

## **Grey Skin, Grey Water: Iterations of Bhartrhari's *Sphota* in Amruta Patil's *Kari***

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines Bhartrhari's concept of sphota as a critical framework for interpreting the intermedial dynamics of text and image in contemporary graphic narratives, with specific reference to Amruta Patil's Kari. Situating the graphic novel within post-millennial visual culture, the study explores how fragmented visual and linguistic elements coalesce into unified moments of meaning. Drawing upon Bhartrhari's linguistic philosophy, particularly the notion of sphota as an instantaneous "burst" of comprehension, the article proposes an expanded model that accommodates the multimodal structure of the graphic novel. It introduces the concept of chitra-sphota to account for visual-semantic convergence and examines how the materiality of the graphic form that generates alternative modes of perception that challenge logocentric traditions of meaning-making.*

*The article further investigates how the graphic novel negotiates meaning through visual and narrative discontinuities, wherein the body functions as a central site of signification. It argues that the interplay between image and text reconfigures conventional linguistic paradigms, allowing meaning to emerge as a fluid and dynamic process rather than a fixed or sequential one. By foregrounding the relationship between embodiment, perception, and textuality, the study demonstrates how Kari enables an expanded understanding of sphota, where fragmentation does not disrupt meaning but instead contributes to its holistic realization.*

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### **Introduction: Graphic Novels and Post-Millennial Visuality**

The graphic novel, memoir, and biography are deeply entrenched in the aesthetics of the “post-millennium” (Varughese 3) and often involved in the search for new regimes of *seeing*, therefore, of perceiving. The beginning of the comic medium in the 1890s, through the sequential arrangement of pictures and text, created a hybrid mode of perception, one that combines various ‘forms’ and sequentialities. Scott McCloud similarly defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 9). The Golden Age of comics enlivened the comics industry, rendering comics, and in particular, the comic serial, mainstream. A parallel movement of underground and independent ‘comix’ raised critiques against this rising syndicalism. Against this backdrop, the graphic novel functions as both reflective and disruptive, rife with tensions, contradictions, dichotomies and relationships, as well as rooted intensely in the materiality of the text. Charles Hatfield notes that comics “thrive on tensions between word and image, sequence and simultaneity, narrative and visual abstraction” (Hatfield 36). Where this materiality becomes an active agent in meaning making, layered with textures, intermedial elements, text, and the active, self-reflexive engagement of the author, the graphic novel becomes an ‘unsettling’ space, “the graphic novel foregrounds its own materiality, inviting readers to engage with the page as both visual field and narrative space” (Baetens and Frey 8).

### **The Inauspicious and Alternative Ways of Seeing in Indian Graphic Narratives**

It is perhaps this feature of the graphic novel that lends itself so deeply to the “inauspicious”. In E. Dawson Varughese’s analysis of the Indian graphic novel, she suggests that this form seeks incisive modes of seeing that challenge dominant “ways of seeing” (Varughese 16). In the post-millennial context, Varughese argues that the “reader-gazer” of the graphic novel is engaged in a dialogue with our own processes of perception, particularly as they “invite the gaze onto inauspicious, unfavourable and challenging depictions of Indianness” (Varughese 16). Varughese names the conventions of *darsan*, *dristi* and the evil eye, which fundamentally depend on the auspices of seeing, generative power to the sight, and the act of witnessing the ‘auspicious’ (Varughese 16). Parallely, she also considers the “inauspicious” within the graphic novel to be a commentary on what he calls the “proper light syndrome,” (Varughese 17) within which structures of power and state emphasize the visualizing and ‘presentation’ of the nation and the experiences therein, in an “auspicious” fashion. Popular Indian comics such as the *Amar Chitra Katha* were upheld as exemplifying the ‘heroic’ and ‘auspicious’ aspects of Indian ethos and identity. The ornate styles and the stable panelizations and layouts, combined with largely linear narratives taken from Hindu mythology or episodes

from Indian history, promote a fairly triumphalist narrative of India and ‘Indianness’ in terms of an “auspicious” historicization of progress and legacy. In contrast, the post-millennial graphic novel is an attempt at recording and visibilising alternate, inauspicious modes of presenting Indianness. This attempt at usurping stable “visual regimes,” often result in unsettlements of form and genre, wherein the graphic novel prioritizes instabilities in form, the communications of silence and simultaneities, as well as the emphasis on pluralistic experiences in complex and divided societies, challenging the “safe, settled ideas and projections of Indian society, history and identity” (16).

