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ART SPIEGELMAN'S GRAPHIC NOVELS: A UNIQUE REPRESENTATION OF THE HOLOCAUST

Angeline Sorna

Post Graduate Department of English
Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous),
Periyakulam-625601, India.

Abstract

Theodor Adorno, in his renowned 1949 essay 'After Auschwitz' declared that there can be no more poetry after Auschwitz. This dictum of Adorno has challenged Holocaust writers for decades posing the question of which would be the right genre of representation to the Holocaust- the most horrifying genocide of all times. One of the consequences of Adorno's pronouncement has been the effort to distinguish between the documentary and the aesthetic. This paper discusses how, through his graphic narratives, Art Spiegelman raises not only the question of how, forty years after Adorno's dictum, the Holocaust can be represented, but also the question of how different media— comics, photographs, narrative, testimony—can interact to produce a more permeable and multiple text that may recast the problematics of Holocaust representation and definitively eradicate any clear-cut distinction between documentary and aesthetic.

Keywords: *Holocaust, Graphic novels, Art Spiegelman.*

Art Spiegelman's graphic novels, *Maus I* and *II* are stunning volumes of graphic narratives that portray both the Holocaust and its continuing effects. *Maus* is all about trauma, the fictive yet recuperative instabilities of memory, and the narrative possibilities for representing authorial identity in the comics form. The books capture the stories of the Holocaust experiences of Spiegelman's parents, Vladek and Anja and his own troubled existence as an inheritor of their trauma. Representing Jews as mice and Germans as cats, *Maus* is an innovative and bold book that defies conventional discussion about genre while re-raising questions about intergenerational transmission of trauma, the relationship

between unique and universal dimension of Shoah and the issue of faith in the death camps. Spiegelman's considerable artistic talent coupled with his experience of growing up in a survivor household has yielded an intense and unrelenting visual text that subversively challenges extant genre distinctions. The book effectively concretizes the guilt and inner psychic chaos experienced by many Holocaust survivors and the trauma that is often absorbed by the members of the second generation.

Since the book's initial appearance, scholars have debated both the appropriateness of the comic format to treat a world historical tragedy and the use of animal figures. Detractors, such as Hillel Halkin, while admitting that Spiegelman intended a serious work, claim that drawing people as animals dehumanizes them while others like Geoffrey Hartman applaud the use of animal imagery. Hartman observes that the books' "metamorphosis of the human figure recognizes that the Shoah has affected how we think about ourselves as a 'species' (Races). The comic book format of *Maus* bears witness to Spiegelman's advocacy of the serious role graphic novels play in the postmodern world. For the author, comics are best understood as a "co-mix" of images and words and the resultant text has a stunning effect on the readers. Holocaust scholar, Lawrence Langer describes Spiegelman's work as "a serious form of pictorial literature." *Maus* is now widely recognised as a major contribution to the Holocaust studies and among the book's numerous recognitions is a 1992 Pulitzer Prize Special Award.

Maus recounts the Spiegelman family dynamic in a brutally frank and honest manner. The Holocaust past is a continual presence in their lives, the devastating lens through which the contemporary world is viewed. The book begins with Spiegelman drawing himself as a 10-year-old child, who falls while skating and his friends abandon him after he trips. Sobbing, he tells his father what happened and Vladek stops working and exclaims, "Friends? Your Friends?... if you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... Then you could see what it is, Friends!"

Maus I contains several levels of narrative. Erin Mc Glothlin describes these narrative levels as “inner” (Vladek’s Holocaust experience), “middle” (scene of Vladek’s testimony) and “outer” (memory and representation). The inner level describes Vladek’s pre-Holocaust and Holocaust experiences at this level reveals him as a resourceful individual whose knowledge of English enables him to meet his wife Anja before the war and helps save both their lives during the Holocaust. Spiegelman portrays the middle level in carefully drawn scenes that include visual representations of Vladek’s tales such as the hanging of four Jewish people in Sosnowiec, Poland for violations of Nazi food rationing quota. Other scenes include a selection in Auschwitz, Vladek smuggling food to his wife in the women’s barracks and a death march. The level of memory and representation emphasizes the continuing trauma of the Holocaust survivors and their transmission of the trauma to the second generation.

Spiegelman’s mother Anja’s suicide is the context for the four-page *Prisoner on Hell Planet: A Case History* segment, a comic book within the graphic novel that encapsulates the psychological issues in this survivor family. The segment opens with an actual photograph of his mother and the characters are drawn as human figures. Significantly, Spiegelman draws himself in a striped prisoner uniform. The depth of his guilt is shown in several ways and *The Hell Planet* serves as reference to both Auschwitz and his own emotional chaos.

The second volume, *Maus II* reveals to us Spiegelman’s overwhelming realization of the enormity of the Shoah, his own troubled relationship with his father and the increasing societal trivialization of Auschwitz. The level of memory and representation emphasizes the continuing trauma of Holocaust survivors and their transmission of the trauma to the second generation. While the second generation has not experienced the Holocaust, it remains the most important event in their lives and this is effectively portrayed in *Maus II*. The setting of the book includes Eastern Europe, Rego Park and Florida, emphasizing the omnipresence of the Holocaust and its legacy for the Spiegelman family.

Maus I and *II* abound with autobiographical elements. The author’s own Jewish identity, like some in the second generation, was initially a source of

great inner conflict. Spiegelman confesses that as a teenager he found the Holocaust terrifying and overwhelming and believed that life would be easier if he were not Jewish. Later, he began voraciously reading survivor accounts and listening to his father Vladek relate his Holocaust experiences served as the son's "shoehorn with which to squeeze himself back into history". As once Spiegelman recounted in an interview, the authenticity of his Holocaust comic panels derives both from his own experience of growing up in a survivor household and from immersion in writings and drawings made by survivors within the camps. His use of autobiographical graphic narratives as a vehicle for serious reflection on the matter of identity makes a signal contribution to the field.

Spiegelman's work also raises the issue of religion and rare instances of Christians helping Jews. His own estrangement from Judaism is made clear when Vladek recites Kaddish over Anja's body while Spiegelman reads from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Alan Rosen intelligently argues that Spiegelman becomes "something of a scribe transferring into the arena of comics the hand-lettering of a sacred Jewish document." Spiegelman's deceased great-grandfather, a deeply religious man serves as a seer who predicts Vladek's release from a German prisoner of war camp and links the event to the reading of a particular Torah portion, *Parsha Truma*. Although Vladek tells Spiegelman that in Auschwitz "God didn't come", he also relates the tale of a priest who comforted him and of a French non-Jewish prisoner who shared food rations.

It is not an exaggeration that Spiegelman's use of graphic novels to represent the lessons and legacies of the Holocaust has reshaped the artistic landscape and thanks to his pioneering and visionary work, it is no longer possible to think of comics in a parochial sense as being only for children or only for amusement. The book's continuing impact resides in its having enlarged and enriched Holocaust scholarship in a unique manner that is cross-cultural and international in scope.

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