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VISUAL NARRATIVES and GLOBAL JOURNEYS

Unveiling Contemporary Arab Cultures



Edizioni Centro Studi Ilà



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Edited by
Claudia Maria Tresso
Jolanda Guardi
Sarah L. Nesti Willard

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ANZAAR
Laboratorio di Ricerca
e Attività Creativa.
Dipartimento di Lingue
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Università di Torino.



VISUAL NARRATIVES AND GLOBAL JOURNEYS
UNVEILING CONTEMPORARY ARAB CULTURES

A cura di
Claudia Maria Tresso
Jolanda Guardi
Sarah L. Nesti Willard

Progetto e realizzazione grafica
Paolo Daniele Corda

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GLANCES FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN



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The Anzaar Lab

“Anzaar – Glances from the Mediterranean” is a Research and Creative Activity Laboratory of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and Modern Cultures of the University of Turin (UniTo). Active since 2019, it is formed by professors and former students of the Department who have written dissertations on visual arts produced in the Mediterranean area. In particular, the Lab’s research concerns the work of those artists who refer to MENA societies either because they are personally part of them or because they have chosen these societies as the subject of their production. The Lab’s research focuses on artistic experiments produced in recent decades in the fields of comics, photography, picture books, calligraphy and graffiti. The Lab also observes and analyzes the work of artists who, in Italy, use these arts to narrate a varied, socio-cultural reality that is the result of past and recent migratory processes. Ultimately, the Lab’s extends its research to activists who use urban graffiti as an artistic and communicative medium. What emerges from research is that through the visual arts, artists in the Mediterranean speak about themselves, their peoples and their countries, aiming to generate discourse rather than conflict, and conveying an image of mutual integration and collaboration.

From 2019 to 2021, Anzaar Lab collaborated with UniTo on the Italian Ministerial Project PrIMED – Prevention and Interaction in Trans-Mediterranean Space (<https://primed-miur.it/>) and created the following events.

1. Two workshops on Mediterranean visual arts at the Museum of Oriental Art (MAO) in Turin.
2. The writing and publication of a book in Italian on “Mediterranean artistic production against stereotypes and fundamentalism” (Torino, Il Leone verde, 2020).
3. A competition for young artists to produce the 2021 calendar “Let’s talk with art”.
4. The set up of two exhibitions, now permanently located on the second floor of UniTo’s Department of Languages: one with panels by Italian cartoonist (of Tunisian origin) Takoua Ben Mohammed and one with the works of the winning artists of the “Let’s Talk with Art” competition.

Anzaar Lab disseminates its research through articles, publications and active participation in conferences and meetings both in Italy and abroad. Connected through the international network of the University of Turin to several universities in the MENA region, the Laboratory has carried out projects with the Mohammed V Agdal University in Rabat and the Italian Cultural Institute in Tunis. In the past few years, it started a fruitful collaboration with the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), which enabled the organization of an international webinar (2022), the creation of the Lab’s new logo (2023), and some of the research presented in this book. Together with MAO and UAEU, the Lab has been invited to represent an example of cultural collaboration between Italian and Emirati institutions at the Sharjah International Book Fair in 2022 (Italy guest of honor). Currently, Anzaar is working on setting up an exhibition of works by Emirati artists to be held at UniTO in May 2024, and on writing a new text in English that comprises new research, artists and art forms.

Connected with the cultural network of the city of Turin and the Piedmont Region, Anzaar collaborates with the aforementioned MAO, the Readers' Circle of Turin and several schools by curating exhibitions, making and broadcasting films, organising book presentations, meetings and seminars. News and information about the Lab's publications and activities can be found on its official website, www.anzaar.unito.it and on its pages on major social networks (Instagram: [progettoanzaar](https://www.instagram.com/progettoanzaar) and Facebook: [anzaar](https://www.facebook.com/anzaar)).

As for the Lab's artistic production, artists Miriam Zatari and Paola de Ruggieri have created a series of panels available on the Lab's website, together with a series of video interviews that Lucia Aletto has conducted with artists from the Middle East.

Anzaar Lab Drawing and Logo

Building on the focus of the Anzaar Lab, the artists Paola de Ruggieri and Miriam Zatari developed a concept by Samia Makhoulfi and created the book cover of the group's first publication. Through collaboration with UAEU in 2023, the group's signature logo came to life from this design.

For the logo, we decided to use Arabic characters; this is because Anzaar is an Arabic word (in English 'glances'), and because calligraphy is an art form highly representative of Arab-Muslim civilizations. The word Anzaar is repeated clockwise around a circular shape, which encloses a crescent moon and a star, the latter being two symbols of Arab-Muslim culture. This logo symbolizes a double meaning: Anzaar, or the glances can be of those who, from an outside culture, converge on the Arab-Islamic world, also including those who already belong to the latter. Framing the circle are eight hands joined together, which represent the desire to embrace other cultures. The number of the represented hands corresponds to the founding members of the Lab, and their circular position expresses the global effort to unite various cultures.

