

SHORT STORY

Ticket and Passport, Please!

QUAZI MOSTAIN BILLAH

“Can I have your ticket and passport, please?”

“Yes, just give me a second.”

I’m sure they are with me; otherwise, how could I have come to the airport. They are not in my pocket; of course, how could they be in my pocket? A pocket is not big enough to hold them. But where could they be? Could they be inside my bag? But, I don’t have any handbag with me. I couldn’t have kept them inside my suitcase. How could I do that? Don’t I know that while travelling abroad people carry their ticket and passport on them? The passport is very important; one will have to show it at several places. Certainly, I didn’t make the mistake of putting my ticket and passport inside the suitcase.

“Sir, have you found your passport and ticket?”

“Sorry, not yet. But, I’m sure they are with me. I don’t know why I can’t find them?”

“Well, shouldn’t you have taken them out before you came to the check-in desk?”

“Yes, certainly. I think I took them out.”

“Then, where are they now?”

“That’s what I am thinking.”

“Could you have dropped them somewhere in the lobby?”

“No; that’s very unlikely. I never lose things. I’m a very careful man.”

“Then where is your ticket and passport? You know I can’t let you check in without them.”

“Yes, I know that quite well. But where could they be?”

“Well, you don’t expect me to answer that question, do you?”

“Oh, no! I was just talking to myself.”

“Sir, why don’t you move from the line and search for them. In the meantime, let me handle the other passengers.”

“But, then I’ll lose my place in the line.”

“But I can’t help that. Without your passport and ticket I can’t let you board the plane. I’m sure you dropped them somewhere in the lobby. The airport security won’t have let you enter the lobby without your ticket and passport. Search carefully.”

“But, officer...”

“Please, sir, let’s not waste time. You see you are holding up the other passengers. As you can see, there is a long line behind you. We have a holiday crowd today and every one is eager to get on their planes. The flights are due to leave shortly. Come back as soon as you have found your ticket and passport and I will take you even if there are people before you in the line.”

“Thanks, officer. I appreciate your assurance. Please, remember that I was first in the line.”

“Sure, sir, and now make room for others.”

But where could be my ticket and passport? I couldn’t have left my home without them? Did I check whether I had them with me before I left home? Usually, I am very particular about such details. Every day when I go outside, I check, double-check my keys, pen, wallet and other essentials. It’s not that I have always been infallible about the details. Didn’t I once lock myself out by picking up the wrong set of keys? Accidents are not common; even if they are not rules of life, they happen now and then. I can’t be above the rules of life. However, rule or no rule, I couldn’t have left home without my ticket and passport. I can’t be so absent-minded. Only, idiots can afford to be so careless. Did I forget to take them out of the drawer at the last minute? Wasn’t I in my room last night? Where was I last night or evening? Wasn’t I at home? I’m sure I was at home. But how sure am I? Let me remember some of the things that I did last evening.

I was with Meena and had dinner in a rooftop restaurant. But just a second! Meena never goes out for dinner with me. She has come out for lunch with me once or twice, but she has never dined with me. Strongly and determinedly, she had declined all my invitations for



having dinner outside. It’s difficult to understand people’s motives. I have never understood how having dinner with me would spoil her reputation. But these are not the thoughts of the moment.

Why is it becoming so difficult to put my thoughts in order? Why did suddenly Meena come to my mind? Why can’t I even remember what I did last evening? How can the simplest things of life get so complicated? What could be easier than recollecting what happened in the immediate past? It may be difficult to recollect what happened a week or a month or a year ago, but how can anybody fail to remember what happened only last evening? Let me try to recollect once again what I did last evening.

The officer told me to search the lobby carefully. Surely, he knows better. Didn’t he tell me that the security wouldn’t have let me in without a ticket and passport?

God, this is a nice place! How cool, clean and quiet it is! Can one think that in densely populated country like ours there can be such a haven? The way light shone all around made the lobby look like an illuminated island. Whatever one looked at, it returned the onlooker’s gaze clearly. Matching the shade of the light, a soft music was playing. Its soft lilt flowed like a mechanical breeze whirling out of the air conditioners.

