

**(Re)Framing Neo-Imperialism: The Role of Media  
Discourse in Constructing Ideological Subjects in Art  
Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers***

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**Abstract**

*The catastrophe of 9/11 sparked decades of controversy owing to an array of interpretive strategies being employed to dissect variegated issues pertaining to ideology, representation, political implications, the ensuing islamophobia and the Arab, Muslim, terrorist trajectory which became a standard image against which the Muslims were measured. Keeping the multi-faceted strings of tension in the backdrop of 9/11, the current study aims at investigating the idea of how media discourse can play a lethal role in twisting common opinion and manipulates the masses. It also addresses how media personnel incorporate their personal partialities and biases in an artistic way; thus, use discourse to perpetuate ideology. By studying the stereotyped representation of Islamophobia/Xenophobia in Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, the study highlights the role of discourse that can shatter the binaries between fair/foul and play a havoc with general sensibility tuning them into subjects interpellated by the dominant ideology.*

**Key Words:** Media Discourse, Ideology, Stereotype, Islamophobia, neo-imperialism

Cartooning is a form of persuasive communication.  
(Medhurst & Desousa 198)

The communicative elements in comic art encourage the form to occasionally create a closed ideological text, imposing on the reader preferred meanings.  
(McAllister et al. 03)

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Media Discourse-the Ideological Core in Postmodern World

The notion of ideology has always been a slippery and problematic one; it is oft-times equated with capitalist political hegemony and also with the overarching influence that media can wield. Mass media, being the organizing principle of superstructure, is a significant arena where discursive power masks ideological underpinnings. Media, or to put it in simpler terms, elite class takes average minds into its web of manipulation, exerts socio-political power and twists everyday realities in a biased manner to attain the desired outputs from subsidiary groups (Gramsci 407; Hall 340; Altheide 477; Barker, 04). Hall argues that ideology is the sum total of values and beliefs that serves as a social “cement” binding together the structural as well as epistemological meanings (334-335).

Comics, as McAllister et al. argues in his book *Comics and Ideology*, tend to harbor “issues of social power and social division” (02) and through an elaborate discussion on mainstream comic art, highlights how comics are connected to governing ideologies. The use of ideology in comics primarily rests on the idea that printed words with visual imagery allow for a “manipulation of meaning” (03). The presentation, representation and interpretation, ultimately all become polysemic giving way to enticing stereotypes for quick dissemination of information (Walker 09).

Within Marxism, media discourse holds a pivotal position owing to its complex and multi-faceted role. Given the fact that media imports facts pertaining to any event and common masses do not have direct access to many of the happenings, they rely purely on media logic and rationale and stop short of forming an independent judgement of their own thus “personal mind control becomes social mind control and ideological hegemony” (Van Dijk 32). As a consequence, they are blinded by the ideological trap set before them. Another perspective can be that people, can show reverse ideology in the face of dominant one based on their personal interests and circumstances, thereby debilitating the power and credibility of media in postmodernist world.

Ideology thus becomes discursive where “text” reproduces fixed meanings and is directly associated with how one ideology is formed and presented. This ideological manipulation is chief end in itself where mind is controlled

in the fashion of a tabula rasa; reader becomes an interpellated subject and his beliefs, opinions and worldviews are distortedly shaped.

The powerful influence of media can be translated in Samuel P. Winch research who studied news production pertaining to Osama Bin Laden between 1999-2002 and explored how “he was constructed as an evil genius archetype with near mythic abilities” (85). The process of identity construction on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity and politics, in the realm of media, is generally seen to be biased and results in manipulating the public opinion. Such depictions are a significant social ingredient that are conspicuous in shaping the overall character and behavior of the community.