Two main colours were chosen for this logo: green and blue. Green is associated with the religion of Islam; therefore it is a symbolic colour for Muslims, representing a garden [in Arabic *al-janna*], but mostly referred to imply Paradise, the garden per excellence. Many Islamic countries have this colour in their flags, either as a background (Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, etc.), as a band (Pakistan, Algeria, Palestine, the UAE), or for certain elements (Morocco's pointed star, the two stars in the central band for Syria and the cedar of Lebanon). Light blue was chosen because it symbolizes the Mediterranean Sea, an area of convergence for different people and cultures.

Three years after Anzaar Lab's birth, we realized that it was time to turn the existing drawing into a logo, which had to be lighter and stylized, suitable for communication on social media and posters. We therefore cooperated with the Department of Media & Creative Industries of the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), involving their students in its design. Proposals were many and, in the end, we selected the logo designed by Emirati Najma Khalifa Nasser al-Khyeli, which was slightly adjusted by Paola de Ruggieri and Tullia Armano.

In summary, we have removed the green background and the hands drawn around the circle, placing it in the crescent and star representative of Arab-Islamic cultures, whereas the pink colour of the hands is now found in the word Anzaar, which is repeated four times within the logo.

For more information, please visit our website (www.anzaar.unito.it) and follow us on social media:

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Instagram: [progettoanzaar](https://www.instagram.com/progettoanzaar)

Introduction

Claudia Maria Tresso, University of Turin

The purpose of this book is to highlight how these visual arts, which are often interconnected, have found ways and strategies of asserting a composite and fruitful Arab cultural identity, different from clichés and away from mainstream narratives, which often describe it as monolithic and unchanging. These arts constitute a valuable medium to counter and overcome many prejudices and stereotypes of the 'other'. In this spirit, without claiming to be exhaustive, this volume aims to offer the public an overview of various forms of visual arts that originate from or relate to the MENA area. The common thread is art as a powerful means of identity, and the aim is to introduce the works of upcoming artists. Among the Arab visual arts we present here, comics is perhaps one of the most popular mediums and, therefore, it is with comics we decided to start.

JOLANDA GUARDI's contribution, *Fifty Years of Comics in Algeria*, introduces the topic of comics by talking about Algeria, one of the countries most impacted by Western contamination during and following the French colonial rule, which marked more than a hundred years of its history. As early as the 1950s, a decade before independence, comics made their appearance in the country, but the real boom took place in the 60s. These contents and evolutions are analyzed up to the present day. What emerges is a rich and varied panorama of comic genres, along with the artists' multilingual identity, achieved by the usage of Arabic, French, and Francarabe, a hybrid language that requires the reader to be proficient in both Algerian Arabic and French.

In her article *Comics and Illustrations from the UAE*, **SARAH NESTI WILLARD** provides an overview of emergent communities of illustrations, comics, and graphic narratives from the United Arab Emirates. Her findings are based on data collected from ethnographic online and on-site observations, as well as direct interactions within artistic communities and local publishers. Nesti Willard's analysis begins with a historical account of the proliferation of the publishing sector, which took place with the support of the UAE government, and aimed at giving visibility to localized productions. These works have international characteristics, but different plots and modus operandi. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of localized productions as a testimony to the need to define a modern Gulf identity and introducing the artists exhibiting at UniTo in May 2024.

MIRIAM ZATARI's and **PAOLA DE RUGGIERI**'s paper *Graphic Novels as a Reflection of Egyptian Society: the Case of Metro* examines the history of comics in Egypt, where the medium is considered a leading cultural example. After a brief introduction to the history of Arab comics, Zatari and de Ruggieri trace their evolution in the Egyptian context, where the medium evolved from illustrated stories for children in the late 19th century to more complex and elaborate forms that also target adult audiences. In particular, they examine the first graphic novel created in Egyptian Arabic: *Metro*, by Magdy El Shafee (2008). It is a thriller/love story set in the dungeons of modern-day Cairo; the story also tackles taboo topics such as sexuality. The illustrations are intricately intertwined with the language, skilfully depicting a sketch of today's Egyptian youth, especially those young people who, even if well-educated, feel trapped in a country plagued by corruption and a stagnant social landscape.

CHIARA CAPPARELLI's article *Stories of Lebanese Feminism Through Words and Images* focuses on the graphic novel *Lawīn minwassalik yā Marī?* [Where to, Mary?] by the Lebanese researcher Bernadette Daou.

