

THE APOLLONIAN

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (Online, Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed)

Vol. 2, Issue 2 (September 2015) || ISSN 2393-9001

Chief Editor: Girindra Narayan Roy

Editors: Subashish Bhattacharjee & Saikat Guha

Special Issue on *Reading Queer in Literature, Film and Culture*

Part II: Literature and Queer

Research Article:

Sex(uality) and The City: Queering Amrita Patil's *Kari*

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Sex(uality) and The City: Queering Amrita Patil's *Kari*

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Amruta Patil's *Kari* is the first Indian graphic novel with a lesbian protagonist. Unlike other popular depictions of homosexual love such as Deepa Mehta's *Fire* or Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf* (to name a few) which take place in the close quarters of domesticity, *Kari*'s story unfolds in the sometimes private and sometimes public spaces of a metropolitan city. *Kari* has been read from a variety of perspectives. To highlight some, Pia Mukherjee in her essay "Graphic Ecriture: Gender and Magic Iconography in *Kari*" tries to understand the "larger postcolonial turn to magic realism" that is operational in *Kari* (161). While trying to explain the relationship between *Kari* and her lover, Ruth, she harks to Judith Butler and writes, "Amrita Patil's story may be read precisely as the delineation of identity by way of alterity" (164). It is primarily the nexus of the postcolonial and the postmodern in *Kari* that Mukherjee tries to explicate in her essay.

On the other hand Ruth Vanita in her essay "The Homoerotics of Travel: People, Ideas, Genres" while critiquing the absence of a pronounced locale in *Kari* writes, "Going by her appearance and preoccupations, *Kari* could as well live in London or New York, as many readers of the book do [...] no sexual identity terms are used, but *Kari*'s butch baby dyke ways are quite evident, visually and in words" (112). For Vanita then Patil's arbitrariness concerning a notable geography and *Kari*'s sexual orientation reflects the "next generation of writers, born and bred in the internet patch" (112). This paper attempts to steer clear of either of the two readings and makes an attempt to uncover the nuances of the lived reality of a homosexual woman in a heteronormative culture. The paper thus seeks to highlight the various ways in which Amruta Patil paints the heteronormative landscape as well as the mental scape of a metropolitan city.

Patil's graphic novel begins with a suicide attempt by *Kari* and Ruth, her lover. Where Ruth survives the fall because she is caught by a safety net, *Kari* is

saved by the sewers in which she falls. Ruth "saved [...] (gets) into a plane and (leaves)" while Kari descends to live an anomic and alienated life (7). Kari's double life post Ruth's departure is the central preoccupation of the novel. The following queries thus become pertinent: What kind of double life is Kari living? Does Kari practice two different professions: one by day and another by night? How does her sexual orientation rub against her double life? Finally and more importantly, are Kari's constant references to suffocation, smog city, anxiety attacks thus just innocent references to the contemporary degrading environmental condition in metropolitan cities? Or do these references hint to an exclusively lesbian experience of the city and its culture?

Where Kari is a boatman who cleans the sewers by night, she works as a trainee copywriter at an advertising agency by day. The section that succeeds Kari's suicide attempt is titled *Fairytale Hair* and gestures to the "international hair-product brand called *Fairytale Hair*" for which Kari and her art director Lazarus have to create an advertisement (13). Interestingly, references to fairy tales abound in this graphic novel. Kari while sharing the fact that she lives at Crystal Palace says, "Interesting that my postal address in smog city sounds like a pit stop in a fairytale" (16). She refers to her roommates and their boyfriends as "two dancing princesses [...] plus two permanent houseguest princes" (17). These fairytale references as is argued speak volumes about a pervasive culture of heterosexual romance.

Fairytales in their contemporary modern Disney rendition are pervaded with nuances of heterosexual romance. In the epilogue to her study *Queer Enchantments: Gender, Sexuality, and Class in the Fairy-Tale Cinema of Jacques Demy* while speaking of Demy's cinema in particular, Anne E. Duggan makes a pertinent remark on the function that fairy tales can perform. She writes, "on the other hand fairy tales can also be used to communicate heteronormative and bourgeoisie ideologies, thus setting us up for failure by inculcating us often subconsciously with prefabricated dreams to which we cannot conform or aspire without sacrificing our singular desires, sexualities and identities". (143) Fairy tales as Duggan rightly argues can thus function as constraints which try to impose heteronormativity on queer subjects.

