

## ‘Can You See Her the Way I Do?’: (Feminist) Ways of Seeing in Amruta Patil’s *Kari* (2008)

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Published: April 11, 2020

### ABSTRACT

Amruta Patil’s *Kari* (2008), the very first Indian graphic novel in English by a woman, is groundbreaking for multiple reasons. For one, it brings to the Indian graphic arena an ‘unusual protagonist’, a ‘young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman — counterpoint to the hyper feminine prototypes one keeps coming across’, as Patil remarks in an interview with Paul Gravett. Secondly, as an experimental text influenced by multiple media such as art styles from across cultures and many literary and graphic texts, Patil’s work also generates a rich narrative that visualises the many moods of its reclusive protagonist, in a powerful, intertextual way. The heteroglossia, combined with an experimental use of ‘ink, marker, charcoal and oilbar, crayon and found images’, captures Kari’s psychological landscape in all its complexity, creating a unique narrative framed by her interiority. In turn this creates a distinct way of seeing (other characters, places and events) through the eyes of this unusual protagonist. This article engages with both its unusual protagonist, and distinct narrative style, and poses the following question: in what ways does this experimental text appropriate the act of looking? How does it resist hegemonic, masculinist modes of seeing through this? The article interrogates the ways in which the text, that celebrates fluidity and exploration, 1) resists masculinist prescriptiveness through its protagonist’s unusualness and unconventionality, and 2) how through its protagonist’s unusual gaze generates new, potentially feminist ways of seeing through the lens of love, affection and curiosity.

**Keywords:** Indian graphic novel, *Kari* (2008), unusual protagonist, feminist ways of seeing, interiority

### INTRODUCTION

As India’s very first graphic novel in English by a woman, and a queer one at that, Amruta Patil’s *Kari* (2008) has carved out an uncontested position not only within the space of graphic literature in India, but within the twin fields of feminist and queer cultural production at large. Broadly, the plot chronicles Kari’s daily life in the aftermath of a ‘slipshod surgical procedure’ (Patil, 2008: 3) — a massive breakup with her lover Ruth who exits at the very beginning of the text leaving Kari in the ‘smog city’ Bombay by herself — marking the journey of self-exploration between Kari’s attempted suicide at the beginning of the text and her decision to go on living by its closing. Yet, as Patil insists in her interview with Paul Gravett, ‘the book is not a coming-out tale. Kari’s queerness is incidental, rather than central to her journey’ (Patil as quoted in Gravett, 2012). The text, which celebrates ambiguity, exploration and fluidity, resists ‘a quickie “suicidal lesbian” synopsis’ (Gravett, 2012) through its unusual approach to the theme. With its many intertextual influences, the narrative is partly reminiscent of English Modernist writer Virginia Woolf’s ‘stream of consciousness’ technique, due to its emphasis on interiority and in its reception of external reality through Kari’s internal world.

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 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. By setting in motion a rich narrative of interiority, lush with intertextual references, poetic language and experimental art, *Kari* visualises the emotional experiences of a young female protagonist

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coming to terms with the intersection of her many identities: as a woman/lesbian/gender-fluid/loner/jilted lover/ad agency trainee/poet/creative within the space of 'smog city', Bombay (described as an active organism). It does so through its 'crossover literary form [...] the story flows from voice-over narrative style text to visuals, then back to voice-over' (Gravett, 2012). Moreover, through heteroglossia and an experimental use of 'ink, marker, charcoal and oilbar, crayon and found images' (Patil as quoted in Singh, 2008), the story captures Kari's internal landscape in a heteroglossic way, creating a unique narrative framework predicated upon interiority. Patil's experimental text is influenced by multiple media — from Indian temple art to Japanese silkscreen prints, to literary texts, like Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1989), R. K. Narayan's *A Malgudi Omnibus* (1994), and graphic novels like Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), amongst others — bringing a rich reading experience.

This article, which engages with both its unusual protagonist and unique narrative style that sees reality through her piercing eyes, poses the following questions: in what ways does this experimental text appropriate the act of looking? How does it resist hegemonic, masculinist modes of seeing through this? To this end, it will interrogate the ways in which the text, that celebrates fluidity and exploration, embodies a critique of masculinist prescriptiveness through its protagonist's unusualness and unconventionality; the article will also explore how its experimental form generates new, potentially feminist ways of seeing through the lens of love, affection and curiosity. A quick word about *Kari* (2008) vis-à-vis Indian graphic literature, however, before I begin.

