

## Moving Beyond Binaries: Exploring Queerness in Amrutha Patil's *Kari*

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### Abstract

Since its inception, graphic novels in India have made deliberate efforts to encompass a diverse range of themes, aiming to cater to the intellectual sensibilities of adult and mature readers. This paper critically explores the representation of queerness and gender fluidity in Amrutha Patil's graphic novel *Kari* (2008) through a queer theoretical lens. Set in a society that is predominantly homophobic, *Kari* presents a protagonist who resists fixed labels, embodying fluid identity and non-conformity. Primarily drawing on Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the study analyses *Kari*'s gender performance, metaphorical use of urban space, and the societal pressures reinforcing heteronormativity. It argues that Patil's narrative challenges and upends binary constructs thereby offering a radical re-imagining of queer subjectivity within Indian English literature while positioning *Kari* as a pioneering work in the graphic narrative form.

**Keywords:** Fluidity; Gender; Graphic Narrative; Queerness; Sexuality.

As the new millennium begins, the Indian graphic narrative has solidified its place as a cornerstone of Indian English literature. As a fresh representational modality that breathes new life into the canon, form, and topics, the graphic story is seen as a valuable complement to the current corpus of writings of the Indian English Literature. Further, as it is said in *The Indian Graphic Novel*, "the graphic narrative takes the tensions, dilemmas, and concerns of traditional IWE and discusses these in a popular medium, offering, therefore, not only a democratizing of forms of socio-political commentary but also a democratizing of the language of cultural analytics" (Nayar 24). It is also astounding how this genre uses visual-verbal literacy to critique the nation through dissident narratives and satire while also engaging with memory, culture, and history.

*The River of Stories* (1994) by Orijit Sen is widely recognised as a pioneering work in the realm of graphic narratives originating from India. Sen's trailblazing efforts paved the way for a plethora of writers and artists who subsequently delved into the creation of graphic narratives exploring a diverse range of critical themes. These themes encompass contested and alternate histories, urban realities, social exclusion, contemporary politics, and identity politics. Sarnath Banerjee, Appupen, Viswajyoti Ghosh, Gautam Bhatia, Srividya Natrajan, S. Anand, Ninan, Amruta Patil, and various other writers have made noteworthy contributions to the development of this emerging genre by broadening the scope of the themes mentioned above. In addition to engaging in satirical commentary on contemporary Indian culture, the texts produced by the authors have also delved into the realm of social discourse, specifically exploring topics such as caste dynamics, developmental concerns, and the grave issue of child abuse. The scope of their critique encompassed not only contemporary issues but also historical events, such as the partition, thereby extending their analysis to the realm of history. The evident observation reveals that this emerging medium exhibits all the characteristic attributes commonly associated with a literary text. These attributes encompass the creation of self-contained realms, the progression of characters, the development of a narrative structure, and the skilful utilisation of visual and verbal language in a metaphorical manner, among various other elements.

The inclusion of a visual dimension within the narration serves as an augmentative element, contributing to the overall structural coherence of the text. Furthermore, the utilisation of graphic medium as a narrative form contributes to the diversification of representational modalities within the realm of Indian Writing in English (IWE) when addressing the subject matter of child abuse (*Hush*), violence against women (*Drawing the Line*), caste discrimination (*Bhimayana, A Gardener in the Wasteland*), and traumatic memories (*This Side, That Side*). In relation to both stylistic and thematic aspects, the aforementioned works present a departure from the established visual conventions established by preceding (juvenile) comic publications such as the *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967) and *Chacha Chaudhury* (1971).

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out in her seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet*, "a study of culture will be incomplete without considering the various aspects of society that remain in the closet" (1). Despite the fact that there are numerous conversations taking place about sexuality and gender, Indian society continues to sweep the issue under carpet thereby making all the possible efforts to keep the topic hidden. How-

ever, interestingly, numerous writers and activists as listed above, in an effort to bring about social change have endeavoured to deconstruct this phenomenon by actively participating in discourses surrounding gender and sexuality within their literary works. Moreover, the emergence of the graphic narrative as a novel medium has also embraced this endeavour, contributing to the ongoing dialogue on these topics.