### **Bhartrhari’s Linguistic Philosophy and Contemporary Graphic Narratives**

A genre of unsettlements, then, which depicts, reads and invites the reader-gazer to engage with the logistics of the unsettled and the inauspicious, may well prove a point of both contention and growth for the assumptions of the ‘finished’ and ‘eternal’ in terms of the Sanskrit *vaiyakaranas*. The understanding of language as primordial and complete, and of true utterance as restricted by a form of correctness propounded through the authority of the *vedas*, naturally diverges from the idea of any formal ‘correctness’ in *vyakarana* (*Vakyapadiya*, Canto I, 1). A deeply *Vedic* understanding of linguistics, when brought to bear upon mediums that explicitly refute the authority of ‘correctness’ may well expose fracture lines and potential points of expansion in our search for contemporary applications of these systems of knowledge. Indeed, we may supply in this regard forms of ‘correctness’ in utterance that emanate not from the centralized authority of the *vak* and the *Vedas*, but through multiple systems and sources of knowledge, particularly those that arrive from the marginal and the critical (*Vakyapadiya*, Canto I, 1). Forbye, in challenging a logocentric, ‘direct’ perceptive line between seeing and knowing, we are left to question where such an application begins and ends in the opening up and questioning of its fundamental assumptions.

This article endeavours to posit tensions between the *vaiyakarana* principles of perception and comprehension as potential analytical resources, rather than as an inherently thought-terminating contradiction. Limitations, challenges and liminalities in this regard that “unsettle” the ways in which we regard theoretical superimpositions in themselves are informative of our mobilities and potentials. It is also informative of the supple and varied nature of the texts that emerge within the unsettlements of discourse.

This article proposes to explore the conception of the graphic novel genre as it pertains to the ‘wholeness’ implicated in Bhartrhari’s notion of the *sphota*. The term which was first propounded in Patanjali’s *Mahabhashya* and later extensively commented on within the *Vakyapadiya*, and is commonly understood as a “burst” into meaning through the *sabda*, the sound, and the principle of the *vac*, the Word. As the *sphota* is communicable through the act of articulation, it thereby forms the singular “counterpart” to the vacillating word-resonance or the *dhvani*. Bhartrhari posits that the *sphota*, while being partless, whole and unchanging, acquires the

“appearance” of the characteristics of the *dhvani*.

### **Chitra-Sphota and Kaya-Sphota: Expanding Bhartrhari’s Framework**

This article attempts to mobilize the conception of a *chitra-sphota* as a mode of witnessing and narrativizing the “inauspicious”, in the face of disorienting and de-familiarizing visualities. We also explore the possibility of encountering and ‘naming’ the ‘inauspicious’ within the *para-vac* and the ‘wholeness’ of the *sabda-brahman*. To this end, this paper explores the possibility of a bodily *kaya-sphota* in the presentation and reading of the body within the graphic novel through Bhartrhari’s principles. We engage with the juxtaposition between the fragmentation and wholeness of the body inasmuch as the body becomes a semantic unit and a manifestation of the *sphota*.

