



Women And Gender in Graphic Novels: An Analysis of Amruta Patil's *Kari*

Parvathy.J^{1*}, Dr.S.Rema Devi²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of English, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishna Kovil, Tamil Nadu.

²HOD& Associate Professor, Department of English, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishna Kovil, Tamil Nadu.

***Corresponding Author:** Parvathy.J

*Research Scholar, Department of English, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishna Kovil, Tamil Nadu.

Citation: Parvathy.J. (2024). Women And Gender in Graphic Novels: An Analysis of Amruta Patil's *Kari*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(4), 8382-8386. Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i4.2102

ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The history of human kind has crossed ages, reaching every generation through stories. These pictures appended with verbal comments or conversations exhibit a remarkable impact on people. The outcome of this amalgamation has resulted in the emergence of a sub-genre of the novel, termed graphic narratives. Though not popular as the other sub-genres, graphic narratives depict various themes of human life. This paper aims to analyse women and gender in a select Indian graphic novel, focusing on gender theory. The novel chosen for study is Amruta Patil's *Kari*, the study analyses the novel in the light of heterosexual matrix and gender performativity theory by Judith Butler. Hailed as the first Indian graphic novel by a woman, the novel *Kari*, depicts the life of a homosexual queer and her struggles to confirm within the spheres of a heterosexual society. As the study of gender is multi-dimensional in nature, the attempt of using this theory in one field will contribute to other areas as well. The study attempts to have a look at the various ways in which women characters emerge in the graphic novels contributing to the growth of female empowerment.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, heterosexual matrix, performance, queerness, subversion.

Introduction

The form Graphic novel emerged in India with the introduction of the Amar Chitra Katha series. The term graphic novel is often defined as the "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in pictorial sequence, intended to convey information and or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, 2020). The term was popularised by Will Eisner in his work, *A Contract with God*. In the beginning, the term was often used along with comics and considered as a form of children's literature (Arockia, 2019). However, as time passed, the term attained wider acceptance, especially after the turn of the 20th century, when there was a spurt of audience to this literature (Biswas, 2021). The impact of technological world along with visuals, spurts its growth in the contemporary world and which in a way results in the depiction of serious themes in these novels especially of subjects which are hitherto considered as taboos (Kamilia, 2019). The development of publishing houses has also paved the growth of these narratives in India, subsequently, even independent publishing houses have started publishing their works, for instance, Zubaan Books have come up with publishing some graphic anthologies (Dawson, et.al,2021).

Initially this form of graphic literature captured the attention of children, however, now they have started addressing the voice of the marginalised (Debanjana, 2020). And in the beginning, the representation of women characters as well as the contributions from women writers was of mere significance. However, now there is a rise of women creators in this medium, all stemming out the need to get their voice heard in the contemporary world. Some among these creators include Amruta Patil, who through her characters addresses the issues of the marginalised communities, Another writer is Marjane Satrapi who represents the tormented life of women through her own self narratives (Allison, 2014), the collective efforts from various publishers including the spring collective resulted in the growth of graphic anthologies, including works like *Drawing the Line Indian Women Fight Back* and *The Elephant in the Room: Women Draw Their World*. These efforts call for the rise of prominence of women creators within this tradition as well as their need for recognition

(Nair,2017). The diversity of themes represented in this graphic medium calls for a space within the mainstream literature.

The objectives of the present study are to analyse gender studies within graphic novels, though a few studies including Nayar, 2016, analyse the history and critique of graphic novel in India to, Strong, et al. 2023, that deal with the basic difference in the genders in relation to their work environment. There are works like Nidhi Shrivastava, 2018, which deals with the representation of gender and sexuality within the field of graphic narrative and consequently, there are a few other works on graphic literature that specifically shows the emergence of this medium into English learning class rooms. The significance of the study is that very less work has been done in the field of graphic narratives and research has not been carried out in the field of performativity. Though the paper focuses on gender theory in graphic novels, it tries to analyse how far the women characters in this medium emerge on par with the medium. In the initial stage graphic novels focused only on superhero genres; however, now they focus on the daily experience of characters, especially, of women. Hence, the researches on this field can contribute to the emergence of female experiences into the literary medium. Initially, women creators in this field were a minority, eventually, they too have started emerging, which advances the scope of study and encourages many more works from the part of women artists.

The methodology chosen for the study is textual analysis with the help of gender theory. The story depicts the life of a homosexual woman in a heterosexual society; therefore within the field of gender theory two aspects heterosexual matrix (Gender Trouble, 1999) and gender performativity (Gender Trouble, 1999) have been selected. The study tries to focus on the development of female characters through their performances in the graphic novel which, in a way, contributes to the empowerment of women in general. The study contains certain limitations as it focuses only on Indian graphic narratives as there are many other novels belonging to this category, consequently it only focuses on gender theory alone as there are many theories out there.