While commenting on "a variety of social constraints" that try to impose heterosexuality on women Adrienne Rich in her seminal work "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" writes, "The ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at her from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry, is a tool ready to the procurer's

hand and one which he does not hesitate to use, as Barry documents" (237). This trope of heterosexual romance as Rich rightly points out is not limited to fairy tales but is disseminated into wider cultural texts. Kari's spatial experience of the city explicitly renders Rich's comment significant. An interesting panel on p. 68 depicts Kari reminiscing about Ruth. While a dialogue box has Kari confess that "This is the place where Ruth passed by me for the first time in my life", the background of the panel carries a poster of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, a Bollywood movie which epitomises heterosexual romance (68). In this panel, Kari's lived reality as she walks around in Mumbai is seen contradicting against her homoerotic relationship with Ruth. Thus Kari's story unfolds against a culture that is permeated with images and simulation of heterosexual romance. What impact does this have on Kari's psyche? How does Kari negotiate with it? These questions shall be addressed only later in the paper after taking account of the heteronormative psyche of the inhabitants of a metropolitan city.

The story is time and again punctuated by injunctions to compulsory heterosexuality not just vis-à-vis the physical landscape of the city that Kari lives in but also by the mental landscape of other characters in the novel. Small injunctions and suggestions to Kari exhibit indebtedness of heterosexuality as well as reprehensible popular notions of homosexuality. For instance, the two "interchangeable gentlemen" namely Orgo and Zap, boyfriends to her two roommates urge Kari to find a suitable man for herself. Where Orgo tells her that "eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman", Zap tells her that "Laz is such a great guy. You have so much in common. Both of you are into books and don't party" (81). Thus, both presume that Kari is a heterosexual woman.

Lazarus on the other hand asks Kari if she is a "proper Lesbian". Although Kari responds to Lazarus by saying that "I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner. The circus isn't in my life. It's in my head" perhaps it is Lazarus's question that is more intriguing than Kari's reply (79). Lazarus's query enlightens us to the naturalized status of heterosexuality in our society. Eric Anderson in his book *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* summarises Rich's arguments on compulsory heterosexuality by remarking, "Rich maintains that the operation of compulsory heterosexuality as a product of nature reifies and naturalizes heterosexuality [...] From this understanding, homosexuality is stigmatized because it is thought to go against the supposed natural inclinations of the person." (39) Clearly, Lazarus along with Orgo and Zap believes that heterosexuality is natural and compulsory rendering any notion of homosexuality

not just stigmatized but absent from their psyche. Lazarus suspicion concerning the existence of Ruth perhaps has genesis in the same naturalized heterosexual ideology.

Kari's workplace does not provide her much refuge either. In one of the panels Kari and Lazarus travel to the tea centre for a meeting concerning the TV commercial for the aforementioned hair brand. A new character who enters "an already erratic discussion" tries to make advances at Kari. He asks "are these your new protégées? Who's the young lady with the burning eyes?" (71) Kari, the panel depicts, does not directly reply to this overture however as she leaves the tea centre with anger and hatred she tells Lazarus "Hope my burning eyes make his penis wither and fall off" (72). Kari's inability to respond, to keep silent in the face of inappropriate sexual advances that are made to her opens up a variety of questions concerning workplace discrimination that is meted to the LGBT population. Such sexual advances at workplace don't just unveil the fact that heteronormativity is more often than not institutionalised but also point to how sexual overtures at workplace put homosexual women in a precarious position as:

The woman who too decisively resists sexual overtures in the workplace is accused of being 'dried up' and sexless, or lesbian. This raises specific difference between the experiences of lesbians and homosexual men. lesbian, closeted on her job because of heterosexist prejudice, is not simply forced into denying the truth of her outside relationships or private life. Her job depends on her pretending to be not merely heterosexual, but heterosexual woman in terms of dressing and playing the feminine, deferential role required of 'real' women. (Rich 235)

Thus, Patil's Kari paints a metropolitan culture that is disseminated with images of heterosexual normalcy. A further chain of questions thus begs address: How does Kari survive in this culture? What stylistic devices does Amruta Patil use to represent Kari's unrest? Is magic realism one of the stylistic conventions that Patil employs to render Kari's experience more apparent? Does she perhaps induce a subplot to address and represent Kari's heteronormative experience of the city? Does Kari's night life, the fact that she cleans sewers at night portray an exclusively homosexual experience of the city? The following section shall cater to these multiple ideas.

