



Studying the Representation of 'Desi' Queers in Select Graphic Texts from the 21st Century

Sreya Bhattacharya

Department of English, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, India

Received: 05 Oct 2025; Received in revised form: 03 Nov 2025; Accepted: 09 Nov 2025; Available online: 13 Nov 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Focusing on the limited amount of Indian and Indian origin/desi representation in comics and graphic novels, especially its emergence and popularization in the last two decades, this dissertation seeks to explore the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ people in India and Indian originated community in graphic literature and also contextualises these graphic texts in the light of the anti LGBTQIA+ legal and social environments in India and Indian originated communities, and further situates them within a larger arc of representation of queer story in the Indian and Indian originated community. The primary texts under examination are printed graphic novels and Indian comics anthologies in India like Kari (2008), Apsara Engine (2021), Jukebox (2021), Keeping in mind the timeline and contemporary ages and society's treatment of the queer people especially in India, it mainly focuses on why there is a lack of representation of queer people, especially 'Desi' queer people in comics and graphic novels, the accuracy of the representation, their treatment & acceptance in the society as shown in these graphic novels, & how the narrative for the desi queer people changes over the years post 2000s? Also interestingly, why do so many authors often take the help of mythology and alternate realities to portray the stories of queer people in their graphic novels instead of portraying them in reality? Alongside these grounds, this dissertation will also take on how these queer graphic novels challenge the cis-heteropatriarchal norms of the society.

Keywords— Comics, 'Desi', Mythology, Queer.



I. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Vanita, Ruth. and Kidwai, Saleem. (eds). Same-Sex Love in India:

Readings from literature and history. New York and Basingstoke:

Palgrave. 2001.

In their ground-breaking book "Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History," Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai examine same-sex relationships in India using both literary analysis and historical investigation. The book provides a thorough analysis of the topic, relying on a variety of sources such as religious texts, poetry, plays, and historical records. In this survey of the literature of India throughout decades

The book provides a comprehensive analysis on the topic of the representation of the same sex love in Indian literature, culture and history, dated as far back as

2000 years old. The book is an important contribution to the field of south Asian Queer Studies. It offers a comprehensive analysis of the topic from the wide range of sources, including mythological texts. Religious texts, poetry, plays, historical documents etc. in various Indian languages such as Bengali, Tamil, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, Sanskrit, etc. It talks about the complex and ambiguous meaning that same sex love has held in Indian culture and society. The book takes interdisciplinary approach with the help of wide range of different cultural, language texts and also the wide range of Hindu, Muslim and British colonial texts.

One of the central arguments that Ruth Vanita and Kidwai make is that the impact of British colonialism and the

imposition of Victorian morality helped the eradication of historical and literary tradition of same sex love from the Indian society and culture. The authors show evidence that same sex love was not only existed in India, but also was celebrated in various parts of India throughout the ages. The book also says how understanding this history can be a way to challenge the modern-day homophobia that can be seen in India.

The book breaks the myth of homosexuality as a trend borrowed from the western culture by showing the evidence from the various age-old myths, folklore, other literary pieces and evidence from various places of India that proved same sex love has always existed in India. The book is about more than just the sexual or the erotic aspect. It also explores how the romantically intimate relationship between the people of the same sex or the gender identity has occurred in literature, mythology and across time and space, as well as the societal and cultural reaction to such relationships. The book shows the ways the same relationships have been celebrated, accepted and also on the other hand stigmatised in the Indian society.

The book also pays attention to the diversity of the same sex relationship in India. The authors talk about different types of ads the complex same sex desire in different times and regions and talks about the way gender, class, caste, religion, etc plays a role in these differences, found in the various literary texts across the regions over times.

The book also examines the legal and social status of same sex love in modern contemporary India. The book provides an overview of the law and policies of contemporary India and social norms that highlight and shapes these relationships.

In conclusion, "Same-Sex Love in India" is a significant addition to the field of South Asian queer studies. With the aid of numerous sources and engagement with a variety of viewpoints, the writers present a thorough and nuanced account of the development of same-sex relationships in India. Also, they produce

1.2. Vanita, Ruth. Queering India: same-sex love and eroticism in Indian culture and society. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.

Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society is a book written by Ruth Vanita that examines the presence of homosexuality and queerness in Indian history, literature, and society. The book has received a lot of praise for its perceptive and nuanced approach to comprehending the complexities of same-

sex love and sexuality in Indian culture. It has been hailed as a groundbreaking work in the field of queer studies in India.

The notion that same-sex relationships and eroticism have a lengthy and varied past in India is one of the main themes of Queering India. Vanita contends that same-sex relationships were generally accepted in pre-colonial Indian society and that both Indian literature and mythology contain numerous instances of same-sex love and yearning. Vanita, for instance, talks about the friendship between the Hindu deity Krishna and his male companion Sudama as well as the erotic poems of Tamil poet Andal. Vanita disproves the notion that same-sex love is a Western influence into India by pointing out these instances.

