

## Presenting the Invisible: Historical Revisionism Through the Graphic Narrative

**Sandra Mariam Xavier**

St. Joseph's College,  
Irinjalakuda, Thrissur

Email: sandramariam24@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** The critical and rhetorical practise of postmodernism has been credited with bringing about a shift in the ontological and epistemological modes of enquiry. It has shaken the foundations of the general belief system and has exposed the biased politics underlying the previously established truths, especially history. As has been incessantly argued by critics both prior to and especially since the intellectual movement of postmodernism, history is just a “narrativized account” that has been formulated to substantiate the dominance of the elite. It has served as a hegemonic discourse to validate its trivializing narrative of the marginalized. The ongoing ethical interventions by postcolonialist and feminist, who leveraged by postmodernism, has led to the discovery of some of the missing chips from the larger picture of nation’s history. Interestingly, even graphic narratives, a sub genre of comics, one of the most demeaned genre by the academia, has been used to find and unmute the voice of the marginalized. Although the combination of graphic narrative and history leaves a bad taste on the culturally refined tongue of the elitist academia, it has been recurrently experimented with. *Maus*, *Persepolis*, *The Best We Could Do*, *Palestine* testifies to not only the avant-garde experiments but also the success story behind it. The paper looks at *Grass*, a memoir by Keum Suk gendry-kim as a historical narrative and how with the use of graphic narrative the subjectivity of comfort women, previously erased in favour of patriarchal-imperialist interest, surfaces. In addition, the paper explores how graphic narrative, being a postmodern genre, helps the author challenge the previous ontological and epistemological assumptions on the nature of truth and the validity of the truth claims made in historical discourses.

**Keywords:** Graphic narrative, postmodernism, revisionism, comfort women, marginalized

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### INTRODUCTION

The critical and rhetorical practice of postmodernism has been credited with bringing about a shift in the ontological and epistemological modes of inquiry. It permeated throughout the world a climate of skepticism towards the foundation and underlying politics of the epistemic standards and traditions, established truths, and what has been conveniently tagged as commonsensical. There were visible cracks on the cemented borders that kept apart the factual and fictional, the self and the nation, popular culture and high culture, and the presence of these oppositionally placed phenomena within each other became more conspicuous. Postmodernism, as Linda Hutcheon remarks, had a “controversial relationship with history” (“Postmodern” 299). History, as postmodernism posits, is a narrative account created by someone for someone else. The act of re-presenting the past is not divested by the historian’s ideologies. Its theories focused on a contrapuntal reading of historical discourses involving a study of the ideologies underlying the ontological, epistemological

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assumptions it propagated. Historiography has been found to embed nationalist, imperialist, and patriarchal ideologies, ensuring their hegemony (). The philosophical movement was successful in raising a renewed historical consciousness that undermined the objectivity of history, and its claim of being founded on truth has been undermined by postmodernism. The endorsed culture of revision of the fundamentals pertaining to systems of knowledge extended to history as well. The interpretations through historical revisionism “dismantle the “truths”, at times mythologized, of traditional historiography” (Cattini I). All the different modes of revisionism, be it evidence-driven revisionism, significance-driven revisionism, or value-driven revisionism, focus on rewriting the officiated history. These revisions within history aren’t immune to the dominant ideologies, but they are a conscious form of accounting for the past that is aware of the inevitability of gaps in the narrative of history. As Aviezer Tucker writes on revisionist history:

One of the chief revisionist strategies has been to “make fuzzy” epistemological issues, to make the distinction between evidence-based probable knowledge of history and fiction vague and unclear. It blurs the border between historiographic truth and falsehood by claiming there can be more than a single “true” historiographic narrative. (para 6)

