

**THE DEPICTION OF JEWISH PEOPLE'S STRUGGLE  
AGAINST NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES IN ART  
SPIEGELMAN'S GRAPHIC NOVEL *MAUS***

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**ABSTRACT**

Jewish people have been facing discrimination and negative stereotyping for ages. Conflicts between the majority and Jewish communities, propagated by racial prejudice, result in violent acts committed by the society to isolate the Jews. *MAUS* is a biography of Art Spiegelman's father, Vladek Spiegelman, which tells about his experience in surviving the persecution of Jewish people in Poland during World War II, and also about Art Spiegelman's efforts to defy the lingering stereotypes of Jewish people in the present.

This research is conducted to analyze the acts of discrimination and negative stereotyping against Jews and the author's efforts to defy them. Sociological approach is utilized in this research in order to explain the root of prejudice and discrimination against Jewish people, as well as the negative stereotypes labeled to them.

The finding of this research shows that Vladek Spiegelman, the main character, faced various violent discriminatory acts inflicted against Jews due to the Nazi's racial propaganda. The propaganda affected the majority by creating an ingroup-outgroup bias, thus forcing the minority Jews into isolation. Nevertheless, Vladek Spiegelman survived using cunningness and hard-work ethic; both are stereotypes highly associated with Jews. On the other hand, Art Spiegelman faced difficulties in portraying his father in the graphic novel, since Vladek Spiegelman's aforementioned positive traits becomes negative in the present. The father-and-son conflict brought Art Spiegelman into self-doubting his identity as a Jew. The self-doubt could be diminished by the realization of Vladek

Spiegelman's traits as a survivor, thus boosting Art Spiegelman's pride as part of the Jewish community.

**Keywords:** prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, Jews, MAUS, graphic novel.

Stereotyping occurs throughout the ages and often becomes the factor of frictions between ethnic groups living together in one area. Stereotypes, according to Allport (1979, p. 189), are "images of certain communities within a category invoked by the individual and act as justifications to love or to hate the different communities". Chinese people, for example, are regarded as hard working and money-minded by the Americans, while the Chinese think of the Americans as open-minded, yet intrusive and demanding people. On the other hand, stereotypes may become one of the causes of public persecution against certain groups. One of the most famous, and terrible, mass persecution based on, but not exclusive to, stereotyping is the mass murder of Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II.

Survivor's tales record how Jewish people were given negative labels and were denied access to shops and banks, all because of the prejudices and stereotypes concerning Jews as a 'shrewd, treacherous, and impure' race. Often, the stories are reproduced in the form of autobiographical novels and movies for the public as a memoir of the horrific event. The memoir entitled *My Life as German and Jew* written by novelist Jakob Wassermann provides an interesting discussion beyond the restrictive description of the term 'German' and 'Jew'. According to Spector (2006, p. 353), *My Life as German and Jew* reflects a resistance of "separated racial, cultural, and social identity", indicating Jakob

Wassermann's effort to disprove discrimination based on stereotypes already assigned to Jewish people. Similarly, Art Spiegelman's famous graphic novel MAUS depicts Jewish people's struggle against discrimination and violence caused by negative stereotypes attached to them by the society.

Art Spiegelman is one of many influential graphic novelists in America. Born in Stockholm on February 15<sup>th</sup> 1948 and grew up in Rego Park, New York, he attended the M.S of art and design, followed by two and a half years at Harper College, SUNY Binghamton. In 1966, he began doing underground comix, an experimental movement in comic arts marked by its mature themes and forms that went against the mainstream genre at that time, which is superhero genre (*Jewishvirtuallibrary.org*). In 1980, Art Spiegelman co-founded an avant-garde comics magazine RAW with his wife, Francoise Mouly, which was where MAUS was serialized for the first time. As mentioned by Mautner (2011, para.1) in an interview with Art Spiegelman, the publication of the first volume of MAUS was "like a warning shot that took everyone by surprise – and not just for the comic-reading public, but mainstream America as well".

