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QUEERING THE GRAPHIC: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND AGENCY IN KARI

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Abstract: Any traditionalist society, that has certain normative cultural practices as a part of their culture and tradition, expect it's public to conform to its heteronormative norms of its functions. Those who stand against it or function differently are considered aberration or different, non-conformist hence they are seen and treated differently in the society. Amruta Patil's Kari, a graphic novel, challenges the norms set by the heteronormative society and calls for a case for those who do not want to conform to its dictates in the name of culture and tradition. This article explores this resistance spirit through the figure of Kari who struggles against the dominant perceptions to construct her identity as different and unique.

Index Terms - Heteronormative, monochromatic, femininity, self-introspective, normative.

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of graphic narratives in India is relatively a new phenomenon, marking a significant shift from traditional literary texts to a popular-visual medium that blends socio-political commentary with visual storytelling. India bears witness to a long history of visual storytelling—ranging from ancient *Panchatantra* to the mythological imaginations of *Amar Chitra Katha*. However, the contemporary “graphic novel” or graphic narrative entered the realm of academic discourses and gained prominence only in the early 21st century. The term graphic novel is often defined as the “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in pictorial sequence, intended to convey information and or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 2020). The earlier texts did not problematize the concerns of the oppressed, therefore offering exhibiting a limiting quality. In the late 1960s, *Amar Chitra Katha* created a space for itself which aimed to educate the youth on Indian heritage and selective Indian history, followed by the vernacular superhero tropes of Raj Comics in the 1980s. However, the turning point for the modern graphic narrative is marked by Orijit Sen's “River of Stories.” By blending grassroots activism with investigative journalism to document the Narmada Bachao Andolan, Sen established the medium as a serious, adult-oriented literature which dealt with themes like abuse, trauma, caste, etc.

The objective of this study is to analyze a queer protagonist against the backdrop of a heteronormative culture. This study aims to analyze the graphic novel by situating it at the intersection of queer and feminist studies. It seeks to expand existing scholarship by examining how the visual-textual medium facilitates a queer subjectivity that resists heteronormative cultural norms. Furthermore, the analysis underscores how the protagonist's gender performance and fluid identity serves as a site of political and personal subversion against patriarchal structures. This study employs a visual methodology while simultaneously drawing upon theoretical frameworks on gender and queerness.

Kari (2011) by Amruta Patil reserves a prominent place in Indian literature as it is the first graphic novel authored by a woman. It is also considered as the first queer graphic novel in India. The story follows Kari, an introverted young woman living in the ‘smog-city’ of Mumbai, navigating the aftermath of a failed double-suicide pact with her lover, Ruth. While Ruth is rescued and reintegrated into a heteronormative life by her parents, Kari is left to navigate the ‘sewers’ of her own existence—both literally, as she works in a male-dominated advertising agency, and figuratively, as she drifts through an isolating, melancholic urban landscape. The graphic narrative explores themes of urban alienation, queer identity, and the internal conflict through its titular protagonist. Ruth’s departure from Kari’s life functions as the foundational trauma that shapes Kari’s identity. The narrative employs a fragmented, non-linear structure to mimic Kari’s internal dissociation. However, through her female friendships and navigation of the urban spaces, Kari goes through a self-introspective journey that challenges the patriarchal and normative forms of love and care.

Amruta Patil’s artistic choices in *Kari*—dark, gloomy, monochromatic palette—serve as a visual idiom of the protagonist’s urban alienation and the dualities inherent in her queer identity. Patil utilizes high-contrast black and white to symbolize the internal struggle between belonging and non-conformity, whereas the rare colored panels sneak in between to highlight the scarcity of queer spaces and moments of true joy. Kari’s resistance to societal expectation is marked by the rejection of traditional femininity to the point that she feels dysmorphic in her body. She struggles with the dichotomy of choice presented to women where they can either be “earth mother” or “rumpled siren” (Patil 107). She wears loose clothing, sports short hair, and use little to no makeup as her plain clothing style aims to avert the gaze from her physicality and rather focus on psyche and mind space. (Datta 4). Datta further states: Patil’s unusual protagonist resists such ‘quick synopses’ and simplified categories systematically. Throughout the text, Kari is visualised as a misfit who does not conform to social conventions. The recurrent associations between Kari and the sewer are interesting in this context. For one, it generates an unusual metaphor to describe a woman. It subverts the historical association between women and beauty across cultures. In fact — quick digression — the text ironically plays on such metaphors. (4)

II. Defying the Heteronormative Norms: one panel at a time

The first page of the chapter entitled ‘The Double Suicide’ illustrates Kari and Ruth, sitting side-by-side on a bench against the grey, hazy stormy sky. They are connected by their hearts which is visualized outside their bodies, tied to each other through arteries. Ruth holds a scissor and a cut artery is bleeding onto her skirt—signifying that she might have been the one to cut the artery. The artery is symbolic of their relationship through which their hearts were connected has now been severed signifying their break-up and the moment their last conversation. Through this painful picturization, the author underscores the *pain* of the last conversation between two lovers. This insight into Kari’s life establishes her as a non-conforming protagonist and braces the the reader for a story defined by despair, decay, and the doom. The illustration also pays homage to Frida Kahlo’s *The Two Fridas* (1939), which Kahlo painted when she separated from her husband. This panel further foregrounds how a queer relationship is rendered vulnerable and precarious due to the rigid, heteronormative culture it is surrounded by.

