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## Of Mirth and Melancholy: A Critique of Urban Spaces in Amruta Patil's *Kari*

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### Abstract:

*My article attempts to discuss how the graphic novel Kari (2008) portrays the impact of the city on literature. The graphic novelist Amruta Patil here painstakingly formulated the strong connections between multifaceted city life and the city dwellers. What is worth observing in the graphic narrative is the varying reactions of its characters. In this interesting study of urban space and character, the inner recesses of the protagonists will be explored. The objectives of my article mainly include an analysis of the representations of the city and urban experiences in contemporary Indian graphic novels and a critical examination of city space by means of applying literary and cultural theories. I have discussed various aspects of graphic novels along with their definition, categories, and global popularity. In addition, a brief overview of the theoretical framework has been offered which I believe would make the article more comprehensive. While analysing the novel Kari, I have highlighted Kari's attitude and reactions towards various spheres of urban life in the age of globalization from the perspective of a woman.*

**Keywords:** Amruta Patil, City Literature, Graphic Novel, Feminist ways of seeing, Urban Spaces

### 1. Introduction:

Amruta Patil (born 19 April 1979) is the first Indian female graphic novelist and painter. She graduated from Goa College of Art with a BFA degree and received her Master of Fine Arts degree from Tufts University, School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Other than *Kari*, she has other graphic novels like *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012), *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (2016), and *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* (2019). She was awarded Nari Shakti Puraskar (Ministry of Women and Child Development) in 2017.

In the truest sense, it is difficult to differentiate between two terms—comic books and graphic novels. Critics share different views while defining the term “graphic novel.” If some prefer using the term “graphic novel” to “comic book,” others argue the two terms are the same. The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature defines graphic novel as a “term used to distinguish longer, more complex single works of sequential art conceived or developed as a unified work, from periodical comic books” (Birch and Hooper 295).



Amruta Patil, by means of combining visual and textual elements, exerts narrative and emotional impact upon the readers. In a nutshell, the graphic novel *Kari* offers an alternative perspective of history, culture and society including the rural or urban space. Additionally, it has offered writers a means of representing the personal impact of the contemporary world on individuals and communities. The popular thematic concerns of graphic novels commonly include myths, personal experiences, urban space, stories of women, and suicide survivors. The varied thematic concerns would showcase “critical literacy.”

Among the Indian graphic novels, *River of Stories* (1994), *Delhi Calm* (2010), *Bhimayana* (2011), *The Harappa Files* (2011), *A Gardener in the Wasteland* (2011), *This Side, That Side* (2013), and *Drawing the Line* (2015) represent the individual victims in different situations and in various time frames. While *River of Stories* depicts the impact of the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the people of the region, *A Gardener in the Wasteland* tells the story of Jyotiba Phule’s struggle for freedom and *Drawing the Line* represents a response to the Nirbhaya rape case that took place on December 16, 2012.

The graphic novel *Kari* (2008) represents myriad aspects of fragmented realities and lives of people in Indian cities. Following this tradition, Ram Venkatesan’s *Black Mumba* (2016) appears as a collection of three graphical stories comprising dark aspects of Mumbai. It is believed that Indian graphic novels are heading towards global recognition. A detailed analysis of Amruta Patil’s *Kari* will show how the novelist utilizes both Indian and non-Indian visual cultural aspects to add extra layers of meaning to the urban narrative. The smells, visuals and sounds accompanied by Patil’s painstakingly detailed artwork and brilliant play of colours make this graphic novel mind-boggling. The novelist represents the happenings through paintings or comics or cartoon strips. Amruta Patil happens to be the first Indian woman graphic novelist.

Truly interdisciplinary in nature, *Kari* offers an intriguing amalgamation of written words and visual images along with components drawn from several other domains of learning. Graphic novels often establish a nexus between time and urban spaces. It is also found to be expressive of positive and negative aspects of urban life. Graphic novels thus offer an insightful study of the lifestyle and behaviour of the city dwellers. The city becomes a key motif in the novel *Kari*. *Kari*’s city is persistently amphibious or aquatic, liquid not solid. The protagonist is seen stuck in the middle of the riddle of city life in Mumbai. Throughout the novel, *Kari* is seen encountering and overcoming the trials and tribulations of life in Mumbai.

