



**Congruence through 'Difference': The Conflict of Universality
in Amruta Patil's *Kari* and Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor***

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Abstract

Scott McCloud's assertion that comics have the potential to act as a universal language by bridging cultural and linguistic gaps raises important questions about the nature of visual communication within the graphic medium. This essay attempts to explore these questions by focusing on two graphic novels, Amruta Patil's *Kari* and Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor*, examining how these narratives encapsulate subjective experiences by locating the characters within a broader thematic framework. It seeks to explore how these novels represent the constrained condition of living within a specific geography and culture, where the global psychogeographic space often intervenes with the porous boundary of the immediate space. It argues that these novels depict the characters' quest to transcend the confines of the tangible world. It will also interrogate how the visual tools unique to the graphic medium contribute to the portrayal of the figure of the outsider, who is constantly negotiating their identity with the ideal, and the way this 'living with difference' shapes how they make sense of the world.



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Introduction

Comics and graphic novels have evolved over the past half-century as powerful instruments of communication that engage with significant social concerns of the day. The academic community has long debated whether comics should be classified as a medium, a form, or a genre, as well as how they differ from graphic novels. McCloud (1994), however, broadens the term 'comics' to describe any work that operates within this medium. He uses the old-school label of "comic book", whereas Will Eisner (1985/2000) prefers the term "graphic novel" (as cited in De, 2017, p. 3). Graphic novels, as popularised by Eisner, refer to book-length works in this format, often characterised by their more mature and literary approach to content (p. 5).

Over the last few decades, graphic novels have emerged as a distinctive and influential medium in contemporary literature in India. These novels interrogate important questions that touch upon several sociopolitical issues, including caste discrimination, social injustice, gender discrimination, and reinterpretations of national history (Arni, 2011; Banerjee, 2004; Ghosh, 2010; Kuriyan, 2015; Patil, 2008/2021; Sajad, 2015; Vyam et al., 2011). By situating personal narratives within a broader sociocultural milieu, these works explore how individuals navigate their identities and inclusivity within an incoherent social system, offering a critical inquiry that reflects the complexities of contemporary cosmopolitan experience.

Comics as a Universal Language: The Ideal, the Edge, and the Outsider

In his famous *Understanding Comics*, McCloud notes, "As the twenty-first century approaches, visual iconography may finally help us realize a form of universal communication" (p. 58). McCloud's idea of universalism seems to stem from the premise that visual images are more easily interpreted across cultures than written or spoken language. The universality of images, in this sense, rests on the assumption that certain visual symbols and expressions can transcend cultural differences by bridging linguistic gaps. For example, a simple image of a smile or a frown is universally recognisable as a representation of happiness or sadness. Yet, while some basic human emotions might be universally understood, the interpretation of more complex icons is heavily coded by context.

This paper attempts to study how the two graphic novels, Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004) and Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008/2021), serve as social critiques of the normative, offering sites where multiple identities, experiences, and narratives can coexist. This paper aims to address three primary concerns through an in-depth analysis of the primary texts: (1) What kind of universalism is McCloud referring to? (2) Is universalism an inherent quality of the visual language? In other words, is there an element in the graphic medium that creates the requisite precondition for universalism? (3) If not so, can this medium aid in the representation of both congruence and difference?

While Scott McCloud's vision of comics as a universal language offers an optimistic view of the medium's potential, a careful examination of the history and tradition of visual communication reveals that the genre is invariably influenced by cultural and historical conditions. According to McCloud, an icon is a symbol or an instrument of the visual language that "represent[s] a person, place, thing or idea" (p. 47). But every icon is deeply rooted in its cultural specificity and carries with it the biases, assumptions, and meanings of the culture from which it originates. The visual language used in American comics, for instance, might not

resonate with readers from non-Western cultures in the same way. Therefore, attempting to universalise these symbols may inadvertently result in an effort that centres dominant perspectives, imposing a Eurocentric view on diverse othered cultures. This risks marginalising or misrepresenting the distinct ways visual symbols are understood and valued in non-European contexts.