### **1.2 Post 9/11: Hegemonic Discourse of Neo-Imperialism**

Neo-imperialist debate argues the tenacity of West’s superiority over East in particular and the rest of the world in general. Imperialism is synonymous with rule, unquestioned power and authority over its subjects but neo-imperialism is designated by exerting hegemony through economic, social and cultural means. Neo-imperialism is the phenomenon historically associated with US’ deployment of global military power reflected through its invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. In the wake of 9/11, this concept took drastic change and certain political, social, religious and media ideologies were introduced to aver nation-building (i.e., xenophobia and Islamophobia) and democratization. This New World (dis)Order took defining patterns of Pax Americana (American Peace) and played a central role in making US an indispensable nation across the globe an example of which can be found in US media’s use of *banana republics*- a mocking term for nations once colonized by United States.

Unconditioned favor such as Kipling’s advice of taking up “the White Man’s Burden” spurred an irrational illusionary mission of civilization onto white shoulders and elaborated on how Whites, everywhere in the world are the chosen seeds who are burdened to educate the so-called backward natives of Africa. scathing criticism such as Huntington’s theory of Clash of Civilization was leveled against this blurred idea. Frantz Fanon, a cultural theorist observed how European colonizers maintained Us/them, We/Other binary opposition to sustain an imaginary racial superiority and preeminence of European civilization and manners.

Keeping in view the fact that mass media functions as RSA for the ruling class, this purported imperial jingoism received unprecedented support from media proponents for upholding American social status quo. The post 9/11 War on Terror further aggravated the neo-imperialist occupation. This nonsensical and irrational approach is discussed by Altwaiji in his research who concluded that “Post-9/11 American neo-Orientalist representations pervade today’s politics and journalism about the Arab World” where “the Americans see Arab Muslims as fanatical, violent, and lacking in tolerance” (313) and vice versa. This symbolic (mis)representation was created with the ambition “to create a hegemonic version of reality” (Bourdieu 41).

Orientalism, as a term, was coined by Edward Said in his ground-breaking book with the same title and defined it as “the production of colonial knowledge” (Sa’di 02). His books *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* presented a counter-discourse to the Eurocentric solipsism and its claims of universal empire. By discussing the binaries of Occident/Orient, Said investigated concepts of marginalization of people of color, racism and Islamophobia. In this context, Sa’di writes:

Western powers are often described ... as the ‘civilised world’, the ‘free world’, ‘the international community’, etc. and their representatives and the mainstream media are labelled the ‘international public opinion’. More ominously, the ‘civilisation mission’ and the ‘white man’s burden’, which are articulated through different slogans such as the spreading of democracy or the liberation of women, continue to constitute a smokescreen for soiled imperialist quests, particularly after 9/11. (03)

Said, in the preface to *Orientalism* (2003), branded the 21<sup>st</sup> century Orientalism as “belligerent neo-Orientalism”. Within this post 9/11 world, belligerent media always presented Arabs as frivolous character who is the sole source of perpetrating evil and misery while Islam is pictured as a parasitical institution feeding on terrorism and bloodshed. Accordingly, Muslims are distortedly presented under social caricaturing of Islamic terrorism having tyrannical mentality (Altwaiji 317).

The idea of Third-Worldism resonates clearly in the lines since only “white” was taken as the norm. Any oscillation and deviation from this norm would constitute *the Other*. The fact that West has a unique superior culture stood

in sharp contrast to East' ontological ineptitude. Colonialism not only disseminated this normative trope, but also segregated people on a "racial system of categorization" (05). English-ness and French-ness resulted as this heightened consciousness of race seeped into Western discourse. Scenario after Twin Towers attacks reiterated the binarism and resulted in heated debate of potential dangerous, violent and uncouth role that Arabs, Muslims and Islamic World can play in a Western society. Taking inspiration from Bram Stoker' 1897 publication, *Dracula*, where Count Dracula wanted to colonize England; all Muslims, in neo-imperialist tradition, are framed in this picture and are termed "new Dracula" who are deemed responsible for all evil originating in any part of the Western world.

