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# The Voice of the Voiceless: Art as a Space of Ecological Refuge in Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's Graphic Novel *Aranyaka*

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**Abstract:**

This study embarks on an exploration into the nuanced interplay of gender paradigms, linguistic hegemony, and ecological awareness within the narrative tapestry of *Aranyaka* by Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik. Situated within the broader discourse of feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial critique, this research endeavours to dissect the entrenched dichotomies that stratify intellect from corporeality while delving into the socio-cultural hegemonic structures that relegate femininity to the subordinate realm of nature.

Central to this inquiry is the deconstruction of the patriarchal lens through which gendered identities are constructed by utilising Val Plumwood's conceptualisation of the "interrelated connection" between intellect and corporeality. A pivotal facet of the analysis lies in the examination of language as a vehicle for hegemonic control, leveraging insights from Lacanian psychoanalysis, wherein linguistic patriarchy perpetuates the erasure of indigenous feminine voices. However, amidst the stifling confines of linguistic hegemony, the graphic medium emerges as a potent conduit for resistance, transcending linguistic constraints to afford visual expression to silenced narratives of the indigenous feminine; as Katyayani, the protagonist embodies Luce Irigaray's 'autoerotic woman' who is not "pleasure-giving" to men but "self-embracing".

The anticipated findings of this study extend thus to offer insights into the transformative potential of visual storytelling as a catalyst for ecological activism and feminist resistance. By excavating the subterranean currents of gendered oppression and ecological exploitation that suffuse *Aranyaka*'s narrative, this study tries to assess *Aranyaka* as an accessible reimagining of our relationship with nature and the reconceptualisation of gendered identities within the crucible of ecological consciousness.

**Keywords: Subaltern, Ecofeminism, Ecriture feminine, Graphic Novel, Postcolonial, Activism, Visual storytelling.**

Irrespective of the afflictions of specific socio-cultural milieus, intellect is universally conferred a higher position as compared to the corporeal, so much so that the superiority of the mind over the body has been an unquestioned assumption in both spiritual and academic spaces. This assumption is further qualified by the association of gendered identities with either of the components placed on the aforementioned hierarchical ladder. Rather, the conception of it becomes easier if the imagery of a tipping scale can be placed here for one of the components shall forever remain at an advantage when compared to the other, even when the measuring unit is changed. If the measuring unit here is bestowed with a utilitarian tinge, then of course in the dualism of 'civilization' versus 'nature' the former reigns superior and thereby is assessed as a manifestation of the intellectual over the corporeal. Val Plumwood, in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* terms this as the "interrelated connection" of "a dualized structure of otherness and negation" (Plumwood, 42), where one side dominates the other.

On the other hand, if the measuring unit is viewed through the patriarchally infused social lens of gender, then the second sex is invariably seen as an accomplice of the subdued 'nature' while 'man' becomes synonymous with the superior logical faculty. Such is the patriarchally fuelled potency of this dualism that it naturalises the corresponding concepts of gender and class. It is this naturalised acceptance of gender norms in institutions like marriage and family which is seen in the relation between Y and Katyayani in Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Aranyaka* when she realises that "Y thought we were halves, not equals. He, above. Me, below." (Patil and Pattanaik 093). Through a subtle re-production and modulation of the Vedic concept of 'Ardhangini', Y re-situates her social locus from being an 'equal' to being an unsheltered refugee relegated to the uncharted, unfurnished 'half' of a psychological terrain that terrifies Katyayani, relocating her from what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber would label as the "mystical estate" of fatherhood, of literary procreation (Gilbert and Guber 10).

While Katyayani's natural eyes could recognise the difference in the configurations of their chosen paths to knowledge and their processes of acquiring it, she forwarded the view that their "different maps of the world came together to make a rich atlas" (Patil and


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Pattanaik 043), yet her assertion failed to garner the validation to reign superior over Y's for it was "gut-know, deep and mute" (Patil and Pattanaik 043) and lacked the grammatical instrument of language and its complex sophistications. According to Jacques Lacan subjectivity requires language, and language is masculine, grounded in the Phallus as universal signifier (qtd. in Jea Suk Oh 2). Then, this apparent loss of female voice is caused by the very apparatus which supposedly measures the audibility of an individual: language, for her feminine "gut-know(n)" language is characterised by a sort of placid invisibility which unifies her with the already subdued and voiceless nature. Yet, the conscious reader remains unsurprised by her apparent loss of voice because language itself as a manifestation of the dividing edge of the masculine intellect "divides the subject from the mother's body, and teaches him or her through grammar and rules to speak of things from a distance" as Verena Andermatt Conley proclaims (Conley 74). This isolating stimulus of language is dually effective in Katyayani's context for it separates her not only from her natural knowledge traditions, but it also confiscates her space of belonging which stems from her associations with the 'Aranya' and her identity as an 'Aranyani' is thereby threatened, her voice is lacerated.

