



In Search of 'Illusory' Wholeness: Urban Existence in Sarnath Banerjee's Graphic Novel *Corridor*

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Abstract

The parallel evolution of the modern city and comics is not a purely spatiotemporal coincidence. They are intertwined and complement each other. On the one hand, urban motif, self-portrayals, forms of urban cultural memories, and variant readings of the city (strolling, advertising, architecture, etc.) are all incorporated into comics. On the other hand, comics have unique abilities to capture urban space and city life because of their hybrid nature, consisting of words, pictures, and sequences. These formal aspects of comics are also to be found within the cityscape itself: one can see the influence of comic book aesthetics all around us today. Graphic novel, a term adopted by the publishing industry usually signifies a non-serialised book length comics meant for a mature readership. With globalization, Indian authors too resorted to this multimodal aspect of story-telling as it gave them more freedom of expression. Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *Corridor* captures the alienation and fragmented reality of urban life in Delhi through intersectional narratives of its characters. In this paper I will argue that all the fragmented characters in this novel seek to achieve 'illusory' wholeness which sets the stage for the depiction of urban existence in the Indian capital.

Keywords: Graphic novel, Alienation, Postmodern

India has a rich heritage of comics with Anant Pai at the midst of things taking the comics form to almost every literate Indian household, popularising it by infusing in it historical and mythological tales, thereby amalgamating education with entertainment. *Amar Chitra Katha* in no time sent the children of the nation in frenzy. Prior to this the *Indrajal Comics* and later *Diamond Comics* and *Raj Comics* found a permanent place at every child's leisure hour. Even though there was infiltration

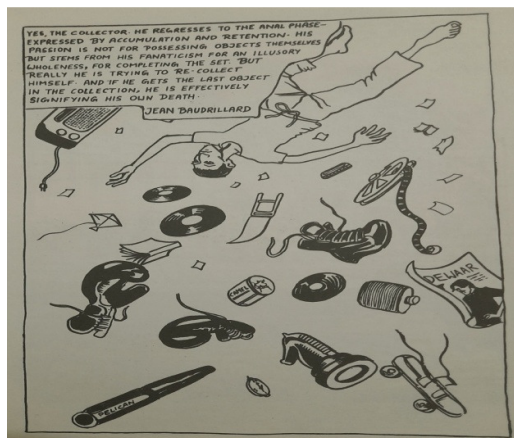
of western comics like the American *Archie* or Belgian *Tintin*, Indian comics had its own readership. But the transition in readership – from the children/ adolescents to the young adults, from the naive to the mature was slow. The graphic novel, a term that came to the fore in 1978 with the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*, is according to Eddie Campbell, “a synonym for comic books” (Campbell 13) whose narrative is usually “equivalent in form and dimension of a prose novel” (13). Hillary Chute on the other hand prefers the term “graphic narrative” over “graphic novel” (767). The target audience of the graphic novel is mature adults. The graphic novels that one comes across in India are more influenced by their American and European counterparts and the Japanese *manga* in form but the content and sensibility is exclusively Indian. The graphic novels published in India cater to a variety of important issues of social concern and, as Pramod K Nayar in his *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique* (2016) puts it, “have significantly contributed to the public cultural practises of the nation” (7) and “have documented lives and satirized contemporary Indian culture” (7). As an offshoot of popular culture, graphic novel is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural milieu it breathes in. In its potentials of engaging both verbal and visual perspectives of readers, graphic novel emerges as a double-edged dynamic genre. Its canvas offers an environment of encoded signs of cultural production. Representation in the graphic form becomes a tool of portraying people and situations in a more engaging manner. The vivid visuals as expressions of ideas are directly stimulating to the readers.

Sarnath Banerjee's first graphic novel, *Corridor*, published in 2004 was regarded by many as the country's first graphic novel. In reality, Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* published in 1994 which documented the ‘Narmada Bachao Andolan’ is the first Indian graphic novel in the true sense of the term. But, as the latter was published by Kalpavriksh, an environmental-action group working on environmental and social issues at local, national and global levels, it had a limited release and outreach, *Corridor* published by Penguin Books had a larger

