

Re-reading History and Trauma through Pictures: A Study of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and in *the Shadow of No Towers*

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Abstract.

Since a few years' graphic novels have emerged from the crises of being represented as a serious form of art and literature. Earlier it was confined to the newspaper strip and was available in the comics' stalls. In the present times the graphic novels have become a serious form of literature. It has become a new form of reading, viewing and perceiving literature. Understanding the panels and the shift of the passage of time lies in the spaces between the panels is indeed a difficult task to understand history, war, trauma etc. The study of trauma has been popular amongst the researchers since ages as the human history offers a bleak scenario since the ancient Greek times and which intensified during the world wars. The world wars have changed the notion of the existence of human beings and the Holocaust has laid in front of us an example of atrocity, hatred and horror. A war of such a magnitude has attracted the attention of the graphic novelists who has resorted to illustrate the heinous treatment of the state machinery and the scar it has left behind to the entire humanity. Since the birth of the graphic novels or comics the artists/authors have made efforts to record the events of the wars, revolutions and genocide in the form of static images and texts moving through the space of panels creating an exceptional narrative register. The paper shall attempt to explore the representation of the state of trauma of both the body and the mind through the readings of the artist/author Art Spiegelman's celebrated work *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*. The texts dive into the trauma and memory that seeps into the mind of the characters who are the victims of war and politics. The paper shall try to explore the discourse between the biological and the political dialectic of the body and the mind and what it means to exist as a political being.

Keywords: trauma, body, mind, genocide, state, visual/verbal narrative.

Crammed into cattle cars by the Hungarian police, they cried silently. Standing on the station platform, we too were crying. The train disappeared over the horizon; all that was left was thick, dirty smoke. Behind me, someone said, sighing, "What do you expect? That's w a r ... (*Night* by Ellie Wiesel)

Introduction

The approach towards understanding history and trauma leaves the researcher with innumerable questions and many questions remain unanswerable. The writers are grappling with the various facets of history and its representation and still probing into some kind of conclusion. There are numerous literary representations of historiography of war and politics and it is the path to evoke

the past which is always present as a grand narrative. In the recent times graphic narratives have opened up a plethora of ideas to understand history and its different parameters through the visual lexicon. Understanding the panels and the shift of the passage of time lies in the spaces between the panels is indeed a difficult task to understand history, war, trauma etc. Holocaust is certainly a history of horror and trauma and the innumerable texts, photographs, memorial museums which have tried to conserve this bleak history is only a partial narrative of this event. The survivors of the events like holocaust and the 9/11 menace are the fractured beings of the giant political design and the state repression. The damage and the injury that the victims bear in their minds and body is irreparable and beyond any form of representation. The trauma of remembering the human assaults and the post traumatic disarray has seeped into the conscious existence and it is easier to unveil through various form of representations may be historical, literary, paintings, and photographs but it is difficult to grasp and understand in its totality. The meaning of trauma as quoted in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* is "the originary meaning of trauma itself (in both English and German), the Greek trauma, or "wound," originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body. In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind." (Caruth, 1996) As the meaning suggests that the injury inflicted on mind is trauma, but trauma is both about the wounds that one bears in the mind as well as in the body. Due to pathological healing the bodily wounds might be subsided but the mind bears it for a long time. The paper shall attempt to examine these issues of trauma in the novels. The Second World War has repeatedly paved a path for revisiting the inflictions and the wounds that the humanity has gone through. The representations of the holocaust by the historians have again and again pushed the readers to go back and understand the truth. A war of such a magnitude has attracted the attention of the graphic novelists who has resorted to illustrate the heinous crimes of the Nazis towards its subjects. Since the birth of the graphic novels or comics the artists/authors have made efforts to record the events of the wars, revolutions and genocide in the form of static images and texts moving through the space of panels creating an exceptional narrative register. The novels of Will Eisner also depicted the stories of war and human sufferings. World War II has always left many questions made the researchers curious about this magnanimous event and the level of sufferings of humanity. In panels of the graphic narratives becomes a medium to understand the reality of the Jews and again and again the traumatic past is hammered. This narrative makes us transport to a different world and seek meaning in the images and the limited dialogues. The Holocaust has tarnished the emotions and feelings towards human beings and to deal this event through images becomes a challenge for the artist/writer. The trauma of the human beings cannot be gauged only by reading and knowing the history. There should be a deeper and broader approach to understand holocaust and 9/11 events as there are multiple layers underlying these events. Thus this paper shall attempt to explore the representation of history and trauma in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*. The blend of image and text has given a different approach towards the treatment of history and has gone beyond the barriers of the traditional narrative of writing a novel or a short story.

