Resurrecting Historical Wounds: A Study of Art Speigelman’s *Maus*

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**ABSTRACT:** The 21st century witnessed many wars, the worst ever in the world history and most heinous of them was the racial expulsion and massacre in the form of the Holocaust. It was state-sponsored genocide of approximately six million Jews by Nazi Germany. American-Jewish graphic novelist, Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize winning, graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1996) is a gripping narrative of traumatic memories of Holocaust. Spiegelman employs the postmodernist technique of using anthropomorphic imagery as equivalents of warring nationalities. The narrative of the novel oscillates between the Holocaust events and the present narration. The central narrative is Vladek Spiegelman’s story of surviving the Holocaust. The second narrative is Art Spiegelman’s himself as experiencing ‘vicarious trauma’, his coming to terms with his mother’s suicide; coping with his father’s symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and his own transmission of intergenerational trauma which he experiences through his father’s narration. The paper will analyse how graphic novel uses the interplay of text and illustrations to show the traumatic experiences of exploitation in a polyvalence and polysemic way. Graphic novel acts as an “autotelic text”, “visual narrative” and “sequential art” allowing readers to understand ‘words through pictures’. Spiegelman portrays beautifully in *Maus* the post-holocaust days of the survivors, memory, postmemory, traumatic wounds, collective traumatisation, behavioural patterns and cathartic venting of “wounds of the mind” as Cathy Caruth calls it. The characters in the novel have ineradicable scars, they are damaged at the core, but at the same time alive and living.

**Key Words:** Trauma, Holocaust, anthropomorphic, transgenerational trauma.

The 21st century is replete with the violence and its history is witness to the innumerable wars and the consequent bloodshed associated. Violence is endemic in global dimension. The two world wars, the Holocaust, the cold war, Vietnam war, brutalities against Rohingyas, communal violence, state sponsored violence, lynchings and mob attacks leave a traumatic experiences on the conscious and unconscious memory of the world population now. Psychologists around the world- Freud, Herman, Cathy Caruth have tried to evince information regarding the traumatic experiences and its after effects on the human psyche. Therefore, trauma has become a subject of study for psychologists and is posing a challenge to psychologists. According to Cathy Caruth, the traumatic experience splits the witness into two selves: the conscious and the dissociated. The traumatic experience settles down in the dissociated self and emerges in the form of nightmares, flashbacks and other psychological symptoms. Derrida calls it ‘hauntology’ and says “haunting as the state proper to being as such”.

Literature, beautifully narrates the traumatic experience. Major trauma theorists like Sigmund Freud, Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, Soshana Felman and Dominik LaCapra have immense faith in literature and its representation of trauma. The interaction between literature and trauma studies has given birth to the relatively new genre of trauma fiction, as underscored by Anne Whitehead. Trauma fiction aptly portrays the traumatic experiences, experiences of survivors, coming to terms with trauma and also the cathartic effect of trauma healing. It also allows the public healing by raising the public consciousness about the collective sufferings. Urvashi Butalia compiled oral narrative of the partition survivors in *The Other Side of Silence*. Sometimes the traumatic event or the victim takes recourse into silence and his/her trauma is unnoticed like domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, child sexual abuse etc. Recently as an act of retaliation women have spoken about their sexual harassment by power corridors ‘#MeToo’ movement. After so many years these women broke their silence, some calling it a conducive political climate which is prerequisite for articulation for the traumatic experience.

“Trauma Theory” as a term first appeared in Cathy Caruth’s book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). The theory stems from the interpretation and explanation of Freud’s concept on traumatic experiences and “traumatic neurosis”. In the year 1980 the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized the concept “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD), which is central concept in trauma theory. Traumatic event is sometimes recollected in the form of dreams, flashbacks, hallucinations. Freud defines dreams as “royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the
mind". Trauma theory emerged during 1960s from various social issues like domestic violence, violence against women, harassment at work places, slavery, Holocaust survivors, refugees, wars etc. The changing paradigms of trauma are responsible for the evolution of trauma theory in literary criticism. The study of trauma in literature and society is affected by the semiotic, rhetorical, and social concerns. Contemporary literary critics now have adopted neoLacanian, neoFreudian and new semiotic approaches to define Trauma Theory. Trauma Theory is pluralistic in approach. Trauma experience is represented in literature by combining Feminist Theory with psychoanalytic theory. Examples are Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things and Toni Morrison's Beloved. Now in the postmodern era trauma has taken new dimensions in the space of the internet- cyber- space, cyber trolling and its impact on the individual psyche. Caruth writes in Unclaimed Experience that, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent, or original event in an individual's past but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature-the way it is precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on".

