

# Visualizing the Language of Pain: A Reading of Autobiographical Graphic novel.

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## Abstract

History has always fascinated the writers and in the contemporary graphic novels too history and its representation plays an important role. In the representation of war and historic revolutions male writers played a pivotal role in shaping our history but in this paper we can see the life and times of a revolutionary woman and the torture she has faced being a woman. Understanding the panels and the shift of the passage of time between the panels is a difficult task to understand the issues of revolution, insurgency, being female and female body. The manifold projections of women in popular media like newspapers, magazines, advertisements etc. made the women a victim of spectacle. These issues and many others including childhood trauma, social taboos, sexuality, pain, loss are dealt with in the graphic medium by the women writers in recent times. This pictorial representation of woman in a limited space and the act of seeing them was a challenge for the authors. The images of the traumatic mind, emaciated and tortured bodies of women besides other representations will be the focus of the paper. The paper shall attempt to examine the image of woman which is being seen, gaped at and tortured by the state machinery in the semi -autobiographical novel *Cuba My Revolution* written by Inverna Lockpez and drawn by Daniel Haspiel. The paper shall further probe into the study of body which is divided between the dialectic of a political being and the biological being under the state repression machinery.

Keywords: visual, image, women, state, body, torture.

## Introduction

The art of detailing through images and words are the factors that shaped the comic books since the early part of the twentieth century. Many comic books had the element of fantasy as they were meant primarily for entertainment. The realistic issues were more or less detached from comic books and less focus was given to artistry. Earlier the controversial issues like sexuality, social taboos were censored by the Comics Code Authority but gradually due to the rise of the underground press in America, some comic artists defied the traditional practice of working solely with fantasy. These artists were interested in reflecting serious issues of society. In the 1960s the artists of the American underground helped in shaping the tenets of the graphic novel as it is known today. But again the term graphic novel itself was shunned by the theorist Hillary Chute who used the term graphic narrative instead which is mentioned in the book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* "I prefer graphic narrative because, as I have explained elsewhere, the most riveting comics texts coming out right now from men and women alike are not novels at all." (Chute, 3) The graphic narratives are mostly written by men as one of the great examples is Art Spiegelman but lately women artists/novelists like Marjane Satrapi, Lynda Barry, Alison Bechdel, Nora Krug, Inverna Lopez have devoted many texts on the women issue in the form of life writing, traumatic accounts etc. Having said this, however, retracing the representation of women in comics cannot be left untouched. The production and re-production of the images of women tracing from the DC and Marvel comics can be said as the extreme form of visualizing the women characters. With the use of bold colours and bold illustrations of women with eye-catching busty bodies and ordained with valiant costumes made the images of women picturesque. Apart from that there were powerful portrayals of women. There were characters who were in the legion of superheroes as compiled in Alastair Dougall's *The DC Comics Encyclopedia* of late twentieth century like Amethyst, Princess of Gem world, Apparition, Aqua Girl, Argent II from Teen Titans, Artemis from Wonder Woman, Dinah Drake from Black Canary and Black Canary II from the Justice League of America, the famous Catwoman from Batman, Cheetah from Wonder Woman, Circe from Wonder Woman. These women got an iconic representation who used their superpowers and fought against the crimes. They were great warriors as some of the characters were trained in martial arts. (Dougall 14-83). The portrayals of these women characters were popular and was consumed in the market and among the readers to a large extent. The use of primary colours, revealing clothes, use of masks, wigs, and bold expressions made them a medium to be looked at or being seen. These representations lured the readers and these visualizations shaped a culture of being seen. At the same time, it can also be said that the gender roles are somewhat interchanged in these representations of women with their toughness to face the patriarchal world. Gradually the representation of women in graphic novels started dealing with serious and contemporary issues like the problems of childhood, portrayals of revolutionary women in the context of Cuba, Russia, women and partition, sexuality. These representations became more realistic and the visuals are drawn in black and white ink in the contemporary graphic narratives. The authors of the contemporary times resorted to picturing the tortured bodies, tortured mind, and traumatic self mostly. The paper shall probe into the challenges faced by the graphic novelists particularly in the text *Cuba: My Revolution* in unveiling the reality of a revolutionary woman in a limited space and reduced

dialogues. The paper shall further explore how the image of a woman is being seen or looked at as a political body and a fictitious body in a visual lexicon.

