

Graphic Intimacies: Queer Form, Urban Alienation, and the Lesbian Gaze in Amruta Patil's *Kari*

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Abstract

Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) is a historical record in Indian graphic fiction, as it opened a new dimension in the representation of a lesbian protagonist. Through this genre, Amruta Patil has subtly explored fragmented identity and the fineness of the graphic novel. These qualities include its interplay of image and text, its non-linear sequencing, and its symbolic visual metaphors, coherently a distinctly queer experience of urban alienation. The novel records the journey of its eponymic heroine (Kari) and her situation post-suicide pact with her lover, Ruth. This has left their unnamed "Smog City." Kari's navigation of this heteronormative metropolis is mirrored in the book's aesthetic: a muted, claustrophobic palette of greys and sepias, punctuated by moments of surreal, symbolic colour. This portrayal has revealed the central themes of the city: as a character of suffocating conformity, the queer body as a centre of both decay and resilience, and finally as the graphic form itself in a "queer medium." The article consequently places *Kari* within the post-millennial incline of Indian graphic novels and its posterity relevance in establishing a visual language for queer female desire.

Keywords: queer theory, lesbian portrayal, urban alienation, trauma, complex relations

1. Introduction

Graphic novel as a serious literary form in India began in the early 2000s. Since then, it has provided a new voice for representing marginalised voices. Amidst this, Amruta Patil's *Kari* is often hailed as the first Indian graphic novel by a woman author. This seminal novel is unique in its themes of queer identity, loneliness, and urban life, and thus stands out in this tradition. It is not

just a story with pictures revealing the harsh life on Kari. Instead, it explores the inherent hybridity of the graphic medium to give form to the liminality of its protagonist's existence, between heartbreak trauma and survival, between perceptibility and indiscernibility, and between the hyper-real city and a surreal inner world. This article explains how Amruta Patil's narrative and artistic potency create a queer gaze that challenges the heteronormative composition of the urban landscape. Through the novel's visual metaphors, its management of the body, and its non-linear structure, we conclude that *Kari* is not merely a story about a lesbian woman, but a formal experiment in queer narration itself.

2. Discussion

In Sanskrit and other Indian languages like Marathi (the author's native tongue), "*Kari*" (करी) stands for "black" or "dark." This is the most immediate and powerful meaning, connecting to the novel's central imagery. The city is perpetually grey and polluted. Kari's name reflects her environment. She is a 'being' of this dark, smog-filled landscape. In the form of an emotional state, the colour black symbolises her grief, depression, and the "sediment of sadness" that fills her after her breakup with Ruth. It represents the emotional abyss she navigates, and finally, in the form of the river. The dark, polluted river that flows through the city is a central symbol. Kari is inseparably linked to this water, having been saved from suicide by it. She is, in a sense, a daughter of this dark river. This is what the story begins with, Kari and her lover Ruth's attempted double suicide. Ruth leaves the city after being saved, while Kari remains in the suffocating "Smog City" (a fictionalised Mumbai) to navigate heartbreak and a pervasive heteronormative society.

i) Challenging heteronormativity: The smog of the city acts as a powerful metaphor for the choking quality of a society that accepts everyone is straight. Kari faces constant pressure from her roommates, who suggest that she find a man rather than a coworker who invasively asks if she is a proper lesbian. The novel's sharp description of this environment does not suggest that Kari's homosexuality is the cause of her struggles.

ii) Smog city & Urban Alienation as a Heteronormative Ecology: According to the novel, the smog is not just pollution; it is the atmospheric pressure of society that lays expectations that Kari must fit. The novel's opening lines establish this statement: "The city was a smog city. We lived in its belly, Ruth

and I. We breathed its air, ate its food, and dreamt its dreams. Or tried to” (Patil 5). This immediately cages the city as an organic, intense entity. The phrase “or tried to” signifies Kari’s failure to assimilate into the city’s dominant “dreams”, the heterosexual life script. Her alienation is environmental, and she is a ‘being’ struggling to survive in an environment that is conflicting with her. The imagery of living in the city’s “belly” suggests consumption and carceral frame. The act of breathing, typically an autonomic and life-sustaining process, becomes a deliberate struggle. The failure to “dream its dreams” is a direct result of this toxic inhalation. Kari cannot assimilate because the city’s fundamental ecology is incompatible with her being. The smog is the environmental condition of heteronormativity. It is everywhere, difficult to see through, and harmful to long-term health.

