

**A Critical Study of Graphic Novels: Speigelman's *Maus*
and Satrapi's *Persepolis***



Inspiring Excellence

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August 2016

**A Critical Study of Graphic Novels: Spiegelman's *Maus*
and Satrapi's *Persepolis***

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At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

- Albert Schweitzer

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Abstract

This thesis exhibits how the intense contents and themes of graphic novels can be credible in venturing its way into the academic world of English literature, particularly in Bangladesh. To accomplish this purpose I intend to analyse two graphic novels, namely Art Spiegelman's *The Complete Maus* (2003) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis I & II* (2000,2003) through the theoretical lens of postmodern and cultural studies. The first part will scrutinise the narrative technique of both graphic novels. Both have several postmodern narrative techniques which, eventually, give an alternative meta-history of the Holocaust in the Second World War and the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran. This part will be followed by the representation of politics in both texts, arguing that by manipulating a popular genre like graphic novels, these texts deal with complex political turmoil within which the texts are situated. My textual analysis will be followed by a discussion where I deal with the possibility of academic inclusion of the graphic novels in the advance level studies of English literature in Bangladesh. This thesis will make use of the theoretical frameworks formulated by Linda Hutchinson, Fredric Jameson and Stuart Hall.

Introduction

“Images are a way of writing. When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw, it seems a shame to choose one. I think it is better to do both.”

–Marjane Satrapi, “On Writing Persepolis”

This thesis is an investigation of the fast growing genre graphic novel in a way that exhibits its aesthetic, new rhetoric, intense theme and its place in literature. This will be done in three chapters by analysing two graphic novels, as such, *The Complete Maus (2003)* and *Persepolis I & II (2000, 2003)* written and drawn by Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi respectively. The first part will scrutinise the narrative techniques of *Maus* and *Persepolis*. The second will analyse the politics and war as presented in these two novels, how Art Spiegelman’s brilliant use of symbols helps to deal with the Nazi violence on the Jews and in Satrapi’s *Persepolis* the state politics of Iran- perspective of the Islamic Revolution. Finally, the third chapter will discuss graphic novels’ possible inclusion in the academic study of English literature in Bangladesh. This thesis is grounded in postmodern theories of Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson and cultural theory of Stuart Hall to investigate and articulate the mentioned graphic novels’ postmodern narrative techniques and the representation of war and politics.

The relationship between writing and illustration is intricate. It annexes an extent visual imaginary, since images are the visual representation of language, designating the bond between what can be said and what can be seen. From time immemorial children’s books of fairy tales and elementary education carry illustrations and texts simultaneously. The purpose is of course to make the children imaginative about their reading, to help them to understand and remember

the story easily. Illustrations also determine the mood of a book. However, apart from the children's books, this method of graphic book has also emerged for adult readers and for a variety of purposes, which required indepth interrogation. Winfried Noth suggests that-

The *inclusion* of words in pictures is mainly of four kinds: *representation* of words in pictures, as for example in a photo which includes the picture of a page of writing, *pictorialization* of words, where words lose their character as verbal signs and become elements of the picture, *inscription*, where the picture merely serves as a writing space, and *indexical* inscription, where the words are inscribed on the picture as indices referring to depict objects (Noth 36).

Therefore, the combination of words and images in a text may seek the way of representing things through pictures. It can be a medium of pictorialisation where words incorporate with picture, leaving its own verbal signs; or just serves a space for writing that is known as inscription. Lastly, it can also be indexical inscription that indicates the depicted objects. Among these ways, it can be said that graphic novel mostly embraces the way of representation with the juxtaposition of words and pictures. Whereas, children's books tend to follow the pictorialisation and inscription most often. In addition to this there are five kinds of relationships between pictures and words in texts. Which can be “distinguished: complementarity, dominance, redundancy¹, discrepancy and contradiction²” (Noth 37). Words and images in a graphic novel work as complement since “both are equally necessary to the understanding of the message” (Noth 37). So the dominance of the picture is obviously rudiment in graphic novels.

-
1. the extreme counterpart of dominance. In the context of a picture, a verbal message is redundant when it only repeats what you see anyhow –Noth, “Word and Image: Intermedial Aspects”.
 2. forms of mistaken or poetically deviant word-image combination, where Word and image do not fit together to make the reader think of a possible solution of this contradiction –Noth, “Word and Image: Intermedial Aspects”.

To talk about the late 20th century graphic novel, we need to go back to the late 20th century, when the trend of comics started to flourish with American comic books. This trend is followed by an elevated version of comics, which is subsequently known as the graphic novel. In 1986, “three convention-rupturing comics appeared” and they are Frank Miller and Klaus Janson’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon’s *Watchman* (Wolk 8). However, along with Chris Ware, one of the best known contemporary graphic novelists, artists such as Art Spiegelman, Craig Thompson and Marjane Satrapi have introduced a highly personal style to their autobiographical graphic works. Satrapi has the fame of being one of the premiere female graphic novelists in this genre which is apparently dominated by the male novelists. Another notable comic book writer, Neil Gaiman is possibly the artist in this community who re-envisioned Marvel Comics (publisher) superheroes. In *Marvel 1602*, an eight-issue comic book, he places the *X-Men*, *the Fantastic 4*, a *pre-Spiderman Peter Parker*, and others in the turbulent world of Elizabethan England at the time of the queen's death. Fitting with the era, these characters’ clothing and names are modified, but the characters' superpowers are not distorted. This reveals the flexibility of this genre, how the graphic novels play with time and experiment with socio-political issues. *The Sandman* series with its beautiful, catchy images and rich stories is able to challenge the reader. His books serve as excellent reminders of the appeal that graphic novels may hold for reluctant readers or visual learners, and they are important tools for achieving multiple literacies. Further, Joe Sacco brought a new dimension to reporting with his graphic novels. His graphic novel *Palestine* (1996) shed light on the political conflict and turmoil of the late 20th century. Because of the time required to produce a graphic novel, Sacco spends months in areas where other reporters may only spend days to assure the vividness of his depictions of the denizens of these areas struggling to maintain

normalcy to the reader. His novels may introduce news stories and conflicts to readers who otherwise show little interest in current events. David B's autobiographical graphic novel *Epileptic* (2002) is another engaging piece of literature (Glubizzi 29).

The graphic novel has pioneered by the master of comics storyteller and American cartoonist Will Eisner in 1978. The term "graphic novel" is familiarised with the seminal formation of the book *The Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* by Will Eisner (Wolk 61). *The Contract with God* is a collection of four apparently separated but thematically intertwined stories: "A Contract with God", "The Street Singer", "The Super" and "Cookalien". Since then, the popularity of the graphic novel has escalated, especially among young adults. Here, it is important to distinguish a graphic novel from a comic book. On a general note, comics are for the children, a hybrid genre that combines the visual and literary. Additionally, multiple picture and sequentialisation are essential for it. "Comics might be defined as hybrid word and image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual" (Chute 452). On the other hand, graphic novels are suitable for adult readers dealing with grave themes. Graphic novels are generally longer and tells a complete story, unlike comics, which are issued in successive instalments. Nowadays the frequent use of the term, "graphic novel" refers both to original comics work created in book form and collections of previously serialised work. "People talk about "graphic novels" instead of comics when they are trying to be deferential or trying to imply that they are being serious (Wolk 63). Eddie Campbell, the Scottish cartoonist and comic artist, was interviewed by Dirk Deppey, where they discussed comic book culture vs. graphic novel cultural. According to him (Campbell) graphic novel is an advanced attitude toward comics. Aaron Meskin, in his article "Defining Comics" quotes McCloud, the author of *Understanding Comics*, who states that comics are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in

deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/ or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (Meskin 371). Distinctive characteristic of comics is the sequence of images or pictures. As for the furnished definition of the graphic novel, Eddie Campbell gives a holistic definition of graphic novels:

The term graphic novel is currently used in at least four different and mutually exclusive ways. First, it is used simply as a synonym for comic books. For instance, I recently read of an "eight-page graphic novel" that I myself once drew. Second, it is used to classify a format - for example, a bound book of comics either in soft- or hardcover - in contrast to the old-fashioned stapled comic magazine. Third, it means, more specifically, a comic-book narrative that is equivalent in form and dimensions to the prose novel. Finally, others employ it to indicate a form that is more than a comic book in the scope of its ambition - indeed, a new medium altogether. It may be added that most of the important "graphic novelists" refuse to use the term under any conditions. (Campbell 13)

Thus, the graphic novel has multiple meanings. First, it is used as a synonym for comics or a booklet format of soft/hardcover. It can be a comic narrative identical to a prose novel because of its form. The last key feature of Campbell's definition is that graphic novel is just an upgraded version of comic. Nonetheless, Gene Yang expounds the graphic novel in a "political term". He thinks "It's a part of a growing effort to cast the comics medium in a new, more literary light, apart from the genres usually associated with it" (Yang 186). Graphic novels, according to this understanding aim at creating a new perspective of certain phenomena. They are more serious than the stereotypical comics, dealing with new themes like politics, WWII-the Holocaust, Islamic Revolution, cultural alienation, identity crisis. For example, we see this variety of themes in the story of *Maus* and *Persepolis*. Hillary Chute, comics and graphic narrative expert, suggests

to use the term “graphic narrative” instead of graphic novels, since graphic novels are “rich work of non fiction” and she defines graphic narrative as “a book length work in the medium of comics” (Chute 453). She emphasizes on the subversive context of graphic novels:

Out of the culture of Underground comix³, a reaction to the censorious content code that debilitated the mainstream industry... today’s most enduring graphic narrative took shape- serious, imaginative works that explored social and political realities by stretching the boundaries of a historically mass medium. (Autobiography, arguably the dominant mode of current graphic narrative, was first established in the underground). Spiegelman provides a prominent example (Chute 456).

