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### Graphic novels “Wrinkles” and “Special Exits”- a comparative study

Halil Bashota

*University for Business and Technology*, halil.bashota@ubt-uni.net

Lirak Karjagdiu

*University of Prishtina*, lirak.karjagdiu@uni-pr.edu

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# Graphic novels “*Wrinkles*” and “*Special Exits*”- a comparative study

Bashota, H<sup>1</sup>, Karjagdiu, L<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of English, UBT Higher Education Institution, Prishtina, Kosova

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Philology- Department of English, University of Prishtina, Kosova

<sup>1</sup>[halil.bashota@ubt-uni.net](mailto:halil.bashota@ubt-uni.net)

<sup>2</sup>[lirak.karjagdiu@uni-pr.edu](mailto:lirak.karjagdiu@uni-pr.edu)

Prishtina 10000,

Kosova

\*Corresponding author: Address: Street Nëna Terezë, 10000, Prishtina, Kosova; Email address: [lirak.karjagdiu@uni-pr.edu](mailto:lirak.karjagdiu@uni-pr.edu)

**Abstract.** *This paper examines a comparative analysis of two graphic novels: “Wrinkles” and “Special Exits”, which consist of similarities as in style, theme and point of view, as well as the overall portrayal of main characters, Emilio and Rachel. Besides that, those two graphic novels have so many similarities; they also have parallels which differentiate them. The assisted care facility vs. home care. Wrinkles shows the life of the main character Emilio, with Alzheimer's in an assisted care facility, and the other novel portrays life experience at home. The other parallel pertain to the parent -child relationship; Wrinkles begins with the admission of Emilio to assisted care, upon the demand of his son, while, Special Exits portrays the relationship between a mother and daughter.*

**Keywords:** *graphic novels, age and aging, family care, assisted care, Alzheimer`s.*

## 1 Introduction

The complexity of topics about old age and aging is perceived as an important phenomenon that needs to be studied from different perspectives: individual, social and collective. The individual aspect consists of a change in a person's course of life towards specific social norms. The social aspect of aging topics extends beyond the individual experience towards wider demography of a group of people or community; while the collective perspective addresses the problem further beyond a single community that includes a larger territory, with much wider demography (Kendig, 2016). Therefore, as we live in an aging society, such topics are becoming more intensive, and the paper tries to analyse and compare key aspects of elderly care in the two graphic novels Wrinkles and Special Exits.

Such research remains very relevant for the overall literary criticism and old age studies, as graphic novels are a new genre and isn't done much in the past, remaining an unexplored and completely new topic. As regarding the methodology, a qualitative research method is used in analysing the primary and secondary literature, in deductive

approach, as an important instrument that helps create a theoretical background on the perception of old age and aging, through analysing the existing literature, critical reviews, and other studies. Scholars estimate that old age and aging are not only insidiously expressed through wrinkles and facial expressions, it is a quite complex phenomenon that reflects our internal part. Gopnik (2019) estimates that old age doesn't have any point; it is a gradual expression of only one point that is aging. "Having reproduced ourselves externally, we fall down on replicating ourselves internally. The process of cellular replication that allows us to be boats rebuilt even as they cross the ocean cease acting efficiently because they have no evolutionary reward for acting efficiently" (Gopnik, 2019). However, aging must be seen as a natural and spontaneous process that becomes socially unnoticed, but on a large scale visually stigmatized. One might ask what is social in both novels, undermining the role of other characters and events that happen! However, despite many gloomy events, still there are happy days among characters that promote communication and fun.

