

Of Mice and Canines: Anthropomorphizing Animals in Art Spiegelman's *Maus***doi: <https://doi.org/10.3126/skmj.v3i01.79290>****Laxmi Regmi¹,
Shiva Raj Panta²****Abstract**

This research article is mainly concerned with the wide-ranging interpretation of animal metaphors especially the dogs and mice in the graphic novel *Maus*. In the novel, the mice are the stand-in for the Jews, and the American are taken as dogs. Pondering the metaphor's aptness and authenticity, the study employs the theories of metaphors and interrogates the metaphorical use of mice and canines in the novel. The methodology of the study is informed by the close readings of the grammatextuality. The analysis of the verbal and visual texts of the graphic novels is carried out by the comparative analysis method. The relation of the verbal and visual sections of the graphic novel are further elucidated by the analysis of the arrangement of the images. In order for the interpretation and the analysis of the evidence collected, an analytical framework consisting of two concepts: suppression of differences and the contradictions of internal validity has been developed so that the mice and canine metaphors in the verbal and visual texts are examined. The graphic novel that has drawn the attention of cognitive linguists to Posthuman animal studies scholars yields an argument: the metaphors employed in this novel lack aptness and authenticity. The researcher argues that the comparison of Americans as dogs and Jews as mice has been interrogated and charged the simplistic and shallow use of metaphor that has created internal inconsistency and turns out to be the inappropriate comparison.

Keywords: Metaphors, anthropomorphism, interpretative validity, contradiction, graphic novel

Introduction

Slow and steady wins the race, a piece of timeless wisdom by Aesop, the ancient Greek storyteller, entails the animal metaphors- hare and tortoise. Employing animals, be it in literature as the metaphors or in science for the experiment has been treated with suspicion ever since the animals are taken as the fellow beings of human beings. This study is an exploration of animal metaphors, particularly the mice and canines in the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, the American cartoonist.

Much of the story of *Maus I and II* revolves around Spiegelman's troubled relationship with his father. When Art Spiegelman asks Vladek to tell him about the Holocaust experience,

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When Art Spiegelman approached him and asked him about his stories, Vladek reluctantly informed, “It would take many books, my life, and none wants anyway to hear such stories” (*Maus I*, p. 12). Spiegelman wants to portray the experience of his father “the way it really happened” (*Maus I*, p. 23). His cartoon strips contain the human experience of Holocaust. However, the visual representation is rendered through the use of animal metaphors.

Basically informed by George Orwell's Essay “Politics and the English Language” “on questioning the metaphors “Never use a metaphor ...which you are used to seeing in print” (2007, p.113) this research article initiates its exploration with the discussion of animal metaphors- the introduction to the novel followed by the reviews around the corpus ensuing the methods such as close reading of narrative strings, reading of grammatextuality. The penultimate section includes the analysis of evidences from the text and the closing section offers the conclusion. The research question that informs this study is: What interrogative interpretation can be framed for the employment of animal metaphors- mice and canines in Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*? With this intrigue in the hindsight, the study sets the objective of pondering the shallowness of animal metaphors to identify the human beings, at the whole of disciplinary thought. Hence, this essay investigates the metaphorical employment of dogs for the Americans and mice for the Jews and introductorily and cursorily exposes the questioning spirit on the employment of the metaphors thereby identifying Spiegelman's cognitive and perceptual biases about the animal metaphors.

The novel has drawn adequate attention from the critics and scholars alike, the attention ranges from cognitive linguistics on the use of metaphors to the impending post humanistic conditions of species. The Holocaust comic book by a cartoonist in a popular art, as discussed by Doherty T. (1996) depicts it as “the true picture of survivor's tale is in the cartoons” (p.82). Min L. (2023) reads the novel as “the stark contrast between the innocence of animals and the atrocities committed during the Holocaust” (12). Schwartz M.R. (2016) maintains that “Anja's absence from the text is a matter of choice. Spiegelman could not reconstruct a life from her occasional and associative memories” (p. 66), “Like Dominick LaCapra, Marianne Hirsch reads the struggles of representation in *Maus* as emblematic of suffering experienced by many children of survivors who have tried to come to grips with the pain of what she terms “post-memory””(p.70). Rajkhowa B. (2021) brings another line of thought into the light, “graphic symbols used by the characters seem to exhibit some kind of visual vocabulary” (pp.46-7) and *Maus* “co-mixes” word and image that in turn generate meanings by challenging each other (p.65). For Si-qi, X. (2023), “The image of mice here is not only a symbol of the Jews as victim during the World War II, but also a reflection of their living condition and status” (p. 511) On a different note, concerning the genre, Chute, H.(2008) emphasizes the function of graphic narrative, it “offers compelling,

diverse examples that engage with different styles , methods ,and modes to consider the problem of historical representation” (p. 457).

