# Negotiating Identities:
# A Representation of Contemporary India in the Novels of Sarnath Banerjee

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**Sarnath Banerjee**
**Courtesy:** http://project88.in/press/tag/sarnath-banerjee/page/5/#sthash.lU2O5IxI.dpbs
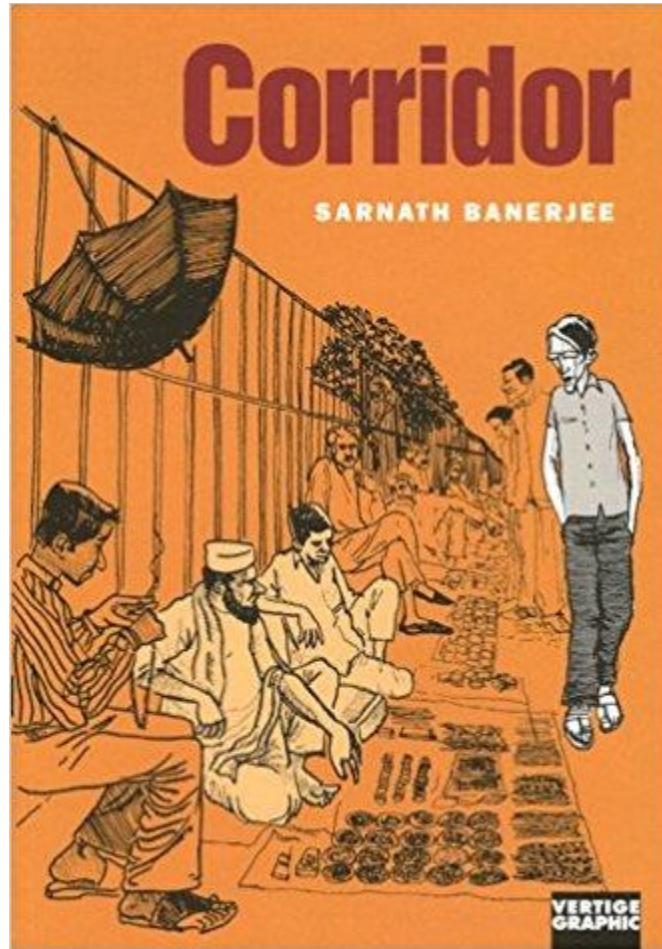
**Abstract**

   This paper focus on fragmented narration in Sarnath Banerjee's prominent work **Corridor**, a graphic novel. The novel sketches fragmentation with characterization. Sarnath's novel focused mainly on history, regional, alienation, search of individualism – identity, quest of knowledge. The paper pictures vivid images through graphics and reflects identity negotiation in Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor*.

**Keywords**:  Sarnath Banerjee, identity, search for knowledge, individual's multifaceted identity, graphic Novel, fragmentation, narration.

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According to Bell Hooks in *Killing range: Ending Racism* "Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world" (Hooks). Moreover, negotiating identity refers to the understanding of an individuals or groups that seek to challenge, resist, or transform accepted identity categories to sanction for more preponderant identity options. Besides this approach is further endorsed in fixating on daily issues however, they make a reading of the social issues of home, belonging, sounds, tones, gestures, nonverbal hints, pauses, silences as well as negotiating identity in the multicultural contemporary society.

**Sarnath Banerjee**



Sarnath Banerjee is one of the most highly acclaimed Indian writers of contemporary Indian literature, especially in the world of graphic novels. His works contain the tenets of postmodernism such as cultural degeneration, globalization, fragmentation, metanarrative, caricature and irony etc. Banerjee captures and remoulds these feelings in his graphic storytelling, either directly with words and pictures, or by activating references, echoes, symbols. His graphic stories as it vividly represents and marks the voice of the sundry characters, and can include contrivances as diverse as spelling, typography, visual alliteration, and visual puns.

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## Graphic Novels

The readership on graphic novels has emerged as a growing segment. The story is told utilizing a coalescence of words and pictures in a sequence across the page customarily includes text, images, word balloons, sound effects, and panels. They are like prose, printed format, but they are withal like film, that they tell a story through dialogue, and through visual images that give the impression of kineticism. Graphic novels with its amalgamation of pictures and verbal representations make the reader to fill the gaps and solve the puzzles left by the author. It has offered to be an efficacious conveyance for historical incitements, both fictional and non-fictional. *Maus* is just one example of a historical graphic novel. In this perspective, *Still I Elevate* by Roland Owen Laird, *Taneshia Nash Laird and Elihu Bey*, depicts the history of African Americans in the Coalesced States, beginning in 1619. The book includes extensive historical information and chronicles the accomplishments and struggles of African Americans. Novelist Charles Johnson contributed the *exordium*, which includes information about African Americans' little kenned contributions to the field of cartoons and comics.