Therefore, this paper elaborates main comparative aspects of old age and elderly care in the two graphic novels: "*Wrinkles*" and "*Special Exits*", which consist of similarities as in style, theme, and point of view, as well as the overall portrayal of main characters, Emilio and Rachel. Despite that, those two graphic novels have many similarities; they also have differences and parallels. The one is the assisted care centre vs. home care. *Wrinkles* shows the life of the main character Emilio, with Alzheimer's in an assisted care facility, and the life experience in the centre, with too many protagonists, all categorized in different mental scales. However, one parallel would be the parents to children relationship. *Wrinkles* begin with the admission of Emilio to assisted care, upon the demand of his son. On the other hand, *Special Exits*, portrays the relationship between a mother and daughter, as the mother's struggling with disease, the daughter is always ready to help. In *Special Exits*, we find Rachel very comfortable at home, a talkative and active person. We see it when she decides by herself whether to see the doctor or not. Another parallel is that in *Special Exit*, we have too many memoirs and a tendency to reflect on the past, while in *Wrinkles*, it is not a good representation of the past as *Wrinkles* reveals fewer family moments.

## 2. Roca's Alzheimer's sequence at *Wrinkles*

*Wrinkles* is one of the most well-known projects by the author Paco Roca, which immediately after the publication won a lot of fame and success. As an artist, Roca's focus was on comics projects. His first projects were *Comix Kiss Comix* and *El Vibora* as early as in 1990s, with a focus on the themes related to some of the cultural movements of the time, mainly rock and roll and drug and sex. However, he became famous when some of the latter projects following the year 2002 came into light, with the publication of graphic novels: *Gog* (2000), *El Faro* (2004), *Hijos de la Alhambra* (2007), *Las Calles de Arena* (2009), *Emotional World Tour* (2009), *El Invierno del Dibujante* (2010), *Memorias de un Hombre en Pijama* (2011), *La Metamorphosis* (texts by Franz Kafka, illustrated book (2011) and *El Juego Lúgubre* (2012) (Fraser, 2008, p. 137).

Roca was very much attracted to topics of old age and aging, while as a young artist, he made frequent visits to the elderly care centres and he knew the category of people that were mainly his friends' parents and relatives suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia. This was the main reason that Roca was very sensitive to it and chose to treat such themes in his artistic project, the most well-known graphic novel *Wrinkles*. Moreover, *Wrinkles* brought fame and success to the author soon after its publication, as it was awarded two prizes: the prize for "Best Script", and the prize for "Best Comics", at the prestigious *Salon Del Comic de Barcelona*, and at the same time, it was qualified as one of the top twenty graphic novels of the year in France. Besides this, it has been translated in many languages as in Japanese "*Sohakukan Shueisha Productions*" (2011), in Dutch language "*Silvester*" (2009), Finnish "*Wsoy*" (2009), and Italian "*Tunué*" (2008). However, it has won another important award for "Best Album" at Expo Cómico, Madrid, the Premio Nacional de Cómico in 2008, the award for "Best Album" at the festivals of Lucca and Rome, and the prize of the Ministry of Culture in Japan (Fraser, 2008, p. 137).

The story centres on Emilio, as the main character, a former bank manager who ends up at a facilitated centre for elderly. It is not much shown about Emilio's life in the past, only what he tries to recall from his flashbacks time to time. As a character,

Emilio is a proud character that is suffering from Alzheimer's. At the beginning, he is silent, confused and disoriented, a character that talks very little. He meets a lot of other characters, Miguel, Pellicer, Modesto, and Doloris, all of them with symptoms of Alzheimer's and dementia, that struggle to preserve themselves from the upper stage of the second floor, a disastrous place where no one would suggest to Emilio and other newcomers.

Roca's projection to bring Emilio at the residence for elderly is done very carefully, when besides the main character he employs another character, Miguel, to enforce the storyline from different perspectives. Hence, using Miguel as a second main character to guide the storyline, from his perspective, enables Emilio functioning as he learns too much from him, at the same time, the author shows the level of Alzheimer and dementia at him as the main protagonist. Moreover, it seems like Emilio and Miguel passes successfully throughout three phases: the first phase- that is an introductory phase- where Miguel tries to learn as much as possible about Emilio, and through it the reader. This phase helps the reader get much more involved in Emilio's personality, habits and behaviours, where he is provided with information about the residence. The second phase portrays a wider and more perspective attitude towards the socializing aspects amid the centre. Here, Roca looks at Miguel as a character that can bring fun and harmony among the residents as he is at least mentally one level better than the others. Miguel tries to indulge Emilio and other characters in the facility, by organizing a trip outside, however it results unsuccessful. One thing that Emilio listens to, is the attempt to preserve himself from medical personnel to send him to the second floor. Third phase- the most problematic one- consists in the identification of Alzheimer's at Emilio, and this is shown directly by the personnel that "*Emilio, you have Alzheimer's*", a confirmation that vanishes all his hopes in the centre.