The complete edition of MAUS consists of two volumes depicting Art Spiegelman's father, Vladek Spiegelman, a Jew who lived in Poland during the wake of anti-Semitism in 1939, paralleled with Art Spiegelman's own struggle to come to term with his father in present time. The first volume consists of six chapters, depicting Vladek Spiegelman's early life in Poland in 1930s, his first meeting with Anja followed by their engagement and moving out to Sosnowiec, where Vladek started his manufacturing business. During this period, anti-Semitic

sentiments had been building, and Vladek heard reports on Jews being robbed out from their business and even beaten up. Vladek and his wife Anja escaped from Poland and encountered many Jewish people who also suffered from discrimination and negative stereotyping. Unfortunately the couple was caught by the Nazi when they board the train to Hungary and were sent to Auschwitz, the largest of the five Nazi's death camps, where 1.1 million people, with Jews as the majority of the prisoners, were murdered (*History1900s.about.com*). In volume 2, Vladek and Anja Spiegelman were lucky to survive the selection, but they still suffered from being forced to do hard works all day, with scarce supply of food and under constant surveillance of the guards. Vladek did anything to ensure Anja's safety as well as himself, from befriending a prison warden and taught him English in exchange for food to sneaking letters for Anja, who was in women's camp in Birkenau. When the war was over and the camps were abandoned, Vladek made a journey back to Poland and was reunited with Anja. Together they moved to America and raised their son, Art Spiegelman, in Rego Park, New York.

America's population is largely comprised of immigrants, and Jewish people are one of them. Although they are respected for their perseverance and hard work ethics, Jewish people also become subjects of bullying and negative labeling based on their distinctive life. Discriminating and giving negative labels to Jews have been done since pre-modern times with varying degree of intensities, causing the Jews to live under social pressures which may limit their activities. The second generation Jews in America, while living a better life than their

parents, may still get affected by the labels attached to them, just like when their parents are being discriminated by the society.

Literature is a reflection of an author's experience as part of a society. The experience written in his or her works may reveal a society's values and behaviors in particular time. However, the experience is not something that is distant to the readers. In fact, literature can bring out a sense of connection between the experience written in the work and the readers' own experience in daily life. Oster (2003, p. 3) states that "the connection between the experience written in literary works and the readers" can immediately happen when they have something in common'. Literature can become a sign of how social condition affects social elements like groups and how the groups compare and relate themselves with the situation presented in literary works. Social problems such as discrimination, racism, or the gap between the rich and the poor can be studied closely by looking at the interaction between characters in literary works. As a result, an approach based on sociology is necessary if a study of social interaction in literature is to be conducted.

As a discipline, sociology studies human interaction within social environment such as groups, organizations, and families. Bryant and Peck (2006) state that sociology's main field of study is the systemic units of interaction inside social groups. Sociology's main interest of study is the social phenomenon in daily life which happens from the ongoing interaction between people from different backgrounds, including conflicts and the disparaging gap between social classes.

Bryant and Peck (2006, p. 363) argue that social problems “arise when there is a huge difference between the idea of an ideal society and its achievements in real life”. Discrimination and prejudice happen because the idea of treating everyone as equal regardless of their backgrounds does not match with the reality, where giving negative labels and stereotyping to minorities are still apparent. Jewish people are one of many minority groups who have endured discrimination and negative stereotyping through the ages, and many literary works record how they try to disprove the negative stereotypes attached to them and challenge the majority’s prejudice against them.

Prejudice, derived from the Latin word *praejudicium*, is a word often used to describe “the state of dislike on a certain individual or a group” (Allport, 1979, p. 6). Prejudice does not happen naturally, and social studies suggest that there are various ways for people to acquire prejudice against others. When prejudice is being acted out in real life, it is called discrimination.

Stereotypes are images invoked from certain categories presumably innate in certain groups. Similar to prejudice, the categories often have no factual background as a support. Allport (1979, p. 189) argues that stereotypes are ‘images’, the result of a temporary impression given by a certain people from a certain group toward the majority. The temporary impression is permeated within the society’s mind and becomes the ground for judging and evaluating the group. McGarthy (2004, p. 2) further states that stereotype serves as: (1) aids to explanation, (2) energy-saving device, and (3) are shared within communities with similar belief. While prejudice can gradually decrease once a certain amount of

knowledge about a particular group is acquired, stereotypes may persist as long as there are supports from the majority. In the case of Jewish people, the persisting negative stereotypes labeled to them have arisen since before the modern age, leading to the prolonged discrimination against them.