The flights had been announced and the passengers one by one were crossing into the departure lounge through a security check door. As they went through, they moved as if they were being ferried into the other side of the world. Didn’t all the passengers look relieved as their backs disappeared beyond the security gate? Yes, they did indeed. Their faces beamed a clear knowledge of their respective destinations. But here I was sweating as though I were in a purgatory without my ticket and passport, essentials for a journey.

Though I knew fully well that I had not dropped my ticket and passport in the lobby. I searched it thoroughly as if to satisfy the official at the check-in desk. After all, he seemed confident that I had dropped them somewhere in the lobby. But nothing can be lost in the lobby. The lights here are crafted not hide but to reveal things. Everything here radiates light. Even the blue-coloured tiles on the floor could be compared to an inverted sky with hundreds of stars twinkling on it. There was no question of losing the ticket and passport in the lobby. However, I didn’t bother to look in the rest room, as I had not used it. Moreover, my memory is quite dependable.

Should I ask the passengers whether any of them had found my ticket and passport? Or should I have it announced through the lobby speakers? But that would look ridiculous. People would laugh at me, taking to be a lunatic who came to the airport without his ticket and passport. Let me see whether I can spot a known face among the passengers standing in line. No, not a soul that I can recognize!

“I had not known death had undone so many.”

How forgetful I am! I should have checked whether I really left home without my passport and ticket. Well, I can do that now. Fortunately, I still have my mobile phone with me.

“Hello, yes, it’s me.”

“Haven’t you left? Wasn’t your plane due to leave an hour ago?”

“Yes, but you see there is a problem.”

“What is the problem?”

“I can’t find my ticket and passport.”

“Where did you leave them? How silly of you! Did you really leave home without them? Where did you leave them?”

“I think I put them in the wooden chest of drawers last evening.”

“What wooden chest of drawers are you talking of?”

“Why, the one in my bedroom, with a huge

mirror.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Why, what’s wrong? I put the ticket and the passport on the top right shelf inside a green envelope, marked journey.”

“Do you remember when you disposed of the drawer?”

“When did I dispose of it?”

“Exactly three years ago.”

How can it be that I don’t even remember that I sold off the chest of drawers three years ago?

The lobby glowed under the lights. One could still hear the whirring of the air conditioners. They were a little louder now as the whole lobby was empty. All the passengers had left. What should I do? I was all by myself and felt lost. May be I should go home.

“Hello there, have you found your ticket and passport?”

“No, sir.”

“Are you sure you have them?”

“I think so. Didn’t you say that I would not have been allowed in without a ticket and passport?”

“Yes, but you see sometimes people are under illusions. And some people bribe the security people to let them in.”

“Officer, I have never done a wrong thing in my life.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Maybe you have you been dreaming.”

“Can one think of going on a journey without a ticket and passport? Have I been having a nightmare?”

A very young friend of mine died a few days ago. He was not even forty.

And how can I, who have no journey to make, be bothered about tickets and passports?

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REBECCA SULTANA

My pet peeve is that the MLA conference always comes around Christmas. My problem is that I am usually not done with my gradings by then and thus exacerbate my stress level by traveling with a job undone. This time around, traveling on Christmas day, I had erroneously thought that I would have the train all to myself. It was full, but at least I had two seats to myself. I was booked for New York and from there to Philadelphia on Amtrak. I had brought books along to read, but I should have known that the end of the semester is not the best time to pensively peruse. At any other time the scenery itself would have been a diversion, but in December there was nothing but dried up winter landscape. Reaching Penn Station at New York, I found my nephew Tanvir waiting to give me a ride to Philly. He was worried that his *chachi* might be stranded at Philadelphia station while the cabbies would be home enjoying their Christmas dinner. I was not one to complain. Much to my surprise, the highway, too, was full of traffic on Christmas night. Driving all through a drizzling rain, Tanvir finally dropped me off at my hotel at eleven at night and made his way back to New York.

Knowing that the conference wouldn’t start until 4:00 the next day, I decided to check out the historic district of Philadelphia in the morning. Notorious for getting lost in new places, I did not venture out far. I visited the cracked Liberty Bell, took pictures of the other museums and bought souvenirs. Come lunchtime, I opted for a cheese hoagie, a Pennsylvania specialty.