In addition to unsettling the foundations of previously established systems of knowledge, postmodernism has desensitized the reader to narratives that feature unusual pairings of popular and elite culture, high and low art. These vivid confrontations and interactions between diverse and, in most cases, oppositionally placed phenomena are stimulated by the postmodernist urge for border crossing. That being said, certain combinations are still beyond the horizon of the reader or academic acceptance; one is graphic narrative and history. It comes as no surprise to comic fans, who, following the underground revolution, have grown accustomed to seeing unusual combinations of the sensual and comic or trauma and comic. The trendsetter of this atypical co-mixture of history and comics/ graphic narratives was Art Spiegelman, who brought attention to the complex semiotic system of comics with his seminal work *Maus*. The work cemented the growing suspicion of the potential of the comic form which was planted with the underground comix. A graphic narrative became a medium where the impossible could be achieved. Concurring with this Art Spiegelman claims that *Maus* could only take form through the medium of comics (). Similar experiments have been conducted by Joe Sacco, Marjane Satrapi, Malik Sajid, Lila Quintero. They are historical narratives that chart the subjective's formation and growth alongside the nation's. *Grass*, the chosen text for the study, could also be placed under this category.

*Grass* is a memoir published in 2019 by Keum-suk-gendry-kim. It is an anti-war graphic novel, centering on the life of a comfort woman, Okseon Lee, a.k.a. Ok-sun, who was abducted and forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. The graphic narrative is a biography of Okseon Lee, covering the events of life from her childhood, prior to her abduction until her life during the post-war era. The features of bearing witness to a traumatic past, self-reflexive narration with the author featuring herself as a character trying to understand and narrate Ok-sun’s life, etc. closely resemble Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. But unlike *Maus*, the frame narrator in *Grass*, i.e the author, is not as emotionally invested as Artie, yet brings about a poignant narrative featuring the victimization of women during the world war. The paper looks at *Grass* as a historical narrative attempting to fill the lacuna within dominant historical discourses, which conveniently leave out the war crimes of abduction, rape, and forced prostitution of helpless women. The paper

also explores how the genre of graphic narrative helps the artistic venture of gendry-kim to problematize traditional historiography and adopt a democratic methodology toward representation.

The preface to *Grass* briefly explains the widely used term "comfort women." It is a euphemism for the Japanese word 'ianfu' which translates to prostitutes. Comfort women refers to the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery. Their treatment of comfort women was politically regulated and condoned. They not only preyed on the most "vulnerable and accessible victims" but used their rape as an oppressive weapon to further emasculate the Korean nation. This crime against women was kept under wraps until a group of survivors filed a suit against the Japanese government, seeking an official apology and compensation. Even when it was acknowledged, they weren't addressed as war crimes, nor were more information divulged on them. Evidence of this war crime is under Japanese control; some of it is probably destroyed. The available data available are either incomplete or manipulated.

In the face of this government-advocated inscriptional effacement, Ok-sun bears witness to her individual tale of suffering and oppression during the Japanese occupation of Korea. This act of bearing witness is a political act, countering the deliberate attempts by the Japanese government to erase traces of this brutality that they unleashed on helpless women. Furthermore, the political act also extends to what is accomplished through *Grass*, a multiply-embodied memoir. Although a testimony, it is devoid of the narcissism that is typical of life narratives. Her testimony exemplifies the "heteroglossic" aspect, that Emira Derbel observes within women's autobiographies. It is opposed to the focus within traditional autobiographies, initiated by male authors, on the solitary self. Instead, women's life writings are multi-voiced. Derbel writes, "the story is not of a single subject, but representative of a collectivity of women's stories through the voice of the female narrator" (2). Ok-sun's self-articulations, similarly, are representative of the collective, who have had a similar experience of the horrors of war and the inhumanity that had taken over during the war. Ok-sun in *Grass* not only narrativize her raped physical body, thereby reclaiming her autonomy, but also the imaginary body, which has been stigmatized by both her homeland and family. Through the biographical writing of Ok-sun, gendry-kim materializes the subjectivity of a previously doubly-"shadowed" objectified being. Her subjectivity is registered by giving form to the emotional truth behind her experiences. Thus, *Grass* is not just a reply to the hegemony of the imperialist nation of Japan but also to patriarchy, and thereby stands as a counter-narrative to mainstream history.

