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Decoding the 'City': A Study of *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*

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Abstract:
Graphic novels are truly interdisciplinary in nature for they offer an intriguing mélange of written words and visual images along with components borrowed from several other diverse disciplines. The production of a strictly codified and mappable space has been a concern for graphic novelists as being 'graphic' is also being 'spatial' in the sense of blending multiple spaces into one. Several contemporary graphic novelists from India have engaged in similar recreation of urban spaces in their art forms focusing on select cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata with all their fascinating histories and heritages, complex cultures and characteristics. This paper aims to address the problematics of the multiplicity of conceptual, historical, textual as well as physical spaces in Sarnath Banerjee's The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers in terms of the production of urban space.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Urban Space, Heterotopia, City

1. Article

The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers by Sarnath Banerjee, one of the leading graphic novelists of India, is an intriguing dense narrative cataloguing the 'secrets' and practices of an ever-evolving city, Calcutta, from early 18th c to the present era. Banerjee, popularly hailed as India's first graphic novelist, has been significantly engaged in the representation of urban space in his works from his very first graphic novel namely *Corridor,* published in 2004. In *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*too, Banerjee, adapting the interesting format of juxtaposing written words and visual images that the graphic novel offers, explores the urban spaces as his story progresses. He leads the readers into a relentless journeyalong with his young protagonist in search of an antique book through the busy by-lanes and alluring alleys of the city of Calcutta. The novel's title is a direct allusion to the 18th c Bengali classic "*Hutom Panchar Noksha"* by Kaliprasanna Singha in which Singha satirized the deliciously decadent and highly hedonistic practices and lifestyles of the then upper middle class of Bengal under the pseudonym of "Hutom Pancha". In a similar vein, Banerjee attempts to deal with "the dark armpits of history" of past and present Calcutta. As Banerjee unfolds his tale which he claims in his epigraph to be "inspired by history but not limited by it", the urban spaces of the city get constructed and reconstructed with all their characteristics and polyphonies, marginalities and destabilizing potentialities. Not only Calcutta, cities like London and Paris too, with their varied architectonic and cultural manifestations, comes alive in this novel. Banerjee aims at addressing the problematic of the multiplicity of conceptual, historical, textual as well as physical spaces in terms of the production of urban space in his second venture as a graphic novelist.

As pointed out by Henri Lefebvre, socio-cultural processes and spatial forms are interrelated and contribute to the production of social space as "(social) space is a (social) product" (1991: 26). No social space can be seen as an empty, inert and passive locus of social relations and practices as space is a product of practice and hence actively and creatively produced. Social space is produced as a complex confluence of spatio-temporal relationships and the complex and creative modes of conceiving social space project space basically as a social product which "can be decoded, can be *read*. Such a space implies a process of signification." (1991: 17) In the context of the production of urban space, spatial forms and social processes open up the fluidity and mobility inherent in the process of production. Such 'production of space' (1991: 26) foregrounds the performative aspects of urban identities as urban subjectivity is a product of the experience of negotiating urban spaces as well as the creative acts of spatial appropriation.

In *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers,* the subversion of such spatial logic in the context of the representations of the urban world highlights the spatial tactics and constant attempts to negotiate, 'produce' urban space. It dwells on the representations of urban space and the politics inherent in the production of such space to highlight the close nexus between the ordered urban spatial fabric and the spaces excluded by the official rhetoric. *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* after a brief preamble depicting the past in a sort of flashback manner through the pages of a book, rushes forward to the present where the narrator is seen to be making love to his partner in an apartment in 'Hackney EC 7, London Fields' area of London, which he describes as a "city of shifting non-relationships" (2007: 54). As he makes love, urban anxiety coupled with paranoia creeps in him affecting his sexual performance – "The old paranoia of getting a soft-on is emerging" (2007:33) and he is in a way relieved to recede from the act in lieu of receiving a phone call – "Fate intervenes in the form of a long-distance call from Calcutta" (2007:34). He is immediately summoned to his native place for the last rites of his grandfather but penniless as he is, he manages to land up in Calcutta near about seven months later. His ulterior motive in visiting Calcutta becomes clear soon as he himself

claims – "My real reason for coming to Calcutta is, of course, to claim the silver lighter and the rest of my inheritance : the old valve-type radio set, the antique motorcycle and the 18[th]century book of scandals, The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers." (2007:59).Thus begins his quest "to find something that was probably lost in time" aided by one Digital Dutta and his search for the book turns out to be a search for the city and in the process of his journey, the city gets its artistic manifestation. Not only the narrator and his enigmatic aid Digital Dutta are the ones traversing the course of the city thereby rendering newer meanings to the urban spaces that are being produced in the process, other characters, both past and present, are seen to be walking, loitering, and travelling too. References of travelers from corners of the world and from multiple time frames and histories are also brought into account. The spirit of the Wandering Jew looms large over the narrative arc and figures like Ibn Batuta , Marco Polo and Heung Tsang perform their due cameos in the story. Images of foot, shoes, boots, legs, toes abound in the text and the projection of the characters as perpetual walkers echoes Michel de Certeau's comment on the experience of lacking space, "to walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place" (2011: 103). This essential fluidity of the cityscape makes its space multidimensional thus more open to multifaceted interpretations.