Kari’s alienation is not merely an external condition but becomes a physiological condition. The trauma of her suicide pact with Ruth, which opens the novel, leaves her feeling internally blocked and stagnant, mirroring the city’s own dysfunctional systems and internalising the city’s toxins, reflecting on her survival, Kari states, “I was left with a sediment of sadness. It settled in my veins, thick and slow like the water in the city’s drains” (Patil 18). This poignant simile directly connects her emotional state to the city’s failing infrastructure. The sediment of sadness is a leftover product of her trauma. It clogs her internal passages just as waste clogs the drains. This demonstrates the interpenetration of the environmental and the psychological as a key concept in queer ecology. The city’s decay is a metaphor for her own emotional immobility. Its decaying infrastructure, such as clogged sewers and polluted rivers, reflects Kari’s internal passivity and emotional clog after her traumatic separation from Ruth. Kari’s alienation in social spaces (e.g., parties, offices) is reflected through the conversations that revolve around heteronormative themes like marriage and family, revealing her inability to adjust.

Consequently, this urban alienation is explicitly tied to her queer identity. The city’s design and social fabric exclude her, forcing her into invisibility. Her coworker Cyrus reduces her identity to a fetish (“a proper lesbian?”), illustrating how the city commodifies her difference instead of accepting it. Her nighttime persona, “Danger Chhori,” who unclogs sewers, symbolises a desperate attempt to cleanse the toxicity of the city, and by extension, her own life. Kari’s alienation compels her to take refuge in herself so she can resist internally. Kari adopts to seek belonging in the city, for this she cultivates a rich inner world and finds solace in small, subversive acts (like her sewer-cleaning).



Figure 1: Kari and the sewer. *Kari* (Patil 32-33)

It focuses on her core landscape, in turn, which fabricates the narrative of the text. The sewer, a dark, fluid space, equals Kari's ambiguous, strange identity and her fantasies, "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 intestines. To the gutters and hastily dug out canals that empty her bladder and swell her arteries with clean blood" (Amruta Patil, p. 41). These images draw the details of the protagonist rowing a boat, her figure surrounded by water from all sides. Interestingly, these portray the action of maneuvering without reaching any end, leading to her alienation in the smog city. This imagery commemorates exploration over seclusion and uncertainty over form. It is the sewer that links one part of the city to another, one part of consciousness to another, and is a serpentine space. The repetition of these watery images sets the tone, and the exploration of Kari's identity as a queer woman, as she repeatedly returns to the sewers throughout the text.

Therefore, this echoes a form of queer resilience characterised by the ability to endure and create meaning outside the dominant social structures. The descriptive elements are intensified when displayed with a muted colour palette, cramped panels, and repeated descriptions of pollution, thereby creating a sense of tangible alienation. This subtle imagery of the city's oppressive weight is visible through Kari's eyes. Moreover, the prevalent use of greys, sepias, and dull blues lends the entire novel a sombre, depleted quality; hence, the visual representation is the smog of urban life and grief. The claustrophobic panels and layout generate a feeling of claustrophobia and imprisonment. This reflects Kari's feeling of being trapped in the city and within her own life. Amruta Patil's page compositions often use small, compact panels that can constrain the artwork, mirroring how Kari's life and emotions feel boxed in.

The selection of these visuals is closely connected to one of the main themes, alienation. The alienation shown is not just a superficial urban loneliness but is precisely connected to Kari's existence as a queer woman in a heteronormative society. The city's lumbering, oppressive view highlights the polluted, cramped visuals, representing the social pressures and dogmas that led her to feel like a stranger. This portrayal is well-fettered with queer urban theory, which analyses how cities impose heteronormativity through spatial and social strata. Kari's experience illustrates how marginalised often exist in a state of liminality, physically present in the city but psychologically isolated from its rhythms.

