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Stepping Back on Unfamiliar Roads: A Journey Towards Self and Desire in Amruta Patil's *Kari*

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Abstract: Love, passion, and desire often shape the trajectories of many literary characters. The culmination of love or the lack thereof often leads protagonists to embark on a journey of self-exploration. Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) often called India's first lesbian graphic novel, is one such tale.

Patil's narrative explores newfound desires against the backdrop of a darkly illustrated city after *Kari* survives an attempt at joint-suicide with her lover. Her journey, as she wades through the waters of a big city along with friends and acquaintances remains marked by a lost love- that of her lover who has since escaped. Thereon, the novel charts a course that is marked by *Kari*'s strenuous yet stellar mental dialogue. A graphic representation and articulation of such a dialogue lay bare the manifold challenges that often remain ignored in the larger discourse of love and desire. These challenges include but are not limited to one's body image issues, sexual orientation, etc.

This paper discusses same-sex desire and love contextualised within a cityscape as in *Kari*. It seeks to explore the tedious lived experiences of a single lesbian as she embarks on a journey of perhaps self-discovery and survival.

Keywords: Gender, sexuality, cityscape, trans-literature, suicide.

*"No matter where you are headed, or how nobly,
you can sink without a trace."*

The culmination of love or the lack thereof often leads literary protagonists to embark on a journey of self-exploration. Failure in love teaches or rather forces characters to sustain themselves via a myriad of methods. Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) often called India's first queer graphic novel, is about one such character. It traces the eponymous character's

journey through the 'smog-city'-an epithet for Bombay. *Kari*'s everyday experiences provide a crucial perspective into the lives of homosexuals in urban Indian spaces. Her journey is both facilitated and mapped onto the crowded cityscape as she dabbles into newfound friendships, passions, and most of all, a desire to survive.

"A failed suicide is death still because no one emerges from it unscathed."

The narrative in *Kari* begins with death. *Kari* and her lover, Ruth plummet to their apparent deaths. While the former ends up in a sewer, the latter has the privilege of flying away. The presence of a safety net, a "protective cradle" within Ruth's building serves as a metaphor for the city's many inequalities. As *Kari* is crawling out of a sewer, Ruth's flight rises above the cement jungle and she goes "towards a flame-coloured calling." The dark and mysterious sewage water comes to define *Kari*'s aura- ubiquitous but unnoticed. She merges herself with the water and even catalogues sewer smells "for entertainment." *Kari* navigates henceforth as a boatman, unclogging the city's drainage pipes and sometimes her own muted passions.

"Are you, like, a proper lesbian?"

Based on self-declaration from the citizens, the Ministry of Health declared that there are 2.5 million gay homosexuals in India. That figure corresponds to less than 1% of the Indian demographic. Thus, a large majority of homosexual people in India either live double or suppressed lives. The realisation of one's sexual orientation becomes a herculean task in a heteronormative society. Most homosexuals choose to enter heterosexual marital relations for the reasons of taboo, prestige, etc. When questioned by her colleague Lazarus whether she is a "proper lesbian", *Kari* reminisces about the time she saw *k d lang*: "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?" (Patil 80). Kari face-to-face with the kind of passion not yet encountered or discussed in the culture around her is muted. While her silence obviously points towards a lack of awareness, it, more importantly, foregrounds the lack of an adequate vocabulary for homosexual desire.

Understanding sexuality by no yardstick is a theme prevalent in discourses within Indian society. It is at best kept behind closed doors or discussed in hushed tones. This remains true even of a place that claims certain ambiguity vis-a-vis the term "society" like Kari's accommodation- Crystal Palace. While Crystal Palace is far from being the benchmark of Indian civilisation as professed in the disapproval by Kari's parents, it grasps at the same stereotypes as the rest of the civilisation. Kari equates her relationship with her flatmates: "And women of the world adore tousled boygirls. They all want to be Wendy to my Peter Pan" (Patil 23).

Kari inhabits Crystal Palace brimming with hopes of a walk-in-sisterhood. However, the ethos of a sisterhood hardly comes into contact with the place. Nevertheless, its location within an urban and crowded city does endow it with some liberty. Both of Kari's flatmates, Billo and Delna go about their sexual lives in an uninhibited manner within the scarce 2BHK. But the same liberty remains evasive when it comes to non-heteronormative relationships. Ruth visited the place only when others were out, turning it into a "secret garden." Patil hints towards the subtle unacceptance that homosexual couples face even in urban spaces where most people seem not to care. Kari and Ruth still require a secret place to materialise their desire and passion. Saranya Mukherjee adds, "Kari, an introvert can truly blossom when she is away from the cynical gaze of others."

In a panel (58-59) inspired by *The Last Supper*, Patil depicts one of the rare female-only suppers at the Crystal Palace. With

food, gossip, and massage, these suppers are the closest Kari gets in experiencing her desired sisterhood. During these, her flatmates both acknowledge and flirt with her. They call her “handsome and loyal” while wanting “a husband just like her.” Patil remarks, “make no mistake- there is no such thing as a straight woman” (58). Such instances while they do misappropriate Kari’s sexual orientation, come quite close to the “lesbian continuum” as proposed by Adrienne Rich. Rita Béres-Deák holds that Rich’s model advocates bonding among women based on a common “lesbian potential that is not necessarily based on genital sexuality.”