Vanita acknowledges that colonialism had a significant impact on how same-sex desire was perceived in India, but she also notes that it did so in a more subtle manner. After India gained independence in 1947, the law that had been in effect during colonial rule that made homosexual behaviour illegal, remains in force. According to Vanita, it has only been in recent years that queer voices have begun to resurface in India because of the chilling effect this legal ban had on the expression of same-sex desire in Indian culture.

The intersections of gender and sexuality in India are also a topic of Vanita's work. She contends that there is a long history of gender non-conformity in Indian society and that same-sex desire is frequently entwined with non-normative gender identities. In order to demonstrate the complexity of gender and sexuality in India, Vanita uses examples like the hijra community, who are frequently perceived as neither males nor females in Indian culture.

The way that Queering India participates in the current political discussions in

India about gender and sexuality is another significant element of the book. In India, a rising queer movement, according to Vanita, is challenging prevailing views on sexuality and gender. In addition, she points out that there is a considerable reaction against the queer movement, especially from conservative religious organisations.

In conclusion, Queering India makes a major contribution to the field of queer studies and offers a detailed analysis of same-sex lust and desire in Indian society and culture. Vanita has created a work that is both academic and approachable by consulting a broad variety of sources and participating in current political debates. The book disproves the notion that same-sex lust is a Western import into India by tracing the development of same-sex eroticism and love in Indian society over a long and rich history.

1.3. Bhadury, Poushali. "There is no such thing as a straight woman": Queer female representations in South Asian graphic narratives." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 22(4), 424-434. 2018.

In this article, Bhadury explores the representation of queer female identities in the south Asian graphic narratives. She argues that these narratives criticise the binary gender of sexuality norms and challenges the idea of fixed notion of femininity in society. She talks about that even though there is growing visibility for the queer people in the South Asian region, the queer female identities still often tends to get overlooked. Analysing these limited range of graphic narratives containing queer female identities, Bhadury talks about how they disrupt the heteronormativity of society, and helps to show other marginalised sexuality and identities.

The article opens with historical and cultural background of the south Asian graphic narratives, and the current state of LGBTQ2+ rights in South Asia. She notes that both has long history in South Asia but only recently gained some positive recognition. She notes This shift in perception has created new opportunities for marginalised voices, including queer females, to share their stories.

Bhadury then examines particular instances of queer female representation in South Asian graphic narratives, like Kari, Dhee, and a few Indie comics. She observes that many of these tales are marked by a fluidity of identity(Like in Kari), with characters frequently shifting between gender and sexual categories. Bhadury contends that this fluidity allows for a more nuanced understanding of sexuality and gender, as well as a challenge to the binary oppositions that rule dominant discourses.

She provides examples of South Asian graphic narratives featuring queer female characters and examines how these characters are portrayed, highlighting the various strategies employed to communicate queer identities and experiences and also highlights how these representations question dominant narratives and stereotypes, and how they can be used to empower marginalised groups.

In conclusion, Bhadury's work adds to the body of knowledge about queer representation in South Asian graphic narratives. Bhadury provides a new perspective on the role of graphic narratives in social and political change by emphasising how these narratives challenge traditional gender and sexual norms.

1.4. Wood, Andrea." Feminist Studies 41 (2):293-334. 2015.

In this article, Andrea Wood examines the importance and influence of lesbian romance comics as a medium for representing and honoring lesbian love tales. The article is a part of a larger body of work that explores graphic

literature history and their cultural and social significance, particularly in relation to queer representation.

Lesbian romance comics, according to Wood, are an effective means of bringing attention to a marginalized group whose stories have typically been ignored by the media. According to Wood lesbian women can examine their own identities in these comics and find positive representation of themselves. She also adds that these lesbian romance comics challenge the prevalent societal narratives about gender and sexuality.

The foundation of Wood's paper is a review of previous works on lesbian romance comics. She looks at various cartoons from the 1980s to the present, including "Hot, Throbbing Dykes to Watch Out For" and "Dykes to Watch Out For." Wood examines these comics from a feminist cultural studies perspective, focusing on the topics, representations, and effects they have on readers.

The discussion of how lesbian romance comics have changed over time is one of Wood's article's major contributions. She observes that early comics frequently emphasised coming-out tales and the difficulties of being a queer in a heteronormative culture. But more recent comics have broadened their scope to cover a broader range of experiences, like dating, parenthood, and political action. According to Wood, this change is a result of queer identities being accepted more widely in popular society. Analysis of the effect of lesbian romance comics on readers is another significant contribution of Wood's article. She observes that these comics frequently have a strong emotional resonance for lesbian women, giving them a sense of validation. According to Wood, this feeling of acceptance can help to combat the marginalisation and invisibility that many queer women deal with on a daily basis.

In conclusion, she contributes to the discussion of how comics can be used to question established narratives and give a platform to underrepresented voices by highlighting the significance of lesbian romance comics for female readers.