readership thus encouraging quite a large number of graphic artists resulting in a surge of graphic narratives. *Corridor* in no time became a bench-mark for succeeding graphic novels for its realistic portrayal of urban existence in the Indian capital, through the overlapping stories of six men: Jehangir Rangoonwalla “enlightened dispenser of tea, wisdom and second-hand books” (Banerjee 2004 back cover); the book’s narrator, Brighu Sen, a postmodern urbanite looking for obscure collectibles and a love; Digital Dutta a C++ professional from Aptech who mostly “lives in his head , torn between Karl Marx and an H1-B visa” (Banerjee 2004 back cover); Shintu, a newly-married young man looking for aphrodisiac to enhance his libido; Prof. DVD Murthy, a forensic expert whose world revolves around Poison, Reggae and John Keats, in search of a perfect perfume that can get rid of “the smell of death” (33); and Angrez Bosch in search of *karma*. All the characters are in search of an ‘illusory’ wholeness which the present paper attempts to unravel taking into consideration the alienation and the fragmented reality of urban existence.

Corridor begins with the image of Connaught Place where the readers are introduced to Brighu Sen, an intellectual Bengali who have relocated from Calcutta to Delhi, is an obsessive collector of “seemingly innocent looking object[s]” (4) like old pens, rare books, “rare LPs of forgotten musicians” (5), Phantom Comics books, a 8mm camera and even his “grandfather’s gall-stone that killed him” (6). Brighu seeks to ‘complete’ his collection. In page 7 of the text under study, Brighu’s full body is shown inverted along with a large number of objects ranging from boxing gloves to a poster of an Amitabh Bachchan blockbuster duly supplemented by a quote from the postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard. In Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects* (1968) it is stated that the collector collects the objects not for possessing them but out of mere passion for “completing the set” (*Corridor* 7), to achieve a state of “illusory wholeness” (7). In *Corridor* the quest for wholeness is not merely connected to physical or social existence. It is an eternal search for metaphysical completeness. Pramod K Nayar in his

The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique (2016) opines that, “The image suggests an identity founded on ‘object-relations’, where material objects are not simply prostheses to identity but *constitutive* of Brighu’s identity itself ... The materiality of the objects draws attention to the forgotten pasts, and informs his (postmodern) present.” (53-54)



**Figure 1: Copyright© Sarnath Banerjee
(Source: Sarnath Banerjee, *Corridor*, Penguin Books
India, New Delhi, 2004, p.7)**

On good days, Brighu feels like Ibn Batuta. Ibn Batuta is a famous Moroccan traveller who visits and chronicles stories of alien lands. He is an alien to the lands he visits. Banerjee draws Brighu wearing the hat of Ibn Batuta at the inset panel of the third panel of page 25 suggesting the fact that Brighu too feels that Ibn Bauta is inside his soul and like Batuta he is an alien, a traveller and a chronicler. Brighu is seen “travelling” through the city meeting people, partying, and smoking dope or playing chess with Jehangir Rangoonwalla, the owner of a book stall at Connaught Place in central New Delhi whom he befriends when he visits the latter’s book stall looking for *Double Helix* and in the process he ends up taking into account the various insights the city of Delhi has to offer about its inhabitants. Towards the end of the novel we find Brighu drawing sketches of all the

characters whose stories we come across in *Corridor*. Brighu also includes himself in his sketches. (see Figure 2)

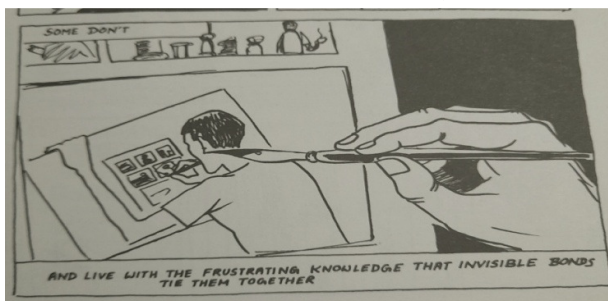


Figure 2: Copyright© Sarnath Banerjee

(Source: Sarnath Banerjee, *Corridor*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2004, p.107)