Kari's experience of the city is time and again described as suffocating. She refers to Mumbai as smog city. "On my way back home like on any other day, I try to breathe as little as I can to prevent smog city from choking me. I wish I could detach my lungs" (13). In the latter part of the graphic novel Kari suffers from an

anxiety attack. "Please let me breathe! Please let me breathe" she exclaims that night (90). This trope of suffocating, of not being able to breathe I argue becomes a metaphor for Kari's queer experience. Patil's Kari paints a melancholic picture of a city and its inhabitants that are impregnated with recurrent signs of heteronormative and patriarchal existence. Against this ideological set-up Kari's most vehement desire for Ruth remains closeted; Closeted perhaps not in terms of its connotations of secrecy but suffocation. Adrienne Rich while commenting on the suffocation that inscribes the life of homosexual women writes,

We come from many pasts: out of the Left, out of the ghetto, out of the holocaust, out of the churches, out of marriage, out of "gay" movements, out of the closet, out of the darker closet of long term suffocation of our love of women. To the historic feminist demand for equal humanity, for a world free of domination through violence lesbian/feminism has joined the more radical concept of women-centred vision, a view of society whose goal is not equality but utter transformation. (212)

It is this "transformation" that Kari tries to usher in with her endeavour to clean the sewers of the smog city. While disclosing her night duty as a boatman who navigates in the sewers, Kari announces "forgot to mention. The day I hauled myself out of the sewer – the day of the double suicide - I promised the water I'd return her favours. That I would unclog her sewers when she couldn't breathe." Interestingly, the sewers' inability to breathe runs parallel to Kari's inability to breathe. If I could go so far as to argue that Patil successfully employs the stylistics of magic realism by using the metaphor of suffocating sewers to highlight the city's heteronormativity, homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality which is equally smothering. Pia Mukherjee makes an accurate estimation when she writes, "Accordingly the double magical template in Kari, the embedded fairytale and the framing navigation myth, may be read as readapting the originary elements of each – that is the familiar tale and the classical legend – to serve revisionary agendas" (161). Both the fairytale trope and the "navigation myth" do serve a "revisionary agenda". However this revisionary agenda as this paper has tried to argue is the revelation of metropolitan cities and culture as essentially silencing and heteronormative. Kari's attempt at cleaning the sewers is thus an attempt of architecting a culture of homosexuality and acceptance.

If Kari is able to find refuge in the stifling atmosphere of the pervasive heteronormativity it's in the company of Angel, the brand manager from Fairytale Hair. Their relationship promises to nurture a "women-centred vision" that

Adrienne Rich speaks of. Names in Amruta Patil's *Kari* are significant as they convey what is to be expected from a character. Angel carries all the connotations of the namesake. We first encounter Angel in *Kari*'s Office with a bald head. Soon after it is told that Angel suffers from terminal illness and is undergoing chemo. *Kari* who feels "madly drawn to her dying" visits Angel with a bunch of roses which the latter rudely refuses (37). This marks the beginning of Angel and *Kari*'s relationship. *Kari* and Angel's relationship however is sexually ambiguous. One does not get answers to questions such as: Is *Kari* in love with Angel? Does Angel reciprocate her sentiments? The following section builds towards answering these queries.

Kari's camaraderie with Angel begins "without preamble" (38). Angel is brutally honest, brusque but a confidante that *Kari* does not have. Although *Kari* and Angel's bonding is struck over death experiences that both have met with it, it soon flowers into sharing details of body tattoos, prosthetic breasts, horse-riding and relationships. *Kari*'s relationship association with Angel assumes importance when one looks at it in the light of Adrienne Rich's concept of lesbian continuum. In her aforementioned essay Rich speaks of a lesbian continuum to include

range - through each woman's life and throughout history - of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support, if we can also hear it in such associations as marriage resistance and the 'haggard' behavior identified by Mary Daly (obsolete meanings: 'intractable,' 'willful,' 'wanton,' and 'unchaste,' 'a woman reluctant to yield to wooing'), we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of lesbianism. (239)

It is this lesbian continuum that is brought to fore by the establishment of a non-sexual yet a co-operative and fulfilling relationship between *Kari* and Ruth.

Thus, Amruta Patil's *Kari* on a closer examination reveals a graphic story of the experiences of sexual minorities' in metropolitan cities. *Kari*'s encounter with "fairytales" of heteronormativity leaves her suffocated in the city; A suffocation that finds further expression in the representation of sewers as clogged and suffocating which depicts the smog ridden stifling heterosexual atmosphere of the city. *Kari*'s mammoth sized task of being a boatman and cleaning sewers thus engenders revolutionary and liberating potential. *Kari*'s navigation through the sewers of the

city while purging them of dirt and clogging promises to intervene to establish an alternative culture and in turn an alternative identity. An identity that is rooted in an exercise of agency, a belief in lesbian continuum and most importantly her homoerotic desire for Ruth.

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