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From Grief to Grievance: Terror, Trauma and Existential Quest in Art Spiegelman's

In the Shadow of No Towers

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Abstract

Since its publication, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel In the Shadow of No Towers has been read and analyzed with the special lens of trauma theory owing to its autobiographical account of Art Spiegelman's response to the fall of twin towers on September 11, 2001. No doubt, the novel represents all features of trauma fiction but reading it from this specific perspective can narrow or hide its other aspects. So this study aims to analyze the novel with mixed perspectives of trauma and Sartre's existentialism and shows the message that this graphic novel forwards beyond trauma. So, it shows that there is an existential message, in the form of narrator-protagonist's existential quest, that this novel conveys in the face of terror and trauma–narrator's grief turns into grievance and sparks an existential quest which offers reverberations of our contemporary world of ruptures.

Keywords: PTSD, Quest, Existentialism, Terror, Trauma, Choice

Introduction

The terrorists' attacks of September 11 and the fall of towers proved catastrophic and devastating for the whole American nation flooding its history-changing effects beyond the borders of United States of America but the terror, trauma and panic experienced by the locals of New York are incredibly intense and shattering. Art Spiegelman was one of those lucky or unlucky survivors having horrible, long-lasting imprints on their minds. He tried to represent that traumatic experience in his graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* which is an autobiographical account in comic series. So this terror and trauma caused a huge crises leading to a quest to sort out that rupture and find something tangible out of the void caused by the event. This paper highlights that trauma and investigates the existential quest which is a struggle to manage that rupture in Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers.*

This study concentrates on the graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* with combined perspectives of Trauma and Existentialism. So far as trauma is concerned, this study is delimited to its representation and symptoms, not concerning with its remedial process. Similarly, Existentialism is a broader concept and includes many thinkers. This study is delimited to Jean Paul Sartre's version.

After the terrorists' attacks of 9/11, trauma studies gained momentum and trauma was largely associated with terror. It has been dealt as a main theme by the writers and artists, especially novelists. So, critics have been using trauma theory as the most appropriate and favorite lens. This study may give a new direction to the readers, critics and researchers to expand trauma analysis from its described and limited domain to other critical concepts like Existentialism. It may encourage further discussion and research in this domain. Moreover, existential quest in the face of such destruction may help and inspire many entangled in difficulties in our contemporary world of ruptures.

This study is a narrative research and includes qualitative methods of data collection. As it investigates terror, trauma and existential quest, it uses clinical concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Sartre's Existentialism to establish theoretical framework. Representations of trauma and existential quest are analyzed in the light of these concepts. Arguments have been carefully supported by textual evidence. The sampling frame includes one work, the graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Relevant quotations and statements are selected from research and critical articles and books which relate to the sample population. This research is exploratory in purpose and follows the holistic content-based mode of analysis.

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As critical frameworks, trauma theories and existentialism have been frequently used by researchers and critics. Critical works and creative productions, especially of 20th century, have extensively used Existentialism as framework and a major theme. Similarly, fiction after 9/11 deals with trauma making it a sweet cake for the critics and researchers. However, for convenience, literature review of this study deals with and limits itself to the critical studies done on Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*. It includes the critical works which are most relevant to this study.

In his 2006 research article "Art Spiegelman's "In the Shadow of No Towers": 9/11 and the Representation of Trauma", Kristiaan Versluys investigates effects of 9/11 on Art Spiegelman as a direct witness to the event. Narrator of the novel represents those effects. Versluys (2009) connects Spiegelman's trauma of 9/11 with the events of the Second World War because he found many signs and indications in the novel showing that this tragic event helped reactivate those memories which he got from his parents (p. 982). He further details the remedial process of trauma presented in the novel.

In a 2014 article "'Thinking in Cartoons': reclaiming Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*", Julie Reiser (2014) reads the novel "through breakdowns and his published interviews" (P. 12) and reflects that this mode of reading illuminates a text that is hell-bent on the usage of representations in a self-reflexive as well as meta-formal way for the sake of transmitting its author's state of the mind to the readers (Reiser, 2014, p. 12). So, she reads *In the Shadow of No Towers* in a formalist way unlike formal critics and readers who have looked at it with the lens of trauma theory. So, she looks at the panels as "phenomenological representations" (Reiser, 2014, p. 9).

In a 2015 essay "'In the Shadow of No Towers'. Coping with National Trauma", Henry Quevedo (2015) analyzes *In the Shadow of No Towers* purely with the lens of trauma theory and investigates the representations of individual and collective trauma. He details Spiegelman's technique to portray trauma in a comic series and the difficulties of this technique while dealing with something serious like 9/11.

