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Critiquing the Urban Culture in Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor*

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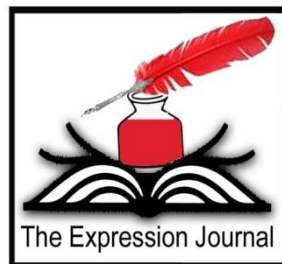
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Abstract

In the nineties, liberalization of economy goes a long way to impact life in totality, especially in the developing countries like India. Visibly, the process of liberalization has not only created a class in economic terms, increasing, consumerist and commercial instincts but also makes it a part of the global discourse. It has facilitated migration from rural areas as well as from smaller towns to the bigger or metropolitan cities, offering better opportunities of comfortable life in materialistic terms. In the pursuit of materialistic life, people leave their homes and families for attractive urban spaces though the new space does not allow them social life, except freedom of profession and consumption. The graphic novel as an avant-garde voice in the Indian literary landscape takes up this issue for discussion. Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *Corridor* not only suggests the marginalized position of family in the current times but also foregrounds the struggle of an individual for home in the new settings. The cultural changes create an atmosphere of alienation, despair, fragmentation of life, identity crisis. The novelist uses fragmented plot to display their fragmented existence.

Keywords

Neo-Liberalism, Consumerism, Masculinity, Alienation Identity Crisis, Home



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In the nineties, liberalization of economy goes a long way to impact life in totality, especially in the developing countries like India. It is claimed that the process of liberalization has not only created a class in economic terms, increasing, consumerist and commercial instincts but also makes it a part of the global discourse as well. It facilitates migration from rural areas as well as smaller towns to the bigger or metropolitan cities, offering better opportunities of comfortable life in materialistic terms. In the pursuit of materialistic life, people leave their homes and families for lucrative urban spaces though the new space does not allow them social life, except freedom of profession and consumption. Obsessed with dreams and desires, they migrate to greener pastures metro spaces and desperately try to find meaning of life in the new settings but fall in conflict with the new value system as created by neo-liberalism.

In India, the family has long been considered a touchstone to assess social transformation in India and the traditional family models, though are disappearing in current times occupy the centre-stage in many literary productions. As a genre, the graphic novel has come to verify the "gradual erasure of age old beliefs in kinship ties, ancestral locations and the genealogies of caste and creed" (Lal and Kumar x). In the context of migration to the city, Sarnath Banerjee's the graphic novel *Corridor* suggests the marginalized position of the family as home. In the novel, a young urban intellectual moves to Delhi in search of better life and comfortable home but he finds himself stranger in the crowded metropolitan city. His "strangeness" needs to be overcome both on a spatial and social plane, but the absence of close-knit relationships, it becomes rather difficult for home to forge a sense of belongings.

In India, the family is still widely hailed as an ideal social arrangement where an individual can have a sense of belongingness but Indian graphic narrative experimental in nature constitutes a cosmopolitan "alternative space" (Mehta 173). for home and family. But in fact it is not easy to establish home in the city as a prototypical site of anonymity and estrangement. And for a new migrant it is rather difficult to have a feeling of home. An individual in such a situation is supposed to forge compromise with the new setting in order to

lead a comfortable life in both material and spiritual terms. In the city, it is easy to feel lonely and isolated in the midst of a crowd, and an individual becomes a stranger even in his/her home in new settings. As the protagonist, Bhirgu Sen in *Corridor* observes “In this city, no one talks. Everyone guards their sanity against the grief of strangers” Brighu, the main character of *Corridor*, confirms: “The city is about anonymity. Some people ... meet, talk, part. Some don’t” (107).

