

Representing Sexual Assault and Trauma in Una's *Becoming Unbecoming* and Courtney Summers's *All the Rage*

Mehdya

Research Scholar, Department of Social Sciences and Languages, Desh Bhagat University, Punjab, India, Email:
mehdyamehdya123@gmail.com

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 25 Feb 2024; Received in revised form: 02 Apr 2024; Accepted: 10 Apr 2024; Available online: 22 Apr 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— <i>Graphic narratives, Sexual Violence against Women, Intermediality, awareness.</i></p>	<p>The paper aims to explore the representation of sexual violence against women in two different mediums and to demonstrate the relevance of graphic novels by comparing and contrasting the graphic novel of <i>Una's Becoming Unbecoming</i> with the traditional novel of <i>Courtney Summers's All the Rage</i>. Through the application of theory of Intermediality, the paper aims to unearth the sexual violence faced by women in selected texts. The author of the graphic narrative employs language and visuals to portray the incidents and aftereffects of sexual assault and trauma. In contrast, the traditional novel presents the problem of sexual violence through stand-alone text. The research paper's focal point is that graphic narrative thematizes intermediality and conveys the issue of sexual assault in a way that is far more effective than a traditional novel in terms of raising awareness. In <i>Becoming Unbecoming</i>, text and pictures relate to each other and communicate meaning in numerous ways, but in <i>All the Rage</i>, the text is given meaning through language only.</p>

Sexual violence has been the leitmotif of different modes of representation to reflect the deep psychological effects. In the aftermath of a sexual assault or rape, survivors might face extraordinarily difficult and painful emotions and experiences. In addition to this, every survivor responds to traumatic events in her own way as per the imprints of this gruesome act. The repercussions of the trauma caused by a sexual assault or rape can be short-term or persist longer. In different literary works and graphic narratives, themes of violence, gender, and sexuality – as well as how these themes relate to one another – recur. The depiction of rape in the literary arena demonstrates that rape is a menace that needs to be dealt with strictly as it costs the victim her peace of life. A victim faces ostracization and is treated as

untouchable, as it reflects the established ideological notions against rape survivors.

The depictions of rape in graphic novels can vary greatly from the traditional modes as the cinematic effects can have serious responses from the audience/readers. Some graphic novels tackle the topic of rape in a responsible and thoughtful manner, aiming to raise awareness, promote empathy, or explore the psychological impact on survivors. These works often focus on the aftermath, recovery, or the broader societal issues surrounding sexual violence. They may portray the emotional turmoil, the struggle for justice, or the support systems available to survivors. Readers who wish to explore graphic novels besides *Una's Becoming Unbecoming* that address sexual violence may consider works like *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, which touches upon the topic within

the context of a memoir about growing up in Iran. *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* by Emil Ferris explores a range of difficult subjects, including sexual violence. *Safe Area Goražde* by Joe Sacco discusses the experiences of survivors during the Bosnian War, including instances of sexual violence.

Una, also known as Una Gallagher, is a British graphic novelist and illustrator. She is known for her powerful and thought-provoking works that explore social and political issues, often focusing on feminism, gender, and identity. One of Una's notable works is *Becoming Unbecoming*, published in 2015. In this graphic memoir, Una addresses the topic of sexual violence, particularly in relation to her own experiences and the broader societal context. The book delves into the impact of rape culture, victim-blaming, and the silencing of survivors. Through her evocative illustrations and personal narrative, Una examines themes of trauma, shame, and resilience. It is praised for its frankness, vulnerability, and the empathy it evokes from readers. Una's work highlights the importance of conversations surrounding sexual violence and challenges the prevailing attitudes that perpetuate it. Courtney Summers is a Canadian author known for her novel *All the Rage*, among other works. While Courtney Summers primarily writes novels, her works often tackle sensitive and important topics relevant to contemporary issues, including sexual assault, bullying, and trauma. *All the Rage* (2015) is a young adult novel that explores the aftermath of sexual assault, focusing on the experiences of a teenage girl named Romy Grey. The book delves into themes of victim-blaming, the silencing of survivors, and the emotional toll of trauma. It raises important discussions about consent, social dynamics, and the prevalence of rape in society. Courtney Summers is recognized for her ability to handle difficult subject matter with sensitivity and nuance. Her works aim to shed light on the experiences of marginalized individuals and give a voice to those who have been silenced. Apart from *All the Rage*, some of Courtney Summers' other notable works include *Cracked Up to Be* (2008), *Some Girls Are* (2010), and *Sadie* (2018).

