

**“Caught in Limbo” from Liminality into
Alienation: Immigrant as depicted in
Graphic Novel: “The Strange” 2018
by Jerome Ruiller"**

العالم في طي النسيان» من العلوغ إلى الاختراب: المهاجر كما تم تصويره في

الرواية المصورة «الغريب» بقلم جيروم رويلر

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Abstract

To be a prey to many wild aspects that paralyze one, a feeling of being 'locked-in' to an uncomfortable state via a set of structural and social barriers often perceived as insurmountable, are all aspects of liminality. This paper sheds the light on the liminal experience that leads into alienation in Jerume Ruiller's *The Strange*. Ruiller introduces the protagonist of his graphic novel "*The Strange*" as one who was caught into the stage of liminality and could not move to the stage of Reincorporation. The author illustrates the difficulties of being "liminal", on the one hand, having a "in-between" condition that serves as a link between two different rules (old and new) is what it means to be a liminal. It also illustrates how ideology and the process of alienation may either reinforce one another or operate in opposition to one another. This is the stage of liminality where we are caught in limbo, and it is the most dangerous one.

Key words: Liminality, Exile, Illegal immigrant, and Alienation.

if they approached them with compassion, without turning the perpetrators into monsters determined to steal our very way of life...it is so hard for some people to have empathy, even for those they oppose.....I don't see why you can't exhibit understanding and compassion even if you oppose the way they entered the country. (Seven, The Strange 2)

Introduction

The term Graphic Novel appeared by the year 1920 referring to those comic books telling stories for children; though both formats feature illustration based storytelling, the two types of novels have some differences.

Many books have tried to define Graphic novel; however there is no determined definition that could be used to refer to that type of books. It could be defined as a novel that tells a complete story via illustrations; it contains a beginning, middle, and an end. Graphic Novel will offer the type of resolution that one expects from a novel, even if it is part of a series.

Graphic novels are different from Comic Books in many ways: first, they are longer than comic novels and more complicated, too. Second, graphic Novels cover a wide array of genres and subject matters, and the writer uses images or jokes to reveal deeper meanings than reality. Comic books may as well, but the subjects are often associated with or explained through the lens of superheroes or heightened realities. Third, Graphic Novels contain complete narratives, whether or not they are part of a larger series. Fourth, Comic books contain excerpts of serialized narratives; it can be difficult to read a comic book if you have not read the one that comes before it in a series. Also, Both Comics and Graphic Novels can contain complex characters with detailed back stories and inner conflict. Moreover, Comic books are produced with greater frequency than graphic novels, often arriving on a weekly or monthly schedule.

Despite its birth in the 20th Century, Graphic Novel has a strong beginning in the 21st Century due to political and social events around the world; it began to gain traction in literary circles. Among most famous books of Graphic novels: Maus by Art Spiegelman, and Watchman by Alan Moore have been widely spread.

Examining Graphic Novels, we can find some characteristics that are clear: first, Graphic novel has a clear beginning, middle, and an end. Second, it has a central narrative or (A story) supplemented by optional B- Stories. Third, it has character development and personal journeys. Fourth, it has thematic messaging. Also, Graphic novel has precise, carefully considered dialogue and narration. The obvious distinction between graphic novels and text based novels is that graphic novels permit their images to do the vast majority of the storytelling, with dialogue bubbles and narration boxes to help elaborate the story. Hence, Monnin emphasizes “Graphic Novels ask us to rethink how we define reading and writing today. The bottom line is that each of these new literacy reading experiences call on us to be competent readers of both words and images” (2011, 12)

As it is not easy for the audience to accept a novel with more pictures and little text, Graphic novel was not approved to be literature till the late 1970s. However, in the last decade Graphic Novel was used as a symbolic one to criticize social, political or medical performance of those tyrant regimes where it was not allowed to be seen or heard. Graphic novel would be Fiction or non-fiction and it deals with Drama, history, Romance, Comedy, and Adventure.

