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Narrating the Unspoken and Queer Women's Experience in K. Vaishali and Amruta Patil

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Abstract

This study examines how two contemporary Indian women writers – Amruta Patil in her graphic novel *Kari* (2008) and K. Vaishali in her memoir *Homeless: Growing Up Lesbian and Dyslexic in India* (2023) – give voice to lesbian and queer women's experiences that have long been culturally silenced. Situating these works within the history of queer literature in India and informed by queer theory, intersectionality, and feminist criticism, the paper explores how each author narrates the “unspoken.” *Kari* uses visual allegory and non-linear storytelling to depict a queer woman's alienation and fluid identity in urban Bombay.

Homeless, by contrast, employs a direct autobiographical voice to confront stigma around lesbianism, disability, caste, and mental health. A comparative analysis highlights differences of form (graphic novel vs. memoir), tone (coded symbolism vs. explicit confession), and intersectional focus (urban alienation vs. marginalised identity). Together, these texts mark a shift from subtle, coded narratives of lesbian life (as in Patil's earlier work) to unapologetic self-narration by queer women (as in Vaishali's recent memoir). They demonstrate how queer women are “reclaiming the silences” in Indian literature, expanding representation and challenging heteronormative discourse. This paper concludes that these narratives, through their distinct genres, contribute significantly to an evolving Indian queer women's literary tradition.

Keywords: Queer Women's Literature, India, Amruta Patil, K. Vaishali, Graphic Novel, Autobiography, Lesbian, Subjectivity, Silence, Intersectionality..

1. Introduction

Queer literature in India has grown significantly in recent decades, but women's voices – especially those of lesbian and bisexual women – have often been marginalised or coded. Early Indian writing rarely portrayed female same-sex desire overtly; when it did (as in Ismat Chughtai's 1942 story *Lihaaf*), the representation was oblique. By the twenty-first century, however, writers like Amruta Patil and K. Vaishali are giving unprecedented visibility to queer women's lives. Patil's *Kari* (2008) – widely regarded as India's first graphic novel by a woman – explores the interior life of a young lesbian artist in Mumbai. (Davé & Davé, 2012) Vaishali's *Homeless* (2023) is a raw memoir of growing up as a lesbian and dyslexic woman, newly defiant in its candor. (Davé, 2011) These two works offer different formal approaches (graphic narrative vs. prose memoir) and belong to different moments in India's socio-legal timeline (Patil's *Kari* predates the decriminalisation of homosexuality, while Vaishali's *Homeless* is published after 2018). Together, they enable a conversation about how queer Indian women “narrate the unspoken” aspects of their lives.

The core questions guiding this analysis are: How do Patil and Vaishali each give voice to experiences that mainstream culture has silenced? In what ways do they construct lesbian/queer subjectivity within Indian social and familial contexts? And how does the form of each text (visual allegory versus personal memoir) shape its telling of what has traditionally been unsaid? By comparing *Kari* and *Homeless*, this paper reveals an evolution in narrative strategies – from symbolic, internalized portrayals to explicit testimony – reflecting broader changes in Indian queer women’s writing. (Shemdoe et al., 2016)

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on several intersecting theories. Queer theory (pioneered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, etc.) offers concepts such as the “heterosexual matrix” and the performativity of gender and sexuality (Butler) that illuminate how both texts depict the policing of sexual norms. For Butler, gender and sexuality categories are not fixed “natural” facts but are “culturally constructed through the repetition of stylised acts in time”. In *Kari*, Patil implicitly challenges this normativity: the protagonist’s very existence outside the heteronormative “grid of cultural intelligibility” (Butler’s term for the compulsory heterosexual paradigm) prompts creative visual storytelling that unsettles gender roles. (Patel & Mishra, 2024)

Intersectionality (Crenshaw) is also crucial: both authors foreground overlapping axes of identity. Crenshaw observes that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” and warns that ignoring intersections fails to capture how individuals are uniquely oppressed. Similarly, Vaishali’s memoir highlights how sexuality intertwines with dyslexia, caste (she is a Brahmin by birth), mental health, and poverty, echoing Crenshaw’s idea of multiple, compounding marginalizations. (Foley, 2019)

