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## Queer Bodies and the Disruption of Bodily Normativity in Bishakh Som's *Apsara Engine* (2020)

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**Abstract**

Literature has always played a very significant role in the representation of bodies that do not fall into the traditional categories of gender and sexuality. Although literature has been representing such categories of gender and sexuality for millennia, the way it has been represented through different forms of literary expression has changed drastically across different periods. In contemporary times, the emergence of new and the evolution of various existing literary forms itself have revolutionized how such a representation takes place. Among these relatively new literary forms, the emergence and the subsequent development of the medium of graphic novel has played a significant role in how these categories of gender and sexuality are represented. Since the graphic novel uses a hybrid narrative medium that combines the visual and the verbal modes of storytelling, it offers a dynamic narrative experience that is facilitated by the parallel workings of both its visual and verbal registers. This study examines Bishakh Som's Apsara Engine (2020), a contemporary graphic novel that deeply engages with the questions of gender and sexual identity. Som's representation of gender and sexuality, however, is not centered on the questions of identity crisis and coming-of-age experiences. Instead, this study explores how Som presents gender and sexuality as fluid and constantly evolving categories of one's identity. Instead, this study explores how Som represents bodies that resist fixed categories of gender, sexuality, and

human identity. The hybrid, transformed, and non-normative bodies represented in her work show that gender and sexuality cannot always be understood as fixed or permanent categories. These bodies change, transform, and take different forms, and these changes become part of the way identity is represented. The visual form of the graphic novel is important here because the changes in the body can be shown directly through images rather than being explained only through words. The body therefore becomes an important part of the narrative through which gender, sexuality, identity, and desire are explored. In this way, the representation of the body allows Som to show identity as something that can change and develop rather than something that remains fixed.

**Keywords:** Queer embodiment, bodily normativity, transgender representation, visual representation, graphic narratives.

## Introduction

Throughout history, literature has always remained one of the most important instruments for writers and creators to convey their emotions, feelings and thoughts. Stories and other similar narratives have remained an integral part of human existence, and they are also believed to be the first narrative instruments that played a significant role in enabling the early humans to communicate. As these methods of storytelling evolved over centuries, it led to the emergence and development of new narrative tools, and in the twentieth century, this process of narrative evolution resulted in the development of a new kind of literary expression that empowered writers and creators to narrate their stories through the combined use of words and images. The medium of graphic novel, which combines these two modes of storytelling, has acted as one of the most dynamic forms of literary expression in the past few decades. This form of graphic novel has facilitated such a representation of bodies that does not depend entirely on verbal descriptions. It makes these bodies immediately visible through the use of its visual language; its appearance, shape, transformation, movement, posture, and positioning become important parts of its representation. This visual dimension of the medium of graphic novel, therefore, becomes particularly significant in this context because it completely transforms the ways in which such bodies are imagined and represented.

*Apsara Engine* (2020) by Bishakh Som, an Indian-American transgender artist and writer, is one such graphic novel that significantly challenges, through the use of its visual register, the conventional notions of how queer bodies are represented. *Apsara Engine* is a collection of eight stories that are vaguely connected with each other, and majority of these stories focus on the disruption of bodily normativity and queer bodies. They present South Asian characters who unapologetically identify as transgender, present bodies that are difficult to categorise, and also present situations in which two normal-looking characters engage in same-sex intimacy and desire, which shows that queer relationships are not always visibly different from other relationships. Som's representation of queerness is not centred on the obvious questions of identity crisis and coming-of-age experiences but is instead centred on the affirmation of this queerness. For Som, gender and bodily identity are fluid and constantly evolving categories of one's identity, and therefore, resist strict categorisation. Such an idea of queerness and bodily identity can clearly be explored in stories such as "Throat", "Swandive", "Come Back to Me", "Meena and Aparna", and "Love Song". The present research, therefore, examines the different ways in which Som represents queer bodies and disrupts the conventional notions of bodily normativity in *Apsara Engine*. Here, Som's representation of queerness takes place not through a single form of identity or bodily experience but through a variety of forms such as transgender bodies, same-sex desire, hybrid bodies, and bodies that resist and challenge clear categorisations. These different forms of representation challenge the traditional understanding that queerness can be understood through a fixed understanding of the body. This idea is challenged even more when the visual medium of this graphic novel makes these bodily differences, transformations, and ambiguities immediately visible to the reader. This study, therefore, focuses on the representation of the body in "Throat", "Swandive", "Come Back to Me", "Meena and Aparna", and "Love Song" to examine how Som challenges the conventional ideas of gender, sexuality, and bodily identity. These stories are important for this discussion because the body is represented in different ways and does not always remain within the fixed ideas of what the body should be. The study therefore examines how these bodily representations question fixed ideas of gender, sexuality, and identity and how the body becomes a way of representing these questions.

