

## THE ART OF AMRUTA PATIL'S *KARI*

*Anna Dasgupta*

*Research scholar, Ambedkar University, Delhi, India*

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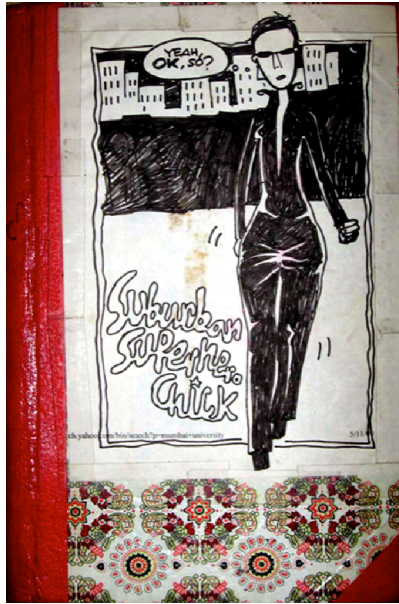
### **ABSTRACT**

*In an interview in 2010 with Helter Skelter, an online magazine, Amruta Patil responds to a question about her choice of adopting the visual medium of a graphic novel by saying that she agrees with Alice from Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland when she wonders what the use of a book was if it did not have any pictures (Shohini, "Painter of Tales"). She also talks about how comics are seen as a lowbrow art form and it indeed has been noted that some critics, like Harold Bloom, have been dismissive of the art of comics because it is more often than not perceived as an easy read. The form of the novel, however, realizes time and space on the page in such a way that it demands the complete attention of readers in order for them to interpret the narrative (Chute, Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics and Documentary Form).*

**KEYWORDS:** Graphic novel, Trinity Syndrome

### **INTRODUCTION**

Amruta Patil's *Kari*, published in 2008, has been hailed by many as the first Indian graphic novel written by a woman about a lesbian character. Heike Bauer in "Comics, Graphic Narratives and Lesbian Lives" explores what it means to call a graphic novel a "lesbian comic" and writes that even though it is largely understood as drawings of queer women by queer women but it is not necessarily limited to this definition as it could also be a graphic novel with a lesbian character without the creator being homosexual (220). When asked about how the character of *Kari* was created by Maureen Burdock for the online journal, *Eleven Eleven*, Patil refers to the personal journal she kept when she was twenty years old. *Kari*, in that journal, was supposed to be Patil's alter-ego who was 'cooler' than her and whose look was inspired by the character of Trinity from *The Matrix Trilogy* (See Fig. 1). However, the coolness of the alter-ego morphs itself in the graphic novel into a solitude that brings *Kari* a lot of pain as an introvert who is struggling with understanding life and relationships. The reference to Trinity is also seen in the graphic novel when she comes out of the sewer in a PVC suit (8). This reference to Trinity is interesting because film critic, Tasha Robinson talks about the "Trinity Syndrome", that is, when female characters that are established as strong and capable, fade away or are rendered inconsequential towards the climax of a film (thedissolve.com). However, in the beginning of the novel one sees *Kari* at her lowest. While Ruth has survived the fall of their separation, *Kari* falls into the sewers. So it is not as if she starts out as a character that has everything in control, in fact, this is the story of how she comes to terms with accepting life as it is and becoming stronger for her own self. In the last segment of the novel she declares that she will not be "jumping off ledges for anyone any more" (115) indicating that she perhaps has found some inner strength. Thus, one can note how one character, that of Trinity, has been appropriated in two ways and may have other endless possibilities of being interpreted or adapted in a certain way.



**Figure 1: Patil, Amruta. Suburban Superhero Chick. Part of Private Visual Journal of the Artist, *Eleven Eleven: Journal of Literature And Art*.**

Pramod K. Nayar in his essay “Urban Graphics” says that in *Kari* one sees an example of “spectral geography” (59). *Kari*’s loss of self and the geography of the city are conflated. One may note this when *Kari* states that she does not think that she has walked the same road twice (14). This may remind one of Heraclitus’s well-known adage about not being able to step into the same river twice. *Kari* is a character who is trying to cope with several things all together, being a lesbian in a society that thrives on heteronormativity, dealing with her job and workplace, and the bigger problem that overshadows all the others, that is of her heartbreak. While there is a sense of a loss of self, there is also an attempt made to establish an identity. In the illustrations one rarely sees her smile; if she does it is a rather sardonic one. Her eyebrows also contribute to her projection of herself as a tough woman but her mental space reveals a much softer side of her personality as she tries to grapple with loneliness. It may also be interesting to note that this exploration of the city and the self also comes across in a very postmodern, self-reflexive manner when she is on a walk with Lazarus and says “As it is, our walk makes for arty b&w pictures of grim urban life.” (78), followed by two black and white panels where homeless people sleeping on footpaths are depicted.

