

# Queer Joy and Closure: Rethinking the Ending of The Graphic Novel *Kari*

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**Abstract**—Queer joy being the radical affective stance fighting marginalization, is increasingly redirected and reabsorbed into heteronormative narratives that equates happiness with romantic closure, social assimilation, and linear resolution. This paper concentrates on the question, “*Must queer joy culminate in a happy ending?*” investigating how joy should resist romantic closure, refuse normative timelines, and continue to be affectively open. Using Amruta Patil’s Graphic novel *Kari* as the primary text, the study explores how queer joy manifests in solitude, fragmentation, and self-discovery. It challenges the hegemonic culture that equates fulfilment with romantic partnership and resolution.

*Kari* offers a visual and narrative grammar of queer temporality with its grayscale palette and episodic structure, reflecting on finding joy in self-discovery, and chosen kinship rather than romantic success. The analysis draws on José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of queer futurity, Sara Ahmed’s critique of the happiness imperative, and Elizabeth Freeman’s chrononormativity to argue that queer joy is not a destination, but a mode of being in ambiguity. By dissociating joy from closure, this paper advocates for an inclusive and boarder understanding of queer lives that embraces failure, solitude, and nonlinear time as valid as heteronormative lives. The study contributes to global queer media scholarship by centring South Asian graphic narratives simultaneously expanding the affective approach to queer joy.

**Index Terms**—Queer Joy, Narrative Closure, Chrononormativity, Queer Temporality, Graphic Narrative

## I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of affirmative representation of queer lives in the contemporary queer media has been often

presented with happy endings. From the mainstream popular films and series, for instance *Heartstopper* (series), to indie graphic novels like *The Prince and the Dressmaker*, queer characters are increasingly allowed to survive, thrive, explore, and find love. While it is important to highlight that these changes are marking a welcome shift from the tragic queer trope – where queer lives were framed by sufferings, loss, or death – it also raises a critical question “Has queer joy has been drafted into heteronormative narrative structures?”

Recent researches on queer joy have critically acclaimed this shift of queer community’s representation towards affirmation, visibility, and emotional fulfilment. Scholars including Talia Bettcher, David Eng, and Carolyn Dinshaw have explored queer joy as a rectifying affect, to counterweight trauma and a space to communal resilience. These researches present joy as a political affect that stands for queer existence and resists their erasure from the narratives. This frequently remain placed in the frameworks of romantic closure, legibility, and social assimilation – where joy is achieved through finding romantic partners and their coupling, recognition from their families, or integration into normative timelines.

This paper shifts from these standards by interrogating the narrative windows through which queer joy is rendered legible. Placing Esteban Muñoz’s concept of queer futurity, Sara Ahmed’s critique of the happiness imperative, and Elizabeth Freeman’s theory of chrononormativity as the theoretical framework, it argues that presenting queer joy to the audience does not necessarily require a narrative (closure) end point or a reward for conformity. Instead, joy can be an

affective mode of resistance, simultaneously nonlinear, ambiguous, and unchained from heteronormative structures of time and relationality.

Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), a pioneering Indian graphic novel, presents a compelling case study for the paper's argument. The grayscale palettes, poetic narrative, and fragmented structure resist the linear narration and romantic closure that heteronormativity honours. The eponymous character derives their joy not from resolution, but from solitude, retrospection, creative expression, and affective denseness. Reading *Kari* through these theoretical lenses, this paper claims queer joy as a disruptive force that thrives in their narratives, temporality and affect.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of queer joy as a scholarly and aesthetic concern marks a crucial shift in queer studies, moving beyond trauma-centric standards toward affective modes of resistance, pleasure, and futurity. Scholars such as David Eng and José Esteban Muñoz have laid the groundwork for this shift, with Eng's exploration of kinship and melancholia offering a reparative lens, and Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* positing joy as a horizon of queer futurity, a 'not yet here' that stirs queer world making.

More recently, Talia Mae Bettcher has interrogated the philosophical dimensions of joy, asking whether it can be separated from liberal notions of happiness and self-realization. Carolyn Dinshaw's work on queer temporalities further complicates the linearity of joy, suggesting that affective resonance across time can produce queer pleasure outside normative structures. The 2025 special issue "Mobilising Queer Joy" in *Sexualities* attempts to consolidate these threads, framing joy as a field of inquiry that spans pedagogy, activism, and aesthetics.

However, much of this scholarship remains secured to frameworks of *recognition*, *relationality*, and *closure*. Joy is often positioned as the reward for survival, visibility, or romantic fulfilment. This paper departs from such frameworks by foregrounding affective ambiguity, temporal dissonance, and non-relational modes of joy. Drawing on Muñoz's *queer futurity*, Ahmed's *critique of the happiness imperative*, and Freeman's *chrononormativity*, it argues that queer joy

need not culminate in narrative resolution or social assimilation.