The conference started promptly on time amid hi’s and hellos as e mail correspondents finally developed into tangible faces and renowned scholars transformed into colleagues. What I look forward to in conferences is catching up with old friends. Sitting together with Ruvani Ranasinha and Deepti Misri, hearing them recount some gossip about ideological conflicts between Gayatri Spivak, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan and Elke Boehmer, I was reminded of Monmoy whom I had bumped into at Hyderabad in 2004 and knew that he was working under Rajan’s supervision at Oxford. Did anyone know Monmoy? I asked. They did, he’s still at Oxford. Say hi to him from me. Ruvani knows Walter Pereira, an old friend of mine from Sri Lanka. Say hi to him for me, Ruvani says to me. MLA is also the place where I meet up with my graduate supervisor from my old grad school. Professor Hughes had been a rock of support for me and I cherish these meetings.

One of the best points of this meet was meeting Uma Parameswaran, a writer whom I have admired for long. Soft spoken and silver-haired, her demeanor belies the energy that is apparent in her poems and stories. That night at “Hamara Mushaira” she read from her poems and a part from her novella where an abused wife walks out of her in-law’s house only to return to retrieve her mother’s gift, all armed with a plastic baseball bat. On her way back she befriends a young boy on the bus who promises to teach her Canadian street language that would go well with her new found persona. The boy, however, adds, “I would get rid of the bat though, if I were you.”

Hena Ahmad, the current president of SALA (South Asian Literary Association) and Nyla Ali Khan, one of the co-chairs, gave their welcome speeches. Nyla was in a nubbly purple turtle neck sweater, unlike the rest of us very formally attired listeners. Lost luggage, she explained, pointing to her unprofessorial garb. Ah, we nodded. Of the first day’s sessions, I especially chose to attend one that overlapped themes with my own paper. This was on Nationalism, Religious Fundamentalism, and Transnationalism in the Global Arena. University of London’s Bidhan Roy’s paper was on Islamicist identity among contemporary British South Asian novels. Questioning as to why an increasing number of British Muslims are adopting an increasingly radicalized version of Islamicist identities, Roy suggested that such as identity was a

Doing the MLA conference

retreat from the dual aspects of global homogenization and the fragmentation of stable collective identities. Roy, however, delves further to indicate an alternative understanding of Islamicist identities that views them, not as counter positioned to the process of globalization, but rather enabled by it. Islamicist identities, from this perspective, are seen as an attempt to radically destabilize the universalization of Western values by rejecting politically, and epistemologically, the logic of secular liberalism. Related to this one was Ruvani’s paper: “Re-framing British Muslims.” Both discussed Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*, as I was to do the next day.

A bane of conferences is that one can’t be at two sessions at a time. The next day, I wanted to be at my friend Chandrima Chakraborty’s talk. She was to speak about the film *Water* and the Eurocentric Orientalizing of the movie. But then, there was a session called “Writer’s Panel: Interrogating Diasporic Authorship.” I had befriended the speakers earlier and the panel promised to be an interesting one. It definitely was. Mary Anne Mohanraj, the executive director of DesiLit, used her own embodiment of Sri Lankan, Tamil, American and multi-sexual identities to problematise how her own work is interpreted. By the time I recovered from the daze of Mary’s multiple personalities, Purvi Shah started to speak. Besides being a poet, Purvi is also the executive director of Sakhi for South Asian Women. Purvi’s talk was called “Diasporic Intertextuality: When the Whole is more than the Sum of Its parts.” Her theme was immigration and the loss that comes in its wake. What I found interesting is how her work transcends disciplines. She read out poems from her collection *Terrain Tracks*, showing how the diasporic community allows for a conversation among artists who work in different media and come from different ethnic backgrounds. As a companion piece to her poem was a collage made up of photos, flowers and knick-knacks which, she told us, were printed directly placed on a scanner. The collage artist, Fariba S. Alam, is a Bangladeshi-American, said her aim was to explore the idea of ‘third spaces,’ such as the ones that exist between “abused and empowered, exotic and local, represented and underexposed.”