Since (The Arabian Spring) of 2011, Graphic Novel has been widely accepted and spread as the best way to satirize and criticize political status and cases of illegal immigration waves to Europe. The Strange (2018) is one of those Graphic Novels depicting the case of an illegal immigrant into new country and his/her suffering from the beginning till the end of the novel.

In his essay *The graphic Novel that captures the Anxieties of being Undocumented* Janine Joseph stresses that “Ruiller strength as a storyteller lies in his layering of these multiple points of view, which he pairs with a stripped-down aesthetic. Drawn with a simple five color palette, *The Strange* lacks ornamentation and melodrama.” (2018, 8)

Additionally, Annie Mok in his review explains the reason why Ruiller uses graphite in his novel:

The graphite markmaking feels tentative and anxious; filled in patches of black graphite seem laborious, and the cross-hatching wobbles. These visual touches all convey a sense of dread. Without much negative or white space, there’s often little area for the eye to “rest” in reading the book. The design is oppressive, as is the world that “the Strange” lives in (2018, 4)

Ruiller also concentrates on the language used in his novel, using many symbols that do not express any certain language and he intends to do so in order to emphasize “the strange we follow may represent people of many different Diasporas. Lost without community, without a name, “The Strange” (4) So, Ruiller focuses on his message regardless of names, places, or languages; he does not want to criticize anyone or any group while he is conveying his message to the whole humanity. When asked about the reason why he used animals rather than humans, he replied:

To denounce the failings of the system, we often use animals as a shorthand that simplifies a conversation...animals are frequently used to tackle real life issues...draw people as animals evokes the human experience without specificity, creating a distance that leaves their story open to interpretation while also preventing us from choosing one particular interpretation...the animals I’ve drawn here don’t represent any one person, so they can represent all of humanity without specificity. (Dueben 2018, 2)

Hence, the novelist is strict in conveying his message generally and globally regardless of places or races.

Theoretical Overview:

Migration or Exile is one of the pre-existent activities that have been recognized all over the world; thus, the rite of passage that refers to the conversion from a social or religious status into another exists in all historical societies. Despite the belief of academics and researchers around the world that migration or exile is the outcome of Fascism, Communism, Oppression, Tyrannical power, ethnicity, or even social and financial poverty, Edward Said emphasizes:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift force between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted [...] the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (Reflections on Exile and other Essays 2000, 137)

The French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep gives detailed explanation to such a concept through his book *Les Rites de Passage 1909* where he divides the rite of passage into three main stages: first, the rite of Separation where man is severed from his old status; in this stage we know that change is coming and we begin to come to terms with the idea of having new life, new society and new identity. Second, the rite of Transition that undergoes adjustment to the new status; it is the process in which we have already lost our identity, yet we have not got the new one. This is called the stage of liminality, and it is the most dangerous state. The last rite is that of Reincorporation or what people call Consolidation or the stage of merger. It is the stage where we start to define and get used to what is really going to mean for us; it is the time where we have new identity, new society, new people, and new dreams fulfilled.

Ruthie Abeliovich discusses that ‘Les rites de passage’ (1909) ‘conceptualizes how rites of passage engender cultural flux that generates social shifts and constructs identities, within pre-modern, tribal, family-oriented social groups’ (2018, 1)

In his essay “The uses and meanings of Liminality” Bjorn Thomassen argues that Vistor Turner rediscovers Gennep concepts of liminality and realizes that:

Liminality served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reaction to liminal experiences: the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience. (Thomassen 2009, 14)

Turner gives a particular emphasis to liminal rites suggesting that after being separated from society and before being incorporated in new society, there is a stage that is called “Betwixt and Between” where there is a big conversion from an environment to another, one society to another, a culture to another, and from living circumstances to another.

In theorizing this issue, the researcher has tried to distinguish two (always interwoven) kinds of liminal experience: “Spontaneous liminal experiences” that happen to people when the normative order patterning their world is abruptly transformed, and “devised liminal experiences” which are actively sought and involve the meditation of symbolic resources serving as “liminal affective technologies” (Stenner, 2017a, 2017b) The natural result of waiting in liminality for long is starting the phase of danger and alienation; waiting for incorporation with the new society and getting the new identity for long fades the hope of person that he/she becomes a prey to alienation which is the father of all terrors.