The root of discrimination against Jewish people can be traced from the history of coexistence between the Jews and the Christians. The conflict between Christians and Jewish people undergoes a sociological process which van Arkel (2010, p. 12) calls a 'secession friction', "a split between two ideologically motivated groups with both sides perpetually accuse each other". Karesh and Hurvitz (2006) state that Christian teachings have significantly different religious traditions than Judaism and some of the teachings are against what mainstream Judaism believes in. During the periods of Christian religious enthusiasm, Christians utilize texts from the Bible to justify their accusations toward the Jews and make the anti-Jewish stereotypes acceptable for the public. Strict segregation creates distance between the majority and the Jews to prohibit the people from developing understanding of Jewish people, followed by rumors about Jewish conspiracy to take over the world. The majority, then, will have no choice but to accept the legitimized negative stereotypes of Jewish people and join in the discrimination. Thus, negative stereotypes of Jewish people will always have explanatory values and will persist in society.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Jewish people have been fighting to disprove various discrimination and negative stereotypes labeled to them by the majority for centuries. By using sociological approach, the discussion of the types of discrimination and negative labeling will be conducted by analyzing the data which have been collected from the graphic novel. The first part of the discussion will consist of an analysis of Vladek Spiegelman's experience of being discriminated before he moved to America and his efforts to survive against the negative stereotyping. The result of the first part will then be compared to the analysis of Art Spiegelman's experience of struggling against persisting negative stereotypes of Jewish people in America.

Jewish people's experience of being sanctioned and persecuted by society through the ages is reflected from two people of different generation in MAUS, with Art Spiegelman's father's story being the focus of the narration. Art Spiegelman's portrayal of his father, Vladek Spiegelman, starts from the exploration of his father's daily life in Poland. Vladek He started from his life in a small city named Czestochowa, doing business in buying and selling textile, up to his engagement with Anja Zylberberg. Vladek remarked, "I didn't make much, but always I could make a living" (MAUS, p. 14). By exploring the daily aspects of Vladek Spiegelman's life in Chapter I, Art Spiegelman made a first step to introduce Jews as more than just their stereotypical 'businessman' image, but also their contribution to the society, reflected in his assurance that Vladek Spiegelman's account of daily life "makes everything more real—more human" (MAUS, p. 25). However, later chapters show how discriminatory acts & negative

stereotyping are used to put the Jews as a separate group from the rest of the majority, effectively preventing the majority from viewing them as part of the society.

The Nazi party was mainly the perpetrator of anti-Semitism in Europe during World War II. According to Longerich (2010, p. 30), The Nazi party tried to reconstruct the elements of the society by implementing racial discrimination to those deemed as the roots of social problem; however the practice would fail if they only considered the physical aspect of a race. Therefore, the implication of racial policy was done through selection using negative criteria. By doing so, the Nazi also created an ingroup-outgroup bias in European society. The majority groups who thought of themselves as fitting in the stereotype of superior 'Aryan' or 'Germanic' race would be most likely to accept the Nazi as part of the ingroup, while the Jews would be categorized as outsiders, the outgroup. An example of ingroup-outgroup bias is when Vladek Spiegelman was caught by the Nazi troops in the frontier. In the prison near Nuremberg, Vladek Spiegelman and other Jewish war prisoners were treated differently from the Polish prisoners. They were made to stand separately and had their valuables taken. One of the Nazi officers remarked discriminately on Vladek's large possession of money and directly linked the material evidence to the 'opportunistic businessman' stereotype by asking, "Why so much money, Jew? Do you expect to do some business here?", (MAUS, p. 53).

Feldman also explains on the theory of the origin of prejudice that people learn to judge minority groups from their parents and friends. Vladek Spiegelman

recalled that Polish mothers taught their children to be suspicious on Jewish people. They would mention negative images of Jewish people to keep the children away from any contact with the Jews, as stated by Vladek, “The mothers always told so: “Be careful! A Jew will catch you to a bag and eat you!”...so they taught to their children” (MAUS, p. 151). The Polish children’s reaction is an indication that the racial discrimination and negative stereotypes propagated to the majority slowly shapes their attitude and judgment on Jewish people. The reaction is also an indication of an imminent isolation of Jewish people from the society, causing the majority’s inability to look past the widely-circulated negative stereotypes of Jews as the basis of judgment.

There were moments when Art Spiegelman confronted the reader directly with imageries of various atrocities done to Jewish people as the society became more agitated at the height of Nazi’s reign over Europe. One example that can be seen since the first chapter is the way people are drawn in the graphic novel. The characters in MAUS are drawn as animals, and the depiction of Jewish people as mice is, as Brown (1988, ch. 3) noted, “the most controversial aspect” of the graphic novel. The animal metaphor is abundant in MAUS, such as the Germans are drawn as cats, the Poles are pigs, and the dogs represent the Americans. The cats-and-mouse metaphor is used extensively in narrating the conflicting relationship between the Jews and the Germans, but the most important aspect of the metaphor is its function in the graphic novel’s theme. Brown (1988) argues that Art Spiegelman’s aim is to disprove the fable-like notion of animals playing

as the representation of race and nationalities, that “the Jews are not mice, the Poles are not pigs, the Germans are not cats” (ch. 3).

