

Nayar, Pramod K.

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THE GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AND AFFRONT/IER AESTHETICS: ART SPIEGELMAN'S IN THE SHADOW OF NO TOWERS

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PRAMOD K. NAYAR

Abstract

This essay argues that Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* explores the making of an aesthetics of the affront/ier. Affront/ier aesthetics in Spiegelman has three components, each addressing one aspect of the events of 9/11 and subsequent events: the mediated morphing of tragedy into travesty, the trauma aesthetic that frames the artistic self and finally the shifts between the monumentality and kitsch. The first section of the paper demonstrates how Spiegelman represents what he terms the travesty of a tragedy in the form of, first, the media-driven travesty of national symbols and icons and, secondly, the pareidoliac and parodic conflation of the Towers with human faces. The second section addresses Spiegelman's trauma-aesthetic where the artistic self is under pressure and whose paranoiac body is embedded within the jingoistic fervour of the moment. In the final section, I turn to Spiegelman's sublime where the monumental and mundane seem to intersect. With each of these modes, the paper demonstrates, an affront is made visible and a frontier breached.

Key words

Spiegelman; In the Shadow of No Towers; trauma; affront/ier; monumentality; tragedy; sublimity

This essay argues that *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Art Spiegelman's 10-page board book (2004), documents multiple affronts to a nation, the nation's interpretation of the events of 9/11 and the warmongering that ensues subsequently, but also turns the very idea of "affront" around. While 9/11 was the breaching of a frontier – of the presumed security and inviolability of America but also of a certain mode of mediating tragedy – Spiegelman suggests that the instrumentalization of the events of 9/11 is an affront upon/to individuals and to American cultures of reporting, political response and the very process of meaning-making.

Spiegelman, famous for his *Maus*, responds to the events of 9/11 and its subsequent media-generated, and unsettling, discourses of national identity, Islamophobia and warmongering. *In the Shadow of No Towers* is a large-dimension board book printed on heavy card stock in a two-page-spread format, and reading it is itself a one-of-a-kind tactile experience, demanding some deft maneuvering to handle its size and shape. In *Maus* he narrated, in the form of received stories

from his father, the trauma of his parents incarcerated in Auschwitz and the legacies he, Spiegelman, inherited from his father (who survived). *In The Shadow of Two Towers* is about his own experiential moment: witnessing, living through 9/11, and reliving it endlessly on the television screens. In the work, Spiegelman maps his own personal grief, paranoia and anxiety onto the national anxieties whipped up post-9/11, and vice versa. The drawings take recourse to his trademark caricature, returns briefly to his animal allegorization from *Maus* (where the Jews are mice and the Nazis are cats). Elsewhere too Spiegelman uses characters from earlier events and work – for instance, the Katzenjammer Kids and a Little Nemo strip. *In The Shadow of Two Towers* is at once an autobiography and the biography of a nation-about-to-go-to-war, even as Spiegelman deplores the turning of a tragedy into first a media spectacle and then an excuse to wage war. Spiegelman maps the transformation of the tragedy of 9/11 into profit-making kitsch, some of which served the politicians but also enabled artists and storytellers like him to market the events to the nation and the world. While the politicians utilized the events for a clearly imperialist war, Spiegelman's work foregrounded his personal trauma, but in the form of what a review termed "a lavishly produced, eye-popping collection [which] costs only \$20 – a bargain for a work of comics art this sophisticated (and likely to become a collector's item)" (Thill). For Spiegelman, what rankles is that the changes and policies enacted in the aftermath of 9/11, in the guise of national security, have undermined the foundations of American democracy, its principles and its social fabric.

The subject of this essay is this making of an "affront/ier" through the disguising and burlesquing of a tragedy into a war-discourse and xenophobia. It argues that, first, Spiegelman's sense of the *tragedy* of 9/11 – driven by his experience as an eyewitness – is presented as his feeling of being affronted by what he terms the tragedy's "travesty" in the blatant misuse of the events by America. Second, the affront is to the sense of the artistic self. In order to capture in words and in pictures, as befits the graphic medium, Spiegelman, this essay suggests, develops an aesthetics of the affront/ier. This aesthetic takes recourse to the traumatic sublime but moves beyond its traditional expression. Further, despite attention to the temporalities in Spiegelman's work, not enough has been said about the *crisis* in self-representation that Spiegelman documents, a crisis that he turns into a narrative device of the affront/ier.

I expand the term "affront" through Mark McKinney's concept of the "affrontier" which he defines as "the limit, beyond which a cartoon or a comic is perceived or treated as an affront to the nation, its symbols and its essential components, including the army, the government and religion" (176–7). It is "a way of constructing and maintaining an identity in the face of external criticism and internal disagreement" (177). McKinney continues: "the term "frontier" is used ... in the literal sense, but also in a figurative sense, given that the affront/ier is linked to the national frontier, with its physical (geographical boundaries, border police) as well as virtual aspects" (177). The affront, in my reading, is the breaching and travesty of a boundary, a frontier, of meaning-making processes, of the integrity of a government's response to and responsibility for its people, and finally to the aesthetic possibilities of rendering the events and their aftermath.

I therefore employ ‘affront’ and ‘affront/ier’ as cognate terms with each feeding into/off the other. With this, Spiegelman makes a meta-comment on the limits of the comic book form he employs to question the affrontery with which the state has travestied a tragedy into a war-situation.

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (serialized 1980-1991) brought the medium of the graphic novel to the subject of the horrific and the tragic when it presented the Holocaust in a hitherto unthinkable “demotic” form (Doherty 1996). Demonstrating how even such terrible events can be narrated to powerful effect through the medium thus far treated solely as ‘the funnies’, *Maus* pioneered an entire canon of works dealing with violence, genocide, environmental disaster, health/sickness and other traumatic subjects. (In his own work, *Breakdowns* (1977) Spiegelman explored subjects like mental health issues.)¹

The use of the board book format in *In the Shadow of No Towers* has been an unusual one, since the format is more commonly associated with children’s books. Critics have interpreted the use of this form as an allegory for materiality itself. Michelle Ann Abate argues:

Spiegelman would like nothing more than to escape from or at least to transcend the material, but he cannot. His traumas originated in and are being perpetuated by physical objects: television sets, newspapers, American flags. The presentation of *No Towers* as a board book both echoes and extends this interest in physicality. The heavy card stock used to construct the text calls attention to itself. (2016: 46)

