



Mapping Mental Landscapes:  
Amruta Patil's *Kari* And Anoushka  
Khan's *Still Life* as Interrogations of the  
Capitalist Fetish of Mental Health

***Nishtha Dev***

Department of English,  
Sophia College (Autonomous), Mumbai  
nishtha.dev@sophiacollege.edu.in

**Abstract**

The paper proposes that Amruta Patil's *Kari* and Anoushka Khan's *Still Life*, as Graphic Novels, map the inner mental life of their protagonists in a unique way which is subversive of the hegemonic frameworks of viewing mental health and illness perpetuated by a capitalist discourse. In this way the texts also offer a critique of the capitalist discourse that is foundational to the increasing popularity of the genre which ironically in its ideological configuration, offers its critique. In this way the paper intends to enable the reader to frame representations of the non-normative mental landscape within new frameworks of inclusivity, creativity and radical politics

**Keywords:**

Mental Health, Mental Illness, Indian Graphic Novel, Popular Culture, Hegemony

**Introduction**

Recent theoretical developments in literary criticism have enabled us to revisit the domain of literature and literary analysis, and have led us to move beyond the traditional definitions of text and textuality as constituted solely by the 'verbal'. The contemporary literary space, therefore, is characterised by a refreshing multidisciplinary and an assemblage of genres and forms which would have been seen as "non-literary" a few decades ago. The Graphic Novel in English is a powerful symbol of this change. Not only has its popularity increased over the years, it has also become the subject of significant scholarly engagement.

Since the genre of the Graphic Novel is constituted by the discourses of both visuality and verballity, divergent views about its disciplinary location have shaped much early scholarship on the genre. Elaine Martin's essay, "Graphic Novel or Novel Graphic" acknowledges the formal and structural complexity that this novel genre represents. The essay suggests that the "iconoclastic" genre calls for a fundamental shift in the way we perceive reading and writing. Much of contemporary scholarship therefore recognizes this duality and places the Graphic Novel as both literature and art (Martin 2011, 5). This paper, while acknowledging the complex representational terrain of the genre, views the Graphic Novel primarily as a "novelistic form that avails itself of both verbal and visual apparatus" (Geczy, McBurnie 2023, 11)

Studies of the Graphic Novel as an expression of a post-millennial urban predicament have highlighted the socio-political and economic alterations that have been nurtured by, and have led to an increased consumerism in the capitalist leisure market. In India and globally as well, the Graphic Novels are being published by reputed publishing houses like Penguin, Harper Collins etcetera, as well as lesser-known independent publishers. Dawson E Varughese writes

"Although most of the post-millennial Indian graphic novels have been published by established publishing houses such as HarperCollins India, Hachette India and Penguin Random House India, there is an equal determination on the part of lesser-known, independent publishers, story houses and collectives to create and disseminate Indian graphic narratives, whether they be in the graphic novel form or otherwise. If we begin by thinking about the logistics of publishing in post-millennial India, we must recognize that the outcomes of the decisions taken to liberalize the Indian economy have been essential in fostering a conducive environment for established publishers to grow and expand." (Varughese 2018, 35)

The Graphic Novel, therefore, appears, inevitably, in a close alliance with capitalism nurtured largely within an expanding liberal economy. This discourse of capitalism that "determines", in a Marxist sense the very structure of the Graphic Novel as a material and ideological phenomenon, can hence be understood as foundational

to it. This paper, while appreciating the capitalist bearings of Graphic Novel, is focused upon the radical ideological potentiality the genre signifies, particularly in its representation of subjectivities and sensibilities that are otherwise rendered marginal within hegemonic literary and cultural frameworks. Pramod K Nayar, has viewed the Graphic Novel, particularly in India, as a genre of protest. Nayar's *The Human Rights Graphic Novel: Drawing It Just Right* represents the ways in which war, rape, genocide, abuse, social iniquity, caste and race which have undermined humanity in multiple ways are represented in the Graphic novel, through depicting vulnerable subjectivities, cultural and personal trauma and various modes of resistance highlighted in them. (Nayar 2021, 16) Aligning itself with this position, this paper aims to analyse the way the delicate issue of mental health and mental illness is represented in Amruta Patil's *Kari* and Anoushka Khan's *Still Life*. It proposes that these texts subvert the capitalist and arguably fetishised category of "mental illness" and inaugurate an affirmative discourse on mental health that views the complex and troubled inner life of subjects as something that resists categorization and labeling. The eccentricities and peculiarities of the characters in these novels cannot be reductively mapped as "illnesses" and "diseases".

