

Ecofeminism in Graphic Narratives: Exploring the Works of Amruta Patil

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Abstract: This paper explores how Amruta Patil's graphic novels *Kari* (2008), *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012), and *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* (2019, with Devdutt Pattanaik), develop a unique ecofeminist vision in Indian literature. Moving from the polluted cityscapes of *Kari* to the mythological waters of *Adi Parva* and finally to the forest-centered wisdom of *Aranyaka*, Patil's work traces an expanding ecological consciousness. The analysis highlights how her stories connect gender, sexuality, and environment, showing that social marginalization and ecological harm are deeply linked. Patil's visual choices of shifting color palettes, fluid boundaries between bodies and landscapes, and recurring images of water create a distinctly ecofeminist aesthetic that emphasizes interdependence over separation. The collaboration with Pattanaik in *Aranyaka* brings mythological scholarship into dialogue with Patil's visual feminism, producing both tensions and possibilities. Together, these texts suggest that graphic narratives can do more than retell myths: they can help us imagine new, embodied ways of relating to nature in an era of climate crisis.

Introduction

Ecofeminism, emerging in the late 1970s and 1980s, is a theoretical and activist movement that illuminates the interconnected nature of ecological degradation and patriarchal oppression. Foundational thinkers such as Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva, and Greta Gaard have established how structures of domination systematically devalue both women and nature, demonstrating that patterns of gendered oppression are intimately tied to environmental exploitation. Merchant's seminal work *The Death of Nature* traces the historical shift from viewing the earth as a living, nurturing mother to the mechanistic worldview of modern science—a transformation that facilitated both nature's exploitation and the marginalization of women (Merchant 1). Shiva's philosophy, rooted in Indian cosmology, reframes nature as *Prakriti*—the feminine principle—emphasizing its active, creative qualities and the indigenous knowledge systems marginalized by capitalist, patriarchal paradigms (Shiva 22). Gaard advances these insights by examining how ecofeminist ethics extend beyond gender to address intersecting oppressions of race, class, sexuality, and species, advocating for narratives that foreground interconnection and embodied experience (Gaard 18).

In the Indian context, ecofeminism finds profound resonance in goddess traditions, indigenous ecological practices, and forest-centered myths that celebrate the divine feminine in nature. The environmental movement in India, particularly movements like Chipko, has foregrounded women's ecological agency while illustrating the continuity between spiritual, material, and

gendered relationships with the earth ("Ecofeminism and Social Ecology" 44). The work of Amruta Patil—India's first female graphic novelist—stands at the confluence of these traditions, employing visual storytelling to reimagine the relationships between ecology, mythology, and feminist consciousness.

This paper expands beyond previous analyses of *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* (2019) to examine Patil's broader graphic oeuvre, including *Kari* (2008), *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012), and *Aranyaka* (2019). Through this comprehensive analysis, I argue that Patil's trilogy constitutes a significant ecofeminist intervention in Indian graphic storytelling, one that progressively evolves from urban queer ecology in *Kari*, through mythological environmental consciousness in *Adi Parva*, to fully realized forest-centered ecofeminism in *Aranyaka*. Each work contributes unique dimensions to an overarching ecofeminist vision that challenges both anthropocentric and androcentric ways of knowing while recovering indigenous ecological wisdom and centering marginalized voices.

***Kari* and Urban Queer Ecology**

Patil's debut graphic novel *Kari* establishes the foundation for her later ecofeminist explorations through what can be understood as urban queer ecology—a framework that examines the intersections between sexual marginalization and environmental degradation in metropolitan spaces. The narrative follows Kari, a young lesbian navigating heartbreak and identity crisis in Mumbai's "smog city," where environmental pollution mirrors and amplifies psychological alienation ("The Interplay of Space" 82).

The novel's most striking ecofeminist intervention lies in its treatment of urban waterways—particularly sewers and drains—as spaces of both exclusion and potential liberation. Patil employs the metaphor of sewers as repositories for society's "unwanted" elements, including queer individuals and environmental waste ("A Questioning and Refashioning" 97). Kari describes herself as a "boatman" navigating these murky underground waters, suggesting that marginalized sexualities and ecological degradation share similar spaces of social invisibility. The text states: "On my way back from work, the stench is a cheerful greeting. Hello, grins the sewer, I am still here" (Patil, *Kari* 41). This personification of urban decay establishes a queer kinship between the protagonist and the city's neglected ecological systems and by extension, with nature.