The term gender often put heated debates among the theorist for a few years. The study of gender theory emerged in the West during the 1970s and the 1980s. As an academic discipline, it often categorises our perceptions on the masculine and the feminine traits. Among the various theorists within this field, one who deserves special stance is the American theorist Judith Butler and her “Theory of Performativity”. In her critical work “*Gender Trouble*”, she points that there is nothing to be defined as gender; every gendered act is performatively constituted. To her, gender is not a cultural construct; it is constituted through repeated acts or performance. Today the graphic medium is trying to represent the women characters in a new light, especially the characters are attempting to subvert the gender stereotypes within the existing patriarchy with their repeated acts of performance. As we all are in the cusp of adulthood struggling to balance within the existing ideology, the inclusion of more and more female graphic novels is of due importance.

Being India’s very first graphic novel in English by a woman, and having dealt with queer concept, Amruta Patil’s, *Kari* (2008) has carved out an uncontested position not only within the space of graphic literature in India, but within the twin fields of feminist and queer production at large. Broadly, the plot chronicles Kari’s daily life in the aftermath of a “slipshod surgical procedure” (3)- a massive breakup with her lover Ruth, who exits at the very beginning of the text leaving Kari in the smog city of Bombay by herself marking her journey of self-exploration between Kari’s attempted suicide at the beginning of the text and her decision to go on living by its closing. The text also celebrates ambiguity, exploration and fluidity through its unusual approach to the theme.

The remarkable quality of the work lies not only in the status of being the first of its kind, but in the way of its experimental form and content, introducing new ways of perceiving and visualizing experience, that of a queer woman, bringing innovative possibilities into the Indian graphic arena. For instance, its keen understanding of female spaces and homosocial interactions questions gender performance and non-conformity. Kari’s complex friendship with the dying cancer patient Angel and her love for Ruth, allows an interesting study of gender in the contemporary context.

Amruta Patil, writer and painter, came into the scene with her 2008 *Kari*, which is now acclaimed a classic and has heralded her as India’s first female graphic novelist. Her two subsequent graphic novels, *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* make up the Parva duology which retells stories from the Mahabharata from the viewpoint of the narrators Ganga and Ashwatthama, respectively. Her works have been translated into French and Italian languages. She has collaborated with the mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik- a graphic novel *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* which was published by Westland in October 2019. Patil was honoured with the Ministry of Women and Child Development’s Nari Shakti Puraskar in March 2017. Patil has a freewheeling visual style that incorporates acrylic painting, collage, water colour, and charcoal. Recurring themes in her work include memento mori, sexuality, myth, sustainable living, and the unbroken thread of her stories has passed down from the storyteller to story teller through the ages. A pioneer of women

graphic novelists in India, Patil's works like *Kari*, *AdiParva*, *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* and *Aranyaka : Book of the Forest* influence other women writers to explore more on this graphic culture.

Popular Culture has the power to deliver political messages. This truism is more evident in the case of comic or graphic novels in the contemporary era. From *Maus* to *March* graphic novels have been instrumental in raising the critical literary level of the events in history and the present-day issues. The representation of gender in these novels has gained attraction from commentators. The theme of gender is not committed solely to one or other gender. The gender events find new ways of representation by pointing to hitherto taboo subjects like lesbian sexuality, for example in Patil's *Kari*. In texts that are autobiographical and personal, the narrator author is made visible in the frames. A significant feature of the graphic medium for these authors and artists seeking to examine the questions of gender is the immense potential for depicting the interiority of characters. This will help the readers to see these voices and thoughts that the patriarchal society does not allow to be verbalised by a girl or a woman.

Patil's powerful debut *Kari* features a queer and eponymous heroine to depict the living realities of queer women in a highly hetero-normative society. The novel chronicles the life of Kari after a suicidal attempt with flashbacks of the past events in the character's life thus leading to her journey of self-exploration. Sexuality and gender identity are the two prominent themes in the novel. Patil addresses those recurring themes through the character Kari and argues that both sexuality and gender identity are social constructs. Thus, the story of Kari recalls the gender theorist Judith Butler who has supported the struggles of the marginalised people who do not fit within the realm of traditional discourse. Her theory on gender mainly focuses on the differences between sex and gender and how both determine sexuality. Her theory critiques and questions the established socio-economic and political power relations which guide the heteronormative society. Butler's main argument in "Gender Trouble" is that, the coherence of the categories of sex, gender and sexuality is culturally constructed through the repetition of stylised acts in time. These stylized bodily acts, through their repetitions, establish the appearance of an essential, ontological 'core' gender (Butler 179). Butler defines gender as an imitation which comes into play through repeated performances ultimately suggests that there can be no stable gendered/sexual identity.