Commentators have classified the work as “graphic autofiction” (Brandt 2014). Others find in the work an instantiation of what Paul Virilio called the “aesthetics of disappearance” (Bray 2008). Hillary Chute sees echoes of *Maus* in *In the Shadow of No Towers*: in both, “characters brushing up against, and trying to make sense of, brutal historical realities” (2007: 229), while for Karen Espiritu, the work symbolizes the outsized and outlandish “which the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center have come to epitomize in our cultural imaginary” (2006: 180). Spiegelman, writes Christina Meyer, “uses the medium to critically reflect on what might be called “trauma as a commonplace” to explain the attacks in 2001, the implications such a “framing” might have for our understanding of the events, and the role of media- or rather media-generated images-in meaning-making process” (2010: 480). Like Chute, Lydia Ferguson noted the fragmented, episodic nature of the narrative, and highlights the personal and collective trauma of the events, even as Spiegelman foregrounds the appropriation of the events for its own purposes:

The more the author dwells on the terrorist attacks, the more he begins to view the U.S. government as a part of the terrorist cell responsible for the deaths of thousands of people. For Spiegelman, 9/11 was not only a day that altered American history and consciousness but also one on which “the world ended. (Ferguson 2012: 384)

Temporality is a major theme in the work, as Chute, Kuhlman (2007), Orbán (2007), Versluys (2007) and others note, while tracing how Spiegelman's art work seeks to communicate multiple dimensions of this temporality about events that have been seen – and projected – as transcending both time and space (Simpson 2006). In the criticism around the work, however, scant attention has been paid to *how* the “travesty” – Spiegelman's own term – of the events of 9/11 has been aesthetically embodied – a gap this essay seeks to fill.

1. Tragedy into Travesty

Spiegelman's affront/ier aesthetic that captures how the USA transformed a tragedy into a travesty works through two principal components. In the first, Spiegelman shows how national symbols and icons are employed in kitschy fashion in the mass media and political rhetoric in ways that constitute a travesty of the tragedy of 9/11. In the second, he takes recourse to a synecdochic and pareidolic representational aesthetic that enables him to foreground the erasure of the human in the mediated frenzy of nationalism, warmongering and mass consumption of the 9/11 images.

1.1 Travesty National Symbols

The affront/ier aesthetic in Spiegelman focuses on the role of the media in the circulation of 9/11. Three icons – television, the flag, cowboy boots – are employed to demonstrate how a tragedy has been travestied.

In one of the final textboxes of the work, Spiegelman writes:

And September '04? Cowboy boots drop on Ground Zero as New York is transformed into a stage set for the Republican Presidential Convention, and Tragedy is transformed into Travesty. (10)

What arrests us here is Spiegelman's own use of the word “travesty.” From the etymology, we understand that it means a burlesque or parody of a serious literary work. But it also has common origins with “travestire”, meaning “to disguise” and “to clothe in another man's habit”, as the *OED* informs us. It implies a certain ridiculousness (“Dressed so as to be made ridiculous; burlesqued”). Given Spiegelman's predilection for unearthing variant meanings – his invoking of “storeying” to describe comics is a case in point (cited in Kuhlman 2007: 850) – the use of “travesty” in the work gives us cause for reflection.

On page 1, Spiegelman offers us a set of three panels, two shaped as television screens, and the third depicting Spiegelman watching one such screen. We first encounter the smoking Towers, imaged very like a photograph. A yellow dotted line proceeds across the top of the panel, extending across the gutter into the next panel/TV. The next one shows the yellow line scything across a TV anchor's scalp and a banner behind him which shows the word “Attack” in repetition. The text box for this panel reads: “Maybe it's just a question of

scale. Even on a large TV, the Towers aren't much bigger than, say, Dan Rather's head" (1).

Later, where we meet Spiegelman watching a screen filled with the American flag alone, and the text box says, "logos on the other hand, look enormous on television" (1). Spiegelman is already burlesquing, in the opening moments of his work, the "tragedy" of 9/11 by comparing the televised Towers to a TV anchor's head, noting that commercial logos are significantly larger than the Towers, and by terming the American national flag a brand/logo. The cartoon serves as an affront to the national symbol, but also signals the fact that national symbols have been used indiscriminately, as spectacle, after 9/11 to fuel patriotic fervour. A second order of signification – beyond the burlesque – is also visible in this set of three panels. Spiegelman suggests that the events of 9/11 were transformed into a disguise, a pretence, for warmongering.

Spiegelman elaborates on this sense of travesty when he draws Spiegelman-the-mouse (from his celebrated *Maus*) lies asleep at his desk.² He is flanked by Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush, the former wielding a bloody sword and the latter carrying a flag and a revolver (2). Spiegelman writes in thick, black upper-case letters in a textbox under this image: "Equally terrorized by Al Qaeda and by his own government..." (2). We later see Bush and Rumsfeld mounted on an eagle swooping across the top of a page. The Towers themselves serve as borders of the page, although the left tower-cum-border is melting and fading. The text box at the top of the tower says: "unbeknownst to him, brigands suffering from war fever have since hijacked those tragic events." Later, the American flag is described first as a "war banner", and then drawn as a carpet under which Spiegelman tries to hide (with the comment "I should feel safer under here, but damn it, I can't see a thing", 7). That is, the media assault has breached the borders of his hiding space, penetrated into the corners of his consciousness so that his very subjectivity – "feel[ing] safer" – has been infringed upon. Each of these instances, I propose, constitutes travesties, cumulatively amounting to an affront/ier. A disaster has been travestied, so to speak, into a spectacle beamed into each home and consciousness.

The image shows a NYC street with brightly coloured and patterned cowboy boots – icons associated with Texas and embedded in a historical cultural economy involving migrant (Mexican) labour, animals and movie stars and tourists (Gibson 2014), a state of which George W. Bush, the US President at the time of 9/11, was once Governor – raining down on New Yorkers. In the forefront are four figures with mice heads, recalling Spiegelman's *Maus*, and many of them have eyes staring in either fear or bewilderment at the shoe-bombing from the air. At the top of the box is a line from W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939": "the unmentionable odour of death offends the September night" (10).

