

## Eco-Consciousness and Eco-Semiotics in Amruta Patil's *Kari*: An Exploration of Queer Ecology

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### Abstract

The field of ecology in literature distorted the notion of humans being the centre of all living ecosystems, striving for an “environment that is neither solipsistically anthropocentric nor blatantly anti-humanitarian” (Lauer, 2018, p.13). This led to the emergence of ecocriticism, which dealt with environmental issues through literature. “To put it succinctly, eco criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... [As it] takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p.18). Meanwhile, disregarding the societal norms constructed on sex, gender, and identity emerged queer theory, suggesting the fluidity of the human body. Despite their inherent differences, environmental criticism and queer theory have the opportunity to combine to produce a new dimension called queer ecology. This analysis aims to establish a connection between eco-criticism and queer theory, shedding light on the concept of queer ecology through the analysis of the literary text *Kari*.

*Kari*, written by the first female graphic novelist, stands as a pioneering Indian lesbian graphic novel that effectively dismantles prevailing societal norms and challenges perspectives on genderqueer individuals. Further, the analysis narrows itself to an eco-conscious approach from a queer perspective, which claims to be the main argument of the article. In its graphical representation, this analysis also focuses on the meaning nature provides us through symbols defining eco-semiotics. The purpose of the study is to contribute to a greater understanding of environmental exploitation concerning the marginalisation experienced by the queer community. The eco-conscious attitude that is looked upon from a queer perspective serves to prove the mutual interdependence between eco-critical and queer sexual desires that are often negated, ignored, exploited and marginalised amidst the dominant ideological discourses.

**Keywords:** Graphic Novel; Ecocriticism; Queer Theory; Queer Ecology; Eco-Consciousness and Eco-Semiotics

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## Introduction

Queer literature consistently serves as a medium to unravel the injustice and discrimination rooted in an individual's gender and sexuality. A range of queer texts have emerged to deconstruct the imposed binaries and societal standards that limit personal autonomy. By harnessing the critical power of queer theory, there arises a deployment that envisions queer studies moving beyond the "realms of sexuality and sexual identity" (Harper, 1997, p.1). This deployment shows how different aspects of social experience intersect and transform each other. The intersection within queer literature is currently in full swing, encompassing not only issues pertaining to sexuality but also various forms of societal exploitation. To illustrate, there exists a connection between queer experiences and various factors such as race, class, ethnicity, and environment. This study concentrates on the intersection of queer and environment, a rapidly emerging field of study, by incorporating the theoretical elements of queer theory and ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism and queer theory are indeed two distinct fields with different and unique objectives to be focused on. Emerging in the late 20th century, ecocriticism focuses on the relationship between literature and the environment. It extensively examines the portrayal of ecology, ecological issues in the literature, and the interactions between humans and their surroundings. Conversely, queer theory, revolves around the constructive nature of gender and sexuality, challenging normative understanding of gender, sex and identity while reasserting the fluid nature of human sexuality. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the leading queer theorists examines queer as a, "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made to signify monolithically"(Sedgwick, 1993, p.07).

The notion of nature is interrogated in both fields, establishing a common thread between them. The idea of "natural" arises from human

perspectives on nature, not 'nature' itself" (Sandilands, 2016, p.170). The societal framework that delineates the naturalness of nature functions according to the perspective it has created.

However, ecocriticism and queer theory intersect by recognising the connectedness between "social identities and the system of oppression that shapes our experience and perspective about nature" (Schnabel, 2014, p.44). The gap between ecocriticism and queer theory is sealed by "drawing attention to how nature and the marginalised social groups, especially queer people, have been exploited historically" (Schnabel, 2014, p.13). This paper aims to establish a connection between ecocriticism and queer theory, by shedding light on the concept of queer ecology through the analysis of the literary text *Kari*. Amruta Patil, the first Indian female graphic novelist's seminal work, *Kari* in its graphical representation, unravels the discourse between environment and queerness. Set in 2008 urban Mumbai, the graphic novel revolves around the life of Kari, a lesbian. It also delves deep into visualising the connectedness Kari develops with the environment or the nature around her after being saved from the suicide attempt, "[t]he day I hauled myself out of the sewer—the day of double suicide—I promised the water I'd return her favour. That I'd unclog her sewers when she couldn't breathe" (Patil, 2008, p.31). The condition of the queer protagonist and the deteriorating environment around her is simultaneously addressed through the incorporation of queer ecology. The theory taken for the analysis focuses on the specificity through which the novel can be studied deeply. An eco-conscious approach from a queer perspective has been used for the analysis.