The modern graphic novel evolved throughout the twentieth century and commenced to be apperceived as a cogent genre (disputably) by the 1960s or 70s. The graphic novel is an art form that determinately has the adequate implements to transcend indicted text and to engender the felicitous medium. Graphic novels can be fiction, non-fiction, history, fantasy, or anything in-between. Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994) is recognised as India's first graphic novel. Sen's work marked out a different space for itself from comic books. Several others set out, *Delhi Calm* (2010) by Vishwajyoti Ghosh, a graphic representation of the Emergency days (between June 26, 1975, and March 21, 1977), and *Bhimayana*(2011) , depicted by award-winning Pradhan-Gond artists, in vivid colours the story of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of India's Constitution.

Vishwajyoti Ghosh pointed out that while graphic novels had evolved from comics and the form was identically tantamount, "the content in terms of the narrative in most cases and the page layout in some pushes the form of a comic to the next level where it can additionally handle solemn content like literature and non-fiction" However, Orijit Sen, India's pioneering graphic novelist, told Frontline that, "Graphic novels do represent a development or even break from the past in that they are not engendered concretely for children and often deal with gregarious, political, sexual and other kinds of conceptions". According to Keir Graff, a well-known American novelist, "A graphic novel, like a conventional novel, is a stand-alone story that is published as a book."

## Illustrations

Both comic books and graphic novels utilize a coalescence of illustrations and words to tell a story. If we take into account, "Comics are sometimes viewed as a trashy genre filled with unacceptable language and imagery but Going Graphic gives answers to concerns about the applicability and felicitousness of comics." (Frontline) Comic art in India got an identity which the characters in the comics, as they evolved year after year, handed over, especially Raj Comics which propagated in the early 90s (Varma). In particular, the term "graphic novel" has been first utilized in 1964 by Richard Kyle in a newsletter and is published by the Comic Abecedarian Press Coalition. Graphic novel fosters interest in a variety of literacy genres in a broad range of topics. In this light, Jacquelyn McTaggart in her chapter "Graphic Novels: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly", states how "teachers use graphic novels because they enable the struggling reader, motivate

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the reluctant one, and challenge the high-level learner" (Frey et al 32). Indeed, educators utilize this medium to make students "see" in their minds what is transpiring in the text.  It promotes better reading skills, ameliorates comprehension and complements other areas of the curriculum for the students.

As a whole, in fact, Nancy Frey opines that, readers in the 21st century need to be able to analyse what they read and understand the motive of the author and the precision of the reading. Furthermore, graphic novels can withal avail amend language and literacy development, including second language learners; the illustrations provide valuable contextual clues to the denouement of the indicted narrative. (Crawford) It stimulates ingenious imagination, develop appreciation of art and enhance understanding of popular culture and other media. Graphics, therefore, addresses current, pertinent, and involute issues.

## Pictorial Representation
As far as the pictorial representation is concerned, the space between the panels is called the "gutter" and just as you step across a gutter, your mind engenders connection between the individual panels, by drawing interference about how the action in the one can relate to the other, and thereby endeavoring to integrate them into a single, paramount narrative (Kukkonen):

> Graphic novel in the latter stages of the twentieth century has been accompanied by a pedagogic impulse, a desire to document traumatic incidents from the past for a contemporary audience.  In this way the woks constitute a visual pedagogy, an expedient by which the contemporary audience may come to ken, or too vicariously experience, past events by denotes of narratives that are engendered by the juxtaposition of image with text.  (Adams 66)

## Indian Comics
Indian comics, particularly Sarnath Banerjee, a graphic storyteller in India born in 1972 in Kolkata, has certainly come a long way since his *Corridor* days back in 2004, and has worked on three novels since - The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers (2007), The Harappa Files (2011) and 2015's.

## *Corridor*
*Corridor* (2004) presents different interconnected stories, nervously oscillating between Delhi and Kolkata, whose most extravagant characters are Brighu and Digital Dutta. In *Corridor* all the incidents of the plot are interconnected by only one character, Rangoonwalla with his narration, observations, remarks and conclusion.  Jehangir Rangoonwalla is an enlightened second-hand bookseller who is always circumvented by people and his "SIPPING TEA, SELLING ASIMOVS GIVING ADVICE" (Banerjee, *Corridor* 111). The form refers to the coalescence of pictures and verbal texts.  Banerjee shifts the perspective of the narrator from first person to third person and then to first person narrative.  This shift in perspective challenges the reader to ken genuinely who is communicating whether the character(s) or the indictor.  It is the book shop, its owner and its customers that connect all the other characters in the plot.

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Brighu narrates the story about his search in the first person while the rest of the story is narrated by Rangoonwalla. Despite these two narrators, Banerjee presents the key conceptions of his novels through his pictures with less verbal texts. The pictures such as Maya the maid that highlights the revelation made by Shintu (Banerjee, Corridor 102), Brighu being woebegone (Banerjee, *Corridor* 106) and missing his cousin (Banerjee, *Corridor* 112) accommodate the purport. The images of the urban life, their hopes and frustrations are best revealed through pictures than the verbal medium. Banerjee's deep insights are brought out in pictures with minimal verbal texts. His pictures on the city and the details like Public Park, high buildings, make the narration impressive. The reader is able to visually perceive more than what is verbally expressed. Some cynical and mordant remarks of Banerjee are withal noted. The setting, the time and the characterization integrate fervor to the narration.