In his essay “Neoliberalism and the City”, David Harvey asserts that cities always remain “centres of conflict, change and transformation”, and “cities can be crucibles where new politics can be constructed and emerge.” Therefore, we have “to regain some notion of the city as a kind of



body politics to which we can reconstruct, not only the cities but can reconstruct human relations and ourselves.” In the light of the idea, we can analyze how the graphic novels represent the transformations of Indian cities. In this regard, one has to examine a mode of observation dominated and limited by the obsession with “the city” that marginalizes one’s sense of urbanity as a process.

It would also be worth noticing how graphic novelists address the contemporary critical and cultural issues about city space and urbanization. In addition, the research work would deal with the visual representations of city life which directly contribute to the domain of city literature. City literature, in the general sense, epitomizes how the city is portrayed in different dimensions in contemporary literature. This particular type of literature is found to have encapsulated multiple thematic concerns: for instance, a city as the chief content of a text; mapping the city along with its environment and inhabitants; and changing faces of the city life in the age of globalization.

The deeply confident work of Amruta Patil, *Kari* reveals the novelist’s powers as a graphic novelist, psychological explorer and urban thinker. After all, *Kari* is a beautifully constructed graphic novel centered around the titular female protagonist. Central to Amruta Patil’s ambitious project is a powerful attempt to overturn a conservative cultural consensus. The novelist here strives to reinterpret the position of young Indian women at the break of the twenty-first century. Along with the mental experiences, the novelist is preoccupied with the external dramatizations of multifaceted activities in the city space. Kari’s personality is strikingly marked by emotional self-control. In fact, Kari conceals an intense emotional suffering only revealed to the readers. Kari is represented as having a worth-noticing internal mental geography which marks her personality quite different from others surrounding her in the city life of Mumbai. Amruta Patil, while delineating Kari’s character, charts the vacillations of the human spirit between despair and ecstasy in subtle artistic craftsmanship.

## 2. Literature Review:

Dominic Davies’ seminal work *Urban Comics: Infrastructure and the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives* (2020) is a significant contribution to comics studies and urban studies. This book shows how artistic collectives and urban social movements operating throughout the global South produce some of the most exciting and formally innovative graphic narratives of the modern era through in-depth discussions of comics from cities like Cairo, Cape Town, New Orleans, Delhi, and Beirut.



Hannah Miodrag's book *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form* (2013) offers an overview of the history and evolution of comics study as well as an in-depth analysis of the genre in three different areas. The book offers analyses of an array of literary works and adopts an interdisciplinary approach.

### 3. Research Objectives:

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (i) To analyze how urban spaces are depicted in Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Kari*.
- (ii) To explore themes of mirth and melancholy within those urban spaces, and discuss their significance in the narrative.
- (iii) To delve into the social, cultural, and psychological implications of these depictions, as well as their relevance to contemporary urban life and literature.
- (iv) To contextualize these themes within broader social and cultural contexts, such as gender, sexuality, and identity in urban environments.

### 4. Research Methodology:

This article will involve a combination of literary analysis, cultural studies, and urban geography and also it might involve a combination of qualitative and literary analysis methods. This could include close reading of the text, thematic analysis, and exploring how urban spaces are depicted and their impact on characters' emotions. It may also involve examining Patil's background, influences, and any interviews or statements she has made about her work to contextualize the analysis. Additionally, drawing on relevant theoretical frameworks from urban studies, gender studies, and literary criticism could enrich the analysis. Overall, the methodology would likely be interdisciplinary, drawing from various fields to provide a comprehensive analysis.

### 5. *Kari*: Cityscape Through the Eyes of a Woman:

*Kari* offers a new dimension to Indian graphic fiction. The novel emphasizes the recognition of the queer spaces within the urban fabric of the city. *Kari* is also an urban graphic fiction about friendship, love, despair, suicide, architectural patterns, and other visual aspects of Mumbai. It is about the self-discovery of its androgynous heroine after her heartbreak. The novelist weaves the events of the narrative in such a way that it never fails to attract the reader's attention to the myriad aspects of city life.