The reason for the tone of the comic being black and white for most of the part could be a reflection of her angst at her lover having left her because she states that the palette of the city where Ruth lives “...was pure and bright” (116) thereby leaving her in the grey “smog city”. Colour is seen mainly in the dreamscapes. However, the depiction of their past relationship shows that it was not probably meant to be. *Kari*’s mother says that even if *Kari* did not want to marry a man it did not mean that Ruth would make the same choice also (29). Also, Ruth only visits when the other girls are out and *Kari* talks about how they would explore the secret lives of spices. This could be a transferred epithet as it is the couple’s life which is secret. The star anise necklace that Ruth makes for *Kari* is seen on *Kari*’s person even after they separate perhaps to hold onto something that reminds her of Ruth (25,79). However, the pendant that is drawn on the first page is not given

a clear context. It could possibly be read as a symbol of eternity as it looks like a Celtic knot where one cannot differentiate between the beginning and the end. Since pendant is flung away, it perhaps signifies that their relationship was not meant for eternity (2).

In “Negotiations of Home and Belonging in the Indian Graphic Novels Corridor by Sarnath Banerjee and Kari by Amruta Patil”, Ira Sarma notes the art that directly refers to famous works of arts like *The Two Fridas* by Frida Kahlo; *Christina’s World* by Andrew Wyeth and *The Virgin* by Gustav Klimt. According to Sarma, this is done in order to show that these experiences are “timeless” and “placeless” because they’ve recurred in history and in various places. However, the focus is on the individual experience of Kari, her separation from Ruth, her crawling out from the sewer (and eventually rising) and her relationship with her roommates and their boyfriends. Most of these famous artworks are a part of the dreamscapes reflecting her inner turmoil and longing. However, Patil’s reworking of the Klimt painting (76) and Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (58,59) are not part of a dreamscape; the former is used in when she feels alienated as her roommates indulge in bacchanalia and the latter is from when she really enjoys her roommates company when their boyfriends are not around.

Apart from the colourful dreamscapes, one can also note certain colourful elements in certain panels. Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, writes that colour is used to objectify subjects as it draws attention to the physical form more than black and white does (192). Through this mode of expression Kari also shows the objectification of women especially models and actors. There is a digital photograph of a bikini clad woman in full colour on Laz’s desk and the images on the adjacent page shows women who have come to audition for the “Fairytale Hair” advertisement and their portfolio photographs are also in colour and Kari comments on their being dressed skimpily in these photographs (64,65). However, it should not be seen as Patil or Kari judging their choice to dress skimpily. It is the attitude that society harbors for the female body that is being critiqued. Thus, it is the long history of the practice of sexualizing the female body in order to sell products that is being brought under scrutiny. The nude body as a natural state of being is shown in the illustration where she is looking at herself in the mirror and wondering why certain beauty standards like wearing kohl is being imposed upon her just for being in possession of a female body when all she wants is to look like Sean Penn (60). Thus, Patil sketches the relationship of the body with the gaze of a patriarchal society; constructed norms of beauty and with that which is seen in the mirror in contrast with what one wants to see.

As stated before there are instances where there is an element of self-reflexivity in the novel. As a consequence of the visual nature of the form, readers are attributed with a gaze. In one panel, Kari notices the signs of physical abuse on the “Airlines lady” and comments on how everybody (including her) knows her but does not acknowledge her suffering. It also seems like the “Airlines lady” is looking directly at the reader and it gives a feeling of proximity to her because like Kari the reader is also literally inches away from her. Perhaps her gaze is accusing the readers of being complicit in the silence that surrounds abuse towards women.