Reviewing the literature on canines as metaphors, to eschew the mouse metaphor considering its ubiquity, yields this: J.R. Donahue & Harington D.J. Harington (2002) state Dogs are “ regarded as unclean animals and almost always have a negative connotation” (p.234).J.M. Redfield elucidates (1994) “ To feed one’s enemies to the dogs “ (p.199). The dogs are not wild animals, they are “ specific to man’s vertical frontier, to nature” (p.200). This quick review demonstrates that dogs are employed in negative manner in the literary and religious texts even in the metaphorical sense while we commonly accept that dog is the most faithful being to human being. Dog’s loyalty is considered the exemplary loyalty even in the discourse of nationalism and other disciplinary thoughts.

The review, thus, supports the interrogation of the metaphors deployed in the text *Maus* as the review of literature demonstrates the presence and acceptance of the metaphors, this study paves its way for the interrogation of metaphors- mice and canines.

Oftentimes, the methodological validity in the exploration of textual scholarship becomes a problem as D. Greetham (2013) observes that textual scholarship is “sometimes dismissively seen as simply the uncritical loading of print” (p.17) and “ the challenge of possibly reaching beyond bibliographical evidence” (p.33). Even so, this study finds the necessity of conducting a research in a grammatextual corpus because, on occasions, the empirical research involves the inherent limitations and the textual scholarship offers richer evidences and insights.

Major methods and methodological inquiries employed in this research article subsume: Close reading of grammatextual elements and comparative analysis.

“Close reading of cultural artifacts” leads to the textual analysis (G. Griffin, p.12) and operating close reading is the preoccupation of the particular text for a fairly sustained amount of period for deciphering the meanings offered by the text. Grammatextuality, a term coined by Jean Gerard Lapacherie involves the reading of the verbal elements and looking at the graphic elements., concerning the grammatextuality in the graphic novels, Beatens, J.(2020) elucidates, “ In contrast to the plain, unmarked text, the visually highlighted grammatext” “ is absolutely crucial to majority of” graphic novels (p. 201).

Human mind processes information in various ways, including comparative framework. This study has employed the comparative analysis especially in the verification of interpretative validity of the canine metaphors used by Spiegelman. Comparison is at the heart of human reasoning skill as Benoit Rihoux and Charles C. Ragin (2009) find that comparison is “ a basic, and powerful mental operation” that can be developed into “ comparative methods or

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techniques" (p.xvii). This method turned out to be useful when comparing the motives of metaphors.

Alongside, the study has employed an analytical framework including the concepts such as suppressing differences and contradictions in interpretative validity thereby generating a mode of analysis to display the discrepancies in the utilization of metaphors. Paul Ricour (2003) discusses how a metaphor works through the means of suppression (p.408) and without suppressing the differences metaphors cannot exist. Concerning the interpretative validity, consistency, E.D. Hirsch(2000) states " the meaning that is being understood" has to be revealed " according to expectations" for maintaining the validity in interpretations (p.14)

Jews as Mice: Suppression of Differences

Aesop's fables had the power as they attempted to illustrate the particular attributes through animal metaphors such that tortoise is the stand-in for :slow and steady that leads the human beings to the desirable destinations. Some representative writers who gained the command and delivered their intended message through animal metaphors are George Orwell and Franz Kafka. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is an example at hand that depicts travelling salesman Gregor Samsa converted into a giant dung beetle. Through this metaphorical deployment Kafta intends to portray the human condition. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is another text that uses animals to satirize the human tendency in which some animals are more equal than others.

Connecting this genesis to the graphic text by Spiegelman draws us to the author's intentions of speaking the unspeakable. However, his use of mice as metaphor cannot be unquestionable in that he has employed very conventional metaphor and he sounds hackneyed. Presumably, authors have various purposes of using animal metaphors: one of them is speaking the unspeakable. Krishna Lal Subba's *Tilling of Maize*- "Makaiko Kheti" is a constant reminder in Nepali popular parlance in which the discussion of domestic and foreign dogs was undertaken and the consequence is testified by the historical interpretations.

Spiegelman's *Maus* is much analyzed around the themes of its depiction of mice as Jews and Nazis as Cats. The cat- and-mouse metaphor is a huge success among the critics and scholars alike Jews to mice and cats to Nazis in its natural order is analyzed in the simplistic manner. Mice are attacked by cats and the cats are further attacked by dogs, this is what happens in the natural order. The same comparison does not work in the textual order by Spiegelman: "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human" (*Maus I*, p. 4). Even if they are not taken as humans, they should not have been considered as mice, there could have been other animal metaphors such as lamb, hen; it could have been even the pigeons as *Hamlet*, the play has deployed. Although Spiegelman would have justified his metaphor in his ways,

this article questions his justification on various grounds such as it is a conventional metaphor and Spiegelman did not sophisticate and remained uncreative; Spiegelman does not seem to have empathy to the species called mice, he is very engaged in proving that mice are species that inherently lack boldness and bravery.

