

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

A BUTLERIAN READING OF *KARI* BY AMRUTA PATIL

SURYA RAJU

Research Scholar, Dept. of English,
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Coimbatore, India



SURYA RAJU

Article Received: 20/06/2021

Article Accepted: 30/07/2021

Published online:09/08/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.3.88](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.3.88)

Abstract

Amruta Patil's *Kari* is a seminal work in Indian graphic literature which presents a complex, yet powerful character Kari who moves beyond the common norms of the society. This paper critically analyses the novel from a Butlerian perspective. The focus of the paper is to unfold the struggles of the queer protagonist who lives in a heteronormative society. This paper is therefore analyzed in a two- fold manner: firstly the paper studies the social implications that made Kari to repress her homosexuality using Butler's notion of heterosexual matrix; and secondly the journey of Kari to a non-binary subject through her theory of gender performativity. The study examines how Patil challenges sexualities and gender identities as social constructs and celebrates the possibility of a queer identity and desire which do not conform to the strict and rigid gender and sexual binaries of a heterosexual discourse.

Keywords: heterosexual matrix, performativity, non-binary, subjectivity.

Introduction

A new medium of expression and representation in Indian English literature, graphic novels have gained popularity during this decade. The history of the graphic novels begins from the Amar Chittrakatha which is the first ever Indian comics to the present day novels which addresses socio-political and cultural issues. The graphic novels of this decade discuss various issues related to identity, sexuality, gender, race and women. Since these graphic novels bring in the multiple expressions of individual and societal voices into visual representations, they act as a powerful medium to communicate with the society.

Amruta Patil's *Kari*, a 2008 published novel, is a groundbreaking work in the field of Indian graphic literature and is designated as the first graphic novel

by a woman author in India. Patil, a writer and painter has a freewheeling visual style and the recurring themes of her work include sexuality, identity, myth, sustainable living and the unbroken thread of stories passed down from storyteller to storyteller through ages. Influenced by the comics and visual arts from her childhood, Patil showed huge interest in graphic literature and attempted vivid exploration of various themes that are relevant in the contemporary society through this medium. Amar Chittrakatha, Indian mythologies, Indian temple art, Mughal miniatures are some of those art pieces that influenced her. A pioneer in women graphic novelists in India, Patil's works like *Kari*, *Adi Parva*, *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* and *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* etc. influences a lot of women writers to explore more on this graphic culture.

Patil's powerful debut *Kari* features a queer and eponymous heroine to depict the lived realities of a queer woman in a highly heteronormative society. Unlike other comic and graphic novels that appeared so far, her work *Kari* is textier and the story flows from voice-over style narrative text to visuals, and then back to voice-over. The novel chronicles the life of Kari after a suicidal attempt with flashbacks to the past events in the character's life to her journey of self exploration. In an interview with Paul Gravett, she says that her protagonist, "Kari is a young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman, a counterpoint to the hyper feminine prototypes you keep coming across"(Patil). Patil presents an unusual protagonist through her novel whose queerness is incidental, rather than central to her journey. The events following her queerness made her to perform two suicidal attempts by jumping from the top of a building in which she chooses to jump in the first time whereas she chooses not to jump in the second time.

Sexuality and gender identity are the two prominent themes in this novel. Patil addresses these recurring themes through the character Kari and argues that both sexuality and gender identity are social constructs. This queer narrative recalls the gender theorist Judith Butler who has made significant contributions to support the struggles of marginal people who do not fit into the traditional discourse of gender and sexuality. The usual logic wherein sex determines gender and both determines sexuality and their incoherence and discontinuity have been the particular focus of Judith Butler's critique. Butler through her theory also 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 stylized acts in time. These stylized bodily acts, through their repetition, establish the appearance of an essential, ontological "core" gender (Butler 179). In this regard, Butler theorizes gender along with sex and sexuality as performative. As Butler defines gender as an imitation which comes into play through

repeated performances ultimately suggests that there can be no stable gendered or sexual identity.