The author takes us to the first meet of Kari and Ruth where the subjects are squeezed into a small panel, the majority of which is covered visibly by a poster of a movie called DDLJ. *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge* is considered a cult classic in Bollywood, underscoring a story of a heterosexual couple known for its idealization of a love validated through family and society by performing the wedding traditions. This scene reflects how there is a lack of representation of queer love and relationships in media, which in-turn, renders any other kind of companionship other than a heterosexual romance null and unimportant. In one of the scenes, we see Kari deflecting a sexist advice from her one of her friend’s boyfriends, “eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman” (Patil 81) to which she stays shut but internally feels out of place. Kari is constantly pressured by the society to mingle with a man because that is the *way* of the world. Kari’s fluid and non-conforming identity is constantly questioned and interrogated by her colleagues, friends, mother, strangers, through which she is rendered hyper visible

and subjected to constant scrutiny. Judith Butler's theory of performativity posits that gender is a social construct which is something that one possesses through repetitions and the societal understanding of what constitutes as male or female. Butler rejects essentialist theories on gender and sex and opines "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (523). Kari's fluid identity constantly shifts and refigures itself and the constant scrutiny from the societal gaze compels her to repeatedly perform, assert, and renegotiate her gendered sense of self. This is why the Kari we see on the first page is starkly different from the one we see by the end of the text. Kari's sense of self is partly re-affirmed when she goes for a haircut at a barber's shop and despite the barber's unsolicited advice against a boy-cut, she comes out sporting a buzz cut with the panel entitled "bring on the ladies" (Patil 107). Post this, she expresses her fluidity through the androgynous, non-conforming gaze and subverts the rigid binaries of gender and heteronormative expectations. Rather than sensationalizing her sexuality, the narrative seamlessly integrates Kari's queerness into the fabric of her mundane existence, beginning with an emotional rupture that rejects conventional romantic tropes. Whether navigating the masculine hierarchies of her advertising career or fostering an alternative kinship with her female roommates, Kari consistently inhabits spaces that both confront and redefine traditional social structures. Ultimately, by elevating these platonic and domestic bonds to the same emotional status as biological family, the text gestures toward a radical model of queer kinship that thrives outside the boundaries of heterosexual norm

III. Female Friendships as Subversive Spaces

Kari has an abundance of female presence in her life—Angel, Billo, Delna, through which she sustains herself and builds emotional resilience. These female spaces act as spaces which depict a sense of belongingness within an otherwise alienating urban landscape. Kari refers to her apartment as "Crystal Palace" where she lives with her other two roommates, Billo and Delna. When Kari first moved in, she expected a cozy *Little women*-like camaraderie—a hub of gossips, sisterhood, and solidarity. However, her utopic bubble is soon burst when her roommates are joined in by their boyfriends and thus, the space becomes normative and hierarchized in the sense that Kari's friends are absent from her life. Despite that, true moments of joy sneak in through colorful panels when their boyfriends are absent from the space. This underscores how without the *male gaze* or the pressure of external dating lives, the three women engage in simple, domestic rituals—sharing food, lounging, or just being. Her friendship with Angel is playful, warm, and beautiful. Kari admits that it was her dying that she was inclined to—Angel is a cancer patient who is terminally ill. Angel becomes a guiding force in Kari's life, often anchoring her amidst an emotional turbulence. These friendships function as alternative sites of care and intimacy, enabling her to navigate her fluid identity outside the constraints of heteronormative expectations. In this sense, female bonds emerge as subversive spaces that resist isolation and foster forms of solidarity, allowing Kari to articulate and inhabit her selfhood beyond normative structures. Kari often ventures to Angel's house where she spends time with her cat, Polydeuces. Angel's house becomes a queer affirming space where Kari does not have to perform or cater to a heteronormative gaze. Angel's house, thus, becomes a liminal space where her identity is not rigid or constrained but allowed to remain fluid, nebulous, and in the process of becoming. Unlike her domestic space which becomes a space where her sexuality is constantly scrutinized by her roommates, Billo and Delna, or their boyfriends who try to *fix* her or pressure her into traditional femininity. Her work space, the ad agency, is similar in its blueprint where her gender presence is scrutinized and sometimes, fetishized by her other co-workers. Similarly, the ghostly presence of Ruth becomes a catalyst that propels Kari's creative and artistic journey where Kari expresses her desire and longing for Ruth through creative ad-writing. Her creative adds are embedded with fragments of memory underscoring how Ruth's lingering presence is not merely spectral but generative, enabling Kari to externalize her inner turmoil. In one of the panels, we see Kari lying down on bed and her imagination is visualized to us. Kari has a snow globe in her hands inside which there is a girl who resembles Ruth. The girl is cold and shivering to which Kari says,

“My heart lurches at the thought of the snow-globe girl waiting endlessly, with only the hope of a new snow blizzard to settle on her mantle when the next person tips her snow-globe world over. Not a gust of breeze may ruffle her skirt, not a bird may perch atop the steeple. The only way out of a snow globe is by shattering the glass dome that is its sky. (Patil 48)

Kari foregrounds the predicament of a queer life and compares it to the fate of the girl who is trapped inside a snow globe. The globe here signifies the heteronormative world which alienates and subjugates queer identities and scare them into hiding. The only way out of a globe—only way to stay afloat in a world shaped by rigid binaries—is to break out of it and resist its walls.

IV. Conclusion

Amruta Patil’s exploration of queerness is quiet yet profound as she navigates through the *smog city*. Through its fragmented storytelling and innovative visuality, the text captures Kari’s journey of self-introspection shaped by grief, desire, and moments of quiet wins. The graphic medium becomes crucial in articulating the complexities of her inner world, where memory, fantasy, and reality constantly intersect.

The novel resists linear closure, instead presenting identity as fluid and continuously evolving. Spaces such as Angel’s home function as temporary refuges, allowing Kari to inhabit versions of herself free from societal constraints, yet these moments are always fragile and transient. In this sense, the narrative underscores the precariousness of queer existence within a largely heteronormative social structure, while also affirming the possibility of self-making through connection, creativity, and introspection.

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