Although Katyayani's voice is not heard, Amruta Patil's usage of medium bridges the gap between the expressed and the unexpressed, such that her voice is 'seen'. The isolation created by the usage of a masculine language unfit for the subaltern indigenous woman's tongue is somewhat countered as the dark endless chasm existing between the readers and the speaker is filled by the striking whites of the gutters. The speaker is no longer bound to speak of anything from a distance as the rules of linguistics are dissolved by the watercolours used.

Language as a medium is only able to partially express the thoughts and afflictions of the female whose very tongue is incomprehensible, who is different from a man, not his equal, as the world "identifies Woman with the reproductive or copulative body." (Spivak 105). For Lacan, Within the phallic definition, the woman is constituted as 'not all.' As Juliet Mitchell also explains, 'Woman' is excluded by the nature of words, meaning that the definition poses her as exclusion (qtd. in Oh 3). It is only through artistic intervention that Patil is able to counter and thereby re-situate this hierarchical narrative. It is only through the underlying symbolic comparison instituted between Y's "fire of enlightenment" represented by a proud sun and Katyayani's "fire of the microcosm" represented by a shy hearth that one is able to comprehend Katyayani's unspoken pain as she reaches the realisation that she and her husband were not "bilateral symmetry of leaves." (Patil and Pattanaik 093). While the


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vibrant tangerine rays of knowledge threaten to outshine and outvalue Katyayani's humble hearth, the silent implication catalysed by the contrast in colour shines brighter— irrespective of the assertion of difference between the two, they are created by the same all-consuming matter: fire, although the latter is domesticated to an extinguishable extent. Even when Katyayani's voice, lacking the grammatical instrument of language is snatched at times, and she cannot connect her words to form a coherent sentence, her words are connected by the bubbles of Patil's art, or in Fig's case, they are connected by thread. Thus, tracing the transformative potential of visual storytelling as a catalyst for ecological activism and feminist resistance, the subaltern voice is excavated from underground.

It is ultimately the assertion of one component that diminishes and gradually confers death upon the other in such dualisms. Helen Cixous proposes this death of one term for the life of another to be the very source of exclusionary politics against women played in the symbolic system. This to her in Freudian psychoanalytical terms is where the "masculine subject asserts himself through negation of the other." (Cixous 68). Conley furthers this argument with the declaration that, to obliterate the consequentiality of the feminine subject, here, the ascendant masculine "spirals toward the spirit and leaves the body (that is, nature) behind." (Conley 199). Simultaneously, Conley argues that the woman's body is already 'written' by culture and its repressed and abrogated by is very association with the realm of subordinated nature. Her predefined signification is further proliferated if she is distinguishable from the dominant mass and thereby is "exotic" or indigenous owing to the untamed wildness encircling her body, soul and spirit, unshaped by the confining machinery of the repressive state apparatus (Louis Althusser). This wildness then, which could have been assessed as "the source of alert survival intelligence" now by association means "the essential nature of nature" (Snyder 128).

The centrifugal structure of culture which relegated nature to the margins therefore conveniently criminalised the sexuality of the indigenous woman and reduced her natural instincts to an unspeakable, untouchable, demonised entity which must be whispered about, not spoken, lest her name grants her even an iota of identifiability. Jea Suk Oh points out that "In order to obtain the hegemony, the masculine suppresses and demonizes the feminine as the other, the abjection. Women are categorised as the human representative of the abjection: the improper, transgression, unclean..." (Oh 5). The ideological state apparatus, including but not limited to language and even storytelling as a tradition bears the gnashes of such whisperings. According to Annika Arnold, the pattern of hearing stories and telling them are reinforced in us since childhood, therefore, stories can become potent ways to redefine the


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identity of a child, and the political usage of stories carry implications which are far deeper than they are suspected to be (qtd. in Banerjee 22). Mythological tales of apsaras who are cursed by sages whose flimsy intellectual pursuits are broken by the music coming from their jingling bangles are abundant. Through Katyayani, Patil reminds the reader to question the perpetuated traditions such that they do not just become bedtime stories which might have subconscious implications when Katyayani upon luring the Great Rejector Yajnavalkya parallels herself to the forbidden- "Was I the seductress my mother used to speak of?" (Patil and Pattanaik 035).

