

“There is no such thing as a Straight Woman”: A study of non-conformed sexuality in *Kari*

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Submitted: 28.02.2022.

Revised: 24.03.2022.

Accepted: 30.03.2022.

Abstract: Comics, writes Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, are ‘juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/ produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.’¹ Comics, a form of expression under-appreciated in during its inception, has taken up a new name, the graphic novel, owing to surge of interest among the publishers due to wide readership began to deal with several social issues ranging from gender, myth and caste. In India too a lot of experiments are being done using this ‘hybrid’ form of story-telling. The graphic novel that this paper deals with is *Kari* by Amruta Patil. *Kari* is the first Indian graphic novel with a lesbian protagonist whose story unfolds in private and public spaces of an unnamed metropolitan city. *Kari* is able to negotiate with society, her sexuality and psyche as queer. *Kari*’s constant penetrating /‘queer’ gaze allows her to observe and negotiate with the heteronormative structures of society and her own personal battle. Through the gaze, one is eventually forced to understand her everyday existence as a transgression of societal norms and boundaries. The paper makes an attempt to uncover the problems faced by a homosexual woman in a heteronormative culture.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Heteronormativity, Queer, Homophobia, Sexuality.

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Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Kari* (2012) begins with an image of Kari and her lover, Ruth, their hearts connected with shared arteries, but with Ruth having severed a link, so that blood is pouring out of the artery. The accompanying text reads: "There are two of us, not one. Despite the slipshod medical procedure, we are joined still"² The opening line is an attempt to claim a selfhood as one, not doubled. It is followed by a suicide attempt by both Kari and Ruth, her lover. Ruth survives the fall as she is caught by a safety net, saved [...] (gets) into a plane and (leaves). She floats above the city like a guardian angel while Kari is saved by the stinking river of effluents that snakes past her neighbourhood. She wishes she had lingered within its loving coils and drowned. Instead she descends to live an alienated life. Kari's double life post Ruth's departure is the central preoccupation of the novel. The following queries become pertinent: What kind of double life is Kari living? Does Kari practice two different professions: one by day and another by night? How does her sexual orientation rub against her double life? Finally and more importantly, are Kari's constant references to suffocation, smog city, anxiety attacks thus just innocent references to the contemporary degrading environmental condition in metropolitan cities? Or do these references hint to an exclusively lesbian experience of the city and its culture?

Where Kari is a boatman who cleans the sewers by night, she works as a trainee copywriter at an advertising agency by day. The section that succeeds Kari's suicide attempt is titled 'Fairytale Hair' and gestures to the ,international hair-product brand called 'Fairytale Hair' for which Kari and her art director Lazarus have to create an advertisement. Interestingly, references to fairy tales abound in this graphic novel. Kari while sharing the fact that she lives at Crystal Palace says, "Interesting that my postal address in smog city sounds like a pit stop in a fairytale."³ She refers to her roommates and their boyfriends as ,two dancing princesses [...] plus two permanent houseguest princes. These fairytale references as is argued speak volumes about a pervasive culture of heterosexual romance.

Fairytales in their contemporary cinematic adaptations are pervaded with nuances of heterosexual romance. In the epilogue to her study *Queer Enchantments: Gender, Sexuality, and Class in the Fairy-Tale Cinema of Jacques Demy* (2013) while speaking of Demy's cinema in particular, Anne E. Duggan makes a pertinent remark on the function that fairy tales can perform. She writes "fairy tales can [...] be used to communicate heteronormative ideologies, thus setting us up for failure by inculcating us often subconsciously with prefabricated dreams to which we cannot conform or aspire without sacrificing our singular desires, sexualities and identities..."⁴ Fairy tales can thus function as constraints which try to impose heteronormativity on queer subjects.

While commenting on a variety of social constraints that try to impose heterosexuality on women Adrienne Rich in her seminal work ,*Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1993) writes, "...the ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at her from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry, is a tool ready to the procurer's hand and one which he does not hesitate to use."⁵ This trope of heterosexual romance as Rich rightly points out is not limited to fairy

tales but is disseminated into wider cultural texts. An interesting panel on p. 68 depicts Kari reminiscing about Ruth.⁶ While a dialogue box has Kari confess that ,this is the place where Ruth passed by me for the first time in my life, the background of the panel carries a poster of Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge, a Bollywood movie which epitomises heterosexual romance. In this panel, Kari’s lived reality as she walks around in Mumbai is seen contradicting against her homoerotic relationship with Ruth. Thus Kari’s story unfolds against a culture that is permeated with images and simulation of heterosexual romance.

The story is time and again punctuated by injunctions to compulsory heterosexuality not just *vis a vis* the physical landscape of the city that Kari lives in but also by the mental landscape of other characters in the novel. Small injunctions and suggestions to Kari exhibit indebtedness of heterosexuality as well as reprehensible popular notions of homosexuality. For instance, the two interchangeable gentlemen namely Orgo and Zap, boyfriends to her two roommates urge Kari to find a suitable man for herself. Where Orgo tells her that ,eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman, Zap tells her, “Laz is such a great guy. You have so much in common. Both of you are into books and don’t party.”⁷ Thus, both presume that Kari is a heterosexual woman. Interestingly, Kari enters the novel with short hair, but this shortens even further into a buzz-cut that enables her androgynous body to trespass the lines that separate maleness from femaleness.

