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***Kari* Unveiled: Exploring Postmodern Visual Narratives in Indian Graphic Novel**

Nighat Falgaroo

Ph. D Scholar,
PG Department of English,
North Campus,
University of Kashmir.

&

Dr Khursheed Ahmad Qazi

SG Assistant Professor & Coordinator,
PG Department of English,
North Campus,
University of Kashmir.

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Abstract:

Since the days of yore, visual narratives in graphic novels and comics have been evolving and gaining mainstream recognition. Artists and writers use a combination of visual and verbal text to create stories that resonate with readers. Even in the current era of postmodernism, the genre of graphic novels has not lost its significance. *Kari* by Amruta Patil follows the story of the protagonist Kari who struggles with issues like urban alienation, personal demons and societal expectations. *Kari* is a phenomenal work of art that resists prescriptive narrative structure and contests conventional storytelling narrative techniques, making it an engaging subject for academic investigation. By exploring the reciprocity of text and image, the fragmentation of narrative, intertextuality, self-reflexivity, subversion of traditional gender roles and the thematic elements present in *Kari*, it desires to decipher how Patil's work standardizes with the theories of postmodernism. *Kari* probes into the issues of representation and identity by displaying characters that defy societal expectations by challenging conventional gender role. By considering the various cast of characters, their intersectional identities, and how they navigate social and cultural contexts, this paper seeks to understand how *Kari* contributes to the broader discourse on representation within the graphic novel medium. *Kari*'s implications for cultural discourse allow us to evaluate its significance within the larger landscape of contemporary literature and its potential to influence social change. Thus, this paper aims to evaluate the Indian graphic novel *Kari* from the postmodern perspective.

Keywords: graphic novel, multimodality, visual culture, visual intertexts, and postmodern narrative techniques.

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, with an ever-expanding assortment of refined visual representations, we find ourselves buried in a fascinating visual environment. The lucid volume of visual/image production, dispersion, and transmission globally linked with media networks has resulted in visual inundation. A visual culture, therefore, provides a framework for understanding the ubiquitous effect of visual representation in our society, emphasising how pictures and visual practices shape our perceptions, values, and cultural identities. In visual storytelling, images carry a meaning that changes the world's perception. In the book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger explored the power of visual imagery in constructing meaning and argues that images are not just visual representations but carry embedded ideologies, power dynamics, and social and cultural values. He opines:

An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved- for a few moments or a few centuries. (9)

Similarly, Nicholas Mirzoeff, a visual culture scholar, argues that visibility is an active process through which we produce, interpret and contest meanings. It has profound implications for politics, identity and social justice. W.J.T. Mitchell is another notable thinker who thoroughly explored the notion of images in his work *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. He mentions that there has been a cultural shift from a primarily text-based society to one increasingly dominated by images, and this shift has profound implications for the way we perceive, understand and navigate the world in a verbovisual environment. He proposes that this shift represents a “pictorial turn” (16), challenging the dominance of text and highlighting the pivotal role of visual culture. Within this context, graphic novels become a powerful medium for engaging with a wide audience, leveraging the combined strength of visual and linguistic elements. The interplay of text and image makes communication comprehensible and multimodal so that spoken language cannot be adequately understood without considering non-verbal communication. In the contemporary era of representation, many forms of language cannot be understood unless both text and image are taken into consideration. Roland Barthes in his book *Image-Music-Text* mentions that the

relationship between the text and image remains an essential phenomenon because it introduces a basic conceptual framework for understanding the interaction of two powerful mediums and shows the interconnectedness of text-image within historical and cultural context. According to Barthes, 'Illustration', 'anchorage', and 'relay' are the three distinct semantic, content-based that play a significant role in the relationship between text-image. (qtd. in Leeuwen 549).

Like other countries Graphic novels have already made their mark in Indian literature, in the book *Indian Graphic Novel*, Pramod Nayar welcomes the graphic turn in Indian Writing in English (IWE). He says the Indian graphic novel "possesses all the qualifications of a literary text" (7), and the average Indian is already exposed to a range of colourful visual stimuli that it becomes an easy transition to welcome the medium and to engage with graphic fiction because the literacy in the demotic register of graphic narrative is already there. Indian graphic narratives possess mayhem of themes like myth, commix, autobiographies, history, social issues etc. The Indian graphic novels efficiently utilize the 'seeable' and 'sayable' modes and with their potentiality allow them to inhabit virtual space and narrate testimonies, memoirs, and critiques as well as self-appraisal. Indian graphic novels push visual engagement, which deals with intellectual and emotional analysis. Additionally, the contemporary generation is particularly visual since they are surrounded by words and pictures daily, from social media to school that the readers of the younger age may easily produce and read graphic novel material. This would be one of the explanations behind the rise of graphic novels in the Indian publishing industry.