## **Fetishization of Mental Health in Popular Culture**

Marxist philosophers Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer have ideated that the commodification of culture is the commodification of human consciousness. Adorno and Horkheimer assert that the culture industry minimizes any possibility of autonomous thinking and criticism which in turn preserves the capitalist status quo. It perpetuates a very restrictive idea of "entertainment" as absence of an intellectual perception which not only distracts masses from the exploitative nature of the ruling order, but also enables the production of formulaic cultural texts that can be purchased in the capitalist marketplace. Culture, according to them, has therefore become a fetish and a commodity, that is uncritically consumed making man servile to and not liberated from the logic of capitalism. (Adorno, Horkheimer 2001, 135)

Within contemporary popular culture, the fetishization and commodification of mental health is appearing as a popular trend. It can be observed through

various forms of media, including movies, television shows, and advertising. For example, research on the popular American film has suggested that sexual addiction has risen to the forefront of many popular culture depictions of mental illness. It further notes that these films tend to portray mental disorders in a sensationalized and unrealistic manner, focusing on extreme cases or using them as a plot device for the purpose of generating entertainment value. Such encoding of mental illness as sexual deviance is dangerous and points to a patriarchal and capitalist ideological totalitarianism that undermines the films' stated humanist intent. (Iwen 2014, 413-425) Furthermore, many television shows often perpetuate stigmatizing and inaccurate stereotypes about mental health, reinforcing societal misconceptions and reinforcing harmful narratives. This fetishization of mental health in popular culture not only misrepresents the reality of mental disorders but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to the commodification of mental health. This fetishization aids a neoliberal capitalist agenda and reduces the complexity and diversity of the human mind to simplistic and predictable formulae.

As an ideology, neoliberalism which views the market as the primary mechanism for societal progress and personal fulfillment promotes an individualistic perspective that tends to overlook the social, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to mental distress. Instead, it positions mental health as solely the responsibility of the individual, promoting the idea that mental well-being can be achieved through consumer choices and products. This neoliberal perspective has led to the medicalization of mental health, where psychoactive drugs are marketed as the solution to mental distress.

A critique of the commodification of mental health is, therefore, also a critique of neoliberal ideology that dominates the production and perception of culture in our society (Sagan 2020, 6). The contemporary graphic novel signifies an alternative space within popular culture through which a critique of the neoliberal capitalist ideology that perpetuates commercially viable, albeit ethically and ideologically problematic stereotypes of mental health and illnesses can be revisited and questioned.

## The Inner landscapes in *Kari* and *Still Life*

As a genre, the Graphic Novel uses a variety of expressive resources. In addition to the verbal and visual components, the graphic novel also employs many resources from popular media and popular culture. The expressive resources in Amruta Patil's *Kari* and Anoushka Khan's *Still Life* are orchestrated towards representing the physical setting and external landscape as subjective visions of their protagonists. It is this consistent focus upon the rich and complex inner, mental life that *Kari* and *Still Life* are significant for this paper.

Both the verbal and the visual signifiers lead the readers inwards, rather than outwards. In Patil's eponymous Graphic Novel *Kari*, the objective maps of Mumbai are undermined by the subjective map of the city that she discovers. The lines that appear in the backdrop of most panels do not subscribe to a realistic mode of representation, but appear as symbolic backdrops signifying the inner predicaments and conflicts of the protagonist. *Kari*, while missing her lover Ruth, thinks how a city changes when someone leaves. (Patil 2016, 37) The cartographic representation of the city is replaced by a subjective vision of the city space. In Anoushka Khan's *Still Life*, the landscape is rarely realistic. It largely becomes a mirror to the pained psyche and emotion of the protagonist who, enveloped in fear and dread, is looking for her husband. (Khan 2021, 16)

