



## **Negotiating 'Space' and 'Belonging': Reconstructing Transnational Discourse of the Refugees through Graphic Narrative in *Over Under Sideways Down* by Karrie Fransman**

**Modhura Bandyopadhyay**

Assistant Professor in English, Jamini Mazumder Memorial College

The author is an Assistant Professor in English at Jamini Mazumder Memorial College, Dakshin Dinajpur. She is currently pursuing PhD research work on Cultural Studies and Folklore at the University of Burdwan.

### **Abstract**

In the post holocaust era- the discourse that has emerged around the terms 'space' and 'boundary' is porous and politically charged. The lived experience of belonging to a space and latching the identity of self with the ideological specificities and ethnic memories of that space, architects one's idea of home at the microcosmic level and nation-state at the macrocosmic level. Transnationalism is in transgression with the non-negotiable boundaries of a nation state, categorization of space in terms of cultural attachments, economic structure, religious orientation and ethnic identity.

It is indeed difficult to belong to a transnational space, as it does not provide anchors to connect genetic memory to ethnic memory of a space. Consequently, the idea of home is forever missing or postponed. This crisis finds representation in the lived experiences of international refugees who are forced to adopt the transnational identity once uprooted from the space which no longer remains their nation or home. This paper explores the discourse of nationality and its negotiation with the forced diasporic identity that constructs the ontological structure of the self, from the perspective of the refugees. The text in context is *Over Under Sideways Down* by Karrie Fransman. The author has chosen the genre of graphic novel, as illustration is an adept medium of communication that complies with the territorial principles of transnational space being a universal signifier.

### **Keywords**

transnationalism, refugees, graphic narratives, ethnographic memory

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### Transnationalism: The Discourse

He wondered whether home was a thing that happened to a place after a while, or if it was something that you found in the end, if you simply walked and waited and willed it long enough. (Gaiman 54)

In the post holocaust era- the discourse that has emerged around the terms 'space' and 'boundary' is porous and politically charged. The lived experience of belonging to a space and latching the identity of self with the ideological specificities and ethnic memories of that space, architects one's idea of home at the microcosmic level and nation-state at the macrocosmic level. Transnationalism is in transgression with the non-negotiable boundaries of a nation state, categorization of space in terms of cultural attachments, economic structure, religious orientation and ethnic identity. The advent of globalized cyberspace further problematized the discourse of boundary and space by eliminating the margins of the virtual and real. It projected virtual lived experience in an uncategorized third space which is shared universally, transcending the demarcation of the barbed wires. Theoretically Transnationalism or Transculturalism seemed a progressive alternative to Multiculturalism- which necessarily means ethnic consolidation and amalgamation into a homogenous organic whole. "Transculturality aims for cultures with the ability to link and undergo transition whilst avoiding the threat of homogenization or uniformization" (Welsch 86). However in practicality it is indeed difficult to belong to a transnational space, as it does not provide anchors to connect genetic memory to ethnic memory of a space and hence the idea of home was forever missing or postponed.

This crisis finds representation in the lived experiences of international refugees who are forced to adopt the transnational identity once uprooted from the space which no longer remains their nation or home. In this paper I would like to explore the discourse of nationality and its negotiation with the forced diasporic identity that constructs the ontological structure of the self, from the perspective of the refugees. The text in context is *Over Under Sideways Down* by Karrie Fransman. What segregates this text from standardized transnational Diaspora narratives is the compelling urgency to 'fit in' and simultaneous exigency to erase all trails of their previous identities. The transnational discourse of these refugees is constructed on the inconclusiveness of both the procedures leaving behind a scarred palimpsest of a new transculturized individual.

### Why Graphic Novel?

Telling Ebrahim's story as a comic makes sense because comics are a universal language. You don't need to speak English to understand what is happening, and it means that someone in Iran, or South Korea, or Japan could read Ebrahim's story, and see what he, and the other 1000 children a year who arrive alone in the UK, have gone through. (Fransman)

I have chosen the medium of graphic narratives, as illustration is an effective medium of communication that complies with the territorial principles of transnational space, being a universal signifier. The visual representation which are the universal signifiers unidirectionally point towards a specific signified which leaves very little scope for subjective interpretation. This minimizes the depreciation of translation and transgresses the binaries of syntactical language; therefore communication is facilitated in a transnational interface. The power of visual representation was demonstrated by the reaction incurred when the photograph of Alan Kurdi a two year old Syrian boy whose dead body washed ashore at Turkey was published in the media. The entire humanity was washed by the waves of despondency and anguish. The photograph stirred the sentiments of all refugees spread around the world and they protested in unison.