## LOCATING *KARI* (2008) WITHIN THE INDIAN GRAPHIC CONTEXT

Over the last two decades, a new, 'inauspicious' form of graphic literature has altered the Indian comics landscape permanently. Harbingered by Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994), the first Indian 'graphic novel' that visualises controversies over the highly debated Narmada dam movement in India, the last twenty years have seen the production of stand-alone 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), Srividya Natarajan et al.'s *Bhimayana* (2011), among others. Dubbed as the Indian comics 'visual renaissance' (Gravett, 2010), these texts are known for bringing fresh narrative traditions into the Indian graphic arena. They offer a break from visual traditions set by earlier (children's) comics such as the *Amar Chitra Katha* (1967) and *Chacha Chaudhury* (1971) both in terms of style and content. If these earlier works projected idealised, 'auspicious', 'appropriate' images of India through their 'bright colourways, clear, strong lines and intricate, often patterned detail' (Varughese, 2018: 17), frequently serving as 'educational content' (Stoll, 2017: 1), these modern texts, some of them historical fiction, turn a questioning eye towards socio-political shifts in the subcontinent. As a collective, these texts generate a new wave of visual expression that is 'inauspicious' (Varughese, 2018: 4) and interrogatory in nature.

The emergence of these texts as a cluster of post-millennial graphic novels grappling with issues of nation, urban spaces and identity, has meant that they have frequently generated questions surrounding Indian modernity and graphic constructions of 'Indianness'. Academia has responded accordingly. Scholars such as Emma Dawson Varughese, for instance, have interrogated the ways in which 'inauspicious' modes of art within these texts 'encode a sense of post-millennial modernity' and offer 'new ways of (Indian) seeing' (Varughese, 2018: 4). Meanwhile, through her study of Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010), Preeti Singh analyses the way in which political selves are constructed through these texts (Singh, 2018). Another strand of criticism has highlighted the complex relationship between the city, modernism and the subject (Nayar, 2016; Nambiar, 2013; Davies, 2019) and interrogated the ways in which city and urban spaces are re-appropriated within these narratives, often through the critical gazes of their protagonists (Nambiar, 2013). Broadly, then, criticism in this area has formulated the ways in which these texts have enabled a new mode of visibility, of seeing, vis-à-vis modern Indian experiences and national identity (Nair, 2017; Nayar, 2016; Varughese, 2017; Varughese, 2018).

*Kari* (2008), published during the first wave of production, alongside Sarnath Bannerjee and Vishwajyoti Ghosh's works, stands out despite its common theme of engagement with the city through its focus on the 'unusual [...] deeply introverted, asocial and queer' protagonist. (Patil as quoted in Gravett, 2012). Mentored by Orijit Sen within a close-knit and relatively small community of graphic novelists, Amruta Patil's experimental text breaks away from its counterparts through its *avant garde* exploration of gender and identity through Kari. Indeed, as Gravett denotes: 'Now that the graphic novel is emerging in India, notably from innovators like Sarnath Banerjee and Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Amruta wanted to send out an unusual protagonist into the literary scene' (Gravett, 2012). Published in 2008 by HarperCollins Publishers India in New Delhi, *Kari* (2008) chronicles the life of a queer misfit who 'trawl[s] the drains dream after dream, [and] can smell the sewer everywhere' (Patil, 2008: 41), is one of the more canonical graphic novels in the country. However, Patil, as a creator, frequently engages with marginalised voices, as is evident through her subsequent graphic novels, *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 Ashwatthama.