### Cuban Revolution and Women.

To understand the language of comics Scott McCloud in *Making Comics: Story Telling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* defined it as “comics is a secret language all its own and mastering it poses challenges unlike any faced by prose writers, illustrators or any other creative professionals” (McCloud, 2). Similarly, Inverna Lopez’s *Cuba: My revolution* also could justify this definition of a language that stood on its own in the representation of a rebellious woman. Sonya is illustrated sequentially in the panels and it foregrounds the struggle of this woman who was languishing in the prison and became a victim of the state controlled violence. The narrative spans the diary – entries opening from December 1958 to September 1966 in a linear narrative. It starts in December 31, in Havana, Cuba 1958, 10:00 PM where one can get an introduction of the character, Sonya who was 17 years’ old who supports the socialist party led by Fidel Castro. Being an autobiographical novel the writer herself could enter into the panels and revisit her past and memories attached to her struggle. The panels are drawn in black and white except the images of the dresses of women, roses, blood, colour of wound that are drawn in red ink. The use of red ink unlike other texts written by women is symbolic and deliberate as it stands for the colour of revolution. Sonya was actively involved in the guerrilla war along with other comrades who were fighting against the fascist ruler Batista and against America. In one of the panels in Part One of the novel one can see the revolutionary mind of Sonya who speaks to Jose, her stepfather and she says “Jose everyone is behind Fidel – Batista sold us out to the Americans, and our best hotels to the American mafia! People are disappearing and there are hundreds in prison. Don’t you know that” (Lockpez, 2).



Figure 1.

Being a conscious fighter and a doctor Sonya leaves home and becomes an active member of the party later. There are whole page panels depicting the history and struggle of the reign of Fidel Castro. The use of slogans, images of fists rising in the air holding the guns, billboards, holding placards etc. delineated the ethos of the party. The definition of gender and its allied meanings changed in the case of a woman. The ideas of masculinity and femininity were overlapped and Cuba gave a different dimension in witnessing history and the roles of gender. There were women organizations like Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), Twenty Sixth of July Movement largely known as the New Left movement of the women which was born out of the Old Marxist organization, Democratic Federation of Cuban Women etc. Regarding the radical participation of women a few facts can be located from the following lines where Michelle Chase in *Revolution Within the Revolution* writes

The 1959 victory of the revolutionary movement led to a new surge of women’s mobilization. Women who had participated in the insurrection now continued their activism in other ways, forming new organizations expressly devoted to furthering the revolution and attempting to spread the revolution’s influence as extensively as possible, both socially and geographically. Many women who had not taken part in the insurrectionary conflict were inspired by the new mood of revolutionary rebirth; they too flocked to the new organizations for revolutionary women.” (Chase 105)

Having referred to the above lines it can be said that Cuba gave a new definition to the idea of being female through a radical participation. In the character of Sonya too one can see the rebel inside her though she undergoes multiple wounds when she was caught by the militia of Batista in the year 1961. However, the atrocities of the state repression on women is evident in history which have been etched out in the panels and it shall be discussed in the paper further.

### Visualizing the language of pain.

The visuals of pain and retribution is traumatic for the readers but it opens a paradigm for understanding the history of pain and torture which is an integral part of being ruled and gazed at. The concept of the dialectic of the body as a political subject and a biological being can be understood from Agamben’s concept of “bare life.” (Agamben, “Homo Sacer” 4) Based on the Aristotle’s concept of state and Foucault’s work on punishment and sexuality Agamben writes about how life (zoe) gets included in the politics (politick) and how body becomes a subject of political design or intrigues in his book *Power and Homo Sacer: Sovereign Bare Life*.