The environmental consciousness in *Kari* operates through what scholars term "dirty resilience"—the dismantling of structures of violence that target particular racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies as disposable ("Queering Ecofeminism" 96). Patil's visual representation of Mumbai's smoggy atmosphere, rendered in grey tones and fragmented panels, reflects both literal environmental pollution and the metaphorical "toxicity" of heteronormative society ("Resistance in Graphic Novels" 43). The city's environmental degradation becomes inseparable from its social discrimination, establishing the groundwork for Patil's later, more explicit ecofeminist interventions.

Significantly, *Kari* introduces the theme of water as both destroyer and healer, a motif that will become central to Patil's ecological mythology going ahead. *Kari's* relationship with Ruth culminates in a failed joint suicide attempt in water, yet water also provides *Kari* with navigation routes through the city's underground systems. This ambivalent relationship with aquatic environments prefigures the more complex treatment of water deities and river goddesses in Patil's later mythological works.

***Adi Parva* and Mythological Environmental Consciousness**

Patil's second major work, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean*, represents a significant evolution in her ecofeminist vision by grounding environmental consciousness in mythological narrative frameworks. The graphic novel retells the origin stories of the *Mahabharata*, with the celestial river Ganga serving as narrator—a choice that immediately centers feminine, aquatic agency in the text's epistemological framework ("Adi Parva: Churning" 83). The titular "churning of the ocean" (*samudra manthan*) becomes a central metaphor for environmental transformation and cosmic balance. In Patil's rendering, this mythological event transcends simple allegory to become a meditation on ecological reciprocity and the consequences of exploiting natural resources. The visual representation of the churning process, depicted through swirling, oceanic forms that merge divine and natural elements, establishes a cosmology where environmental and spiritual dimensions are inseparable ("A Confluence of Myth" 93).

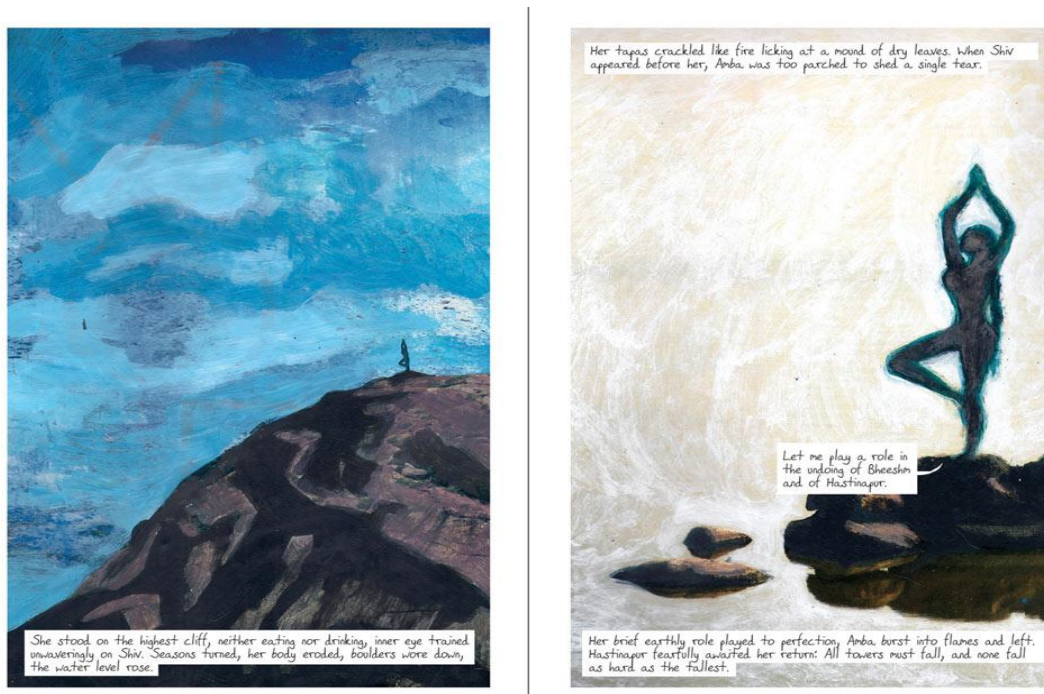


Figure 1: Graphic novel pages by Amruta Patil depicting mythological scenes featuring Shiv, Amba, and references to Bheeshm and Hastinapur.