This paper analyses the stage of liminality that leads into alienation in Jerume Ruiller’s *The Strange* (2018) as an example of Graphic Novels criticizing social and political status of new comers and asylum seekers in different countries around the world.

“The Strange”:

Ruiller introduces the protagonist of his graphic novel “The Strange” as a clear example for those who are caught into the stage of liminality and could not move to the stage of Reincorporation. By the title of the novel, Ruiller means to point out that he uses “The Strange” instead of the stranger because “the protagonist is not a “stranger” with the opportunity to become known, or perhaps to even become a friend; he’s a “strange” and therefore always alien” (Joseph 2018, 2); an emphasis from the very beginning that the protagonist is a prey to many wild aspects that paralyze him.

The novel is written without mentioning names, places, or even reasons for the protagonist to immigrate; Joseph believes that “Ruiller disrupts any impulse on the part of the reader to make judgments, to think from the perspective of a fictional country’s courts... This vagueness allows the story to strive for a degree of universality.” (2018, 5) The author tells his novel from many perspectives: employers, the Police, landlords, neighbors, passerby, and other immigrants; he divides the trip of his protagonist into three main sections: people who see him as inferior to them, people who seek to exploit him, and people who really have the desire to help him despite being very few.

The protagonist passes the first stage that is the Rite of Separation from his original society and his old status with the hope for better life, status and new society where he can achieve his goals; Said states:

Cut off from their roots, their land, their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. Exiles feel therefore an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. (2000, 140-141)



Once the migrant moves to the new society, he is under surveillance of those from outside and from inside the new society. To be exiled or new comer means “to live as if everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial...to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as to querulous lovelessness.” (Said 2000, 146) The outsiders are represented by The Crow that is watching him since he arrives at the airport “He thought He’d made it through the hardest part...In fact, a new life was starting for him, though not necessarily the one he had dreamed of...From that moment on, I felt connected to him” (Ruiller 40,41) However, in his essay “The Strange”, John Seven illustrates that The Crow “At its most Fantastical...offering a metaphor the outsider through kinship felt by the crow. But others who relate the story are more down to earth, more part of the reality we live in...than an observer could have no access to” (2018, 3)

The Crow, then, may be the middleman character or the mouthpiece of the author himself who supports the idea of accepting immigrants or group of strangers as “still belonged to the human Race at all” (109), he also tells the reader of what is coming next and he considers himself responsible for the protagonist as he feels his suffering, depression and insecurity since his arrival to the new land; so he is very happy when “he started laughing...I’d never seen him laugh like that before...I flew off happy, with a loud caw and a powerful flap of my wings” (129)

Inside the hosting land, there are many people with different perspectives: The passenger, in addition to him, realizes from the first moment that he is a strange “And with that heavy coat, you could tell right away that he wasn’t from here...then he spoke to me in a language I didn’t understand...He was a strange” (27-28) The passenger returns him the paper with the address without offering help or even asking someone else saying “sorry” considering himself irresponsible for the strangers “we didn’t speak again until we got to the Bus Terminal.” (30)

The idea of being rejected just because he is strange is quite clear from the very beginning of his arrival; the passenger alienates himself for no real reason but it is the attitude of many people there, Conrad assures “it is indeed hard upon a man to find himself a lost stranger helpless, incomprehensible, and of a mysterious origin, in some obscure corner of the earth” (qtd. in Said 2000, 134) Also, Language barrier leads man to alienation, as he couldn’t speak their language, couldn’t understand what they say or even communicate with them. Even the Taxi driver was worried about the places those strange people are living in and he did not like to go there, despite living in jungles outside the city taking the trees as shelters, they are rejected by society.

