Emotional Intensity in *Vagabond*: Prognosis of an Anti-hero?

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Abstract

Vagabond is a graphic novel that unveils the story of a vagrant using visuals to intensely support dialogues. It provides a glimpse of the protagonist's emotional intensity of having both qualities of vice and virtue. Traditionally, the hero or protagonist is appreciated for good qualities, being brave, noble, strong, helping others, and admired for his achievements and abilities, not for evilness. The protagonist in *Vagabond* possesses all of the characteristics that have projected him to be a true hero. However, often some critics interpreted him as an anti-hero. This research will try to address the following questions: Why is the protagonist described as a vagabond in the novel? How graphics could be an effective tool for expression? How does the protagonist in *Vagabond* portray an anti-hero? What is the emotional intensity that contributes to his anti-hero status? This research article aims to answer the above questions and explore the protagonist Shinmen Takezo, a fierce warrior as a vagabond with an anti-hero identity having fiery magnitude fighting like a beast. Furthermore, it examines the changing paradox of beliefs and actions that are supposed to believe in a real hero of postmodernism with the effective use of graphic/visual frameworks.

Keywords: anti-hero, emotional intensity, graphic novel, postmodernism

Introduction

Vagabond is a Japanese manga graphic novel and a martial arts manga series written and illustrated by Takehiko Inoue in 1998. It is based on Eiji Yoshikawa's novel *Musashi* (1935) the story of Miyamoto Musashi real-life hero who was the most renowned samurai in Japan. Miyamoto Musashi's original name was Miyamoto Masana, a famous Japanese soldier when he was 13 years old killed a man in a single fight. He was unbeaten in 61 duels, the total of his battles comprises 400, the most

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victorious swordsman in Japanese history. Vagabond is a fictional novel based on the life of Miyamoto Mushashi. There are 12 Vagabond vizbigs released in 3 in 1 consisting of 36 volumes. The research focuses only on Vagabond Volume 1, which contains 728 pages. The objectives of the research article are to examine the protagonist Takezo's identity as a vagabond and anti-hero analyzing his emotional intensity in the process of his adventures in the postmodern world. In addition, how the graphics could be an effective tool for telling the story with feelings and emotions.

The protagonist in *Vagabond* is a 17-year-old young boy Shinmen Takezo, who mirrors the resemblance of Musashi. A wild brute who knows only the way of the sword. He begins his journey to become the strongest samurai after being exiled from his Miyamoto village and hunted by his own people for the alleged murder. He becomes a vagabond. As described in *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* "vagabond" is a person who wanders from place to place without a fixed home. Osugi Hon'iden, mother of Matahachi Hon'iden alleged Takezo is the murderer of her son, which was not true. Because of his aggressive nature, the villagers shun Takezo as the devil child. Banishing from the village, he joined the Toyotomi army to fight the Tokugawa clan at the battle of Sekigahara.

In *Vagabond*, the story begins on the battlefield of Sekigahara where the protagonist Takezo is half dead lying on the ground surrounded by dead bodies. He lost the battle and pretended to be dead until the enemies moved from there. Once the enemies have left Takezo stands up to look for his friend Matahachi. Matahachi is lying on the ground. Both of them survived. Wounded and hungry the two young men left the battlefield. Matahachi needs to answer the call of nature and an enemy samurai discovers him. Seeing him, Matahachi cries for help, unarmed and weakened, Takezo steps forward and kills the enemy samurai with fierce strength and ruthless brutality using the wood rod. For the first time, Takezo's rage and thirst for blood appear. This brutal scene sets the tone for the show. How Takezo vehemently struck the enemy, his intensity in beating the enemy is evidently displayed. He is like a true hero who saves his friend but his act and expression resemble those of a villain like an anti-hero. As a vagabond, he has no obligations to anyone. Nothing fears and scares him. His action and intense desire to kill the enemy are deadly. His emotions reflect more excitement than fright.

Emotional villainy of Takezo (*Vagabond,* vol.1, pp. 24-39)

Later a girl Akemi and her mother Oko who live in the mountains alone take them at their place. They are thieves who loot the bootie from the battlefields. They invite Takezo and Matahachi to stay with them. At home, both women try to seduce Takezo, they are attracted to him but are rejected. Takezo has no feelings or emotions for love; as a vagabond, he likes to live life freely, becoming a warrior.

