

Reframing the Seascapes in *The Best We Could Do* and *Zenobia*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the representation of Sea/Ocean in two graphic narratives: Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017) and Morten Durr and Lars Horneman's *Zenobia* (2016). Though these narratives depict two vastly different contexts of displacement, both these texts with their unconventional, narrative structure and visual techniques perfectly document the uncertainties and perils of border crossing by sea. The ocean/sea occupies a significant place in most of the refugee graphic narratives, as it functions as an escape route for a large number of displaced people. Imbued with myriad meanings, the ocean stands as a conflation of contradictory ideas—it symbolises boundary and transgression, hope and despair and life and death. This paper proposes that in the select graphic texts, the ocean/sea acts as a space of transition and it also destabilizes the essentialist notion of identity and belonging. By borrowing extensively from the theorizations of liminality, we argue that the selected graphic texts not only articulate the ambiguities of migration but also effectively illustrate the sea as a liminal space.

Keywords: Graphic narratives; Liminality; Migration; Ocean; Refugees.

The sea/ocean appears as a recurrent trope in literary and artistic works, and hence has occupied a significant space in academic discussions over the years. The sea has been envisioned as a "malleable imaginative space" (Shewry 7) and hence the lived and imagined interactions of human beings with the ocean has been framed in many literary works. According to William Boelhower, sea is "the space of freedom par excellence" (92). Jonathan Raban notes that the sea in literary works "is not a verifiable object, to be described, with varying degrees of success and shades of emphasis, by writers of different periods; it is rather, the supremely liquid and volatile element, shaping itself newly for every writer and every generation"

(3). The feral nature of the ocean, its unpredictable tides and the isolated patches of islands have prompted many writers to construct it as an alternate space- to project myriad narratives, from myths and fairytales to science fiction. Philip E. Steinberg in his work *The Social Construction of the Ocean* suggests that the “Interpretations of modernity’s obsession with the sea have ranged from its being the embodiment of the desire of “Modern Man” to return to the womb, to His desire to deny His corporeality, to His search for new material conquests” (35).

The history of human migration is entwined with stories of border crossing by sea. In the introduction to the edited collection, *Negotiating Waters: Seas, Oceans, and Passageways in the Colonial and Postcolonial Anglophone World*, Andre Dodeman and NanciPedri succinctly state, “communities have crossed seas and oceans, voluntarily or not, to settle in foreign lands and undergo identity, cultural, and literary transformations” (vii). Oceans play a significant role in constructing national identity by acting as borders and separating land and also function as “points of departure where paths cross and cultures intersect” (Dodeman & Pedri vii). Thus, the material, symbolical and metaphorical presence of sea/ocean is of crucial importance in the literature of exile. However, the representation of sea in comics remains an uncharted space in academic discourses. The polysemiotic nature of comics positions it as an ideal vehicle for visualizing and representing the complex and precarious experiences relating to conflicts and exile. The two graphic narratives, *The Best We Could Do* and *Zenobia* effectively encapsulate the ordeals of displacement.

Thi Bui’s graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* traces the anguish and trauma of a family that has escaped from war-torn Vietnam. *Zenobia* (2016) is a Danish comic by author Morten Dürr and artist Lars Horneman, which narrates the story of Amina- a young Syrian child who leaves her homeland in a boat to escape from war but in a tragic development drowns in the Mediterranean Sea. *Zenobia* highlights the plight of refugees crossing the sea in search of a better future. Though these narratives depict two vastly different contexts of displacement, both the texts with their unconventional narrative structure and visual techniques perfectly document the uncertainties and perils of border crossing by sea.

