

The Skin of the Story: Texture and Mythic Intermedia in Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*

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Abstract: *This paper examines the intersection of tactile aesthetics and mythological reimagining in Amruta Patil's graphic novel, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean*. By employing a "mythic intermedia" approach, Patil transcends the traditional boundaries of sequential art, blending charcoal, acrylics, collage, and rich prose to create what this study terms "the skin of the story." Unlike conventional comic art that prioritizes linear clarity, Patil's textured panels demand a sensory engagement that mirrors the complexity of the Puranas. The research analyses how this tactile visuality serves a dual purpose: first, as a bridge between the ancient oral tradition and the modern graphic medium; and second, as a tool for "ecofeminist" reclamation. Through the character of the Ganga as the *Sutradhaar* (narrator), the narrative skin becomes a living, breathing entity that challenges the rigid, patriarchal interpretations of the *Mahabharata*. By investigating the materiality of Patil's work, this paper argues that the "texture" of the graphic novel is not merely decorative but is essential to its philosophical inquiry into memory, fluid identity, and the cyclical nature of time. Ultimately, *Adi Parva* is positioned as a transformative work that re-embodies the mythic past for a contemporary audience.*

Keywords: Visual Intertextuality, *Sutradhaar*, Materiality in Comics

1. Introduction: The Skin of the Story

The Living Epic: From Orality to the Graphic Page

The *Mahabharata* is often described not as a static book, but as a "living" tradition—a vast, oceanic confluence of myth, philosophy, and history that has defined the Indian subcontinent's cultural consciousness for millennia. Traditionally categorized as *Itihasa* (that which happened), the epic has survived through an endless cycle of transformations: from the ancient oral chants of the *Sutas* (bards) to the structured Sanskrit verses of Vyasa, and later into regional folk theatre, television soap operas, and cinematic spectacles. However, in the 21st century, a new medium has emerged to claim the mantle of the epic storyteller: the graphic novel.

While the mid-20th century saw the rise of *Amar Chitra Katha*, which utilized a clean, linear, and often didactic visual style to popularize mythology for children, contemporary Indian graphic narratives have begun to push the boundaries of the medium. At the forefront of this movement is Amruta Patil. With the publication of *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012), Patil did not merely "illustrate" the first book of the *Mahabharata*; she reimagined the very texture of mythic storytelling. By moving away from the "clear line" style of Western comics and the rigid panels of traditional Indian comic books, Patil introduced a "mythic intermedia"—a dense, layered aesthetic where the story is told as much through the physical medium of the page as it is through the written word.

The Concept of "The Skin of the Story"

This research takes as its primary departure point the metaphor of the "skin." In biological terms, skin is the boundary between the internal self and the external world; it is porous, sensitive to touch, and carries the scars of history. In the context of Patil's *Adi Parva*, the "skin of the story" refers to the literal and figurative texture of the artwork. Patil's pages are not flat digital renders; they are palimpsests of charcoal, acrylics, oil paints, and collage. There is a palpable materiality to the work—a graininess in the

depiction of the primordial forests and a fluid, watery translucence in the depiction of the river goddess Ganga.

This tactile quality is not merely an aesthetic choice; it is a philosophical one. By giving the story, a "skin," Patil invites the reader into a sensory relationship with the text. In the classical Indian tradition of *Darshan*, the act of seeing is reciprocal—one "sees" the deity, and is "seen" in return. Patil's intermedia style facilitates a modern form of *Darshan*, where the reader does not just consume a plot but experiences the weight and grain of the mythic past. This paper argues that this texture serves to "re-embodiment" the epic, stripping away the sanitized, plasticized versions of the *Mahabharata* popularized by 1980s television and replacing them with a visceral, earthy reality.