Methodology.

To understand the survivor's reaction, the wounds of body and mind, the post traumatic disorder, the absence, the loss the paper shall take resort to the trauma theorists like Jean Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman. The theorists mentioned here are the pioneers of the study of trauma. To begin with the paper shall focus on a few binaries to understand trauma like physiological/ psychological trauma, private/ public, body/ mind, brain/ mind, and other issues like behavioural changes, focusing on the changes of emotions, managing stress, intending to remember or to forget etc. Trauma was first related to the mental illness and this has been associated by the French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot. His main focus was on hysteria which was found amongst women. This study was carried on during the 19th century. In this study he came upon the observations regarding the "hypnotic" states of his patients. In this process the patients were hypnotised and they were made to remember their past events. Later Pierre Janet proposed the theory of the "dissociated" phenomena of the traumatic memories based on the hypnotic experiment of Charcot. The psychological trauma emanates from the hysteria as Charcot experimented amongst the women. To further this concept, the paper shall look at the following lines "In the 1880s, Freud and Breuer as well as Janet independently concluded that hysteria was caused by psychological trauma. They agreed that unbearable reactions to traumatic experiences produced an altered state of consciousness that Janet called "dissociation." According to Janet, dissociation manifested in hysterical symptoms. Putting the emotions into words and reconstructing the past helped alleviate the patients' symptoms." (Quoted from Shoshana Ringel and Jerrold. R Brendel in *Trauma: Contemporary Directness in Theory, Practice and Research*. Pp 7) . From the lines it can be said that the earlier observations were basically devoted to the physiological aspects to alleviate the trauma by hypnosis treatment. Later in the new approaches to trauma in the late nineteenth centuries the binary of body and mind is studied at length. The study of PTSD and the cognitive symptoms are experimented with in the modern approach to trauma. Shoshana Felman studied the literary responses towards trauma and its pedagogical branches and the culture of witnessing trauma through testimonies. Felman and Dori Laub ventured on the traumatic testimonies to understand the essence of the events for example the historical events. They also looked at the role of the witness of a historical event and have discussed thoroughly regarding the therapeutic effect of trauma of one who experiences himself.

***Maus* as a testimony of trauma.**

The World War II has been an important area of representation for the comic's artists and many writers have worked on Holocaust but it is only with the publication of *Maus* the treatment of holocaust gained extreme popularity. The caricatures are no doubt exaggerations but they also represent serious issues. In the journal *Punch* the cartoons were popular for their representation of satirical characters dealing with the issues of nationalism, revolutions, socialism, political movements etc. The socialist movement of Russia, Germany, France were depicted through cartoons and after the October Revolution the Russian cartoon appeared and the picture of the foreign minister Tereshchenko is represented. The cartoons depicted how the Russians were entrapped by the capitalists and the breakdown of the Soviet. The cartoons played an important role in reproducing the

