

All about Cats and Mice: Trauma and Testimony in Art Spiegelman's Maus

Dr. Prantik Banerjee

Associate Professor
Hislop College, Nagpur

HHH.....

Abstract

The relationship between historical events and trauma literature is a symbiotic one. Events that are world-altering and catastrophic in nature, such as the Holocaust, are difficult to represent in art and literature because of their traumatic impact on entire populations. In trying to depict the misery and suffering of millions of Jews and the brutality of the Nazis, writers, artists, and film makers, have struggled to appropriately and imaginatively reconstruct the event in word and image. Such events threaten the very power of language to render extreme violence in words. When a conflict of terrible proportion happens not only does it alter the reality of the times, but it also makes demands on language. Writers grapple with the challenge of capturing trauma in narrative. Often, the complexity of reconstructing trauma creatively pushes artists to explore new modes of representation. This paper analyses the manner in which Art Spiegelman combined the visual and the verbal in comic mode in order to narrate the Holocaust experience of his family. This highly unusual way of recreating an extremely tragic event in history in comic book form throws up aesthetic and ethical issues of art and atrocity - Is it right and is it possible, for example, for Spiegelman to use a graphic technique to narrate what is usually thought to be un-narratable? By enrolling some of the key concepts of contemporary trauma theory, the paper also examines the interrelationship between the testimonies of Nazi concentration camp survivors as recounted by their next of kin.

Keywords: Trauma, Comics, Intergenerational, Testimony, Post memory

Can trauma be depicted in the form of comics? Can something as horrific as the Holocaust be represented in a graphic narrative?

Art Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale is one of the most influential works in contemporary fiction about the Holocaust and incredibly written in comic book form. One tends to think that for such a grim and serious subject as the Holocaust, the comic form would be most unsuitable and inappropriate. But Spiegelman's Maus has proved that the iconic language of graphic novels can be suitable for any topic, on par with any other kind of narrative. Maus is a historical record of Holocaust, a personal

memoir and a survivor's tale, depicted in a genre in an unprecedented way. It has proved to be one of the greatest graphic novels of all times. Spiegelman created Maus to record his father and his family's survival in the most inhuman conditions of Nazi camps and to memorialize the deaths of the nearly 3 million Jews in gas chambers. Actually, Maus is a record of three kinds of traumatic experiences: his father's suffering and survival in the concentration camps, his own experiences as the son of a survivor, and third, his experience while writing about the experience of being the son of a survivor (what a demanding task!). Indeed, like Shakespeare's Hamlet, Joyce's Ulysses, and Homer's Odyssey, Spiegelman's Maus is the depiction of the trauma of fathers and sons. Furthermore, like these stories, Maus too is a tale of intergenerational or generational trauma.

Intergenerational trauma is trauma that is experienced not by one individual but by a family/ community, and one that extends from one generation to the next. If the pain felt by later generations is, although admittedly not of the same nature, at least equally legitimate as the suffering of the parents who experienced historical atrocities firsthand, the continued artistic elaboration of those atrocities has a powerful *raison d'être*. If the trauma inflicted by the Holocaust, the Second World War, and the Partition is still felt today, then works of art that concern themselves with these historical moments can be justified as socially and psychologically beneficial. Fiction gives us some heart-rending narratives on this subject. There are several popular works dealing with intergenerational trauma caused by a host of factors: slavery (Alex Hailey's Roots), war (Pat Barker's Regeneration trilogy), genocide (Marcus Zusak's The Book Thief, William Styron's Sophie's Choice), domestic violence and sexual abuse (Toni Morrison's Beloved).

Maus is a depiction of intergenerational trauma. It graphically narrates the traumatic experience of the Holocaust as told by Spiegelman's father to him, and narrated by Spiegelman in comic mode. In the comic book, Spiegelman draws human characters as mice and men. The Jews are mice, the Germans are predatory cats, the Poles are pigs, the Swedes are deer with horns, Americans

are dogs, a Gypsy is a butterfly, a Frenchman is a frog. Clearly, his Jewish mice are a barbed response to Hitler's statement "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human." His feline Nazis remind us that the Germans' brutality was at bottom no more explicable than the savagery of cats toying with their prey, mice.

