

**Postmodern Simulation and Graphic Narrative in Sarnath Banerjee's  
*Corridor: A Graphic Novel***

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**Introduction**

In this ever-altering and ever transmuting age of technological modernity, writers and artists are ceaselessly searching for new mediums that can reach out to the reader in the most intimate and most effective way possible. And for this reason graphic narrative comes out of the dilapidated shady "closet" of the clichéd form of traditional narrative techniques and serves the purpose of the composite culture of this postmodern era precisely, where everything is presented in a topsy-turvy way, where the face of an individual is imagined as a mouse, or a pig, or a cat (as conspicuous from Art Spiegelman's magnum opus *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*,<sup>1</sup> or where multiple selves and voices of people are compared with "onions" with multiple layers as cleared from Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *Corridor: A Graphic Novel*. But unfortunately, with the evolution of the graphic narrative, the gradual evolution of looking at it from a distance and accumulating hatred for it started to grow as well. It is a well-known fact that, what does not fit into this comparatively "normative" (so called "heterosexual") world is counted as "other," we tend to neglect the sexual, biological, social orientation of the "different" kind of people by cornering them with the aid of our age-old ideologies and ethos. Same is the case with the graphic narrative technique, it is not regarded as traditional literature since it contains pictures; nor has it been assigned a place with painting since it contains written (typed) words. This undetermined status of the comic narrative goes remarkably with the flexible elastic identity of the composite culture of

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on postmodern techniques and graphic narrative, see Art Spiegelman, *Manus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1991).

the postmodern era. Hirsch (2004), while speculating on the issue of the absurdity of the graphic narrative style, says that the medium of graphic narrative can capture the “visual-verbal literacy [that] can respond to the needs of the present moment” (p. 1212). Graphic narrative can be defined as a medium that amalgamates words and art to represent the world around and is said to “embody a seriousness of purpose that goes against the essential lightness of the cartoon mode” (Orvell, 1992, p. 111).

In this postmodern context the influence of “avant-garde”<sup>2</sup> literature triggers the problem of alienation and existential crisis with the aid of an ontological question: “who am I?” This question does not actually try to search for an answer; rather, it questions the very “being” of the person. In the world of images (as the graphic narratives do) we can also find the ubiquitous presence of this question in the form of “icons,” “pictures,” and “abstractions” as clearly manifested by McCloud in his masterpiece *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Some say that comics is the best way to depict the devastated and fragmented postmodern condition of human civilization because of its power of abstraction. While talking about this abstraction McCloud (1993) brilliantly points out that “iconic abstraction is only one form of abstraction available to comics artists” (1993, p. 50). Now the question is what is this “iconic abstraction”? An “icon” can represent anything, it can be a letter, a word, a sign, an image, a picture of an image, a portrait, a picture of a portrait drawn by someone; anything.<sup>3</sup> But, according to McCloud this iconic abstraction is something that does not need detailed manifestation; a simple letter can be an example of iconic abstraction. The structural approach of iconic representation of a word (rather “word image”) enables us to accept the representation of iconic abstraction more blindly like a simple text containing written or printed (typed) words.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For the notion of the term “avant-garde,” see M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham, *A Handbook of Literary Terms* (New Delhi, India: Cengage Learning, 2009), p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> For the details of the term “icon,” see Charles S. Peirce’s *Semiotics*.

<sup>4</sup> For the detailed study of structuralism, see Jonathan Cullers, *Structural Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), pp. 9-23.