### The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers

In the next novel *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, Sarnath Banerjee challenges the reader to deduce the monk's identity and by introducing the same at two different places and at two different centuries' endeavours to allude that he is the wandering Jew who became a legend. He alludes the reader that Digital Dutta will appear in this novel additionally. The reader who reads the initiatory pages finds it arduous to connect or even cerebrate that Banerjee makes this Wandering Jew appear in virtually all the centuries. Sarnath draws us to tardy 18th Century Calcutta, ironically, he compares with the modern era atmosphere like indemnification companies. The English men invading India faced many difficulties such as weather conditions. Due to weather conditions virtually, many of them had lost their life and according to them their life became vapidity due to the lack of female company.

He takes the readers to the Belvedere estate and expounds about the banyan tree which stood majestically in the effulgent sunny morning. These two banyan trees face each other in battle position which betokens the quench of blood thirst. This place is the setting for the duel between two English generals later. The reader is puzzled to find a shift in the setting from London to Calcutta and back to London. The setting apprises the reader three divergent perspectives. At Calcutta the protagonist as a puerile boy reads a book while his grandfather is diligent loading his pipe with the capstan brand pipe tobacco. There is a radio that narrates a story set in London. The boy becomes a man and he lives in London who gets a call from Calcutta about the demise of his grandfather. The layering of histories and drawings engenders a remarkable atmosphere for Banerjee. He utilizes the technique of flash back to show the readers, the protagonist's early days with his grandfather. His photos, drawings and paintings and the explication of fish market, gives us the clear picture of the nostalgic Sarnath. The last incarnation is that of Digital Dutta, which is explicitly kenned to the reader only in the concluding chapter.

### The Harappa Files

*The Harappa Files* commences with the description of the more preponderant Harappa Rehabilitation, Reclamation & Redevelopment (GHRRR) Commission. This committee was set up by Sri Sudarshan Mittal and has the elite of the society who are retired bureaucrats as its members. Their function is to conduct a gargantuan survey of the current ethnography and urban mythologies of a country on the brink of great hormonal changes. Impending launch of the Nano, the car priced not much higher than the scooter utilized by entire families to convey themselves to

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places like Delhi's India Gate for picnics and frozen monoxide-cream.  Mothers get together for tea parties they discuss the sundry achievements of their children.  Their notion on gelusil, boroline, vicco can be cited as examples.  Sarnath has utilized stunning images to elaborate on the product, we could find less words and more images in this particular chapter.

Constructed as a series of interrelated sketches, strips, advertisements, pictures, the book is fictitiously presented as the final report of an imaginary institution called the Greater Harappa Rehabilitation. The different "files" that make up the volume are organised as sorts of chapters. These products were purchased by the well –to-do people and not by the mundane man.  Boroline an antiseptic cream that remedies all type of cuts, bruises, wounded elbow, wounded nail cuticles, and cracks skin etc. It replicates the feeling of typical Indian mothers towards their children, on the optical discernment of their child's cracked lip and dry elbow.  Selling homemade Calomine X unguent on local trains, on one particular route, depicts the Indianess. The product Calomine x has a legendary reputation for rejuvenating eczema that appears due to sweating in exclusive shirts in the sultry, airless compartments.

The industrial magnification gave elevate to the engenderment of cotton shirts of sundry colours and the person who sold the indigenous product vanished from the train. Lifebuoy soap and Liril soap were the two soaps utilized by the noble people and upper-middle class people, even the regalement like games were all incipient to the prevalent people and it's a stunning information's to the mundane people.  Sarnath cynically remarks the architectural follies of the 1980s. He points out how there is no congruous blueprint of the building available to the plumbers to fine-tune the quandary at the right phase. So, Girish the plumber utilizes the dye to find the blockage, modern buildings which have no plumbing blueprints, so one need psychic plumbers whenever something goes erroneous. The writer attempts to resurrect, examine and catalogue cultural, human and material relics thereby reveals expectancies on the actions of target individuals.

## To Conclude

Banerjee's graphic novels, spectacle the depth of a novel, and requires two readings for consummate contentment.  At the first reading, we descry the characters, the clever puns all over the place and above all the consummate Indian urbanity in the divests.  But due to the non-linear storytelling, a second read is needed to get in order the jigsaw pieces of the characters' lives. Through Corridor Sarnath blows the reader's mind with the details. His The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers is plenary of pictures than verbal form whereas The Harappa Files has more of verbal descriptions than the visual representation.

Although the three graphic narratives are constructed distinctively and through different techniques, they share some structural characteristics, which constitute Banerjee's representational negotiating identities. He evokes a postmodern identity, with a certain psychological maelstrom rendered through a rich intertextual technique, using both verbal language and significant drawings. Tony Tanner (1971) remarks "the fragment form caters to a kind of disordered and rescheduled imagination."  There are two distinctive tenets. Firstly, fragmented narration provides illimitable space for the writer's imagination. Secondly, fragmented narration negates the affirmation of authenticity.  The features of such narration are multi-vocal, alternative perspective

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and challenge the reader offering them opportunities for participation. Thus Sarnath, through his work gives us a clear picture of fragmentation and interplay between social thought and social interaction.

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