The Middleman who is responsible for providing him an apartment or a room to stay in exploits him taking much money that represent “several Month’s work” (46) where the protagonist came from as “renting an apartment to an illegal immigrant, or even just housing one...was now punishable by three years’ imprisonment” (45) This increased the suffering of the Protagonist from the day one, no speech, no welcome, no housing and above all social rejection. This is the society he seeks to be incorporated in. Ryan C. illustrates:

Namelessness. Anonymity. Invisibility...these three things are inextricably linked, the first two are undeniably de-humanizing (even if, fair enough, he’s a dog), while the third is key to, if not his freedom, at least his continued survival in the country he is attempting to scratch out a subsistence-level “living” in. (2018, 1)

A passerby who had noticed him indicates he was “walking close to the wall, trying to stay out of sight. But he stuck out anyway...He kept turning around like he was worried about being stopped...He disappeared into the traffic” (57-58) His feelings of being rejected everywhere and by everybody leads him to be afraid and unconfident of what is going to face and why he should take care.

Policemen and officers adopt the hostile attitude against strange people; Ruiller depicts them here as Gorillas stressing the feelings of power, authority and cruelty “the cops took down names, we took a photo for the papers, and they took down more names. Then they got into their cars and left.” (55) However, the author emphasizes that the strange is just a paper in the hands of parties for winning elections, strange people are “a scapegoat something that will sustain the fantasy of a common enemy. It’s a way that they can rally their followers.” (qtd. in Dueben 1) Bernard, the chief of immigrants who is writing many petitions asking for legal rights said to the police:

Stranges are easy scapegoats. In Hard times, politicians always use them to turn attention away from the real issues...why do we have to break up this family?...more and more stranges are being expelled here, like everywhere else...the prefect has no respect for basic human rights...His lack of humanity is a disgrace. (54)

However, the officer who drives the Commissioner car explains:

They didn’t want us behaving like a police force anymore...it was all about numbers. Any reason was good enough to stop and check someone...we were under pressure to meet our expulsion quotas...There were too many stranges in the city. But who had decided? And what were the criteria? I was sick of it. (62-63)

Even policemen emphasize being imposed to act inconveniently to bother and pollute the new comers’ life. They believe that their duty is to keep security not to arrest people for the sake of being stranges. The Commissioner stresses the idea that “it scares the residents when they see gangs of them in the streets looking for a fight” (63) and this gives a clear justification for racism against those stranges and exiled people in new societies.

Exile can’t be made to serve notions of humanism. Exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible. Exile is

irremediably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human being; and that, like death but without death's ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography. (Said 2000, 138)

On the other side, neighbors of strangers feel they are not safe with those new comers and they are rejecting their incorporation in their societies; they are afraid of being insecure with what they hear in the media and hence they are not ready to receive exiles. Indigenous people can't adapt themselves with the comer's cultures and attitudes; the neighbor says:

It doesn't feel like home with all those strangers...too much coming and going, too much filth, too much fear...the clothes I hang out on my Balcony keep disappearing...someone even stole food Right out of her freezer...many strangers are here illegally...what's wrong with turning them in...He doesn't even speak our language...He'll be bringing his family soon...They're just here to poison the lives of honest people. (66, 68)

This tempts Ryan C. to clarify the real suffering of strangers in new societies and the impossibility of the idea of reincorporation "...for an undocumented immigrant this is no doubt true no matter what country they happen to be in: one sideways look to the wrong person, one perceived act of disrespect-one step out of line in the eyes of someone else...it's a life constantly spent on the precipice of losing wat very little you have" (2018, 4)

Ryan is in the right track in explaining that this struggle is not new and not related to certain societies in particular,

The struggles here are authentic. The fears palpable. The loneliness, desperation, alienation, disaffection far more personal and immediate than the third-hand narrative accounts would lead one to believe- and the same is true of the acts of kindness, generosity, and empathy that shine through both the darkness of prejudice and the dimness of uncaring bureaucracy. (2018, 5)

and he stayed for a few months, so I was happy with him. Very happy” (78) However, even the wild wood is not allowed for strangers to stay in, so the Boss took him to a friend, a legal one, to stay for a while till they find another solution.

