



ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

## An Analysis of Multimodal Narrative and Cognitive Construction of Identity in "Are You My Mother?" Scott McCloud and Erik Erikson's Perspectives

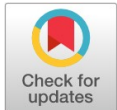
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**Abstract**— For the past few decades, multimodal narratives hold a unique place in the contemporary world of literature. These distinctive trends of narratives are preoccupied with the representation of highly verbalized self-consciousness and cognitive development of identity. Taking the theoretical concepts of Scott McCloud and Erik Erikson into consideration, this paper explores the visual and verbal expression of Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* to understand the presentation of cognition in a mixed-media environment of the graphic novel. This study is limited to the focal character of the graphic novel, and selected eight images are analyzed to answer research questions. McCloud's theoretical model deals with visual structure whereas, Erickson's conceptions examine verbal expression of the novel. The findings reveal that both pictorial and written assertion of the selected narrative is overbrimming with dispersed references to the character's cognitive state. Moreover, it also inspects Bechdel's complex personality; she struggles hard to resolve her psychosocial crisis in different stages of life but succeeds in accepting and maintain her identity through the therapeutic process and writing. This study is also a call for those who think reading comics is labor; it tracks the way for readers to reach the cognitive functioning of characters in multimodal narratives.

**Index Terms**— Cognitive narratology, Multimodal narrative, Identity, Graphic novel, Comics

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### Introduction

In this advanced age of the twenty-first century, man has reached the point when he does not rely on a single mode of expression. Instead, he strives to combine multiple forms to deliver his message (Kress & Leeuwen 2001). This change from mono-modality to multimodality also determines advancement in the human cognitive system. People have learned how to use their cognitive skills to knit on pages something more complex than the web of a spider to convey a single idea. With this elevation of cognition, they have also learned how to build a coherent idea out of an entangled web (Cohn 2016). One example of such mode is comics or graphic novels, in which the artist uses his intellectual skills to use unique elements of comic books like panels, frames, gutters, icons, symbols, speech balloons, etc. to bind words with visuals, by doing this he conveys his message and readers use their cognitive skills to unbind the message (McCloud 1993).

The selected comic book is a multimodal memoir about the artist, some glimpses of her biographical background aid in the understanding the selected work. Gregory (2015) talks about the novel that it highlights Bechdel's traumatic relationship with her mother and represents how she resolves her cognitive conflicts to maintain her identity. Diedrich (2014) adds selected narrative is filled with psychotherapeutic theories of Freud and Winnicott along with accounts of personal meetings with her therapists. Eventually, Alison Bechdel tries to resolve her cognitive dissonance through writing this multimodal narrative. the selected narrative has a non-linear plot, it demands

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advanced inferring skills from readers to understand the chronicle account of events. This study proposes a way of the understanding the structure of comics both with and without the use of verbal references to dig out how cognitive identities are revealed in narratives.

Serafini (2011) defines multimodal narrative as the mode of narrative which relies on more than one form to convey its meaning, like visual images accompanying graphic designs and text with unusual narrative structure and complexly designed elements. In multimodal narratives, visual and written text are combined with specific logic, and work together to complete the meaning. Therefore, mere common strategies of comprehending written text are not sufficient to understand such multimodal narratives. Due to the higher level of complexity, readers also require higher cognitive skills to decipher the meaning.

Serafini (2012) further states there was a time when one's literacy was dependent upon his ability to read and write. However, shifting from mono-modality to multi-modality has changed the parameters. Due to these changes, old literacy standards of just reading and writing are shifted to one's competency in dealing with the digital and mobile world. Kress (2003) also argues that in the future, there will be a shift away from old traditional text to new forms to meet the upgraded needs of literacy. The case of speech, language remains the mode of communication. Still, in terms of writing, old textual modes will be replaced by new forms involving images, and this change will affect human cognition, culture and bodily engagement with the world. Moreover, multimodality unlatches new ways to explore the art of storytelling; comics are its one form. Tasić and Stamenkovic (2015) mention, comic books contain compounded text and in order to understand it, readers have to harmonize the two strands; images and words. McCloud (1993) also states that combining words and images appears to be effective for the growth of comics as a medium because of their narrating power.

In multimodality, all modes are considered one entity and are equally important in their contribution to meaning-making. As defined by McCloud (1993), comics has their unique vocabulary for example, panel, layout, frame, bleed, gutter, speech, dialogue, thought balloons, sound effect, and background. He describes while reading comics; one must be familiar with its page-layout, which works from left-to-right and top-to-bottom. However, Yus (2005) elaborates that the sequence of layout can be altered to achieve additional effects.

The current paper also deals with the comic book *Are You Mother?* which is an amalgamation of text and images and the researcher uses different techniques to analyze the text and to dig out unsaid meanings hidden in images.

## Research questions

The current research work aimed to explore complex cognitive patterns of identity in Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* more specifically the research answers the following questions:

- How do selected novel's graphics construct the cognitive identity of the central character under McCloud's model of analyzing comics?
- How Erickson's selected stages of psychosocial development are reflected through the verbal expression of Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?*

