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# Negotiations of Home and Belonging in the Indian Graphic Novels *Corridor* by Sarnath Banerjee and *Kari* by Amruta Patil

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## Introduction

- 1 The individual's sense of belonging—or not-belonging—is a recurring theme of city narratives: the big city is the prototypical site of anonymity and estrangement; it is a place of frequent comings and goings, of inclusions and exclusions. Feeling at home can be difficult in the city, even more so for the newcomer—the migrant—who needs to negotiate his or her position on various planes. As Georg Simmel argued in 1908 in his classic article “The Stranger,” the degree of a person's strangeness depends on the congruence of spatial and social belonging; sharing a space does not necessarily entail being a member of the social group that occupies this space (Wolff 1950). Hence the dilemma of “being without belonging” ensues: in the city it is easy to feel lonely and isolated in the midst of a crowd, and we can become strangers even in our homes if we withdraw from the “entity” that constitutes the family. “In this city, no one talks. Everyone guards their sanity against the grief of strangers” states Kari, the protagonist of Patil's graphic novel of the same title, and Brighu, the main character of *Corridor*, confirms: “The city is about anonymity. Some people ... meet, talk, part. Some don't” (Patil 2008:42; Banerjee 2004:107).
- 2 Exploring the two Indian graphic novels *Corridor* by Sarnath Banerjee and *Kari* by Amruta Patil, this article will provide a literary analysis of two twenty-first century representations of the individual's negotiations of home and belonging in the city: What are the different ways in which the literary protagonists Brighu and Kari act and feel like strangers in the modern metropolis, or are made strangers by it? What does it take to

make the city one's home and overcome strangeness? What role does the (absent) family play in this process? The protagonists of both works are intellectual urban migrants; they are young, educated, and locally flexible—and both have decided to live away from their parental homes and their families.<sup>1</sup>

- 3 The family has long been considered a touchstone for evaluating social transformations in India<sup>2</sup> and “traditional” family models (or their demise) have, accordingly, been at the center of many literary and filmic articulations of the theme.<sup>3</sup> The graphic novel—very much an avant-garde voice in the Indian literary landscape—has taken up this discussion in an unconventional way. As a genre it has come to attest to the “gradual erasure of age old beliefs in kinship ties, ancestral locations and the genealogies of caste and creed” (Lal and Kumar 2007:x). In the context of migration to the city, as the graphic novels *Corridor* and *Kari* suggest, the position of the family home has become marginal.

## Migration to the city

- 4 The subject of migration to the city has been on the agenda of Indian literature and film for many decades, presented either with a dichotomous approach—the city as juxtaposed to a “home” that is elsewhere—or with a view that focusses on the city itself as a new home and shows the migrants in their attempts to establish a sense of belonging amidst the unknown. Both views have, over the years, produced ample bodies of narratives: the city has, for example, been shown in opposition to the village—a dichotomy which, according to Sisir Kumar Das, “is as old as the days of the epic”<sup>4</sup> (Das 1995:407). In its diasporic garb and against the background of increasing international migration, it has been contrasted with a “home” epitomized by India as the native country<sup>5</sup> Finally, it has been explored as both a dangerous abyss and a place of opportunity for those who try to make it their new home.
- 5 As a destructive juggernaut the city does not allow strangers to ever settle in; protagonists in such narratives are lost, disoriented and unable to make that which is alien to them (H. *parāyā*) into something of their own (H. *apnā*).<sup>6</sup> The city as a space of hope, on the other hand, allows newcomers to make a living and possibly find spatial as well social freedom. Thus, in a recent example of experimental city literature—the collection *Isq meri śahar honā* (*Being a City in Love*, 2015), a compilation of Hindi *laghu prem kathās* (mini love stories) originally published on Facebook—the author Ravīś Kumār presents us with protagonists who wander the city in search of love. In the brief stories, ranging in length from around six lines to half a page, belonging is closely connected to belonging to one another; the alienness of the city finds expression mainly in its waxing and waning consent to grant the lovers moments of privacy. Interestingly, Kumār states in the preface to his book that he, too, has always considered the city in comparison to the village (H. *śahar banām gāmv*). For him the city used to connote a temporary place of residence (H. *asthāyī patā*) while his village in Bihar was home (H. *ghar*) and the place of his permanent address (H. *sthāyī patā*) (Kumār 2015:ix). In his stories, however, this temporariness and shifting quality of the city is not depicted as threatening: it no longer forces the protagonists to be strangers but rather allows them to exploit urban spaces of anonymity that allow them a certain degree of togetherness. Kumār's use of the word pair *sthāyī*—*asthāyī* sets him markedly apart from the dichotomy *apnā*—*parāyā*: his stories suggest that an initial lack of spatial belonging can be overcome by establishing a sense of social belonging, even if only in the context of coupledness.

- 6 In the graphic novels *Corridor* and *Kari*, which stand at the center of the following analyses because they both explore the theme of urban migration, the respective protagonists Brighu and Kari experience the city in a similar vein: it is a space that needs to be appropriated as home on both the spatial and the social level, and we see them employing different strategies to establish a sense of belonging and overcome their feeling of alienness. Importantly, as we will see, in *Corridor* and *Kari* an abundance of both verbal and visual intertextualities makes Brighu and Kari part of a twenty-first century global community.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the protagonists of the above-mentioned narratives, their points of reference for establishing a sense of belonging are not restricted to the village, the city itself, or a general (and homogenized) concept of Indianness but include examples from a cosmopolitan arena of music, literature, philosophy or film. Brighu and Kari negotiate their notions of home and belonging both on the local plane with its everyday life and against the background of a global cultural repository.

