

SPEAKING PICTURES: A NARRATOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MARJANE SATRAPI'S GRAPHIC MEMOIR, *PERSEPOLIS*

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Abstract : Representing reality is an aporia, an ever elusive task. Documenting the traumatic experiences of life received from violent wars is more problematic. Marjane Satrapi, the Iranian born French graphic novelist and cartoonist, brings into the narrative surface of pages her war experiences in Iran. The genre of comics is now widely used to represent traumatic experiences of the writer's life, which is popularly referred to as graphic memoirs or autobio comics. The graphics, panels, pictures and the text speak out the harsh realities the writer had experienced with an advanced kind of fidelity to the readers. Satrapi's *Persepolis* is a portrayal of life in Iran in the wake of the Islamic Revolution. This paper attempts to analyse how Satrapi presents her life through the graphic memoir *Persepolis* and its advantages over conventional autobiographies.

Index Terms: graphic memoirs, war trauma, narratology, comics

Writings of the self are always something which gives a proper shape to the scattered and the broken episodes of one's life. Writings of the self like autobiographies, memoirs, testimonies, letters, blogs etc. help the writer to recollect, reorder and reflect the fragmented pieces of memory in her/his mind. It is an even more complex process to represent the traumatic memories a writer had undergone in her/his life. Documenting trauma is an irresolvable task. Many attempts have taken place in literature to capture the experience of trauma in the symbolic realm of language. There are memoirs and autobiographies which attempt to represent war trauma, trauma from rape and the like. The genre of cinema, using the multiple possibilities of textual, visual and auditory media, also tries to represent the trauma. We have horrific war movies like Spielberg's *Schindler's List* which create in us a horrifying nausea. The Italian film maker Roberto Benigni attempts a better representation of trauma in his outwardly comic film *Life is Beautiful* which won the Academy Award.

The traumatic experiences a person had undergone in life must be inculcated into the narrative memory. Documenting the experience as it was is not enough to make the readers experience the trauma. Fictionalizing the experience is still a problematical issue for that would distort reality. But the trauma must be conveyed to the readers and thus to the society. For that purpose some writers who have experienced trauma in life have drawn their shattered and scattered psyche into the pages in the form of graphic memoirs.

"Graphic novel" is rather a new genre in literature. Or the genre which was entirely an area of children came to be used as a powerful medium to depict serious topics like trauma. A graphic novel can be defined as a story narrated by using different types of cartoons and graphics in the form of a book. The term graphic narrative and comics are used interchangeably where graphic novel appears in the form of a complete book and comics as serialized having different stories. But there has been a hot dispute regarding the definitions of the terms graphic novel and comics since then. Both comic books and graphic novels use a mix of illustrations and words to inform a story. That story may be something, whether it's fiction or non-fiction, the tale of a superhero or of a zombie apocalypse. The distinction isn't most within the content, but in the presentation. The term "manga" in Japan may be a word accustomed to refer each comics and cartooning. "Manga" as a term used outside Japan refers to comics originally printed in Japan. Even though graphic novels have dealt with the stigma of being solely for children, more and more graphic novels have been written for adults in recent years,

and a new niche of graphic novels emerged. These adult graphic novels contain topics, such as war stories, which are written and drawn for adults and are definitely not inferior to literature in prose. The cartoonist Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (1986) helped to establish both the term and the concept of graphic novels in the minds of the mainstream public. "A subdivision of the graphic novel, in which conveying a message and connecting to the reader is very important, is what was first called the 'autobio comic' but has been referred to as the 'graphic memoir' in the past decade" (Bradley 162).

Marjane Satrapi is an Iranian-born French graphic writer, cartoonist, illustrator, film director, and children's book author. She became world famous with her critically acclaimed autobiographical graphical novels which were originally published in French and later translated into English, *Persepolis* (2004). She describes or draws her childhood in Iran and adolescence in Europe in the book. *Persepolis* became a remarkable work in the genre of Graphic memoirs. It has been adapted into an animated film and was debuted at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. It received a special jury prize. It was appointive for an award for Best Animated Feature in January 2008. With this, she became the first lady to be appointive for the award.