The terminologies can be understood by the following lines “zoe, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and bios, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. When Plato mentions three kinds of life in the Philebus, and when Aristotle distinguishes the contemplative life of the philosopher (bios theoretikos) from the life of pleasure (bios apolaustikos) and the political life (bios politikos).” ( Agamben, 1). The three ideas cannot be put in different planes as the zoe, bios and politikos have to be understood together in the context of contemporary politics. It is the bio political existence of a human being which is the reality. Having mentioned this, however, one can deduce this concept in the case of Sonya when we see many pictures of the naked body of Sonya when she was incarcerated and how power was exercised. The Part Two of the novel starts with the entries of 1961, the image of Sonya in the military attire is shown as leaving for an unknown place. Sonya was sitting in the back of the truck and she was telling herself “a tremendous serenity settles over me. I am neither fearful nor excited, but alert and calm.” (Lockpez,33) Near the Bay of Pigs they got down and they had to sleep over the pile of dead bodies and for the first time Sonya was feeling weak and she felt that she may be killed. Soon after a sound of shooting was heard and she found out that it was her friend and lover Flavio who was shot. She cleaned the wounds of Flavio and later she fell asleep. When she woke up Sonya saw herself under the custody of the CIA agent and was soon arrested. In a whole page panel with red ink smeared all around, one can see the naked body of Sonya lying on the floor and in the succeeding panels the brutal images of the atrocities infested on Sonya is illustrated. She was a victim of the state repression as well as a victim of visual pleasure. Her body became a spectacle who is being looked at, interrogated and tortured. The body of this woman was taken into the bower of the penal practices. The history of torture can be traced back to the Greek and Roman civilization where beheading, flogging, exile, mutilation, crucifixion, interrogation etc. were the most common forms of torture. Tracing back to the testimonies of women torture one can see the instance of witchcraft dating back to 1488 where Jacob Sprenger shaped the existence of women as a witch where Sprenger says “Feeble in mind and body, it’s not surprising that they so often become witches. The first woman must have been made from a bent rib, bent in a contrary direction from the others, and they have been contrary ever since.” (Quoted from Daniel P. Mannix’s *The History of Torture*, 54). Further, these women were brought to the Inquisition and they were made to agree that they were witch and were imprisoned later. The penal practices are seen in the atrocities towards Sonya in this novel too. The tools of immense torture like flogging, interrogation, threats were part of it. Sonya was locked in a filthy prison and was stripped off, flogged and splashed with hot water every day. The illustrations are shown in figure 2 and 3 below. She was made to languish beside her own excreta. Gradually Sonya turned into a furry animal like a “black panther” which is shown in figure 4 and she started loving the smell of her own body which signifies that her body became assimilated with the filth, her pain became an everyday affair and she was dehumanized by the brutalities of the state.



Figure. 2



Figure. 3



Figure. 4

On this the paper shall take resort to the concept of pain of Elaine Scarry who wrote about the strong language of pain and torture which is specific to human history in his book *The Body in Pain*. Scarry writes :

While torture contains language, specific human worlds and sounds, it is itself a language, an objectification, an acting out. Real pain, agonizing pain, is inflicted on a person; but torture, which contains specific acts of inflicting pain, is also itself a demonstration and magnification of the felt experience of pain. In the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body of the prisoner, it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer’s body. (Scarry 27)

Sonya’s experiences in the jail is a testimony of pain and torture and the body is performing under the dialectic of the political and the biological underpinnings. In the graphic medium pain becomes a cognitive phenomenon with all the minute detailing. The silence of the character in the post incarceration period also speaks the language of pain and trauma and the instances of the violent dreams later in the thought bubbles becomes the portrayal of her post traumatic disorder.

**Conclusion**

The graphic medium offered a different paradigm to understand and interpret a text and its evident in the various signifiers of pain, afflictions and torture in the sad account of Sonya being a female and a revolutionary. This pictorial representation by Lockpez

made her experiences sensory and palpable as well for the readers. The reality of being female and being an object of suppression and atrocity is brilliantly delineated by the images which was a challenge to the graphic novelists. Though Sonya was silent about her experiences and finally left Cuba at the end, her feelings of not being in the socialist party were dormant in the thought bubbles and in the gutters. With limited texts and an enormous space to think and fill in the spaces between the panels the graphic medium has risen to a different plane to understand the wounded mind and the body of a woman.

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