The novelty of *Grass* lies in the fact that a graphic narrative is used to render visible a group who were forced into invisibility. Even when there exist varied choices of media such as documentaries/ photographs/ films, which people consider realistic genres, gendry-kim uses the medium of graphic narrative to perform this pregnant task of remembering the overlooked and forgotten past. With Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the graphic narrative has proved itself to be a medium "fully capable of emotion, remembrance, and healing" (Zuckerman 55). The choice of the genre comes with some added benefits that align with the thematic preoccupation of the text. An artistic representation of traumatic experiences such as abduction and rape always involves an "aesthetic quandary"(55). Any other illustrations or representations, except for evidence in the form of photographs, involve the risk of trivialization or not doing justice to the experiences. Graphic narratives, even with simplistic drawings, have been found to enable authors to articulate the unrepresentable or the unspeakable. Its unorthodox format embodies a liberatory

stimulus that probes the author to authentically present their experiences without self-censoring. Moreover, by transporting the events to the unfamiliar ground of graphic narrative, the author is able to defamiliarize and achieve a distance from the events.

In addition to this, graphic narrative also gives form to a component that fails to get replicated in official history i.e emotional truth. In *Grass* when Ok-sun narrates her initial rape, the sequence shows the old ok-sun transitioning to her younger self that was raped. A gradual receding of speech could also be observed when ok-sun attempts to speak about her rape. Kate Douglas's explanation of "the language being inadequate to articulate the traumatic experience" becomes most applicable here. Each of these self portraits of ok-sun wears the same defeated, traumatized expression. The page following this transition sequence is one with only the dirtied face of ok-sun staring at the viewer/ reader with haunted eyes. This image is positioned at the center of the page, and in the background are six panels in black. The panels' silence becomes louder as the void within them is highlighted by white interstices bordering them. This helps to convey the experienced horror and inner fragmentation that occurs with such traumatic events. Following this, are three consequent pages mimicking the same panel composition and placement sans Ok-sun's image. This probably suggests the continued trauma and perhaps the repetitiveness of the act that ok-sun had to endure. Although dialogues appear on the following page, it is devoid of any images of ok-sun. This conveys the degradation of the self, the demise of her innocence, and the awful pain she had to endure in the process. As she recalls her experience of rape, ok-sun's older self is weighed down and is seen withering away with every moment of recollection. A similar representation could also be found in Satrapi's *Persepolis*. When Marji, the protagonist, recalls a bombing in her neighborhood, she cites the destruction of her neighbor Baba-Levi's house. Following the panel where she finds under the debris a hand with a familiar bracelet, which she identifies as belonging to her friend Neda, is a blank panel in black. The panel is captioned "no scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger". Hilary Chute claims that through such representation Satrapi implies that "stylized form (of graphic narrative) can represent "reality" better than realism itself" (Poharec 23). Both Gendry-kim and Satrapi "through their distorted understanding of torture and, to some extent, the unrepresentability of horror evoke the artificiality of history because nothing can be understood or explained if one does not experience it directly" ( 47)

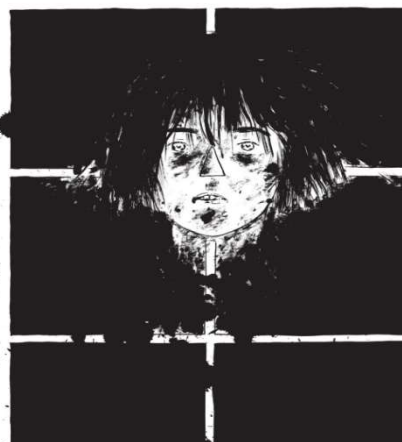


Figure 1. Gendry-kim, Keum-suk. *Grass*.