Auden's line captures the sense of despair and tragedy in an event of this degree and kind. However, the effect of this line positioned on top of the box, with the boots raining down, significantly alters the impact of that line. Spiegelman composes two text boxes before he introduces the term "travesty." In one he informs us that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Americans waited for the next wave of the terrorist attack. The desolate Americans found solace, he says, in poetry

and comics. Spiegelman suggests that even in 2003, decades after Auden's poem, composed incidentally in New York upon hearing of the German attack on Poland, "the 'unmentionable odour of death' *still* offends" (Spiegelman 10, emphasis in original). But Spiegelman also notes that in these two years, America "squandered [its] chances to bring the community of nations together", implying the tragedy is now being *reviewed* for the opportunity it presented, and which was lost (10).

The synesthetic incorporation in *words* – since smell is not captured within the printed-and-drawn account of war/death or even (stinky) boots – is itself a travesty. The smell of a "regular" September night has been travestied through the intrusion of another smell, the smell of ash and destruction – in the aftermath of 9/11 cannot be captured in the book format, but assails the artist as he tries to depict the events.

The national flag described as a "war banner" – where the "banner" could also imply the celebration or pronouncement of an event – is a powerful symbol of this travesty (7). A sign that was to unite the nation has been made to serve an entirely different, and dishonourable, purpose. Spiegelman proposes that the flag divides rather than unites – those opposed to the war and those in favour of it – and transforms the solemnity and joy symbolized in the flag into tacky, commercialized and jingoistic signage. He asks: "why did those provincial American flags have to sprout out of the embers of Ground Zero? Why not...a globe?" (7). Spiegelman, therefore, is calling into question why and how the 9/11 tragedy enabled a provincialism rather than a globalism. The flag's further transformation into a carpet on the same page implicitly references the metaphor of "sweeping under the carpet", indicating the concealment, secrecy and conspiracy that followed 9/11. But Spiegelman also depicts the flag's "stars and stripes, "a symbol of unity that many people see as a war banner" as the colours of terrorist alerts. He moves from "orange alert" through "red alert" to "red, white and blue alert" which, he writes, signals "virtual certitude of terrorist attack". Here Spiegelman changes the semiotic codes of the alert by transforming the American flag's colours itself into an alert-system. Whether these colours and their meaning ("virtual certitude of terrorist attack") gestures at the *American* terrorist acts on foreign soil that followed 9/11 is, in Spiegelman's inverted semiotics of alert codes, a moot point.

Spiegelman here is not dismissing the tragedy of 9/11, rather he is showing how the events that ought to have reaffirmed individual and collective faith in the world, the nation and the flag, were hijacked to enable fake news, jingoism and packaged war sentiments. This is a travesty of the tragedy of 9/11. What did however get swept under the carpet was the American sense of the self, a self now cowering in fear.

Under the banner/flag, the US President and government have become akin to the very terrorists who brought down the Towers, Spiegelman implies. In a deliberate conflation of categories, and echoing Bush's famous line, "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists," Spiegelman makes it hard to see the American state as distinct from the "rogue" state that entered the rhetoric in the post-9/11 era.

The frontier between dignified mourning and jingoistic nationalism coded as war has been crossed, and Spiegelman finds the *disguising* of a genuine tragedy

as an excuse for war-driven nationalism despicable. For instance, he objects to the way he is not allowed to mourn the tragedy as would be appropriate, an affront, no less to the dignity of mourning and to the lives lost on that day. In a stunning series of panels, he enunciates this affront/ier to the true meaning of 9/11 and its tragedy. Spiegelman does so by showing how national symbols are manipulated by the media to render a massive tragedy into a kitschy spectacle.

1.2 Parody, Synecdoche and Pareidolia

Exactly halfway through the book we meet the image of a glowing tower, skeletal, shorn of the concrete, topped by a text box: “Leave me alone, damn it! I am just trying to comfortably relive my September 11 trauma but you keep interrupting” (5) Spiegelman then paints the Towers in gradually disappearing shape/structure. One text box at the foot of the diminishing tower reads: “Like that mind-numbing 2002 ‘anniversary’ even, when you tried to wrap a flag around my head and suffocate me” (5). Later, the tower is wavy, swaying before the collapse, one presumes, and the text box, again at the top, reads: “you rob from the poor and give to your pals like a parody of Robin Hood while distracting me with your damn oil war” (5). Later, the wavy tower is paler, overwritten by shadows and smoke in the shape of human faces, as though the falling Towers are palimpsests over which the human tragedy has been inscribed. The text box, again at the foot, reads: “Then the recent elections – OW! I’ve gotta shut my eyes and concentrate to still see the glowing bones of those Towers...” (5).

Spiegelman’s representation of the affront/ier works brilliantly here. First, there is the complaint that one cannot relive trauma uninterruptedly, implying a disrespect (affront) to the very act of mourning. Second, the image of the suffocating flag: the flag serves as a mask – a theatrical device, or a *disguise* – under which Spiegelman suffocates. The disguising of the tragedy of the Towers as jingoistic nationalism is in the fullest sense of “disguise,” a travesty of the tragedy because the Towers have been used as a cover-up, a disguise and a mask to conceal the true intentions beneath them: war. The oil-war referenced in a later panel is the true face beneath the disguise of the tragedy of 9/11. Third, when Spiegelman invokes the parody of Robin Hood by the American politicians, he is appropriating a stereotype for political purposes, what Simon Dentith would identify as the key function of the parody: “the polemical allusive imitation of a preceding text that characterizes parody [that has] its polemic directed to the world rather than the preceding text” (2000: 18). In this burlesque of the heroic tale of Robin Hood, in contemporary America, the government steals from the poor and affords more privileges to its rich pals. The mourning audience is “distracted” by the oil war waged in the name of the nation, while the plunder of the poor continues. Later, the Towers are written over by terrified, howling faces in the form of smoky, spiraling shadows. (Two additional panels running down the left side of the page extend this theme of faces inscribed on the Towers.)

The pareidoliac work of this fourth panel forces us to see not the Towers but the humans who died in them, while the government uses the Towers for its own nefarious purposes. Pareidoliac reading occurs when, across indistinct, unknown

and unknowable faces, we evolve the mental image of the human. If we knew the character, if the face had a name attached, it would not be pareidolia. Pareidolia is the foundation for a universal face, an unnamed but recognizably *human* face. Meg Jensen argues that in reading pareidoliacally, “with minimum information, [we] ascribe not only a face but a mood to such an object” (2016: 184). For Jensen, hybrid narratives such as the *bildungsroman* and misery memoir “open a frontier that gives a schematic but entirely recognizable face to human rights and the legacies of its violations” (185).