Vladek Spiegelman lived a hard life under discrimination and prejudice directed at him and his fellow Jews. Nevertheless, he actively sought ways to trade with others via black markets to keep him, as well as others, alive. His resilience and hard-work habit reflect the positive stereotypes of Jewish people, and these kinds of stereotype are highly emphasized in MAUS. For example, Vladek Spiegelman asked his cousin Haskel, a chief of the Jewish police, to protect him from being caught by Nazi soldiers. Haskel sneaked Vladek into a shoe shop, and then asked him to help his brothers fix the German soldiers’ boots (MAUS, p. 119). Vladek Spiegelman also sought other jobs available around the ghetto, from delivering sacks of sugar (MAUS, p. 87) to helping a Polish citizen write a letter to his family in German in exchange for chocolate and eggs (MAUS, p. 158).

Discrimination and negative stereotyping as experienced by Vladek Spiegelman are laced with social and political issues. Jewish people were forced to isolate themselves from the society due to imminent violent acts and lynching against them. In MAUS, the harsh condition Vladek Spiegelman must live through had made him tough. He proved that the stereotypes of Jewish people—materialistic, clannish, and opportunistic—were only partially true. Resilience and frugality, both were stereotypes commonly associated with Jews, were shown as the deciding factors of Jewish people’s survival. Nevertheless, Vladek

Spiegelman's past life haunted Art Spiegelman in relation to the portrayal of his father in the graphic novel.

Discrimination affects minority groups not only on how they conduct their social life, but also their own perception of their groups. Unfortunately, the categorization process may result in ignorance of other qualities possessed by individuals in favor of a unified perception of minority groups as desired by the majority. Furthermore, the enforced stereotypical images may affect minority groups' perception of their own social identity. They may be forced to adjust their values in order to fit in the majority groups' values. The inability to express individual qualities and positive values to counter the persisting negative stereotypes is what Art Spiegelman was trying to disprove in *MAUS* by portraying Vladek Spiegelman's past life and struggle as honest as possible. However, he was also confronted with the fact that he was affected by his family's sufferings; a problem that he often encountered in trying to portray his father as far away from the negative stereotypical images of Jewish people.

An example of the difficulties Art Spiegelman faces is when Vladek Spiegelman picked up a telephone wire from a trash can when he and Art Spiegelman took a walk. Art Spiegelman, who was appalled by his father's action, retorted on how Vladek always picked up trash instead of buying the new ones. Vladek answered that buying things which can be found for free was unnecessary, and that "this wire they don't have it in any store" (*MAUS*, p. 118). Art Spiegelman's problems concerning the pauper-like lifestyle of his father do not only revolve in financial matter. Hard-work ethic, one of many positive

stereotypes of Jewish people, becomes a source of tension between them. In Chapter Four, Vladek scolded Art Spiegelman for coming home late. He wanted Art Spiegelman to fix a leak in the drain pipe on the roof, something which Art was not good at. When Art Spiegelman suggested on hiring a plumber, Vladek refused, saying that it would cost Vladek a lot of money. Hlfe said, “You and Mala! You both think money grows on bushes! I’ll fix it myself!” (MAUS, p. 75).

Art Spiegelman’s problem with portraying Vladek Spiegelman as a struggling human being stemmed from his different background compared to his father. Brown (1988) states that Vladek Spiegelman’s experience is significantly different from Art Spiegelman’s; however, Vladek’s past life still haunts his son and affect Art Spiegelman’s effort to understand his father’s experience. As a result, Art Spiegelman slowly became self-conscious about his own background as a Jew, which then sent him into doubting his own identity. Art Spiegelman’s problem with portraying Vladek Spiegelman as a struggling human being stemmed from his different background compared to his father. Brown (1988) states that Vladek Spiegelman’s experience is significantly different from Art Spiegelman’s; however, Vladek’s past life still haunts his son and affect Art Spiegelman’s effort to understand his father’s experience. As a result, Art Spiegelman slowly became self-conscious about his own background as a Jew, which then sent him into doubting his own identity.

