



THE PHILOSOPHY OF CARE GIVING IN GRAPHIC MEMOIR

S Pushpanathan

Research Scholar

Department of Humanities

National Institute of Technology - Tiruchirappalli - INDIA

ABSTRACT

Special Exits is a poignant graphic memoir by Joyce Farmer about her aging parents and Alzheimer's disease, a disease connected with loss of memory. The title *Special Exits* symbolizes serious issues faced by the narrator in caring her aged parents. The carer has to bathe, dress and feed her mom, thus taking up the responsibilities in an unfamiliar direction finally leading to personal loss. This paper will explore by close reading the graphic memoir and by applying theories of care giving, how comics can be used to inculcate ethics of care giving and investigate issues such as What are the ethical and social implications of care taker turned life writer? What is the relationship between Life writing and Graphic narratives? What is the role of Graphic Memoir in Medical humanities?

Keywords: Graphic Medicine, Care giving, Ethics, Aging

The philosophy of life is very subtly portrayed in Joyce's *Special Exits*. *Special Exits* by Joyce Farmer depicts the reality of life from a very different angle apparently. But later in the story, as the reader continues reading, it becomes clear to the reader that the comic scenes or instances which the author has set up are actually keeping aside from the readers the truth of life. The readers need to interpret the meaning lying underneath the comedy instances, which speak about the bitter reality of life. The author here speaks about the crumbling life of an elderly couple, who are seriously ill; they are in their last stage of life. The little life span, which they have now with them, taxes them as it has become very difficult for them to bear it anymore. However, the author very deftly and humorously portrays how the difficult situation of their life has been made lighter through their tit bits of quarrels and affection towards each other.





In this story, the author describes the deterioration of the lives of an elderly couple whose internal organs have started to falter and how their middle aged daughter Laura cope with her parents and their degrading lives. It is quite interesting to notice how the author has used the comic elements in her memoir under the guise of which she attempts to delineate the difficult stage of life, which everyone has to confront (Bayer Lisa).

Human beings pass several stages of their life and ultimately reach the stage of old age, but while passing these stages, we, human beings often forget that it is not possible to remain young forever. Everybody has to reach and face the difficulties and hardships of old age (Farmer Joyce).

The author in reality portrays in this story the condition of his own parents when they were suffering from chronic diseases. Her father suffered from cancer and she lived with her parents in her childhood home to take care of them during the last few years of their life. It was during this time that Farmer observed how the life of her parents was ticking away. According to her opinion human being's life ripe and rot, humans are born; grow up only to face the death. This memoir very unusually leads to the ultimate truth of life. The memoir revolves around the characters of an elderly couple, Lars and Rachel. Lars and Rachel have reached their last stage of life. They live within the confines of the four walls. The author very cautiously paints the picture of the bungalow, the furniture of the bungalow; the details of the interior have been very skilfully done. These have been displayed under the light of old age, symbolising the death. The old age and the lessening of life span of the elderly couple of hovers around the house. The power of Time has overpowered the house and its residents. The wilting details of the interior of the house as presented by Farmer create a claustrophobic atmosphere, which can be felt by the readers (Muccicolo & Graham). The major characters, in the story Lars and Rachel after spending a warm loving married life, enters their old age. They reside in Los Angeles. But gradually as they enter their old age, their natures and thoughts start differing from each other. The want of independence overpower each of them, this leads to various heartrending consequences. This makes their daughter Laura, come and stay along with her parents, helping them in their day to day routines. This kind of situation usually happens with them who look after their ageing parents. Here the character of Laura represents the author Joyce Farmer. The author here completely reveals her own experiences with her father and step mother during their ill health when she lived with them. In the same way the daughter in this of the elderly couple, Laura, who keeps on visiting her parents, assists them in bathing, eating and other works. As their mental and physical abilities decline, Laura becomes their ultimate support as it happens in any family. This seems to be a completely common story of





every family. Although Joyce Farmer, well known as comic artist and writer, writes a very heart rending story of an elderly one's parents in the guise of comic instances (DeFalco).

Farmer through this story gives her readers a memoir about her ageing parents and ageing process. She almost relegates her own story (Irwin Ken).

The story of *Special Exits* seems to be very common apparently. A reader while reading the memoir and confronting its comic instances would surely take it as a story of any or every family in a society. This memoir records the life of an aged couple who like any other couple spends a warm, happy life after marriage, but emotionally declines everyday under the burden of old age. As we, often see in the society, among our friends or neighbours, how the old and aged people feel lonely, isolated from the entire family rather from the society itself. They are cornered in a family or sent by their sons or daughters to the old age homes. The children of their own become aloof from them as the age of retirement approaches. The parents, who devote their whole life for the welfare of their children, hardly get the opportunity to experience a peaceful and happy time during those few remaining years of life. The younger generation remain so very busy in their own worlds that they lack time to spend with their ever giving and loving parents (Czerwiec and Michelle).

The story penned by the author in this memoir, the way the pictures of the characters are drawn, any reader will assume it to be a comic memoir which will be very fascinating. But gradually, it is understood in the process of reading the memoir, how much it takes deep down into the real life. The very beginning of the work may hardly interest any 21st century reader who is accustomed to the highly eulogised distinguished descriptions which make the commencement of any work, especially a memoir (Hoffer and Joy Lynn). The monotonous, drab beginning of the work picturing an elderly couple may, their lifestyle which is almost confined and claustrophobic may not draw the attention of the young readers (Coombe Paul).

The story has been told so smoothly and in a linear manner, that it happens to make the readers or the spectators think that not much is going on, everything is moving just as they have to. The author very subtly knits the humour with the moroseness of life. It is only the close reading and analysis of the major underlying theme of the memoir which makes it clear that this memoir chronicles the simple theme of life of the human beings. The moments of life that make up our entire life have been depicted in the work every now then. The characters of Lars and Rachel, Laura's parents seem to be very simply sketched monotonous. Their facial expressions may look odd to the readers or the spectators but the events in the memoir are very emotionally moving and elevating (Lodge David). This work tells us how a daughter proves herself to be more than a son in caring for her parents. The way she looks after her aged





parents is really praiseworthy. The author herself sets an example of her own as Laura in the story represents Joyce Farmer who faced the challenges along with her parents during their difficult stage in their age of retirement. She gave them all the required love and care they were in need at that specific age. All the parents wish and urge for the love from their off springs. It makes them feel contended and if the parents are suffering from ill health, then this want becomes a need for them. The author had fulfilled this; she had proved herself to be a perfect daughter to her parents as Laura does in the fiction (Golomb Liorah).

In Shakespeare's famous play Macbeth we come across the famous speech by Macbeth himself, where he talks about the reality of life. He via certain example says that life is like a walking shadow which stays for a while and then disappears suddenly, it is like a burning candle that after giving light to its surroundings blows out. In this similar way, Farmer in her comic memoir, through the humorous dialogues and funny instances actually makes the people aware of the death which is the truth of life. The deaths happen in the memoir so normally, that a reader may miss out that point in between the lines. It is only because the author knows very well and wants her readers to know how the life goes on, and this is how life moves on as delineated by the writer in her work (Pagliaro Michael).

Coda:

The memoir is much more straight forward in the sense that the story tells us about the simple drab lifestyle of an old couple, how they engage themselves in their daily humorous quarrels and how their daughter cope with them and manage to take care of them with full of love and concern. But at the same time, it hides as well as reveals the philosophy of life which tells us that it is the rule of nature, to ripe and rots, when there is life, death is also obvious. This is what makes Farmer's memoir very much realistic (Quayson Ato).





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