1.5. Vanita, Ruth. "Wedding of Two Souls": Same-Sex Marriage and Hindu Traditions." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2004, pp. 119–35. JSTOR.

In her essay, Ruth Vanita examines Hinduism's potential for same-sex unions. According to the article, same-sex love and desire have a long past in Indian literature and society, and Hindu scriptures can be used to support same-sex marriage. She mentions the long history of same-sex relationships in India, including "gandharva marriages" (marriages between women) and "kliba marriages" (marriages between men).

Vanita starts off by talking about the idea of "sakhi-bhava," which is a Hindu word for the powerful emotional and spiritual bond between two women. The Ramayana and the Bhagavata Purana, among other works, both contain references to sakhi-bhava, which the author claims is proof of same-sex love's acceptance in Hindu tradition. Vanita also explores the concept of

"yugadharma," which refers to the notion that social and religious customs should change with the times. According to her, same-sex marriage is a logical extension of yugadharma, and Hinduism should now accept and acknowledge same-sex relationships.

Vanita also examines the representation of same-sex relationships in Hindu writing. She shows tales involving the god Krishna and his male companion Arjuna as well as the myth of the goddess Mohini, who assumes a male shape in order to wed Shiva. She claims that these tales show that same-sex relationships were not only acceptable in Hinduism but also praised and venerated.

The topic of same-sex marriage's formal recognition in India is also covered in

Vanita's article. She notes that while same-sex unions are presently illegal in

India, there is a growing movement for LGBTQ+ rights there. According to her, Hinduism's acceptance of same-sex unions could contribute to the development of a more welcoming and inclusive society.

In conclusion, Ruth Vanita's article makes a significant addition to the understanding of LGBTQ+ problems in Hinduism. Her research disproves the notion that same-sex marriage is an alien thought to Hinduism and offers proof that it has existed there for centuries. Vanita emphasises Hinduism's tolerance and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity by delving into its past and literature.

1.6. Making Space: Queer Comic Anthologies by Jennifer Camper

Jennifer Camper's *Making Space: Queer Comic Anthologies* is a significant contribution to the expanding subject of queer comics studies. The book examines the ways queer voices have found spaces in LGBT comic anthologies, which have traditionally been dominated by straight, white men. The editor provides a complex and perceptive analysis of the topic by drawing on interviews with queer comics artists and editors as well as her own experiences as a comics artist.

One of the central arguments of the article is that LGBT artists have benefited greatly from the exposure and respect that queer comics anthologies have given them in the comics community. Camper emphasises the value of the anthology structure, emphasising how it can feature work

that might not otherwise be seen by mainstream publishers and promote a variety of voices and writing styles. She also highlights the support and nurturing of LGBT artists that queer comics communities have provided, as well as the part they have played in fostering a sense of community and shared experience

The way queer comics have questioned conventional gender and sexual norms is another key topic of *Making Space*. According to Camper, LGBT comics creators have been at the fore of this exploration of non-normative gender identities and sexualities and that comics can be an especially potent medium for exploring these topics. She also emphasises the value of representation in comics and how, for queer readers, finding themselves mirrored in a comic book's pages can be a very affirming experience.

In conclusion, *Making Space* adds significantly to the field of queer comics studies and makes a strong case for the value of queer comics anthologies and groups. In order to question social norms and carve out spaces for themselves and their work, LGBT artists have used comics as a platform, as highlighted in the book. The book also shows the interactions between queer comics and more general cultural discussions about LGBT rights, as well as the contribution of these comics to the development of queer creator and fan communities.

II. INTRODUCTION

The rise of the representation of queer people, especially of Indian origin in visual literature in the 21st century happened due to several reasons.

Globalisation made people aware of what is going on around the world, which included the global notion and how the world's perception towards queer identity was changing gradually to a positive note. Globalisation in the 21st century is made possible largely because of the advent and advancement and rise and use of technology, and most importantly, the rise of social media.

The rapid growth of social media helped spread awareness about queer life. The people from South Asian countries and diasporas came into contact with the rest of the world and the discussion about queer folk became mainstream gradually. People started constructing and discussing queerness through literature and arts to spread awareness and help the 'desi' queer people to find their identity and become comfortable with it. What I mean by 'desi' shall be substantiated soon hereafter. The genre of graphic texts also started to become popular with the rise of the cybernetic nexus. Comics and graphic novels started to become less about a genre only meant for children, but more for people across age groups. It also started to have its own

subgenres and became one of the prime mediums to spread awareness about important social issues. As graphic narratives include both the textual and the visual elements, it becomes easy to disseminate messages for the human mind. So, in the midst of spreading awareness of various social issues, the issue of the LGBTQQIAA+ have also come to light. Graphic artists have started to pick up on this issue.