## The graphic novel: to tell new stories one needs new languages

- 7 In another graphic novel of Sarnath Banerjee's, *The Harappa Files* (2011), an imaginary "Harappa committee" comes together to commission an inventory of "the current ethnography and urban mythologies" of the country in order to document "contemporary societal concerns." To have the findings recorded and then, duly, published, the committee decides upon the employment of a new medium—"the medium of comics"—because, in their opinion, it is through a combination of image and text that the ruptures of post-liberalization India can be best presented. And indeed, in South Asian modernities the visual realm "is central" as Sandria Freitag has argued: acts of seeing have become acts of knowing and it is through seeing and knowing that "persons constitute their identities and construct meaning from their world" so as to be better enabled to "grapple with change" (Freitag 2002:366). The graphic novel is amongst the sites where such processes of meaning-making are played out—"a site where old and new modes of visibility confer and where India is represented anew but often in an uncomfortable or an inauspicious manner." (Dawson Varughese and Dudrah 2016:2) The Indian graphic novel thus satisfies a growing desire for the visual while, at the same time, asking the reader/spectator to move beyond the "darśanic" gaze<sup>8</sup>—as noted by Dawson Varughese and Dudrah who contrast the new medium with the classic *Amar Chitra Katha* comics which "celebrate India and Indianness" through straight-forwardly told stories and "neat line drawings" (Dawson Varughese and Dudrah 2016:3). The graphic novel, on the other hand, offers us diverse experimental and often complex visuals (e.g. collages) that do not always allow for easy deciphering. Far from being mere illustrations, they provide the story that runs through the text with additional—at times even alternative—narratives, facilitating interpretations of the depicted world that are much more multi-layered than those to be found in classic textual genres like the short story or the novel. In their introduction to a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on the theme of graphic narrative, Chute and DeKoven (2006) emphasize that "images have never been more important, or more under siege" (Chute and DeKoven 2006:771). In an increasingly visual world the image is a vital means of communication, for words alone no longer convince people.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, in the *Harappa Files* we are told that the comic medium is "the sharpest butcher's knife to cut a 'society of anxieties' into chewable

filets.” When the committee concludes that “to tell new stories one needs new languages” (Banerjee 2011:11–15), they are getting right to the heart of modern graphic narrative.<sup>10</sup>

- 8 The Indian graphic novel is, indeed, a genre that has taken to telling the new stories of a rapidly-changing twenty-first-century India, providing us with an uninhibited and often unconventional look at conventional themes. It is an “alternative space” which has, according to Suhaan Mehta, the capacity to accommodate “voices that habitually fall outside the realm of Indian socio-politico-cultural discourses” (2010:173). As the genre is popular with “left-leaners, ecological warriors, travelling birds and political beasts”—not only in India but “the world over” (Patil 2010)—we encounter non- or counter-mainstream thought-provoking stories, presented to us in a range of original narrative modes and visual grammars. Indian graphic narratives allow eccentric (“ex-centric”) voices to be heard.
- 9 It is therefore not surprising that we find the protagonists in these new stories negotiating home and belonging largely outside a “classical” family context. Family, in general, is not of vital importance in the Indian graphic novel and family matters are not usually at the center of the stories. Instead, the graphic novel often challenges idealized notions of home and of family relations and we are presented with the subversive and dark side of the family.<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, as the family recedes into the narrative background, the idea of what socially and spatially constitutes home is expanded, as we will see in the following.

## The texts

- 10 Sarnath Banerjee’s graphic novel *Corridor* came out in 2004 and sparked off an upsurge in the genre in India. Its narrative follows over quite some time the lives and development of the relationships of three young men: Digital Dutta, who “lives in his head” (2004:40), Shintu, who is newly married and searching for the ultimate potency remedy, and Brighu—protagonist and first-person narrator—a young urban intellectual who originally hails from Calcutta and has moved to the capital, presumably for work. In addition to this, *Corridor* is a portrait of twenty-first century Delhi from an intellectual and rather laid-back perspective, showing us the city as a site “of rich associations—between desire and its discontents” (Sardesai 2012:31). Importantly, Brighu’s Delhi is part of a global cultural network and we find his personal cultural reference points oscillating between Woody Guthrie, Perry Mason, Ibn Battuta and Tintin. The stories are brought to us through a combination of pointedly ironic texts and mostly black and white visuals, with single episodes and images presented in color. The multiple techniques—from line drawings to frenzied collages—make *Corridor* a dense and multi-layered novel, replete with the above-mentioned verbal and visual intertextualities that weave both the city and the story into a world-spanning cultural fabric.
- 11 Amruta Patil’s *Kari* (2008) is a coming-of-age novel: a 20-year-old woman, Kari, comes to the big city—Mumbai, or “smog city” as she calls it (2008:13)—to work as a copy writer for an advertising agency. Like Brighu in *Corridor*, Kari also portrays the city in very personal terms, and we become witnesses of how she learns to settle into her new environment and cope with the breakup of her (presumably) first relationship. A second narrative thread is Kari’s lesbianism which is, however, not the central theme of the book. Patil herself has called *Kari* “a queer book that wasn’t a ‘coming out’ book”—a story that is not

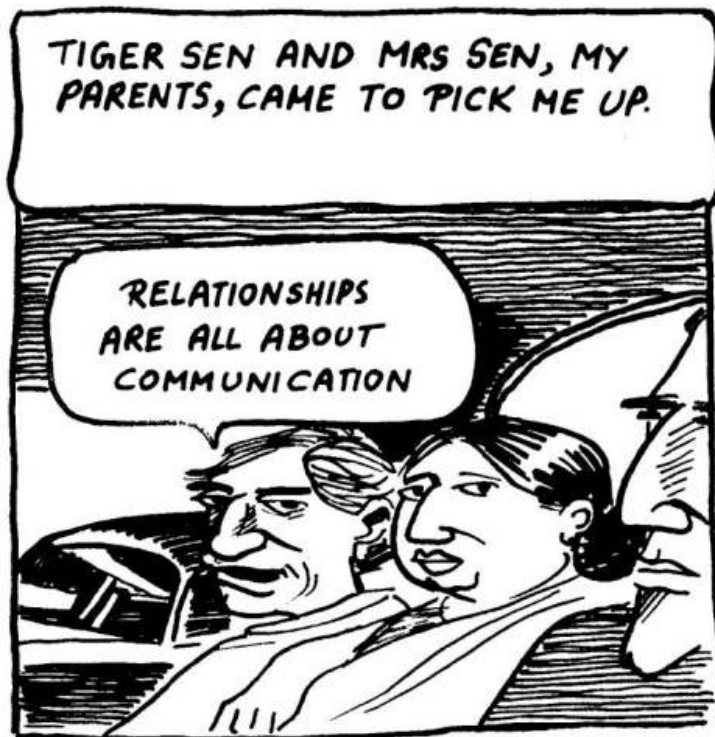
setting out to accomplish a mission but rather wants to tell us about how to give people “room to be what they are, even if it looks odd to the majority” (Menezes 2012:42).<sup>12</sup> We hear a story of a protagonist who happens to be lesbian rather than a story of what it means to be lesbian. Nevertheless, the theme is very much present: we learn about her special relationship with Ruth, her lover, and see the different (positive) reactions of her social environment to her homosexuality. Kari tells us about her coming-out as a young girl, watching the openly lesbian Canadian singer kd lang on TV, and we encounter Kari reading Jeanette Winterstone’s *Sexing the Cherry*, a novel in which the author presents her readers with “a counter-historical framework that naturalizes lesbian desire” (Roessner 2002:105).