So graphic novels also act as something serious and serve as distinct volumes within a collection. In this postmodern time, literature has entered into a new world of possibilities. In this world of possibilities, writers and authors are free to experiment with words, signs and images to express their thoughts textually. The above discussion suggests that the images of graphic novels deal with semiotic topic. Therefore, graphic novels are modulated with complexity that evokes its aesthetic value and also offers a very insightful reading. In this case, the sign and symbols become pivotal to interpret comics and graphic novels through new perspectives. This issue will be detailed in the second chapters of this dissertation.

Postmodernism and Graphic Novels: Given the time frame when graphic novels emerged as a popular genre, one cannot ignore this genre’s relationship with postmodern literary movement.

³.Underground comix is self published comics deal with mature content and often be satirical. The use of ‘x’ instead of ‘c’ is intentional to differentiate it from its mainstream industry.

The mid 20th century overtures the emergence of Postmodern literature, whereas 1940s herald with comics culture. Evolving with time, postmodern literature has paved its strong presence in the academia. On the other hand, comics showed up as an elevated format under the term of "graphic novel" in the later decades of the 20th century. Both postmodern literature and graphic novels thus expanded in the United States after the Second World War. Hence, equivalence between postmodern fiction and graphic novels can be discerned not only through the appropriation of themes, characters, ideas, and events, but also by the style of narrative structures and textual strategies, such as, the violent juxtaposition of scenes (temporal distortion) and the use of humour to bring normalcy to the gruesome matter. Thereby, the techniques adopted by postmodern fiction contributed exceedingly to the evolution of comics into the graphic novel form. This also added:

(A) degree of permanence to an entertainment object, which, if one excludes the collectors' market, started and developed mainly as a disposable one. By presenting comics in expensive book-format editions and by calling them novels instead of comic books, graphic novels now place themselves among avant-garde literature and are consequently perceived by readers as well (Simonetti 379).

Indeed, postmodern literature emerges from the similar cultural and social background that generated graphic novels. "One finds a similar affinity in the latest attempts at classification and definition of both post-war literature and the most recent "graphic novel" form of comics;" (Simonetti 380). To draw the connection between postmodern literature and comics/graphic novels Julia Round states that-

comics are thriving in the current postmodern literary swell. Whilst the medium is intrinsically fascinating as a narrative structure, only within the realms of postmodernism is its potential even beginning to be exploited. Postmodernist narratologies can redefine the comic-book panel.... Within the panel the layers of words, story and art are extremely exposed, represented by layers of colours, pencils and inks; providing a postmodern emphasis on the multiple elements that make up the whole (186).

Unlike the works of postmodernist, where distorted thoughts and several literary elements jumble together to shape the meaning as a whole; in graphic or comics book the panel, story, art, variations of colours and inks combine the work as a whole. Thus, it reflects the notion of pastiche⁴ and the postmodern idea of the structure and function of themes, characterizations and symbols can redefine graphic novels.

Late 20th century also marks the initial development of Cultural Studies. The emergence of this new study arena has created the possibilities of changing the reading of art. Cultural studies “has been a conjunctural practice. It has always developed from a different matrix of interdisciplinary studies and discipline.”⁵ It combines a varied kinds of critical approaches including semiotics, film/media theory or studies, ethnography, literary theory, translation studies, communication studies, and art history or criticism in order to study cultural phenomena in different societies following different time frame. It has changed the notion of “text”, moved from written language to the visual material like films, images/photographs, television programs so they comprise all

4. “The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche” – Fredrick Jameson.

5. Stuart Hall, “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis in Humanities”.

sheds light on both the traditional high culture, i.e. the culture of elite or ruling social groups and the culture of mass people. Thus, it makes an impact on the academic canon and a connectivity between studying comic/graphic culture and cultural studies is visible. With this changing trend, books are now being published with illustrations, images along with the words and being accepted, appreciated by the worldwide readers. The 21st century is going through numerous transitions. It is time for the English literary canon to embrace the change-to acknowledge the significance of this fairly new emerged genre- graphic novel. Since, the growing success of comics and Japanese manga, graphic novel caters to audience of different capacities and age. Its conscious postmodernist style of engaging with meta-history and meta-style demands academic engagement. Thus, creating its possibility to be included in academic canon.

Chapter One: Narrative Technique of *Maus* and *Persepolis*

“A true war story is never moral... you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil”.

— Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

The power of constructing an attractive story depends on the aesthetic beauty of an author's use of narrative style or techniques. Narrative technique implies several methods that writers or authors use to impart his story to the readers or audiences. It adds certain artistic and dominant features, sets the level of emotion to the story. Narrative technique is also relevant to the style (use of metaphor, personification, hyperbole and so on). Plot construction is the way sequence of the events precedes (backstory, flashback or foreshadowing), and perspective or point of view means who is telling the story. These are useful parts of the narrative technique. My concern is to look at the narrative technique of the plot of *The Complete Maus and Persepolis I & II* and subsequently, I will focus on the style of the texts.

The late 20th century witnessed a transition in literary narrative technique in some of its literary works. The modernist ideas of structured story, use of stream of consciousness, grand narrative, tendency towards reflexivity⁶ follow the postmodernist ideas of metanarrative and personal account as a way of innovation and experimentation. “Grand Narratives of progress and human perfectibility, then, no longer tenable and the best we can hope for, which are provisional,

6. Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*. pg. 79

contingent, temporary”⁷ and thus postmodernism gives the idea of “a unitary end of history and of a subject”⁸ But it does not suggest the desisting of past ideas to shape the present, “rather, traditions develop”⁹. Hence, postmodernism may appear as “significant revision”¹⁰. It has revised the modernist narrative techniques. Therefore, the texts of postmodernism allow experimentation with narrative. Later experiments become the standard of such texts.

Maus, one of the best known graphic novels, published in a two-volume, apprizes the autobiographical story of the American cartoonist Art Spiegelman’s construction of (his father) Vladek Spiegelman’s biographical and harrowing tale of the cruelty of the Nazi Holocaust and Valdek’s miraculous endurance. This story unfolds through repetitive flashback style and possesses two intertwining narratives. The central narrative focuses on depicting Vladek Spiegelman, a Polish Holocaust survivor’s experience of escaping horror during the rise of the Hitler regime. Whereas, the other narrative sheds light on the speaker’s (Artie) attempts to interview his father. This interview provides needed information for the author (the speaker) in crafting the *Maus*, a work that ventures to recover, reconstruct war history. On the other hand, the tumultuous period of Islamic Revolution of Iran of 1979 foregrounds Marjane Satrapi’s critically eulogized graphic memoir *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, which comprises the years before and after the Revolution and the break out of Iran-Iraq war from the perspective of a merely young girl- Marji. The sequel *Persepolis: the Story of a Return* reveals Satrapi’s unfortunate exile from her native land and culture. This exile, eventually leads to a struggle for her identity as an immigrant in Viana, Austria.

7. Peter Barry, *Beginnign Theory*. pg. 81

8. See 7

9. Ihab Hasan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*. pg. 260 10. See 9

Since, the genre, graphic novel is a recent and acclaimed product of the postmodern era, a critical reading of these graphic novels can trace postmodern narrative technique. The postmodern narrative technique challenge and subverts the modernists' idea of narrative approach and form. Linda Hutcheon remarks, "... gone are the days of Walter Benjamin's idea of 'aura' (of modernism). Postmodernism rejects the notions of originality, authenticity and uniqueness" (Hutcheon 33). Temporal distortion (fragmented and non-linear narrative), black humour, irony, intertextuality (that includes pastiche, parody and allusion), minimalism, maximalism, magic realism, along with metanarrative and metafiction (combines fabulation¹¹, poioumena¹², historiographic-metafiction) are part of the postmodern strategy to represent the real in an unusual manner.

Both texts share almost similar narrative techniques. Delving beneath the story, conscious reader will come across the writing technique, the use of meta-fiction, flashback, time leap, intertextuality, abundant reference of pop culture in the text much in *Persepolis*. The representation of political turmoil and violence through the graphic art and the use of irony and humour is also palpable here. Such elements anticipate these memoirs as an unwavering piece of postmodern write up. Thereby, this chapter aims to scrutinise above mentioned facets of postmodern narratologies that contribute to shape the narrative techniques of *Maus* and *Persepolis*.

With the setting of Rego Park, New York, in 1970s the story of *Maus* begins where Artie (Speiglman himself as the character) went to meet his father Valdek almost after two years.

11.inventing fantasy or false story, the style is similar to magic realism.