Bonding within the Crystal Palace is not free from the general mothering and advises that are showered in rather copious amounts upon those who do not look the part. While her flatmates tell her to wear kohl, her hairdresser makes a seemingly earnest request to not go for a 2mm buzz cut. Kari however goes for a “boy-type” face. A dominantly heteronormative society dictates that one’s body image falls in line with one’s gender performativity. After all, the look of a performer stays crucial to the ‘performance of their gender’ as theorised by Judith Butler. Although Kari openly identifies as a lesbian (at least within the urban space) repeated attempts are made to pull her back into the binary gender fold. She is reminded of the importance of a husband by her mother and also by her flatmates’ boyfriends among other people: “Eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman” (Patil 81).

Challenges exist along with love and desire for Kari. Patil charts Kari’s desires in the context of Bombay- the smog city. New roads with interesting inhabitants spring up for her overnight and vanish in the same manner. The lacuna created by Ruth’s absence is filled by drainage water from the smog city. Kari’s character takes on the role of a “boatman” that not only ferries people but also unclogs the choked-up sewage pipes. Neel Mukherjee refers to her as an “androgynous cross

between Charon, who ferries dead souls across the Styx, and Villanelle from Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*."

Kari's character starts on a journey where it remains somewhat paradoxical in the beginning but finds consolidated ground soon after. She forms the multitude of people who do not react to dismembered bodies after the first gasp but she also remains the astute observer who can differentiate between the smells emanating from a tiffin and a sexy armpit. who can differentiate between smells emanating from a "tiffin" and a "sexy armpit." As Kari begins to unclog the city, the city too opens up to her. It begins to form a "tender offshoot to the tar" for Kari to wander upon on her way to work. She spends time with the urban spaces lying between work and home. For her, it is "returning the favour" to the city's water that somewhat cushioned her fall. As per Neel Mukherjee, "it is possible to see *Kari* as a poem written to and for Bombay."

The smog city makes Kari more resistant as it weighs down upon her lungs and sensitive varicose veins. It strengthens her to "carry her own water"- a metaphor for developing one's own methods for survival. At the same time, the city provides space to Kari's flatmates too. It enshrines many like them with traumatic childhoods or the ones running from imperfect realities. *Kari* attempts to look at the infamous underbelly of India's largest city, Bombay but does not forget to shed light on its kindness. Mukherjee remarks, the novel "is a slowly unfurling meditation on the city itself, seething, polluted, overpopulated, hellish yet alive, the great survivor"

Ruth's lingering and powerful love *in absentia* form the basis of Kari's survival and self-discovery while going around the city. Kari's desires get shaped in the mould of Ruth's love. An independent blog Aspi's Drift take note of the inspiration behind *Kari*'s first panel:

“The panel is a homage to Frida Kahlo's searing Las Dos Fridas, painted after Frida was abandoned by her long time partner Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. It depicts two Frida's - two versions - one rejected by Diego and the other embraced by him. Frida's heart is bleeding her to death.”

Ruth as shown in the first panel then can be considered a version of Kari- the one that inspires Kari the boatman to navigate further on. Ruth becomes a driving force not only for Kari's desires but also for her professional life. It is through visions of Ruth as a princess that Kari copy-writes a successful ad campaign. Her happiness continues to turn “into a small blue thing in Ruth's palm.”

Ruth continues to exist as inspiration or as a figment of Kari's imagination. Through her love, Kari manages to conjure up and further invest in new friendships and desires. Imagination plays a central role in her desire. This is displayed in sequences where Kari plays around with semantics and inanimate objects. The very name of her Project lead, Susan Lush fires up her imaginative desire:

“My heart is an expanse of green grass at the sight of the name. ... Can you see her the way I do? Susan, Lush against watermelon walls. Susan, Lush against Grecian blue or white. Susan, Lush, and tan on a bone-white beach. Susan, Lush and succulent, all tan, all sun.” (Patil 64)

Kari's sensuality is further projected onto exotic fruits. “A fruit that lingers on your fingertips with unfruitlike insistence, fuzzy down on a pretty jaw.” Desire in these instances is a mele of exotic and fancy. It is given a dimension beyond ordinary humans. The sources of Kari's desire are derived

largely from semantics. Thus, Patil contributes in her own way to the meagre vocabulary of homosexual discourse.

Love, desire, and passion in *Kari* exist at a nexus where they are also joined by societal challenges and incomprehension by others of one's sexuality. Love- for a partner departed and for a city crowded sustain *Kari*'s discoveries in desire, passion, and herself. The interplay between lost love and the ensuing struggle to survive as contextualised in *Kari* brings to fore the lived realities of same-sex couples in urban spaces. The same cityscape that allowed *Kari* to fall in a sewer also ensures that she does not drown. It might still not provide her with the privilege of a "protective cradle" but it empowers her to stand on a ledge and step back.

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