So, this literature review relates to the concepts of trauma both individual and collective as well as form and technique used in *In the Shadow of No Towers*. This research has engaged the insights into trauma given by the above mentioned works to indicate that the narrator-protagonist of the concerned novel represents all characteristics of psychological trauma. While none of the critics have related psychological trauma to existential quest while analyzing *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Thus, this study moves a step forward by diverging from above mentioned works in spite of using useful insights for the support of this research.

Terror and Trauma in *In the Shadow of No Towers*

During the last two decades, trauma and trauma theories have gained great popularity after the terrible attacks of 9/11. This tragic event of terror haunted and occupied creative imagination of artists, writers and critics. Post 9/11 novels and stories gained great focus as "initial fictional responses to 9/11" (Morey, 2011, p. 136) and, with a deliberate attempt to portray that terror and trauma, trauma theories became the most relevant and appropriate framework for the analysis of these texts. Step Crafs (2005) maintains that trauma theories gained importance in 20th century that was a saturated era filled with unprecedented and violent events (p. 9). The most important representatives of this field are Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman and Dominick LaCapra. According to Crafs (2005), idea of trauma got culminated in 1980, in the proper and formal acknowledgement of the term 'trauma' by APA (American Psychiatric Association) which entitled it as 'Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)' (p. 9). So, this PTSD or psychological trauma as well as collective trauma got associated with terror after terrible terrorists' attacks of 9/11.

Thus, terrorism and trauma became a literary fashion, especially in post 9/11 fiction. So this "illegitimate violence" (Scanlan, 2001, p. 6) and terror caused by the terrorist who can be defined as a person "who instills fear" (Mansoor, 2012, p. 30) caused all that rupture. Although post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is applied elsewhere, to the victims of physical violence, to the victims of sexual harassment, to the victims of war and to those who survive from life threatening events, yet PTSD represented in the post-9/11 fiction and writing is outcome of the terror of that fatal day. So, from a clinical notion, trauma became a cultural and critical concept. Farrel (1998) maintains that Trauma is a clinical concept as well as a cultural trope (p. 14).

Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychological disorder or a psychological trauma also known as individual trauma. It may occur in people who experienced or witnessed a violent event

as a severe accident, natural disaster, terrorist attack, rape, war/combat, or who are threatened with death, sexual violence or serious sort of inquiry. People who have this disorder experience disturbing and intense thoughts and feelings related to their experience that may last long. They may have flash backs and nightmares and may experience sadness, fear or anger. They may be feeling detached or estranged. There are two types of trauma: PTSD or psychological or individual trauma and collective trauma. Both types of trauma can be the result of same event. Kai Erikson (1976) differentiates by maintaining that individual trauma is a great blow to the psyche breaking through the defenses so abruptly and forcefully that one is unable to react properly and effectively. On the other hand, collective trauma is a blow that damages the very basic tissues of cultural and social life and badly affects the bonds which attach people together. It also impairs the sense of commonality (p. 154).

According to Caruth (1996), trauma is a reaction to unexpected or overwhelming and violent events which cannot be fully grasped on their occurrence (p. 91). The terrorists' attacks on twin towers were catastrophic and these stand as a "breakdown of symbolic resources" destroying narrative as well as imagery (Kaplan & Wang, 2004, p. 17). These events were so devastating that these traumatized the whole nation causing collective or national trauma as well as left most of the locals of New York with an unspeakable horror resulting in PTSD.

Art Spiegelman was one of them. As a direct witness of the fatal event, Art chose to write the comic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* considering that "carrying through the witness" serves as a source which can transmute pain into a sense of responsibility (Lifton, 1991, p. 138). In this autobiographical comic book, Art attempts to represent terror and trauma caused by this historical event that exists outside the boundaries of language (Edkins, 2004, p. 1).