The work of art encapsulates the diversity of experiences its protagonist has undergone in the city life of Mumbai. The first-person narrative unfolds the layers of city life with the protagonist's wry adventures. Apart from her professional responsibilities with the ad agency named Fairytale



Hair, the twenty-year-old young girl with “burning eyes” Kari undertakes a rather queer journey throughout the novel. During her journey of life, her encounters with different types of men and women are graphically detailed in the course of the novel. Moreover, her vivid descriptions of various aspects of city life envisage the reader’s critical attention. A woman with strong but unusual individualistic traits, Kari proves her talent at every step of her life.

The novel starts with Kari’s break up with her partner Ruth culminating in their suicide attempts. Fortunately, both of them are saved—Ruth by a safety net and Kari by a sewer. Afterwards, Kari crawled back into life and put in efforts to survive on her own terms. On one Thursday, Ruth called Kari over the phone and asked her to look up and discover “the person who loved you most in the world” (*Kari* 4), billowing on the ledge of the building. Kari also retorts, “I am the one who loved her most in the world too” (*Kari* 4). The act of conversation over mobile would be seen as one of the popular practices in city life. This chapter offers a graphic *presentation* of how both have decided to commit suicide. Kari is willing to embrace death as she feels, “I must meet death, though it was the heart that willed it” (*Kari* 5). It is to be noted that suicide is a very common practice among young people across the globe in the age of globalization.

Their suicide attempts fortunately went in vain. After being saved by a safety net, Ruth left the city. At this point, the novelist captures the emotions strikingly: “Ruth’s fall was broken by a safety net. How typical. Saved, she got into a plane and left. Her last memory of the city must be an aerial one. Dark and ablaze with fistfuls of night. The airport was a ford, and she crossed over” (*Kari* 7). Ruth’s departure leaves an everlasting impact on Kari’s psychological world. The novel focuses on how a lesbian contends with her isolation in an urban space. On the other hand, Kari’s outlook toward the external world never seems to be disturbed by the turbulent happenings of her inner world.

A suicide survivor, Kari, in the second chapter, appears as a sincere employee in an ad agency named Fairytale Hair. Kari strives to forget the bad memories and decides to live her life to the fullest on her own terms though she knows “A failed suicide is death still, because no one emerges from it unscattered” (*Kari* 10). No matter what a person feels emotionally, being a workaholic is the norm of city life. Being anti-normative in the personal sphere, Kari overlooks “hushed voices and careful observations” upon her. After all, she has to work for the ad agency and has to write headlines for Fairytale Hair to earn her livelihood. Kari records her mental agony while she asserts, “I give my days to the ad agency, work like a fury and sleep like the dead” (*Kari* 14).

The graphic novelist successfully portrays the urban official space through Kari’s encounter with the trainee copywriters and art directors. Even after rewriting any ad for the thirty-sixth time, she has not given up on writing it again. The competitive and professional spirit in private sectors



of the urban space would be well understood when Kari asserts: "Bearded man, custodian of paycheque and professional growth, to bring in the sex, bring in the glamour, and discover my inner fox" (Kari 11).

Kari's perception of the urban space is poignant and graphic: "On my way back home, like on any other day, I try to breathe as little as I can to prevent the smog city from choking me. I wish I could detach my lungs" (Kari 13). The protagonist here explicitly draws reference to the severe case of air pollution in the megacities of India. Kari unfailingly presents the city with its "drawbridges," "new roads," "strange backyards," and "junk heaps."

In the third chapter, the novelist shifts the reader's attention to Crystal Palace, the apartment where Kari lives with her fellow roommates. While two couples are involved in a live-in relationship, Kari, under the same roof, has to "try and imagine different worlds on the other side of the bookshelf." Kari also points out that practices like late-night parties, and live-in relationships as commonplace in big cities like Mumbai. Kari never misses a single detail to describe how they (including Kari) share a flat with others in the "smog city."