2. Graphic novels as a postmodern genre.

The graphic novel has become a distinctive and essential genre in postmodern literature. The graphic novel becomes a prime example of postmodernism's traits and motifs since it combines visual art and narrative storytelling. In *Comics as Literature*, Hillary Chute believes that the visual storytelling medium, graphic narrative, has resonated with and built upon the artistic innovations found in traditional fiction. It draws inspiration from the modernist era's social and aesthetic perspectives and practices while also embracing the postmodern trend that celebrates the accessibility and inclusivity of popular art forms. In the "graphic narrative, we see an embrace of reproducibility and mass circulation as well as a rigorous, experimental attention to form as a mode of political intervention" (462). Jan Baetens considers the graphic novel "to be a typically postmodern genre", while Mitchell also calls the graphic novel a "postmodern cartoon novel". However, by examining its narrative strategies, intertextuality,

self-reflexivity, and engagement with social and cultural critique, this paper seeks to investigate the graphic book as a postmodern medium. Narrative techniques are one of the defining features and innovative use of the graphic novel as a postmodern genre. Through the interaction of visual and verbal elements, graphic novels employ complex visual storytelling strategies such as panel layouts, montage, and unconventional page structures. These techniques allow for nonlinear narratives, fragmented storytelling, and the exploration of multiple perspectives, challenging traditional storytelling notions and emphasising the constructed nature of narratives. Jean-Francois Lyotard defines “postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives”. According to him, postmodern narratives reject totalizing explanations and celebrate the plurality of smaller, localized narratives. Intertextuality and Metafiction are the two critical distinctive marks of postmodernism in the graphic novel. By referencing and recontextualizing existing texts, graphic novels engage in a dialogue with literature, art, and popular culture. Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes are the key figures in this study. In “Word, Dialogue and Novel” Kristeva argues that a literary work is not simply the product of a single author but consists of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself. She quotes, “Any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66). Metafiction, a term coined by William H. Gass, in graphic novels includes a narrative technique where the story becomes self-aware and draws attention to its status as a work of fiction. It involves incorporating self-referential elements, breaking the fourth wall and challenging the boundaries between fiction and reality within the graphic novel. Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* discusses how metafiction challenges conventional narrative techniques and engages with the process of storytelling. In graphic novels, self-reflexivity highlights the work's creation and challenges the distinctions between the natural world and the writing process. Therefore, more discourse is essential to analyse how the different elements come together to create a narrative that challenges, questions, and engages the readers on various levels by making the genre a unique exploration of postmodern themes and techniques. That is why in postmodernist fiction, Mc Hale opines that postmodernist literature “produces new insights, new or richer connections, coherence of a different degree kind, ultimately more discourse” (4-5).

The graphic novel's use of meta-commentary, self-aware characters, and artistic experimentation reveals its understanding of its form and proves its capacity to dissect and reassemble narrative norms. A graphic novel can offer representation on matters including racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity through visual storytelling, and graphic novels offer

unique perspectives of society in literature. Graphic novels like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* discuss historical trauma and explore the Holocaust, while Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* provides a personal account of growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. These narratives use the graphic novel format to confront and subvert conventional narratives and provide a space for critical reflection.

3. Study of *Kari* by Amruta Patil through a Postmodern Lens.

Amruta Patil is a prominent Indian painter and graphic novelist who is associated towards Indian writing in English. She was awarded the prestigious Ministry of Women and Child Development's Nari Shakti Puraskar in 2017 for "unusual work that breaks boundaries". Her works present artwork through a unique blend of visual and verbal interaction. Her subsequent novels include *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers*. *Kari* is the first Indian graphic novel with a lesbian protagonist. It follows the story of a young woman, Kari, who has recently moved to a smog city (Mumbai) where she works in an advertising agency. There are several chapters in the novel from "The Double Suicide" to "The Exit Route", each episode reflects Kari's life and her connection with the other sections of society while celebrating ambiguity, exploration and fluidity. She shared an apartment with Billo and Delna and their boyfriends. Kari, a character in the story, battles with urban alienation, inner demons, social expectations, and the pervasive heteronormativity in her environment. The novel shows Kari's relationship with these characters and her struggle to be accepted by society.

