

## Exploring and Reinventing Sexuality, Subalternity, Sedition, and Self-identity in Amruta Patil's *Kari*

Varsha Sharma<sup>1</sup>, Arun Kumar Poonia<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Varsha Sharma, Research Scholar, Department of Languages, Manipal University Jaipur

<sup>2</sup>Arun Kumar Poonia, Assistant Professor, Department of Languages, Manipal University Jaipur

\*Corresponding Email: [rvsharma24195@gmail.com](mailto:rvsharma24195@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore and reinvent the aspects of sexuality, sub-alternity, sedition, and self-identity in Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Kari* (2008). The Indian society, firstly, holds heterogeneity as a standard norm for both men and women. Any deviation from this position is punished by the society, and those who believe in the concept of homosexuality are seen as deviant and abnormal. Secondly, the individuals still experience caste discrimination, which is believed to have ended in the contemporary society. Thirdly, the modern society is interspersed with individual level protests and resistance against the established order and social norms set down by the authorities. Finally, with education and professional development, women's sense of self-identity has grown, but maintaining that identity, remains a challenge for them due to the male dominance in the Indian society. Through her graphic novel *Kari*, Amruta Patil questions the traditional beliefs to break down the gender stereotypes, stemming out of the need for women to be heard strongly in the contemporary society. While this divergence from traditional culture continues to haunt the power structures of the Indian society, Patil draws the plight of individuals who are different and unconventional, but not deviant, and by reinventing contrasts with the mainstream society, Patil canvasses this dissent in the society. This article aims to interrogate on the aspects of sexuality, sub-alternity, sedition, and self-identity in the Indian culture in relation to different social groups (class, ethnic group, race, gender, etc.). This article provides insight into the transition, perception, and purpose of Indian graphic novels and seeks to critically analyze *Kari* to explore and reinvent identified aspects in the context of Indian culture and society. This research study is dissected from two perspectives: on the one hand, it studies the social impact and harsh reality of homosexuality in India, dealing with issues related to gender perceptions; on the other hand, it highlights the sexual innuendos created by Amruta Patil that portray women as thinking, self-aware beings who are placed within a patriarchal framework, but not necessarily living happily submissive within.

**Keywords:** Indian Graphic Novels, Sexuality, Subalternity, Sedition, Self-identity, Homogeneity.

### Introduction

In the early 21st century, the dimensions of literature as a discipline have seen an alteration rather than expansion. Because of its unique coherence and validity, literature has now become more interdisciplinary, drawing on psychology, philosophy, visual arts, political science, and other disciplines (Debroy, 2011). But history shows that everything new and experimental will inevitably be criticized and condemned by the majority before it is finally accepted. This is clearly evident in the writing styles of fictional novels, thrillers, science fictions, film adaptations, and fantasies; which have attracted much scientific attention recently (Saini, 2022). It's the same with graphic novels these days, which have to stand the test of time in order to be universally accepted.

Although it had its foundations to flourish at the turn of the century, it has yet to achieve that level of recognition in many institutions. It is still sometimes on the threshold of reasoning about its plausibility. It can be seen that the line between literature and non-literature has blurred recently, which is a positive sign and an invitation to new ventures (Srivastava, 2016). Consequently, different types of experimental novels find their emergence. Laudislas M. Semali, as quoted in Gretchen Schwartz's article "*Expanding Literacies Through Graphic Novels*", claims that –

“Time has arrived to broaden the canons of traditional education and curriculum... using critical pedagogy to integrate the new forms of visual and electronic texts represents a curriculum requiring new competencies and a new definition of what constitutes learning as well as how and when it takes place” (Schwarz, p.58).

Due to the advantages of using both visual and textual forms, graphic novels are becoming a powerful medium for interacting with society at large (Saini, 2022). It can also be said to combine the best part of the two forms, since the textual form of the novel as a genre offers the highest zone of contact with the reader (as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests in *epic and novel*), while the visual form has the greatest impact on our senses and “all lines carry with them an expressive potential” (McCloud, p.125).

This article critically analyzes Amruta Patil’s graphic novel *Kari* to discuss issues related to gender perceptions and the harsh realities of homosexuality in Indian society. The novel follows the story of a young woman protagonist who carries the load of womanhood. Even though the Supreme Court of India has partially revoked Section 377, the Indian society has yet to publicly consent to homosexual behavior. While same-sex marriages have been legalized now, these are not yet generally sanctioned and accepted by majority. Consequently, homosexuals are doomed to remain in the closet.

Against the above backdrop, the entire research article is based on four major assertions. Firstly, the Indian society holds heterogeneity as a standard norm for both men and women. Any deviation from this position is punished by the society, and those who believe in the concept of homosexuality are seen as deviant and abnormal. Secondly, the individuals still experience caste discrimination, which is believed to have ended in the contemporary society. Thirdly, the modern society is interspersed with individual level protests and resistance against the established order and social norms set down by the authorities. Finally, with education and professional development, women’s sense of self-identity has grown, but maintaining that identity, remains a challenge for them due to the male dominance in the Indian society. Thus, this article explores and re-invents the aspects of sexuality, sub-alternity, sedition, and self-identity based on Amruta Patil’s graphic novel *Kari* (2008).

### Transition, Perception, and Purpose of Graphic Novels in India

The term “graphic novel” was first coined and popularized in 1964 by Will Eisner (Parvati & Remadevi, 2022). Due to the poignancy and confusion of the times, graphic novels gradually eclipsed the traditional comic book series format, offering standalone stories with more complex plots. Anything simple and funny like *Chacha Chowdhary*, *Amar Chitra Katha*, and *Champak*, or a superhero story like *Nagraj* or *Phantom* just doesn’t seem right in today’s world. Today we live in a representational age, an age of myth and cultural renaissance, where artists explore tradition and traditional mythology in unconventional ways. Now it considers various cultural, psychological, political, social, and religious issues. Originating from comics, the graphic novel is a genre that combines verbal (dialogue) and non-verbal (images, symbols, illustrations, drawings, and paintings) that gained widespread popularity in the 20th century. Thus, the stories of these books are expressed through serial art (multiple pictures of words placed next to each other in time and space to form a story). They deal with complex and intense issues or themes, and unlike comics, they have a self-contained storyline.