12.story about creating the story itself

Artie then informed him that he would want to draw a book about him (Valdek) that will be “about your life in Poland and the War” (Spiegelman 14). Thereby, the book completely depends on the recollected memory of an old man (Valdek). The overall story goes on with two parallel narratives. In one narrative, through the flashback technique Valdek recounts his past-starting from his meeting with Anja (his first wife) followed by prewar and wartime events and then his release as a war prisoner from Auschwitz. The other narrative, focuses on the way how the book came into being. As the story proceeds the narrative gets complicated because of its simultaneous presentation of the past and the present events even in the same page. Figure 1 is such an example. This figure highlights how the events of the past and the present are juxtaposed in the same page (Spiegelman 90). It makes the reading intricate where readers often lose the track of the narrative like any other postmodern text.

Non-linearity is observed through the narration of Valdek. Valdek’s narrative is often seen as fragmented one. Without completing one story he shifts to another one. Sometimes he also interrupts a story by telling completely different event such as he suddenly talks about his dates with Lucia and his



Figure 1

problematic relationship with Mala (Valdek’s second wife). On other occasions, he adds details that he has forgotten to remember earlier and he often leaves gaps in his stories “ACH! here I forgot to tell something from before I moved to Sosnowiec but after our engagement was made” (Spiegelman 22). This shows the impossibility of restoring memory in its most authentic manner.

Although graphics are abundantly used to clarify the texts, there are instances where the writer deliberately leaves blank space. There are certain things that cannot be represented by text or image. For another example, in the first volume Valdek's story about Tosha (Artie's aunt) and her suicide along with the murder of her children using poison does not come up with concrete illustrations rather it is mentioned that she used to have poison hanging around her neck since she preferred death to Auschwitz's gas chamber. This gap is intentional that gives readers space to imagine the situation and it might be avoided not to deal with the violence of a mother killing her children. Artie has been seen reinforcing the ordering of the story through his occasional interruption of his father's stream of consciousness memory. In postmodern term, it is known as narrative intrusion. An obvious illustration of this is found in the first volume when Artie becomes annoyed with such fragmented and non-linear stories and states: "I want to tell your story, the way it really happened" (Spiegelman 25). Then again, he says "Wait! Please, Dad if you don't keep your story chronological, I'll never get it straight..." (Spiegelman 84). Thus, we observe a manifestation of tension or problem between Valdek's effort of recalling past events and the speaker's attempts to reproduce his father's story into an art form.

Critic James E. Young's critical article on *Maus* focused on such representation of history what he pointed out as an "uncanny history of the Holocaust that sustains uncertainty and allows us to live without a full understanding of events" (Young 666). Both the common and deep memory of the Holocaust work in the narrative of Valdek. Common memory "tends to restore and establish coherence, closure and a possibly a redemptive stance" and deep memory "remains essentially inarticulate and unrepresentable, that which continues to exist as an unresolved trauma just beyond reach of meaning" (Young 666-67). Valdek's attempt to restore his memory is much visible throughout the story which is common memory. The sole example of deep memory, the

inarticulate trauma of the loss of Valdek's first child Richieu is manifested when the dying father (Valdek) addresses his son Artie with the name of Richieu in the last frame of the first part. "Such narrative would simultaneously gesture both to the existence of deep, inarticulate memory and to its own incapacity to deliver it" (Young 667, 668). Part of Fredric Jameson's book, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* also addresses this problem of narrating history. He shares his views on the postmodern historical novel that it:

can no longer set out to represent the historical past, it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past... we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach (Jameson 25).

Therefore, the ability to identify absolute truth is not possible since postmodernism rejects the idea of absolute truth, and the awareness of the past is also impossible to represent meticulously. James Young remarks this kind of representation as "received history... when absolute truth claims are under assault, Spiegelman's *Maus* makes a case for an essentially reciprocal relationship between the truth of what happened and the truth of how it is remembered" (Young 39). Spiegelman as the character of Artie states his feeling of inadequacy "I feel inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dream" (Speigelman 176).

To maintain chronology is strenuous while revisiting the past, to be specific- the past related to violence and war. Hence, memory has a pivotal role, but at the same time memory is problematic, dubious, people even reconstruct memory and war memory does not work accurately; "no one can tell their own story... They're the most untrue stories of all... Everyone has a region of privacy, things they keep from the world, but that region is only protective layers behind which are the things they themselves cannot see, a layer shielding them from

themselves.”¹³ So sometimes people become unable to deal with their story, history and its events as Jameson argues:

As though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience. But if that is so, then it is a terrible... pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history (Jameson 47).

The unreliability and limitation of human being's capacity to remembering past events and failure to focus on the present is mentioned here. Linda Hutcheon also theorizes this phenomenon, but in a different way, she terms it as 'historiographic metafiction':

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or commonsense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems (Hutcheon 93).

Like Spiegelman's *Maus*, *Persepolis* also represents traumatic historical past, as experienced by an Iranian woman Marji (the author herself), the protagonist, who has to leave Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Eventually, the format and content comes out as a celebrated aesthetic work along with its metafiction and ideological depth to represent war, revolution and exile. The term postmodernism can be associated with *Persepolis* since a fiction "should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past" (Hutchinson 3). Several momentous historical events are depicted as

¹³.Zia Haider Rahman, *In the Light of What We Know*. pg.512

stories that the protagonist Marji heard from her parents and grandmother. Her parents share the historical event of the fall of the Persian Empire and the rise of the Shah in the third chapter of the first volume of *Persepolis*. Whereas, the history of Reza Shah's harsh Regime is told through the narrative of Marji's grandmother in the chapter four of *Pesepolis* entitled as "Persepolis" too. In this way, *Persepolis* retells the perspective of Iranian political history and these stories delineate the presence of metafiction in *Persepolis*. Such narratives in a fiction redefine the value of history writing and "surely historiographic metafiction, like postmodern architecture and painting, is overtly and resolutely historical-though, admittedly, in an ironic and problematic way that acknowledges that history is not the transparent record of any sure "truth"" (Hutcheon 10).

The striking uses of humour, irony and satire in *Persepolis* are made to represent the gruesome reality of Iran under an autocratic rule. The chapter entitled as "The Party", "The Water Cell", "The Key" and "The Socks" are noteworthy for humour and irony. When the mass people were rejoicing over the fall of Shah regime, Marji's father told "lets's enjoy the new freedom" (Satrapi 43). The reader gets the irony lies within this statement as they progress with the story that there is no new freedom but a new repression. Moreover, one should not ignore the image of a snake intertwined with this panel, which may have drawn intentionally to foreshadow something evil is lurking. The insistence of playing Monopoly by Marji with her parents when they just came from supporting the Marxist revolutionaries. The irony implies the game's teaching of capitalism (monopoly) which is antithetical to the Marxist ideals. The denial of playing Monopoly ultimately indicates the rejection of capitalism in Marji's family. Again, the decoration of honouring the anniversary of the revolution meets with humour where Marji and her classmates choose to use toilet paper instead of flowers to decorate the room. And her teacher cringes her brow in anger and yelled: "What are these garlands? Toilet paper?" (Satrapi 97). With this

mocking humour readers are given insight into the protagonist's understanding of politics and her rejection of the revolution. Marji's personal exclusion from this revolution is also noticed with her humorous statement: "we nevertheless learned to draw drapes" since during an art class, the professor announced that all the classical nude figures should be covered that were being used for art classes (Satrapi 121).

Again, similar with *Maus*, temporal distortion or non-linearity, has also appeared in the few pages of *Persepolis: the story of a childhood*. But the juxtaposition of past and present is not as frequent as in *Maus*. The following figure 2, which is the very beginning part of this memoir, can be seen as an example of temporal distortion. Opening with a classroom photo the narrator suddenly jumps

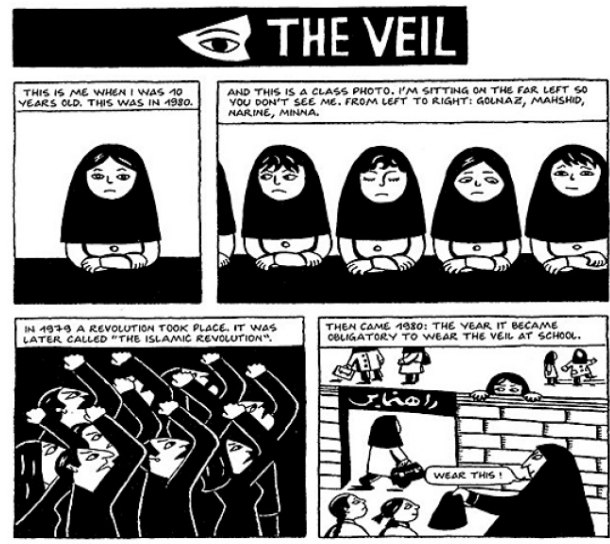


Figure 2

to the historical event that was one year back with the depiction of the anonymous crowd of people marching forward. Then the very next panel brings the reader to the school again. Hillary Chute observes this non-linearity and states that "*Persepolis* literally moves back and forth across a momentous event. In the first four frames alone, we have criss-crossed from 1980 to 1979, and back to 1980, the chapter will then backtrack to 1975" (Chute 96). Further, in chapter four, the past event of Reza Shah is followed by a certain present situation of Marji's family when she and her mother



Figure 3

were worried about her father, who was caught in a violent demonstration. The chapter “Moscow” also progresses through the back and forth narrative where Anoosh, Marji’s uncle was revealing his troubled past to Marji. In one panel reader sees Marji with Anoosh whether the very next panel engages with depicting scenes from Anoosh’s earlier life (figure 3).