Domestic abuse also forms a part of Delna’s family history. However, it is not only the male figure that is always portrayed as the perpetrator. It is implied that Billo’s mother was probably an alcoholic and that Billo had to mother her own mother since the age of seven. The two illustrations that accompany this narration is one of Billo as a child and one of her as a grown-up but the interesting thing is they are both wearing the same clothes, perhaps implying that she had to grow up much before her time. The illustration of her as a child also shows her clutching her frock from the side while the

panel with an older Billo, has her clutching a pillow on her lap, indicating a sense of anxiety that has not abated.

In one instance, Kari also looks directly at the reader and declares that she would have given anything to have had a child with Ruth. This can be interpreted as either her making a declaration meant for the self or is done by Kari in the hope that Ruth would read this (100).

The theme of fairytales also permeates the narrative. Kari considers Ruth to be her princess, her Cinderella on whom the glass slipper, that is, Crystal Palace, fits perfectly (26). She also constructs a fairytale about the Princess and the fox who can never meet. This could be a reference to their relationship as she had been asked by her senior at work to “release her inner fox” (13,14). Thus, the distance between Ruth and Kari is like the distance between the Princess and the fox; a distanced that cannot be bridged (12). Also Kari’s identity as the butch lesbian does not allow her to identify herself as either a Princess or a Prince Charming. The fairytale references in this novel seem to not talk about or sketch the princes involved probably because it is a part of Kari’s inner self where she does not see a man having that sort of a role. This bringing together of heteronormative narratives with a homosexual one could also throw light on the lack of mainstream queer narratives that are representative of the non-binary.

McCloud explains how in comics one could show a fragment of a scene with it still making sense and the perception of the whole being possible. It is, what he says is called, “closure” (63-66). Many panels in Kari are depictions of fragments that give a sense of the scene only when the reader carefully observes the individual panels and sees it as an arrangement. McCloud also states the importance of the gutter space where the imagination of the reader lies. Due to it being blank, one would assume that it does not require an engagement of any of the senses but since the reader has to bridge the gap between the panels through his/her imagination it demands the involvement of all the sense (89). However, in Kari in one of the dreamscapes where the reader sees Kari as a boatman in the sewers of Bombay, the gutter is not blank. The panels are imposed upon a larger background picture of Kari surveying the filth and the gutter is choked with this background image (32,33) perhaps to evoke the sense of suffocation (that Kari feels) in the reader by blocking the space that they control. This could be read as a depiction of the norms and expectations that are forcefully imposed upon those who are anything but heterosexual.

In an interview with Paul Gravett she also lists Dave McKean’s work as one of the influences in her art. One can note the stylistic similarities between McKean and Patil in their use of the arranging of bits and pieces of digital photographs against a black background which seems to reflect a conscious construction of what is included and what is not in the work. In the collage depicting the “Twelve Princesses” of Crystal Palace, pictures of various crystals and gems are arranged with what seems like five princesses of the twelve but are in all probability a representation of the five inhabitants of the house (16). Thus, there is also a careful arrangement of the fragments.

The world that is depicted in the novel is Kari’s perception of Bombay and her internal projections upon the city. The grey dark tones interspersed with staccato bursts of colour seen in the novel also reflect her own temperament. Since the text is in first person the reader tends to interpret the illustrations as Kari’s view. Also, even though she is physically included in most of the panels, the panels also illustrate her state of mind. For instance, in order to feel less lonely she calls

her mother and later states that her bed feels as large as a football field and this text is imposed upon an illustration of her calling her mother from an STD booth (21), whose fluorescent light, soft blue tones and smudged aesthetic inform readers about her feeling blue and emphasize her isolation. Even though her bed feeling abnormally large (this may be contrasted to the bed feeling narrow in Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf) is not visually depicted it does connect to a later illustration where her anxiety attack is portrayed through her sleeping in a fetal position on a floating iceberg, perhaps indicating the lack of warmth she feels from the people around her while she keeps repeating that she needs to breathe. The book is mostly about an individual's journey of evolving and through the entire novel we see that her homosexuality is not the center of the narrative, the story is just about a young adult coming of age and trying to deal with becoming independent (from Ruth and also in a broader sense).

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