

Tepid Masculinity in Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor*: Setting the Stage for the Depiction of Postmodern Life

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ABSTRACT: *Sarnath Banerjee's first graphic novel Corridor is also widely accepted as the first graphic novel from India. I will argue that in this novel he sets the stage for the depiction of postmodern life in the Indian metropolises where masculinity, while progressive, unaggressive and self-reliant is at the same time watered down or as the title of this paper suggests, tepid. In the depiction of male characters he captures the unease of living in accordance with the ideals of a changing world. The inherent humour of the graphic novel form allows for the sublimation of this quiet angst.*

Key Words: : postmodernism, sarnath banerjee, graphic novel, masculinity

The publication of Sarnath's Banerjee's graphic novel *Corridor* in 2004 is supposed to have launched the genre of the graphic novel in India. According to Ratik Asokan (2016) *Corridor's* "cosmopolitan sensibility" spoke directly to the educated urban youth of the country what with the novel capturing a world of "roadside hustlers and garish billboards, of liberated college students and their conservative landlords, of trendy parties and shady markets". Since the publication of his first novel Banerjee has written *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007), *The Harappa Files* (2007) and *All Quiet in Vikipuri* (2011). While his graphic style differs in his various novels Asokan says that his concerns have remained constant: "Time and again, he delves into the psyche of middle-class India -- that fraught zone of consumerist aspiration, post-colonial angst, and conservative leaning -- and emerges with reports on its citizens' yearnings and fears". In this paper I will focus in particular on the depiction of the lacklustre masculinity of the young urban cosmopolitan male in India in his first novel and thereby on how the graphic novel lends itself to addressing the theme of contemporary masculinity.

Explaining the legacy of the Indian graphic novel, Corey K. Creekmur (2015) says that this form has not evolved from the Indian comic tradition; rather it arrived fully formed to India in the twenty-first century from the West, its formal features in dialog with American, European, East Asian and Japanese, *manga* in particular, comic traditions (p. 349). It's content however and interestingly is explicitly Indian (p. 349). Quoting Suhaan Mehta¹, Creekmur says that in direct contrast to mainstream comic traditions, the graphic novel in India has created an alternative space for voices that are ignored by Indian socio-political-cultural discourses (p. 350). Graphic novels, unlike mainstream comics, are "deeply invested in realistic representations of everyday life and the ways in which relatively ordinary people experience it, unlike the fantastic extraordinary adventures found in superhero comics" (p. 350).

Humour is at the basis of the comic form. The word comic suggests a certain lack of seriousness. Comics in India like the Diamond comics or Raj Comics were light comics meant to be read by children. *Amar Chitra Katha* comics that tell historical and mythological tales, that is tales that already carry a lot of weight, are written for educational purposes and the comic form is meant to make weighty narratives palatable to a young audience. And therefore the term graphic novel is appropriate for the darker themes of works like Banerjee's and others' that do not appear comic in the same way as earlier comics in India even as they generate humour. These novels are meant for adults or young adults but certainly not for children. The advent of the graphic novel is also a reflection of the times when strict divisions between high and low art, commercial and parallel cinema, literary and pulp fiction have collapsed. In its very being the graphic novel defines postmodern times.

Corridor revolves around six main characters: Jehangir Rangoonwala, Angrez Bosch, Bhriгу, Digital Datta, Shintu Sarkar and Professor DVD Murthy. Jehangir Rangoonwala has become a bookstall owner and dispenser of wisdom after trying out forty different jobs. Angrez Bosch after experimenting with hatha yoga, tantrik sex and ayurvedic cooking finds his karma in web designing. Bhriгу's story revolves around his breakup with his girlfriend Kali, who is a documentary film maker. Digital Datta who is visited by Marx in his sleep every night, is caught between living out his own dreams and his girlfriend, Dolly's parents' demand that he gets an H-1B Visa. Shintu pays a heavy sum to enhance his virility only to find out later that he has

been cheated of a thousand rupees and his enhanced drive is directly related to his enhanced sense of self. And Professor DVD Murthy is a forensic expert who is shown to be trying to get the smell of death off him. The novel gives us a bird's eye view of the struggles of these young men instead of drawing out an intricate narrative of their strife or psychological depths. As a matter of fact using the word depth is anomalous in relation to this graphic novel the graphic style of which -- comprised as it is of minimalist black and white sketches, interspersed with a few pages of coloured panels some of which are collages -- a kitschy effect is also created by the use of old photographs, film posters, and cutouts from posters for school children -- gives the narrative a flattened effect. Frederic Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche, where parody imitates with an ideological purpose and pastiche with none applies to Banerjee's text as well. While the use of various graphic styles within one novel may reflect the world the characters inhabit, why a specific episode is created in a certain style is unclear and perhaps has been done randomly. There is no logic behind it.

