



MAUS: A GRAPHICAL SAGA OF DEVASTATION

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Abstract

Art Spiegelman's graphic fictional work *Maus* is an arresting tale of a holocaust episode during World War II. With effective illustrations and oscillating dialogue patterns, the novel has been identified as one of the prominent works of holocaust literature. The protagonist's devastated experiences during the Nazi regime and in the concentration camp, Auschwitz have been presented effectively. The paper presents the physically, materially and psychologically distressed conditions of the oppressed during World War II in Germany. In addition to such a compelling tale of devastation, the novel is marked with artistic experimentation. Graphic Novels have become a popular trend in the field of literature. They are similar to comic books in that they use sequential art to tell a story. Spiegelman's *Maus* is a significant contribution to the genre of Graphic fiction.

Keywords: Concentration Camp, Auschwitz, Predicaments, Graphic Novel, Devastation

Graphic Novels have become a popular trend in the world of literature. This literary trend is similar to comic books as they use sequential art to tell a story. Unlike comic books, graphic novels are generally stand-alone stories with more complex plots. Kai Mikkonen understandably posits that Graphic Novels manipulated the relation between visual and verbal allowing them to achieve two separate aims at once (Mikkonen, 74) Spiegelman's *Maus* is an excellent example of the same. Carefully considered dialogue and precise illustrations throughout the text are the significant elements that leave an indelible effect on the readers' minds. 'An epic story told in the tiny picture' as New York Times compliments, the novel reveals the story of World War II, centering Germany and its brutal episode of Jewish genocide.

Arts Spiegelman's *Maus* as The New Republic states, "A loving documentary and brutal fable, a mix of compassion and stoicism that sums up the experience of the Holocaust with as much power and as little pretension as any other work can be thought of," tells the story of the holocaust.

The novel effectively portrays that the scars of social unrest undergone by the older generation are unknown and unfelt by the younger generations. The unprecedented agonies a generation suffers remain inexperienced by the generations who experience the sun and light of peace. But what is hidden under the debris of peace and security remains only with the voices who undergo the same. The protagonist Vladek represents the generation who suffered the wounds of World War II in Germany during the reign of Hitler and Artie represents the generation who experienced the aftermath scenario. The story revolves around Spiegelman's family, which consists of

Vladek, his first wife Anja, his second wife Mala, and Vladek and Anja's son Art. Art's earnest desire to know his parents' past predicaments shapes his book *Maus*. It is the autobiographical and empirical revelation of Vladek's bitter phase from the war in the German province till his death. The entire novel is spread into two parts with titles 'My Father Bleeds History' unveiling the chapter of WW II during the command of Nazis and the other, 'And Here My Troubles Began' with the experiences of post-holocaust psychological effects on the surviving community.

The novel moves from past to present and again to past with a clear understanding of the protagonist's life from his young to old age. It is the cinematic presentation of various conditions, the Jews have undergone from peace to misery and misery to rehabilitation. Another significant feature of the novel is that Spiegelman presents the Jewish people with the image of a mouse, Nazis with cats and Polish with dogs. The reaction to this is published in the newspaper article,

Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed... Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honourable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria career in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of animal... Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse Wear the Swastika Cross!' (*Maus*, 164)

Some critics have observed this aspect from different critical lenses and have expressed their views. Hillary Chute states,

It also is a high-water mark for comics- exemplifying the medium's productive tensions between word and image, presence and absence that are so key to expressing memory. The series famously articulates its characters as animals; they understand themselves as human, but readers see Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, Polish gentiles as pigs and Americans as dogs. This level of abstraction, which repurposes a metaphor from Nazi propaganda, is hard to imagine being effective in any other medium. (Chute, 1)

Mario Salazar has voiced his views from another perspective when he writes,

Spiegelman also draws behavioural comparisons between humans and animals. For example, when some species of animals are taken to slaughter, the other animals do not run away- rather, they stand and watch. Similarly, the Jews in *Maus* are forced to stand by and watch as many of their fellow Jewish people are taken away to concentration camps. On page 121, of the first volume, Vladek and his cousin Miloch stand by helpless as they watch Jews boarding a German van. Vladek is conscious of the final destination of these people: 'By the end of 1945, the vans went every Wednesday with more and more and more people from Srodula to Auschwitz' (121) where most of the concentration camps were located and many Jews were put to death. (Salazar, 1)

On one hand the book exhibits the entire era of holocaust and on the other an interesting love story of Anja and Vladek takes shape. Vladek shares his love story with his son without keeping any secrets even his interest in Lucia and her ill intentions are revealed. Vladek pleads not to write this episode but Artie insists on which gives real touches to the novel. It is a delightful opening where Anja's father, a settled businessman provides professional backup to Vladek by opening a factory in 1937. The birth of Vladek's first son Richeu and the progressing life of Vladek and his community during that period bring out the picture of the good condition of the Jews in Germany. Although, during the journey by train, excitement and fright are evoked by watching 'the hanging high in the centre of the town a Nazi flag' gives a kind of hint to the readers of the impending danger in the coming years.