Furthermore, this article aims at promoting eco-consciousness through queer literature. This analysis then delves deeper into an eco-conscious approach from a queer standpoint, which is presented as the central argument of the article. The eco-conscious approach (Deep Ecology) shows us how we are connected to

one's environment and habitats. Embracing the "practice of deep- ecology platform and exploring our ecological selves, one can realise one's ecological self, which Arne Naess calls self – realisation" (Barman, 2022, p.8737). The analysis then examines visual representation and how nature uses symbols to convey meaning, defining eco-semiotics. Eco-semiotics, as Maran & Kull explains in their article, where "living systems are [considered as] meaning-making system, they are sign-using systems, or communicative systems" (2014, p.41). *Kari*, in its graphical representation, explicitly provides us with the meaning the environment signifies.

The aspect of ecological consciousness in a novel is explored through the characters' action, speech, author's comment and here in this analysis, the protagonist *Kari's* action and speech prominently reveal it. The intersection between ecocriticism and queer theory concerning environmental issues and the struggles faced by the queer protagonist in the novel have been perspicuously bridged at the end of the analysis. The research begins with an introduction that describes the study's context and background, along with the theoretical frame that is used in the study. It is followed by the literature review section, where the existing literature on the intersection of ecocriticism and queer theory [queer ecology] is being analysed. The methodology section elaborates on how queer ecology can be interpreted under the context of the chosen text. Subsequently, the analysis part focuses on the text, *Kari* by Amruta Patil, exploring its connection to eco-conscious and eco-semiotics from a queer ecological perspective.

### Literature Review

The study concentrates on the convergence of eco-criticism and queer theory, leading to the development of queer ecology as a distinct field. Concurrently, the literature review has been categorised into three separate sections. The first section focuses on existing literature in queer ecology. The second section narrows down from the first section, specifies itself by focusing on the existing literature on the eco-conscious approach. The final section elaborates

on the meaning nature gives us through symbols and signs, and how they are depicted in literature defines eco-semiotics.

### Eco-Criticism and Queer Theory

Eco-criticism has rapidly grown after its establishment in the 1990's. The rudimentary nature of this field of study is to bring in the connection between literature and the natural environment. William Rueckert's article, *Literature an Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism* laid the foundation for the emergence of Eco-criticism. Later in the year 1996 Cheryll Glotfelty's text, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology* served as a cutting edge writing in the rapidly evolving field of literary ecology. The major purpose of this study is to establish how physical environment is dealt in the literary works. Similarly, Buell, in his article, *Literature and Environment*, argues that the sole purpose of his study is to grasp the attention of the readers by its powerful, "words, story and image to reinforce, enliven and direct environmental concern" (Buell et al., 2011, p. 418) that in turn can create a greater understanding of the environmental problems and the various factors that involve in the destruction of the environment. The words, plot and the images tend to create a strong and desirable effect in the reader's minds. These arguments somewhat reinforce the arguments put forward by scholars like Kerridge, 2006; Garrard, 2011; Morita, 2014. For instance, in his article "Environmentalism and Eco-criticism", (Kerridge 2006, p. 530) put forth the idea of how, "texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful and helpful effects".

Seemingly, Garrad, in her book, *Ecocriticism* describes the challenging role of ecocriticism in the following lines stating, "the challenge for eco-critics is to keep one eye on the ways in which nature is always in some way culturally constructed, and on the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse" (Garrard, 2011, p.10). A range of other sub-fields is being incorporated with ecocriticism such as Eco-feminism, which deals with the relationship between women and the environment. It

primarily engages in the joint liberation of women and nature. Women have visibly shown their concern and association for/with nature in many time periods. One such striking concern can be elaborated through origin of the Chipko movement. “Chipko — a movement whose activities in its two decades of evolution have been extended from embracing trees to embracing living mountains and living waters” (Shiva & Mies, 1993, p. 245-246). Women from Nahi-Kala village located in the Doon Valley of North India resorted in embracing the trees as an act of protecting the trees from deforestation. Similarly, there are other sub-fields like, Social Ecology, Eco-Marxism and most recently Queer Ecology.

Queer theory was brought into practice to understand the myriad complexities of identity, oppression and group dynamics. Sedgwick, in his book *Epistemology of the Closet* in the year 1990, critiqued both sides of essentialist versus constructionist, suggesting they were overly focused on issues of identity in the end. Rejecting the construction of binaries, queer theory opposes the policing of heteronormativity as the only form of sexual normality that is being “reproduced in everyday life not only through talk, but also through routine activities in which gender, sexuality and heterosexuality interconnect” (Jackson, 2006, p.114). Jackson (2006) goes on to argue that heterosexuality has never been a straightforward approach to life as it seems to be. It is not simply about desiring or engaging in sexual acts with the opposite sex but about living all other aspects of life within the confined boundaries of the gender binary.