Much work has been done on selected graphic novel, but very few focused on the structure or nature of multimodal narrative. Giaimo (2013) argues that psychoanalytical theories portrayed by Bechdel to shape her memoir *Are You My Mother?*, hint towards her percepts related to cognitive and neuroscience. Giaimo (2013) adds, Bechdel's memoir is a diffusion of many psychological and neurological concepts which makes the memoir a challenge in referential form of life narrative genre. Bauer (2014) examines the representation of transitional archive of queer books in Alison Bechdel's graphic memoirs; *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* She investigates the role of reading in resolving Alison Bechdel's complex sentimental enmeshment with her both parents and highlights the importance of books in shaping familial bonding. Another researcher, Diedrich (2014) studies the selected graphic novel from a psychological perspective and highlights the therapeutic practices of D.W. Winnicott as portrayed in the comic book. Furthermore, she also shed light on the transitional space, a phenomenon given by Winnicott which deals with the mother-child relationship. Chaplan (2014) studies two graphic memoirs; *Stitches* by David Small and *Are You My Mother?* by Alison Bechdel through the psychoanalytical point of view and explains how this graphic novel represents subjective psychological experiences with the blend of visual and words. Belia (2015) also wrote a Master's thesis on the diffractive reading of *Are You My Mother?*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Roofwalker*. Here the researcher argues that Bechdel's graphic memoir *Are You My Mother?* invites the reader to read it together with other texts, including the two novels mentioned above. Bechdel uses other writers as models that show how to practice self-therapeutic writing, or as authority figures that validate her work. Belia (2015) argues texts should not be treated as fixed events but as an object whose meaning emerging at the moment of their encounter can change our insight produced in reading. Another researcher, Rüggeheimer (2016) argues that Alison Bechdel uses her own body to pose for all the characters in *Are You My Mother?* and captured her through self-timer, afterward reproduces the photograph through hand drawing. Rüggeheimer adds Alison Bechdel in her memoir *Are You My Mother?* represented inter-subjective experiences of the past and her own body as a medium transgresses the limited focalization. Magnet (2017) highlights how the selected graphic novel exemplifies the potential of therapy in the field of self-actualization and hint at the possibilities of *Are You My Mother?* for explaining the analeptic process as a call for those who think of the therapeutic process as labor. Clewell (2017) explores the memoir from psychoanalytical as well as modernist's views. Also, highlights the reparative reading experience for readers in discovering the common emotional strug-

gle in the complex mother-daughter relationship. Camden (2018) reflects upon the simplicity of the cartoonish figures in *Are You My Mother?* and how her artistic figures appear to be enigmatic and transcendent as if the artist didn't know how to draw developmentally. Kellond (2020) explores Alison Bechdel's connection with second-wave feminism particularly highlighted in her selected graphic novel. Kellond highlights that Bechdel's text speaks out loud the second wave's concern of telling stories about mother and offers an account how psychotherapy challenges the mother-daughter bond. Blanco (2021) writes about the ways Bechdel fills the gap of time and distance to compose her story and mends relationship with her mother. Blanco also talks about the text as a therapeutic tool which highlight the ways how the author finds cure through her experience. Serafini (2011) clarifies to develop deductive skills in readers, it is mandatory to highlight how narrative works. The structure of the selected multimodal narrative is brimming with immense references which expose the cognitive construction of the identity of the main character. The supreme purpose of this paper is to draw certain ways for readers to understand the structure of multimodal narratives and reach the cognitive dispositions of characters through various references using inferring skills.

The current study is significantly unique in multiple ways. Firstly, this study can be undertaken to find out those ways which are used to understand multimodal narratives, i.e. comic books and graphic novels. This is but a small contribution to enhancing students' knowledge and critical skills needed in f narratology. Secondly, this study can be helpful to readers interested in such narratives for understanding how the character's disposition reflects in narratives. Also, this study might be helpful to both students and teachers learn how comic books act as a medium to enhance the inferring skills of the readers. Fourthly, this study can help know Alison Bechdel in a better way because her graphic novel is a memoir dealing with her own life experiences.

## Literature Review

Dissatisfied with the behaviorist approach, cognitive researchers gave importance to the study of the mind, and its impact on human behavior. Lachman, Lachman and Butterfield (2015) define cognitive psychology as the scientific study of the human cognitive system, which deals with "how the minds work"; it includes a model that processes information, including human perception, consciousness, understanding, thinking, language and memory, etc. Barsalou (2014) adds cognitive psychology is always concerned with how the encephalon processes information; it deals with the channels in the brain that pick information from the surroundings, store and recoup it from memory, process it and send it back to the surrounding.

Taken its roots from cognitive psychology, cognitive narratology focuses on aspects in narratives that are related to the mind of characters. In cognitive narratology, it is assumed that the human cognitive system works in terms of narratives. It implies that the process of interpreting the narrative reveals the functioning of the human mind if the narrative is taken as a tool to reach cognition. Moreover, Herman (2009) elaborates that for cognitive narratologists, the process of reading requires interaction between human cognition and selected text. Not everything in the literary work is necessarily stated but, many words/events bear symbolic meanings. The hint of those intended meanings can be given, and called gaps. This is the ultimate responsibility of the reader to decipher and fill those gaps. Mind enabling can be studied through different considerations, including the happenings narrated by the teller, artifacts embedded with meanings, proclivity, and the psychosomatic state of characters. In the same way, Palmer (2004) explains, r to understand the narrative, the reader simply follows the cognitive performance of the character. According to Trabasso and Wiley (2005), readers can also infer the mental state of characters through their behaviors and others towards them. Briefly, inferences can be made from self-directed dialogues, body language, body shape, artifacts, systematic use of focalization, etc. In essence, cognitive narratology not only focuses on mind-relevant aspects in narratives but also in real-life interaction, electronic media, virtual environments, and other storytelling like comics.

As comic book writers often leave gaps that readers are supposed to fill, therefore Cohn (2019) explains, comic books demand the direct interaction of a reader to complete its meaning. McCloud (1993), in his seminal work *Understanding Comics*, calls this phenomenon a closure which means "observing the part but perceiving the whole." Due to its frequent presentation of dream after dream, Alison's masterpiece demands persistent, insightful effort, which provokes the reader's cognitive skills to clasp complex and diverse reality.

Erik Erikson (1902-1994) was a German-American psychologist famous for his eight stages of psychosocial theory ranging from infancy to old age, which deals with the social influences on one's personality throughout the lifespan. Erikson (1959) articulates during each stage, an individual faces different conflicts which he must resolve to develop a healthy personality. Each stage is binary; success in sorting the conflict out leaves a positive and healthy impact on personality, whereas failure in resolving the conflict leaves a negative impact and affects an individual in completing further stages successfully. Although these are eight different stages, this paper has opted for five stages that are most applicable for identifying the identity formation of the main character in the selected multimodal narrative.

