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Drawing Desire: Lesbian Identity and Queer Urban Loneliness in Amruta Patil's *Kari*

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Abstract
Amruta Patil's *Kari* (HarperCollins, 2008) stands at the intersection of queer narrative, visual art, and Indian urban realism. Emerging as one of the earliest Indian graphic novels to foreground lesbian subjectivity, the text moves beyond the "coming-out" paradigm to inhabit the textures of queer survival and affective loneliness. Patil's protagonist, Kari, is not a heroic figure of liberation but a weary flâneur who drifts through "Smog City," trying to breathe in a world that has little space for her kind of love. Through the fusion of text and image, Patil visualizes what Judith Butler calls the "constitutive failure" of gender performance (Butler 33) and what Sara Ahmed theorizes as the disorientations of queer phenomenology. The novel's murky atmosphere—its drains, smog, and bruised skylines—renders urban space as both material and psychic landscape. Reading *Kari* through Butler, Ahmed, and later queer thinkers such as José Esteban Muñoz allows us to understand how lesbian identity in a heteronormative Indian metropolis becomes an ongoing negotiation between visibility and erasure, embodiment and alienation, desire and survival.

Keywords: Queer narrative, Lesbian identity, Graphic novel, Urban alienation, Gender performativity

Introduction

Patil opens *Kari* with an image of descent—literally and figuratively. The first panel shows two women leaping from a high ledge, an echo of their failed suicide pact. The accompanying text "We jumped. Ruth survived. I lived" (Patil 3) immediately fractures identity: to live is not necessarily to survive. This moment situates Kari's narrative within a melancholic afterlife of love. Butler's reflections in *The Psychic Life of Power* that the subject is "constituted through subjection" (Butler 7) resonate here: Kari's subjectivity is born out of loss and negation. The city, too, mirrors this wound. "Smog City stinks of sweat, diesel, and half-lived dreams" (Patil 12); its polluted air figures the social toxicity that Kari must inhale daily. The smog is both literal pollution and the affective residue of heteronormativity—a haze through which Kari's orientation, in Ahmed's sense, becomes uncertain.

Ahmed defines orientation as the way bodies are "directed toward some objects and not others" (*Queer Phenomenology* 15). Kari's body is continually mis-directed. Her love for Ruth places her out of line with the city's spatial and moral directions; even her workplace scenes advertising offices lit by neon monitors display a misalignment between private longing and public façade. When a colleague asks about Ruth, Kari replies with calculated vagueness, "She moved abroad," while the panel's shadowed corners frame Kari in a boxed cubicle (Patil 27). The image captures the phenomenology of the closet—not as secrecy alone but as a constricted orientation within space. Ahmed reminds us that "to be oriented is also to be at home" (8); Kari's home is thus perpetually deferred, existing only in fragments of memory and sketch.

Patil's visual grammar amplifies this misorientation. Kari's figure is often drawn in grey washes against stark white backgrounds, her posture slightly slouched, eyes averted. These compositional gestures enact Butler's insight that gender is a citation of norms—always repeated yet never quite complete (*Gender Trouble* 45). Kari's androgynous clothing and withdrawn body language perform femininity askew: legible enough to avoid overt hostility, illegible enough to remain outside heterosexual scripts. In one panel she cuts her hair herself, scissors glinting near her face, muttering, "Ruth liked it long" (Patil 41).

The act becomes a small rebellion against the memory of heteronormative femininity internalized even within queer desire. As Kaustav Bakshi notes, *Kari* "locates queerness not in loud assertion but in the quiet bodily negotiations that mark everyday life" (Bakshi 82). Each gesture—lighting a cigarette, tending to the wounded drains of the city—becomes a micro-performance through which Kari tests the boundaries of legibility.

The city, however, never allows stable legibility. Its architecture is claustrophobic: stairwells, overpasses, subterranean tunnels. Kari's work as an advertising copywriter positions her amid capitalist spectacle yet emotionally detached from it. In panels showing billboards of glamorous heterosexual couples, Kari walks beneath them like a ghost. This visual juxtaposition performs what Ahmed calls "compulsory straight lines" (Ahmed 70): the spatial directionality of normativity that renders queer paths crooked or invisible. The "smog city" is therefore both an environment and an epistemology—an opaque medium through which vision and orientation falter. Patil writes, "You can't see far in this city. Everything is smoke, fog, and people trying not to bump into each other" (Patil 56). The line evokes not only urban congestion but the affect of queer loneliness, an inability to reach others across blurred distances.