Amruta Patil's *Kari* becomes a site for this intervention. Its grayscale aesthetic, poetic fragmentation, and refusal of romantic closure offer a counter-narrative to dominant depictions of queer joy. Rather than a destination, joy in *Kari* is a mode of being, solitary, creative, and temporally misaligned. This reading reclaims joy not as a heteronormative endpoint but as a queer affective strategy that resists legibility and embraces opacity.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper draws on three interlocking theoretical lenses, José Esteban Muñoz's queer futurity, Sara Ahmed's critique of the happiness imperative, and Elizabeth Freeman's chrononormativity, to interrogate how queer joy can function as an affective mode of resistance rather than a narrative endpoint.

*José Esteban Muñoz: Queer Futurity and the Not-Yet* Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009) positions queer joy as anticipatory, utopian, and fundamentally resistant to the present. For Muñoz, queerness is not simply a sexual identity but a mode of temporality, a horizon of possibility that defies the here and now. Joy, in this framework, is not a reward for assimilation but a glimpse of alternative worlds. This paper uses Muñoz to read *Kari*'s refusal of romantic closure as a gesture toward queer futurity, *Kari*'s solitude and creative expression are not signs of lack but of potentiality.

*Sara Ahmed: The Happiness Imperative*

Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) critiques how happiness is socially constructed as a moral good, often used to discipline marginalized subjects into normative life paths. The "happy ending" becomes a tool of regulation, where deviation from heteronormative scripts is framed as failure. Ahmed's framework allows us to see how queer joy, when tied to romantic success or social legibility, risks becoming complicit in the very structures it seeks to resist. In *Kari*, joy emerges not from being understood or accepted, but from affective opacity and refusal.

*Elizabeth Freeman: Chrononormativity and Queer Time*

Freeman's *Time Binds* (2010) introduces the concept of chrononormativity, the use of time to organize individual lives toward productivity, marriage, and reproduction. Queer time disrupts this linearity, embracing rhythms and durations that resist normative life scripts. *Kari's* fragmented structure, grayscale palette, and poetic narration enact this temporal resistance. Kari's journey is not one of progress or resolution but of recursive affect, where joy is felt in moments of disorientation and creative rupture.

#### IV. THE RISE OF JOY IN QUEER DISCOURSE

Representation of queer community in literature and media has been dominated by narratives of trauma, loss, and death. The "bury your gays" trope, the AIDS crisis, and the dehumanization of queer desire have all contributed to a cultural archive saturated with suffering. In response, scholars and creators have turned toward joy, not as escapism, but as resistance. Queer joy became a radical act – to feel pleasure, to love, to survive, and to imagine otherwise, a utopia. However, as queer joy gains visibility, it risks being reabsorbed into normative frameworks. The "happy ending" often marked by romantic union, social acceptance, or personal success has become a shorthand for queer fulfilment. This paper challenges that perspective and question "Must queer joy culminate in a happy ending?"

#### V. QUEER JOY IN *KARI*: BEYOND ROMANCE AND TOWARD AFFECTIVE AMBIGUITY

Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) offers a striking intervention into dominant narratives of queer joy by refusing to tie fulfilment to romantic closure. Set in a grayscale urban landscape and narrated through poetic fragments, the graphic novel centres on the eponymous character, Kari, a queer woman navigating solitude, creative labour, and affective dissonance in post-breakup Mumbai. While the story begins with Kari's separation from Ruth, her romantic partner, it does not culminate in reconciliation or ending up with new coupling. Instead, Kari's journey unfolds through moments of introspection, artistic expression, and ambiguous relationality, suggesting that queer joy may reside outside the bounds of romance altogether. It

resists the heteronormative script of romantic closure not only through its plot but through its formal and aesthetic choices. The graphic novel's grayscale palette, poetic narration, and spatial fragmentation work in tandem to produce a queer affective landscape where joy is not a resolution but a mode of survival and creative becoming

#### VI. REFUSING ROMANTIC CLOSURE

Unlike many contemporary queer texts that equate joy with romantic success, *Kari* resists this teleology. The narrative opens with Kari's fall, both literal and metaphorical, into the underbelly of the city, signalling a descent rather than an ascent toward resolution. Ruth's departure to "cleaner air" abroad (Patil, 07) is not framed as a tragic loss but as a catalyst for Kari's own affective reorientation. The absence of a romantic arc allows Patil to explore other registers of queer joy, the quiet satisfaction of surviving, the pleasure of creative work, and the intimacy of chosen solitude.