Postcolonial authors often critique attempts to homogenise the literatures of the postcolonial states, such as 'Third World Literature' or 'Commonwealth Literature' by rejecting the static ideas of nationhood and looking at one's cultural identity as a dynamic process of hybridity (Ahmad, 1987; Bhabha, 1994/2004; Rushdie, 1992). Bhabha argues that contemporary culture, rather than simply producing alternative discourses, shifts the basis of international connections away from traditional national identities towards more complex cultural and political affiliations shaped by issues like race, sexuality, migration, and so on. He also contends that "it is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence" (p. 12). Therefore, according to Bhabha, world literature could emerge as a way to explore cultural differences and conflicts and focus on how cultures recognise themselves by projecting their own conceptions of "otherness" (p. 17).

While engaging with the concept of world literature, Auritro Majumder (2018) highlights the transnational reach of arguments by thinkers such as Tagore, Mao Sedong, and others who have underlined the centrality of the vernacular and the importance of creative human agency in social transformation (p. 13). Judith Butler, after initially rejecting the idea of 'universality' in her 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*, writes in her Preface added later in 1999, that she has come to understand how "the assertion of universality can be proleptic and performative, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet met" (p. xvii-xviii). While postcolonial debates have examined universalism from the perspective of nationhood, this paper seeks to redirect the debate towards the politics of inclusion and belonging.

Navigating Congruence through the Depiction of 'Difference'

Roman Krznaric (2014), in *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It*, advocates collaborative understanding through the cultivation of 'outrospection'. Rather than introspection, which is a self-oriented approach, outrospection is a way to understand oneself not by looking inward but outward, at others (p. 21). Krznaric underscores the importance of extending our perceptions through art, literature, film, and other social networks to facilitate exchange and empathy. The notion of outrospection indicates that the representation of exclusion or 'difference' can also contribute to the quest for universal congruence.

(Un)Belonging, as a theme in these novels, is intricately tied to the tension between the immediate and the extended psychescape and the way the characters constantly adjust themselves in response to the ideal. Both *Kari* and *Corridor* challenge the notion of universalism by highlighting the specificities of belonging and identity, while also recognising the shared human experiences that transcend these boundaries. In doing so, these novels not only represent congruence and difference but also encourage readers to question the assumptions underlying both.

I

Corridor by Sarnath Banerjee highlights the intricacies of the fragmented reality of living in a city and the claustrophobia of urban life that leads to anxiety and substance abuse. The novel develops around Brighu's sojourns across the cities of Delhi and Kolkata. He identifies with Ibn Battuta, a medieval Moroccan traveller who journeyed across the Islamic world. His quest to find 'answers' in the city mirrors his search for meaning amid the city's chaotic, inconsistent landscape. The protagonist navigates the city that is both a place of possibility and a site of disillusionment. The angst of the murky, misleading city is deliberately undermined by postmodern disinterest and potentially self-subversive humour. Despite the occasional nods to the local cultures, such as references to Bengalis' love for biriyani and Boroline, the vastness of the big city evokes a feeling of being lost, as the cultural continuum stretches from Connaught Place to Kolkata, Baudrillard to Reinhart, and Heisenberg to Houdini.

A similar dislocation can be traced in Amruta Patil's description of contemporary life in *Kari*. The protagonist is a queer, introverted woman living in the 'smog-city' of Mumbai. She is out of place in a heterosexual world, always alienated, always on the fringes. Her parents' disapproval causes her to feel ashamed, "In some inexplicable, definite way, I have let them down again" (Patil, p. 30). Her desire to find a place where she fits in is set against the uncompromising city. The memory of an unforgotten affair flashes in front of her everywhere she goes. The city shows no compassion, as is evident in an incident Kari recounts: a flight attendant, who regularly shared the same compartment as her, had bruises on her arms and face one day and was continuously sobbing, but no one bothered to check on her (Patil, p. 42). The city is also portrayed as unforgiving and unpredictable, as exemplified in Kari's dream in which her canoe cracks in two: "No matter where you are headed, or how nobly, you can sink without a trace" (Patil, p. 56).

