

An Aesthetic Analysis of Socio-Mythical Representation of *Hunger* in Indian Graphic Novels: A Study on Amruta Patil's '*Aranyaka*'

Hardik Shiroya^{1*}, Dr. Suman Pandey²

^{1*}Research Scholar GLS Institute of Design, GLS University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India,
Email: hardik.shiroya@glsuniversity.ac.in

²Assistant Professor GLS Institute of Design, GLS University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India,
Email: suman.pandey@glsuniversity.ac.in

Article History:

Received: 06-08-2025

Revised: 27-09-2025

Accepted: 26-10-2025

Abstract:

This paper examines *Aranyaka: The Book of the Forest* (2019) by Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, reimagining 'hunger' as a multi-layered aesthetic, philosophical, and socio-mythical construct. Drawing upon Indian aesthetic theory (*rasa-bhava*) and Upanishadic philosophy (*ksudha, anna, atman*), along with visual semiotics of panel composition, chromatic use, and spatial rhetoric, the study situates hunger as bodily desire, ethical anxiety, and metaphysical quest. Methodologically, the paper combines (i) intertextual analysis of the *Taittiriya* and *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣads*, and (ii) close readings of selected panels to trace the interrelationship of gender, ecology, and spiritual striving through the protagonist Katyayani. The graphic text presents hunger as a law of life rather than a moral lapse, expressed through five thematic lenses: elemental appetite, cosmic maw, feminine agency around food, rejection/gift, and sacred feeding. These strategies re-center feminine subjectivity and eco-spiritual reciprocity. The paper argues that *Aranyaka* transforms hunger from a stigmatized appetite into a mythopoetic principle of becoming, thus positioning Indian graphic novels as sites of philosophical reflection beyond their narrative surface.

Keywords: hunger, Upanishads, aesthetics, Indian graphic novel, eco-spirituality, Amruta Patil, *Aranyaka*

1. Introduction

The Indian graphic novel has increasingly evolved into a medium of cultural and philosophical reflection, moving beyond reportage or social realism into the terrain of mythic revisioning. Among these, *Aranyaka: The Book of the Forest* (2019) stands out for redefining 'hunger' not merely as material lack but as a state of becoming that animates creation, desire, and restraint. Rooted in the Upanishadic idea that beings arise out of food, subsist on food, and ultimately return to food, the narrative situates hunger in both primal and sacred terms. Within this horizon, Patil and Pattanaik reimagine the forest as a discursive realm where appetite, gender, and ecology remain in dialogue; where the kitchen becomes epistemic rather than domestic; and where feeding or fasting functions as an ethical gesture rather than a personal choice.

This paper offers a thematically structured reading of *Aranyaka*, foregrounding the socio-mythical construction of hunger and analyzing how aesthetic strategies of symbolism, composition, chroma, and narrative fragmentation craft a visual philosophy. The analysis highlights Katyayani's feminine agency and eco-spiritual reciprocity, destabilizing ascetic hierarchies that historically disembodied knowledge. The discussion unfolds across five thematic lenses: elemental appetite, cosmic maw, feminine agency around food, rejection/gift, and sacred feeding.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Indian Aesthetics and Philosophical Systems

The Indian aesthetic tradition frames hunger beyond bodily lack. Bharata's *Natyasastra* systematized *rasa* theory, and Abhinavagupta's *Abhinavabharati* explained how emotions become aesthetic experience. Among the *navarasa*, *karuna* (pathos) and *shant* (tranquility) are central to Patil's

depiction of hunger as suffering and transcendence (Gnoli 41). Hunger thus appears as an epistemological drive producing detachment (*vairagya*) and self-inquiry (*atma-vichar*).

2.2 Semiotics and Visual Narratives

Semiotics helps decode Patil's visual language. Barthes distinguished denotation from connotation, showing how images carry layered cultural meanings (Barthes 37), while Eco's "open work" highlights reader participation in meaning (Eco 45). Applied to *Aranyaka*, these theories clarify how panels demand interpretive closure and multiple readings.

2.3 Graphic Novels as a Serious Form

Will Eisner defined comics as "sequential art," elevating them to literature (Eisner 7). Scott McCloud detailed panel transitions and closure as the grammar of comics (68–75). In India, Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994) pioneered graphic novels as a socio-political critique (Chatterjee, "Graphic Novels" 92). Later, Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) and Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) extended the form to feminist and urban themes (Chatterjee, "Aesthetic Resistance" 91).

2.4 Feminist and Eco-Critical Readings of Amruta Patil

Patil's retellings—*Adi Parva* (2012), *Sauptik* (2016), and *Aranyaka* (2019)—foreground female voices, ecological wisdom, and spiritual embodiment. Critics note how she disrupts patriarchal narratives. Subramaniam highlights her blend of "visual mythologies and feminist thought" (118); Singh emphasizes her feminist rewriting of myths (64); and Ghosh sees Katyayani as an "eco-spiritual archetype" uniting hunger, sexuality, and ecology (135).