Ganga's role as *sutradhar* (narrator) is particularly significant for ecofeminist analysis. As a river goddess who traverses celestial, terrestrial, and subterranean realms, Ganga embodies the interconnectedness of all ecological systems ("In Conversation: Amruta Patil" 85). Her narrative authority stems not from detached omniscience but from embodied knowledge gained through "cosmic travels" that have "enriched her with countless tales" (*Adi Parva* 83). This positioning aligns with ecofeminist epistemologies that privilege situated, relational knowledge over abstract, universalizing claims.

The text's treatment of female mythological figures—including Vinata, Kadru, and Matsyagandha—recovers women's ecological agency from patriarchal mythological traditions. These figures are not passive recipients of divine will but active agents whose choices and relationships shape cosmic and ecological outcomes. Matsyagandha's transformation from fisherwoman to queen, mediated through her relationship with the sage Parashara, illustrates how feminine sexuality and natural abundance are interlinked rather than opposed.

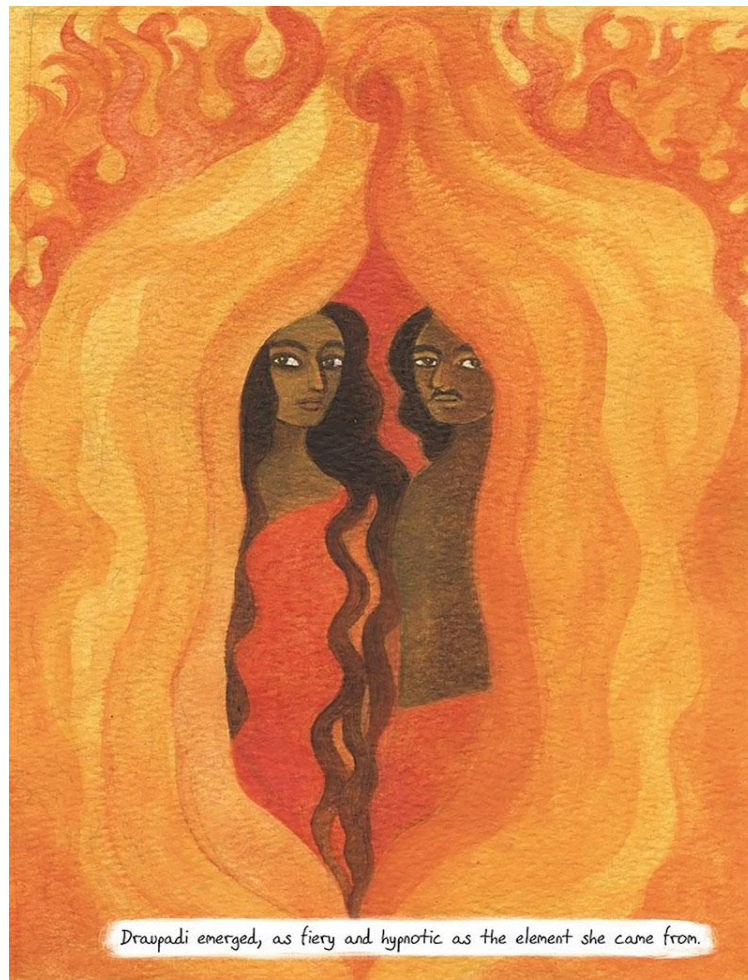


Figure 2: Draupadi emerges fiery and hypnotic, embodying the element of fire in a watercolor illustration by Amruta Patil.

Patil's visual style in *Adi Parva* employs vibrant, elemental colors to distinguish between mythological and contemporary narrative frames. The use of blues and greens for aquatic

scenes, fiery oranges and reds for transformative moments, and earthy browns for terrestrial episodes creates a visual ecology that reinforces the text's thematic concerns. The recurring motif of flames, particularly in Draupadi's origin story, where she emerges "as fiery and hypnotic as the element she came from" suggests that feminine power is elemental rather than merely social or cultural.