Persepolis connects the personal with the historical. It reflects upon a particular social trauma, thus the violent destruction of childhood and at the same time speaks of History as an act of reconstruction through collective and individual memory. The representation of Iran as transforming from a constitutional state into an Islamic republic in *Persepolis* becomes questionable, since writing through memory is not meticulous. The tumultuous period of Iran is observed through the understanding of a ten year old girl-Marji. This observation gets words later in her life (2000) and formed the first volume of *Persepolis*. So, her memory plays a crucial role in presenting the history. Like *Maus*, it can be argued that Satrapi is interested to see and show history from a personal and subjective perspective away from a ‘neutral’ eye of a historian.

Moreover, some events related to the political conspiracies and changes the politics brought forth, unfold to her by the form of story in her childhood. For instance, how the death of her grandfather (as he was involved in politics) affects the life of her grandmother and her mother. And later, she came to know about her uncle Anoosh, who also shares a few political events with her. Lastly, before his trial he met with Marji and asked her not to forget the historical stories related to her country and family. Thereby, it substantiates the words of Satrapi that she installs at the end of her preface of this graphic memoir “One can forgive but one should never forget” (Satrapi 2). This book is thus an attempt to capture some events, lives and moments that should not be forgotten and to remove the stigma attached to Iran, a country of fundamentalist, fanaticism and terrorism, as she believes “an entire nation should not be judged by the

wrongdoings of a few extremists” (Satrapi 2). However, one should also notice the black and white artwork of this book which may accentuate the historical past where their stories took place and thus the historic memory “appears as if it were an image faded by the passage of time” (Moreno-Nuño 22). The whole representation of the past events or history of Iran therefore manifests Jameson’s thought:

that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present;... such active temporal unification is a function of language.... If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of a sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life (Jameson 27).

Thus, by using metafiction, irony and black humour this graphic work illustrates the capacity of the comic-strip genre to establish a dialogue between history and memory. Moreover, it exhibits another way of dealing with history, violence and war and contributes to restore or revisit historical memory.

In Postmodern literature, reference to visual media and popular culture is nothing new. The remarkable postmodern texts like Don DeLillio’s *White Noise* (1985) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* have taken the theme of television and mentioned 1960s popular musical band the Beatles respectively. This criterion seeks the life of an individual’s relativity with culture, how a person in this era likes to assimilate with it and obviously how media and culture affect the life of certain people. Likewise, in *Persepolis*, there is the avid consumption of popular culture, namely music and clothes. During the Islamic regime, such western things were banned. But the black market culture continues to supply those. One day Marji goes out to buy blue jeans

and some tapes: "For a year now, the food shortage had been resolved by the growth of the black market. However, finding tape was a little more complicated. On Gandhi avenue you could find them" (Satrapi 132). Eventually for young Marji this culture becomes an instrument of identity and transgression against Islamic fundamentalism, since she belongs to a liberal family where religion is not followed from an extremist perspective: "I really don't know what to think about the veil. Deep down I was very religious but as a family we were very modern and avant-garde. I was born with religion" (Satrapi 6). Through this foreign culture she finds her own way of living amidst the troubled situation of her country. Both volumes of *Pesepolis* are inclusive of famous figures from the western popular media. These profuse references include icons like Bruce Lee, Star Wars, Princess Leia, Kim Wilde, Michel Jackson, Iron Maiden, Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd. The highbrow cultural of writing autobiography has blended with the popular culture. Thus, it epitomises the postmodernist idea of blurred cultural differences.

However, Marji's free access to and the enjoyment of western popular culture also manifests her exclusion and dismissal of being fundamentalist. In the chapter "Kim Wilde" readers see her parents in Istanbul where they buy things that were banned during Revolution in Iran. They bring denim jacket, a batch of Michel Jackson, Nike sneaker and posters of Kim Wilde and Iron Maiden for Marji. When Marji goes for a walk with her new western outfit, a group of women stopped her who was the strong supporters of the new Islamic regime and they harass Marji for wearing sneakers, tight jeans, a denim jacket, and a Michael Jackson pin that one of the women call a "symbol of decadence" (Satrapi 133). An unveiled and untamed Marji appears at the end of this chapter who finds her own way of calming down by singing and dancing with the song of Kim Wilde's "We're the Kids in America" (Satrapi 134). It reflects her fantasy on Western culture that is a counter cultural identity for those Iranian who feel choked up because of sudden

limits and restrictions on personal lifestyle. In a sense, her individuality is rescued by the culture of white people and her relaxation comes down through western culture. “Satrapi depicts her young self as performing identity through bricolage, appropriation, borrowing, and mixture of European and North American styles” (Elahi 318). The issues western cultural influence is also discerned in the chapter “The Cigarette” of *Persepolis I*. The mentioning of burger joint “Kansas” and the poster labelling with ‘coca-cola’ inside the burger restaurant mark the western style of food consumption. The place also becomes the symbol of normalcy during war since it is one of the public places that “had survived the regime’s repression” (Satrapi 112).

Considering the overall discussion, it can be said that the graphic novels, once categorised as only for juvenile taste, now developed in aesthetic beauties of highbrow literature. One cannot deny the authors’ use of comic convention rupturing stylistic features of these two graphic novels. The flashback, non-linear technique and double narratives of the *Maus* makes the reading complicated as well as help to unfold history and vicarious past of the Valdek’s life. The touch of historical metafiction also increases its richness of imparting historical events of the Holocaust and Islamic Revolution for both texts. My argument shows how *Persepolis* is shaped by the postmodern narrative technique of non-linearity, ironic humour and ample allusion to the popular culture serve well the representation of politically messed up Iran, its autocratic government system, sudden changes in individuals’ lives and how the young people embraced the culture of the West.

Chapter Two: Representation of the Holocaust and the Islamic Revolution in *Maus* and *Persepolis*

“The image is more than an idea. It is a vortex and cluster of fused ideas...” —Ezra Pound

The first part of this chapter aims to look at the politics of the Nazi regime, its vicious actions executing upon the Jewish as presented in *Maus* through analysing symbolic images. Spiegelman's *Maus* can be seen as a quintessential American endeavour to make sense and relieve the anxieties of the vehement period of WWII by means of a different medium like graphic novel. Divers narratives such as metanarrative (narratives of historical experience and knowledge), myriad of heroes and superheroes featuring in comic books and films successfully persist today by marking the triumph over Third Reich or Nazism. Evolving from strips to novel and juvenile to mature, contemporary comics/graphic novels explore complex and darker subject matter like Nazi regime or the Holocaust. This chapter will mainly look into the symbols and metaphors employed to develop a harrowing tale of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

The animal metaphor is one of the radical elements in the *Maus*. This novel stands on the traditional symbol of cat and mouse which on the one hand feeds into the perception of the power struggle between similar species. But on the other hand, plays with the Tom and Jerry cartoon image. Spiegelman chooses the metaphor of cat and mouse to deal with the Nazi or Germans as depicted by the cat and the Jewish represented by the mouse. The reason for choosing this metaphor is explained in Spiegelman's *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus* (2011), as he was repeatedly asked “why mice” after the publication of the *Maus* in 1996. In *MetaMause* he explains how this idea came about by mentioning “the most shockingly relevant anti-Semitic work I found was *The Eternal Jews*, a 1940 German

documentary that portrayed Jews in a ghetto swarming in tight quarters... and then cut to Jews as mice... with a title card that said “Jews are the rats’ or the vermin of mankind”. This made him clear that the core of the mass extermination was such dehumanization (cited by Kunz 84). In an interview with Hillary Chute, Spiegelman says that Hitler collaborated this work as he begins his novel with the epigram, a saying of Adlof Hitler: “The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human”. Thus that dehumanization is carried through the image of mice as Jews. In response to the question of choosing this medium (graphic novel) Spiegelman said “I wouldn't have made a really great ballet about the Holocaust. It wasn't in my gene structure. So to me it was obvious....”¹⁴

In addition to the animal image, the recurrent image of Swastika confirms the book’s association with Nazism since the Swastika is a part of the Nazi flag. As cited by Jenifer Rosenberg this Swastika is defined by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* that the black swastika, used in Aryan cultures for millennia, represents “the mission of the struggle for the victory of the Aryan man, and, by the same token, the victory of the idea of creative work, which as such always has been and always will be anti-Semitic” (Rosenberg 21). This symbolic representation of cat chasing after mouse also helps the reader to digest easily the Nazi brutality as it is enacted through allegory than viewing the actual victims’ images or the actual photo of concentration camp conditions. Nonetheless, a photo of Richeu and Valdek wearing an outfit of prisoner camp is given within the text.

The political horror of Nazi’s extermination of the Jews with barbarity comes along with few disturbing images in *Maus*. It would be much more disturbing and unbearable to read without the animal allegory. It is worth mentioning that Spiegelman only masks the human face with mice,

14. An interview published in national public radio of USA. 5th October 2011.

this ambiguity is intended to allow the reader to remember that these characters are actually humans. One of this ambiguous images (Figure 4) is shown in the page where the middle panel depicts the hanging bodies of mice and the next panel only shows four pair of dangling legs that are very human. Valdek mentions of the dead bodies of few Jews that were hanged for an entire week and it continues to haunt him that he could not go outside (Spiegelman 85-86).