Amruta Patil's, *Kari* projects the life and the thoughts of a young woman Kari, who works as a creative designer in an advertising company in Mumbai. There are no evidences in the novel in which she reacts against the existing social norms and gender roles in her earlier life which shows that her queerness is incidental. She has a good relationship with Ruth which further culminates into a kind of sexual and romantic relationship. She says "whatever love laws have to be broken; the first few seconds suffice. After that everything is a matter of time and incident" (Patil 69). Their relationship grows stronger but they are hesitant to disclose their lesbian identity in front of the public. This leads them to decision of committing suicide by jumping from the top of a building. These events which happen in the first phase of her life are depicted as flashbacks in the novel. Kari's inability to reveal her lesbian identity marks the presence of a heteronormative society, which calls for heterosexuality as a natural and coherent form of sexuality. Heterosexual culture thus devalues all other non-heterosexual identities and remains undisputed or natural. This invisibility of its power normalises heterosexuality and people practise it.

The gender theorist Judith Butler in her seminal essay "Gender Trouble", theorises the notion of 'heterosexual matrix'. According to her it is "that -grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, gender and desires are naturalized" (194). Our society is constructed within the matrix of heterosexuality and only those who are within this matrix enjoy privileges and agency. This heterosexual power represses the space of non-heterosexuals to express their sexuality. These people often get ostracised in the homophobic society. This repression begins from the family itself. For instance, in the novel, when her family identifies her relation with Ruth, they try to compel to repress her homosexuality. Moreover, her cut short hair and also her uncaring attitude to dressing create tension within her family. The intensity of heterosexual matrix increases her pressure as the novel moves on. Even the Advertising Company in which she works plays a major role in instilling the concept of heterosexuality in the novel.

The notion of marriage is another instance in the novel- to marry someone from the opposite gender. Kari is also forced by her family to marry a man. Her mother says "when a husband comes along, best friends become nobodies" (Patil, 29). This societal pressure makes her to commit a 'slipshod surgical' procedure along with Ruth. However, this attempt is a failure and after that Ruth leaves her thinking that their romantic inclination has become an obstacle to build her career in modelling.

The presence of sewer with which Kari is saved showcases the unawareness of homosexuals about their alienation in the society. Through these various institutional practices, Patil identifies the various factors that lead to the repression of this non- heterosexual identity. Thus, the first phase of Kari's life which is filled with problems and dilemmas calls for a space for the marginal identities.

After rebirth, Kari still faces the same problems and dilemmas of her previous life. She says “I, Kari, twice born, who travel the drains dream after dream, can smell the sewer everywhere” (Patil, 43). As the problems continue in her second birth, she reaches a point of saturation. She herself states that “I give my days to the ad agency, work like a fury and sleep like a dead” (Patil 41). Gradually, she returns back to her life and the various activities she then performs open up a new space for her to construct her gender identity.

According to Butler, human beings do not inherit their gender from the day they are born out, rather they identify it through their performance or actions. Kari in her two births used to have the same short hair and shabby clothes. Butler in her theory states that “Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition of a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the context of the body, in past, as a culturally sustained temporal duration (Butler xv). Thus, during her second birth she repeatedly performs certain actions that assert her subjectivity. For instance, her gender expressions, especially her hair cut, breaks the conventional definition of a woman within the society. The inability of Kari to define herself either as a man or a woman in her appearance emphasises her non-binary identity.

The society often makes certain attributes to both gender and they are expected to behave accordingly. For example, in the advertising world women used to wear trendy and modern dresses whereas, throughout the novel Kari used to appear in shabby clothes. This act suggests how she shifts away from the concepts of binary gender. These actions by Kari reminds us of Butler’s words that ‘there is no gender identity behind the expression gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results’ (33).

In the second part of the book, it is the company of Angel Lazarus which brings her back to life. Angel is a dying cancer patient and owner of her advertising company. Angel appears as a girl in the novel who gives more importance to gender attributes. Hair plays a crucial role in the novel in defining gender roles. Especially for Angel it is a great loss for her having no long hair. Kari easily gets attached to Angel and in their relationship; she takes up the role of a man, the same in the case of her relationship, with Ruth. Kari’s repeated actions with both, exposes her masculine identity. Being attracted to women and taking up her role as a male again shows her non-binary identity.

Nevertheless, her relationship with Lazarus (her co-worker) is just the opposite. Her actions with Lazarus point out her feminine identity. Instances like both of them sitting together in a pool enjoying themselves as peeping toms and she holding his hand and blushing at him when he proposes to her also recalls the girl within her. Throughout the novel, she appears to be feminine on the one hand and masculine on the other. This state of in-between-ness and her repeated actions again confirms her non-binary identity. These actions again direct us to Butler’s assertion that identity is not confined to gender but through the actions of individuals, or in other way, it is a fluid concept which can be transformed depending on the circumstances.