Graphic Ocean: Visualising the voyage

The Best We Could Do interweaves Thi Bui’s personal story or micro-history of her family’s suffering with the macro history of Vietnam. The use of the affective trope of family in the narrative effectively articulates the

gross violation of human rights and the lived and imagined experiences of individual and collective trauma. The cover page of *The Best We Could Do* illustrates a family of two adults and three children, standing on the beach, looking at the sea. They have their bags and seem ready for travel. The sea in front of them is illustrated with a simple brush stroke of blue watercolour. The light blue colour indicates the calm uncertainty and ambiguity of what lies ahead. Except for the azure ocean on the cover page, nowhere else in the graphic narrative, the sea/ocean is portrayed in blue. A mélange of crimson red, dark grey and black colours which is used to paint the sea most often conveys its wildness and violence. Bui recounts her parents' experiences in a war-torn Vietnam and narrates how trauma is transferred to the next generation. She writes "I keep looking toward the past, tracing our journey in reverse...over the ocean...through the war seeking an origin story" (40). The page is not divided into panels and an illustration of the yacht serves as a reminder of the migration of Bui's family through the turbulent ocean. The vast ocean and the violent waves denote the past-which is unfathomable and the traumatic memories that are incomprehensible.

The ocean here acts as a metaphor for memory that transcends time. Janine Macleod suggests that "...watery "depths" of memory can help to cultivate a sensual awareness of multi-generational time and can gesture toward the meaningful integration of personal and collective histories. They can also draw our attention to the simultaneous age and newness of water, and to its capacity to communicate between the living, the dead, and the unborn" (41). Bui is positioned here as the witness of the distant lands and tumultuous ocean. But the memories that Bui recounts are not simply inherited; they are transgenerational and transcreative. Imagining the past events and the lives of her parents in which Bui was absent is in itself a transcultural process, as she had to imaginatively relocate herself to a distant, unknown past and culture. She writes that though her family fled away from the conflict-torn Vietnam for survival, "certain shadows stretched far. Casting a grey stillness over our childhood" (59) and thereby incisively conveying the intergenerational trauma of exile.

The ordeals of their journey at night, in a boat through the ocean metaphorically denote their fight for survival during turbulent times. On page 247, marked by a page bleed, Bui's father is presented as looking at the twinkling stars in a dark night, during their migration from Vietnam. Here, the ship in which he travels is not visible, but a boat is illustrated in the distant dark deep sea. The shining stars in the sky symbolise hope. But the dark turbulent sea in the background conveys the horror and es-

trangement. This complicated interaction between hope and horror effectively conveys the plight of refugees, especially those who migrate across the borders by sea. Throughout the memoir, ocean marks a significant presence in the memories about migration. The ocean-painted in dark colours often resembles the shadows or haunting memories of the narrator. On page 257, Bui illustrates how the refugees are helped by the fisher folk to reach the shore of Malaysia. The panel shows a crew of people stepping onto the land from the crimson red sea. The refugees from a distance resemble abstract shadows. This gives a hint about the plight of refugees in an alien land. They lack identity and symbolise an in-between state; similar to how the silhouettes are illustrated between the land and the sea. The trauma of exile is not only personal. It is often transferred across generations. But Bui hopes that her descendants will be healed from the festering wound that is bleeding through generations. The image on page 328 shows the child of the narrator surfing and swimming through a water body. The waves illustrated by fluid lines resemble the waves of the ocean. The child swimming across the waves conveys a glimmer of hope that future generations will survive the generational trauma of exile.

Though both the narratives demonstrate the travails of displacement, *Zenobia* employs a very different visual grammar compared to Bui's memoir. Bui most often paints her narrative in sepia tones of pale red and black, while *Zenobia* starts and ends in oceanic-blue, except for the episodes that show Amina's memories, which is presented in pale yellow colours. The initial page of the novel presents the image of the blue sea in three panels. On page 5, the width of each panel widens, creating a magnifying effect, thereby producing an illusion of taking the reader near to the sea. The sea here looks calm and pleasant, without the slightest trace of waves. The third panel in the first page spots an overcrowded boat which can be read as a foil to the vast, lonely sea in the beginning. The scene shifts to the boat, and focuses on a passive young girl in the subsequent frames. The giant waves that torpedoed the boat, throwing the little girl into the sea symbolizes the sad predicament and unpredictability of refugee life. On page 93, which is marked by the absence of frames, the deep, ambiguous and unbound nature of the sea is illustrated. While helplessly descending to the bottom of the bottomless sea, the helpless child remembers her past, her family, war ravaged-isolated homeland and the precarious ambience that forced her to flee home. Her territory no more offers her security, and hence "Having let go of the notion of safety as fixedness in a geographic site, the child gives herself over to the sea, an alternate memorial space" (Kurmann and Do 224). Her falling down to the depths of the sea is equated with drowning in memories, and hence a melancholic return