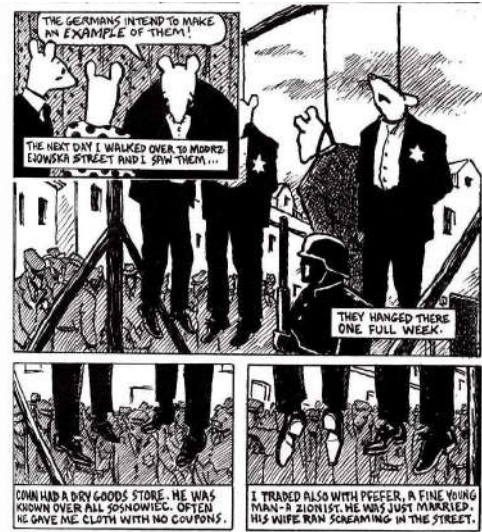


Figure 4

The figures 4 and 5 try to capture the utter violence done to the Jews during the Holocaust. The burning of Jews was another disturbing image (Spiegelman 232) that was a very common occurrence of the ghetto and the pain of the conflagrated Jews becomes visible as he drawn the jaw dropped mice.

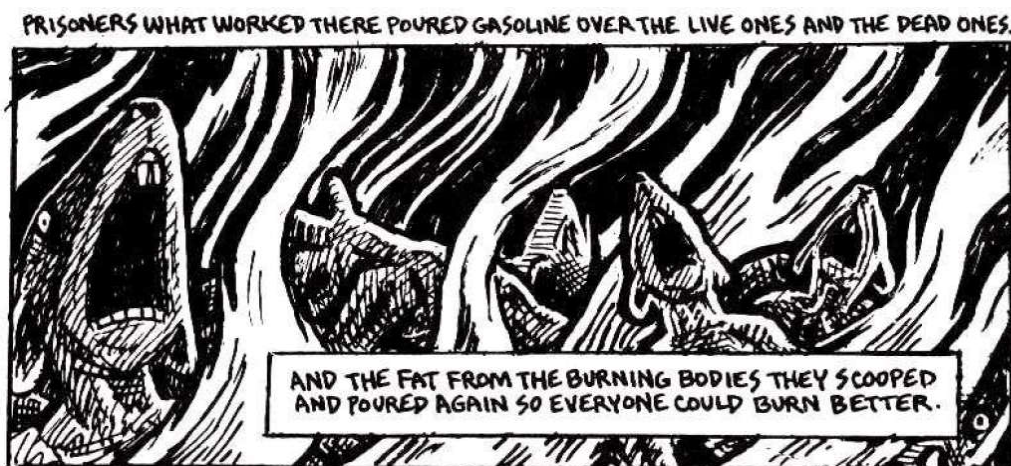


Figure 5

The swastika in particular bears enormous weight of fear and trauma on the victims of Nazism. The sacred symbol of Eastern religions-the swastika- turned out to be the symbol for Aryan supremacy and a solution for the racial cause, because of its association with the Nazi party. Visually portrayed as a hovering shadow and reigning icon of Nazi ideology, Vladek recalls his first encounter with the swastika on a Nazi flag “Here was the first time I saw with my own eyes” (34) while riding a train through Czechoslovakia (Figure 6). The panel size becomes important here as mentioned by



Figure 6

Spiegelman in his lecture on *Maus* at Sacred Heart University. The Nazi flag has been depicted in the largest panel among the three panels, symbolizing that the Nazi party is gradually taking over the Jews. The Flag arose “excitement and frightened” and the passengers started telling horrific stories of the Nazis taking over Jewish businesses, beating the Jews severely and taking them away. The black Nazi flag is seen as a background image in each depicted panel (Spiegelman 34-35). Further, this recurring background image represents the projection of psychological terror as each of the passenger’s terror is excellently drawn through their awe-stricken eyes. Later, as Vladek and his wife, Anja, continue to hide from place to place to avoid being caught by the Nazi, the swastika appears once again as a symbol for their inevitable fate



Figure 7

(Spiegelman 127). As shown in figure 7 the winding path leading them back to their hometown of Sosnowiec, shaped like a swastika. For the deciphering of this image we can relate it to Stuart Hall's hypothetical positions of decoding a text or discourse that he formulated in his critical essay 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' (1973). The apparent and transparent message of this figure is Valdek and Anja is walking through a path which is the "dominant-hegemonic position", where readers or receivers fully accept what is showing without questioning or doubting, they decode the message with its "reference code in which it has been encoded" (Hall 515). Whereas, the conscious and active reader can easily come across with the swastika like path if he/she decodes it from the "oppositional position". It defines as, when a text or discourse is perfectly understood "both the literal and the connotative inflection" (Hall 517) by the reader/receiver, but he/she clings to reject it or decode it in an alternative way. Thus, this image (text) makes the readers to foresee Valdek and Anja's walk not for as an escape from the Nazi but for the eventual confinement in Auschwitz.

In another occasion, Spiegelman tries to balance this viciousness, as in one page he adopts a rounded abstract figure for the animals and the tone of the images dramatically shifts away from the horrendous Nazi guard toward a more different and distanced approach. The image of the cat as a Nazi guard on the top right of the first panel is



Figure 8

drawn as zoomed in. There he said “we should hang you right here on this spot” both this dialogue and the zoomed in style imply the power and authority the guard possesses over the mouse (Jews). Then in the middle of the second panel both the oppressor and oppressed are on focused. Interestingly, the oppressed Jew has shown here as another source of power, since he had “300 zlotys” (Spiegelman 93). It articulates the idea that “power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”¹⁵. Along with the zooming out of the characters, their eyes also dimmed showing the less fear and less viciousness and authority in Valdek and in the guard respectively. Moreover, the disproportionate size of the panel showing cat towering over the vulnerable mice becomes recede too-proving the importance of panel size once again (figure 8). The style serves an annexed approach to interpret the Nazi guard by blurring the line of oppressor and victim. Thus, Spiegelman also minimizes the Nazi brutality through such style and skilled appearance of his drawing since the depiction of Nazism was not the author’s core concern.

Nonetheless, the artistic representation of Nazism, its historical events and the victim’s narrative of the Holocaust can never achieve an ideal expectation of accuracy. Spiegelman confesses it through his mouse persona in the second part of the novel, “Some part of me does not want to draw or think about Auschwitz, I can’t visualize it clearly and I can’t begin to imagine what it felt like (Spiegelman 206). Spiegelman acknowledges the inevitable incompleteness of his personal, historical narrative, yet *Maus* continues to stand as the most effective use of the comic medium to represent the traumatic past of the Holocaust through allegory. And Spiegelman considers *Maus* “a 300-page yearzeit candle” and explains it in an interview for NPR book-

yearzeit candle is a memorial candle lit for the dead.... It was my way of

¹⁵.Michel Foucault, “Method”

commemorating, of understanding and making a monument on paper with ink, but some kind of monument to what happened, not just to my parents, but by implication, beyond – without trying to charge that with the politics of other issues just as an urgent thing to try to understand, not so that we just don't burn Jews in the future, but just so that we don't burn up the planet, even, for the future (NRP.org).

Ultimately, the representation of Nazism was not as focused as Vladek's personal experience and endurance. Instead of the bulk of the menacing representation of Nazi ideology, there are few appearances or references to political Nazi leaders, their activities and the looming background of Swastika that could not subside the story of Valdek's personal account of surviving the concentration camp.

This part of the second chapter intends to discuss the Islamic Revolution of Iran with its ramifications as exhibited in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, delineating mainly the social and cultural perspectives. Needless to say that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 is one of the most significant political upheavals that left an indisputable scar on the socio-cultural structure of Iran.

In general, the revolution is:

viewed as a mass movement, which gained enormity due to conscious efforts of the working class and the clergy in opposition of the monarchical state under Mohammad Reza Shah. Backed by the US government, the regime of the Shah was extremely influenced by its western policies due to which he showed his inclinations towards modernizing and secularizing the country... causing immense dissent and instability among the people at large (Sharma 1).

So the Islamic Revolution was a mass movement against the Shah regime who did not appreciate secularism and modernism for his country. Hence, the Revolution. Therefore, there were oppositions against Shah, despite of sound economic progress. Though historical revolutions have always been an apt subject of research, it remained somewhat unexplored in the graphic novel.

Persepolis depicts the childhood and adolescent life of Satrapi, who is from an “avant-garde” middle class family. Satrapi has witnessed two remarkable historical events of Iran from a very close quarter. The first one is the Islamic Revolution that brought radical changes and turbulences. The decade was the Iran-Iraq war that made the life troublesome for the Iranian. In the essay “The Texture of Reacting in Satrapi’s *Persepolis*” Hillery Chute states that:

Persepolis narrates the trials and tribulations of precocious Marji and her upper class leftiest parents; their protests against the Shah, later against the Islamic regime; Marji’s growing class consciousness; the torture and killing of family and friends; the havoc wreaked by Iran-Iraq War; and Marji’s fierce and dangerous outspokenness which eventually leads her fearful parents to send her out of the country at age fourteen, after she hits one school Principal and disputes politics with another (Chute 94).

