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Title of the Book: *Corridor: A Graphic Novel*

Name of the Writer: Sarnath Banerjee

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Corridor: A Graphic Novel is a thoughtful product of a fellowship awarded to Banerjee by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in Chicago to probe into the sexual topography of the contemporary Indian cities. Banerjee indeed did justice to the project and his first book *Corridor: A Graphic Novel* came out in 2004, in India and France, bordering on the fragmented reality of Indian urban lives and times. Banerjee captures the spatiality of ennui, alienation and sexual whims walking through the corridors of Connaught Place, Delhi and the alleyways of modern-day bustling Kolkata, where he was born.

The narrative of *Corridor: A Graphic Novel* centers on Lutyen's Delhi. Jehangir Rangoonwalla owns a second hand book shop there, in the shady by-lanes of Connaught Place. He looks upon himself as a dispenser of anecdotes, wisdom and tea. Brighu unfolds as the narrator in the novel, and he thinks of himself as a postmodern Ibn Battuta. He is in search of a book by James Watson. He arrives at Rangoonwalla's bookshop where Rangoon Walla is found deliberating on chess moves and recapitulating the eccentricities of his customers. Rangoonwalla tells the story of Digital Dutta who lives mostly inside his brain and then narrates how newly married Shintu is in quest of the perfect aphrodisiac to heighten his sexual escapades with his wife, Dolly. Banerjee takes the readers through seedy by-lanes of quack sexologists with Shintu looking for his sande-kal-tel of some sort to have superhuman vigour in bed. Through a recurrent theme of public places, spaces devoid of belonging and spaces marked by placelessness, Banerjee portrays the fragmented urbanity in contemporary Delhi. Rangoonwalla then shifts to Brighu who is seen going through a break-up with his live-in girlfriend, Kali, and finds his next amatory intended in Gauri in Calcutta's underground tube rail. The narrative closes with Brighu, an illustrator and graphic designer, deliberating upon forging a pattern of sustainable relationship in the midst of the crowd of alienated people he meets around.

The very beginning of *Corridor* hints at the soul-searching angst that Banerjee represents throughout his work. Lying among scattered collection of odd artefacts, although in the home space, the narrator brings out the ennui that he carries home with him from all

those placeless spaces where he finds those items. The pubs, the restaurants, street-side stalls, roads, over-bridges, rail stations—the ‘third places’, the non-places—that contribute to the breadth and depth of the book bear enormous significance not only as resolving spaces of conflicts of the oscillating individual psyche but also as spaces where the characters build up their outlook in a way as to mark the forward movement of the shuttle of incidents.

Jehangir Rangoonwalla thinks of his second hand book shop as the centre of universe. It is to be noted how Banerjee first gives us a bird’s eye view of the “corridors” of Connaught Place, then pictures a thinking Rangoonwalla, and then through the third panel shows people from myriad walks of life and times gathering in his Disneyland, his microcosm, his menagerie—which is nothing but a placeless place, more like a Foucauldian heterotopia of time, such as, mausoleums where artefacts from different places and time are preserved. Banerjee builds up a topographical cognition within his readers first and then he plunges into the facets of the people thronging in there.

The setting of a funding agency party is shown (Banerjee 22-23), and the public place is used by Banerjee to depict the superficiality gnawing at the supermodern lives and times of the people in a city space. Banerjee talks about uncharacteristically friendly people, “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.

Relationships in a city usually thrive more in the public places, like, pubs and restaurants than in the domestic home space. One comes across the narrator speaking with a lady over a cup of coffee sitting at a pub roundtable talking about his singlehood. Delhi is the city of couples to him, and this self-proclaimed Ibn Battuta prefers being single. With the introduction of Battuta, the readers are taken into the realms of an explorer. Banerjee’s graphic novel *Corridor* unmistakably blossoms into a narrative in which navigation and cartography play an indelible impact on the reader’s gaze.