- 12 As in *Corridor*, in *Kari* the protagonist tells us her story from a first-person-perspective, with the text heavily relying on longish narrative passages and thus meandering between voice-overs and direct speech. The “smudgy, charcoaly visuals” (Sardesai 2012:33) alternate between color and black and white, and like *Corridor*, *Kari* too connects some of its imagery with a global cultural arena, for example by quoting famous Western paintings and thus providing visual subtexts, as will be seen later. In the following we will first look at the living environments of Brighu and Kari—their current situations and their original homes—before analyzing in more detail the ways in which they negotiate their belonging to the social and physical arenas of the different places they call “home.”

## New homes and old homes

- 13 In *Corridor* the protagonist Brighu has moved from Calcutta to Delhi, or to be more precise, a flat in South Delhi, a rather affluent part of the city. He is single and lives alone but later in the story his girlfriend Kali temporarily moves in with him. The flat as a space of living, however, does not play a major role in *Corridor*; we hardly ever see Brighu at home but rather find him out and about “travelling” through the city. He spends a lot of his time meeting friends and having coffee, partying, and smoking dope or playing chess with Jehangir Rangoonwalla, the owner of a book stall at Connaught Place in central New Delhi. Unlike Kari who, in her attempts to settle in, repeatedly ponders notions of belonging, Brighu does not make his “home away from home”-situation a topic of discussion. It is, therefore, primarily with relation to the “old” home that *Corridor* negotiates notions of home and belonging: Brighu goes to his parents’ place in Calcutta when he wants to take a break from his relationship with his girlfriend Kali, which suggests that for him his old “home” holds the promise of security in an insecure situation.
- 14 In Calcutta, however, feeling at home is not connected to the presence of the family but to other factors, as we will see later. During Brighu’s stay his parents only enter the scene when they pick him up at the station. We see them sitting in the car with him, his father delivering a comment on his son’s relationship situation like a line in a drama (see Figure 1). Like other elderly members of Brighu’s extended family his parents, too, are represented in a way that is reminiscent of the chorus in Greek (especially Euripidean) drama: They enter the “stage” of the narrative and inevitably comment on the dramatic action but ultimately remain bystanders (see Figure 2).

Figure 1



Corridor: 88

Figure 2



CORRIDOR: 74



- 15 Like the Greek chorus on stage the older generation represents the general population and speaks with an apparently collective voice. Parents in *Corridor*—not only Brighu’s but also those of other characters—are primarily employed to utter statements which function, in their brevity and absurdity, as ironic comments on daily life. As a point of reference, however, the family is of minor importance.<sup>13</sup>
- 16 Similarly, in *Kari*, the family has ceased to be Kari’s point of orientation. Her parental home in an unnamed town at the seaside is nostalgically remembered—Kari keeps it as “an altar in ... [her] heart” (Patil 2008:84)—but it does not feature in the novel. In the beginning we find Kari homesick: lonely, anxious and feeling like “curling up and dying, or going back home” (Patil 2008:28). Like Brighu, she also perceives her parental place as a safe haven; she regularly calls her parents and appreciates the attention she thus gets through her mother’s voice even though, as we will see below in more detail, the communication is one-sided and it is more a question of Kari’s listening than of her entering into a meaningful exchange about what matters in her life (Patil 2008:21). As in *Corridor*, Kari’s parents are given the role of the chorus in Greek drama.
- 17 When they eventually visit her in Mumbai she awaits them at the station, but significantly the chapter in which she recalls the visit is titled “the visitations” (Patil 2008:27)—her parents enter her life like apparitions from a faraway world. When they leave again after ten days during which Kari desperately tries to distract them from aspects of her new life of which they disapprove (the flatmates, Kari’s “best friend” Ruth), Kari watches their train disappear—and with it an entire old world. Only temporarily does she slip into the old role of “guilt-ridden and miserable child” (Patil 2008:31) until the follow-up phone call after the visit transforms her mother back into “a dismembered voice” from which Kari manages to distance herself (Patil 2008:31).
- 18 However, her new domicile in Mumbai does not naturally become a home—the feeling of belonging is hard-earned, and the fact that her flatmates have known each other for some time when Kari moves in makes it even more difficult for her to find her place. Kari shares a flat with two girls, Billo and Delna, whose personal stories remind us of the fact that family, in the graphic novel, is not a dependable concept. Both girls come from dysfunctional families—Billo, we are told, grew up with an alcoholic mother and Delna “ran away” from a wife-beating father (Patil 2008:22), an experience that has left her literally shattered: Kari tells us that she came to Mumbai to become an actress “but ended up being a Hand and Foot stand-in” (Patil 2008:22).
- 19 As has been argued earlier, according to Georg Simmel a sense of home and belonging entails both a spatial and a social dimension, and the aspects that constitute “home” for Brighu and Kari do indeed relate to both the physical and social planes: alongside the very materiality of home, we find the protagonists referring to a shared history, to aspects of familiarity and repetition, to communication and, lastly, to commensality. Brighu and Kari both negotiate and ponder these aspects, and we will see what role they play in their establishing a sense of belonging or overcoming strangeness. In addition, we shall see how far the presence or absence of family contributes to the protagonists’ ability to create a home for themselves.