*Free falling, I pass by a mesh. A mesh with her in it, bouncing up and down, held within a protective cradle. Your building had a safety net, Ruth's, mine had none.*



Figure 1 *Kari's Fall* (Patil, 05)

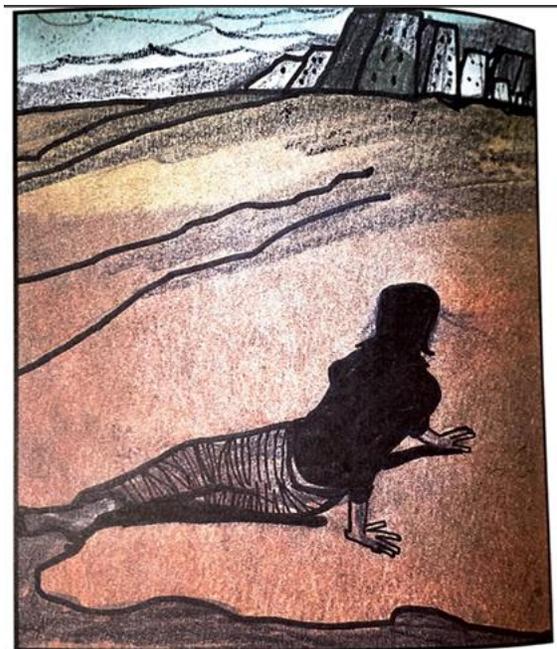
This refusal aligns with Sara Ahmed's critique of the happiness imperative, which positions romantic coupling as a normative endpoint. Kari's joy is not delayed until she finds another partner, it is embedded in her everyday negotiations with space, memory, and selfhood. Her interactions with friends, with the city, with her own body, are marked by uncertainty, not resolution. In this way, *Kari* challenges the assumption that queer joy must be legible through relational success. The novel begins with Kari's literal fall into the city's underbelly, a sewer system she calls "Smog City's underworld." This descent is not framed as degradation but as a metaphorical rebirth. The panel composition here is claustrophobic, with tight frames and heavy shadows, evoking a sense of disorientation. Yet Kari's voiceover is calm, even wry "Out of the sewer and into a landfill. Not only have I survived the fall intact, I even have me some kind of a Trinity outfit in PVC" (Patil, 08). This juxtaposition of visual darkness and narrative poise introduces a key theme queer joy as a quiet, defiant persistence amid abjection.

This moment aligns with Sara Ahmed's critique of the happiness imperative. Kari's fall is not a failure to "rise" into normative happiness but a refusal of its terms. Her survival in the city's margins becomes a source of agency, not shame.

#### VII. AFFECTIVE AMBIGUITY AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Patil's visual grammar strengthens this affective ambiguity. The grayscale palette, punctuated by occasional bursts of symbolic colour, evokes a mood of introspection and emotional complexity. Panels are often fragmented, nonlinear, and poetic, mirroring Kari's internal landscape. Her work as a copywriter and her engagement with the city's sewage system become metaphors for creative and emotional labour. Joy here is not exuberant or celebratory, it is quiet, resistant, and deeply personal.

This aesthetic strategy echoes with Elizabeth Freeman's theory of chrononormativity. Kari's life does not follow a linear trajectory of progress, romance, and resolution. Instead, time in *Kari* is recursive, disjointed, and affectively queer. The narrative dwells in pauses, diversions, and refusals, suggesting that joy can emerge in temporal disruptions rather than in forward motion.



Some people are lucky enough to be saved by the Light, no such luck for me I was saved by a sewer, by the stinking river of effluents that snakes past our neighbourhood, the one our buildings avert their faces from. I should have layed within its loving coils and allowed it to drown me. Instead I crawled right out into the fray.

Out of the sewer and into a landfill.  
Not only have I survived the fall intact, I even have me some kind of a Trinity outfit in PVC.

Figure 2 Out of the sewer (Patil,08)

#### VIII. QUEER FUTURITY WITHOUT THE COUPLE

José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer futurity offers a final lens through which to read *Kari*. While Muñoz celebrates the utopian potential of queer desire, he also warns against the foreclosure of possibility through assimilation. *Kari* embodies this tension, it gestures toward futures that are not yet realized, not through romantic hope but through creative survival. Kari's joy is anticipatory, speculative, and resistant to closure. Her refusal to be fixed or understood becomes a mode of queer world-making.

