

The Transgressive Self in Amruta Patil's *Kari*

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Abstract

The paper endeavours to understand and justify the revolutionary spirit embodied by the protagonist of the graphic novel, *Kari* (2008) by Amruta Patil. It seeks to examine the maltreatment of the queer community and expose the years of prejudice attached to their acceptance in our society. The paper, through the use of Queer theory, will thus be an attempt to understand the implicit politics in *Kari*, especially in terms of the fluidity through which the protagonist moves across gendered sexualities, spaces and boundaries - physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and geographical. It proposes to trace *Kari's* search for identity by revealing how even the most minute of daily experiences can affect one's understanding of the self. Patil's use of vibrant images/ graphics would also be taken up to analyse the foregrounding of queer, urban spaces and the ritual of queer desire as also the importance of identifying our oneness.

Keywords: Gender-fluid; Graphic novel; Identity; Queer; Self.

The emergence of the field of graphic literature defines itself as a narrative through comics and crafted images, which in turn helps us pay attention to these graphic narratives in an immaculate way. The term "graphic novel," can be a misnomer to understand graphic narrative and encompasses a range of narrative work in comics. The canonic components, outlines and channels, of the graphic narrative captivates us as readers through its visual excellence, and further encourages us to act, process, and interpret the same. Graphic novels bring across their motives and thoughts through both drawing and language (dialogues). This transparent style leaves little to our imagination and instils in us the explicit awareness of the work. Its intricate and layered interaction of words and images accentuates the representation of thought and adds to its narrative style, making the language of comic unique and intangible.

To go with the flow of the changing times, the literature produced and

studied has, over the years, adopted new interdisciplinary practices and gone into varied fields, viz. psychology, arts, philosophy, and biology to name a few; for motivations, inspiration and relation. One such outcome of the same is graphic novels, their unprecedented blend of words and illustrations collectively add to the essence of the text. With everyday inventions and discoveries around the globe veering us in newer directions, it is safe to say that no alliance seems odd. Hence, now is the time when we affirm and embrace diversity over mainstream alliance wholeheartedly. Though any distinct change usually meets resistance and criticism more openly, than acceptance and hope, the reception of these newer ideas becomes tougher if they are a component of the popular culture.

Incubated in the backdrop of the Great Recession of 2008, Amruta Patil's first graphic novel, *Kari*, is the narrative of a girl in the suburban 'smoke city', Mumbai. Patil through her use of vibrant images/graphics examines the foregrounding of queer urban spaces and the ritual of desire while outlining the protagonist's (Kari) struggle with her identity as a homosexual and her reaction to a recent breakup.

Kari is portrayed as having varied identities, like that of a modern-day working woman, a caring yet confused daughter, a passionate lover, a convenient room-mate are only some of the most prominent ones. Patil traces these issues and struggles in an attempt to bring forth and illustrate how Kari transgresses through her queer identity. Whether she does so deliberately or not is not as important, rather, what is interesting is that by merely coming to terms with her own identity she occupies society in very different ways. The reality of Kari's queer self in terms of how she does not conform to norms, occupies gendered spaces and deviates from all that is coded with meaning and politics in society, only to create her own, is what challenges the status quo.

India is yet to fully come to terms with the concept of queerness or rather queer sexuality. Though queer identity has been a rather popular topic for debate, prejudice and discussion, its acceptance somehow always has been dangling on a fine thread. R.K. Dasgupta maintains in "Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narrative of India's Historical Archive" that "identities are complicated to begin with and become more complicated when relating them to nation and sexuality". And knowing the complex diversity of a slow-developing nation like India, who is still more attached to terms like culture and tradition rather than ethnicity and progression, Indian sexual identities have become the product of brutal internal and external conflict.

Sexual orientation and gender identity are two different concepts, as are sex and gender, one is biological and the other is societal. Sexual orientation is the romantic indulgence towards other people and can range from heterosexuality to homosexuality. Gender identity is one's sense of self as a woman, man, or transgender, and may be different from one's biological sex. Through the introduction of the modern doctrine of secularism and keeping away organized faith from politics, economics, and identity, there have been escalating instances of societal problems like queer-phobia, which is the explicit and implicit hostility towards the LGBTQ community.

Gender, class, and religious equality have been perpetual concerns over centuries. Humanity is struggling for its rights in a constrained conventional society. The world is in a constant battle to establish just and equal rights for women, LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Transgender, Queer, Inter-sex, and Asexual), minority and backward classes. Yet the victory is not achieved. In order to understand the status of equality in the present, we must be able to comprehend equality in the past. Was the world emancipated of these concerns in the prehistoric age? Were our ancestors free of the burden of equality? Perhaps, yes. Perhaps, they had relished the established equality among every realm possible. But where does that leave us in the modern times? And how are we to move ahead with these questions dangling around? Patil has attempted to reason with and answer similar questions in her novel through the character of Kari, possibly leading way towards new understanding and hope.

