

## Reimagining Beauty and the Art of Living: Aesthetic Engagement in *Flute in the Forest*

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### Abstract

The relationship between literature and aesthetics lies in literature's ability to evoke beauty, perception, and meaning. This paper explores this intersection through Leela Gour Broome's *Flute in the Forest*, a children's novel set in the forests of southern India. The novel centres on Atiya, a thirteen-year-old girl with a physical disability, whose journey illustrates the beauty and solace found in nature, the simplicity of daily activities, music, and meaningful connections. The analysis draws upon Arnold Berleant's theory of aesthetic engagement to show how the novel values the everyday and the environment through immersive participation. Its depiction of the Kurumba tribe, alongside an emphasis on empathy and cultural traditions, reflects Berleant's concepts of environmental sensibility and aesthetic communities. Ultimately, this study deepens the understanding of the processes through which aesthetic perception can be cultivated from an early age by encouraging young readers to slow down, pay attention to their environment, and appreciate the aesthetic qualities present in everyday life.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, art, beauty, environment, everyday

### Introduction

In contemporary society, the relentless pace of life often causes the subtleties of everyday existence to fade into the background. While the repetitive nature of daily activities may seem unworthy of scrutiny, moments of pause—whether personal, societal, or historical—can draw attention to these overlooked details. When people slow down, they discover beauty embedded in both the ordinary and the environment. In such moments, everyday tasks and encounters with nature emerge as sources of meaning, resilience, and emotional well-being. Eklund et al., in their study “Daily Uplifts during the COVID-19 Pandemic: What is

Considered Helpful in Everyday Life?" (2022), highlight that mindful attention to one's immediate surroundings, immersion in nature, nurturing productive emotions, and embracing ordinary routines help in sustaining mental health during times of disruption and uncertainty. Their findings suggest that the essence of lived experience lies within seemingly inconsequential details. Thus, it becomes worthwhile to examine how literature, as a reflection of human experience, portrays these subtleties.

The field of aesthetics has long been concerned with questions of beauty, art, and perception. Traditionally, it focused on canonical works of art and was closely associated with beauty in high culture. In recent decades, however, its scope has broadened to include the appreciation of the ordinary and the environment. This has given rise to two significant branches, namely everyday aesthetics and environmental aesthetics. In her book *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007), Japanese-American philosopher Yuriko Saito challenges conventional paradigms that privilege high culture and instead emphasises the beauty found in ordinary life, which can significantly enrich human experience. Similarly, Arnold Berleant, a prominent American philosopher and musician, argues in *The Aesthetics of Environment* (1992) that environmental aesthetics examines how the perception and experience of both natural and built environments shape human lives. Taken together, these approaches show that aesthetic experiences arise not only from high art but also from routine activities, familiar settings, and interactions with the environment. Such perspectives are especially valuable for literary analysis, as in *Flute in the Forest* (2010) by Leela Gour Broome, which highlights the aesthetic potential of daily life and the environment.

The narrative of *Flute in the Forest*, a children's novel set in the forests of southern India, revolves around Atiya Sardare, a thirteen-year-old girl whose life is disrupted by polio. Contracting the illness shortly after her fifth birthday, Atiya's left leg shrinks in size, necessitating the use of a walking stick and later callipers for support. This physical limitation drastically alters her life, especially shattering her mother's dreams of Atiya becoming "the best dancer in the world" (Broome 7). Subsequently, her mother, Sarojini, moves back to the city, leaving Atiya in the care of her father, Ram Deva Sardare. Amidst these challenging circumstances, Atiya discovers solace and beauty within the forest, which becomes a source of joy and aesthetic appreciation. Her journey of self-discovery and healing unfolds through deep connections with nature, the warmth of relationships, and the music of

her flute. Alongside Atiya, other characters such as her music teacher Shivan Dorai (whom she calls 'Ogre Uncle'), his daughter Mishora, her friend Gopal, and Rangappa the elephant are integral to the novel's narrative and themes. The insights of the Kurumba tribe further underscore the transformative power of aesthetic engagement, expressed through art, nature, and daily life.