Minority groups which have suffered from victimization may develop various traits to defend themselves or to achieve a better grip of their identity. Members of minority groups who have become aware of their identity may begin

to identify themselves with dominant groups to strengthen the bond between members. On the other hand, they can also feel insecure. Allport (1979) states that insecurity between members of minority groups, due to the inability to understand the culture or the history of the groups, may develop into self-hatred.

Self-hatred is dangerous because it traps an individual in a continuous doubt about himself and his position in his group. During a session with his psychiatrist, Pavel, Art Spiegelman confessed about his inability to continue his graphic novel, feeling that his arguments with Vladek Spiegelman “have lost a little of their urgency...and Auschwitz just seems so scary to think about” (MAUS, p. 204).

Art Spiegelman’s session with Pavel exposes more about the feeling of self-hatred he suffered in figure 5.6. The self-hatred stemmed from the constant comparison between his relatively happy childhood in America and his father’s experience of surviving discrimination. When the first volume of MAUS hit commercial success, Art Spiegelman’s self-doubt became bigger because, by portraying his father as honest as possible, he assumed that he would ridicule him as an individual and as a member of a minority group which had been victimized in public. Nevertheless, Art Spiegelman also felt proud of his father for surviving, and even admired his tough personality. He said, “I know there was a lot of luck involved, but he was amazingly present-minded and resourceful” (MAUS, p. 205). The realization that he understood and admire Vladek Spiegelman’s efforts to fight against discrimination and survive returned Art Spiegelman’s confidence about his identity.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes are hindrances for minority groups to establish their place within a society. They stem from collective assumptions perceived by majority groups, which then serve as parts of social categorization. The categorization eventually forces minority groups to either adjust their norms and behavior to match the majorities' expectation, or they can fight back by strengthening their identities through socializing positive aspects of their groups.

Art Spiegelman's graphic novel MAUS is a biographical account of his father, Vladek Spiegelman, in surviving against discrimination committed by the society. The characters drawn in the graphic novel are presented as animals. Jewish people are drawn as mice, while the Germans and the Poles are respectively presented as cats and pigs. The cat-and-mouse metaphor reflects the struggle Jewish people must face when the Nazi German leaders spread their racial discrimination propaganda in Europe, causing many violent acts to be committed against Jewish communities. Nevertheless, the portrayal of the characters as animals is meant to show the human side of the people separated by nations, races, and ideology.

MAUS tells two stories of Jewish people from different generation: Vladek Spiegelman and his son, Art Spiegelman. Vladek Spiegelman's struggle against discrimination and negative stereotypes in Poland during the height of World War II is presented as the focus of the graphic novel's narration. Art Spiegelman presents his father's story by exploring the aspects of his daily life in

Poland, his interaction with his fellow Jews and Polish citizens, in order to confront the reader with the human aspect of Jewish people. The human side of Jewish people is then challenged by the emergence of Nazi party and its racial discrimination propaganda. Various violent acts against Jewish people are done under legitimized presumptions and the persisting images of Jews as the ‘enemy’, creating an ingroup-outgroup bias from the narrow categorization of superior and inferior race. The racial discrimination propaganda also affects the Poles as the majority group; children were taught to hate Jewish people and alert their parents when they saw one. Vladek Spiegelman, as well as the rest of Jewish communities in Poland, must struggle to avoid being captured by the Nazi soldiers while facing discrimination from the Poles. However, Vladek Spiegelman shows constant determination to survive, and Art Spiegelman highlights the positive traits of Jewish people as tools for survival.

Discrimination and negative stereotyping against Jewish people also affects Art Spiegelman in thinking about his father’s portrayal in the graphic novel and his own identity. The positive traits of Jewish people—frugality, hard-work ethic, and cleverness—become a source of tension between Art and Vladek Spiegelman, as well as with Vladek’s second wife Mala. The constant tension and difference of values affects Art Spiegelman’s opinion about his portrayal of his father and, eventually, his identity as a Jew. The self-doubt he suffered comes from his inability to understand Vladek Spiegelman’s personality and past life as a whole. Nevertheless, Art Spiegelman can overcome his self-doubt after realizing

that his father's ability to survive brings pride to himself as a member of a struggling minority group.

MAUS is a graphic novel with complex social, political, and historical issues concerning Jewish people. Future research of this graphic novel might be conducted by analyzing the social interaction between members of Jewish communities and their culture. Historical approach can also be utilized to expose the relationship between the rise of Nazi Germany and the Jews. Finally, a study on generation gap in Jewish family can be conducted in relation to the life of Jewish immigrants in the United States.

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