### **1.3 Representational Crisis, Comics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

Comics are cartoon images with stated or unstated captions aiming at public entertainment. "It is a medium with compelling narratives, fantastic imagery and heroic characters" (qtd in Dar 101). Willems believes that comics are "ideological texts which offer a particular framing of reality" (126). He further claims how comics are laden with "hidden script" forcing readers to either conform or challenge the dominant standards. While discussing Zimbabwean media discourse, he avers that "comic strips circulated through newspapers are here understood not primarily as ideological vehicles but also more importantly as cultural narratives that reflect—as much as construct— social change" (131). This means that media has an innate capacity to share embedded institutional ideologies and comic strips function as tool under the garb of infotainment through which such ideologies are injected and desired output is achieved without the use of explicit power.

The political realm of comics hint at how political leaders are scoffed at and satirized by the cartoonists (Connors 260). The social as well as political background help at drawing a terrain by dint of which the typical characteristics are mocked and readers are given leisure time at the expense of characters' follies. Keeping this fact in view, Medhurst and DeSousa expounded on decoding process of cartoons and averred that "one must be somewhat familiar with the literary or cultural source to which it refers" (201).

Frank Miller's comic book, *Holy Terror, Batman*, presents insidious representation of Muslims with Al-Qaeda leaders ruling the center stage who are demonized as evil-doers, animalistic and sinister in nature. Dar contends that "The villain is the comic book Muslim, a poorly developed caricature based on Islamophobic and Orientalist stereotype" (99-100). He goes on to claim that such representations are typical of entire comic book industry, American mainstream media as well as Hollywood cinema where one after another, every production, overtly or covertly hits at the single underlying ideology: the Muslim figures as threatening "Other" while being simultaneously "brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women" (100).

The unreal obnoxious and filthy portrayal of Muslims along with Arab Stereotyping is what constitutes the sum total of comic books authored by Whites in the wake of 9/11 catastrophe. It is also pertinent to mention here that Muslim Terrorist image and racial superiority is prevalent in American popular culture since American media is directly influenced by US foreign policy and anything going against American ideals is trashed and treated as dehumanizing and subjugated from all positive connotations. DC Comics (*The Dark Knight Returns, Action Comics, Batman: Year One, Batman; A Death in the Family*) and Marvel Comics (*New X-Man: Dust, The Punisher: Nuclear Terrorists over Times Square*) bear testimony to the animosity of Westerners towards Muslims and crude racist generalization pervade such as Arab/West referring to Them/Us.

Discourse is what we speak. It is a reflection of human behavior and is influenced by social practices. CDA is defined as a multidisciplinary tool that helps in the "deconstruction and interpretation of how a so-called reality is constructed" (Henri 341) and enables a reader to dismember "both what is present in a text and what could have been there but is absent" (Mesikämmen 726). CDA is an influential framework that studies power structures in relation to social structures. As discussed by Van Dijk, CDA is an amalgam of social norms, discourse practices and language structures all of which are dependent on one another. Graphic novel is an emerging field gaining ground and bears testimony to the power of textual messages and images. In this regard, Kress and van Leeuwen debated the coded images discussed through media and concluded that "the control over language has decreased in favor of the codification and control of the visual" (26). Both

the producer and the consumer share affinity in this non-verbal world of gestures, postures and facial expressions and context-the actual world where such productions take place is the binding element. The “pictorial structures” are utilized to seize, manipulate and guide the “semantic dimension” (45).

Multiple CDA approaches are used by many theorists including Fairclough who highlighted discourse in poststructuralist perspective and expanded on “how social relations, identity, knowledge and power are constructed through written and spoken texts in communities” (Luke 50). Michel Foucault’s trajectory of power relations, discursive practices and discourse production are also central to CDA canon as the powerful segment “systematically form the objects of which they speak ... they do not identify objects, they constitute them” (49).

Norman Fairclough has discussed CDA approach in detail. He combines three elements namely semantic macroscopes that deals with “what a discourse or corpus of texts is all about” (102). The next is dubbed microstructures and it is syntactical and grammatical function that a text performs with the last stage being the “meso” level which pinnacles the ideological field with contextual domain of the subject and results in the “positive self-presentation and negative other presentation” (103).

