the more hieratic or epic modes of the pre-text. (Stephens and McCallum 253)

The above-cited passage from *Retelling Stories, Framing Cultures* discusses how retellings question and revise canonical texts. There is an openness in the retold texts and thereby proposing the fact that reversions are always open to alternatives. Recreation explores multi-perspective from the classic texts. It projects the multidimensionality of an individual or minor character or untold point of view in the texts. Recreation attempts to open a conclusion, in which the readers/viewers can find their own suitable conclusion. Thus, recreation becomes more than homage—it is critique, response, and expansion. In India, such recreations are deeply visible in film, television, and increasingly, in graphic literature.

Mani Ratnam's *Ponniyin Selvan*, released in September 2022, is a cinematic adaptation of Kalki's *Ponniyin Selvan* (1950) and received positive reviews from modern Indian audience. Similarly, ancient Indian epic *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* have seen numerous recreation in films, plays, television, and graphic novels. These retellings reflect not only artistic innovation but also the evolving sociocultural consciousness of readers and viewers.

The authors are motivated to work on recreation because the audience are interested in it. A reproduction may have been inspired by the original and represent the author's thoughts on a specific passage that they believed needed to be changed. Recreation is an art where the reader

turns into an author and delivers their own creativity, that can be assumed as a reader's response to a specific book. Moreover, the amalgamation of text and images attracts all ages and also makes learning easier (Williams; Shabiralyani et al.). Such creation can be seen in graphic novels, as it is defined as the combination of text and images arranged in sequential art. It saves the time of a reader who do not have time to read a text and presents the concepts concise and clear. Texts are processed by the short-term memory that retains seven bits of information and images "go directly into long-term memory that are indelibly etched", says Dr Lynell Burmark (2002), an education consultant. This study investigates *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* (2019) by Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, a graphic novel that revisits the *Upanishadic* forest and its philosophical inquiries. The analysis highlights the visual artifacts and narrative devices employed in the work, arguing that such recreations renew Indian literary traditions through contemporary aesthetics and ideologies.

Literature Review

Scholarly attention toward graphic novels has increased significantly, particularly in the domains of media literacy and multimodal education. Graphic novels for multiple literacies by Schwarz (2002) emphasise that graphic novels provide variety, value, and new mediums for literacy. It implies that studying a graphic novel in any subject area can bring media literacy into the curriculum as students examine the medium itself. Historically, the evolution of comic art has been well documented by Roger Sabin (1996) in *Comics, Comix, & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, which traces the trajectory from 17th-century English broadsheets to the golden age of American comics, the rise of alternative comics in the 1960s, and the diverse, international graphic novels of today. The theoretical foundations of graphic novels are further elaborated by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (1993) and *Reinventing Comics* (2000). McCloud explores the history, creation techniques, cultural significance, and evolving relationship between comics and digital media. Similarly, Will Eisner's works — *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (1996) and *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) — underscore the intricate interplay of images and words in graphic storytelling and invite reconsideration of storytelling craft in visual form. In educational contexts, *Getting Graphic with the Past: Graphic Novels and the Teaching of History* by Michael Cromer and Penney Clark (2007) investigates the efficacy of graphic novels in history education. Their study highlights how the structure of graphic novels can enhance students' understanding of history as an interpretative discipline and build tolerance for uncertainty. From the perspective of adaptation studies, Lissette Lopez Szwydky

(2018) discusses how nineteenth-century literature became “culture-texts” through early adaptations in *Adaptations, Culture-texts and the Literary Canon: On the Making of Nineteenth-Century ‘Classics’*. Complementing this, P.L. Thomas (2011) in *Adventures in Genre!: Rethinking Genre Through Comics/Graphic Novels* interrogates genre and text classifications within educational contexts. Thomas encourages integrating comics and graphic novels into multi-genre units to challenge students’ preconceptions about genre and text. Recent scholarship on Indian graphic narratives highlights their evolving role in conveying ecological and cultural themes. The graphic novel *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* presents a nuanced portrayal of the human-nature relationship through spiritual symbolism (“Portrayal of a Nature-Human Relationship”). Studies focusing on anthropomorphism in Indian visual narratives reveal how personifying nature evokes empathy and moral depth (“Anthropomorphism in Indian Visual Narratives”). Broader literary overviews situate such works within a shifting tradition where contemporary forms like graphic novels enrich Indian literature through layered, multimodal storytelling (“Indian Literature: Past, Present and Future”). In the Indian context, Sarkar and Karmakar (2021) in *Multi-modal Engagement with Aranya: Appropriating Ecological Awareness in Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik’s Graphic Tale Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* emphasise ecological consciousness in Indian literary and visual practices. They explore narratology through two modes: image narrative and word narrative, with a particular focus on ecological perspectives. Likewise, Sharma and Rath (2021), in *Ecopoetics and Aranya in the Graphic Novel Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, argue that although human beings occupy an advanced position as sages and seers within the narrative, they remain integral components of a broader ecological system, reflecting the ecopoetics of creation. Supporting this line of inquiry, Serafini (2010) notes that as we transition from a typographic era dominated by printed words to a post-typographic epoch dominated by visual images and multimodal texts, the analytic tools and interpretive repertoires must expand to support readers in new ways (p. 101). This study aligns with such scholarship, aiming to analyse *Aranyaka* as a multimodal artifact that deeply engages with Indian literary heritage and ecological traditions.