The parallels drawn between the Jews and mice are expressed most explicitly in the novel. One memorable parallel between Jews and mice draws to chewing on wood. Vladek , Spiegelman's father and Holocaust survivor states "never any of us had been so hungry like then" (*Maus I*, p.123) and the scarcity of food leads Vladek to search food everywhere and comes with the dust of wood as food and "chewing it feels a little like eating food" (*Maus I*, p. 123,). The mouse and cat metaphors that are the stand-in for Jews and Nazis have almost become the dead metaphors. Presumably, naturally speaking, it is the cat that attacks the mouse. With the sense of interrogation, we need to ponder the comparison between mice and Jews.

The mice cannot be exactly same to the Jews in its absolute sense. The theory of metaphor obviously suppresses the differences highlighting the similarities. Nonetheless, the question is the aptness of mice as metaphor for the Jews. Although Spiegelman claims, in fact, that "the metaphor is meant to be shed like a snake skin" (Witek,1989, p. 110), we need to reconsider the purpose of using the mice metaphor for the Jews. The obvious reason is the rendition of the familiarity. The horror of the Holocaust was so unspeakable that the plight of the mice as timid creature could be expressed in that fashion. Again, there is adequate room for the question that it is not merely the mice that is timid. Even the lamb is timid in front of a butcher; a snake is timid in the presence of mongoose.

Shifting the focus, there is much suppression of differences, although Nazis themselves are reported to have used this metaphor for the Jews, Spiegelman should not have succumbed to their use as the creative artist as George Orwell reminds us not to use the metaphors without considering them much.

Canines: The Contradictions in the Interpretive Validity

Another metaphor deployed and scarcely discussed by critics is Americans as dogs. This canine treatment cannot be interpreted in a singular framework. In the novel, Vladek visits a teller. In the narrative strings, the teller is normal, but in the graphic elements, she is shown with the head of the dog. She is depicted positively, she is seeking to help them, she looks cooperative. In another instance, when coming back from groceries, Vladek and his companions have to take help of Hitchhiker. The hitchhiker is portrayed negatively. A few other instances in the narrative strings about dogs are the instances of negativity. There is the mention of mad dogs and they are shot. These representations cannot be taken in singular

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framework. The dog, a stand-in for Americans has at least two attributes: supportive, and treated with derogation.

A conversation in the verbal form is found in *Maus I*, “Anja and I did not have where to go. It was nowhere we had to hide. Can I help you Mr. Spiegelman? Yes, I have here my son Artie, I want to sign him a key. So he can go also to my safety box” (125). As Vladek Spiegelman has gone to bank for offering his son the key of his safety box, there is a teller, she is an American lady. She is shown with the mask of dog. We are to ponder the metaphor here. An American with the supportive attitude is depicted as dog:



Figure 1: Spiegelman, 1985, p.125

In the natural order, a mouse is attacked by a cat and the cat is attacked by a dog. If this logic follows the instance depicted in this instance, it is applicable. Vladek, a Jew, a mouse is supported by a teller, an American lady, a dog. In this line of reasoning, a dog has become a stand-in of favor. Art Spiegelman has gone beyond the conventional depiction of canine metaphor as the subject of disfavor. However, in a straightforward manner, if we are to accept that Americans are dogs, that sounds a derogatory, if not with the open-mindedness. The point of contention is that Spiegelman's treatment of animal metaphor is problematic as he suppresses the differences and highlights the similarity; in fact, it is the inherent nature of metaphors, not merely the problems of Spiegelman.



Figure2 Spiegelman, 1985, p.125

In the cartoon strip, we can see Vlodek Spiegelman and his son, Art Spiegelman in the mask of mouse whilst the teller is in the mask of a dog seeking to help the father and son for the key of safety box that Vlodek is intending to offer. The father wants to provide the key of his safety box of the valuables in the bank to his son.

Another instance from *Maus II* contains a complex scene. As Vlodek, his son and his daughter-in-law are returning home from the groceries, they have to take help of a hitchhiker,



an African

American person.