## The materiality of home

- 20 As indicated above, the physical home in the new city is of more importance for Kari than for Brighu and she introduces us to her residential situation quite early in the book. First of all, we learn that the postal address of the apartment block where her flat is located is *Crystal Palace*—a name that stands in stark contrast to the real life situation (see Figure 3). In Kari's imagination *Crystal Palace* sounds

like a pit stop in a fairytale. Where gold trees with silver boughs bear pomegranates with real ruby seeds. Floors of marble, ceilings of brocade. Place where twelve dancing princesses dance through the night until the soles of their shoes wear out. (Patil 2008:6)

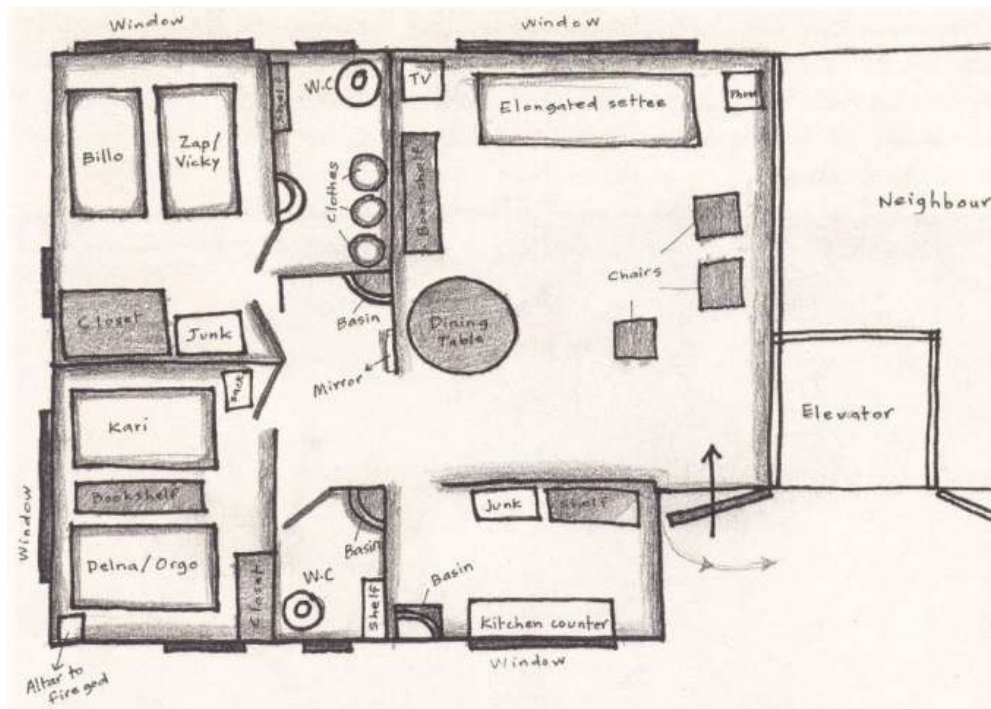
The real life *Crystal Palace*, however, turns out to be a mundane “2 BHK”—a 2-bedroom-hall-kitchen-flat—which is shown as a grey-in-grey floor plan (see Figure 4).

Figure 3



Kari: 16

Figure 4

**KARI: 17**

The visuals neatly illustrate the gap between signifier and signified: instead of a fairy tale palace we are presented with a matter-of-fact layout of the flat and we see the placement of names in a grid rather than a space inhabited by individuals. The technical and impersonal character of the home thus depicted neatly mirrors Kari's initial situation of feeling "homeless."

- 21 An important aspect of the physical home is furthermore that it provides a space for objects as carriers of memories, signifiers of history and emblems of intimacy. As Povrzanović Frykman and Humbracht have observed in a study on *Objects in Migrants' Transnational Lives* "[o]bjects can be important for reasons of personal attachment, practical usefulness, or their 'everydayness' in a person's life—regardless of where that life is being enacted" (2013:47). Both Kari and Brighu are aware of the significance of objects. We find Kari repeatedly formulating the idea that a space that is filled with the personal items of those that inhabit it signifies home and belonging. Thus, when describing her new flat in *Crystal Palace* Kari states: "You would imagine that with so much clutter, the one thing you wouldn't miss was company" only to conclude, somewhat disillusioned: "But that isn't true" (Patil 2008:18). Kari realizes that she has penetrated only the spatial but not the social boundaries of the group of flatmates. Within these boundaries, at least in the beginning, she remains a misfit—quite in contrast to Ruth, her lover, who has no interest in socially belonging to the group and therefore feels more comfortable in the space of the flat: "The grotty kitchen," Kari tells us, referring once more to a dancing princess from a fairy tale, "turned into a secret garden around her. The house fit her perfectly, like a crystal slipper" (Patil 2008:26). Later in the narrative we see Kari sitting on the roof of her house watching a family in the opposite building through their window. Once again she ruminates on what she thinks home must feel like: a life that is "beautifully peopled," with children "sitting at cluttered study tables" (Patil

2008:89). For Kari, an assemblage of everyday objects suggests that a place is inhabited by people; clutter signifies both spatial and social belonging.

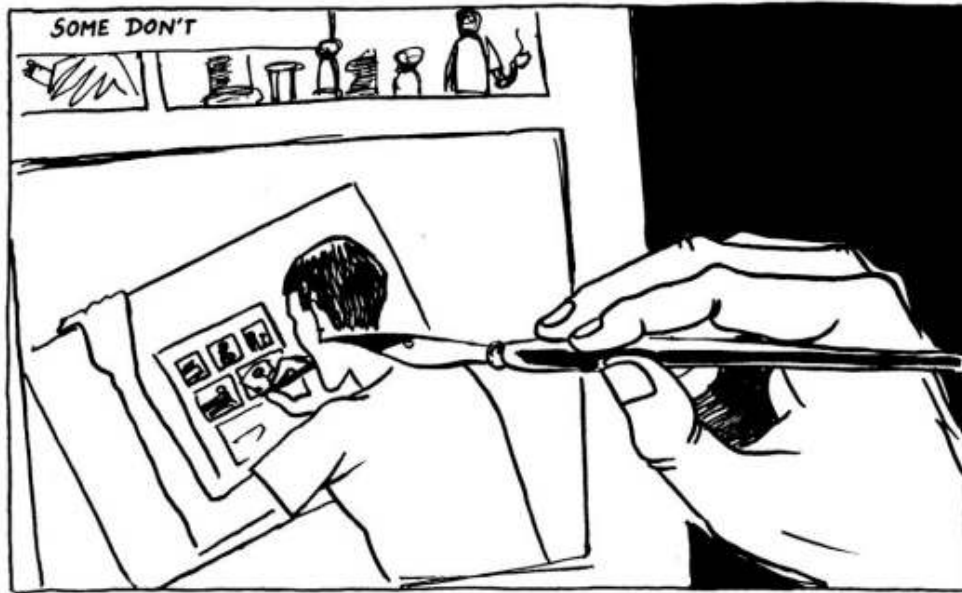
- 22 Unlike Kari, Brighu does not tell us much about his living situation, but the materiality of home is important for him too: he presents himself, from the very beginning, as an obsessive collector of things (and stories), always “looking to find the impossible” (Banerjee 2004:9). The visuals suggest that his flat contains a hoard of collected objects, and Brighu states that “on good days” he feels “like Ibn Battuta” (Banerjee 2004:25 and 106)—the famous fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler and chronicler who is said to have collected stories from around the world during nearly thirty years of explorations, later to be published in his so-called *Rihla* (journey), whose full title promises the reader insights into “the wonders of cities” (*gharā’ib al-amṣār*). True to the tradition of this apparently kindred spirit, Brighu collects all sorts of wondrous items, ranging from hard-to-find books and pens to tales about the city and its inhabitants. At the very end of the novel we see him drawing sketches of all the people whose stories we have encountered in the book, including himself (see Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5



