
Critical Analysis Of The Text: Depiction Of Postmodern Ethnography In Maus

This paper is an attempt to analyze the following aspects of the graphic novel Maus: A Survivor's Tale by Art Spiegelman. Firstly, the novel as a depiction of postmodern ethnography and the experience that is enriched in the narration. Secondly, the reflexivity of memory and how the author has brought in the relation between memory and history. And finally, how 'graphic novel' as a genre, is an ample and unique platform selected by the author and how effectively he has executed it.

Ethnography

Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale is identified as a graphic novel that put the genres into the map. Although there are several other novels such as Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi and Fun Home by Alison Bechdel that Maus are related to in the matter of form and narrative, the text is clearly different because, those novels are largely autobiographical and they are narrating a story of specific time and space. While in Maus, even though it can be considered as an autobiography weighing the parts of the story where Spiegelman's life story is interrupting his father's account of Holocaust, the narrative does not completely fall in to that category. Moreover, Maus is considered to depict postmodern ethnography. Even though the text unravels in an order, following Vladek's account of Holocaust and Nazi Germany, it is not a historical documentation of the same. Unlike other stories and documentaries and films that have been based on holocaust, Maus is a depiction of a personal history as well as official history. It throws light on the personal experiences of Spiegelman's family during the world war and on the lives of other Jews and their survival. The autobiographical part which describes the author's life itself focuses on how "his family's Holocaust trauma has become his trauma, and the ways in which he has inherited his parents' survivor guilt".

History is a narrative that combines heterogeneous elements. It can be said as a construct which might appear objective at the surface but is actually subjected to various prejudices and is distorted. But here, the dominating voice of Vladek throughout the story is what gives the readers a clear picture on the magnitude of larger historical events. Here the account of history is given through the voice of the subject who underwent the trauma. Hence, Maus cannot be considered as an accurate, indisputable testimony of the genocide. The author himself has said that despite the fact that the story seems to be concrete in an order arranged box by box, it is a recollection of the past and a retelling of how much truth the father was willing to share. And that's why more than the horrors of Holocaust what strikes the reader most are the second generation trauma experienced by the author and the guilt of survival.

Memories about past: Personal and collective

More than simply telling a story, Maus is a process of transferring and recording memory. The reflexivity of the memory, of the past is well portrayed in the story through the intrusions made by daily life. While the author is very much interested in his father's account, the father is trying to mend his relationship with his son. He often complains about Mala and sighs that he has no

one to share it with but Spiegelman. He tries to invade into his son's life style, his way of dressing, smoking habits et cetera. And the fact that Spiegelman has involved all this in the comic shows that he is trying to prove how memory is not based on definitive fact, rather a part of the construction of the past. Thus the story generated as a result of this father-son interaction is not something that is already known, but a unique experience that belongs to the teller. The medium of comics allow the author to show this process the circumstances that lead to this interaction and he achieves a mixture of picture and text which makes the mutually constructive relationship between the teller, listener and the reader. The part where Art is trying to obtain his mother Anja's journals prove that he was also in search of another perspective or another experience within his family. Though later the realization that those have been destroyed in the war brings immense pain to the author, this is a metaphor that points out the difficulty in recovering different narratives of the Holocaust and other historical incidents.

Through the illustrations, he makes note of the small things like his father pedaling, his Auschwitz tattoo, the family members around the dining table in Vladek's story and the picture of himself eating with Vladek and Mala and so on. These illustrations show us the ways in which the present is continuously trapped, shaped and evolved with the past. The images of the past and present are hence not clearly distinct in Maus but closely interwoven on several levels. The first frame itself does not begin with the Vladek's account of world war but with Art's traumatic experience of his friends leaving him. His experience as a secondary victim, an inheritor and witness to traumatic memory. This again makes the point clear that Maus is not specifically about Holocaust but about the relationship of memory of the trauma to the present. This demonstrates that memory and history are not two distinct entities objective and constructed, but rather they are dependent on each other. And that there is no definite beginning or ending to both.

Formative innovations

A large number of debates and discussions that surrounded Maus were on the 'appropriateness' of portraying the Holocaust in the form which Spiegelman has selected. Usually, comics and illustrations are for the large crowd, the strip of entertainment mixed with humor, normally viewed as trivial. However, Spiegelman's creative move was not to trivialize Holocaust. He chose this genre because first and foremost, he is an artist, an illustrator and this was a medium he was comfortable with. Spiegelman has also managed to break the conventions and understandings of modes of representation and literature. Through these complex narrative structures arranged in order and made to seem simple, he has transgressed the conventional ways of telling or retelling a story. Instead of repeating what has already been done, Spiegelman makes a re-representation of a familiar history while also escalating the seriousness given to the genre of comic medium, widening its highly expressive, multifaceted, and layered structure. The author himself has admitted that transferring memories and depicting them through illustrations in a normally considered 'trivial' medium has been a daunting task for him. However he has succeeded in establishing order and accuracy. He has successfully portrayed the process of recollecting the memory and then orderly laying them in a chronology starting from classification, separation, deportation and extermination done by the Nazis. The minute detailing given to each of the illustrations, the emotions, body language and such gives makes it more commendable. Spiegelman's conscious employment of animal characters in Maus has been controversial and criticized by many who argue that it casts the significance of the Holocaust as commonplace and comedic. He justifies it by saying that this adaptation

makes possible an authentic portrayal, avoiding unnecessary emotions. By portraying Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, and Poles as pigs he is also trying to evade misrepresentation and overdetermination of human imagery. The animal imagery also helps in showing some of the brutal events of the Holocaust in a less gruesome way. These anthropomorphic imageries are however secondary to the narration which focuses on relationships. This conscious mask as a matter of fact only amplifies the human characteristics helping the readers to identify the characters as humans rather than animals.

Works Cited

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