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“Alternative identity and Voice of the Dissent: A Questioning and Refashioning of Self in Amruta Patil’s Kari”

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Abstract:

The age in which we live in is interspersed with protests, rebellions and movements against the established order. On a regular basis we come across such happenings in television or newspaper. However, the Country and the State continually tries to curb such actions and impose an order so that their modus operandi remains unquestioned. Though there is an attempt to repress these anti-government events, the protests at the individual and social level continues to haunt the power structures of society. In such a condition when an individual is forced to follow societal norms and conventions set down by authorities so far, there is a feeling of anguish and discontentment in the long run. Our society strictly prefers heterogeneity as a norm that men and women are supposed to follow. Any deviation from this standpoint entails social chastisement and the concerned people who believe in the concept of same sex love are looked down as abnormal or deviant. Literature has always been a significant medium to explore such dissent in society. There have been numerous instances in literature where we find references of such relationships that thrive on homogeneity. In order to trace how conventional belief systems is contested and questioned, I have chosen Amruta Patil’s graphic novel Kari (2008). The graphic novel illustrates how same sex relationship is perceived in our society and the stigma attached to it. Patil gives an opportunity to express dissent through her work and highlight on the plight of those individuals who are different not deviant.

Keywords: Dissent, repression, Country, homogeneity, deviant

With the advent of the twenty first century literature as a discipline has undergone significant change. Presently literature has become more interdisciplinary drawing from other disciplines like psychology, philosophy, fine arts, political science, history and so on. Along with the inclusion of other disciplines, literature has also given expression to various forms of dissent prevalent in society. In literature we often come across narratives of

resistance that highlight past or present oppression that led to protest and offer possibilities of alternative futures. It helps us explore the function of gaps in a text and question the repression that results in silencing of those issues that are viewed as subversive by society. Locating dissent in literature offers a reading of the power dynamics in society. Amruta Patil’s Kari (2008) is the first Indian graphic novel by a woman that explores the theme of homosexuality and queer identity in contemporary India.

The term “graphic novel” was first used in the late 1970’s after the publication of Will Eisner’s A Contract with God (1978). One of the earliest major graphic novels, Maus (1991) by Art Spiegelman uses postmodern techniques to talk about Spiegelman’s father as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor, was awarded the Pulitzer in the following year. Alan Moore and David Gibbons’ Watchmen (1986), and Frank Miller’s The Dark Knight Returns (1986) are listed among the most popular ones in the West. Though long considered as a less serious art form they have started acquiring a mainstream position somewhere in the last decade of 20th century. A new form of graphic literature has altered the landscape of Indian comics in the last two decades. Orijit Sen’s River of Stories (1994) was the first Indian graphic novel that highlights controversies over the highly debated Narmada dam movement in India. The last twenty years have seen the production of graphic narratives such as 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), among others.

Patil’s Kari traces the emotional upheavals of a young female protagonist who tries to explore the multiple identities she encounters as a woman, i.e., as a lesbian, a queer, a loner, and an ad agency trainee within the space of ‘smog city’, Bombay. Kari chronicles the life of a queer

RESEARCH ARTICLE

misfit who 'trawls the drains dream after dream, can smell the sewer everywhere' (41). There has been representation of other marginalised voice in subsequent graphic novels of Patil as *Adi Parva: Churning of the ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik: Blood and flowers* (2016), both of which retell stories from the Mahabharata from the perspective of marginalised characters, Ganga and Ashwathama. Instead of portraying any dominant contemporary social issue, Patil focuses on the inner lives of her characters in order to bring to forefront the existence of people who do not conform to societal conventions. Since there is a clear representation of people with altered consciousness, therefore, Patil's work makes an attempt to address those silenced emotions and experiences that is not viewed as normal within the strict confines of our society.