Posters like 'This Town is Jew Free', 'I am a filthy Jew', compelling the Jews to sell their businesses to a German and making them run out of the country without money are more suggestive with gradual rise of alarming secret fear in the minds of the readers. Three months' absence of Vladek and Anja from the growing disturbances of the outside world for the treatment of Anja in a sanatorium proves the last peaceful and quiet period for Vladek. After that frightful journey, the Jew community proceeds toward disaster.

Robbing of the factories, shouting with slogans 'Jews Out..', Vladek's joining of the frontfire against Germany from the side of Poland as per the draft all describe the beginning of the disturbances on the national, social and family fronts of the people. Vladek gets arrested as a War prisoner. There the Jews soldiers receive very bitter treatment. German soldiers observe Vladek's palm at the time of capture and remark, 'you never worked a day in your life' shows his well-to-do condition at the family front. Antisemitism is seen when Vladek experiences '.. the other prisoners get two meals a day. We the Jews get only a crust of bread and a little soup.' (55) Being Jew, he is assigned to clean the mess in an hour but when he fails to finish it within an hour, he is abused and has to lose his soup and bread. War prisoners are assigned to labour work to replace the German workers with the temptation that they 'would be provided abundant food'. (56) Frostbite wounds to the soldiers with pus and lice present the picture of fear and brutality. Although, being war prisoners, some soldiers are liberated but six hundred are marched to the forest by the Nazis and all are shot dead (63) Acute dehumanizing conditions and the height of sadism can be seen outside.

Vladek's father (who might have been the victim of World War I) desires to keep his children out of the army. He suffers a lot to escape. He puts his eldest son on starvation to keep him sickey, so thin so that he will fail in the army examination. He applies the same method to Vladek, which he remembers, 'it was something terrible'. This self-protective and family-protective approach of the middle-aged people at that time is seen resulted of social insecurities arising from war-like situations adding miseries to the lives of the Jewish community.

During the traumatic conditions, many Jews could have survived and successfully came out of the situation due to their indomitable faith and optimism. People could endure to meet their spouses or family members again. Vladek is desperate to see and meet Anja and has an optimistic dream with the words, 'You will come out of this place—free! On the day of Parshas Truma, ' he explains that each Saturday, they read a section from the Torah called Parshas, and one week each year is Parshas Truma (59). Looking back, he proves himself right.

It is seen as Nazism got more concentrated with the instigations of German dictator Hitler, and the Jews were targeted. Vladek shares his experiences as Jews are found out and are given coupons to get limited food items

like 8 ounces of bread a day and a tiny bit of margarine, sugar and jam per week only. Many Jewish businesses are taken over and many accept jobs as workers in the German offices. This makes the Jews take out all the valuables from the bank, safe with the hope that the war would be over like lightning. By 1941 Jews are grabbed in the town. The order that all the Jews must be relocated into the strata Sosnowiec quarter by January 1, 1942 and Non-Jews to be moved to the vacated premises exhibits the plans for the Jews in Germany. The incidence of the hanging of the Jews in the square for two days for doing food black market without coupons, Jews over 70 years to be reported and transferred to Auschwitz and overall conditions are showcased to depict the injustice and impending danger for Jews in Germany.

The title, 'Prisoners on the Hell Planet' brings out the horrors of extermination camps in Auschwitz. In 1943, all the Jews received orders to live in an old village Srodula, in Ghetto. The degrading condition of the well-to-do Jews a few days back, is seen in living in very small cottages and many living only on streets, managing with the merge availabilities. Everywhere the people hear about the stories of Auschwitz and gas chambers, Tosha's taking poison along with three kids (along with Richeu, Vladek's son) adds grimness to the situation. Hiding of the Jews in bunkers or tunnels sans food sans water to save themselves from the predicaments, rigorous efforts to get shelter to hide and to get food, and dragging groups by Gestapo (political force of Nazi) towards the unseen gas chambers showcase the panorama of massive psychological and physical destruction.

When life is at stake, corruption, inhumanity, selfishness, and crudeness all become rampant. The Holocaust provides a picture of brutality and insensitivity where everyone takes advantage of the opportunity, even a few Jewish officers are not exceptions to reaching the peak of corruption, and relatives are not ready to help. Everyone turns selfish and cares for themselves only. Anaja's millionaire father's money also fails to save his life. Gradually vacating the ghettos from the small villages to Auschwitz remains the eventual journey for most of the Jews at that time.