However, Roca's intention was not, and shouldn't be taken as a criticism towards any kind of healthcare systems or institutions, but as an attempt to increase awareness on a wider public about the topics of disability and impairment among the old age and aging people, and the people with Alzheimer's through the comic art, what was very successfully done in *Wrinkles*.

### 3. Special Exits, an autobiographical novel

*Special Exits* is another successful project, with author Joyce Farmer, whose works were known for sensitive and feminist topics. She wrote her first feminist comix book *Tits & Clits*, together with Lyn Chevli, a local cartoonist in Los Angeles, which over the years had a great amount of controversy, along with many other works, known for antagonism towards the male production of comix and sexism of the time, under the titles: *Pandora`s Box*, *Abortion of Eve*, *Wimin`s Comix*, *Mama*, *Itchy Planet*, and many others that were internationally promoted (Fraser, 2018, p. 208).

Farmer was very keen and chose this genre as a unique and productive art. She hoped that *Special Exits* will get the attention of the public and at least will inspire people to think differently, about the relevant topics, that may be drawn from the book, in which memory loss exacerbates by accumulating illness, impairments, and indignities of aging, with topics of elderly care, mother and daughter relationships or people with Alzheimer's disease that needs to be looked after (Venema, 2019, p. 667).

The book is a memoir of her parents; step-mother and father as they grew old and went through an aging process that Joyce suffered a lot by herself. She experienced personally parents` health decline. The loss of ability to care about themselves, starting from the very simple things such as washing and cleaning, let alone the negligence of medical treatment of glaucoma that brought them to lose Rachel`s sight. Their beloved daughter, Laura, while not exactly the narrator, bears witness as she provides support for their final years. The author is a close observer while the *Special Exits* is packed with details that can only come from observation and experience. (Jerkins, 2020).

*Special Exits* embraces life by chronicling the counterpoint that defines life. Although the action takes place largely within the home, the production is not stage-like. The four walls of their cluttered bungalow contain the lives of Lars and Rachel. The place is bursting to the rafters with the possessions of a lifetime. Farmer`s panels are chock full, reflecting and amplifying the claustrophobia (Jerkins, 2020). Through it, she warned the society about elderly care system which is of utmost importance due to the fact that the individual world always matters, despite what you are now, at least it should be remembered for a life that someone had.

#### 4. Narration and style in *Wrinkles* and *Special Exits*

According to Fraser, the graphic novel shouldn't be seen as distinct from visual art, when considering the artistic components. He goes much further to consider that it needs some more attention and special treatment of the graphics, as a unique genre. However, both novels can perfectly perform all kinds of art that rely on the artistic aspects of a medium of graphic novels full of combinations with word and images, graphs, thought bubbles and memoirs.

As it's written by title the graphic novel "*Wrinkles*", an award-winning novel by Paco Roca, elaborates such topics of senescence and dementia in the very start of Alzheimer's disease of the main character Emilio, a former proud bank manager brought in the elderly care. As regarding the narrator, the story in *Wrinkles* doesn't have a third person narrator, which narrates it from an omniscient perspective, but it's let on characters' thought bubbles and graphs to describe it to the reader. Hence, the story is told mainly through dialogues by the characters, with Emilio as the main character, brought to the elderly care due to inability for a family care, as his son and the daughter in law think that they can't look after him and this is the best solution.

As a character Emilio is a visual character that better communicates by his gestures, facial visuals and mimics than words. However, the author enforces this by using another character, that of Miguel, who would play an important role in the satisfaction of Emilio and the reader, through his immanent information about everything in the centre.