In a similar context, Watson examines queer theory as “a framework for understanding the constitution of identities [...] a revisioning of fields of the erotic and the flow of desire, and [...] a method to disturb the heteronormative” (2005, p.79).

The long-term debate about queer theory as to whether homosexuality is a cultural construct or a natural phenomenon can be analytically explored with the aid of eco-criticism. Comparing the issues of environmental

degradation and inequalities faced by sexual minorities, the emergence of queer ecology can be studied thoroughly. The connection between queer theory and eco-criticism is based on the belief that both mutually inform each other challenging attitudes and seek to disrupt the constructed systems of society. For example, both fields are critical of anthropocentrism and challenge the notion of human superiority over other species. Moreover, queer theory and ecocriticism elaborate on the importance of recognising and valuing diversity, be it sexual identity or biological diversity.

In this context, Heckert (2012) elaborates how power dynamics, oppression and heteronormativity shape our perception and connection with nature. It also scrutinises how environmental practices, discussions, and portrayals contribute to the normalisation of heterosexism, perpetuating societal norms. Seemingly, Sandilands’s *Queer Ecology* showcases the connection between power relations of sexuality and nature, interrogating the traditional environmentalism, which excludes marginalised communities, such as people of colour and queer individuals. She “highlights the complexities of contemporary bio-politics” (Sandilands, 2016, p.169). Morita’s review article on *Ecocriticism and Gender/Sexuality Studies* justifies the need for the integration of ecology and queer, stating, “if ecocriticism is to be the enterprise that reverse[s] the impact of environmental destruction, then it must also take into consideration the injustices of discrimination based on gender and sexuality” (Morita, 2014, p.1).

### **Eco-Consciousness Approach**

Emerging as a new area in eco-critical studies, the eco-conscious approach suggests that humans are part of nature and not the supreme one. The article *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism* by Sessions (1995) emphasises that the nature of humans such that, with sufficient comprehensive (all-sided) maturity, we cannot help but identify “our self with all living beings;

beautiful or ugly, big or small, sentient or not" (Sessions, 1995, p.225). Ecological consciousness can be represented in novels and other literary works through characters' actions, speeches and the author's comments. Taking these thoughts forward, K Satchidanand and G Sankara Kurup's, works strongly reflect ecological consciousness. Analysing their poems, an article titled *Eco Crisis Leads to the Rise of Eco-Consciousness* by Maniar et al. (2021), reveals the country's pitiful condition of rivers through the soul of a farmer who committed suicide. In a similar way, *Consciously Eco-conscious: An Eco-conscious Re-reading of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's Moon Mountain as Young Adult Literature* by Narendiran in the year 2021 examines the ecological consciousness addressed brings out how the colonial legacies continue to influence the contemporary environmental challenges and discusses the literary relationships between nature and youth influence readers' attitudes towards the contemporary anxieties such as climate change and related environmental crises. In a slightly different context, Amer's (2022) publication entitled *Literature and Ecology: Promoting an Eco-Consciousness through Children's Literature*, demonstrates how eco-consciousness is represented in children's literature. Further, in his analysis, he interprets the characters' "relationship to nature that is developed daily and mixed with pleasure and delight and a sort of fear for the unknown depths of her (nature) realities" (2022, p.199). He also suggests that humans should have a balanced state between their needs and the demands of the ecosystem. Taking these arguments together Barman's article published in the year 2022, titled *Arne Naess Reflection of Eco-Centrism and Deep-Ecology with Utilitarian and Deontological Defence against Anthropocentric Theory* stresses the need for a universal holistic approach where humans can develop ecological consciousness and, at the same time, realise ourselves internally. He deviates from the anthropocentric aspect and believes in eco-centrism, where human beings are not the centre but part of the ecosystem. Indeed, eco-consciousness is one of the eco-centric practises that shows how we are connected to one's

environment and habitats (Barman, 2022, p.8737).

### Eco-Semiotics

Eco-semiotics is the study of the semiotic interrelationships between organisms and the environment (Noth, 1998, p.332). Farina & Napoletano in the year 2010, contributes more significantly to a systemic study of landscape processes from an eco-semiotic perspective.