Feminist literary criticism (e.g. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s critique of Western feminism, Anjali Arondekar on sexuality in India) also informs this analysis. Nivedita Menon’s radical feminism is especially relevant: she argues that “[o]nce we give up on the idea that only heterosexuality is normal and that all human bodies are clearly either male or female, more and more kinds of bodies and desires will come into view”. This insight underpins both works’ challenge to essentialist gender norms. (Mack, 2025)

Because *Kari* is a graphic novel, scholarship on visual and autobiographical narratives (e.g. Hillary Chute’s study of women’s comics) helps frame it. Chute notes that female cartoonists often “rewrite and redesign the parameters of acceptable discourse” through an interplay of words and images that conveys trauma and memory. (Germaine, 2016) Patil’s art – a mix of collage, watercolor and ink – is in this lineage, using fragmentation and metaphor to “express difficult, even traumatic stories” (Chute) about a queer life. Meanwhile, Vaishali’s memoir can be contextualized by theories of life-writing (Leigh Gilmore’s work on trauma and testimony), since she uses confession to transform personal pain into collective insight. Together, these frameworks help analyze how both authors reclaim the unspoken: whether through performative visuals or testimonial prose, they disrupt dominant narratives that have traditionally kept queer women silent. (Chansky, 2014)

Contextual Background

Queer women’s stories in Indian literature have a long but subdued history. The Urdu story *Lihaaf* (“The Quilt,” 1942) by Ismat Chughtai is often cited as an early allegory of lesbian desire, but it inspired controversy for its “suggestive lesbianism” and was defended as artistic rather than obscene. In English-language fiction, overt lesbian characters were virtually absent until the late 20th century. (Ogene, 2019) The postcolonial era and its literary culture were dominated by heteronormative narratives or by male-centered queer stories (e.g. Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* for Sri Lanka). Feminist and queer scholars (e.g. Mohanty, Menon, Arondekar) have argued that colonial legacies and patriarchal norms invisibilized non-heterosexual female sexuality. (Waugh, 1993)

The legal backdrop also shaped literary expression. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, introduced in the British colonial period, criminalized “carnal intercourse against the order of nature.” Although rarely enforced against private same-sex relationships, it remained a symbol of societal disapproval. Indian queer writers have often referenced Section 377’s shadow. (Sanders, 2009) For instance, Aishwarya Singh notes that Sedgwick’s analysis of sexuality resonates with how Section 377 “entered the Euro-American discourse” linking same-sex acts to fixed identities. In India, activism against 377 culminated in 2018’s Navtej Johar Supreme Court decision, which struck it down, famously quoting Wilde’s “love that dare not speak its name” (a phrase also alluding to hidden homosexual desire). This legal change opened space for more candid queer writing. Patil’s *Kari* was published in 2008, when homosexuality was still criminalized; Vaishali’s memoir appears in 2023, in a post-377 India more receptive to LGBTQ visibility. (Davé, 2011)

Alongside legal shifts, Indian publishing saw a rise in memoirs and graphic novels by women. New publishing houses (e.g. Zubaan, Yoda Press) have encouraged marginalized voices. In graphic storytelling, Patil’s *Kari* inaugurated a female-authored, urban queer narrative (she later gained acclaim with mythology comics). In life-

writing, there has been a growth of queer autobiographies (e.g. Arvind Narrain's *Because I Have a Voice*, Roxanna Mistry's *A Life in Trans Activism*). K. Vaishali's *Homeless* is part of this wave, offering a frank account from a South Asian lesbian perspective – something rarely seen in mainstream Indian memoir. (DJ, 2025) Thus, these two works emerge from a moment when Indian literature is increasingly acknowledging the “many identities and desires” Menon describes, even as it continues to wrestle with deep-seated silence around them.

