

Identity Tracing in the Graphic Novel "*Nasreen's Secret School*"

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ABSTRACT

People show different manifestations of themselves in accordance to different roles, status and contexts. These reflections are the result of different identities they have. Through these identities they constitute distinctive personalities and unique social positions. Nasreen's identity, the main character in the graphic novel: *Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* (2009), written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter, will be traced to see whether she exercised different types of identity, and if so to identify these types. But, as graphic novels employ many modes jointly to tell their story, then multimodal discourse analysis approach MDA will be adopted to analyze Nasreen's identity verbally (text) and non-verbally (image). Finally, some conclusions have been reached stating that Nasreen exhibits three types of identity: master, interactional and personal identity through verbal and non-verbal interactions.

KEYWORDS: Graphic Novels, Identity, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Modes, Systemic Functional Linguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is the "self-image" of individuals (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014; Jenkins, 2008), and it has different types. Each type expresses a special character customized for special role within special situation. These types usually traced through past personal experiences, autobiographical stories, interviews, and the like (Bamberget *al.*, 2007; De Fina *et al.*, 2006). Yet, to trace identities in graphic novels the case is different with this relatively new medium of writing.

Graphic novels are "images in sequence" (Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993). Graphic novels are made up of many modes; images tell stories, words illustrate them and colors emphasize the whole meaning. Consequently, to analyze, trace or describe any aspect or component, a multimodal approach is required in which both verbal and non-verbal aspects are analyzed simultaneously in order to achieve a comprehensive view regarding the aspect under investigation: identity and its types.

2. IDENTITY

People tend to identify their individuality, emphasize their distinctive personality, to confirm their social status, and to occupy different interactional roles. Identity is their means to do so. In fact, the concept of

identity is very elusive and tricky one. Most people show different representations of their identity by acting differently to people with whom they have different kinds of relationships: formal/ informal, close/ distance, relatives/ strangers, etc. they govern where and when to display these types according to relationships, social status, roles occupied, and so forth.

Scholars outline how identity has multiple meanings from different perspectives. Simon (2004), from a social psychological perspective, states that identity has an essential role in organizing how people see themselves and others, how people categorize themselves and others into social ranks and levels. Likewise, De Fina *et al.* (2006) assert that: “identity claims are seen as ‘acts’ through which people create new definitions of who they are” (p. 3). Similarly, Jenkins (2008) also confirms the same point that identity is the key to know ourselves, and it is the link to know others: “knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on” (p. 5). Moreover, Bamberg, *et al.*, (2007) and Jenkins, (2014) describe identity as a “process” not “a given product”, something that is flexible and in constant change, not as a fixed and concrete entity.

In addition, Simon (2004) clarifies that “modernization and globalization” are the main reasons behind identity claiming. Now, there is a need for each individual to be featured from their surroundings. And this distinctiveness include many aspects such as religion, nationality, gender, ethnicity and so on.

The format of graphic novels (text, image and color) provides a tri-dimensional system to trace identity types through social interactions. They are traced by examining how the character feels and behaves: facial expressions and body postures and gestures, through costumes and their colors. Also, the background of images with their symbolism are of great significant.

3. IDENTITY TYPES

Identity – in general – is classified into two types: “collective or social identity and individual or personal identity” (De Fina, 2006; Jenkins, 2008; Simon, 2004). According to this categorization, identities are practiced within two dimensions: about one’s self and within social environments. People express their identity to emphasize their individuality and to emphasize their membership within particular groups and communities. Therefore, the way people behave, act and interact are only the manifestation of their different identities which are determined by different role people choose to occupy.

On the other hand, Tracy and Robles (2013) state that beside these two types, there is a third one which reflects who we are, what is our traits, and from what we construct our individuality. Therefore, they identify three types of identity: “master identity, interactional identity and personal identity” (pp. 21 – 22). These types respectively are: “aspects of personhood that are presumed to be relatively stable and unchanging: gender, ethnicity, age, national and regional origins”; “specific roles that people take on in a communicative context with regard to specific other people”; and “personality aspects of self” (ibid).

In this article Nasreen’s identity (the graphic novel’s main character) will be traced to investigate how identity types are reflected when she engages with different interactive stances.

4. GRAPHIC NOVELS

Comic books, graphic narratives or novels, pictorial magazines, and the like, all project stories through pictures. Graphic novels almost share the same format of writing with comics and pictorial magazines, but, they differ in their content, as they address serious topics in course of complete story. Therefore, *reading* images and understand their sequential order is an intricate process. Especially, with the critical subjects graphic novels stress and the important themes they present (Petersen, 2011; Dong, 2012).