Authenticity is always an issue when it comes to the reconstruction of the past. Historical discourses are popular for their authentic representation. The simple

drawing accompanied by a concise verbal description doesn't make the graphic narrative a convincing candidate for authentic representations. However, diagrammatic representation of maps, replication of buildings from real life, and citing other sources of the narrative (a Japanese soldier's diary), add to the believability of the narrative and its authenticity "by showing the reader exactly what is being portrayed rather than just description of it" (Zuckerman 65). The testimony of ok-sun, as well as the addition of such diagrams of maps, and real buildings, makes *Grass* a biographical documentary, lending more authenticity to the narrative. Moreover, the reader is also assured of the author's commitment to accuracy when she herself travels to the sites of oppression that ok-sun mentions in her (hi)story. Gendry-kim's fastidiousness as a researcher becomes evident here. The reader is also made aware of the author's conscientious effort to accurately depict the memories of Ok-sun when she relays all the events as narrated by ok-sun. The backstory behind the scar on her hand is of the least significance in comparison to the rest of her story. Instead of resorting to the endorsed methodology within the traditional historiography of selective representation of events, gendry-kim provides a verbatim visualization of ok-sun's narration. This alerts the reader to the distortions that occur in official history, which is a strategically compiled interpretation of only selective events.

Unlike the modernist methodology of recording history, *Grass* is a self-reflexive narration of history drawing attention to the non-chronology, gaps, and misconceptions that are part and parcel of historical narratives. It is doubly mediated-the narrative that the reader's receives is the memory of the witness's memory, and the same defines the official history we consume. The appropriateness of using graphic narrative to represent ok-sun's memory becomes evident here. As Spiegelman claims, graphic narratives possess "the synthetic ability to approximate a mental language that is closer to actual human thought than either words or picture alone" (Young 672). It is aware of and represents the dislocutions, losses, absences/ gaps, and non-chronology that is intrinsic to narratives drawn from the memory. When ok-sun narrates her personal story of how she got punished for stealing persimmons fruit, the narrative abruptly changes its focus to the political context of the period, the china-japan war. Other interruptions to the narrative are also recorded in the narrative, like when the caretaker of the house of sharing takes Ok-sun away from the author. Most often the image of trees has been included when there is a break in the narrative. It is used as a connector to scenes that are temporally spaced apart. Similarly, images of the landscape and the surrounding trees, shrubs, and weeds serve as substitutes for uncertain information. For instance, when Ok-sun states, "My father was from the north. That's all I know. I don't even know what city he was from. He said somewhere near the Tumen river. He was tall and strong and my mom was about my size. She was pretty, but he was so-so" (loc.69). The gaps within the narrative is not only highlighted in the narrative but it is formalistically also captured through the gutter. *Grass* also consciously draws attention to the difficulties in acquiring information from the experienced / the witnessed. Gendry-kim shows how Ok-sun is not able to get past her exclamations about the injustice done to women like her and the need for the government to compensate them. This repetitiveness in her response is captured by the frame narrator, who in a series of panels shows the same image and response. The transparency accorded through self reflexive narration not only adds to the credibility of the narrative but also highlights the lack of it in official history.

Through graphic narrative gendry-kim is able to presence the memory of the silenced and subjugated, countering the effort of the government that tries to erase any

traces of it. This is narrativized by gendry-kim, who upon her visit to Japan can find no evidences to Ok-sun's narrative. Even the collective memory of it has been tampered with and erased by the Japanese government. *Grass* is a historic revisionism bearing witness to the injustice and seeks to fill the gap that exist within the narrative of official history. Through this process it counters both the patriarchal and imperialist attempts to present itself as a philanthropist venture. The genre's self reflexivity, the pregnant gaps/ gutter, its capacious form affording the inclusion of maps, its potential to represent the unspeakable makes the twisted lines of history readable (Chute 200).

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