Christopher Murray in *The Encyclopedia* defines a Graphic Novel as “a long-form comic narrative intended for a mature audience published in hardcover on a serious literary theme”. As Lila Christensen observes, “in contrast to superhero comic books, graphic novels are more serious, often nonfiction, full-length, sequential art novels that explore the issues of race, social justice, global conflict, and war with intelligence and humor” (p.227). In the present context, these novels redefine the strategies that are needed for reaching target audiences by utilizing mass media to address the most relevant and relevant issues plaguing society. The characters in these stories don’t have any extraordinary powers; they don’t have strong personalities, but they still fight the system and break gender stereotypes (Daiya, 2018). It was the modern Indian graphic novel that fundamentally repositioned the comic medium and brought it into the 21st century. The key to this development in any culture is to move away from the formula of genre fiction, which, if it existed, would be

a re-narrating of the ideas from epic texts like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as reproduced in Graphic India, Campfire, and Vimanika.

Long before epics and myths were written, Indian culture was passed down from generation to generation through oral storytelling. Most of us grew up reading mythical stories in graphic art forms, planting religious and moral seeds in our hearts through the imagery of suras (gods) and asuras (demons). That's why Anant Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967) can be considered a complete comic art series that came to India before Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1991) came to the West. However, Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994) is considered the first modern Indian graphic novel. It features *Narmada Bachao Andolan* not only as social commentary but also as a bold anti-government statement.

In recent years, graphic novels have set an unconventional milestone, raising readers' standards and expectations. Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) was met with great critical acclaim and huge popularity. In an Indian context, it has even been said that "not knowing *Corridor* or Banerjee is a sheer blasphemy". Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2006), a strange mix of fact and fiction, takes its readers back to 1975 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of Emergency. India's first female graphic novelist, Amruta Patil through her graphic novel *Kari* (2008), took a giant step forward by choosing a young woman entangled in a web of psychological and social rules people as the theme. It highlights the hardships of homosexuals living in the "smog city". This list also includes many well-known masterpieces such as *Harappa Files*, *Kashmir Pending*, and *Hush*.

Thus, "the Indian graphic narrative demands a new literacy, a new pedagogy, and a new interpretive frame. It is a medium that anticipates and shapes the thematic concerns of the canon of Indian Writing in English" (Pramod K. Nayar, 2019: p.17). Some Indian graphic novels also make heavy use of cultural and folk traditions. For example, Gonda art, the traditional art form in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh, was used by the artists in Srividya Natarajan's *Bhimayan* (2011) to portray Bhimrao Ambedkar's experiences and struggles as a member of the Dalit community. Meghan Maier in "*Bhimayana: Thirst for Khulla*" asserted that:

"They (writers) combine text and images to discuss social and political issues and deliver this information to the reader in the quickest most descriptive way possible. Graphic novels allow authors to provide their readers with a multi-sensory slap in the face. The combination of picture and text forces the reader to come face to face with the social issues these authors are portraying" (p.23).

Urban Indian realities and lives are also common settings for these graphic novels. The hidden lives and love and fragmented realities of contemporary cities are explored through a Delhi shopkeeper by Sarnath Banerjee in *Corridor* (2004) and a lesbian community by Amruta Patil in *Kari* (2008).

Moreover, the introduction of web comics has given rise to a large number of women cartoonists, who use simple cartoons to convey messages of pro-feminism, body-positivity, and social acceptance of LGBTQs. This reflects a growing demand for strong, capable female characters and strongly signals the direction of the Indian comics industry (Parvathy & RemaDevi, 2022).

Although women writers have traditionally been a minority in the comics industry for a long time, they have had a notable impact from the beginning; and as the medium matures, more and more women writers got recognized. Women writers dabble in every genre—from superhero creations, horror, war, romances, crime stories, and more. As women's roles in society changed, so did the ways in which they expressed themselves and their topics of discussion.

The characters in these narratives have no superhuman qualities, no extraordinary strength, and they do not show strong personalities, yet struggle against the system and break gender stereotypes (Mathai, 2018). Graphic novels are redefining the strategy of reaching their target audience by using mass media to address the most pertinent and relevant issues plaguing society. These are transformative narratives where art, reality, and activism come together to promote social justice and equality, "paving the way for new popular literature" (Daiya, 2018).

The representation of female characters in these novels is another issue. Tracing back to the development of these novels, we can find the performance of early female characters. Male characters have been at the center since the dawn of Indian comics. Originally, most comics were made with male protagonists. Women were given secondary roles. The few female characters that appear in the comics were supporting characters, used for plot development.

In the last decade of the 20th century, a need was felt to bring female characters to the forefront. We see a lot of different and interesting portrayals of female characters these days, variations can be seen depending on their occupation, body type, clothing, posture, attitude, etc. The focus on women in graphic novels is actually new. It can take a significant amount of time and effort for women to be in the spotlight in this field and be able to write their own stories. However, it took some time for the female voices to find their way onto the pages of the graphic novel. Many female writers and artists began to explore this medium and women began to find voices in these books, several artists created memoirs featuring female protagonists and others wrote about strong women who rebel against patriarchy or deal with personal and family problems or religious and cultural issues.

