



Imaging the Sexual Innuendos: A Study of Amrita Patil's *Kari*

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Abstract:

Amrita Patil's *Kari* is a graphic novel dealing with the problems related to the social notions of gender. It explores the life of a 'girl' who shoulders the burden of attributed femininity. In spite of the fact that the Supreme Court of India partly revoked Article 377 in 2018, stating that the application of section 377 to consensual homosexual sex between adults was unconstitutional, society has not yet openly consented to homosexual practices. Same-sex marriages are legal now, but not yet socially appreciated. As a result, people with alternative sexual behaviours are ill fated to remain in the closet. Amrita Patil has attempted to portray the drastic reality of what it means to be a homosexual in India. This research paper explores the ways in which Amrita Patil problematically portrays the social tendency of keeping homosexuals as the 'other'. She uses the image of a sewer to expose social discrimination based on sexuality. An attempt is also made to analyse critically how *Kari* being a graphic novel from India, has made use of the possibilities of a graphic novel to discuss a universal theme in the Indian context.

Keywords: Graphic novel, Homosexuality, Semiotic and symbolic, the sewer.

Graphic novel has now become a global phenomenon with deep historical roots and new thematic concerns. Technological advancements and the shift to new media have enhanced the transmogrification of visual narratives into its modern form. The general acceptance of graphic novels in the medium of comics best explains the popularity of visual narratives. It was Will Eisner who popularised the term 'Graphic novel' in the late 1970s (Prorokova, 5). This new form of literature which is a combination of comics and novel soon got acceptance in the mainstream literary world. Graphic narratives have recently attained the status of serious art form dealing with complex stories with "combination of text and images, dialogue balloons, recurring characters, and ongoing serial narratives" (Gardner 241). With its artistic complexity, graphic novel has now started occupying prominent space in the discussions and deliberations of the academic circle.



The visual-verbal communication is the peculiarity of graphic novels, in which the narrative aspects of images are as powerful as the visual aspects of the text. The three components of comics that function as modes of communication are images, words and sequences. The visual- verbal combination can be word specific (where the text serves as a dominant component in terms of its contribution to the construction of meaning), picture specific (image is the dominant component) or an interdependent combination of both word and picture. The visual-verbal communication stipulates a vigilant reader in the act of understanding and interpreting the story:

One might argue that the graphic novel's power as a cultural medium to transmit its messages, both visually and verbally influences the perception of the audience by intensifying the process of consuming and interpreting the story on various levels. Thus visualization and narration complement each other equally and are inseparable within the comics' medium. (Prorokova, 9)

Prorokova and Nimrod observe that reading a graphic novel is a hard work, as the reader may stumble upon the juxtaposition between the images and the text. A film or novel offers the audience an experience of the life presented in it; whereas a graphic novel can hardly do that.

As the reader follows the sequencing of panels and moves from one panel to the next, the element of juxtaposition comes into play. The reader performs an ongoing construction of meaning by considering each panel in direct relationship to the one immediately before it, as well as in the context of all previous panels. The understanding of the next panel can also be influenced by a number of the panels yet to come [...]. And each next panel has the potential to prove new information to the meaning of one or more previous panels (Duncan, 141)

Graphic narrative is a transcultural phenomenon, and Indian literature has shaped it by giving colours to its local culture. In India, it has developed in the fourth century BC: "Comprising series of several images, visual narratives developed considerably in India in the



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4th century BC, and from there spread to Sweden, Spain, Japan and Indonesia”(Prorokova 1). Though these early visual narratives can hardly be considered as comics, they elucidate the effectiveness of communication through images. Although India has a rich tradition of the ancient forms of visual narratives, it welcomed the modern forms of comics and graphic narratives in the early twentieth century as a result of British Colonisation. Incorporating elements from Western tradition, India developed its own distinctive style, highlighting its historical and cultural nuances. “...Keeping in line with some of the Western characteristics of the comics, graphic narratives in Asia have dealt with domestic, historical and contemporary events, including western colonialism, and their own religious ideas, local politics, and domestic social process” (Prorokova,4). Ira Sarma, in her essay titled “Indian Graphic Novels: Visual Intertextualities, Mixed Media and the Glocal Reader”, observes the need for the Indian graphic novel to have a ‘glocal’ (It is a portmanteau word created by combining the words global and local) reader who can navigate both local and global cultural spaces. From the initial Indian attempts in the form of comics such as the *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967) and *Chacha Chaudhury* (1971) the modern graphic novels soon developed both in terms of style and content to such works like Sarnath Bannerjee’s *Corridor* (2004), *Kashmir Pending* (2007), *The Harappa Files* (2011), *All quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), Vishwajyoti Ghosh’s *Delhi Calm* (2010), Amruta Patil’s *Kari* (2008) and Srividya Natarajan et al.’s *Bhimayana* (2011).

