

# A Study of Queer Subalternity and Human Values in Amruta Patil's Kari

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## Abstract:

Amruta Patil, is a pioneering figure among Indian female graphic novelists. She is widely known for her seminal works, including *Kari* and the *Adi Parva* duology. *Kari* stands as a landmark in Indian literature. It transcends the boundaries of set queer narratives. *Kari* depicts the experience of the outsider in an indifferent urban landscape. The novel is set against the backdrop of a Smog City (Mumbai). The protagonist has deal a world characterized by systemic neglect. This study examines how *Kari* stands for her dignity. She doesn't choose protest. She proves herself through quiet, existential acts of service specifically her role as a metaphorical boatman and her intimate companionship with a dying friend. *Kari* by Amruta Patil moves beyond traditional coming out narratives set in LGBTQ Literature. This paper argues that Patil presents a raw, humanistic struggle for survival and integrity within a patriarchal framework.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ Literature, Human Values, Subaltern Studies, Indian Graphic Novel, Urban Alienation.

## Introduction:

### The Human Landscape of Kari

Amruta Patil's graphic novel, *Kari* (2008), focuses on a marginalized protagonist who faces a double marginalization: she is both a woman and a homosexual in a restrictive society. This dual identity places Kari on the edges of the Smog City of Mumbai. However, Patil does not just show her as a victim. Instead, the story explores how Kari maintains her human values despite being pushed to the sidelines. While the city is indifferent and crowded, Kari finds ways to reclaim her dignity. She does this through her quiet work and her deep, personal connections with others. This paper will examine how Kari's struggle is not just about her identity, but about the universal human need for integrity and resilience. This paper explores the journey of Kari, a young woman living in the crowded Smog City of Mumbai. The story begins with a painful ending: a failed suicide pact between Kari and her lover, Ruth. Ruth leaves for a conventional life, but Kari remains in the city. She is left to face a world that often ignores her existence. Most narratives about LGBTQ focus only on the act of coming out. However; this research argues that *Kari* is about something deeper. It is about the preservation of human values in a cold, urban environment. This can be seen through Kari's daily life and her unique career. She works in an advertising agency but views herself as a metaphorical boatman. Through this lens, one can see that dignity is not always found in loud protests. Sometimes, it can be found in the quiet choice to stay kind. Kari's bond with her dying friend, Angel, shows us the power of empathy. Her refusal to hide her true self shows us the value of integrity. This study aims to show how Patil uses the graphic novel form to highlight these universal human struggles. In a world of smog and shadows, Kari represents the light of a human spirit.

### The LGBTQ+ Perspective: Living Beyond the Binary

Amruta Patil does more than just write about sexuality. Many scholars use Judith Butler's theories to explain Kari's appearance. Her short hair and tomboy style are not just fashion choices. Instead, they are quiet acts of dismantling the stereotypes in the society. After their failed suicide attempt, Kari's lover, Ruth, chooses to live so called a normal life. In contrast, Kari chooses to stay messy. She accepts a life of non-belonging. As Patil suggests, this choice makes Kari simply human in all her complexity. She refuses to play a specific role just to make others feel comfortable. By staying true to herself, Kari shows the value of integrity over social conformity.

### 2. The Queer Subaltern: A Voice from the Sewers

Kari exists as a Queer Subaltern. This means she is pushed to the edges of society twice. First, she is marginalized for who she loves. Second, she is marginalized because she refuses to follow the city's standard success story. In this context, the Smog City of Mumbai acts as a metaphor for a toxic social climate. Kari's career provides a powerful symbol for her journey. She describes herself as a boatman who clears the city's clogged drains and sewers. By cleaning the literal filth that others choose to ignore, Kari finds her own form of power. She takes on a subaltern task to fix a society that refuses to look her in the eye.

This role shows an important human value: the dignity of labor. It proves that the most marginalized people are often the ones who keep the world running. Even in the shadows, Kari's service to the city gives her life a quiet, resilient purpose.

### 3. Reflection of Human Values: Love, Friendship, and Integrity

In the Smog City of Mumbai, Kari preserves her humanity through two very different but equally important relationships.

- **Resilience in the Aftermath of Love (Ruth):** Kari's identity is deeply tied to Ruth, her lover. After their failed double suicide attempt, Ruth leaves the city, but she remains a bullet in Kari's stomach—a constant memory. The human value here is emotional resilience. Kari does not let the heartbreak destroy her. Instead, she uses the memory of Ruth to navigate her loneliness and eventually find the strength to step back, not step off the ledge.
- **Compassion and the Boatman Spirit (Angel):** While Ruth represents the past, Angel represents the present. Angel is a cancer patient who provides Kari with a safe space away from the judgment of the city. Their bond highlights the value of empathy. Kari acts as a metaphorical boatman, helping shepherd Angel toward death with dignity. In return, Angel teaches Kari not to fear the end. This friendship shows that compassion is not about fixing someone, but about witnessing their journey with an open heart.
- **Authenticity as Resistance:** Kari's refusal to conform to proper gender roles—like her short hair and androgynous style—reflects the value of integrity. Despite pressure from her roommates or co-workers at the ad agency, she stays true to herself. She chooses non-belonging over a fake life. This authenticity is her way of surviving a society that tries to push her into a box.

### Conclusion:

Ultimately, *Kari* is much more than a story about marginalized identity; it is a profound study of human values within a decaying urban landscape. By embracing the metaphorical role of a boatman, Kari finds a meaningful way to serve a society that often rejects her. Her journey shows us that integrity is not about conforming to strict social rules. Instead, it is about the quiet courage required to remain simply human.

Kari's relationships—specifically her resilient memory of Ruth and her deep compassion for Angel—prove that resilience is not a single, loud victory. Rather, it is a quiet, daily act of showing up. Patil's work reminds us that even within the Smog City, personal truth and empathy can thrive. Kari does not merely survive the sewers of Mumbai; she navigates them with her soul intact, proving that dignity is found in the choices we make when no one is watching.

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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