3.1. Fragmented Narrative Structure in *Kari*.

In *Kari*, the narrative structure is the crucial element contributing to its postmodern nature. Patil employs the stream-of-consciousness mode of narration to break conventional patterns of narration and attempts to "depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind" of a narrator (Cuddon 682). In this narrative mode, Patil employs a fragmented and nonlinear narrative structure that deviates from traditional narrative progression. The fragmented or disjointed scenes and episodes shifting back and forth in time and weave together different moments and perspectives. In the novel, the narrative is presented in a non-chronological order, consisting of 18 sections with different chapters but even in the same section, there is story distortion from flashback to imagination to real moment and vice versa. In the flashback chapter titled "Visitations", Kari's parents visited the Crystal Palace (apartment) in the smog city (Mumbai). However, her parents, especially her mother, Urmila,

did not like the aura that Kari was living. She admonished her and expressed disappointment in her choices, particularly in her association with the smut and the degenerates of the city, despite how she had raised her. Urmila also expressed concern about Kari's relationship with Ruth, highlighting that such a companionship would undoubtedly hinder the development of a harmonious heterosexual society (Mufeeda 11). In another panel of the chapter titled "The Snow Globe", Patil shows an image of Kari who kept her eyes shut but still thinking about the snow globe which is beside her table. Her heart lurches on thinking about the condition of things inside the snow globe, especially the "snow-globe girl" who is waiting endlessly with the only hope of new snow to settle on her symbolically stands for Kari's loneliness. Subsequently, she concentrates on Ruth's unexpected departure and considers whether she is adjusting to her newfound city life. In the illustration, Patil talks about Kari's imagination of a princess (Ruth) stripping her life by sticking a needle in her fingertips. Not long later, a carpet of red flowers, which stand for blood, covers the snow, signifying that Kari continues to heal over her being apart. In the next panel, Patil comes into reality where Kari shows the tattoo of fallen Angel wings (48-50) to Angel, a cancer patient, symbolising that Kari is the archangel or a "boatman". This narrative fluidity in the spatial arrangements of the narration disrupts the linear flow of the narrative, reflecting the fragmented nature of memory and experience of the unconventional protagonist. The non-chronological ordering in the narrative disrupts the traditional flow of time, with events from different periods interspersed throughout the graphic novel. The narrative fluidity in the novel reflects the postmodern notion that there is no stable truth or reality and that meaning is created through multiple perspectives.

3.2. Tracing the Threads: Intertextuality in the novel *Kari*

A French Semiotician Julia Kristeva coined the term Intertextuality in *Word, Dialogue and Novel*. She remarks that intertextuality is a postmodern theory that changes the concept of a text and allows new expressions locating the systems of sign structure in a relational process. In a way, she attempts to view intertextuality as transposition, the transposition of one sign scheme into another and "specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the ethic—of enunciative and denotative positionality" (59) signalling that the meaning of the text is never single but continuously plural and shattered in narration. In *Kari*, intertextuality is showcased through various artistic, literary and cultural references embracing postmodern traits (Chute). Amruta Patil illustrates from various sources, including mythology, literature, popular culture and art history. In an interview Patil says that returning to the religion again would be the "best stories in the world" as these "don't need to

develop my own language, instead, I can tap into an existing idiom. And that's what I find this sort of lore does". Myth is a folklore genre consisting of narratives that play a fundamental role in a society, such as foundational tales or origin myths. The leading myth characters are usually gods, demigods, or supernatural humans. In the section titled "Playing" the concept of "the Blood of Christ" is mentioned by the narrator in connection to the influence of alcohol and its ability to create connections between man. In Christian theology, the concept represents the sacrificial offering of Jesus's blood on the cross is believed to cleanse the sin. In the novel, the narrator compares the "Blood of Christ" to a wine that "brings the truth out of a woman sooner than any confession box does. Makes you trust a stranger with your life." (75). The section "Ganesh Country" is the another notable mythological instances in the novel. Lord Ganesh is the son of Lord Shiva and Devi Parvati and is prominently known as the remover of obstacles. Patil describes God as:

"Calm-eyed idols, swaying with the heaving throngs that pull them along.... I've always liked being under his gaze. Strange eyes, steady and of an upward slant. Eyes of wide-set beauty, brown and clear, always a little lacquered with moistness, kind eyes that ask for no familiarity." (92).