Both these texts focus upon the complex inner life of their protagonists, and it is in the representative resources and narrative strategies they utilize that a lot of common ground can be found. In Amruta Patil's *Kari*, curved and continuous lines are used to represent that internal tumult and emotional suffering of the protagonist. The strictures and geographic certainties of urban spaces like roads, buildings are too often seen as getting blurred. The external spaces appear as projections of the mental and emotional state of being. Similar to *Kari*, Anoushka Khan's *Still Life* too employs visual resources to represent the external reality as an extension and a projection of the mental state of being. As the protagonist's mental state gets disoriented due to a fear of a possible personal loss, the visuals too acquire a disintegrated aspect.

Both *Kari* and *Still Life* therefore, focus upon mapping this complex inner mental life of their protagonists. The focus on the mind and mental well-being is also sharpened through the contrast it offers to the representation of their physical selves. *Kari*, not devoid of sexual desire, is not sexualized as a body. The female protagonist, Pinky, in *Still Life* does not appear as a body in the textual space at all. As texts written by female authors and with female protagonists, this measuring of focus can be read as a moment of political engagement with hegemonic patriarchal discourses that very often reduce female identity to female body, and view female desire as primarily rooted in and expressed through the body. Embodiment has remained a central concern within feminist theory as it is theorized and critiqued as a site for construction of gender difference. (Disch, Hawkesworth 2018, 13) These texts shift the locus of the construction of the female self from the body to the mental state. And this ideological shift from the body towards the mind, lies at the heart of the radical potential of these texts. Not only do they undermine the patriarchal hierarchy between mind and body, they also imbue the inner mental life of these protagonists with a subversive non-normative potentiality.

### **“Metaphors” of Mental Health in *Kari* and *Still Life***

In their book *Metaphors of Mental Illness in Graphic Medicine*, Sweetha Saji and Sathyaraj Venkatesan state that within popular culture, that mentally ill people are often stereotyped as either grotesque or romanticized, or, as emotionally barren and irrational beings, incapable of active social engagements and against a normative idea of healthy/sane society. They further critique this stereotype by deconstructing the binary between sanity/insanity, normal/abnormal through a detailed study of a few Graphic Novels. This paper places itself in the line of criticism inaugurated by the aforementioned book and wishes to unsettle the binary between sanity/insanity, mental health/illness by analyzing the representations of “sanity” in the novel. It further proposes that any invocation to or allusion to the idea of sanity or health in these texts is metaphorical in the sense that both texts resist the very capitalist tendency to mark and label all performances of mental health under fixed and rigid labels structured around the polarized binary of health and illness.

In this context it is significant to note, that despite the fact that neither of these novels are overtly 'about' mental health or illness, a radical and novel perspective towards mental health constitutes their politics. In Patil's *Kari*, the protagonist's mental landscape is represented as an assemblage of contradictory mental states. Suffering from the loss of her lover Ruth, *Kari* undertakes a metaphorical journey towards her own mental and spiritual well being through the novel. This journey is as real as it is mythical. It is also transformative for the protagonist as it pulls her out of a mental darkness that had led her to a failed suicide at the beginning of the novel. At the end of this journey, she discards death and affirms and upholds an idea of life. Through this affirmative journey, metaphors of disease and death are consistently invoked in relation to the character of Angel to whom *Kari* is almost uncannily drawn towards. *Kari*'s complex mental states paradoxically locate her within the contrary discourses of self-harm and self-affirmation. Both life and death instincts appear metaphorically in the text, and appear pivoted on the character of *Kari*. As a projection of her inner life the external space of the city, at times, comes a mythical space, and at others, real. In relation to these spaces, *Kari* also assumes multiple identities; she is a part of both the common population of Mumbai living a routinized existence bound by travel to and away from work and of the mythical under-city of Mumbai in which new roads appear and disappear for her. (Patil 2016, 35) Her mindscapes defy categorization and the Graphic Novel resists encoding the irreducible variety of her mental states as symptomatic of a mental 'disorder' or 'illness'.

