

VISUALIZATION OF SEEKING IDENTITY ON TRANSNATIONAL CHILDREN IN BE PREPARED GRAPHIC NOVEL

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Abstract: *Be Prepared* is a graphic novel about Vera, the daughter of immigrants from Russia. In her storyline, Vera faces many cultural challenges when dealing with American and other Russian immigrant children. Vera attempts to find identity amidst the differences between the original culture of Russia and the American culture as the country she lived in. The situation between 2 cultures is a challenge for transnational children. This study aims to analyze and see the meaning represented in the graphic novel, especially how transnational children obtain identity and adapt to their environment. The research method used in this research is semiotics and literature review. The semiotic method is used to see the relationship between signs to get the meaning. The semiotic theories used in this research are based on Roland Barthes's theories. Another method is the literature review which is conducted by overviewing the signs through several published literature to expand the meanings. The base theory used in the literature review is a cultural study that consists of ideas about acculturation, immigration, and cross-cultural theories. From this research, it can be seen that in the comparison of situations of 2 birthday parties, there are expectations in acculturation. The worship scene in the Russian Orthodox church represents immigrant families' coping mechanism for acculturation stress. The signs seen in the graphic novel are also seen in the acculturation stage of Vera's character to gain identity, which can be divided into three stages, namely, the stage of seeking recognition, the stage of imitating, and the stage of integration

Keywords: *transnationalism; immigrant; acculturation; graphic novel; sequential arts.*

Introduction

There are many human experiences that can't be explained clearly through words and voice. An attempt to represent human experiences is through a visual medium. Visualization of experience can appear as an embodiment of human mental conditions and complex situations that are faced by an individual. Yet an illustration is not enough to portray a long format of storytelling. Therefore to portray

human experience, graphic novels can be an appropriate medium. A graphic novel is a form of sequential art that is created by arranging pictures to make meaning. The composition of a graphic novel can include dialog balloons to clarify intonation and emotion in the scenes that are presented (McCloud, 1993).

The graphic novel can reflect the author's perspective of reality (McCloud, 2000). In the creating phase of the art,

the artists experience a filtering process because they need to choose the characters and story background that must be presented in the form of style and composition. Style and composition are signs of the author's identity (Davies, 2019).

The graphic novel term itself is a distinction from the comic term. The term distinction provides an epistemological difference to overcome public prejudice because the comic is originally based on the word comix, which means funny and silly. In the graphic novel, story plots, themes, and pictures can represent more severe societal issues (McCloud, 2000).

Graphic novels can be part of the children's literature category if placed from a children's perspective as the center of the story. The content of children's literature contains the development of children's life experience and knowledge that include the development of mind, emotion, language, and psymotoric. Children's literature does not represent cynical themes such as politics, broken hearts, and desperation (Nurgiantoro, 2018). Based on the definition above, *Be Prepared* is included as a children's graphic novel.

Be Prepared graphic novel as can be seen in Figure 1, was created by Vera Brosgol in 2018, is a semi-biographical book. It was because the author has the same name as the story's main character, Vera. Although the graphic novel's storyline also contains fictional elements from the author's imagination. In the graphic novel *Be Prepared*, Vera is a girl from a second-generation Russian immigrant family who struggles to adapt to the society around her. In the early part of the story, Vera wants to become normal as an American child.

Vera tries to assimilate with another American child but fails because her birthday party is conducted by mimicking American birthday party culture. As a result of her failure to mimic American

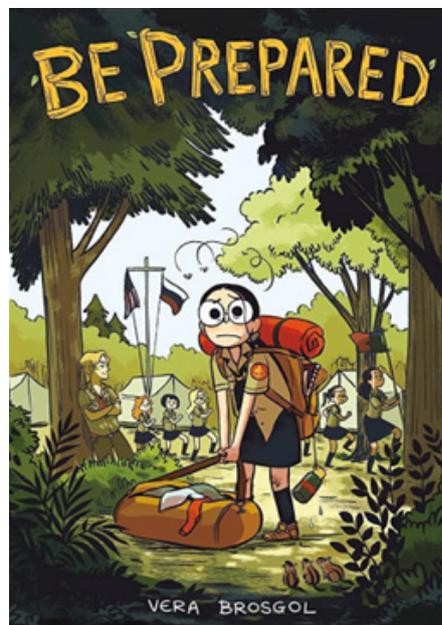


Figure 1. The cover of *Be Prepared* graphic novel (Source: Brosgol, 2018)