Ira Sarma in her essay “Negotiations of Home and Belonging in the Indian Graphic Novels *Corridor* by Sarnath Banerjee and *Kari* by Amruta Patil” calls this “a narrational whim, Brighu presents himself as a spectator [...] a classical position for the stranger who can observe from the outside and exhibit a certain ‘objectivity’ without, however, necessarily becoming passive or detached” (11). Brighu constantly juggles with his emotion for Kali, his temporary live-in girlfriend, a documentary film maker. He suffers from phobia of being committed to her on one hand and on the other Kali seems to be omnipresent in his psyche. Brighu returns to Calcutta when he wants to take a break from his relationship with Kali. For him his roots in Calcutta promise him emotional security in crisis rather than alien Delhi. Ironically, Brighu finds his ‘roots’ in an Elnore James record and in a Tintin comics book, as a poster of the Rolling Stones watches over him. Brighu also travels in Calcutta buying records at Free School Street or drinks at Olypub. In Calcutta, his passing affair with Gauri, whom he stalked at a deserted metro-rail compartment and later they meet at a common friend’s place, comes to a sudden halt when he felt a sudden pang: “But there is Kali” (100). (see Figure 3)

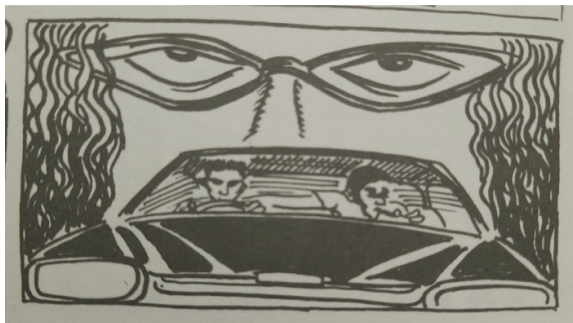


Figure 3: Copyright© Sarnath Banerjee
(Source: Sarnath Banerjee, *Corridor*, Penguin Books
India, New Delhi, 2004, p.96)

Returning to Delhi, confused to commit- “I love you but I’m not in love with you” (103), Brighu meets Kali, confesses his unfaithfulness and they part ways. His existential angst and disaffected ways are reflective of the condition of most urban dwellers. All the characters in *Corridor* cross each other at Jehangir Rangoonwalla’s book stall which according to him is “the centre of the universe” (14). Here we are introduced to Angrez Bosch who had arrived from Hrishikesh “armed with advanced knowledge of Energy Pyramids” (15) that taught him the secret about “mastering the *kundalini*” (15) He further intends to go for a *vipassana* course. By the time the novel ends, Bosch have completed “the full circle of Hatha Yoga, Tantrik sex and ayurvedic cooking” (109) only to realise that his real *karma* lies not in the spiritual quest of life but in web designing and he turns to New Castle.

Professor DVD Murthy’s obsession with the smell of death is from his first year at CMC Vellore, when he encountered the smell for the first time in his anatomy class. It remained as a trusted old friend. The smell “seeped through his skin, his hair, his terry cot shirt, into his soul” (32). He is introduced in *Corridor* reading aloud the seventh stanza of *Ode to a Nightingale* which also touches upon death. Death wish has become an obsession for him. Here, the readers find a man

whose home space faces a juncture of endearment because of his life in non-places. DVD Murthy's daughter cannot stand the odour of morgue and medicinal liquids emanating from her father. The more Murthy tries his best to come closer to his little daughter, the more the daughter runs away from him due to the odour. Murthy's occupation has driven a wedge between his daughter and him. He is unable to reconcile with his daughter, his only interest to return home because of the 'smell of death' that he carries home from a placeless space like morgue. Murthy feels incomplete without the endearing embrace of his seven-year-old daughter. Hence his search for a perfect antidote to counter the 'smell' began. He tried a variety of perfumes fruitlessly till he came across "ISIS" by Marks-n-Sparks that worked both for him and his daughter. Finally, Murthy feels to be at home.

Digital Dutta is the only character who is introduced in coloured pages while most of the narrative is illustrated in black and white which probably is a satire on the mundane existence in a city that is a detached observer. It can also be an approach to uphold a tradition of black and white strips. He too like Brighu Sen migrated to Delhi from Calcutta in search of job. Rangoonwalla narrates the story of an evening when Digital Dutta was sitting in a bench at Central Park Connaught Place, in a sort of sulky and uneasy silence, with love interest Dolly, whose father does not approve their marriage although he is a C++ professional. Dolly is eager to know about the status of his H1-B visa as the foundation of their marriage is based on the visa. It is pungent satire on the middle-class urbanites who in order to display pseudo-sophistication want to get their daughters married off to grooms who will settle abroad signifying wealth and status. They are confronted by anti-socials who make a comment about Digital's mother that hits him at the synaptic level. Jostling in his head are images of iconic mothers of Bollywood films: Nargis of *Mother India*, Nirupa Roy of *Deewar*, along with the leftist and communist icons from Mao to Jyoti Basu. Even Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose found a place there. They urge the "mild mannered rice-

eater” (37) into action and Digital beats them up. But the irony of postmodern living is that in the very moment the hero reached the zenith of his prowess; he is defeated by a mere mosquito. Digital Dutta also features in Banerjee’s *The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers*.