Scholars have read *Kari*'s smog as an allegory of queer invisibility. Smita Mohanty and colleagues argue that "Patil transforms pollution into metaphor, making the city's grime coincide with the moral murk that clouds queer life" (Mohanty *et al*. 3). Yet Patil also grants the smog a paradoxical productivity. The same haze that obscures can protect. When Kari tends to the city's drains—her job as "drain cleaner of Smog City" (Patil 63)—the filth becomes a refuge, a place unseen by moral surveillance. Here Patil reclaims abjection as agency. Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, reminds us that "the abject designates precisely those 'unlivable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely inhabited" (Butler xxiii). Kari's drain-work literalizes this: the underbelly of the city, its unlivable zone, is where she most vividly lives. The panel where she wades through muck, haloed by dim light, offers a queer sanctum amid decay.

Loneliness pervades the narrative not as mere emotion but as structure. "Ruth is a hole in the smog," Kari confesses, "a clean breath I can no longer reach" (Patil 71). The line entwines desire and respiration—love as the possibility of breathing. Ahmed's concept of "breathing room" in queer spaces (Ahmed 147) clarifies this: heteronormativity suffocates by crowding out alternative orientations, leaving queer subjects gasping for air. Patil's panels literally depict this suffocation: narrow frames, overlapping speech bubbles, dense grey tones. The few moments of visual openness—rooftop scenes, rain-washed skies—suggest transient reprieves rather than freedom.

Yet *Kari* is not only about suffocation; it is about crafting livable air. José Esteban Muñoz's notion of "queer utopia" as the horizon of potentiality (*Cruising Utopia* 1) helps us read Kari's quiet acts—writing, drawing, tending plants—as gestures toward alternative futures. In one striking sequence, Kari draws herself and Ruth as mermaids entwined beneath the sea (Patil 90). The aquatic imagery recalls her earlier fall and survival but re-imagines immersion as connection rather than drowning. Muñoz writes that queer utopia "is not yet here but insists on being glimpsed" (23); Patil's drawings within the novel function as these glimpses, moments where imagination reorients the suffocating city toward possible tenderness.

Brinda Bose situates *Kari* within what she terms "the queer intimacies of the ordinary" (Bose 118). Rather than spectacular rebellion, Patil's protagonist enacts a politics of minor gestures: sharing food with her flatmates, patching walls, cleaning drains. These acts embody Butler's later reflections on precarity and interdependence (*Frames of War* 43). Survival, for Kari, depends on mundane relationality. Her household—composed of non-conforming women and transient friends—becomes a fragile queer collective that counters the city's isolating logic. When one roommate remarks, "You look like a boy," and Kari replies, "So do you," the panel's humour disarms gender policing and affirms shared deviance (Patil 102). Here queerness is communal, an everyday practice of care amid alienation.

The novel's graphic form plays a crucial role in constructing this affective politics. Scholars such as Nandini Dhar note that Patil's "visual minimalism resists the colonial inheritance of spectacle in Indian art" (Dhar 59). By refusing bright colour and excess detail, Patil situates desire in ambiguity. The muted palette of greys and greens evokes both decay and interior calm. In contrast to Western lesbian graphic memoirs like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, which rely on verbal irony, *Kari* speaks through silence and shade. Panels without text compel the reader to dwell in pauses—an aesthetic of reticence that mirrors queer discretion in a society where visibility can invite harm. Butler reminds us that recognition can also be violence: "To be recognized is to be in some sense captured" (*Undoing Gender* 33). Patil's restraint thus becomes ethical, protecting queer interiority from the capture of voyeuristic gaze.

Still, silence is double-edged. The very invisibility that shields Kari also isolates her. When she walks alone through rain-soaked streets, umbrella tilting, the narration observes, "There is no word for the kind of loneliness that smells of diesel" (Patil 110). The sensory precision—the smell of diesel—anchors alienation in the material. Ahmed's phenomenology insists that orientation involves the senses; smell, touch, and sound orient bodies in space (Ahmed 27). Kari's loneliness is thus corporeal, not abstract; it is inscribed in breathing polluted air, in brushing against indifferent crowds. Yet this material embeddedness also resists abstraction into universal "urban angst." Patil grounds her lesbian protagonist within the specifically Indian city—where class, gender, and language intersect. The maid who calls her "sir-madam," the landlord who warns against "funny business," the advertising jargon that sells heterosexual fantasy—all index how queerness is policed through everyday discourse.

