

Intra-Ethnic Conflict and Ritual Morphing: A Psychoanalytic Study of Othering in Post-Holocaust Jewish Identity in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

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Abstract

This article investigates Art Spiegelman's Maus from a psychoanalytical perspective by drawing on the concepts of Thomas Ogden's 'analytic third' and Jessica Benjamin's 'intersubjectivity' to expose the trauma-driven intra-ethnic conflicts that lead to psychological othering within Jewish Holocaust survivors. The study also explores the idea of ritual morphing as practised in Spiegelman's narrative, highlighting the unconscious alterations and psychological mechanisms embedded in the behavioural patterns of Holocaust survivors and their descendants.

Drawing on Benjamin's concept of intersubjectivity, the article analyses the relationship dynamics between Art Spiegelman and his father, Vladek, which disrupts their father - son relationship through shared traumatic experiences. This disruption enables the recognition of their psychological and cultural differences and induces ethnic conflict between them as a Polish Jew and an American Jew. Vladek's PTSD and Spiegelman's inherited trauma (intergenerational PTSD) create a doer-done-to dynamic that ruptures their familial bond, intensifying underlying shame, guilt, and depression. The article further engages with Benjamin's theory of mutual recognition to examine Vladek's hypervigilance, which reflects the traumatic dominance that shatters the capacity for mutual recognition, leading to a reproduction of Holocaust trauma within the Jewish community across generations.

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Introduction

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* serves as an epitome in the genre of graphic memoirs retelling the holocaust events from a survivor's perspective adhering to the trauma generated during the period within Jewish community. Instead of a sentimentalising narrative, Spiegelman employs comic narratology to expose the groundbreaking reality of survivors and their descendants. Spiegelman exercises the application of anthropomorphic images for an effective representation of characterisation. His novel usage of animal metaphors such as cats, dogs, pigs, and mice enables the readers to interpret different identities of varied communities. Michael Rothberg views this visual representation as "another commodity in the American culture industry" (Rothberg 60). Spiegelman's *Maus* is not merely a survivor's tale, but it is a tale of the survivor's survivor referring to the transgenerational survivors and their association with the Holocaust. Joan Gordon observes *Maus* as the embodiment of interpretations that played a vital role in the shaping Holocaust narratives violating the laws of narratology (3).

Psychological Othering among Holocaust Survivors

This article speculates *Maus* in the light of psychological othering centring on how traumatic Holocaust survivors enable othering within their own Jewish communities. Weis states othering as the method that helps to indicate oneself different from others which attracts alienation (Weis 17). Besides, othering is often the defence of one's identity by distancing and denouncing the other which is visible in *Maus* through the expression of Vladek where he voluntarily distances himself from others to secure his Jewish identity (Grove and Zwi 1931-42). This article examines that trauma initiates psychological othering within Jewish holocaust survivors which is evident through the strained familial bonds in *Maus*.

This article highlights on the Post Holocaust trauma forming the base for intra ethnic othering creating a rift within Jewish community, focusing on the shattered relationships of Vladek and others in the memoir. In addition, the article highlights the trauma driven disorders such as PTSD, OCD, and hypervigilance of Vladek to exhibit the alterations in the daily rituals of the Jewish identity. It emphasises that trauma distorts the authentic religious practices replacing them with the survival strategies among the survivors.

Jessica Benjamin's Intersubjectivity and the Doer-Done-To Dynamic

The study integrates the concepts of Jessica Benjamin's intersubjectivity focusing on the disputes between Vladek and his family which upsets the familial relationships due to the collective traumatic experiences. In addition, the article incorporates Thomas Ogden's psychoanalytic concept of the 'analytic third', which refers to the unconscious intersubjective space generated between the analyst and

the patient to facilitate a deeper understanding of the self and the other. This concept is applied to the interaction between Art Spiegelman as the analyst and his father, Vladek, as the patient, wherein their shared traumatic experiences initiate the process of mutual identification and recognition.

Jessica Benjamin's theorizes intersubjectivity as the contradiction of recognition is that it continues as a constant tension between recognition of the other and self-assertion, she states that the problem of recognition arises when the intrapsychic conflict urges to think the subject as an 'object' (Benjamin 39). The article speculates that trauma distorts the mutual recognition of the 'other' as subject through the analysis of Vladek and his familial relationships in *Maus* adhering to Benjamin's idea of intersubjectivity. The deformation of mutual recognition generates a doer-done -to space leading to the othering of another subject. Vladek, Art's father as well as the holocaust survivor in *Maus* is examined as the subject who fails to recognize his son as the subject due to his past traumatic experiences. Correspondingly, Art fails to acknowledge his father's trauma driven behaviour and distances himself from his responsibilities as a son. During their interaction, Vladek often complains his second wife Mala, who is also a Holocaust survivor, but Art neglects it, "You always tell me the same things. There's nothing I can do" (Spiegelman 67).