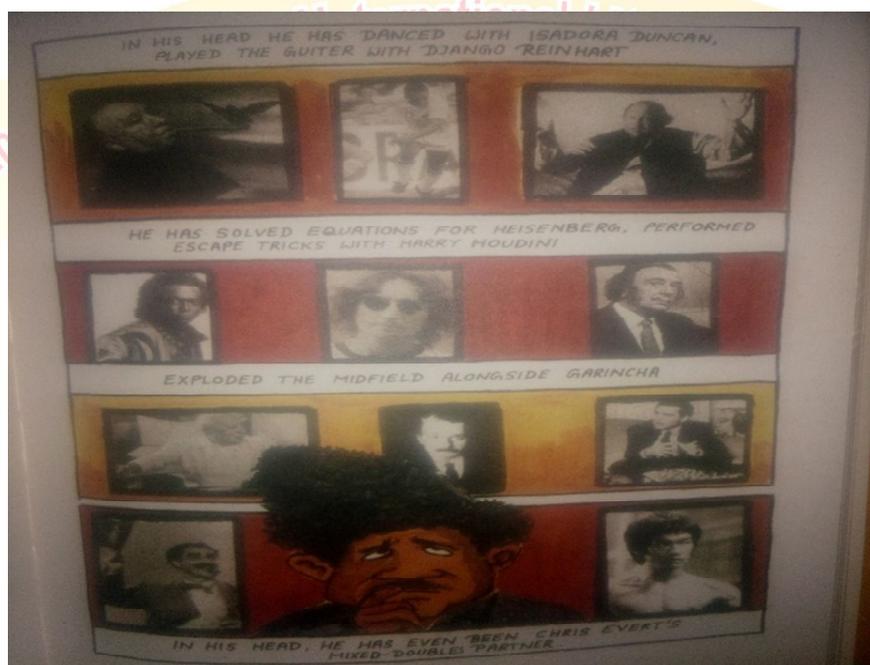


Figure 1: Representation of the strangeness of images and icons in McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (p. 26)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> From *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, (p. 26), by Scott McCloud, 1994, New York, NY: Harper Perennial. Copyright 1993 by Copyright Holder. Reprinted with Permission.

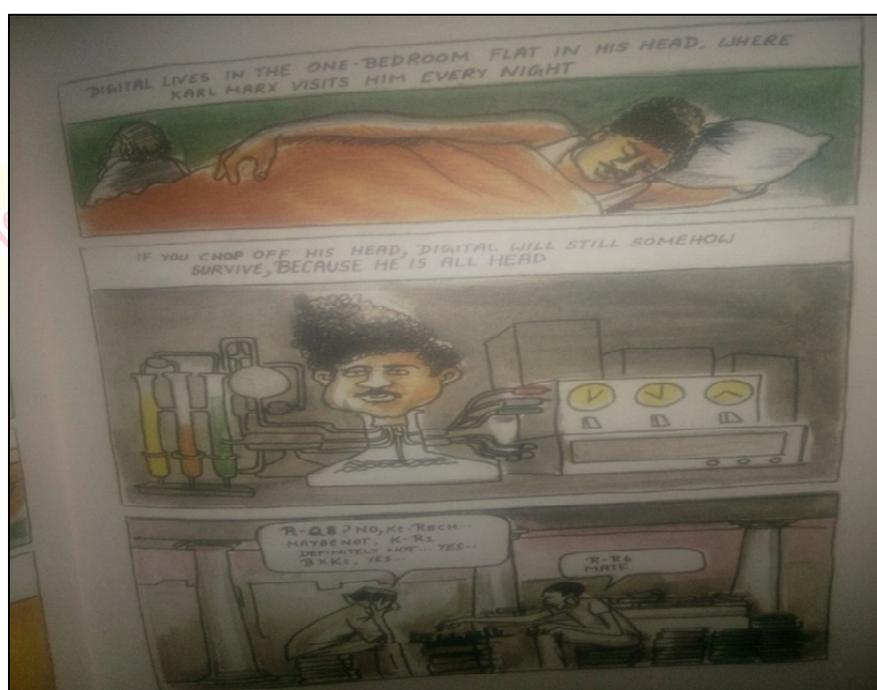
### Representation of Postmodern Simulation and Graphic Narrative in *Corridor: A Graphic Novel*

In his graphic novel *Corridor* Banerjee portrays Digital Dutta (one of the main characters of the novel) in a humourous way. Digital Dutta is the kind of person who is an avid reader, a true seeker of knowledge as Banerjee (2004) says that, "torn between Karl Marx and H-1B visa, Digital Dutta lives in his head...in his head he is a faith healer, a quantum physicist, a war reporter, a linguist and a kalari expert." (p. 40). Banerjee



illustrates Digital Dutta more humourously by showing that the head of Digital is constituted with numerous cables, wires and chemical funnels justifying his name (i.e. "Digital"). So, if Banerjee had not chosen graphic narrative as a "medium" to convey this "message" then what would happen? Readers would certainly have no notion about the actual identity of Digital Dutta, or probably they would have imagined him in a

traditional way, readers would have pictured him in their brains like a “normal” human being. Readers would definitely not think about him in this way. That is the magic of comics, it enables us to imagine the unimagined, to tell the untold, to see the unseen and to unveil the veil of traditional normativity by deconstructing the very structure of traditional narrative form. Again, Banerjee says that Digital is so engrossed with knowledge that if somebody chops off his head, he will still somehow survive,



because he is all head. Needless to say, with the representation of Digital Dutta, Banerjee brings out the utter hollowness of the postmodern composite culture.

Figure 2: *Corridor* (p. 41)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> From *Corridor: A Graphic Novel*, (p. 41), by Sarnath Banerjee, 2004, New Delhi, India: Penguin Books. Copyright 2004 by Copyright Holder. Reprinted with Permission.