For a while, *Kari* (2008) remained the only graphic novel by a woman in English in India, and still remains one of the few queer graphic novels. It was not until the dire incident of December 2012 that a new wave of feminist texts began to emerge. The *Drawing the Line: Indian women fight back!* (2015), *Elephant in the Room: Women draw their world* (2015), Ram Devineni and Dan Goldman's *Priya's Shakti* series (2014-2019) are artistic responses to the infamous 'Nirbhaya' gang rape in Delhi, December 2012. This devastating assault case that left the country shocked also led to an unprecedented gain in momentum within Indian feminist discourse. Leading to massive protests across the country, and generating furious women's rights debates across media, it created a political moment within contemporary Indian history that facilitated the production of overtly revolutionary narratives such as these. For instance, the *Drawing the Line* anthology was first produced by Goethe Institute and Zubaan Books, an independent feminist publisher in New Delhi, as part of a week-long workshop run by volume editors Priya Kuriyan, Ludmilla Bartscet and Larissa Bertonasco. Bringing together fourteen young, female, Indian artists, amateur and professional, this collection turns a critical gaze towards gender discrimination within urban spaces. These newer feminist interventions adopt an activist tone — for instance, referring to Robin L. Teske's concept of the butterfly effect, from *Conscious Acts and the Politics of Social Change* (2000), which argues that seemingly insignificant but consciously subversive acts in fact generate social change by gradually shifting larger structural patterns within society - the foreword to *Drawing the Line* (2015) locates itself as a resistance narrative and identifies as 'a powerful path to intersectional feminism' (Satpathy-Singh, 2015: Foreword, n.p.). *Kari* remains more implicit in its resistance politics. As a text, then situated within two literary movements, the first wave of graphic novels in India, and the more recent feminist traditions, it remains unique through its significant differences. Meanwhile, in terms of queer literary traditions, as Poushali Bhadury argues, 'The paucity of image-text stories featuring queer female characters becomes glaringly apparent when one sets out to provide even a brief overview of available texts [...] due to the history of legalised homophobia.' (Bhadury, 2018: 424). *Kari* remains one of the few queer graphic novels by a woman within the Indian context. As a significant text that embodies unique politics, then, it merits serious critical attention.

## **'MY FAVOURITE FORM OF MOVEMENT IS FLOAT': SEEING THROUGH KARI'S UNCONVENTIONAL GAZE**

Navigation is of essence here [...] I am a treacherous, dangerous fish. [...] Round and round, cutting through the water silently [...] I move in stealth, arms by my side.

(Patil, 2008: 85)

On her twenty first birthday, Amruta Patil's 'unusual protagonist' (Patil as quoted by Gravett, 2012) gifts herself with membership at the local swimming pool. The above excerpt, from her detailed description of swimming in the 'separate Ladies Lane' where she observes other women keenly, captures her proficiency in navigating fluid spaces. (Patil, 2008: 85). Recurrent images of fluidity and navigation within the text are arguably a metaphor for exploring the unconscious, 'the city's lower intestine' (Patil, 2008: 41), an uncontrollable, elusive space. And *Kari*, as an 'active loner' (Patil, 2008: 79), navigates this space efficiently. Patil's experimental text brings to the Indian graphic arena an 'unusual protagonist', a 'young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman — counterpoint to the hyper feminine prototypes one keeps coming across', as Patil remarks in an interview with Paul Gravett. (Gravett, 2012). Moreover, as an experimental text influenced by multiple media — from Indian temple art to Japanese silkscreen prints, to literary texts, like Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1989), R.K. Narayan's *A Madagudi Omnibus* (1994), and graphic novels like Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) — the text also generates a rich, intertextual narrative that visualises the many moods of its reclusive protagonist, in a powerful, intertextual way. This heteroglossia, combined with an experimental use of 'ink, marker, charcoal and oilbar, crayon and found images', captures *Kari*'s psychological landscape in all its complexity, creating a unique narrative framed by her interiority.

In turn, this creates a distinct way of seeing (other characters, places and events) through the eyes of this 'unusual', queer protagonist. Of particular interest to this discussion is the way in which women are seen in this narrative, so this article poses the following question: in what ways does this experimental text appropriate the act of looking? How does it challenge masculinist modes of seeing by counterposing this unusual protagonist as an active observer?

## I

In an interview with Paul Gravett, Amruta Patil makes a significant remark about her graphic novel:

I wanted to send out an unusual protagonist into the Indian literary scene. A young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman - counterpoint to the hyperfeminine prototypes one keeps coming across. And yet, the book is not a coming-out tale. Kari's queerness is incidental, rather than central to her journey. She is dark and funny and detached —something you may not expect from a quickie 'suicidal lesbian' synopsis. People love quick synopses.

(Patil as quoted in Gravett, 2012: n.p.)

She makes two significant cultural observations here: the recurrence of 'hyper feminine prototypes' within popular production, and a quick synopsis as a way of engaging with literature. In the book, two categories of such prototypical femininities are highlighted: 'a ruffled siren' and an 'earth mother' (Patil, 2008: 107), both images frequently represented through advertisements and other forms of popular media. Such categories, indeed, categorisation itself, captures a distinct aspect of masculinist politics: appropriation through containment that risks reducing people to 'quick synopses' (Gravett, 2012).