Trauma, PTSD, and the Breakdown of Mutual Recognition

Vladek expresses the signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD) such as hypervigilance, hoarding, frugality, Paranoia and OCD which serve as contributing factors for the doer-done-to complexity. During the days of holocaust, Vladek was unable to recognize other Jews as friends because of the worsened situations in camps and everyone was ready to betray even their own family for survival, "If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week . . . then you could see what is, friends" (Spiegelman 5). Besides, Vladek recognizes his family as a reflection of his traumatic past which is identified as the carrier of unwanted self-parts such as weakness or vulnerability (Benjamin 118). This mental attitude continues post holocaust displaying cynicism towards his own family and finds solace in fixing and cleaning chores and it is obvious when Art says, "He loved showing off how handy he was . . . and proving that anything I did was all wrong." (Spiegelman 96).

Benjamin incorporates Klein's notion of 'other' as the recipient of the communication by the subject and then both subjects become partners in a process that adopts differences and recognition (Klein 306). Vladek and Art are investigated as the subject and recipient where they share differences as well as recognition. But the recognition ends up in a doer-done to relation which lacks the space of thirdness (Benjamin 123). Unlike Ogden's analytic third, Benjamin's mutual recognition paves way for a complicated relationship where one initiates (the doer) and the other is impacted (done to). In *Maus*, Vladek is observed as the doer where his trauma instigated actions are experienced by Art (done to). But Benjamin believes that the third space shall happen when the self and the other reconstruct recognition by

admitting historical accountability for injury, failure, loss, sufferings and scars of destructiveness which is intense in *Maus II* through the realisation of Art (121).

Alike Art, the article assesses Vladek's wife, Mala who is also a survivor of holocaust as a recipient (done-to) of Vladek's trauma driven actions. Benjamin states that the co-creation and intersubjectivity that involves two subjects is fragile which is vulnerable to breakdown in which the pattern of doer-done to dominates (119). The relationship between Vladek and Mala is examined in this light of fragility to which is operated by the traumatic past of Vladek. Though both are survivors of Holocaust, it is Vladek who takes up the role of doer and affects Mala with his actions (done-to). Also, intra ethnic conflict is visible in their relationship as Vladek's trauma obsessed impulses persuade him to view Mala as the 'other'.

Intra-Ethnic Conflict and Survival Strategies during the Holocaust

Intra-ethnic conflict occurs with the pressure to compete for inadequate social, political, and economic resources, intra-group divisions can become hardened and divided (Warren 484), and this is witnessed in *Maus* through the traumatic recollection of Vladek's Holocaustic narrative. Vladek's wariness is the outcome of his distressing experience with other Jewish survivors who were unveiling vicious qualities as survival strategies. Warren and Troy perceive this survival strategy as the one of the root causes for intra ethnic conflict that occurs when a group contends with the sub-groups who are good in securing their place and capture a huge portion of the group's resources. (Warren 484). Vladek who excelled in his survival strategy naturally earns the hatred of other survivors that creates a suspicion over other survivors. His cynicism peaks when he even doubts the corpse of Jewish telling, "And maybe one of them could talked of me to the Germans to try to save himself" (Spiegelman 84).

Eventually, this cynicism is continual with Vladek post holocaust which is apparent through his PTSD such as hypervigilance, hoarding, frugality and OCD. In other words, he is hypervigilant with Mala in monetary handlings and expresses his financial reluctance, "With Mala, it's not to get along. Only it's the money" and finds faults with her frequently in her actions (Speigelaman 135). The imposition of Vladek's post-traumatic behaviour on Mala is a significant indication of psychological othering where the 'other' (Mala) is distanced and dehumanised by the 'self'(Vladek) which is not necessarily the affirmation of self-superiority and other-inferiority (Brons 72). Thus, it is understood that Vladek's perception on Mala as the other is an outcome of the intra-ethnic conflict by the trauma driven recognition.

Thomas Ogden's Analytic Third and Intersubjective Space

Parallel to Jessica Benjamin's theory, Thomas Ogden views intersubjectivity as the coexistence of dynamic tension between the analyst and patient as separate individuals with their own thoughts. This idea of Ogden aids in highlighting that trauma led thoughts, feelings and psychological identity forms the base of

intersubjective interaction between Art and his father, Vladek in constructing a third space as represented in *Maus*. Throughout the narrative, it is palpable that Vladek, the patient and Art, the analyst share a third space expressing their traumatic experiences during their conversation about the Holocaust which is the outcome of their interaction generated between the separate subjectivities of analyst and analysand within the analytic space. (Ogden 3).

