

Representations of Identity formation in Amruta Patil's Graphic Novel Kari

¹Dr. Chitra.V. S, ²P Aditiya Mizan

¹Associate Professor of English, ²Research Scholar

¹ Postgraduate Department of English,

¹Mahatma Gandhi College, Thiruvananthapuram. India.

Abstract— The Indian literary scene underwent a radical transformation with the emergence of a new wave of Graphic Novels which voiced protest against numerous social and political injustices. However, there has been a conspicuous dearth of queer representations even within these new-wave narrations. Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) becomes remarkably pertinent to this study as it is one of the few Indian graphic novels that blatantly exposes, ridicules, and subverts the hetero normativity of a seemingly tolerant society. This paper discusses how Patil, through her 'unusual' protagonist Kari, endorses Judith Butler's critical theory of Gender Performativity. Butler's concept of the 'Heterosexual Matrix' is also explained in the light of the novel. The protagonist's search for identity and her ultimate decision to vehemently resist categorization are systematically examined in this paper.

Index Terms— Indian Graphic Literature, Amruta Patil, Gender Performativity, Heterosexual Matrix, Judith Butler.

I. INTRODUCTION

The very essence and experience of literature underwent a seismic shift with the emergence of a new kind of fiction- the Graphic Novel. Being a combination of pictorial as well as linguistic renditions of thought, it leaves no space for ambiguity or misinterpretation. In fact, the graphic novel provides a prominent platform for the transparent and conclusive expression of ideas. However, until the dawn of the last decade, Indian graphic novels were unfortunately limited to mere children's entertainment in the form of cartoons, caricatures, and comic strips. Debates of immense sociopolitical and cultural significance began to seep into the rhetoric of the graphic novel only over the past two decades. The colossal potential of graphic fiction began to be explored and engaged within the Indian literary framework only after Orijit Sen harbingered a revolution through his graphic novel *River of Stories* (1994). It can be said that Sen, through his pictorial confrontation of the controversial Narmada dam issue, kick-started an unorthodox and non-conformist movement within Indian literature. The dawn of the twenty-first century witnessed the emergence and rampant popularity of graphic fiction that addressed controversies including those within political, communal, social, and feminist realms. For instance, novelists like Sarnath Bannerjee and Vishwajyoti Ghosh maneuvered the pre-existing literary visual narrative traditions to incorporate elements of awareness and resistance. A cluster of graphic novels emerged during the time which created nothing short of a 'Visual Renaissance' (Gravett, 2012) within Indian graphic literature. These texts facilitated new ways of understanding Indianness and Identity. Children's comics like the *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Chacha Chaudhury* gave way to a new 'non-conformist' wave of works within graphic novels. The idealized, colorful images of life and society collapsed in the face of a more realistic genre that painted existence in all its bleakness and misery.

Another major literary movement took birth within Indian literature following the atrocious Nirbhaya gang-rape incident of 2012. Massive debates on women's rights shook the country in the wake of the event, prompting the vehement incorporation of feminist discourses into the Indian English literary canon as well. These newer works adopted a tone of fiery and deafening protest in order to subvert the existing patriarchal social structures and facilitate the empowerment of women. Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) falls in the middle of two distinct and prominent literary cults- the Visual Renaissance brought about by new-wave graphic novels and the powerful feminist interventions spurred by the infamous gang rape. *Kari* offers a more implicit yet passionate resistance to social and cultural injustices toward the queer. As it is, the scarcity of queer female representations in Indian literature is glaring and *Kari* is till date considered one of the best pieces in that regard. Tracing the life of a queer misfit, the novel lays bare the appalling homophobia that is still being nurtured within hetero-normative social structures. The toxic tendency to categorize, label, and consequently limit gender identities is exposed through *Kari*'s queer protagonist who resists all forms of categorization in her journey towards self-discovery, thus substantiating Judith Butler's theory of 'gender performativity'. This paper attempts an understanding of a few of Butler's critical theories, including her concept of the heterosexual matrix, in the light of Amruta Patil's *Kari*. It also discusses how Patil's graphic novel offers an unorthodox, avant-garde reading of gender, sexuality, and identity, thus forming part of the 'visual renaissance' within Indian literature.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutionalized homophobia and fanatical celebration of regressive cultural norms have made the Indian scenario one that is intimidating for queer female representations. There is a conspicuous dearth of queer inclusion in Indian literature and art. The novel format of 'Graphic Fiction' has barely included homosexuality in its rubric. Even the new wave graphic novels that advocate activism

