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Alissa Torres's *American Widow*: Teaching Experientiality in and through the Graphic
Narrative

Abstract

Graphic Narratives embed literariness in a hybridised form. Along-with challenging the logocentric nature of literary narratives they disrupt the logocentric pedagogies by blending the visual with the verbal. This disruption however is quite crucial in grasping the narratives produced by new communities. The upsurge in graphic narratives and memoirs in recent decades underscores the choice and need of alternative or subversive forms of narratives by artists coming from non-literary backgrounds and locations and telling the stories through the forms purely shaped by experiences. Modern classrooms of literature, which also experiment with modern media, online open sources, are quite open to the texts that are hybridised and blended. In this paper I use Scott McCloud's methods of closure, vocabulary of comics, narrative time, grammar of the lines to analyse Alissa Torres's graphic memoir *American Widow* to establish that the experiential narratives are understood and taught better in graphic forms. (148 words)

Keywords: Graphic narrative, logocentric pedagogies, non-literary locations, method of closure, experiential narrative.

Hybridity and the teaching of literature:

The understanding that literature is more than mere communication of message or it is a specialised use of language, figurative, metaphorical or otherwise does not generally go against its logocentric nature. However, the literariness anticipated from a literary work is not dependent only on the logocentric arrangement and could be produced in any form of a text that does not essentially depend on the language. We usually suppose that the production, reception and the meaning-making of literature all exist on one plane—language. This proves to be an erroneous assumption given that the emergence of non-logocentric texts such as graphic or multimedia texts and the textual varieties in digital humanities. Literatures produced on these sites are not only non-logocentric but enabling in terms of images, graphics, and sounds. This is different from the presence of multimedia texts as an aid to the alphabetised writing. The hybridised texts—with the images, sketches, words, balloons, diagrams, graphs—are produced to compensate for the stereotypical linearity of language, inadequacy of language as an effective narrative, as well as resistance to the normalisation through the language, the bland and flat nature of it, resistance to the linguistic appropriation of non-lingual expression, resistance to the linguistic binarisation, and so on.

This resistance is peculiar in the case of new communities emerging from the new locations and positions who would not like to be homogenised through the language. The case of Alissa Torres's memoir *American Widow* is an example of such expression that resists the dominant political narrative prevailed after the incident of 9/11 in America. Telling her story in a verbal format would be quite similar to any number of accounts that were narrated, written, published and discussed after 9/11. However the subjective dimensions of these experiences and the differences with not only the dominant state narrative but with the other subjective narratives need to be underlined with the specific choice of form. While teaching

American Widow, one needs to explain the graphic mode not only a visual co-text to her excruciating and traumatic experiences frequently invaded by the vivid memories but also a mode of narrative using the technicalities of language of lines, panels, balloons, colours, and the acts of closure.

The graphic text:

The comic art, which later on goes to become the foundation of graphic narratives, is initially defined by Scott McCloud as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence”(9). He also traces back the glimpses and the presence of the graphic art narrating about the human and the social life in Egypt and Mexico more than two thousand centuries ago. At that time they served the purpose of encoding the information about social life or community entertainment or the instinct of preservation of their presence for the future generation in the absence of any other forms. The way the form was used in nineteenth and twentieth century it served more than the recollection of past, storage of information and entertainment. Especially with the rise of Underground Comix during late sixties and early seventies the graphic narratives were used as subversive or alternative medium for the dystopian imagination. To specifically mention Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* in 1991 and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* in 2000, which memorialise their respective spaces where their parents had troublesome pasts. In both the cases the text is graphically narrated to serve not only to remember their pasts but also to bear us and themselves witness to those horrors which were normalised over the years in verbal narratives. Retextualising those experiences in graphic forms sensitise us towards the subtleties of horror and trauma and critically intensify our empathetic responses to the human tragedies. What is made invisible and disabled by the written texts is visualised and enabled by the graphic narratives, by creating an experiential topography.

It is not advisable to just stress the graphic aspect of the text opposite to that of a written text, though a comparison of this kind, in a limited way, illustrates the contours of graphic texts. While the written texts make the perceptual act unidimensional, graphic texts enables meaning in a spatial, temporal, visual way. The perspective and the location of the reader and the temporality and the development in the narration are carefully embedded in the graphic texts and their interrelatedness and dependence is crucial in making and understanding the meaning.

New communities, new experiences and new languages:

The emergence of narratives from the new locations with the new communities after the experience of globalisation in 90s and afterwards suggests that the new social actors jostled for voices and forms to express themselves. This enabling endeavour was a silver line in the otherwise gloomy and dark atmosphere prevailed due to the massive displacement and dislocation. Conventionally passive social actors, the marginalised population affected by these developments, began talking from their personal experiences and this gave experiential dimension to the state, media or market-sponsored phenomena worldwide. Massive incidents like civil wars, terror attacks, genocides, violence against sexual minorities and the fall out of environmental disasters in the first two decades of this century reported to us through 24x7 media were mostly the official versions interpreting incidents in their binary meanings. The narratives of the affected, often in the forms of testimonies, memories, remembrances, anecdotes, memoirs, gave experiential turn to the events while narrating the horror, personal tragedies, and the micro-impacts as well as served as narratives of endurance, resilience and healing. However, these experiences were so complex and subtle that usual media of language or television/newspaper was insufficient and distant for their articulation. Graphicking the layered self, the disconnected memories from the past, and the ungraspable

suffering was one of the ways in which the sufferers could understand themselves, reconstruct their own stories and reflect on the suffering which they could not understand or grasp at the time of crisis. It was also to give coherence, order and meaning to their own lives in the post-trauma times. Often these narratives contest the dry and gullible factuality of the immediate flood of media accounts that were thrown at us in a rapid pace. Our meanings about these incidents are based on the hasty conclusions.