Kari deals with the problems an individual faces when one feels more attached to another person of the same sex. In such a situation it is not only the individual who finds it difficult to cope with the surrounding but also the society that tries continually to stigmatise the individual. The novel explores the life of a girl who shoulders the burden of attributed femininity. Though same-sex marriages are legal presently, but in most cases, they are not socially appreciated. As a result, people with alternative sexual orientations have to repress their feelings. Patil has attempted to portray the drastic reality of what it means to be a homosexual in India. This paper explores the ways in which the society tries to mark an individual as deviant when one prefers to have an alternative sexual choice. The novel uses the image of a sewer to expose the social discrimination prevalent in society. An attempt is also made to analyse critically how Kari has explores the possibilities of a graphic medium to portray a universal theme in the Indian context.

The first part of the novel titled 'The Double Suicide' begins with the image of Ruth and Kari sitting next to each other holding hands with their hearts connected, which is metaphorically shown as tied outside their body. The fact that their heart is outside their body possibly tries to indicate the social repression in case of women who are lesbians. Our society is heterosexual and any deviation is viewed as abnormal and not encouraged. Patil showcases the trauma and social stigmatization that one faces when one is inclined to another of same sex through Kari. Moreover, the image of Ruth with scissors in her hand is indicative that 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" (3). Their suicide attempt resulted from their inability to maintain the relationship. After the fall, 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. In an article "Decriminalizing homosexuality in India" (2019), Rebecca A. Clay argues that the 19th century law introduced by the British and known as Section 377 made sex "against the order of nature" a crime punishable by life in prison". However, in 1973 American Psychology Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

From the moment Kari falls in the sewer after her suicide attempt, the image of sewer and filth become significant as well as a recurring image in the novel. The text presents two different spaces within the Smog city- the outside material world and the unacknowledged world of sewer. Kari's jump from the building is an attempt to escape the stringent moral codes followed by the mainstream society. The continuous reference to sewer in the Smog city becomes a metaphor for the presence of homosexuality in the mainstream society. The Smog city is aware of the presence of sewer but does not acknowledge it. Similarly, the city dwellers continue life as if the sewer is not present. After her failed suicide attempt, Kari takes her second birth in the sewer. She understands her position in the society and imagines herself a 'boatman'. She says that the city has made a "boatman of her" (31). There is another reference to Kari as 'boatman' by Angel, an actively dying cancer patient, later in the novel.

When Kari visits Angel, Angel tells Kari that people who are on the verge of death will be drawn towards her in hordes. She even questions Kari why she did not choose to play with pretty boys instead (40). By deciding not to "play" with pretty boys, Kari has established her sexual orientation. Moreover, sewer becomes a metaphorical representation of the marginalised homosexual community in the mainstream society. Michael Safi and Aarti Singh in "There are few gay people in India" (2019) comment that violating India's ban on homo-sexual acts was punishable by upto 10 years in prison. The stigma still lingers and in our country, "it is a case of ethics", says Sanjay Paswan, a member of the Bihar State Council and former Indian federal minister who approved the decision to lift the gay ban. Moreover,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kari's role as a boatman in the novel is suggestive of her desire to sail against the conventional codes of conduct and assert her choice irrespective of any hindrance or acceptance.

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. (13)

Kari portrays the need of social acceptance of change in society and for social inclusiveness by embracing sexual differences. Kari envisages a society that incorporates sexual differences as different parts of the body joined in an organic 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" (41). 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 represented 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 (97). When Billo aborts her child in the stench, Kari feels helpless looking at the foetus. She says that since she has left her boat to enter the water and cannot perform the function of the boatman.

The second part of the novel titled 'Fairytale Hair' consists of five sequential strips that highlights 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 (10). She is working on advertisements for the international hair product brand called Fairytale Hair. Her creative headlines face rejections and she is asked to discover her inner fox. She soon 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 moon. The further the Princess walked, the further the fox ran- always on the horizon" (12).