and change usually turn a blind eye towards issues of the queer. Amruta Patil's Kari remains, to date, one of the few Indian graphic novels that foreground gender fluidity and homosexuality. Consequently, academic research has extensively engaged various facets of the work.

Krishnanunni (2008) illustrates the global history and ennui that composes the emotional make-up of the queer protagonist, while Vashishta (2021) studies the images and graphic techniques employed by Patil to foreground Kari's plight. Chris A Eng (2018) gives the novel an international perspective by exposing the global discrimination faced by 'Queer of color' youth. Kari is located within the post-modernist tradition in Zahra Ahmed's 2021 study of the 'Perception and Purpose of Indian Graphic Novel'. Studies like that of Shuhita Bhattacharjee (2018) explain the Indian queer experience in Kari through the Global diaspora. However, research is rather scanty on the topic of Kari's gender fluidity. This study aims to bridge the gap in research by systematically examining Kari's emotional landscape using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in order to subvert the hetero-normativity that is invisible yet very much existent in the Indian social dynamic.

The graphic novel Kari becomes remarkably pertinent to this study because it blatantly exposes, ridicules, and subverts the hypocrisies of a seemingly tolerant and secular society. The novel's critical acclaim and the immense paucity of queer graphic novels in the Indian literary canon warrants the need to study this work. The present study employs Textual Analysis to expose how Amruta Patil achieves this subversion. Textual Analysis is a methodology employed by researchers to understand the language, symbols, or pictures within the selected text. Such an analysis helps to gain insight into the way meanings are created. The social, political, historical, and cultural influences on those meanings can also be studied using this methodology. Textual Analysis has been chosen as the methodology for the present study taking into consideration its reliability and efficiency.

III. SUBVERTING PROTOTYPES OF GENDER AND IDENTITY

Patil's protagonist, the eponymous Kari, is a queer girl fighting for her place in the fictional suburb of Mumbai called 'smoke city'. The morbid opening of the novel heralds the predicament of Kari in her journey towards self-discovery from within a rigidly hetero normative society. It is with visuals of Kari and her lover Ruth's attempted double suicide that the novel begins. However, both the girls are rescued and planted back into life. Ruth is saved by a safety net following which she leaves the city and adopts a life of blind assimilation into the heterosexual equation. Kari on the other hand is saved by a sewer and is hurled back once again into the very 'smoke city' that she wanted to leave behind. In the second phase of her life, Patil's twenty-one-year-old Kari decides to view the failed suicide as a mere 'slipshod surgical procedure' (Patil, 3) and as a catalyst for the acknowledgment and acceptance of her true queer self. The failed suicide is a transformative point in her life and is a dire incident that changes Kari's perceptions about her own self; she learns to come to terms with her sexual and gender identity. The young queer protagonist takes up a job in an advertisement company where she makes friends with people who help her emerge as more adaptable and bolder. For instance, her friend Angel, a cancer patient, prompts her to embrace the unconventionality of her existence and to remain in the 'fluid' space of both society and life. Kari's flatmates and their boyfriends all play a crucial role in the shaping of her identity and in her fight against hetero-normativity.

