

## Trauma And Postmemory In Art Spiegelman's *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*

Dr. Jasleen Kaur Sahota  
Assistant Professor Of English  
University Of Jammu  
India

---

### Abstract

*Art Spiegelman's Maus is a narrative through which the trauma of the Holocaust is remembered and transmitted across generations. This paper analyses Maus I through trauma theory and Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory to examine how catastrophic experience continue to change and shape the survivors and their children long after the historical event has ended. Maus shows that memory is fragmented, uneven, and difficult to contain within a linear story. The paper draws on trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, and argues that Vladek Spiegelman's testimony reflects the logic of traumatic memory itself. His repeated digressions, contradictions, and obsessive focus on detail suggest a past that has never been fully processed. The Holocaust does not remain in the past; it intrudes constantly into the present. The paper also examines Artie Spiegelman's role as a second-generation witness. Using Hirsch's idea of postmemory, it shows how Artie's understanding of the Holocaust is shaped by stories he did not live through but feels intensely connected to. His anxiety, guilt, and ambivalence toward his father reveal how trauma is passed on not only through narrative, but through silence, family conflict, and emotional inheritance. By bringing trauma theory and postmemory together, this paper argues that Maus resists closure or redemption. Instead, it presents memory as unstable, and trauma as something that persists across generations, shaping identity long after the original violence has ended.*

**Keywords-** Trauma, Memory, survival, narrative

---

Date of Submission: 07-12-2025

Date of Acceptance: 17-12-2025

---

### I. Introduction

*Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* recounts the experiences of Vladek Spiegelman, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust, as narrated to his son, Art Spiegelman. The narrative moves between Vladek's recollections of pre-war life, Nazi persecution, ghettos, and concentration camps, and the present-day interactions between father and son in postwar America. The book does not follow a strictly linear structure. Instead, past and present overlap, showing how the Holocaust continues to shape Vladek's behaviour and relationships even after the war has ended. The text not only narrates the history of survival, it also brings to the fore the emotional tension between Artie and his father. It is this tension through which trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next. The story is rendered through animal figures—Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, and Poles as pigs—emphasising the vulnerability of Jews, the power possessed by the Nazis, and their eventual persecution. The retelling of the father's story through the graphic novel also highlights the mediated nature of memory and representation.

*Maus* was as one of the first graphic novels to bring out the horrors of the Holocaust using the form of the graphic novel. The narrative combines visual storytelling format with memoir and testimony, thereby expanding the possibilities of the graphic novel as a medium which deals with trauma, history, and memory. The use of comics allows *Maus* to represent fragmentation, repetition, and silence in ways that conventional prose often cannot. Although comics were always thought to be trivial and therefore unsuitable for serious subjects, the publication of *Maus* legitimised the graphic novel as a form of literary and historical inquiry.

Art Spiegelman is an American cartoonist, editor, and writer, best known for *Maus*, which won a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Born in Stockholm in 1948 to Holocaust-survivor parents, Spiegelman grew up in the United States. His personal story was highly influential in giving shape to his graphic novel. He emerged from the underground comics movement of the 1960s and 1970s and later co-founded the influential comics magazine *RAW*, which made pathbreaking and defining advancements in the way the medium of the graphic novel engaged with storytelling. Spiegelman's work is marked by formal experimentation, self-reflexivity, and

his thematic concerns have been memory, trauma, and their representation. Through *Maus*, he brought autobiographical comics into dialogue with history and theory, establishing the graphic novel as a serious medium for confronting the ethical and psychological aftermath of mass violence.

## **II. Trauma And Postmemory**

Art Spiegelman's *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* does not present trauma as a finished story. It presents it as something unresolved, something that resists order. The narrative jumps back and forth between past and present. Vladek Spiegelman's memories of the Holocaust interrupt his everyday life, and his everyday habits are shaped by his experience of emerging as a survivor from the Holocaust. The book does not ask whether trauma happened. It asks how it continues.

Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma helps explain this structure. Caruth argues that trauma is defined not only by a violent event, but by the survivor's inability to fully grasp that event when it occurs.

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. Trauma is thus not so much a symptom of the unconscious as it is a symptom of history.

(Caruth 4)

Trauma, in this sense, is always belated. It returns in fragments, symptoms, and repetitions. Vladek's testimony follows this pattern. He does not narrate the Holocaust as a coherent, completed past. His memories emerge unevenly. He repeats certain details while skipping others. He sometimes grows impatient when Artie asks for clarification. These interruptions are not flaws in storytelling. They are signs of traumatic recall. Vladek's speech often collapses past and present. When he describes hunger, fear, or betrayal, the emotion feels immediate. The Holocaust is not over for him. It continues to structure how he understands the world. When he tells Artie, "If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week...then you could see what it is, friends!" (23), he is not narrating an episode from his past, rather he is reliving a lesson learned under terror. This is how trauma speaks through him.