Amruta Patil’s *Kari* is a graphic novel dealing with the problems related to the social notions of gender. It explores the life of a ‘girl’ who shoulders the burden of attributed femininity. With a fine balance between words and images *Kari* paints before us, the life of a ‘butch’ who chooses life over death. *Kari* is considered as the first graphic novel by an Indian woman. It is also treated as a vital text that offers cultural space to discuss themes of gender, sexuality and homophobia. On the relevance of *Kari* as a culturally important text, Surangama Datta observes:

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 visualising experience, in this case, that of a queer woman, bringing



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innovative possibilities into the Indian graphic arena. For instance, its keen understanding of female spaces and homosocial 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, 1)

The first part of the novel titled 'The Double Suicide' begins with the image of Ruth and Kari sitting next to each other holding their hands. They have their hearts connected, which is metaphorically shown as tied outside their body. Ruth has scissors in her hand with which she has perhaps cut the connecting artery. There is a caption beneath the image which says, "There are two of us, not one. Despite a slipshod surgical procedure, we are joined still" (Patil 3). An attempt to break their relationship by cutting the arteries will be like destroying their own self. The image thus prophecies their suicide attempt which is prompted by their inability to maintain their relationship. This initial panel is picture specific, where the theme of the novel is made explicit. The second and third pages are interdependent combinations of both words and images which show their suicide attempt. The second panel has an 'eyeline match' image, where the reader sees what the narrator (Kari) sees- Ruth standing on top of her building, prepared for her fatal jump. The third page with two panels separated by a gutter, has used the third person point of view for the image and first person point of view for words- it shows Kari's fall from the building. These establishing scenes are packed with thematic suggestions. It throws light upon the intimate relationship between Kari and Ruth and the socially imposed 'slipshod surgical procedure' to separate them.

The narrative begins with the suicide attempt of Kari and Ruth. Ruth called Kari from her phone; and jumped down from the ledge of her building. Kari, with the phone still in her hand, followed Ruth. Ruth fell on the safety net of her building and was saved. She got into a plane and left the city. Ruth's exit marks the beginning of Kari's self-exploration. Kari also had a narrow escape from death as she fell into the sewer.



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Sewer plays an important role in the story. The text presents two different spaces within the Smog city- the conventional material world and the sewer. Kari's jump from the building is an attempt to escape the stringent moral codes of the main stream society. Any deviation from heterosexuality is demeaned as something that exists outside the conventions of social practices. In spite of the fact that the Supreme Court of India partly revoked Article 377 in 2018, stating that the application of section 377 to consensual homosexual sex between adults was unconstitutional, society has not yet openly consented to welcome homosexual practices. Same-sex marriages are legal now, but not yet socially appreciated. As a result, people with alternative sexual orientations are ill fated to remain in the closet. In her seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out that 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, 1).

The presence of sewer in the Smog city becomes a metaphor for the existence of homosexuality in the mainstream society. The Smog city is aware of the presence of sewer but does not acknowledge it. City dwellers live their life as if the sewer is not part of their life. After her failed suicide attempt, Kari takes her second birth in the sewer. She identifies her position in the society and declares herself a 'boatman'. She says that the city has made a boatman of her (Kari 31). Kari describes her rebirth from the sewer as a boatman in the following passage:

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. (31)



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The image of the ‘mother bog’ establishes Kari’s identification with the sewer. Her second birth from the sewer fixes her position in the society. Since she has declared her lesbian identity, her position in the hetero-normative society will be akin to the existence of the sewer in the Smog city. There is yet another reference to the image of ‘boatman’ when Angel addresses Kari. Angel, the brand manager from the client’s end, comes to the scene in the chapter titled ‘Angel on the Cornice’. She is an ‘actively dying’ cancer patient. When Kari visits Angel, Angel tells Kari that Kari has a sign above her head that says ‘boatman’, and that people who are on the verge of death will be drawn to her in hordes. 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. She even asks Kari why she didn’t choose to play with pretty boys instead (Kari, 40).