It's important to note that graphic novels and traditional novels are distinct mediums, but both can effectively address difficult topics and provide valuable insights and perspectives. So both the selected novels accurately depict actual instances of sexual assault and trauma. While both Una's *Becoming Unbecoming* and Courtney Summers' *All the Rage* address the theme of sexual violence, there are notable differences in terms of format, approach,

and target audience. *Becoming Unbecoming* is a graphic memoir by Una that combines personal narrative with evocative illustrations. It delves into Una's experiences and reflects on the broader societal context surrounding sexual violence. The memoir format allows Una to take a unique and intimate perspective, exploring themes of trauma, shame, and resilience through the lens of her own story. On the other hand, *All the Rage* by Courtney Summers is a young adult novel that follows the story of Romy Grey, a teenage girl dealing with the aftermath of a sexual assault. The novel delves into themes of victim-blaming, the impact of trauma, and the challenges faced by survivors. While not a graphic novel, Summers' writing delves into the emotional journey of her characters and provides a nuanced exploration of the subject matter. In terms of target the audience, *Becoming Unbecoming* and *All the Rage* have different intended readerships. *Becoming Unbecoming* is primarily aimed at mature readers, given the graphic memoir format and the nature of the content. It tackles complex themes and is intended for an adult audience capable of engaging with the subject matter critically. *All the Rage*, as a young adult novel, is written for a teenage audience. It addresses the themes of sexual assault and its aftermath in a way that is accessible and relatable for young readers. Summers' writing style in this novel allows for emotional engagement and encourages important discussions about consent, victim-blaming, and the impact of rape culture.

While both works explore the repercussions of sexual violence, their differing formats and intended audiences offer distinct perspectives. *Becoming Unbecoming* provides a personal and introspective examination through a graphic memoir, while *All the Rage* engages young readers through a fictional narrative that tackles similar themes. In Una's graphic novel, *Becoming Unbecoming*, the representation of the whole incident of sexual assault and trauma through images and text makes it an apt text to be analyzed through intermediality theory, a theory i.e., also known as media intermediality or intermedia studies, an academic field that explores the relationships between different media forms and the ways they interact and influence each other.

Una represents the subjective experiences of rape victims by making use of facts. She also uses the Yorkshire Ripper murders as a case study to analyze the victim blaming mentality that has permeated institutions across society. Her imagery is a mirror of her sexual trauma and powerfully depicts the inner

suffering beyond expression. While educating viewers about the social concerns surrounding rape, the objective facts and aggregate case studies are compelling. The novel depicts sexual assault as well as patriarchal dominance in our culture. The word 'rape' had been resonating in Una's thoughts for a long time with numbing undertones. She experiences trauma due to her sexual assault. Psychologists, theorists, and counselors failed to detect her traumatic rape terror, or even if they did, no treatment was offered. It took Una a while to find justice because she was courageous enough. All of this is represented through both pictures and text. The protagonist of *All the Rage* by Courtney Summers has the impression that she is dead inside. It's because of how she has previously been treated. Romy's attractive appearance, crimson lipstick, and red nail polish conceal her reality. The fake Romy is just trying to blend in, while the true Romy is broken, injured, lost, bullied, and unfairly targeted. Romy was raped at a high school party, but virtually no one in her small hometown believes her. Following the party, a girl with connections to both Romy and Kellan goes missing, and it is revealed that Kellan attacked another girl in a nearby town. Romy must choose whether she wants to fight or carry the responsibility of knowing that more girls might be abused if she stays silent. Although no one believed her the first time, they most likely won't believe her again, and the price of her silence could be too much for her to bear.

In context of Intermediality theory, "conventionally unique means of presenting cultural content", according to Wolf, are largely defined by their underlying semiotic systems (pictorial signals, verbal language, music, etc., or, in the case of "composite media" like film which is a combination of various semiotic systems)...When two or more media are overtly or covertly present in a semiotic entity", connection with other media may occur explicitly. (Daniel Stein and Jan-Noel Thou 196). According to Eisner, "The use of Intermediality approach in comparative literary studies is motivated by the fact that the image and the dialogue give meaning to each other". (Daniel Stein and Jan-Noel Thou 197). It is important to keep in mind that reading relies on a range of perceptual modalities, including sequential reading, looking at the entire panel and looking at the graphic narrative page. The reader can change static images into movement and two-dimensional mode fragments into three dimensions by using sequential and simultaneous modes of reception.

The representation of entire incidents of sexual assault and trauma in both novels is important and provides an insight into how it destroys the life of victims. The varied incidents of sexual assault in the graphic narrative *Becoming Unbecoming* are represented through metaphorical imagery which cannot be communicated by Una. She employs anatomical anomalies, landscapes, blank speech bubbles, blank thought bubbles, and other visual elements to illustrate her own experience of sexual assault as a young child. Her first story of a sexual assault is quickly followed by pictures of red apparel, the color red being applied to garments. She uses a variety of red clothing imagery to convey her identity with red color and its strongly sexual overtones. The color red is used to physically portray the perversity she experienced as a youngster by invoking its associative overtones.

