
Ecological concerns as portrayed in the select work of Amruta Patil's 'Adi Parva: The Churning of the Ocean' and Sharanya Manivannan's 'Incantations over water'.

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes select graphic work of Amruta Patil and Sharanya Manivannan. The entitled works are *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* and *Incantations over water* respectively. The analysis of the works will be made in order to understand the ecological concerns especially in accordance to aquatic landscapes and also feminine agency in the works. Additionally, these works also carry the Post-Colonial trauma which will be part of the evaluation. The focus of these works are Ganga as the river goddess as the overarching storyteller weaving cosmic, earthly, and liquid histories in the previous and Ila as the grounding narrative in coastal, ecological, and personal memory in the latter. Methodology applied in these two texts are visual and qualitative.

Keywords: Graphic, Blue Humanities, Feminine, Hydro- Violence, Ecocritical, Churning, Post- Colonial, Aesthetic, Individual.

Introduction

In contemporary South Asian visual and literary culture, the graphic novel has emerged as a fertile site for reimagining traditional epics, historical trauma, and ecological degradation. Within this domain, Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and Sharanya Manivannan's *Incantations Over Water* (2021) stand out as transformative graphic interventions. Both works relocate the focal point of storytelling from terrestrial, patriarchal, and heroic centers to the fluid, liminal margins of aquatic environments.

Amruta Patil, regarded as India's first female graphic novelist, undertakes in *Adi Parva* a visually rich retelling of the Mahabharata's foundational myths and the Vishnu Purana. Crucially, she frames the entire cosmos through the voice of Ganga the celestial river goddess acting as the primary sutradhar (storyteller/narrator) who

weaves together cosmic, earthly, and liquid histories. On the other hand, Sharanya Manivannan's *Incantations Over Water* introduces Ila, a centuries-old mermaid inhabiting the Kallady lagoon of Mattakalappu (Batticaloa), Ilankai (Sri Lanka). Through a lyrical mix of text and luminous, hand-illustrated visuals, Manivannan weaves together mermaid lore, coastal ecology, and the devastating, unvoiced trauma of the three-decade Sri Lankan Civil War.

While differing in scale Patil operating on a cosmic and epic plane, and Manivannan on a localized, coastal, and diasporic plane both texts share a profound commitment to engaging with water as a critical site of agency, ecological reflection, and postcolonial historical reclamation. This article investigates how Patil and Manivannan use visual and textual strategies to critique "hydro-violence," assert feminine agency through fluid narrators, and articulate postcolonial trauma lingering in South Asian waters.

To rigorously analyze *Adi Parva* and *Incantations Over Water*, this study synthesizes three interrelated theoretical perspectives: the Blue Humanities, Ecofeminism, and Postcolonial Hydro-Violence.

2.1 The Blue Humanities and Hydro-Criticism

The "Blue Humanities," championed by scholars like Steve Mentz and John Gillis, shifts ecocritical inquiry away from terrestrial, land-centric paradigms toward oceanic, fluvial, and coastal spaces. In *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, Astrida Neimanis posits that water connects the biological, ecological, and social realms. Water is not a passive backdrop or a static natural resource; rather, it is a dynamic, material, and trans-corporeal medium that holds memory, records trauma, and bridges temporalities. Applying hydro-criticism to graphic literature exposes how panel borders, color palettes, and fluid narrative lines embody the physical dynamics of aquatic landscapes.

2.2 Ecofeminism and Feminine Narrative Agency

Ecofeminist theory, articulated by scholars like Greta Gaard, Carolyn Merchant, and Vandana Shiva, examines the parallel subjugation and exploitation of nature and women under patriarchal and capitalist structures. In South Asian cultural contexts, rivers and water bodies are frequently sanctified as maternal deities (e.g., Ganga Mata) while simultaneously suffering severe physical contamination and environmental degradation. Patil and Manivannan deploy ecofeminist subversion by liberating the feminine-water construct from pure symbolic commodification or passive motherly sacrifice. Instead, their female, water-bound narrators are given critical voice, bodily autonomy, and storytelling authority.