Corridor: 108

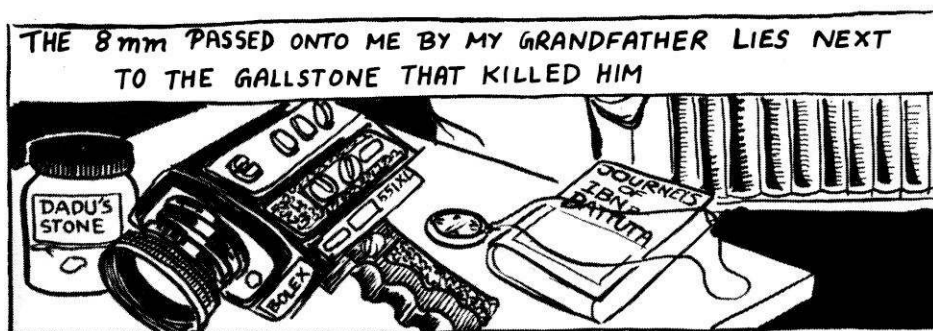
Figure 6

**CORRIDOR: 107**

The image that shows Brighu drawing himself as he is drawing himself is a neat narrative twist in the tradition of romantic irony whereby the process of composition is exposed “as a matter of authorial whim” (Baldick 2001:222)—or, in our case, a matter of “narratorial” whim.<sup>14</sup> Brighu presents himself as a spectator—in Simmel’s understanding a classical position for the stranger who can observe from the outside and exhibit a certain “objectivity” without, however, necessarily becoming passive or detached (Wolff 1950:404).

- 23 For Brighu, the collector, the objects he assembles are of two types: firstly, items infused with memories which allow him to establish a connection to his family or his personal history, like the 8 mm camera that had been passed on to him by his grandfather or “the gallstone that killed him” (Banerjee 2004:6) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

**CORRIDOR: 6**

Such objects invoke a feeling of belonging in him by reminding him of his “roots”—an aspect that is played out in detail when Brighu visits his parents in Calcutta as we will see

later. On the other hand, Brighu accumulates objects for the sheer sake of collecting so as to make his collection “whole.” This striving for wholeness can, for one thing, be seen on a simplistic material level as a will to possess things. On the other hand, however, Brighu himself offers us a second reading by referring to Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects* ([1968] 2005) where it is argued that collecting is not about the objects but about the act of “completing the set,” as Banerjee has phrased it, in order to achieve an illusionary state of “wholeness” (2004:7). In *Corridor* we thus learn at the very beginning of the story that wholeness is not only connected to a physical or social home but must also be seen as the eternal search for metaphysical completeness. Importantly, both in *Kari* and *Corridor* the objects in the home do not need to be used or employed in any way. Their main significance lies in *being* there and providing a meaning merely by what they stand for.

## Shared history, familiarity and repetition

- 24 A second aspect that contributes to making a place “home” is the history one shares with the social group occupying this space. As briefly mentioned above, in *Kari* both Billo and Delna have already lived in the flat before Kari moves in; they have known each other for some time, and we learn that they have swapped boyfriends at some point in the past. Besides, they have established a clear hierarchical relationship: Billo, according to Kari, is the “diva” or “empress” of the flat and Delna acts as her “humble minister” (Patil 2008:22). Given this shared history of Billo, Delna and their partners, Kari feels like an outsider. She perceives the two couples as a “single-cell organism with not much room for strangers” (Patil 2008:22) and her position in the flat is the classical condition of “being without belonging.” As a result, Kari feels like the fifth wheel and has trouble settling in. Her initial position in the group is, to use Simmel’s words, “determined, essentially, by the fact that [s]he has not belonged to it from the beginning” (Wolff 1950:402).
- 25 At the same time, however, the flat also provides Kari with a routine which she feels is essential for her sense of belonging. Kari calls *Crystal Palace* “her chorus”—“the only part of the song familiar enough for me to sing along with, the only part that inevitably repeats itself whether I care for the words or not” (Patil 2008:16). Familiarity and repetition—good or bad—give Kari a sense of security and provide her with a reliable constant to fall back upon.
- 26 Likewise, for Brighu the feeling of being at home is connected to a particular set of routines and to a personal history—shared with objects, friends and, importantly, with the city itself. In *Corridor* the first thing Brighu does after arriving in Calcutta where he wants to spend his holidays is to get “reacquainted” with his old home (Banerjee 2004:88), and he accomplishes this, interestingly, through music and literature rather than interaction with his parents (see Figure 8).



Figure 8

**CORRIDOR: 88**

It is in his old records and comic books—an eclectic mixture of James Elmore, The Rolling Stones, and *Tintin*—and in the history he shares with these objects from his past that he sees his “roots” (Banerjee 2004:88). In order to fully appreciate this situation in the context of the story we have to move backwards in narrative time to the beginning of Brighu’s journey: while boarding the train in Delhi, Brighu meets a fellow traveler, Mr. Murthy, who engages him in a conversation. He asks Brighu for his surname, his marital status, and, lastly, for his father’s name, and then declares that “roots are very important” (Banerjee 2004:87). This statement gets ironically twisted by the choices Brighu makes in order to settle back in, i.e. his opting for the “metaphysical home that clings to the person who sets out” (Lal and Kumar 2007: ix).