Erikson (1950) describes the very first stage as initiative versus guilt which is somewhere in between three to six years when the child is active in experimenting with different things. This is the age when a child starts exploring his interpersonal skills; if he is encouraged and motivated by his caregivers, this will lead him to develop a sense of initiative and trust in his abilities. Conversely, if he is criticized and discouraged, it will generate a feeling of guilt as if a child is not capable of doing remarkable things. Erikson (1959) further says that industry versus inferiority is the stage where the social group plays a significant role in developing the self-esteem of the child. This is the

stage when a child feels enthusiastic about being an active contributor to society. If his initiatives are valued and encouraged by society, a sense of competence develops in his personality. On the other hand, it is also the stage where there is a great risk of inferiority complex. He articulates that during identity versus role, adolescents look for a sense of self and unique identity in society as now their primary concern is what others perceive about them rather than what they think of themselves. This stage is a shift from childhood to adulthood during which adults start reflecting on their values, beliefs, initiatives and begin to make big plans as they feel a sense of independence. This stage builds ego identity in individuals, which is an intense sense of one's self, about weaknesses, strengths, and beliefs. Identity is the most substantial issue for the individual living in the fifth stage, and failure in this stage causes identity confusion which is "the inability to settle on an occupational identity." Giddens (1991) also sees identity as a pliable and fluid entity; he argues that in the world of risk and insecurity, there is an emotional burden on individuals, and their selves have become a kind of project on which they have to work on.

Intimacy versus isolation is the sixth stage of this model; Erikson (1959) adds that during this time, individuals begin to make intimate relationships with others but to create such relationships, one must have a sense of self-identity. He further explains that the more a person becomes familiar of himself, the more he seeks it in the form of close relationships. Completing this stage will ultimately lead the individual towards the virtue of love, whereas failure will lead him towards isolation and depression. Generativity vs. stagnation is a stage that takes place during middle adulthood. Erikson (1950) explains generativity as "primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation." It is the stage where one feels the need to create and leave achievements behind, which will contribute something positive to the world. People reflect to see what mark they have left behind for others. Through this, they feel as an eminent part of the whole world; they find themselves useful and productive, while failure in this stage results in shallowness and stagnation which means failing to contribute to society as a whole. By using these selected five stages, this paper aims to look into Bechdel's complex identity formation and how society influences her during different stages.

Scott McCloud, an American cartoonist and comic theorist famous for his renowned books *Understanding Comics* (1993), *Reinventing Comics* (2000) and *Making Comics* (2006), is known as the Aristotle of comics because his books act as instructional guides for the process of making, and understanding comics as well. McCloud (1993) claims that every medium used in narratives performs a role of bridge between minds because selected modes convert the thoughts into one form; later, with the use of cognitive senses, readers decode those forms and eventually make them thought again. In comics, such thoughts follow a track from the artist's mind to paper and then meet the eyes through which they find a way to enter into the mind of readers.

Likewise, Eisner (1985) mentions that the father of comics also sheds light on the unique communicative model of comics that "the reading of the comic books is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit." Constant interaction of a reader is the demand for clearly understanding comics. McCloud (1993) emphasizes the idea of closure, observing the part but perceiving the whole. He further states that the story gets completed when readers bring life and meaning to comics; it is not just the job of a cartoonist but of the reader's also to create and recreate moments to make complete sense of the story.

McCloud (2006), in his seminal work *Making Comics*, talks about facial expressions in understanding the mind of the character. According to him, "expressions are not something we can opt-out easily, as with words, they are a compulsive form of visual communication all of us use we all know how to read and write them with our faces." He also explains that incorporated with body language; facial expressions are considered to be the visual signals which convey a specific message from sender to receiver; for example, a head position along with a specific gaze direction creates a glossary of meanings. However, context can never be departed in studying expressions because in the specific context, the tender smiley face can deliver ferocity. Moreover, McCloud (2006) adds there might be a condition when the face of the character remains expressionless; in such a case, he suggests readers look in the surrounding story and text to reach those hidden emotions. He also gives the model explaining how different expressions are generated in comics, for example, the emotion of anger and disgust intermixed to make an expression of outrage similarly, mild disgust in combination with mild sadness gives an expression of puzzlement. Several other expressions are given by McCloud (2006) are; expressionless mouth with averted fearful gaze shows the embarrassment of character and averted angry gaze with tightly closed mouth reflects emotions of resentment. Similarly, arched eyes with bunched cheeks represent joy, pinched nose, and brow with square upper lip and bulging chin shows disgust, raised brow with popped eyes and slack jaw reflect surprise, for fear, the mouth will be stretched with brow tortured, turned head with narrowed eye/eye-contact and lowered brow gives a suspicious look. Similar to the facial expressions, McCloud (2006) also explains certain contexts in which body language plays an authoritative role in communicating non-verbal for instance, how characters interact with people who are near and dear ones and how they resist intimacy with others through their bodily gestures like turning away, stepping back, and often by averting or erecting their eyes. McCloud (2006) writes characters' body postures reveal much about their identity; for example, a symmetrical stance reflects the strength and a strong self-image, chin-up and chest out reflect the same strength and confidence, whereas without the symmetry image becomes weak and self-loathing. Likewise, bent or lowered posture with hands out of sight communicates a lack of confidence, hopelessness, discouragement, pessimism, or dismay.

McCloud (1993), in his work *Understanding Comics*, considers pictures, icons, and panels as the vocabulary of comics (47). To understand the working of comics, it is important to combine all the elements to complete the meaning. The space between the panels is

called gutter, which reveals the real mystery of the comic world. Closure helps the readers to fill these unconnected gaps and mentally construct the complete image to complete the meaning. McCloud (1993) elaborates the importance of closure that “if visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar and since our definition of comics hinges on the arrangements of elements then in a very real sense, the comic is closure” (p. 67).