Intergenerational Trauma and the Role of the Analysand

Art is not a direct survivor he encounters thoughts of Holocaust and his dead brother Richieu in his dreams which is a sign of his repressed transgenerational trauma finding way through his dreams, “I did have nightmares about S.S. Men coming into my class and dragging all us Jewish kids away” (Spiegelman 14). In *Maus I*, Art takes the role of analyst in creating the analytic third whereas in *Maus II*, he places himself as the analysand to expose his inherited trauma of Holocaust. Often, he expresses his guilt of being a survivor’s son as he recognizes his father’s trauma post holocaust, “wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through! I guess it’s some kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did” (Spiegelman 16). Art’s state of guilt can be identified with Ogden’s where he states that the recipient does not merely identifies with the ‘other’ but he becomes the other and experiences through the subject of a newly created analytic third. In *Maus II*, Art becomes the recipient to be a part of the shared space of trauma.

Ogden from his clinical observations reveal that the third space is not merely a space of dream, but it is the account of unarticulated experience of the analysand in the analytic third (Ogden 184). Thus, it is apparent that Art avails the third space to vent his unprocessed inherited traumatic experience of Holocaust. Art’s reference to his comics, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* adds up to the analytic third where he discloses his traumatic relationship with his dead mother, Anja, “I felt nauseous. the guilt was overwhelming” (Spiegelman 1972). He deliberately self-referred to unmask his sufferings of intergenerational trauma that lead to the rift in the relationship with his mother. Art exposes himself as an analysand in his interaction with a Czech Jewish doctor, Pavel who is also a Holocaust survivor. Further, Art images himself as young boy in during his conversation with Pavel where he figuratively expresses that he is traumatized since his childhood. The feel of guilt identified with Art is a revelation of projective identification that creates unconscious narratives that fantasizes of relinquishing a part of oneself into another (Ogden 187) In *Maus*, Art surrenders his ‘self’ to the narratives of his father, Vladek that puts him in the state of depression and stops him from enjoying his success as a writer.

Ritual Morphing and Trauma-Driven Behaviour

Subsequently, Ogden’s analytic third or third space paves way for both Vladek and Art to exhibit their unarticulated trauma through their actions which is otherwise referred to as ‘ritual morphing’ in this study. The study observes ritual

morphing as the unconscious transformation of rituals among the Jewish survivors of Holocaust where their religious or habitual practices are morphed with post-traumatic behaviours. The article analyses Vladek's PTSD such as hypervigilance, hoarding, frugality and OCD which are observed as a version of survival strategies during Holocaust have transformed as his daily rituals post holocaust. Rituals are perceived as components of broken forms of action, which are shaped and repeated in established or constrained ways (Boyer & Liénard 635). Vladek's religious rituals are replaced with survival adaptations after Holocaust. The lack of resources during Holocaust enables Vladek to accumulate things for their survival which later transforms into hoarding and induces him to be attached to things, "He's more attached to things than people" (Spiegelman 93). Hobson acknowledges rituals are for managing anxiety which people avail to improve performance that are like habits and routines. (Hobson et al. 260). The article exposes Vladek's rituals as his defence mechanism to PTSD.

Graphic Narratives as Therapeutic Ritual

Apart from frugality and hoarding, his hypervigilant behaviour is traced in his familial relationship especially when he constantly monitors Mala assuming that she may deceive him. Art's expression of graphic narratives is another significant form of ritual morphing where he finds solace in venting his transgenerational trauma through his comics. Gavin Brown theorizes ritual as performance or a repeatable action which is a cultural outcome (3). Art's performance is observed as his expression of graphic narratives through which he feels therapeutic. He avails the usage of animal metaphors such as dogs, cats, mice and pigs to heal his unspoken trauma. His visual images of animals unveil his prejudice against each community. Art's presentation of Poles as pigs depicts their unreliability whereas Germans as cats and Jewish as mice portray the enmity between them. Americans as dogs illustrate them as trustworthy and reliable. This anthropomorphic depiction satisfies his psychological othering where he discriminates each community. Art's trauma on the aftermath of his mother's death is compensated with his expression of graphic narratives with his self-reference to his *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*.

Conclusion: Trauma, Recognition, and Intra-Ethnic Division

Maus incorporates Benjamin's intersubjectivity of mutual recognition steering to the concept of doer-done-to complexity as well as Thomas Ogden's 'analytic third' to shed light on intra-ethnic conflict and ritual morphing of Holocaust survivors. On one hand, Ogden's analytic third creates an empathetic space of sharing traumatic experiences. On the other hand, Benjamin's intersubjectivity initiates a trauma induced recognition of the other. Ogden's analytic third centres on Art who plays the role of both analyst and analysand in the narrative whereas Benjamin's concept focuses on Vladek, the direct holocaust survivor.

In the series of *Maus*, *Maus I* embraces the proposal of Benjamin and *Maus II* adopts the idea of Ogden's analytic third. Furthermore, the study reveals how the long terms effects of trauma can lead to psychological othering within the Jewish

community creating divisions and discriminations.

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