In the Shadow of No Towers consists of two sections. The first consists of introduction and ten comics. This second section also opens with an introduction which is a short historical account of role played by Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst in helping the creation of newspaper comics and seven comic pages taken from the early part of 20th century. In the first section of comics, after the introduction, Art recounts the story of frantic search of their daughter. After the attack that day, he and his wife rushed in a great panic to the school of their daughter. He tells this story in a third person. There is also a story of a woman who is homeless and shouts anti-Semitic abuse daily, and how he blows in interview on TV by not answering accurately. There is severe attack on Bush administration and political parties because they used these fatal events for their own purposes. A cartoon is shown blaming not only Al Qaeda but also US government exercising equal terror. Owing to this bitter comment on US government, these comics could not get published first in America and were originally published by German publisher in Germany. These comic pages are disjointed and fragmentary. There is only one image that recurs: "the image of the looming north tower's glowing bones just before it vaporized" (Introduction).A shoe advertisement shows the feeling that people were waiting for other attacks while being stuck in horror and panic. At the end, in the second section, there is a comic supplement. So, this graphic novel with author's highly anxious as well as "fragile recastings" (Espiritu, 2006, p. 186) tries to transmit its writer's state of mind "to the reader" (Reiser, 2014, p. 12) with "hepatic visuality" (Orban, 2007, p. 75) and "narrativity of images" (Hirsch, 2004, p. 1213).

The representation of traumatizing events in literature or in imagery has been a topic of discussion because such events are considered unrepresentable. The very soundlessness of trauma is a strong point for those who oppose its representation. Art Spiegelman knew all this when he decided to represent his post-traumatic stress disorder and overall horror that haunted the whole nation. He decided to depict trauma in a comic series: a mode which apparently seems more inappropriate while dealing with something as serious as traumatizing event of 9/11 and is proven that the compression of thouhts into icons enables cartoons to burrow deeper in the mind. By creating resemblance between fragmentary and disjointed style of these comics and panic, horror and terror of the event, Art Spiegelman tries to prove that representation of trauma is possible. Whitehead (2006) approves Art Spiegelman's representation by saying that the effect of trauma is only suitably represented while mimicking it. Its temporality as well as chronology does collapse (p. 3).

The narrator-protagonist in *In the Shadow of No Towers* is psychologically traumatized. Being a direct witness to the fall of towers is a clear and sufficient proof for the narrator protagonist to be labeled as one who is traumatized. It is further affirmed by his self diagnosis. A strip reads thus: "I insist that sky is falling, they roll their eyes and tell me it's only my Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder"

(Spiegelman, 2004, p. 2). Of course, one feels the fall of sky when time does stand still at the event of trauma. He directly witnesses that mighty tower glowing when it falls. The narrator protagonist represents main symptoms of PTSD as severe anxiety, flashbacks, disturbing and intense thoughts. Art Spiegelman acknowledges himself that it took a time to forget the burning towers. In the similar way, the narrator protagonist experiences flashbacks and is unable to forget the burning towers. A strip reads, "His memories swirl and events fade" (Spiegelman, 2004, p. 4). But he keeps seeing that burning and falling tower whenever he tries to close his eyes.

The image of the falling man falling from the tower on page 6 haunts him and the falling man does fall through the very holes of his mind. The holes which were already present refer to Art Spiegelman's traumatic memory of his parents who were Auschwitz survivors and this memory becomes a "family heirloom" (Versluys, 2006, p. 983). A strip reads: "I remember my father" who tries to describe the smoke of Auschwitz (Spiegelman, 2004, p. 3). So, all characteristics of PTSD are represented and are affirmed in the light of views of Cathy Caruth (1995) who maintains that the exact definition of post-traumatic stress disorder cannot be clearly outlined. Somehow, it can be generally agreed that, sometimes, there is a delayed response to overwhelming events that take the form of repeated hallucinations or dreams accompanied by numbing that might have started during or after the exact experience (p. 4).

The panic search of his daughter that day also serves as an evidence of the traumatic experience which recurs from page 2 to page 4. This pursuit to find their daughter shows intense fear and panic. This search shown in a chronological way is in detail and plays important role in the beginning. Thus, Art Spiegelman is able to present unrepresentable "muted trauma" (LaCapra, 1998, p. 45), which needs some kind of compromise of text between the initial tragic encounter and the apparatus used for sense making (Hirsch, 2002, p. 101). Unlike other novelists, who have tried to comprehend the very "meaning of 9/11" (Randall, 2011, p. 4), Art used an unusual means of representation of the unrepresentable events that took place on 9/11 (Michael, 2014, p. 5) which was a rupture for him as well as a rupture for all (Versluys, 2009, p. 4).

Existential Quest in *In the Shadow of No Towers*

Existentialism emerged as an important philosophy in 20th century. As a post-war philosophy, it affected almost all disciplines. Writers and artists became preoccupied with the existential quest and the basic point of this philosophy can be taken as a desire for revolt and rebellion against the conservative philosophy (Karali, 2013, p. 5). It finds its traces in the works of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Nietzsche. But the most important existentialist philosopher is French thinker, Jean Paul Sartre. According to Olson (1962), the detailed illustrations and explanations of existentialist ideas are drawn frequently taken from the concepts of Sartre (p. 8).