2.5 Hunger as Myth, Ritual, and Symbolism

Upanishadic texts frame hunger as primal: the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* states beings are "food-born" (Olivelle 144), while the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad* begins creation with a "hungry self" (1.4.1). Beyond scripture, hunger has been a tool of socio-political critique, from Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" to Sahni's *Tamas*. Dehejia notes its encoding in Indian art through absence and longing (76). In *Aranyaka*, Sohini Ghosh shows how kitchen and forest function as parallel epistemologies where hunger is both ecological and emotional (29).

3. Research Objectives

O1. Examine how *Aranyaka* constructs "hunger" as both bodily and metaphysical within socio-mythical frames.

O2. Analyze the aesthetic and semiotic strategies of symbolism, composition, color, spatial design, and narrative structure by which this construction is visualized.

O3. Situate the character's feminine agency and eco-spiritual reciprocity within the broader discourses of gendered subjectivity and ecological philosophy in Indian mythic retellings.

4. Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive design anchored to **O1, O2, and O3**.

Intertextual analysis (O1): Close reading of narrative voice, motifs, and dialogue in *Aranyaka* against Upanishadic sources (*Taittiriya*; *Bṛhadaranyaka*) and Indian aesthetic philosophy (*rasa-bhava*) to trace how hunger is articulated as spiritual, social, and gendered.

Visual semiotics (O2): Panel-level analysis of composition (framing, horizon, figure/ground), chromatic choices, gesture/body language, and spatial metaphors to unpack how images enact appetite, denial, and reciprocity.

Critical lenses (O3): Feminist and eco-critical perspectives guide the interpretation of Katyayani's embodied knowledge and the forest-kitchen continuum, positioning feeding as an epistemic labor.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Hunger as Elemental Force: Fire and Appetite

The introduction of hunger in the early chapter of *Forest* is made by the contrast of a careless blue sky and feeding on the orange flames in panel no. 2 (Fig. 1). The panel (Fig. 1) represented in the eye takes the label *raudra rasa* (fury), in the devouring power of the fire, and balances it out in *shanta rasa* (tranquility), in the placid sky overhead. The semiotics of horizontal division: earth underneath, sky above places on stage a dichotomy of desire versus detachment. The flames, in Upanishadic nomenclature, represent *Agni*, the sacrificial mouth of the universe, in a repetition of the Taittiriya Upanisad acknowledgement of hunger (*ksudha*) as an antecedent to being. For Katyayani, unlike the cosmic fire, appetite is not self-legitimizing but requires justification, reflecting how women's desires are historically problematized. Hunger then, is aestheticized as both cosmic and gendered elemental law to fire, but an ambivalent experience for women.



Figure 1: Panel no. 2, Chapter 'Forest', pg. 004 (Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, 2023).

5.2 Cosmic Hunger and the Maw of Creation

In panel no. 5 of chapter *Forest* (Fig. 2), the seascape depicts small beings consumed by huge mouths, overemphasizing the scale and the sense of urgency. And the jaws open to create *bhayanakasa* (fear) and *adbhuta rasa* (wonder), creating terror at annihilation and wonder at cosmic continuity. Semiotic techniques of spiraling composition, cold blue, and predatory symmetry heighten the sense of inevitability to be consumed. This is philosophically consistent with the Bṛhadaraṇyaka Upaniṣad (1.4.1), which indicates creation as a product of a hungry self, and the Bhagavad Gita saying that

Time is the consumer of worlds. Thus, hunger is recast not as a fall into taboo but as the sacred rhythm of becoming and an aesthetic-philosophical counter to patriarchal asceticism.



Figure 2: Panel no. 5, Chapter 'Forest', pg. 0007 (Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, 2023).

5.3 Feminine Agency and the Politics of Food

In panel no. 41 of the *Field* chapter (fig. 3), communal eating reclaims hunger as agency and pleasure. The direct involvement of Katyayani with food produces the rasa of *shringar* (relation/ erotic delight) and *hasyarasa* (ease, convivial joy). The earthy palette and banana-leaf arrangements act as semiotic cues of community, ritual, and care. These scenes, on the background of Upanishad teachings which tend to glorify renunciation, resonate with the Katha Upanishad and Gita, yet turn the order upside down by insisting that appetite is wisdom and not distraction. The feminist and eco-critical interpretations give importance to the way Katyayani reclaims appetite as embodied knowledge that turns the kitchen into a philosophical realm where ecological cycles and feminine subjectivity meet. Food becomes epistemic labor—a form of attention and relation, not indulgence.



Figure 3: Panel no. 41, Chapter 'Field', pg. 070 (Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, 2023).

5.4 Rejection, Gift, and the Feminine Self



Figure 4: Panel no. 36, Chapter 'Field', pg. 067 (Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, 2023).