Fig.1: Paco Roca, *Wrinkles*, p.9

Referring to Fraser's article "*Sequencing Alzheimer's Dementia*", the narrative points of view in Roca's graphic novel "*Wrinkles*" blends among two narrative perspectives: the objective and subjective viewpoints. The *objective viewpoint* is manifested through daily routines and actions that happen within the facility, whether

in the cafeteria, hallways, TV rooms and outdoor areas, and the *subjective viewpoint*, which renders throughout flashbacks and memories from the young days of the main protagonist Emilio, as well as, other characters in the novel.

In one of the panels I attached, there is a moment that Emilio and Miguel develop a parallel narrative perspective; Emilio's reminiscing his best days from the past by shaving himself to get ready for the work, and Miguel reminds that it is 3 o'clock and he is not working anymore. The panel represents the *subjective viewpoint* of Emilio as he is looking at the mirror in black hair, as a young man with no wrinkles in the face and forehead, full of power and life, while in the following panels it changes to the actual situation portraying an old and consumed person with so many wrinkles. This shows the narrative perspective from the point of view of Emilio's looking into himself and the perspective how he sees himself as a proud manager of the bank.



Fig.2: Paco Roca, *Wrinkles*, p.39.

In *Special Exits*, the narrative storyline is developed by using different media, through panels, word and image combination as well as some of the panels are preceded by a narrative perspective from a third person point of view. The narrator explains chronologically the perspective of the storyline that follows the explanation from one panel to another. It mainly recounts the time by saying: “two days later”, “a week later”, “two months.... six months later”. This is done very carefully to maintain a chronology which enables a better and more comprehensive realization of the events that occur. Panels are mainly black and white and it keeps the reader feeling the event as it happens.

Baetens and Frey (2015), consider that when a familiar narrative voice disappears from a comic's page or panel, it is done deliberately, in order to give the



emotional intensity to the visuals and panels (Venema, 2018, p. 680). This visual to verbal communication with the public remains essential in realization of a conceptual attitude among the author and the reader which becomes much more sensitive, as the reader will perceive the narrative from a more personal perspective. This is very evident in the *Special Exits*, where most of the story is told from the perspective of mingling symbols and graphs which talk much more than words.



Fig 3: Joyce Farmer's *Special Exits*, p. 11.

In both narratives we can easily find moments where age and aging representation is visually and directly expressed through most of the graphs, dialogues as well as facial expressions. To discuss it further, age and aging is also realized as a deterioration of mental health, and this has been the focus of the author to present old age, as well as, Alzheimer's disease and dementia for the affected persons in the novel. *First*, graphs are full of visible moments that reflect on characters, and their activities. In *Wrinkles*, Emilio changes frequently through flashbacks and memoirs, as in the beginning he is shown to be a young man, in black hair and with a very regular and tidy personality, but it immediately shifts into the next panels, where Emilio is old with the first signs of dementia.

*Second*, dialogues reflect the age perspectives in most of the panels. Miguel reminds it to Emilio whenever he forgets, in this case, we can use as an example the

panel in fig.2, where Miguel is shown at the picture very tired and sad, as he tries to obey his roommate Emilio that he is not going to the work, as he is now old, and even getting older by the weary times they are waiting ahead for them. In *Special Exits*, the characters of Rachel and Lars are shown visible to pass a health decline from one moment to another. It is shown much more through their reduced ability to take part in activities, that in a month earlier they have only done.

*Third*, facial expressions are redundantly expressed in the narratives, hence we can take the picture of the panel as Emilio is portrayed without any wrinkles in the first picture as he is looking at the mirror, at the same time, just a moment latter he is portrayed of being full of wrinkles and facial lines that makes him look very old. The same happens even with the other characters in the novel, Miguel, Dolores, Modesto and Pellicer, etc. The same happens with the characters of Rachel and Lars, which the facial expression changes from one panel to the next panel. Therefore, in three of the panels represented here, the age and aging process is well depicted through distinctive images, immanent dialogues and clear facial expressions that make the novel an important work, which is successfully written by the author.

