

BEYOND INK AND PAPER: UNRAVELLING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF HOLOCAUST ON SECOND GENERATION IDENTITIES IN MAUS

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ABSTRACT

Wars have always been a part of human existence since time immemorial. Beginning from the Trojan War in 12th century BC to World War I in 20th century this world has seen all but World War 2 sticks out because of the sheer scale of death and destructions. Jewish Holocaust was one such atrocious chapter in the history of human existence. It resulted in the detainment of thousands of men, women and children. The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored murder of six million Jews by the Nazi and its allies and collaborators. This trauma of Holocaust is undoubtedly transmitted from the survivors to succeeding generations, yet the transmitted psychological effects are the most potent as they impact multiple realms of successors' lives. The second generation in particular, as they are the first group to come after survivors, intake it uniquely, as their parents are the ones who first experience the Holocaust. This paper applies the concept of intergenerational transmission of trauma and the concept of post-memory to Art Spiegelman's graphic novels Maus. The paper aims to study the psychological impact of Holocaust on the second-generation children and the trauma, alienation and identity crisis they have to face. A part of this paper is also devoted to analyzing the presentation of the Nazi genocide in the form of graphic novel.

KEYWORDS: *Intergenerational Trauma, Post-Memory, Holocaust, Graphic Novel.*

INTRODUCTION

Holocaust is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews were "inferior," and were an alien threat to the German racial community. In 1933, the Jewish population of Europe stood at over nine million. Most European Jews lived in countries that Nazi Germany would occupy or impact during World War II. By the end of the war in 1945, the Germans and their allies killed nearly two out of every three European Jews as part of the "Solution". The Nazi rule came to an end in 1945. However, the catastrophic event of the Holocaust continued to re-live through the traumatic memories of the survivors. For this reason, the consequences of the event were even more horrific as the wounds of the trauma were slow to heal. The recounting of the first-hand information of the event, reconnecting with relatives, restitution of confiscated wealth and property, immigration, and rebuilding of fragmented lives characterized the aftermath of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust thus remains a major touchstone for trauma, and any response to it inevitably evokes a traumatic response. Trauma has always been regarded problematic in its representation. Trauma theorists are divided in their opinion

with regard to the appropriateness of its definition and a medium of representation. It is considered as a state that is dominated by *aporia* and hence eludes a straitjacketed description and definition. The trajectory of the definition of trauma has indeed been a long one. Reports of the psychological and physiological damage inflicted upon Holocaust victims circulated within a few years after the end of the Second World War; however, it was not until the 1960s that an extensive body of literature began to appear on this subject, and a number of comparative studies were introduced. These findings documented a wide range of physical and psychic impairments suffered by Holocaust survivors. This included severe headaches, fears, anxieties, dependence and indecision, and various forms of social maladjustments. These symptoms were then interpreted as constituting a syndrome characteristic of individuals subjected to the peculiar trauma experienced by Holocaust victims.

One of the most frequently cited authors on Holocaust literature is Theodore Adorno, he in his work *Commitment* said, "I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature" (6). It is true that all we know about the Holocaust from a secondary perspective; either from historians or from testimonials given by the survivors or witnesses. It is impossible for one to truly grasp the intensity of the incidents that took place during those times, unless one has lived through it. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. Memoirs emerged in the early years as the survivors wanted to retain their identity. They "bear witness" to the barbaric history which came to an end with the Holocaust and only existed in the memories and testimonies written by the survivors thereafter. Elie Wiesel highlighting the importance of a memoir in '*Confronting the Holocaust*' wrote: "There were ... messages I had to deliver to the living from the dead. There were things I had to do, words I had to speak, moments which I had to dissect in order to show the world what I had seen and lived through, on behalf of the millions who had seen it also-but could no longer speak. Of their dead, burnt bodies I would be the voice"

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESONANCE OF HOLOCAUST TRAUMA IN MAUS