#### 1.4 Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature where a deep and systematic content analysis is carried out to dissect words, images, non-verbal communication and frames. The researcher opted one graphic novel i.e. *In the Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman. The text appeared in the form of comic strips, yet carried crucial meanings for readers. The study at hand will employ the three-pronged CDA framework given by Norman Fairclough constituting the three main elements involving text, discursive practices and social practices as stated below:

1. **Description:** Linguistic Analysis on the level of Semantics, Grammar and Lexical Sets
2. **Interpretation:** Procedural Analysis on the level of Production, Distribution and Consumption
3. **Explanation:** Social Analysis on the level of Society, Institution and Context

### 1.5 Research Questions

Keeping the afore-mentioned paradigm in view, the research at hand will investigate the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** In what ways do media perpetuate hegemonic power relations?

**RQ 2:** How do Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* support/subvert the discursive practices of caricaturing and stigmatization in the wake of 9/11?

**RQ 3:** What are the implications of coded images as portrayed in *In the Shadow of No Towers* by Spiegelman?

### 1.6 Research Objectives

Given below are the objectives set for the study:

**RO 1:** To scrutinize the role of media discourse in propagating stereotyping

**RO 2:** To highlight the discursive practices of caricaturing and stigmatization in Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* in post 9/11 world

**RO 3:** To explicate the significance of coded images in *In the Shadow of No Towers* by Spiegelman

### 1.7 Rationale for the Study

The relationship between media and ideological discourse is an established one. The thoughts of the ruling class and superstructure are generally adopted as the mainstream hegemonic ideas to be instilled in the masses. 9/11 carries symbolic association and is tied up with the burden of presentation, representation and interpretation. A plethora of literary and non-literary texts have dealt with these representational issues in their own right. Comics/graphic novels as a genre rose to prominence in 1990s. These are satirical sketches having thematic unity in them and gradually becoming a contested field for either conforming with the discursive narratives of representation or by rejecting such practices, is reflecting upon a counter-narrative.

*In the Shadow of No Towers* by Art Spiegelman appeared in German newspaper *Die Zeit* in serialized form between 2002 to 2004 and was published in book form in 2004. It is critically acclaimed owing to its complexity as a graphic text. A considerable research has been carried out to probe into its traumatic, stylistic and graphic ideals; however, an in-depth study of language and images by applying the theoretical framework of



CDA can yield its ideological pursuit. Thus, the study is an effort to delve into the problematic underpinnings of framing post 9/11 grim realities from an ideological and stereotypical perspective in Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*. The text carries traces of traumatic memory as well as the violence and disillusionment caused thereof, yet in portraying his emotions, the study contends that, the writer has consciously/unconsciously dragged the readers into "constructed" ideological zone where the readers may look into portrayals from the eyes of the writer and fall a prey to faulty judgments.

### 1.8 Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*

Comics are a kind of concentrated orange juice, and your brain is the water.

(qtd in Reiser 06)

"The raw event was one thing, the coverage another"

(Dellilo 38)

The tragic nature of 9/11 happening made humanity change its whole perspective towards the world at large. The mammoth differences between pre 9/11 and post 9/11 became a subject of wide interest on front-line media and through discursive narratives, the event is and will always be invoked as a muse of motivation to reinscribe the deadly scenario as has been aptly elucidated by Awan when he claimed that "9/11 will continue to haunt the media and the academia for the foreseeable future" (537). Fictional as well non-fictional narrative form showed unflinching affiliation towards propagation and containment of hegemonic ideologies. Spiegelman's *In the Shadow*, a graphic novel, also grappled with the issues of trauma, identity and representation in the backdrop of 9/11.