A crucial subject in trauma studies is the study of testimony. For instance, in their seminal book, *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) write about the crucial role of witnessing testimonies of trauma. Felman and Laub were particularly interested in literature that testified to large scale trauma and the witnessing role of readers who encountered trauma on the page. Along with other scholars in literary trauma studies, Felman & Laub's approach to trauma and testimony relies on three underlying assumptions: one, that testimony is the written record of an experience; two, that the reader is at an emotional distance from the testimony being offered in the literature, and, three, that the confrontation with immense trauma such as the Holocaust demands that the reader serve as witness. Of course, the experience of the reader as witness to the testimonial writing involves an empathetic emotional response or expression to the writer and his writing. This may manifest in both verbal and non-verbal forms, one that acknowledges the weight and importance of the stories told.

So, testimonial storytelling is the narration of a traumatic experience to an audience. It involves a process: the witness has a story to tell and requires a listener to receive it; by receiving it, the listener becomes witness to the witness, and thereby a bearer of testimony in his or her right. Generally, witnesses follow an imperative to tell their stories, and witnesses to the witnesses are also subject to an imperative to re-tell the story. Describing the essential role of the listener in trauma testimony, Dori Laub says that "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event". But this position is not without its problems. First, in the case of *Maus*, Spiegelman tells us that his father was actually reluctant to talk about his experiences in Nazi Germany and Poland, that is, he didn't really want to narrate his Holocaust experience as a witness because he thought that to remember and tell what was horrific in the details would be to revisit the trauma. Moreover, besides his father's reluctance, Spiegelman admitted that his own act as a witness writer raised ethical questions: what did it mean for him to participate in and co-own a trauma which was not his, what right did he have to claim a share of the pain of his father, mother or of his dead brother?

This is precisely where trauma comes into conflict with ethics and leads to an unresolved dilemma. There are no easy solutions or way out of this dilemma. However, one may say that an uncritical commitment to the ethical value of secondary witnessing is perhaps an inevitable blind spot of trauma studies. We like to, perhaps, we need to believe that in the act of witnessing and in the act of representing something second hand we are doing something ethically valuable. But there will always be an experiential and hermeneutical gap between what was experienced by the victim and what is being narrated as witness.

Nevertheless, *Maus* has been read as Spiegelman's own quest to come to grips with the trauma of his father's Holocaust experience. Written in two parts, "A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds history" and "And here my troubles began", it became a literary project that eventually took him 13 years to complete. Spiegelman's first approach to his father's testimony on the Holocaust was published as the underground short comic book, "Maus," in the first issue of *Funny Aimals*, in 1972. Subsequently, between 1980 and 1991, he developed it into the Pulitzer prize-winning graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Praised by critics and readers alike, the work's influence has cascaded into other fields, becoming the subject of critical analyses as well as the source for exhibitions in museums and art galleries. *Maus* was released again in *The Complete Maus CD-ROM* in 1994, this time with supporting materials gathered for those exhibitions. Finally, in 2011, *MetaMaus* was published. This book contains an exhaustive interview with the author; a reprint of "Maus," the short story; interviews with Spiegelman's wife and children; and a transcript of the recordings of his father's original testimony. A work such as this, as you can see, took on epic proportions in its long journey of turning trauma into testimony.

Maus is a moving example of testimonial writing of searing trauma achieved most remarkably in comic form. Its form and technique has been called a visual testimony. Let me give you one instance of Spiegelman's unique technique here. Take the panel on page 13 shown on the slide. Every panel on the page anticipates and defines the complete story of the trauma of Holocaust experienced by Vladek, the father, and its intergenerational effect on both his son Artie in the comic and his creator, Spiegelman. The first obvious element that grabs the reader's attention is the mouse metaphor that is employed in this text, and the fact that all characters are anthropomorphic mice. However, neither their language, gestures, clothes, nor their homes give them away as mice. Another element that is introduced in the first panel of that page is the