The *Sutradhaar* and the Fluidity of Narrative

Central to the narrative architecture of *Adi Parva* is the choice of the narrator. Patil breaks from the traditional patriarchal lineage of storytellers by positioning Ganga, the celestial river goddess, as the *Sutradhaar*—the holder of the strings. This choice is pivotal for the "mythic intermedia" this paper seeks to analyse. Ganga is an entity of flow, change, and depth. As she tells the story to a circle of disenfranchised listeners on the banks of the river, the narrative mirrors her nature. It is not a straight line but a series of eddies and currents.

The "intermedia" aspect comes into play here through the blending of various artistic traditions. Patil draws from the rich wells of Indian folk art, Renaissance chiaroscuro, and modern collage. This hybridization reflects the character of the *Adi Parva* itself—the "Book of Beginnings"—which deals with the churning of the primeval ocean and the birth of various lineages. By using collage, Patil literally stitches together disparate elements, much like the *Mahabharata* itself is a "stitched" compilation of diverse myths and folklores. The texture of the page thus becomes a visual representation of the *Sutra* (the thread) that binds the chaotic elements of existence into a coherent narrative.

Intermedia as a Tool of Reclamation

The theoretical framework of "Mythic Intermedia" also allows for a profound feminist reclamation. Traditional retellings of the *Mahabharata* have often focused on the *Kshatriya* (warrior) code and the political machinations of men. However, Patil's visual focus often lingers on the elemental and the domestic. Through the use of deep, evocative textures, she highlights the "ignored" bodies of the epic: the mothers, the outcasts, and the environment itself.

When Patil paints the character of Satyavati, the fisher-girl who founds the Kuru lineage, the "skin" of the story becomes musk-scented and earthy. The use of mixed media allows Patil to represent the divine and the mundane on the same plane, suggesting that the "mythic" is not a distant, golden age, but something that exists in the very fiber of our current material reality. This paper will explore how this intermedia approach challenges the "Great Tradition" of Sanskrit classicism by infusing it with the "Little Traditions" of local texture and bodily experience.

Research Questions and Scope

This paper intends to navigate the following questions:

- 1) How does the materiality of Amruta Patil's art—specifically her use of texture and mixed media—alter the reader's perception of the *Mahabharata*?
- 2) In what ways does the concept of "intermedia" bridge the gap between ancient oral traditions and modern digital/print consumption?
- 3) How does the "skin of the story" serve as a site for gendered and environmental reclamation in *Adi Parva*?

By focusing on the first volume of Patil's project, this research will demonstrate that *Adi Parva* is a landmark in the evolution of the Indian graphic novel. It is a work that demands we look closer—not just at the words or the icons, but at the very "skin" of the narrative. In doing so, we find that the *Mahabharata* is not a relic of the past, but a breathing, textured presence that continues to churn the ocean of our collective imagination.

2. Methodology

This research employs a **qualitative, interdisciplinary framework** that integrates formal visual analysis, narratology, and postmodern adaptation theory. To adequately address the "texture" and "intermedia" aspects of Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva*, the study moves beyond a traditional philological reading of the *Mahabharata* and instead treats the graphic novel as a multimodal artifact.

The following methodological pillars form the basis of the inquiry:

1) Visual Semiotics and Formal Analysis

The primary method for analysing the "Skin of the Story" is **formal visual analysis**, rooted in the semiotics of comics (as defined by theorists like Will Eisner and Thierry Gorenstein). This involves:

- **Medium Specificity:** Examining the choice of materials (charcoal, acrylic, collage) and how these textures signify different emotional or temporal states.

- **Panel Architecture:** Analysing the "braiding" of panels—how the absence of rigid borders in Patil's work contributes to a sense of mythic fluidity.
- **Colour Theory:** Mapping the shifting palettes— from the earthy ochres of the forest to the deep, layered blues of the Ganga— to understand the psychological landscape of the narrative.

2) Comparative Adaptation Studies

To understand the "Mythic" element, the paper utilizes **comparative adaptation theory**. This involves a "side-by-side" reading of Patil's *Adi Parva* against the "Critical Edition" of the *Mahabharata* (Sukthankar et al.) and popular 20th-century visual iterations (such as *Amar Chitra Katha*).