The image of the fox in the novel is extremely suggestive. It represents Kari's creativity as well as highlights the futile attempts to curb one's sexual orientation. In Kari's ad, the princess never reaches the fox: "the further the Princess walked, the further the fox ran" (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.

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. Kari 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" (16). Perhaps, the bright red ruby seeds alone serve the purpose of contrasting the happiness of the Fairy World with the harsh outer real 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 stark absence of men. This opens up the possibilities of reading Kari's creative ads as literary demonstrations of Lesbian Continuum, 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 deliberately employed to highlight female bonding and lesbian theme, which the conventional society is scared to address. The

RESEARCH ARTICLE

mundaneness of the city life is contrasted with the inner life of these women who form strong bonds. Patil uses strong colours to depict such scenes where women assert their identity and find happiness in their own company.

In the 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 Dressers. 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. (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. The fear of colours by the society suggests the fear of acknowledging alternative sexualities. In “LGBTQ- A part of our society” (2019) Shashank Malviya outlines how the people in LGBT community are fighting for equal rights and acceptance. Such people are looked down upon in society and strong prejudices against these people make us think that they are odd and different. The novel through this image highlights the fear of the ‘unknown’. The conventional society does not acknowledge differences and is scared to address any deviation. The colour used to describe the city is black and white, or grey suggesting the lifeless life of the city people who are like robots. Patil reveals how the life on the other side, i.e., the day to day existence of the people with alternative sexual orientation is colourful. However, society with its strict notions neither appreciates nor includes such people in its domain. 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 connects the girl sitting on the bench with Kari, and Kari with the princess of the Fairytale ad. 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” (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” (75). On her twenty first birthday Kari takes a four-month membership 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 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. (85)

Kari’s fascination with the women folk and her fondness in the company of women is brought out in this section. Kari’s comfort is not with the men of opposite sect but with women with whom she could relate. Moreover, she is throughout seen to have a keenness for sewer, filth and water. Patil makes a hint at Kari’s fluid identity through these images that does not restrict her individuality as a woman. She is instead seen mobilising different spheres in the novel.

The third part titled ‘Crystal Palace’ describes Kari’s abode and 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 the world of Kari and that of Delna and Billo. When Kari first came to this flat she was expecting female camaraderie, but that did not happen. The girls were busy with the boys most of the time. This part of the novel also offers glimpse of Kari’s bonding with her mother. The panels that discuss Kari’s bonding with her mother reveal the influence of her mother in her life. “The only person who always wants to talk to me is my Mamma. Every Friday, at 10 p.m, is the long call

RESEARCH ARTICLE

home. Mamma talks, I listen. When I get back home, the silence has teeth again. My bed feels as large as a football field” (21). Simone De Beauvoir 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). 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. However, 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 become a symbol of femininity. 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. At the end of the novel, Kari asserts her butch identity by choosing a buzz cut for her hair. The novel ends in an optimistic note as Kari decides not to jump off the building. She says she still loves Ruth, maintains a buzz cut and she decides not to end her life. Kari celebrates personal freedom, right to live, right to choose one’s gender and right to express her sexual preferences.

The chapter titled ‘The Ark’ features an idealized situation of heavy rain which mixes road and sewer. “First rains! . . . 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 violent was the grey 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.

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 when they look down heights (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” (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. Kari transgresses social hetero-normatively through her ‘troubled’/ alternative sexual identity. She decides not to conform to social norms and creates her own identity.

Amruta Patil has attempted to portray the common perception towards the same sex lovers and queers in our country. By allowing the voice of people who are not listened, Patil offers a possibility of understanding the experiences of the “Other”. The novel deals with the problems related to the social notions of gender circulated in society. Any form of deviation from this notion entails social chastisement and othering. Therefore, Kari can be read as a literature of dissent that offers an alternative reading of sexuality. It shows that one may choose not to love another from the other sex and procreate. The fact that one may independently exert one’s sexual choice is highlighted in Kari.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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