### **Signifying the Body**

In his introduction to the graphic novel, Bataens and Frey suggest that the notion of “graphiation” is central to the construction of the form: in essence, it combines the aspects of “visual enunciation or graphic expression” by positioning the artistic “hand and the body” as active and *present* agents in its semantic structure. (137) While Bataens and Frey suggest the notion of graphiation (164) in relation to the prevalence of individual style within the graphic novel, it is not a coincidence that the body and the self are often sites of semantic transformation and struggle within this form. This prevalence of the body and the hand is a counteraction against the conventional comic, wherein the industrial lines of comic production and uniformity in material and style superimposes a homogeneity within which the individual artist may well become a ‘disembodied’ presence. “Graphiation” incorporates the “re-embodiment” of the artist and the reincorporation of the body into its semantic fold. This visual predominance of the body within the graphic novel also challenges the undermining of the body- of characters, creators and of material objects- within formal literary analysis. As Baetens and Frey write:

. . . the graphic novel reintroduces certain aspects of story analysis such as world-making, space, and characterization that had been neglected if not simply discarded as inessential by the formalist methodologies that have dominated narrative analysis so strongly for long parts of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (164)

### **Pathways of Graphiation**

The focalizing gaze upon and *of* the titular character and the repeated presence of her body in varying manifestations become not only sites of semantic contentions, but also significant in the visual world-making of *Kari*. Through the juxtaposition of narrative voice and focalizing vision, Kari’s desiring, is a formative force within the text. It sketches out new pathways within the city, altering its byways and surfaces. She orients herself variously amidst the bodies located around and beside her, the bodies she desires, the bodies that desire around her, the body that she inhabits and those that she remembers. Patil renders the physicality of her

characters in stark, strong personalities. There are upturned, delicate eyelashes and gentle, inviting smiles, open hungry mouths, faces contorted in anger, lines and curves and bodily excesses of scent and flesh that lie outside notions of the body as an immobile realm set with an 'eternal' meaning. The body is marked also with the ambivalence of being the focalizer of perceptions, as well as its own object of perception. The visual depiction of the body, as an aspect of language and cognition, shares this characteristic with Bhartrhari's notion of the *Sabda*. Consider Bhartrhari's assertion in Canto I, "Just as the light has two capacities, viz, that of being perceived and causing perception of objects, all *Sabdas* have got these two distinct capacities" (Canto I, 55).

Bhartrhari's notion that 'form' in itself may be denoted as a meaning, lends credence to our reading of the body as at once form-as-meaning, "the word is not merely a vehicle of meaning; rather, it is identical with meaning itself" (Bhartrhari, *Vakyapadiya* Iyer 55). Throughout *Kari*, the body resurfaces within the *vakya* upheld by the panel or the page, or spans across the page in itself as the semantic wholeness of a particular scene, "the perception of meaning emerges as an instantaneous flash in which fragmentary linguistic elements act only as suggestive cues, allowing comprehension to occur as a unified cognitive event rather than as a sequential process" (Ananthanarayana 214). We suggest that a *kaya-sphota*, accessible through the manifestations of the body and its particular place in narrative, circulates throughout *Kari*. Even in moments of isolation, Kari's body is continuous with those of 'others'. The assertion of Kari's and Ruth's conjoining in the very first page foretells her other bodily entanglements. As Pia Mukherji suggests, the "self" inasmuch as she is bound up with the body, does not assert an overt, singular voice throughout the narrative, or coalesce into a "singular voice" (140).

Rather, the body and the self are delineated relationally, through her internal and external dialogue, the inherent condition of her existence as a self and an 'other.' The *kaya-sphota* then exists as the congealed multitude of meanings perceived upon, here, marginalized body. As the *sphota* takes the form of the *dhvani* and appears in the shape of the *dhvani*, the inextricability of Kari's body from the societal *bodies* and topographies that surround her speak of possible and 'unusual' narratives galvanized through her perceived 'externality' from societal *norms*. This begins in the very first 'event' of the novel, that illustrates the "slipshod surgical procedure" of combined suicide that both conjoins and separates Ruth and Kari. Kari follows Ruth into her attempted suicide, a bodily 'orientation' that begins on the ledge upon which Ruth stands. The following panels depict Kari's body in seeming isolation, in free-fall, hurtling through space to land within the 'safety net' of the sewer (1-4). The focal position of the body blurs the backgrounds and contours of the city, erasing all spatial markers in favour of the marker of motion. The points of orientation- the sewer, the sky, and Ruth herself, are shaped and conveyed by Kari's falling body. Indeed, through this orientation, and thereby through her desire for Ruth, Kari's body, just as the topography of the city, acquires new dimensions, and therefore, new forms of the *artha*. Through the "excess" of Kari's desire, through

which she both pursues and evades death, the *artha* inscribed upon Kari's body refuses to finalize.