Close Reading: Amruta Patil's *Kari*

Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Kari* (2008) tells the story of Kari, a young woman in Mumbai coping with heartbreak and personal crises. The narrative begins after Kari's lover, Ruth, has abruptly left her, which Patil metaphorically describes as a “slipshod surgical procedure” – a botched double-suicide attempt. After nearly drowning (saved by a sewer), Kari tries to reclaim life among Mumbai's chaos. The plot unfolds through her interactions, flashbacks, and internal reflections. Central to *Kari* are themes of lesbian love, urban alienation, and female friendship. (Arvindar & Sen, 2025)

Kari's relationship with Ruth is loving but hidden: she and Ruth are “hesitant to disclose their lesbian identity” because Kari's family and society expect a heterosexual marriage. Her mother even warns that “when a husband comes along, best friends become nobodies,” underscoring how queer female bonds are invisible to heteronormative families. The failure of Kari and Ruth's secret pact reflects the oppressive “heterosexual matrix” that Butler theorizes – an environment in which Kari cannot openly live as a queer woman. (Dumortier, 2016)

Yet Kari explores queerness in rich, indirect ways. The novel foregrounds Kari's deep friendship with Angel, a dying cancer patient, whose presence offers Kari intimacy and understanding that blood relatives do not. This female homosocial space contrasts with the alienating city and Kari's other roommates. As one reviewer notes, Mumbai itself becomes “a hostile space... a grotesque, living thing, attempting to choke Kari out,” and Kari's own home (a women's hostel) is filled with heterosexual girls, a constant reminder of the intimacy she cannot claim. Indeed, visual motifs of smog, dark alleys, and surreal imagery mirror Kari's alienation. Her fluid sexual identity (Kari herself describes a “circus in her head”) defies easy labeling, clashing with the rigid forms of her urban surroundings. (Haritaworn, 2019)

Patil's use of the graphic form is integral to narrating the unspeakable. She relies heavily on imagery rather than exposition. Reviewers emphasize that Kari “leaves a lot unsaid”: the origins of the suicide attempt, Ruth's reasons for leaving, and even much of Kari's inner feelings are conveyed visually rather than verbally. The novel's sparse text – often only fragments of dialogue or inner monologue – forces the reader to “drown in descriptions” of Kari's world. (Harlin, 2025)

For example, Kari has only one bold statement about love: “Whatever love laws have to be broken; the first few seconds suffice”, hinting at the resilience of queer love under oppression. Otherwise, Patil uses recurring symbols: the organic shapes of nature, the color palette, and the shapeshifting city (the “smog city” of Bombay) all externalize Kari's inner state. In this way, Kari “celebrates ambiguity, exploration and fluidity through its unusual approach” to narrative. (Carcione, 2025)

Critics have noted Kari's pioneering status: it “features a queer and eponymous heroine to depict the living realities of queer women in a highly hetero-normative society”. In a sense, the graphic form allows Patil to circumvent language's limits. As Hillary Chute observes of graphic women's autobiographies, the interplay of words and images can “rewrite and redesign the parameters of acceptable discourse,” enabling writers to tell traumatic or marginalized stories. Patil does precisely this – she conveys what cannot be said directly. When Kari is silent about certain details, the art steps in: an empty street, a shadowy figure, or a distorted panel layout speak volumes. For instance, after Ruth's disappearance, Patil draws Kari sitting alone amid Mumbai's dark cityscape, her figure small and angular – a visual embodiment of her solitude and emotional “fluidity” set against oppressive straight lines of the background. In sum, Kari narrates the unspoken (fear, grief, desire) through a subtextual, allegorical visual language. Its indirect narration and symbolism embody the way queer women's voices were historically silenced, even as the book itself is a bold proclamation of their interiority. (Ward, 2024)

Close Reading: K. Vaishali's *Homeless*

K. Vaishali's *Homeless: Growing Up Lesbian and Dyslexic in India* (2023) is a first-person memoir that breaks silence with candor. The title itself – *Homeless* – is provocative, and as reviewers note, it refers not to literal homelessness but to the existential feeling of alienation. Vaishali chronicles her journey from a conservative Brahmin upbringing in Mumbai to finding independence in Hyderabad. The narrative is linear and confessional, detailing how at age 20 she discovered both her lesbian identity and her dyslexia, two truths that shape every challenge she faces. Unlike Patil's figurative approach, Vaishali confronts taboos head-on. In one segment, she writes frankly about seeking information on the clitoris – a raw depiction of her sexual awakening and ignorance under patriarchal education. The publisher's summary emphasizes this directness: “As she writes, she finds the

past has a way of catching up with her, even as she explores her dyslexia, homosexuality, and the clitoris; falling in love and recovering from a harrowing breakup...". In other words, Vaishali names the forbidden parts of her experience with no euphemism.(Vaughan, 2000)