A significant example of a graphic novel containing an Indian/Indian origin character can be found in Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Kaari* (2008). And even though the number of graphic novels with desi queer characters is very less, the few works that have been created to show desi queers are still noticeable. This dissertation will explore some of these titles that focus on desi queer representation, namely Amruta Patil's *Kaari*, Nidhi Chanani's *Jukebox* and Bisakh Som's *Apsara Engine*.

The term 'Desi' is a colloquial term meant to designate the people of south Asia, or the people who belong to the South Asian diaspora, according to a paper by Sunaina Maira, a professor of Asian American Studies at the University of California, Davis, and author of a book on South Asian youth culture titled *Desis in the House*. The protagonists of all three primary texts either belong from India or hail from the south Asian diaspora, and they are the part of the LGBT+ community. They can be considered as the representatives of the desi queer people in the practice of graphic novels in the 21st century. Reason scarcity has limited the representation of Indian queer people in comics, resulting in a lack of diverse characters and narratives. The comic book industry in India is relatively new and small compared to other countries. Moreover, the censorship laws and societal stigmas surrounding queer identities have made it challenging for creators to include queer characters in their work. This has resulted in a lack of representation of Indian queer people in mainstream comics.

Ruth Vanita talks about how it's only after the colonial invasion that India became so hostile towards the queer community thanks to the coloniser's ideologies and law enforced by them, like the enforcement of law in section 377 criminalizing all kinds of acts of homosexuality that they specified under unnatural sexual activities. As Ruth Vanita mentions, Homosexuality was never a western idea, but homophobia is, contradicting the idea or myth that homosexuality was a culture brought to the south Asian subcontinent by the western colonisers. "One of our aims is to make accessible many little-known or neglected texts to a general as well as a scholarly readership. Many societies foster the homophobic myth that homosexuality was imported into their society from somewhere else [...] We

hope that this book will help open the way for further research" (Vanita, 2000: xxiii)

Cultural taboos can be another reason, as India is a conservative society where queer people are often stigmatized and discriminated against, in most parts of India, there is still a significant social stigma attached to being queer. The conservative mind-set of people in India makes it difficult for creators to represent queer people in mainstream media, and This can make it difficult for Indian queer people to come out and share their stories with the world. This leads to a scarcity of representation of Indian queer people in comics. Another reason can be Lack of awareness and education: There is a lack of awareness and education about queer issues in India. Many people in India are not aware of the existence of queer people, their rights, and struggles. This makes it difficult for creators to represent queer people in comics.

Also, India has a strict censorship policy that restricts the depiction of certain themes and topics in media. Queer representation is one such topic that is often censored in India. This leads to a scarcity of representation of Indian queer people in comics.

Despite the representation of Desi queers in graphic novels being very limited due to various socio- cultural and legal issues, it is still important to analyse these representations in order to give them more visibility. Not much work has been done on the representation of Indian queer characters in graphic texts and that is what my dissertation seeks to work on.

III. STUDYING THE REPRESENTATION OF 'DESI' QUEERS IN SELECT GRAPHIC TEXTS FROM THE 21ST CENTURY

3.1. Evolution of Queer Representation in Graphic Narratives:

Kari was the first graphic novel in the English language written by an Indian woman, with queer characters. The novel explores the idea of sewage generation in the metropolitan city of Mumbai. The protagonist, Kari, is unapologetically queer and fluid, she is 'unusual [...] deeply introverted, asocial and queer' protagonist (Gravett). She is constantly compared with the sewer by the narrator and Kari herself, as she 'trawl[s] the drains dream after dream, [and] can smell the sewer everywhere' (Patil, 2008: 41),

There is a sense of melancholy in Kari's character that partially is due to her identity. The novel explores themes of sexuality, gender, and identity, with Kari questioning her own sexuality and struggling to come to terms with her attraction to women. In her article "Can You See Her the

Way I Do?': (Feminist) Ways of Seeing in Amruta Patil's *Kari*" (2008), Surangama Dutta mentions that "... the exploration of Kari's identity as a queer woman, as she keeps returning to the sewers over and over again through the text makes Kari's gender identity [is] equally nebulous" (Dutta 2008:1). Kari, the lesbian protagonist, struggles throughout the novel to fully embrace the label of certainty, that of being a 'lesbian'. She says in the novel, "I roll the word 'lesbian' in my mouth and it feels strange there. Sort of fleshy, salivating, fresh off the boat from Lesbia, and totally inappropriate." (Patil, 2008: 79). Poushali Bhadury's assertion about Kari's gender identity argues, Scholars and reviewers alike have usually described Kari as a lesbian character. However [...] she aspires to the elusive "genderless" quality kd lang possesses' [...] and push[es] towards a non-binary, androgynous identity.' (Bhadury, 2018: 428)

