

# LIBERAL STUDIES

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## *Book Reviews*

**Tahneer Oksman, *How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?: Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs*, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2016), ISBN: 9780231540780, Pages: 296, Price: \$ 25.54.**

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Art has long been understood as one that grows outside of the two most basic human instincts: survival and reproduction. However, the story of all art is the story of human experience. And art that represents human experience with nuance is considered praiseworthy. Sequential art uses a combination of Genre, Medium and Form. Over the last few years, sequential art has gained momentum as serious intellectual inquiry mostly because the medium of visual communication has improved by leaps and bounds. Today's generation transmits and decodes meanings visually, a fact highlighted by the revolution in the telecom sector.

### **Brief History of the Graphic Novel**

Historically though, Sequential art or comics never received any critical acclaim in literature. One must remember that great artwork alone is not enough to gain critical reviews. For years, the comic has only catered to the teen/tween mind rarely if ever touching upon sensitive subject matters. Initially, the elitist establishment of the literary world reckoned that comics are just for spotty kids fascinated by superhero dreams. Some of us have guiltily re-read Tintin as adults or have continued our basal love for *Malgudi Days*. A comic strip of Calvin and Hobbes still appears in national dailies but it is neither worthy nor perceived of as “serious reading.” A comic book about holocaust starring a mice made an excruciating dent in this thinking. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was first published in 1973 as a memoir of a holocaust survivor's difficult relationship with his father.

But it is after the publishing of second part in 1991, that the allegorical trope garnered much attention. Cat on mouse violence is so old and pervasive that, in a way, we've become desensitized to it. Countless depictions of it in the arts have made it a stale, clichéd topic; almost at times. That's why it was particularly effective to tell the story allegorically. Cats (Nazis) and Mice (Jews) continue to dominate our visual and political space and this is where perhaps for the first time a book in comic form was able to symbolize something more pervasive and endemic, something that all scholarly books do. Much credit to the impact it created, *Maus* was banned in Russia for a long time. But the loopy movement of Graphic novels' inclusion into literature wasn't complete. Publishers realised it was hard to market and comic books with their glazed full colour panels are costly investments. So the promise of Graphic Novels ushered in by *Maus* was a bit of a false dawn.

It took another couple of decades for graphic novels to climb off kids shelf and join the literary heavyweights. This happened with Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a personal story of growing up in Shah's Iran in the 1970's. A few more notable entries include *Fun home* by Alison Bachdel about her secretly Gay father and *Palestine* a long form work of Comics reportage by Joe Stacco. When Spiegelman and Satrapi both got recognised by Pulitzer prizes the message was rapturously clear: Graphic novels are not just comics that don't need stapling, they are comics with a spine and require a bookmark.<sup>1</sup> According to *The New York Times Magazine*, with *Maus*, pictorial literature was born. Then graphic novels, then sequential art, then came graphic memoirs.

### **The Narcissism Beneath Comics**

Graphic novels often depict a singular figure in proximate relationship to depictions of community and thus in a comic we have a unique opportunity to view the social in a graphic novel. Human brain is ideally trained to recognise mind in faces. In other words, we do not process words and images separately or simultaneously rather we process them imbued to each other. Comic books accord meanings to words through images and hence solve the biggest problem of storytelling i.e. imagination.<sup>2</sup> Realistic depictions actually detract from our ability to take meanings from comics hence caricature always borders ridicule. But ridicule in a graphic novel is meant not to amuse but to deliver a message often in relation to a social reality for instance, the use of mice and cats by Spiegelman to show the politically misplaced identities of Jews and Nazis.

Michael Chaney has called it iconic abstraction.<sup>3</sup> This has a lot to do with how we have a tendency to see narcissistically perhaps human faces in perhaps anything, a dustbin or a car for example. The comic is therefore there to suggest

that it is in the most cartoonified face that we are able to see a reflection of the image in our minds eye of ourselves. Naturally thus, these books referred to by the oxymoron graphic novels are rarely works of fiction but are actually autobiographies.

This is a one of those examples that showcases what is most unique about comics, the way comics in a single frame can show you complexities of culture and identity often perceived and not real. While moving images and words in a story have their own force, the economy in Graphic novel is standout. Marjane is telling us that her sense of identity is a sum of two competing determinants which are cultural influences.