Lazarus on the other hand asks Kari if she is a proper Lesbian. Although Kari responds to Lazarus by saying that, “I’d say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner. The circus isn’t in my life. It’s in my head”⁸ Perhaps it is Lazarus’s question that is more intriguing than Kari’s reply. Lazarus’s query enlightens us to the naturalized status of heterosexuality in our society. Eric Anderson in his book *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (2009) summarises Rich’s arguments on compulsory heterosexuality by remarking, “Rich maintains that the operation of compulsory heterosexuality as a product of nature reifies and naturalizes heterosexuality [...] From this understanding, homosexuality is stigmatized because it is thought to go against the supposed natural inclinations of the person.”⁹ Clearly, Lazarus along with Orgo and Zap believes that heterosexuality is natural and compulsory rendering any notion of homosexuality not just stigmatized but absent from their psyche. Lazarus suspicion concerning the existence of Ruth perhaps has genesis in the same naturalized heterosexual ideology.

Domesticity in *Kari* (2008) does not always become the refuge from the urban chaos. In the text domesticity is essentially reduced to food, drink, bodies in the form of multiple sexual liaisons and is devoid of companionship. Kari’s workplace does not provide her much refuge either. In one of the panels Kari and Lazarus travel to the tea centre for a meeting concerning the TV commercial for the aforementioned hair brand. A new character who enters, an already erratic discussion, tries to make advances at Kari. He asks, “are these your new protégées? Who’s the young lady with the burning eyes?”¹⁰ Kari, the panel depicts, does not directly reply to this overture however as she leaves the tea centre with anger and hatred she tells Lazarus, “Hope my burning eyes make his penis wither and fall off.”¹¹

Kari's inability to respond, to keep silent in the face of inappropriate sexual advances that are made to her opens up a variety of questions concerning workplace discrimination that is meted to the LGBT population. Such sexual advances at workplace don't just unveil the fact that heteronormativity is more often than not institutionalized but also point to how sexual overtures at workplace put homosexual women in a precarious position.

The woman who too decisively resists sexual overtures in the workplace is accused of being 'dried up' and sexless, or lesbian. This raises specific difference between the experiences of lesbians and homosexual men. Lesbian, closeted on her job because of heterosexist prejudice, is not simply forced into denying the truth of her outside relationships or private life. Her job depends on her pretending to be not merely heterosexual, but heterosexual woman in terms of dressing and playing the feminine, deferential role required of 'real' women.

Thus, Patil's *Kari* (2008) paints a metropolitan culture that is disseminated with images of heterosexual normalcy. A further chain of questions thus begs address: How does Kari survive in this culture? What stylistic devices does Amruta Patil use to represent Kari's unrest? Is magic realism one of the stylistic conventions that Patil employs to render Kari's experience more apparent? Does Kari's night life, the fact that she cleans sewers at night portray an exclusively homosexual experience of the city?

Kari's experience of the city is time and again described as suffocating. She refers to Mumbai as smog city, "On my way back home like on any other day, I try to breathe as little as I can to prevent smog city from choking me. I wish I could detach my lungs."¹² In the latter part of the graphic novel Kari suffers from an anxiety attack, "Please let me breathe! Please let me breathe."¹³ This trope of suffocating, of not being able to breathe argue becomes a metaphor for Kari's queer experience. Kari paints a melancholic picture of a city and its inhabitants that are impregnated with recurrent signs of heteronormative and patriarchal existence. Against this ideological set-up Kari's most vehement desire for Ruth remains closeted; Closeted perhaps not in terms of its connotations of secrecy but suffocation. Adrienne Rich while commenting on the suffocation that inscribes the life of homosexual women writes,

"We come from many pasts: out of the Left, out of the ghetto, out of the holocaust, out of the churches, out of marriage, out of gay movements, out of the closet, out of the darker closet of long term suffocation of our love of women. To the historic feminist demand for equal humanity, for a world free of domination through violence lesbian/feminism has joined the more radical concept of women-centred vision, a view of society whose goal is not equality but utter transformation."¹⁴

It is this transformation that Kari tries to usher in with her endeavour to clean the sewers of the smog city. While disclosing her night duty as a boatman who navigates in the sewers, Kari announces, "The day I hauled myself out of the sewer – the day of the double suicide - I promised the water I'd return her favours. That I would unclog her sewers

when she couldn't breathe"¹⁵. Interestingly, the sewers' inability to breathe runs parallel to Kari's inability to breathe. If I could go so far as to argue that Patil successfully employs the stylistics of magic realism by using the metaphor of suffocating sewers to highlight the city's heteronormativity, homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality which is equally smothering. Pia Mukherjee makes an accurate estimation when she writes; “accordingly the double magical template in Kari, the embedded fairytale and the framing navigation myth, may be read as readapting the originary elements of each – that is the familiar tale and the classical legend – to serve revisionary agendas”¹⁶. Both the fairytale trope and the navigation myth do serve a revisionary agenda. However this revisionary agenda as this paper has tried to argue is the revelation of metropolitan cities and culture as essentially silencing and heteronormative. Kari's attempt at cleaning the sewers is thus an attempt of architecting a culture of homosexuality and acceptance.