autobiographical dimension. "I went out to see my Father in Rego Park," the narrative voice says in the caption box, and continues: "I hadn't seen him in a long time-we weren't that close." Later, in the last panel of the page, the reader is informed that Artie and Vladek, his father, had not seen each other for nearly two years. The troubled relationship between father and son is thus hinted and briefly presented to the reader. The fourth panel displays the core subject of the book: The Holocaust and its recollection. Artie's parents, father and stepmother, Mala, and most of their friends, are Holocaust survivors. They all went through the death camps (Auschwitz, Birkenau, Dachau, etc.), and ended up reunited in Rego Park, in the United States. In a metonymic sense, they become representatives of the testimonies of other survivors who went through the same horror. As I said earlier, their mice-figures are visual symbols of Hitler's view about Jews. The cartoon figure of the author is also clearly displayed in this panel: A mouse-faced man, chain-smoking and forever wearing a black waistcoat and white shirt that stereotypes the image of an orthodox Jew in a self-deprecating way. Undermining the linearity of a conventional comic narrative, every element from the past is here interconnected and inextricably linked with the present. Artie's relation with his father, his parents' damaging marriage, Vladek's uncompromising behaviour, Anja's (Artie's mother) suicide, their Polish background, the Jewish history, the death camps and the war - all these the reader is called upon by the panel to apprehend together and simultaneously in a constellation of memories that recalls what Walter Benjamin had said about the simultaneity of the past in the present, that "the past coincides with the present to such an extent that the past achieves a 'Now' of its 'recognizability'". Page 13 therefore is one example of Spiegelman's technique of visual textimony that he employs consistently throughout the comic book.

With regard to the idea that trauma narratives are intergenerational and are about unpacking the experience as memory, Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post memory" has become an influential keyword in Trauma Studies. According to Hirsch, "Post memory is adopting the traumatic experiences-and thus also the memories-of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story". Post memory typically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experience of their parents - experiences that they remember only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. Post memory, then, is a sort of 'familial inheritance' and is therefore intergenerational

in nature.

Spiegelman's *Maus* is a perfect illustration of Hirsch's concept of post memory. Its narrative not only shows the terrible experiences of the Holocaust suffered by Vladek, the father, but it also reveals the way in which his trauma is 'remembered' by his son Artie, and by extension, Art Spiegelman. Here Vladek's memories are recorded by Artie and turned into a family memoir in comic form. More importantly, however, Artie's individual reception of his father's historical experience of the Holocaust enables him to participate in collective (cultural) remembrance. The memories of his father and the collective remembrance of the Jewish experience turn it into post memory, which is "retrospective witnessing by adoption". As Hirsch says, "post memory is adopting the traumatic experiences-and thus also the memories-of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story".

Both in form and technique, *Maus* is a graphic novel that pushes the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between testimony and textimony. It problematizes the categorical distinction between the language of icons and the language of words, between comic books and history books, between written transcription and drawn graphic novel. Spiegelman's performative textimony and his technique for creating a constellation of memories bear witness to the sufferings of his parents as well as his and succeed in representing them in a remarkably original manner.

The thing to consider here is, that if language captures trauma and texts become traumatic, then it has implications on witness and witnessing. If the force of trauma is felt in language, then all creative responses to trauma (including visuals in *Maus*), no matter how distanced from the historical origin of the trauma, are testimonial. In that sense we as readers also become traumatized by the testimonial writing of *Maus*. Spiegelman's work manages to represent the traumatic history of his family, of his people, and of his own mental suffering by means of questioning categories and problematizing the boundaries between genres. It definitely demonstrates that representation of the Shoah is possible even in comic book form. The book shows that only by means of complex constellational textimonies, the "objective correlative" of the horrors and trauma of the Holocaust is effectively transmitted to the community of readers.

Literary trauma texts often expose and work with the essential paradox that characterizes trauma narratives in general: the attempt to communicate that which resists

remembering and narrating. Trauma narratives raise important questions about the possibility of speaking the unspeakable, narrating the unnarratable, and making sense of the incomprehensible. But exceptional trauma narratives such as *Maus* brilliantly succeed in performing a complex balancing act regarding the (un)-speakability, (un)narratability, and (in)comprehensibility of trauma. Indeed, trauma writings like *Maus* turn wounds into words and images. Trauma narratives, in general, cannot have endings. Such writings can only revisit trauma as haunting, an absent present, they cannot fully retrieve the whole story. All that they try to do is to turn living wounds into writing scars, healing wounds with bleeding stories.

Works Cited

- 1 Caruth, Cathy (ed.). *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1995
- 2 Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1996
- 3 Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York and London: Routledge. 1992
- 4 Fine, Ellen S. 'Intergenerational Memories: Hidden Children and the Second Generation', in Margot Levy (ed.), *Remembering the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, Vol. 3. Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 78-92. 2001
- 5 Hirsch, Marianne. "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory," *Discourse*, 15:2, 1992-93, p. 3-29. 1992
- 6 LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2001
- 7 Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon. 1986
- 8 Spiegelman, Art. *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon. 1991.