Since comics demand individual involvement and interpretation, McCloud (1993 & 2006) provides certain notions, which have made this particular task easy for an ordinary reader. The researcher also focuses on panel transitions; how the time duration works through the panels or between the panels. McCloud (1993) states:

“The panels act as a sort of general indicators that time or space is being divided. The duration of that time and the dimensions of that space are defined more by the contents of the panel than by the panel itself (p. 99).”

In case of a complete action on a single panel or scattered actions in multiple, McCloud (1993) reinforces, with the help of closure, readers complete the information by joining all the disseminated references that the artist leaves intentionally. He divides the panel transition into different categories, for example, moment to moment, action to action, subject to subject, scene to scene, aspect to aspect, non-sequitur.

The structure of Bechdel’s narrative is complex; each chapter begins with a dream presented via a dense blend of words and images throughout the pages. The current paper aims to study the mind-relevant aspects of storytelling and tends to explore the identity development of the central character and author Bechdel, in the selected comics. For exploring the structure of comics, the researcher bases this study on the given notions of McCloud; panels, artifacts, closure, transitions, body language, and facial expression as explained in his work *Understanding Comics and Making Comics* and to analyze verbal expressions the focus will be selected five stages of Erikson’s model of psychosocial development. Although there are much more facets to explore when it comes to comics, this study covers only selected ones.

This paper focuses on how Bechdel’s cognitive identity is reflected in the selected graphic novel, and by following the cognitive processing of the character, this study aims to explore her identity. To understand the cognitive aspect, this study also focuses on the structure of selected graphic novel; how panels, artifacts, body language, expressions, and the whole portrayal of the character reveal her identity development.

**ANALYSIS**

The graphics of *Are You My Mother?* reflect the complex structures of author’s cognitive identity. Researchers dig deep into these patterns and answer the first research question using McCloud’s model of analyzing comics. The study focuses on specific details of each graphic i.e., panels, closure, artifacts, transitions, body language, and facial expressions.

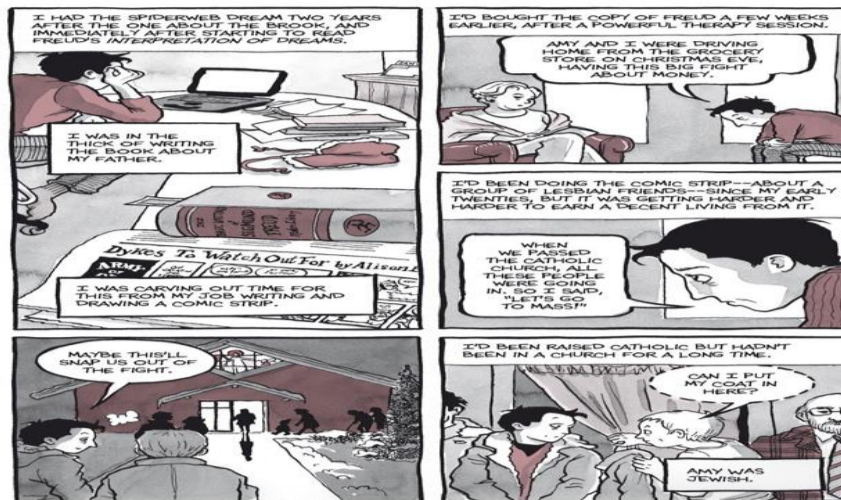


Fig. 1. Are You My Mother? Chapter: Transitional Objects.

In this layout, there are five panels containing different scenes and actions. In the first panel, Bechdel is busy doing her work, but her face is not visible. In such a case, McCloud (2006) suggests readers to look the surrounding story to reach those hidden emotions. If one pays attention to Bechdel's study table, one may find a book on her table, *The Basic Writing of Sigmund Freud*. Bechdel's dreams and her choice of reading Freud's work during her writing process provide glimpses of her struggle dealing with her subconscious. With the help of such references, it can be inferred that there might be some suppressed complications that Bechdel continuously tries to understand through reading all the psychological work of different theorists. In the second panel, which provides a different scene of Bechdel meeting with her therapist, Bechdel's bowed posture, lowered eyes, and hands out of sight communicate her lack of confidence, submissiveness, and despair, hopelessness, misery. From panel two to panel three, though time is not changed yet, the field of view focuses on Bechdel. This close-up shows Bechdel's averted gaze and expressionless mouth, which, according to McCloud (2006), reflects the feeling of embarrassment. Afterward, the scenario changes; this scene-to-scene transition provides different versions of time and space. In the last two panels of Figure 3, Bechdel appears to be in front of the church with her friend Amy, and for the first time in the story, one can see a gentle smile on her face. Also, she maintains eye-contact with her friend, which has never seen before. McCloud (2006) points out that in social situations, characters reflect intimacies from a specific distance from others through special stances. When characters want to resist intimacy, they do it also by stances like stepping back and averting their eyes.