Figure 3: Representation of Digital Dutta in a comical manner (p. 43) <sup>7</sup>

One can raise a very pertinent question here; what does a postmodern literature do? Does it always show a fragmented, machine-like identity of human beings or does it portray a calm and serene (virtual) world? We can answer this question with the aid of a well-known play called *Endgame* by a postmodern playwright Samuel Beckett. In his play *Endgame* Beckett strikes the destabilized condition of the society with the aid of Clov, one of the four characters of the play, who promises himself at the beginning of the play by saying: "finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished." Now, if we look at the title of the play we will be surprised to know that, in the game of chess, from which Beckett's play takes its title, the endgame is not the end of the game, but the game of ending that forms part of it and may be looked towards from the beginning, same is the case with postmodernism. T. S. Eliot once said that "in my beginning is my end...in my end is my beginning."<sup>8</sup> By saying so Eliot probably tried to address the insalubrious absurd identity of postmodern world. To speak the truth, postmodernist thinking has typically reacted with suspicion to the idea of origins. While talking about the "ending" of a "beginning," Sheehan (2004) says:

As first cause or foundation, an origin—a transcendental ground to which all subsequent phenomena must pay obeisance—resurrects the deity that the "death of God" supposedly vanquished. This resistance to origins is matched by a much messier obsession with "ends." Postmodernist endings are not so neat as the term suggests, however. They are thorny recalcitrant, at the very least placing certain practices or instruments of thought off-limits; at most, the latter are rendered fallacious, untenable, "no longer possible." (p. 20).

We all know that a postmodern text endorses a strange, non-linear narrative pattern; and Banerjee's *Corridor* is not an exception. It switches between the tales of different

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<sup>7</sup> From *Corridor: A Graphic Novel*, (p. 43).

<sup>8</sup> See T. S. Eliot's poem "East Cocker."

characters. It depicts the presence of multiple layers of its characters being gradually peeled off like an onion as conspicuous from the magnificent speech of Jehangir Rangoonwalla: "people are like onions, baba" (p. 111). The narrative of the text also manifests the same issue. It deconstructs the traditional way of perceiving as well as depicting the incidents chronologically. It fundamentally focuses on putting the unconventional facts, images, words and doodles together into a sequential-pattern which, needless to say, unwittingly parallels the topsy-turvy nature of postmodernism. Comics, and by extension graphic novels, rely on a set of conventions, and navigating these conventions requires readers to possess and apply a robust repertoire of information literacy skills. Eisner (2008) wrote, "In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language-a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the "grammar" of sequential art" (8).

Now, the structure of the book *Corridor* is very interesting from the perspective of postmodernism. At the centre of the book sits Rangoonwalla, enlightened dispenser of tea, wisdom and second-hand books. He talks about some mysterious (sometimes obscure), insignificant, bizarre facts with his customers over a cup of tea or with the occasional joint or game of chess at his bookstore. One of his "strange" customers is Brighu, who imagines himself as Ibn Batuta on his good days, who suffers from a certain (rather peculiar) kind of "existential crisis"<sup>9</sup> which unanimously typifies the existential angst of the Bengali "bhadroloks" (i.e. gentlemen). Unable to commit to his documentary filmmaker girlfriend Kali, Brighu wanders around Delhi looking for rare books until he stumbles upon Rangoonwalla's shop. To a certain extent we can smell the scent of autobiographical flavour in the portrayal of Brighu Sen; as we all know that like Brighu, Mr. Banerjee too moved from Calcutta to Delhi. Apart from Brighu and

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<sup>9</sup> For more elaboration on the term existentialism, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press), p. 17-72.

Digital, there is another important character called Shintu, who, being obsessed with sex, reads *Cosmo* for new and unknown tips about sex. Newly married Shintu, unable to satisfy his wife in bed, visits the seedy, rather shady, egregious by-lanes of Delhi for aphrodisiacs. And while searching for the aphrodisiacs he stumbles upon the worn-out place of a hakim called Tartoosie who rebukes him for his “bad character” and advises him to quit his “nocturnal pollution” and become an “Ideal Boy”. He gives Shintu a tiny bottle of “sande ka tel” (i.e. a pale extract from the bile of rare lizard), and says that “the oil that will ten tiger that lay sleeping inside Shintu; restore his original role as hunter-gatherer” (p. 78). But at the end he realizes that what he thought as “sande ka tel” is nothing but an ordinary hair oil. At this point, needless to say, a major epiphany occurs which says, as Banerjee establishes, “sex is in the mind, silly;” though Shintu is more conscious about the loss of his thousand rupees than this ‘real’ fact.