Images of Rape, Sexual Assault, and male violence against women exist in specific climates. (Una, 113). The most significant item of clothing in *Becoming Unbecoming* that uses the color red is child Una's outfit, which she wears after she describes her first sexual assault. The image of red clothing brings to mind books in which female characters have dressed in red as a sign of sexual permissiveness. Una uses art to creatively express the perversion she encountered as a child. Red is the sole conspicuous color, and Una uses its associative meanings to graphically depict the perversity she encountered as a youngster. Una's depiction reflects that she is broken into pieces. Her fragments also stand in for the wounds, bleeding, and injuries sustained as a result of her attack. A woman is deprived as a result of the psychological effects of being raped, which is a numbing experience for her. It damages the victim's body, knocks her out cold, and leaves her open to trauma. She is unable to find herself after the attack since it has left her so shredded, and she expresses that the pain she endured has destroyed her identity. One of the reasons she feels disoriented is because the assault has destroyed her identity. The bleeding, bruises, and injuries serve as a graphic illustration of how men assault women. The vestiges of rape and sexual assault are also described, reflecting the traumatic experience of Una. When a victim is hurt, both her identity and her physical well-being are hurt. Brown states that:

The range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and unusual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is that which disrupts

these human lives but not others (qt. in Karen and Rijswijk, 98).

The Intermedial presentation of the novel makes it evident that pictorial representation helps Una to communicate more explicitly the incident of her assault. The pictorial depiction in the novel helps to understand the brutal and numbing effects of rape. Gabriele Ripple and Lukas Etter argue that:

The static images of graphic narratives and the unique blend of graphic and verbal signs are able to construct a fictive world full of movement, space, and its own time structure.... (Daniel Stein and Jan-Noel-Thon, 196).

The picture of the broken Una communicates her assault through the use of signs as depicted in color red on her clothes and the division into pieces represents pain and trauma. Pictures show the movement and transcend successive power invested by its static quality. Her bodily distortion is further depicted through the imagery of an insect.

Following her initial description of sexual assault, Una states, "My body was changing. (Una, 40). My wings didn't seem to work very well. Perhaps they were just decorative"? (Una, 41).

Una feels different as her body has been changed into a different creature. She thinks that because she can no longer fly, her wings have gotten damaged and are now unable to function properly, symbolizing a larger rift between her soul and her body. The victims of an assault experience trauma due to the physical alterations to their bodies. For the rest of her life, Una will carry the burden of being sexually raped and having her body deformed. Additionally, her wings are trailing behind her on the ground, demonstrating that she is not utilizing them. The psychological trauma Una has experienced is still extremely evident in her physical distortions. Una's body uses the recurrent design of insect wings to illustrate how psychological trauma persists, even when it is not always apparent in the current body.

Cathy Caruth talks about "an important connection between literature and trauma theory in that literature has the potential to bring together the fragments of traumatic memory (qt. in Nicole Szklarczyk, 11).

Literature has the unique feature of presenting those harmful experiences which are invisible. It provides a domain for expression that is incapable of expressing and depicting. Traumatic experiences are destructive, they damage the victim's psyche as well as well-being

of victims and literature has the potential to represent such incidents through the genre of graphic novels.

The Theory of Intermediality explicitly tells the involvement of two media in a given semiotic entity. Werner Wolf's typology of Intermediality overtly states that the use of more than one medium specifically in graphic narratives by juxtaposing word and image together, communicates the meaning of the text. Una's graphic depiction of her bodily distortions as she states, "My body was changing" and "My wings didn't seem to work well. Perhaps they were just decorative," (41) proves that the graphic depiction as well as the words used by the author give clear meaning to the text. The imagery of her bodily distortions and her combination explicitly show the harmful effects of sexual assault. She reverts to silence as her illness worsens to the point where she is unable to speak.

In the book, Una plays two unique roles: the adolescent Una and the little child, Una. The young childhood Una is depicted with empty speech bubbles in which she reflects her incapacity to speak for herself as a result of her sexual assault, in contrast to the adolescent Una who frequently uses speech bubbles to communicate. It also conveys the magnitude of her silent worries and agony and the image of this blank speech bubble represents both her alleged incapacity to speak and the silence she was alleged to have displayed as a young child who had been sexually raped. Her formative years are represented by blank speech bubbles.

In graphic novels, typically speech bubbles contain character conversation, but in this work, empty speech bubbles symbolize the burden of sexual assault that cannot be spoken. In contrast to other basic tales, two-media narratives have the ability to directly represent such situations. For the purpose of filling in the gaps and illuminating her *Becoming Unbecoming*, Una employs a range of metaphorical images. Metaphorical imagery is used regularly throughout the narrative in a way that is akin to how themes are used to speak for the silent Una. She deliberately employs stillness to reflect the silence she encountered as a child throughout the entire book. Una embraces graphic mediums to improve her portrayal. The fact that Una's speech bubbles in the artwork are empty serves as a metaphor for her inability to say something or hear. In light of her psychological and emotional state, it is conceivable to comprehend the graphic representation as an incredibly abstract metaphorical image.