This passage clearly establishes Kari’s lesbian identity and her relationship with the sewer as a boatman. Kari has chosen to remain a boatman, and she has to be a boatman hereafter. It means that she has declared herself as a lesbian and there is no going back. She has decided not to “play” with pretty boys instead. The identity of the boatman is closely linked with the sewer. Sewer thus becomes a metaphorical representation of the marginalised homosexual community in the mainstream society. Society is aware of its existence, but does not let it occupy the normal space.

The last strip of the second part portrays the gruesome reality of the 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, 13). Kari speaks about the need for a social mutation in order to accept the new reality. She points out the absurdity of living a life under the pretention that they may remain unaffected by the changes happening around. Kari speaks about the need for social inclusiveness by embracing sexual differences. Instead of treating sexual difference as the unwell digestive system of the human body that requires treatment, she envisages a society which incorporates sexual differences as different parts of the body joined in organic unity:



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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, 41)

Though people have become oblivious to the existence of sewer, heeding no attention to it, Kari cannot stop thinking about it, because she is a part of it. In the section titled 'Ganesh Country', where Billo decides to 'drop' her unwanted child, the metaphorical status of the drench is further established. Sewer is shown as a place for 'unwanted' lives. "A dark clot lodged in the bogs keeps screaming, throwing sleep into disarray. Tonight I have left my canoe behind to enter the water, defenceless. Nothing survives long in this sludge. Caught in a grey anemone is Billo's tweezed out baby", says Kari.

The second part of the novel titled, 'Fairytale Hair' consists of five sequential strips speaking about Kari's profession as the creative writer in an ad agency. She goes to her office soon after her failed suicide attempt, because for her the thought of home is oppressive and her work, on the other hand, is unaffected by the personal mood swings (Patil, 10). She is working on advertisements for the international hair product brand called Fairytale Hair. Her creative headlines face rejection and she is asked to discover her inner fox. She gives life to her inner fox and comes up with a successful ad. The third strip of this section features Kari's ad consisting of four panels separated by narrow gutters. It portrays 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



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moon. The further the Princess walked, the further the fox ran- always on the horizon” (Patil, 12).

The image of the fox can be subjected to multiple interpretations. On the one hand it stands for Kari’s creativity that has taken shape on the ad page. It can also be related to the image of the fox in D.H. Lawrence’s novella, *The Fox*(1922) which also has the lesbian theme as its subject. The novel deals with the psychological relationships of three protagonists in a triangle of love and hatred. Nellie March and Jill Banford were living on a farm together, and the plot establishes a strong bonding between them. Though the fox is a hindrance to Banford and March, the latter becomes entranced by it. When Henry comes to their life, a link is established between the fox and Henry. Thus the fox stands for the masculine presence that threatens the female bonding. In Kari’s ad the princess never reaches the fox: “the further the Princess walked, the further the fox ran” (Kari 12). If the fox symbolically stands for masculine presence, then the Princess’ inability to meet the fox cancels out the possibility of a heterosexual relationship. The creative ad pages serve as Kari’s semiotic space. She uses her creative freedom to speak about things which are otherwise forced to the closet by the inflexible social norms. Kristeva refers to two different aspects of language- semiotic and symbolic: “1. As an expression of clear and orderly meaning; and 2. As an evocation of feeling or more pointedly, a discharge of the subject’s energy and drives” (McAfee, 15-16). These two modes of the signifying process can 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. (17)

In graphic novels, both words and images weigh proportionately. In the case of words, semiotic expression is the unrestricted verbal expression of desires; whereas in the case of



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images, the semiotic expression may take some other forms. In *Kari*, the colourful panels that feature Kari's creative space serve the purpose of semiotic expression. These panels are less orderly, more passionate, and they hardly depict the gruesome reality of life. Her creative pages are always given colour in the otherwise black and white graphic novel with occasional colourful panels. Kari's moments at Cristal Palace with Billo and Delna (of course, when the boys are not there), which remind us of lesbian continuum, also take colour images. The panel featuring Kari's intimate relationship with Ruth is beautifully presented in colour images. The final transformation of Kari into a declared 'butch' with the 'buzz' cut is assertively colourful.