Critical readings of *Kari* often emphasize its pioneering status in Indian queer literature, but Patil's innovation lies equally in her re-imagination of the city itself. The metropolis becomes an organism with lungs and nerves, a character that both crushes and shelters. Kari describes it as "the monster I feed every day with my labour and my loneliness" (Patil 121). The symbiosis recalls Walter Benjamin's flâneur, yet gendered and queered. Unlike Benjamin's male wanderer, Kari cannot roam without scrutiny; her flânerie is circumscribed by safety and respectability. Nevertheless, her nocturnal wanderings reclaim urban anonymity as queer possibility. As she rides empty trains or sits on rooftops, she inhabits temporal

margins—nighttime, monsoon, between shifts—that suspend normative rhythms. Ahmed would call this a "queer temporality of delay" (Ahmed 158): moving sideways rather than forward, lingering in the smog instead of seeking clear skies.

The novel's closing movement transforms this delay into endurance. Ruth remains absent; no reconciliation occurs. Yet Kari's narration shifts from despair to tentative affirmation: "I have learned to breathe the city's air without choking" (Patil 132). The final panels show her cycling through dawn mist—a repetition of earlier smog scenes, now tinged with light. Muñoz's optimism resonates: queerness as the horizon of hope that "lets us feel that the world might be otherwise" (Muñoz 9). Kari's survival is not triumphalist but durational, what Butler calls "the persistence of the living through the unlivable" (*Precarious Life* 28). In this persistence lies Patil's ethics of queer survival: breathing within smog, not beyond it.

Reading *Kari* today, in the context of post-Section 377 India, its portrayal of lesbian isolation remains urgent. Legal decriminalization has not dispelled the social smog of shame and invisibility. Patil anticipated this condition, crafting a protagonist whose alienation is structural, not merely personal. The novel's affective realism—its slow pacing, its muted palette, its interweaving of humour and hurt—renders queer life as both ordinary and extraordinary. The drain cleaner, the copywriter, the friend, the ex-lover: all coexist within a single, smog-stained frame.

Scholarly engagement with *Kari* continues to expand. Recent feminist readings (Datta 2019) emphasize Patil's redefinition of visual agency: the lesbian subject as both observer and maker. Kari's voiceover, often in lower-case script, coexists with drawings that contradict or exceed her words. This tension mirrors Butler's idea that language never fully captures embodiment. Kari's self-representation through drawing becomes an act of self-constitution beyond verbal discourse. As she sketches her city, she re-orients herself within it what Ahmed would call "a politics of re-direction" (Ahmed 178). The final image of Kari's bicycle moving toward the horizon is thus not escape but ongoing negotiation, an acceptance of motion as identity.

The ethical question that shadows all queer representation—who gets to look, who gets to speak—receives a subtle answer in *Kari*. Patil, as both author and illustrator, occupies the dual role of witness and world-maker. Her narrative voice is compassionate yet unsentimental, refusing both martyrdom and moral panic. The lesbian outsider is neither demonized nor idealized but rendered in shades of grey—literally and metaphorically. This tonal complexity resists what Bakshi calls "the new essentialism of queer celebration" (Bakshi 89), reminding readers that visibility without nuance reproduces the same binaries that queerness seeks to undo.

In synthesizing Butler, Ahmed, and Muñoz, we see *Kari* as a meditation on orientation, performativity, and utopian endurance. Butler's performativity exposes the fragility of gender scripts that Kari must cite and resist; Ahmed's phenomenology traces how spatial and affective disorientation shapes her daily movements; Muñoz's utopianism illuminates the glimpses of hope that flicker within her melancholia. The "smog city," then, is not merely oppressive—it is generative, producing the very conditions through which queer art and survival emerge. Kari's loneliness, far from exceptional, reflects a collective affect of queer urban existence, where desire is both a wound and a form of knowledge.

Ultimately, Patil's *Kari* compels readers to rethink what it means to see, to breathe, and to desire in a city that both erases and sustains. Its fusion of visual minimalism and lyrical prose creates a phenomenology of smog: the blurred vision that nonetheless perceives differently. In doing so, Patil offers an ethics of queer attention—an invitation to look closely at the unnoticed, to find tenderness in pollution, and to acknowledge the quiet labour of survival that queer bodies perform daily. The novel redefines lesbian identity not as a fixed label but as a way of moving through space, an embodied orientation toward others that persists despite erasure. Kari's journey, from falling to breathing, from isolation to tenuous belonging, maps the contours of queer life in contemporary India: uncertain, muted, but defiantly alive.

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