Both Ruth and Kari subvert conventional femininity in their inability to be "saved" by another (male) presence. It is, however, the body that recuperates them, the particularly desiring body in which death and rebirth are coincident, and the body that 'catches' upon liminal topographies; such as the safety net and the sewer, to cushion their blow and enable their combined rebirth. Here, the expectation of the reader-gazer, as we apprehend Kari's swift descent to her presumable death, is subverted, as the meaning of "death" is multiplied and deferred. Death does not figure and culminate within the *chitra-vakya* formed within these panels, nor does it form the partless *sphota* in itself. Relational continuity resonates from the body as *dhvani*, and the meanings inscribed upon the body takes the forms of these unlikely and often 'inauspicious' continuities. The subsequent panels, in which Kari is depicted as emerging 'reborn' from the sewers, conjoins her joined legs to the water of effluence in a way that recalls popular visual iconographies of the fairytale mermaid (4).

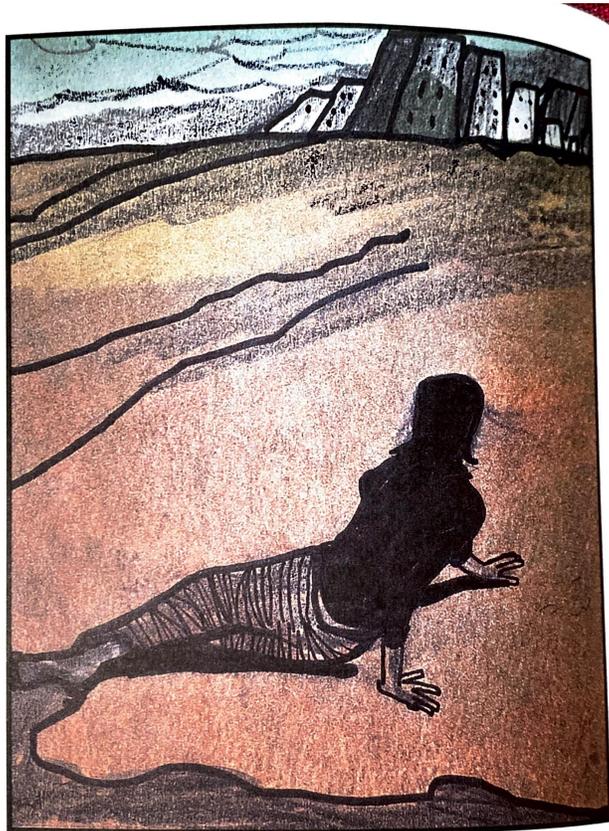


Figure 1 Patil, Kari 4

We may find here an analogy between inviolable notions of "correctness" as handed down by the *shishtas*, with the notion of a "classical body" that is sealed from the world, displayed upon an elevated pedestal, and understood as "complete."

Kari's form is tied to the shifting, effluent water in a transgressive depiction of the figure of the mermaid. Rather than acquiring legs in order to enter the discourse of heteronormative desire, the image suggests a lingering incompleteness of form within which she opens into the world, an 'unfinalization' of the body. Reading such an assertion as against the notion of a "correctness", however, coexists with the primacy of the *vakya* that privileges the inherent connection between words and word-elements. The fulfilment of *akanksha* as a property of the sentence suggests the 'incompleteness' and the expectation of the *vak* upon the other. Disrupting the notion that the *kaya*, or the body forms a singular assertion or a *vakya*, the varying manifestations of the body form an amalgamation of elements that render it "readable", and locatable in the scheme of the *sphota*. It also disrupts the notion of the *vak* and *varna* elements, i.e, the topography of the body itself, offering linear memory-impressions that coalesce into this singular *vakya*.