Within the text, such modes of meaning-making that rely heavily upon structure, organisation and categorisation are reflected, for instance, through Lazarus, a character in the graphic novel who works with Kari, and Billo and Delna's boyfriends. Kari deflects Zap's essentialising, heterosexist advice, 'Eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman', by pointing to the reader in the over-head section of the panel how he 'understands nothing but plies me with advice' (Patil, 2008: 81). The text presents two spaces within 'smog city' — organised spaces on the one hand, hidden alleyways and the sewer on the other. The former, such as Kari's advertising agency, denote order and organisation and is unaffected by the 'waxing and waning of personal moons' (Patil, 2008: 10). Lazarus, Zap and Orgo are a part of this space. In a chapter entitled 'Love Song', where Laz expresses romantic interest towards Kari and gets rejected, he confusedly reproaches, 'Are you, like, a proper lesbian?' (Patil, 2008: 79). Her elusive response, 'I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, act loner' (Patil, 2008: 79) captures the text's resistance to this mode of looking through a 'totalising sweep of the eye' (Nambiar, 2013: 74). It denotes Patil's war against 'quick synopses' (Patil as quoted by Gravett, 2012) — of people and literary texts — that she actively resists through her graphic novel.

## II

Patil's unusual protagonist resists such 'quick synopses' and simplified categories systematically. Throughout the text, Kari is visualised as a misfit who does not conform to social conventions. The recurrent associations between Kari and the sewer are interesting in this context. For one, it generates an unusual metaphor to describe a woman. It subverts the historical association between women and beauty across cultures. In fact — quick digression — the text ironically plays on such metaphors. For example, in the commercial for hairstyling products where 'ruffled sirens' audition is entitled 'Fairytale hair' (Patil, 2008: 65), the house that Kari shares with her 'degenerate' female flat mates, Billo and Delna, is called 'Crystal Palace' (Patil, 2008: 16), and the models who audition for 'Fairytale hair' are referred to as 'urban [...] princesses' (Patil, 2008: 64). The sewer imagery offers a stark contrast. Kari frequently appears in stinky, dirty locations such as drainage areas, and on one occasion, her 'clothes smell funny' from falling into 'the stinking river of effluents' (Patil, 2008: 8-10). Such imagery takes attention away from physical appearance and engages the reader with the internal, the unusual. Her minimalist clothing style achieves a similar purpose — it redirects the reader's gaze, taking it away from her physical appearance and placing it instead on her mind-scape, an interesting visual tactic. Indeed, if anything captures attention within her appearance, it is her intense eyes. One character in the graphic novel in fact describes her as 'the young lady with burning eyes.' (Patil, 2008: 71), and indeed, it is not surprising that eyes are foregrounded. After all, they represent seeing, expressing and visualising.

The parallel drawn between Kari and the sewer, a space of fluidity, exploration and unpredictability, highlights the text's celebration of the internal, the unfathomable and the infinite. It foregrounds her internal landscape, in turn, that frames the narrative of the text (discussed in the next section). The sewer, a dark, fluid space, parallels Kari's nebulous, unusual identity and her dreams:

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.

(Patil, 2008: 41)

The recurring image of ‘trawl[ing] the drains dream after dream’ is further emphasised by how her ‘thoughts keep returning to the city’s lower intestine’. The image is almost wave-like in its recurrence, and links directly with the text’s frequent visualisation of fluid spaces such as sewers, rivers, and streets flooded with rainwater. Moreover, the sense of journey that is emphasised through the image of trawling the sewer, is paralleled by how ‘the city has made a boatman of me [Kari]’ (Patil, 2008: 31). The corresponding image, spread across two pages, depicts a dark cityscape with its dirty sewers as Kari, a shadowy figure, stands on the edge looking into the darkness, her back turned to the reader. The visual juxtaposition of Kari and the sewer highlights the parallel between the two. Four smaller panels appear on the page on the right, against this background. These images are close-up shots of the protagonist rowing a boat, her figure surrounded by water from all sides. Interestingly, these portray the action of rowing without reaching any destination, the act of rowing itself being meaningful. This imagery celebrates exploration over destination, fluidity over form. It is the sewer that connects one part of the city to another, one part of consciousness to another, and is a serpentine space. The inventiveness of this fluid space is highlighted by images of travelling, trawling, traversing — communicating a sense of being constantly in motion. The recurrence of these watery images in Patil’s text sets the tone for, as well as parallels, the exploration of Kari’s identity as a queer woman, as she keeps returning to the sewers over and over again through the text.