The landscape also represents a lack of life in the external environment and a halt in personal development. Una's life has also come to a halt as a result of her sexual assault. Rape has put a stumbling block in her happy life. Her growth has slowed, and she is no longer able to enjoy her daily activities. She also expresses her life's melancholy as a result of her sexual assault. Una expresses her distress through the imagery of barren landscapes with hills and trees. She is using metaphorical imagery to represent the difficult obstacles and challenges she has faced. This imagery also represents the weight of her silence, or how it is attributed to her. The silence of sexual assault victims is conveyed through the use of imagery in graphic novels, because most often, after the incidence of sexual assaults victims grow silent. Una portrays her ineffable anguish in *Becoming Unbecoming* through the use of visual elements and words such as empty speech bubbles showing the unspoken trauma and empty thought bubbles depicting unexpressed fears. Her depiction of metaphorical imagery of the landscape (the mere depiction of lifelessness and stoppage in her personal growth) is evident and it happens through intermediality. In *All the Rage*, Romy states that two buttons of her shirt were open and she started opening all the buttons and found a red dark stain on her stomach. Initially, she felt that the red stain was blood but when she touched it, her hand jerked back and she then found her lipstick getting flattened and ruined. Then she realized that something terrible had happened to her. She herself managed the aftereffects of that brutal incident. The disturbing scenes of sexual assault and cruelty affected her mental well-being. Sexual assault is that which is without consent. She was surprised by the changes that took place in her body and dealt with them on her own. Rape harms both the identity and the subjectivity of women. It violates the capacity, will, and desires of women. The damage to victims' subjectivity affects her physically, and as well as psychologically. In this regard,

Lynda Martin Alcott, "too emphasizes ...that sexual violations can be both identified and criticized on the basis of their damage to victims' sexual subjectivity" (111).

When someone's identity and subjectivity are damaged, that person's life becomes more miserable and it often leads to suicidal tendencies. Romy looks into the mirror and says "My reflection is still in the mirror. The red on my body-letters. Letters on my skin, reversed in the glass, turning themselves into this.... I step in and lower myself slowly until I am

sitting, I reach for the soap and I scrub it across my stomach hard until the lather turns pink, until the pink turns white until it disappears" (Courtney, 112-113). The rapist has achieved his victory by raping her, leaving her on the road, and writing the words "Rape Me" on Romy's stomach. The aftermath of this heinous act shows that the threat mark is applied to the victim's body as well as to her soul. The entire incident reflects the truth that rapes are often frequently planned in advance rather than occurring spontaneously. The words 'Rape Me' written on Romy's stomach are symbols of men abusing women in various ways. She is terrified by this menacing situation, yet she manages to deal with it on her own. Frye and Shafer emphasize that "rape gives the victim a picture of herself as a being within someone's domain and not as a being which has a domain..." (341).

The representation of barren landscapes, hills and trees depicts the hurdles faced by Una after her assault. "Words failed me. They didn't present such a problem to others" (*Becoming Unbecoming*, 79). The empty speech bubbles and empty thought bubbles represent unexpressed anxieties and unuttered trauma. The barren trees are symbols of stagnation in growth and in Una's life symbolize a stoppage in her personal life. "So I became an unreliable witness and a perfect victim" (Una, 82). In *All the Rage*, the incidents of sexual assault and trauma are presented through protagonist Romy's language when she describes the aftermath of sexual assault and how she manages and deals with it. The open buttons of her shirt, the red color on her stomach, the bruises on her right cheek, and the pain in her body depict the aftereffects of rape.

Two-medium graphic novel delivers the issue of sexual assault in such a way that subsequent and concurrent modes help to interpret the meaning of metaphorical imagery as used by Una in the select text. Its findings show that graphic narratives, which combine two forms of media, have a greater ability to convey sexual assault in a more overt manner. Much more than a traditional novel, a graphic novel can assist in raising awareness. It uses both text and visuals to tell the story and uses intermediality such as imagery and text to communicate meaning. Graphic novels help in acquiring educational benefits and studying a graphic novel brings media literacy into the curriculum as students examine artistic conventions, such as how color expresses emotions, visual stereotypes, and how dialogue is represented by word bubbles. *Becoming and Becoming* explores themes of identity, gender,

and self-discovery via dual modes of representation. The book delves into the author's personal journey of understanding and accepting gender identity and the challenges along the way. On the other hand, *All the Rage* doesn't provide a neat resolution in terms of legal justice, it emphasizes the importance of speaking out and supporting survivors. Romy's journey reflects the resilience and determination needed to confront and address the issue of sexual assault.

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