

A Review of *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest*

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A verdurous sight; a ladle feeding ghetto the ritualistic sacrificial fire; life engendering from the hunger of the earth: that's how the graphic rendition of Vedic wisdom unfolds through Amruta Patil's *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* (2019), the concept of which has been provided by mythologist and co-author Devdutt Pattanaik. Both the authors have forayed in the arena of mythology with several retellings of Indian myths, at large. This book is the masterpiece of the artist and author Amruta Patil who painted retellings of *Mahabharata* in *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (2016), previously.

The bigger canvas of the narrative is occupied by the forest in which the love story of Katyayani and her husband, the renowned sage and philosopher Yājñavalkya, addressed throughout the book as the interrogative 'Y' by Katyayani, unfolds. The storyline is loosely inspired by the original tale of Yājñavalkya and his three wives Gargi, Maitryei, and Katyayani from the *Bṛihadâraṇyâka Upanishad*; where the former two are intellectually bent whereas Katyayani is more somatically inclined, but not without a mind and wisdom of her own.

The book is divided into nine sections titled Forest, Others, Field, Grove, Rivals, Classroom, Exchange and Ladle, through which the journey of Katyayani unfolds, as an ousted woman with her abundant form and an insatiable appetite who discovers Y and cohabits with him as his wife. A few characters appear and disappear in their home from the world, to gain the knowledge and wisdom accorded by Y to his pupils, while Katyayani exists symbiotically with the forest and at points metamorphoses into *Aranyâni*, a goddess of the forests (86). This richly illustrated piece carries the chiaroscuro of tellurian tones in conjunction with its very simple and complex Vedic messages by giving the earthy, primal, organic Katyayani the lead in the meaning-making process; the author deconstructs the androcentric gaze to bring in a gynocentric one. Katyayani is everything Y is not, Katyayni the large: she with her untameable hair, large eyes like those of Goddess *Durga*, big 'pûrnâkumbhâ,' filled pot body (80) she likes to eat and feed as well. We see her traversing her space, which is the home to her larger habitat of the forest. There she decorates herself according to the seasons, swims in natural ponds and lakes; and learns the ways of the forest.

As the story progresses, the appearance of a civilisation begins to take form based on human needs with pots for food, fasting for rejuvenation of the body, housing for shelter, farming to feed and the stories of gods and goddesses to explicate the transforming world (85).

The intermingling of the visual and verbal illuminates brilliant and thought-provoking perspectives throughout the tale, beginning with Katyayani's revelation when she affirms, "I am Katyayni the Large. The warp of my story has always been hunger" (2). The predominant theme of hunger manifests as hunger for food in Katyayani, as abstinence in the character named 'the fig', and as knowledge represented by Y, ironically instilled in the pronunciation of the alphabet, resembling that of 'why'.

The initial art strip shows Katyayani, exiled from her village on account of eating the village Devi's food because of her insatiable hunger (14), after cohabiting with Y, her space becomes the kitchen where there's violence and temptation as she breaks the necks of chicken and turns them into tempting stews (128). Hunger has its ally in desire which begins the cycle of life and death, cause and effect for all living beings and in this lies the insight of the Rig Veda which expounds on the first seed of the mind, which is desire (Singh). The interplay of binaries between the body and mind, desire and abstinence, home and outside; kitchen and classroom play to highlight the importance of the primal, basic, rhythmic and natural.

We see her insightful wisdom reflected through her stream of consciousness, "Food demands violence but violence is terrifying. Every part of a felled tree and culled animal satisfies a need" (83). Her grassroot wisdom is revealed when Y's student Upakoshala aka Uppi is enlightened after an episode in the Aranya where he is sent to graze animals by Katyayani. He comes back and falls to her feet and utters the following, "You sent me to learn what Satyakâma Jabali learned with his four hundred cows. In keeping a herd alive, fed, mated, all of life's secrets are revealed... my big lesson came from the kitchen, not from the classroom" (99). To this Katyayani naively wonders who Satyakâma Jabali is; who is a character mentioned in the *Chândayoga Upanishad*. Here Katyayani naively wishes to return to her work. This light-hearted take on the grand ideas of epiphanies and enlightenment shows the authors' efficacy at instilling deep insights into the uncomplicated parts of life.

Katyayani is far from being a great philosopher, rather she is more invested in the natural rhythms of the body in sync with nature around her which is reminiscent of ancient cultures of India, Africa, and Latin America. These earth centered practices were goddess centric, as we see in the image of the *gram devi*, the village goddess, carved from the earth which Katyayni metamorphoses

Indraprasth

into at one point in the book as *Aranyâni*, the forest Goddess, which is a concept present in the Rigveda (Devdutt). This interplay of *purusha*, the divine masculine and *prakriti*, the divine feminine is what keeps this tale of humanity progressing (Devdutt). Katyayani becomes an allegory of the forest as well as of the primordial goddess.

By choosing her to be the narrator of the story, the authors have tried to shed light on the generally hidden, muted and marginalized women characters in ancient Indian literature and the Katyayani in the original tale. Here, the character is magnanimous, wise and abundant as she teaches not only Upakoshala but enlightens King Janak in a debate on love, while Y and 'the weaver' brainstorm about the world and philosophy (148).

Aranya, the forest, is a metaphor for the universe and how it operates. It takes its ideas from the Vedas, the erotic poems in the Sanskrit language by Amaru, tribal village art, natural sciences, and other Indian arts like weaving, pottery, and sculpting. Characters have been modelled based on different cultures and epics as well, with that of 'the Fig' from northeast and of King Janak from the much revered Indian epic *Ramayana*.

The central plot is devoid of banal tropes of fuming sages, curses and divine intervention and exchanged with a simple tale of love and growth. It is the meta-narrative though, that is steeped in Vedic wisdom with environmental issues, universal truths, life cycle, human nature and the mind. The confluence of the words and art on these 180 pages mirror the journey of human life with its stages of birth, life and death in a continuum. The burgeoning human thought to seek more and discover more is whetted by a will to survive.

It is a commendable rendition and unprecedented in its attempt and aim. The ease of access with which it offers an explication of Vedic wisdom through the graphic form and of the uncomplicated, yet complex tale of Katyayani holds immense potential in terms of the dispersal of knowledge to all who shall love to engage in that old game of searching for the truth and essence of life in a land of seekers.

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