If Kari is able to find refuge in the stifling atmosphere of the pervasive heteronormativity it's in the company of Angel, the brand manager from Fairytale Hair. Their relationship promises to nurture a, women-centred vision. Names in Amruta Patil's Kari are significant as they convey what is to be expected from a character. Angel carries all the connotations of the namesake. We first encounter Angel in Kari's Office with a bald head. Soon after it is told that Angel suffers from terminal illness and is undergoing chemo. Kari who feels madly drawn to her dying visits Angel with a bunch of roses which the latter rudely refuses. This marks the beginning of Angel and Kari's relationship. Kari and Angel's relationship however is sexually ambiguous. One does not get answers to questions such as: Is Kari in love with Angel? Does Angel reciprocate her sentiments? Kari's camaraderie with Angel begins without preamble. Angel is brutally honest, brusque but a confidante that Kari does not have. Although Kari and Angel's bonding is struck over death experiences that both have met with it, it soon flowers into sharing details of body tattoos, prosthetic breasts, horse-riding and relationships. It is Angel's emaciated and rapidly dying body that Kari gets attracted to. Kari is Angel's boatman, designated to ferry her across when she is about to die. Later Kari is present when Angel dies, as the boatman who is around when the last breath leaves the body. Kari's relationship association with Angel assumes importance when one looks at it in the light of Adrienne Rich's concept of lesbian continuum. In her aforementioned essay Rich speaks of a lesbian continuum to include range - through each woman's life and throughout history - of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more 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, if we can also hear it in such associations as marriage resistance, we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of lesbianism.¹⁷ It is this lesbian continuum that is brought to fore by the establishment of a non-sexual yet a co-operative and fulfilling relationship between Kari and Ruth.

The passion of all the women in *Kari* (2008) is doomed to discontent and disaster. All the relationships in this tale suffer from trauma which is gendered as it affects the women alone. With her flat-mate Billo, Kari anticipates a lurking danger and promise of betrayal that men can never resist. Then Billo gets pregnant, by Vicky and not her regular boyfriend Zap and decides to abort the baby. Delna, who had come to Mumbai to become an actress but ended up as a ‘hand-and-foot-stand-in’¹⁸. In films she becomes somebody’s hands, somebody else’s feet. Hence, instead of becoming a star body, Delna becomes the body ‘spare-parts’ of Aishwarya Rai and other stars. Angel has willed her body to medical science and therefore expects to be dismembered and studied well. Angel, says Kari, ‘found it vastly entertaining that young medical school boys would be experimenting with her’.¹⁹ Billo, Ruth, Delna, Kari and Angel are all, in some way or the other damaged and fragmented, negotiating loss and discontent.

Kari is not given a surname in the book. While her butchness prevents her from successfully passing as Ruth is able to with her more conventional feminine good looks, the author’s non-conferment of a surname suggests Kari’s “type” holds true for a larger terrain than that of Bombay. It is hardly possible to “place” Kari within a particular Indian state or region; she could be from anywhere. Neither can we make out from her salwar-kameez clad mother or mustachioed father’s appearance where they hail from. Kari could come from just about anywhere. Her parents are indeed located within an emotional specificity -they love their daughter, give her good advice, she misses them, but as is true for almost all socialised children, she must leave the homestead to make her own way in the world, emotionally and economically. The name ‘Kari’ with mock-playful similarities with nicknames that are also endearments, suggests an individual whose identity itself is playfully and at the same time vexingly mobile; our inability to reference particular geographical locations makes the name at once refer to an infinite number of local habitations and possibilities. Ruth’s name on the other hand has vivid ‘lesbian’ overtones, invoking the story of Ruth and Naomi from the Bible. Ruth’s devotion to Naomi, whom she follows leaving behind the land of her parents and her youth, despite her marriage of convenience to Naomi’s kinsman Boaz, is a story that lesbian friendly readers have interpreted and invested with positive significance for female same-sex love.

Thus, Amruta Patil’s *Kari* on a closer examination reveals a graphic story of the experiences of sexual minorities in metropolitan cities. Kari’s encounter with fairytales of heteronormativity leaves her suffocated in the city; a suffocation that finds further expression in the representation of sewers as clogged and suffocating which depicts the smog ridden stifling heterosexual atmosphere of the city. Kari’s mammoth sized task of being a boatman and cleaning sewers thus engenders revolutionary and liberating potential. Kari’s navigation through the sewers of the city while purging them of dirt and clogging promises to intervene to establish an alternative culture and in turn an alternative identity.

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