Discussion

I. Repression of Homosexuality:

Amruta Patil's *Kari* projects the inner world and thoughts of a young woman Kari who lives in Mumbai, working in an advertising agency as a creative designer. She is silent and is deeply involved in her activities. There are no evidences of Kari's revolutionary acts against the existing social norms and gender roles earlier in her life which show that her queerness is incidental. Kari develops a good friendship with Ruth which further develops into a sexual and romantic relationship. She says that, "whatever love laws have to be broken, the first few seconds suffice. After that everything is a matter of time and incident" (Patil 69). This relationship grew stronger but both Kari and Ruth didn't show the courage to disclose their lesbian identity in front of the society. They feared the society they live in and finally decide to commit suicide by jumping from the top of a building. These events which happen in the first phase of Kari's life are depicted as flashbacks in the novel.

Kari's inability to live with her lesbian identity highlights the presence of a heteronormative society, which practices heterosexuality as a natural and coherent form of sexuality. As Linda Schlossberg says, "heterosexual culture continually passes itself off as being merely natural, the undisputed and unmarked norm" (05). Heterosexuality therefore becomes an institution which exercises all kinds of power in a society and also devalues all the non-heterosexual identities which do not conform to the norms. But, the invisibility of this existing powerful institution normalizes heterosexuality and people practice it. It is various feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig who has made significant contributions to fight against this concept of heterosexuality from a feminist perspective. Acknowledging the contributions of Wittig's heterosexual contract and Rich's compulsory heterosexuality, the gender theorist Butler

theorized her notion of “heterosexual matrix” (xxviii).

According to Butler, heterosexual matrix is defined as “that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized” (194). That is, the relations between sex, gender and desire are conceptualized on the model of a matrix (the socio-cultural or political environment in which something develops) and she argues that it is the regulatory practices within the society that determine which particular combinations of these three signifiers are allowed to be as coherent, recognized identities (Butler 23). This regulatory practice is that of the compulsory heterosexuality which institutes the sex and gender as mimetic and binary and is governed by desire for opposites.

Homosexuality and other marginal sexualities in which gender does not correspond to sex or in which desire does not follow sex or gender assignment are denied intelligibility and recognition. This notion of heterosexual matrix establishes the interdependence of sex, gender and sexuality. Our society is constructed on this matrix and only those people who are within the boundaries of this matrix exercise power and agency. In other words, it is the heterosexuals who dominate the society and if a person has to enjoy power and agency, they should be within the heterosexual matrix. This occupancy of the heterosexual power structure represses the space of the queer individuals to express their sexuality. They fear that they may not get represented as a social being and decides to repress their sexuality. Thus the dilemma faced by the ‘other’ sexualities does not get any recognition because of this hegemonic authority. These people get reduced to objects in a homophobic society.

The socio-political and economic discourses work towards the repression of queer identities and at the social level, the individuals are forced to be in a heterosexual relationship because of the social pressure. This pressure to remain within the boundaries of a heterosexual matrix begins from the family itself. In this novel, Kari’s family compels her to repress her homosexuality when they found that she is in love with Ruth. This pressure is because they fear that their daughter will otherwise become an

outcaste in the society. In a telephonic conversation with Kari, her mother says, “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). This repression is because they want Kari to remain within the “institution of compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality” (Butler 30).

Kari’s family has normalized the concept of sexuality as ‘hetero’ as they live in a heteronormative society which has universalized heterosexuality. Here, only those who uphold dominant social norms, rules and regulations are accepted as intelligible subjects. As, Kari remains outside the dominant sexual orientation, she is considered unintelligible and is also at the risk of getting violated, discriminated and ostracized by the society. As her family fears that she is may get ostracized, they compel her to repress her lesbian identity and asks her to perform as a ‘straight’ person in front of the society. Also, there are certain rigid gender traits which a girl should perform such as passivity, repressing her voice, dressing style etc. Here, Kari has short hair and is also not conscious of her dressing. This marks her difference from other girls and her family worries if these deviations from the common norms will make her an unintelligible subject.