Amruta Patil is renowned for celebrating marginalized lives through her literature. For instance, her graphic novels *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (2016) engage the perspectives of sidelined characters from the Mahabharata namely Ganga and Ashwatthama. Kari too is sidelined within the fast-paced heterosexual society she is destined to have been born into. She refuses to or rather is incapable of fitting into the prototype of a 'feminine' character. Amruta Patil places her non-conformist protagonist at the intersection of multi numerous social and cultural roles. She struggles to fit into her identity as that of a lesbian, a working woman, a loner, a confused daughter, a committed lover, and most of all a societal outcast. She celebrates both her 'non-belongingness' and her inclusivity in the cultural framework of 'smoke city'. The novel captures Kari's lush emotional experiences and interiority as she learns to come to terms with her various different and equally prominent identities. It can be said that 'Kari' offers us an uncensored and raw glimpse of the world through the eyes of a young queer individual. Reminiscent of Kari's multiple roles in society, Patil's novel falls at the intersection of various intertextual influences. The work is considered to be replete with influences of multiple works including those of Jeanette Winterson and RK Narayan. This conspicuous heteroglossia of the novel echoes the complex array of emotions within the young girl's psychological landscape. This multiplicity of discourse was, it can be said, incidental in the uniqueness of Kari's character formation. Patil herself baptized Kari the 'unusual protagonist' while discussing the novel in an interview with Paul Gravett. She clarified that she "wanted to send out an unusual protagonist into the Indian literary scene. A young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman- counterpoint to the hyper-feminine prototypes one keeps coming across" (Patil as quoted in Gravett 2012)

IV. THE ROLE OF METAPHORS IN 'QUEERING' KARI

An abundance of uncommon and unorthodox metaphors marks the progress of the novel. What makes Kari exponentially more peculiar in the Indian literary framework is her frequent association with the drainage systems and sewers of smog city. The tendency in the literature to identify femininity with fragrance, divinity, and motherhood is subverted unquestionably through Patil's portrayal of a shabby queer woman who occasionally even 'smells funny'. Likewise, Water, which is usually symbolic of purity, reverence, and fertility, especially within an Indian context is given a starkly contradictory connotation in the novel. The constant reference to wastewater in the sewers and other underground drainage pipes serves as a reminder of queer existence within the pockets of seemingly heterosexual and cis-gendered society. The effluence in these drains can be said to signify the queer populations that co-exist within rigid hetero normative cultures. They, however, are avoided as one would avoid wastewater. The queer protagonist Kari learns to maneuver the ostensibly dirty sewers and assumes the role of a boatman. She says, "The day I hauled myself out of the sewer- the day of the double suicide- I promised the water I'd return her favor. That I'd unclog her sewers when she couldn't breathe.

I earned myself a boat that night. As a boatman, you learn to row clean through the darkest water.” (Patil, 31). The metaphor of the boatman brings to the forefront Kari’s navigation through rough waters and her ultimate success in embracing the fluidity of her existence. The sewer has also been seen as a pictorial representation of Kari’s troubled, unpredictable and infinite head space. Her nebulous and peculiar identity is often paralleled with the sewage systems in smog city, thereby radically subverting the age-long tradition of limiting femininity to clean and ostensibly pure spaces. Kari’s fascination with the stinky and filthy locations and her nonconformity to feminine beauty standards have been symbolically portrayed through her comparison to sewers.