- 27 Home and belonging, for him as well as for Kari, is about ritual and the intimately known, which can be music (Kari, too, speaks of her “chorus”—if in a semi-metaphorical way) but, significantly, also the city itself and one’s routines within this city. We later see Brighu taking a tour of Calcutta, following old routines like eating sweets at Calcutta’s New Market, shopping for old records at Free School Street, or going to the Oly Pub in Park Street to have a drink. Significantly, just as Brighu reclaims his city by going back over his own well-trodden paths, for Kari, who struggles with the sensation of *not* feeling at home, the (new) city is not a stable entity. After the break-up of her relationship with Ruth, Kari observes:

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. (Patil 2008:14)

For Kari the absence of familiarity and routine goes hand in hand with a sense of *not*-belonging. The loss of social togetherness, for her, entails a transformation of the spatial dimension of the city as well.

## Communication and commensality

- 28 The last two aspects in *Corridor* and *Kari* which are associated with the feeling of belonging are communication and, closely related to it, personal interaction, and here

especially commensality. Both graphic novels touch upon these themes, but as it is only Kari who addresses them explicitly we will, in the following, concentrate on her narrative. We have already seen that Kari feels the necessity to have, at home, a “song familiar enough to sing along with” (Patil 2008:16)—a situation, however, that ensues only after she has been staying in her new flat long enough for certain routines to develop. Hence, at a chronologically earlier point of her story we find her deeply afflicted by the lack of communication in her life: we see her in a phone booth talking to her mother, and from Kari’s monosyllabic answers it becomes clear that the conversation is one-sided and that there seems to be no exchange about, for example, her loneliness or the break-up of her first relationship (see Figure 9).

Figure 9



#### KARI: 20–21

From the voice-over commentary underneath the image, however, we learn that even these one-sided conversations with her mother are comforting for her because they provide her with the personal interaction that is missing in her flat:

The only person who always wants to talk to me is Mama. Every Friday, at 10 pm, is the long call home. Mama talks, I listen. When I get back home, the silence has teeth again. My bed feels as large as a football field. (Patil 2008:21)

Once again Kari is shown as the embodiment of the stranger who has entered the space but not penetrated the social boundaries of the new group. In spite of her spatial proximity to Billo and especially Delna, with whom she shares a room, she remains remote and feels lost—even in her own bed, the classical safe haven. At a later point, however, it is interesting to witness that the very silence she is bemoaning in the above quote, becomes a precious asset. As we see her sitting on the water tank on the roof of her apartment building, Kari’s voice-over narrative tells us that this is the place she retreats to when she doesn’t want anyone “to psychoanalyze ... [her] silence” (Patil 2008:89). For



Kari, meaningful personal relationships not only involve the right to communication but also the right to be silent if she so wishes.

- 29 Importantly, however, for both Kari and Brighu, the home is not the only space where personal interaction can take place and we see them both establishing meaningful social relationships in the outside world. For Kari it is her colleague Lazarus, her friend Angel and even her casual acquaintances Alexa and Manuel who provide her with the relationships she needs in order to develop a feeling of belonging. Among others, Brighu relies on his cousin, his girlfriend Kali, and on the bookseller Jehangir Rangoonwalla. Home, in *Corridor* and *Kari*, extends into the city; it is not limited to the space beneath one's own roof. At the same time, the social group that ensures the development of a feeling of belonging diffuses into the open—as the family has ceased to be the basic reference point, the lives of both Kari and Brighu become more socially fragmented. Traditional responsibilities and tasks of the family, such as, for example, decisions about the selection of partners or the responsibility of caring for—and physically tending to—the dying are transferred to a variety of different people, as is the case in the relationship between Kari and Angel who is suffering from cancer.
- 30 A special situation in which personal relations are played out occurs in the context of meals. Commensality—the sharing of food and space—plays a vital role in establishing social relations. Thus, home, for Kari, is where people cook and eat together “properly”—signified by unhurried dining and homemade food, especially when prepared with high-quality ingredients. Much in contrast to Kari's flatmates who have the cupboards in the kitchen filled with “hardened leftovers and junk and processed food,” Ruth introduces Kari to “the secret lives of ginger, cardamom, basil and anise” (Patil 2008:25) or the difference between FTGOP and NKOTB—“Fine Tippy Golden Orange Pekoe” as opposed to “New Kids on the Block,” as Kari feels compelled to explain in a footnote (Patil 2008:56). In *Corridor*, it is *Biryani*, a rice dish that is typical of North India and also of Delhi's Mughlai cuisine, that is accorded a special position in the food universe: the high quality of the *Biryani* makes up for a failed business reception (Banerjee 2004:23–24) and it is *Biryani* that Brighu's girlfriend Kali cooked for him as a welcome dish after he returns from Calcutta (Banerjee 2004:87). Here, too, commensality and homemade food signify home and belonging.
- 31 Food habits in *Crystal Palace*, Kari quickly learns, go hand in hand with eating habits: in the beginning she is rejected point-blank by Billo and Delna with a terse “no” when she invites them to have soup with her (Patil 2008:18). Only about half way into the narrative Kari does give an account of the “rare hearty suppers” which occur at the flat from time to time:

I love it when the boys aren't around. The girls are a lot cheerier, and a lot more interested in one another. I can smell the peaches of Billo's perfume, Delna makes chicken in Coke and stir-fried spinach. On such days, the conversation wanders along a familiar track. Food, gossip, the occult, and then the moot-issue talk that ends either in a head massage or in (Delna's) tears. The other thing that happens during these suppers is that the girls' mother me and shamelessly flirt with me in turns (Patil 2008:58).

These suppers, it appears, offer everything that is needed to establish a sense of home and belonging: familiarity, repetition, homemade food, togetherness, communication and intimacy. Much in line with Ruth's above-described act of replacing “prosaic” with “poetic” food, the flatmates, at least once in a while, exchange fast-paced gobbling up of junk food for leisurely indulging in carefully-prepared dishes and each other's company.

Nevertheless, there is an interesting ambiguity contained in the image accompanying the above quote (see Figure 10).

Figure 10



**KARI: 58**

When comparing the image with Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, the painting that provides the model for the panel, we find Kari in the first position on the left hand side, sitting in the place of Judas—the eternal outsider. After all, a home away from home, the image seems to imply, is not easily established; it is a difficult and winding way from the spatial into the social arena of a new home.