Graphic novels require active participation from the readers. They must understand that each image included in the panel contributes to the meaning and development of the plot. When we look at images, waves of physics hit our retinas, and our brains decode them into meaningful structures. This decoding structure is termed a “graph structure”. A series of images are used to tell a story to capture the reader's attention throughout the story. Thus, “navigational component become an important aspect of the graphic structure which tells us where to start and how to progress through it. The images are then arranged in a sequence, into a conceptual structure which generates the meaning out of it” (Cohn, p.3).

The graphic novel is a powerful medium for giving voice to repressed voices by revising myths, ancient traditions, and customs. As such, it blurs boundaries and undermines the hierarchy of social systems. They give voice to individuals who have been overlooked in mainstream mythology, highlighting their problems. With their own distinctive voices, these novels have slowly made a solid place for themselves on the global stage. The “popularity of the historical graphic narrative is not a passing fad; it is an emerging trend that has trenched deep into the domain of Indian writing in English” (Parvathy & RemaDevi, 2022: p.4837).

## **Methodology**

The research work employed observational technique for its analysis. The article initially establishes the transition and perception of graphic narratives in India and then uses Amruta Patil's *Kari* as an example to explore and re-invent cross-disciplinary aspects of sexuality, sub-alternity, sedition, and self-identity. This research study is dissected from two perspectives: on the one hand, it studies the social impact and harsh reality of homosexuality in India, dealing with issues related to gender perceptions; on the other hand, it highlights the sexual innuendos created by Amruta Patil that portray women as thinking, self-aware beings who are placed within a patriarchal framework, but not necessarily living happily submissive within.

## **Critical Analysis of *Kari***

Amruta Patil's *Kari* explores the life of a girl burdened with femininity. The first section of the graphic novel, titled “*The Double Suicide*” starts with an image of protagonists Kari and Ruth, sitting beside each other holding their hands. Their hearts are connected, metaphorically manifested outside of their bodies. Ruth was holding a pair of scissors with which she must have cut the connecting artery. Beneath the image is a caption that reads, “there are two of us, not one. Despite a slipshod surgical procedure, we are joined still” (*Kari*, p.3). An attempt to destroy their relationship by attempting to cut the arteries will be self destructive.

Thus, the image predicted their suicide attempt, which was caused by their inability to maintain their relationship. This opening panel is typical for the picture, and the theme of the novel is clear. The second and third pages are an

interdependent combination of words and images that depict their suicide attempt. The second panel features a visual matching image and what the reader sees is what the narrator (Kari) sees – Ruth standing at the top of the building, preparing for her fatal jump. The third page, two panels separated by a gutter, shows Kari falling from the building using the third-person view of the image and the first-person view of the text. These scenarios are full of theme suggestions. It reveals the intimacy between Ruth and Kari and the sloppy surgery society has imposed on them.

The story begins with Kari and Ruth attempting suicide. Ruth calls Kari from her phone and jumps off the roof of her building. Kari, still with the phone in her hand, followed Ruth. Ruth falls onto the safety net of her building and survives; later, she leaves the city. Ruth's exit marks the beginning of Kari's self-exploration. Kari also narrowly escaped death due to falling into the sewer. The sewer has a greater significance in the story. The text presents two distinct realms within the smog city – the traditional physical world and the sewer.

Sewer's appearance in the smog city becomes an allegory for the existence of homosexuality in mainstream society. The dwellers of the smog city are aware of the existence of the sewers but never acknowledge the sewers. They live as if the sewers are not a part of their lives. After a failed suicide attempt, Kari considers her re-birth in the sewer. She identifies her place in society and declares herself a "boatman". She declares that this incident has made her a "boatman":

"Forgot to mention. The day I hauled myself out of the sewer- the day of the double suicide- I promised the water I'd return her favour. That I'd unclog her sewer when she couldn't breathe.

I earned me a boat that night. As a boatman, you learn to row clean through the darkest water.

Washing the stench off my body when I get back home is a ritual. I can see the stench, eager as mercury, rush into the drain hole to join the mother bog" (*Kari*, p.31).

The image of "mother bog" establishes Kari's identification with the sewer. Her rebirth from the sewer established her place in society. Now that she has disclosed her lesbianism, her status in the heterosexual society is similar to that of the presence of the sewers in the Smog city. In the novel, when Angel addresses Kari, there is another reference to the boatman image. Angel, the client brand manager, came to the scene in the chapter titled "*Angel on the Cornice*". She is depicted as an actively dying cancer patient. When Kari visits Angel, Angel tells Kari that there is a sign above Kari's head that says boatman, and that dying people will be drawn to her in droves. "Once one opts in, he or she cannot opt out. Once one becomes a boatman, he or she will always have to remain a boatman" (*Kari*, p.40). She even asks Kari "why she didn't choose to play with pretty boys instead" (*Kari*, p.40).

The above description clearly establishes the "lesbian identity" of Kari and her relationship with Sewer as a boatman. She chose to continue working as a boatman and would also continue to do so in the future. This indicates that she has declared herself a lesbian and there is no other choice. She decided not to hang out with pretty boys. The identity of the boatman is closely related to the sewer. Thus, the sewer has become a metaphor for the marginalized homosexual community in mainstream society. Society knows it is there, but does not allow it to take a normal place. The last paragraph of part two paints a horrifying reality of a heavily polluted 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. Every day, the city seems to be getting heavier, and her varicose veins fight to break out of her skin. Soon we must mutate- thick skins and resilient lungs- to survive this new reality" (*Kari*, p.13).

The second section of the novel titled, "*Fairytale Hair*" comprises five sequential strips depicting about Kari's profession as the creative writer in an ad agency. She went to the office immediately after the suicide attempt because the thought of returning home was depressing for her, and on the other hand, her work was not affected by her personal mood (*Kari*, p.10). She works on a commercial for an international hair product brand called Fairytale Hair. Her creative title

was denied and she was told to discover her inner fox. She channeled her inner fox and created a successful advertisement. The third strip in this section shows Kari's advertisement consisting of four panels separated by narrow slots. It depicts a princess with long hair chasing a fox. The ad has a caption that says, "the fox was beautiful, and white as snow. The Princess walked o'er hills and dales to find him. East o' the sun she walked, and west o' the moon. The further the Princess walked, the further the fox ran- always on the horizon" (*Kari*, p.12).