The novel vigorously draws attention to Kari’s emotional landscape rather than to her physicality. She is sketched as a girl with an unobtrusive dressing style probably in an attempt to channel the readers’ attention away from her appearance and make them focus on the multifarious metaphors signifying everything from turbulence to silence and unquenched thirst for self-discovery. In fact, the novel Kari is a celebration of the queer mental space. The portrayal of the protagonist’s intricate psychological dilemmas is the primary concern of the work and it is achieved by exploring her intimate emotional equations in all their rawness and uncensored wild beauty. The reader is taken on a voyage through the psychological landscape of the young girl. For this purpose, Amruta Patil employs various narrative as well as visual strategies. For instance, Kari’s physical appearance including her dressing style is in a minimalistic pattern, often tapering to mere silhouettes or shadows in some of the panels. This lack of importance assigned to corporeal attributes is however ironic as it is this very physicality that proves pivotal in her journey towards identity formation. Kari’s body interestingly is both trivial and vital in the progression of the novel as the very body that was ignored and evaded in the initial phase of her journey was later on endowed with great significance. It is through her body that Kari’s rebellion, non-conformity, and acceptance of her raw being become evident. The second phase of her life, set off by the momentous failed suicide, is characterized by her journey towards self-identity. During this phase, she exhibits ultimate protest against many of the regressive gender norms of smog city. One of her marks of non-abidance to the gender binary is by cutting her hair short right before a public function. This action is in fact the point that marks Kari’s ultimate and conclusive liberation from the toxic social norms. In other words, it is through her body that she celebrates the fluidity of her existence. With her hair cut short and her clothes all shabby, she is, as described by her hairdresser, a “looking boy type” (Patil, 107). Towards the end of the novel, Kari has learned to accept, acknowledge and embrace the androgynous facets of her existence. However, she resists any kind of categorization, describing herself only as ‘fluid’. She does not assume even a lesbian identity, placing herself strongly within the realm of water, sewers, and boats. Her journey is one towards fluidity.

Kari is juxtaposed with images of sewers in many of the panels. For instance, one of the drawings reveals Kari, silhouetted against the dusky city surrounded by water on all four sides. She has her back turned and seems to be observing carelessly the exceptional significance of water in her life. As she is surrounded by deep water, one can easily deduce that in this scene she plays the role of the boatman. She is constantly shown as rowing her boat without the concept of reaching a destination. As sewers and consequently water is all-pervasive within the architecture of smog city, she finds no escape from the role of the boatman. However, we understand that what she celebrates is not the destination but the journey itself. The boat and the water that engulfs her are metaphors that remind the readers of her pronounced relationship with fluidity. She chooses to remain outside the mainstream conventions that define sexuality, gender, and identity, preferring instead to remain in the undefined and fluid spaces of society. The boatman metaphor elucidates clearly how Kari undertakes to embrace the fluid nature of her emotions as well as corporeal reality.

The fluidity of her mindscape has been projected not just through water imagery but also by providing the reader with a conclusive and internalized understanding of the world through the protagonist’s very subjective point of view. Through a surreal and mystic reporting of Kari’s experiences with the sewer and with the fluidity of that space, the reader is made to empathize with her on a personalised plane. The metaphors are open to interpretation just like Kari’s sexuality. They refuse to take on a singular rigid form, thus leaving space for endless interpretations and ‘reinterpretations’. The only truth which remains untampered is the young queer girl’s obsession with fluidity. Kari’s gender fluidity and non-conformity now become an intimate and customized experience even for the readers themselves. Images like that of the boatman and the effluence succeed in triggering the emotional sensibilities of the readers making them take part in Kari’s misery, viewing matters through the queer eye. The usual patriarchal gaze, which invariably advocates the rigidity of a problematic sexual binary, is subverted in the novel by offering an ‘unusual’, feminist and queer gaze. Kari’s outright rejection of categorization and the fluidity of her existence are explained further on in this paper in the light of Judith Butler’s theory of Gender Performativity.

V. AN UNDERSTANDING OF HOMOPHOBIA

A conclusive understanding of Kari and her emotional landscape prerequisites an understanding of society at large. Queer communities are pushed into the fringes of society and their culture is sidelined, if not outright ignored, through the establishment of regressive and gravely toxic social structures. Kari exists in an essentially hetero normative environment where anything departing from a constructed notion of ‘normalcy’ is rejected. Nonconformity to the rigid social norms, it can safely be said, is the ticket towards othering and ostracism. Especially within patriarchal cultures like that of India, homosexuality and queerness are met with extreme resistance, and consequently many non-conforming individuals are forced to adopt silence or repress their sexuality for fear of persecution. Even within the rubric of seemingly progressive metro cities, the extent of homophobia is baffling.