This revolution was stimulated by a group of Islamic fundamentalists that were repelled by the westernized culture that the Shah regime had embraced. The people’s support for modern ways of life had received popularity during the time of the Shah. Later, this capitalistic lifestyle was seen as sacrilegious, tended to profane Islam and needed to be overthrown by a new government that would reinforce the Islamic law. Eventually, this led to the dethrone of the Shah Mohammad Reza and the monarchical power, then occupied by the Islamic Republic party. The chapter

“Water Cell” depicts one of the scenes of the mass people roaring “down with the king!” (Satrapi 18). Then the chapter “The Party” comes with the euphoric image of the celebration of the downfall of the Shah “The day he left, the country had the biggest celebration of its entire history” (Satrapi 42).

The storyline went on following the changes of life and remembering several past events of their family. The new government started to rule with harsh fists by suddenly imposing Islamic laws for each purpose that was not easy to follow by all. Although there was much acceptance such as neighbours of Marji (Satrapi 75), there were a large number of people that opposed the stringent regulations of their new leader and started to revolt. Marji’s parents were also opposed to the new government system and witnessed riots that eventually failed to control the extremist new ruler. However, As soon as the new government settled the Iran-Iraq war began. In September 1980, the Sunni Muslim-dominated regime of Saddam Hussein in neighbouring Iraq, invaded Iran in an attempt to take advantage of revolutionary chaos and destroy the revolution in its seedling stage. Satrapi thus sheds light on it too by depicting the intrusion of Iraq in the chapter entitled as “The F-14s” followed by the war violence, the destruction of Tehran, people’s suffering and evacuation.

The rudimentary motive behind the opposition of the Shah was based on the principle of saving the nation from moral degeneration that is considered as an effect of westernization. The first step was seen by the reformation of the Iranian education system done by the new government. The very opening chapter tries to capture this sudden change as the author has shown herself in veil with a gloomy face. This picture of her is an artistic way of showing the prevailing social condition which entrapped her freedom and identity within the veil which had been made mandatory by the Islamic Republic in 1980. The situation gets more critical when the

government closed down all the bilingual schools since the Islamic Republic (one of the leaders of it) (figure 9) asserted that “they are symbols of capitalism and of decadence.” (Satrapi 4)



Figure 9

The fundamentalist nature of the government further states that “the educational system and what is written in school books, at all levels, are decadent. Everything needs to be revised to ensure that our children are not led astray from the true path of Islam... That’s why we’re closing all the universities for a while. Better to have no students at all than to educate future imperialists” (Satrapi 73). In the novel, the element of fundamentalism met the extremism when the fundamentalist verbally assaulted Ebi (mother of Marji) since she was found unveiled in public. They tried to impose their ideology on mass people. According to their thought, this type of appearance in public place was the defiance of the custom prescribed by them. The words “women like me should be pushed up against a wall and fucked. And thrown in the garbage... and that if I didn’t want that to happen, I should wear the veil” (Satrapi 74) explicate the fundamentalist nature of the people who were against any sign of modernity.

The Islamic Revolution also adversely affects the subjective self of the protagonist. The issue of identity crisis becomes prominent here. The following image (figure 10) reveals something diametric and thought provoking issues regarding the position and emancipation of women under the rule of Iran as an Islamic state. Here, Marji confines herself between supposedly traditional and her habituated modern life.

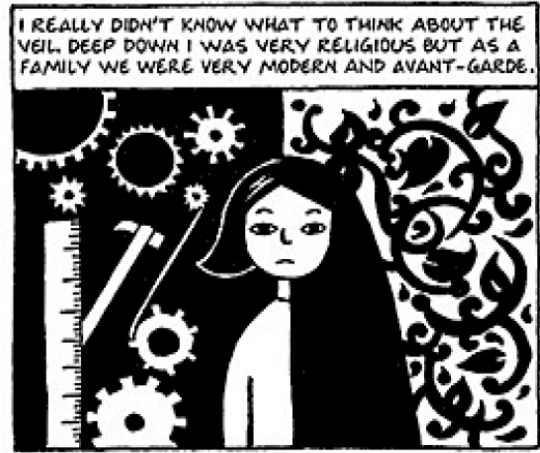


Figure 10

The right handed background has the needle worked design which is traditionally assigned to women. She is also veiling herself that was mandatory during 1979 in Iran. The other half of this image's background is covered with pictures of little gears, a scale and hammer- connotation of education and eventually representing modern life where women are allowed to be educated. This situation is reminiscent of that of women during Nationalism in India. Partha Chatterjee's essay "The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question" postulates that nationalists solved the problem of women's subjugation by allowing them to be educated. But by creating "material sphere" belongs to men; and "spiritual sphere" which is fit for women they limit women's emancipation (Chatterjee 233). The nationalists managed to make women understand that women are given a sacred place so they should obey the constructed rules set by the nationalists. Further manipulation inscribes with the thought that the material domain is full of struggle and eventually unimportant. But the most powerful and sacred domain "is the spiritual which lies within, which is our true self; it is which is genuinely essential" (Chatterjee 245). Their real freedom was buried under the concepts of "spiritual" "ghar" and "inner space" (Chatterjee 238). Thus, Marji's position is ambivalent and complex like the new women of India. With the new

repressive Islamic regime the condition of most of the women in Iran becomes problematic. Some adapt this forced veiling issue, whereas others are caught in a dilemma.

For useful reading the graphic works can be looked up in terms of the structuralist theory of semiotics. In semiotics—the study of sign and symbol—the sign/symbol (signifier) can be interpreted as having a meaning (signified) other than itself, therefore, “the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified”.¹⁶ With this theory, if we further scrutinise figure 10, the image becomes the sign that can signify the bifurcation of self/other where Marji is living in a ‘liminal’ space which obviously was a fallout of the Iranian state politics. Because of this politics, she left Iran and her mother vindicated her leaving with the statement that: “We feel it’s better for you to be far away and happy than close by and miserable” (Satrapi 148). However, this image (figure 10) is an insight of Marji’s sufferings during her exile in Austria, since this binary relation of belonging/non-belonging is one of the cruxes of *Persepolis: the Story of a Return*.

In Austria, she was in a constant struggle to behave and look like her fellow mates who were mostly natives of Austria. The chapter entitled as “The Vegetable” graphics a new Marji who has a conscious tendency to mimic (figure 11) the ‘Self’ the native people of Austria; “mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha 122)¹⁷. She started to use makeup, smoke joints, cut her hair off and dressed in Western style to substantiate her inner desire to be a part of them (Self). But she could not be so and she fell into the position what Bhabha calls “in between” where she is not “Self and

16. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistic*. Pg.67.

17. Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man”, *The Location of Culture*.

Other but the “other-ness of the Self” (Bhabha xxvii)¹⁸. In the process of mimicking the ‘Self’



Figure 11

subversion takes place, a gap or third space creates, since in the second volume she states “the harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game of somebody else’s rules” (Satrapi 39). Here, this sense of guilt does not allow her to mimic the ‘self’ successfully and thus the rupture of subjectivity befalls and the ‘other’ holds the “liminal” or remains in an “in between” position. She continues living within this liminal space. Even her return to Iran could not make her an original Iranian woman. She was neither enough for the home, nor enough for the foreign world- “I was a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West. I had no identity. I didn’t even know anymore why I was living” (Satrapi 54). Thus, the political issues of her country intricate her identity of being native Irani or Austrian. Babak Elahi comments on Marji’s identity crisis that “the attempt to piece together a divided identity, a fragmented subjectivity,

18. Homi Bhabha, “Foreword to the 1986 Edition” *Black Skin White Mask*.

a subjectivity that is split not between some absolute and essential "West" and some monolithic Islam, but between self-consciously iconic and ideological images of Western and Islamic worldviews" (Elahi 318).

Thereby, both the graphic novelists have dexterously utilized the personal narrative and public events, anarchic situations and incidents to project and (re)construct the endeavouring history of the Holocaust, the Islamic Revolution and expose and unify the fragmented historical facts to develop a personal narrative of history.

Chapter Three: Graphic Novels and Their Academic Possibility

“There is no text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing.”

- John Fiske

Considering the discussion of the former two chapters, it is noticeable that the comics or graphic novels can be read from different perspectives, beyond as a means of pleasure. As the academic world of literature gives it way to postmodernism. Graphic novels have been included in the different academic syllabus, in particular in Western countries. The narratives, themes and contents of *Maus* and *Persepolis* are for certain extent parallel to that of first rated literary works that are ruling the academia. Thereby, this chapter intends to focus on the possibility of including graphic novels in the study of English literature in Bangladesh.