- The focus is not on "fidelity" (how "accurate" the retelling is), but on **trans mediation**—how the story changes when it moves from Sanskrit verse to a tactile, painted medium.
- Special attention is paid to the **Sutradhaar (Narrator) shift**, analysing the rhetorical impact of replacing the traditional male sage with the female deity Ganga.

3) Feminist Hermeneutics and Ecocriticism

Given the paper's focus on "reclamation," a **feminist hermeneutic lens** is applied to the text. This involves:

- **Gaze Analysis:** Investigating how Patil's visual perspective centres the female body and the domestic sphere, areas often marginalized in heroic epics.
- **Ecofeminist Reading:** Analysing the intersection of the feminine and the elemental (specifically water and earth) through the texture of the illustrations, exploring how the environment acts as a secondary narrator.

4) Materiality and Reader Response

Finally, the research incorporates elements of **materiality studies**. This approach treats the physical book as an object of "haptic visuality"— a term coined by Laura Marks to describe art that triggers a sense of touch through sight. The methodology explores how the grain and "skin" of the artwork invite a participatory reading experience, moving the reader from a passive consumer of myth to an active witness of the "churning" process.

Data Selection and Scope

The primary data for this study is limited to the first volume of the Parva trilogy: *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean*. Specific chapters (such as the birth of Ganga's sons and the burning of the Khandava forest) are selected as case studies for intensive visual and textual "close reading."

3. Case Study: The Churning of the Ocean as Tactile Genesis

1) The Materiality of the Deep

In traditional depictions (like *Amar Chitra Katha* or the 1980s TV series), the Churning of the Ocean is often rendered with clean blue lines and a clear distinction between the gods (*Devas*) and demons (*Asuras*). In Patil's *Adi Parva*, the ocean is not merely water; it is a thick, textured soup of charcoal and grey-white acrylics.

By using **heavy impasto** (thickly laid paint) and **scratching techniques**, Patil creates a "skin" for the ocean that feels primordial and dangerous. The methodology of **formal visual**

analysis reveals that the lack of defined borders between the churning waves and the bodies of the beings suggests a state of *becoming*. The "intermedia" here—the mixing of dry charcoal with wet paint—physically mimics the "churning" of elements.

2) Haptic Visuality and the "Scent" of the Page

As the ocean yields its treasures (the moon, the cow, the poison), Patil's use of **collage** becomes prominent. She often incorporates textures that look like aged parchment or organic fibres. This triggers what theorist Laura Marks calls **haptic visuality**: the reader's eyes begin to function like organs of touch.

- **Analysis:** When the *Halahala* (poison) emerges, the texture becomes gritty and abrasive.
- **Effect:** The reader doesn't just "see" the disaster; they feel the caustic nature of the event through the visual "grain" of the page. This reinforces the paper's thesis that the "Skin of the Story" is a sensory bridge to the mythic past.

3) The Sutradhaar's Fluid Perspective

Ganga, as the narrator, describes this event not as a historical fact, but as a visceral memory. The transition between panels is blurred, often using **watercolour bleeds** to move from one sub-story to another.

- **Feminist Reclamation:** By focusing on the *labour* of the churning—the sweat, the strain, and the physical toll on the world—Patil moves away from the "heroic" and toward the "elemental." The texture of the characters' skin is indistinguishable from the texture of the world around them, suggesting a deep, ecofeminist interconnectedness.

4. Results and Discussion

1) The Breakdown of the "Plasticized" Epic

The primary result of this analysis is the identification of a radical departure from the "clean-line" aesthetics of 20th-century Indian mythological media. While television adaptations and earlier comic books (such as *Amar Chitra Katha*) utilized saturated, flat colours and clear boundaries to present a moralistic and "sanitized" version of the epic, Patil's *Adi Parva* utilizes **textural ambiguity**.