The image of the fox can be interpreted in many ways. From one perspective, it reflects Kari's creative idea on the ad page. From another perspective, it represents the image of the fox as depicted in D.H. Lawrence's novel, *The Fox* (1922) which is based on the lesbian theme. The novel describes the psychological relationship of the three main characters in the love and hatred triangle. Nellie March and Jill Banford live together on a farm, and the plot creates a strong bond between them. Although Fox stands in their way, March becomes obsessed with it. A bond develops between Fox and Henry when Henry enters their lives. Thus, the fox symbolizes a male presence that threatens a woman's relationship.

In the ad designed by Kari, the princess never reaches the fox: "the further the Princess walked, the further the fox ran" (*Kari*, p.12). If the fox symbolically represents the presence of a male, then the inability of the princess to see the fox negates the possibility of a heterosexual relationship. The creative ad page serves as a symbolic space for Kari. She uses her creative freedom to talk about things that strict social norms have to hide. Kristeva addresses two different aspects of language - semiotic and symbolic: "First, as an expression of clear and orderly meaning; and Second, as an evocation of feeling or more pointedly, a discharge of the subject's energy and drives" (McAfee, pp.15-16). These two aspects can further be explained thus:

"The semiotic is the extra-verbal way in which bodily energy and affects make their way into language. The semiotic includes both the subject's drives and articulations. While the semiotic may be expressed verbally, it is not subject to regular rules of syntax. Conversely, the symbolic is a way of signifying that depends on language as a sign system complete with its grammar and syntax. The symbolic is a mode of signifying in which speaking beings attempt to express meaning with as little ambiguity as possible" (p.17).

The first strip of the third part of the novel is an instance of color image. It is a single-panel strip depicting the fairy tale world of a princess. This picture-specific strip is used to contrast the dark and gloomy real world. She depicts the world of fairy tales thus: "Where gold trees with silver boughs bear pomegranates with real ruby seeds. Floors of marble, ceilings of brocade, the Place where twelve dancing princesses dance through the night until the soles of their shoes wear out" (*Kari*, p.16). Perhaps only the bright red ruby seed can contrast the joy of fairyland with the harshness of the outside world.

In addition, there are no princes in the fairy-tale world; just twelve princesses dancing all the night, which equates happiness in the fairy-tale world without the presence of men. This opens up the possibility of viewing Kari's creative advertising as a literary representation of a homosexual continuum, an idea proposed by Adrienne Rich in her essay titled, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*.

Kari's sexual encounter with a strange woman in the section titled "*Playing*" also reflects her sexual inhibition. When Billo and Delna try to arrange a cafe party for Kari and their friend Vicky, Kari becomes uncomfortable. The subsequent panel shows Kari's intimate moment with a stranger, followed by a voiceover: "She wasn't my kind of woman and that's why that night she was. This wine is the Blood of Christ. Brings the truth out of a woman sooner than any confession box does. Makes you trust a stranger with your life, your car keys, your best guarded secret" (*Kari*, p.75).

On her 21st birthday, Kari became a member of the local pool for four months, which gave her the opportunity to swim in an isolated area of women's swimming and develop a keen eye for other women:

“Here ladies of every shape, size, and skill level thrash about... I can see every suspended particle and hair curling in this chlorine clogged habitat. If there were little fish within a mile, I would have smelled them out. Wherever they are, they must be trembling in relief that they aren’t in my path. I am a treacherous dangerous fish. I have smooth fins and very sharp teeth” (*Kari*, p.85).

The third part titled “Crystal Palace” describes Kari’s abode. She shares Crystal palace with two girls - Delna and Billo, and two permanent house guests - Orgo and Zap. Kari and Delna/ Orgo share a room in a two-bedroom house, but their beds are separated by a large bookshelf. The bookshelf draws the line between two different worlds - connected/unconnected, straight/ homosexual, public acceptance/ private life. When Kari first came to the house, she counted on a female friendship, but that was not the case. The girls were mostly busy with the boys. No wonder Kari created a No Men’s Fairy World, where only princesses are dancing whole the night.

This section of the novel also gives us insight into Kari's relationship with her mother. The panel discussing Kari’s relationship with her mother is another instance of colorful imagery, in addition to creative advertising, that underscores the influential role of her mother. “The only person who always wants to talk to me is my Mamma. Every Friday, at 10 PM, is the long call home. Mamma talks, I listen. When I get back home, the silence has teeth again. My bed feels as large as a football field” (*Kari*, p.21). Simone De Beauvoir, in the chapter on Lesbianism in her article titled, “*The Second Sex*” talks about the role of mothers in the lives of lesbians. She points to her mother's stubbornness as the reason for her homosexuality. She notes that “the mother who recognizes and alienates herself in her daughter often has a sexual attachment to her” (Beauvoir, p.532).

The section titled “*The Visitations*” is a recollection of Kari’s first visit to the smog city. Her parents, especially her mother, were unhappy with the conditions of her lodging: “In 1.5 seconds, Mamma’s eagle eye takes in braless dress, lit cigarette, and the location of the young man’s head in Delna’s lap” (*Kari*, p.29). Kari’s mother expresses her dismay at Kari's friendship with Ruth, noting that such a friendship certainly gets in the way of a healthy heterosexual relationship. Kari sympathizes with Angel who is “an actively dying cancer patient” and attempts to befriend her. Angel clearly explains to Kari that “she is bald because she is sick, not because she is a butch” (*Kari*, p.38).