During the immersion, lord Ganesh takes away the troubles and obstacles his devotees face, purifying their lives and granting them blessings. Kari also wants to celebrate the Ganesh Chaturthi to clear the "cobwebs" (ibid.) and problems in her life. In an interview, Patil says, "Mythology is a form of psychology, which is why it remains compelling. Stories stop being relevant because people stopped retelling them". These mythological retellings allow the writer to explore different perspectives or modernize ancient stories with creative alterations.

The novel embraces the elements of popular culture to depict urban life and the experiences of its protagonist. Music is a significant part of Kari's life. She is depicted as engaging in listening and discussion of various genres, including rock, jazz and Indian. American sitcom television shows like FRIENDS and actors like Chow Yun-fat and Kathryn Dawn Lang reflect the influence of cinema on the life of characters and show the cultural impact in which they exist. Unlike traditional letters, modern use of language is concise, ideally readable and does not require a format. The embrace of abbreviations, acronyms, and instant messages is what David Crystal called the language of "netspeak" in *Language and the Internet*. The novel *Kari* also embraces short-form communication or language used in text messaging, social media, or online communication including the abbreviation "FTGOP" (Fine

Tippy Golden Orange Pekoe) and “NKOTB” (New Kids on the Block) reflecting the modern use of language and creates the sense of immediacy and familiarity with readers.

With the art allusion in the novel, Patil tries to enhance the meaning or context of the work by adding layers of depth and interpretation for those familiar with the original artwork. The narrative opens with an illustration by Patil of two ladies, Ruth and Kari, joined by an artery. The Blood oozes from the vein, leaving a stain on Ruth's white clothing. The text read as, “There are two of us, not one. Despite a slipshod surgical procedure, we are joined still”, depicting sadness and heartbreak (Patil 3). The graphic depiction shows ending of their relationship, but the story doesnot end here, rather, the disintegration lays the foundation for the rest of the narrative. According to Aneel Mukerjee, this portrait is a replica of the oil painting of Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, which is displayed in the museum of Coyoacan, Mexico. On the continuous panel, Patil portrays an image of the two women trying to end their lives from the roof but fortunately turned out in different ways where “Ruth’s fall was broken by a safety net” (7) and Kari “saved by a sewer” (8). Here, the image is a representation of the famous 1948 American tempera painting *Christiana’s World* by Andrew Wyeth. These art allusions allow the artists to engage in a dialogue with a history of art and serve as a means of paying homage to influential artwork. In the novel, Kari has named her apartment “Crystal Palace”, when the narration follows, in the chapter titled “Smokescreen”, we find a panel that spreads over two pages where the three women (Billo, Kari and Delna) are in a continuous conversation where Patil tells us that the dinner was the “rare hearty suppers at crystal palace” (58). This image is the illustration of the famous artworks in the world painted by Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*. The conversation took place about Kari who feels like an outsider in her apartment due to the lack of bond and her shortcomings with the roommates, this is an allusion to pariah. Therefore, using art allusions enhances the narrative and invites readers to engage with the interplay between art and literature. The references and allusions in the text contribute to the postmodern nature of the graphic novel, thereby engaging in intertextuality, artistic allusion, and mythology. These elements reinforce the ideas of multiple perspectives and constructed storytelling, which are key themes within postmodernism.

3.3 Subversion of Gender Roles.

In *Kari*, Patil represents a marginalised voice of society by focusing on the personal struggles of the characters featured in the novel in order to bring to the forefront the experiences of people who do not conform to societal conventions. She represented the character with

altered consciousness, making an attempt to address those silenced emotions and experiences that are accepted as abnormal within the strict confines of society. In an interview, Patil remarks:

I wanted to send out an unusual protagonist into the Indian literary scene. A young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman - counterpoint to the hyperfeminine prototypes one keep coming across. And yet, the book is not coming-out tale. Kari's queerness is incidental, rather than central to her journey. She is dark and funny and detached— something you may not expect from a quickie 'suicidal lesbian' synopsis. People love quick synopses. (Patil qtd. in Gravett)