The novel presents two phases in the life of Kari- one filled with problems and dilemmas that lead her to commit suicide and the other phase that contains problems, but through her repeated actions and performances she tries to assert her identity or subjectivity. Through her acts, the mix of her gender is clearly visible to the public. Moreover, the visuals in the pages are coloured indicating her celebration of this fluid identity. Towards the very end of the novel, she sees a girl jumping off from a building which reminds her of her own act of committing suicide. She also confirms that “1) I feel no bird urge, 2) I want to step back, not step off, 3) I still love Ruthie more than anything else in the world, but I won’t be jumping off ledges for anyone anymore” (Patil 115) thus, bringing an optimistic end to the novel by taking the decision to celebrate her non-binary identity. The novel can be read as an eye opener for the queer individuals who fear the hetero-normative society to reveal their real identities.

Through her debut work Amruta Patil offers one with a visual transformation in women characters. Subsequently, provides one with an insight into the struggles of homosexual people. Her discussion of queer theme in graphic arena calls or encourages future conversations about women in general, consequently leading to an improvement in women condition.

As a new field it uses various forms of visual storytelling to share daily experiences of the women in general, with its ability to convey a complex series of experience and information in an attractive and approachable way the novel carries the potential to reach a diverse group of audience and instilling in them the need for solidarity among women in general for their empowerment.

Works Cited

1. Alan, Mckinlay. Performativity and the Politics of Identity: Putting Butler to work. *Critical Persepectives on Accounting*, Vol21, Issue 3, 2010. Page 232-242.

2. Allison,M.C(2014). (Not) Lost in the Margins: Gender and Identity in Graphic Texts.Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal, 47(4), 73-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030722>.
3. Biswas, Aibhi.Indian Graphic Novels: The New Mode of Storytelling. (2021). Research Journal of English Language and Literature.Vol.9. Issue 3. <http://www.rjelal.com>.
4. Butler, Judith. GenderTrouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Routledge, 1999.
5. Datta,S.(2020).Can You See 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, 4(1),13. <https://doi.org/10.20897/Femenc/7917>.
6. E. Dawson Varughese, Varsha Singh & Sakshi Wason (2021). Indian Graphic Narratives and the Post Millennial Moment: Reflections on the last twenty years, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics,12:6,1265-1269, DOI:10.1080/21504857.2021.2011757.
7. Gravett,P.(2012).Amruta Patil:India's first female graphic novelist.Paul Gravett. Comics, graphic novels, manga.4 Seo. Available at: <http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/amruta-patil> (Accessed on 1 march 2024).
8. Junik-Kuniewska, Kamilia."Towards the Visual: New Genres and Forms of Storytelling in India". 2019. Politeja 16(2(59):149-60. <https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.16.2019.59.10>.
9. McCloud,Scott, (1994).Understanding comics: the invisible art. Newyork: Harper Perennial, 1960.
- 10.Nair, R.V. (2017). Rethinking Panel Culture: Resistance and Subversion in Drawing the Line: Indian Women Fight Back. Indian Journal of Gender Studies,24(2),266-280.<https://doi.org/10.1177/0971521517697890>.
11. Nayek, Debanjana. (2020). From Shakuntala to Sanitary Panels: Women in Indian Graphic Narratives. Feminist Encounter: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics.4.10.20897/Femenec/7919.
12. Nayar, P.K. (2016). The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique. India:Taylor & Francis.
13. Nealie, Ngo. Healing the Whole Family: A Graphic Novel-About Asian American Intergenerational Trauma and Mental Health. 2022. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Vol.61, Issue10 2022.Pages 559-560.
14. Nidhi, Shrivastava. The Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Priya Shakti (2012). 2018. South Asian Review.39:1-2,212-226, DOI: 10.1080/02759527.2018.1509553.
15. Patil, Amruta. Kari, Harper Collins, 2008.
16. Patil, Amruta. "AmrutaPatil: India's First Female Graphic Novelist". Interview by Paul Gravett. 04 Sep, 2012. http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/amruta_patil. Accesed on 20 Apr,2022.
17. Strong,M.T,Cook,T,Belet,L.A,& Calarco,P.(2023). Changing The World: How Comics and Graphic Novels Can Shift teaching. Humanity and Society, 47(2),245-257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016059766231158969>.
18. Yadav,K."Stepping Back on Unfamiliar Roads".Contemporary Literary Review India, Vol.10,No.2,May 2023,pp.66-74.