



# Visual Narratives in Kalki's Poetry: The Intersection of Art and Activism

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**Abstract**— A well-known poet and activist named Kalki has successfully bridged the gap between art and activism with her poems by using a distinctive blend of visual storytelling. The paper examines the visual components that Kalki uses in her poems as effective vehicles for expressing social and political ideas. It does this by delving into the rich tapestry of her works. This study examines the complex interplay between art and activism in Kalki's work, giving insight into the poetry's ability to spark social change through in-depth analyses of a few poems. The poems selected for analysis include: "She", "Piece by Piece", and "Don't tell that to me".

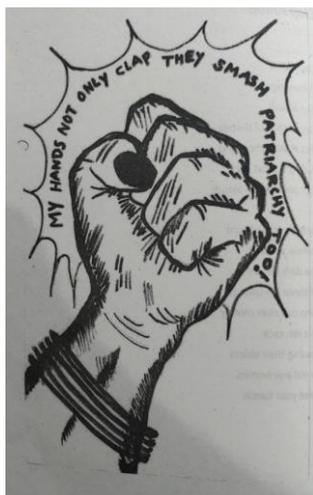
**Keywords**— Transgender Activism, Visual Narratives, Identity and Empowerment, Intersectionality in Poetry



## I. INTRODUCTION

"My hands not only clap they smash patriarchy too."

- Kalki Subramaniam



The above picture from the book takes on a profound significance. It underscores the interconnectedness of transgender liberation and the broader struggle against patriarchal structures that perpetuate discrimination and inequality. By asserting agency and empowerment, it

encourages transgender individuals to challenge and dismantle these oppressive norms actively. This statement signifies solidarity with the transgender community, emphasising that support goes beyond mere words to tangible actions. It encapsulates the spirit of resistance and determination to confront societal expectations that marginalise transgender individuals. Ultimately, it calls for a more inclusive and equitable society where all gender identities are respected, protected, and empowered to thrive. The mention of clapping signifies solidarity with the transgender community and their struggles.

Kalki, a prominent contemporary poet and activist, has gained recognition for their ability to craft poems that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also politically charged. The book "We Are Not the Others" uniquely portrays the triumphs, aspirations, and difficulties faced by the transgender population in India. This paper explores the visual narratives within Kalki's poetry, highlighting their work's seamless fusion of art and activism. By analysing specific poems, we aim to uncover how Kalki employs visual elements to convey their social and political messages.

## II. THE AESTHETICS OF KALKI'S POETRY

In Kalki's poetry, words transcend their usual role to become colourful landscapes painted with feelings, ideas, and social consciousness. This mesmerising union of aesthetics and activism is what makes her work so captivating. What distinguishes Kalki as a poet-activist inside the thread of their rhymes is the words themselves and how they are skillfully woven into visual stories. This distinctive fusion of literary skill and visual storytelling is a channel for conveying ideas that strike a chord in the reader's mind.

**Similes and Metaphors:** Kalki often uses similes and metaphors drawn from the realm of art, painting, and visual culture to evoke powerful emotions and insights in their readers. Their poetic canvas is painted with words that transcend the boundaries of traditional literary forms, creating a tapestry of visual and emotional experiences.

**Concrete Imagery:** The poet employs concrete, sensory-rich imagery to create mental pictures that stay with the audience, making the issues they address more relatable. Kalki's words can transport readers to the heart of the narratives they construct, enabling a profound engagement with the subjects of their activism.

**Synesthesia:** Kalki's poetry often triggers synesthetic experiences by intertwining sensory perceptions, such as blending colours with emotions or tastes with sounds. This synesthetic approach fosters a unique, multisensory engagement with their work, enriching the reader's understanding of the socio-political themes at its core.

**Symbolism:** Kalki frequently employs symbols and allegorical imagery with deeper socio-political connotations, enabling readers to connect with broader societal issues.

## III. THE INTERSECTION OF ART AND ACTIVISM IN KALKI'S POETRY

The title of the book "We Are Not Others" holds profound significance in the context of transgender activism. It encapsulates the essence of the struggle for transgender rights, recognition, and acceptance while challenging societal norms and prejudices. The title encourages people to see transgender individuals as human beings with their own experiences, emotions, and struggles. It promotes empathy and fosters understanding by highlighting the common humanity all share. In the realm of activism, the title serves as a rallying cry for transgender rights. It calls for equal treatment under the law, access to healthcare, protection from discrimination, and the right to live authentically. It demands that transgender individuals be afforded the same rights and opportunities as anyone else.

The poem "She" sheds light on the difficulties transgender people encounter in their search for freedom, acceptance, and a respectable life. It depicts the fight for financial survival, the value of self-affirmation, and freedom of expression. It is a potent reminder of the need for society to recognise, accept, and support transgender people.

**Visual Imagery:** The poem opens with vivid visual imagery describing the transgender woman's appearance. The reference to her "turmeric face" and the "crimson red Kungumam" on her forehead creates a striking picture, symbolising her identity and individuality. This imagery can be seen as a celebration of her gender expression and identity, highlighting the uniqueness of transgender individuals.

**The Street Performance:** The act of the transgender woman clapping, walking from car to car, tapping on the glass, and seeking monetary support from passers-by can be interpreted as a commentary on the economic challenges faced by many transgender individuals. Often, transgender individuals are marginalised in the job market, which can lead them to engage in street performances or sex work as a means of survival.