to her past. Her isolation and an air of silence that permeates the war-torn region are entwined with the deep silence of the ocean, thereby connecting the past with the present. Unable to make any voice or call for help, her memories, experiences and her life story got immersed in the silence of the sea; along with many other refugees. The ocean here turns into a graveyard of material and immaterial matters. As the concluding panel of the novel indicates, there are debris of life stories, ripples of memories and ramshackled ships of optimism hidden beneath the apparently tranquil surface of the sea.

The title *Zenobia* refers to the story of a woman warrior named Zenobia, who was courageous enough to fight all odds and emerge victorious in her life. The young child Amina derived her courage from the myth of Zenobia and was determined to fight against all the ordeals by herself. But unfortunately, Amina failed even before she began to fight. It is ironic to note that the graphic novel *Zenobia* begins where the protagonist's life story ends- demonstrating the life of a number of refugees. The sea here acts as an indifferent natural force that can act mercilessly on an already shattered and scattered group of human beings. The sea which jeopardized the boat in frenzy hides its deathly claws and returns to its usual calmness by the end of the novel. These unforeseen and abrupt transformations of the sea as illustrated in the novel posit pertinent questions regarding the helplessness of human beings in front of nature's brute forces.

In both the graphic texts, the sea is also associated with memories- it symbolizes the flow of memories from one generation to another, as in *The Best We Could Do*, or as a trigger of memories-like in *Zenobia*- in which the protagonist gets drowned in the boundless sea and in her endless memories before embracing death.

The Sea/Ocean as a Liminal Space.

Both the graphic narratives portray the displacement of people during wars and their perilous journey through the sea. Bui illustrates how crossing the borders through sea during wars and other conflicts is not an easy task, as it involves a lot of hurdles- from bribing the boatmen to saving oneself from the pirates in the sea. She also narrates the ordeals involved in the voyage, which many a time pushed her family to the brink of danger and death. *Zenobia* also depicts the circumstances that forced Amina to flee from her "home" to a place unknown to her- which literally ended in her death.

From the theoretical perspective, liminality refers to those that is in the threshold- which "is neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 95). In the case of refugee experiences, one can note that sea marks a space between two lands- most probably between the native place and foreign land; between a dangerous home and a hopefully protective host. Sea is hence not only a metaphor for uncertainty, but also symbolizes a corridor that offers a passage from death to life, danger to survival, and from hopelessness to hope.

The boat is symbolic of a place of refuge in the vast uncertainty of the sea- a place in the midst of placelessness. Taking a cue from Cusack's arguments in the case of ships, boats can also be considered as "spaces that are constantly displaced, as they exist geographically outside of established land-based societies and cultures" (4). One also notes that the boat also acts as a liminal space. The boat crowded by refugees often acts as a microcosm of the conflict-ridden place floating in the liminal space of the sea and life. It symbolises a mobile and transient home in the vast uncertainty of the sea. It is a metaphor and metonym for continuity- a journey from past to the future. It is taking them away from a familiar but unsafe home to a safe but alien land. Boat offers a liminal state- they are at once citizens and refugees- homeless/ boat people.