**Queer Bodies and Bodily Normativity in *Apsara Engine* (2020)**

As discussed above, Som's representation of queerness in *Apsara Engine* takes a completely unconventional form. One of the clearest examples of this can be located in the story titled "Swandive" where Som presents Amrit and Onima, the two characters who

identify as transgenders. Amrit and Onima are the only two characters in the entire graphic novel that are explicitly labelled as queer characters. Through these two characters, Som brings the transgender body directly into the narrative and questions the idea that gender can be understood only through fixed bodily categories. Their bodies and identities are not presented as something that can be easily placed within the conventional understanding of male and female but as something that is personally experienced and understood by the individual. The body is important in this experience, but the body alone does not decide or completely define a person's gender. This becomes important because gender is not experienced in the same way by every individual. The representation of the body therefore becomes connected with the experience of gender, but it also shows that gender cannot be understood only through the body. The conversations between Amrit and Onima are important in this regard because they allow the two characters to talk about their experiences of being transgender as well as their experiences of being South Asian. Their conversations show that their identities are shaped by different experiences and not by gender alone. This understanding of gendered embodiment can also be connected with the idea of "resistance to an oppressive binary norm" (Taylor, Clarke, and Thomas 250). This idea becomes useful in understanding Amrit and Onima because their identities do not fit easily within a strictly binary understanding of the body. Their bodies cannot be understood only through the usual binary categories, and their identities also cannot be completely understood through these binary categories. Judith Butler's discussion of bodily norms is useful in this context, as she argues that "bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (2). Butler's idea helps explain the representation of the bodies and identities of Amrit and Onima. Their bodies and identities do not fit completely within the fixed or conventional categories of gender. The body is connected with gender, but the experience of gender cannot be understood only through the fixed categories that are usually used to understand the body. Amrit, for instance, recalls her childhood memories of Juhu Beach and describes the feeling of belonging that she experienced there. However, when she returns to the United States, she describes herself as being "at sea again" and as being "unmoored twice over" (138). These expressions are important because they connect her experience of gender with her experience of cultural displacement. She is not only thinking about her gender identity but also about the place where she belongs and the place where she feels that she belongs. Her body therefore becomes connected with the question of gender as well as with the question of cultural belonging.

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However, it is also important to note here that Som does not present Amrit and Onima only to represent the difficulties faced by transgender individuals. Som's idea of queerness goes far beyond such a limited construction and instead gives the two characters the autonomy to assert their queerness. "Swandive" is remarkable not simply because of its two transgender characters but because of the agency and autonomy that it allows its characters to define themselves. This autonomy to define themselves and to assert their queerness unfolds most beautifully in the visual sequence where Som gives the two characters the freedom to imagine and create a world of their own on a piece of canvas. As shown in Figure 1 [map], the two characters create their imaginary map together, and it is here that Onima tells Amrit that "you have to choreograph your own culture, you cultivate a tribe, you fashion your own paths" (140). This statement is significant in the context of the present study because it suggests that identity does not always have to come from existing social structures or from the identities that society already provides. It can also be created and shaped by the individual. The map that the two women create, therefore, does not remain a simple imaginary map but instead acts as a representation of their attempts to imagine a world in which they can define their own paths rather than simply follow the ones already created for them. The world in the imaginary map, thus, assumes the character of a transgender or queer utopian world where these individuals can assert their queerness and define themselves in their own way. This imaginary map, therefore, serves as a strong visual symbol for how Som approaches queerness.