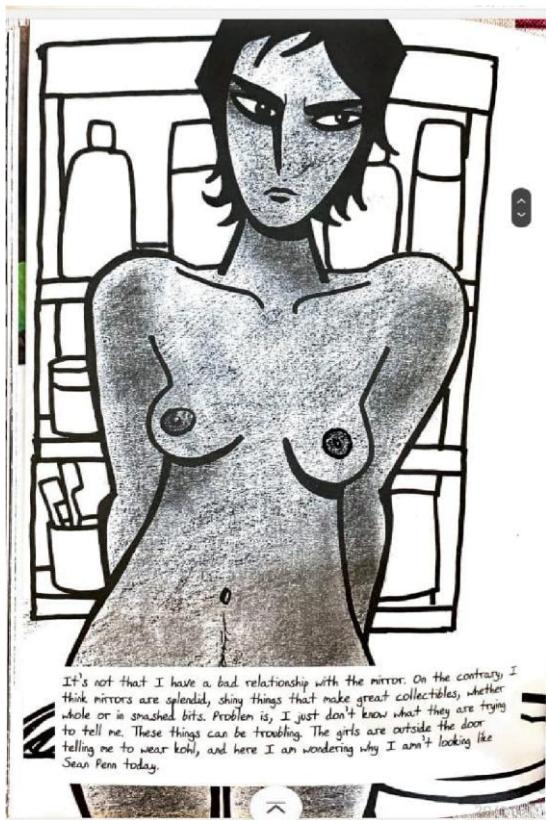


Fig. 1: Kari's gender dysphoria (Patil, 2008:60)

The queer sensuality also shown through Kari's perspective, as she uses fruit symbolism to express her attraction towards the female body;

I play with fruit [...] Avocado, kiwi, mangosteen. There are some fruits you do not want to venture into alone. A peach, for one, creature of texture and smell, sings like a siren. A fruit that lingers on your fingertip with 'unfruitlike' insistence, fuzzy like the down on a pretty jaw. Figs are dark creatures too, skins purple as loving bruises. A fig is one

hundred percent debauched. Lush as a smashed mouth. There, I said it again:

Lush. (Patil, 2008: 66)

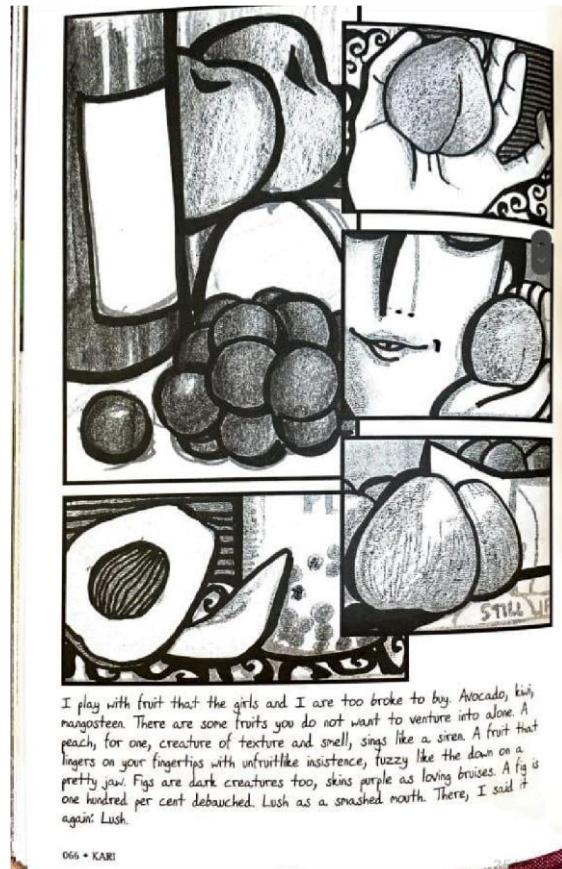


Fig. 2: Using Kari to show queer sensuality (Patil, 2008:66)

Through Kari's experiences, the novel portrays the challenges faced by queer individuals in a society that often does not accept them. The novel also depicts the vibrant culture and diversity of Mumbai, and addresses issues of class and social inequality. The use of bold artwork and poetic language gives the novel a dreamlike quality that adds to its emotional impact. Overall, *Kari* is a powerful and thought-provoking graphic novel that offers a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of queer identity and experiences in contemporary India.

Jukebox by Nidhi Chanani, on the other hand, is a graphic novel published in 2021 that shows two cousins going to an old record company to find out Shahi (one of the cousins)'s father Gio got transported to different musical eras through a magical jukebox and ultimately, find the father. The novel shows these people's journey to magical or past eras of music through the Jukebox to find themselves, cure estranged relationships, and the family coming to terms with their members' sexuality. Naz, the other cousin confides in her uncle Gio about her being

bisexual and asks for his support to help her come out to her parents. Gio gladly accepts her and assures her that he will help. Later, when Shahi asks her why she is so concerned and eager to find her uncle, Naz comes out to her as well. Shahi, even though heartbroken that she didn't trust enough to tell her first, accepts her nevertheless. At the end of the story, readers find out Naz's father accepted her, but only with hope that she may still end up with a boy. Even though it can be a little problematic of a view, there is perhaps still a modicum of hope regarding the other family members showing acceptance. It's also one of the few representations of an Indian queer Muslim character. Afraa Idrees in her thesis for bachelor of technology, "The Brown Stripe in Pride: Exploring South Asian Queer Liberation through Graphic Design", talks about the importance of representation of queer Muslim identity, as she examines the "I Am" campaign of the LGBT Muslim Project, which combines images of

