
**Subverting major discourses through multimodal narrative: a study through
*Barn Owls Wondrous Capers***

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Abstract: Saranath Banarjee is a popular Indian graphic novelist. *Barn Owl Wondrous Capers* is one of his popular works published in 2007 talks about several unspoken sides of the colonizers in India. The people of the colonies are uniformly made to believe that the colonisers have the best culture and that is superior to everything that co-exists with it. This has in turn created an inferiority complex in the minds of the colonised. The colonisers of India were so concerned about plundering the country and were least bothered about the existing structures in the country. This novel is a piece of fictional deconstruction. Derrida says, "That is what deconstruction is made of: not the mixture but the tension between memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and need a break" (27). The author uses visual art to exhibit the unpopular idea that the colonizers are not the ideal human beings. The public opinion about the white people among the Indians is very strategically maintained through the epistemological structures built by the white people.

Indians tend to believe and act like the colonizers because they hold a very low value of themselves. The lifestyle of the colonizers as shown by the author in this book makes it evident that they weren't people with ideal moral standards. The morality principles of India vary drastically from that of the colonisers, but the colonised eventually started looking up to the principles of the colonisers. The attachment and surrendering done by the colonised towards the colonisers are very psychologically and politically achieved. The colonizers promoted structural violence in India. The Indigenous elite were given the chance to enjoy their liberty, whereas the people who were marginalized by them were treated even worse by the colonizers. The marginalized people who were serving the Indians before the British rule started serving the colonisers after that which legitimized the irrational inequality prevailing in the country. The indigenous elite people took this as an opportunity to establish their arguments of dividing people into categories so that the structure remain intact to maintain their power positions. No "war of position" (Gramsci) can be risen by the oppressed people as colonization has further strengthened the marginalization and discrimination of those people. The power play has resulted in a structure that is legitimized by the external force of colonization and that has, in turn, affected the people psychologically to accept their oppressed state without questioning anything. As a result, structural violence happens and they are deprived of even their basic

needs. The images that showcase Indians as punkah wallah, topiwallahs, and, hucca burdar are very important as they reveal the condition of the working-class Indians in colonial India. Saranath Banarjee says, “in such times, it was easier to stumble upon a good duel than a couple of able-bodied punkha-wallahs” (15). The living state of those people was not very good, they were always under the grace of their employers who naturally never respected them as their equals and even more not as human beings with all needs and wants just like them.

The historical subjugation of those people has resulted in a psychological inferiority complex, where they never try to overpower the people who oppress them instead try to follow them and act according to their commands.

Occupations are a way of making their livelihood and people should be proud of what they do, but the epistemological superstructure about degrading certain occupations brings down the self-pride that every human can enjoy. The knowledge system created by the haves has created a strong inequality status in society, which iterates the idea that people below certain economic strata cannot be proud of their occupations or creates a counterargument that talks against the existing highly perpetuating ideologies of oppression in the country. The silence of these people results in the creation of sub-altern people. The silence of the working class towards the unjust treatment of the Indigenous people is further deepened by the colonisers. Colonisation has reiterated the idea of the proletariat being lesser human beings through their economic status and the strata of their occupation. The figures in this novel show a strong depiction of this reality. The weak sunken bodies of the working class people are a proper portrayal of the marginalized people without a voice in colonial Calcutta. The place is known for its tropical climate, the Europeans couldn't live but only survive, but still they managed to take advantage of the native people through their exotic lifestyle and mannerisms. The vulnerability of the Indigenous people was so high that they ended up with them being exploited by the colonisers. As Fanon says the colonizers disrupted the lives of the natives.

Fanon in his work *Black Skins, White Masks* says, “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. The colonized is made to feel inferior by the culture and values of the colonizer, which he has been forced to internalize” (18). The colonisers are generally portrayed in history as the people who comparatively had rich culture than the colonised. This major discourse of giving legacy to the colonisers by the colonised historians is questioned by the author in this book. The author has drawn images of the explicit messages which is visually appealing to the readers to think about the internalized state of inferiority in themselves. The disrespectful state of the colonised working class people near the colonisers and the Indigenous elite people enjoying certain liberties, not something equal to the colonisers is thought-provoking when it is visually presented. The constant oppression of these people gradually resulted in the internalization of foreign cultural ideologies to be superior to the native culture.