It is at this juncture, in the realm of graphic literature in India, it is noteworthy to mention the significant impact of Amruta Patil's literary contribution *Kari*, published in 2008. Overtime, *Kari* has undeniably established itself as a prominent and unchallenged presence within the field. It is also remarkable to mention that India's inaugural graphic narrative in the English language has been authored by a pioneering female writer who has fearlessly embraced the inclusion of queer characters within her narrative framework. The text is widely recognised and regarded as a significant piece of literature that provides a cultural platform for the exploration and examination of various themes pertaining to gender, sexuality, and homophobia. On the relevance of *Kari* as a culturally important text, Suran-gama Datta observes;

The remarkable quality of this work lies not only in its status as first but in the way its experimental form and content introduce new ways of perceiving and visualizing experience, in this case, that of a queer woman, bringing innovative possibilities into the Indian graphic arena. For instance, its keen understanding of female spaces and homosocial interactions (such as *Kari's* relations with various women in the text, the interpersonal dynamic between her female flatmates, Billo and Delna), questions about gender performance and non-conformity, *Kari's* complex friendship with dying cancer patient Angel, and her love for Ruth, allow for an interesting study of gender in the contemporary context. (1)

The narrative of *Kari* revolves around the central protagonist, Kari, and their experiences in the aftermath of a significant romantic separation from her partner, Ruth. This event referred to as a "slipshod surgical procedure," marks the commencement of the story (Patil 1). Consequently, Kari finds themselves in the bustling urban environment of Bombay, devoid of any companionship. The incident described in the text represents a significant turning point in Kari's personal development, as it signifies her process of self-exploration subsequent to her initial suicide attempt (Patil 3). Ultimately, this incident culminates in Kari's resolution to fully embrace life. Yet, as Patil insists in her interview with Paul Gravett, "the

book is not a coming-out tale. Kari's queerness is incidental, rather than central to her journey" (Patil as quoted in Gravett, 2012).

The text, which celebrates ambiguity, exploration, and fluidity, resists a quickie "suicidal lesbian" synopsis through its unusual approach to the theme (Gravett, 2012). Published in 2008 by HarperCollins Publishers India in New Delhi, *Kari* provides a comprehensive exploration of the life experiences of an individual who identifies as a queer misfit, one who "trawls the drains dream after dream, and can smell the sewer everywhere", is one of the canonical graphic novels in the country (41). Patil, in her capacity as a creator, consistently demonstrates a proclivity for engaging with voices from marginalised communities. This inclination is readily apparent in her subsequent works, namely the graphic novels titled *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (2016). These literary pieces serve as reimagined narratives of episodes from the *Mahabharata*, wherein the focal point shifts towards the experiences and perspectives of characters who have historically been marginalised. Specifically, Patil explores the stories of Ganga and Ashwatthama, shedding light on their unique vantage points within the larger narrative.

Meanwhile, the character Kari in this graphic narrative exhibits a distinctive representation, which can be interpreted as a contrasting perspective to the prevalent hyper-feminine archetypes commonly encountered. The character exhibits several notable characteristics, including youthfulness, profound introversion, asocial tendencies, identification as queer, and a propensity for silence. This individual is highly absorbed in their personal pursuits and interests. Notably, they form a meaningful bond with another young woman named Ruth, which subsequently evolves into a sexual and romantic connection. They say that "whatever love laws have to be broken; the first few seconds suffice. After that everything is a matter of time and incident" (69). Despite the progressive nature of their evolving bond, both individuals exhibited reticence in disclosing their sexual orientation within a societal framework that espoused regressive attitudes across various domains. The phenomenon of individuals succumbing to the overwhelming fear of societal rejection, leading them to make the tragic decision to terminate their lives through the act of jumping from a considerable height, is portrayed in the work.

