

Questions of Identity and Belonging in Amruta Patil's *Kari*

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While Indian print comics have experienced a steady decline since the late 1990s, graphic narratives in the form of graphic novels are increasingly being explored as a new medium for storytelling. *Kari* (2008) is deemed the first Indian queer graphic novel, written by India's first female graphic novelist, Amruta Patil. The book navigates through the many identities and roles of the eponymous protagonist, Kari - as lover, friend, boatman, storyteller, city-dweller, and a young Indian woman working at an ad agency in Smog City (based on Mumbai).

bell hooks, in "Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body", describes "queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it". Kari is a misfit - in her queerness and love relationship with Ruth, among her roommates at Crystal Palace, in the crowded Smog City. However, this intermediate state of being an outsider on the inside lends her a unique perspective and position, enabling her to navigate her many identities and juggle many roles.

Kari's decision to attempt suicide on the second page of the novel, however, is not triggered by her inability to deal with constantly being at odds with everything around her, but by her desire to follow the one person she is not at odds with - her lover, Ruth. Lesbian double suicides are an everyday reality in India. Lesbian women face a life of double discrimination and alienation - first because of their gender in a male-dominated, patriarchal society and second because of their sexuality. Kari and Ruth survive the fall, though - Ruth is saved by her building's safety net, Kari by a flowing sewer. "Saved, she [Ruth] got into a plane and left...The airport was a ford, and she crossed over" (Patil, *Kari* 7). Kari is left behind to pick herself out of the gutter, both literally and figuratively.

Ruth is Kari's anchor and refuge, and also her ideal. The book's first chapter, entitled "Double Suicide", sets off Kari's struggle to understand who she is, how she identifies herself, and where she fits in a world post-Ruth. The first panel of the book shows Kari and Ruth sitting hand-in-hand, twined around by a single artery. It is an homage to Frida Kahlo's *Las Dos Fridas*, painted after Frida separated from her partner, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. The reworked image in *Kari* indicates the trauma and emotional pain that will result from the breaking apart of this 'twinsip' and also suggests the contrast between the two women.

Kari is shown standing on the brink twice in the book. The first time around, she chooses to jump. The second time, she chooses not to. It is through Kari's sharp eyes that we witness her evolution as she regenerates and grows from the mud, the gutter she falls into after attempting suicide on the second page of the novel. "A failed suicide is a death still, because no one emerges from it unscathed" (Patil, *Kari* 10).

Though *Kari* is one of India's early graphic novels, Amruta Patil's artwork and her choice of protagonist stand out from traditional graphic storytelling and Indian literary subject matter. Patil wanted *Kari* to be a "counterpoint to the hyperfeminine stereotype or the jaded Bridget Jones stereotypes that exist in fiction". She steers clear of definitions, apologies or rationalisations in the narrative. Kari describes her adolescent infatuation with the singer k.d. lang after watching her for the first time on television: "What kind of creature was this, this genderless one, and why did she make me feel this way?". Towards the end of the novel, Kari decides to get a two millimetre buzz cut before her office awards ceremony, leaving her barber very disappointed ("Madam, face looking boy type" (Patil, *Kari* 107)). It is a move towards taking charge of her body, which is an important part of her queer identity, and making it her own, instead of feeling out of place in it. On one occasion, she is questioned by her work partner and friend, Lazarus, about whether she is a "proper" lesbian, reflecting an inability to fully accept a sexual identity that is not fixed and categorised in heteronormative terms. Kari's refusal to identify herself through labels challenges a

kind of hegemonic narrative of identity and sexuality. When asked to clarify her sexual orientation in definite terms, Kari says: "I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner" (Patil, *Kari* 48).