Seemingly, Maran & Kull's *Ecosemiotics: Main Principles and Current Development* too views eco-semiotics as a communicative system of eco-systems; instead of emphasising the material aspect of the object taken for study, it focuses on sign relations.

Now turning on to the rationale of our study, in the publication titled *Disarming "Nature" as a Weapon: A Queer Ecosemiotic Reimagining of Futurity and Environmental Ethics*, Lauer (2018) studies the concept of eco-semiotics within queer theory. His work emphasises two things an eco-semiotic reading must do: one, it must address the character's attitude towards the physical environment in the text. Subsequently, it must also discuss the places where the narrator of the text or the characters exposes the "meaning of signs, especially if that meaning is assumed to be natural or essential to the character or the thing and its expression as a sign" (Lauer, 2018, p.27). Similarly, the novels *Jonny Appleseed* by Joshua Whitehead (2018), *Stay and Fight* by Madeline Ffitch (2019), *The Mere Wife* (2018) by Maria Dahvana Headley and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) deals with the resource extraction and ecological destruction in reliance with queerness. These novels do not provide a direct reference to climate change, rather mention about flooding, wildfires and failed tobacco crops. Queer or gender-queer characters in each novel have an association with the physical environment around them. Altogether, these novels outline qualities of queer ecology reflecting our relationship with the environment.

The research gap identified underscores the necessity for examining eco-consciousness and

eco-semiotics through a queer lens, especially taking into account the representation of nature and humans in the Indian graphic novel selected for the study. The already existing literature has examined eco-consciousness and eco-semiotics as separate entities. But this research tries to intervene in both entities and analyse from a queer ecological perspective. This analysis attempts to bring out the similarities between queer theory and ecocriticism in a more specific form by analysing their graphical representation.

### Methodology

This study engages in visual analysis and explores the interconnectedness between queer theory and ecocriticism. As ecology stems from biology, which has a non-essentialist aspect, similarly queer theory is a non-essentialist view of gender and sexuality (Morton, 2010, p.275). Ecology and queer theory both adopt non-essentialist views in their fields. Ecology as a subset of biology, examines the complex interactions between organism and environment. It understands that these interactions are dynamic and influenced by the context, rather than being fixed or essential. Similarly, essentialist idea of gender and sexuality are challenged by queer theory, posits that identities are fluid. This analysis examines the Indian graphic novel *Kari* from a queer ecological perspective. The common traits of oppression and exploitation experienced by sexual minorities and the environment are being studied analogously. Segregating the analysis into two parts, the researcher studies Eco-consciousness and Eco-semiotics through the character's action, the setting, and the author's view. The protagonist of the novel, a queer woman connects the gap between ecology and queerness. Moreover, the data used were particular illustrations, expressions, phrases and sentences. This analysis brings in ideas of theorists who have contributed to the emerging field of queer ecology. Notable theorists such as Greta Gaard (1997), Catriona Sandilands (2016) and Bannan-Watts contributions to Queer Ecology and Eco-consciousness are deeply analysed regarding the graphic novel taken for study. Further, the study incorporating elements of queer ecology postulates queer literature as a

medium to promote eco-consciousness and eco-semiotics to decipher the meaning nature provides us.

This research makes a significant contribution to the ever-developing field of queer ecology. Centred on environmental practices and politics through a graphical queer narrative, this study addresses the intricacies of contemporary biopolitics and the degradation of the environment with an eco-conscious attitude.

### *Kari*: A Graphical Overview

"Graphic novels include a keenness for the authorial voice, the longing to establish a serious relationship with the readers and a deeper sense of the medium's history that previously prevailed" (Jee & Mishra, 2022, p. 81). A graphic novel also acts as an active discourse to a reader by playing a dual role in combining images and words. Nayar, states that "the graphic narratives must be read not just in terms of themes but also in terms of forms" (2016, p.13). The following analysis of the text *Kari*, interprets both the form and the theme by deciphering the meaning of the panel construction and other forms. *Kari* by Amruta Patil carves out an uncontested position not only within the space of graphic literature in India but within the twin fields of feminist and queer cultural production at large (Datta, 2020, p.1). This novel's narrative includes panels divided by a white space called the gutter. The construction of the panel does not follow a regular pattern. Each page in the graphic novel differs in panel construction, and no conventional division of panels follows the entire novel. The panels' frame takes a rectangular shape with thick, dark lines. In *Kari*, there are specific illustrations that break free from traditional boundaries; these boundary-less illustrations are referred to as 'bleed', and when an image extends beyond all four sides, it is called 'full bleed' or 'splash'. The author employs the technique of 'Splash' or 'Full bleed' in select illustrations such as the slipshod surgical procedure, an aerial view of Ruth after her unsuccessful suicide, Kari's phone conversation with her mother, Kari observing her reflection in the mirror, Angel's living space after her death, and lastly an aerial view of Kari at the end of the