This paper examines the aesthetic dimensions of *Flute in the Forest* through Arnold Berleant's concepts of aesthetic engagement and environmental perception. By aligning the novel's textual analysis with theories of environmental aesthetics and everyday aesthetics, this study examines how the text influences perception and nurtures appreciation for both the natural environment and the mundane. In doing so, the paper supports the novel's celebration of simplicity, interconnectedness, and the essence of lived experience. As children's literature, *Flute in the Forest* demonstrates that themes of art, environment, and the everyday can be made accessible and meaningful to young readers. Through its child protagonist, the narrative suggests that aesthetic perception extends beyond adulthood and high art, and can be nurtured from an early age. Such engagement can reshape children's perception of beauty, their environment, and the meaning in their daily lives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Arnold Berleant has made significant contributions to the expansion of aesthetics by challenging traditional paradigms. A central aspect of his theory is the participatory nature of aesthetic experience. In *The Aesthetics of Environment* (1992), he rejects the notion of passive consumption and instead advocates for active and immersive engagement with one's surroundings. For Berleant, genuine aesthetic engagement is not a detached act of contemplation but a bodily and emotional interaction. His exploration of environmental aesthetics challenges the dominance of fine arts in analytic aesthetics, emphasising instead the role of environmental perception in shaping human life. He, therefore, dissolves the traditional boundaries and broadens the field of aesthetics to include both everyday life and the environment.

In *The Aesthetic Field* (1970), Arnold Berleant further develops this view, arguing that aesthetic experience is not limited to fine arts but permeates daily life, including music and the act of playing an instrument. He argues that musicians communicate uniquely through their art and that music is most fully appreciated through the active involvement of the

listener. This strengthens his broader argument that immersive engagement forms the basis of aesthetic experience (129–30). Expanding on this idea in *The Aesthetics of Environment*, Berleant asserts that true aesthetic appreciation requires both a deeper connection with and a sense of responsibility toward one's surroundings, establishing an intrinsic link between aesthetics and environmental ethics (112).

This paper primarily draws upon Berleant's concepts of participatory aesthetic experience and environmental perception to explore the manifestation of beauty in everyday life and the environment. It also engages with his ideas of sensibility, aesthetic community, and culture, as discussed in his research papers "Aesthetics and Community" (1994), "Environmental Sensibility" (2014), and "Whose Everyday? On the Cultural Aesthetics of Everyday Life" (2023). Based on this theoretical foundation, this study examines *Flute in the Forest* as a narrative that exemplifies the interaction between everyday aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, and literature.

### **Nature and Beauty of the Everyday**

*Flute in the Forest* demonstrates how subtle details and natural settings enrich the narrative, emphasising the beauty found in everyday scenes while remaining essential to the plot. Broome's descriptions of the environment, such as the colourful bougainvillea and floribunda roses, add sensory depth to the narrative and reveal how creativity can emerge from simple observations. Seemingly mundane moments, such as Atiya glimpsing "a couple of small tiled roofs" while "someone was scrubbing pans in the nearby stream" (Broome 13–14), acquire narrative significance. Household chores, often overlooked in traditional aesthetic discourse, are presented as integral to a broader appreciation of life. Yuriko Saito, in "Aesthetics of Doing House Chores" (2023), contends that interacting with household objects cultivates humility and care for the surrounding world as they "help us manage our everyday life, but at the same time, we are responsible for their use, care, and maintenance" (173). In line with this view, *Flute in the Forest* shows how routine experiences cultivate respect for the world. Through Atiya's journey, the novel invites a reconsideration of the perceptions of beauty. It encourages the readers to pause, observe, and appreciate the joy in life as it unfolds.

Furthermore, the novel broadens aesthetic awareness to include the natural world. The forest is not a passive backdrop but a central element of Atiya's experience. Broome elevates animals, plants, and landscapes into essential components of a life filled with simplicity and

wonder. This echoes Arnold Berleant's argument, in *The Aesthetics of Environment*, that environments are not passive settings for human activity but are foundational to aesthetic experience. Detailed descriptions, such as the enchanting melody of the river and the vibrant spectacle of butterflies, evoke contentment in everyday moments. Such attention to beauty is further portrayed during Atiya's walks with her father, who introduces her to the forest's rich treasures, from diligent ants to tadpoles thriving in the puddles on the road, thus cultivating her sensitivity to the natural world.