Caruth emphasizes that trauma often speaks indirectly. The survivor is "possessed" by the memory rather than in control of it (4). Vladek does not choose when the past returns as organically his tone changes, he appears angry and distrustful when he is possessed by trauma. His memory is not organized around meaning. It falls back to survival mode and behaves accordingly.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" further clarifies Vladek's condition. Acting out occurs when the traumatised subject remains caught in repetition. The past is relived as if it were still present. The traumatized individual keeps harping on the same thing during this process. Working through, by contrast, involves gaining some distance from the trauma while acknowledging its reality (70).

In acting out, one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the repetition of traumatic scenes; in working through, one is able to gain some critical distance on the past and recognize it as past, even while acknowledging its continuing effects on the present. Acting out is related to repetition, working through to a modified repetition that is neither compulsive nor merely ritualistic.

(LaCapra 70)

Vladek is largely trapped in acting out. His Holocaust experiences have not been transformed into a distant memory of what was. They appear instead in his daily habits when he hoards food and objects. He refuses to waste anything. He becomes furious when Mala throws things away. These behaviours are not treated as quirks. Spiegelman shows them repeatedly, without apology.

LaCapra warns against judging such behaviour morally. Acting out is not a personal failure. It is a symptom of unresolved trauma. "In acting out," LaCapra writes, "the past is compulsively repeated as if it were fully present" (70). Vladek's behaviour fits this description closely. The camps have ended, but their logic remains. The graphic form further reinforces this repetition. Certain images recur: cramped spaces, piles of bodies, narrow paths. These visuals do not build toward resolution. They circle back. Trauma does not progress. It repeats. Even Vladek's storytelling reflects acting out. He avoids certain topics, then suddenly returns to them. He becomes irritated when Artie insists on detail. He wants to move on, but cannot, and this how the past intrudes. *Maus I* does not offer catharsis through narration as Vladek does not achieve peace by telling his story. Instead, the act of telling exposes how deeply the trauma remains embedded in his present life.

## **III. Trauma And The Limits Of Testimony**

*Maus I* also challenges the idea of the reliable witness. Vladek's memory is inconsistent. He contradicts himself and he sometimes misremembers details. He tells stories shaped by prejudice. Artie occasionally questions him, but these moments do not restore certainty. They expose how fragile memory is. LaCapra argues that survivor testimony exists in tension with historical accuracy. Memory is emotionally true,

but not always factually precise. *Maus I* does not attempt to resolve this tension. Spiegelman leaves contradictions in place. He refuses to smooth out his father's account. "But Pop—this is ridiculous! You're telling me something impossible. You must be mixing up some things" (84). This moment shows the son acting as a corrective voice, but the correction fails. Vladek does not revise his account. The exchange exposes the gap between historical plausibility and lived memory.

This refusal is ethical. Caruth argues that trauma resists full understanding. To impose coherence too quickly risks falsifying the experience. Vladek repeatedly interrupts himself, admitting, "I'm not sure anymore... maybe it was different" (83). Silence appears without explanation—"I don't want to talk about it" (100)—and the narrative simply moves on. The visual layout reinforces this uncertainty. Panels are crowded and speech often overlaps, as when Vladek cuts himself off mid-account: "Wait—let me tell you something else first..." (41). The book does not guide the reader toward mastery or resolution. Instead, as Vladek abruptly declares, "It's enough stories for now" (47), the narrative closes itself, leaving the reader unsettled. The text shows memory as partial and unstable. The visual layout reinforces this uncertainty. Panels are crowded. Speech bubbles overlap. Silence appears and no explanation is given for certain pronouncement. The book does not guide the reader toward mastery. It leaves the reader unsettled. Trauma, is not something that can be fully told. It can only be approached indirectly.

#### **IV. Postmemory And The Second Generation**

While trauma theory explains Vladek's experience, it does not fully explain Artie's. Artie did not live through the Holocaust. Yet it shapes his identity, his emotions, and his creative work. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory addresses this position. Hirsch defines postmemory as the relationship of the second generation to traumatic events that happened before they were born. These memories are not recalled, they are rather inherited. They come through stories, silences, and emotional patterns. Artie lives within this inheritance. He grows up listening to his father's stories of survival. He also grows up surrounded by unspoken grief. The Holocaust becomes the emotional centre of his family life, even though he did not experience it himself.

Postmemory describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch 22)

Postmemory, Hirsch argues, is shaped by proximity and distance. The second generation feels close to the trauma but lacks direct access to it. This creates anxiety and guilt. Artie compares his own struggles to his parents' suffering and finds himself wanting. This tension appears early in the text when Artie expresses frustration with his father but feels guilty for doing so. Vladek's suffering becomes a moral benchmark and Artie's pain feels insubstantial when compared to his father's trauma.

Postmemory is not transmitted only through stories. Hirsch stresses that it also travels through silence and absence (Hirsch 22). Anja Spiegelman's absence is central. Her suicide is not shown, but it shapes everything. Artie's access to his mother's past is cut off when Vladek destroys her diaries. This act becomes one of the most painful moments in the book. "You murdered her," Artie tells his father (161). This accusation reveals how postmemory is shaped by loss. Artie inherits not only stories, but gaps. Hirsch notes that postmemory often involves an intense emotional connection to fragments rather than to complete narratives (Hirsch 31). Artie's understanding of his mother's suffering is pieced together from hints, silences, and anger. This incompleteness becomes part of his trauma. The loss of Anja's voice also highlights a gendered silence. Artie inherits his father's story, but his mother's experience remains largely inaccessible. Postmemory here is uneven. Some memories are preserved while others have no way of being carried forward and therefore remain absences in the larger narrative.