Kukkonen (2013) defines a graphic novel as: “a publication format of the comics medium, which is a self-contained, non-serialized comics narrative. Commonly, however, it is used to refer to any page-based

comic” (p. 172). To be distinguished from other graphic works, a graphic novel is a graphic novel only if it tells an integral story through images in sequential order (Di Liddo, 2009).

Nowadays there is a tendency towards employing a variety of modes together in literary works, and it is – as explained by Kress (2010) – due to globalization and intercommunication among people from different geographical regions and different cultural backgrounds.

5. NASREEN’S SECRET SCHOOL

Nasreen’s Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan (2009) is a graphic novel written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter. It tells the story of a little girl in Herat, Afghanistan, during Taliban ruling. After the arresting of her father and the disappearance of her mother, she turned sad and silent. Her grandmother decides to send her to a secret school. There, she smiles and speaks for the first time, she interacts, learns to read and write, there she opens a window of knowledge and education. This graphic novel emphasizes the power of science as the strongest weapon to be armed with.

Winter’s writing style is somehow distinct from other writing styles. Each page contains an image with a caption for illustration, with rare speech balloons. No gutters, transitions, panels, speech bubbles, and other employed techniques in this medium of writing (see: Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993; Kukkonen, 2013; and Stein and Thon, 2013). A centered image is the focus of each page, providing an easy way to detect their meaning.

6. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS(MDA)

Multimodality is the nowadays tendency, where multiple semiotic resources texts are fundamental means of communication (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005). As a result, such texts are interpreted and analyzed through multimodal approaches to include all modes involved (O’Halloran, 2004; Gee and Handford, 2012). MDA deals with hyper texts to analyze multiple aspects of one discourse jointly, linking modes together in order to achieve a full understanding from the message sent.

7. METHODOLOGY

Nasreen’s Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan (2009) is the data selected for this article. Through MDA approach, verbal and non-verbal modes are analyzed to trace different types of identity the main character (Nasreen) exhibits and develop during the novel. As a start Halliday and Matthiessen’s (2004, 2014) SFL theory and Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996, 2006) multimodal social semiotic approach are selected to analyze text and image respectively. Many models are adopted concerning different non-verbal aspects such as body language (facial expressions, postures and gestures): Pease and Pease, 2004; costume: Pendergast and Pendergast, 2004; and color: Cerrato, 2012 and Hasan, 2011.

8. ANALYSIS

To identify Nasreen's different identities, selected pages from the graphic novel will be analyzed. Through these pages, Nasreen will show different conditions and different social roles as a reflection to her multiple identities.

Image 1:



My granddaughter, Nasreen, lives with me in Herat, an ancient city in Afghanistan. Art and music and learning once flourished here.

At first, Nasreen’s master identity will be identified by analyzing image (1).

This image is the first page from the graphic novel, where Nasreen’s grandmother is the narrator voice of the story. The image includes the text shown below:

“My granddaughter, Nasreen, lives with me in Herat, an ancient city in Afghanistan. Art and music and learning once flourished here”.

So, to trace the aspects which construct Nasreen’s master identity, verbal and non-verbal modes are involved. Her gender, name and nationality are given through text:

- *My granddaughter* means it is *she* (female).
- *Nasreen* is her name (capitalized words mean proper names, in their culture it is known as girls’ name).
- *Herat, Afghanistan* is the city and country she lives in, from where she is (nationality). The clauses are declarative in mood, active and simple in structure. This indicates clarity in meaning, as each lexical word refers to its conventional meaning that is found in dictionaries and known by the majority of people.

Nasreen’s age and religion are traced through image

analysis:

- A little girl (age) with colorful outfit (culture: Eastern).
- Wearing Islamic hijab (religion) (Pendergast and Pendergast, 2004).

The colors are of important significance, green and blue colors (Nasreen’s outfit colors) reflect the values of her religion and her culture. Green symbolizes goodness and positivity, and blue symbolizes divinity and nature (Cerrato, 2012; Hasan, 2011). Her costume remains the same through the whole story to symbolize uniformity and constancy that the grandmother establishes within Nasreen’s roots about knowledge and education.

All these traced aspects are Nasreen’s relatively fixed aspects, which remain the same through different social roles and interactive contexts, (her master identity) (Tracy and Robles, 2013).

Image 2:



And Nasreen answered back!

Image 3:



With those words,
her first since her mama went searching,
Nasreen opened her heart to Mina.

Now, the second type of identity (interactional identity) will be examined through image (2) and (3).

In these two images, Nasreen talks for the first time. She whispers to her friend student (Mina): *I missed you too*. She tells Mina about what happened to her parents.