II

The sense of smell plays a significant role in the characters' negotiation with the immediate physical space. Kari is perpetually haunted by the smell of the sewer: "Washing the stench off my body when I get back home is a ritual" (Patil, p. 34). It is the "smell of death" that makes Professor DVD Murthy's seven-year-old daughter run away from him (Banerjee, p. 33). He tries to get rid of this literal and figurative 'smell' through substance abuse, but even when he is intoxicated, he thinks about the end. Death, like a spectral presence, lurks ominously in his life. The temporary timelessness of his intoxication is represented by a single panel across the page and a blank background, with DVD saying, "Universal death rate, one death per person" (Banerjee, p. 35). Death is conceptualised in these narratives as the bridge connecting the finite with the infinite, the immediate experience with the transcendental reality.

For Kari, death serves as the only way of rising above the lifeless indifference of her existence. She repeatedly asserts in the novel that she is 'twice-born'. Death has subsumed her identity as she cannot detach herself from her failed suicide attempt. She draws a line between a dignified death and a humiliating life, sighing out the words: "Some people are lucky enough to be saved by the Light, no such luck for me. I was saved by a sewer" (Patil, p. 8). Kari's augmenting obsession with death is also evident in her affection for a dying woman. The relationship with Angel further complicates the interaction between death and transcendence. Very interestingly, what binds them together is an attempt to disengage themselves from suffering: "Angel has forgotten what a body feels like without pain" (Patil, p. 39). Kari's sense of escape is fuelled by her own suffering, but the transcendental element lies in the fact that

through her pain, she is trying to grasp the meaning of mortality itself: “Fear of heights is fear of a desire to jump” (Patil, p. 112). Thus, her exploration is not egotistically exclusive but an inclusive effort to make sense of the world.

III

The tension between the ideal and the real is depicted in *Corridor* through the distinction between life and cinema: “Life, mostly, is a stream of missed opportunities, anything else is cinema” (Banerjee, p. 96). Four panels are squeezed into a single row to evoke the sensation of a montage, signifying the rapid passage of time. This gap between aspiration and actual experience is also exemplified by the character of Digital Dutta, who “lives in his head” (Banerjee, p. 40). His internal world, marked by grand fantasies and intellectual pursuits, reinforces his detachment from the external life that is plagued by a dead sameness of being. His fantasies are illustrated using coloured panels in the novel. Patil also employs colour to highlight this contrast. When Kari first hears about ‘Crystal Palace’, she imagines it as an enchanting fairytale with “Floors of marble” and “ceilings of brocade” (p. 16). The panel is vibrantly rendered through the use of pink and gleaming glitters. However, on the following page is a black-and-white diagram of the bare scaffold of the building, exemplifying Kari’s sudden fall from her radiant expectations. She also criticises the ideal of universal sisterhood after being constantly relegated to the periphery by her flatmates: “This warbling Little Women camaraderie is a badge that must be painstakingly earned” (Patil, p.18). Throughout the novel, Kari’s visions are constantly disrupted by the gritty environment of the city, where the allure of an idealised existence is overshadowed by the grim vicissitudes of monotony.