## **5. Family care vs. assisted care facility**

It's worth mentioning the author, Sarah Miller, in her book: *The Philosophy of Need*, as she theorizes the family care as “*morally appropriate reaction*” (Miller, 2005, p. 142), while, in both graphic novels, we find different approaches regarding the elderly care, but an appropriate reaction. The one which is completely treated outside the family sphere, and the other which is portrayed to have used all necessary means of family environment, memory and stuff.

In *Wrinkles*, Emilio is a character that has not been treated well but appropriately by his family, at least this is the impression, as it is seen to be sent to an assisted care facility by his son and daughter in law, as they won't be able to care for him anymore. Disoriented and confused by the new environment at the facility, he finds himself abandoned, with a hope to get away, as soon as possible, from that. In an article, "Holding one another (well, wrong, clumsily) in a time of dementia, Hilda Lindeman, calls on "*identity maintenance*", calling for a family role which is irreplaceable, when considering the great need of people that may have for such a family surroundings. In fact, family stuff matters even for Emilio, as he is seen

appalled by the way how he faces the new environment. In a panel, he is compared to a child facing the first day at school, where he finds everything new around him, unknown, and practically unpleasant. Lindeman insists that strangers would never provide such a warm attitude and care towards a person in need, although in “*Wrinkles*”, the author employs a second character Miguel who plays an important part, to somehow substitute the feeling of a family member (Fraser, 2008 p. 143).



Fig. 4: Paco Roca, *Wrinkles*, 2008, p. 11.

In *Special Exits*, the family care changes dramatically as Rachel becomes the centre of all family matters. Her husband and daughter leave everything behind to stand her aside with all the help they can provide. Benner (1996) determines this relationship as a human component that sets the relationship mutually recognized: “a set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and realization, growth and development among the human community, by assisting others to cope with their weaknesses while affirming their strengths” (Benner et al. 1996, xiii). The author emphasizes the ethical ideals of reciprocity and responsibility against human limitations, what in *Special Exits*, it is shown through family places and objects, beloved things, pets, faith rituals as well as some more personal things.



Fig. 5: Joyce Farmer, *Special Exits* 2018, p.161.

*Special Exits*, reposition the need for a more proactive approach towards an "identity maintenance", which is historically preserved at family care. The attempts of Lars, and the daughter to further improve Rachel's picture, makes her a social and beloved person. Farmer employs all the media that visualizes moments that share characters' memories from her past. It is her character that reflects the most, her room, family things, and early marriage ornaments which makes her life alive. She also was addicted to religion; her faith became very much liked among others, as a person that had great values in life. This was quite evident when Lars, her husband, made a statement about her after death that she had a good life.



Fig. 6: Joyce Farmer, *Special Exits*, 2018, p.151

However, *Wrinkles* doesn't focus on issues related to inadequate care, state policies and institutional circumstances (Fraser, 2008:140). It reflects the living experiences of Emilio, his mental state, health problems, problems with his

communication and socializing. It leaves the impression that sending him to the assisted centre remains the best option when knowing the fact that the family can no longer care about him. This moment is reflected especially when family members pay a visit, for the second time, and find Emilio quite well situated among other characters. In contrast, *Special Exits*, recounts a large number of defects among the nursery home, as it turns to be with fatality for her mother.

## **6. The representation of old age in characters of Emilio and Rachel**

*“When you look into the mirror and begin to see your mother or father, you know you are an adult” (Roca, 2008 p. 100).*

We have talked even above about the internal vs. external aging signs, however besides this, it is important to point out two different aspects when looking at representation of old age, that is the distinction between disability and impairment. Disability theory typically differentiates between disability and impairment. While “‘impairment’ refers to the specific physical or cognitive deficiency that leads to a reduced capacity to fully actualize all aspects of one’s life,” “disability” refers “to the socially regulated parameters that exacerbate the effect of the impairment” (DeFalco, 2015 p. 30). To be more specific, disability covers a wider range of deficiencies and becomes more generic in terminology, while impairment consists in a more specific aspect. In characters of both novels, we see that disability among Rachel, and impairment among Emilio has a life scale progression.