The section titled “*The Ark*” features an ideal condition of heavy rain for mixing roads and sewers. “Fast rain... we are happy in here... road and sewer are one” (*Kari*, p.52). Kari hopes for an ideal world in which homosexuality is not considered as an abnormal behavior. Kari sees a progressive Indian society that cannot treat people with alternative sexual behaviors as ‘Sewer’ others. In the heavy rain, Kari saw a wet girl on the sidewalk. The image of the girl functions like a Joycean Epiphany in reinforcing Kari’s sexual destination. Kari wonders if a girl can fall in love with her forever. That night, Kari had a dream in which she was on a boat with a wet girl to the house of the west. “Furiously the sewer flowed. So violently was the gray water that it cracked my canoe in half. No matter where you are headed or how nobly, you can sink without a trace” (*Kari*, p.56). For those who are much indulged with the sewer, the dream is a poignant social warning.

### Exploring and reinventing the aspect of Sexuality

Though Lazarus and Kari were in intimate friendship, Kari would have never fallen in love with him. Lazarus asks Kari if she is a “real lesbian”, causing Kari to question her sexual identity: “I role the word ‘lesbian’ in my mouth and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshy, salivating fresh off the boat from Lesbia, and totally inappropriate” (*Kari*, p.79). She remembers her emotions when she saw K.D. Lang, a Canadian pop singer, for the first time on television. Lang is a declared lesbian who has campaigned for the rights of the homosexuals. Kari believes that people like Lang could help arouse her, the way Ruth had always aroused her: “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 a creature such as this, my heart would be in serious peril. Ruth put my heart in serious peril too” (*Kari*, p.80).

Kari's inability to define her sexuality reminds us of Judith Butler's poststructuralist notion of "gender fluidity". Zap and Orgo suggest Kari to accept the proposal of Lazarus. Their suggestions like, "eventually a woman needs a man, and a man needs a woman", or "Laz is such a great guy. You have so much in common. Both of you are into books and don't party" (*Kari*, p.81), reflect the social insistence on heterosexuality. When Lazarus introduces Kari to Tina, his new girlfriend, she felt like she had lost her only friend. As Lazarus has new friend now, he will not need the presence of Kari anymore. At this moment, she feels like "having the last umbilical cord severed, and realizes the need to get the hell out of there" (*Kari*, p.110). She thought about death but decided to live.

At the end of the novel, the decision of the protagonist to live a homosexual life, calls for a more inclusive approach to gender differences. In the final section titled, "*The Exit Route*", Kari witnesses a girl's suicide attempt from the fifth floor. Kari, sitting on the water tank on the terrace, witnessed the girl jumping off in an attempt to suicide. Kari observed that "everyone has a bird urge to jump down when they look down heights" (*Kari*, p.112). As Kari watched this suicidal incident, she realized three things - "First, I feel no bird urge; Second, I want to step back, not step off; and Third, I still love Ruth more than anyone else in the world, but I won't be jumping off ledges for anyone any more" (*Kari*, p.115). These realizations made her feel that she should not worry about correcting her sexual orientation. She should love herself and respect her alternative sexual orientation, so that she does not feel like attempting a suicide because of not uniting with Ruth. This assertion of sexual identity is a call to accept sexual differences. Kari challenges social heteronormativity through her problematic alternative sexual identity. She decides not to obey social norms and to form self personality of herself.

Not only because *Kari* is one of the few graphic novels featuring a "lesbian" protagonist but also because it doesn't shy away from exposing ordinary readers to the fact that they're complicit in creating a heteronormative world. In the novel, Amruta Patil deals candidly with heterosexual relationships using the characters of Ruth and Kari. Yet she succeeds in drawing attention to differences in how other people perceive such relationships.

India is yet to fully come to terms with the concept of queerness or rather queer sexuality. Though queer identity has been a rather popular topic for debate, prejudice, and discussion, its acceptance somehow always has been dangling on a fine thread. R.K. Dasgupta maintains in "Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narrative of India's Historical Archive" that "identities are complicated, to begin with, and become more complicated when relating them to nation and sexuality". And knowing the complex diversity of a slow-developing nation like India, which is still more attached to terms like culture and tradition rather than ethnicity and progression, Indian sexual identities have become the product of brutal internal and external conflict.

### Exploring and reinventing the aspect of Subalternity

Sexual orientation and gender identity are two different concepts, as are sex and gender, one is biological and the other is societal. Sexual orientation is the romantic indulgence towards other people and can range from heterosexuality to homosexuality. Gender identity is one's sense of self as a woman, man, or transgender, and may be different from one's biological sex. Through the introduction of the modern doctrine of secularism and keeping away organized faith from politics, economics, and identity, there have been escalating instances of societal problems like queer-phobia, which is the explicit and implicit hostility towards the LGBTQ community.

Gender, class, and religious equality have been perpetual concerns over centuries. Humanity is struggling for its rights in a constrained conventional society. The world is in a constant battle to establish just and equal rights for women, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual" (LGBTQIA), minorities, and backward classes. Yet the victory is not achieved. In order to understand the status of equality in the present, we must be able to comprehend equality in the past. Was the world emancipated by these concerns in the prehistoric age? Were our ancestors free of the burden of equality? Perhaps, yes. Perhaps, they had relished the established equality in every realm possible. But where does that leave us in modern times? And how are we to move ahead with these questions dangling around? Patil has



attempted to reason with and answer similar questions in her novel through the character of Kari, possibly leading way toward new understanding and hope.

