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## Maus And Persepolis: Visual Narrative, Post Memory And Identity

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The research paper analyses Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and has juxtaposed both the graphic narratives under a common light of their respective author's attempt in retracing their family history and their own position during the historical revolutions. *Maus* is set during the Holocaust while *Persepolis* is set during the Iranian Revolution. The subject matter of these narratives is very serious but the medium of the graphic novel that the authors pick is rather unconventional for such a solemn topic. The central question addressed in this paper consists of the conventions of the graphic narrative genre. The stylistic and aesthetic choices that the authors have picked to convey their stories, and the ways in which they have attempted to narrate their personal history.

According to Michael L. Haney, "In the world of comics, we must learn to see for ourselves, since the whole truth is always a complex interrelation of words and images" (17:05 - 18). Every panel of a graphic novel separated by a gutter establishes a picture mixed with speech balloons that work as a caption. The captioned pictures together form a narrative. The 'whole truth' that Haney talks about is what the authors of *Persepolis* and *Maus* are after. They establish their version of authority through their narrative pictures.

Art Spiegelman calls comics "picture-writing" and Marjane Satrapi calls it "narrative drawing" (Chute 6). Both of them picked this mode because they are trying to give their story a photographic validity, a witnessing power, and a recreation of their version of reality. Through the graphic novel, they are capturing an essence of their version of an aesthetic based on specific historical events. They subtly challenge the previous representations popularized through other mediums.

The two volumes of 'Maus' are a recording of an interaction between a father and a son about the Holocaust. Art Spiegelman records the narrative of his father Vladek both on a tape recorder and on paper. The peculiarity of this graphic novel is the anthropomorphic transformation of races. In *Maus*, the portrayal of Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Polish as Pigs, and Americans as dogs symbolically establish races during a particular historical backdrop. The opening page of 'Maus: A Survivor's Tale' states a quote by Adolf Hitler, "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not humans" (Spiegelman 3). The author graphically transforms this inhumaneness into animal, and we are introduced to a young

Spiegelman - as Artie - and the father Vladek, transformed into an anthropomorphic mouse. This representation of the race as animals is a constant reminder to viewers about the state Jews are forced to live in, and the ways other races (dominantly Nazi Germans) reacted to it.

Marianne Hirsch in her essay 'Mourning and Postmemory' defines Maus in terms of an interplay between actual history and postmemory. She defines postmemory as memory "mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (Chaney 22). The imaginative investment takes place when Art Spiegelman imagines this postmemory through his father Vladek's narrative and then recreates it through his anthropomorphic characters graphically. Art shares a similar traumatic memory like Vladek, in one of the sections of Maus, titled 'Prisoners on the Hell Planet' Art dresses up as a Jew concentration camp prisoner, shuns his mouse mask and regret his lack of connection to her mother's suicide. Since Art was not born during the Holocaust, it becomes necessary for him to experience this postmemory and hence relive his absence or survivor's guilt. According to Jane Tolmie, "Traumatic memory of something as intangible as being unable to speak can be made visible in the comics medium" (xi). The traumatic memory of both father and son, over not just their survivor's guilt, but also the family members they have lost including Art's brother Richieu and his mother Anja, plays heavy on their mind and becomes inaccessible to define just verbally. By creating a visual narrative through writing his graphic novel, Art Spiegelman recreates his family history of the survivors and the deceased, where he also becomes the part of the narrative. The inaccessible or imaginative memory of the author becomes accessible through his recreational artwork.

In her criticism, Marianne Hirsch writes that Maus can be seen as "an attempt by father and son to provide the missing perspective of the mother" (Chaney 34). The first volume of Maus ends with an irritated and sad Art after realizing that Vladek has burned her mother Anja's documentation of the Holocaust. In a way, Art is guilty over his inability to empathize with his parents' trauma. His dressing up in the concentration camp uniform shows how he like to reconnect with his post-memory as a survivor. The way Spiegelman attempt to achieve this reconnection is through creating a photograph where both his parents along with other family members are present alongside him. Hence, Spiegelman writes Maus in the graphical format and especially through the anthropomorphic characters because it gives him a way where he could be anyone, a homogenization of all the Jews including himself, where he becomes a witness too.

Witnessing a historical upheaval through a marginalized section is also a dominant theme of Persepolis. Marjane Satrapi or the young narrator Marji is marginalized because of the political position she is set in. The last line of the introduction of Persepolis states, "One must forgive, but one must never forget" (Satrapi IV). Forgetting and remembering hold value in Satrapi's choice of writing the book as a graphic novel.

Through 'narrative drawing', the author is providing a visual testimony of her experiences under a repressive regime where especially a woman's testimony holds no relevance. Marji is aware of gender inequity in Iran. Her first desire in the text is to be a prophet. In one of the speech bubbles of the first chapter, Marji imagines other prophets in confusion over "a woman?" (Satrapi 6) being a prophet. Marji is also class conscience right from the beginning of the text. She is discomforted over her maid's situations and guilty over her father's wealthy Cadillac. Her source of comfort in the first chapter is God and Karl Marx. She defines both the figures in terms of their visual similarity. Discontent, she shuns both the symbols later. Throughout Persepolis, the veil is an important visual symbol, it's also a constant reminder to the readers about the oppressiveness of Iranian regime.

The idea of testimony is reinforced in one of the instances where Marji's uncle Anoosh says to her "our family memory must not be lost" to which Marji replies "Don't worry, I'll never forget" (Satrapi 60). The

idea of witnessing and recreating the family history becomes important in that way. Like Anoosh, Satrapi is recreating a photograph of countless faceless martyrs of Iran who gave up their life retaliating the regime. In one of the public lectures, Satrapi said that “I wrote a book because I wanted there to be a witness account of the history of my country” (Chute 166). Satrapi’s sketches are very minimalistic and naïve when expressing the brutalities of the revolution. On her sketching technique, Satrapi states, “I write a lot about the Middle East, so I write about violence, violence today has become something so normal so banal... the color of flesh and the red of the blood and so forth – reduces it by making it realistic” (Chute 146). Hence, graphical realism is not what Satrapi is after, but it is the accounting of the subjects, the recognizing and what Viktor Shklovsky calls, “the new seeing of reality... as the fundamental device of art” (Chute 146).

Both Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi at the end goes away from their parents because perhaps their reality is too burdensome to be relived and they have lost their precious people in those settings. Both of them deploys a dominant visual symbol in their text, Spiegelman uses the mask of the mouse while Marjane uses the veil. Both of these symbols are a steady reminder to the viewers about the oppressive regimes. Their graphic narratives are an attempt to retrace their lost accounts of the family while retracing their own psyche. Their text is their version of witnessing and hence self-authorization. As both the authors are traumatized by the recollection of their events, they characterize their narrative avatars using simple, non-photorealistic drawings, in order to distance themselves from their traumatic recollection. Other reason to draw their autobiographical visual self in such a way was to make their narrative testimonial impersonal, but also a tragedy of an entire race. By making their personal tragedy collective, both the authors render the unspeakable, and invisible, visible.

Together, both the narratives make a compelling case for the graphic narrative as a serious literary and historical form. Their narratives are not merely illustrated memoirs; they are theoretical interventions into questions of memory, identity, testimony, and representation. In recovering the stories of those silenced by history Vladek's fellow prisoners, the unnamed martyrs of the Iranian Revolution they also assert the authority of the marginalized witness: the child, the survivor, the diaspora subject who carries the past in inherited images rather than direct experience.

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