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NAVIGATING THE 'SMOG' CITY: URBANITY AND BELONGING IN AMRUTA PATIL'S *KARI*

Dhrupadi Chattopadhyay
SNDT Women's University, Mumbai.

Abstract
Illustrations accompanying texts or in the form of comic strips have been part of the India's publication history since almost its inception. But was since read often as "cheap, undemanding, throwaway entertainment mainly for kids or the sub-literate". With the coming in of the graphic novel however, things seem to have changed radically in India. Graphic novels are not merely pictures or comics that are thicker in dimensions but are narratorial innovations that have radically shaped the way that narratives are consumed in India. Major publishing houses such as random house, Harper Collins and Penguin India has taken the lead in publishing graphic novels in the last decade. This has transformed the ways in which graphic novels are circulated and consumed in India. Largely written in English, it appeals to the sensibilities of the urban English-speaking elite. This unique space that the graphic novels occupy in India between the popular and the elite have allowed for this relatively new form to experiment with content that other more established forms like the Indian English novels, for example, resisted. This has allowed for radical spaces of negotiations to emerge that escape the systematized censuring measures of both the textual and the visual forms. Women writing the graphic form have profited immensely from these fluidities, as they have invented new modalities of operation in this form. A number of pointed interventions in this regard have come from the ways in which women have conceptualised discourses of the body/ies. In particular, attention to localised triggers to understand contexts of women's bodies have significantly radicalised ways in which female experience has been routinely read and recorded. Critical to these interventions have been the ambivalence that the form of the graphic narrative affords. This paper uses this as an incentive to read into the invisible urban identities through Amruta Patil's Kari.
Keywords: Indian Graphic Fiction, Gendering the City, Queer Spatialities.

► *Corresponding Author: Dhrupadi Chattopadhyay*

The graphic novel is a rather recent addition to India's pluriform literary culture, having announced itself in the 1990s. Illustrations accompanying texts or in the form of comic strips have been part of the India's publication history since almost its inception (Stoll 2016). These were typically since read as "cheap, undemanding, throwaway entertainment mainly for kids or the sub-literate" (Gravett 2023). With the coming in of the graphic novel, however, things seem to have changed radically in India. Graphic novels are not merely pictures or comics that are thicker in dimension but are narratorial innovations that have radically shaped the way that narratives are consumed in India. Major publishing houses such as random house, Harper Collins and Penguin India has taken the lead in publishing graphic novels in the last decade, complemented by independent publishing houses such a Phantomville. This has transformed the ways in which graphic novels are circulated and consumed in India. Largely written in English, it appeals to the sensibilities of the urban

English-speaking elite. This unique space that the graphic novels occupy in India between the popular and the elite have allowed for this relatively new form to experiment with content that other more established forms like the Indian English novels, for example, resisted (Creekumar 2015). Beyond the confines of strict generic expectations, this allowed for radical spaces of negotiations to emerge that efficaciously bypass the systematized censuring measures of both the textual and the visual forms. Women writing the graphic form have profited immensely from these fluidities, as they have invented new modalities of operation in this form (Nayek 2026). A number of pointed interventions in this regard have come from the ways in which women have conceptualised discourses of the body/ies. In particular, attention to localised triggers to understand contexts of women's bodies have significantly radicalised ways in which female experience has been routinely read and recorded. Critical to these interventions have been the ambivalence that the form of the graphic narrative affords.

This paper attempts to read into this ambivalence particularly in the affordances that a city offers. As a primarily urbane form, the graphic narratives have not necessarily dealt with the city (Chakraborty 2022). The urbanity has been often been in terms of the lens/spirit rather than the city itself. In particular, women inhabiting cities and owning spaces within cities have been a rather contentious debate. Several works of Shilpa Phadke has shown how women are routinely excluded from public spaces and their right to own the city heavily compromised. The city for all practical purposes is heavily gendered and the spaces highly regulated by men (Phadke 2020). Phadke writes, "large cities and particularly public spaces are unfriendly and even hostile spaces for women. The state and its functionaries appear to believe that given this hostility, women might be better off avoiding these spaces altogether. Thus, not only do the former not just abdicate their responsibilities to facilitate access and provide justice, if not safety, but they also assume that nobody would want to access unfriendly spaces" (Phadke 2013, 51). Given the looming presence of gendered violence in Indian cities and its representation in available media, it becomes normative to read urban spaces as off-limits for women. Men are ubiquitous in the public spaces of the cities and the women are conspicuous by their absence. One of the most common ways in which women are encouraged to self-regulate their movements in the city is through the dismissal of loitering. While men are free to claim the streets without any perceivable necessity or purpose, women are strictly forbidden to 'loiter'. Phadke suggests that this strategy of loitering be employed by women as resistance and that 'frivolous fun' be used as feminist acts. The multipronged powerful idea of occupying a hostile city has been used as an incentive in this paper to read Amruta Patil's graphic narrative *Kari*. Published in 2008, and since hailed as the first graphic novel by an Indian woman, its highly stylised visual and textual aesthetics offers an autoethnographic account of a queer young woman living in Mumbai. Written like a memoir and offering a pastiche of artistic forms and mediums, the text seeks to visibilize migrant sexualities in an unforgiving city given to continuous processes of erasure. I argue that the eponymous heroine employs political strategies of belonging that challenge heteronormative ideas of inhabiting spaces in the cities. In this, one receives the city as not only a space that restricts, but as a one that offers radical alterities. Bilal Moin in the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Poems on the Indian City* (2025) observes, "The city offers a kind of freedom that the village, bound by its rigid social structures, cannot: a space where one can slip out of the constraints of caste, religion and tradition. In the anonymity of the urban sprawl, there is the possibility of reinvention, of liberation. This freedom— social, personal and creative –- becomes a defining feature of the city, even though it, too, can impose its own unique forms of oppression" (Moin 2025, LIII). I argue that the space of these alterities emerges from the (un)freedom that the city offers.

