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Title of the Graphic Novel: *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*

Name of the writer/artist: Sarnath Banerjee

Publishing House: Penguin Books (New Delhi, 2007)

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The embarrassing perversity of *bābu-dom* and the zamindars makes the corpus of Banerjee's narrative in *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*. In it, Banerjee takes the readers across a scandalous anecdotal history of Kolkata from its foundation by Charnock to the present day by-lanes and alleyways, still teeming with occultists and idiosyncratic individuals. Abstract, at times disoriented and intellectually nauseating, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* portrays the underbelly of the growing city of Kolkata in respect of the sexual gossips and eccentricities of the elites, the colonizer lords and the colonized zamindars alike. The author/illustrator adopts the panels, viewing angles, the speech bubbles and ever-changing point of view to achieve a coalescence of urbanity and perversity of the past and the present.

The narrative of *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* opens up in Lubeck, in 1601, in a most unlikely setting where readers find a bald man wearing a cape running up to the terrace of a towering fortress chased by a number of soldiers. He takes a dive into the ground all of a sudden. But when the soldiers come and pick up the cape lying on the ground below, to their bafflement, they do not see any corpse. The man is seen again in the woods of 1864 Struttgard. Legend brews that this odd man is seen by lost travelers guiding them through the woods. But grass does not bend when he treads on the ground. Banerjee clearly points out that the book "is inspired by history but not limited by it" (Banerjee iv), and the opening mute sequences of action begins the flow of history that he is to complicate and unravel soon.

After the readers meet the first man, another man, caked in mystery, emerges out on the following pages of the novel and he seems to be an aristocrat of extraordinary grace and dignity. The Parisian society of the 1740s witnesses this man with impeccable charm and knowledge of perhaps twelve languages. The sequence here turns out to be an "action to action" graphic narration as a single subject is revisited in a series of actions, through a series of panels. Readers find London of 1743 and a dark attic on St Martin's Street is occupied by

an occult chemist. In August 1914, one finds the same shady character—who still has his back turned on the readers—a prisoner in Alsace. He dangles upside down and sounds a note of premonition to a couple of Bavarian soldiers, who call the man a nutcase (xiv). Towards the closing of this sequence Banerjee shows Jesus, on his way to Golgotha, speaking with the Wandering Jew. *The Barn Owl's Wonders Capers* is influenced by both the title of Kaliprasanna Sinha's Bengali novel from the 19th century, *HutumPyachārNakshyā* and the fragmentary legend of the Wandering Jew.

London, Paris and Kolkata become the locale of action, and the narrator is—much like the opening of Banerjee's maiden graphic novel, *Corridor*—in search of a book. Banerjee takes the reader back and forth cities, towns, buildings, maps and sometimes millenniums only to create an intellectual nausea. It is a trying task to lay out a linear synopsis of the narrative as Banerjee frequently intermingles the scandals and stories from the book with the protagonist's search for the book. Banerjee's work opens up as a well-researched fiction(s) within a fiction. The author tells tales from the protagonist's grandfather, Pablo's book of scandals from time to time, and calls its first chapter "Dark Armpits of History". Banerjee, actually, historicizes the eccentricities of the founding generations of Kolkata. He gives the readers insights into how disease-ridden Calcutta had been, back in those days when the British first landed there. He uses newspaper cut outs, photographs and also portrays it sequentially with the historical figures.

The book of scandals also includes a sketch of Jobus Charnock, the 'founder' of Kolkata. He saved his future wife from being burnt alive. And it still remains shrouded in mystery whether he buried his Hindu wife or cremated her. In course of looking for the book of scandals left by his grandfather, the narrator roams around Kolkata by-lanes and comes across the scandals of the zamindar-households. The book of scandals too has those infamy and disgrace penned down. Here, the calumny of Mandar De's family is revisited by means of a two-fold narration—first, it seems that one is reading the book of scandals itself, and second, it seems that the narrator is recapitulating what he heard once from his grandfather. The zamindars scaled heights of infamy and embarrassment with their capers. We come across a linear story of a few feudal lords. Sexuality was not the only axis of the infamy of the Bābus. Tarachand De's brother Kali Kinkar, Mandar De says, was the maddest of them all and he loved the sound of a glass breaking. He spent thousands of rupees on buying remote and rare glass artefacts only to throw and break them into shards. On one occasion, Banerjee shows the madman Kali Kinkar bent down from his rooftop to see the public spectacle he has arranged—he wants his brother's horse carriage to run over giant-sized Belgian glasses laid out on the street below. Banerjee uses depth perception to forge a sense of the height and also gives us an aerial view—the opposite of the worm's gaze—to clarify and signify the action's impact. Banerjee, literally, signifies the "public spectacle" with his panel.

Apart from framing and the flow of narration, Banerjee uses superimposition techniques to deliver the 'feel of belonging' to a panel. Mention should be made of Pablo's visit to the hole-in-the-wall antique book shop in Montmartre. There he picks up the battered journal of scandals, *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, around which the quest motif of this graphic novel revolves. The readers learn that the journal of scandals from the 18th century

Calcutta, already teeming with calumnies, was penned and kept by Abravanel Ben Obadiah. One characteristic connection *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* shares with *Corridor* is the presence—or, say, omnipresence—of Digital Dutta. Dutta makes the narrator a list of people most likely to have the journal of Pablo's scandal unknowingly given away by Pablo's widow. The chance acquaintance of Dutta is not fully examined in this narrative. It opens as a chance meeting and the ball is set rolling as Digital Dutta asks the narrator if the latter had heard of the eternally dissatisfied Moroccan Ibn Battuta's journey:

On reaching India, he complained that although women there were thick-lipped, voluptuous and well disposed, with childbearing hips, they still could not match up to Moroccan women. Let's not forget that by then, Battuta had acquired several wives and fabulous riches. Yet he complained and complained. Like a medieval Woody Allen. Whining about every single place he visited. As if he travelled great distances to justify the fact that things back home were better. Funnily, he never returned home, and died somewhere in China. Physical travel doesn't necessarily open one's mind. (Banerjee 87-88)

What is interesting about the quoted lines is that Banerjee takes Dutta's speech and gives the lines a two-fold implementation: some of the lines are used in speech bubbles, as if the lines drop from Digital Dutta's lips, and again, Banerjee uses the lines in the garters of the panels, as if an omniscient narrator is speaking.

Manifestly, in his second graphic novel, Banerjee uses urban love-making sequences more than twice—once in the dark urban home space of Hackney EC, London Fields, and then again in a hotel, away from the eyes of the pedestrians. The latter episode takes place in the non-place, and it may be connected to the motif of scandal that Banerjee is revisiting in this novel. The scandalous alternative sexuality of the *bābus* and *zamindars* took place in non-places such as the red light district of Sonagachi, or in those garden houses guarded by the armed *leth-hels*. But the modern representation of stealthy love-making is taking place in the placeless motel rooms where people come and go. As the novel is a metafiction with the journal of scandal embedded in its narrative, readers cannot dismiss the present-day representation of urban sexuality shown through Mandar De's obsession-sequence. The narrative goes back and forth and brings out the central theme of perversity from time past and to time present. Mention should also be made of Madam G's obsessive encounters with the lords in her emptied mansion. These episodes of perversity take place inside emptied mansions, but Madam G changed her mansions frequently too, and thus these mansions could also be considered non-places. In his narrative about scandals, it seems, Banerjee represents and critiques the anxiety with which people encounter and re-live their hidden private lives in such non-places.

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