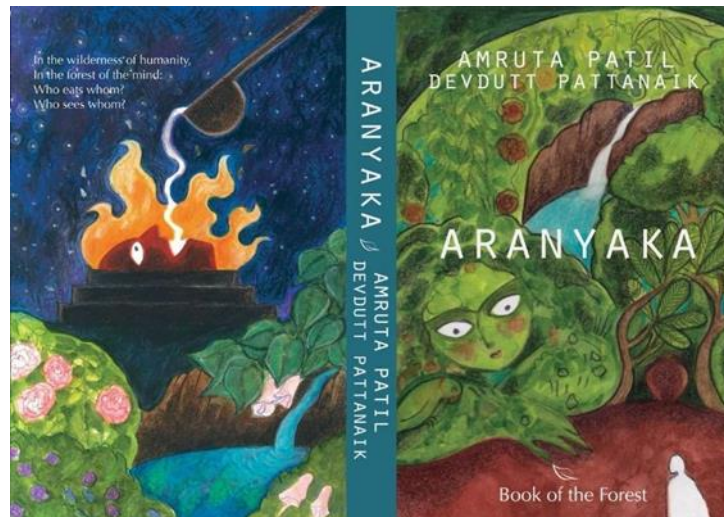
Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative approach grounded in book review methodology. It closely analyses the graphic novel *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, focusing on its thematic construction, visual aesthetics, and philosophical undercurrents. The narrative structure, symbolism, and character portrayals are evaluated in light of existing theoretical frameworks on adaptation, ecocriticism, and feminist retellings. The visual narrative is given particular

emphasis, considering how illustration amplifies textual meaning. The literature review supports the interpretative lens, providing scholarly context for the analysis.

Analysis: Re-viewing *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*

Modern retellings of Indian mythological narratives often take a feminist lens—not to denigrate tradition but to amplify the muted voices of women who have long lingered in the margins. *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* follows this trajectory while also extending the discourse into ecological and philosophical terrains. Written by Amruta Patil—India’s first female graphic novelist—and mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik, *Aranyaka* is less an adaptation of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and more a meditative reimagination that blends Upanishadic wisdom with contemporary sensibilities. Rather than a linear plot, the narrative unfolds across six thematic segments, each marked by an interplay between visual metaphors and textual reflections. The authors foreground female subjectivity, not only through the central character Katyayani but also through other women like Gargi the Weaver and Maitreyi the Fig. These women are not merely characters but philosophical archetypes. Katyayani represents instinctual, embodied wisdom; Gargi, cerebral detachment; Maitreyi, a bridge between the two. The forest—*Aranya*—serves both as a literal and symbolic setting. Illustrated in earth-toned watercolors with soft pencil strokes, the forest exudes a tactile organic quality, reinforcing the meditative pace of the narrative. The non-linear paneling, eschewing traditional grid layouts, suggests an epistemological openness that mirrors the book’s core argument: truth is multifaceted and lived differently. In one striking visual sequence, Katyayani is seen dissolving into the forest—a motif that suggests her ontological alignment with the non-human world. These visual dissolutions challenge anthropocentric narrative hierarchies, positioning nature not as backdrop but as protagonist.