Symbiotically speaking, the key word is “but” in the text. While it is easy to figure out that the veil represents religiosity, it is less obvious which side is a referent of the modern? It depends on our own perspective and how we allow to train ourselves with the central message of the comic. It’s a personal story after all. But like feminists would have you believe, personal is rarely personal. The contrasting images of religion and avant-garde are somewhat coalescing in the frame. The loud message perhaps is that in the world of Graphic novels we must learn to see for ourselves since the whole truth is a complex interaction of words and images.<sup>4</sup>

### **Autobiography and the Graphic Novel**

The genre of the graphic memoir, either autobiographical or historical or biographical, has been around in one form or another throughout the history of comics itself. Some of the most noteworthy graphic novels have been entirely autobiographical.<sup>5</sup>

Gillian Whitlock has observed the “potential of comics to open up new and troubled spaces.” Alison Bechdel’s autographic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is such a text, a provocative exploration of sexuality, gendered relations in the American family, and Modernist versions of what she calls “erotic truth.” It both enacts and reflects on processes of autobiographical storytelling and exploits the differences of autographic inscription in the art of cartooning. Bechdel is a well-known American feminist cartoonist who for over two decades has published the politically savvy lesbian-feminist syndicated comic strip “Dykes to Watch Out For.”

As Leigh Gilmore explains, autobiography “draws its authority less from its resemblance to real life than from its proximity to discourses of truth and identity, less from reference or mimesis than from the cultural power of truth telling.”

A fundamental distinction for analysing autobiography usefully separates the narrating I from the narrated I. The narrating I, or the self that tells the events of a life and gathers together stray details of experience into the legible structures of a story, is therefore pried away from the narrated I that functions as an actor in the story. The confusing resemblance of these two I's results from the promise implied in all autobiographies that the life stories authors tell about are, if not verifiably true, at least emotionally truthful to the way they perceive, remember, and make sense out of their lives.<sup>6</sup>

It is no secret that the first autobiographies that were published were by elite members of English faculty in universities who were obliged to defend a genre once mocked and dismissed as being self-indulgent and marginal to the canon. Then came the revolution in photography and memoirs became hijacked by photography. But being worth in the proverbial thousand words was not enough to many. The aspiration of deriving a value only limited to literature continued and the search ended in graphic novels.

### **How Come Boys Get to Keep their Noses**

In her scholarly look at seven contemporary women cartoonists, Oksman shows how they use their art to portray the conflicts they feel about being an American Jew – a process Oksman describes as *dis-affiliation*: “For these artists, actively identifying with generally secular Jewish women in post-assimilated America begins by rejecting particular aspects and expressions of Jewish identity. It is a visual mapping practice based in rebellions and disorientations but nevertheless resulting in partial affiliations and identifications.”<sup>7</sup>

In simpler terms, Oksman shows how the cartoonists struggle with various aspects of their Jewish identities in an ever-changing world.

Rooted in a conception of identity based as much on rebellion as identification and belonging, these artists' representations of Jewishness take shape in the spaces between how we see ourselves and how others see us. They experiment with different representations and affiliations without forgetting that identity ties the self to others. The title is a reference to Kominsky Crumb's iconic novel “Nose Job.” Oksman demolishes the notion of cosmetic identity and says that when a Jewish woman chooses not to opt for a nose job she feels empowered by the very act of refusal.

However, it is neither American convention nor Jewish custom that women need to have their noses shaved in a certain manner. Oksman thus has succeeded

in bringing the cache of literary value to comics by dwelling upon the contradictory images drawn upon to understand the Jewish identity in postmodern era. In her narrative, she is particular about noting that the authors chosen by her are rarely Jewish as they are neither associated with the religiosity of Judaism nor have they faced the pangs of being an early immigrant. Oksman's book is a chronicle of attempts to fit into a religious life and changing identities in a world that does not accept contradictions. *How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses* is not light, easy reading. Oksman challenges readers to transform their understanding of the comic format – to see the serious exploration that underlies the cartoonists' work.

## Conclusion

Having come a long way from the days of “kapow!” “Boom!” and “Thwack” graphic novels now are trespassing diverse themes of sexuality culture and history thanks to some very celebrated works some of which I have tried to touch upon. Will Eisner who coined the word graphic novel and is regarded as the father of the genre called it sequential art and opined that they are not a genre of literature but a form or medium. However autobiographical writers are less dismayed by the controversy over the use of the term “graphic novel” as it has allowed them a natural space wherein the cache of literature can be explored and claimed and at the same time the use of “pictorial literature” lends to it the accuracy not available in a worded autobiography.

## Notes

1. Talbot Mary and Talbot Bryan, “Bryan and Mary Talbot's top ten Graphic Novels”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/23/graphic-novel-spectacular-rise-costa-prize>, accessed on 11 November 2016.
2. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
3. Michael A. Chaney, ed., *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography, 2011.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Becky Barnicoat, “The graphic novel's spectacular rise: from kids' comics to the Costa prize”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/18/bryan-mary-talbot-10-graphic-memoirs>, accessed on 10 November 2016.
6. Julia Watson, “Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's Fun Home” in Chaney, 2011, n. 3, pp. 123–157.
7. Tahneer Oksman, *How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?: Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs* (Gender and Culture Series), Columbia University Press, 2016.