The fictional smog city is said to be located within Mumbai which means that the novel showcases an actual slice of Indian culture in all its bleakness and shortcomings. Homophobia has been internalized into the equation of Indianness since time immemorial. Consequently, engaging in Indian culture invariably implies the existence of problematic narratives both within informal as well as official avenues. For instance, Indian broadcasting companies and mainstream media still advocate regressive ideologies on issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. Advertisements and other popular mainstream narratives swarm with toxic representations of queer individuals leading to the nurturing of further societal prejudices against such people. Prior to the twentieth century, queer characters mostly assumed negative roles or were custom-made for humor and ridicule in media. In fact, even today, the situation remains

pathetic. Cultural minorities are still grossly underrepresented and stereotyped within the mainstream narrative, leading to further oppression of these communities. Media discursive plays a pivotal role in the normalization of the toxic binary of males and females. The idea of traditional and moral family values assumes a hetero normative, upper caste, and middle-class stance in Indian media. Consequently, the Indian society has learned to limit acceptance and inclusivity to a limited hetero normative section, while pushing all other non-conforming individuals to the margins of civilization.

The ghastly attempted suicide of Kari and her lover Ruth, with which the novel opens, is Patil's strong statement against the institutionalized homophobia in Indian society. The young lovers were petrified at the very prospect of coming out to the patriarchal, orthodox, and rigidly hetero normative society. This led them to adopt extreme measures like suicide, self-loathing, and violence like millions of other queer individuals destined to have been born into the same society. What makes the plight of the queer even more agonizing is the institutionalized invisibilization of the problem. Patriarchal societies refuse to, or rather are incapable of comprehending the venomous aftermaths of rigid hetero normativity. When only a single, hegemonic version of sexuality is accepted as normal, it paves way for the problematic notion that all other types of sexuality are 'abnormal'. Likewise, the existence of staunch male-female binary exiles all other practices of gender to the peripheries of society. This unintentional yet careless handling of fragile concepts like gender and identity makes Indian society a turbulent space for queer individuals. Linda Schlossberg, an eminent professor of gender and sexuality studies remarks that "Heterosexual culture continually passes itself off as being merely natural, the undisputed and unmarked norm." (2012). Numerous studies have been carried out on this issue of the invisibility of hegemonic and powerful social structures. It was Judith Butler who ultimately verbalized this social dilemma conclusively through her concept of the 'Heterosexual Matrix'.

VI. THE CONCEPT OF A HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX

The heterosexual matrix is "the grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (Butler, 194). Judith Butler also calls it the "institution of compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality" (30). This means that aspects of gender, sexuality, and desire are regulated by society and culture. Only a certain combination of these three aspects becomes acceptable within a social framework while other lesser practiced combinations are brutally sidelined. The accepted combination is that of mandatory heterosexual desire along with a docile abidance to the gender binary. This regulatory combination also dictates that the words 'sex' and 'gender' be used synonymously. Consequently, individuals whose sexuality and gender do not indicate the same feature or those who fail to exhibit a sexual desire for the opposite gender are excluded from the 'heterosexual matrix' of the society. They are denied recognition, acceptance, or even empathy within the patriarchal social structure, where only those who fall within the heterosexual matrix get to enjoy the privileges of power and agency. Cis-gendered heterosexual individuals dominate the social, cultural, and political spheres, thereby colonizing the spaces of the queer. Sexual minorities are consequently made victims of under-representation and sidelining, causing them to repress their true identity for fear of exclusion. They are pressurized by family and society to somehow find for themselves a place within the heterosexual matrix. The novel Kari efficiently portrays how the existence of this problematic matrix leads the young queer protagonist towards suicide.

Kari has always been forced, even by her family, to remain within the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix for fear of her being labeled a social outcast. For instance, her mother did not welcome or acknowledge Kari's homosexuality when she found out about Ruth. As homosexuality is often considered the road towards social exclusion and objectification, her mother begins to panic about Kari's status. She not only advises her queer daughter to assume the false identity of heterosexuality but also scorns her for being the way she is. "This is not how I raised you. Of all the people in such a big city you pick the smut and the degenerates" (Patil, 31), she says. She is also desperate to get Kari married at the earliest, as the institution of marriage occupies prime space within the hetero normative rubric.