The morality principles of the colonisers and the reverence the colonised show for their moral values are not exactly proportional to each other. The lustful act of the colonisers especially those done by the colonels whose pictures are hung at the museums around India is very interestingly depicted in this novel by the author. The Babus also had mistresses and that was their normal way of living. Monogamy is a highly prevalent practice in India, but the white people were very liberal in this aspect and the indigenous rich people also had the same privilege. The colonizers going to other women who are wives already is not moralistic, but still, none of the colonized people question all those practices. The colonized choose to remain oppressed and always believe that they are inferior in every aspect compared to the oppressors and also remain blindfolded to the immoralist behaviors of the whites and also the rich Indian Babus. The societal norms are different for the rich and the poor. The poor are crushed and silenced constantly. They are always put under the spotlight of judgment by the highly immoral rich people. The rich have the power to design what is right and wrong for the different sects of society. The economic difference thus plays a crucial role in the establishment of power dynamics that affect the lives of the working-class poor people, who are deprived of their basic rights, thus structural violence happens effectively. The colonizers managed to establish their epistemological purity, wherein the native people were never given a chance to turn their knowledge systems into powerful weapons. The people who had no strict moral standards set the standards for another country. They made proper use of the Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser) to ensure their dominance.

The protagonist of the novel and his insincere interest in the lost book of his grandfather shows how the people who are oppressed never act seriously against the injustices, instead, they imitate the living style of the people who dehumanized them. The comical and liberal images in the episode where the author talks about the protagonist make the book very entertaining for the readers, but still, it does the job of subverting the major discourses as the author becomes sarcastic in tone. He wants to find the book only for the fortune it can bring and he is not concerned about the manipulated history of his country and the place where he was born. He is interested in some of the materialistic possessions of his grandfather, but not the intellectual property he had. This neglectfulness is a common feature that can be found in the colonized people. They are worried about their self and their immediate family. People are completely unaware of the politicization of their history.

This character is a great representation of the common people of India. This character is created to be a casual being and can resonate easily with the young readers but it has a deep hidden meaning. It is a reflection of reality but a mirror which questions the reality. The careless attitude of the people is the main reason for their being colonized. Even a history of colonization hasn't brought any notable progressive change in the attitude of the country. The temporal shifts the author implies in this book aids in bringing out the comparison of the country in its colonized era and the present. Such a comparison is necessary because it provokes the readers to question the ever-conforming mindset they have. The narrative technique of temporal distortion employed by the author is really

helpful in achieving the result of this fictional creation.

Bahktin in his work says, “The chronotope, as a principle of narrative construction, allows the author to shape time and space in such a way that it affects the development of the characters, their actions, and the overall plot. It is through the chronotope that the social and ideological nature of the novel is revealed.” The shift in time and space thus becomes very significant as it reveals the layered themes the novel talks about.

The characters in colonial India and post-colonial India represent the idea that humans have always been the same. The mob psychology of Indians is being so carefree and careless about the world and negligent about their freedom being snatched by others and their history being painted dark by people who marginalize them on a larger scale. The generational change brings no change in the attitude of the people, but it brings a stronger likeness to the culture of the colonisers.

The social reforms brought by the colonizers in India, like the abolition of Sati the practice where the wife is thrown into the funeral pyre of her husband are appreciable and the author leaves a note about this through the character Jobus Charnock, who is considered to be the founder of the Calcutta city. He married the woman he rescued from Sati but hit the laborers at his estate when he wanted to sleep. This brings out the hypocritical state of the colonisers, who had a superiority complex about themselves and naturally had a disrespectful aversion towards the colonised people. The brutal act of hitting people to get peaceful sleep is mentioned clearly as a legend by the author in the book but still, the fundamental idea behind marking this in the text is to bring out the superior mindset of the white people where they behave like all the colonized are uncivilized and they are their properties to be exploited for their entertainment and benefits. Plundering the natural resources on one hand is a violation but dehumanizing human beings was done very casually by the colonizers and the colonized showed no mark of opposing it, as the dominance was clearly and strongly established by the power systems that legitimized the injustices. The comments given in the book about the native fruits show that the colonisers always held their native land above every other colony, but that spirit is not found in the minds of the colonised. They instead celebrate foreign lands, their food, their culture, their religion, and moral standards. The protagonist is an example of this. He lives in London and also has poor respect for his native city of Calcutta. This self-destructive attitude paved the way for the manipulative colonizers to find their way easily into a country that has a rich history and legacy. The author establishes the fact the attitude of the Indians hasn't changed much. They remain with the same negligence and that is brought out easily through the graphic narrative structure of this novel. This easy read will enrich the questioning attitude of the people who read it.