Banerjee’s *Corridor* faithfully and aesthetically portrays the urban existence mainly through the overlapping stories of a half a dozen male characters, namely Jehangir Rangoonwala, a dispenser of tea, second-hand books and wisdom, Bhirgu Sen, the narrator and collector of assorted artifacts, Digital Dutta, a C++ professional from Aptech who mostly “lives in his head, torn between Karl Marx and an H1-B visa; Shintu is looking for herb to enhance his sex performance. Prof. DVD Murthy, a forensic expert, struggling hard to forge meaningful relationship with his seven year daughter and Angrez Bosch in search of *karma*. All these characters live in their own make-believe world, away from the world of realities.

In *Corridor*, Brighu, a migrant from Calcutta, lives alone in a small, isolated flat in South Delhi which is occasionally shared by his girlfriend, Kali. The word ‘*barsati*’ as used for the flat refers to such a flat which serves a shelter from the rain, not a shelter from suffering. Abandoning the flat, he moves and travels through the city to seek meaning of life in strange things and places while meeting casual friends and having coffee, partying and smoking dope or playing chess. Failing to develop intimate relationships in the outside world, he shares a physical space with persons like Kali and Rangoonwala but it does not mean that he is sharing mental space with them. In the big cities, an individual, especially new person feels lonely and becomes stranger even in the midst of a crowd.

In the age of mass migration for better life, family and intimate relationships go to the background. On his own Bhirgu moves to Delhi from Calcutta in search of better life opportunities, leaving behind his family and other intimate relationships. But in the new city needs genuine relationships to escape the harshness and anonymity of big cities, however he gets alternative space at other places but relationships at these places are superficial as governed by material considerations. To escape the pains of privations, he regresses to the past while collecting “seemingly innocent looking objects like old pens, rare books, rare LPs of forgotten musicians Phantom Comics books and his “grandfather’s gall-stone that killed him” (6). He is so obsessed with these articles that he does not use them for a long time, fearing the extinction of their existence. It is assumed that he is collecting these objects out of fanaticism for “an illusory wholeness” (7) and by doing this, he is regressing to the anal phase which is “expressed by accumulation and retention” (7). His girlfriend, Kali considers him “a little crazy” (8).

Suffering from an acute sense of alienation, Bhirgu is busy collecting these articles to connect himself to the outside world as all the clutter that he has collected seems to be giving him a sense of belongingness. The fact is that this strange collection not only evinces his material desire but also speaks of his desire to have a sense of belongingness but these inanimate objects could not replace the intimate human relationships. After the breakup with Kali, he gets into a state of depression and decides to spend some time with his family. On the train to Kolkata a co-passenger reminds him of the importance of close-knit family ties, reoffering to such words as “roots’ and “ancestry.” Realizing the importance of intimate relationships, he tells Kali: “I love you but I’m not in love with you” (103). The writer uses the

typically blank white background to reinforce Brighu's sense of dissatisfaction and disconnectedness.

Shintu Sarkar, recently married, lives in the dirty small streets of old Delhi, but he has massive insecurities about his own sex life. To seek solution of insecurities, he moves from pillar to post, including Hakim as for to him it is matter of shame and stigma in social sense. Shintu outwardly seems happy but he is little apprehensive and insecure of sex life within wedlock which is evident in the way Shintu and Dolly "played scrabble" (49) on the first night but for his mother it is "a good sign" (50). The problem of Shintu seems to be rooted in the way he learns of sex from books, not in a natural way. To make his married life more exciting he buys a book "BLONNDE IN BONDAGE" (50) from the market. Being alone at home, Shintu finds an opportunity to do "something amatory about an empty house" (51) but contrary to the guarantee of "Twenty minutes of quality sex" (51) that the CD gives Shintu fails at it, wondering how a man in the blue film is "still at it" (51). On the other hand, Shintu's father attributing acidity as the root cause of this sexual incompetence. Shintu's seemingly incompetence at sex causes in him feelings of fatigue, disenchantment, creating "permanent worry lines...on his forehead" (53). Finding almost no way to bring about cheerful changes in his life, Shintu feels so much "distant, disengaged" (53).