One night the Tsujikaze gang attacks Oko's place. Her husband was also killed by the leader of the Tsujikaze gang, the brigand General. The General demands plunder which Oko and Akemi have gathered on the battlefield and along with that, he tells his men to rape Oko. All of a sudden, Takezo intrudes with an oak sword and viciously kills the General by chasing him. The brigands arrive to exact revenge on Takezo after learning of the General's murder. During the attack, Takezo, Akemi, and Matahachi are in the jungle. Takezo dashes home to save Oko. Akemi also wishes to go with him. However, Takezo stops her and asks her to stay back.

Matahachi wants to come with Takezo however, he does not go, he is scared to death to fight with savage brigands. Takezo fights alone with the gangs. He kills all and calls Oko. No one answers instead he finds Oko's comb and clothes in the forest later where he has left Akemi and Matahachi. Takezo becomes sad and thinks his friend Matahachi has abandoned him, taking Oko and Akemi, forgetting his village and fiancée. Takezo too decides to return to his hometown, the Miyamoto village, to tell Matahachi's mother, Osugi, that her son is still alive and has run away with Oko.

When Takezo meets Matahachi's mother in the village and tells her about her son, she does not believe him, she is angry with Takezo. She thinks Takezo is a thug and criminal who has forcefully taken her son to battle, and because of him, her son is not with her.

In the meantime, Otsu, the fiancée of Matahachi, gets a letter signed by Oko saying that Matahachi has gone off with her and to forget him. Otsu is heartbroken. Matahachi's mother invites Takezo to her home and provides food and a hot water bath. The motive behind is not kindness, it is a trap. In reality, she wants to capture him with the help of clan members and the lord of the village. Nevertheless, he escapes and kills most of the members of her clan and lord. His true emotions and the color of an anti-hero could be seen in the last scene. This is the end of the story of Vagabond Volume 1. The story shows that Takezo as a free man begins his journey as a vagabond to become Musashi. He deliberately decides to roam the world as a vagabond and takes on his foes. The whole story is explained through graphics adeptly, which is quite expressive.

Graphics as a Means of Expression

Vagabond is a graphic novel that has gained popularity due to its well-designed, expressive graphics. Graphics are used commendably to describe the entire narrative, which is more effective than words. As Jan Baetens (2008) writes about illustrations:

> First of all, the image should be able to make its own contribution to the making of the story (not independently from the sequence, of course, but in creative tension with it). In other words, the reader is supposed to infer the story not only from the textual and verbal indications that are given but also from the internal structure of the image. …Secondly, the image should also co-create the story by relying on the narrative possibilities of montage and sequentially…. in the production of the plot, instead of simply spelling out in an uneventful way the progression of a story….Third and last, the storytelling possibilities of image and sequence are expected to take advantage also of the publication format of the graphic novel…. All three features of the positive approach of literary storytelling in the graphic novel are significant. (p. 81)

Graphic novels describe the story effectively with graphs and less use of words and phrases. The use of imagination and creativity of the illustrators are superb in *Vagabond* in expressing the protagonist's high and low emotional intensity through a few words and his expression.

As Imison-Mazy (2010) states that, Will Eisner has bred the term *graphic novel* as a "sequential art" in the 1970s. For Eisner, comics mean the forms of sequential art they are published one after another by weekly or monthly as a series. Thus, "graphic novels" denotes a complete work published in one volume (p. 41). Jan Baetens (2008) affirms that the graphic novel avoids seeking longer narrative forms (p. 82). In graphic novels, pictures speak themselves with less dialogues. Few words or sentences are sufficient to describe a situation with visuals. The term *graphic novel* is debatable. The debate is whether it is a comic or a novel. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2017) defines:

> For many, the word *comics* denotes a periodical for children, published on a weekly or monthly basis, sold at newsstands or in especially comic book stores, often with pages devoted to advertising and, when intended for younger readers, competitions and puzzles. In contrast, the *graphic novel* is usually taken to mean a long comic narrative for a mature audience, published in hardback or paperback and sold in bookstores, with serious literary themes and sophisticated artwork. ("Graphic novel," 2017)

Longer than comics with a hardcover publication, a thick volume with complete work is called a graphic novel. American comics critic and magazine publisher Richard Kyle coined the term graphic novel in 1964 and was also instrumental (Gravett, p.8) in the rise of interest in bandes dessinées (French cartoons) and manga (Imison-Mazy, 2010, p. 41). Comics are for young readers and are published regularly in series of specialized narratives in comparison, graphic novels are complete narratives and Japanese graphic novels are called manga. Collins English Dictionary defines "Manga as a type of Japanese comic book, which often contains material that is intended for adults. a Japanese graphic novel, typically intended for adults, characterized by highly stylized art" ("Manga," 2022). Manga is read from right to left.