**The Symbolism of Freedom:** The lines, "They were all grim and caged, and trapped in their pasts and uncertain futures, she was the only one free and present," suggest a stark contrast between the transgender woman and the occupants of the cars. This juxtaposition can be seen as an allegory for the constraints and prejudices faced by transgender individuals in society. The transgender woman, despite her economic struggles, represents a form of freedom, authenticity, and presence that others may lack due to societal expectations and discrimination. The "rustling green saree" worn by the transgender woman symbolises her identity and femininity. Clothing choices can be significant symbols of gender expression and cultural identity, particularly for transgender individuals who may face societal expectations and stereotypes.

**Clapping for Herself:** The poem ends with the transgender woman clapping for herself, symbolising self-empowerment and resilience. This act can be seen as a statement of defiance against a society that often marginalises transgender individuals. It underscores the importance of self-acceptance and self-celebration in the face of adversity. It might be interpreted as a potent sign of self-acceptance and self-celebration. It emphasizes the value of resilience and self-affirmation in the face of difficulty.

The poem "Piece by Piece" can be analysed particularly concerning gender identity and the journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. The poem reflects the journey of a transgender individual. The poem opens with a

clear statement: "I am not a woman by birth." This line immediately addresses the issue of gender identity. The speaker acknowledges that they were assigned a gender at birth that did not align with their true identity. This is a common experience for many transgender individuals who may not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. The metaphor of a "shattered Rubik's cube" symbolises the complexity and fragmentation of their identity. The act of "collecting all of me" symbolises the process of coming to terms with oneself. LGBTQIA+ people often go through a process of self-discovery and acceptance as they gather the several aspects of their identity, including their body, mind, and spirit. The line "she wrote her own life script" highlights the agency and self-empowerment of the speaker. LGBTQIA+ individuals often forge their own paths, embracing their true identities and creating their own narratives in a world that may not fully understand or accept them. In an interview with Justice News, Kalki writes about this poem,

"Through this poem, I want to acknowledge the struggles of young queer persons around the world and inspire them towards hope and change."

In these last two lines,

"Farewell to the boy who was She,  
Welcome to the joy for all new Me.."

Here, the speaker bids farewell to the identity imposed upon them and welcomes the authentic self, which brings them joy and fulfilment. It beautifully encapsulates the essence of self-acceptance and the journey toward embracing one's true gender identity within the context of LGBTQIA+ experiences, particularly in the case of transgender individuals. These lines convey a sense of liberation, self-affirmation, and celebrating one's genuine identity.

The poem "Don't Tell That to Me" is an expressive representation of the experiences, feelings, and frustrations transgender people encounter when dealing with societal expectations, prejudices, and intrusive questions. It reveals the intense resentment caused by being assessed and classified based on outward appearances, whether one is accused of not seeming "transgender enough" or of being "brave" for living honestly. The poem eloquently draws attention to the scrutiny of voice and gender expression and the pressures put on transgender people to adhere to rigidly prescribed ideals. Additionally, it emphasises the need for respectful understanding by delving into the unpleasantness of dealing with intrusive and insensitive queries about one's personal history and family life. In the end, the poem challenges cultural conventions that marginalise or objectify transgender people by asserting the universal fact that they, too, are human beings deserving of dignity and equality.

The repeated phrase "I am tired of you" in the poem represents a sense of exhaustion and frustration that the speaker feels towards the societal expectations, judgments, and inquiries directed at them as transgender individuals. It encapsulates the emotional toll of constantly navigating and responding to others' perceptions and assumptions about their identity and experiences. It conveys a yearning for understanding, respect, and the freedom to exist authentically without constantly defending or explaining one's identity. The poem's concluding lines, "I am like you / I am Human too," serve as a powerful conclusion, reinforcing the idea that the speaker's transgender identity should not define them or limit their humanity. Instead, they assert their right to be treated as an equal and to be seen as a human deserving of empathy, respect, and dignity. These lines underscore the universal theme of the poem, which is the call for understanding, acceptance, and equality for transgender individuals within the broader framework of shared human experiences.

An effective link between the worlds of art and advocacy is made possible by Kalki's clever incorporation of visual narrative into her poems. This unique blending of artistic expression and social messaging captures the audience's attention. It provides a simple and powerful way to explain complex social and political ideas to a larger audience. Moreover, Kalki's approach can inspire future poets and activists. It acts as a torchbearer, illuminating the untapped potential of visual storytelling in art and advocacy. Aspiring artists and activists can learn from Kalki's craft, recognising that words alone need not bear the burden of conveying powerful messages. Visual narratives can be harnessed to enrich and amplify the impact of their work, allowing their creativity to catalyze social transformation.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Kalki's poetry is not confined to ink and paper; it transcends the page to create an immersive experience for readers. It beckons readers to step into a world where words take on the colours of revolution, the shapes of resistance, and the textures of empathy. The artist-activist within Kalki paints vivid scenes of societal change and challenges, inviting readers to inhabit these landscapes, to feel the emotions that saturate them, and to contemplate the profound questions they raise. In the poetry of Kalki, we witness the powerful convergence of art and activism through visual narratives. Their work serves as a testament to the capacity of poetry to challenge societal norms, convey messages of change, and inspire collective action.

In her Author's Notes to the collection, Kalki writes:

"Poetry and art give a richness to my life. They give beauty, strength and hope. They heal. I

couldn't have survived my tormenting teenage years without them.”

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