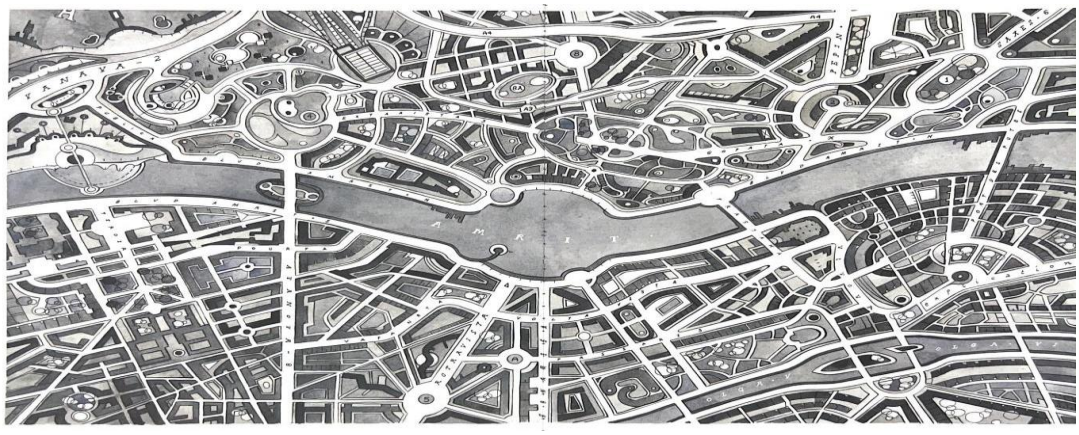


Figure 2: The imaginary map created by Amrit and Onima.

Som's understanding of queerness goes even further in *Apsara Engine*. While "Swandive" is more concerned with presenting queerness through characters who explicitly identify as transgenders, the story titled "Meena and Aparna" explores this idea of queerness in an implicit way by presenting the friendship and emotional intimacy between two women. Although Meena and Aparna are not explicitly labelled as queer characters like Amrit and Onima, Som explores their queerness by creating a sense of ambiguity around their relationship. This ambiguity can also be understood in relation to Adrienne Rich's discussion of relationships between women, particularly her discussion of forms of "woman bonding" that may be overlooked when relationships are understood only through heterosexual frameworks(11). Rich's discussion becomes useful here because relationships between women are not always given the same understanding as relationships that are understood through heterosexual frameworks. Some forms of bonding between women can therefore be overlooked when the relationship is understood only through conventional categories. In "Meena and Aparna", the relationship between the two women also creates a similar difficulty of categorisation. Their relationship has emotional significance, but this emotional significance does not give the relationship one fixed meaning. The relationship is important because it remains open to interpretation, and this openness makes it difficult to place the relationship within one simple category. Aparna is a married woman, but her friendship with Meena occupies the central position in this story. During their meeting, Aparna repeatedly tries to extend their time together and tells Meena, "I miss the old us" (42). She wants to spend more time with Meena and that shows that their relationship continues to hold an important emotional place in her life. This becomes even more significant when Aparna worries about Meena not having a partner who could "take care" of her. Meena responds, "I'm happy to take care of myself" (44). Here, Meena's response is important because she does not see a partner as necessary for taking care of her, and this shows that she is able to take care of herself and that she is comfortable with this independence. However, the most important moment of the story appears when the two women return to Aparna's birthday party organised by her husband Ashok. Even though it was Ashok who surprised Aparna by organising the birthday party, Aparna explicitly states that she finds greater emotional comfort in Meena than in the celebration around her. She even embraces Meena and says, "I've already got my present" (66). By this story, Som attempts to present the idea of queerness not as an explicit reality but as something that is more situated in friendship and emotional comfort. Albeit the story does not categorically define Meena and Aparna as queer characters, their conversations throughout the story and the birthday party sequence clearly

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suggest a form of intimacy that goes beyond an ordinary friendship.The story ends with Aparna still hugging Meena, and this open ending allows the reader to make their own judgements about the two characters. Therefore, through the story of Meena and Aparna, Som presents an implicit working of gendered identity and queerness.