Sartre belongs to the atheistic group of existentialists. According to Sartre's version, this universe is Godless and the man is thrown in this void. So, there is absurdity and meaninglessness. Bohlmann (1991) also approves this meaninglessness by maintaining that this world is purely without exact meaning, and human beings are left to create their own meaning (p. 14). So, it can be rightly said that the value of the existence cannot be taken as "predetermined" (Şener, 1998, p. 29). In such conditions man has the freedom to act and to take him out of this void or lie there. According to Sartre (1972), existence is more important than essence. It comes before essence. It means that human beings first of all exist, encounter themselves, and, then, surge up in the world defining their existence (p. 28). It implies that man has subjective life and is not a lifeless thing which can be turned and placed according to the will of others. Man has will and possesses freedom. So, man is what he makes of himself and defines himself his own being. So, it can be said that man can define his nature and being by living, meditating and opting proper actions (Walter, 1965, p. 23) and he can exercise his freedom instead of being determined on the basis of prevailing public taste and standard (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 207). This freedom of choice and action emerges from the meaninglessness and absurdity of life because man has been thrown into desolate condition as well as "into isolation" (Kern, 1970, p. 169). Sartre's point of view is further approved by Kaufmann in these words "The self is essentially intangible" which should be considered in terms of possibilities, decisions and dread (Kaufmann, 1956, p. 17). Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (1996), also approves this notion by saying that meaninglessness leads to a feeling of 'angst' (p. 173). So, Sartre maintains that individuals have the ability to surpass themselves and follow possibilities outside of themselves (Sartre, 1948, p. 66). While being in a void, one surges up by taking freedom of action and choice for the sake of taking

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control of one's own life (Carter, 2003, p. 208). While explaining this freedom and liberty of action and choice, Berlin (1969) claims that the ideas of freedom are directly derived from the ideas of self-constitution (p. 134). This idea of freedom is a "doctrine of action" (Sartre, 1948, p. 56), all actions are ventures into "non-being" (Caws, 1979, p. 112).

But man has certain responsibility on his shoulders. Sartre maintains that we are responsible for our freedom and the freedom of others (Sartre, 1972, p. 553). Man should assume the situation by considering himself the author (Sartre, 1972, p. 554). So, the anguish can be taken as a revelation to human beings relating to their conduct, being and responsibility (Campbell, 1977, p. 69). It can be said that Sartre's version of Existentialism focuses on the meaninglessness and absurdity which man confronts in this Godless universe but, he has the freedom of action to surge up in this world and give meaning to this meaningless life. In doing so, he needs to be responsible because his freedom and choice of action concern all humanity. According to Sartre (1948), we fashion others while fashioning ourselves (p. 26). In other words, it can be said that Sartre's existentialist individual possesses certain existentialist quest which rises out of meaninglessness and despair, and forces him to create his own meanings with freedom and responsibility. This existential quest is, in fact, a struggle to get out of the chaotic conditions. That's why; it may lead nowhere and end up in smoke. However, it is optimistic in nature because it is, after all, based on some action which aims at managing the ruptures.

Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) is primarily a response or reaction to the tragic event of the ruin of World Trade Centre. Since its publication, the novel has been taken as a sweet cake by the lovers of trauma studies because It directly deals with tragic fall of the towers and terror and trauma caused by that catastrophic moment, but a close reading of the comic reveals that Art Spiegelman's narrator is Sartre's existentialist man who is haunted and prompted by the existentialist quest. The fall of the towers traumatized Art Spiegelman with its unspeakable terror as he was its direct witness but the ashes and smoke rising out of the heap sparked a quest in Spiegelman: an existentialist quest to take man out of the void and give meaning to his meaningless existence. An individual with such a quest tries to take a leap and determine his own way by violating conventional standards and predetermined social patterns. This existentialist quest is primarily founded in meaninglessness and absurdity. In other words, absurd situations stir up this existential quest. Sartre (1948) says that life is meaningless without *"a priori"* (p. 49). Of course the catastrophic fall of the towers caused a great chaos and life lost its meaning. Traumatized Spiegelman feels that life has become absurd. He feels this state of nothingness while being stuck with terror. He feels as if the sky has fallen. A plate reads that he insists the sky is collapsing and falling (Spiegelman, 2004, p. 1). This absurdity is clearer on the same page: "God's name got taken in vain" (Spiegelman, 2004, p. 1). As Sartre maintained that man has been thrown into a Godless universe. It is a void where man is in despair with meaninglessness (Sartre, 1948, p. 34). Art Spiegelman feels that it is vain to take God's name at this moment of great catastrophe. When sky falls, there is no God to hold it back. After being stuck in such absurdity, man needs to surge up and define the situation by considering himself the author (Sartre, 1972, p. 554). With this existentialist quest, a man moves forward and frames his own life.