Fraser insists that aging in *Wrinkles* is most clearly marked through the development of Emilio’s Alzheimer’s symptoms, which becomes evident as the time passes in the storyline. Other important symbols of sickness and old age are crossroads and stairways. They’re used to testify brain reproduction of meaningful effects in taking any reasonable actions. It is introduced by Miguel, who serves as a second main character, knows everything in the centre, so, Miguel told that once you have a developed dementia, you will be sent to the second floor, as in the beginning he reminds that there are two floors: First floor- the competent (healthy ones) and the second floor, which is set for those who are incompetent (unhealthy).



This scene at the stairway reappears after Emilio has spoken with the doctor about his diagnosis. Given the metaphorical and symbolic value of the stairway scene discussed above, this repetition prompts a return to those deeper forms of lucid contemplation that had been communicated only visually (Fraser, 2018 p.156).



Fig. 7: Paco Roca, *Wrinkles*, 2008, p.20

However, in *Special Exits*, aging becomes part of everyday life, as Rachel has a constant health decline and memory loss. In the beginning of the book, Rachel is able to function well, she is a talkative and easy-going person, someone who wants to be in the centre of things. As time passes very quickly, as months and years pass, it is notified in the panel by a written gutter, where together with this, almost every new chapter presents a new fact about old age, showing her health decline, together with the consequences as Rachel loses her sight, falls and breaks her hip, and by the end her mind starts fading. As a character she passes through different phases, from an early phase where she is quite well with her quietness and stuff, to a more problematic time where she loses almost everything.

As readers proceed across the panels and down the tiers, they experience themselves moving so rapidly towards, away from, and around the mother as to mimic the disorienting distress that migraine sufferers readily recognize (Venema, 2018, p. 668).



Fig. 8: Joyce Farmer, *Special Exits*, p. 153

However, this becomes evident by the end of the comics that deformity matters among characters as a higher impairment scale that allows the identification of Alzheimer's and dementia. Hence, memory loss associates both characters in the novels, Emilio has Alzheimer's and he is very lost as a character. He “loses” his watch early in the novel (Roca, 2008, p. 25), “loses” his wallet and his money at its midpoint (Roca, 2008 p. 51), and further on “loses” his black socks (Roca, 2008 p. 87), where only when Emilio has been transferred to the second floor, for a greater level of assistance with his everyday activities, Miguel finds the items in a box that Emilio kept under his mattress (Roca, 2008 p. 94) (Fraser, 2018, p. 154). On the other hand, Rachel’s last years were very hard, maybe the hardest one that can be heard, and knowing the fact that the book was written as an autobiography picturing the author’s mother, that was the reason that she wrote it after her mother's death at the nursery home due to the neglect of medical personnel.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it's evident that the common intention of both authors, Roca and Farmer was to criticize the elderly care system and raise the awareness among the readers of both graphic novels: *Wrinkles* and *Special Exits*, that old age and aging should not be seen differently but people should take it normally, aiming to improve the environment for elderly, who are actually living whether in family or assisted care centres.

In this regard, we can conclude that the novels treat the same topic and draw on many similarities. Both comics, *Wrinkles* and *Special Exits* convey a clear message to everyone interested in topics about old age, elderly care, as well as Alzheimer's disease, that people who are affected can be diseased but not marginalized, they are people that might have lived an important life, for what they need to be respected and cared. Hence, when it comes to style and narrative viewpoint, as there is not a third character as a protagonist, both novels use various media where the story is told from different sources through dialogues, thought bubbles, flashbacks as well as those most representative among which are wrinkles, mimics and gestures, from which the plot reveals its complete meaning.

In the other hand, what differs the novels remain significantly noted by the perception of such sensitive topics. Elderly care is not treated the same, as family care different from or assisted facility struggles into two groups of extremes: the ones that are giving up from their parents and sending them to an elderly care facility, without any future care – the case of main protagonist in *Wrinkles*; and the others, which despite the life difficulties, still persist to keep the responsibility for a family role towards their elderly members, just like the example in *Special Exits*. In general, the concept of old age and aging requires a serious approach that covers the study of this phenomenon, which jointly replicates the need for a better elderly care and care system.



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