3. Urban Loneliness and Identity

For Kari, it is her estrangement that led her to loneliness and quench her identity of self-gender. The city resembles a living entity that reflects Kari's inner state. The packed yet isolating metropolis echoes her alienation. Her nighttime alter-ego, "Danger Chhori," who unclogs the city's sewers, represents her attempt to cleanse the toxins she feels around her as well as herself, thus repaying the city that saved her. Kari faces the internal danger, representing her depression, her suicidal imagination (the "sly wish to exit"), her emotional turbulence, and her feeling of being out of the rhythm with society. The city (Anger City) amplifies this inner danger. She ensnares herself in danger. The nickname expresses her internal state, making it a point of condescending recognition between her and Ruth.



Figure 2: Kari and loneliness (Patil 40)

Therefore, at the core, the art becomes integral to the story narration. For instance, the intro visual resonates with Frida Kahlo's famous 1939 painting,

“The Two Fridas.” It visually represents the deep, devoted connection between Kari and Ruth. The incident is not a narrative event but an influential visual reference in the opening section of Amruta Patil’s *Kari*. The visual consciously resonates with Frida Kahlo. In Kahlo’s painting, two versions of the artist sit side by side, connected by a vein that links their hearts. One Frida, in traditional Tehuana dress, represents the woman loved by her ex-husband and the other, in a white European-style dress, represents the rejected Frida. The way they hold hands signifies an intimate connection and sufficiency even during heartbreak. Amruta Patil recreates this composition with Kari and Ruth, depicting them as connected entities and often showing them in the same pose, emphasising their deep bond.



Figure 3 : ‘Profound bond’ (Patil 10)

The visual implies that, like the two Fridas, Kari and Ruth are also two halves of a single entity. This artistic choice is decisively important for several reasons. Firstly, it confirms an inseparable connection, proving they are psychologically and emotionally attached. Secondly, it indicates the theme of heartbreak. Amruta Patil designs *Kari* as a story created from a similar tremor as in the aftermath of a profound separation. Thus, showing a tone of melancholy, loss, and struggle for identity. The third and most key element is that it emphasises a queer, female-centric lineage. By connecting her work to Kahlo, Amruta Patil places *Kari* within an identifiable artistic tradition of women representing their own experiences. It dawns on a story about female interiority and queer desire, told through a sophisticated visual language. This opening imagery reveals that this is a story about an intimate, symbiotic love between two women, the trauma of its termination, and the subsequent struggle to reanalyse oneself.

4. Queer form complex relationships: The protagonist's complex relationships with Ruth and Angel represent two distinct but interrelated forms of queer relationships. While Ruth functions as the traumatic absent centre of Kari's desire, her friendship with Angel offers an alternative model of companionship. Kari reveals that her roommates, Delna and Billo, flirt with her outright, especially when not with their boyfriends. Kari identifies that their trust in being in a straight relationship disappears when they are away from their boyfriends.

Furthermore, Ruth's physical absence dominates Kari's psychological landscape. Their relationship exists predominantly through memory and desire. This establishes a paradigm of queer desire defined by loss rather than contentment. The novel's opening establishes this connection through absence: "The city was a smog city. We lived in its belly, Ruth and I" (5). The past tense "lived" immediately signals that this relationship belongs to the past. Kari's internal monologue frequently returns to Ruth: "I kept looking for Ruth in the smog. Her absence was more present than anyone's presence" (34). Ruth represents the romantic ideal that remains perpetually out of reach. The focus on memory rather than interaction makes this relationship fundamentally melancholic. Furthermore, the relationship of Kari and Angel blurs every frontier and belief of what a queer relationship looks like. They share a cup of tea, enjoy the sunset and their intimacy. Their passion in their own way of expression is how they speak to each other without words, and they let an eager moment continue without awkwardness. The way Kari ultimately looks at Angel as a whole human being rather than as a sick person who needs to be fixed. It will be assumed that their intimacy is neither physical nor sexual, but rather grows like vines on a windowsill, and their intimacy is never physically connected. However, due to Ruth's absence, Angel's dying body requires attention and physical care. Their friendship is the result of shared vulnerability rather than romantic passion. In Kari's words we understand their bond: "With Angel, there were no explanations needed. We understood decay" (Patil 72). In a key scene, Kari tends to Angel's physical needs: "I bathed her thin body, watching the water trace the paths of her bones. There was no shame, only the terrible beauty of a body being honest" (Patil 89). Angel's cancer created a different kind of affection based on common recognition of tenderness. Ruth and Angel represent romantic loss and physical decay, respectively, and both these forms of vulnerability exist outside heteronormative contexts of relationship success. Their platonic intimacy indicates that queer connection can exist outside romantic concepts, thereby offering a model of care that challenges traditional relationship pyramids. These relationships are not converse but corresponding