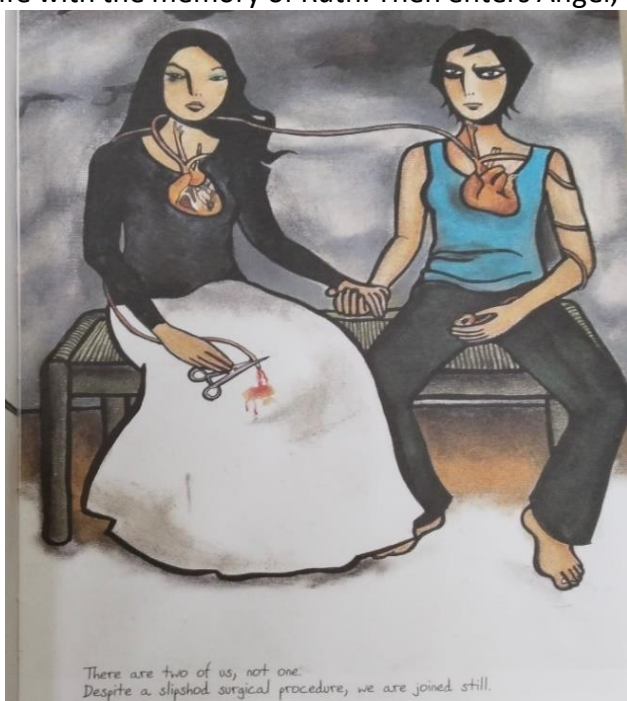
novel. These illustrations without borders show specific details of a scene that are impossible to project in a small panel.

As already stated, *Kari*, authored by Amruta Patil, is a graphic novel that was published in 2008. Kari, the central character of the novel, is a homosexual woman residing in urban Mumbai. She is employed in the field of advertising at an agency. The novel's commencement discloses Kari's association with her longstanding companion, Ruth. The novel follows a non-linear narrative structure, where memories of Ruth intermittently appear and disappear. Kari's appearance defies conventional gender norms; she sports a buzz cut and prefers pants and t-shirts. After Ruth leaves the city following a joint suicide attempt, Kari is left shattered. To cope with her heartbreak, Kari begins to form a bond with the physical environment that provides her with solace. Kari lives in a place named crystal palace where she shares her room with her friends, Billo and Delna and their boyfriends Orgo and Zap. When Kari came to Mumbai she expected "walk in sisterhood" (Patil, 2008, p.18) but she did not get it from the other two women living with her. Despite, others including her parents, being unsympathetic and indifferent to her emotional fluctuations, Kari starts living her life with the memory of Ruth. Then enters Angel,

a terminally ill individual who is the brand manager for one of their clients. Kari finds herself drawn to Angel and starts aiding her. Despite Angel's initial reluctance, a strong friendship blossoms between them. Later, Kari spends her days working in her Ad agency and assisting Angel. The rest of the novel deals with Kari's family dynamics, the challenges she faces as a queer woman and her journey of overcoming societal criticism.

### **Eco-Consciousness through the Lens of a Gender Queer Woman**

This graphic novel centred on the struggle, heartbreak and mental health of a queer woman, is seen against the backdrop of ecology. The novel starts with a "slipshod surgical procedure" (Patil, 2008, p.3), revealing Kari's intimate relationship with Ruth. The first graphical representation in the novel, where Ruth and Kari are joined by a vein, takes an entire page as a panel (Figure1). Ruth, holding the scissors, suggests that the agency for ending the relationship was hers, while the vein curling around Kari's arm depicts her possessiveness and her being entangled in love. This image not only establishes "the end of the relationship but also the roles that Kari and Ruth have within the relationship" (Jee & Mishra, 2022, p.83).



**Figure 1: The Slipshod Surgical Procedure**  
Source: Patil, 2008, p.3



**Figure 2: Kari Saved by the Sewer**  
Source: Patil, 2008, p.5



The intervention of eco-consciousness follows Kari immediately after the suicide attempt, which both Kari and Ruth make at the very beginning of the story. Both decide to jump off a building, but their jump did not help them reach their desired place 'death'. Ruth being saved by the building's safety net and Kari "saved by a sewer" (Patil, 2008, p. 8) (Figure2). It is from this juncture sewer becomes an important motif throughout the entire life journey of Kari. It also plays a prominent role in developing an eco-conscious attitude in the protagonist's life. Kari, both physically and mentally, experiences suffocation living in Mumbai. The latter form of suffocation, the novel depicts, is because of the rigid heteronormative society she lives in, and the former one is because of the environment that surrounds her, which she mentions as a decaying one.