On the other hand, Hakim gives a forty years experienced look. He tries to draw attention of Shintu towards the fact: "See, masturbation causes premature ejaculation" (58). Further he ascribes the sexual problems to "cinema, film magazine, western literature lead to dirty thoughts and young men waste precious semen in their own hands" (58). The Hakim tries to draw his attention, stating that too much masturbation would make him weak, mental and exhausted. Shintu gets a tiny bottle of oil extracted from the bile of a rare lizard and keeps it the rest room, hiding it from his mother. As things take a dramatic turn, a distinct change is noticed in Shintu's personality and his wife seems happy, and everything is going fine for him, though the oil is applied by the maid on her head that leads to her hair loss. But he makes a priceless discovery that: "sex is in the mind." (101).

Murthy is the Head of the Department of Medical Jurisprudence and Forensic Sciences. Every evening around eight, he turns hard, performing an autopsy at nine. Murthy is obsessed with the smell of death received from autopsy from his first year at CMC Vellore and it keeps staying with it is if were his trusted friend. It is "seeped through his skin, his hair, his terry cot shirt, into his soul" (32). Smell of death seems to an integral part of his earthly existence. His is so obsessed with death that it has become for him "rich to die" (29). Death as "darkling" (29) takes away from lively life. For the last 28 years death is staying with him "like a trusted old friend" (32). For her daughter, the smell is so dreadful and nauseating that she runs away as and when she finds him in her proximity. He reads aloud a stanza from the poem "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats that deals with the theme of death. But his tender daughter cannot stand the odour of autopsy and medicines that comes from the clothes as well as body of her father.

The smell is so nauseating that she runs away from him as he tries to come closer to her. Dissatisfied with his work he moves to his home but his presence with foul smell repels his daughter. He even wishes to have taken as his profession psychiatry instead. The writer uses his character to suggest a dark urban space hidden under the façade of beauty and bounty. Obsessed with the smell of death he makes the statement, "Verse, fame and beauty are intense indeed. But death intenser—Death is life's high meed" (27). Though he does not like this job, he does it in order to survive in city space. Banerjee suggests a dark urban space hidden under the

city's good looks. The city has turned him to be a dead man. The darkness and sadness surround him and make him more gloomy. He escapes from the dark and sordid reality of urban existence, listening to music and talking philosophical. It is obvious that his profession is marring his relationship with his daughter. Finally she happens to locate a variety of perfumes to drive away the stinking smell from the persona of her father.

Digital Dutta, another isolated individual, is introduced as someone who "lives mostly in his own head" (40) and is described as an individual "confused between Karl Marx and H1-B visa" (40). Torn between the aspirations of his in-laws and his own wishes he represents two world views, communism and capitalism respectively. He is caught between what he as an individual wishes and the social dictates. He is shown as a typical city dweller who sits with his girlfriend in the park, which has become a typical city scene as couples use public space as their own due to the restrictions in their house. At the same time, he carries multiple assignments of his head "as a faith healer, a quantum physicist, a war reporter, a linguist and kaleri expert" (40). He seems to be 'a jack of all trades but master of none.' Born in Calcutta, climbed Everest several times. At the age of 12 he discovered...smuggled Bactrien comets to Rukhana, by At 15 came to know the name of every street in Prague. Presently Digital Dutta is living in the one-bedroom flat where in bed Karl Marx visits him every night. The writer makes fun of him saying that If you chop his head, he will survive because "he's all head" (43). Dutta finds an opportunity to sit with his love interest Dolly in a park, though her father does not approve their marriage. 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 a bitter 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.

Angrez Bosch, with an existential crisis, wanders around to find solace. Having a round of Rishikesh, he visits the spot of Rangoonwala. Though he "armed with advanced knowledge of Enery Pryramids" (15), He is in search of meaning of life in spiritualism and for that he plans to visit Igatpur for a ten-day Vipassana Meditation course to experiment with truth. The city "is bursting with my sorts" (22). Bosch moves from place to place: Rishikesh to Igatpur for a Vipassana Meditation course. Bosch again represents a similar tone of loss, lack of content and quest for "wholeness" like Brighu and Rangoonwala. Bosch have completed "the full circle of Hatha Yoga, Tantrik sex and ayurvedic cooking" (109) only to realize that his real karma lies not in the spiritual quest of life but in web designing.