The body is here more than the sum of its parts in a single instance; to unveil the *kaya-sphota*, the reader-gazer is invited to read "backwards" and through disjointments to piece the multiple and shifting meanings of the body, to trace the *dhvani* as its material manifestation through the text. Here, the *sphota* is not uncovered in the 'sequential' unfolding of the *vak* and the *varna* within the unit of the *vakya*, but rather through series of re-inscriptions and re-readings that prioritizes *akanksha*, or the expectation that posits the manifestation of each individual word as incomplete, and thereby the state of the body as both presented and read in continuity.

Kari's abnormality primarily inscribes "unsettling" meanings and desires upon her body, even in the apartment that she occupies with her (heterosexual) female roommates. We witness this particularly in the panel where Kari apprehends her own reflection in the mirror. The *akanksha* posited by the presumable 'wholeness' of the nude female figure is displaced here by Kari's lanky, short-haired figure and her androgynous self-perception (60). The nude female body is often already placed into the circulations of heterosexual desire, a gazed-upon object complete unto itself. Furthermore, assertions of her wounds, her sexuality, and her conception of selfhood are often bound up in the presumed fullness of this body's meaning. The reader-gazer presumes to read and gaze the entirety of Kari's selfhood through the isolated nudity of her body. The *artha* already inscribed upon this body, then, unravels in conjunction with Kari's humorous indifference to her own reflection. What we may apprehend to be the location of the *kaya-sphota*, the 'whole' body in itself, is undercut by the uncertainty that the text interjects with;

. . . mirrors are splendid, shiny things that make great collectibles, whether whole or in smashed bits. Problem is, I just don't know what they are trying to tell me. These things can be troubling. The girls outside the door telling me to wear kohl, and here I am wondering why I amn't looking like Sean Penn. (*Kari* 60)

The mirror-image destabilizes the 'eternal' fixity in meaning we may be

tempted to place upon Kari's apprehended femininity. This instance is an unraveling of the expected contours of the *dhvani*, and thereby the direct linkage between this manifestation of *dhvani* and the *kaya-sphota* itself. Here, we interrogate the linear over-determinations we may draw and thereby inflict upon the lesbian body, particularly in her complex and desiring relationship to femininity. Indeed, the marked disruption between Kari's self-perception and "the girls outside" who ask Kari to wear Kohl, is where we may find the crux of the memory-impression that then manifests within the *kaya-sphota*. The insignificance and incompleteness of the mirror is congruent to the insignificance and incompleteness of this nude, isolated female form that Kari witnesses. Marking an irreverence along with the frustration of the *akanksha*, the expectation for the body to congeal into a comprehensible *vakya*, Kari asserts, "I just don't know what they are trying to tell me."

### **Death, Desire and the Body**

The seeking for meaning then, and the creation of the *vakya*, as well as the location of the *sphota*, arises not through its reflection within the mirror, but through Kari's relationships with 'other' bodies. Ruth's body, for instance, constructed through Kari's desiring memory, occupies central and defining positions in Kari's self-regard, and her bodily continuum. The *sannidhi*, or proximity, and the satisfaction of the *akanksha* that positions the individual body as radically incomplete and 'open', are realized in the acts of meaning-making engaged within Ruth and Kari's desire for each other. The pages depicting recalled or imagined sexual intimacies between the two women are replete with these acts of meaning-making. The page following Kari and Ruth's meeting, for instance, fragments the two women's bodies across different panels (69). The fragmentary nature of individual bodily segments is cohered through the desiring touch of another, the *sannidhi*, indeed, of visual elements against and upon each other as the only decipherable forms within the page. Every other element of visuality here devolves into the fluid lines that hold their gazes, culminating in their touching, joined bodies in the final panel. It is the desiring gaze that does the work of the *vak* and the *varna*, making possible the construction of the *vakya* and the *sphota* upon the "inauspicious" body. The final instance of culmination is the fulfilment of *akanksha* and *sannidhi* in the meeting of the two women's bodies.