The faces *are* the mood of the collapsing Towers (I shall return to this imposition of faces on the melting Towers for a different argument later). Spiegelman implies that we should see the human loss rather than the collapse of the Towers. If the act of terrorism destroyed the humans in the buildings, the war subsequently did the same, because it dehumanized and anonymized the Americans who opted for the war, as it did the terrorists who piloted the planes. The anonymizing of the human losses in the process of warmongering and nationalist sloganeering is an affront to the individuals and their loved ones, suggests Spiegelman.

The “glowing bones” image of the tower synecdochically invokes the men and women who burnt to death in the Towers, but the synecdoche is also aligned with the *imprint* or *design* of the falling Towers on the eyes and minds of the witnesses: “I’ve gotta shut my eyes and concentrate to still see the glowing bones of those Towers...” (5). What Spiegelman is getting at is: even (or especially) when the American closes her/his eyes, the falling Towers stay imprinted on the mind, thanks to the power of the media that has beamed the scene repeatedly into every home. In other words, the border between sleep and consciousness has also been breached because the falling Towers are a persistent ocular presence in their lives. It is a scene in constant replay mode. The identity of the American is now defined in terms of the endless consumption of the images which Spiegelman takes as an affront.

The “face” of the enemy is the Muslim, an affront, Spiegelman implies, to the identity of the Muslim.³ That is, pareidoliac reading is what the USA also performed when it imposed a Muslim’s face – any Muslim face, in fact, so that whether Arab or Afghan did not matter – on the act of terrorism, and inscribed a terrorist face on the Muslim in what is clearly, in Spiegelman’s view, a portability of race itself. In this pareidoliac representation, Spiegelman has literally *drawn* the affront/ier, which is the disguising of the tragedy at the cost of the dead. The pareidolia here, just like the “glowing bones” of the Towers, serves as a reminder that we perhaps need to see the human cost of 9/11 rather than be distracted by the rhetoric of nationalism, terrorism and war. Occurring exactly midway through the book, thereby indicating a turning or pivotal point in the narrative, Spiegelman’s deft use of pareidolia reinforces the argument implicit in *In the Shadow of No Towers*: the making of an affront/ier through the disguising and burlesquing of a tragedy.

There is one more powerful instance of the morphing of tragedy into travesty in the text. Close to the end of the work, in one set of panels, Spiegelman begins by informing us that their seventeen-year-old cat died, and they have adopted another one very similar to the dead Zazou, and the new kitten sits on Spiege-

Iman's lap, with Zazou's portrait in the background. Then begins a process of displacement: Spiegelman's head is replaced by a lampshade, and his head now adorns the lamp (9). The text speaks of a "benign form of 'displacement,'" which he then allegorizes into something more: "In a more sinister form, it's America's latest craze, like, remember how we demolished Iraq instead of Al Qaeda" (9). Later, Spiegelman is in the place of the cat, and the cat is reading *The New York Times* with its headline, "WMD found in Baghdad Litter Box". Later, Spiegelman's head is in his hand, and there is a cigarette where his head ought to be on his neck, then a shoe where his head ought to be, and then a mouse-head replaces the human head, and the kitten is flung away. The text boxes cite instances of the displacement of the tragedy and the subsequent war. The news reports are on less serious matters such as Martha Stewart and the ban on smoking in NYC bars when it should be, Spiegelman implies, on the toxins released into the air on 9/11 and Vice President Dick Cheney's links – he was CEO, 1995-2000 – with oil giant Halliburton. This, in line with Spiegelman's emphasis thus far, is another affront to not just the tragedy of 9/11 but the entire nation itself, being fooled by the *disguise* of terrorism, the minor (in comparison) misdemeanors of Martha Stewart and the risks from passive smoking when there were far more serious concerns like NYC's toxic air, the links of national leaders with corporate giants who benefited from the war-on-terror, and the war itself. "Displacement," as Spiegelman terms it, is deflection, a parody of the true condition of the nation. When his head is repeatedly displaced and replaced by shoes, lampshades, cigarettes, and cat and mouse-head, Spiegelman is allegorizing the loss of rationality, its displacement by fatuous and vacuous issues, lies and misrepresentation. The events being reported and the nation's actions – war, contracts to Halliburton – are affronts to sanity (in one panel Spiegelman, now wearing a mouse-head, says "this gang in power gets me so mad, I could scream", 9) and to national identity itself, suggests Spiegelman, when real issues and concerns are disguised as the innocuous.

In the elongated panel bordering these six displacement panels, a skeletal hand holds four playing cards. One shows George W. Bush as Joker, the others are of Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and John Ashcroft, costumed as monsters in space helmets. The panel is titled "The Architects of Armageddon," with a line beneath it: "By their faces shall ye know them," parodying the Bible, "Wherefore by their fruits you shall know them" (Matthew 7: 20). If the Biblical lines cautioned people against false prophets (who would produce false fruits), Spiegelman shows the actual displacement: the faces of fake leaders have replaced the faces on the cards. These are the faces whom we recognize, but who mislead. The faces are a "travestir," or disguise, wherein Bush and Co., mask their true natures and pretend to be somebody else. In the process of such disguising and displacement, the country has been led astray.

The first affront/ier is the shift from tragedy to travesty.

2. The Trauma-Aesthetic and the Artistic Self

Spiegelman centers the artist's anxiety in the midst of a national tragedy, producing what Jenn Brandt terms "graphic autofiction" (2014). In this process of centering his life and trauma, he also expresses, commentators note, a love for NYC. Thus, the book is about *his* traumatic experience, but is also a recall of, the events of 9/11 that destroyed the Towers, leading Karen Espiritu to argue that Spiegelman is clearly nostalgic about and has an "ambivalent affection" for the Towers. His later despair and depression emanate from this ambivalence from which he can only escape by drawing comics (Espiritu 2007: 181). Indeed, the pages' absence of a discernable sequentiality reflects the frayed, paranoid – "the sky is falling feeling," as Spiegelman puts it – state of the artist's mind (Ferguson 2012).