The author talks about the fragile egos of the white people who lived in Calcutta. The duels they initiated for trivial matters show how easily triggered they were. The sensitivity in their nature is very selfish, as they neglect the colonized very easily. They don't think about the presence of the same fragility in the people they are oppressing and exploiting.

They also bring out epistemological structures that legitimize inequality and injustices. They also use Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses effectively to make people budge to their dominance. The violence they inflicted upon the colonized people was huge and they never even feared an uprising from their side. This fearlessness of the colonizers in turn seeded fear in the minds of the colonised.

The episode where one of the Babus applies the most valuable perfume, the one that is the queen's favorite on his horse's testicle is a mean way of fighting the colonizers. The actual response should have been the creation of a strong counter-discourse and ideologies, but the elite acted meanly. The luxury they enjoyed from the fruits of the labor of the laborers made them so lazy and neglectful. The option they chose to show their opposition was exactly the idea that promoted the colonizers to justify their colonization telling them that the colonies were uncivilized and it was their responsibility to civilize them. It should have been a war of manoeuvre initiated by the elites, but they didn't mind about the fate of the nation instead were keenly focused on acquiring wealth and maintaining their supremacy. The oppressed groups in their day-to-day struggle to make a living had no power in their groups and were subjected to double oppression, one by the colonizers and the other by the rich people of their land. This layered oppression created a vast subaltern group, which had no voice just like the characters in the novel which never speak. The favored group of the oppressed became so stealthy and greedy. The constant othering of these humans led to a state where they gradually tried to manipulate their state of marginalization to gain wealth by stealing valuables from the Babus. The morality of the individual is tested through economic inequality. Karl Marx in the book *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* says, "The devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things." (23) The estrangement of the labor from the laborer eventually leads to the moral depletion in the society.

The legend of Charnock in this book is very interesting. He is called the founder of Calcutta City. He is one among the white men who reached Calcutta and survived its tropical climate. He is a man with identity crises. He married a woman he rescued from sati and performed some Muslim rites on her after she died. He is a Christian man but doesn't have a strict adherence to his religion. The fragmented identity and his mental state get worse during the later part of his life. He becomes so cruel that he beats his laborers to get some peaceful sleep. Such a person has become the man who gave identity to a geographical location that has existed all along time. The established system of knowledge is so biased and politicized. The counter epistemological structure is still in its budding stage and no powerful exhibition and perpetuation has happened so far.

The author has very subtly brought out all these important arguments through a playful entertaining narration. A study done in 2018 titled "Graphic Options: A Comparison of Stories and Their Graphic Novel Counterparts" revealed that readers enjoyed the graphic versions of traditional novels because of the intriguing images and the engagement they create. The simplicity of the narrative helps the readers comprehend ideas easily. The

traditional narrative styles are filled with words and in this rapidly evolving world young people are used to minimal effort requiring interactions. Graphic novels are a good option for this present generation as these types of novels are filled with information and are a powerful medium for creating counter-arguments which is highly necessary at today's point in time. This novel *Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* is a pinch from a heap that explores a wide range of ideas and successfully instils certain questions in the minds of the readers. The significant role of the sketched images in this novel is remarkable as they communicate important information without the usage of words. The major and popular narrative styles are being challenged by this newly emerging style of narration as it is becoming effective among young readers.

The colonial mindset is still prevailing in the minds of the colonised people, they still have not come out of the impacts of colonization. The present generation of India is more drawn towards the exotic foreign culture of the colonisers. The eurocentric knowledge system and the perpetuating Western ideologies of culture and tradition are very easily infused in the minds of the younger generation because of the still living, colonial mental state which makes the people hold a higher level of respect and love for the cultures of the colonizers. It is a result of the inferiority complex people have about their own identity. This novel very beautifully brings out this idea through the depiction of history that is politicized and the present reception of that history which is still the same as it was when the marginalized people had no say in anything that was written or spoken about them. The pictorial representations of these ideas and the easily readable form of narrative effectively help in achieving the goal of the author to bring out a change in the readers, thus ending up subverting the major discourses that favor colonialism and those that legitimize all the negative aspects of colonization. The superiority paint of colonization is peeled through this multimodal narrative. Such new narrative styles are effective and suit the rapidly evolving trends in the literary world. As time changes, it is highly inevitable for literature to adapt to the current requirements, graphic novels are one such form of literature that are appealing to the readers with their interactive images and minimal words.

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