For the first time in the new land, The Protagonist does not feel insecure or worry; he is now safe with people from his native land as he believes that “anyone from our country is like family...I needed somebody, too. Just to talk to about home” (80); the feeling of social alienation paralyzes his thoughts completely and tempts him to lose desire in life, being blocked for long in the case of liminality represented a heavy burden on his shoulders. Despite being accepted by the hostess at the hostel because “he reminded me of the men back home” (79), her good treatment to him aroused the anger of the clean lady who was strange like him. She could not accept the idea of him finding a place to live in for a while he is stranger without more and more suffering:

Who’s he to get all that support? May be it’s because he’s penniless, or because he’s alone...My son wanted to try his luck elsewhere...But of course he had to have his documents in order and money in the bank. It’s not fair. (131)

Instead of achieving human solidarity with him to reduce both his and her feelings of alienation in the strange land, she rejects him without a real reason he is responsible for. The cleaning lady increases his feeling of alienation and solitude and she broke the chain of humanity that knits together all the innumerable hearts.

The Police did not even leave him to stay safe and calm, but they take him to the Detention Center because as they claim “it’s our job, but it’s not what we get off on, to put it bluntly...we are just doing our job. Nobody’s going to hurt him. He’ll see a judge, and if his papers are in order we’ll let him go” (85, 88, 92) Ruiller comments:

He had lived in hiding since his arrival...And he never left home except to work...so he hadn’t met many people from here and only ever spoke

his own language...He had no physical strength left...The strain of his life had exhausted him...The way he held his hands, he seemed like some wild creature...he couldn't get to sleep. (122-123)

The whole passage suggests that since his separation from his original society and his native land starting the journey to re-incorporation into the new society, the protagonist tries to get himself out of being seen or noticed. He feels shocked in the stage of liminality of being rejected for nothing he has done; even in a grocery store, the stranger cannot move or buy his needs freely "they didn't like the look of him, that's all" (105) he is deprived of the minimum rights of being human and poverty cracks him that he "started rummaging for scraps" (108) Yet, the desire to be exiled or separated from the original society does not mean forgetting everything about the original land, habits of life, expressions or activities in the new environment are vivid also besides the old ones of the original place where the immigrant has been aroused.(Said 2000, 148)

After being blocked in Detention Center where he met dozen numbers of strangers like him waiting for their inevitable fate of returning to their native lands, he loses the hope completely and he realizes well that he is stuck in the second stage. He is aware now that he cannot be accepted in the new society and that the process of re-incorporation is impossible. Though his community manages to get him out of Detention Center, still he remains "traumatized by the experience...he hadn't slept in 48 hours, and he couldn't stop crying...He was confused, Demoralized. His dream had become a nightmare, and he wasn't able to sleep anymore." (102-103)

The four years during which he has been chased, rejected, and out casted does not prevent him from trying to bring his wife and daughter with the hope for a better life for them, especially the young girl with the age of five years now. Again, smugglers exploit him and take the money he earns from his work and they manage to bring him his wife and his girl. He applies for papers as asylum seeker to guarantee the safety of his family, at least till

they decide for their case. The Network of strangers help them take all necessary steps to be regularized and even their daughter “started schools five years ago, and she integrated easily. The teachers are pleased with how she’s doing, and she speaks the language fluently” (134) However, this integration for five years old girl and her ability to speak the language fluently does not justify the family application for residency. The young girl manages to be integrated into the new society while her parents can not do so due to their old age. Said indicates about the feelings of exile:

Because nothing is secure. Exile is a jealous state. What you achieve is precisely what you have no wish to share, and it is in the drawing of lines around you and your compatriots that the least attractive aspects of being in exile emerge: an exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders, even those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you. (2000, 141)

Ruiller used the speech of one of politicians attacking exiles and rejecting their coming to his country:

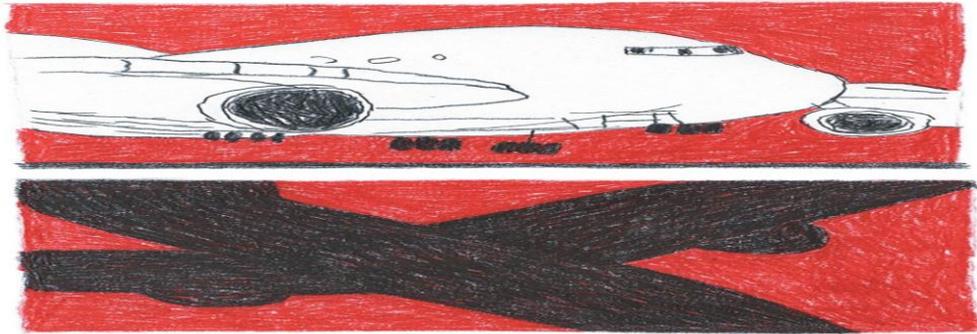
We’re fooling ourselves if we think we can solve the problem of the strangers through integration alone. These people have ways of life that are very different from our own. And that’s why they are destined to return to their country of origin. (137)

Hence, it is not the problem of integration, but it is the problem of not accepting the new comers, new cultures, new thoughts and variations.

This leads the exile to be locked into liminality which means separation from the original land which is not ready to restore him, and his being rejected by the new land upon which they have attached a lot of hope and importance. The Protagonist has a bad dream of being busted and taken by the police on a plane that will take him to his country “I saw that I was in trouble...Really deep trouble.” (134-144) The plane is drawn in

the shape of a big shark and very black one opening its mouth to swallow him. Janine Joseph comments “the graphic novel closes with a silent sequence of teeth and shadow, then a panel of darkness. This is what it was like. For many who still live with the thread of deportation and whose delicate and uncertain future waits on the desks of others, this is what it is still like” (2018, 9)

The author is professional in drawing the last picture closing his novel; the shark here is a symbol of hurt and suffering; it swallows men who are swimming, exploring the sea or even those who are lost or have ship crash. Here, the shark plane is employed to give the same sense of swallowing the protagonist, referring to swallowing his dreams, his future, his hope for better life. Despite suffering since his arrival to the new land, he still has hope for his daughter and wife. It is black in a



clear reference to the immigrant’s future in case he returns again to his native land; he strips himself out of his land with plans and goals to be fulfilled, but his dreams are destroyed by liminality waiting for social permission to be accepted in the new land before even having formal papers for this.

Conclusion

This term paper has tried to analyze Jerome Ruiller’s Graphic Novel, “The Strange”, through the rite of passage. Using many images and short text enriches the novel and makes it spread among children, teens and even adults. The protagonist of the novel represents the exile or immigrant who decides to leave his own country without determining a certain reason for this and

starts a journey of illegal immigration, seeking a new start and better life for him and his family, whom he decides to bring later on. The first stage of separation from homeland is a successful process, and the second stage of liminality starts immediately with the protagonist preparing himself for the last stage of incorporation in the new society. The shock comes very strong and powerful as he is stuck in the second stage being unable to move to the third one. Suffering while walking, shopping, sleeping, eating, and even speaking put the protagonist into a big circle of alienation that escalates his suffering; he has no fault other than dreaming of better life for his family; however, laws, regulations. Rules and legislations are against him. He is a scapegoat for all, the politicians, the passenger, the police, smugglers and even the cleaning lady who is one of his native communities and assumed to be his supporter.

The protagonist represents all asylum seekers or exiles who sacrifice their life, power and money, aiming at living safe and secure. They are caught in limbo getting nothing, and they spend dozen years stuck in their liminality without being incorporated in the new societies they have moved to. Ruiller manages to depict the case brilliantly without any reference to spot, group or governments to give the reader's focus that this happens anytime and everywhere. He does not criticize a certain country or place, but he criticizes the policy and attitude itself.

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