political attitudes of the nations during the First World War. However, later there were representation of the Turkish and the Ottoman Empire and their national struggle and the political cartoons played became a significant tool of representation. The fascist reign of Mussolini's Italy, Great Depression (1929-31), British politics, Rise of Nazi was also depicted by the use of caricatures. Therefore, the cartoons were an important vehicle of world history and politics and it has added substance to the entire of gamut of narrative. The representation of the Nazis coming into power was depicted as early as 1923 which was a soviet cartoon and it depicts a balloon where the Nazi's rise to power is shown and the tension between the communists and the Nazis was shown and the impending struggle of the Jews was pointed out by the dialogues. The figure of Hitler with the sign of swastika was popular in the 1923 cartoons which were published in the newspapers of Germany. In the late twentieth century the figure of Mickey Mouse was incorporated in the serially produced art forms and work of Horst Rosenthal dealt with Holocaust in the form graphic narrative and it can be said as the earliest form of sequential narrative. Mickey Mouse was depicted to show the bitter politics of the Nazis. In 1942 Rosenthal's "Mickey Mouse in the Gurs Internment Camp" was widely accepted as the apt presentation of the torture of the Nazis. Rosenthal was himself a prisoner at the Gurs camp and later sent to Auschwitz. The worst condition of the internment camp is described in this comic book and it is mostly drawn with black ink. Spiegelman gave a similar treatment of Holocaust history in his *Maus* and the images of mouse as Jews can also be traced back to Rosenthal's work but he has directly incorporated the image of Walt Disney's Mickey mouse. Later in Captain America Comics one can find the image of Hitler was represented and it became very popular. The readership of comics increased and gradually it became a culture. The representation of leaders like Hitler was helpful in increasing the readers of historical events and also for the popular mass. Therefore, the event like holocaust and wars were popular in the medium of comics prior to Spiegelman. In Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the trauma of the individual is depicted through a confluence of text and image and the readers play a role of visually experiencing the trauma. The mental state of the characters can be deciphered from the speech balloons and the signs of communication associated with them. The communication is made possible by the gestures and postures and facial expressions in the progression of the panels. The use of diagrams in the form of maps plays a vital role as it acts as an icon that helps in decoding the meaning of the narrative. The incorporation of the maps in the narrative gives a clear idea of the conflicting boundaries of the nation. In *Maus* the artist has represented the history of holocaust in a story telling method. Art's father Vladek is the character-victim-survivor of the holocaust and his experiences are penned down by his son, Artie. The leading theorist of trauma studies Dori Laub has categorised the different stages of being traumatised whether one is a direct witness or not. Laub writes as quoted by Cathy Caruth "the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself." (Caruth, 1995). In this case Artie belongs to the second level of the analysis of trauma and he is a witness to the testimonies of his father. It is a process of listening to the witness and representing the narrative witnessed by his father. The horrors of his father's experience are drawn out in the visual/ verbal text and the narrator himself participates and relives the past of his father. The narrator connects a link between the past and his present venture of being a listener and represents the testimonies of trauma of his survivor father. Through the testimonies, documents and anecdote the personal trauma of the survivor father is made public and the it becomes a "collective trauma" as Shoshana Felman describes in the

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Juridical Unconscious. Felman further writes "But it was also a conscious and deliberate attempt to transform an incoherent mass of private traumas (the secret, hidden, silenced individual traumas of the survivors) into one collective, national, and public trauma, and thus to give a public stage to a collection of individual abuses and private traumas, to render public and politically transform into public, abuses that were lived as private and hidden away by the individual traumatized subjects, who had become, in their own self-perception, "the bearers of the silence." (Felman, 7).

The story begins with the panel where Artie is going to meet his father after a long time as he wasn't very close to his father. Artie asked his father to tell his story of surviving the Holocaust in which he is interested to work for his comic book. Artie visits his father often and the flow of the narrative goes back and forth. The pages of the novel are filled up with black and white sketches and some frames and figures are blackened for rendering the dark history of Nazi occupation in which Vladek was a victim. The inception of the Nazi rule is depicted by the swastika cross which was embossed in the Nazi flag. The Jews looked at the flag with bulged out eyes in an utter fright. Vladek was a war prisoner and he has undergone an array of exploitations, humiliations, and deprivations in the concentration camps. Vladek has lost one of his eyes in the war and after operation he survived with the glass eye. The prisoners were ordered to work incessantly with shovels in the camps to dig the earth. In the panels the picture of the prisoners is blackened which depicts the darkness surrounding their existence in the camps. The condition of the workers can be understood better by the dialogue "...and every night they marched us back, counted us and locked us in." (Spiegelman, 108) The marching went on under the oppression of the Nazis and the constant marching depicts marching towards an uncertainty. The description of marching with a uniform is found in the second volume, Chapter 3 where Vladek tells "So the march was going and going, forever we marched. And the ones what didn't fall down, we marched." (Spiegelman, 243)



(Figure1).

Vladek also hallucinated about his dead grandfather who used to console him in his dreams. Hallucination plays an important role in trauma studies as it depicts the disturbed mental state of the victim.



(Figure 2)

The description of hallucinations in the graphic panels can be found in the other two novels too which will be discussed in the paper. The mental state of Vladek is visible in the novel through his position of sitting by keeping his head bowed low, drooping eyes, resting the hands close to his chin etc which reflects his melancholic mind. The mind of Vladek is caught in the web of the traumatic thoughts and experiences which the war inflicted upon him. Recollecting the traumatic experiences creates a psychological disturbance in Vladek's mind and one cannot forget that he was made to remember what Spiegelman wants to document. In this context the paper resorts to Cathy Caruth who writes in her book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished. (Caruth, 1995).