Kari raises her voice in support of the need for social change to embrace the new reality. She points out the absurdity of pretending a life unaffected by the changes happening around. She talks about the need for social inclusion by embracing gender differences. Instead of seeing gender differences as a malfunction of the human digestive system that needs to be cured, it envisions a society that sees gender differences as different parts of the body joining a biological unity:

“On my way back from work, the stench is a cheerful greeting. Hello, grins the sewer, I am still here. It’s hard to fathom the exact composition of the smell. It must have something to do with the city’s digestive system. When a digestive system is unwell, it poisons the body with toxins of its own making.

People who travel this route every day stop smelling the sewer over the years. People who live here become oblivious to the smell in a matter of days. And yet, I assure you it is most vile. I, Kari, twice-born, who trawl the drains dream after dream, can smell the sewer everywhere. My thoughts keep returning to the city’s lower intestine. To the gutters and hastily dug out canals that empty her bladder and swell her arteries with clean blood” (*Kari*, p.41).

### **Exploring and reinventing the aspect of Sedition**

*Kari* tells the narrative of a melancholic and lonely lesbian, who struggles in an advertising agency and copes with the complications of her estranged amorous life with Ruth but becomes “Danger Chorri - a vigilante” at night, depicting the complex nature of frustration and depression, thus capturing the true state of modern individual. The symbolism used here is reminiscent of Eliot’s “*The Wasteland*” (Mathai, 2018). Depicting a woman in the 21st century, the author skillfully reveals the contradictory side of her character. Black and white images deftly portray a world of urban dichotomy, addressing the crisis of queerness and identity in today’s smog cities.

Some colorful images highlight the commercialization of women in the frenzy of urbanization. The story vividly explores the psychology and sexuality of a woman. Amruta Patil explores the lonely and isolated lives of people residing in an urban society. Patil uses irony as she sets Kari in a job at an advertising agency that creates “ideal women”. Advertising creates gender-specific roles around which women in society must build their identity. In an advertising world that defines gender roles, Kari’s inability to define her own gender identity remains paradoxical.

Kari paints a stifling portrait of a cosmopolitan culture rife with heteronormative norms. The identity crisis she is going through is an example of the problems sexual minorities face in heterosexual settings. Kari’s alter ego, a boatman trying to clean sewers, is symbolic of the need for purification and liberation in today’s world. In this way, Kari becomes an agent of change and hopes to adopt another identity in this complex and fragmented world.

### **Exploring and reinventing the aspect of Self-identity**

Kari has come to live in a big city, Bombay and works in an advertising agency. Billo, Delna, their boyfriends and Kari lived in a shared space. In spite of the failed suicide attempt and loss of her lover she still has to go for her work. Since “work, ... is unaffected by the waxing and waning of personal moons.” (*Kari*, p.10) She had to prepare an advertisement for Fairytale Hair which she finally succeeded in, after ‘thirty-sixth rewrite’. Lazarus, her boss asks her to bring in sex and glamour which was an irony indeed. The ugly picture of the corporate world and working culture is also brought to the fore. Irrespective of the product being sold, women and their bodies are always used as models and objectified. Even Kari’s workplace shows scantily dressed models which is a common occurrence in almost every advertisement industry with popular media frequently portraying women as ‘rumpled sirens’, emphasizing their sex appeal (*Kari*, p.107). Since we are looking from Kari’s gaze it appears absurd. It talks of various realities but doesn’t glamorize anything.

The idea of home as a safe haven has also been subverted here. She has left her parental home, an unnamed town at the seaside is nostalgically remembered—Kari keeps it as “an altar in my heart” (*Kari*, p.84). She had come to the ‘city’, leaving behind her home, and was living in a shared accommodation along with four other people, and the other place she visited was her workplace, which was equally repulsive. Eventually, the idea of home was claustrophobic and suffocating to her, thus subverting the normative. Her mother was the only person who always wanted to talk with her and gave her attention otherwise she feels lonely, alienated disoriented and misfit. Though she misses her parents initially, their visit appears like apparitions from a faraway world, as seen in the chapter ‘The Visitations’. (*Kari*, p.27) This makes it clear that the protagonist has now somewhat adjusted to her new surrounding and left her past behind.

Everything about her identity appears very obvious and natural. Kari’s humane character is also shown in her friendly relation with ailing Angel whom she cares for and regularly visits. Depiction of Angel, a cancer patient, as ‘actively dying person’ (*Kari*, p.36) has magical and realistic form. Her illness and death are equally real and original. In fact, several layers of realities are shown, personal reality (loss of someone close), professional reality (troublesome, monotonous to work in an ad agency) and city reality (includes natural problems - pollution, waterlogging) (Ahmad, 2021). The recurrent image of stench, sewer, waterlogging, polluted air, fluidity and navigation serves as a metaphor for exploring the unconscious, “the city’s lower intestine”. (*Kari*, p.41) The turmoil in Kari’s mind resembles the overflowing roads and sewers. She imagines the blurring of divisions too between heterosexuality and homosexuality just like the roads and sewers appeared as one. And she becomes a boatman who is ready to struggle for establishing her identity. Protesting and demanding inclusiveness to ‘othered’ subculture, she transcends the boundary of traditional norms of heteronormative patriarchal culture ready to face the world with established identity and declare herself as a ‘boatman’ (Ahmad, 2021).

### Highlighting the Harsh reality of Homosexuality

*Kari* by Amruta Patil is an Indian graphic novel that harnesses the power of the graphic novel to confer a universal theme in an Indian context. Patil uses the image of a sewer to question society’s attitude toward homosexuals. She tried to portray the harsh reality of what it means to be a homosexual in India.

India witnessed a historic turning point on September 6, 2018, when the Supreme Court overturned an 1860 colonial law that criminalized homosexuality:

“De-fanging a 158-year-old Victorian era law that hounded the rainbow crowd, the Supreme Court in a landmark judgment on Thursday legalized consensual sexual relations among gay adults by partially striking down Section 377 – a momentous event, perhaps that first step towards the gradual embrace of the LGBTQ community and hesitant acquiescence into alternative sexuality” (Mahapatra, p.1).