Although the reader hears her question, Katyayani's voice remains unheard of in the Vedic tale for the indigenous knowledge traditions of the feminine, "gut know, deep and mute" is erased by those who had severed their ties with the ground in a whim to reach the sky, who "talked ceaselessly about the world as a way to avoid really living in it." (Patil and Pattanaik 043, 063). This reflects in turn the silencing of the indigenous voice which is deemed to be unintelligible by the colonial discourse and deliberately kept such. The unifocal objective lens of the androcentric vision scans the indigenous woman only to reduce her complexities to stereotypical consolatory representation of a woman with "curves". No wonder that to Katyayani it seemed that "…the bigger I got, the more invisible I seemed to become to those around me" (Patil and Pattanaik 066), for in such instances it becomes obvious that 'language distracts us,' becoming an obstacle between ourselves and the objects of perception—"we let ourselves be led aside by grammar, we let ourselves be distanced from objects by sentences, we let language double us, let it throw itself surreptitiously in front of objects, just before we can attain them." (Cixous 150). Following the Derridian perspective, the only language available is the logocentric, phallogocentric, binary language. This linearity of verse is broken by Amruta Patil's celebration of duality expressed through her art. As Katyayani's voice is seen in the connecting bubbles presented in the panel work, Patil's medium counters Derrida's "difference", or the ineliminable gap (irreducible otherness) between reality and language that confounds us. (qtd. in Oh 3).

Irrespective of her tripartite tribulations that she faces as a woman with an indigenous identity, as a manifestation of the subdued nature, Katyayani remains "unweaned from Prakriti, her umbilical cords uncut" (Ghosh 31). Even though she is represented as nature personified, in a society where "…the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant… the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak), it is her connection with nature that reverses her


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ostracisation. While she cannot "speak", she regains a political space of representative identity allocated to her by her presentation by Patil, whereby she is 'seen'. Patil reverses what Gilbert and Guber call a "relationship of "sonship"" in the filial space of poetic influence to present Katyayani on a page which is, by no means, a 'virgin page', pure and white (Gilbert and Guber 6).

Amruta Patil takes upon herself the work of showing Katyayani through a form which is seen and sees- "the imagery of village goddesses, they of the staring eyes, and the goddess Aranyani, forest incarnate", a Shalbhanjika (a fertility motif in Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism) as she mentions in the "Making Aranyaka" section of the book countering the figure of the literary woman who is but a "eunuch" (Gilbert and Guber 9). Thereby, she speaks for, or rather represents the subaltern with definite disassociation to her own identity as a member of the urban elite. Val Plumwood problematises this stance of speaking as nature. She also critiques the assumption of the right to speak as the other on performing "the requisite self-enlargement," which Plumwood sees as an expression of arrogance that erases the need to acknowledge our role as oppressors. She poses an open-ended question, "Can it ever be acceptable to speak for the other?" (qtd. in Banerjee 336).

Yet, as Patil speaks for the indigenous woman here, Katyayani must be assessed as not just a woman whose language is unintelligible, but as a material signifier of a form of nature—the Aranya, which has no communicable language at all, for the Aranya does not discriminate, all "Human laws are meaningless here", including the accepted laws of comprehensibility, such that her voice remains unknown (Patil and Pattanaik 022). Patil's usage of dyad mediums of art and words creates a space for communicating this unknown which the singular and structured medium of language is unable to contain. The cerebral-corporeal hierarchy as well is re-situated through the graphic narrative for though the reader never hears Katyayani's voice, but is able to see her glorious self-succulent form as a "Purnakumbha" (Patil and Pattanaik 081). Her body becomes the divine pot that sustains the 'amrit' of unification of nature and man, coexisting in the womb of a woman. She transpires to be Luce Irigaray's 'autoerotic woman' who is not "pleasure-giving" to men but "self-embracing" (qtd. in Oh 6). She becomes the very relational and "harmonious" language that Cixous searches for, that which embodies the "poetic idiom of proximity" and bridges the gap between the experiencing self and nature, created by a phallocentric culture. (qtd. in Conley 150).


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