The graphic novel's treatment of environmental themes in mythology directly challenges anthropocentric readings of ancient texts. Rather than viewing nature as mere backdrop for human drama, Patil foregrounds the agency of natural forces and the consequences of disrupting ecological relationships. The text's description of seasons, rivers, and forests as active participants in cosmic events establishes a framework for understanding environmental crisis as spiritual and ethical concern rather than merely technical problem.

***Aranyaka* and Forest-Centered Ecofeminism**

Aranyaka: Book of the Forest, co-authored with Devdutt Pattanaik, represents the culmination of Patil's ecofeminist vision through its explicit synthesis of Vedic philosophy, ecological wisdom, and feminist storytelling. The work draws from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*—literally "the great forest Upanishad"—to explore philosophical reflection and interdependence through the embodied experiences of female sages (*rishikas*) ("Scoping the Eco-sensitive Mythology" 14).

The forest in *Aranyaka* functions simultaneously as geographic setting, philosophical framework, and feminist intervention. Unlike the urban wasteland of *Kari* or the cosmic waters of *Adi Parva*, the forest represents a space where ecological and gender relationships can be reimaged outside patriarchal structures. The narrative focuses on Yajnavalkya's wives—Katyayani and Maitreyi—and the sage Gargi, positioning these female figures not as appendages to male wisdom but as independent knowledge-seekers whose insights emerge from their intimate relationships with forest environments.

Patil's visual treatment of the forest employs what can be termed "elemental feminism"—a style where feminine forms merge seamlessly with natural textures and processes ("An Ecofeminist Reading" 6). Women's bodies are rendered with bark-like skin, hair that flows into river currents, and gestures that mirror the movements of trees and vines. This visual strategy challenges the nature/culture divide central to patriarchal thinking by presenting feminine identity as fundamentally ecological.

The text's treatment of ascetic traditions provides a crucial site for ecofeminist critique. While traditional interpretations of forest hermitages emphasize renunciation and transcendence of bodily existence, Patil's *Aranyaka* presents asceticism as deepened embodiment and ecological relationship. The female sages' practices involve not withdrawal from nature but intensified engagement with seasonal cycles, plant growth, and animal behavior. Their wisdom emerges from what Shiva calls *Prakriti*-centered knowing rather than abstract philosophical speculation ("The Ontological Foundations" 16).

The collaborative authorship with Pattanaik creates interesting tensions between textual mythology and visual feminism. While Pattanaik's narrative voice draws from traditional scholarly interpretations of Vedic literature, Patil's illustrations consistently subvert patriarchal readings by foregrounding feminine agency and ecological relationship. This creative tension mirrors broader challenges within ecofeminist scholarship regarding the recovery of women's voices from androcentric textual traditions.

Visual Techniques and Ecofeminist Aesthetics

Across all three works, Patil develops distinctive visual techniques that constitute a significant contribution to ecofeminist aesthetics in graphic literature. Her use of mixed media—watercolors, acrylics, collage, and charcoal—creates tactile, material qualities that invite sensuous engagement with environmental themes ("Women And Gender" 36). The deliberate ambiguity and fluidity of form in her artwork echoes both the liminality of forest spaces and the instability of fixed gender categories.

Patil's color palettes evolve across the trilogy to reflect deepening ecological consciousness. *Kari*'s predominantly grey and sepia tones capture urban environmental degradation while suggesting the psychological "colorlessness" of heteronormative oppression. *Adi Parva*'s vibrant primaries—blues, reds, yellows—evoke elemental forces and cosmic energies, while *Aranyaka*'s earth tones—greens, browns, ochres—ground mythological narrative in specific ecological relationships.

The treatment of water as recurring visual motif provides particularly rich material for ecofeminist analysis. In *Kari*, water appears primarily in underground urban systems—sewers, drains, and hidden waterways that parallel queer invisibility. *Adi Parva* expands this to cosmic waters—the primordial ocean, celestial rivers, and transformative floods that reshape terrestrial landscapes. *Aranyaka* focuses on forest waters—streams, springs, and seasonal rains that sustain plant and animal life while providing metaphors for feminine wisdom and cyclical time.