aspects of Kari's queer experience. Ruth symbolises the internal landscape of desire and memory, whereas Angel symbolises the external reality of bodily presence and present-moment care. Ruth's absence leads to Kari's melancholy and internal conflict, whereas Angel's presence is filled with physical compassion and moments of empathy. Amruta Patil's artwork strengthens this contrast.

This interpersonal and vigorous intimacy challenges the singular definitions of queer relationships by:

- i) Confirming platonic queer intimacy as equally meaningful.
- ii) Presenting empathy as a legitimate form of queer intimacy.
- iii) Demonstrating how diverse relationships perform different emotional desires.
- iv) Intensifying meaningful queer relationships beyond romance

The juxtaposition of these relationships suggests that queer existence relies on myriad forms of connection. They are both the lost memory and the experience of physical care. Through Kari's relationships with Ruth and Angel, Amruta Patil presents a subtle portrait of queer intimacy enriched with both romantic longing and physical care. This complexity resists diminutive representations of queer relationships and instead shows how different forms of relationships work together to experience individuals who navigate alienation and loss. Amruta Patil thoughtfully shows us the many hues of a queer relationship. She explains the numerous ways of queerness and its manifestation from outside of its mainstream, from a straight path or from pre-destined pit-stops or from a fixed destination.

5. The Queer Body and Resilience

Kari handles her body in a complex way. Kari is not attached to a binary. There is fluidity, and so is her gender identity. Hence, when there is no conformity to social gender norms, it always ends with its own struggles. And Kari has never considered or proclaimed her gender conformity. She says, "Although I am not a part of the organism, they like me enough. I am non-threatening and non-intrusive. And women of the world adore tousled boy-girls. They all want to be Wendy to my Peter Pan" (Patil 23). This disclosure provides us a glimpse into Kari's queer innermost thoughts as she is not outwardly rebellious or intrusive.

Besides, Kari's description of her alter-ego, "By night, I was Danger Chhori. I unclogged the bowels of the city. It was my way of giving back to the city that saved me. A strange repayment for a strange debt" (Patil 23). expresses an effective metaphor for queer existence. By connecting in this underground world, Kari actively processes the toxicity that surrounds her. It becomes a "strange repayment" because of its lonely, anonymous, and grotesque characteristics of resilience. In unclogging the city's veins, she operates a symbolic angioplasty on her own. It is like attempting to restore a semblance of flow and life to her dormant survival. This forms the crux of unclogging the self through a direct, hands-on engagement with the source of the blockage. It is expressed when Lazarus, a male colleague, romantically chases her and asks her if she is a lesbian, for which she responds with, 'I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner' (Patil 79). But Kari thinks to herself: "I roll the word 'lesbian' in my mouth, and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshy, salivating, fresh off the boat from Lesbia, and totally inappropriate" (79). This physical description of the word 'lesbian' reflects a similarly sensual image of consuming fruit in Angel's house in a chapter, 'Secret Lives of Fruit', "I play with fruit [...] Avocado, kiwi, mangosteen. There are some fruits you do not want to venture into alone. A peach, for one, creature of texture and smell, sings like a siren. A fruit that lingers on your fingertip with unfruit-like insistence, fuzzy like the down on a pretty jaw. Figs are dark creatures too, skins purple as loving bruises. A fig is one hundred per cent debauched. Lush as a smashed mouth. There, I said it again: Lush" (Patil 66).