The first strip of the third part of the novel is an instance of colour image. It is a single panel, picture specific strip, where there is a colourful picture of the Princess' fairy world. This image is used as a contrast to the dark and bleak real world. She speaks about the Fairy world thus: "Where gold trees with silver boughs bear pomegranates with real ruby seeds. Floors of marble, ceilings of brocade. Place where twelve dancing princesses dance through the night until the soles of their shoes wear out" (Kari, 16). Perhaps, the bright red ruby seeds alone serve the purpose of contrasting the happiness of the Fairy World with the harsh outer world.

Moreover, the fact that the Fairy World has no prince, but only 'twelve princesses dancing all the night' equates the happiness of the Fairy World with the absence of men. This opens up the possibilities of reading Kari's creative ads as literary demonstrations of Lesbian Continuum, which is an idea introduced by Adrienne Rich in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". Lesbian Continuum is a radical feminist model of sexual orientation claiming that all women have a lesbian potential, and that women's bonding defined as lesbianism, but not necessarily based on genital sexuality is the only successful way to overthrow patriarchy. This concept designates various female behaviours such as informal mutual help, supportive female friendship and finally to sexual relationships (Barry 142). It can be observed that in *Kari* colour images are specifically employed to highlight female bonding and lesbian theme, which the 'normal' society is scared of. In the



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second section from the last, titled “The Award Ceremony”, as Kari walks to the ceremony with her buzz cut, she observes:

The walk home is three times as long as the walk to MR. Hair Dresser. Smog city looks even more anaemic 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 colourless. Add to this, streams of man and women, like robots and slaves, in equally tired colours. We are scared of too much colour. (Kari, 108)

The reference to “too much colours” takes us to the image of ‘the rainbow flag’, which is also known as the LGBT pride flag. The colours reflect the diversity of LGBTQ community. Society’s fear of colours, here suggests the fear of alternative sexualities.

Kari’s sexual identity crisis and her attempts at self-exploration are artistically presented in the form of a Snow Globe mentioned in the novel. The Snow Globe with a girl sitting on a church bench inside it, eternally waiting for someone symbolically stands for Kari’s loneliness. The Snow Globe is placed on Kari’s bedside table. It connects the girl sitting on the bench with Kari, and Kari with the princess of the Fairytale ad. There is an abrupt jump from the snow globe panel to Fairytale ad, interrupted in between by a description of Kari’s sexual repression. Kari’s observation from the Globe 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 49). Kari’s sexual encounter with a strange woman in the section titled “Playing” also illustrates her sexual repression. Though Billo and Delna try to couple Kari with their friend, Vicky, during their night out at a café, Kari feels uncomfortable and moves to the washroom. Next panel features Kari’s intimate moments with a stranger, which is followed by the voice over: “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 75). On her twenty first birthday Kari takes a four-month membership



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at the local swimming pool which offers her a chance to swim in the separate ladies' section, and thus to keenly observe 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, 85)

The third part titled 'Crystal Palace' describes Kari's abode- she calls it Cristal Palace. She shares her Cristal palace with two girls- Delna and Billo, and two permanent houseguests- Orgo and Zap. Kari shares Delna/Orgo's room in that two bedroom house; but their beds are separated by a big bookshelf. The bookshelf draws a line between two different worlds- coupled/ uncoupled, heterosexual/ homosexual, socially accepted/ personally lived. When Kari first came to this house she was expecting female camaraderie, but that didn't happen. The girls were busy with the boys most of the time. "When I came here I had expected walk-in sisterhood. Head massages and face packs and fusion, end-of-the day comparing of notes. This warbling Little Women camaraderie is a badge that must be painstakingly earned" (Kari 18). No wonder Kari created the No Man's Fairy World where there are only princesses dancing all the night.