Source: *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* (Patil and Pattanaik, 2019)

The cover art deepens this symbolic register: a maternal forest figure looms over humans and non-humans alike, visually levelling species and destabilizing anthropocentric worldviews. The back cover quote, “In the wilderness of humanity, in the forest of the mind, who eats whom? Who sees whom?”, paired with fragmented panels of eyes and animal mouths, evokes the primal forces of hunger and desire. This visual-textual coupling dramatizes the paradox of human civilization—simultaneously seeking dominion and meaning. The narrative tension between Katyayani and her husband Yājñavalkya—the ascetic sage who privileges knowledge over sensual experience—is visually rendered in sparse, symmetrical panels where Y sits rigid and abstracted while Katyayani is surrounded by swirling natural forms. These contrasting visual styles reinforce the dichotomy between mind and body, logos and mythos, male and female epistemologies. The novel’s climax—where multiple characters echo the refrain “she is not me,” “he is not me”—is presented across a mosaic of intercut panels, a technique that visually stages difference as philosophical pluralism rather than conflict. Ecologically, *Aranyaka* rejects the binaries of nature versus civilization. Instead, it presents the forest as a site of coexistence, learning, and transformation. The depiction of animal-human hybrids, symbiotic imagery, and inter-species dialogue within the panels evokes an eco-poetic vision of interconnectedness. This recalls traditional Indian literary depictions of forests—as places of penance (*tapas*), exile, refuge, and enlightenment—as seen in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Yet Patil and Pattanaik disrupt these tropes by portraying the forest not as punishment but as possibility. Visually, the margins of the pages—often filled with non-linear notes, botanical sketches, or symbolic glyphs—encourage rereading and slow engagement. They echo the sutra tradition, where truth is revealed gradually, through layering. The final section, “Making Aranyaka,” which documents the artistic process, reinforces the work’s meta-narrative quality—foregrounding the act of

making meaning as central to the reading experience. This multimodal narrative, then, is more than a sum of its parts. The textual brevity is offset by visual density, where every panel functions like a philosophical stanza. Each image operates as allegory—a gesture, an empty space, a leaf—pointing beyond itself. The story’s richness lies not in narrative complexity but in symbolic resonance, demanding active reader engagement and multiple interpretive passes. *Aranyaka* reconfigures traditional Indian storytelling using the unique affordances of the graphic novel medium. It presents forest not just as space but as epistemology—one that includes the feminine, the ecological, and the intuitive. The book is not merely a narrative artifact but a multisensory dialogue between word and image, body and spirit, myth and meaning. This analysis contends that such multimodal works require interpretive approaches that attend equally to visual and verbal syntax. In this way, *Aranyaka* emerges as a contemporary sacred text—one that speaks in images as much as in words.

Conclusion

Aranyaka: Book of the Forest stances as a demonstration to the power of literary recreation in connecting the ancient and the contemporary. By reinterpreting mythological and philosophical standards through a gender-inclusive and ecologically sensitive lens, the text surpasses conventional narrative forms. The forest, both literal and symbolic, becomes a liminal space where knowledge, resistance, and renewal converge. Through its multidimensional female protagonists—Katyayani, Maitreyi, and Gargi—the novel not only regains women’s voices within traditionally patriarchal frameworks but also reshapes the philosophical discourse by foregrounding alternative modes of knowing and being. The graphic novel’s hybrid form—melding oral tradition, scriptural reflection, and visual storytelling—produces an intertextual dialogue that is both accessible and reflective. It democratises sacred knowledge and re-situates ancient wisdom within the urgency of contemporary challenges: climate change, spiritual alienation, and gendered exclusions. The ecological vision presented in *Aranyaka* calls for a radical rethinking of humanity’s relationship with nature, accenting reciprocity, humility, and inner awakening over domination and exploitation. Furthermore, the text functions as an epistemological intervention. It problematises the authority of textual knowledge by validating embodied experience, oral histories, and marginalised voices. The women of *Aranyaka* do not merely inhabit the forest—they become its consciousness, navigating its silences, tensions, and transcendental rhythms. Their journeys dismantle the dichotomies of mind/body,

reason/emotion, and sacred/profane, offering a reconfigured ontology rooted in interconnectedness.

Outlook

This study unlocks some avenues for further enquiry. Upcoming research could discover how Aranyaka aligns with or diverges from other contemporary retellings in Indian graphic literature, predominantly in terms of ecofeminist and decolonial aesthetics. Comparative analyses with similar works by artists like Amruta Patil (*Adi Parva*, *Sauptik*) or international graphic novels with mythic retellings could illuminate cross-cultural patterns in the representation of feminine archetypes and environmental ethics. Additionally, pedagogical applications of Aranyaka value deeper investigation. As a visual-textual artefact, it has immense potential to be used in interdisciplinary education—combining literature, gender studies, environmental humanities, and philosophy. It also offers reflection on how Indian knowledge systems can be creatively reimagined for younger generations, resisting reductive Western academic framings while remaining globally legible. Aranyaka cultivates a vision for an inclusive, introspective, and sustainable future, does not merely reframe a mythic past. It affirms that the act of retelling is not a return to origin but a movement forward—toward plurality, dialogue, and transformation.

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