2.3 Postcolonial Trauma and Hydro-Violence

Hydro-violence refers to the structural, direct, and environmental harm inflicted upon water ecosystems and the communities reliant on them. In postcolonial contexts, hydro-violence manifests through colonial resource extraction, military maritime surveillance, toxic dumping, and the displacement of coastal and indigenous

populations. As Rob Nixon notes in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, environmental destruction often operates invisibly across long timeframes. In Sri Lanka and India, aquatic spaces lagoons, rivers, and oceans have historically served as sites of military conflict, colonial commerce, and ecological devastation. Both graphic novels capture this intersection of ecological collapse and human trauma.

3. Methodology: Visual-Qualitative and Multimodal Analysis

This article employs a visual-qualitative and multimodal methodology tailored to comic book studies and graphic scholarship (drawing on frameworks from Will Eisner and Gillian Rose). Graphic novels convey meaning through the interaction of text and image including visual composition, gutter space, panel arrangement, color symbolism, and verbal-visual harmony.

4.1 Liquid Mythologies and Cosmic Narratives in Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*

In *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean*, Amruta Patil reimagines the beginning of the Mahabharata by introducing Ganga as the primary storyteller. Amruta reflects on her work as mediator:

"In any case, you are not held captive by old narratives. Tales must be tilled like the land so they keep breathing. The only thing you owe allegiance to is the essence" (Patil 116)

Traditionally, epics like the Mahabharata are narrated by male sages (such as Vyasa or Vaishampayana) within courtly or sacrificial contexts (such as Janamejaya's snake sacrifice). Patil disrupts this patriarchal lineage by placing the river goddess Ganga around a campfire, speaking directly to a diverse gathering of mortals, seers, and beasts.

Ganga as the Sutradhar of Fluid Time

Ganga declares early in the text: "Tales must be tilled like the land so they keep breathing". Her perspective is uniquely aquatic non-linear, continuous, and non-anthropocentric. Unlike human narrators bound by royal genealogy or dynastic pride, Ganga sees the rise and fall of kings as transient ripples upon her surface. Her voice fluidly connects the cosmic creation story to earthly human lives.

The Samudra Manthan: Ecological Extraction and Hydro-Violence

A pivotal sequence in *Adi Parva* is the Samudra Manthan (the Churning of the Cosmic Ocean). In conventional Hindu mythology, the churning is celebrated as a triumphant endeavor where gods (Devas) and demons (Asuras) cooperate to extract Amrita (the nectar of immortality). However, Patil's visual and textual rendition highlights the violence inherent in this act. Mount Mandara is uprooted to serve as a churning rod, and Vasuki, the serpent king, is pulled as a rope until his body bleeds and vomits toxic venom (Halahala).

"To know if a tale is worth its weight in gold, check if it reveals threefold: In your bloodstream. In the town square. In the turning of galaxies. If it does: Gold. If it makes you giddy just to think of the scope of the tale: Gold" (Patil 12).

Visually, Patil paints the ocean not as an endless resource, but as a wounded, thrashing entity. The mixed-media panels employ dark, turbulent brushstrokes, swaths of indigo, charcoal, and fiery reds to depict the distress of marine life caught in the churning. Patil frames the Samudra Manthan as an early mythic archetype of anthropocentric and divine resource exploitation the ruthless extraction of ocean wealth without regard for ecological balance. Through Ganga's narration, the extraction of Amrita comes at the cost of poisoning the waters, requiring Shiva's intervention to consume the Halahala poison.

Reclaiming Feminine Autonomy: Ganga and Shantanu

Ganga's personal history in the epic specifically her marriage to King Shantanu is frequently interpreted in patriarchal traditions as cold or unnatural, due to her drowning of her first seven children. Patil reframes this event through an ecofeminist lens. Ganga's actions are presented as an act of mercy, releasing the celestial Vasus from earthly, mortal curses. When Shantanu breaks his promise and questions her agency, Ganga departs without hesitation. In Patil's visual rendering, Ganga does not disappear into submissive silence; she expands back into her vast, flowing river form. Her liquid identity resists male ownership and courtly control, affirming her ultimate allegiance to the cosmic and ecological order rather than terrestrial patriarchies.