Atiya's immersive relationship with nature deepens through her sensory encounters in the forest. She marvels at vibrant Indian birds, inhales the clean forest air, and delights in the sensation of extra oxygen filling her lungs. Such experiences bring immediate joy and a sense of well-being to Atiya, illustrating Arnold Berleant's claim that direct and embodied engagement brings aesthetic fulfilment. The forest, with its rich biodiversity, is therefore an active participant in Atiya's moments of joy and admiration. For instance, the novel recounts, "Hundreds and hundreds of butterflies fluttering about, spreading and closing their pretty wings, reminding Atiya of miniature gardens of yellow flowers, their petals moving gently in the early morning breeze" (Broome 88). Similarly, Atiya's appreciation for the birds underscores the aesthetic richness of her everyday surroundings. The novel narrates, "She was very proud of these fabulous Indian birds, and no matter how often she saw them, she would still marvel at the colours of their long, beautiful and graceful feathers" (Broome 13). These scenes reaffirm the narrative's claim that everyday and environmental aesthetics together enrich human experience.

Arnold Berleant's emphasis on engagement is mirrored throughout the novel. The changing seasons and time in *Flute in the Forest* reflect his participatory approach through immersive moments. At one instance, Atiya approaches a bridge, leaving behind Shivan Dorai's voice which is replaced by the serene presence of nature through the "sounds of the rushing water" and she stops "in the middle of the bridge, peering down into the water as it swooshed and gushed below her. What a welcome song it sang, gurgling over the boulders" (Broome 93). This moment marks not only a physical crossing of the bridge but also an encounter with the beauty and tranquillity that emerge from closely observing the simplest acts of nature.

The detailed depictions of the wagtails tweeting, a redstart singing, and even a potter wasp transporting a caterpillar to its mud nest draw attention to the intricate cycles of life and death within the natural world. The narrative notes that the “hapless thing was already as good as ‘dead meat’ for the wasp larva. As soon as the larva hatched, it would feed on the caterpillar ... also ready to fly from its nest. Nature was truly amazing!” (Broome 93). Such portrayals resonate with Arnold Berleant’s argument in “Environmental Sensibility” (2014), which proposes that aesthetic engagement with the environment involves a sensory engagement that encompasses a wide range of lived experiences. While Berleant’s theory acknowledges both positive and negative values, the novel primarily celebrates the complexity and vitality of nature, encouraging mindful recognition of change and interconnection in human experience.

The novel equally highlights the aesthetic value of relationships and the warmth of everyday activities. Laughter, an otherwise ordinary occurrence, becomes especially impactful when it comes from Shivan Dorai, who is seldom seen expressing joy. For Atiya, his laughter becomes a rewarding moment, revealing the power of rare expressions of happiness. Similarly, Shivan’s daughter Mishora, through her quiet devotion in caring for her father and diligence in household tasks such as cooking and cleaning, embodies the aesthetics of daily life. Together, these moments shape Atiya into a more observant and empathetic individual.

The narrative extends this sensibility beyond the household to the natural world. The river, calling out Atiya’s name, ““Atiyaaaa! Ashshshshshiyaaaa!”” (Broome 82), shows how routine encounters with nature can evoke fascination and contentment. Similarly, the Kurumba tribe exemplifies a life deeply intertwined with the environment, where dietary habits and communal ways of living reveal the aesthetic value embedded in daily life, ordinary experiences and the natural world. This vision resonates with Arnold Berleant’s claim in “Aesthetics and Community” (1994) that an aesthetically harmonious person and community could contribute to a more sensitive, connected, and fulfilling world. In its portrayal of both domestic life and the natural world, *Flute in the Forest* ultimately affirms that beauty resides as much in housework, laughter, and relationships as in forests, rivers, and birds.