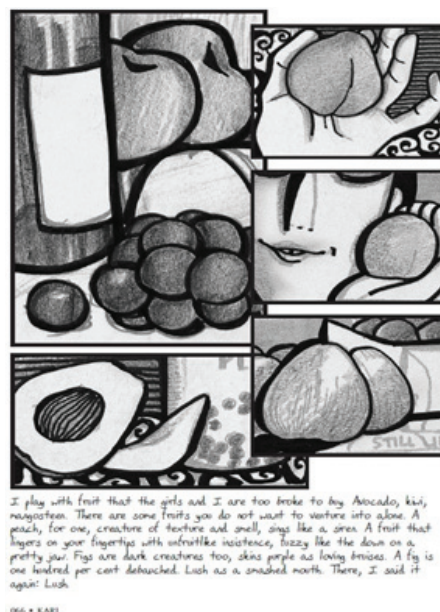


Figure 4: Kari and the fruits (Patil 66)

Later, for Kari, the city becomes unbearable and suffocating. She loses her lover, her friend, her expression to this space. What she refers to as the ‘smog city’ looks anaemic and dull to her. She merely survives on autopilot here, trying to find a way to breathe and not sink. The sewage water that saved her life also becomes her priority to safeguard. The ‘smogcity’ has massive and towering buildings which make Kari feel insignificant, negligible and invisible. But on the top of one of these same towering buildings, Kari ultimately finds the courage to live and not ‘fall’ for love. She quotes, “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” (Patil 115).

Ultimately, the narrative arc is not about the body’s succumbing to decay but about its stubborn resilience. The fact that Kari continues to exist is that her breathing, moving, daily routine, her friendship with Angel, and her work act of defiance. Kari’s spirit of resilience is not described as a glorious overcoming, but it is a quiet, determined persistence. Her body, though inflicted with trauma, continues to function. Her desire to care for her dying friend Angel is a key example. This physical care, a body caring for another body, is a contrast to the segregation and decay. It poignantly proves that the queer body is not only meant for suffering but also a source of compassion and strength that can nurture life even while surrounded by death and pollution.

5. The Lesbian Gaze

The concept of the Lesbian gaze is rich and complex, as taken by Amruta Patil through her characters. It encompasses desire, alienation, introspection, and a subtle and clear analysis of standardising forms. It is a gaze of internal melancholic but not an explicit desire. Unlike a gaze that is explicitly objectifying or desiring another body, Kari’s gaze is predominantly an inward desire. The loss of Ruth is perceived by filtered memory and absence. This is directly proportionate to a psychoanalytic reading of queer subjectivity, where the ego is represented through a melancholic attachment to a lost love object (Judith Butler). Kari’s gaze is not about enthusiastically pursuing a new object of desire, but it is about processing the internal emptiness caused by Ruth’s departure. The lesbian behaviour of her gaze is therefore less about active watching and more about a wide perception that is regulated by a specific and determining loss that is beyond the comprehension of the heteronormative world.

It is an analytical gaze that implies heteronormativity. Kari’s perspective functions as an acute lens that exposes the absurdity and suffocation of

heterosexuality compulsion. Her alienation enables her to see the conventional practices of the heterosexual world as unfamiliar and discursive. At a social gathering where conversations revolve around “babies and real estate,” Kari feels like “an island,” her mind “a balloon on a slack string” (Patil 34). At this point, the gaze becomes effectively political and acts as a reverse of the “normal.” The heteronormative social script is revealed as a bizarre and empty performance, and Kari feels outlandish. Her gaze introduces her to the mundane, showing how places like parties or offices are designed to reinforce heterosexual life cycles. This critical detachment is a survival mechanism, allowing her to maintain a sense of self in a world that seeks to erase her identity.

It is an empathetic gaze that has challenged the male gaze. Kari’s gaze at other women is often out of a sense of shared experience and empathy, but is not sensualised or objectified. This is in direct opposition to the traditional “male gaze” (as coined by Laura Mulvey), which sees women as passive objects for sensual pleasure. When Kari observes a woman adjusting her sari, she thinks, “There is a particular loneliness to a woman preparing her armour for the day. A quiet, desperate prayer” (Patil 19). This thought process of Kari reveals that lesbian gaze is not about possession or consumption but about recognition. Kari perceives the “labour,” the “armour,” and the “loneliness” as complicated in presenting a female body to the world. This emphatic gaze is legitimate and insightful, as is the vulnerability behind the public performance. It defines female identity as a shared condition of navigating patriarchal expectations.