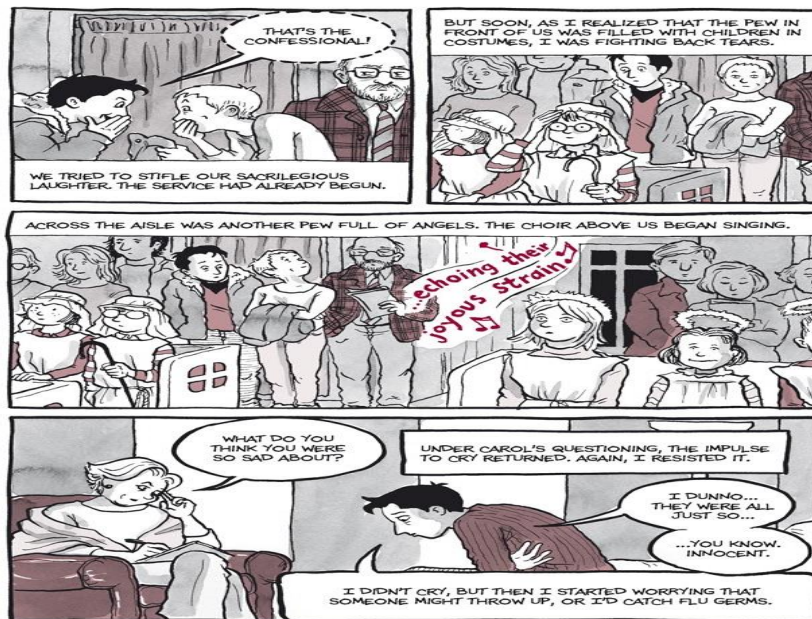


Fig. 2. Are You My Mother? Chapter: Transitional Objects.

Figure 2 displays the view when they both enter the church with a feeling of joy, but in the second panel, action is changed. This action-to-action transition not only shifts from one moment to another, but it also reflects the change in Bechdel's emotional state. In the second panel, Bechdel's facial expressions reflect the intense emotion of surprise and she tries to hide herself behind children. McCloud (2006) calls such expressions with a raised brow, popped eyes, and slack jaw as a surprise. Likewise, similar emotions can be seen in panel three. From here, one needs to connect Figure 1 and Figure 2. Previously, it was discussed that Bechdel is interested in dream interpretation and knowing about the unconscious; now, one can link that information with this current particular scene where Bechdel's emotions have suddenly changed from joy to surprise as there is something in her unconscious that gets activated when she saw those children. In the last panel, the scene shifts back to Bechdel's drawing-room with her therapist Carol; these scene-to-scene transition moves back to the previously left scene in Figure 2, panel three and it becomes obvious that she was telling her therapist about her visit to church. From her lowered gaze and bowed posture, it is implied that what she felt in the church is just refreshed in her mind. Bechdel uses this technique of moving back and forth many times to explain her different life experiences. Moreover, this weaving of different incidents in a nest and also reflects her confused identity as if she is not familiar with how to express herself clearly.

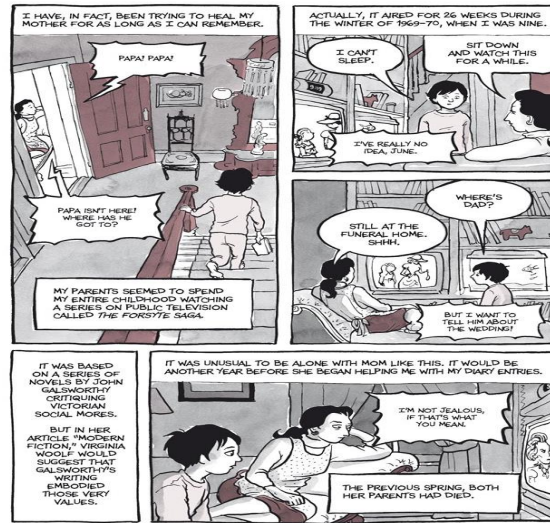


Fig. 3. Are You My Mother? Chapter: True and False Self

In Figure 3, there are four panels dealing with the childhood memories of Bechdel. The first panel, which is bigger, provides a wider view of Bechdel stepping downstairs, and her mother is sitting inside a room. In the second panel, where Bechdel finally enters the room, Helen can be seen watching a TV show and the time mentioned is 9:19. Helen's attention is not interrupted when Bechdel enters the room; Helen's face is intentionally drawn towards the TV to show Helen's lack of attention towards Bechdel. According to McCloud (2006), there are certain contexts in which body language plays an authoritative role in communicating the non-verbal, for instance, bodily gestures like turning away, stepping back, and often by averting or erecting their eyes, characters resist close interactions with each other. Here, Helen's unconcerned and turned posture reflects her divided attention, which leaves Bechdel confused about her presence as if she does not even exist in the room. In the third panel, Bechdel is sitting beside her mother, and her face is towards Helen. Although Bechdel's expressions are still not visible yet from her body position, it is implied that her full attention is towards her unconcerned mother. The last panel of Figure 3, provides a close look at Bechdel's as well as Helen's mutual blank faces as if they both are unaware of each other's company. It implies that the mother-daughter relationship is devoid of such sentiments that a normal relation share.

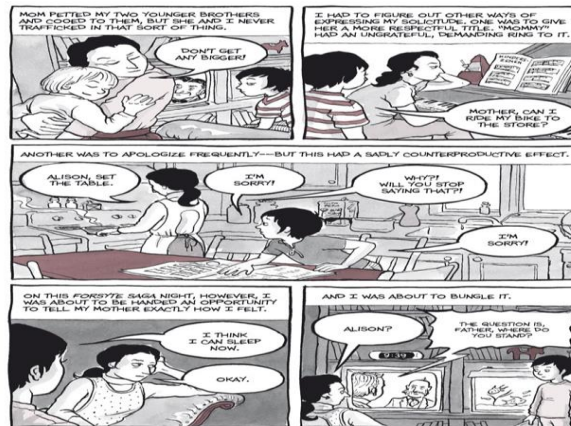


Fig. 4. Are You My Mother? Chapter: True and False Self

In Figure 4, there are five panels, and each deal with a short period. In the first panel, Bechdel is sitting in front of the TV while her mother is embracing her other child. Furthermore, while sitting in front of the TV, Bechdel's attention is focused on her mother noticing how she embraces her brother. According to McCloud (2006) turned head with narrowed eye contact reflects a suspicious look. Here, Bechdel's suspicious looks towards her mother also reflect her jealousy towards her brother's bond with her mother. Scene-to-scene transition moves the time later to the scene where Bechdel is alone with her mother. Here again, Bechdel's facial expressions are not

visible. Still, Helen's back towards Bechdel again reflects her avoiding maternal bond with her daughter as she was embracing her brother in the previous scene. Similarly, the third panel provides a broader view of another scene of Helen's kitchen; she is devotedly engaged in kitchen chores, completely ignoring the presence of her daughter. Afterward, the last two panels move back to Bechdel's and Helen's first TV scene in the previous layout.