A sequence of panels shows Spiegelman altering his appearance in the wake of 9/11. Initially clean-shaven, he then is drawn as bearded, then clean shaven again. If "travesty" means to be in disguise, to be in somebody else's clothes, Spiegelman undertakes an intentional travesty of his identity as a (white) American by growing a beard akin to that of the traditional Muslims. In the process, he also performs a travesty of the traditional Muslim identity by pretending to be like them. The text says:

I was clean-shaven before Sept. 11. I grew a beard while Afghans were shaving off theirs. But after some "bad reviews" I shaved it off again. [...] Issues of self-representation have left me slack-jawed! (2)

Self-reflection merges with the other-reflection, a merger with the "enemy", so to speak, as Spiegelman attempts to refashion himself in the image of the most derided physiognomy of the era: the bearded Muslim. Jenn Brandt reading this sequence writes:

Spiegelman identifies with other bodies – both nationally and not – and through the nationalising of other bodies in his works. By both separating from and also identifying with other bodies, Spiegelman demonstrates how subjects are formed not only by personal circumstance, but also within historical, political, and cultural frames. (73)

The artist's paranoid body is produced within the crucible of national identity, jingoism, terrorism and warmongering. In Spiegelman's self-representation, his body mirrors those whom he is supposed to see, if American discourse after 9/11 was to be believed, as enemies. In the process, he implies that the so-called enemies are also, perhaps, produced by and in American bodies. Thus, America produces its own and its "others", so to speak. By turning away from the "national" calamity, by switching between the American self and the "enemy" other, Spiegelman's traumatized author-figure produces an affront/ier.

In the last panel of this same sequence, Spiegelman draws himself as a mouse, again recalling his celebrated earlier text, *Maus*. The frontier between animal

and human has been breached in this self-representation, necessitated by the dehumanization of the individual by the nation's rhetoric ("us versus them") and practice (war).

The Spiegelman-as-Muslim self-portrait, with a beard and all, presents an affront/ier at another level. It recalls to individual and collective memory the fact that the 9/11 hijackers were trained in the USA, had been living in and a part of *America* for years. Their heinous act was plotted, prepared for and facilitated by their location in the USA. As Muslims *in America*, they constitute, post-9/11, an affront to the very culture, country and people that accepted them. When Spiegelman *becomes*, however temporarily, a Muslim with his beard, he implicitly signals the dramatic tension between the Americanized (or pretend-Americanized, maybe?) Muslim and the Muslim who plotted against the Americans when living in their midst. Spiegelman is employing here the figure of prosopopoeia, face-making.

However, this prosopopoeia is itself an affrontery. The traditional trope of prosopopoeia is "an imaginative gesture whereby someone who is absent or dead is brought back to life through an act of language" (Miller 1990: 47). It is also a vacillation between the self and the other, giving (a) face to a voiceless entity (Mikkonen 1996). It is also simultaneously a de-facement and a dis-figure. It implies, for J. Hillis Miller, "a 'disfiguring' of the face and figure of the other, or the ascription of a consciousness like my own or different from my own to an appearance in the perceptual field" (cited in Mikkonen 322). Spiegelman's assumption that he can take on, even temporarily, the face of the other, is itself a troubling affront because it implies that one don a Muslim identity at will, although Spiegelman's Jewish roots that are recalled, along with his iconic *Maus* in the characterization of his-self with a mouse-head, complicates the process of face-making.

When Spiegelman puts on the bearded face, he is offering a comment on this national-level prosopopoeia that was a travesty of several identities, American and Muslim, terrorist and innocent (Muslim) civilian. The prosopopoeia, then, is part of what Feldman terms the "trauma-aesthetic" (2004), wherein Spiegelman tries to come to grips with his own response to not just 9/11 but to what came after. Spiegelman draws (on) a face of the Muslim(s) who are *deemed* to be terrorists and attacked by the Americans. Any individual, simply by virtue of being a Muslim, or even being bearded, was invoked as the equivalent of, or similar to, the dead terrorist(s) – a clear travesty of the individual in favour of a collective identity. That is, in the patriotic fervour and hatemongering in the wake of 9/11, the dead (and therefore absent) terrorist's face was superimposed on every bearded individual, thereby troping and imaginatively constructing them as terrorists.

Spiegelman's trauma-aesthetic creates a narrative about the trauma and its subsequent iterations in his head by mixing up temporalities (as Martha Kuhlman has demonstrated, 2007). In Katalin Orbán's interpretation, he also aligns the immaterial televisual with the material, an "uneasy relationship of *No Towers* to the eerie irreality of the televisual sublime and to 'tele-suffering'" (2007: 72). Orbán attributes this "generosity toward nontelevisual experience" (73) to Spiegelman's declared "rooted cosmopolitanism" (4). For Orbán, Spiegelman's

“return to materiality clearly contests rather than mimics the mainstream mediated representation of the event” (79). Spiegelman shifts between the mediated event and the personal experience, between the aesthetic (of representing it) and the materiality of the loss, the tragedy and the aftermath of 9/11. As an artist he finds himself unable to escape the event’s “traumatic temporality” (Chute 2007: 231). The past – which, commentators have noted, include the Holocaust, as extended from his earlier *Maus* – and present merge, especially when Spiegelman marks a parallel between the smells in Auschwitz as recalled by his father and the smells that he, Spiegelman, encounters in post-9/11 NYC.

While I concede the above arguments about mixed temporalities and the return to a materiality (Orbán), *In the Shadow of No Towers* does far more in terms of the trauma-aesthetic. When speaking of the artist’s crisis in self-representation and its dynamic with the mediated iteration of the events of 9/11, Spiegelman foregrounds the body of the artist, as we have already seen in the episode of the beard, the body being crucial in the trauma-aesthetic, as Feldman notes in the case of slave testimony:

The testifying ex-slave still needs to support his speech by virtualizing the violence he has been exposed to in the performance of the body. His speech and truth is precipitated from the mass of the body scarred by violence ... In the slave’s testimonial performance, this would be the vertical descent of subjecthood back into the primordial landscape of the racialized body in the aftermath of the giving of testimony. (190)

Feldman adds:

The exposure of the scarred body in the abolitionist oration stands in relation to the exposure of the slave’s body as commodity on the auction block. (191)

Adapting Feldman’s exposition of the trauma-aesthetic, I note that Spiegelman opens with his corporeal experience of 9/11: “my wife, my daughter and I are rushing from the bomb site. We hear a roar, like a waterfall, and look back. The air smells of death...” (1). Two senses are foregrounded here: 9/11 in Spiegelman’s recall, and subsequent documentation *as a witness*, returns to the sound and smells of the events. But the recall does not end with this capture and recall of the sensorial experience of 9/11. The very act of documentation in Spiegelman’s self-conscious narrative is grounded in the artist’s body. Spiegelman writes:

I’m hunched over the drawing table in my Lower Manhattan studio, with my fingers tightly crossed... It’s hard to hold a pen this way...”(1).