Trauma thus is inexplicable and cannot be adequately conveyed. It is not a flight from reality; it is rather a return to reality, return to memory; it is a "return of the repressed" as Caruth states in her *Trauma, Narrative Unclaimed Experiences and History* (Caruth, 1996). Even the readers are traumatised by the images of death, destruction and the distress of the victims. The image of the train serves as an icon in the novel and it is drawn in a pitch black colour that stands for the overwhelming darkness. The Nazis loaded the Jews in the train and they sent them from one camp to another. It is the carrier of the corporeal beings who are allowed to board in a huge number in the compartments leaving very little space to breathe. In the novel Vladek talks about his experiences in a train and we find such descriptions as "It was such a train for horses, for cows. They pushed until it was no room left. We lay one on top the other, like matches, like herrings." (Spiegelman, 245). The blackened picture of the train is thus an artistic strategy to understand the darkness that has encompassed the victims. The train also stands as a metaphor of the brutality of the Nazis who reduced the human beings to the level of animals. The inhuman experiences can be cited from dialogues of the panel "If someone had to make urine or a bowel movement, he did where he stood." (Spiegelman, 246). The dehumanizing of the characters thus became a necessary tool to grasp the existence of the human beings in such a catastrophe.

The narrative acts on different layers as Spiegelman stands in between the brutal history of the holocaust and its victim and survivor. In this context I would like to quote Hillary Chute who writes in the book *Disaster Drawn* "*Maus* immediately establishes itself as a narrative concerned with the communication of testimony, however confusing it may be for the son, who becomes the interlocutor to the survivor witness trying to visualize his father's experience as the opening narrative act of the story, he comes up against the dominance of the photographic public archive." (Chute, 2016). Spiegelman stands as an interface between the trauma of holocaust and its survivor. He is like an interlocutor of presenting history as a whole and the trauma of his survivor-father in

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particular. The history of holocaust is difficult to rely only within the limited space of panels. Vladek was almost compelled to revisit his past again and again and it has in turn intensified his trauma as a survivor. In this process the particular act of going back to the past is repeated many times and it gave rise to new and afresh traumatic feelings. Having said this discourse takes resort to the theorist Cathy Caruth again who writes:

What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of survival. Repetition in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one's own survival. If history is to be understood as the history of a trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one's survival as one's own. (Caruth, 1996).

It is not the death or rescuing oneself from death which is engulfing the mind of Vladek but it is his survival which is making him feasible to go back to the past repeatedly and it kept on haunting him. It is the incomprehensibility of getting survived and bearing the experiences always with him.

Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* gave a new dimension to interact with history. It was published in the year 2004 that is ten years after his seminal work *Maus*. He has written this when he was in Manhattan and *In The Shadow of No Towers* is a representation of his own personal experience. The representation of the catastrophe can be seen in literature, comics, movies, television etc. The September 11 issue has been dealt with by Don DeLillo in *Falling Man* and other novels like John Updike's *Terrorist*. Amiri Baraka in the poem "Somebody Blew Up America" wrote about the terror attack of 9/11 and the poem throws a different perception about the terror attack. The memoir of Spiegelman has represented the horror of surviving this deadly attack and at the same time he has represented the media culture that has shown the falling of the towers. Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* is a blend of the images of the devastation and his own experience of surviving the attack. It is a handbill or advertising sheet sized coloured graphic novel which is spread out in a number of small panels as well as bigger and outsized panels. This technique of writing the novel helped in accommodating the giant visuals of the falling towers though it is unlike *Maus* which was a black and white text with more depth in it. Some of the panels have texts only and in some panels there are only images. It also includes real photographs as it was shown in the television screen. The broad sized novel is hardbound with black cover and the motifs of tower and the human beings falling are embossed in it in black itself. The novel opens with the words which acts almost like a slogan "the Sky is Falling" and the double page description which was not written in serialized or panelled form. This graphic novel represents the event where the personal and the collective history come together and Spiegelman himself understood history of extremes from his father's experience of holocaust survivor. The two broad paged description of the event which often acts like a prologue to the novel shows his experience of the dark sky and the falling man and he writes "Before 9/11 my traumas were all more or less self-inflicted, but outrunning the toxic cloud that had moments before been the north tower of the World Trade Centre left me reeling on that fault line where World History and Personal history collide – the intersection my parents, Auschwitz survivors had warned me about when they taught me to always keep my bags packed." (Spiegelman, 2) Art realised that this event of the falling down of the towers is bringing together the private and public history in one plane. The experiences of the narrator are the experience felt by others who are the victims in this event and he goes back to recollect the history of his survivor father Vladek and their experience of getting ready at any moment whenever they have to leave for the concentration camps.