Next, Ronita Bhattacharya’s paper exposed the frustration that we, South Asians academics, who read and teach the “Cosmopolitan Celebrity” authors regularly experience. Ronita Mukherjee Bharati Mukherjee’s use of Indian cultural artifacts and the distortion of their authenticity by a mile or more. For example, in her use of the movie *Mister India*, Mukherjee mixes up the time frame as well as the actor, when the movie itself was a mega hit in India itself. Of course, the North American readers would be none the wiser about these, but any first generation South Asian would be perplexed, not to say annoyed, to be taken to be such dupes. And let’s not forget the preponderance of paisleys whenever someone is wearing a sari, Ronita reminded us. And this is not just with Mukherjee, Ronita also implicated Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as writers who she felt render the South Asian readers invisible in their narratives. The next speaker was a chemistry teacher turned poet, but I had to run, the next session was mine.

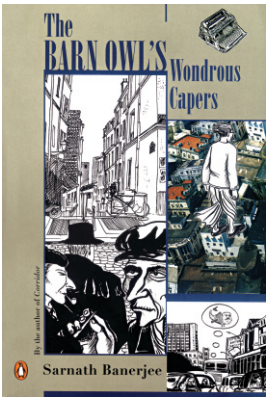
In the evening, the very last session came, the ninth for that day. I had to sneak out after the second speaker. I just could not listen to one more paper. Call it information overload. I joined the other escapees having tea outside the closed doors of the simultaneous sessions. The final parts were the keynote speech and the presentation of the SALA Award to be followed by the round table: “Postcolonialism and South Asian Diaspora.” Nyla asked me to be part of the final discussion session. Much as I was tempted, I could not. I had a train to board and an old friend to catch up with in New York.

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Book Review

The Wandering Jew Indianized

FARHAD AHMED



The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers by Sarnath Banerjee; Delhi: Penguin India; 2007; Rs. 395; 263 pp.

The *Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* is a graphic novel. And what is a graphic novel? Author Sarnath Banerjee, who is on the fast track to becoming a cult figure among India’s small but tightly knit cohort of graphic novel readers, answered it best when asked what kind of a ‘writer’ he was: “I am a comic book writer. ‘Graphic novel’ is a term publishers use to segregate comics which have a certain literary quality. And have concerns which are novelistic...whatever that means.”

Graphic novels have been around for 25 years in the West, in Germany, in the US and UK. Japan has followed the trend aggressively, with its now famous manga comic works. Some of the more celebrated graphic novels have tackled fairly heavy themes such as the Holocaust and tales of migration and exile. The term came about accidentally, when the first man to write one, Will Eisner, fearing the publisher he was talking to over the phone might hang up if he called it a

‘comic book’. They haven’t looked back since.

This is Sarnath Banerjee’s second such book. The first was *Corridor*, which was notable not only for its drawings, but for its characters: Jehangir Rangoonwalla, Digital Dutta, Brighu, Shintu, and D.V.D. Murthy, all of whom were shown spinning in various post-modern ironic modes in the urban bylanes of Delhi and Calcutta, strung between home-made aphrodisiacs and Karl Marx.

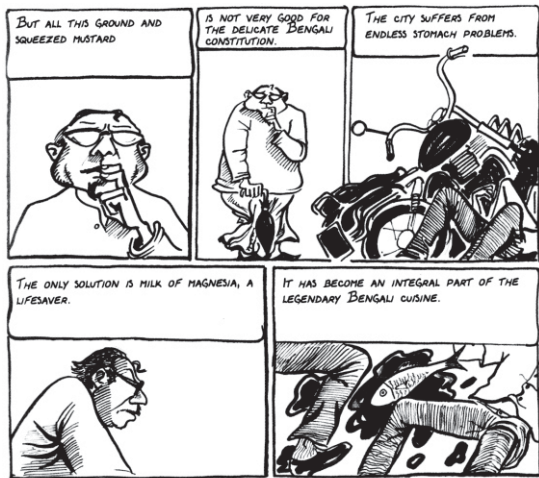
Characters from *Corridor* make appearances in *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, which otherwise is a far more complicated and ambitious book, difficult to get one’s arms around it at first reading. But then for the beginning reader, the beauty of graphic novels is that one can enjoy it at the level of drawings, and Sarnath’s drawings, the sudden bursts of colour panels amid the black-and-white with their iconic skylines, the skewed perspectives, the dhuti mingling with the hip-hugging jeans, the urban scowl, are superbly modulated to his own satiric, layered, postmodern vision of Indian life.