According to Kari, Billo is "the diva of the Crystal Palace" and Delna her "humble minister." Each of them is found to be involved with each other's boyfriend: "Zap, Billo's boyfriend, is Delna's ex. Orgo, Delna's boyfriend, is Billo's ex." Being inconsistent or unfaithful in a relationship would not be considered an issue nowadays in the urban scenario. In a country like India where conservatism still matters, both Billo and Delna challenge societal norms. It is the urban space which makes room for the young girls to make their own choices in their lives. In addition, the novelist poignantly depicts women's resistance toward the age-old Indian concept of Sati or virginity.

Urban space is usually considered a land of a million possibilities. Everyone comes to the city to try one's luck. For example, Kari has documented the reason why Delna came to Mumbai three years ago: "She [Delna] wanted to be an actress but ended up being a Hand and Foot stand-in" (Kari 22). Nevertheless, Kari stands apart and clarifies her position: "Although I am not part of the organism, they like me well enough. I am non-threatening and non-intensive. And women of the world adore tousled boy girls. They all want to be Wendy to my Peter Pan. The more my roommates grow to like me, the more vehemently they dislike Ruth" (Kari 23).

In the course of time, Kari has befriended a girl named Ruth whom she met near a cinema hall at Churchgate. Ruth questions Kari regarding her troublesome living with other girls in the same flat: "And no one was such a flame-thrower acrobat with pans and knives as was Ruth...The house fit her perfectly; like a crystal slipper" (Kari 26).



The chapter entitled “The Visitations” exposes how Kari was left in the smog city to “fly solo.” Her parents visited Crystal Palace once. The narrator reveals how her parents showed unuttered uneasiness when they came across Kari’s roommates Delna and Billo with their respective boyfriends in callous manners. Kari’s mother represents a conventional attitude when she asserts: “When a husband comes along, best friends become nobodies” (Kari 29). Kari replies, “I don’t want a husband” (Kari 29). At this point, she seems to live her life independently. Kari keeps her parents busy with “movie outings and cuisines” (Kari 30) to avoid the seemingly shameful activities of her roommates. In this regard, Kari has to behave against her will to handle the situation. A conflict between tradition and modernity would be well understood when one examines the evaluation of Kari’s mother: “This is not how I raised you, says Mama. Of all the people in such a big city you pick the smut and the degenerates” (Kari 31). Kari’s self-discovery should be noted here: “I earned myself a boat that night. As a boatman, you earn to row clean through the dark water” (Kari 31). She has aptly used the metaphor of “boatman” to highlight her ability to avoid the nuances of city life. Later in the novel, Kari identifies herself as a fish.

Loneliness becomes a recurrent motif in the course of the novel, Kari. Angel always undergoes the pain of being lonely in the busy city life of Mumbai. At an event, Kari met Angel, “the first actively dying person I’d met in my life. It’s as potent a connection as first love” (Kari 36). According to her, “Not all relationships have a logical beginning, growth and consolidation. Some begin like this, without preamble” (Kari 35). When Kari shows interest in Angel, Angel asks her a pertinent question: “Why didn’t you just choose to play with pretty boys instead?” (Kari 41) Her attraction for Kari is so true that even during heavy rain, Kari goes out to meet Angel. On Kari’s twenty-first birthday, Kari unfortunately discovers Angel on her deathbed. To impress Angel and win her favour, Kari shows the tattoo on her back. At this particular juncture of the text, it can be noted how lesbianism and tattoo culture have gained popularity among upper-middle-class working women in Indian cities.

A keen observer of life, Kari documents the negative aspects of city life. She catalogues “smells for entertainment” while travelling in local transport “Tiffin box vapour, biscuit factory. Potty, Sexy arm...Sulphur, sulphur, sewer” (Kari 41). Kari reveals another significant aspect of city life: “In this city, no one talks. Everyone guards their sanity against the grief of strangers” (Kari 41). While travelling in local transport, Kari also takes note of a victim of domestic violence. Kari has encountered the airline lady having “bruises on her arms and face today and her eyes keep welling, but no one asks her why” (Kari 42). The revolutionary spark helps Kari stand apart.