The emphasis on bodily comportment and discomfort, from seating position to the pen-grip, asks us to note how visceral the memory and the attempt to narrativize the memory is. Any telling of the story of his witnessing the tragedy demands, Spiegelman suggests, and forces him to *perform* the disaster in and

through his body. The emphasis on the sound-smell and subsequent corporeality of writing/drawing *is* this performance by the witnessing body. To testify to 9/11, then, is to perform his scarred body. The affront to the nation is linked to the visceral affront Spiegelman experiences even days later when he wishes to write/draw the event as an artist. The trauma-aesthetic conflates the corporeal-material of witness-experience and the recalling-artist experience. An affront/ier has been created here when the national, globally televised, tele-disaster is *affirmed* in and through the body of the artist himself.

I forward this argument based also on the location of Spiegelman's verbal texts in the book. The account of sensorial experience and the corporeal act of the recall-writing are given as text boxes in panels that has no human body. Instead, Spiegelman places these text boxes *on* the image of the glowing, swaying, collapsing Towers themselves.

The trauma-aesthetic works in a palimpsestic fashion where an account of the corporeal experience of the events is written over the collapsing "body" of the Towers themselves. One notes that the traumatized body of the artist is not an image inscribed on the body of the Towers, but is present only as a *verbal* account of this traumatized body. The bodies of the two Towers are *disappearing* (and it is in the present continuous because Spiegelman draws *fading* Towers). The body of the artist has *disappeared*, except as the verbal narrative in the text boxes. The Towers remain the subject of his account in the form of an image, just as the suffering pathogenized body (re)appears in the textual form, a palimpsestic text on the body of the Towers. To phrase it differently, the disappearing Towers and the disappeared body of the artist remain and return respectively when Spiegelman *writes the account of his suffering body on the image of the melting Towers*. It is in the powerful mix of word and image that Spiegelman's affront/ier makes its appearance: the border between event and embodied witness (or eyewitness) has been blurred, the border between eyewitnessing and recalling has been blurred, the border between collapsing Towers and traumatized body frozen in recall days after the event has been blurred, with *each* of these being treated with considerable affrontery.

One further point on the aesthetics of disappearance and memory. A central image in Spiegelman's text is the North Tower glowing just before it disappears. This moment, or event, was not possible to capture in painting, notes Patrick Bray, and hence Spiegelman composed it digitally on a computer. For Bray, this representation is itself a major comment on the disappeared/disappearing Towers:

Within the image itself, its own status as the representation of a lived memory is undermined by the exaggerated size of its pixels, which guarantee the readability of image's technological origin. The fleeting memory of the moment just before the collapse of the north tower, a memory threatened by the devastating force of media images, can only be represented by an image exposes the danger of vision machines. The computerized illustration offers a vision of disintegration (of the tower and of memory), which itself disintegrates into pixels. (2008: 14)

Another frontier, from the material-corporeality of drawing to the technological, is crossed when the illustrator-artist is unable to draw with his hands (a key aspect of graphic novels, as Hillary Chute has argued, 2016) and turns (back) to the technological vision and visualization of the events.

Spiegelman reinforces this trauma-aesthetic and its resultant affront/ier immediately afterwards. At the foot of the page (page 2) there are seven vertical panels. Six are in sets of two, symbolizing the *twin* Towers. These capture the shrinking, i.e., collapsing, Towers, as smaller and smaller images so that in panel six one only sees the tips of the Towers and smoke. Panel seven has no tower at all, just smoke. It is the final “panel” that really spectacularizes the affront/ier described in the preceding paragraph. This “panel” is in the form of an exclamation mark, whose upper elongated trapezoid space has only a coil of smoke within it. The dot in the exclamation here is a sphere. Inside this sphere is a brain, which one presumes is the artist’s brain. (It has to be the artist’s brain because on the top of the page in one panel, Spiegelman draws himself and informs us that people say he has “post-traumatic stress disorder,” 2) The shrinking Towers in this sequence may have disappeared materially. However, Spiegelman’s narrative suggests that they have shrunk, and have now come to reside in his brain/mind. That is, the Towers may have disappeared in their embodied, material-physical sense, but they now occupy centrestage in *his* corporeal form: the brain. This argument is invited by one more specific feature besides the brain in the exclamation mark. The tendril of smoke spiralling up from his brain in this exclamation mark parallels the smoke rising out of the Towers in the seven panels preceding this one. The image also begs the question: does the tendril of smoke from an individual serve as an affront to the “national” tragedy that is 9/11?

There is a seriality and sequencing visible here. The Towers shrink in a sequence of seven panels, with only spiralling smoke and flames hanging in the air by the time we reach panel six and seven. A later panel erases the Towers completely in favour of the artist’s brain but retains the smoke, suggesting a causality: the disappearing, *smoking Towers* disappear *into* his brain, thus producing, now, the *smoking brain*. The affront/ier between the Towers and the witness-body has been reiterated, and when comprehending the Towers’ collapse has been an affront to consciousness, the reduction of the compelling tragedy to a personal nightmare of the artist is also an affront. But the image can also be read as symptomatic of how the brain of the average American has been scrambled and fried – hence the smoke – with the bombardment of images and propaganda from 9/11.

Later, Spiegelman turns to the famous incident of the falling man of 9/11, who executed a “graceful Olympic dive as his last living act” (6). However, the images are of Spiegelman who, in sharp contrast to the actual, “graceful” falling man, is drawn with a rictus of fear on his face and falls flailing his arms and legs – no grace whatsoever. This panel is a vertical one and runs down the entire length of the page in the form of a tower. The opening text box, located at the top of the panel/tower, says: “He keeps falling through the holes in his head, though he no longer knows which holes were made by Arab terrorists way back in 2001 and which ones were always there...” In an echo of the panels on page 2, Spiegelman

documents the collapse of the Towers, and the tragedy of the falling man, in corporeal terms.