The morbid beginning of the novel suggests more than it lets on. We witness a visual of Kari's and Ruth's attempt to commit suicide. Both Kari and Ruth survive this suicide, but not in the same way. Kari's attempted suicide and escape from death can be read in several ways. Since Kari can be understood as an abject figure, it is indicative that this suicide can be looked at as a catalyst to her queering. Her bizarre escape takes her on the journey of reflection and meditation towards her acceptance of her queer self. This suicide becomes significant since the book begins and ends with it and the Kari we are introduced to is not the same by the end of it. In Kari's narrative, we see consistent references to her 'failed suicide' and how she was saved. There is a transformative viewpoint to Kari's suicide which can be noticed through her admittance of the act, the shifts in her thought and the ways in which she comes to term with herself and her sexuality. It is only because the sewer spits out Kari into reality again (vis. Ruth's safety net), that she emerges as a resilient and tougher individual: "A failed suicide is a death still, because no one emerges from it unscathed." (10)

It is important to note that suicide only acts as a catalyst and not the sole reason for Kari's transformation. It lends a lens for her to view herself and society. Therefore, adding to the characteristic rebirth of Kari, in every sense of the word: "The body rights itself midair, aligns itself heaviest part first. It is with the head, then, that I must meet death, thought it was the heart that willed it." (5) The quote confirms Kari's attempt at suicide as an ideological one. Her motivations may have had to do with love (Ruth, to be specific) but she meets 'death' headfirst and rationally. To understand, why suicide was an ideological one; it is essential to know how Kari was saved and how her life changed. Patil uses bleak and raw images of sewage, effluvium, stinks and claustrophobic spaces to project the rash realities of both the 'smoke-city' and Kari's headspace.

Every day, the city seems to be getting heavier, and her varicose veins fight to break out of her skin. Soon we must mutate – thick skins and resilient lungs – to survive this new reality. (13)

The novel is replete with water imagery, but not of a traditional kind. In *Kari* water does not stand for purity and fertility, rather it occupies Kari's consciousness pivotally and becomes a space denoting fluidity, navigation, negotiation and regeneration. From being saved by sewage effluents till the end of the novel, the image of water in *Kari* is dirty, claustrophobic and dark – much like how Kari looks at the 'smog city' or society at large. Water which has traditionally denoted all that is life-giving becomes polluted and asphyxiating for Kari. It also acts as a metaphor for Kari's navigation and negotiation with the self and society. Hence, Kari takes on the role of a boatman who is advancing within the society and its tyrannical structures. And simultaneously, is seen coming to terms with her sexuality. Along with this, helping others only leads her to understand herself better.

The day I hauled myself out of the sewer – the day of the double suicide – I promised the water I'd return her favour. That I'd unclog her sewers when she couldn't breathe. I earned me a boat that night. As a boatman, you learn to row clean through the darkest water. (31)

Angel, Kari's friend who is dying from cancer, pushes her further to understand this role. Angel is brusque and unemotional but is the only one in Kari's life that asks her the right kind of questions. She asks why Kari chose to take on a more challenging trail in questioning herself, rather than choosing a more unconventional route to living. Kari takes this issue further and decides to stay in the fluid space. She begins to understand the nature of water itself, and as an extension, how to navigate through it fear-

lessly. In another instance, while on her way to Angel's house Kari spots a woman on the road, completely drenched in water. The same night she dreams about it:

In my dreams that night, I rowed home after an evening with the drenched girl on the street. I rowed towards the house of the West, where the dead sleep. Furiously, the sewer flowed. So violent was the grey water that it cracked my canoe in half. No matter where you are headed, or how nobly, you can sink without a trace. (56)

The boatman metaphor inevitably acts as a constant reminder to society of the instability of a fixed sexual identity. Therefore, Kari is the essence of queer - one which haunts society's hetero-normative structure by being both within it and equally distanced from it. It is this very act of distancing that allows her to acknowledge the structures that bind her. Dasgupta opines - "The queer struggle is not only intended to achieve a sense of equality but also to challenge the apparent immutability and naturalness of the constructed ideas such as identity and sexuality." The closer Kari comes to accepting her queer self, the easier her relationship with water (society) gets; she feels comfortable in that periphery, in the space of fluidity and challenges it by going at it headfirst. In the images denoting the festival of *Ganesh Chaturthi*, Kari navigates through the water with the idol, steering clear of obstacles, this depiction, though a simple ritual, has immense significance metaphorically. These images reveal both Kari's courage while also the slow weakening of the structures in society.