culture, Vera is deserted by her American children's friendship circle. After the birthday party, Vera assigns herself to a summer camp with other Russian immigrant children. Vera is enthusiastic about meeting other Russian immigrant children because she sees the encounter with them as the solution to her friendship problem. However, Vera's expectation of summer camp is inaccurate because she doesn't know about Russian children's culture. Vera can get a friend in summer camp after she meets a girl younger than her called Kira. Friendship with Kira is the conclusion of *Be Prepared* Graphic novel.

Based on the structure of the story plot and sequential pictures in the graphic novel, Vera is a girl who experiences a problem with seeking identity because she is a transnational child. Children's development to understand identity is mainly conducted by finding justice, rights, obligation, prosperity, role, authority, hierarchy, norms, and societal expectations. Transnational children understand the

concept of identity simultaneously as the culture acculturation process.

The effort to understand new cultures, rules, and societal expectations is the meaning of acculturation. During the acculturation process, an individual needs to practice interacting with another. However, the success of interaction is not only about language fluency; it can be about work habits and skills (Orozco et al., 2005). Transnational children's challenges can be doubled because they need to learn from more than one community standard. Community standards also can contradict each other, which can be a source of confusion.

Transnationalism is an attempt of transnational people to maintain their cultural connection with their original nation and sojourned nation. The effort to maintain connection can simultaneously occur with the adaptation process (Bradatan et al., 2010). Transnationalism emphasized the set of relations and connections that continuously expanded. The relations and connections mentioned above include religion, culture, and international domiciles (Vertovec, 2009). Transnational children are unique because of their uncommon set of connections and relations.

After reading the *Be Prepared* graphic novel, the question that emerges from the research is, "How can transnational children's challenges of seeking identity be portrayed in the graphic novel?" The question can be answered by obtaining deep meaning from signs found in graphic novels.

Methodology

The research is conducted by semiotics and the literature review method. The Semiotics method is a way to find meaning from cultural manifestation that occurred in society (Hoed, 2014). Semiotics theory

applied in the research is based from Roland Barthes's theory. He states on social and cultural life, signs is an expression, and signifier is the content. Roland Barthes's theory consists of 2 types of signs which are denotation and connotation. Denotation is a general meaning of the sign, and connotation is a meaning obtained by finding the relation between signs. Clarification of Roland Barthes's theory can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Semiotic Theory by Roland Barthes. (Source: Cobley & Jansz, 1999)

Signifier	Signified
Denotative	
Connotative Signifier	Connotative Signifier
Connotative Sign	

On the semiotic method developed by Roland Barthes, there is a unit of sign, namely Lexia. Lexia is the way to sort signs on the narration discourse into simplified fragments (Budiman, 2011). Lexia, found in the graphic novel *Be Prepared*, can arrange based on the scene that repeatedly occurs in the story. Repeated scenes emerge in the story, which can be contradicted each other to make antithesis meanings called symbolic codes. Examples of Lexia in the *Be Prepared* graphic novel are birthday scenes, Catholic church worship scenes, and summer camp scenes.

The literature review method is applied to explain and expand the meaning of signs with references from another discipline's knowledge. In relation that develops from provided references, the literature review method can assign the position of researcher with the conducted research (Ridley, 2012). The literature review method in this research is applied to explain meaning after the signs have been found using the semiotics method. The

literature review applied to this research uses cultural study theory which consists of ideas about immigration, cross-culture, and acculturation theories. Discourse about meaning in this research also applies theories and research results from the psychology discipline to understand the perspective of transnational children's mental state.

Story plots in the graphic novel are divided into three parts as the foundation of research. 3 part of the story plot consists of the setup stage, confrontation stage, and resolution stage. Partition of the story formula is based on Aristotle's theater formula and Syd Field's theory from the book titled Screenplay.