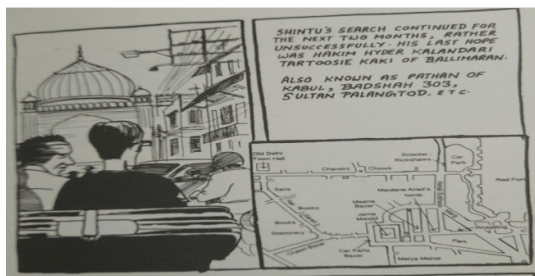


Figure 4. Copyright© Sarnath Banerjee
(Source: Sarnath Banerjee, *Corridor*, Penguin Books
India, New Delhi, 2004, p.75)

Next comes Shintu Sarkar, a newly-wed Bengali youth obsessed to heighten his sexual escapades with his wife, Dolly. He rents *Blondie in Bondage*, a film with pornographic content Kukreja Video Palace. On an opportune moment when his parents move out, Shintu indulges in “twenty minutes of quality sex” (51) with Dolly. The crisis begins thereon: “How come the man in the blue film was still at it?” (52) Shintu’s search begins for a perfect aphrodisiac. It takes him to the seedy by-lanes of Old Delhi, to the world of quack sexologists, plying their dubious trade. Banerjee very cleverly sketches the map of Old Delhi (see Figure 4). Shintu finds his ‘cure’ at Hakim Hyder Kalandari who offered him *sande ka tel*, “the oil that will awaken ten tigers that lay asleep inside Shintu” (78) in exchange of one thousand rupees. Later Shintu rues the loss of one thousand rupees when he finds out that *sande ka tel* is nothing but an ordinary hair oil. But he makes a priceless discovery: “sex is in the mind.” (101) Banerjee presents the act of sexual intercourse between Shintu and Dolly in a light hearted manner as a part of the sensuous experience of urban life. Foregrounding

a sensuous engagement with the urban experience in *Corridor* is a way of humanising the city.

Jehangir Rangoonwala owns a second-hand bookshop in the outer circle of Connaught Place. He calls it the “centre of the universe” (14), just as Connaught Place is at the centre of travellers’ mental maps of Delhi, Rangoonwala’s stacks of books between the Georgian pillars of Connaught Place are where each character in the novel wanders in, wanders out, shares a fragment of a personal quest before wandering away. Rangoonwala’s search for answers to life’s mysteries that continued for years reached a moment of epiphany in the elevator of a skyscraper in Nariman Point. Prior to that, he had changed forty odd jobs. Since that moment of enlightenment, Rangoonwala has taken to sharing tea and wisdom, along with the occasional joint or game of chess, with his regular string of customers at his bookstore.

Graphic novels as a propagator of urban modernity apart from mirroring different aspects of modern life, also adopt its aesthetics and cultural prerequisites. Every modern metropolis in the world has been made the subject of graphic novels spanning across continents. Notable among them are New York City, Berlin, Paris, London and Tokyo. At the same time, many fictional cities such as Superman’s Metropolis, Batman’s Gotham City and the New York City of Spider Man have found a place into the global cultural memory. There are aspects of the connection between cities and the graphic form. Firstly, the city becomes a subject. Secondly, the combination of words and images in the form of signage and graffiti can be found within the cityscape itself. Thirdly, the mass production and circulation upholds its links with forms of industrialization that are urban in origin.