The gravity of the heterosexual matrix from all the corners of the society further increases the plight and pressure of Kari and this hostility makes her to subjugate her homosexuality. Various powerful discourses in the society contribute to the non-acceptance of her sexuality. The advertising agency in which Kari works is a powerful discourse that creates detachment towards ‘other’ sexualities. In the ad agency, Kari is ruled by the social norms of a ‘real’ gender and sexuality. These advertisements influence people and take a major part in instilling the concept of heterosexuality. As Cohen points out that, “both those localized practices and those centralized institutions legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and natural within society” (448). Advertisements, being a part of public life should actually take a part in creating awareness among people but on the other hand, these ads try to avert other sexualities. This reluctance from the society

makes Kari to repress her homosexuality and also hides her desire for same sex relationships.

The notion of marriage is also an important discourse in a heterosexual society. The social norms of a heterosexual matrix is in such a way that a person should get married to the opposite sex to get social acceptance. This pressure from the society even forces the homosexuals to repress their sexuality and marry a person following the norms of the dominant society as they can't manage the social pressure. Here, Kari also receives the same pressure from her family and to marry a man. When Kari's mother realizes that she is attached to Ruth, she warns her and compels her to get married. This coercion is because Kari's mother fears that her daughter will otherwise get isolated. She persuades her to choose a male partner saying that, "When a husband comes along, best friends become nobodies" (Patil 29). Kari's mother doesn't want her to subvert the conventional norms of a heterosexual matrix. She fears that the instability of the signifiers in the matrix will make her daughter alienated and compels her to remain within the boundaries of heterosexual matrix.

This social pressure and the realization that she can't possess an equal power as other individuals made her to commit a "slipshod surgical procedure" (Patil 03) along with Ruth to escape from a world which does not give any recognition to their sexuality. They felt that they cannot fit themselves into the closets of the existing society. They tried to escape from the "normative violence" (Butler xx) which they otherwise will have to face from the society. This normative violence includes hatreds, sexual orientation jokes, racial slurs etc. But their attempt was a failure as both of them undoubtedly gets saved and Ruth elopes from the 'smog' city. After the suicidal attempt, Ruth decides to avert her homosexual inclinations as she feels that her sexuality will stand as a barrier for her career as a model. Ruth understands that the society will never sanction her sexual orientation and runs off from her lover. Kari on the other hand gets stuck in the same 'smog' city and she is saved by a sewer in the city.

The vacuousness of the homophobic society can be seen clearly through the presence of a

'sewer'. The aversion of the heterosexual society towards the other sexualities considering them as a taboo exists in our society without any change over the years. This hegemonic group asserts their authority and power in the society and does not value the crisis, dilemma and pain of the queers. The visual that portrays the presence of sewer in the novel is sketched in a grey shade which conveys their absent life in the society. Just like the people in the city are not aware about the presence of sewer, the homophobic society is also not conscious about the alienation of the homosexuals.

Patil's through her protagonist Kari has projected out the how the different variables within the society like family, community and various institutions function in repressing non-heterosexual sexualities. Kari's life during her first phase is filled with troubles regarding her homosexuality because of the existence of heterosexual matrix. This pain and dilemma faced by Kari raises questions regarding the space for marginal sexualities which Butler argues through her theory. The suicidal attempt of Kari highlights the need for a wider acceptance of individuals beyond the boundaries of heterosexuality. These events that happen in Kari's life reflect the constructed nature of sex, gender and sexuality in the society. Butler argues that desire and sexuality are not tied to sex, or gender, and she attempts to open up pathways of identification and intelligibility of subjects that fall outside the heterosexual matrix, by deconstructing the typical notions of sexuality and gender (140). This can be seen in the second phase of Kari's life wherein she acquires her subjectivity through gender performativity.

II. 1. Gender Performativity in Kari:

Before her suicidal attempt, Kari's life was circulated by the problems regarding her sexual orientation. Her inability to withstand the problems from a hegemonic heterosexual society being a lesbian troubled her. This matrix continued to be the same even after her rebirth and she faced the same isolation. Kari says, "I, Kari, twice born, who travel the drains dream after dream, can smell the sewer everywhere" (Patil 43). But, after her separation with Ruth, Kari faces much more isolation in the

'smog' city. The emptiness in her life becomes a constant element and Kari remains in a state of saturation during the initial days of her second birth. This isolation can be understood from Kari's words that, "I give my days to the ad agency, work like a fury and sleep like the dead" (Patil 41). Gradually Kari returns back to her usual life, but the various activities that she then performs opens a new space for her to construct her gender identity. Even though there are certain acts of Kari before her suicidal attempt which shows deviations from her feminine gender, it becomes difficult to say that there is a shift in her gender identity. But, the various acts which she performs after her second birth states this shift.