The setup part in the Be Prepared graphic novel is the birthday party scene and Vera's preparation for the summer camp scene. The setup part can be found on pages 4 to page 102. The confrontation part is the summer camp activities scene, Vera's exiled scene, and Vera's encounter with Moose Scene. The confrontation stage can be found on pages 103 to 173. The resolution part of the graphic novel occurs when Vera meets Kira until the summer camp is over. The resolution stage can be found on pages 174 until page 244.

Result

In the setup part of the graphic novel, Vera, as the main character, faces two social environments: the social environment of American children and the social environment of fellow Russian immigrant children. The American children's social environment can be seen in birthday party scenes and the environment of fellow Russian immigrant children can be seen in Russian Orthodox Catholic church worship scenes.

The sign and meaning that is founded on the birthday party and church worship

scenes can be represented in the Table 2, below:

Table 2. Explanation of signs on set up part of the story in a graphic novel. (Source: Personal documentation)

Signifier 1	Signifier 2	Denotative Signified	Connotative Signifier
Sarah Hoftman's Birthday Party	Vera's Birthday Party	Identity Recognition for Children	Expectations of cultural acculturation
Indoor Russian Orthodox Catholic Church Worship with family	Outdoor Rusian Orthodox Catholic Church Worship on summer camp	Religion as a safe space for immigrant	Acculturation stress

Discussion

In the beginning, the graphic novel shows a birthday party of the American children which is Sarah Hoffman's birthday party. The next part shows Vera's birthday party as a comparison of the situation. The comparison is laid bare by the author when, for example, a specific brand of pizza or even a specific kind of cake that Vera wants for her birthday after she attends Sarah's birthday party as can be seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

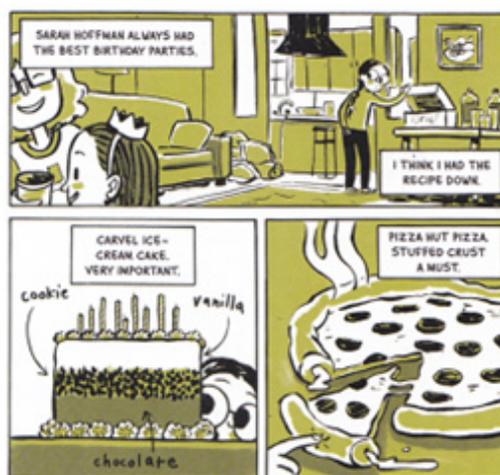


Figure 2. American Birthday party culture (Source: Brosgol, 2018)



Figure 3. Birthday party of Vera as Russian Immigrant children
(Source: Brosgol, 2018)

Comparing the two birthday parties, the sign of American children's parties and Russian immigrant children's parties become the connotation signifier of cultural acculturation expectations. Cultural acculturation expectations are attitudes expected from the immigrant when they come into contact with the dominant culture (Berry, 2003). From the presentation

in the graphic novel, it can be seen that there is a gap in cultural acculturation expectations between Vera and her mother.

Generally, the role of parents is to become a reference for the children to understand the culture of the surrounding community, such as lifestyle and quality of life (Orozco & Orozco, 2002). However, in the event of a birthday party in the graphic novel, Vera, as a child, is exposed to more references shown by American friends who have a more dominant culture, this makes Vera feel an inner conflict. Inner conflicts in immigrant families are usually vented through their religion.

The role of Vera's religion as a child experiencing transnationalism can be seen through the Russian Orthodox Catholic worship ceremony (Figure 3). Even though she couldn't understand the meaning of the Russian Orthodox Catholic worship ceremony she attended, Vera still attended it. In the graphic novel, the Russian Orthodox Catholic faith is a cultural belief system. The function of a cultural belief system is to provide standards on how to behave and to give a sense of security in socializing. This sense of security includes interpersonal networks, shared understanding, and support providers (Orozco & Orozco, 2002).

A contradicting experience occurred when Vera joined the worship with the Russian children at the camp as can be seen in Figure 4. The worship outdoors in the rain becomes a symbolic code sign of acculturation stress. Acculturation stress occurs due to 2 causes, the first is shock due to contact with another culture, and the second is the interaction between the dominant culture, which, due to lack of knowledge resources, raises prejudice and discrimination with a non-dominant culture (Berry, 2006). The scene displays a failure of traditional belief systems as a provider of security due to Vera's lack of understanding of the environment around her.