The stain of the Holocaust on human history bleeds deep in the psyche of historians, survivors, and the children of those who made it through alive. There is abundance of literature reflecting on and detailing the tragedies; there are vast collections of stories and memoirs written in the aftermath. One such author is Art Spiegelman, a Nobel laureate and 'second-generation' Holocaust victim. He drafted *Maus* in an effort to reconcile the trauma he inherited. Spiegelman copes with that heritage through art, specifically drawings in *Maus*, a graphic narrative retelling his father's memory of his experience in Auschwitz. *Maus* is a two-volume graphic narrative (*Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* and *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*) in which Art Spiegelman retells the tale of his father Vladek, a Polish Jew, who endured the Nazi death camps along with his wife Anja. He recounted the anecdote about the Holocaust in the funny cartoon/comic design, *Maus*'s most salient feature is the animal metaphor that he used in the novel. Spiegelman draws the characters as humanized creatures in which Jews are depicted as mice as the German word for mouse is 'maus', the Nazis as felines, the Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs, and the French as frogs. The story primarily talks about Vladek's life from 1930s Poland until the end of the Second World War. In great detail, the memoir recounts his courtship and marriage to Anja; his rise in business in the Polish town of Sosnowiec; his time in the Polish Army and his subsequent capture and release by the Nazis in 1939; his plans and strategies to hide with Anja to avoid being sent to the camps; and his experience in Auschwitz. More broadly, Vladek's account traces the transition of the position of Jews in Poland through the implementation and practice

of the anti-Semitic policies. Interchanging between past and present and full of self-reflexivity, the narrative simultaneously records Vladek's post-Holocaust life in America, Art's childhood, and the present relationship between father and son.

What is immediately notable about *Maus* is Spiegelman's use of the comic book format. It is considered as an unprecedented medium of portraying the Holocaust. The appropriateness of Spiegelman's comic format raises crucial questions regarding the "limits of representation" in the case of the Holocaust. For instance, Spiegelman's work is problematic for those who believe that the Holocaust can only be represented through historical fact, as embodied in Elie Wiesel's statement that, "A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka" (1). Spiegelman's *Maus* is a graphic novel and Spiegelman must have chosen this format because it is the only way to discuss the Holocaust while simultaneously conveying the impossibility of doing such a task. The Holocaust was such a horrific event that there is no way of truly representing it. Spiegelman realized that everything is a representation. He also realized that representing every aspect of the Holocaust was something that simply cannot be done. It is impossible to capture something free of representation. Spiegelman wanted to write a story about the Holocaust but he was very cautious in his construction. *Maus* is constructed with precise self-awareness and self-devaluation to tell a story about the Holocaust, while also writing a story about the impossibility of trying to capture this tragic event within the extremely limited parameters of representation. However, Spiegelman's creative and risky move to combine image and text to relate a complex and fraught private oral history does not trivialize the Holocaust; instead, it reflects a break from earlier understandings of literature and representation. Through his complex narrative images, Spiegelman transgresses the sacredness of Auschwitz by depicting his survivor father's suffering. In doing so, Spiegelman resists repeating what has already been seen, while still existing within a textual re-presentation of familiar history. By discussing the Holocaust, Spiegelman also reinterprets and heightens the commonly low position of the comic medium into a form that is highly expressive, multi-faced, critical, and psychologically layered.

Literature is said to narrates the traumatic experience beautifully. 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. "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 etc. Freud defines dreams as "royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind"(1990). 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. 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” (4).

Apparently, the notion of trauma has undergone significant change. What was anteriorly known to be a wound inflicted upon the ‘body’ came to be known as a wound entailed upon the ‘psyche’. It is this psychic wound which becomes the crucial force in driving the traumatic Holocaust testimonies. Judith Herman notes that such traumatic memories often lack verbal narrative and context and rather are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images. Thus, the traumatized people see meddling images and have recurrent dreams and nightmares – a condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder. The disorder was known by at least a hundred names before it became PTSD, those names were combat fatigue, shell shock, and soldier’s heart etc. As late as the 1980s, the term Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was given its formal recognition by the U.S. medical and scientific community, which is central as a concept within Trauma studies. The incongruity of trauma is that it cannot be represented – and yet it should be. Cathy Caruth, in her work, *Unclaimed Experience*, argues about psychological trauma being the state that is retained by an image or event. Trauma warrants recognition, and hence witness of trauma imports a moral obligation for others to bear witness to it and participate in its reconstruction. The narrative of trauma that is provided through testimony generates our knowledge of that trauma, which emerges from the void.

The first volume of *Maus* is subtitled *My Father Bleeds History* — symbolic of the fact that the disbandment of his story is not without cost for Vladek. In fact, Spiegelman reports that his father had “no desire to bear witness,” as Vladek claims in the text that “no one wants anyway to hear such stories” (12). While Vladek tells his story, he does in fact “bleed history” as the trauma he underwent during the Holocaust comes through in his present-day testimony. For instance, while narrating his time working as a prisoner-of-war cleaning stables, he interrupts his own story to reprimand Art for dropping cigarette ashes on the carpet saying “But look what you do, Artie! You’re dropping on the carpet cigarette ashes. You want it should be like a stable here?” (26). This instance alludes to the way the past invades present, suggesting that Vladek’s process of remembering the past constitutes a psychological reconstruction of the past in the present day. Spiegelman illustrates this process more explicitly when he draws Art’s cigarette smoke as a shadow drifting atop the Auschwitz crematorium, suggesting that Art’s elicitation of Vladek’s story is literally bringing the Holocaust back to life. Vladek even remarks that, “All such things of the war, I tried to put out of my mind once and for all.... Until you rebuild me all this from your questions.” (45).