In another instance, the nude figures of the two women are framed against an explosion of colour, situated again in both memory and fantasy in which Kari wistfully declares that "I'd give anything in the world just to be able to knock you up, Ruthie." (100). On the one hand, this yearning is transgressive, dissonant with the two female bodies depicted within the panels, an impossibility that violates notions of *asatti* or congruency, and yet generates a *vakya* rooted within this incongruency that signals and prioritizes desire over the linear continuities of reproduction. Indeed, reproduction is conceptualized as the ideal form of female continuity, at odds with the woman who is designated as a 'failed' form of womanhood. On the other hand, Kari's yearning here seeks to inscribe intelligibility upon their bodies, a

disjointed sense of meaning that is in fact the yearning to be *read* in the fullness of her desire. This ambivalence is reflected in Kari's moment of intense isolation as she ponders the horizon from her position on the ledge: "Others' lives are beautifully peopled. Storyboard lighting up dark windows. Children at cluttered study tables. Husbands in lungis. Phone conversations, food on the table. Wandering pets. If I knocked on the door, would they take me in?" (89)

The visual image of (heteronormative) stability against which Kari ponders "knocking", is in fact that of a 'storybook', a narrative arrangement within which the self may dwell in intelligible meaning. In the scheme of intelligibility that centres heterosexual desire, 'intelligible' forms of continuity are lost to Kari and Ruth's desiring strange bodies. In rejecting a *kaya-sphota* based within bodily completion and isolation, they are charged with inventing different understandings of intelligibility, rooted not only in manifest realization, but in fantasy, subversion, and the disruption of form. In other words, the shaping of unseen manifestations of the *vakya*, thus inventing subversive forms of conceptualizing the *asatti*, *sannidhi*, and *akanksha*. Bodily relationality and multiplicity within the graphic novel are then central to these acts of invention, the allegiances that bodies make with each other in their pursuit.

Another curious allegiance, in the context of *Kari*, is that between Kari and her friend Angel, who is slowly dying of cancer. In her analysis on the intersections of cancer, in the work of Audre Lorde, Stella Bolaki speaks of the transgressive potential within the resignification of the "deathly" body into avenues of continuity. She writes that "change and growth often acquire sinister undertones in the context of narratives of terminal illness, (in that they conjure images of cells proliferating and the fear of imminent metastasis or death.) (226). As a lesbian whose body occupies liminal and incongruent spaces of self-definition, and as a survivor of suicide, Kari renders herself proximate and welcoming to Angel's pained, wounded and surviving body. Bald, frail, and read within her association to death, the *vakya* coalesced and inscribed upon Angela's body excludes her also from notions of conventional femininity. The advertising company that perpetuates beautifying measures for such a conventional body inspects Angela almost in retrospect, from the position that she, as Kari herself, is not "meant to survive" (Bolaki 224). Kari's friendship with Angela is a means by which the two women synthesize the meanings of their bodies through their proximity to the meanings of simultaneous death and rebirth. Kari, who emerged into her workplace with the 'unsettling' remnants of the sewer and her attempted suicide, and Angela upon whose body finality, fear and death are inscribed to the exclusion of all meaning, attempt to construct a *vakya* by association. A renewed set of possible meanings emerge from this association, including the acknowledgement of Kari's persona of the "boatman" as being intrinsically tied to the deathly, liminal and survival-related associations with her identity: "You must know, though- once you opt in, you can't opt out. Once a boatman, always a boatman. Why didn't you choose to play with *pretty boys* instead?" (40).



Figure 2 Patil, Kari 86

The *sphota* located in the extension of their bodies signifies the coexistence of life and death, as well as the meanings of resilience, continuity and community accessible through their shared liminal position. This disorienting, ‘reorienting’ inscription of meanings reverberates as *dhvani*. In her extensions of the self, such as the scene where she shares the experience of horse-riding, another instance of bodily continuity with Kari, as well as through Angel’s own self-reflection, and her naming of Kari as her “ferry” to the afterlife. The body as a site of death and revival has been a recuperated site of meaning and performance, particularly in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis. The *sphota* revealed through the intersections of these bodies rewrite the meanings projected through societal understandings of “correctness.” By the virtue of bodily presence and simultaneity, wherein the *dhvani* resounds through every reiteration of the body, multiple bodies are resonances and completions of the other. In one of Angel’s final instances within the novel, as Kari finds her dying on her birthday, she lends closure to this conversation between the body, death and its revival, by asserting “, “Birthday blessings for you. Death will come to you as a friend. You will not be scared. Don’t be clingy. Now fuck off” (086)