Figure 4. Russian catholic orthodox worship scene with Vera's family (Source: Brosgol, 2018)



Figure 5. Russian catholic orthodox worship scene in summer camp (Source: Brosgol, 2018)

The birthday party scenes and church worship scenes form a picture of Vera's condition for the reader. After going through the setup stage, the reader currently knows that as a child of Russian descent, her mother guides her habits and behavior, but because Vera lives in the social environment of American children, whatever Vera's mother did for her only makes Vera become more rejected by her friends.

Being rejected by her American friends makes her determined to join a Russian children's summer camp. However, confusion reoccurs because she expects the camp activity will be similar to how the American children's camp usually is. She thinks it will be more enjoyable for her if she gets to do it with her fellow Russian children. This Russian children's summer camp incident shows Vera's stages of acculturation by accepting her environment as a transnational child exposed to American culture are shown. The explanation of Vera's experience in Russian children summer camp as the stages of acculturation for transnational children can be seen more clearly in the Table 3 and Table 4 below:

Table 3. Explanation of signs on confrontation to resolution part in the graphic novel story (Source: Personal documentation)

Signifier 1	Signifier 2	Signifier 3	Denotative Signified	Connotative Signifier
Vera pleases her older friends with her drawing skill and snack gift	Vera mimics her older friends by mocking a weak child at summer camp	Vera befriend a younger girl at summer camp	Vera's Experience in Russian Children summer camp	Acculturation stages of transnational children

Table 4. Stages of acculturation signifier on the graphic novel
(Source: Personal documentation)

No	Signifier	Acculturation Stage Of Transnational Children
1	Vera pleases her older friends with her drawing skill and snack gift	Seeking Recognition stage
2	Vera mimics her older friends by mocking a weak child at summer camp	Imitating stage
3	Vera befriend a younger girl at summer camp	Integrated stage

In the story's confrontation part, namely during the summer camp, Vera's attitude towards the other children changes. At first, Vera tried to get recognition from the older children. To get recognition, Vera did several things, starting with drawing her friends' faces to get appreciation, then smuggling snacks so they could be distributed to friends at the camp. Examples of Vera's efforts to obtain this recognition can be seen on the following pages on Figure 6:



Figure 6. Vera's stage of seeking recognition
(Source: Brosgol, 2018)

Vera's attempt to get an acknowledgment fails after she is caught by a coach smuggling snacks. After being caught by the supervisor, the entire camp is also searched so that Vera's friends became hateful of her. After the incident, Vera became ostracized by her friends.

Vera is accepted back into the camp's social environment after she imitates the older children's behavior by bullying her weaker friends. When she bullies the weak, Vera feels that she has an outlet after being pushed aside by the others, even though she feels that this was wrong. An illustration of Vera's behavior, when she participated in bullying her friend, can be seen on Figure 7.



Figure 7. Vera's stage of imitating
(Source: Brosgol, 2018)

Vera then changes her behavior again after she meets a very beautiful moose in the forest; this scene is the beginning of the resolution stage in the graphic novel. The next day after seeing the moose, Vera chooses to be herself and help a friend who had been bullied before. Vera's change in character finally made her get a friend named Kira. When she befriends Kira, Vera becomes herself without caring about what other people think. Kira is younger and equally ostracized by the other kids. After befriendng Kira, activities at summer camp are more enjoyable for Vera. Illustrations of the process of changing to be yourself and gaining friends can be seen in Figure 8.



Figure 8. Vera's integrated stage (Source: Brosgol, 2018)

The change in behavior experienced by Vera during the summer camp event is a signifying pattern of the stages experienced by transnational children. If seen from the depiction in the graphic novel, these stages can be divided into three stages, namely, the stage of seeking recognition, the stage of imitating, and the stage of integration with the new environment. The stages in seeking recognition occur because transnational children need to understand the context of norms that apply in a new environment. In understanding this context, a transnational child must build connections to receive social assistance. Social assistance can be in the form of real help to complete daily tasks, guidance, and advice from others.