With its interplay of text and visuals, the graphic novel format renders much power to Kari's perspective, often making it a counterpoint to heterosexual fantasy, desire, and romance. As Kari reminisces about her first meeting with Ruth, the panel shows a poster of *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* in the background (Patil, *Kari* 68). Again, in another instance, after Kari learns that her friend Billo is accidentally pregnant and might have an abortion, a full-colour memory follows, where Ruth says in an intimate moment, "Isn't it great? We never have to worry about getting knocked up by mistake?" To this Kari replies, "I'd give anything in the world to be able to knock you up, Ruthie,". Patil explores regular moments of lesbian fantasy and erotic desire, for example, through Kari's candid thoughts about the brand manager, Susan Lush or her sensual opinion of fruits.

The novel does not focus exclusively on the protagonist's sexuality. Kari's other relationships and other identities are equally important and complicated. Keyushee Vashishtha observes in her article that Kari initially expects to find fulfilling female friendships or a "walk-in sisterhood" among her roommates in her shared apartment in Crystal Palace. However, she remains the adored but ultimately different addition to this group of heterosexual women: "...women of the world adore tousled boygirls. They all want to be Wendy to my Peter Pan" (Patil, *Kari* 44). In contrast, Kari's friendship with the character Angel provides her with a valuable, positive space where she does not feel alienated. It can be seen in terms of the concept of 'lesbian continuum' - "...forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support..." (239) - that Adrienne Rich speaks of in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". Angel's home, where Kari at first shows up without an invitation, becomes an intimate space where she allows Kari to see her weakness, her pain, the ravaging

marks of her terminal illness. Their conversations form an important part of Kari's journey of self-acceptance and understanding. After Angel's death, Kari's loss is depicted through Angel's empty room: "I did not ever revisit Angel's street. More than anything else, I find it hard to quote my friends in closed brackets" (Patil, *Kari* 104).

It is not surprising that rivers, sewers, and waterways figure prominently in the novel, and in Amruta Patil's later works, *The dying river Mitthi* in *Kari* which smells of sewage; beautiful, cruelly detached Ganga which feeds and inundates the land and carries the remains of its dead in *Adi Parva*; dark and turbulent Yamuna of *Sauptik* – all embody navigation, negotiation, continuity, and regeneration. Kari takes on the role of the 'boatman' after being saved by the sewer – "the day of the double suicide—I promised the water I'd return her favor. 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" (Patil, *Kari* 31). It not only acts as a metaphor for Kari's negotiation with the self and a suffocating society in the novel, but the idea of the 'khevatia', or boatman, is also significant in Indian mythology (an important source for Patil). He is the one who ferries people across from one spiritual phase to another. The boatman is neither god, saviour nor prophet – but a temporary companion, rowing one through as one evolves, and clearing the path in the process. Kari, the boatman, helps the other characters and the reader navigate the murky, polluted heteronormative society towards greater inclusion, a more nurturing and empathetic space.

Kari's negotiations with the public space are often presented through her interaction with Smog City. Kari talks about the textures, the smells, the sights of the city– often dark, dirty, unapologetic, or indifferent. The suffocating cityscape adds to her sense of alienation, but she also feels affection and a sense of responsibility towards it. Kari says: "In this city, no one talks. Everyone guards their sanity against the grief of strangers" (Patil, *Kari* 42). However, this city also, at times, offers almost magical places of respite and companionship, like Juhu beach, where Kari and Angel go horse-riding, or

Alexa and Marvel's house, the road to which occasionally appears on Kari's way to work.

Kari's decision at the culmination of the novel to "step back, not step off" from the ledge of her building's terrace is an assertion that she now finds enough strength and value in her self-awareness and in the many identities she carries, even in a world without Ruth (Patil, *Kari* 115). As Amruta Patil says in an interview, "It's a fragile, precious thing; giving people room to be what they are, even if it looks odd to the majority." Kari gives herself and people struggling like her this room to grow and be surer of themselves. In the end, Kari is much more than a graphic novel about a queer protagonist. It is also about the queerness of friendships and desire, the queerness of a city, and a loving ode to the queer nature of love itself.

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