Apart from her commitment to the ad agency, Kari spends her spare time in different activities. Walking a short distance is one of Kari’s habits. Kari asserts: “I have walked from the railway





station to the ad agency almost every single day” (Kari 43). Kari, despite all her engagements, shows her love for “a large orange-eyed tomcat” named Bostiao.

In the chapter entitled “The Ark,” the novelist portrays how the lifestyle gets hampered in waterlogged situations due to heavy rainfall: “The ad agency, like the rest of the city, is closed because the railway tracks are flooded” (Kari 52). Kari’s experience in a “spluttering and wheezing auto rickshaw” becomes a strong metaphor to determine the quality of living in a city. Some factors like a bright future, promotion, and financial security in life are so integral parts of city life that one can never hesitate to dump one’s long-term partner. For example, Delna, instead of her boyfriend, decides to marry her boss. On the other hand, Kari and Lazarus go to Soul Fry to celebrate their promotions in the ad agency. Kari loves to watch movies and have dinner with best friends. She met Ruth on her way to the cinema hall at Churchgate. On the other hand, Kari and his friends dine at a restaurant named Soul Fry and take tea at the Tea Centre. This type of hangout with friends is quite normal for someone living in any city.

The novelist portrays the grim urban space through the narrative point of view of Kari: “Laz and I have been walking around the city at night, camera in hand, watching homeless people in slumber” (Kari 78). Kari formulates an excellent analogy between human digestive organs and the sewerage system: “On my way back ...blood” (Kari 41). She also identifies the mouth as “a wet garbage heap” (Kari 58). What others think about her does not matter to her at all. Regarding personal life, while other girls want “sweet,” “handsome and loyal” husbands “like Kari”, Kari falls in love with herself: “I am wondering why I amn’t looking like Sean Penn today” (Kari 60). She never hears whether others criticize her “buzz haircut” or being “single” where good options are readily available. Nevertheless, the novel is a vivid commentary upon an independent woman’s choice over love and life. Kari’s unusual stances towards sexuality and love apparently mark a Western tendency in the Indian scenario.

Imaginative, but a realist, Kari has felt deep affection for dying people like Angel, and for her ad agency companion Lazarus. In city life, one would seldom find a successful personality like Kari who is discovered to be attentive to almost every single detail of what is happening around her. One would seek an equivalent of the outer space of city life to the inner space of Kari. Kari disentangles herself from her inner problems. Life is a continuous struggle for her. To some extent, Kari’s survival skill would make us remember every person living in the city.

It would be easily pointed out that Kari embraces whatever comes to her path in life be it positive or not. Though the graphic novel begins and ends with suicide attempts, Kari ultimately proves herself to be optimistic in her life. After all, Kari can be identified as an adventurous spirit.





She is “simply disinterested” in the lurid activities of the young girls. A lesbian, Kari is never found getting angry with her male colleagues. She is also a good observer of the things and events happening around her. Her attachment to city life is undeniably exceptional and praiseworthy. It is to be noted that Kari repeatedly identifies Mumbai as a “smog city” perhaps out of her concern with air pollution caused by the industries.

Amruta Patil, in the course of the graphic novel *Kari*, incorporates several contemporary issues of city life such as loneliness, lesbianism, abortion, pollution, sewerage system conservatism, moral and ethical degeneration, etc. Most of the issues are explained by the protagonist Kari while moving to and for in the city. The text is multi-layered and requires multiple readings for a seemingly proper understanding. Nevertheless, after a few readings, it appears that Kari would be an example of a “growth novel” charting the growth of an ad agency employee in relation to her psychological world in Mumbai.