In Figure 3, where Helen is watching TV, the time mentioned is 9:19, whereas in the last panel of Figure 4, when the same scene is repeated, here time mentioned is 9:39; it shows that whatever is explained in between was only happening on a cognitive level. In her thoughts, Bechdel was comparing her mother's behavior towards her other siblings. From mentioned time and unchanged position of Bechdel, it can also be concluded that no conversation is made between mother and daughter; It shows Helen avoids expressing her affection towards Bechdel.

McCloud (1993) emphasizes that it is not just the job of a cartoonist but reader's also to create and recreate moments to make complete sense of the story. Keeping in view the notion of closure given by McCloud (1993) happenings of Figures 3 and 4 can be linked with the scenes presented in Figure 2. This link reinforces Bechdel's cognitive functioning, and her behavior becomes clearer. As discussed previously, Bechdel's unconscious holds such emotions and experiences which made her uncomfortable when she saw other children during her visit to church. Bechdel's childhood memories, her mother's divided attention, and lack of affection towards her stays in Bechdel's unconscious, which prompts her to behave in a specific way during her church visit.



Fig. 5. Are You My Mother? Chapter: Mind

In Figure 5, the first three panels with different kinds of outlines aid in comprehending the present situation. McCloud (1993) associates such lines as a source to reflect the sense of "reason and introspection." Bechdel, lying on her bed, imagines herself as disabled; this non-symmetrical and incomplete physical appearance reflects her sad and hopeless situation. These scattered references show clear images of her mental struggle to build her identity. Furthermore, in the second last panel, the cartoonist provides an allusion to a P.D Eastman's children's comic book, *Are You My Mother?* in which a baby bird, after coming out of the egg, leaves the nest in search of his mother and questions every distinct animal or bird he meets that whether or not they are his mother.

These scattered chains help to reach the cognition of the focal character of the novel. As the selected multimodal narrative is also entitled *Are You My Mother?* in Figure 5, it gets clear that Alison Bechdel has borrowed this from P.D Eastman's book published in 1960. The complex relationship of Bechdel with her mother is much discussed earlier with reference to the selected figures. Still, no such reference is provided, which shows the reason for Helen's behavior towards Bechdel. From this specific layout provided above, it can be surmised that both things are affiliated with each other; Bechdel will be able to identify her true identity only when her understanding of her mother is clear. The last panel of Figure 5 shows Bechdel sleeping on her bed; this particular panel is without any border, and McCloud (1993) declares such kind of panels are used to reflect the sense of timelessness. While Bechdel is asleep, the sense of timelessness is created to reflect her desire of living in dreams and avoiding the toxic realities of her surroundings.





Fig. 6. Are You My Mother? Chapter: The use of an object

Later in the memoir, Alison Bechdel provides references to how she started writing. Bechdel, in her book, *Are You My Mother?* compares herself with Virginia Woolf and wants to get free of all the mental complexities through her writing about her mother's relationship with her as Virginia did by composing about Mrs. Ramsay in her novel *To the Lighthouse*. In the first panel of Figure 6, the view is of Bechdel's hands typing on a keyboard, and the second panel captures a broader view of the focal character with her overjoyed and contented looks. McCloud (2006) points out that through the depiction of facial expressions artist conveys to readers about the inside world of the character. The overjoyed expressions of Bechdel at the time of typing her book show how her complications resolved. Writing helped Bechdel to let free those repressed emotions and complexities that she used to hold throughout the early years of her life. She changes her views towards her mother and begins to accept her individuality.

Through writing, she resolves her cognitive dissonance and better understands her relationship with her mother. Alison Bechdel has beautifully engraved this transformation in the structure of her comic book. For sure, her comic contains a complex plot which demands close reading multiple times, but through putting little effort and amalgamating all the scattered references in one frame, one can understand Alison Bechdel's flawless artistic technique easily. McCloud (1993) states that to understand comics, it is mandatory to clear one's mind from all predetermined notions related to comics and state, "only by starting from scratch can we discover their full range of possibilities comic offer, this means learning to separate the form of comics from its often-inconsistent content" (p. 199). The selected graphic novel is formed so that each element reflects the cognitive identity of the main character in one way or the other. Even without words (content), one can dig out the mental functioning of characters by simply understanding the functioning of all the different elements of comics.

### Erikson's Conceptions and Verbal Presentation of Mind

To answer how Erikson's selected stages of psychosocial development are reflected through the verbal expression of Bechdel's, *Are You My Mother?* the analysis is based on Erikson's theoretical conceptions. Still, the study is limited to only five psychosocial developmental stages are compatible with the selected multimodal narrative.

In the selected multimodal narrative, Bechdel provides her childhood experiences; for her drawing was a kind of relief, but when Helen witnesses her interest in cartooning, she starts denouncing her, which gave birth to guilt and shame in Bechdel as if she has committed something offensive. Children hold some hidden qualities and develop different interests; they start exploring and learning different things and aims to pursue them in the future as their initiatives, but sometimes parents impose their ideas over children and criticize their initiatives. Helen is an example of such a mother who finds it hard to get out of their shell to understand what their child wants to do.