The time has come to broaden the traditional arena of studying English literature. In a way the inclusion of the graphic novel can serve this purpose. Hence, the issue of the English literary canon becomes important here. The notion of quality and high culture mark the emergence of the traditional literary canon. According to Hall, “the idea of canon developed in the nineteenth century to embrace the ‘classic’ literary works” (cited by Shomer 72). It is the specification of the literary texts that should be included in a syllabus in school or university. With such classics and specific texts, a number of authoritative texts organise the literary curricula. It has been believed that canonical texts are rhetorically, aesthetically and morally valued to develop an enlightened individual. According to Kennedy, canon formation is a ‘natural human instinct’ which is an attempt ‘to impose order on variety by choosing what is best for preservation over time’ (cited by Fleming 2). But the question of including new pedagogy, genre, texts related to popular culture has been revolving around over the debate of the English literary canon. The

traditional canon has always tended to focus on those texts that have stood up with time. Thus, literature written specifically for children or young adults like comics and graphic novels is sometimes excluded from the traditional canon. But such literature has established a new genre and open a way for academic research. Such specific literature for young people have contested the desirable aesthetic qualities and depth that might be expected of canonical texts. The *Maus* and *Persepolis* can be a good example of this new possibility.

Jordan Bates cites Behrendt, who said:

literacy was historically the province of the privileged and so, the uneducated or minimally educated – which included some women but most laboring-class citizens, of both sexes, as well a children – were automatically excluded. The remnant of this class-based exclusionary thinking is visible in today’s society in the disdain with which the cultural elite usually greets “popular” art like Harry Potter, graphic novels, country-western music, etc (Bates 2).

So, the notion of being privilege has been related to literacy. Social class discrimination evokes cultural elite to appreciate ‘popular culture’ as an inferior form of art. However, the birth of various ethnic studies, postcolonial studies programs in the 1960s reflected the social upheavals of the time. Women’s writing and the writings from margin found their way of inclusion in studying literature. According to Benton “the challenge to the traditional canon has come from two main directions: from post-colonial, feminist and other theorists who, as part of an agenda for social and cultural change, have questioned the dominance of white, male, bourgeois canonical texts” (cited by Bates). This resistance to the dominant or the traditional canon during the late 1900s has catalysed canon reformation. A number of Academicians and scholars expressed their anger on the traditional canon and brought forth the reformation. “The advent of

film and other forms of media has questioned the exclusive focus on the written text which has tended to define the traditional canon. Modern technology has brought new access to resources and to different forms of texts” (Fleming 5).

In addition, nowadays teachers who are faced with the reality of trying to kindle interest in young people for will often take a more pragmatic approach to choose texts. Many prefer to select contemporary texts with the argument that they can create an engaged readership. John Guillory argues that canon formation should be understood as a question of the distribution of cultural capital in schools. In a culture of ‘universal access’ canonical texts would not be experienced as ‘lifeless monuments’ or as ‘proofs of class distinction’ his argument is in favour of universal access (cited by Fleming 5). Upholding the postmodernist thought of the fluidity of the boundaries, there may be an argument to suggest that the English literary curriculum should not stick to specific, time tested texts or authors in relation to a literary canon but rather should focus on a range of diverse types of reading. That is to say, the inclusion of textual and visual fiction and non-fiction texts. School and universities around the world have started to teach comics and graphic novels as primary course material.

In spite of versatility and growing success of graphic novels in popular culture and market consumer, studies of it are not always welcomed in academic curricula. Some critics have denied to consider graphic novel as a material of academia. Jeremy Llorence cites Paul Loopes, a sociologist, who states “For many critics the ‘transgressive’ mix of image and text of comic books undermined the supposedly superior quality of print culture as well as the unique quality of visual culture” (31). This criticism is not withstanding, there are universities that have taken graphic novels as a medium of teaching English Literature. For example, University of Michigan offered two courses on graphic literature in 2010. Certain professors valued the use of graphic

literature as course material. Professor Sebastian Maisel uses *Persepolis* and *Palestine* as textbooks, who considers graphic novels as valuable assets to his class, since it gives a personal visual input and helps students to learn in the new style (Llorence 32). The University of Lancaster started offering a Ph.D degree in comics studies in 2015.¹⁹ In Australia, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) provides a list of approved texts for study as part of English and English as an Additional Language. It includes texts for the category of ‘multimodal’ formerly the ‘film’ category from 2014. The move to expand the category “film” to “multimodal” and to provide teachers and students with the opportunity to study a graphic novel, is significant. The decision to include *The Complete Maus* as a text suggests the graphic narrative now stands alongside plays, poetry and novels as a sophisticated and complex text form worthy of study and close analysis. It provides students to take on the challenge of embracing both contemporary and more traditional forms of literacy.²⁰

In Bangladesh, also the genre, graphic novels are gradually finding its way into academia. It can be very helpful for students, since, it makes a reader more active, awake the visual sense and brain captures images faster than words. In today’s media dominated society reading traditional texts based on words is not enough. We need the knowledge to deal with images that eventually give birth to meaning related to the context of the text. Such images are not abstract but have multiple connotations. So it is high time to consider the popularity of it as “we cannot deny the fact that pop culture defines what is “now”” though the “older generations tend to ridicule pop culture” (Chowdury 12).

At this point of my thesis it is necessary to know the recent condition of the comics or graphic

19. "Lancaster University offers doctorate in comic books", Web.

20. "Teaching graphic novel as literature: the complete *Maus* enters the curriculum", Web

novel in the context of Bangladesh. Young people typically create the fanbase of comic novels. Comic novels or comic strips often deal with subversive matters. The flexibility of this genre offers a new way of looking at radical topics like homosexuality other than dealing with intense matters of politics. What gets prominent recently is the Bangladesh's first comic strip dealing with the so called taboo issue of homosexuality. Entitled as "Dhee" (i.e. wisdom) is a project of the largest gay rights activist group of the country (*The Daily Star*). So the stigma of being a source of entertainment only can be diminished by the project like "Dhee" that talks about the story and problem faced by a young lesbian girl. However, the academic importance of comics or graphic novels come into being by the country's first ever conference on "Embracing Graphic media: The Role of Graphic Novels and Comics in Academia" held at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh on 12th June 2015. As reported in *The Daily Star*, sixteen academics, independent scholars and professionals from the comics industry presented their papers there. So, the wave of change is approaching here. Recently, the young talent Nuhash Humayun has worked on the graphic interpretation of Shakespeare Sonnet 130 (Britishcouncil.org). This is how the first page of his work looks like (figure 12). It brings a new direction to the sonnet and it will undoubtedly make the reading of sonnet much more interesting.



Figure 12

We can see this particular work of Nuhash Humayun as a mean of recreating the classic. It gives a new arena to look at and read the classics differently. Moreover, such work can bridge the past with the present. The old/past and the new/present interpenetrates and this interconnection results into something new. This new creation is the simultaneous existence of the values of the past and the present. The survival of past endorses the presentness of it. It thus becomes the evidence, that the writer or poet is guided or influenced chiefly by the dynamics of the classic or the tradition in the process of (re)creating something new. This idea relates to T.S Eliot's theory of the pastness of the present: "The difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past" and thereby, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must see him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."²¹

Another interesting work based on the concept of the graphic novel has recently published (23 July 2016) in the most popular social networking site Facebook by Mashroof Hossain. It is entitled as *Reema's War: A Graphic Novel Based on 1971 Liberation War*. The images of this novel are collected not personally drawn thus it has the essence of being a graphic novel that gives a new way of presenting our very own history. Opens with Bangabondhu's historic speech on 7th March (figure 13) the story follows the declaration of University girl's urge to fight against the Pakistani oppressors. Women in liberation war have most of the time presented as "Birangona" but here the brave sacrifice of a Reema is shown (figure 14). To destroy a Pakistani military tank there was only a way of suicidal attack. Therefore, she has used a land mine. This "supreme sacrifice uplifted the morale of freedom fighters sky high and Pak army...never thought

21. T.S Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent"

a Bengali woman could destroy their tank” (Hossain 16). Eventually, it ends up with the birth of a new country.



Figure 13



Figure 14

Now it can be asked, why should we include comics or graphic novels in our curricula of studying English literature? According to Wright and Sherman, there are at least three reasons to use comics or graphic novels as a teaching tool “(1) there is a great deal of student interest in this genre; (2) they are inexpensive to obtain; (3) the vocabulary is not difficult so they are easy to read” (as cited in Williams 13). Apart from these reasons, the images of comics or graphic novels are potential to create an effective understanding. It can be attracted by the reluctant readers or students with limited capacity. Furthermore, plot and characters become spontaneous and much vivid. Embracing graphic novel in the academia of Bangladesh can be an excellent choice to comprehend literary terms like symbols or metaphor. Since, artists communicate directly to the readers with powerful images. Moreover, being the well crafted writing piece and attractive artwork, graphic novels have the latent quality to evoke the sense of connectedness and empathy among students. *Maus* and *Persepolis* for example, endorse the readers to feel the empathy with the characters and witness the characters’ agonizing endurance, their wrestling with a haunted

past, history and personal events. They can "portray torture and massacre in a complex formal mode that does not turn away from or mitigate trauma; in fact, [it] demonstrate [s] how its visual retracing is enabling, ethical, and productive" (Chute 459). These kinds of graphic novels allow readers to step into another's eyes and thus able to comprehend the critical circumstance of the characters from the characters' perspectives. David Swanger states, "one of the feeling that art engenders is empathy; successful art creates a connection between the percipient's sensibility, the sensibility of the artist and if the art is representational, the figures within it" (cited by Williams 18). Plus, graphic novels offer the opportunities to deconstruct the texts on several layers. Since, here the image, panel and gutter are also the form of text along with the words. Thus, comics and graphic novels can be an innovative way to combine visual cultural with the tradition of reading verbal texts for studying English literature. Elizabeth Bridges contends that these texts also make sound choices when viewed in light of established pedagogy. She cites Schwarz, who states "graphic novels offer value, variety, and a new medium for literacy that acknowledges the impact of visuals. These novels... are useful across the curriculum and offer diverse alternatives to traditional texts" (Bridges 262).