LGBT Muslims with the text that dispels common misconceptions about both Islam and queerness. Idrees contends that the combination of the bold typeface and a simple layout emphasise the complexity and diversity of gay Muslim identities, while also having a strong aesthetic impact.



Fig. 3: Queer acceptance in society and hopefulness
(Chanani,2021:66)

Apsara Engine is a comic anthology consisting of several comics by Bishakh Som. Many of the pieces in this anthology/album are either queer, or queer coded. As Bedatri D. Choudhury in her book review for "Hyperallergic" mentions, it is "A Queer, South Asian Utopia Comes to Life in This Graphic Novel". For instance, *Pleasure Palace* envisions a post-modern 'zenana' that is a fusion of the utopias. The story begins with an older woman amuses a persistent young man who is trying to connect with the protagonist by going on a journey with him and telling him a tale that sounds legendary about her former life as a monarch, and her relationship with her friend "Maya", who had to sacrifice herself for narrator's duty towards nation, slowly the young man understands this story is nothing but a metaphorical way of narrator telling her own life experience and when he questions her on it, she asks him to follow her. They arrive at her destination, which turns out to be a paradise for women, where the woman is centered in the strength of her many varied and lived experiences. *Meena & Aparna* highlights the conflicts that arise between female friendships. A gathering of two friends is strangely charged with unspoken tension, which eventually erupts. The comic is queer coded, it shows the tension, the awkwardness and the problems of homo erotic female friendships. *Swandive* follows Onima and Amrit, two self-described Desi trans-persons who meet and bond at an academic conference, where Onima gives a talk on trans geographies. Together, they embark on a magic realism inspired adventure that turns Onima's speculative remarks into a fully realised vision, through a futuristic map that Onima draws with their blood. It examines trans identity, a subject that Som, who is trans herself, has previously addressed. However, *Apsara Engine* has, what might be said to be a trans-aesthetic, even when Som isn't directly discussing trans related issues. The book is a testament to how having a transgender experience may give one a completely fresh perspective on what it is to be human, eschewing conventional classifications and upsetting well-known narrative patterns. The comics in *Apsara Engine* explores different emotional modes, narratives, and identities through the comics and conceives the idea of an optimistic, inclusive future.



100 JAGMALA SINGH

Fig. 4: Swandive (Som, 2020: 150)

From these three graphic texts about Indian and Indian originated queer people, keeping in mind their timeline, one can also see the changes in representation of queer people, their portrayal and treatment over the past decade. For example, in *Kari*, we see the protagonist as a gloomy, dark, and melancholic character. She represents the metropolitan city she lives in and its sewage system that she loves so much for saving her life; and also wants sewage treatment for the better of the city's survival. She is also melancholic because of her queer identity. Throughout the novel, one can observe that the colours are muted, the panels are mostly dark, and everyone exhibits an expression of gloominess.

Kari is in search of her identity, in a society that is not accepting of her sexual orientation. Given the time the graphic novel is written, the contemporary legal status of India is still not accepting of queer sexuality, with the Act 377 criminalizing same-sex relationships. Surangama Dutta states,

"the text also generates a rich, intertextual narrative that visualises the many moods of its reclusive protagonist, in a powerful, intertextual way. This Heteroglossia, combined with an experimental use of 'ink, marker, charcoal and oil bar, crayon and found images', captures *Kari*'s psychological landscape in all its complexity, creating a unique narrative framed by her interiority." (Dutta, 2008:1)

A city alters when a person leaves. It drops drawbridges, grows new roads, looks hairy at dusk. Since Ruth left, I don't think I have walked the same road twice. Every day I wander into strange backyards and junk heaps and miraculously find my way out and back to work or home again. I give my dogs to the ad agency, work like a fury and sleep like the dead.



While I sleep, Ruth must be striding towards a flame-coloured calling.