As Imison-Mazy (2010) says that graphic novels have their own importance in literature. It is a new literary genre with the integration of visual and verbal narratives (p. 28). It conveys the story using both visual frames and dialogues. Imison Mazy further states that:

> Graphic novels have, in fact, a long history both in terms of their origins as "comics" or "cartoons" and as verbal-visual texts that have a pedigree extending back centuries. Although I would argue that scholarly writing about and critical analyses of graphic novels as literary artifacts is only now slowly emerging, there is by contrast a significant body of work that addresses the history of comics, cartoons, and graphic novels, and the rise of manga. Books such as Eisner's Comics and Sequential Art, Gravett's Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life, Pilcher & Brook's The

Essential Guide to World Comics provide substantial information on the history of graphic novels, typically since the 1700s….Perhaps one of the most distinctive features of today's graphic novels is that they self-consciously and self-referentially

Matahachi and Takezo in the battlefield, and their expressions seeing each other alive (*Vagabond,* vol.1, pp.12-13).

Anti-hero Status in Postmodernism

According to Stuart Sim, "postmodernism is the rejection of cultural certainties…" (2005, p. vii). That is the rejection of all the established concepts and beliefs in the past. To support this statement of Sim, Sheeba (2017) states that ambiguity, rejection of the ultimate faith in science, anti-positivist and anti-verificationist stance, autonomous rational mind, individuality, truthful perspective, globalization, multiculturalism, and pluralism are the major features of postmodern literature (p.184). Moreover, following these features of postmodernism, an anti-hero's traits in the postmodern period are individualist, anti-positivist, multifaceted character, cynical, good intentions, integral struggle, challenging laws, standard morals, and realist. Tazeko is the protagonist in *Vagabond*, true hero who tries to save others. However, he as a vagabond follows all the traits of an anti-hero too. He feels rejected by society, nobody cares about him and he does not either. Like a nomad, he does not settle in one place, self-motivated and destructive heading towards isolation or death.

The traditional hero is the character of a narrative who carries a feat and functions as the main character/protagonist and has aims in life to overcome the

conflict. They excel ordinary men in skill, strength, honesty, helpfulness, inspiration, moral integrity, conviction, courage, etc. They are usually born to perform heroism. Lulu Marzan Salma (2008) shares an example similar to the statement that each of Hemingway's novels contains a "Hemingway hero" -a man of honor and integrity who expresses himself not with words, but in action….Hemingway's heroic figures are driven by a need to find inner peace in a modernized world that cannot provide them with the answers they seek" (p. 34). The works of Ernest Hemingway generally focus on the notion of heroism. Takezo is neither a hero nor a villain completely. He does not do evil things as a villain does, he is more like a hero who does heroic activities protects, and fights for others, however, his ruthlessness comes up when he starts fighting and killing people which are the traits of the anti-hero in the postmodern world.

Salma (2008) further states, "Antiheroes are a quintessential element of Modernism, postmodernism, and existentialism…. The antihero is someone with some of the qualities of a villain, up to and including brutality, cynicism, and ruthlessness, but with the soul or motivations of a more conventional hero" (p. 1). She claims, "An Antihero is the principal character of a modern literary or dramatic work who lacks the attributes of the traditional protagonist or hero... In works featuring these types of protagonists there usually are no cut-and-dried, good-or-evil characters" (pp. 2-3). From the absurd anti-hero of Camus, moves on to the two characters of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot.* Existentialists essentially believe that to rationalize man's existence is an absurd endeavor, for life, it is absurd. In essence, living is merely a passage of time, terminated by inevitable death (Salma, ibid, p. 24). Hero or anti-hero differ in interpretation by scholars. It is no good nor bad, vice and virtue in the fictional characters of postmodernism, those who are popular and appreciated by the readers or people are real heroes. Takezo is the most popular anti-hero and is liked and admired by the readers.

Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (n.d.) defines the word 'antihero' as "the main character in a story, but one who does not have the qualities of a typical hero, and is either more like an ordinary person or morally bad." Likewise, *Collins English Dictionary* (n.d.) states, "An antihero is the main character in a novel, play, or film who is not morally good and does not behave like a typical hero." In Vagabond, Takezo is the protagonist, and the main character however, he does not fit to the concept of a real hero. Traditional heroes are full of good qualities. As Carlos Rey Perez (2018) quotes Vernant (1991):

> By the model of Ancient Greece, the figure of the hero was personified as a
> demigod, that is, an outcome of the conception between a deity and a mortal

being. Their actions had an altruistic and virtuous feature, their selfless dedication by the other made him to sacrifice himself, even when motivated by not-honored causes, such as the feeling of vengeance. The desire of a warrior was to die young in a battle, in order to be mythicized as a hero. (p. 49)