The events that manifest during the initial stage of Kari's life are portrayed in the narrative as retrospective occurrences. Kari's challenges in navigating her lesbian identity highlight the pervasive influence of a heteronormative societal framework, which upholds heterosexuality as the

normative and cohesive expression of human sexuality. Heterosexuality, as a social institution, assumes a distinct manifestation that possesses the capacity to establish societal cohesion while simultaneously scrutinising any structures that deviate from its prescribed norms. Non-heterosexual identities, due to their non-conformity with societal norms, often elicit aversion within the established system. Judith Butler has developed the theoretical framework known as the Heterosexual Matrix, which provides a comprehensive analysis of the functioning of normative systems within societies. According to Butler, the heterosexual matrix is defined as “that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (194). The author posits that the interplay between sex, gender, and desire can be understood through the framework of a matrix, which refers to the socio-cultural or political context in which these concepts evolve.

According to Butler, it is the regulatory mechanisms embedded within a given society that dictate which specific amalgamations of these three signifiers are permitted to manifest as cohesive and acknowledged identities. There is a lack of understanding and acceptance of homosexuality and other marginalised sexualities since they do not conform to the binary of sex and desire. The concept of a heterosexual matrix posits the interconnectedness of sex, gender, and sexuality, and our societal structure is predicated upon this matrix. Consequently, power dynamics and agency are selectively bestowed upon individuals who conform to the implicit confines of this matrix. Heterosexual individuals who conform to societal norms predominantly occupy positions of power and influence, thereby benefiting from the inherent advantages bestowed upon them within a patriarchal social structure. The phenomenon described herein consequently leads to the marginalisation of various communities, as it restricts the ability of queer individuals to openly express their sexual orientation and gender identities. Individuals experiencing concerns about their representation as social beings may exhibit apprehension regarding the recognition and acceptance of their sexuality, leading them to contemplate the repression of said sexuality. Consequently, the lack of acknowledgment of the predicament experienced by non-heteronormative sexual orientations can be attributed to the prevailing dominance of a particular authoritative power structure. In a societal context characterised by fervent homophobia, individuals belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community are subjected to a dehumanising process whereby they are stripped of their personhood and reduced to mere objects.

Due to societal pressure, people are compelled to be in heterosexual partnerships, while economic and sociopolitical discourses stifle queer identities. The family unit serves as the foundational locus, wherein individuals experience societal expectations to conform to the prevailing heterosexual paradigm. In the present narrative, Kari's familial unit exerts pressure upon them to relinquish their homosexual orientation subsequent to their discovery of their romantic involvement with Ruth. The apprehension surrounding potential social exclusion compels Kari's mother to caution her regarding her conduct. In a telephonic conversation with Kari, her mother says, "This is not how I raised you. Of all the people in such a big city, you pick the smut and the degenerates" (Patil 31).

This repression is because they want Kari to remain within the "institution of compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality" (Butler 30). Marriage, as a significant aspect of patriarchal discourse, holds considerable influence within the context of a heterosexual society. In order to attain social acceptance, individuals are expected to adhere to prevailing societal norms, which include entering into matrimony with individuals of the opposite gender upon reaching adulthood. The societal expectation to enter matrimony exerts a significant influence on the cognitive processes of young individuals, potentially leading to the suppression of their sexual orientation, particularly among individuals identifying as homosexual. In the graphic narrative under study, the protagonist Kari also faces a similar situation where she is constantly asked to wed a man when her mother finds her attachment towards Ruth. This coercion is the result of the fear of getting isolated from the social structure. She persuades her to choose a male partner saying, "When a husband comes along, best friends become nobodies" (Patil 29). Kari's mother doesn't want them to subvert the conventional norms of a heterosexual matrix.