Subjective account of Alissa Torres about 9/11 and her life aftermath gives us an occasion to explore the possibility of experiential perspective to this horrifying incident. While the state account mostly centred around the ghastly visuals of terrorists-driven planes crashing the twin towers and the succeeding narrative of retaliation and justice for the people killed in the attack, Torres' narration in the *American Widow* extends the horror and trauma further in her daily life— dealing with the immediate absence of her husband, the dreams about their life together, reconstructing Eddie's last moments, search for his body for the funeral, getting permissions for his relatives to attend the funeral, reluctance of the state machinery to help and the clichéd response by the employment and insurance agencies and conspicuous absence of social fabric that could absorb the shock and could help her heal.

In a flood and flurry of multimedia driven narratives a mere written text would rather go unnoticed. She needed a medium which could compete with these mediatized homogenising visualisations and find space for her personal narrative. The graphicking vivifies her experiences in communicating her actual state—mental and physical—she was in. She was seven months pregnant when the tragedy of 9/11 happened. The zestful anticipation of life of the three together immediately confronted with the absence of both— her husband and the not-yet-born-child. It was also essential to resituate herself as a pregnant woman struggling alongwith others, to locate his body in various hospitals.

Subjectivity, interiority, reflexivity and the mode of graphic:

Immediately after the terror attack, the scene in *American Widow* shifts on to Alissa. Her mind is flooded on one hand with the anxieties to know about what happened to Eddie, her husband, while on the other with the memories of both of them. This simultaneity of her anxiety with the memories about him has to be actually graphed during her searches from offices to offices. Her unwillingness to accept the news of Eddie's forces herself to think about him more and more, so her memories about the exuberant moments they spent together pour in chapter 2 "August 1998". (Torres 11-21). Their curiosity about each other, mutual attraction, his proposing to her, marriage and the conception of their baby almost roll down in her eyes before anything else. As a young couple immersed in each other almost forget the absence of the world, especially the twin tower in the background (15), which becomes the reason to break these dreamy memories. While in the beginning Eddie appears hanging around her (58, 61,70) at the time she is searching for his body, later her memories about his physical contiguity begin to fade away with the burden of memories. She says, "Where are you. I can't remember." (172).

The absence of Eddie is interiorised in her loneliness while she is in bed on many occasions (43, 44, 87, 109). The intensity of her loneliness fluctuates further as she comes to know about him in bits and pieces. The loneliness is partially filled by the birth of her baby but constantly reminds her the unfulfilment of Eddie's dream of vacationing by the three of them together (32-33). This interiority is more conspicuous in graphic form than it would have been in verbal narration.

While the political and the military world in America moved on after 9/11 with the course that was chosen by the state, lives deeply affected by this incident continued with their individual and collective experiences, memories, and fears and anxieties even after the decade. This made the interiorised grief reflexive over the period of time, though it began to

be less intensive and incoherent. This reflexivity also contributed in healing the trauma and find meaning and order to the life aftermath of their tragedies.

Graphic modes and the experientiality:

Scott McCloud explains the language of lines, panels, gutters among other techniques to decode the graphic narrative. The full page panels with clouded borders suggest the dreamy feelings or dreams of Alissa (32). Successive, stable and rectangular panels at the beginning of her narration indicate the stable life of the two in New York. The gutters between the full pages 3 and 4 indicate the clear sky over New York and then in the fraction of a second two birds appear without hinting at the deadly consequences of those birdlike creatures and immediately on the 5th page one could see news of the twin tower attack flashed throughout the world. The gutters, which show the time transition so quick and stupendous, that anybody could respond to it. McCloud mentions about the “closure,” the meaning making activity about what happens between and outside the panels. The meaning of many anxious moments in Alissa’s life lies outside the mostly regular panels. Those are the moments when she broods, anxious, tired, lost. The interiority thus constantly peeps in to make the reader brood about the state of her mind. Eisner’s suggestion that the comic in itself acts as a form of reading to understand the embedded meaning works well in case of tracing the interiority of Alissa after the tragedy (Eisner 7).

For the last hundred years, the subject of reading has been connected quite directly to the concept of literacy; learning to read ... has meant to learn to read words.... But reading has gradually come under closer scrutiny. Recent research has shown that the reading of words is but a subset of much more general human activity which includes symbol decoding, information integration and organisation.... Indeed, reading— in the most general sense— can be thought of as a form of

perceptual activity. The reading of words is one manifestation of this activity; but there are many others—the reading of pictures, maps, circuit diagrams, musical notes...” (Eisner 8)

Conclusion:

Conceived this way, reading of the graphic texts foster a new kind of literacy, which enables not only to read images, pictures, shapes but to fathom the minds and the experiential dimensions of those minds through the reflections on their graphic representations. In order to understand the experiences of people from non-literary backgrounds and locations it is essential to find a language which is not essentially logocentric.

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