The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers has been inspired, as the opening panels reveal, by the myth of Cartaphallus, the Wandering Jew who has been cursed to roam the corner of the earth till Judgement Day. Sarnath has Indianized the legend, and the book thereby spans cultures, cities and history, deconstructing our/Indian assumptions of linearity and historiography. The most enjoyable part for the Bengali reader will undoubtedly be the Calcutta parts, with its palpable hits at 18th-century decadent zamindars and repressive Bengali middle-class attitudes (male sexual anxiety for example, is a

recurrent theme in his books). It has been compared in tone to the Bengali classic, *Hutom Pechar Naksha* (1862) by Kaliprasanna Singha.

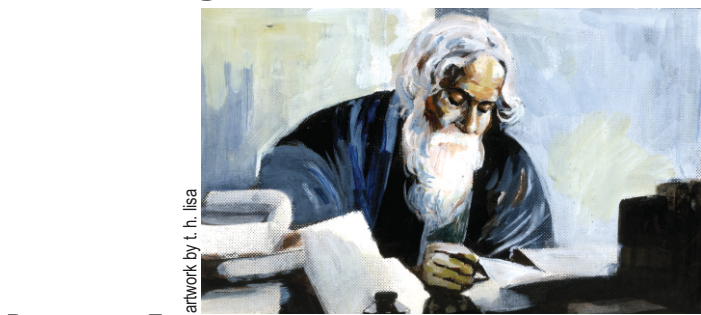
Readers resistant to this form should open up their minds and try Sarnath. He argues that his works are not a gimmick, that “an image can explore the larger realities of life”, that there is a “creative tension between word and image” and that the “final tango between reader and text” is an unpredictable one—in other words, one might end up thoroughly enjoying oneself.

Given such articulation, Sarnath Banerjee’s works might just achieve a wider readership than expected.



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Pilgrims *



RABINDRANATH TAGORE
(Translated by Kaiser Haq)

In biting cold began our journey,
A terribly long one too—
And at the worst time imaginable,
The roads all circuitous,
Winds sharp and blustery—
An utterly impregnable winter.
The camels, with sore feet and chafed necks,
Tetchily lie down in slush
Sometimes our minds grow refractory
Recalling summer resorts in valleys,
Their broad terraces, and young women in silk
Serving sherbet. Our cameleers
Growl and curse and make off
To look for women and booze.
The torches sputter out
But there’s no place to kip down,
In towns and cities we are met
With hostility or suspicion,
The villages are filthy, the prices they ask
Outrageous: we are in for a hard time.
At last we decide to travel all night,
Snatching a snooze now and then
While a voice whispers in our ears—
All this is sheer madness.

Towards dawn we came to a pleasantly cool valley
Beneath the snow line, moist and heavy
With the scent of dense vegetation.
A river sped along, the wheels of a mill
Threshing the dark, and three trees
Stood out against the horizon.
An ageing stallion galloped across the green.
We came to an inn, by whose open vine-festooned door
Two men sat dicing for high stakes,
Kicked away the empties of wine.
But no one had any news,
So we moved on, travelling till dusk.
The destined hour was nearly gone
When we found the place—
You might say it was most gratifying.

I remember, all this happened ages ago,
Would that it happened again,
But note this—please note this—
What was it drew us such a long way,
Was it a quest for birth or death?
Of course there was a birth,
No gainsaying that—we had proof incontrovertible.
We had seen many a birth and death—
And thought how different they were.
But this birth was hard to bear, sheer agony,
Very like death, our own death.
We came back, each to his homeland, his kingdom.
But we have lost all faith in the old order,
Amidst strange people clinging to their gods and goddesses.
Another death would be most welcome.

**The Bengali poem by Rabindranath Tagore, 'Tirthajatri', is itself a translation of T. S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi'. I thought the somewhat Borgesian exercise of translating the translation back into the language of the original, while carefully avoiding 'contamination' by the original poem itself, would amuse at least some readers. Punascha, the collection that contains 'Tirthajatri', also features another poem, 'Shishutirtha', that was purportedly inspired by 'Journey of the Magi'. I shall present a translation of this poem in the near future. --K. H.*