In *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (1994), Kate Bornstein celebrates the idea of the recognition that acquiring sexed identification enables one to be a desiring subject, that is, free to experience one's desire rather than enacting someone else's. She encourages the concept of "gender fluidity" and remarks that safe gender involves the ability to express ourselves as we genuinely are, without fear of judgement or damage. It follows our preferred pathways without jeopardising our own or others' well-being. In essence, a safe gender is not having to conform, dissemble, or conceal our genuine selves or the real identity. Such non-binary identity represents in Patil's queer protagonist, who challenges conventional gender expectations throughout the narrative. Kari defies the prescribed roles and behaviours assigned to women in Indian society and embraces her individuality. The protagonist explores the pressures on women to conform to societal norms and expectations, including getting married, having children and adhering to traditional gender roles. Lazarus makes Kari a marriage proposal in the chapter "Love Song," however during that exchange, Kari recalls her girlfriend Ruth warning the readers it would be a pointless debate. After a while, Lazarus asks Kari, "Are you, like, a proper lesbian? To which she replies, "I'd say armchair straight, armchair gay, active loner." (Patil 79) shows resistance and forces Kari to reflect on her identity when she says "I roll the word 'lesbian' in my mouth and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshly, salivating, fresh off the boat from Lesbia" which is totally "inappropriate" (ibid) for her. In the same chapter her roommate's boyfriend namely, Zap advises Kari to accept Lazarus' proposal saying "Eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman" (Patil 81). However, Kari pays no heed to him and does what she wants.

Another feminist theorist Simon de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* is regarded as a seminal statement on women's liberation that spurred a generation of women to challenge the

conventional wisdom that femininity is a product of civilization and a reflection of situational differences rather than "essential" differences between men and women but of differences in their situation. Hence "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 330). According to Simone de Beauvoir, it is totally acceptable for women to get frustrated by the limitations connected with their gender. Rather than asking why they should refuse these limitations, the more essential inquiry is to explore why they embrace them. Similarly, Kari challenges all the societal norms like her dressing sense is entirely against the typical girls, she cuts her hair short by breaking the traditional gender definition. Her personality does not fit into the social construction of gender dichotomy. Kari is unable to connect either with men or women. She cuts her hair short, which is something socially associated with the aspects of femininity. In contrast, Kari has kept the butch identity by choosing a buzz cut (it is a men's hairstyle) and challenges the universally accepted notion of gender roles (Mufeeda). Kari shows in the last chapter titled 'The Exit Route' that "I feel no bird urge. I want to step back, not step off." (Patil 115), depicting that the protagonist makes up her mind not to give up her life for "anyone anymore" (ibid), thus celebrating her identity. In a way, she transcends the traditional norms of society and accepts individuality. (Zahra)

3.4 Breaking Boundaries: Metafictional Marvels in *Kari*.

Kari incorporates elements of metafiction, which is a literary technique where a work of fiction draws attention to its status. As far as the narrative voice is concerned, it breaks the fourth wall by addressing the reader directly and acknowledging the presence. This type of technique creates a sense of self-awareness. It also strengthens the metafictional components by combining verbal and visual tactics. While serving the story, the use of visual elements like pictures and typography also brings attention to the medium itself. It serves to remind readers that they are interacting with a piece of art. Patil employs various storytelling devices such as nonlinear narratives, multiple perspectives and dreamlike sequences. These techniques blur the boundaries between reality and imagination, challenging the readers' expectations and making them conscious of the constructed nature of the story.

Conclusion

As a result of its distinctive fusion of visual art and narrative storytelling, the graphic novel has developed into a well-known postmodern genre. Graphic novels represent postmodernism through narrative strategies, intertextuality, self-reflexivity, and gender roles, questioning conventional literature ideas and providing a singular forum for creative and

critical expression. *Kari* can firmly be situated within the realm of postmodern literature due to its prominent incorporation of intertextuality, metafiction, and breaking the fourth wall. *Kari* emerges as a thought-provoking and innovative graphic novel that exemplifies the essence of postmodernism. It challenges readers to question established norms, embrace intertextuality, explore the boundaries of fiction, and participate actively in the storytelling journey. By pushing the boundaries of graphic storytelling, "Kari" paves the way for future works to continue exploring the richness and possibilities of postmodern narratives.

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