The memoir's tone is urgent and explicit. It describes domestic abuse, psychiatric illness, suicide attempts, and homophobia plainly, often in short, straightforward sentences. Vaishali does not shy away from her pain, nor does she sentimentalize it. As one reviewer observes, her writing "isn't lamenting... She is telling how it is," making *Homeless* read like an "open diary" of a young woman coming to terms with life's realities. The narrative is interspersed with commentary on caste privilege: Vaishali's brahmin background afforded her certain comforts even as she suffered stigma for being queer. The memoir grapples with the contradiction of belonging to a privileged caste while also being marginalized by sexuality. This intersectionality is central: Vaishali acknowledges her "own conditioning" in caste hierarchy while also detailing the homophobia she endures.(Upadhyay, 2020)

Family dynamics and social pressures loom large. Vaishali describes coming out to her mother at 22, a fraught episode that forces her out of her childhood home. She moves to a women's hostel in Hyderabad, where she struggles with poor living conditions ("a dingy, insect-ridden yet rent-free room") and her anxiety around reading (due to dyslexia). The memoir depicts college politics and the caste-based Rohith Vemula protests of 2016 as part of its backdrop; in one excerpt, Vaishali recounts how she chose not to join a student protest because she doubted it would solve structural issues. These passages show how even in adulthood Vaishali negotiates the public sphere cautiously – she is hyper-aware of both gendered expectations and academic paths that did not suit her learning style. Yet throughout, her lesbian identity becomes a vital lens. She describes secret crushes, the fear of her parents discovering a boyfriend (or girlfriend), and the bittersweet arrival of her first serious love.(Garber, 2015)

Significantly, *Homeless* contrasts with *Kari* in its mode: it is brutally explicit. It names the "many truths" the author holds, using the very language that often gets repressed in polite society. Reviewers note that Indian readers seldom encounter such "raw and open first-hand accounts" of queer lives. Vaishali's memoir includes direct references to sex, sexuality, and mental health that would have been unpublishable even a decade ago in India. The result is a narrative of queer selfhood that refuses metaphor. Where Patil's *Kari* might express hurt with shadowy imagery, Vaishali writes it plainly: when she attempts suicide, she recounts exact details; when she learns to find her sexuality through reading *Dil Se Dil Tak* books in English, she speaks of it in concrete terms. This frankness is itself revolutionary: it embodies Sedgwick's idea that emerging from the closet (and giving up the "shame" of unspoken desire) can be transformative.(Wyile, 2015)

Nevertheless, Vaishali does use a touch of narrative artistry. The memoir is punctuated by short anecdotes, journal-like entries, even poetic interludes. For example, after describing a heartbreaking breakup, she notes the bitter irony of being both "dyslexic and deaf to love," subtly linking her learning disability with her emotional numbness. The tone is often conversational; she peppers the text with reflections and questions to the reader. But even these devices feel straightforward rather than "coded." As one commentator put it: "Coming out as a lesbian, coming out as a dyslexic lesbian, is a struggle... in a country like India, more so. I have a lot of respect for and extend my support to Vaishali, and others who come out every day". In *Homeless*, the act of narrating itself is defiant testimony – Vaishali places on record experiences many queer women never mention in writing. The text repeatedly reminds us of the social forces trying to silence her (family honor, academic failure, patriarchal schooling), and yet it speaks them openly. By the end, the narrative arc sees Vaishali gaining confidence: the memoir closes with her achieving professional stability and moving into a home with her partner. This happy outcome – a rare publish of "*Homeless*" ending with hope – underscores the book's mission to turn unspoken fears into spoken possibility.(Marshall et al., 2023)