### **The Aesthetics of Art, Community and Connection**

Atiya's journey, with a focus on the natural world and quiet joy, illustrates that true contentment often resides in modest and overlooked experiences. Through its careful attention to the subtle details of daily life, *Flute in the Forest* extends this appreciation of simplicity from Atiya to the people around her. Broome's portrayal of natural phenomena and understated moments of daily life conveys a sense of calmness. It implies that peace and optimism can persist even in adversity. The novel's use of imagery, such as "The following Saturday, dawn broke early. The sun peeked through the trees just a little" (Broome 57), shows how reflecting on the routine aspects of life and nature can provide healing.

Supporting this idea, Yam Prasad Sharma, a faculty member of English and Art History at Tribhuvan University, highlights the therapeutic properties of artistic expression in his paper "Aesthetic Pleasure: The Arts of Healing" (2021). He states that engagement with music, literature, drama, films, or visual arts can enrich lives and support personal transformation. This applies to both the creation and appreciation of art, which can facilitate solace within oneself (107). The music of the titular flute in *Flute in the Forest* functions as a narrative device that underscores the healing properties of art. Ogre Uncle finds comfort in music during his critical illness, while Atiya, guided by his influence and the music she encounters, gains emotional strength and courage. Their shared flute-playing sessions uplift their spirits and connect them in harmony. The narrative describes how playing the flute rejuvenates Shivan Dorai, leaving Atiya astonished by the power of music to restore a sense of vitality.

Arnold Berleant, in "Whose Everyday? On the Cultural Aesthetics of Everyday Life" (2023), observes that "everyday experiences of a hunter-gatherer society are different from those of a farming community ... and, more profoundly as well as prosaically, that of a pre-industrial society from that of a high-tech one" (65–66). *Flute in the Forest* reflects this idea through its portrayal of the Kurumba tribe and broader Indian traditions, offering insight into their unique cultural patterns and everyday practices. The Kurumba people live in ways that promote connection and mutual engagement, where the customary boundaries that often isolate people begin to dissolve. In "Aesthetics and Community" (1994), Arnold Berleant describes aesthetic communities as those built on reciprocal relationships, shared experiences, and engagement. In such communities, individuals maintain their individuality while experiencing a sense of connectedness with others. The traditional rituals and collective



practices depicted in the novel, marked by a sense of unity, shared purpose, and respect for the environment, align with Berleant's vision, suggesting that beauty and meaning are often created through shared living.

Shivan Dorai, who leaves urban life to dedicate himself to anthropology and immerse himself in the Kurumba culture, develops a deep personal connection with the community that goes beyond academic interest. He becomes fully integrated into the tribe through marriage and family ties. Following his demise, the tribe holds a tenth-day prayer ceremony in his honour. The ritual's simplicity and authenticity, devoid of conventional prayers or incantations, suggest that Shivan remains present among them. This nuanced view of mourning emphasises the community's desire for his peaceful departure while acknowledging the painful reality of his death. The narrative notes, "Atiya had never seen a service like this one. No prayers, no rituals, no incantations, no meaningless, endless chanting, ... as if Ogre Uncle, in some strange way, was still with them, for just a while more" (Broome 177–78).

The novel's climax further explores the significant role of everyday aesthetics in honouring relationships and traditions. During the ceremonial tenth-day gathering after Shivan Dorai's passing, Atiya pays homage to her beloved teacher through an emotional musical performance. Despite her grief, the music chosen and played by Atiya captures the essence of the ancient Indian Guru-Shishya Parampara, highlighting the sanctity and transmission of knowledge, skills, and cultural legacy in a mentor-disciple relationship. Atiya's performance rises above a mere farewell as it embodies cultural continuity and enduring connection, affirming art as a powerful medium for remembrance and emotional closure.

While Atiya's tribute highlights the cultural and emotional significance of music, the novel also presents flute-playing as a means of personal connection with the environment. It is portrayed as a deep engagement with the world that transforms ordinary moments into aesthetic experiences. This reflects Arnold Berleant's idea, in *The Aesthetic Field*, that music requires active engagement to be fully appreciated. As described in *Flute in the Forest*, "Someone deep in the forest was playing the flute... It was pure, blissful and sweet!" (Broome 65). This fusion of music with the natural harmony of the forest demonstrates that aesthetic experience can emerge from the seamless integration of daily life, artistic expression, and the environment.