4.2 Coastal Ecologies and Diasporic Memory in Sharanya Manivannan's Incantations Over Water

While Patil expands outward to cosmic oceans, Sharanya Manivannan plunges inward to the localized, politically scarred coastal waters of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka. Centered around the figure of **Ila**, an ancient mermaid inhabiting the Kallady lagoon, *Incantations Over Water* blends indigenous folklore, marine biology, and postcolonial political critique.

Ila as the Subaltern Oceanic Witness

Ila derives her name from Ilankai (the Tamil name for Sri Lanka). As a creature belonging neither fully to the land nor to the open sea, Ila embodies the liminal existence of marginalized, displaced, and traumatized communities. "Manivannan uses hand-drawn illustrations in deep blue, cyan, and black ink, creating an immersive aquatic atmosphere where text and visual lines merge like underwater currents." (Sullivan 2021)

Through Ila's "seductive soliloquy," addressed directly to a diasporic Tamil woman who has returned to the lagoon in search of her heritage, Manivannan addresses the loss of cultural memory caused by war and displacement. Ila notes that during the decades of the Sri Lankan Civil War, the famed "singing" of the Kallady lagoon ceased:

On full moon nights, from deep within the lagoons... mysterious sounds emerge. During the three decades of civil war, it is said, those sounds had ceased. (Manivannan 2021)

The silence of the lagoon reflects how human military violence disrupts natural environments. The aquatic world acts as an archive, storing the bodies, secrets, and unexpressed grief of wartime atrocities.

Hydro-Violence, Militarization, and Ecological Grief

In *Incantations Over Water*, hydro-violence is both literal and symbolic. The military conflict in Sri Lanka militarized coastal waters, restricting traditional fishing, polluting lagoons, and turning marine spaces into sites of violence. Manivannan juxtaposes imagery of delicate marine life seahorses, stingrays, dugongs, and coral reefs with the heavy shadows of gunboats, drowned civilians, and naval checkpoints. Ila acts as an archive of ecological grief (solastalgia). She recounts the impact of both human-made conflicts and natural disasters (such as the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami), showing how coastal communities bear a double burden of political marginalization and ecological fragility. Through Ila, Manivannan presents water not as a barrier or a mere site of trauma, but as a site of potential healing and survival.

Multimodal Fluidity and the Aesthetics of Water

Both artists use visual techniques to express the concept of fluidity:

1. **Disruption of Rigid Panel Boundaries:** In both works, water constantly spills over panel edges. In *Adi Parva*, waves of paint break traditional grid layouts, reflecting Ganga's unpredictable narrative path. In *Incantations Over Water*, Manivannan uses full-bleed blue spreads where text flows along line art, mimicking the movement of lagoon currents.
2. **Color as Emotional Landscape:** Patil uses earth tones, golds, and deep blues to convey the ancient, epic scale of myth. Manivannan uses a focused palette of blues, teals, and whites, reflecting the isolation, memory, and depth of the lagoon.

Postcolonial Hydro-Violence and Cultural Memory

In both texts, water preserves histories suppressed by dominant, land-based narratives. In *Adi Parva*, Ganga records the consequences of greed, hubris, and patriarchs who view the earth and rivers purely as resources to conquer or exploit. In *Incantations Over Water*, Ila preserves the memories of Tamils displaced or killed during the Sri Lankan Civil War, offering an alternative archive to official state histories.

Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* and Sharanya Manivannan's *Incantations Over Water* showcase the power of South Asian graphic literature to engage with pressing ecological and political questions. By centering non-human, water-bound feminine narrators a celestial river goddess and a lagoon mermaid both works challenge terrestrial, patriarchal, and state-centric perspectives.

Through their visual and text-based approaches, Patil and Manivannan reveal how hydro-violence affects both human lives and natural ecosystems. *Adi Parva* reinterprets ancient epic mythology to critique anthropocentric resource exploitation,

while Incantations Over Water grounds its narrative in coastal geography to expose the traumas of civil war and displacement.

Ultimately, these graphic novels demonstrate that water is neither silent nor passive. As Ganga and Ila show, water remembers, speaks, and insists on its own agency. In giving form to these aqueous voices, Patil and Manivannan offer new ways of thinking about ecofeminism, postcolonial recovery, and environmental justice through graphic art.

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