Comparative Analysis

Kari and *Homeless* represent two divergent narrative modes. *Kari* is a graphic novel, blending visual art with minimal text. Its storytelling is non-linear, symbolic, and often dreamlike. In contrast, *Homeless* is a straightforward memoir, told in prose, structured chronologically. This formal difference shapes how each book "speaks" unspoken truths. Patil's graphic form externalizes internal states through imagery – absence of dialogue on sensitive issues forces readers to decode meaning from panels. Vaishali's memoir lays everything out in words; the visuals are the real world, and the "visions" are her memories written down. The memoir form allows explicit naming of taboo topics (dyslexia, the clitoris, mental illness), whereas the graphic novel often hints at such themes through metaphor (for example, broken glass or a knife might symbolize pain or desire without stating it outright).(Mthombeni & Vincent-Lambert, 2025)

Patil's narration is allegorical and muted. *Kari* herself is often "stone-faced" and silent, and the tone is melancholic, reflective. Patil invites readers to fill silences. By contrast, Vaishali's voice is forthright and confessional. She uses plain declarative sentences. Reviewers note that she "isn't whining" but "telling how it is,"

giving even discomforting details. Where Kari suggests (“flashing shadows,” “elephant-shaped quilt”), Homeless states (“I am dyslexic,” “I am a lesbian,” etc.). This tonal contrast highlights a shift from indirect to direct narration of queer life in India.

Both texts depict isolation in urban India, but in different dimensions. In Kari, the city (Mumbai/Bombay) itself looms as an indifferent smog-filled entity. Kari is “largely alienated... as a queer person in the heteronormative landscape”; her queerness is a personal inner fluidity, largely hidden. The focus is on individual emotional experience – loss, friendship, meaning-making. In Homeless, Hyderabad and the university are the settings, but place is secondary to community and social structures (caste, family, campus politics). Vaishali faces systemic issues – caste hierarchy, institutionalized patriarchy – explicitly alongside her coming-out journey. One text shows loneliness in a big city; the other shows marginalization within both the family and broader society. Both are inclusive of queer desire, but Patil’s queer character struggles primarily with personal anguish, while Vaishali’s struggles are communal (societal homophobia, ableism, etc.).

Both novels emphasize that lesbian identity cannot be separated from other identities. Kari subtly addresses gender expression: for example, Kari’s short hair and tomboy style create tension with her mother, and her friendship with Angel (a fellow outsider) touches on class and mortality issues. However, Vaishali foregrounds multiple intersections directly. She is not only lesbian and dyslexic but also mentally ill at times, poor (due to hostel life), and upper-caste – which she acknowledges. The memoir repeatedly notes how her brahmin background insulated some hardships (privilege of class) even as her sexuality and disability caused others. Thus, intersectionality is an overt concern in Homeless (echoing Crenshaw’s point that overlapping oppressions compound one’s experience). In Kari, intersectional identity is more implicit, surfacing in scenes of economic struggle or in Angel’s illness (death and queer friendship). (Brinkman et al., 2022)

A key contrast is how each work “narrates the unspoken.” Kari embodies silence – the title character keeps her feelings largely internal, and the novel “has few words to offer,” relying on visual expression. Its narration is literally unvoiced or symbolic, echoing Sedgwick’s idea of the closet’s “coexistence of contradictory models” of sexuality. Homeless is the opposite: it is a testimony meant to be heard. It speaks openly of things rarely said: Vaishali even titled a chapter about her dyslexia “Invisible Disability.” The memoir frequently names the silences (“I did not tell my father I was in love with a woman” style confessions) and thus transforms them into spoken narrative. We might argue that Kari uses imagistic syntax to voice the unspoken (visual storytelling as subtext), whereas Homeless uses testimonial prose to explicitly voice it. Together, the two illustrate an evolution: from decoding (reading symbols of queerness) to decoding heteronormativity itself. (Blix et al., 2021)

Finally, these works reflect different historical moments. Kari (2008) can be seen as part of an earlier wave of queer Indian writing that was careful and coded – though still trailblazing. Homeless (2023) belongs to a newer generation that is more unapologetic. The shift is not just stylistic but social. Vaishali can cite 2018’s Navtej Johar and 2016’s campus agitations as part of her life backdrop; Patil’s protagonist existed before those, in a time of illegality and stigma. In comparative terms, Kari and Homeless together argue that queer women’s writing in India is transitioning from “the narration of silence” (as Patil does through art) to explicit self-narration (as Vaishali does through memoir). Both are crucial: one laid groundwork by breaking visual ground, the other builds on it by speaking the “unspeakable” in words.