An analysis of the progression of Kari's character development reveals significant implications regarding not only her sexual orientation but also her active exploration and navigation of her gender identity. She exhibits a gradual process of navigating through the aftermath of her romantic separation, ultimately leading to the discovery of her vibrant and multifaceted sense of self. Kari's statement, as indicated by their assertion "my favourite form is float" (39), aligns with Pati's perspective that Kari's exploration of her queerness lacks stability and instead suggests her inclination to the seamless transition between different identities. The emergence of diverse identities and the corresponding recognition of gender as a fluid construct can be attributed to the destabilisation of traditional binary frameworks. Gender fluidity, in broad terms, encompasses a diverse range of experi-

ences and expressions related to one's gender identity and the way it is manifested in relation to one's physical body and personal desires.

Interestingly, Queer literature has emerged as a dynamic and diverse genre, serving as a catalyst for exploring the intricacies of third-gender or gender-fluid individuals. This exploration has provided writers with a platform to showcase their exceptional literary contributions within the broader literary landscape. In that sense, Amrutha Patil's Kari is noteworthy for its introduction of the concept of gender fluidity within an emerging literary genre. Patil adeptly encapsulates Kari's pansexual queer desires and experiences, mirroring the way she indulges in the diverse flavours and aromas of various fruits. She says;

There are some fruits you do not want to venture into alone. A peach, for one, a creature of texture and smell, sings like a siren. A fruit that lingers on your fingertips with unfruitlike insistence, fuzzy like the down on a pretty jaw. Figs are dark creatures too, skins purple as loving bruises. Fig is one hundred percent debauched. Lush as a smashed mouth. (66)

The author's juxtaposition of Peach's texture, described as "fuzzy like the down," and its aesthetic appeal, referred to as "pretty jaw," alongside the purple hue of figs, likened to "loving bruises," serves as an indication of Kari's exploration of their queer identity (66). The character's inclination towards indulging in the opulence of diverse fruits is indicative of their eagerness to savour and relish a wide array of flavours and experiences. On certain occasions, it has been observed that the romantic partners of Delna and Billo (Kari's flatmates) fail to appear, resulting in Kari experiencing heightened enjoyment. During these instances, Kari seizes the opportunity to engage in quality interactions with her cohabitants. She also reports her cohabitants' engagement in flirtatious behaviour towards her and they even unabashedly assume a maternal role in their interactions.

Moreover, Patil presents a compelling argument through Kari by asserting with clarity that the concept of a "straight woman" does not exist (66). This statement serves to disclose and familiarise the reader with an additional, distinct, and idiosyncratic aspect within the realm of the grey space. The observed behaviour of Della and Billo engaging in flirtatious interactions with Kari, despite the absence of their respective boyfriends, provides insight into a fluidity in gender expression exhibited by all three individuals, rather than solely by Kari.

An additional facet of Kari's queer identity becomes apparent upon her encounter with her colleague Lazarus. Kari's response to Lazarus' romantic advances has consistently displayed a clear aversion. However, upon encountering Lazarus' girlfriend and contemplating his potential departure from the country, Kari experiences a recurrence of a distinct auditory sensation resembling the snapping of an umbilical cord, which she had previously perceived (89). It is worth noting that the mention of the umbilical cord snap is introduced by Kari when discussing Ruth's departure from the city. This comparative analysis examines the interplay between the characters of Kari, Ruth, and Lazarus, shedding light on the nature of their relationships.

The presence of a shared umbilical cord serves as a compelling indication of a robust connection between individuals Ruth and Kari. The mention of the snapping of the umbilical cord can be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of Kari's complex sexual identity. This notion is further supported by their subsequent response to Lazarus. The attribution of a lesbian identity to Kari lacks sufficient justification. Kari cannot be definitively classified as a lesbian due to her own uncertainty regarding her sexual orientation. The manifestation of variability in her personal identity becomes perceptible through her subsequent dialogue with Lazarus in her refusal of his proposition;

Lazarus: are you like a proper lesbian?

Kari: A proper lesbian? I roll the word 'lesbian' in my mouth and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshly, salivating, I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner. The circus is't in my life. I's in my head. (79)

As per Kari's perspective, it is evident that the term 'Lesbian' fails to fully encompass the entirety of her identity. They have come to understand a particular aspect of their sexual identity, yet they do not fully embrace the fluidity that they had hoped to explore in order to better understand themselves. Kari's recognition that the circus exists within their mind rather than in reality signifies a distinct pattern that overflows and causes her to become flexible and susceptible to randomness.