## 6. Conclusion:

For authors, academics, and students of Indian Writing in English, the Indian graphic book is still a relatively unexplored literary form. The twenty-first-century Indian graphic narratives usually portray the “ideas of Indianness” and represent dynamic identities such as that of the introverted lesbian protagonist of *Kari*. A sensitive reading can hardly ignore how the production of “space” stretches to the discourse on corporeality as the novel represents the city as diseased bodies as well as a space swarmed by diseased bodies. The classificatory system thriving on the corporeal leads to the conceptualisation of the body in terms of metonymic representation of the city itself acting as an extension of the corporeal and vice versa. Patil envisages the physical body as a site of construction by others thereby conterminously celebrating the role of the body in identity politics: “On my way back home, like on any other day, I try to breathe as little as I can to prevent the 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 skis and resilient lungs- to survive this new reality” (*Kari* 13).

Kari’s worldview is questioned by the people surrounding her. Delna and Billo’s sexual life, their alcoholic nature, and their participation in the late-night parties have created new dimensions of the graphic novel. After all, Mumbai is a metro city where live-in relationships will not be as hampered as the other Indian towns. However, Kari, unlike her roommates Delna and Billo in *Crystal Palace*, never opts for such an uncontrolled lifestyle. After all, she possesses a different attitude towards life. In this regard, the mouthpiece of the novelist, Kari would be regarded as a person of moral and ethical integrity.



Identity formation is undoubtedly the most important thing in everyone's life. Kari has soft corners for distressed women like Angel having no relatives in Mumbai. A helpless woman suffering from cancer, Angel becomes the centre of Kari's care and affection when Kari gets familiar with her. Kari likes to visit her house frequently to look after her. This type of soft-heartedness is a rare quality among the city dwellers. Kari is seen to be oblivious to whatever is going on around her. She is rather an introvert and likes to control her impulses. Perhaps the novelist intends to create an outstanding female protagonist with astonishingly exceptional characteristics uncommon in city life.

Every city dweller has to accept the law of change. At a time, Kari is found to be incapable of coming out of the memories of Ruth. Afterwards, she has managed to accept crude reality. In the truest sense, Kari is a genius who handles the ups and downs of her own life without taking any help from others. At this point, Kari would represent every aspiring Indian woman who likes to be independent financially and live her life on her terms.

Amruta Patil's protagonist Kari bears witness to the social and political upheavals, reinterpreting them from her perspective. Here the novelist gives a fictionalised account where memory is allowed to flow in time and space. The readings of the text would make one identify Kari not as other to the littered city, but as an integral part of it. Kari embraces all the positive and negative aspects of city life. She has undergone many challenges to establish her identity as not being straight.

*Kari* would be read as an attempt to integrate the scattered fragments of the city the protagonist dwells in. After all, Kari is a survivor of the suicide attempt. Afterwards, being an anti-normative, Kari questions various stigmas of the Indian society while moving in the city in various directions. She eventually interacts with various types of young people who are usually found to be at odds with Kari. The issues addressed in the novel *Kari* such as mess life, live-in relationships, air pollution, smog city, flood-like situations during monsoon and poor sewerage system would represent Mumbai at its best. The novel is also known for its handling of the theme of lesbianism and challenges. Amruta Patil's *Kari* adds unique fervour to the world of the Indian graphic novel with its special emphasis on urban space.

According to Pramod K Nayar, the Indian graphic novel "is poised to become a part of the global popular, taking specific local contexts and conditions of casteism or abuse via a globally hyper-visible and widely recognised medium, onto the world readership screens" (Nayar 197). It would be observed that the graphic novel dealing with the theme of city life has gained popularity among Indian readers. For instance, Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *Corridor* (2004) represents the world of young men in old Delhi whereas *Kari* depicts the women's world in Mumbai. Both of



the novels claim critical attention regarding their masterly handling of city life from different perspectives. Kari's failure to belong to the cityscape is brilliantly highlighted by the water imagery. They also represent the degenerating aspects of the Indian cities such as old Delhi and Mumbai. To some extent, the novels have successfully incorporated the conflict between tradition and modernity. In each of the novels, one would trace the convergence of littered culture and youthful activities within an urban space. Kari undeniably anticipates that the advent of independent intellectuals will have the capacity to shape and ultimately revolutionize the littered city from within.

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