The Extermination Camp at Auschwitz is penned out by many survivors. Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* which is called the classic tribute to hope from the Holocaust is another influential work in this regard. He describes Auschwitz as,

The men were herded sometimes to one place then to another; sometimes driven together, then apart like a flock of sheep without a thought or a will of their own. A small but dangerous pack watched them from all sides, well-versed in methods of torture and sadism. They drove the herd incessantly, backward and forwards, with shouts, kicks and blows. And we, the sheep, thought of two things only how to evade the bad dogs and how to get a little food. (Frankl, 60-61)

Vladek's quandaries and memories at Auschwitz are hair-raising. The story of Mandelbaum speaks volumes. A very rich man in Sosnowiec, Mandelbaum is reduced to a mess at Auschwitz. He is given too big shoes and too big pant like for two people, not have any pieces or strips to make a belt. All day he holds it with his hand.



The dehumanizing conditions of the Jews with lack of food, lack of space, lack of sanitization, lack of humanity and lack of hope is visibly illustrated everywhere in the novel when Vladek expresses about kicking, beating, labouring and yelling at the camp. While sharing the memory of food at the camp he says, 'It was just enough to die more slowly' (209). Birkenau is said to be much bigger than Auschwitz. Vladek shares, 'In Auschwitz, we had say 20,000 prisoners, in Birkenau was at least five times so many.' He further says 'Auschwitz, it was a camp where they give you to work so they didn't finish you so fast. Birkenau was even more bad. It was 800 people in a building made for 50 horses. There it was just a death place with Jews waiting for gas.' (211) The life at Auschwitz and the tattered life before War affect badly on Vladek. He represents the generation who have undergone the horrors of the holocaust. At every moment, living under the fears of death and life surrounded by dire insecurities make the people fragile. In this context Frankl shares,

But for every one of the liberated prisoners, the day come, when looking back on his camp experiences, he can no longer understand how he endured it all. As the day of his liberation eventually came, when everything seemed to him like a beautiful dream, so also the day comes when all his camp experiences seem to him nothing but a nightmare. (Frankl 99-100)

The records show that between May 16, 1944, to May 24, 1944, over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz. (201) After war, Vladek's back-to-home journey provides the last stoke of brutality with the following picture,



Vladek, a young man with a good presence of mind, industrious approach, talent, confidence, and social skills is seen as vulnerable at the second phase of his life. He takes several pills to keep himself physically sound. His loss of temper with Mala, his second wife, shows his lack of patience affecting his married life. His forgetfulness, short-tempered attitude, sometimes crying for the bygone days with Anja, unexpected behaviour like climbing on a roof to fix the drain pipe, his stubborn nature, his being a miser, and suddenly getting out of breath all can be seen as results of insecurities he has undergone in the concentration camps. He says to Artie, 'With my life now, you know it can't be everything ok.' (100) Even, it becomes difficult for Mala to get on with Vladek. Vladek's urges to his son to live with him, Artie's better understanding of his father with close conversations and his remorse for not being there with his parents during the difficult days provide a sympathetic touch to the novel.

Being graphic fiction, the effective use of thought bubbles to reveal the inner thoughts of the characters, the exhibition of the emotions through close facial expressions, and the characters facing positioning from the front for clear visibility so the readers view the character face to face, etc are commendable on the part of the novelist as an illustrator and writer. The readers can easily differentiate between young Vladek at the concentration camp and old Vladek with spectacles in his old age. Spiegelman effectively illustrates varied feelings such as fear, insecurity, inhumanity, pity, anticipation, and cruelty through various tiny pictures in the novel. Among all animal illustrations, Spiegelman presents the real photograph of Vladek at the end which satisfies the readers' curiosity.

After eight years of work, the first part of *Maus* was published. It was a critical and commercial success. Spiegelman got many offers to turn his book into a movie or T.V. Serial. Although, the book was included in the school curriculum of some countries, it has been banned by a few for major reasons. As Chute writes,

Maus is also a tricky text prone to misinterpretation- and, as in Tennessee, censorship. It was notably banned in Russia in 2015 because the modified swastika on its cover was categorized as violating anti-Nazi-propaganda laws. *Maus* was also subject to book burnings in Poland in 2001, the year it was published there (long after other foreign editions), by people who objected to its depiction of Polish genitals. (Chute, 1)

The holocaust is past but such books provide a platform for the generations to understand the fatal episodes in history. Such violent pages of world history make the generation wise by making them understand the significance of peace and humanity. Indian preaching and implementation of the concept *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (The entire earth is a family) is the only solution to such bloody chapters and mind-sets that should never be ever possibility in the present and future.

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