According to Butler, we do not inherit our gender from the day we are born out rather we construct our gender through actions. Kari appeared to be the same in her dressing and hair style before and after her suicidal attempt. She has the same short hair and wears shabby clothes. But, these two appearances alone do not provide any clue in determining Kari's gender identity. In her second birth, Kari performs various actions repeatedly which determine her subjectivity as Butler 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 part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (Butler xv).

As it has been highlighted in *Gender Trouble*, one's gender identity is determined through the acts that one does repeatedly. The different acts that Kari performs in the novel determine her gender identity. Kari's gender expressions project her unwillingness to remain only within the feminine gender. Gender expression is how a person publicly expresses or presents their gender identity and it is a person's choice to express their gender through different acts and gestures. Moreover, these actions are not limited to a person's biological or physical body. Kari is presented in the novel as a girl with short hair. She breaks the conventional definition of a woman in Indian context by cutting her hair short. Every society has its own fixed attributes that a woman is supposed to perform compulsorily. This is how society constructs gender binaries through various gender roles. Her image does not fit into the

social construction of binary gender dichotomy. This inability of Kari to define herself either as a man or a woman in her appearance emphasizes her non-binary identity. The society has constructed various attributes for both masculine and feminine gender and all are expected to behave accordingly. But, it is not these fixed attributes that determine a person's gender. On the other hand, it is the attributes performed by the subject. Butler says that "gender attributes are [...] performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal" (180). If attributes are performative, it is possible for Kari to acquire new attributes outside the restricting frames of binary system.

In Kari's 'advertising' world, women wear stylish and trendy dresses to express their femininity. When the women around her become conscious of their dressing and spend time for shopping to become trend setters in the town, she wears shabby clothes. Once, her colleague commented that, "Your clothes smell funny" (Patil 10). Also, she appears in gents pant and shirt that stand for her nonconformity to either gender. Kari's disinterest in dressing according to the social norms of a woman highlights her shift from the binary gender. These repeated actions and expressions of Kari determine her non-binary gender identity as Butler 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).

After her separation with Ruth, Kari undergoes severe isolation in her life. It is the presence of Angel and Lazarus who brings her back into her life. Angel, who is a dying cancer patient, is the owner of the product for which she is working as the creative designer. Angel appears to a girl who gives importance to her gender attributes. Angel makes it clear to Kari that, "I'm bald because I'm sick, not because I'm butch" (Patil 38). Hair plays a crucial role in the novel in defining the gender roles especially in Indian context. Long hair is always associated with the patriarchal definition of female entities. Angel being a feminine in gender considers it as a great loss in not having long hair. Kari finds solace in Angel and gradually they get attracted to

each other. In this relationship, Kari takes up the role of a man whereas Angel becomes the woman. This same happens in her relationship with Ruth. Both Angel and Ruth are feminine in their gender. Ruth's sincere dedication in modeling and Angel's love for long hair signifies them. Whereas, Kari's repeated actions when she is with them exposes her masculine gender. But, she does not want to change her body into a man. She is attracted to women but takes up a male role which further conform her non-binary identity. Her actions recall Nietzsche's statement that, "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed, the doer is everything" (Butler 33).

Kari also finds happiness in her relationship with Lazarus who is her co-worker. There are several instances when Kari and Lazarus blush each other and slowly they build a strong relationship. When Kari is with Lazarus, her actions define her feminine gender. The images when Lazarus and Kari sit together in a pool enjoying themselves as 'peeping toms' indicates the pleasure she enjoys with a male partner. She holds his hand and blushes at him when Lazarus proposes her. Kari's behavior and actions with Lazarus recalls the girl within her and these differences in her acts makes confusion in her identity. At some point of time, Kari's identity is that of a masculine whereas at other point of time, she is a feminine in gender. Also her gender expressions are in a stage of in-between's and these repeated acts of Kari conclude that she is a non-binary. As Butler points out, identity is not something that is predetermined and cannot be divided into genders, but it is formed through individual's acts. Nevertheless, it is not the individual who determines actions, but it is the actions that determine individuals. To put it another way, identity is not a fixed state, but rather a fluid concept which can transform depending on specific situations (177-80).