This part of the novel also gives glimpses of Kari's bonding with her mother. The panels which discuss Kari's bonding with her mother, being another instance of colourful images other than the creative ads, underscore the influential role of her mother. "The only person who always wants to talk to me is my Mamma. Every Friday, at 10 p.m, 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 21). Simone De Bouir, in the chapter 'On Lesbianism' in *The Second Sex* speaks about the role of mother in the life of a lesbian. She points out mother fixation as a reason for homosexual tendencies. She observes that the mother who recognizes and alienates herself in her daughter often has a sexual attachment to her (Beauvoir, 532).



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The chapter titled 'The Visitations' is a flashback to when Kari first came to the smog city. Her parents, particularly her mother, are not happy about the condition 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, 29). Kari's mother expresses her disappointment in Kari's friendship with Ruth. She points out that such a friendship will definitely be a hindrance to a healthy heterosexual relationship.

Kari is sympathetic towards Angel who is an actively dying cancer patient and tries to form a friendship with her. Angel makes it clear to Kari that she is bald because she is sick, not because she is a butch (38). Hair plays a crucial role in the novel in defining gender roles. At the office, Kari is working on the fairytale hair advertisement- international hair product advertising. The imaginary fairytale space that she has painted on the creative canvas features a princess with long hair. The fairytale space is a no man's land and hair becomes a symbol of femininity. In Indian context, particularly, long hair is always associated with the patriarchal definition of female entities. It signifies different feelings in different contexts- the charm of a docile domestic wife, the appealing curl of a seductive whore, and even the vengeance of a powerful woman. Whatever be the signification the association is always with women. Social conditioning has attributed gender definition of hair by identifying it as a feminine quality.

Kari is presented in the novel as a girl with shortly cut hair. She breaks the conventional gender definition by cutting her hair short. Her image does not fit into the social construction of gender dichotomy. Her inability to identify herself completely with either man or woman underscores the need for gender fluidity. When Kari visits Angel at her home, Angel misreads Kari's sympathy to the dying patient as her lustful advance. Angel's statement that "she is bald because she is sick, not because she is a butch" is in tune with the social convention of associating hair with aspects of femininity. Baldness is not Angel's choice. Given a chance she would have perhaps grown her hair long to keep her feminine identity. Angel declares to Kari that she is not a butch, whereas Kari has a declared butch identity. At the end of the novel, Kari asserts her butch identity by choosing a buzz cut for her



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hair. Buzz cut is a classic men's hairstyle. This further complicates her gender identity and challenges the social practice of dividing people into two- men and women.

The novel ends in an optimistic note as Kari decides not to jump off the building. She says she still loves Ruth (meaning she is still a lesbian), she maintains a buzz cut (meaning she will be open about her alternative sexuality) and she decides not to jump off (meaning she will live the life of a lesbian instead of killing herself for that). Kari celebrates personal freedom, right to live, right to choose one's gender and right to express sexual preferences. Apart from the fact that Kari's liberation from gender dichotomy seems to have chained her again to patriarchy in the form of Butch and femme binary, Kari upholds the values of sexual differences.

The chapter titled 'The Ark' features an idealized situation of heavy rain which mixes road and sewer. "Fast rain...we are happy in here... road and sewer are one" (52). Kari anticipates an ideal world where homosexuals will not be treated as the other, where homosexuality will be considered as 'normal' behaviour. Kari envisages a progressive Indian society that may not treat people with alternative sexual behaviours as 'Sewer' other. During the heavy rain, Kari sees a drenched girl on the sidewalk. The image of the girl functions like a Joycean Epiphany in reinforcing Kari's sexual destination. Kari wonders whether that girl may fall in love with her forever. That night Kari dreamt of rowing a boat with the drenched girl towards 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" (56). The dream stands for a poignant social warning for those who indulge too much with the sewer.