## Conclusion

- 32 Kari and *Corridor* negotiate notions of home and belonging in the context of migration to the city. As twenty-first century graphic novels they introduce us to two young modern intellectuals—"city creatures" in the best sense of the word—who move through a global cultural arena with more ease than many of the protagonists of the other literatures mentioned above. Accordingly, we see the dichotomous perspectives on the city disappear once more: the city is seen neither in contrast to the village, nor is it, for example, an embodiment of an imagined deplorable "West" as opposed to a morally intact "East." Likewise, the binary opposition contained in the word pair *sthāyī*–*asthāyī* as used by Kumār in the introduction to his collection *Isq mē śāhar honā* is not valid for *Corridor* and *Kari*: in both graphic novels the old as well as the new domicile are called "home" and the protagonists strongly focus on their respective current situations, intent on creating a home away from home for themselves.
- 33 As we have seen, this situation demands different strategies of adaptation on various levels: a house (or any space for that matter, even the city itself) becomes a home firstly when it contains objects that carry meaning and memories (Kari's "clutter" and Brighu's "collections"), secondly when it allows for familiar routines to develop which provide the occupants with a constant in their lives (the "chorus" at *Crystal Palace*, or Brighu's ritualized walk through Calcutta), or thirdly when meaningful communication takes place between the newcomer and the receiving group (in our cases friends in the city, or the city itself, rather than the parents in the old home or, for Kari, the flatmates in the new home). Furthermore, an important factor in the process of overcoming "strangeness" is, as we have seen, the act of eating together—gathering around a table, sharing specially-

cooked food, exchanging ideas and, ideally, memories: since a shared history contributes significantly to the sense of belonging, the process of establishing a home requires time. Belonging, in *Kari* and *Corridor*, is negotiated against the background of these criteria.

- 34 At the same time the protagonists Kari and Brighu are firmly rooted in a global cultural arena—in contrast to the initially-mentioned examples of narratives about migration to the city. The global frame is neither rejected as “Western” as is the case, for example, in many of the Hindi-language NRI-films, nor is it interpreted as an “alien” point of reference that is distinct from an “Indian” one. “The gap between the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ has narrowed” Lal and Kumar have noted, and therefore, unsurprisingly, “the new generation writers tend to disregard locational separateness” (2007:ix). Accordingly, the global cultural milieu of the two graphic novels is shown as a natural playground for the protagonists. In *Corridor* Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects* sits comfortably next to Ibn Battuta or the “Ideal Boy”; in *Kari* we encounter the Hindi movie *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* as well as John Kennedy Toole’s American cult novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* or Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*.<sup>15</sup>
- 35 In *Kari* the connection with a global cultural landscape is further engendered by Amruta Patil’s visually quoting a number of famous paintings. We have already seen the girls’ flat dinner staged as the *Last Supper*. Other paintings used in this way include Frida Kahlo’s *The Two Fridas*, Andrew Wyeth’s *Christina’s World*, and Gustav Klimt’s *The Virgin* (see Patil 2004:3, 8, and 76, respectively).<sup>16</sup> Since *Kari*, in these panels, is shown in situations that have already been painted by artists around the world, her experiences are connoted as both timeless (they have happened before) and placeless (they have happened elsewhere). Moreover, they are not individual experiences: others—the individuals depicted in the paintings—have had them too, even though they (or rather we, as the beholders) may have interpreted them differently.
- 36 As far as family relationships are concerned, it seems telling that in the graphic novel, at first sight, the family is either seen extremely critically or plays a minor role as appears to be the case in *Kari* and *Corridor*. The parents live far away from their children; they are not involved in their everyday lives and are not shown to be consulted in times of distress—their “modes and categories” seem to stem from the past and are no longer appropriate for the “reality experienced by the present world” (Lal and Kumar 2007:x). Both protagonists willingly arrange their lives independently from their families and we do not see the parents being assigned any role of importance in the context of their children’s attempts to establish a home for themselves in the “big cities” of Mumbai and Delhi. Nevertheless we must assume that notions of what constitutes “home” will have been formed, at least in part, in the parental homes of Kari and Brighu, who both seem to derive some comfort from their very existence: we have seen how Kari regularly phones her mother and Brighu spends his holidays at his parents’ home when he is thinking about breaking up with his girlfriend Kali. This suggests that the general criteria that are mentioned as important for producing a sense of belonging have been pre-established in these homes. Nevertheless, in the spaces of the graphic novel, Kari and Brighu are allowed to act and live much more independently and unconventionally than protagonists in other narrative genres. This includes a metaphysical sense of belonging, an opportunity for the protagonists to grow into *themselves*, in addition to the new spatial or social arena—quite in contrast, for example, to the eternally alienated characters of the Hindi *naṭī kahānī*. The graphic novel, it has been said, is an alternative space—*Corridor*

and *Kari* show that it negotiates alternative modes of urban living outside classical family models.

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## NOTES

1. So far the Indian graphic novel has been largely an English-language genre, with only rare works published in any of the vernacular languages (mostly as translations from texts originally composed and brought out in English). English has been a literary language in India for more than a century, adding to the proverbial multiplicity of Indian (literary) languages. Nevertheless, in the following a brief glance at the themes of the (migrant's) city as represented in a vernacular literary context seems to be in order, so as to place the works considered here in a wider context of the literary urban narratives of India (for a discussion of the desideratum of considering "urbanity in the vernacular" cf. Harder 2016). Given the multifaceted linguistic environment in India it is not possible to comparatively address urban narratives produced in all the vernacular languages that are potentially relevant for the cities that provide the settings for our graphic novels, i.e. Delhi (with the vernaculars Hindi, Urdu and Panjabi) and Mumbai (with Marathi, Hindi and Gujarati). Therefore, reference will only be made to selected works in Hindi, as this has been a literary language for both Delhi- and Mumbai-related city narratives. For an overview of early urban narratives in Marathi see Apte (1970); Hindi narratives on Indian cities, including Delhi and Bombay/Mumbai, have been listed by Śaśikānt (2005).
2. See Uberoi's article "The Family in India: Beyond the Nuclear versus Joint Debate" (2001) for an evaluation of the topic.
3. For a multifaceted exploration of the topic see Lal and Kumar's edited volume *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature* (2007).
4. According to Das, in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century the city-village contrast was increasingly conceptualized as a "nature-artefact dichotomy" and as "part of a new set of opposition that is East and West" (1995:408), with the latter perspective remaining virulent far into the twentieth century. Examples of technology- and industry-critical works from the Hindi literary sphere of 1920s and 1930s include Premchand's novels *Raṅgbhūmī* ([1925] 1961, translated as *Rangbhumi, The Arena of Life*, Premchand 2010) and *Godān* ([1936] 1995, translated as *The Gift of a Cow*, Premchand 1968). For a brief overview of key themes and some major Indian literary works that explore "the city and the village" see Das (1995:406–09). The East-West opposition in the context of migration has also been thoroughly explored in popular Hindi film.
5. This theme has been explored in the literature of the South Asian diaspora, especially in the USA and the UK, but also in popular Hindi film, especially the so-called "NRI-films." The latter present the viewers with the homeland's perspective on migrants: their situation in the foreign land is often conceptualized as exile rather than opportunity; the alien culture ("the West"), it is suggested, needs to be contested and the situation must be overcome by mimicking the imaginary homogeneous culture of the homeland ("the East"). Diasporic migrants of film and