The narrative also turns to themes of communication, belonging, and friendship, where aesthetic experience becomes a fundamental aspect of human relationships. This is exemplified in the friendship between Atiya and Gopal. In ninth grade, Gopal, the son of Atiya's teacher, Naina Pillai, joins her village school for a year before returning to Chennai for his State Board Examinations in tenth grade. Both Atiya and Gopal share the experience of being only children from broken families, which becomes the basis of their conversations. Atiya, having endured bullying from her classmates and neglect from her mother, finds genuine happiness and comfort in quiet, unhurried moments, such as walking through the forest and engaging in aimless and relaxed conversations with Gopal while appreciating nature. For Gopal, burdened by academic pressures and the uncertainties of the future, these shared experiences offer a sense of peace and a renewed appreciation for the present. Their interactions reflect Arnold Berleant's assertion that aesthetic engagement, marked by attentiveness and immersion, is integral to well-being. Their bond reinforces the novel's recurring message that beauty, connection, and healing often emerge from the quiet and simple patterns of life.

Following Shivan Dorai's death, his daughter Mishora, now orphaned, chooses to teach tribal children. Her decision is further supported by her late father's financial grant. This part of the narrative celebrates the value of seemingly modest yet meaningful actions. Mishora's commitment to education and the tribal community demonstrates how service to others can lead to both personal satisfaction and communal growth, contributing to a more ethical and compassionate engagement with the world.

The theme of healing and connection through aesthetic experience is further illustrated through the unique bond between Shivan Dorai and Rangappa, a wild elephant known for his restless and potentially dangerous demeanour. Shivan Dorai, once a strong and independent man, becomes irritable as he loses his sense of sight, has limited time to live, and struggles with dependency. Rangappa, too, experiences loneliness and agitation following the loss of a beloved previous mahout who was also a skilled flute player. Despite the absence of verbal communication, the two share an unspoken understanding and empathy. Atiya notices the striking resemblance between Shivan Dorai and Rangappa: both endure suffering, feel outcast, and find comfort in the soothing melodies of the flute. Initially played by Shivan Dorai and later by Atiya, the flute evokes memories of Rangappa's late mahout, providing

him with a sense of belonging and affection. During the musical sessions, Rangappa stands motionless, flapping his ears in contentment across the riverbank, while Shivan Dorai's irritability also seems to fade. Their peaceful connection goes beyond their sorrows and affirms the therapeutic power of art for both the creator and the listener.

The plot reaches a crucial moment when Rangappa visits Atiya's home, wordlessly conveying Shivan Dorai's passing through his mere presence and gestures. Rangappa's presence at the tenth-day ceremony highlights the strength of their relationship, which is built on shared experiences rather than words. This interspecies empathy suggests that aesthetic engagement extends beyond human relationships to include the wider natural world.

Through its integrated themes of nature, art, and human relationships, *Flute in the Forest* encourages a reflection on human engagement with the world, the role of art in daily life, and the value of meaningful experiences and connections. Above all, it highlights the inseparability of aesthetics from lived experience as it links the personal journeys of the characters with the universal search for beauty, understanding, and connection.

## **Conclusion**

*Flute in the Forest* goes beyond the conventional boundaries between art, environment, and daily life. Through Atiya's journey and her deep connections with nature, music, and community, the novel redefines beauty as an immersive and participatory experience rooted in simplicity and meaningful connection. Drawing on Arnold Berleant's theories, the narrative illustrates how aesthetic appreciation emerges through active engagement with the world, encompassing both human and non-human forms of life. The text further highlights the therapeutic and ethical dimensions of such engagement, demonstrating how rich aesthetic experiences promote healing, empathy, and a sense of belonging. With a perspective that values simplicity, encourages stronger connections, and acknowledges the artistic quality of the everyday and the environment, *Flute in the Forest* holds a universal appeal. It echoes the timeless essence of finding joy, meaning, and beauty in life.

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