Another powerful figure of postmemory is Richieu, Artie's older brother who died during the Holocaust. Artie never met him, yet Richieu dominates the family's emotional life. His photograph is preserved and his memory is respected and carried forward in discussions. Artie grows up in Richieu's shadow. He feels like a replacement and this inherited guilt is central to postmemory. Hirsch argues that the second generation often identifies with loss rather than survival (Hirsch 31). Artie's guilt does not come from something he did. He infact feels guilty that he was the one who survived whereas his brother could not live past the Holocaust. Richieu becomes a silent standard against which Artie measures himself. He cannot compete with a child who died. This burden shapes Artie's self-image and his relationship with his parents.

Postmemory also raises ethical questions. Hirsch warns that the second generation must navigate the risk of appropriation. How does one tell a story that is not one's own? Artie is acutely aware of this problem. He worries about using his father's suffering for art, and he is also concerned about his own authority. These doubts are not resolved rather they become part of the narrative. Artie does not assume narrative authority; instead, he asks, "You want I should tell your story?" (14), foregrounding consent and uncertainty from the outset. He

frames the project as a long-held but unresolved burden—"I've been wanting to do this book for a long time" (6)—rather than as an act of confidence. Even when he insists, "I want to tell your story, the way it really happened" (14), the narrative repeatedly demonstrates the impossibility of such transparency. These doubts are not resolved. Instead, they become part of the structure of the text, reflecting Hirsch's claim that postmemory involves responsibility without ownership.

## **V. Animal Representation As A Language Of Trauma And Postmemory**

The animal figures in *Maus I*—Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, and Poles as pigs—are often read as allegory. While this interpretation is useful, it remains incomplete if taken on its own. When viewed through the lenses of trauma and postmemory, these animal forms function less as fixed symbols and more as a visual language shaped by fear, survival, and inherited memory. The animals do not simplify the Holocaust rather they represent the effect that the Holocaust has had on their psyche. Trauma theory helps explain why Spiegelman turns to animals rather than realistic human faces. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma resists direct representation because the event itself overwhelms understanding and returns indirectly, through displacement and metaphor (Caruth 4). The animal figures in *Maus I* operate as such a displacement. They do not replace human suffering. They create a necessary distance that allows the story to be told at all.

This logic is visible in how Vladek describes his experience of persecution. He does not speak in abstract terms of ideology or politics. "For the Germans, we were just vermin," he remarks (52). The language is blunt. The metaphor is not imposed by the artist alone; it is how the survivors felt and thereby resulted in this animalistic representation of humans. Vladek's memories are not recalled calmly. They are relived. In this sense, the animal figures reflect the logic of traumatic perception rather than symbolic intent. The cats are not simply Nazis; they are predators. The mice are not simply Jews; they are beings defined by constant vulnerability. This is how the world appears under extreme threat. Survival becomes a matter of hiding, running, and avoiding capture. The visual grammar of predator and prey expresses this reality more forcefully than psychological explanation could.

The animal imagery also shapes how postmemory operates in the text. Marianne Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory is mediated. The second generation inherits trauma through images as much as through stories (Hirsch 22). Artie does not access the Holocaust directly. He encounters it through his father's testimony and through Spiegelman's drawings. The animal figures become part of this inheritance. They structure how Artie imagines a past he did not live. This mediation is made explicit when Artie reflects on his distance from his father's experience. "I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams," he admits (44). The statement captures the core of postmemory. Artie is emotionally invested, but he knows his access is limited. The animal figures acknowledge this gap. They signal that what we are seeing is not memory itself, but a representation shaped by fear, distance, and reconstruction. Hirsch argues that postmemory involves "imaginative investment and projection" rather than direct recall (22). The animal forms make this process visible. They show that Artie's relationship to the Holocaust is already filtered. He belongs to the category of the mouse, but not in the same way as his father. His Jewish identity is shaped by inherited trauma rather than lived persecution. The animal imagery reflects this difference without collapsing it.

## **VI. Conclusion**

*Maus I* presents trauma and postmemory as ongoing conditions rather than completed processes. Through Caruth, we see how Vladek's trauma remains unassimilated, returning through repetition and behaviour. Through LaCapra, we understand this repetition as acting out rather than working through. Through Hirsch, we see how this unresolved trauma is passed on to Artie, shaping his identity through postmemory. The book refuses to offer closure. It does not promise healing. Instead, it shows trauma as something that survives survival itself. Through the play of silence and memory, the past continues to intrude.

## **Works Cited**

- [1]. Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, And History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- [2]. Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, And Postmemory*. Harvard UP, 1997.
- [3]. Lacapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.
- [4]. Spiegelman, Art. *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*. Pantheon Books, 1986.