Fig. 7. Are You My Mother? Chapter: Mind

Something relevant can be observed in Figure 7; Bechdel states that when her mother talks of her drawings, she used to hide behind the door out of shame and, after a while, “crept out from behind the door.” This is the stage when a child wants to explore as much as he can. If a child is encouraged and motivated by his caregivers during this initial stage of exploring interpersonal skills, this surely leads him to develop a sense of initiative and trust in his abilities. On the contrary, if a child is criticized and discouraged, it generates a feeling of guilt as if a child is not capable of doing remarkable things. Eventually, this guilt causes a lack of self-confidence; a child has a social phobia, and it may hinder his creativity.

Bechdel talked about her childhood; when she was eleven years old, she faced some problems in writing her diary, and at that point, her mother took command and started helping her. Bechdel adds, “She did this every night for six weeks, whatever I said she wrote down” but suddenly Helen stopped doing that. Bechdel, who was entirely dependent upon her mother, is now forced to carry her weight alone. Erikson (1959) addresses this situation that establishing a strict sense of duty makes a child entirely dependent on such duties and spoils the desire of a child to learn things on his own. He further adds that when children are not trained according to the demand of time and society, they struggle a lot being a productive part of it and ultimately develop a sense of inferiority. This is most prominent in Bechdel’s character; for instance, during her therapy with Carol, Bechdel tells her the incident of visiting the church; she adds, “but soon, as I realized that the pew in front of us was filled with children in costumes, I was filled with tears.” Carol questions her to reveal the reasons behind such feelings, and Bechdel does not answer affirmatively. She simply thinks “they all just seem to be so innocent.” She compares her childhood with them and finds them better than her.

Identity is not merely concerned with one’s thoughts about oneself; rather, it also includes one’s complete identification in society. Erikson (1950) writes society including; parents, teachers, or peers, play a dominant role in developing one’s sense of identity. In the selected graphic novel, Bechdel initially showed a desire to compose a book about her father, Bruce Bechdel, but her initiative was taken as trivial by her mother. This attitude of Helen gave rise to a loss of faith and confidence in Bechdel. She kept struggling between her mother’s behaviors and personal initiatives.

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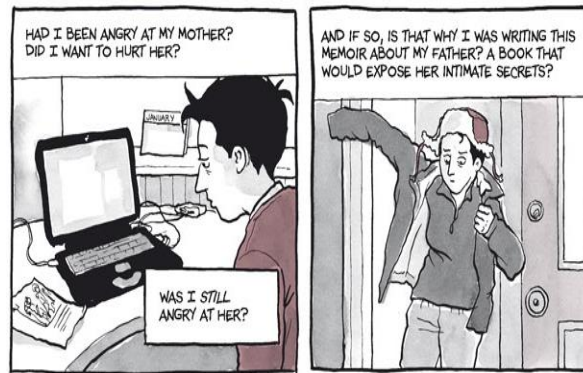


Fig. 8. Are You My Mother? Chapter: Transitional Objects

A stage comes in an individual's life when societal image is more important than one's perception of self. In Figure 8, Bechdel questions herself after receiving such a cold response and thinks that "did I want to hurt my mother?" or "why I was writing a memoir about my father?" Although she tries to start writing later on, yet fails to succeed and mentions in one of her meetings with her therapist that "I am writing this memoir about my dad's suicide and for every sentence, I put down, I delete two." This shows her psychological struggle and failure towards her belief, and plans. Erikson (1959) explains that such a situation causes low self-esteem and the character feels over-controlled by societal patterns and trends, which also gives rise to identity confusion.

In the selected multimodal narrative, Bechdel fails to remain committed in relationships; sometimes, it occurs due to her lost interest and, most of the time, due to her feeling of insecurity. She mentions in her book that "my life is a mess. I've been in a really solid relationship for eight years. But I keep getting attracted toward other people." Bechdel's insecurities are rooted from her mother's unconcerned nature towards her. Erikson (1950) elaborates that when caregivers provide children with desired attention and support, it develops a sense of trust in children that in days of need, there will be people to offer hands to them. On the other hand, lack of parental concerns also generates an inability among children to trust other relations. Bechdel mentions that even when she was around one of her friends, Eloise, she did not feel anything that she used to feel once. Erikson (1959) also talks that when a person lacks understanding about his own unique identity, he fails in being committed towards others. This stage of psychosocial development is directly related to the previous one, i.e., identity versus role confusion. He further adds that to build healthy relationships, it is a prerequisite to first to have an understanding of one's likes, dislikes, perceptions, and beliefs.

In this milieu, when Bechdel leaves Eloise in the selected narrative, she prefers spending her time without any human company. When a person gets hurt by his partner, he tries to find alternatives to fill the gap and keeps his sad feelings away. Bechdel mentions that "I slept with my teddy bear that night and found him more comforting." Her current statement can be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, it implies that she might feel more comfortable being alone. Secondly, it suggests that she says that inanimate objects are better than humans. Lastly, it reflects the isolation of Bechdel, who attaches herself to her teddy bear to feel comfortable because no one else's shoulder is available. While composing a book, Bechdel fills all the empty gaps inside her personality. She always wanted to do something for her mother; for example, during one of her therapies, she mentions that "I have in fact been trying to heal my mother for as long as I can remember." Erikson (1950) adds that it is when one feels the need to contribute something to another's life and accept one's life as "something that had to be." After she started the writing process, Bechdel develops a sense of completeness and does not regret any single day of her past; rather she writes: "There was a certain thing I didn't get from my mother" she adds, "But in its place, she has given me something else, something I would argue that is far more valuable. She has given me the way out". Bechdel successfully resolves her identity conflict at this stage and finds herself standing at a point where she no more regrets anything but appears thankful to her mother for helping her resolve all those complexities which were rooted in her character. Erikson (1950 & 1959) proposes to develop a healthy personality at every stage, the crisis must be resolved. However, Bechdel's character is dynamic and keeps on altering throughout her life. Ultimately, she resolves every complication through composing her book, *Are You My Mother?*