Furthermore, the protagonist, Kari, exhibits a tendency towards incoherence throughout the novel, suggesting a preoccupation with deciphering the messages conveyed by her own physical form. Kari's identity is effectively conveyed through her performances, as evidenced by her deliberate



exploration of various aesthetic expressions. They derive comfort from the concept of arbitrariness and fluidity, as is made apparent by her reaction upon witnessing the televised performance of K.D. Lang for the very first time;

I remember the day I saw K.D Lang for the first time. On TV. Grammy Awards 1997. She was handsome, preening. Me, I was mute, with no way to explain myself to myself or to anyone else. What kind of creature was this, this genderless one, and why did she make me feel this way? All I knew was that if I ever stood in a room across from a creature such as this, my heart would be in serious peril. (80)

Kari's affinity for K.D. Lang provides the reader with some insight into her inclination towards finding fulfilment without adhering to a specific gender. They exhibit a distinct cognitive inclination towards the concept of a "genderless being," devoid of any additional emotional or psychological elements (80). P. Bhadury in her research article "There is no Such Thing as a Straight Woman.: Queer Female Representations in South Asian Graphic Narratives," contends that "scholars and reviewers alike have usually described Kari as a lesbian character. However, she aspires to the elusive "genderless" quality KD lang possesses and pushes towards a non-binary, androgynous identity" (428).

The selection of a buzz-cut hairstyle by Kari for the award function can be interpreted as a personal affirmation of her queer identity within her social environment. To ensure the acquisition of her desired personal space, they opt to engage the services of a barber establishment, as opposed to a traditional salon, and explicitly request a buzz-cut hairstyle in preparation for the forthcoming event they are scheduled to attend. They exhibit a persistent and unwavering demeanour, as evidenced by their refusal to acquiesce to the barber's suggestion of a complete buzz cut. They exhibit a notable lack of physical response, maintaining a stationary position despite the verbal proposition made by the barber to administer a haircut typically associated with the female gender, known as a 'woman's boy cut.' For the information of the reader, she says that she chooses to be a "shorn sheep" instead of a "rumpled siren" because increasingly her hair makes her feel like a drag queen (106).

The inclusion of yet another allusion to a drag queen serves as an additional indication that Kari's identity is primarily acknowledged within the context of her lesbian orientation. In this assertion, they place signifi-

cant emphasis on the performative dimension of her identity. Butler says, “When we say gender is performed, we usually mean that we have taken on a role we are acting in some way and that our acting our role playing is crucial to the gender that we are and the gender that we present to the world” (Big Think 0:07- 0:23).

The recurring visual motifs that pervade the narrative once more emphasise their inherent fluidity. The imagery of “trawling the drains dream after dream” is accentuated by the persistent fixation of her thoughts on the urban metropolis’s lower intestinal region. The text consistently introduces to the readers various fluid spaces, including sewers, rivers, and streets inundated with rainwater. Furthermore, the emphasis on the sense of journey in the context of trawling the sewer is mirrored by the statement made by the protagonist, Kari, that “the city has made a boatman of me” (31).

Within the context of the narrative, it is the sewer system that serves as the conduit linking distinct sections of the urban landscape. The presence of aqueous imagery and the persistent motif of perpetual motion contribute to the distinct queer identity of the character Kari, as evidenced by her recurrent visits to the subterranean realm of the sewers throughout the narrative. Therefore, Patil, in her portrayal of the character Kari, has provided an insightful exploration into the intricate interplay of various societal variables that significantly influence an individual’s sexuality and identity. Kari’s non-binary identity was developed through a series of repeated actions, which contributed to the construction of their sense of self. Additionally, Kari actively embraces and affirms their subjectivity by publicly declaring their authentic identity.

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