The constitutional change hasn’t much affected the social attitude. The tolerance level of the public for homosexuality has evidently increased to a considerable extent, but it cannot be said that social attitudes have changed completely. Donald E. Hall observed that it is never possible to completely destroy one’s former sexual orientation and miraculously build a new sexual order on the ashes of the old one. He is excited and optimistic about the upcoming but gradual changes, as he notes: “We have to be patient and persistent and yet find ways to retain our political enthusiasm” (p.13). He further notes regarding the future of queer studies, “...we need a new reading strategy – a hermeneutics of sexuality – and a theoretical base that allows for a radically different future achieved incrementally through critical conversation and continuing political engagement” (p.13).

To escape the strict moral codes of mainstream society, Kari attempted to jump off the building. Any deviation from heterosexuality is downplayed as something that exists outside the conventions of social practice. Although the Supreme Court of India partially overturned Section 377 in 2018, saying it was unconstitutional to apply Section 377 to homosexual relationships between consensual adults, society has so far not publicly agreed to welcome homosexuality. Although homosexual marriages are currently legal, these marriages did not receive the social acceptance they deserve.

Therefore, individuals with other sexual orientations are not destined to remain in the closet. In her groundbreaking article “*Epistemology of the Closet*”, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observed,

“every aspect of modern Western culture will remain incomplete and damaged if it does not incorporate an analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition. A study of culture will be incomplete without considering the various aspects of the society that remain in the closet” (Sedgwick, p.1).

Focusing on the character of Kari, the novel explores the pleasures and challenges of gay/lesbian lives. The novel illustrates beautiful panels and strips praising homosexual love. The section titled “*Crystal Palace*” features a romantic episode of the personal life of Kari and Ruth’s love. The page contains a panel showing Kari’s smiling face as she blushes when Ruth adorns her with flowers. Kari’s smiling/happy face is rare in the fiction. The section titled, “*The Vigil*” contains triple panels depicting the personal love life of Ruth and Kari.

Amruta Patil seems to have used expressionism in the novel to describe their homosexual love. These characters, along with their bodies, convey feelings of love and longing. The final strip of the section titled “*Ganesh Country*” has three colored panels depicting their sexual union. The colors in bright greens and browns put their bodies deep into nature, challenging traditional practices that label homosexual love as unnatural and unacceptable. In intimate moments, Ruth remarks that they don’t have to be afraid of being procreation: “Isn’t it great? We never have to worry about getting knocked up my mistake” (*Kari*, p.100). This question is full of important philosophical ideas. In India, where society sees sex as a means of procreation, homosexual behavior is condemned as an innate hedonistic drive.

### Imaging and Highlighting the Sexual Innuendos

Amruta Patil’s *Kari* deals with the issues related to gender representation. Through a delicate balance between images and words, *Kari* presents before its readers, the life of a butch who made a bold attempt to challenge the social norms by choosing life over death. *Kari* is also seen as an important text, written and drawn by an Indian woman, providing a cultural space for discussing topics such as gender, alternative sexual orientation, homosexuality, and homophobia. Regarding the importance of *Kari* as a culturally significant text, Shurangama Datta explains:

“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 homo-social interactions (such as Kari’s relations with various women in the text, the interpersonal dynamic between her female flatmates - Billo and Delna), questions of gender performance and non-conformity, Kari’s complex friendship with dying cancer patient Angel, her love for Ruth, allows for an interesting study of gender in the contemporary context” (Datta, p.1).

In graphic novels, both words and images weigh proportionately. Word-based semiotic expression is an infinite verbal expression of the will; whereas image-based semiotic expression can take other forms. In the novel, the colored panels that represent Kari’s creative space serve as a semiotic expression. The panels are less ordered but richer, rarely depicting the harsh realities of life. Most of the panels in graphic novels are black and white, and there are color panels used occasionally. Kari’s moments with Billo and Delna in Crystal Palace (when the boys are away) are presented in colorful images that remind us of the lesbian continuum. A panel of Kari and Ruth’s intimate relationship is beautifully presented in color graphics. Kari’s eventual transformation into an avowed “butch” with a “buzz” cut was colorful.

The Lesbian Continuum, a radical feminist sexuality model that claims that all women have lesbian potential and that such associations of women are defined as lesbian bonding but not necessarily based on genital sexuality, is the only way to successfully overthrow the patriarchy. The concept designates a variety of female behaviors, such as informal mutual aid, cooperative female friendships, and eventually sexual relations (Barry, p.142). It can be seen that the novel

specifically uses colorful imagery to highlight female relationships and homosexual themes, which the “normal” society is scared of.

In the section titled “*The Award Ceremony*”, when Kari walks into the ceremony with her buzz cut, she feels:

“The walk home is three times as long as the walk to MR. Hair Dresser. Smog city looks even more anemic in the sun. Left to itself long enough, everything in the world withers, wastes, fades away to brown and grey. Tarpaulin and trash, Cinders and ash. Vegetables turn to potty. Red curtains turn colorless. Add to this, streams of man and women, like robots and slaves, in equally tired colors. We are scared of too much colors” (*Kari*, p.108).

The reference to “too much colors” takes us to the image of “the rainbow flag”, which might also be considered as the “LGBT pride flag”. The colors represent the diversity of the LGBTQ community. Here, society's fear of color suggests a fear of alternative sexual behavior.

Kari's sexual identity crisis and her attempts at self-exploration are artfully presented as Snow Globes outlined in the novel. The Snow Globe, inside which a girl is sitting on a church bench, waiting for someone, symbolically stands for Kari's loneliness. The Snow Globe is placed on Kari's bedside table. This connects Kari to the girl on the bench and Kari to the princess in the fairy tale ad. There is an abrupt jump from a Snow Globe panel to the fairy tale advertisement in the middle of Kari's sexual repression. Here, from the Snow Globe, Kari's observation goes like this:

“...It is too cold for limb and heart to be alone seven months of the year. When every walk down the street is a war waged against a frozen sidewalk, the least you can ask for at the end of the day is a generous fuck” (*Kari*, p.49).