Her fear stems from the bare truth that society has nothing to offer but cruel discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice for anyone who chooses to remain outside the rigid boundaries of the heterosexual matrix. Kari's family, consequently compels her to put on a facade of heterosexuality by customizing her appearance and mannerisms to be more 'feminine'. She is asked to mimic the qualities of 'femininity' prescribed by the hetero normative society which mandates her to be submissive, soft-spoken, perfumed, and well dressed. Kari however, refuses to mask her deviance from socially accepted norms. In fact, during the second phase of her life, Kari exhibits a subtle yet fierce subversion of such regressive norms through her conspicuous non-compliance to the prescribed rubric of femininity. After the failure of her suicide attempt, Kari makes strong statements against the existence of the invisible heterosexual matrix by celebrating her gender fluidity and non-conformity. It is mainly through her physical appearance that she drives home her resistance. Her dressing style is minimalistic and her hair is cut short as she learns to embrace her androgynous self, in outright defiance of the normalized heterosexual matrix.

Kari's rebellion against the vicious matrix is not an easy one, especially with the abundance of regressive discourses within mainstream narrations. As discussed earlier in this paper, mainstream media, including advertisements, contribute to the institutionalized othering of sexual minorities. The toxic notion of a gender binary and the normalization of heterosexuality are propagated mainly through popular media like advertisements which reach a considerable portion of the population, thereby assuming ascendancy over their ideologies and beliefs. "both localized practices and centralized institutions legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and natural within society." (Cohen, 448) Kari is, quite ironically, the creative designer of one of the prominent advertising firms in smog city. This probably is Amruta Patil's way of strategically exposing the helplessness of queer individuals who are incapable of finding their voices within a predominantly heterosexual environment. In spite of working at an advertisement company, Kari is not able to radically shift the patriarchal and problematic nature of their ads. Her workplace is no different from the rest of the society in aspects of sexuality and gender awareness. In fact, the young girl happens to be at the receiving end of endless unsolicited advice from her colleagues and friends on matters of her sexuality. For instance, one of her acquaintances Zap tells her "eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman" (Patil 81).

VII. GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Kari, in the initial stages of her life, is seen as a helpless and voiceless young girl whose only escape from the orthodox heterosexual matrix was suicide. However, as her attempt at it fails, Kari begins to embrace her existence in all its colors. She renounces all societal norms and learns to celebrate every facet of her life including the fluidity of her gender. The failed suicide, it can be said, was an occurrence of epiphany in Kari's life where she realized the utter futility of abidance to socially constructed conventions. Her suicide can be considered as a 'transformative viewpoint' (Vashishta, 215) that acted as a catalyst for her queering. It was after this point that Kari began to exhibit conspicuous non-conformity to hetero normative social systems. "A failed suicide is a death still because no one emerges from it unscathed" (Patil, 10).

Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity states that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (33) The idea that gender is not assigned at birth but is constructed through repetitive actions is crucial to an understanding of Kari's ultimate liberation from regressive social shackles. The second phase of her life, characterized by the miraculous escape from death, is a powerful protest against the dichotomy of gender. Kari chooses to remain within the fluid spaces of society and refuses to be categorized into a single socially constructed gender or sexual identity. She embarks on a quest to construct her own distinct identity in the later sections of the novel. Like the boatman that she is, Kari constantly engages in a journey through the complex landscapes of her still unexplored identity. The constant association of the protagonist with water is Patil's strategy to expose the malleability and transferability of traditionally rigid concepts like gender and sexuality, thereby substantiating Judith Butler's theory.