## **Findings and Discussion**

The graphic novel is studied under the theoretical models of Scott McCloud and Erick Erickson to capture the complex playfulness of Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* In presenting an insight into a character's cognitive functioning of the mind, this study draws certain key findings. Firstly, it is analyzed that graphic novels are unique modes of narrative that demand the understanding of their unique elements like panels, closure, transitions, body, and facial expressions, etc., to get the message. It also encourages the notion that multimodal narratives do not narrate the story itself; rather readers have to dig out the meanings through dispersed references which often work as signposts of the character's cognitive processing. The results of the current study indicate that different elements of graphic novels work side by side to narrate the story. The selected multimodal narrative is structured with such elements of comics, which reflect the cognitive construction of the identity of the main character, Bechdel. Moreover, not only the structure but also the verbal expression reflects her complex identity formation. With the help of selected elements, this study discovers how Bechdel's character transforms from a submissive individual to a more confident one. The present study reinforces the idea that comics do not rely on words alone to read or understand them; instead, it is a stand-alone genre, and its structure and form work for themselves. This study does not fit with the views of Tasić and Stamenkovic (2015), who mention that since comic books are compounded text, readers must harmonize the two strands; images and words. However, under McCloud's model of understanding graphical construction, this paper justifies the idea that inferences can be drawn without the aid of verbal expressions and it can be achieved only through the use of mind relevant aspects, and understanding the structure of comics.

Moreover, the findings of current study also stand with the idea of Palmer (2004) that narrativity is the representation of human consciousness and to understand the narrative, readers simply follow the cognitive functioning of characters. The first research question successfully elaborates that mind-relevant aspects show ways to understand a character's dispositions, for example, how artifacts are used as tools for signaling the inside condition of Bechdel, etc. Likewise, the second research question also stands with the idea of Trabasso and Wiley (2005), who claims readers can infer the mental state of characters through their behaviors and others towards them. While dealing with the second question, it is highlighted that society influences the psychology of characters, and it is also displayed that other's behavior plays a major role in generating certain cognitive responses in characters.

The paper also explores the nature of identity, considering Bechdel as a model of this research, and advocating the idea that identity keeps on revolving throughout the lifespan. This research upholds the idea of Giddens (1991), who also sees identity as a flexible entity that, in the modern world with an emotional burden on individuals, their selves have become a kind of project on which they have to work onto make them better. As the selected graphic novel is multimodal, this study explores both modes separately. However, it's both modes; visual and verbal can be used together for analyzing the identity construction of the character in the selected graphic novel.

## **Implications of the Study**

Based on research findings, it is implicated that multimodal narratives reveal the complex patterns of identity via graphical and verbal assertions. The current study is significant in multiple ways. Firstly, this study can be undertaken to find out those ways which are used in order to understand multimodal narratives i.e., comic books and graphic novels. This is but a small contribution that not only addresses newer literary trends of current century but can also be a learning paradigm to enhance students' knowledge and critical skills needed in the field of narratology.

Moreover, this study also describes how by simply following the mind relevant aspects of the characters, readers can reach to the cognitive functioning of characters. In this way, this can be helpful for readers interested in such narratives for understanding how the character's disposition reflects in narratives. Also, this study might be helpful to both students and teachers in learning how comic books act as a medium to enhance the inferring skills of the readers. Furthermore, this study can be helpful in knowing Alison Bechdel in a better way because her graphic novel is a memoir dealing with her own life experiences. Lastly, the proposed study will assist future researchers as a reference or guide in the field of cognitive narratology and multimodal narratives.

## **Conclusion**

Multimodal narratives are of essential importance in modern times because of their unique nature. They are not the kind of modes that communicate directly; rather readers have to use multiple skills to uncover the hidden messages. Graphic novels are an amalgamation of verbal and visual modes; artists carve implicit messages in the structure of comics and sometimes provide them explicitly by using the verbal technique. The comprehensive analysis of the selected graphic novel concludes that Alison Bechdel has flawlessly used both modes of graphic novel; verbal and visual, to reveal the cognitive functioning and character development of prime character Bechdel. Although graphic novels are considered multimodal narratives, this study also reveals graphic novels carry hidden messages in their structure which can be explored even without the aid of verbal expressions. By analyzing the visuals of the selected graphic novel under the shadow of

McCloud's model of understanding comics, this study reveals by simply exploring the different elements of visual mode of comics, readers, with the help of closure, amalgamate the scattered references and reach the unsaid messages. Likewise, in this paper Bechdel's character development is explored under the shadow of the psychosocial theory proposed by Erikson, and the study evinces Bechdel fails to cope with her initial crisis but later on resolves the conflicts by writing her memoir. The present findings confirm that social influence plays a major role in developing one's character; and among that, parents are predominant. In the selected graphic novel, Bechdel's cognitive functioning and identity are also intermingled with her mother's relationship with her. This study holds its minimal share in the field of multimodal narratives. It manifestly highlights the importance of different elements used in the structure of the comic books, which play their unique role in the development of the story and in reflecting the cognitive functioning of characters.

### **Future Research**

This paper has explored the structure of multimodal narrative and cognitive construction of identity yet, many opportunities for extending the scope of this study remain for future work. Firstly, this study is limited to the cognitive identity of the main character of the selected graphic novel. Still, future researchers can involve the cognitive functioning of Helen, the main character's mother as well. Secondly, this study only explored the selected elements of comics elaborated by Scott McCloud, still this graphic novel can also be explored from remaining aspects like captions, motion lines, sound effects, and the relationship between words and images. Thirdly, this study is based on the theoretical conception of Scott McCloud, still the selected graphic novel can also be explored through the model of other comic theorists like Neil Cohn and Will Eisner. Fourthly, the current study is based on the psychosocial development of Erik Erikson but in the future this particular graphic novel can also be investigated under the framework of Donald Winnicott or Sigmund Freud.

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