These images include the text shown below respectively:

“And Nasreen answered back!”

“With those words, her first since her mama went searching, Nasreen opened her heart to Mina”.

Here, Nasreen’s interactional identity is structured through the social role she occupies with different people. Concerning the text in image (2), Nasreen is the subject of the sentence, the doer of the action. And with the exclamation mark, the indication of the significance of what she does is very obvious. The verb of the clause *I missed you too*, is a mental verb. This indicates that mental processes lead to the change in Nasreen’s behavior and condition. And the text in image (3) explains to what extent Nasreen interacts: *opened her heart*, it is not a matter of words, it is a matter of sharing and trusting others.

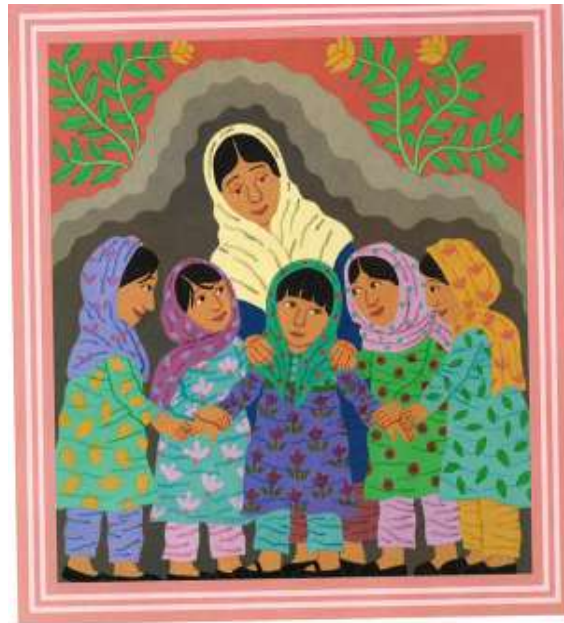
The images tell the rest of the story. Now, Nasreen starts talking to others, communicates with them, and expresses herself to them. The whispering and the tears clarify the shift in Nasreen’s behaviors which are the reflection of her interactional identity. Now, Nasreen is not just a sad and silent daughter and granddaughter, now, she is a student who interacts with her classmate. The speech balloons abbreviate the whole scene. The balloon in image (2) with the phrase: *I missed you too*, highlighting her start point to be socially active. Likewise, the balloons in image (3), inform what happened to her parents and cause her this state in the first place.

Image 4:



Nasreen never spoke a word,
She never smiled.
She just sat, waiting for her mama and papa to return,
I knew I had to do something.

Image 5:



And she smiled for the first time
since her papa was taken away.

Finally, images (4) and (5) will illustrate the personal identity Nasreen shows. These images include the text shown below:

“Nasreen never spoke a word. She never smiled. She just sat, waiting for her mama and papa to return. I knew I had to do something”.

“And she smiled for the first time since her papa was taken away”.

During Nasreen’s journey, she displays two phases of her personal identity which is concerned with mood and personality. At first, she was sad, gloomy and silent girl. From image (4) these feelings are shown: down head, mouth and eyes, curved eyebrows (Pease and Pease, 2004). Then, the transition in her social role (becomes a student) and her temper, she becomes smiley, confident and social girl: slight smile, eyes up, and shaking hands with other girls (Pease and Pease, 2004).

The background image and the colors emphasize Nasreen’s condition in both ways. Gray, large clouds are over her head when she is down and negative. Flowers with green leaves when she is up and positive.

9. CONCLUSIONS

As this article aims to explore how different types of identity can be traced in graphic novels (verbally and non-verbally, it reaches the following conclusions:

1- Nasreen exercises different selves of her as a reflection of different roles and social status she occupies through her interactions verbally and non-verbally. Within each social role Nasreen plays, a different ‘who is she’ is reflected and manifested.

2- Nasreen does exhibit master, interactional and personal identities as classified by Tracy and Robles (2013). These types are recognized via textual (verbal) analysis and image (non-verbal) analysis. The

master identity associates with Nasreen's relatively fixed aspects: name, age, gender, religion and nationality. The interactional identity associates with the social status Nasreen takes: as a daughter, as a granddaughter and as a student. Finally, the personal identity associates with the conditions of Nasreen: sad, gloomy, silent, and finally an educated, strong girl.

3- Graphic novels employ multiple modes within their writing formats (text, image (body language, costume and color)). This employment provides wider insight which can be seen through MDA approach. Because each mode deliver the message in a distinctive way that other modes cannot. In this, the story can be read different times relying on different ways of reading.

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