Persepolis deals with the horrific details about the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the war between Iran and Iraq. This is a touching story of the life she and her family had spent in Iran and her later life in Europe. Her trauma includes war, exile, and loss of identity, isolation or alienation and suppression of women. At the opening of the book, Marjane, or Marji, is ten years old. It's the year after the Iranian Revolution, and although her family has always been secular, Marji must wear a veil and attend a religious, girls-only school. She's imaginative, but doesn't really understand what's happening. She gives us a child's-eye view of the country's history, from its glorious past as the Persian city of Persepolis to the tumultuous events leading up to the present moment.

Gradually, her family helps her make sense of what's going on around her. Violence is a daily event as protests fill the streets. When her beloved Uncle Anoosh returns, Marji finds out that he had fought as a revolutionary and spent time in prison. The country becomes more religious. Marji's mother comes home one day, frightened after having been accosted for not wearing a veil. Iraq begins bombing Tehran, and the family has to spend time in a bomb shelter. It's so bad that a neighboring Jewish family is killed one day during an intense attack. During all of this, Marji tries to be a normal teenager. She likes punk music and American clothes, but she frightens her parents when she buys them on the black market.

Increasingly worried about Marji's rebellious behavior, her parents announce that Marji will be moving to Austria to attend a new school by herself. Marji's beloved grandmother helps her pack and tells her never to forget where she came from. In Vienna, Marji lives briefly with some friends of her parents, Zozo and her daughter Shirin, but it doesn't go well, and she quickly moves to a boarding house run by nuns. When a nun makes cruel comments about Marji's Iranian heritage, Marji snaps and is thrown out. She moves in with Julie and her liberal mother. European ways sometimes puzzle Marji, who has a hard time understanding why teenagers disrespect their parents or talk so much about sex. All the while, Marji is developing into a young woman, and she begins experimenting with sex and selling drugs. Her boyfriend Markus cheats on her, and in desperation, Marji begins living on the streets. After two months, she winds up in the hospital with bronchitis. Finally, she reconnects with her parents, who arrange for her to come home.

Once more, Marji must create a new life. Her friends have found ways in which to regulate to the new regime, but Marji no longer fits in. In despair, she attempts suicide. When she survives, she decides to completely revamp herself: new hair, new clothes, and new attitude. She becomes an aerobics instructor and starts dating Reza. She also enrolls in art school. During this period, Marji and Reza have several run-ins with the moral police, who have the authority to whip or fine them for being seen together out of wedlock. They marry, but their relationship is not a happy one and they decide to divorce. Marji's grandmother helps her through it, confiding that she had once been divorced herself. Once more, Marji realizes that she must leave home in order to find the life she wants. She says goodbye to her parents at the airport, a repeat of the scene when she was fourteen and left for Austria. Marji is now an adult woman and a confident artist, although the parting is still bittersweet. As she writes in the final sentence, "Freedom had a price" (Satrapi 344).

Satrapi gives a brief introduction about the rich cultural heritage of Iran and its downfall at the beginning of the novel. "Iran was rich. Because of its wealth and its geographic location, it invited attacks: From Alexander the Great, from its Arab neighbors to the west, from Turkish and Mongolian conquerors, Iran was often subject to foreign domination..."(5). Since 1979 when Shah of Iran came back to power, Iran has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. Satrapi states in the introduction that she wants to show the truth regarding Iran and Iranians to the world. So she says:

This is why writing city was thus vital to Maine. I believe that an entire nation shouldn't be judged by the wrongdoings of many extremists. I also don't need those Iranians UN agency lost their lives in prisons defensive freedom, UN agency died within the war against Asian nation, who suffered under various repressive regimes, or who were forced to leave their families and flee their homeland to be forgotten. One can forgive but one should never forget. (5-6)

Trauma refers to a person's emotional response to an amazing event that disrupts previous concepts of individual's sense of self and therefore the standards by that one evaluates society. The term "trauma novel" refers to a piece of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense worry on individual or collective levels. A shaping feature of the trauma novel is that the transformation of the self lighted by an outside agent, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and the world. The external event that elicits extreme response from the protagonist isn't essentially connected to certain to a collective human or natural disaster like war or tsunamis.

The popular trauma theory employed today depends upon the abreactive model of trauma, which is used to assert the position that traumatic experience produces a "temporal gap" and dissolution of the self. For example, in *Worlds of Hurt* Kali Tal writes: "Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal conception' " (Tal 15).