The entire narrative moves around the tea stall and library of second-hand books owned by Jehangir Rangoonwala on the periphery of CP, New Delhi. It is located on the margins away from the centre of the CP that boasts of sky-touching business establishments and malls. The shop is presented "The Centre of the Universe" (113-121) and the proprietor, Jehangir Rangoonwala, is the "Cyrus of Second-Hand Books" (14). In the absence of intimate relations, almost all the characters, frustrated and isolated in the big city, halt at the shop, considering it an alternative source of solace from sordid and seedy existence of city life. The story of Ranggonwala is no different from that of the ones who frequent and ferry the shop. The Book shop along with tea stall plays a major role in the novel as it is the place which provides different perspectives on city life. Rangoonwala tells Brighu, "People are like an onion, baba...They have layers and layers... but who will know... who has time?" (111). Banerjee paints a picture of a city through the analysis of urban complexity, the portrayal of urban chaos and the positioning of characters in an urban setting.

Almost all the characters are without stable homes/ families and jobs and if one or two of them do have, they are not satisfied with their position in the family and outside world as capitalism has increased their desire but they are provided with limited means to satisfy their desires. With different stories to narrate they come from different places but their narratives are interconnected in one way or the other. Migrated from different socio-cultural backgrounds, they struggle for space in new settings to settle and search meaning of life. It is the materialistic pursuit that drives them towards the big cities to upgrade their life style at the cost of intimate familial relationships but they suffer from an acute sense of loneliness in new settings where relations are governed by consumerism in the wake of monetization of culture. The struggle of these characters provides insight of the complexities of Indian society and its numerous difficulties through their distinctive lenses. Corridor shows how characters function within the urban socio-cultural space and can be read through the lens of postcolonial identities. As Peter Middleton and Tim Woods argue in postmodern literature, “an urban area is envisioned as always varying, constantly under negotiation, perpetually decentralized, and structured by altering simulations” (Middleton and Woods 307).

Contextualized in the contemporary times in the pre-net era, the novel shows several socio-cultural and technological changes that govern human life, depriving him of real social and familial life. The writer critiques the urban culture by stating that only warriors can attain the dignified space in urban culture as it is a culture of completion and competition. The novel presents the urban inhabitant as the “urban warrior” (1) to survive but contrary to the common perception, only “hardcore” ones survive. Though they think that they are at the centre but they ferry the margins. In the novel, the CP stands for the central space where different corridors, shopping complexes are vying. The setting of the novel is in the central space but it is used to narrate the stories of peripheral characters. Corridors stand for individuals from diverse backgrounds who interact with their socio-cultural issues in the urban environment.

In *Corridor*, Banerjee locates the urban spaces where the migrated people strive to anchor themselves to make the city space their home. Instead of integrating their life, their life is shattered into shreds. The shattered stories in the city of significance as well as sordidness are illustrated by using a shattered narrative. The shift in narration from first to third persona, change in the role of narrator from the author and *vice versa* and sudden shifts in storyline represent the disorder life of assorted, marginalized characters in the face of global development. Apart from various aspects of life, these shattered shreds of life, putting together, constitute the post-modern condition of contradictions as well as compromises at the same time. Though they stand for absurdity of modern life, they struggle against the oddities of the time and space for meaning and space in life. Banerjee is not against urbanization but against the capitalist forces that silence and segregate the subaltern in the name of progress. Moving from rural to urban is considered a progressive movement from the backward country side to urban metro life. Chaos and noise of the urban space stand for loss and confusion of city life. City life offers opportunities to better life in materialistic terms but saps the opportunities for social life.

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