Concept of trauma is transhistorical i.e., "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another". In common parlance, trauma can be defined as the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overtaxes an individual's ability to cope with the situation and causing the feelings of helplessness and misery, which could be seen in behaviour of the individual. Rothberg's concept of trauma is " collective, spatial and material(instead of individual, temporal, and linguistic)". Which is opposite the concept of trauma as held by Caruth and others. Cathy Caruth in her recent book titled Literature in the Ashes of History (2013) turns from melancholia to life, she emphasises its "imperative to live". Judith Herman psychiatrist in her book Trauma and Recovery discusses the narrative as an effective therapeutic method in the treatment of trauma victims. According to her they help in the healing and recovery of the trauma patient. In simple words trauma theory is the outcome of cross-fertilization between psychology and the humanities. Holocaust is the germinal seed for the growth of trauma theory. Sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander says that colonialism is part of the "trauma process". Narrativization of trauma leads to the formation of the traumatic memory. It is the narrativization which leads out of the traumatic past.

Intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories is explained by Durkheim's theory of 'collective consciousness' how transmission takes place to subsequent generations through stories, oral narratives, photographs, behavioural patterns that they watch and assimilate. Individual trauma stories enter into the culture and become cultural trauma stories. Caruth writes that, "trauma is never simply one's own". According to Freud, memories masquerade as thoughts, feelings and images but never truly as themselves.

**Introduction to Graphic Novel:**

The term "graphic novel" was first coined by Richard Kyle in an essay in 1964, the genre gained popularity in the comics world after the publication of Will Eisner's A Contract with God (1978) and Marvel's Graphic Novel Line (1982). The term became familiar to public in the first volume of Art Spiegelman's Maus in (1986). Exact definition of the graphic novel id debated and open to many interpretations, though Merriam- Webster dictionary defines it as, "a fictional story that is presented on comic-strip format and published as a book". It is also defined as "cartoon drawings that tell a story and are published as a book". The term graphic novel is controversial. American comic critics sometimes refer to European graphic novels as "Eurocomics". In Japan a large population regularly reads comic called as "manga". A graphic novel usually means a long comic narrative for a mature literary themes andouth artwork. Graphiation is based on the theory that entire personality of an artist is revealed through his/her visual representation in a novel. In a graphic novel there are certain prerequisite like control over the use of panel transitions, layout of the artist in order to achieve certain narrative objectives and also to display the individual style of an artist. Graphic novels display fundamentally amalgamation of word and image in order to produce undercurrent of satire and parody. A graphic novel uses both text and illustrations to create and stimulate a story in a reader's mind. It allows readers to understand 'words through pictures'. A graphic novel employs in sequential panels as "visual narrative" and "sequential art". In the academic stature graphic novels are gaining momentum owing to its appeal of educating and delighting at the same time. Graphic novel acts as both a "teaching aid" and "autotelic text". It uses the postmodern technology of visual culture and graphics involving use of panels, frames, speech/ thought balloons etc in a proper manner to render the story in the mind and imagination of the reader.

**Art Spiegelman:** Art Spiegelman was born on 15th February 1948 as Itzhak Avraham ben Zeev is an American cartoonist, editor, and comics writer, much acclaimed for his graphic novel Maus. Art Spiegelman's
father was a Holocaust survivor- Wladyslaw Spiegelman was a Polish Jew. In the novel Maus which represents his parents better Art Spiegelman uses the names "Vladek" and "Anja" for his parents. The surname Spiegelman comes from the German and means “mirror-man”. Maus depicts the family story of the Spiegelmans, how the elder son of the family "Richieu" was poisoned by his aunt to save him from Nazis who could take him to the extermination camps. Out of 85 relatives of Spiegelman alive at the beginning of World War II only 13 have survived the Holocaust. Maus is a novel based on his father’s recollections of the Holocaust. Art interviewed his father and made a research visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp before setting to write Maus. Art Spiegelman says, “All comic-strip drawings must function as diagrams, simplified picture- words that indicate more than they show”. Spiegelman is a non-practicing Jew and describes himself “a Zoinist” - neither pro- nor anti-Zionist and calls Israel “a sad, failed idea”. Maus is a novel that popularized the concept of autobiography in comics. Maus novel is credited of lifting comics from the popular culture into the world of high art in the eyes of general public imagination. Though the prism of graphic novel Spiegelman depicts the wounds and sufferings of the Holocaust survivors. Art Spiegelman’s Maus: A Survivor’s Tale (1986) won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Spiegelman uses the strategy of anthropomorphic imagery instead of warring nationalities. The mice stand for Jews; cats signify Germans; pigs denote Poles; dogs imply Americans and frogs refer to the French. It may be analysed with reference to T.S Eliot’s concept of ‘objective correlative’.

Concept of race as a social construct is highlighted in Maus, race is a social construct rather than a genotypic character. Our genetic make-up does not determine our race, race is a social myth. The Jews have been subject to racial discrimination, ‘hyphenated identity, is the hallmark of Jewish civilization. The worst discrimination ever in the history of mankind was faced by Jews in the form of the Holocaust, which was a state-sponsored genocide of six million Jews by Nazi Germany. Under the headship of Adolf Hitler, Nazis started believing in ‘social Darwinism’ and they equated the Germanic race with the Nietzschean idea of ‘Übermensch’ (superman) and Jews as ‘Untermensch’ (sub-human), with this mind set Nazis legitimised the unabated killing of Jews. The German phrase ‘Lebensunwertes Leben’ meaning "life unworthy of life" was the linchpin of the Nazis’ racial party.