A survey has done to know the responses of the M.A students of the English and Humanities of Brac University who have taken the course ENG:617 Literature and Popular Culture since this course has offered *Maus* as a primary course material. Only 20% have read graphic novel in any courses before this. But interestingly, everyone of them thinks that this type of novel can be the part of academia. The reasons for such positivity as said by the students are the new approach of literary learning, serious issues (i.e. class division, oppression, war) of the graphic novel, the theme and symbols are as same as regular novels, easy to grasp, the visual involvement says more with less words. However, all of them have found the reading of *Maus* easy and helpful to

understand mainly because of its style and images that breaks the monotony of reading text only. Additionally, as a picture is worth a thousand words, the image makes them much engaging to grasp the subtly presented emotions of the characters along with occasional foreshadowing of events. As this course did not have many students, so there is also no way of generalisation. This survey might not be the same if too many students have taken part in it. Therefore, there is a huge possibility in Bangladesh to include graphic novels in the academia.

Here, another question can be raised: can we include the superhero series of comics or graphic novel for the academic venture? Superhero comics are most popular and common form of American comics. It features stories about superheroes i.e. people with extraordinary power. Though popular this form of the comic or graphic novel is little studied. Because it is better to choose the kind of graphic novel that meets academic approval. Alex S. Romagnoli et al. listed several graphic novels that represent a canon of the graphic novel. These are:

- *The Complete Maus* (2003) by Art Spiegelman
- *Persepolis* (2007) by Marjane Satrapi
- *Palestine* (2002) by Joe Sacco
- *Pride of Bagdad* (2008) by Brian K. Vaughn & Niko Henrichon
- *A Contract with God* (1978) by Will Eisner
- *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on the Earth* (2000) by Chris Ware
- *Watchman* (1986) by Alan Moore and David Gibbons

This list does not include superhero comics but *Watchman* that focuses on superheroes. Although *Watchman* is a one of the best superhero graphic novels ever written, it sets out to deconstruct the notion of superheroes. The author wants us to show adversity of the world if superheroes

existed (Romagnoli 20). According to Coogan, the genre of superheroes is “perceived as a subgenre instead of its own genre with all the inherent dynamics thereof.... Typically it is either taken for granted or dismissed as a genre or marked as a subset of other genres- science fiction primarily” (cited by Romagnoli 22). Superhero literature is considered as “lowest tiers of artistic and literary recognition” (Romagnoli 22). So the art quality and themes matter if anyone wants to include superhero comics or graphic novel in academia. The superhero comics have yet to prove their worth for being selected as academic texts. Resisting such criticism, if any superhero comic meets the criteria of a traditional literary text, it can be included in the canon.

Therefore, graphic novel can be a possible medium for studying English literature in a new way in Bangladesh. It can serve the purpose of creating subversion of meanings. It can give opportunities to talk about society’s radical issues, to recreate the past in a new way and most importantly to create an engaged readership.

Conclusion

This thesis contributes to the understanding of graphic novels, by interrogating the stylistic features and the political aspects of Art Speigleman's *The Complete Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis I & II*. The opening chapter has examined the narrative technique of both of these novels. My argument has shown how graphic novel's inclined affinity with postmodern literature resulted in homologous narrative techniques to some extent as both genre established in the postwar era. This homogeneity has sought the postmodern technique of 'historiographic metafiction' in *Maus* and *Persepolis* that was one of the cruxes of chapter one. That eventually, graphic novels become a potential postmodern product, which have been largely accepted as children's book. It has discussed few other postmodern narrative techniques, one being non-linearity or temporal distortion which is more prominent in *Maus* than *Persepolis*. Discussion on stylistic features like pastiche, humour, and allusion has been a part of this chapter too. These techniques contributed much in shaping the narration of *Persepolis I & II*. Thus, how the history of the Holocaust: received memory of Valdek has assisted to write *Maus* and the Islamic Revolution of Iran: witnessed by a teenager Satrapi and later found words from mature Satrapi, has examined there. Taking into the account, the part of Linda Hutcheson's theoretical work *The Politics of Postmodernism*, this thesis has enquired the meticulousness of historical events as well. Since both were retentive works and the authors revisited the past through haunting memory.

The second chapter of this thesis focused on the images of these two autobiographical graphic novels. Images that ultimately presented the serious issue like political aspects to the readers. Both novels deal with political perspectives, but the way of dealing with it is not the same. Though retentive work, Speigleman was entirely depended on his father's memory, what gets

told and what he heard became important to talk about Nazism. Whereas, Satrapi relied on her own memory in creating almost all of the parts of *Persepolis*. After discussing the Nazism of the World War II and the Islamic Revolution of 1979, attention has shifted to the images, the drawings of atrocious violence of the Holocaust done to the Jews in *Maus*. Such images with animal allegory assist reader to continue turning the pages of *Maus* to read and see sheer violence. Moreover, the identity formation and the rupture of the subjective self of Marje, the protagonist of *Persepolis*, is scrutinised that was the outcome of the disordered political and social movement. The purpose was to show how the protagonist's progress to an unavoidable exile in Austria complicates her identity in *Persepolis*. Remaining in a limbo situation, the protagonist could not help to liberate herself properly from her traditionally social and religious bindings, even though she belonged to a modern family. My argument has also shown identity crisis of Satrapi, thus, this chapter by using a particular image from *Persepolis I*, slightly talked about 'in-betweenness' or 'liminality' as opined by Homi Bhabha. However, how the rendition of the images or symbols that come up with images and the fluidity of meaning foreshadowed events and situations in certain characters' lives are also analysed here with the support of Stuart Hall's critical essay "Encoding Decoding".

The last chapter of this thesis has looked at from the possibility of including graphic novels in the literary canon. The important thing is, the way someone looks at graphic novels. Graphic novels are part of academic discipline in many western systems. The key argument for the graphic novel is, it is easily accessible, nimble to understand. However, some also argue that graphic novel simplify the significance of the matter. I have introduced the depth, seriousness and richness of the graphic novel through the first two chapters, therefore, this thesis, particularly, has looked at the possibility of the inclusion of graphic novel in the curricula of

studying English literature in Bangladesh. I have thought of this possibility based on my research and the short survey findings was also for its favourable inclusion. Besides, it has talked about the recent condition of graphic novel in the context of Bangladesh along with the gradual interest of young people in it and how they are working on it. This part has also sought to answer the question why should we include graphic novel in the academia or how it can be helpful for the students.

However, this can be the inclusion of pure graphic text or be the renovation of some classical texts with graphic, where the subject matter is not easy to deal with. Such inclusion can give the possibility of reforming the literary texts. For example, books related to our 1971's Liberation War. Speaking the unspeakable, the issues of war violence, genocide and rape have always been within the limit of representation. The graphic medium can seize this representational limit to some extent since images talk more than words. Like *Maus*, our own holocaust can be presented in this way of remembering the past through allegorical art. It allows us to look at the gruesome and harrowing history in a fresh way. There are two kinds of memory "common memory" and "deep memory" of the Holocaust that I have mentioned in the first chapter. Personal narratives of our Liberation War that deal with such common or deep memory can be implemented using the graphic medium since its elements help to form a visual entity. Spiegelman contends "storytelling possibilities of the comic strip's unique formal elements: the narrative as well as design significance of a panel's size and shape, and how these individual panels combined to form a coherent visual whole" (cited by Young 672). And if the visual art comes up with the tacit of masking, it will convey the need to show such unbearable events without even showing them. Therefore, graphic work can be a possible way to speak about the unspeakable, to reveal the horror like genocide and to offer a distinctive way of writing history.

Therefore, in conclusion, it can be contended that the graphic novel as an evolved form of comic, has the potential to be like other literary texts used in the academia. Since, the stylistic facets are appreciable which I have examined throughout the first chapter. How narrative techniques like temporal distortion, pastiche, allusion contributed in the making of these two graphic novels and how far term like “historigraphic metafiction” can be related to writing of the history of the Holocaust and Islamic Revolution are looked at. Then, the grave theme like political aspect along with the grimness of the Holocaust and the tumult of the Islamic Revolution has seen by analysing several images of these graphic novels. The issue of identity crisis has also been discussed considering *Persepolis* to show the variety of subject matter. Lastly, I have talked about the academic inclusion of graphic novels for studying English literature. The possibility and richness that graphic novel offers in terms of its narrative style and political affairs affirm the value of it as an academic text. Thereby, it is not only for juvenile taste to be entertained rather it can make readers thoughtful. The personal accounts of the life that are presented in different ways yet somewhat similar in *Maus* and *Persepolis* are truly engaging. They have profoundness and the desirable aesthetic qualities. Having excellent illustrations to convey various perspectives of history, war, religious segment and exile, these visual historical personal accounts can be read as regular literary text in the advance level of studying literature in Bangladesh like other countries where graphic novels have become the part of their curriculum in recent years.

(14,535 words)

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