In Anoushka Khan's *Still Life* the protagonist is shown as emotionally exhausted as she is on a quest to find her husband who has suddenly disappeared. In this context she remembers her sickly childhood and confesses how her perception of immediate physical surroundings has been deeply impacted by her emotional predicament for her entire life. Constituted by a very active imagination, her gaze has always been a transformative agent. While the visuals in the novel represent an objective picture of a "still life, the verbal text unsettles the stillness, and permits it to acquire an animated subjective quality. The visuals depicting the protagonist waiting for her lost husband portray her sitting on a bed of flowers which that appears shapeless and devoid of structure. At other instance, the intricately carved corners of the bed get magnified as symbol of her varying mental states. The verbal description on the page reads,



“On a warm afternoon,  
 when for hours no one has come  
 I see the patterns I everything and  
 Faces I know are not there. I fall into  
 the patterns and then I jolt awake from the purest  
 fear, but I was never asleep. Then for a time I think  
 we are both lost and will never be found” (Khan 2021, 21)

The visual representations of the protagonist's vivid interiority also alternate between form and formlessness, signifying the alternating mental states of the protagonist. In the last few pages of the Graphic Novel, when she is entering a forest with much fear and dread, she is described as getting “sucked...into the shadowy thing” that “exploded” around them. It is further described in the following way.

“Inside it were pieces of light and dark that flew out, so many of them  
 That they were all I could see” (Khan 2021, 25)

Similar to Patil's Kari, Khan's *Still Life* too represents the complex and contradictory mental landscapes of its protagonist as the aesthetic center of the text. Pinky's interiority is not a disruptive agent for her but enables her to continue both an external search for her husband and an internal search for herself. This political aesthetic is poignantly expressed through the blank black and white pages that punctuate the narrative flow of symbolic words and images. This diversity is not coded within the medical discourse of illness, but a larger spiritual and existential discourse of self-discovery. (Khan 2021, 23)

Recent scholarship on human subjectivity has been deeply affected by the poststructuralist theoretical school that has not only demystified human subjecthood, but also enabled us to view human subjectivity as an aggregate of multiple and contradictory identities, rather than as a fixed structure with a recognizable and fixed center. In the domain of mental health studies, it has given rise to a questioning of the traditional vocabulary of categorizing mental health as a polarized binary of mental illnesses. The posthuman turn in mental health studies has led researchers to sensitize themselves to diverse mental

states as important sites of creativity, struggle, and personal growth. They mark an intervention within the hegemonic discourse on mental health as they

“differ significantly from traditional bio-psychiatric models and interventions and can offer both patients and mental healthcare providers with an alternative language to frame mental health.” (Fletcher 2017, 16)

This subjective turn in the bio-psychiatric model of mental health is particularly significant for current study as it enables the reader to frame the non-normative bent of mind within new frameworks of inclusivity, creativity and radical politics. Patil's and Khan's protagonists, therefore, are seen as signifying the departure from the hegemonic and capitalist representations of mental health or illness.

## **Conclusion**

Studies on the material history of the Graphic Novel have proposed that the new genre, which is gaining popularity every day, is constituted by, produced by, and consumed within a capitalist marketplace. (Varughese 2018, 18) But a closer look at the ideological expanse of the form also presents the form to us as a medium, that in its representation of marginalities and diversities, opens up avenues for a subversion of the very capitalist ideology that constitutes it in the first place. The protagonists of Graphic Novels chosen for analysis here, are also firmly rooted within this capitalist world of which they offer a critique. In this way, through the representation of their mental health outside the discourse of “illness”, and within the affirmative discourse of creative self-expression, these texts contribute to the ongoing research about mental health and its representation in literature. Raymond Williams famously described hegemony as a process (as opposed to a static structure) that does not just passively exist as a form of dominance” and that has to be “continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified... resisted, limited, altered, and challenged by pressures not at all its own.” (Williams 1997,103) He further added that the process of hegemony is never complete. In this sense, these Graphic Novels represent a moment of ideological negotiation within the largely capitalist framework that to a large extent controls knowledge production about mental health and fetishizes it. They are valuable as they do

not only signify a new literary and cultural domain, but also force the reader to adapt to new ways of reading and perception.

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