“That could have been me,” Dr. Vinh Chung told CNN’s Carol Costello. “The body of the lifeless toddler, face down, washed up on the beach is really chilling to me — because that could have been me.” In 1979, when he was 3-1/2, Vinh and his family fled communist Vietnam. The family of 10 and 83 other refugees drifted aimlessly in the South China Sea. With no food or water, they were dehydrated and dying, he says. “But my family had a different outcome,” he says, “because a mercy ship from World Vision found us, and we were eventually relocated to the United States”. (Reid)

The use of illustration in both the graphic novel does justice to the trauma experienced by the immigrants in the arduous course of their journey across continents, fleeing through different countries, encountering new geographical and cultural horizons.

The detailing and intentional blurring of illustrations, crafty use of the dialogue box, choice of colours (refer to Fig.1.) often add an authentic texture to the lived experiences of trauma and acculturation which is almost incommunicable in words. The changing of emotions in such quick succession from- terror to loss, separation to desperation, fear of annihilation to resurrection, from confusion to familiarization ; is only possible within the

scope of graphic narratives. The grand palimpsest of a transnationalized individual is portrayed masterfully by the illustrator as some distinctive feature of the protagonist is purposely retained. In *Over Under Sideways Down* Ebrahim can always be identified by a sharp pointed nose and a string of 'precious tasbin beads' around his wrist which is reminiscent of his Kurdish lineage, while he is forced to explore unknown territories-geographical, political, economical, social, linguistic, culinary and many more.

It's obvious from the basic layout of the characterization and the pictorial consistency of the narrative framework that Fransman was particularly motivated by the lived experience and ethnographic memories of her subject. She adopts the storytelling tricks that is possible under the purview of graphic novel. These liberties include clever use of visual metaphors, the speech often transcending the boundaries of speech balloons, interchanging the territories of speech and illustrations, and brilliantly imaginative and playful uses of the sequential foundation of the comics narrative abound throughout. Despite this crafty and assured usage of the complex integration of visual and literal language, Fransman's work always bears the spontaneous simplicity and randomness of a narrative fabricated from the memories of a dislocated teenager. Fransman is always carefully subtle and painstakingly avoids burying Ebrahim's story in overly exuberant visual ostentation, or cramming too much details in too little space. Andy Oliver testifies my argument: "As ever, Fransman is economical in line and yet always substantive in both intent and delivery. The presentation of the story in graphical form makes it immediate and accessible to many readers and complements the text. The artwork is simple but effective and its sparing use of colour reflects the often bleak emotions and events."



Fig.1. 'The Asylum seeker' episode. Ebrahim negotiating with the UK officials seeking for asylum assistance and hoping to begin a safe life in UK. Karrie Fransman. *Over Under Sideways Down*,17.

### ***Over Under Sideways Down: A Historical Outline***

*Over Under Sideways Down* narrates the story of Ebrahim, a Kurdish Iranian, who is forced to choose fleeing his country in order to safeguard his step father. Set in the backdrop of Iranian refugee crisis and illegal migration to UK, Fransman delivers a heartbreaking tale of a teenager which is the embodiment of the predicament of millions, who inhabit the Middle-East Asia. Iran, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Afghanistan are plagued by the worst refugee crisis that the world hasn't witnessed in decades.

The Iranian revolution in 1979 often termed as the Islamic Revolution took the world by surprise as the world witnessed a progressing economy slowly fade into progressive degeneration. The people of Iran before the revolution were used to a pro-Western secular way of life, under the last serving Persian monarch-Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. This authoritarian rule backed by the US government caused dissent among the Islamic fundamentalist which led to political unrest. This revolt culminated in Iran becoming an Islamic Republic headed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Since the onset of Islamic Guardianship in 1979 many Iranians have fled their country in search of a more liberal 'space' to call home. However in the last year there has been a steep rise in the number of immigrants who has risked crossing the English Channel in small perilous boats to infiltrate into England .According to the BBC report delivered by McLennan the current huge influx of refugees to UK has been caused by a special political decision:

Miodrag Ćakić, chief executive of Refugee Aid Serbia, which monitors migration through the Balkans, believes migrants arriving in the UK are among the thousands who flew into Serbia after the country began offering visa-free access to Iranians in August last year. The move was ostensibly intended to increase tourism and trade between Iran, the world's 25th largest economy, and Serbia, the 90th. The visa scheme - which attracted allegations it was being abused by migrants seeking access to western Europe - ended on 17 October, by which time some 40,000 Iranians were said to have flown to the Balkan nation. It is unknown how many returned home, but according to the Associated Press, local media reported that direct flights from Tehran to Belgrade had been arriving full and returning empty. (McLennan)

Karrie Fransman teamed up with the British Red Cross and interviewed Ebrahim asking for a detailed account of his transnational journey in order to observe Refugee

week which later she developed into a graphic novel. The novel is based on true incidents which testimonies the political breakdown in Iran and the spirit of revival that the promise of the new nation brings even in the face of death. The novel establishes the fact 'space' is rarely a physical entity, it is constantly in negotiation with the power dynamics which could instantaneously alter the paradigms of ideology, culture and ethnicity it stood for, suddenly alienating those whose identities were woven to the ideology of the 'space'. Old boundaries fade and new nation states are born overnight, but the edgy erasure of the ethnic memories leave behind trail marks like scars- which rarely hurts but are always present below the epidermis.

In a single graphic text (refer to Fig.2) the entire saga of the political tension pertaining to Islamic rebellion is encapsulated. The visual metaphor of the rebellion is wrapped up in few half framed sentences and fragmented images of a bleeding boy which is a stark juxtaposition to the complete family portrait with the backdrop of the burning cityscape. It is also revealed that his father was a pro-monarch and therefore fell victim to Islamic bullets. Ebrahim tries to wipe out the memories of the trauma by 'dis-belonging' like an act of violent amputation and dislodge his anchors from the space which no longer complied with his ethnic memory of home. From that moment onward he was in search of a new 'space' that was in synchronization with his perspective of 'home'- a safe, secular, progressive nation state where he could comfortably disembark the anchors of 'self'.



Fig.2. Ebrahim remembers his past and parents by touching the scar in his leg where he was shot when his father was killed. Karrie Fransman. *Over Under Sideways Down*, 6.

At the tender age of six Ebrahim discerned that 'nation' and 'home' were vulnerable psychological spaces which constantly questioned the topographical boundaries. This scar of amputated home pushed the 'self' to perpetually exist in a transnational interface. In this homogenously heterogeneous space- binaries could be merged, ideologies negotiated and boundaries erased while preserving the individuality of 'self'.

### Unlearning Identities: The Journey Away from Home

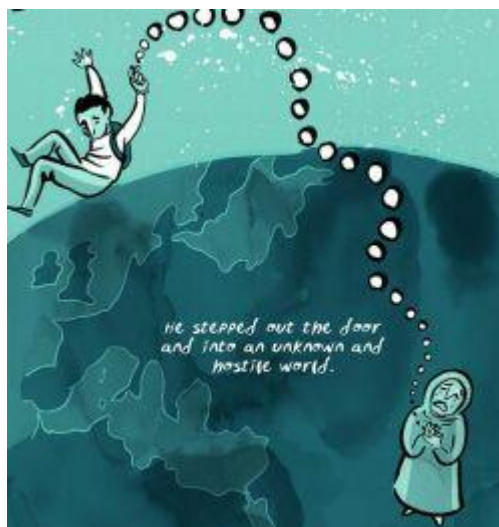


Fig.3. Ebrahim wanted to disguise his previous identity as a Kurdish Iranian and don a new Westernized identity and yet the precious tasbeeh beads always connected him to his mother and Iran. Karrie Fransman. *Over Under Sideways Down*,10.

The graphic novel begins with a quirky prologue by the author where she states that nobody chooses to be a refugee. At the age of fifteen Ebrahim is forced to embark on a journey as an asylum seeker in search of a new nation state after completely uprooting himself from his homeland-Iran. Fransman states that during her research for the comic she read about the resilience of those who have left their countries driven by the terror of persecution. To dwell in the dichotomy of desolation and resurrection, the trauma of living in the warzone and the promise of a safe destination, constantly rubbing at each other required immense strength which finds embodiment in Ebrahim.