**Figure 3: The Smog City**  
Source: Patil, 2008, p. 14

In representing the physical environment in its decaying stage, Patil relatively portrays the barren life of Kari as queer woman amidst the constructive norms of society, searching for solace and commitment in life. The suicide attempt made by Kari and Ruth at the beginning of the novel illustrates the struggles they have been facing as a queer couple in urban Mumbai. Especially the time when a same-sex relationship

Kari's life in the smog city is pierced by the environmental and identity crises that surround her. Her life in the city becomes terrible day by day, "I try to breathe as little as I can to prevent the smog city from choking me, I wish I could detach my lungs" (Patil, 2008, p. 13). The choking and suffocation experienced by the protagonist are the result of humans' exploitation of nature, which is deeply visualised by the characters' actions and the setting of the novel (Figure 3). Suffocation as a metaphor seems emblematic of the unrest Kari experiences. It perhaps alludes to the suffocating nature of heteronormativity in the metropolitan city (Mahurkar, 2017). The visual that portrays the presence of sewers in the novel is sketched in a grey shade, which conveys their absence from society. Like the people in the city are not aware of the presence of sewers, the homophobic society is also not conscious of the alienation of homosexuals (Raju, 2021, p.91).



**Figure 4: Unclogging the City's Lower Intestine**  
Source: Patil, 2008, p. 93

is considered a serious crime according to the law.

Life after Ruth's departure becomes miserable; the reminiscences and the days spent with Ruth keep haunting Kari. Ruth's departure from the city after the failed suicide makes changes in the city. According to Kari, "a city alters when a person leaves. It drops drawbridges, grows new roads, looks hairy at dusk" (Patil, 2008, p.14).



The void created by Ruth's departure is replaced by other elements in an ecosystem, as Kari mentions in the above phrase. This projects nature's ability to balance the ecosystem by filling the void created by other living beings. Bannan-Watts, an eco-conscious theorist, defines a person who has ecological consciousness as tending to consider his or her actions to maintain the health of the environment.

Abiding by Watts' theory, Kari considers herself to protect the decaying environment through her actions. Her eco-conscious attitude makes her, a real boatman who returns her favour to the sewer by unclogging its depths. In an attempt to accomplish the promise, she made on the day of fall: "the day of double suicide, I promised the water I would return her favour. That I would unclog the sewers when she couldn't breathe" (Patil, 2008, p. 31). Kari's navigation through the city sewers while purging them of dirt and clogging them is a way to establish an alternative culture and, in turn, an alternative identity (Jee, 2022, p.86). Words related to breathing, like suffocation, match the environment and Kari's life. She suffocates because of the struggle she has to face in a "stifling heterosexual atmosphere" (Jee, 2022, p.86). Whenever society burdens the environment by polluting and poisoning them, Kari takes up her role as a boatman. Another instance mentioned in the novel is the day after Ganesh Chaturthi<sup>1</sup>— as Kari mentions, "the morning after the immersion, the beachfront is a massacre ground. Broken trunks with baby folds. Delicately pink fingertips clasping a lotus. In the landlocked parts of the city, amputated plaster limbs have clogged pipelines with silt and toxic paints" (Patil, 2008, p. 93) (Figure 4). Kari leads herself with her boat and starts to unclog the sewer. As she is into it, she addresses the sewer as, "grey skin, not grey water" (Patil, 2008, p. 93).

By illustrating the cruelty done by society, it proclaims the need for "ecological consciousness in every human, to prevent their

actions from destroying the environment and open their eyes to the real condition of [the] environment" (Saputri, 2018, p.32). Therefore, eco-consciousness eliminates anthropocentrism and acknowledges ecology as the centre. Every time Kari accomplishes her role as a boatman, she can see the irreversible effects humans have had on the environment.

### Queer Eco-Semiotics: Decoding the Symbols

Eco-semiotics reveal the discourse of the ecosystem. Noth (1998) defines eco-semiotics as studying the sign relationship between organisms and their environment (p.332). The visual analysis of the novel provides a deeper interpretation of the signs and symbols coded by nature. This part of the analysis decodes certain illustrations that mediate meanings through the symbols. Kari's role as a 'Boatman', (Figure 6) becomes one major symbol the novel keeps on reiterating. Kari takes on the boatman role as a responsibility, ensuring herself she will get back to the sewers whenever it needs her. Simultaneously, her role as a boatman can be interpreted as a real boatman like Charon in Greek mythology, who is responsible for delivering souls across the rivers Acheron and Styx (Charon, 2021).