However, efforts to gain recognition in the new environment still depend on the social skills obtained from the previous environment. Someone who tends to be

rigid, such as being shy, arrogant, and sensitive to outside opinions, will experience difficulties at this stage with the threat of alienation or rejection from others (Orozco et al., 2005).

After the stage of seeking recognition, the imitating stage is carried out as a sense of alertness in adapting to a new environment. In imitating, a child will look for a maternal figure or mentor who is considered the most influential in social circles to be a reference. The process of imitation is actually a fundamental thing for humans in knowing their own identity because other people's opinions can be seen as a mirror of self. If others appreciate the imitation process, then a child or even an adult will feel valuable and competent. The process of imitation can occur when a person has not been able to digest the reality around him; if self-awareness of the environment has been obtained, then the person can get a distinctive identity (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Distinctive identity is the result obtained in the integrated stage. The integrated stage is the stage reached when transnational children can evaluate phenomena that occur in a cultural context. The cultural context in question is when someone focuses on goals, reviews previous experiences, possesses intercultural sensitivity, accepts differences, has intentions to behave interculturally, and tries to do so (Bhawuk et al., 2006).

Conclusion

A graphic novel can represent an abstract situation and engage the reader to emphasize the characters within. Inside the narration and experience of Vera at birthday parties, the function of a parent is very important as a behavior map of what is correct or wrong in society. However, in the graphic novel representation, Vera's parent does not understand the expecta-

tion of children in the new environment.

In transnational situations, mainly parents cannot learn fast enough as their children in the adaptation process. Although immigrant parents have language skills, they can't grab the context of cultures, norms, and rules in the sojourned country. Even from the parent's perspective, a new culture can be seen as a corrupt influence on their original country's culture. Therefore, parents need to have flexible behavior and expectation to keep connected with their children as immigrants.

In the graphic novel, the Russian Catholic Orthodox church is represented as a safe space for immigrant families. Essential functions of a religious institution are also perceived by varieties of immigrants around the globe. The existence of God is a force to keep respect, mercy, and love value around immigrant communities (Ehrensaft & Tousignant, 2006). The symbol of the values of religion can be manifested through religious leaders.

In the development of transnational children, values in religious communities can be different from values in real socio-cultural systems of the new environment. The situation is well presented when Vera feels envious to a religious leader figure that is placed indoors, yet she worships outdoors on rainy days. The conclusion after seeing the presentation of the worship scenes in the graphic novel is that participation in religious institution stands as a good acculturation stress coping mechanism yet have limitation in nurturing immigrant communities. Religious institutions are simply positioned as a medium of cultural transition for immigrants.

The acculturation stages experienced by Vera in the graphic novel are the seeking recognition stage, the imitating stage, and the integrated stage. The stages can be compared to acculturation strategy

practices from John W. Berry, a psychologist who focuses on cross-cultural and immigration phenomena. In his book titled *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology Volume 3* in 1997, he divided the acculturation strategies into four results, there are marginalization, separation, assimilation, and integration. From the representation of *Be Prepared* graphic novel and John W. Berry's theory, the process of assimilation can be conducted in parallel. It means, in the sojourned nation, an immigrant can experience different stages and behavior results depending on participating communities.

The representation in *Be Prepared* graphic novel has limitations. In the graphic novel, Vera's family is a Russian immigrant from the middle-lower economy class. Economy class is an important point that has an effect on Vera's perspective and decisions. Based on the argument above, the story in general, can't represent another economic class, family, or individual. Representation of the acculturation process should not be seen from a stereotypical perspective, even if the story is based on the author's real experiences. To overcome the stereotypical view, the readers need to be guided to experience an encounter with immigrants and new cultures to emphasize the actual situation. Besides the limitations, a graphic novel can be a gate to understanding pieces of knowledge, mainly for children, because a graphic novel as a medium is easy to read and remembered.

The suggestion for the future is to research the acculturation process of transnational children on opposite sides. The opposite side means the graphic novel story about children from first-world countries who lives in second or third-world countries. The suggestion is based on the graphic novel *Be Prepared*; Vera's family is represented as a family who wants to get a second chance and follow the American dream. The research can be compared to

get more interesting results and enhance the understanding of how to visualize transnational children's challenges.

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