The novel explores the pleasures and challenges of gay/lesbian lives through the character of Kari. There are beautiful strips and panels celebrating same-sex love. The section titled 'Crystal Palace' features a romantic episode of Kari and Ruth's love life. Ruth comes to the Crystal Palace when others are not there. She pampers and plays with Kari. The page contains a panel of image showing Kari's smiling face as she blushes when Ruth adorns her with a flower. Kari's smiling/happy face is a rare instance in the novel. The second strip of the section titled, 'The Vigil' contains three panels imaging the sexual life of Kari and Ruth.



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The novel seems to have resort to expressionist techniques in describing their love. The characters, their bodies, along with the exterior, express the emotions of love and lust. The last strip of the section titled ‘Ganesh Country’ has three colourful panels featuring their sexual union. The bright green and brown colours place their bodies deep into the nature, challenging the conventional practice of labelling homosexual love as ‘unnatural’. Ruth makes an observation during their intimate moment that they don’t have to fear procreation: “Isn’t it great? We never have to worry about getting knocked up my mistake” (Kari 100). This question is loaded with significant philosophical thoughts. In India, where society looks at sex as a medium for procreation, homosexual practices that consider the pleasure drives, are naturally condemned.

Lazarus proposes Kari but in vain. Though they are intimate friends, Kari could never fall in love with him. Lazarus asks whether she is a ‘proper lesbian’, which forces Kari to reflect on 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 79). She thinks about the emotions she had gone through when she saw K.D. Lang for the first time on TV. Lang is a Canadian pop singer, a declared lesbian who has championed gay rights causes. Kari observes that a person like Lang could arouse her the way Ruth had always done: “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 80). Kari’s inability to define her sexuality takes us to Judith Butler’s post-structuralist notion of ‘gender fluidity’. Zap and Orgo advise Kari to accept Lazarus’ proposal. Their advices like, “Eventually a woman needs a man, and a man needs a woman”, “Laz is such a great guy. You have so much in common. Both of you are into books and don’t party” (81), reflect social insistence on hetero-normativity. When Lazarus introduces Kari to his new girl friend, Tina, she feels like having lost the only friend she had. Since Lazarus has got a new friend he does not need Kari’s presence. At the moment, she feels like having the last umbilical cord



severed, and realises the need to get the hell out of there (110). She ruminates over death, but decides to live.

Kari's decision at the end of the novel to live the life of a lesbian calls for a more inclusive attitude towards sexual differences. In the last chapter titled, "The Exit Route", Kari witnesses the attempted suicide of the girl from the fifth floor. Kari, sitting on the water tank on the terrace, saw the girl jumping off. Kari observes that everyone has a bird urge to jump down when they look down heights (Kari 112). Three things became apparent to Kari as she witnessed this incident. She says, "1. I feel no bird urge. 2. I want to step back, not step off. 3. I still love Ruthie more than anyone else in the world, but I won't be jumping off ledges for anyone any more" (Kari 115). She still loves Ruth, which means she has no intention to 'correct' her sexual orientation. She has learned to love herself and respect her alternative sexual orientation, so that she does not feel like succumbing to death for having lost Ruth. This assertion of sexual identity is a call for embracing sexual differences. Kari transgresses social hetero-normativity through her 'troubled'/ alternative sexual identity. She decides not to conform to social norms and creates her own identity.

On 6 September 2018 India witnessed a historical turn when the Supreme Court withdrew the 1860 colonial law that criminalised homosexuality:

De-fanging a 158-year-old Victorian era law that hounded the rainbow crowd, the Supreme Court in a landmark judgement on Thursday legalised 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, 1)

The constitutional change hasn't much affected the social attitude. Public tolerance of homosexuality has increased considerably, but the social attitude cannot be claimed to have completely changed. Donald E. Hall observes that it is impossible for one to shatter his/her past sexuality completely and miraculously construct a new order of sexuality on the ruins of the old one. He is optimistic and enthusiastic about the upcoming, but gradual changes: "We



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have to be patient and persistent and yet find ways to retain our political enthusiasm” (13). About the future of Queer Studies he says, “... 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” (13).

Amrita Patil has attempted to portray the drastic reality of what it means to be a homosexual in India. She has problematized the social tendency of othering homosexuals using the image of the sewer. *Kari* being a graphic novel from India, has made use of the possibilities of a graphic novel to discuss a universal theme in the Indian context.

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