First, a certain travesty has been enacted: the falling man has been replaced, disguised, and merged into/as Spiegelman himself. There is an additional, contextual part to Spiegelman's depiction. The "Falling Man" photograph, by Richard Drew, along with other photographs of people jumping/falling from the Towers, was banished from public displays and reproductions: even art work such as Eric Fischl's sculptor *Tumbling Woman* (2002) and Sharon Paz's *Falling* (2002) was removed from an exhibition on the first anniversary of 9/11 (Brottman 2004). It became, Mauro Carbone argues, "taboo" to exhibit these images ostensibly because of the need to "protec[t] the victims' and their families' privacy" (195). It was, in other words, an affront to the people who died *in this fashion*, and those who mourned them.

Second, the grace of the original falling man is no longer visible because it has been masked, clothed under (*travestir*), the utterly graceless falling Spiegelman.⁴ These two constitute an affront to the original, and tragic, falling man who inspires Spiegelman's art, although he can only draw himself. This blurs the borders between the original tragedy and the artist's rather self-involved narration of the tragedy and making himself the subject of the tragedy.

In the process of depicting his own "falling", Spiegelman is underlining the battle over memory and image-making that was 9/11. When the proscription on the "falling" images emerged in the year following 9/11, it was a repression of specific kinds of memories of particular kinds of deaths, argues Mauro Carbone:

9/11 memory confesses to being haunted by the desire of *not showing*, and firstly *not looking* at what, literally, *the world never happened to see before*: namely, those deaths, or rather, those suicides, or rather, those *condemnations* to suicide; a dreadfully spectacular suicide, to be committed before everyone's eyes. Such was in fact the suicide of many unaware and lost singularities, rather than a "mass suicide." (197, emphasis in original)

What Spiegelman does is to map the repressed collective memory onto a personal memory, even going so far as to draw himself as a (or is it "the?") falling man. It becomes a visceral haunting, a corporeal duplication of a memory that is otherwise unavailable in the public domain.

An affront/ier is also brought into being when Spiegelman claims he cannot distinguish between the new trauma of 9/11 and his previous deranged condition ("he no longer knows which holes were made by Arab terrorists way back in 2001 and which ones were always there," 6). Does the artist fall through new trauma-holes in his head, or old ones? Is this trauma entirely new to one who is already traumatized? Spiegelman alerts us to the "mixed temporalities" that commentators have noted, but also to the impossibility of sifting through traumatic memories and distinguishing between them. Does this in some way reduce the power and sentiment – and therefore constitute an affront – to 9/11? This, I suggest, is Spiegelman's point: that for those already scarred, 9/11 adds a layer but not a discernible layer, to the traumatized mind.

It must be noted that this panel is in the third person. This lends a certain distancing in the narration, and again alerts us to the figure of the artist. No longer narrated as an introspective account of his deranged mind, this panel suggests a diagnostic account of the artist. It creates a border between what the artist sees and knows about himself thus far in the work, and what an external viewer sees and perceives. Whether this diagnosis erodes the narrative thus far (because it has been narrated by somebody who is unable to distinguish between the “holes ... made by Arab terrorists way back in 2001 and which ones were always there”, 6) is a moot point, and forces us to recognize the extraordinarily self-conscious mode Spiegelman adopts.

3. The Sublime Affront/ier

At one point, Spiegelman describes the “bones of the tower” that “glow,” terming it “sublime” (4). The sublime, reconfigured as the “traumatic sublime” by Spiegelman, is a sublimity of injury, of a never-ending, repetitive iteration of the events of 9/11, an event that delivers to all Americans “the sense of disruptive power” even as “its exceptionality has been taken to affront the sense we have of *our* culture” (Simpson 2006: 5, emphasis in original). As Spiegelman notes, the ferocious iteration of the events of that day pervades all aspects of American life, constituting an affront to the America he knows. Its “manipulative iconicity” has both a “history and a future” (Simpson 16). This process of having both a history and a future is “cultured, in the sense of cultivated, and monitored and produced with the specific possibilities of consumption in mind” (16). Its excesses, both as event *and* as representations, call to mind the repetitive nature of trauma (Caruth 1996).

In the “traumatic sublime” (Hal Foster’s coinage, developed by Segall 2005), experiences of violence develop into images of oppressed subjects and ghosts, where the images serve as memory sites. Other commentators on the traumatic sublime define it thus:

It relates to both repetitive appearance of one action, such as looped projection, and, recalling Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, the impossibility of something being critically comprehended, because of the psychological intensity it initially produces in conscience of the viewer. The era of de-territorialisation is signified by increased use of digital technology and algorithms in re-shaping the dimensions of reality, which in turn impacts the process of thinking. (Jankov 2016: 140)

The sublime, in Philip Shaw’s interpretation, “is ... an affront or ‘outrage’ to our powers of Comprehension” (2009: 78).

In this version of the sublime, first, the Twin Towers represent home, as Spiegelman notes: “I never loved those arrogant boxes, but now I miss those rascals” (2). Andreas Huyssen writes: “the image of the twin Towers simply represented home in the metropolis”, and it was “monumentality itself ... at the core of their

afterimage and effects” (160). So, the loss of the Towers is, in effect, the loss of a signifier of “home.” Second, the afterimage of this lost home takes the form of kitsch in Spiegelman, as critics have noted (Espiritu). Indeed, Spiegelman himself writes: “I was an eyewitness to the bombardment of kitsch on sale that day...I almost became a participant” (10).

There is, Spiegelman suggests when speaking of his almost-participation in this “bombardment”, a certain pleasure in the trivialization of the events into consumable images and what Daniel Tiffany in his study terms the “indelible moral stain” of kitsch (2014: 1).

This panel occurs as the third one in a block of panels, representing one of the towers. The parallel block of panels, in the first set of six panels, shows the model of NYC blowing up in Spiegelman’s face (10). Connecting the two blocks, symbols of the two Towers, is a plane that appears to be flying from one tower into the next, with a bit of bleed into the second.

Earlier in the text, he had drawn out the jingoistic assertions of emblems and flags that followed 9/11, for, as Gene Ray argues, “trauma is collapsed into pre-digested emblems: finally, into a single flag” (3).