In graphic fiction the mundane and ordinary user of the urban space employs the tactics of movement including walking and clever appropriations of space to elude the cartographic impulse and the panoptic strategies to organize urban space. The moments of everyday movement through the city cannot be mapped or read within a structured space as they are mysterious, illegible as "*social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another*" (1991: 86). We get similar examples in this novel too:

> For the residents, living in the interior city is like playing out a conspiracy. Sharing a sense of familiarity that comes from your local paan-wallah knowing the brand of cigarettes you smoke and giving them to you on credit. If nothing else, Kedar Babu's psychic map will serve as my rite of initiation into these secret neighbourhoods of the erstwhile black town. So on a Saturday morning I set out to explore Kedar Babu's map. Not a map in the traditional sense, just a set of landmarks and a jumble of directions.(2007:210)

In his seminal essay, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotropias", Michel Foucault talks about 'spaces' which are there:

> Probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places-places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society –which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (1984: **5)**

These heterotopic sites situated within and outside the society serve the specific function of mirroring the 'self' which escapes the stabilizing effect of social norms. The marginal spaces personify the fear of the 'other' at various levels. Their existence parallels Foucault's classification of two categories of heterotopias-crisis heterotopias and heterotopias of deviation. The subterranean world of roadside photo studios and watch repairers, quacks and hakims, beggars and undertakers, in *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* reflect the traces of Foucault's heterotopias of deviation: "in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (1984: 25). Although society guards its space from the fear of transgression, such marginal spaces and figures are simultaneously absent and present in society. Social security is generated and established with the help of characters who lack a culturally sanctioned space and identity. They inhabit the places situated outside the socially sanctioned spaces of belonging. Though these are the real places situated within the territory of the society, the society forbids any sense of identification with these spaces. While foregrounding his "second principle" regarding description of heterotopias, Foucault notes:

> (A) society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another […] As an example I shall take the strange heterotopia of the cemetery. The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces. (1984: 5)

Banerjee reproduces in his novel suchheterotopiaslike the "Nimtala Ghat" which "is the oldest and holiest cremation ground in Calcutta". He invests the place with notable importance when he mentions – "Nimtala Ghat is where, they say, the history of Calcutta began" (2007:56). Images of tombstones and other graveyards can be traced in the novel too. In a cheeky yet thought provoking sequence regarding the nomenclature of his native city, the narrator places forward the theory that the name "Calcutta" is "a corruption of Golgotha, The Biblical city of skulls" He goes on to explain- "In the early days the East India Company men died quite young because of unexplained tropical diseases and melancholy. In England, the tombstone industry flourished, therefore Golgotha, a typical example of early-empire galley humour." (2007: 58)

Again according to Certeau, "urban life increasingly permits the re-emergence of the elements that the urbanistic project excluded" (2011: 95). Although, the administration employs a process of elimination on the basis of regulatory and classificatory operations, these graphic novels narratives echo the features like "abnormality, deviance, illness, death etc." characterizing the "waste products" of a functionalist administration" (2011: 94). The lived realities of the 'representational spaces' in the form of ad hoc spatial structures, slums, street corners, roadside hotels, intrude the systemized urban fabric. Suchmarginal pockets of the urban space crop up throughout the novel. Be it the "Celestial Studio" which "specializes in photographing the dead. Dead people before they are to be cremated, that is. Passport photos for the last journey (w)here the tradition of taking photographs of the dead is almost as old as the tradition of photography" or the Parisian rundown shop "selling middle eastern kitsch[…] an overrated junk shop in an overrated city", these marginal spaces pose glaring contrasts to the official versions of the urban planning. Marginal

people like Baleshwar Mallick who introduces himself "as the senior most undertaker at the (Nimtala) crematorium" and Kedar Babu, founder of the "International School of Psychic Cartography" also come crowding the text.

One of the characteristic features of a graphic novel which sets it apart from a comic book is that often the distinctive setting of the tale itself becomes a conspicuous character of the tale thus helping in the progression of the story. Calcutta, likewise, can indeed be considered as a vital character in *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* blending seamlessly with the multilayered narrative of these particular graphic novel.From geographical landmarks to locale-specific cultural practices, the variegated image of the city of Calcutta is evoked and established throughout the entire course of the novel. We get references of Dalhousie, Maniktala, Chowrangee, Nimtala, Calcutta Dockyard and other notable localities of the city. We also get a sneak peek into the innards of Bengali culture and their culinary habits. – "The importance of fish in the life of a Bengali is like the importance of water in the life of fish" (2007:76). Banerjee decks up the urban space of his Calcutta with meticulous details by incorporating images of posters of Bengali films, newspapers, even symbols of local political parties graphitized in the walls of the city. Calcutta thus with all hercharacteristic essences and multihued disposition emerges as a throbbing, pulsating, living entity in the novel.

I would like to conclude by referring to a line from *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*: "Cities like Calcutta have intricate ways to keep their secrets, forever careful not to blurt them out to the uninitiated". (2007: 12)In the attempts at unraveling such secrets while mapping the urban spaces as found in the novel, one can thus decode the covert connotations hidden in the city's matrix and reconstruct the city as he gradually experiences it.

2. References

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