Hero is always noble and flawless. Perez (2018) states that an antihero attracts us from his lack of unselfishness. We find vanity and selfishness in the antihero character and perceive them as our own identity (p. 51). He explains that the antihero is alienated from the features to prove him a hero. Perez further states that "Antiheroes use their heroic virtues to accomplish selfish feats motivated by immoral feelings" (p. 49). That's why they are rejected socially in the community. Tazeko is excluded by his people because his brutal nature has made him an outcast in his own village, and he is hunted down like an animal. His self-interest to be a vagabond is his objective in life. "Unlike the meaning that the word antihero can have in a first moment as an antagonist to the hero, he is someone who does not fit into the classic stereotype, being antiheroic under the light of the feats permeating heroic acts"(p. 50). Takezo's actions speak of his deeds.

Gilda de Mello e Souza (2003) defines an antihero as "a loser-winner, who turns his weakness into strength, his fear into his weapon, from the shrewdness his shield; who, living in a hostile world, persecuted, expelled, grappling with the adversity, he ends up always circumventing his misfortune" (p. 77). Takezo lost the battle and wins several fights. There are moments he seems weak as Oko tries to seduce him, but he overcomes his emotions and shields himself with his hostility and ignorance. Similarly, Smith (1976) states that an antihero has characteristics of "disillusionment with and alienation or withdrawal from societal problems; opposition to or rebellion against those problems; or mockery and derision of heroes themselves" (p. 18). We observe, Takezo as a violent and brutal young man with zero consideration and empathy for others aside from the few people he loves and respects. Looking into his eyes, one could read his rebellious mind and feel piercing your heart. His indifference towards the world and sarcasm makes him from hero to an anti-hero. Takezo is intense and raw obsessed with being the strongest swordsman and very angry with the world, he is as the protagonist of the story represents the anti-hero of postmodernism.
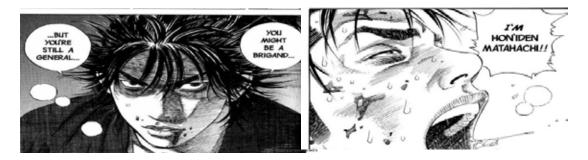
Emotional intensity in Vagabond

Vagabond is a novel of emotional intensity articulated by the characters through graphics and dialogues. Physiological theories suggest that responses within the body are responsible for emotions. Neurological theories propose that activity within the brain leads to emotional responses. Cognitive theories argue that thoughts and other

mental activities play an essential role in forming emotions. However, all kinds of theories agree that emotions are subject to be expressed. Emotional intensity refers to variations in the magnitude of emotional responses which are the interpretations and hidden depths of conveying meaning.

Most psychologists state that anger and fear are emotions. They (e,g., Arnold, 1969; Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991) try to involve an urge with emotions. Whether the emotion of fear or anger or empathy, it urges one to respond in a particular way (Brehm, 1999, p. 2). "Urge is neither a cognitive nor a behavioral term. It refers to motivational arousal, and in its application to emotions, it appears to be consistent with the thinking of many prior investigators (e.g., Duffy, 1941; Leeper, 1948; Mandler, 1984)" (Brehm, ibid, p. 2). In most of the scenes in *Vagabond*, when Takezo urges to fight, his expression becomes apathetic and his eyes burn like fire. We see the beast in him that is aroused suddenly. His anger and emotions come out in-depth fiercely. It seems he is motivated and enjoys beating and killing people. Though young, he is not afraid to fight with the adult single-handedly with the wooden sword. His wickedness appears in his actions. We see in a scene when he becomes ready to fight with the General of the brigands, he challenges him. His motive to kill the brigand becomes a pleasure. His anti-hero characteristic comes up with emotional intensity. Takezo's emotions are different from Matahachi's. We see fear and weakness in the eyes of Matahachi in most of the scenes. His emotions are echoed in his utterances. In one of the scenes on the battlefield, he tries to walk with support from Takezo and says whether he dies or lives he remains Matahachi. His strong desire for living motivates him. In both scenes, the emotional intensity is replicated vividly, however, his emotions and feelings are different from Takezo.