Art Spiegelman’s Maus; A Survivor’s Tale consists of two factions "My Father Bleeds History" (1986) and "And Here My Troubles Began" (1991) The full text was published in 1996, and translated into more than twenty languages. The novel is based on two narratives, interweaved beautifully together. The central narrative is of Vladek and Anja Spiegelmans story of surviving the Holocaust. The second narrative is based on Art Spiegelman, his coming to terms with his mother’s suicide, coping with his father’s eccentricities and trauma and his own problems as the victim of transgenerational transmission of trauma. Art Spiegelman presents his first-hand experience of trauma due to his mother’s suicide, she committed suicide due to PTSD, due to psychic-scars left by Holocaust. In Maus, Verfremdungseffekt i.e “estrangement effect” is produced by showing alliance between cats and dogs and rats fearing their same species; this estrangement helps readers from passively accepting things.

The novel begins at Rego Park with a little episode which serves as prologue to the novel, Artie (Art Spiegelman’s name in the novel) is seen playing with his friends- roller-skating, Artie’s belt is loosened and he falls down, his friends leave without him, he narrates this episode to his father, who gives him a pragmatic lesson and says

‘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 06

Part I “My Father Bleeds History”

The narration of the story oscillates between the past and the present. Even after the Holocaust is over, the survivors are suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder. Vladek has tendency of hoarding things. At the dinner table, he asks Artie to finish off the left over food in his plate, Artie says to Mala (step-mother)

“when I was little if I didn’t eat everything mom served, Pop and I would argue... sometimes he’d even save it to serve again and again until I’d eat it or starve”.

To this Vladek reacts and says, “Yes! so it has to be. Always you must eat all what is in your plate.” This behaviour implies that Vladek has seen food crunch during Holocaust and he knows what it means to be without food. The prisoners were expected to die within three months by burning up their own body weight due to scarcity of food. Prisoners were ordered to “spotlessly clean” the mess on the table. The past
is juxtaposed with the present beautifully, Artie is engrossed in his father’s story, mean while the ash of the cigarette falls on carpet. Seeing this Vladek starts rebuking Artie and telling him to clean the carpet making an excuse of illness. Actually Vladek does not want to relive his past but ironically he is living it by narrating his own story. Recalling the plight of prisoners were made to stay in tents in freezing cold and given only a “thin blanket, a crust of bread and a little soup”. Prisoners having frost bite had pus and lice in wounds. 

With the help of Polish train-man Vladek camouflages his Jewish identity by wearing a pig-faced mask and is united with his family. This incident substantiates that race is a social construct and not the genetic composition. Vladek is suffering from the trauma of Holocaust, on the slightest expenditure he feels irritated, he fixes the drain pipe himself, tells Artie that tape recorder should have maximum $35 price. These are all the symptoms of his trauma, he has been through fund crunch, barter system in concentration camps. Vladek is suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder. His second wife Mala complains that he is attached more to things than people and never allows to through away old and worn out things. Holocaust has made him learn to hoard things for rainy days. He is suffering from “compulsive hoarding”. Dr. Robin Zasio in his book The Hoarder in You: How to Live a Happier, Healthier, Uncluttered Life writes,

“..if someone has a tendency towards compulsive hoarding, a trauma can trigger the condition and there is research that shows that the subject had, the more severe their hoarding problems were. It is well known, for instance, that Holocaust survivors were seen to hoard food, money, clothing and other items”.

Art Spiegelman is himself suffering from trauma though born after world war second. Professor Marianne Hirsch in her book The Generation of Post memory: Writing and Visual culture, differentiates between "vicarious trauma" and "personal trauma". Art’s personal trauma is due to his mother’s suicide and his “vicarious trauma” i.e, the second hand experience of trauma is due to his father’s narration. In the second part of the novel, Art is seen struggling with his own trauma Art acknowledges the fact that one cannot transcript in words the horrendous experience of Auschwitz death camps. Art tells his wife in the novel

“I mean I can’t even make any sense out of my relationship with my father... How am I supposed to make any sense of Auschwitz?”

Art visits a psychiatrist who ironically is himself a holocaust survivor. Towards the end of the novel Vladek is exhausted by narrating his story he is overpowered by sleep and says “I’m tired talking Richieu, and it’s enough stories for now”, calling Art by the name of his dead brother indicates that vladek is still living in past and is not able to forget his dead son. Art Spiegelman is also remorseful towards the end that he and the publishers are going to make bucks and do a good business out of the wounds of his family. All of them are alive but they are not living, Holocaust has left unerasable wounds on the psyche of the affected families.

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