Not only does the generation that witnessed and survived the Holocaust deal with its corporal and psychic consequences, also the generation after, the so called “second generation” receives more and more attention in the scholarly field of Holocaust studies. “One may observe that the Shoah is an extreme illustration of a traumatic series of events that pose the problem of denial or disavowal, acting-out, and working-through” (LaCapra, 187). The Holocaust depicts an event of cognate magnitude and such an absurd reality that even victims back then could not imagine or comprehend its magnitude. The notion of historical trauma suggests also that its event has a negative impact on individual beings which poses problems for later generations involving intergenerational transmission of trauma. The trauma of the first generation has therefore consequences for their children, to whom the trauma is transferred and which is to be specified as the concept of postmemory.

Maus is part of a larger body of second-generation Holocaust literature. Children of Holocaust survivors grew up

with the coextensive presence and absence of Holocaust memory in their day to day lives. As Anne Karpf acknowledges, “It appeared then as if I hadn’t lived the central experience of my life—at its heart, at mine, was an absence” (1). Art Spiegelman’s graphic memoir *Maus* captures his life as the son of two Holocaust survivors, a replacement child, and a transmitter of their story, and these identities mould him. In both volumes of *Maus*, Art seeks to convey the history with what he can attain through his father, Vladek, but must struggle simultaneously with his current escapades and pressing disclosures. By trying to make sense of himself with the past of his parents, Art’s psyche is strained. *Maus* portrays how these children like Art, possess a distinct sense of bearing an un-lived trace of the Holocaust past within the present. As a result of being strongly marked by its bequest, many from the second generation construct their identity in relation to the Holocaust, exploring it through imaginative writing and art, attempting to fill and restore the gaps created by this incomprehensible void. Marianne Hirsch terms this effort as reflective of “post-memory,” the second generation’s response to the trauma inherited from their parents.

Since Art has no direct experience of the Holocaust, the traumatic incidents are intervened to him through interviews with his father, which he records on tape. During these interviews, Vladek re-enacts his suppressed trauma as brought about by the loss of almost his entire family. Art, the secondary witness, receives the history of the Holocaust and re-interprets it by rewriting Vladek’s testimony in the form of a graphic novel. In doing so, he acquires what can correspond to **post-memory**, and thus belongs to the **second generation** that receives broken refrains of trauma from the survivor or the first generation. According to Hirsch, “post memory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (48). It is not coincidence that the notion of postmemory arose in connection with Holocaust studies because of the centrality of the genocide for the children of survivors who ‘remembered’ the events not lived through. Postmemory reflects the degree of identification with the original recipients of trauma and is frequently characterized by the feeling of relegation, living in temporal and spatial exile, estrangement and the experience of a lack and absence which frequently leads to an identity crisis. The graphic interpretation of testimony in *Maus* is, to some extent, an amalgam of the memory and postmemory of the Nazi genocide. Spiegelman’s work belongs to those texts that articulate a “complex intersection between identity, the past, memory, and culture and, centrally, they concern the process by which identification takes place and then is developed” (Eaglestone, 2004).

Maus, in its absoluteness, explores and records this act of dual memory, as Art recounts the situations in which his father’s reminiscences are conveyed. According to Erin McGothlin, “postmemorial work performs a crucially double role by recording the personal and historical trauma caused by the Holocaust, and by facilitating the rehabilitation of the second generation to its un-lived past” (10). At a certain point, Art lives through and recalls the effects his father’s memories have on him: for example, in the opening scene of the first instalment, Vladek, instead of comforting his son after his friends leave him, cynically remarks that friends are fickle and untrustworthy. Thus, *Maus* is part of second-generation literature that strives to both learn about the influence of the first generation’s past on their present, and to work through and comprehend their relationship and identity in the context of this traumatic and absent past. Also born to Holocaust survivors, Dr. Sam Juni expands upon the distinct rigor the second generation faces, particularly in the realm of identity, in his article “Identity Disorders of Second-Generation Holocaust Survivors.” As is generally the case for the second generation, identity is put into the context of being a child of survivors. He refers to the danger of “parentification –where

the child is expected to care for parental emotional and practical needs,” and when this role swap occurs, the children in the mix struggle with “poor personality development and diminished relationship building” (Juni,204). Clearly, Art has a personality and relationships, but as he reveals through the memoir, they are clasped because they are so entangled with the trauma of his parents. Though Vladek may seem simply senile or jaded, his tendencies seep into the role that Art has to fill, especially for him.