The lack of depth in the use of graphics is also seen in the creation of characters, who are caught in a variety of circumstances but whose reactions are similar. Digital Dutta is struggling in his sleep with his own dreams against what is expected of him by his in-laws, and his struggle does not happen at a conscious level. Bhriгу's reaction to Kali's rejection of him when she finds out about his sexual encounter with another woman during their "break" period, Rangoonwala's reaction upon settling down as a roadside book seller, DVD's struggle with his smell especially for the sake of his daughter display a dampened intensity. The novel deals with masculinity in a variety of characters but in an insipid manner. All the men appear to be new age, non-violent, easy going men.

The only time an extreme emotional reaction is seen is when Digital Datta fights the goons who are teasing his girlfriend, but really because they've used the word mother abusively. The idea of the mother being desecrated by being brought in thus instigates him and single-handedly he thrashes four guys. This is remarkable assertion for a man who appears to be as indecisive as he is shown to be. Such violence emerges only in the case of a traditional value being challenged -- a son's duty of protecting his mother's honour. When Shintu is unable to satisfy his wife, instead of becoming harsh towards her, he addresses his own shortcoming. Bhriгу's manhood is not challenged when his girlfriend rejects him. Rangoonwala has settled for a fairly nondescript job and his wisdom-dispensing does not appear to be taken very seriously but it does not ruffle him. If their reactions are a sign of these characters' acceptance of their fates and their democratic attitudes then how can the absence of cheer or contentment in the narrative be explained? It is interesting that in his second novel *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* notes Lopamudra Basu (2018) "postcolonial masculinity is represented to be in a state of anxiety, struggling with accommodation in the emerging space of a postcolonial metropolis, an anxiety camouflaged by a superficial performance of aggression, heterosexuality and patriarchal privilege" (p. 34). In these two novels we get two distinct portrayals of masculinity. While there is aggression in the second, in the first, masculinity if anything, is tempered.

Humour also arises from the narration and dialogue which at no point allow the story to get serious. This despite the fact that the novel is largely dark in that there are no moments of joy even when characters manage to get what they've worked towards. When Shintu's manhood is enhanced instead of experiencing joy the panels reflect a magnified ego. This view of the world and the people it inhabits is largely negative. This is the condition of the man in the city in the novel. Additionally these male characters appear to be traversing the world alone: Rangoonwala only talks to his customers, Bhriгу's parents are completely flattened in the narrative and the one relationship he has ends, Digital Dutta, Angrez and DVD do not appear to have any friends; Shintu is the only character who has a friend -- Kedar. There is an obvious absence of emotional bonds in the narrative. People appear to be lonesome and isolated. The image of masculinity that can be extracted from the novel is of progressive characters, characters who solve their own problems, who search for answers, who do not blame others for their own inadequacies, and yet these images do not appear progressive, because they're dull, emptied of life and emotion -- they generate dry humour at best. Masculinity is being shorn of its peculiarities to be put at par with other aspects of life in the novel, all of which arouse dull humour.

The graphic novel in India comes after the comic book and if not directly is indirectly derived from it because the Western form that it adopts descends from the comic book form. A comic represents life lightly and the state of contemporary masculinity cannot but be presented lightly. And yet masculinity is not a light subject. So the graphic novel that can deal with mature themes in a humorous way is apt for capturing the change in the defining features of manhood which were physical strength, sexual prowess, show of power, subjugation of the "other" and which in the novel have changed to a democratic attitude, self-

dependence and isolation that are at the opposite extreme of the earlier ideals. An acute shift in ideals is never an easy situation. Humour is essential to represent such a condition in order to avoid despair and mortification that arise from it. Through *Corridor* Banerjee illustrates the potential of the graphic novel to capture postmodern blues.

Notes

¹ See Mehta (2010), p. 173.

References

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