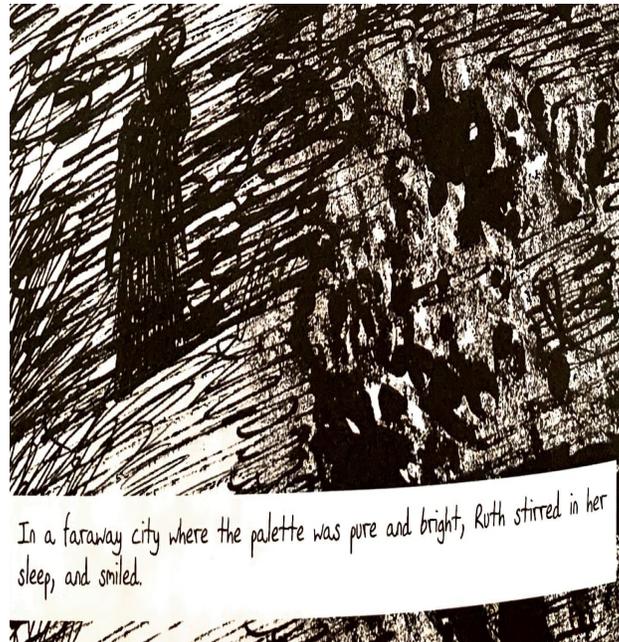


Figure 3 Patil, Kari 116

The *kaya-sphota*, designated as “inauspicious” for her desires and her ambivalence of gender, is then relocated into formal and bodily ruptures, openings, and liminalities. Indeed, in the final page of the novel, when Kari steps away from the suicidal ledge in an act of survival and self-assertion, “Ruth stirred in her sleep, and smiled”(116). The body, and the *sphota* that resides in their desires and interminglings, stretch and cross the bounds of the text. The ‘partlessness’ of the *sphota*, in this case, relates to the inevitable linkage of bodies continuous in both death and survival. “Continuity”, here is the understanding that the *artha* is altered and recognized through the association of elements, rather than an assertion of “eternal” meaning. Simultaneously, the inextricability of one meaning from another within the sphere of the *sphota* reconciles the multitude of bodily manifestations, and the resounding *dhvani* across the text so created.

The recuperative meanings by which bodies are invested with the potential to subvert and survive, reading from the perspective of the *Vakyapadiya*, becomes also “eternal, and imperishable” (*Vakyapadiya* Canto I, 5). In positing the ‘culminatory’ *sphota* as this recuperative potential of the body, this transgressive reading displaces the moribound and ‘unsurvivable’ as the primary meanings inscribed upon the body. The impressions of death are deemed ‘temporary’, inasmuch as “the meanings of individual words are merely hints or stepping stones to the meaning of the sentence” (qtd. in Ananthanarayana 214). All that is “deathly”, here, including loss, frustrated desires, memories and liminalities, as well as the ‘atypical’ inauspiciousness of the body, reorient into a multitude of *dhvani*. We comprehend through the revelation of the *sphota* the inextricability of the “deathly” from what becomes resources of desire, intimacy, viability and survival.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate the unfolding of *sphota* through the utilization of image, sight and the politic of the body. I suggest that cohering and fragmentation of meaning within *Kari*, particularly in its reliance on narrative and signficatory tensions, makes space to expand the idea of the *vakya* and the *sphota* into spaces of fragmentary and deliberately subversive meanings. While these understandings question the concept of “wholeness” as affixed to “correctness”, they also conceptualize other modes of comprehending wholeness, alternative pathways to meaning and understanding through deployments of significations.

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