Art feels he lives in the shadow of his dead brother, and this intensifies the trauma inevitably experienced as the second-generation victim. As a replacement child, Art’s is assumed to take on the role of his dead brother, Richieu. Since Richieu was born before the tragedy and did not live to survive it, Vladek and Anja transfigure that loss into proliferation through Art’s birth. However, this phenomenon is not to be accepted as simply romantic. For parents in any circumstance, outliving a child is unnatural and devastating in itself, but in the context of the Holocaust, it is also a call to action. This act not only correlates to the aggressiveness to bring back the Jewish population that was destroyed by the Holocaust, but on an individual familial basis, the replacement child has the “task of filling the emotional void of parents, carrying the torch of family historical and ... insuring the continuation of the Jewish people” (Juni,204). All of these specific guidelines in being a replacement child are embodied in how Art perceives Richieu. Though obviously not still living, according to Art, Richieu would have been perfect: “The photo of Richieu never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble... It was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn’t compete. ... He’d have become a doctor, and married a wealthy Jewish girl... the creep. ...” (Spiegelman,15). Gabriele Schwab argues that the competition with a dead sibling is a classical syndrome of replacement children. It is also a prevalent form in which parental trauma is transmitted to the next generation and often to generations to come. Having lost Richieu in the tragedy, Vladek and Anja consequently desire to protect Art, but often they forget their limits and it reaches an extreme. Children of Holocaust survivors have “difficulties individuating from overbearing, overconcerned, and over intrusive parents” (Juni,205). Art struggles with his parents’ demeanour, but it is a result of the trauma they continuously experience. Their concern and way to show love chokes Art. Art resents the suffocating love of his parents, as it stifles his identity and being overall. This disguised or disposed perception of emotion contributes to how the second-generation intakes the trauma from their parents. Art’s ‘inheritance’ of his parents’ trauma results in his preoccupation with the Holocaust, although he is in constant denial with it. Vladek’s and Anja’s past experiences form an important part of his identity. His identification with his parents’ trauma becomes so intense that he starts imagining being in Auschwitz.

Art’s dreams associated with the Holocaust reveal his mind’s activity. In Sorscher and Cohen’s study, children of Holocaust survivors “demonstrated significantly greater Holocaust related dreams, Holocaust-related thoughts, and Holocaust associated places,” suggesting an “elevated Holocaust ideation in children of survivors” (497). Not uncommon apparently, the second generation inserts itself into the stories that came before, even if they seem torturous. The craving to be a part of the memories that they received can be seen as logical, as the second generation is a part of the past, without even having physically lived in it. Art sharing his thinking with Françoise attempts to rectify and clarify his experience.

CONCLUSIONS

Art Spiegelman is only one of hundreds of thousands of the children of Holocaust survivors searching for ways to deal with the complex emotional situation placed before them. The children of Holocaust survivors bear the utmost burden of insuring that the world never forgets the trauma their parents suffered through and the tragedy that claimed the lives of six

million Jews as well as millions of others. Coming to terms with their sensibilities toward their parents, realizing the importance of learning and understanding towards their parents' histories, and helping pass on these stories to the coming generations are the hurdles that this "second generation of survivors" must overcome so that the world never forgets. Art Spiegelman, as one of these children, displays his maturation through these steps in his highly original and individual way with MAUS: A Survivor's Tale. The second-generation intakes the trauma and experiences of their survivor parents, in the various forms that they are presented in. Whether the harsh past is spoken of or not, merely being a product of those who outlived the horrors has a significant role in shaping identity, and the overall psychological state of themselves. With factors like guilt for what their parents experienced, to the pressure of being good so as not to add any more burden. Indeed, the psychological trauma of the children of Holocaust survivors is not equal to their parents' who experienced the horror firsthand, yet its severity must still be acknowledged. Thus, trauma from postmemory is not exclusive from the impacts on the psyche, and this work proves that its effect can be everlasting and encompassing. Transmitted trauma in the second generation thus cannot be seen merely as pain passed on or less than, but more intricately, as pain and experiences that shape the mind and self as a whole

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