At the centre of Banerjee’s graphic novel stands Delhi or “Power polis” (Ghosh 7). Vibhuti Prasad, the protagonist of Viswajyoti Ghosh’s graphic novel *Delhi Calm* rightly points out that “being there is a necessity, not a compromise. Connections, clubs, circles, circuits, opportunities...” (7) This makes the city a fertile subject for study. Throughout *Corridor* we find ample

illustrations of pubs, coffee shops, parties where social relationships thrive. In one of the panels, we come across Brighu Sen talking to a lady, who is a stranger, about his singlehood over a cup of coffee on another panel we find him dancing with another lady he had met moments ago. The party hosted by the funding agency in which Kali goes (22-23), clearly depicts the superficiality gnawing at the postmodern lives and times in a city space. Banerjee talks about uncharacteristically friendly people, “Kali, the extraordinary documentary filmmaker in the country”, “Veeny, the extraordinary veena player in the country”, “Badri, extraordinary folklorist”, “Jatin, extraordinary theatre activist” (23) and so on and so forth. The epithet “extraordinary” is used again and again only to point at the resurfacing unfamiliarity and surging flippancy of a foppish culture in a city life. The dominance of public sphere in city life, “the continuous proximity of others blurs the difference between public and private space. Private space for personal recreation and individual activity becomes smaller and smaller, while public space becomes a domain of often involuntary intimacy” (Jorn and Meteling 240).

Even though most of the images in *Corridor* are drawn in black and white panels, flashes of colourful panels come up every now and then. As stated earlier, Digital Dutta’s entire narrative is in colour where along with sketches elements of photographs, old film posters, and cut-outs from posters for school children are superimposed which provides a kitschy effect on one hand and on the other brings in “resource of intertextuality by simultaneously evoking various epochs, world settings, historical information and fictional events via explicit and hidden references.” (Adami, 91)

Shintu is introduced asking the price for *Message of Youth* at Rangoonwala’s book store. The cover page of the book is adorned with the photograph of a bodybuilder and at the background we have a thin, lean Shintu holding the book in his hands. This particular image sums up Shintu’s desire. Next, when Shintu visits the self-proclaimed aphrodisiac expert as Hakim Gulabkhus Peshawari, he is lectured on inculcation of

good habits, Banerjee cleverly juxtaposes with his artwork typical images from a moral science textbook or a chart on good manners available at every nook and corner of every Indian city. Another important aspect is the infusion of Hindi language with English in the poster probably hinting at heteroglossia. (see Figure 5)



Figure 5: Copyright© Sarnath Banerjee
(Source: Sarnath Banerjee, *Corridor*, Penguin Books
India, New Delhi, 2004, p. 65)

It is also interesting to find that in Banerjee's world all his characters are lonely. Rangoonwala strikes a conversation and dispenses wisdom only to his customers, who are mere acquaintances. They are like aeroplanes stopping for fuel at the airport. Bhriku has no friend. The only relationship about which he was serious was Kali but that too came to an abrupt end. Digital Dutta, Angrez Bosch and Professor DVD Murthy do not appear to have any friends. Only Shintu has a friend – Kedar who is also his close confidant. There is an obvious absence of emotional bonds in the narrative. People appear to be lonesome and isolated.

Banerjee in *Corridor* refuses to present a coherent narrative of urban existence in the Indian capital mainly because such coherence is a myth. Framing a city within panels, with its interrupted spatial continuity and temporal linearity, is a way of

acknowledging that a city is best understood in its fragments and glimpses. Henri Lefebvre shows how “simultaneity” as opposed to repetition is a defining trait of the urban. “The existence of simultaneity of events, perceptions and elements of a whole” (Lefebvre 137) applies to comic book as a montage. A single panel in a comic book can include a multitude of voices and perspectives existing simultaneously.

Through recurrent images of public spheres, places devoid of belonging and places marked by non-places, Banerjee portrays the fragmented urbanity in contemporary Delhi. But still there is an attempt for reconciliation, an attempt for achieving an organic whole towards the end. Brighu, graphic illustrator by profession, draws the faces of his acquaintances. From Rangoonwalla’s eccentric centre-of-the-universe theorem the reader finds himself moved away further and further into the cosmic design of attaining, achieving an organic whole: the urge for us to be together, to be social, to come full circle. Towards the end, one will find an authorial voice speaking: “Amidst all this sits Mr Rangoonwalla, in his ‘centre of the universe’, sipping tea, selling Asimovs, giving advice” (111), and along with it, in a speech bubble, while planning his next chess move, Rangoonwalla comments: “People are like onions, baba. They have layers and layers. But who will know? Who has time?” (111). The truth lies in the fact that a panoptic view of the city of Delhi would allow us to see Connaught Place as a beautiful set of concentric circles, a coherent schematic. But we live on the ground, in difficult cities, we go around in circles, we get lost in the corridors, stumble upon a bookshop, linger and wander away. The idea of achieving wholeness is merely an illusion.

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