Figure3, Spiegelman, 1991, p.98

Vlodek's daughter-in-law soothes Vlodek telling him that even if they were not home yet, they could take help of a hitchhiker. When Vlodek saw the hitchhiker, the African American person, he utters an expression- a coloured guy, a shavarster. He asks the hitchhiker to run the vehicle quicker as he dislikes him and wants to get rid of him. A victim by Nazis, Vlodek Spiegelman, victimizes a colored person. There is the problematic case in the framework of

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understanding- a victim victimizes; lacks the empathy. Honam M. (2017) displays his observation of this phenomenon, a hunted does not know the wounds of another hunted: “Through Vladek’s reaction to black hitchhiker in *Maus* “ people have the tendency for the racial stereotyping “ even those who are subjected to it themselves” (p.275)

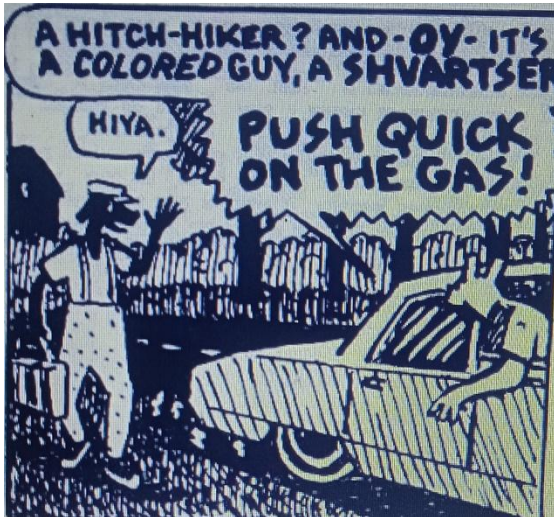


Figure 4, Spiegelman, 1991, p. 98

Sharvtser is a term used by the Jewish people to the colored people. As the Jews are troubled by the Nazis, naturally follows, they should not have troubled others. Nonetheless, Vladek displays his disfavor to the colored person. This metaphorical deployment of dog to American suffers the interpretative validity internally. In an earlier case, a teller from American origins had been taken positively whilst the hitchhiker is depicted negatively as Sharvtser.



Figure 5, Spiegelman, 1991, p.99

Vladek, the father of Art Spiegelman, asks the colored hitchhiker to be good. He assumes that the colored people are inherently bad and malevolent while he assumes that he is benevolent and asks the person to be as he is. "Even when they came with dogs to smell us out- and they knew that Jews are laying here- but still they could not find" (*Maus I*, p.111).

In addition to the visual texts distinctly treating dogs as the Americans, there are instances in which dogs are referred: "The dogs ran up and down like mad. But in the coal bin was only coal. It looked full and they could not lift it. And the cellar, it was only a cellar" (*Maus I*, p.11). This string is spoken by Vladek. He further discusses his thoughts on the dogs and the shooting of the dog:

When I was a boy our neighbor had a dog what got mad and was biting. The dog was rolling so, around and around, kicking, before he lay quiet. The neighbor came out with a rifle and shot. And now I thought : "How amazing it is that a human being reacts the same like this neighbour's dog" (*Maus II*, p.82).

These references do not show, even in the slightest sense, the favor to the dogs. They are mad and they are killed and they are the nuisance to human beings. This interrogation on the interpretive validity of dogs even in the internal structure of Spiegelman's graphic novel clearly demonstrates that Spiegelman is not consistent in his use of the canine theme, let alone his choice of the canines as the stand-in for Americans. The aptness of the metaphor is the secondary concern when the internal validity is prone to the questions.

To add, when Spiegelman is not consistent in the meaning he is attempting to establish, the readers cannot find the interpretative validity in the comprehension. On occasions, the canines are portrayed as the favorable beings, immediately after, in another instance, the

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canines are considered the species for the betrayal. This inconsistency in the use of canines to mean a particular meaning has caused a trouble on the side of the readers.

Conclusion

The study yields a conclusion that Spiegelman's employment of metaphors particularly mice and canines is inappropriate even for his context. The problem of the study as set in the beginning- the interrogative effort against the anthropomorphizing of animals has been substantiated with the evidence from the graphic novel itself. The mice are not only the timid beings; the canines are used in an inconsistent manner. The study has assumed that metaphors are problematic in that they cannot capture all the essences of the object compared. This study begun with the objective of framing interrogative interpretation of anthropomorphizing animals has established the claim that Spiegelman has failed in his metaphorical enterprise. Comparing mice with Jews in general and in particular in his novel cannot capture the essence because animals are animals and they cannot be anthropomorphized. The case of canines is almost a fiasco- Americans are dogs. The internal validity of interpretation has remained questionable. Thus, the study raises a question in the use of animal metaphors in the novel *Maus* and offers the evidences that the metaphors are neither apt nor authentic. In fact, the animal metaphor distances the author from the real and Spiegelman could be charged of trivializing the intensity of suffering in the Holocaust. Thus, Spiegelman has not been thoughtful enough in the use of the animal metaphors in his graphic narrative *Maus*.

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