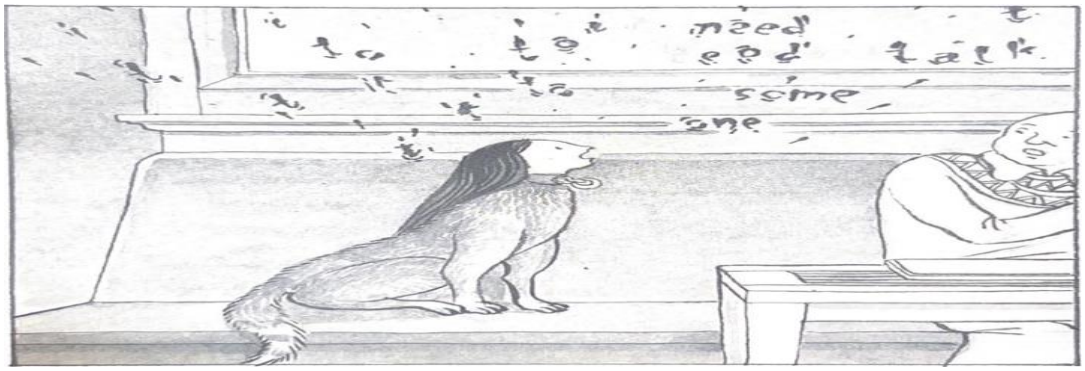



Figure 2: Kiki's body challenges the distinction between human and non-human forms.

Som's *Apsara Engine* is highly remarkable for the experimental treatment of its subject matter. The graphic novel is pregnant with instances that repeatedly draws the reader's attention to its uncanny environment and the unusual beings that constitute the world of that environment. While "Swandive" and "Meena and Aparna" explore queerness through gender identity and intimate relationships, Som also presents bodies that resist easy categorisation and fixed categorisation of the body. This becomes particularly significant in "Throat", where the body of Kiki challenges the distinction between the human and the non-human. "Throat" presents Kiki, a six-year-old child whose body does not fit neatly into the conventional category of the human body. As shown in Figure 2 above, she has the head and upper body of a young girl, while the lower part of her body resembles that of an animal. Her body is neither presented through a completely fixed understanding of the human body nor does it fit easily into a clear category. Her physical appearance therefore challenges the idea that the body can always be placed within one fixed and stable category. Aidan Diamond and Lauranne Poharec explain that a body "can be non-normative or 'Othered', when it breaks from or is not validated or recognised by social norms and conventions" (402). This idea is useful for understanding Kiki's body because her physical form does not conform to the conventional understanding of the human body. Her body does not fit easily within the usual understanding of what a human body should look like, and this makes her body different from the conventional human body. Her body has human features, but at the same

time it also has features that make it different from the usual understanding of the human body. This makes her body difficult to place within one clear category. Unlike Amrit and Onima, whose transgender identities are explicitly discussed through their conversations, Kiki's difference is mainly communicated through the visual representation of her body. The reader does not need a detailed verbal explanation to understand that Kiki's body is different. The image itself makes this difference visible to the reader.

Kiki's difficulty in communicating with the people around her further emphasises the problem of categorisation and the difficulty of understanding her body. Susan's attempts to help Kiki through a vocalisation programme focus on "breathing, vocalization, and reducing stress" (29). However, Kiki herself expresses the desire to communicate when she says, "need to talk to someone" (32). When Mark responds with "AWARE!" and then clarifies "Of herself" (32), the conversation draws attention to the fact that Kiki is aware of herself even though the people around her have difficulty in understanding her. This becomes important because the difficulty in communication is not presented as a difficulty in consciousness. Kiki may not be able to communicate in the way the people around her expect, but this does not mean that she is not aware of herself. Her body may appear unfamiliar to the people around her, but the story does not present this unfamiliar body as a body without identity or consciousness. Instead, Kiki is shown as a being who has an awareness of herself and who is also able to express her own needs. The difference is therefore not only in Kiki's body but also in the way other people understand her. In this way, "Throat" shows that bodily difference, difficulty in communication, and lack of understanding by others should not be taken as an absence of identity or self-awareness. By not giving Kiki a body that easily fits into the already-existing categories of physicality, Som challenges the fixed understanding of what a body should be and also establishes the body as a space where different forms of physicality can exist together. Kiki's physical body, therefore, serves as one of the powerful sites through which Som presents her idea of the disruption of bodily normativity.