This also depicts how the sea dissolves their identity- they are no longer citizens- they are boat people/refugees and their rights as citizens are under threat. The displaced people cross the territory- or boundary of the land, which is in fact an act of deterritorialization. Hence, "The ocean could be regarded as a liminal space and the crossing a period in which old identities are unmade and new ones begin to be forged"(Cusack7). The theory of liminality was first drafted by Victor Turner and later developed by Arnold Van Gennep in his work *Rites of Passage*, published in 1909. In this work, he is concerned with the phase of transition- the temporal aspect i.e., a "period of margin or 'liminality'- between the ritual subject's dissociation from the social order and his return to it with a new social status. The displaced group of people lose their identity and assume a new status as refugees. The rite of passage is basically a process of transformation- a metamorphosis, from one "state" to another. In both of these graphic texts, we have noticed how the identity of the people has suddenly changed from citizens to refugees, and in Zenobias's case- from a human being to a corpse. Death also symbolizes the end of a period/ phase. Bui's parents, once they crossed the border of their territory lost their natural claim for citizenship, and were labelled as immigrants/ref-

ugees in the foreign land. For Turner, the limen does not imply a simple margin or threshold, but he proposes it as a period of transition. In Turner's theorization, during the liminal phase/period, the subjects are positioned outside the contours of the social order, and no longer possess their old status, but also haven't yet achieved the new/next status.

It is also pertinent to note that in both the texts there is a child protagonist/character who is witnessing and suffering the ordeals, as "the recurring motif of the child on the boat takes on a memorial function in the contemporary diasporic imagination" (Kurmman and Do 223). It is also significant here to find that childhood also symbolizes a liminal state—a phase of fluidity—and a stage of transience, and as Margot Schwass argues they "mediate between two spheres" (76). According to Alexandra Kurmann and Tess Do, these spheres refer to those of the adult and the minor, but in the in-between, shifting space of the sea this mediation extends to spatio-temporal realms, and hence "the child, whose own state of being is temporary, may provide the diasporic writer the only fictional character type that has the capacity to convey the complex intersection of time and space in the vacillating present-moment narrative events taking place at sea" (223).

The sea remains a significant factor in the narratives of exile and contributes to the continual shaping and re-shaping of immigrant identities, and their experiences of displacement. The graphic medium with its fluid-trans medial narrative techniques thus offers a perfect apparatus for the representation of the harrowing experiences of border crossing by ocean/sea. When people cross the boundaries of their territory, they lose their fixed identities and even their basic rights. The voyage through the sea destabilizes the familiarity and fixity signified by the notion of home. These voyages, leaving their home, identities and past into an uncertain future create a perfect framework for the representation of memories. The journey from past to future is emblematic of the fluidity of memories. Both the graphic narratives closely associate the voyage with memory work. The forced displacement or exile of the people through the ocean is a voyage into the unknown. As Robert Preston-Whyte argues, the sea "lie in a limbo-like space often beyond normal social and cultural constraints" (350). Ocean crossing is employed in these graphic narratives as a metaphor to facilitate "a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown" (Nisbet 4; Preston-Whyte 350). During the time of wars and other conflicts, an escape through the sea route is the only glimmer of hope for the migrants. Most often people leave their homeland and depend on the sea for survival and refuge. But the sea is not a substitute for home. It is a

placeless place; a liminal space between native and foreign lands. The sea is not just a sublime, aestheticised and romantic space. Both these graphic narratives visualise the untameable and uncertain nature of the sea. They illustrate the ocean as a space of danger and hope. It is within the geopolitical locations but is also beyond the usual territorial borders. It is closely connected to the land, but at the same time doesn't belong to the territorial borders. It also acts as a space of transition, as represented in the graphic texts. The ocean dissolves and transforms the identities. The migrants in the sea are at once citizens and refugees. They have left their place, but is yet to reach the foreign land, which confers a hybrid identity on them. Hence, the select graphic texts not only articulate the travails of migration and associate them with memory work but also effectively present the ocean as a liminal space.

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