**Figure 1.** Kari and the sewer. Excerpted with permission from *Kari* (pp. 32-33) by Amruta Patil. © Amruta Patil.

Kari’s gender identity is equally nebulous. The boatman reference is interesting in this regard. Alluding to the mythological Charon, the boatman between this world and the next, the narrative captures a sense of in-betweenness. Although frequently read as a lesbian protagonist, throughout the text Kari refuses to identify entirely with this category. I agree with Poushali Bhadury’s assertion:

Scholars and reviewers alike have usually described Kari as a lesbian character. However [...] she aspires to the elusive “genderless” quality kd lang possesses’ [...] and push[es] towards a non-binary, androgynous identity.

(Bhadury, 2018: 428)

When Lazarus, a male colleague who is romantically drawn to her, asks her if she is a 'proper lesbian', she responds with, 'I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner' (Patil 2008: 79). In the overhead text of the panel she 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.

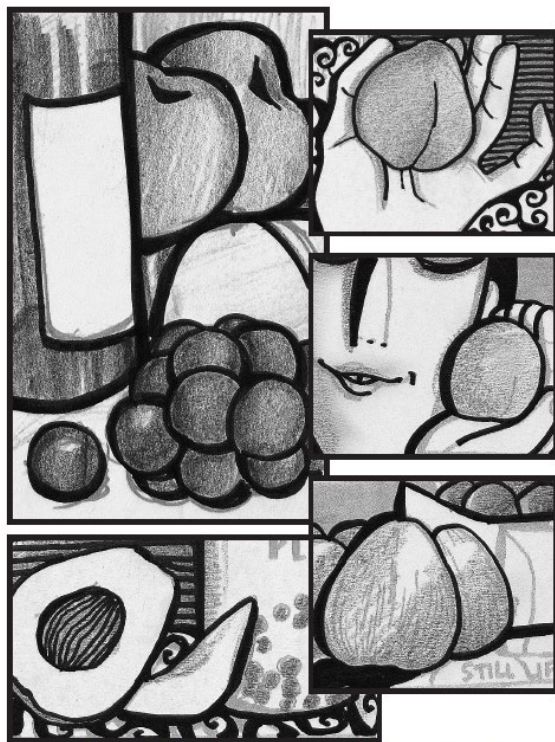
(Patil, 2008: 79)

This sensual description of the word 'lesbian' mirrors an equally sensual image of consuming fruit in Angel's house in a previous 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 unfruitlike insistence, fuzzy like the down on a pretty jaw. Figs are dark creatures too, skins purple as loving bruises. A fig is one hundred percent debauched. Lush as a smashed mouth. There, I said it again: Lush.

(Patil, 2008: 66)

The panels corresponding to this description are just as sensual. Three of these depict the fruits from different angles, and one panel portrays her rubbing a peach against her face, feeling it sensually. The insistence with which she plays with these fruits is matched with the way the word 'lesbian' rolls in her mouth. In addition, the lushness of the fruits mirrors the fleshiness of the word 'lesbian'. Resembling a woman's bottom, the peach is a particularly significant metaphor. It is placed on the palm of her hand, as she examines it carefully. As a perpetual explorer who resists labelling, she distances herself equally from the concrete, tangible category of 'lesbian'. She loves women without committing to the tag 'lesbian', nor does she dismiss it entirely. Engaging with the seductiveness of the word but remaining non-committal, she 'espouse[s] nothing but Ruth' (Patil, 2008: 71).



I play with fruit that the girls and I are too broke to buy. 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 fingertips with unfruitlike 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.

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**Figure 2.** Kari and the fruits. Excerpted with permission from *Kari* (p. 66) by Amruta Patil. © Amruta Patil.

Indeed, as the text nears its close, Kari moves further towards androgyny. In its second last chapter, ‘The awards ceremony’, she decides to get her hair cut into a 2 mm buzz-cut to attend a crucial awards function. She refuses to adopt either traditionally feminine image of ‘rumpled siren’ or ‘earth mother’, deciding instead to look like ‘GI Jane’ (Patil, 2008: 110). She rejects the barber’s offer to give her one of the ‘lady’s patterns’, or at least a ‘lady’s boy-cut’ and is as visibly pleased as the barber dismayed that her ‘face looking boy type’ (Patil, 2008: 107). In this colourful panel in an otherwise greyscale text the protagonist stands boldly facing the reader on the streets of ‘smog city’ Bombay, proudly announcing, ‘Bring on the ladies’. The use of colour in the text offsets epiphanic moments while greyscale is used for the mundane or the morbid. This moment in the text is significant for at least two reasons: one, it heralds the emergence of fresh ways of representation within contemporary Indian graphic narratives, and two, it is a reflection of Kari’s internal world that is celebratory of subjectivity.