Graphic narratives and the city

The graphic fiction in India is seen a rather new form that emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century and has routinely been framed within the urban aesthetic expectations. Davies notes that contemporary graphic novels reflect a deeply unequal urban society marked by differential access to infrastructure, however, "in both their formal innovations and radical content, they also frequently counter this violence by offering templates for cultural and political resistance, and conceiving alternative models of urban habitation and socialisation" (Davies 2019, 3). Dittmer and Latham have been able to conceive of the representation of these kinds of graphic spatialities of the cities through understanding of "the embodied visuality of graphic narrative and its alchemic power to shape our subjectivities, spaces, and temporalities" (Dittmer and Latham 2014, 428). This kind of understanding not only builds on the dimension of space, in particular urban spatialities, as not fixed entities but ones that are constantly in flux. Crucially in their conception, spaces are not just relative to other indices but also relational. This relationality is reflected in the ways in which the graphic form narrativizes the space. The concept of time is relayed through the spatial arrangement of panels. Sometimes small panels appear in linear sequence indicating a constant linear progression of time. On other occasions, panels are often not framed to give and illusion of time suspended while elsewhere panels appear in various sizes and sequences indicating variability in the experiences of time. Space, on the other hand, and its representation, is often in excess of the structures as represented in the text. Take for example, the image of the train and train compartments in Patil's *Kari.* Trains are perhaps the most potent material symbols of the city; symbolising modernity and movement in equal measure. As a quotidian practice, the inhabitants of the city rely on the local trains to get to work and back home every day. The public transport network sets the rhythm of the city and regulates the ways in which people circulate. This lived experience of structure that is vivid, material, and defined, is placed against the narrativities that embody this presence in its graphic avatar. Identifiably, urban structures are hence rendered abstract and simultaneously produced as 'relational' to the narrative output of the same. This opening offers a unique opportunity to read marginal narratives about the city that are rendered 'relative'.

One instance that immediately comes to mind from text is the two panels on the left-hand side drawn on the charcoal. Drawing in charcoal gives the panels fluidity and renders a dramatic light and shadow effect. It offers a kind of subtle depth to the city and a range of black, white and greys adds to a wide-ranging sense of both depth and gloom. The first one provides a long shot of the train crossing a bridge over a water body (offering a sense of the movement) and the next offers a close-up of the women's compartment in the train (a suffocating sense of stasis). The text accompanying the image is interestingly outside the panel. Says Kari, "[t]his morning, I am yet another jostling shoulder in the railway python. Like any other morning, we travel in silence. In this city, no one talks. Everyone guards their sanity against grief of strangers. We see a dismembered body on the tracks, but after the first gasp, no one utters a word." The route to belonging in this city therefore is the erasure of the individual self. The cost of inhabiting this urban space is to get lost in its unnamed spaces punctuated by immunity to losses. The epitome of the existence is the interiority of the self that a well-adjusted person in the city achieves as the human loss in the form of a nameless dismembered body is unable to stir. The poise of the faceless crowd devoid of its humanity is juxtaposed against the human suffering that is allowed space in the ladies compartment: "The airlines lady who travels in the same compartment as us day after day, has bruises on her arms and face today and her eyes keep welling, but no one is keen to engage. Our eyes dart towards her, but we go back to travelling in too much proximity. Two inches

from one another and expressionless (Patil 2008, 42). The lady in question has a battered eye and is clearly someone who experiences domestic violence and her sobs are easily drowned in the crowd which seems to be oblivious to gendered violence. Kari reclaims this metaphoric control over the space through a map that has been individualised. The next page interestingly does not have a frame but is a colonial map of the city re-inscribed by Kari to denote the places that she visits and inhabits. The colonial cartography that lies beneath the postcolonial modernity is invoked in an attempt to over write the erasures that define the city thereby rendering marginal populations inconsequential. The urban gendered consciousness is processed through these deliberate acts of rewriting born through series of (un)freedoms that outline their lives.