Fighting scene with the General (*Vagabond ,*vol.1, p. 106) and another Matahachi in the battlefield (*Vagabond,* vol.1, p. 36)

It is obvious that some emotions, such as fear and anger, do indeed look like motivational factors. In the above scenes, Takezo's motivation to kill General brigand is the cause of anger. There are some investigators who disagree that emotions are associated with motivational processes. For example, the Jamesian view (James, 1880) assumed that "the situation gave rise to behavior and that it was the feeling of the visceral feedback accompanying the behavior that was the emotion. In this case, motivational arousal preceded the emotion" (p. 2). For James, the situation is important to express emotions not only the motivational factor. The background in the scenes and tone give the moods of the character. The scenes in *Vagabond* are drawn in black-and-white frames, which, could create a tense atmosphere and support the emotions of the characters. Takezo is driven by anger due to situations and sometimes-motivational factors to protect the life of others. However, urges and desires also play the role of emotions as in the state of Matahachi. "According to Lazarus (1991), for example, sadness produces a tendency to withdraw into the self, and according to Frijda (1986), sadness urges one to do nothing" (Brehm, ibid, p. 4). We feel Matahachi's desperation and sadness make him cling to life.

A research theory on emotional intensity (Brehm, 1999) reveals that emotions are functionally identical to motivational states. Similar to motivational states, the intensity of emotion should be a joint function of the importance of instigating events and the degree of discouragement to the emotion. "Emotions have motivational character, or, in other words, they urge one to behave in a particular way. Various theorists have made the same argument in one way or another (e.g., Arnold,1969; Duffy, 1941; Frijda, 1986; Leeper, 1948" (p. 3). Collectively, "Emotions promote fast adaptation to situational demands" (Miron et all, p. 2). For instance, if someone is going to be attacked, automatically one might defend himself/herself. The person gets a temper of fear, anger, or nervousness. In the case of anger, events that interfere with feeling or expressing anger can affect its

intensity. Takezo in defense raises the weapon to kill the enemy. We feel that for him it is a pure delight mentally and physically and for the enemies, his actions fill them with fright. It has a connection with situational demand.

Brehm (1999) argues, that subjective intensity determines the corresponding intensity of action: emotions function as emotions (urge adaptive responses) only to the extent that they are felt consciously (p. 20). Takezo's responsiveness urges him to fight with the enemy and is always ready to fight, however, the subjectivity of intensity for fighting lacks in Matahachi. It is related to the heightened awareness of one's emotions and always leads to greater intensity. As Paul J. Silvia and Gendolla (2001) explain "If self-awareness is indeed clarifying an internal experience, it should promote veridical assessments of emotion regardless of the direction of intensity. Self-focused people might realize, …their bad mood was not as bad…self-focus …lead to less intense self-reported affect" (Silvia, 2002, p. 11). The intensity of stimulation of Takezo depends on achieving the goal. *Vagabond* is a remarkable manifestation of the protagonist's emotional intensity that develops the protagonist's status as an anti-hero.

Conclusion

Vagabond Volume 1 introduces feudal Japan. Shinmen Takezo, a protagonist, a vagabond who portrays the legend of Miyamoto Musashi, the greatest Japanese swordsman, and samurai. In one place, Takezo is carrying the glorified history of the country's samurais and on the other hand, challenging the conventional notion of the hero, which ruled over fiction from the beginning until the postmodern era. Takezo is not a nobleman from a noble family; he is a ruthless killer when it comes to slaying enemies and lacks traditional heroic traits. Instead of the grand victory and glory, Takezo has anticipated being a great samurai. He is a hunted fugitive, and vagabond, known for his evil actions.

The novel also ends up with Takezo in an uncertain situation where a crime squad with the intention of capturing him surrounds him. Yet, Takezo challenges the entire village and security forces as he claims that he will kill them first before he dies. Takezo's world is brutal, unfair, and hard –but beautiful. A bloodthirsty youth lost in anger and hate, pursued by relentless enemies. *Vagabond* is a graphic novel full of the emotional intensity of the protagonist Takezo. The action-packed narrative of the anti-hero survives in the postmodern world that provides a glimpse of the new heroic concept of complexity and changing paradox of the notion of a real hero. Links and associations among characters, scenes, and events are created in cohesion with black

and white images with few colors reflecting the overall narrative. The explicit use of graphics illustration has given extra value to the narrative. *Vagabond* as a graphic novel synthesizes the language of cinema, the sensibilities of contemporary literature, and the appeal of emotional intensity through imagination. To sum up, Inoue's *Vagabond* deploys a central character-Takezo as an anti-hero of the postmodern world who demonstrates both bad and good qualities. He is highly motivated by himself. He longs for reigning the entire world, to become a wild samurai warrior that nobody can defeat him.

The *Vagabond* is the prescribed text in the fourth-semester course of MA English at Tribhuvan University. I believe this research will help teachers and students to comprehend the text *Vagabond* as well as the concept of antiheroes and the importance of the graphics. In addition, it has opened avenues for the researchers to do further research on other volumes of *Vagabond*.

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