The traumatic history of Art's father's past and the present trauma of the narrator collides in this incident. Moving on to the first chapter one can see that it starts with a panel which depicts three people sitting in front of the television on 10th Sept and on 11th September they are watching the news and the news of the terror attack made them feel scared and their expressions were shown by their bulged out eyes and spiked hair. In the adjacent panel the artist writes "SYNOPSIS: In our last episode as you might remember the world ended." (Spiegelman, 1) By episode Art particularly meant about the world history which is engulfed with traumatic events and human sufferings. By the use of the term "last" he meant the existing world order as this book is the only representation of the falling towers and there was no past episode. On this particular expression of Spiegelman, the American scholar and an expert on graphic narratives Hillary Chute in her article titled "Temporality and Seriality in Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*" writes "Since this strip is Spiegelman's first in the collection, of course, there was no last episode; Spiegelman here demonstrates the perpetuity of trauma, and also how it places stress on a dominant notion of the serial." (Chute, 231) One of the panels of the first chapter says "My wife, my daughter and I are rushing from the bomb site. We hear a roar, like a waterfall and look back. The air smells of death." (Spiegelman, 1) The role of media in representing the calamity is focussed here and in the beginning of the novel itself Spiegelman mentioned about the representations of the attack in media. The news visuals showing the flag of America and the tumbling towers is put into the boxes of the novel. The image of television is shown in one of the panels where Spiegelman is watching the television and he utters "Logos, on the other hand, look enormous on television: it's a medium almost as well suited as comics for dealing in abstractions." The event was represented through an entire process of significations and the text is almost like a collage of different signifiers encompassing the terror attack. There are images of the billowing smoke that has covered the entire sky and the writer /artist deviates and brings a parallel to his earlier novel *Maus* where he recalls that how his father mentioned about the smoke of Auschwitz : "I remember my father trying to describe what the smoke in Auschwitz smelled like." These panels depict his survivor father, Vladek and the exact panels from *Maus* are incorporated in this text. The traumatic events, the visuals , the humans falling in the post attack period and in the novel its evident in the panel in page 5 "Trauma piles on trauma! Over half the country was already doubled over in pain after the coup d' etat in 2000." (Spiegelman, 5). Trauma acts as an after effect and it haunts for a long time though a person is not a directly involved but the elements of the traumatic events gets enmeshed in mind for a long time. Keeping in mind the mental condition of Spiegelman regarding the falling towers the chapter shall take resort to the famous trauma theorist Cathy Caruth who writes about the after effects of trauma and its undying impact:

At the heart of this volume is the encounter with a peculiar kind of historical phenomenon—what has come to be called "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD)—in which the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them. This singular *possession by the past*, as we have seen in Part I, extends beyond the bounds of a marginal pathology and has become a central characteristic of the survivor experience of our time. Yet what is particularly striking in this singular experience is that its insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred. Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned. (Caruth, 1995)

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Spiegelman was possessed by the past events and it has affected him for a long time and "his memories swirl and events fade, but he still sees that glowing tower when he closes his eyes" (Spiegelman, 4) It is like a post-traumatic disorder and he couldn't get away from it. Whenever he closes his eyes the images of the towers grips him. In page 5 in the right top panel the narrative goes back to his memory and writes "Then the recent election – OW! I've gotta shut my eyes and concentrate to still see the glowing bones of those towers..." (Spiegelman, 5).

Conclusion

In both the texts one can trace the representation and re-representation of history and trauma and re-reading of history through the medium of images is challenging indeed. E.H. Gombrich in *Art and Illusion* states that "All artistic discoveries are discoveries not of likenesses but of equivalences which enable us to see reality in terms of an image and an image in terms of reality" (Gombrich, 1977). In the graphic novel various signs- gestures, postures, senses, movements are employed to convey meaning but signs also involve a certain distancing from the actual happenings and they may be read differently by readers placed in different contexts. Through the limited images and texts and a minimal space Spiegelman has reconstructed history. The illustrations of the traumatic body and mind are a challenge to the artists/ writer as the magnitude of the events are difficult to endure.

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