This conception of trauma which is of Freudian and memory emphasizes the need to recreate or ease – through narrative recall of the expertise. Yet, at identical time, this model claims, as Tal makes clear, that the remembrance of trauma is always an approximate account of the past, since traumatic experience precludes knowledge, and, hence, representation. The literary trauma theory articulated by critics such as Kali Tal and Cathy Caruth, considers the responses to traumatic experience, including cognitive chaos and the possible division of consciousness, as essential characteristic of traumatic experience and memory. The idea that traumatic experience pathologically divides identity is employed by the literary scholars as a metaphor to describe the degree of damage done to the individual's coherent sense of self and therefore the amendment of consciousness caused by the experience.

The prevalent view of literary studies is that "trauma stands outside representation altogether imagines an intrinsic epistemological fissure between traumatic experience and representation" (Caruth 17). This notion of trauma ends up in the essential framework of the dominant literary trauma theory best articulated by Cathy Caruth in unwanted expertise once she says:

Trauma isn't locatable within the easy violent or original event in associate individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not far-famed within the initial instance – returns to haunt the survivor shortly (Caruth 4).

Traumatic experience becomes unrepresentable because of the lack of the brain, understood as the carrier of coherent cognitive schemata, to properly encode and process the event. The origin of traumatic response is forever unknown and unintegrated; however, the ambiguous, literal event is ever present and intrusive. This theory argues that trauma is only known through repetitive flashbacks that literally re-enact the event because the mind cannot represent otherwise: "The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is first experienced at all" (Caruth17). Traumatic experience is like an unchanged photographic negative hold on in an unlocatable place of the brain, but it maintains the ability to interrupt consciousness and maintains the ability to be transferred to non-traumatized people and teams. Moreover, this idea of trauma perceives responses as essentially pathologic and privileges the act of speaking or narration because the primary avenue to recovery. In different words, presenting trauma

as inherently pathologic perpetuates the notion that every one responds to any reasonably traumatic expertise manufacture a immoral consciousness.

The phantoms of trauma lurk latent in the mind, grow along with the survivor and intrude into the past, present and future memories and thought patterns. The haptic surfaces of the graphic novels pictures trauma to the spaces of the comic pages. As Hilary Chute states:

Graphic narratives draw trauma – a phenomenon characterized by its unspeakability, invisibility and silence – out into the open spaces of the comic page. Furthermore, graphic narrative represents unseen wounds in a readable form of visuality: combination of words and pictures linked graphically in sequence provide an alternate means of depicting trauma's ineffable and disorienting nature. (Chute 3)

Traumatic memory often returns unwilling in dreams and flashbacks because it is an experience which is not fully understood at the true time it happened or fully comprehended when re enacted in the present. "To be traumatic is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (Caruth 5), says Cathy Caruth. This image will always be distorted and monstrous one which lurks in the mind to be revisited giving the traumatic experience. Graphic narratives and comics offer a narrative space to draw out such distorted images using the unique features of colour, panels, gutters, repetitive imagery etc. Interestingly, these graphic narratives are used as a therapeutic device to redeem a victim from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This shows the effectiveness of graphic narratives in representing the unspeakable and invisible trauma.

Graphic memoirs focus attention on how victims remember and re enact their own histories through drawing. They draw disasters on page; create worlds on page with colours and pictures for the readers to inhabit. Judith Herman puts thus: "Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensation and images" (38). And Art Spiegelman, the graphic novelist says that even though it is said to be vulgar, semiliterate, unsubtle comic books are the very appropriate form of speaking the unspeakable.

Graphic narratives cannot be read rapidly. Their style slows down the pace of reading, giving the readers a space to inhabit, remember, visualize and relive the trauma experience.

The increasingly violent action of the battle is presented as a seamless visual narrative in the format of a folded mini- panorama, while the format itself serves as an obstacle to the fluency of reading: the accordion- like structure is not that easy to handle as is turning the page of a book, the materiality of the pages has to be dealt with. This new format does not only make the reader conscious of his or her body during reading, but, more importantly, due to the readers' bodily performance during reading, it creates an actual embodied connection with the thousands of represented bodies that are being destructed in the battle. (Szep)

Persepolis presents the life of Marji as a young girl in Iran. The war, massacres and bombings she witness put her in a trauma. Even when she is in Vienna, she could not keep up her spirits due to the memories regarding her nation Iran. The suppression of her trauma leads her to attempt even suicide. All her emotional turmoil is given expression in the form of complicated graphics throughout the novel. Thus *Persepolis* becomes a compelling representation of trauma and the readers get a "co- ownership" in the experience.

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