Patil's visual representation of feminine bodies consistently challenges Western artistic traditions that separate human figures from natural backgrounds. Instead, her women emerge from and dissolve into their environments through techniques that blur boundaries between skin and bark, hair and foliage, breath and wind. This aesthetic strategy aligns with Indigenous and Hindu cosmologies that view human beings as continuous with rather than separate from natural processes.

Contemporary Relevance and Queer Ecological Futures

The contemporary relevance of Patil's ecofeminist trilogy extends beyond literary analysis to engage pressing questions of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental justice. By positioning marginalized sexualities and genders as particularly attuned to ecological relationships, Patil's work contributes to emerging frameworks of queer ecology that challenge

heteronormative assumptions about "natural" behavior and relationships ("On Inclusive Ecology" 94).

The progression from *Kari's* urban queer ecology through *Adi Parva's* mythological environmentalism to *Aranyaka's* forest-centered feminism suggests a developmental model for contemporary ecological consciousness. This trajectory moves from recognizing environmental degradation as parallel to social oppression, through recovering traditional ecological knowledge from patriarchal interpretations, to actively reimagining human-nature relationships through embodied, situated practice.

Patil's work anticipates and contributes to current discussions of "dirty resilience" and "insurgent posthumanism" that seek to dissolve human/non-human dichotomies while centering justice as "immediate, lived, worldly experience" ("Queer ecology" 99). Her graphic novels demonstrate how visual storytelling can create affective ecological consciousness that moves beyond rational argumentation to engage readers' sensuous, emotional, and imaginative capacities.

The trilogy's treatment of water systems—from urban sewers to cosmic oceans to forest streams—provides particularly relevant models for understanding climate change as simultaneously environmental, social, and spiritual crisis. By tracing water's movement across these different scales and contexts, Patil suggests that effective climate response requires attention to local ecological relationships, mythological frameworks, and marginalized voices rather than technocratic solutions imposed from above.

Conclusion: Toward an Embodied Ecofeminist Praxis

Amruta Patil's graphic trilogy—*Kari*, *Adi Parva*, and *Aranyaka*—constitutes a major contribution to both Indian literature and global ecofeminist discourse. Through her innovative synthesis of visual storytelling, mythological retelling, and environmental consciousness, Patil demonstrates the unique capacity of graphic narratives to articulate complex ecological relationships while centering marginalized voices and embodied ways of knowing.

The progression across these three works reveals a sophisticated understanding of how ecological consciousness develops from recognition of interconnected oppressions through recovery of alternative knowledge systems to active reimagining of human-nature relationships. Each text contributes essential elements to this overarching vision: *Kari's* urban queer ecology reveals the environmental dimensions of sexual marginalization; *Adi Parva's* mythological environmentalism recovers feminine ecological agency from patriarchal traditions; *Aranyaka's* forest-centered feminism models alternatives to anthropocentric and androcentric worldviews.

Patil's visual techniques—particularly her use of fluid boundaries between human and natural forms—provide important resources for contemporary ecocritical scholarship by demonstrating how artistic practice can embody rather than merely represent ecological

relationships. Her work suggests that effective responses to current environmental crises require not only policy changes and technological innovations but also transformed ways of seeing, feeling, and relating that challenge fundamental assumptions about gender, sexuality, nature, and human identity. Future scholarship might extend this analysis through comparative studies with other graphic novelists working at the intersections of environmental and social justice concerns, examination of Patil's influence on subsequent Indian graphic literature, or exploration of how her visual techniques might inform environmental education and activism. The trilogy's demonstration that traditional ecological knowledge, feminist epistemology, and queer theory can be productively synthesized through visual storytelling offers important resources for scholars and activists working toward more inclusive, embodied forms of environmental praxis.

Ultimately, Patil's work exemplifies the potential of graphic narratives to serve as sites for reimagining relationships between humans and more-than-human worlds. By grounding abstract theoretical concepts in sensuous, narrative experience, her trilogy contributes to the emergence of what might be called an "embodied ecofeminist praxis"—one that integrates cognitive understanding, emotional engagement, and material action in service of more just and sustainable ways of living with the earth.

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