Kari sets forth to construct her own unique gender identity through her actions. For instance, she customizes her physical appearance in such a way that it becomes quite impossible to determine her gender and to categorize her under the dichotomy of male or female. Although still biologically female, she frequently dresses up in men's attires. She can also be seen referring to herself as a drag queen. This physical non-conformity to the rubric of femininity is also seen in her relationship to her hair. A woman's hair assumes the primary position in signifying her purity, chastity, and femininity, especially within a traditional Indian context. This immense significance endowed on hair is foregrounded in the novel through Kari's friend Angel who is a cancer patient who has gone bald. Being a conforming female in Indian society, Angel longs for her long hair. "I'm bald because I'm sick, not because I'm a butch" (Patil, 38) she confirms, implying that shaving off hair would make one look less of a female. Through this conversation, Patil subverts the inherent tendency of patriarchal societies to view gender not as performative, but as rigid and binary. Kari however remains unaffected by the social prejudice and bigotry during the second phase of her life. In fact, while Kari gets rid of her hair, she pictures herself as cutting off the umbilical cord that connects her to the patriarchal and regressive society. At the closing of the novel, we see a Kari who has discovered her sexuality and extension, her true identity. She emerges from her suicide as a tougher and resilient being who is capable of maneuvering the rough waters of her emotional landscape and finally establishing her existence outside the conventional social categories. Kari becomes an image that unsettles hetero normative societies as she is both within and outside the social structure simultaneously. Kari assimilates into the dynamic of a functioning heterosexual society while at the same time remaining outside its borders.

Kari is at times an active participant in the equation of sexuality, while at other times she assumes the role of an estranged observer, reiterating the fluid quality of her gender. She vehemently resists categorization. For instance, while engaging in conversation with a heterosexual friend, she is faced with the question, "Are you like a proper lesbian?" (Patil, 79) The invisible absurdity of this question is brought to the forefront through Kari's even more absurd reply. She responds, "I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, the active loner. The circus isn't in my life. It's in my head" (Patil, 79). Kari, here, exposes the irrationality of trying to gatekeep the notion of sexuality and impose categories on individuals. She proves how gender cannot, as Butler observes, be socially constructed or regulated.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Towards the end of the novel, we understand that Kari has evolved to be a more mature, composed, and happier version of herself probably because she began performing gender in a fluid and non-binary manner. The novel ends just like it opens- with the imagery of suicide. In one of the final panels, Kari is shown to be standing on top of a building fighting the urge to jump from there. However, this time she wishes not to die but to take off and soar high like a 'Pigeon Girl'. "(I) still love Ruthie more than anyone else in the world but (I) won't be jumping off ledges for anyone anymore." (Patil, 114) Kari's 'queering' therefore can be read as a vibrant chronicle of love- for the self and for transformative change. In the process of subverting the normalized notions of heterosexual supremacy, this novel offers us a vibrant assortment of political, social, and cultural debates. Patil, in fact, has radically opened up new ways of seeing the Indian queer and literature.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ahmad, Zahra. "Perception And Purpose of Indian Graphic Novel". *The Criterion: An International Journal In English*, vol 12, no. 4, 2021, Accessed 27 June 2022.
- [2] Bhattacharjee, Shuhita. "Relocating Home and Diasporizing the South Asian Queer". *Beyond Trishanku: Diaspora Poetics and Homing in South Asian Women's Writing*, Lexington Books, 2018, Accessed 27 June 2022.
- [3] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.
- [4] Datta, Surangama. "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*, vol 4, no. 1, 2020, Accessed 27 June 2022.

- [5] Eng, Chris A. "Toward The "Uncommonly Beautiful": Queer-Of-Color Youth And "Delectable Deformity" In Rakesh Satyal's Blue Boy". MELUS: The Society for The Study of The Multi-Ethnic Literature Of The United States, vol 43, no. 4, 2018, Accessed 27 June 2022.
- [6] Patil, Amruta. Kari. Harper Collins, 2008.
- [7] Raju, Surya. "A Butlerian Reading of Kari by Amruta Patil". Research Journal of English Language and Literature, vol 9, no. 3, 2021, Accessed 27 June 2022.
- [8] Vashishtha, Keyushee. "The Transgressive Self in Amruta Patil's Kari". IIS Univ.J.A, vol 10, no. 1, 2021, Accessed 27 June 2022.