When Ruth departs at the start of the novel, Kari is left in desolation, causing her to work "like a furry" (Patil, 2008, p.14) and devote her days to the Ad agency. The boatman role becomes real when she meets angel, a brand manager in her Ad agency. Kari's encounter with Angel is extremely professional, but very soon she is, "madly drawn to her [angel] dying" (Patil, 2008, p.37) (Figure 5). Nature's ultimate end of life, 'death', becomes a symbol where Kari is the boatman. After their first meet she accompanies angel and assists her. Even after Angel questions the reason for Kari's visit to her home, "don't know why you are here, but you should know two things. One, I am bald because I am sick, not because I am butch. And two all that I own will soon be gone on hospital bills" (Patil, 2008, p.38). Later the death of Angel becomes the key

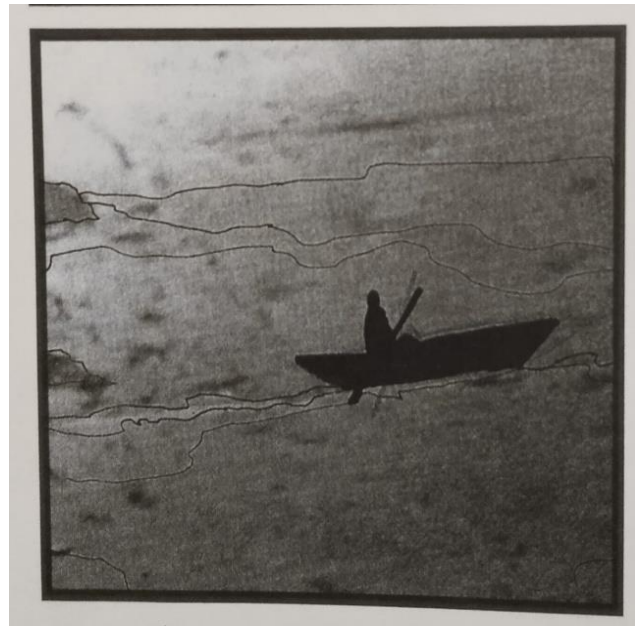
<sup>1</sup> Ganesh Chaturthi is the celebration of the birth of the Hindu God Ganesh and it is celebrated throughout India.

factor and mediates the inner meaning of Kari as a boatman in the novel. Angel's last conversation with Kari over the phone directly emphasizes the boatman role that is to be accomplished by Kari

as she utters, "My time is up, boatman I need you to ferry me over" (Patil, 2008, p.102), this becomes a clear instance of Kari being the real boatman.



**Figure 5: Angel Dying of Cancer**  
Source: Patil, 2008, p.86



**Figure 6: Kari as a Boatman**  
Source: Patil, 2008, p.56

The sewer is yet another symbol that follows the entire novel, the sewer, which reveals the eco-conscious attitude of the protagonist in the early part of the analysis, also becomes one important symbol that decodes the presence of sexual minority people in a metropolitan city. It also emphasizes the experience of queer individuals within a heteronormative society and discloses the way their space is being left unnoticed, much like the sewer. The symbol of sewer in comparison with sexual minorities is deeply highlighted in the words of Kari, "People who travel this route every day stop smelling the sewer over the years. People who live here become oblivious to the smell in a matter of days. And yet, I assure you it is most vile" (Patil, 2008, p.41). The depiction of rain in the novel exemplifies the major symbol coded by the author. Rain, as the main source of nature, is common to every living being in the ecosystem, and there is no discrimination under the natural showers. The rain as the key symbolism brings an ultimate change that deconstructs the notions of society, considering all living beings as equal,

First rains! Toes curled in, say don't pull us out, we are happy in here. Storms charge in and knock things over, leav[ing] cracks in the ceiling and rivers in the corridor and in your soul. Road and Sewer are one. (Patil, 2008, p.52)

The comparison that takes road and sewer as equal entities decodes the hidden meaning the author incorporates regarding genderqueer individuals and heterosexuals. Simultaneously, it reiterates the author's belief in biodiversity.