Discussion: The "Skin of the Story"—the visible grit of charcoal and the layering of paint—suggests that myth is not a polished, finished product, but a process of "churning." The results show that by making the page look weathered and tactile, Patil strips away the nationalistic "plasticity" often associated with modern Hindu epics. This restores a sense of the **Primeval** to the *Adi Parva*, aligning the visual experience with the ancient, earthy origins of the oral tradition.

2) Haptic Visuality as a Narrative Tool

The study finds that the "texture" of the graphic novel functions as a non-verbal narrative layer. In scenes such as the birth of the Kuru ancestors or the churning of the ocean, the medium's physical "grain" shifts to reflect the story's emotional weight.

- **Tactile Transition:** The shift from the fluid, watercolour-heavy sections (representing Ganga and the celestial) to the scratchy, collage-heavy sections (representing the terrestrial and the political) creates a sensory map for the reader.

- **Reader Engagement:** This "haptic visuality" forces a slower, more meditative reading pace. Unlike traditional comics, where the eye moves quickly to follow action, Patil's intermedia style demands that the reader "feel" the depth of the panel, effectively turning the act of reading into an act of **witnessing**.

3) The Feminization of the Mythic Gaze

A significant result of the "Mythic Intermedia" approach is the decentring of the male warrior gaze. By using the river goddess Ganga as the *Sutradhaar*, the narrative focus shifts from political conquest to **biological and elemental cycles**.

Discussion: The texture of the skin—both of the characters and the earth—is treated with equal reverence. This collapses the hierarchy between the human body and the natural world. In Patil's work, the "Skin of the Story" is an **ecofeminist site**; the scars on the landscape (the burning of forests) and the scars on the characters (Satyavati's scent, Amba's transformation) are rendered with the same visceral materiality. This suggests that the epic is not just a story of kings, but a story of the *Materia prima* (first matter) from which all life emerges.

4) Intermedia as a Bridge to the "Orality" of the Past

The discussion highlights that Patil's use of mixed media—merging prose poetry with avant-garde painting—effectively simulates the **multi-sensory experience of oral storytelling**. Traditional bards did not just speak; they used gesture, song, and physical props.

Conclusion of Findings: Patil's "intermedia" functions as a modern equivalent to the bard's performance. The collage elements act as the "props" of the narrative, while the fluid paintings act as the "song." The result is a graphic novel that feels less like a book and more like an **artifact**. This bridges the gap between the ancient *Purana* and the contemporary digital age, proving that the graphic medium is uniquely suited to capturing the "infinite" nature of the *Mahabharata*.

5. Conclusion: The Infinite Churning

Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva* represents a pivotal shift in the trajectory of the Indian graphic novel, moving the medium away from mere commercial illustration toward a profound "mythic intermedia." This research argues that by prioritizing the "Skin of the Story"—the literal, tactile texture of the page—Patil successfully reembody an ancient epic that, in many modern iterations, had become sanitized and two-dimensional.

The study's findings demonstrate that Patil's use of mixed media, charcoal, and collage does not simply decorate the narrative; it functions as a **Sutradhaar** in its own right. Through the lens of **haptic visuality**, the reader is invited to experience the *Mahabharata* not as a static historical record but as a living, breathing entity. The deliberate blurring of boundaries between the human body, the celestial river, and the primordial earth facilitates an **ecofeminist reclamation** of the myth, centring the labour of birth, the fluidity of identity, and the cyclical nature of time.

Ultimately, *Adi Parva* proves that the graphic novel is perhaps the most capable modern successor to the oral tradition of the

Puranas. Just as the ancient bards used voice, gesture, and physical space to "churn" the story for their audience, Patil uses the grain of the paper and the weight of the paint to create a sensory bridge across millennia. The "intermedia" approach ensures that the story remains "infinite"—a palimpsest where every layer of paint reveals a new beginning. As we move further into the digital age, Patil's insistence on **materiality** serves as a vital reminder that our most enduring myths are those we can still feel beneath our fingertips.

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