Art Spiegelman's choice to respond to the tragic and traumatic event by writing and designing such comics shows his quest to take himself out of that void. As Sartre's existentialist man with existential quest moves forward to action with freedom, Art Spiegelman musters up his courage, tries to lift himself up and moves to action : to design and write graphic novel. Of course, this creative power of an artist is nothing but an existentialist quest.

According to Sartre's version, an existential man does not follow the predetermined, conventional or social standards passively but he determines his own patterns actively and critically. Bohlmann (1991) approves Sartre's point of view by saying that man is suppposed to create his own meaning (p. 14). Art Spiegelman does not follow or believe the narrative of Bush administration. He strongly reacts to the plans of his governments after the fall of towers. Bush and his cabinet used this tragedy to launch war but Art Spiegelman criticized his government for hijacking these events. In introduction, he says that his leaders did promptly instrumentalize the events for their personal agenda. He means that Bush administration does not actually have love or sympathy for the dead and the families of the departed but it has its own pockets to fill. They have used these events for upcoming elections. In Introduction of the novel, Art Spiegelman (2004) says that he did not anticipate that the hijacking during the event would be hijacked by their government that transformed

it to a war poster. So, these events force Spiegelman to think, he gives these events his own meanings. Terrorized by the terrorists as well as by his own government, Art actively sorts out the response of Bush administration. This act of "destroying" (Lifton, 1991, p. 141) the events annoyed him and, thus, his grief turns into grievance. Terror and trauma spark an existential quest in an artist whose creative mind and imaginative power get fire. After facing great terror, trauma and grief, Spiegelman's grievance rises to the level of an existential quest when he strongly rejects his political parties and shows his will for the need of a new political party which may represent true America and which may feel the pulse of the nation and find remedy for its ills. This quest for change is an existentialist stance. A strip suggests that "RAMPAGING REPUBLICAN ELEPHANTS" and "DIMWITTED DEMOCRATIC DONKEYS" are not real representatives of America; the animals of both parties are dinosaurs who are interested in their own survival. A third party is needed that can actually represent America.

Art Spiegelman's existential quest is also obvious even on the last plate. There are the images of two towers which have collapsed to the ground. It is Spiegelman's urge and quest to see these towers back again. He wants to see them with same dignity and glory. Thus he wants to see life out of the ashes. It is Sartre's urge to see man lifting himself out of the mud, a void; moreover, this existential quest is accompanied by responsibility. Sartre focuses on man's freedom of choice and action but maintains that man carries great responsibility on his shoulders. His action concerns all men (Sartre, 1948, p. 26). Similarly, Art Spiegelman not only settles his grief but also acts for all who have been affected. He does not fall to inaction but makes a responsible choice to mourn for the dead and respond to the event by creating these comics suggesting that one should choose what can be morally or ethically right (Knopp, 1975, p. 6). Like Sartre's responsible existentialist man energized by existential quest, Art Spiegelman criticizes public attitude days after the event, response of his own government and existing political parties in order to create a better situation. So, his terror and trauma spark this quest and his grief turns into grievance.

Conclusion

Since its publication, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) has been the center of focus for trauma theorists because it was Spiegelman's response to the fall of towers being direct witness to it. Although, undoubtedly, this graphic novel represents all characteristics of trauma fiction specific to 9/11, yet reading and analyzing it exclusively with the lens of trauma theory can lead to narrowing down results and restricting its meaning. When analyzed and investigated with the mix prospective of trauma theory and Sartre's Existentialism, a more expanded and complex meaning of the novel gets highlighted where it seems to be relevant to both the representation of psychological trauma and existential message that this book conveys in presence of utter destruction. This study contends that the situation of terror which makes the narrator-protagonist suffer from psychological trauma and sparks an existential quest can work as a metaphor for many whose lives are entangled into many terrorizing horrors in our contemporary world of ruptures replete with terrorism, racism, political corruption and violence. By depicting terror and trauma which led to existential quest in the case of narrator protagonist in the graphic novel, Art Spiegelman seems to stress that we—as entangled in contemporary sociopolitical difficulties—need to keep our attempts alive to find meanings as well as reasons to make life worth-living and bring better change.

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