I consider lying to the man that I am auditioning for a film about the Indian Army - people like being aides to celluloid history - but I am too lazy to begin. As it is, scissorman is neither happy nor convinced. Why would someone choose to be a shorn sheep when she could be earth mother or rumpled siren instead? The answer is that, increasingly, my hair makes me feel like a drag queen.



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**Figure 3.** ‘Towards graphic androgyny’. Excerpted with permission from *Kari* (p. 107) by Amruta Patil. © Amruta Patil.

### III

Kari’s world is populated mostly by women, and they are viewed through the lens of the protagonist’s love, affection and keen observation. In this section I will demonstrate how the text generates an alternative an ‘unusual’ mode of looking (at women) through the lens of curiosity and love. If on the one hand the text problematises mainstream representation of women through Kari’s satirical gaze, it equally presents an alternative way of seeing them.

As a keen observer Kari brings out ‘unusual’ desires that operate within the big city. In Sandhya Devesan Nambiar’s words, ‘as a tale of the city “down below”, *Kari* spawns illicit, secret desires, presenting the urban woman in the city in her various forms, working, suicidal, victim of household’ (Nambiar, 2013: 74). By giving voice to these desires, she looks beyond convention, beyond ‘quick synopses’ (Patil as quoted in Gravett, 2012). One of the many instances of this is her description of Billo and Delna, her two female flat mates. Describing her happier memories 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. The other thing that happens during these suppers is that the girls mother me and shamelessly flirt with me in turns. Make no mistake - there is no such thing as a straight woman.

(Patil, 2008: 58)

The imagery of smells (in Billo's perfume), touch (head massage) and taste (Delna's chicken) creates a lush, multi-sensual picture. Through her keen observation of these women she claims that 'there is no such thing as a straight woman', implying that conventionally heterosexual women too, and not only the queer, cannot be contained in representation. These women turn their attention to Kari when their boyfriends are not around, and in these (though transient) moments, a different aspect of their sexuality is revealed. What this implies is that *Kari* offers a multidimensional view of the people and places around her. This is in direct contrast to the narrative generated through masculinist discourse. Through her fluid but detached observation, she brings out the many incongruities that envelop the subconscious of the city. Indeed, her resistance/critique of the masculinist system is manifested broadly through the subversive use of interiority on the narratorial, diegetic level. Interiority as a narrative tool enables visualisation through the subversive gaze of its protagonist offering resistance to the symbolic gaze of patriarchal order, and a masculinist mode of seeing.

Kari's position as an observer, combined with this mode of visualisation, is an interesting narratorial choice. As a narrative of interiority with Kari's consciousness at the centre, and Patil's eloquent use of the visual and textual tools, the reader is conditioned from the very beginning to subscribe to, or at least empathise with, Kari's gaze. In this context, there is a significant moment in the chapter 'Secret lives of fruit': women waiting to audition for a commercial for hair styling products at Kari's ad agency are depicted within the panels as sensuous looking, scantily dressed models whose portfolios include pictures in lingerie (Patil, 2008: 65). This would certainly not seem unusual within the advertisement industry with popular media frequently portraying women as 'rumpled sirens', laying emphasis on their sex appeal (Patil, 2008: 107). It is through Kari's gaze, however, that the ridiculousness of this phenomenon is foregrounded. She ironically observes, 'If hair-product audition equals so much cleavage, lingerie audition equals what?'. Visually, the panels portray the protagonist holding the photographs in her hand and only her thumb is visible. The camera angle places the reader at the same position as her. As a result, the reader's gaze is bound to coincide with Kari's, with the reader's thumb positioned exactly like Kari's in the panel, creating a parallel. Reinforcing the bond forged between the protagonist and her audience, this appropriation orients the reader towards her perspective, which problematises the masculinist gaze.