Mumbai, in particular, has been the site of manifold literary imaginations. The city has been variously imagined across identities, spatialities and materialities most importantly in films and literature. On 'Bombay poets' R Raj Rao notes, "[a]s a city Bombay is unique. It is modern in the western sense of the term, and yet primitive. Its modernity of sensibility fails to find an objective correlative in the reality of experience, resulting in anarchy, chaos and disorder." (Rao 1996, 63). I contend that this overwhelming radicality of experience exhibited through 'anarchy, chaos and disorder' mark the graphic narratives pertaining to cities and in particular, Bombay.

Kari, and the Queer City

"[O]f all things denied to a woman, the solitary life most be the one that's never really mentioned. Not having it— a chosen time of aloneness— might make one lonelier than one would have felt otherwise" (Roy 2026). The pursuit of solitude has been one of the driving forces of women's independent thinking and creative pursuits. However, the affordances that solitude allow vary across caste, class and sexual identities. As we have seen in the previous section, the city appears in a completely different warp in the migrant woman's everyday experience. But Kari, the protagonist, is also lesbian and acutely aware of the invisibility of her sexual consciousness in the city that has been steeped in images of heteronormative love. In fact, the text begins with a suicide pact between Kari and her love interest Ruth which ends up sending Kari to the real and metaphorical 'gutters' and sewage lines that dot the city. Like sewage that can be easily hidden in plain sight and has to be treated with indifference reserved for the painful unavoidable existences of the urban every day, so is her sexuality.

In the case of graphic narratives, it has been argued that the mainstream comics have by and large ignored the LGBTQ rights and their protagonists. Observes Mance, "[i]t has been primarily in the works of LGBTQ comic creators, published and distributed through underground, independent, and alternative presses, that readers have encountered LGBTQ storylines set in LGBTQ communities and featuring queer and trans characters whose interests, activities, and relationships resist mainstream, heteronormative identity categories, institutions and ideals" (Mance 2016, 294). In the Indian context, argues Svati Shah, that the urban imaginary has in many ways shaped and concretized a queer consciousness in India. Through various street protests, cultural festivals and marches, the urban centres in India has given both momentum and visibility to the queer rights. In other words, contemporary Indian urbanism is framed by non-normative gender identities (Shah 2015, 637). Siddarth Dubey and Tanupriya have suggested that urbane sexualities are framed through anonymities.

> One way queer individuals temporarily enact space within heteronormative geographies is through cruising—a spatial practice where desire reconfigures otherwise heterosexual public zones such as parks, alleys, and metro stations. These brief, often anonymous encounters subvert ownership and visibility norms by queering space through presence and gesture

> rather than permanence. In the South Asian context, where queer expressions remain surveilled or criminalized, cruising functions not just as a form of desire but as a tactic of survival, reclaiming visibility within marginal cracks of public life. (Dubey and Tanupriya 2025, 2)

One sees an interiorization of these public spaces in the heteronormative geographies of the city as Kari 'cruises' the city. From public transport, movie theatres, art galleries, railway stations, sundry tea stalls, office spaces to the streets, Kari maps the city in alternative ways. Succinctly put, Kari says "I have no burning issue. Blurring genderlines? Bigotry? Cultural genocide? Dying planet? My favourite form of movement is float" (Patil 2008, 70). The ability to retain her political consciousness as she categorically rewrites the identities forming pillars within the urban body politik gives velocity to Kari's 'cruising'. Interestingly, it is the inner quarters of the city that Kari devotes her maximum attention to, turning the heteronormative city inside out. She exposes the hypocrisy of her heterosexual flatmates who feel free to spread themselves across the shared spaces in her 2BHK with their boyfriends and simultaneously engage with her in sexual banter. On the other hand, Kari is trapped and only obliquely acknowledge her sexual identity and has to perforce hide her partner.

Modern cities often embody disease and decay, but interestingly, diseased bodies have been absent from most representations of Mumbai. Environmental indicators of illness hang in the air like smog, open sewage , torrential downpour and ensuing floods but ailing bodies are remain outside this representational matrix. For decades, Mumbai has been at the forefront of cancer research and treatment in India. However, this aspect of the city is carefully hidden in the cultural mapping of the city. The diseased body is as dispensable as the non-normative body. Kari finds emotional fulfilment in her relationship with Angel who is suffering from terminal cancer. The panels that attend to her relationship with Angel are filled with warm colours indicating an emotional companionship that Kari is unable to find outside. The questions regarding her sexuality that comes across as casual violence and she retreats "I roll the word 'lesbian' in my mouth and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshly, salivating, fresh off the boat from Lesbia, and totally inappropriate" (Patil 2008, 79). It is only in the company of Angel that she truly discovers herself, finds a foot in the city that invades her personal space. Their coming together places the contexts of marginal identities in a state of suspended animation. The play of colours, frames and texts in the graphic novel plays to heighten the tension between prescribed knowledges, the language of dominance and the everyday resistances. The memoir almost serves as a handbook for queer individuals to inhabit urban spaces and rewrite the gendered spatialities of these geographies while making spaces for emotional ruptures.

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