The pain of being dismissed on the ground of epistemic reasons is dramatized in the panel when offerings made by Katyayani are rejected (Fig. 4). In the panel (Fig. 4), the visual representation of nourishment is fertile (fruits of papaya, parrots, green vegetation), but their loss is visualised through negation, and the idea of abundance is turned into a loss rather than abundance, which creates *karuna rasa* (pathos). Her endurance embodies *vira rasa* (heroic strength), as she likens herself to bedrock upon sand, gaining dignity in invisibility. Semiotics of negation, the transformation between luscious color and dust, visualize the violence of emotions.

The rejection philosophically recapitalizes the Upanishadic theme of tension between *bhoga* (enjoyment) and *vairagya* (renunciation), only now in the form of a criticism of the silencing of the embodied wisdom of women in the name of abstract rationalism. Eco-critical views also highlight the undervaluation of women as sources of labor and knowledge of the environment, despite being central. Hunger, therefore, turns out to be a need of the body, as well as an existential desire to be seen.

5.5 Feeding as Sacred Continuity and Female Solidarity



Figure 5: Panel no. 14, Chapter 'Ladle', pg. 157 (Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik, *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*, 2023).

A climax resolution is provided in panel no. 14 of Ladle chapter (Fig. 5) in which Maitreyi satiates Katyayani, and hunger is converted to divine reciprocity. It is a scene of quietness (*santa rasa*) and a spiritualized, nourishing love (*shringar rasa*) which is aesthetically complete. The semiotic symbols of rebirth and clarity are the deep indigo leaves and the single white flower, and the ladle itself turns into a ritual object, aestheticizing feeding into a metaphysical offering. An Upanishad philosophy comes to the fore itself: the Taittiriyya Upaniṣad (3.10.6) is emphatic that one cannot reject a person seeking food, and that feeding is the law of divinity. Feminist and ecological approaches to the text have emphasized the experience of the act that heals Katyayani of her earlier rejection by Maitreyi, who rebrands hunger as a source of strength and solidarity. Here, feeding becomes not indulgence but an Upanishadic ethic, linking women, ecology, and philosophy into a circle of sacred reciprocity.

6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that *Aranyaka: The Book of the Forest* by Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik elevates the condition of being hungry to a series of aesthetic and philosophical registers. The intersection of *rasa* theory, visual semiotics, Upanishadic philosophy, and feminist eco-criticism reveals hunger not as deficiency, but as cosmic rhythm, ethical relation, and embodied knowledge. The aesthetics of *rasa* frame hunger not only as a narrative theme but also as an affective experience for the reader: the rage of fire (*raudra*), the sublimity of cosmic mouths (*adbhuta*), the pathos of rejection (*karuna*), or the calm of nourishment (*shanta*). Such affective registers situate hunger within the aesthetic-philosophical traditions of India, affirming its emotional and epistemic power. Visual semiotics highlights how panel composition, chromatic choice, and bodily gesture render appetite as both threat and affection. Banana leaves, ladles, flames, jaws, and papaya fruits emerge as semiotic signs that aestheticize hunger as a universal law and relational act.

The novel also re-reads Upanishadic *darsana*, reformulating scriptural teachings about *ksudha* (hunger), *anna* (food), and *Atman* (self). Fire as Agni and jaws as Kala, along with feeding, provide a visual grammar that translates metaphysical wisdom for modern readers.

Finally, feminist and eco-critical perspectives clarify that hunger functions not only as cosmic law but also as a gendered and ecological principle. Katyayani's feeding labor foregrounds appetite as epistemic power, resisting patriarchal ascetic hierarchies and affirming the forest–kitchen continuum as a site of eco-spiritual philosophy.

To conclude, *Aranyaka* demonstrates that the graphic novel is not merely a literary genre, but a philosophical medium where image and concept converge. Through the aestheticization of hunger in affect, symbol, scripture, and gender, Patil and Pattanaik recast the graphic novel as a present-day *darsana*: an interpretive vision that preserves cultural memory, ecological wisdom, and feminine agency.

References

1. Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, 1977.
2. Chatterjee, Rimi B. "Frame/Works: How India Tells Stories in Comics and Graphic Novels." *Writing India Anew: Indian-English Fiction 2000–2010*. Ed. Krishna Sen and Rituparna Roy. Amsterdam University Press, 2013. 205–228. Print.
3. Dehejia, Vidya. *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art: Visual Narratives of India*. Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997.
4. Eco, Umberto. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Indiana UP, 1979.
5. Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art*. Poorhouse Press, 1985.
6. Ghosh, Sohini. "The Art of Revering in Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*: An Analysis." *Middle Flight*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2020, pp. 27–36.
7. Ghosh, Tanushree. "An Eco-spiritual Reading of Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik's *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*." *Middle Flight*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2020, pp. 131–39.
8. Gnoli, Raniero. *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*. Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1968.
9. McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Harper Perennial, 1993.
10. Olivelle, Patrick, translator. *The Early Upaniṣads*. Oxford UP, 1998.
11. Singh, Preeti. "Rewriting Myth Through Feminist Lenses: Amruta Patil's Graphic Novels." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2020, pp. 63–70.
12. Subramaniam, Arundhati. "Visual Mythologies and Feminist Thought." *Indian Literature*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2016, pp. 117–20.