This disruption of bodily normativity can be seen in other stories of *Apsara Engine* as well. However, it is not always limited only to bodies that combine the human and non-human physical forms, because Som further complicates this idea of the body by also bringing in the aspect of supernatural into the human form. Unlike Kiki whose physicality is characterised by both human and animal features, the story titled "Come Back to Me" challenges this idea of bodily normativity by introducing a sea mermaid who is visibly both

feminine and supernatural. Even though the apsara possesses recognisably feminine features, her body is also connected with water and the supernatural, and consequently, her body does not appear as a completely human figure nor can she be even understood as an entirely non-human being. The sea mermaid's figure occupies an uncertain space between these categories and this makes it difficult to categorise her as one way or the other. This uncertainty becomes important because Som does not give the reader a fixed explanation of what the apsara actually is. The reader is therefore not given one clear idea about her identity or her physical form, but her physical form remains fluid and difficult to define. It does not fit easily into one fixed category, and this makes her body important to the discussion of identity.

Like Kiki in "Throat", the apsara represents a body that cannot be easily placed within an already existing category. However, the category that is challenged is not the same in both cases. Kiki's body challenges the distinction between the human and the animal, whereas the apsara challenges the distinction between the human and the supernatural. In both cases, the body is not completely human in the usual sense, and therefore, it becomes difficult to place the body in one fixed category. The difference is that Kiki's body creates a boundary between the human and the animal, while the apsara creates a boundary between the human and the supernatural. Som uses the visual possibilities of the graphic novel to make these differences visible to the reader. The reader can see the unusual form of the body directly through the images, and does not need only verbal explanation to understand that the body is different. In this way, both Kiki and the apsara show how Som uses the body to question fixed categories and to make bodily ambiguity visible through the visual form.

Som's exploration of bodily normativity takes another form in the story "Love Song", where she presents both non-normative bodily forms and unconventional experiences of desire. The story presents a woman sitting alone on a bench and remembering her past relationship, but it also introduces an unusual animal-like figure covered with feathers. The figure has a body that resembles that of an animal, while its body is also covered with feathers, making it difficult to place the figure within any familiar category of animal or bodily form. It looks like an animal, but its body does not completely fit into the usual idea of what an animal body should look like. The presence of this figure further complicates the distinction between the human and the non-human that Som explores in other stories in *Apsara Engine*. The figure therefore becomes difficult to define because its body does not

fit easily into one familiar category. Its unusual physical appearance challenges the idea that bodies must necessarily conform to recognisable and stable forms. The body is not shown in a fixed or usual way, and this makes the figure important in the discussion of bodily difference. In this way, Som again uses an unusual body to question the idea that bodies can always be understood through fixed and recognisable categories.

In this respect, the figure in "Love Song" can be read alongside Kiki in "Throat". While Kiki's body combines human and animal features, the feather-covered figure in "Love Song" presents a completely different combination of animal-like physicality and unusual bodily features. The two figures are different and their bodies are also different, but their bodies create difficulty in placing them within one fixed category. Kiki's body makes it difficult to separate the human from the animal, while the feather-covered figure in "Love Song" also makes the usual understanding of the body less clear. In both stories, Som creates bodies that resist easy categorisation and make the boundary between the human and the non-human less certain. The body therefore becomes a way through which Som questions these fixed categories and the fixed ideas about the body. The visual medium of the graphic novel is particularly important in this context because these unusual bodily forms are shown directly through images. The reader can see the difference in the bodies through the images and does not have to understand the difference only through verbal description. In this way, both stories show how Som uses the visual form of the graphic novel to represent bodies that are difficult to define and difficult to place within one fixed category.

However, the significance of "Love Song" is not limited to the unusual bodily form represented in the story. It is also about the body and what the body carries through memory, desire, and emotional attachment. The woman's repeated presence on the bench is important because the bench becomes connected with her memories of her past relationship. She returns to the bench and she also returns to the memories of the past relationship. Her body is sitting in the same place, but her memories take her back to another time. Therefore, her body is in one place while her memories are somewhere else, which creates a difference between the physical body and the emotional experience. Her body remains still, but the memories continue to move and continue to come back. The body is still because she is sitting on the bench, but emotionally she is not still because she continues to remember the relationship. This shows that physical stillness does not mean emotional stillness. The body may remain in one place, but memory and desire can continue to move through the body.

The person she remembers is absent, but the memory of the person is still present, and because the memory is present, the emotional attachment is also present. Desire therefore continues even though the person is absent. The body becomes connected with this desire because the desire is experienced through memory and emotional attachment. In this way, "Love Song" connects the unusual body with another kind of bodily experience, where the body is also connected with memory and desire.