Throughout the novel the metaphor of corridor unfolds from the very first onset where Brighu is seen walking into Connaught place. Jehangir Rangoonwalla is shown to be a metaphorical covering point through which Brighu discovers all the stories he narrates as the story proceeds further. The symbolism of corridor not only forms the spine of the narration but is continued throughout the novel. It also not only exposes everyday life like a corridor, but also highlights the uncertainty such life might bring. In the novel Banerjee represents postmodernist and graphic narrative that visualize the everyday lives of metropolitan cities in a self-reflexive, humourous and ironical way. The notion of “new” metropolises alludes to the multilayered ways of life inside and outside, or even “downside,” of postcolonial city spaces, e.g. Calcutta, Delhi, Mumbai, etc. where tradition, modernity and postmodernity collide in the most unrelenting and dynamic fashion.

Now the question is why does Banerjee choose Delhi and Calcutta as the setting of the novel? This question obviously poses plethora of other important questions, like, why does Banerjee show the “strange urbanity” in his novel? Why does he choose

Rangoonwalla as his mouthpiece to portray the sadistic sardonicism of urban people in his text? Why does he present his characters in his novel in a serio-comical way? To speak the truth, probably he is trying to search for an answer for all these questions in his novel, probably he is trying to show the actuality of the destabilized monotony of the urban people and the pseudo-confused aura of them with the aid of the characters like Digital Dutta, Jehangir Rangoonwalla, Brighu Sen and Shintu. Each of them typifies the pseudo-intellectual dilettanteism of the "hyper-real"<sup>10</sup> urban culture and justifies the aptness of their existence. Nayar, a remarkable Indian critic, draws our attention to the Urban Graphics and "psycho geography" in his critical book *The Indian Graphic Novel: Nation, History and Critique*. Nayar (2016) examines the spaces of horror in *The Harappa Files*<sup>11</sup> and *Corridor (The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers)*, and spaces of desire and gynecological gothic in *Kari*.<sup>12</sup> He states: "the subtexts of these narratives generate a critical literacy about the reality behind a confident urban India" (p. 77).

### **Conclusion:**

Last but not the least, Sarnath Banerjee deviates from the dilapidated destructive tradition of "ut pictura poesis"<sup>13</sup> (i.e. as is painting, so is poetry). The temporal space that a graphic narrative ushers is fundamentally grappled with the "spatial turn" of the postmodernity in Banerjee's *Corridor*. He liberates art from the snare of time and space which is peculiar to graphic narratives. Actually, postmodern space flattens into two-dimensional and it refuses the "seriousness" of modernist space. Baudrillard, after looking out at the built environment of Los Angeles's downtown, says: "All around, the tinted glass facades of the buildings are like faces: frosted surfaces. It is as though there were no one inside the buildings, as if there were no one behind the faces. And there *really* is no one. This is what the ideal city is like." In his graphic narrative *Corridor*

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<sup>10</sup> For an elaboration of the term "hyper-real," see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, in *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 166-184.

<sup>11</sup> See Sarnath Banerjee, *Harappa Flies* (New Delhi, India: Harper Collins, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> See Amruta Patil, *Kari* (New Delhi, India: Harper Collins, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> For more information on "Ut pictura poesis" and mimetic representation of reality, see Horace's *Ars Poetica*.

Banerjee depicts the pictures of the urban culture by showing two different (apparently) “unreal cities” called Calcutta and Delhi. We can say that the glimpses of these cities that have been portrayed by Banerjee are rather the mimetic, simulated, self-duplicating surfaces of repelling desire itself. The frustrated façade of urbanity (both Calcutta and Delhi) connotes the flexible, concocted, virtual (rather artificial) space of Baudrillard’s Disneyland.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, these “unreal cities” are the diffusion of the “real fakes” of the Disneyesque simulacra as conspicuous from the comment of Soja (1996):

Over the past thirty years...these “real fakes” have escaped from their formerly circumscribed territories and manufactories to infiltrate more deeply than ever before into the intimate everyday life of postmodern urban society, economy, polity, and culture. In these new secular sites and situations, the hypersimulations of urban reality have been blurring...the older distinctions between our images of the real and the reality itself, inserting into the confusion a hyperreality that is increasingly affecting where we choose to live and work, what we wear and eat, how we vote for, how we shape our built environment, how we fill our leisure time-in other words, all the activities that together constitute the social constructions of urban life. (p. 451)

Unanimously, the idea of “disorder” (as prevalent in the postmodern era) is also incorporated by Banerjee in his magnum opus *Corridor*. It disseminates the multiplicity of human minds, hybridity of cultural discourses and proliferation of utter hollowness in the apparent exhilarating countenance of blithe soul. This is the untold magic of Banerjee, this is the unseen vision of postmodernism, and eventually, this is the unspoken truth of hyper-real society.

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<sup>14</sup> For further information on “virtual reality” and “Disneyland,” see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

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