Rangoonwalla points to a Professor DVD Murthy, head of department of Safdarjung hospital’s Department of Medical Jurisprudence and Forensic Sciences, whose life revolves around reciting Keats, Rangoonwalla’s book shop, restaurants and autopsying corpses even on Sunday nights—he is a man living out of the non-places only, coupled with a Keatsian death wish. Murthy unfortunately carried with him the odour of a medical autopsy room, to which his daughter reacted aversely. 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 hates him for his odour. Murthy’s occupation has driven a wedge between his daughter and him. He is unable to reconcile with his daughter, for whom every night Murthy looks forward to be home. The smell of death that he carries home from a placeless space like morgue becomes the hindrance because of which his daughter keeps away from Murthy. This is how Murthy feels that he is incomplete without the endearing embrace of his seven-year-old daughter. The

characters long for a home space laden with sustenance and endearment—be it Murthy or Brighu. Although later in the narrative, Murthy discovers Isis, “a perfume made to drive women crazy” made by Marks-n-Sparks (109). The perfume certainly works miraculously for him and his wee little daughter. Murthy’s affection finds its way home.

The introduction of Digital Dutta takes place on eight subsequent coloured pages in the novel. Banerjee has kept most of the narrative only in black and white only to hint at the boredom of a life in an insensible city. Rangoonwalla talks about that evening, well past office hours, when Dutta sat with his Dolly at Central Park, Connaught Place. Through this, Banerjee begins to introduce a character who is going to come back in Banerjee’s next enigmatic book, *The Barn Owl’s Wondrous Capers*. Digital Dutta seems to be Banerjee’s Stephen Daedalus. Over a game of chess, Rangoonwalla is seen talking about these said characters one by one. Dutta is a colourful persona with a girlfriend, apparently whose father does not approve of him although he is a C++ professional at Aptech. When a few hooligans attack Dutta and Dolly, surprisingly enough, Dutta rises to the occasion and with JyotiBasu, Lenin, and Mao on his side, takes the urchins down one by one: “a whimsical roundhouse, followed by the ancient discipline of Akido; his movements were sharp, minimal yet seamless; like the dance of a dervish” (38).

Corridor takes its turn from page 45 onwards to a more dark reality lurking beneath the lives of idiosyncrasies. Sexuality and the narrator Shintu’s preoccupation with sexual pleasure resurface in the novel. An October morning in Delhi unravels itself in front of the Jama Masjid and the author comments on the daily ritual of breakfast on the edge of Meena Bazar. It is from one of the pirated video stalls that sell pornographic films Shintu brings home *Blondie in Bondage* one afternoon. From Kukreja Video Palace he also brings another adult hardcore film. When Shintu’s omnipresent mother is not home, he cashes in on the amatory feel of an empty house and with Dolly has “twenty minutes of quality sex” (51). But what piques Shintu is the virtual reality of adult entertainment world: “How come the man in the blue film was still at it?” (52).

Despite the multifaceted ups and downs of their lives and times, in closing, there is a blurring of the voices: one finds, towards the fag end, the deeper questions of life are portrayed. Brighu happens to be a designer, graphic illustrator and his eccentric night routine involves drawing the faces he meets, the people he comes across. From Rangoon Walla’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 MrRangoonwalla, 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).

Corridor: A Graphic Novel opens in a third place, comes to a close in the same third place, and also moves forward and backwards in a series of public spaces. The “layers” of people are mostly replete with idiosyncrasies and enigmatic eccentricities, and most of these

stem from sexuality. Exercising sex publicly or talking about sex glibly is still considered a taboo in Indian society. In this context, the cultural impact of the graphic novel cannot be ignored; it indeed turns out to be a telling text—a written ‘jigsaw puzzle’ on which ever-shifting identities of ‘strangers on strange lands’ and newly-sprouting everyday relations are being tirelessly interlocked. Before we conclude, it should be underlined that the representations of lives and relationships at metropolitan non-places unmistakably bring *Corridor: A Graphic Novel* quite closer to the “palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten” (Schaberg 79).

Works Cited:

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