For Ray, the

sublime evocations and avowals of traumatic history are used to reactivate the disruptive hit or force of such history. Through the artistic mimesis of the structure of trauma, disturbance is reinstalled in the scene and put back into play, spurring mourning back into movement. (6)

He refers to “aesthetic disturbance or mis-experience,” as the sublime (7). I propose that the sublime in Spiegelman is the affront to the “monumentality” of 9/11 (Huysen) and the Towers when transformed into kitsch and “predigested emblems” (Ray). Conversely, it is the disruption of both everyday life and kitsch through the intrusion of something as monumental as 9/11.

In other words, it is not simply the iteration and reiteration of 9/11 as a traumatic process that makes up its sublime nature in Spiegelman. Rather, it is the disruptive force of the monumental *in* and *as* mundane that Spiegelman the artist is unable to comprehend. When the kitschy toy blows up in his face, Spiegelman says: “you go back to thinking you might live forever after all” (10). When the text concludes, he images the diminishing Towers in a set of three panels. The first shows the glowing, melting Towers in orange, the second is in grayscale where the Towers are discernible as outline, and the third is in darker gray, where the Towers are barely visible. The accompanying texts read:

The Towers have come to loom far larger than life...
But they seem to get smaller every day...
Happy anniversary. (10)

I suggest that the diminishing size and visibility of the Towers, which would ordinarily be the case of any traumatic event, is reversed or at least inverted by the last text box which announces a greeting, “Happy Anniversary”, implying that the

process of memorialization and commemoration is not over yet. That is, the routine diminishing of the events in memory and symbolization is resisted through the intrusion of the monumental “Anniversary.” This is the disruption that many commentators cited above have identified as the power of the sublime.

Thus, another frontier has been breached: that between monumentality and kitsch, between routine forgetting and spectacular memorializing. The affront to monumentality appears as the kitsch, the jingoism and the tragedy, even as the routine and the kitschy are disrupted by the sheer monumentality of 9/11’s recurrent afterimage – and this what affronts Spiegelman.

* * *

If 9/11 exceeded the scope of the imagination then Spiegelman’s work with its affront/ier aesthetic captures the event’s scope and its consequences, demonstrating how the media-hype, the iterations and the travesty rendered the tragic events into an affront.

Parodying the children’s book format of the board book in order to deliver a powerful political comment but also to highlight in a metacomment the limits of the form, Spiegelman seems to suggest that trauma and travesty, tragedy and political parodying, are part of the everyday materiality of reading and consumption an American engages in, in terms of TV commentaries and media. The resilience of the board book – the reason why it is a popular format for children learning to read – is reflective of the resilience of mediated travesties of tragic events in the cultural imaginary: twist it, turn it, handle it roughly, the book survives the assault by the reader!

The power of *In the Shadow of No Towers* lies in its ability to constantly showcase the disruption, the affront/iers, of not simply the event that was 9/11 but its absorption as trauma, its malignant and “manipulative iconicity” and its transformation into an excuse for irrational warmongering. The affront/ier, as Spiegelman employs it, is a political aesthetic. It links personal and public histories of trauma. Undoubtedly, Spiegelman, as Jordan Rendell Smith argues, “represents himself as the artist-hero in *No Towers*, struggling against the powerful forces spinning the 9/11 tragedy into a commercial for old authoritarianism in new clothes, garishly striped and starred in kitschy red-white-and-blue patriotic excess” (2008: 2). In the process, Spiegelman himself travesties a national tragedy or national trauma by placing himself as an “artist-hero”.

It foregrounds the singularity and the particularity of the event, as experienced by the artist, by showing the affront to his dignity, identity, emotional and psychological stability when the event is morphed into – travestied – something else altogether. The affront/ier, therefore, is Spiegelman’s way of showing how a tragic event is mediated into a monstrosity, the borders between the body that experiences the events and the televisual representation of the events blurred so that his self-representation itself is called into crisis. The traumatic sublime renders the monumental and kitschy interchangeable, and this, Spiegelman seems to suggest, is the tragedy of 9/11.

Notes

- ¹ Some of the more widely read and critically examined works in the medium include Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003), Keiji Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen* (2004-2010), Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde* (2000) and other works of 'comics journalism', Igor's *The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks* (2016), Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *This Side That Side* (2013) among others.
- ² Commenting on this, Kristiaan Versluys writes:
 "Picturing himself and his next-of-kin as mice does not mean that Spiegelman arrogates to himself the role of Holocaust victim. What it does signify is that, suffering a primary trauma as a close 9/11 witness, Spiegelman positions himself within a larger Jewish Tradition." (2006: 985)
- ³ Post 9/11, as Evelyn Alsultany demonstrates, in addition to the debates whether the Arabs and Muslims ought to be racially profiled, there was the conflation of Muslims with terrorists in the mass media (2012).
- ⁴ The aesthetic of this Drew photograph has been debated. Rob Kroes et al see a coherent aesthetic in the image:
 "[The falling man] is perfectly vertical, head down, seemingly poised and in full control of his posture. The image shows him in perfect accord with the lines of the buildings behind him. He splits them, bisects them." (Kroes et al. 2011: 12)
 Miles Orvell writes:
 "the image is remarkable in picturing what appears to be a moment of poise and deliberation: the body is pointed down head-first, in a perfect vertical line, with one leg out as if to balance the position against a symmetrical background." (2021: unpaginated)
 Others argue that the man "fell desperately, inelegantly" (Junod 2003. See also Westwell 2016). In the Library of Congress' 'The September 11 Digital Archive', the photograph is itself not displayed, although a pencil drawing from the photograph is (<https://911digitalarchive.org/items/show/36351>, 8 July 2023).

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PRAMOD K NAYAR, FEA, FRHistS, teaches at the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, India, where he also holds the UNESCO Chair in Vulnerability Studies. His most recent books include *Nuclear Cultures* (2023), *Life/Writing* (2023), *The Raj* (2023), *The Human Rights Graphic Novel* (2021), *The Indian Graphic Novel* (2019), among others. His essays have appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Narrative*, *Ariel*, *Kunapipi*, *Changing English*, *Celebrity Studies*, *Postcolonial Studies* and other journals.

Address: Pramod K Nayar, PhD, Department of English, The University of Hyderabad, Prof CR Rao Road, Gachibowli, Hyderabad 500 046, Telangana, India. [email: pramodknayar@gmail.com]



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