Hair plays a crucial role in the novel in defining gender roles. At the office, Kari is involved in an international hair product advertisement - Fairy Tale Hair Commercials. The fantasy fairy tale depicted on the creative canvas features a princess with long hair. Fairytale space is no man's land and hair becomes a symbol of femininity. In the Indian context, especially, long hair has always been associated with patriarchal definitions of female entities. Social conditioning has attributed the gendered definition of hair to its identification as a feminine characteristic. It depicts different emotions in different contexts - the allure of a submissive homely wife, the alluring curls of a seductive courtesan, and even the vengeance of a powerful woman. Whatever the significance, the association is always with women.

Kari is a girl with short hair in the novel. She broke traditional gender definitions by cutting her hair short. Her image doesn't fit the sexist social construct. Their inability to fully identify as male or female highlights the need for gender fluidity. When Kari visits Angel at her house, Angel mistakes Kari's sympathy for dying patients for her own lust. Angel's statement that she is bald because she is sick, not because she is a butch, fits with social conventions that associate hair with femininity. Baldness is not an option for Angel. Given the chance, she would probably grow her hair long to maintain her femininity. Angel announces to Kari that she is not butch and that Kari has the identity of butch. At the end of the novel, Kari opts for a short haircut to express his butch identity. A buzz cut is a classic hairstyle depicting a masculine identity. This further complicates her gender identity, challenging societal conventions that divide people into men and women.

## **Conclusion**

The novel ends on an optimistic note as Kari decides not to jump off the building. She says she still loves Ruth (indicating she's still a lesbian), she maintains a buzz cut (indicating she'll be open about her alternate sexuality) and she decides not to jump (indicating she would rather live the life of a homosexual, challenging the social norms, rather than end her life for that). Kari celebrates individual liberty, the right to live, the right to choose one's gender, and the right to express sexual preferences. Apart from the fact that Kari's liberation from gender discrimination once again binds her to patriarchy in the form of “Butch and Femme binary”, Kari supports the materiality of gender disparity.

Indian graphic novels are the essence of turning small stories into the mainstream and have certainly proved to be a panacea for human ills. Graphic novel artists and writers affirm their local cultural roots by combining Indian examples with international networks to create a global impact. They express an alternative perspective, modifying Indian socio-cultural norms. While sociopolitical issues are recurring themes in these pictorial narratives, over the years there has been a desire to revive, reinvent, and repoliticize these issues to represent the new realities that develop around them. The emergence of multiple expressions of individual and social voices in visual representation has made the graphic novel a highly political platform for discourse. Kari's narrative demands acceptance of homosexuals in a heterosexual Indian society. The principles used in the dissection of the novel challenge the destruction of binary systems in the hope that this will end discord and inequality. The novel reflects the one-sidedness of Indian society, which serves both the dominant ideology and the marginalized sections.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Ahmad, Zahra. "Cultural Elements in Funny Boy and Kari". *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 12(5): 179-187, 2021.
2. Barry, Peter. "Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory". Second Edition. Manchester University Press, 2002.
3. Beauvoir, Simon de. "The Second Sex". Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.
4. Butler, Judith. "Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity". Routledge, 2007.
5. Christensen, L.L. "Graphic global conflict: Graphic novels in the high school social studies classroom". *The Social Studies*, 97(6): 227-230, 2006.
6. Cohn, Neil. "Visual Narrative Structure". *Cognitive Science*, 37(3): 413-452, 2013.
7. Daiya, K. "South Asia in Graphic Narratives". *South Asian Review*, 39(1-2): 3-10, 2018.
8. Dasgupta, R.K. "Queer Sexuality: A Cultural Narrative of India's Historical Archive". *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 3(4): 651-670, 2011.
9. Debroy, D. "Graphic novels in India: East transforms West". *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 49(4): 32-39, 2011.
10. Dutta, Surangama. "Can You See Her the Way I Do?: (Feminist) Ways of Seeing in Amruta Patil's Kari (2008)". *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 4(1): 13, 2020.
11. Hall, Donald E. "Reading Sexualities". Routledge, 2009.
12. Mahapatra, Dhananjay and Choudhary, Amit Anand. "Independence Day-II". *The Times of India*, 7 September 2018, p.1.
13. Mathai, Anu. "Unconventional Voices and Alternate Spaces: Redefining Popular Narratives through Kari, Nasreen and Priya". *Navajyoti, International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research*, 2(2): 1-4, 2018.
14. McAfee, Noelle. "Julia Kristeva". Routledge, 2004.
15. McCloud, Scott. "Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art". USA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.
16. Murray, Christopher. "Graphic Novel". *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
17. Nayar, Pramod. K. "The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History, and Critique". Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.
18. Parvathy, J. and RemaDevi, S. "The transition of Graphic Novels in India". *International Journal of Mechanical Engineering*, 7(1): 4835-4837, 2022.
19. Patil, Amruta. "Kari". New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2008.
20. Saini, Himanshi. "Scoping the Eco-sensitive Mythology in the Works of Amruta Patil and Appupen". *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, 10(1): 75-80, 2022.
21. Schwarz, Gretchen. "Expanding Literacies through Graphic Novels". *The English Journal*, 95(6): 58-64, 2016.
22. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Epistemology of the Closet". University of California Press, 1990.
23. Srivastava, Vartika. "Graphic Novels: Visual Narrative Theory and its Pedagogical Relevance". *International Journal of English Language, Literature, and Translation Studies*, 3(2): 590-598, 2016.