014 + KARI

14/115

Fig. 5: Use of dark, muted colours and expression to show the melancholic queer character (Patil, 2008, *Kari*:14)

On the other hand, *Apsara Engine* and *Jukebox* are written respectively in 2020 and 2021, almost more than a decade after *Kari*. So even though there is still some gloominess in the portrayal of the graphic texts (More in *Apsara Engine* than *Jukebox*), it's still visibly less than that of *Kari*. It may be because of the changes and progress of society's attitude and treatment towards the queer community in the last decade; and also the decriminalization via dismantling Act 377. Also, both the authors of these two novels are a part of the Indian diaspora in America, mainly writing about people in the South Asian diaspora. Living in a first world country where queer people have more rights and acceptance perhaps helps a lot to frame a positive outlook. Even though they still struggle with complete acceptance, like for example in *Jukebox*, where Naz talks about her father's reaction to her coming out, "That there's still a chance I marry a man and have kids [...] It'll take time" (Chanani, 2021:206) they still find hope and better treatment than '*Kari*'. The use of vibrant and less muted colors and more cheerful expression of characters, especially in *Jukebox* is significant, as it is also directed towards the children, so that empathy can be nurtured from an early age.

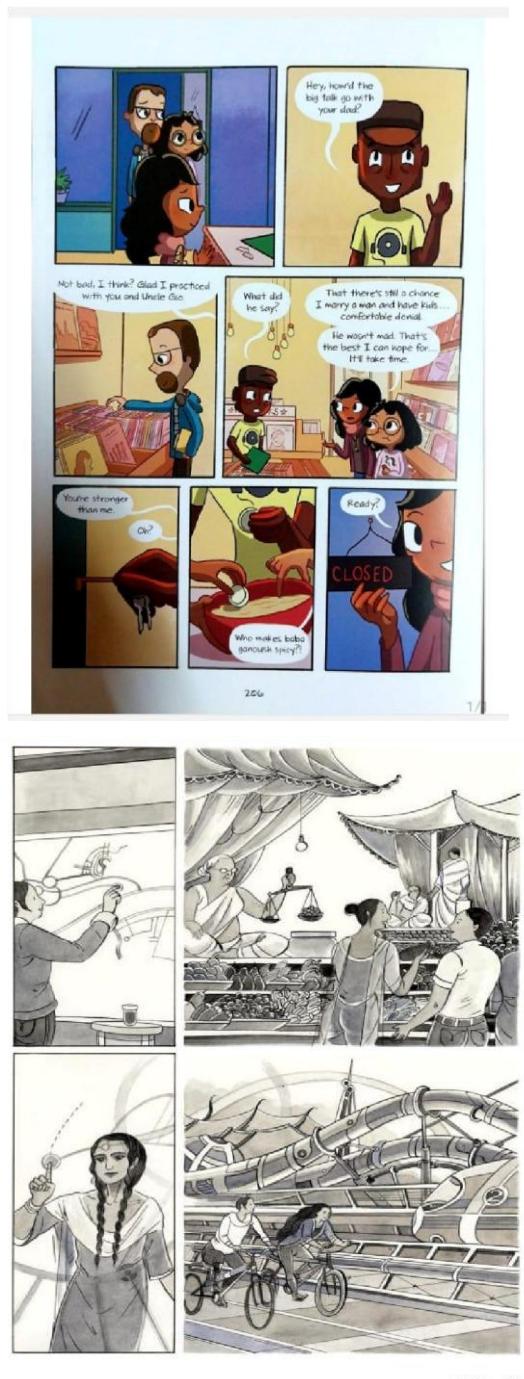


Fig. 6: Use of more vibrant colours in *Jukebox* (Chanani, 2021:206) and *Apsara Engine* (Som, 2020:155)

3.2. Queer and Myth-making:

It is interesting to note that the majority of the graphic texts tend to portray the queer characters, with the help of fictionalized mythology, either in this or some alternate universe; whether it is by using the character's name from some mythological entities, or by sending them to alternate realities. In *Kari* and *Apsara Engine*, we see many queer protagonists in the novels to have mythological names. In

some comics in the album of *Apsara Engine* anthology and in *Jukebox*, one sees the alternate universe somehow related to queer characters. In *Kari* by Amruta Patil, Kari and her girlfriend, Ruth, both bear the name of two mythological creatures from the mythology. Ruth is taken from the bible Ruth, biblical character, a woman who after being widowed remains with her husband's mother. The story is told in the Book of Ruth, part of the biblical canon called Ketuvim and Kari from Norse mythology where Kari is the old Norse God of the North Wind Ruth Vanita, in many of her books and articles, states the relation of ancient India and its mythology as well as culture's relation with homosexuality. She shows how India, for centuries, has acknowledged the existence of homosexuality. It has had both positive and not so positive reactions to it. Vanita and Kidwai mentions in their book,

Our study suggests that at most times and places in pre-nineteenth-century India, love between women and between men, even when disapproved of, was not actively persecuted. As far as we know, no one has ever been executed for homosexuality in India. This does not mean, however, that there were no difficulties to be overcome. Even when love between men or between women was not trivialized, viewed as inferior to love between men and women, or ignored (and it often was treated in all these ways), even when it was romanticized and to some degree encouraged, society rarely provided institutions that allowed it to be chosen and lived out as primary, in refusal of marriage. People who managed to express same-sex love in this way displayed tremendous creativity in shaping their own lives as well as patterns of community. In the modern world, these communities have often been composed of men and women, and homoerotically inclined persons have provided each other with support, regardless of gender. (Vanita, 2000: xviii)