2. Assertion of Subjectivity:

In the first phase of her life, it is Kari's sexual inclinations that made her to commit suicide as she found it unable to withstand the social pressures. Even though her second phase is also filled with dilemma and confusions regarding her sexuality and

gender, Kari constructs her gender through different activities that shape and form her gender identity. Kari performs the same repeated actions which further assert her identity. As a part of receiving the award for the best creative writer, Kari decides to get a haircut of 2mm buzz-cut as she wanted to expose her non-binary identity in the public. Now, the mix of two genders is clearly visible from her gender expression. This is how Kari publicly presents her real self and declares her identity. These acts of Kari prove that it is performativity that brings the subject into existence, and it is performativity of gender which makes a coherent relation between identity categories. Thus when one's performative gender performs various acts, it makes the incoherent "discourses" understandable through the acts it does. And then it makes the subject, by performing the very act, and through those performances, the "I" of the subject is constructed. The visuals of this page are also colored reflecting Kari's celebration of subjectivity.

As she returns back from the shop, she feels that the smog city is even more anemic. But, she does not pay attention to the 'smog' city and move forward confidently. Towards the end of the novel, Kari sits on the water tank of a terrace and witnesses a girl committing suicide by jumping from the top of a building which made her to recall her act in the beginning of the novel. On witnessing that she feels that everyone has a bird urge to jump down when they look down heights. But, she makes a strong confirmation that, "1) I feel no bird urge. 2) I want to step back, not step off. 3) I still love Ruthie more than anyone else in the world, but I won't be jumping off ledges for anyone any more" (Patil 115). She decides not to jump off from the building and live her life expressing her 'real' identity. This is an optimistic end in which Kari decides to celebrate her personal freedom, right to live, right to choose one's gender and to express sexual preferences. Kari asserts that she is open also to alternative sexualities so that she does not feel to submit to death for losing Ruth. Kari transgresses social heteronormativity through her alternate sexual identity. She decides not to conform to the social norms and creates her own gender and sexual identity.

Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated how the notions of sexuality, gender, performativity and subjectivity are represented in Amruta Patil's *Kari* using Butlerian perspective. The study has brought out the constructed nature of sex and gender through the character Kari. The dilemma and pain of alternate sexualities highlighted using Butler's notion of 'heterosexual matrix' explains their need for recognition. Patil through her character Kari has explained how different variables in the society play a key role in determining one's sexuality and identity. Furthermore, as Butler argues that gender becomes performative via doing, Kari constructed her non-binary identity through her repeated actions and further celebrates her subjectivity by declaring her real self in the public. This novel therefore becomes an epitome for queer individuals who fear the society to announce their 'real' identities.

Works Cited:

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.

Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers and welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 3, p.448, <https://985queer.queergeektheory.org>.

Ennis, Kathleen. *Michel Foucault and Judith Butler: Troubling Butler's Appropriation of Foucault's Work*. 2008. The University of Warwick, PhD Thesis. *University of Warwick institutional repository*, <http://g0.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/1965>.

Mufeeda, T. "Imaging the sexual Innuendos: A Study of Amrita Patil's *Kari*." *A bi-annual peer-reviewed journal of Department of English and Cultural Studies, Punjab University, Chandigarh*, no.36, pp. 1-17, Autumn 2020, <https://dialog.puchd.ac.in>.

Patil, Amruta. "Amruta Patil: India's first Female Graphic Novelist." Interview by Paul Gravett. 04 Sep. 2012, http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/amruta_patil. Accessed 20 June 2021.

Patil, Amruta. *Kari*, Harper Collins, 2008.

Schlossberg, Linda. "Introduction: Rites of Passing." *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, race and Religion*, edited by Maria Carla Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg, New York Printing Press, 2022, p.5.