*Kari* reclaims queer joy as an effective strategy away from romance. Through its visual style, narrative structure, and philosophical undercurrents, the graphic novel challenges dominant scripts of happiness and offers a model of joy that is solitary, ambiguous, and temporally queer. This reading expands the terrain of queer media analysis by foregrounding joy not as a destination but as a mode of resistance.

Throughout *Kari*, the page layouts resist linear progression. Panels bleed into one another, text floats

free of speech bubbles, and temporal markers are deliberately obscured. In one sequence, Kari walks through the city while her narration shifts between past, present, and speculative futures. The lack of clear transitions mirrors Elizabeth Freeman's concept of queer time where chrononormativity is disrupted in favour of affective rhythms.

This temporal fragmentation allows joy to emerge in unexpected places, in a moment of solitude on a rooftop, in the act of writing copy, in the quiet intimacy of tending to a sick friend. These are not climactic moments but affective pulses but what Muñoz might call "utopian fragments" that gesture toward a queer futurity.

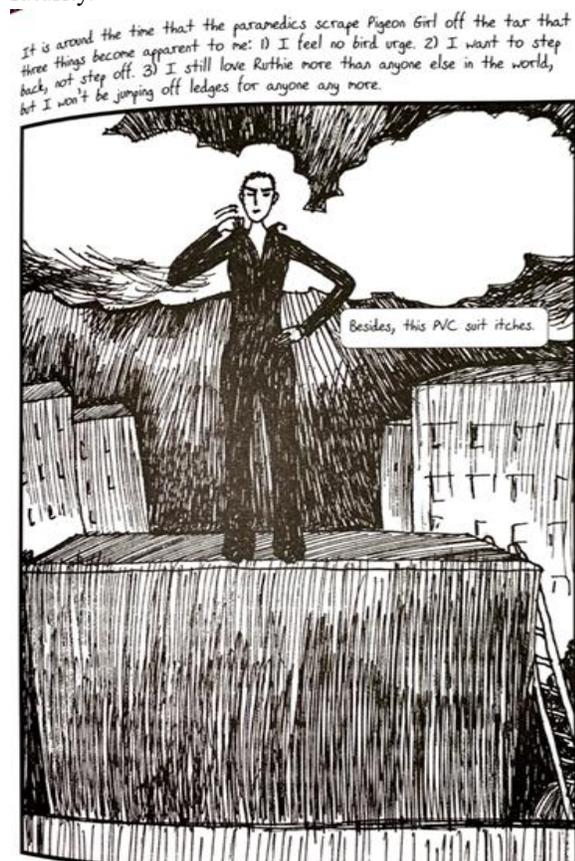


Figure 3 I want to Step Back (Patil, 115)

Ruth, Kari's ex-lover, is largely absent from the visual field of the novel. Her presence is evoked through memory, metaphor, and negative space. In one striking panel, Kari stands alone in a room where Ruth's silhouette is outlined only by the absence of ink. This visual technique, rendering presence through absence, underscores the novel's refusal to resolve romantic loss through replacement or closure. In the final page

of the novel Kari states that "three things are apparent for me: 1) I feel no bird urge, 2) I want to step back, not step off, 3) I still love Ruthie more than anyone else in the world, but I won't be jumping off ledges for anyone anymore." (Patil, 115) Rather than seeking a new partner or narrating a return to Ruth, Kari turns inward. Despite loving Ruth, she wanted to be present for herself now. Her joy is not found in relational repair but in affective ambiguity. As said, people ignore the fact while listening, that leads to misinterpretation. (Chamundeshwari 3673). This resonates with Muñoz's notion that queerness is not yet here, it is glimpsed, felt, and imagined, but not resolved.

## IX. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A QUEER EPISTEMOLOGY OF JOY

Through its visual and narrative strategies, *Kari* offers a model of queer joy that is solitary, ambiguous, and temporally queer. It refuses the heteronormative arc of romantic closure and instead locates joy in disorientation, creative labour, and affective opacity. This paper, through close reading affirms that queer joy, as theorized by Muñoz, Ahmed, and Freeman, is not a destination but a mode of resistance, a way of being that thrives in the interstices of narrative and normativity. This paper has argued that queer joy need not culminate in a happy ending. Using *Kari* as a case study, and drawing on Muñoz, Ahmed, and Freeman, it has shown how joy can exist in solitude, ambiguity, and resistance. *Kari* offers a model of queer joy that is nonlinear, affectively complex, and politically potent. In a cultural moment where queer representation is increasingly tied to visibility, success, and romantic fulfilment, it is crucial to remember that joy can also be found in refusal. Refusal to conform, to resolve, to explain. Refusal, in this sense, is not nihilism, it is utopia.

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