Through her dreams, Kari engages in a metaphysical quest that reflects an enduring search for wholeness and fluidity. Her rejection of a fixed identity is evident when she sees herself as an aquarium shark and a little fish (Patil, p. 85). Instead of viewing Kari’s dreams as ritualistic nightmares, they can be seen as stemming from a desire to transcend the stifling space that suffocates her: “Please let me breathe” (Patil, p. 90). Bhadury (2018), in her article on queer characters in South Asian graphic narratives, observes that “Kari herself rejects the term “lesbian” as she aspires to [have] the elusive “genderless” quality...” (p. 5). These lines are also cited by Dutta (2008), who looks at *Kari* as a novel that celebrates “exploration over destination, fluidity over form” (p. 5). This fluidity is further reflected in Kari’s relationship with water: “I promised the water I’d return her favour” (Patil, p. 31). Water, in contrast to the arid city, represents Kari’s yearning for an identity and existence beyond rigid definitions. The theme of transcendence is not limited to Kari’s personal journey but extends to the narrative’s overarching exploration of space. Kari’s disconnection from both her immediate environment and the global cultural space reflects a desire to exist beyond the limitations of space and identity, beyond all confines of control. The snow globe metaphor, in which Kari imagines shattering the glass dome that traps her, is her desperate search for a way out. It suggests that Kari’s struggles are not just about escaping the physical confines of her world, but also about overcoming the psychological barriers that limit her sense of self. The fatality of the comparison hauntingly resonates with Sylvia Plath’s (1981/2023) inexorable question, “Is there no way out of the mind?”

In *Corridor*, the narrator alludes to Jean Baudrillard’s (1968) concept of “illusory wholeness,” in which the act of completing collections signifies an unending search for completeness that is ultimately unattainable (Baudrillard, p. 7). Brighu also blends the tangible with the transcendent when he states, “Prof. DVD’s world revolves around poisons, reggae and

John Keats” (Banerjee, p. 31). Keats, known for his exploration of universality and timeless beauty, becomes a figure through whom Banerjee connects ephemerality with the eternal. Chakraborty (2021), in his article on *Corridor*, observes that “[T]he quest for wholeness is not merely connected to physical or social existence. It is an eternal search for metaphysical completeness” (p. 147). The characters' pursuit of completeness, whether through relationships, art, or intellectual endeavours, reflects a desire to transcend into a metaphysical realm where true completeness is elusive. In both novels, the obsession with the unreal arises from a profound sense of disconnectedness. The characters, instead of inhabiting a liminal space, end up existing nowhere, neither in the plurality of the city nor in the comfort of the ideal.

Towards the end in *Corridor*, a panel shows Brighu at his desk sketching himself, representing the artist looking at himself through his art (Banerjee, p. 107). The metatextual elements in these novels are crucial in understanding how the medium of comics emerges as a spatial outlet, reflecting the role of art in life. These novels thus provide a platform for an interconnection between the reader and the artist, as the city is no refuge: “In this city, no one talks” (Patil, p. 42). Both Patil and Banerjee employ a self-referential technique that not only blurs the line between art and life, but also accentuates this connection. In doing so, *Kari* and *Corridor* highlight the medium's potential to offer a unique, introspective space that challenges and contributes to the understanding of both art and existence.

Conclusion

Gloria Steinem, in an interview with Maria Shriver, observes, “Every social justice movement that I know of has come out of people sitting in small groups, telling their life stories, and discovering that other people have shared similar experiences” (Shriver, 2011). Similarly, Frantz Fanon's (1952/2021) insight in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that “it is utopian to try to ascertain in what ways one kind of inhuman behavior differs from another kind of inhuman behavior” (p. 67), suggests that despite having varied expressions, human struggles can share a commonality. At the same time, Fanon notes that oppression can take multiple forms, underscoring the challenge of comparing diverse experiences of marginalisation. While McCloud's vision of comics as a universal language is appealing, it is more accurately understood as an ideal rather than a reality. Although not inherently Eurocentric, it carries the risk of becoming so.

In both *Kari* and *Corridor*, the characters' out-of-placeness is not merely a thematic concern but a structural element in the narrative. The fragmented panels, the use of urban landscapes as metaphors, and the interplay between text and imagery all contribute to a depiction of contemporary life as a constant negotiation between aspiration and reality. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the role of graphic novels in representing the diverse experiences of (un)belonging will continue to grow. These works remind readers that, while the ideal of a universal language may be elusive, the power of a medium lies in its ability to foster a deeper understanding of the human condition, in all its complexity and contradiction.

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