The reason that so many authors rely on mythology and alternate universe tropes while depicting the queer characters, or even that scholars like Ruth Vanita perhaps uses ancient India, its religion, mythology and cultures and texts to justify the legitimacy of queer people especially in India, is because mythology has been used in Indian comics as a way to create inclusive and relatable characters. Many mythological stories have queer themes and characters, such as the story of Shikhandi, Arjuna as Brihannala, Krishna as Mohini in the opus of *Mahabharata*. *Apsara Engine* features queer characters inspired by Indian mythology. For example, from the comic *Meera and Aparna* where the names of the protagonists both Meera and Aparna are both taken from mythology, like Aparna who is in Indian mythology the daughter of Himavat, the god of snow and the Himalayas and Mena or from the comic *Swandive* where

the name of the character Maya is also taken from mythology, Maya the goddess of illusion. Mythology perhaps offers a space to explore and represent queer people in a non-threatening way. Many Hindu mythological texts have queer characters and stories. These characters have been depicted in various forms, such as the androgynous Ardhanarishvara, who is half male. Alternate reality has also been used to create inclusive and relatable characters in Indian comics. By creating alternate worlds where queer identities are accepted and normalized, creators can explore queer narratives and experiences without the constraints of societal stigmas. For example, the comic book series *Priya's Shakti* features a super-heroine who fights against gender-based violence in an alternate reality where women are empowered. Alternate reality offers a space to explore and represent queer people in a world that is different from our own. This allows creators to create a world where queer people are accepted and normalized. This can be a powerful tool in changing people's perceptions and attitudes towards queer people. The use of alternate realities in depicting Queer characters provide creators with the opportunity to create planes where socio-cultural stigmas do not exist. In the comic "name??" from the comic anthology *Apsara Engine*, creator Bishakh Som uses an alternate reality to explore queer relationships and identities. By removing societal pressures, the comic is able to focus on the complexities of queer relationships.



Fig. 7: Finding solace in their identity through help of alternate universe, (Som, 2020: 256)

IV. CONCLUSION

In the preface to Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's groundbreaking anthology, *Same sex-desire in India* (2000), Vanita profoundly expresses, 'Love need not take an explicitly sexual form, but it is nearly always expressed in the language of poetic excess and metaphoric power' Vanita, 2000: xiv). To show love through all forms of it, proper representation is needed. The representation of Indian queer people in comics has been limited due to several reasons, but creators have found ways to overcome this by using alternative methods. By including diverse characters and narratives, comics can serve as a powerful tool for representation and social change. It is perhaps essential for the comic book industry to continue to embrace diversity and inclusivity for its readership. The comics "Kari," "Apsara Engine," and "Jukebox" are examples of how these techniques can be used to tell compelling stories about Indian/Indian originated queer people. As society continues to progress towards greater acceptance and inclusivity, it is important that creators continue to push the boundaries of representation in comics.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bhadury, P. (2018). "There is no such thing as a straight woman": Queer female representations in South Asian graphic narratives. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 22(4), 424–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2018.1428500>
- [2] Mitter, S. (2020, May 28). Bishakh Som's "Apsara Engine" imagines what happens when femmes, as Donna Haraway writes, "make kin, not babies." *Hyperallergic*. <https://hyperallergic.com/563525/bishakh-som-apsara-engine-review/>
- [3] Chanani, N. (2021). *Jukebox*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Children's Books.
- [4] Choudhury, B. D. (n.d.). A queer, South Asian utopia comes to life in this graphic novel. [Article].
- [5] Galvan, M. (2018). Making space: Jennifer Camper, LGBTQ anthologies, and queer comics communities. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 22(4), 373–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2018.1449499>
- [6] Gravett, P. (2012, September 4). Amruta Patil: India's first female graphic novelist. *Paul Gravett: Comics, graphic novels, manga*. http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/amruta_patil
- [7] Patil, A. (2008). *Kari*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- [8] Som, B. (2020). *Apsara Engine*. New York, NY: The Feminist Press at CUNY. (Kindle edition).
- [9] Vanita, R. (2004). "Wedding of two souls": Same-sex marriage and Hindu traditions. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 20(2), 119–135. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002506>
- [10] Vanita, R. (2009). Same-sex weddings, Hindu traditions, and modern India. *Feminist Review*, 91(1), 47–60. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.46>

- [11] Vanita, R., & Kidwai, S. (Eds.). (2001). *Same-sex love in India: Readings from literature and history*. New York, NY: Palgrave.
- [12] Vanita, R. (2002). *Queering India: Same-sex love and eroticism in Indian culture and society*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- [13] Wood, A. (2015). Making the invisible visible: Lesbian romance comics for women. *Feminist Studies*, 41(2), 293–334.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.41.2.293>