literature inevitably carry the “baggage of a given-up past clinging somewhere in memory” (Lal and Kumar 2007:ix). For the representation of the binary of “East” and “West” in popular Hindi films see for example Kaur (2002), Punatambekar (2005) and Sarma (2009).

6. Among the best-known Hindi genres that have explored this topic is the *navī kahānī* (new story) which, in the 1950s and 60s, introduced the readers to protagonists who found themselves alone in the city and far away from anything that might constitute a home for them. For a detailed analysis of the theme of alienation in the *navī kahānī* see Roadarmel’s renowned study (1969). Typical examples are Kamleśvār’s short stories *Khoyī hūī diśāem* (*Lost Directions*, 1963), and *Parāyā śāhar* (*Alien City*, 1965). Roadarmel provides us with an investigation of these and other stories revolving around the theme of alienation in the city (1969:188–205).

7. Banerjee and Patil literally present us with Kristeva’s “mosaic of quotations” (Kristeva 1980:66). Proceeding from Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas of dialogism and the carnivalesque, Julia Kristeva coined the term “intertextuality” in 1966, contending that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1980:66). Far more than a mere “study of sources” Kristeva understands intertextuality as a transposition of sign systems and discourses “into another” so that they produce multiple layers of meaning (Kristeva 1984:60). Intertextuality has also been a central term in postmodernism, the “classical” the arena of “pastiche, imitation and the mixing of already established styles and practices” (Allen 2000:5; for a more detailed discussion see Allen 2000:181–99).

8. For a brief introduction to the concept of *darśan*, the mode of differentially beholding an image, for example, of a deity, and at the same time being seen by the deity, see Vidal (2015).

9. In this context Chute and DeKoven remind us of Donald Rumsfeld who pointed out with regard to the photographs of abused prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison that “[w]ords don’t do it” (2006:771).

10. Raviś Kumār’s collection of experimental *laghu prem kathās*, too, must be seen as an example of such a new “language” being used to negotiate the modern metropolis: here it is not through images but a combination of brevity and channeling (Facebook—an inherently mobile medium) that the life (in the city) is “dissected.”

11. See, for example, *Hush* which deals with the sexual abuse of children within their own families (Thomas and Eipe 2010); *Lie* touches, among other themes, on female infanticide (Bhatia et.al. 2010); in *Kari* alcoholism and domestic violence are mentioned (Patil 2008).

12. For Patil’s take on the question of Kari’s lesbianism see also Paul Gravett’s interview with the author (Gravett 2012). For a graphic novel that explores lesbianism as a primary theme, see for example Julie Maroh’s *Blue is the Warmest Color* ([2010, French: *Le bleu est une couleur chaude*] 2013). In India the topic has been addressed through comedy in *A Queer Graphic Anthology* (Gangwani and Biswas 2015), a special issue of the queer magazine *the gaysi zine*.

13. Brighu’s parents appear at the station once more when he is leaving again for Delhi, but we only see them waving in the background, so far away from us, the spectators, that not even their facial expressions can be seen. The parents, thus, literally “frame” Brighu’s visit but they are not shown as part of the “picture” itself.

14. Self-reflexivity is also a major tool of postmodern literary production where a potentially endless succession of duplications (Brian McHale’s “Chinese box” effect) calls our attention to the constructedness of works of fiction and also of our perception of the world (cf. McHale 2003:112–30).

15. Baudrillard and Ibn Battuta were mentioned above; for the use of the “Ideal Boy”—visuals of the well-known educational charts—see Banerjee (2004:65; a poster of the film appears in (and ironically comments upon) the scene where Kari meets Ruth for the first time (Patil 2008:68). For Kari reading Toole’s novel see Patil (2008:63). For Winterson’s postmodern narrative see Patil (2008:79). The latter work, incidentally, includes an adaptation of the fairy tale *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* which Kari uses to describe *Crystal Palace*. For an analysis of Winterson’s book see



Roessner (2002). Mukherjee (2015) discusses the “marvelous intertextualities” (Mukherjee 2015:161) of the fairy tale references in *Kari* as important tropes of postmodern fiction.

16. The upper panel on page 5 probably quotes Kahlo’s *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, but the similarities are not as obvious as in the other examples.

## ABSTRACTS

In times of increasing spatial mobility the negotiations of home and belonging for those who need (or want) to settle down in new places have become a daily issue, and the young in particular often leave their families behind as they set out to conquer new frontiers. Looking at two Indian graphic novels—*Corridor* by Sarnath Banerjee (2004) and *Kari* by Amruta Patil (2008)—this article will examine the notions of what constitutes “home” for the protagonists: two young urban intellectuals who have moved to Mumbai and Delhi respectively. We will see that “strangeness” needs to be overcome both on a spatial and social plane, but that establishing a feeling of “belonging” no longer depends on their being closely connected to their families—the family being a concept that, in India, is still widely hailed as an ideal social paradigm. The Indian graphic novel constitutes a cosmopolitan “alternative space” (Suhaan Mehta 2010:173), and it presents us with alternative paradigms of home and belonging.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** home, belonging, family, graphic novel, *Corridor*, *Kari*, intertextuality, materiality of home, shared history, repetition, communication, commensality

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