### Conclusion

The interconnected nature of queer and ecology is clearly projected in the visual representation of the novel. The oppression faced by both entities makes them fall under the same roof. The monochromatic tone used in most part of the novel reveals the real world of Kari, and the inclusion of colours in a few illustrations acts as an agency that represents the dream realm of the protagonist. The implication of different types of panels in the novel makes it more interesting. The author uses floating panels to enhance the nuances of the characters' actions and expressions. The novel utilises speech

balloons and captions as major elements to develop the storyline. The author intentionally reduces the use of thought balloons. In the entire novel, only one panel is illustrated with a thought balloon. Overall, the narrative speaks of Kari's struggle as a lesbian in a metropolitan city and her connection with the surrounding environment. The identity crises she faces at the beginning of the novel are acknowledged by the consciousness she develops after her suicide attempt. Kari's eco-conscious attitude helps her overcome the crises she faces regarding her own identity. The study examines queer ecology, more precisely under the context of eco-consciousness and eco-semiotics, by focusing on the character's actions, settings in the novel and the voice of the author. It decodes the symbols nature provides us by analysing particular illustrations from the novel. Through the actions of Kari, a gender queer woman, this analysis connects the gap between queer theory and ecocriticism.

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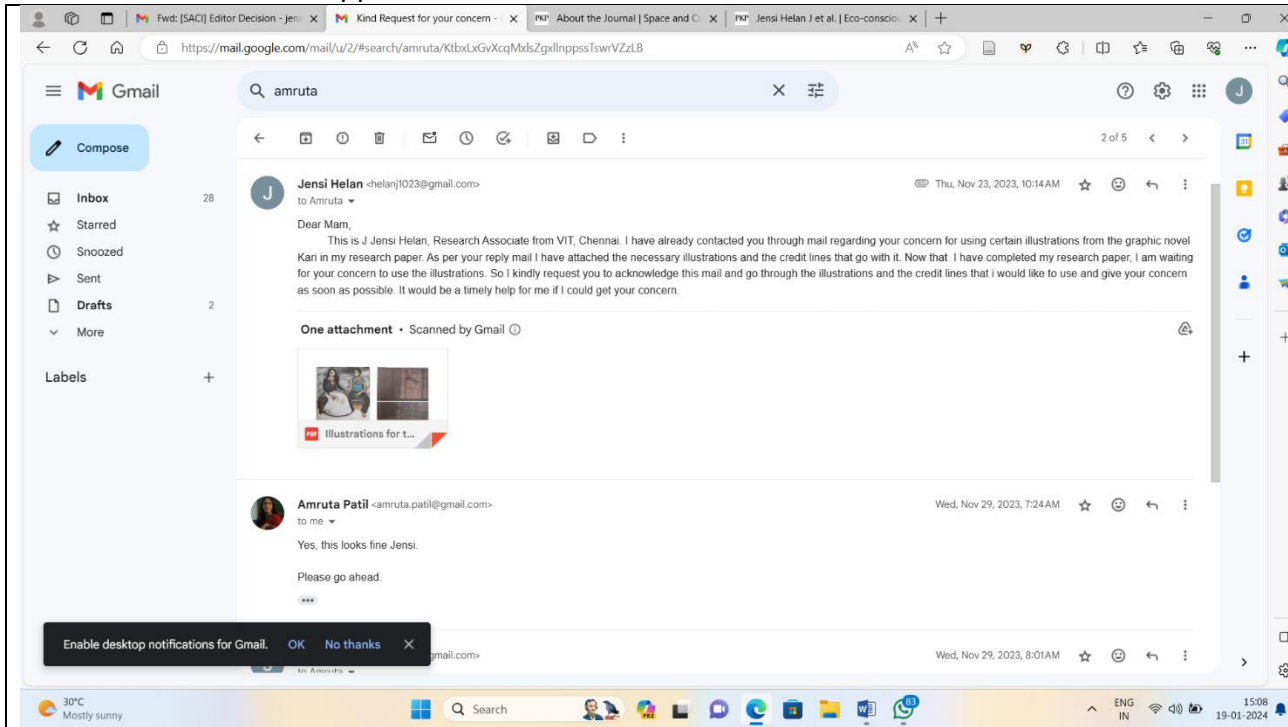
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### Conflict of Interest & Ethical Approval

The authors state that there are no conflicts of interest and that ethical approval has been

acquired for this study from our institute. The authors also declare that required permission to use the figures has been taken from Amruta Patil, the author of *Kari*. The permission email is appended below.



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Jenji Helan J conceptualised, analysed, and wrote the original draft. Rashmi Rekha Borah, the corresponding author and supervisor, contributed to editing and reviewing the earlier drafts.

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