This kind of metaphorical imagery consumes the surreal universe that Kari inhabits without ever spelling out things, answering questions, categorizing or justifying its fluid and complex nature - quite like the queer self. At no point in the novel, does Kari identify as queer or talk about her sexuality explicitly, which is where its most prominent fervour lies. Not only does it force the reader to read between the lines and recognize the more subtle markings of fluid sexuality but further, it resists identification and categorization which is quintessential to being queer. Kari ardently defies all attempts toward the indications of femininity and is never satisfied or comfortable with most female attributes. When she first started living at her apartment, Crystal Palace, she had several stereotypical perceptions of what living with women would be like and is instead surprised to find indifference: "This warbling Little Women camaraderie is a badge that must be painstakingly earned." (18)

She never quite fits in with her room-mates and their lives, but is simultaneously both inside and outside this 'feminine space'. She acts again as the

outsider, the observer and is “non-intrusive”. Kari’s narrative voice also exposes the fluidity of sexuality at large in her dynamic with her room-mates. Her room-mates also project the role of “the gay best friend” onto Kari by expressing how they would like a husband like her, who is handsome and loyal. Kari plays that role consciously at times, exhibiting the other ways that men and women treat her sexuality.

Kari’s voice is a feminine one, she acts as the less dominating one in her relationships, but her attire and aesthetics are masculine. In several instances, it is evident that she is uncomfortable with her female body, be it about her menstrual cycle or the fact that she has breasts. Kari mentions how she was captivated with K.D Lang as a child when she saw her on television and refers to her as the “genderless one”. When her friend Laz asks her if she is a “proper lesbian”, she finds the question strange. And, replies by saying: “I’d say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner. The circus isn’t in my life. It’s in my head.” (79)

Kari’s response appears relatively absurd, but, she is often seen seeking sanctuary in absurdity. For she has realized, that the idea of constructed sexuality implies nothing but internalization of absurdity itself. She exposes this construct of sexuality and its performative aspect, both of which are suggestive of the authenticity of fluidity, malleability and transferability of gender and sexuality itself. These actions do not, of course, exist in isolation. There are socio-cultural and political meanings encoded within them. Existence of people like Kari or K.D. Lang challenges the heterosexual framework that our society so diligently follows, and is seldom believed to disrupt these fixed meanings of identities and sexualities. Therefore, when Kari finally accepts her own identity, she concurrently weakens and defies the patriarchal narratives of identity and sexuality. The more she accepts her queerness, the more hegemonic boundaries she transgresses making the act more radical.

Kari, while working with Laz on their ‘Fairytale Hair’ Ad had been feeling tomboyish or increasingly more like a ‘drag queen’, and in preparation for the award they were to receive, she decides to get a haircut. The cutting of hair then becomes an awakening for Kari, to ‘sever the umbilical cord’ that bounds her, and she leaves the award ceremony. Now, standing atop a building again, Kari is shown, in the last chapter - Exit Route, fighting the urge to jump off and she imagines a metaphorical ‘Pigeon Girl’ jumping off, which can be looked at as Kari’s ‘desire’ and ‘passion’ finally taking flight.

These realizations of not wanting to ‘step off’ into the abyss, instead ‘step

back' and finally notice herself and her surroundings sets Kari free. She humbly accepts the true depth of her love for Ruth but at the same time also acknowledges the fact that even though she - "still loves Ruthie more than anyone else in the world but (I) won't be jumping off ledges for anyone anymore". And in a way only Kari can justify and express these feelings as something deep and dark she humorously yet absurdly says:

There are so many ways to exit towards the Light, but with my luck, I'd be the one electrocuted by Diwali lights. Or the one who cracks her head falling off a footstool. I'd still be a jester, leaving the audience with a stitch in their sides. (114)

The trope of space is of immense importance in the text with Kari's literal navigation through space symbolizing the spatial movement in her mind-space, and her culminating point where she upholds and embraces the realities of her existence as a queer, leaving behind the 'circus that is in her head'. And letting Ruth go, emotionally and psychologically, in a distant city, smiling and leading a different life. Kari's reflection woven journey in a fantastically surrealist narrative starts with a suicide and ends with one. Her journey started with a younger, reckless and unsure girl and ended gracefully, with a competent, mature and assured woman.

On the whole, Amruta Patil's *Kari* depicts poignantly the experience of a kind of crisis which is attached to the transition from the rigid categories of a hetero-normativity with regard to self, subjectivity and sexuality. Furthermore, it shows how such a crisis - and the way in which it is negotiated - is not limited to the plot alone. The very surreal atmosphere and the world depicted in the work also reflect it in remarkable ways.

Conclusively, one can view *Kari* as a story about pushing and transgressing boundaries, recognizing one's true self (queer), and ultimately about the mundane quest for love, even a potentially absent one, which goes beyond the petty and patriarchal constructs of sex, gender, and identity. It serves as a perspective, a queer one, challenging the stability and the monolithic narrative of identity; the gaze that is both inside and outside and is accompanied with the mock-ironic tone, tearing apart our notion of all that is normative, heterosexual and constant. Kari's queering, hence, is as radical as it gets.

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