The narrative commences with Ebrahim being ejected out of his home as he used to distribute political pamphlets for his step-father. One day he was urgently called back by his step-father, who fearing persecution due to his political activism compelled Ebrahim to flee the country. Ebrahim did not have much to hold him back to Iran except

his mother and the wristlet, yet he was reluctant to be left at the disposal of the unknown with only a bag of clothes.

He took a perilous and traumatic transcontinental journey witnessing murder, rape, terror and uncertainty inflicted by the agents who took him to an unknown future via Turkey. Though he walked and travelled in silence yet he could experience the loss of his identity with the loss of homeland. Turkey being the gateway to Europe for Asian refugees from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria was a conglomeration of ethnic memories, and personal tragedies which was a shared lived experience for people who now could not be categorized on the basis of boundaries of nation state. These tragedies and apprehensions lent them universality which helped them gain their transnational perspective.



Fig.4. Ebrahim's transcontinental migration. Karrie Fransman. *Over Under Sideways Down*, 11.

### The Assylum Seeker's Transculturization

Ebrahim entered the UK in packed cartoon boxes after being fed tablets to prevent urination for fifteen days. This land with all its hostility and threats slowly acculturated Ebrahim. Though his initial experiences were horrific- he was locked up in prison and interrogated about his true identity. He had to convince the security personnel about his existence by reiterating the same traumatic tales of his escape from Iran. He had to suffer



being investigated naked to confirm that he was a minor, a fifteen year old boy who sought assistance and refugee. This struggle ran for four long years but he was allotted a hostel with inmates, where he could pursue his old passion of education.

The true transculturalization begins with his stay in the asylum where he began imbibing and negotiating the British culture and tradition. His daytime schedule was water tight with his trips to bureaucratic offices, college, visiting other refugee children at asylums as a counsellor. However at night he felt he was back in Iran, he missed his mother, his language. His day time confident self would metamorphose into the uncertain, perplexed terrorized teenager who crossed the mountains fleeing persecution. In these moments of desolation and crisis he could only hold on to the precious beads in his writs like the invisible umbilical cord that connected him to his mother. He would be shocked when his friends complained about their parent's obsessive intrusion in their privacy. He would be even shocked when he saw the easy availability of water, the hustle bustle of the city, the sense of safety that blew in the air. But often he would suddenly feel insecure thinking if he was deported back to Iran. London had now become the 'space' with which he associated 'home', going back to Iran would be like being uprooted once again, once again becoming a refugee.

As represented in Fig. 4 London helped Ebrahim to reestablish himself where his ideologies and idiosyncrasies were no longer in transgression with the principles of nation state. He had now attained the liberty to 'belong' to a place which he chose. Transnationalism endowed him with the power of choice which he did not have when he became a refugee. He could now choose his identity, language, company, food, education, religion and could happily coexist in both the terrains. This coexistence is an essential feature of transnational experience which differentiates it from diaspora.



Fig.5. Ebrahim's transnational identity-Kurdish Londoner. Karrie Fransman. *Over Under Sideways Down*, 18.

**Conclusion: The institutions of Transnationalism**

It would be befitting to conclude by recognizing the efforts of the institutions like British Red Cross which contributes in creating real lived experience of transnational bonding by giving it an organizational structure. Without such institutions volunteering to accommodate displaced immigrants these terms would have amounted to dry intellectual exercise. *Over Under Sideways Down* is a graphic novel composed under the initiative of such institution where people from different nationalities connect by sharing compassion and giving it a voice. According to Faist,

transnationalism – and transnational spaces, fields and formations – refer to processes that transcend international borders and therefore appear to describe more abstract phenomena in a social science language. By transnational spaces we mean relatively stable, lasting and dense sets of ties reaching beyond and across borders of sovereign states. Transnational spaces comprise combinations of ties and their substance, positions within networks and organisations and networks of organisations that cut across the borders of at least two national states. (Faist 14)

Granting to the report it could be concluded that transnational voice truly finds embodiment in the visual metaphors of the graphic narratives and organizations which enables refugees to replace their fascist past with the promise of a transnational tomorrow.

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