Moreover, the pictures are offset from her through a colour variation. The frame and the finger are in grey-scale, whereas the images are in bright colours, emphasising a contrast between her perspective and masculinist representation. Interestingly, an actual photograph is also pasted into this panel alongside Patil's drawings, alluding to a larger, cultural phenomenon in society, in that the woman's face is cut off and only her body, especially her breasts, are visible. Indeed, this is quick satire on masculinist ways of seeing that isolate the woman from her own body. Kari's appropriation offers a moment of intervention, a disruption of what is otherwise normalised in popular culture. There are other similar moments across the text that critique such representation. For instance, an image of a 'coy Hindu bride' appearing in an advertisement is similarly critiqued within the text (Patil, 2008: 23). It shows a woman's side profile where she looks down shyly, lush hair falling over her face, her eyes big and her lips sensuous. The bride too is represented as an object of masculinist desire. Capturing the cultural fantasy of demureness and obedience in women, she is as much an object of male gaze as she sensually 'pours the lotion and steps over a threshold' as the siren (Patil, 2008: 23) The advertisement appears on television, and in this case too, Kari is the critical spectator to this unidimensional image.

Turning, finally, to the gaze through love. In the preface to Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's groundbreaking anthology, *Same sex-desire in India* (2000), Vanita articulates gracefully and poignantly, 'Love need not take an explicitly sexual form, but it is nearly always expressed in the language of poetic excess and metaphoric power' (Vanita, 2000: xiv). In this book about same-sex love in Indian history and literature from the ancient to the modern world, Vanita's observation captures how love frequently produces a specific mode of poetic expression within literature that is more universal than not. The language of *Kari*, a text that narrates through the internal world of its protagonist, and which on one level captures the journey of a heartbroken lover, embodies such 'poetic excess', both visually and textually, in its narration of Ruth. It corresponds directly to Kari's state of mind, capturing the 'waxing and waning of [her] personal moons' (Patil, 2008: 10) The opening panel of the graphic novel, for instance, visualises her separation from Ruth thus: sitting together on a bench, clasping each other's hands after the 'slipshod surgical procedure', an artery joining Ruth and Kari's hearts is cut. Ruth holds the pair of scissors in her hand, as drops of blood soil her white skirt. Yet, they remain connected through a second artery that remains intact (Patil,



2008: 3). This metaphoric depiction captures at once the pain of severing ties and cutting romantic cords with a lover, that coexists with an undeniable connection forged through memory, nostalgia and longing. This magic realism representation captures complex feelings and co-opts the emotional into this mode of seeing. The poetic, metaphoric quality of the depiction captures the imaginative, and visualises the transcendental, that goes beyond the ordinary and conventional. In other words, it resists containment.

This (visual) language of love enables a mode of seeing that transcends the ordinary and engages with the imaginative, the exploratory. Love takes a poetic, magic realism form within the text that finds beauty in unusual places. This is most visible in the text's depiction of cancer patient Angel, an 'actively dying person' (Patil, 2008: 36), who, just like the sewer, is smelly and ill. The theme of death connects to the motif of the Boatman. Kari is the boatman, who travels between this world and the next, the real and the imaginative. Angel's last words to Kari are: 'My time is up, boatman. I need you to ferry me over' (Patil, 2008: 102). Kari's 'unusual', loving gaze sees Angel's decaying body and her looming death through non-intrusive, affectionate interest. 'Do you mind that it was your dying I was most drawn to?' she asks (Patil, 2008: 39). The text approaches the idea of death in a unique way, connecting it to the imaginative realm through the image of the Boatman. As a harbinger of unusualness, Kari brings out beauty in strange places (Angel, the sewer), without dismissing the lived realities such as the smell of 'violent gastric juices' (Patil, 2008: 55). In doing so, it brings out the in-between, and makes the ordinary a work of art through her way of looking.

## CONCLUSION

'Can you see her the way I do?' (Patil, 2008:64) ... this rhetorical question about the act of looking posed by Amruta Patil's queer protagonist opens up a larger question that lies at the heart of contemporary feminist literature. How can one look in resistant ways? How can one see beyond the influences of the everyday, the masculinist gaze? Through the lens of unusualness, non-containment and fluidity, *Kari* (2008) engages in a new mode of representation that systematically defies binaries and totalising ways of masculinist seeing. As India's first graphic novel by a woman, *Kari* introduces a fresh syntax for representation, a new way of thinking about women (and literature).

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**Citation:** Datta, S. (2020). '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. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/7917>

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