The animal-like figure covered with feathers further adds to the unusual representation of desire because the figure itself is unusual and its presence is also within an unusual world. The woman's memories and emotions are already presented within this strange world, and the presence of the animal-like figure makes this world even more unusual. The figure is animal-like, but its body is covered with feathers, and therefore it is not easy to understand the figure through the usual idea of an animal body. It is also not completely human, so it becomes difficult to place the figure between the human and the non-human. Because of this, the experience of desire is also presented in a way that does not remain within the usual categories of human desire and non-human difference. The body is unusual and the experience connected with the body is also unusual. The story therefore brings together the unusual representation of the body and the experience of desire. The body becomes connected with desire because the unusual figure becomes part of the representation of desire in the story. At the same time, the body is also connected with memory and emotional attachment because the woman's memories and emotions are part of the same strange world. Through this combination of the body, desire, memory, and emotional attachment, Som shows that the body can become a space through which these different experiences are represented. The body is therefore not only a physical form, but it also becomes a space for desire and memory, and this makes the representation of the body important in the story.

The discussion of these five stories shows that Som does not present the body as a fixed or stable category. Joseph and Chavez similarly argue that "the image of one's body, then, is never a static snapshot of the fleshy body," thereby challenging the understanding of the body as something "real or constant or natural" (23). This idea is useful in understanding Som's representation of bodies because the bodies in these stories do not remain within one stable or recognisable form. The bodies change, transform, and appear in different forms, and therefore they cannot always be understood as fixed or constant bodies.

Instead, the body takes different forms in different stories and becomes connected with different experiences of gender, sexuality, identity, desire, and memory. The body is therefore not presented in one fixed way because the body changes according to the experiences connected with it. In "Swandive", the transgender body challenges the idea that gender can be understood only through physical characteristics. The physical characteristics of the body are important, but they do not completely explain the experience of gender. In "Meena and Aparna", the body becomes connected with emotional intimacy and with a relationship that remains open to interpretation. The relationship is not given one fixed meaning, and the body is also connected with this uncertainty and emotional intimacy. "Throat" and "Come Back to Me" further challenge fixed ideas of the body by presenting figures that exist between familiar categories of the human, the animal, and the supernatural. Their bodies are difficult to place within one fixed category because they exist between different categories. "Love Song", meanwhile, connects bodily difference with memory, desire, and emotional attachment. The body in this story is connected with memory and desire, while desire is also connected with emotional attachment. These five stories therefore present the body in different forms and connect the body with different experiences. In this way, Som shows that the body does not always remain fixed or stable, but can take different forms and can be understood through different experiences of gender, sexuality, identity, desire, and memory.

What connects these different representations of the body is the visual form of the graphic novel. Som does not only describe bodies that are different from conventional bodily forms, but she also makes these differences visible through the images. The body is therefore shown as different, and this difference can be seen directly by the reader. The shape of the body, the appearance of the body, the physical features of the body, the movement of the body, and the positioning of the body all become important in understanding the characters and figures. These visual aspects of the body help the reader to understand how the body is different and why the body does not always fit within a familiar category. The reader can see the body and can see the bodily difference instead of only reading a description of the bodily difference. This makes the visual form important because the bodily difference becomes a direct part of the reading experience. The reader sees bodies that cannot always be placed within familiar categories, and because these bodies are difficult to place, the reader is also encouraged to question the fixed categories through which bodies are usually understood. In this way, the visual form makes the representation of the body more direct

and makes bodily difference an important part of how the characters are understood.

Through these different representations, Som expands the idea of queerness beyond a single form of identity. Queerness in *Apsara Engine* is not represented in only one way, but is represented through transgender identity, intimate relationships, unusual bodily forms, bodily transformation, desire, and the disruption of boundaries between the human and the non-human. These different representations are important because they show different forms of queerness and different ways in which queerness can be experienced. They also show that the body cannot always be understood through fixed categories. The body is not always the same and does not always remain within one fixed form. Instead, it can change, transform, experience desire, carry memories, and exist between different forms. The body can therefore become different in different situations, and these differences become important in understanding identity and queerness. The body therefore becomes one of the central spaces through which Som represents queerness. It is through the body that questions of gender, sexuality, identity, desire, and bodily normativity are brought together. Som therefore uses different forms of the body to question conventional ideas about the body and about identity. In this way, the body becomes an important space through which Som questions conventional ideas of gender, sexuality, identity, and bodily normativity.

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