Meyer, in her article, discussed the relevance of "framing" history, culture and traumatic memory in graphic form. Through an extended interpretation, she highlights how the aftermath of 9/11 has propagated panic, the idea of *homeland* and patriotism. The paratextual elements of the novel point to the singularity of "his grief, anger and healing" (qtd in Meyer 486). Meyer has given extensive attention to "frames" by taking inspiration from how Spiegelman, himself, remarked that he wanted to put his "fragmented thoughts" (feelings, emotions and pain) "into boxes" (*In the Shadow* Preface). However, the signification process of image along with the

intended meanings are overlooked. The fact that history is always trivialized and manipulated as per individual beliefs forms the basic proposition of Spiegelman as he, himself, admitted the overload of information and ideas delivered through comics in “relatively few words and simplified code-images” (qtd in Reiser 01).

## **2. Neo-Imperialistic Ideological Tendencies in *In the Shadow of No Towers***

Since a text is said to embrace the dominant ideology in a hidden way; therefore, it is of paramount importance to discuss how does this function is achieved. As discussed before, CDA provides a theoretical backdrop to understand the nature and workings of ideology so Spiegelman’ *In the Shadow of No Towers* is analyzed according to Fairclough model of CDA. In his book, *Language and Power* (1989), Fairclough has enlisted multiple questions to ask while decoding a text. Discussing vocabulary, he stressed on experiential value (the way text’s producer experiences social realities, knowledge and beliefs); relational value (social relations) and expressive value (social identities) (112). Spiegelman stamps an ideological ground from the title page that is “*In the Shadow of No Towers*” followed by the caption “*The Sky is Falling*” with interrupted yet consistent symphony of “*Disaster is My Muse*” pictured all through the comic strips. All these statements are reflective of how he created a terrain distorted by the catastrophe of 9/11 and the reader is trapped to feel the agonizing impact of these words.

The description about “Holocaust” and “raghead terrorists” mentioned in the preface indicates how the attack on New York City is “an attack on America” itself resonating the indoctrinated idea stated by Bush Administration that there is a threatening “Other” who is bent upon deteriorating the “civilized’ America. The dominance of corporate media as well political discourse in service of ideology is explicit in the metaphorical use of America as a “melting pot” that is a fusion of multiple ethnicities, cultures and nationalities and the concept of “rooted cosmopolitanism” borrowed from Kwame Anthony Appiah (1997) speaks volumes about the pride and patriotism of the author. The imperialistic/colonizing tone is evident as only America is presented as welcoming immigrants from across the globe. There is an undercurrent of neo-imperialistic agenda termed as

“politics of cultural production in times of security panic that often leads to moral crises” (Awan 521).

Spiegelman is disillusioned all through the text to differentiate between reality and fiction, truth and untruth with the result that his mind is tainted by the political falsehood. He declares unequivocally about getting lost “constructing conspiracy theories about my government’s complicity”. He echoes his sentiments claiming “I wanted to sort out the fragments of what I’d experienced from the media images that threatened to engulf what I actually saw” (Spiegelman Preface). The bridging of the gap between “seeing” and “presenting” is done at the expense of ideology. Whatever he experienced i.e.; experiential value collided with relational as well as expressive value. The power dynamics including media and state apparatuses crippled his trauma of witnessing.

A cursory glance at the experiential use of vocabulary according to model Fairclough posited lists lexical components comparable in semantic relations. These include; polysemy, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy and idiom. *In the Shadow of No Towers* lists all these elements in different panels. The idiom, “waiting for the other shoe to drop” is ideologically constructed with the purpose of keeping readers in an alarming phase, where they must stay vigilant about any such happenings in near future. The distortion of reality makes the reader question the “the privilege and hegemonic power of official testimony” (qtd in Gauthier 371) which is structured in a humorous way, but the willful implication of text and image narrates how, America, being an imperialist, makes an outrageous show of its fear of violent extremists and fundamentalists. The image of a shoe, with all Americans standing apprehensively underneath it with caption stating “new! Improved! Jihad Brand Footware” available in extra-large sizes reveal how jihad, a concept central to Islam is commodified and problematized by dint of which common public is turned into a reified object of trusting the official grand narrative of “War on Terror”.