Broader Implications

What do these two narratives imply for Indian queer women’s literature? First, they affirm that lesbian and queer women’s voices are diversifying. These writers are expanding the canon beyond conventional heterosexual or male-centric tales. They challenge the assumption – noted by Nivedita Menon and Sedgwick – that sexuality can be neatly categorized or silenced. Instead, they present sexuality as fluid and intersecting with other identities, showing “all kinds of sexual desire and identifications are possible”. This enriches India’s literary landscape with perspectives that were long absent. (Davé, 2011)

Second, the existence of Kari and Homeless suggests a changing readership and market. They signal that there is both a hunger and a space for queer women’s stories, from youth to middle-class to working-class backgrounds. The graphic novel medium in Kari also highlights the potential of visual art to reach new audiences, such as young women who might not pick up a traditional novel. Conversely, Homeless exemplifies the importance of personal narratives in advocacy: by framing her struggle as an “open diary,” Vaishali invites empathy and understanding, potentially influencing social attitudes about disability and sexuality. (Gilkey, 2008)

Third, both authors contribute to a postcolonial feminist reimagining of identity. They echo the call of feminist scholars like Chandra Mohanty and Menon to tell stories from “the margins” that deconstruct colonial and patriarchal norms. Vaishali explicitly situates her story in the context of caste and nation (for example, referencing Rohith Vemula’s story), indicating that queer issues in India cannot be separated from broader struggles of caste, class, and postcolonial modernity. Patil similarly weaves mythic and modern elements, tying female narratives to

ancient storytelling traditions. Thus, these works participate in a larger project of redefining Indian national and cultural identity to include voices that were once excluded.(Singh, 2019)

Finally, they serve as a template for future writers. By narrating what was once “unspoken,” Patil and Vaishali open doors for others. Future Indian lesbian or queer women writers – memoirists, novelists, poets, cartoonists – can look to Kari and Homeless as exemplars of how to articulate queer subjectivity in culturally resonant ways. Scholars and educators, too, now have new texts to include in curricula on postcolonial literature, feminist studies, and LGBTQ studies, thereby normalizing queer women’s experiences in academic discourse. In short, the shift from Kari’s coded shadows to Homeless’s explicitness exemplifies how silenced stories become spoken, one generation to the next.(Ramirez-Stapleton et al., 2020)

Conclusion

K. Vaishali’s Homeless and Amruta Patil’s Kari both succeed in “narrating the unspoken” in distinct yet complementary ways. Patil’s Kari gives voice to silence through artful visuals and allegory, embodying the queer woman’s interior world at a time when direct expression was risky. Vaishali’s Homeless speaks its truths overtly in clear prose, reflecting a moment when Indian queer women can finally write their own stories with “ease in its reading”. Each author, within her genre, expands the literary representation of lesbian identity: one by illustrating a life in Bombay’s margins, the other by testifying to her life in Hyderabad’s hostels. Both challenge heteronormative silence: Patil by visual subversion of narrative form, Vaishali by verbal assertion of experience.(View of REPRESENTATION OF LGBTQ COMMUNITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN LITERATURE, 2024)

Together, they suggest a broader trajectory in Indian queer women’s writing – from cautiously coded to boldly confessional. They underscore the importance of narrative form in articulating identity: whether through the “counterpoint of presence and absence” in graphics (Chute) or the candid diary style of memoir. Both strategies perform a kind of activism: making the private public, the invisible visible. This paper argues that Patil and Vaishali have thus “rewritten the parameters of acceptable discourse” for Indian literature. In doing so, they make room for future stories of queer women who refuse to remain in silence.(Mohanty et al., 2024)

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