The ‘gaze’, as Amruta Patil describes, is also largely passive and internal. Kari observes and analyses but rarely acts to change her circumstances within the narrative. Furthermore, her own gaze is not unaffected to being framed and consumed. Her colleague Cyrus lowers her identity to a fetish, asking, “You are a hot kari. Like this... A proper lesbian?” (Patil 28). This comment in the scene is crucial as it demonstrates that Kari’s nuanced, interior gaze exists within a power structure that can violently simplify and exoticise it. Cyrus’s comment explores the heterosexual gaze co-opting and commodifying queer identity. It provides us a stark reminder that the power to define and “look” is not equally regarded. Kari’s sophisticated interiority can be instantly diluted into a stereotype for someone else’s consumption.

The gaze is precisely queered through the graphic medium. ultimately, the true novelty of the lesbian gaze in *Kari* is its expression through the graphic novel form. Amruta Patil queers the very mechanics of visual storytelling by not

just describing but making her characters enacted through the interplay of text and image. The muted, often neutral colour palette echoes Kari's emotional state. The layout of panels feels claustrophobic, corresponding to her sense of enmeshment, or can break into the surreal. This gaze lets the reader not just talk about Kari's perspective but is forced to *see through it*. Hence, the channel itself becomes the vehicle for the gaze, making it an expression of experience for the reader rather than a purely intellectual belief.

The other incident of this gaze is connected to her female flat-mates, Billo and Delna. Discussing her blissful memoirs with them, Kari recounts, "I love it when the boys aren't around. The girls are a lot cheerier and a lot more interested in one another. I can smell the peaches of Billo's perfume, Delna makes chicken in Coke and stir-fried spinach. On such days, the conversation wanders along a familiar track. Food, gossip, the occult, and then the moot-issue talk that ends either in a head massage or in (Delna's) tears" (Patil 42). The lesbian gaze in *Kari* is therefore a sophisticated and encrusted construct with melancholic and by loss with inert desire. At the same time, it is critically defamiliarising as it spills the heteronormative world as strange and constructed. It is empathetic and connective as well because it sees other women as allies in a shared condition. Finally, Amruta Patil moves beyond a humble portrayal of a lesbian character to a developed, exceptional image and transforms the narrative language to represent a lesbian consciousness. The gaze in *Kari* is less about who Kari looks at and more about the complex, painful, and resilient way she sees the world and her place within it.



Figure 5 : 'The gaze' (Patil 107)

Conclusion

Amruta Patil's *Kari* stands as a landmark work not merely for its representation of a lesbian protagonist, but for its profound integration of queer content with queer form. Through its innovative use of the graphic novel medium, the book translates the internal experience of urban alienation into a tangible visual language. The muted color palette, claustrophobic panel layouts, and evocative symbolism of "Smog City" do more than illustrate a story; they render the suffocating weight of heteronormativity palpable. Kari's "lesbian gaze", a perspective marked by melancholy, critical distance, and a deep, empathetic connection to female experience, is not just described but enacted through the interplay of image and text. This gaze, which exposes the strangeness of the normative world, finds its formal counterpart in a narrative structure that itself resists linear, conventional storytelling.

Ultimately, *Kari* argues that for stories that exist in the margins, the medium itself must be malleable. The graphic novel becomes a "queer medium" precisely because its hybrid nature allows for the expression of fragmented identity, non-linear time, and subjective truth. The novel's conclusion is not one of triumphant assimilation but of resilient endurance, mirroring the ongoing, often solitary work of navigating a world not designed for you. By forging these "graphic intimacies," Patil creates a powerful and enduring testament to the fact that the struggle for representation is as much about *how* a story is told as it is about *who* it tells. *Kari* thus secures its place as an essential text in the canon of queer world literature, demonstrating that new forms of seeing demand new forms of storytelling.

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