**Fig. 2.1: Jihad as Stereotyped Fundamentals of Islam (Panel 1)**

Panel 2 also, through text and context, nurtures the stereotypical representation of Muslims and Islam. The image of Osama bin Laden, donned as wearing turban, bearded and a long cloak shows striking resemblance of how Muslims/Arabs are typically represented in West. The popular cultural production with a blood-stained scimitar is reflective of violent and evil tendencies in Eastern people, especially Arab countries. Linguistically, he conflates the dominant narrative of Us/Them and describes how he is “equally terrified by Al-Qaeda and by his own government” in capital letters sets the ground for ideological interpretation. George W. Bush, holding American flag in one hand with gun in the second is symbolized as “Pax Americana” in the face of evil perpetrators i.e., Arabs who are synonymous with Muslims and terrorists.



**Fig. 2.2: Ideological Representation of Muslims and American Peace Mission (Panel 2)**

The description of how Spiegelman's brain is "missing" with animal face explains how people had lost their common sense after 9/11 and followed the propagandist machinations proliferated by the government. The images displaying the hesitation between beard and clean shave while referencing towards "Afghans" show how media plays a key role in flaunting geopolitical dominance of America in the world at large. The caption of "issues of self-representation" and "bad reviews" reveal ideological enterprise where growing beard is a part of political (mis)representation. The repetition of the use of "awesome" for falling towers is laden with irony and recontextualizes "the image of the looming north tower's glowing bones just before it vaporized" (No Towers Foreword). Reference towards Albatross hanging around his neck is a euphemistical image where he is bound to tell and re-tell the whole story, each time with new hidden meaning and agenda.



**Fig. 2.3: Spiegelman as Metaphorical Albatross with Hidden Agendas (Panel 3)**

Not only is islamophobia spotted in the text, but anti-Semitism also is propagated. His "inner demons" gets flared up and in an anguished tone, he mutters, "dirty Jew, we'll hang you from the lamp posts, one by one". The racialized ideological burden of personal hatred, just like *Maus* is broken loose on all the readers as is stated by Gauthier that "each writer "frames" his or her narrative in a very specific way" (371). Official narrativization and constructedness is apparent in disapproval of all that is against imperialist goals.



**Fig. 2.4: Xenophobic Tendencies alongside Islamophobia (Panel 7)**

Overt denunciation of government's policies is made by Spiegelman stating:

I had anticipated that the shadows of the towers might fade while I was slowly sorting through my grief and putting it into boxes. I hadn't anticipated that the hijackings of September 11 would themselves be hijacked by the Bush cabal that reduced it to a war recruitment poster. (No Towers Foreword)

Statements such as “republican elephants” and “dimwitted democratic donkeys” are presented as “19<sup>th</sup> century dinosaurs, interested only in their own survival” pushes the reader to enter into the idiosyncratic caricaturing of political figures and can be interpreted as the dissemination of anti-government ideology. It is significant to mention that media has the power to convert popular figures into demons within no time; hence, Spiegelman, while educating the public cautions them to beware of the controlling tactics that ruling class can use to attain their hegemonic purposes.



**Fig. 2.5: Media's Power of Presenting Ideology (Panel 6)**

Use of slogan such as “war to begin all wars”; “an upside-down world”; “the architects of Armageddon” and “we are number one! We won! We won!” reflects the imperialistic world that was carved by the power-drunk American media to heighten the binaries between West and the rest of the world. Towards the end of the comics, insomniac Spiegelman is found amidst napping men and yet disillusioned by the confusion between the chaos/order and writes: “Whew! Sometimes complaining is the only solace left! ... ZZZZZZZ”.

### 3. Conclusion

A detailed analysis into the discourse of *In the Shadow of No Towers* paints intricate relations between the dominant discourse of media and ruling class that interpellates the readers into a sarcastic labyrinth of ideological representation. The writer, being an American, shows his fidelity with American interests and speaks on behalf of dominant class. It is what Abel also concluded saying:

The aftershocks of the attacks continue to structure American political and cultural discourse, and as the chronological distance from the terrorist attacks of 9/11 increases, the number of politico-philosophical and literary discourses surrounding the event continues to multiply. (qtd in Awan 524).

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