After an outline of the feminist Lebanese movement, the author includes an introduction to the author and her graphic novel, a description of the story's plot, the characters and their stories, with a consequent text analysis of the works.

This analysis confirms that this graphic novel documents the hardships of generations of women who have long fought for their rights, and whose stories are not publicly known. Hence, this study is a further confirmation that graphic novels, often considered fictional media, are increasingly becoming texts used to document the power struggles of female groups.

Concluding the discussion on Arab comics, **BENEDETTA BROSSA**'s paper, *An Alternative to Marvel's Western superheroes: The Islam-inspired 99 by Naif al-Mutawa* explores the comic book series *The 99* created by Kuwaiti psychologist Naif Al-Mutawa, first published in May 2006. The essay illustrates how al-Mutawa utilized the ninety-nine names of God in the comic book discussing the plot of the series, and a closer look at emblematic characters is taken. The narrative highlights the "superpower" of culture in fighting prejudices and fostering multicultural solidarity. The chapter concludes by describing how this comic book generated both praise and controversy in the Middle East and the West. While many appreciated the work for its positive representation of Islam, others deemed it blasphemous or viewed it as a vehicle for Islamic propaganda. Despite the criticism, the comic book gained great success worldwide.

PAOLA DE RUGGIERI finally reverses the perspective of the discourse on comics with *Reality in Comics: How to Show the Arab World Through Comics*, de Ruggieri studies the impact that graphic journalism has on audiences; through this analysis, the article claims that graphic journalism should be held in the same regard as more traditional forms of reportage, in terms of importance and accuracy. To demonstrate this claim, the article develops around the description and analysis of comic strips reporting on events and realities from the Arab Islamic culture, authored by graphic journalists of Western origins.

SAMIA MAKHLOUFI's article, *Diversification and Transformation of Children's Literature From the Arab World*, explores the profound transformation that Arab children's literature underwent in the last two decades. The literary genre broke free from its educational connotations and began to offer creations centered around the child, their desires, dreams, doubts, and fears. A new universe was brought to life, closer to the reader's daily reality, reflecting their concerns, joys, experiences, and whims. Examples discussed of such productions include the Egyptian series *Awwal Marra* and the Jordanian *Al-halazūna*, which address problems typical for many children, such as fear of the dark, reluctance to do schoolwork, and the thrill of doing something for the first time, serenely and reassuringly.

MANUELA TALARICO's article *A Universal Call for Peace and Tolerance*, introduces the 'calligraffiti' of the Tunisian-French artist eL Seed: that is, an artistic expression that combines the Arabic calligraphic tradition with the universal art of graffiti. In the first part of her paper, Talarico dwells on eL Seed's life to understand the artist's exploration of his own cultural identity, which influenced the emergence of an unprecedented personal technique. The author analyzes eL Seed's famous project *Perception* (2016) in the sociocultural context of the Cairo neighborhood so-called 'Garbage City', where the work was realized, noting the artist's skill in questioning prejudices and stereotypes against communities living in degraded urban areas characterized by phenomena of social marginality. Other important projects made by eL Seed and quoted in this paper are *Declaration* (Dubai, 2014), *Lost Walls* (Tunisia, 2014), *Mirrors of Babel* (Toronto, 2018) and *Secrets of time* (Cairo, 2022).

In *Street Art as a Form of Protest: Haifa Subay*, **TULLIA ARMANO** explores the great communicative power of Street Art, an artistic current born during the 90s in New York after the spread of Graffiti Art, which soon developed as a form of political and social protest. During the Arab Spring, Street Art became the main medium used by Arab street artists to denounce the regimes.

This article focuses on the Yemeni street artist Haifa Subay, who started painting murals for an artistic campaign of her brother Murad. In 2017, a little after the start of the Yemeni civil war in 2014, Haifa Subay decided to pursue a career as a street artist by creating her first artistic campaign called *Silent Victim*, which aimed at keeping alive the memories of the war crimes suffered by the Yemeni people. Thanks to her work and her social commitment, in 2019 the artist was invited to participate in the Singapore Biennale, where she presented an unpublished exhibition entitled 'War and Humans'. This article concludes with an unpublished interview with Haifa Subay dated January 2023, where her artistic and social work in Yemen is further discussed.

If the works of calligraphers and street artists embellish the written message with refined aesthetic strokes, there is another kind of written message that, in the form of graffiti covers the walls of modern cities. **LUCIA ALETTO**'s contribution, *Spaces of Memory and Resistance. Graffiti and spontaneous Writings from the Arab Spring to the Walls of Turin*, is dedicated to this type of writing. According to Aletto, graffiti is a contemporary and widespread urban practice that symbolizes rebellion and seeking freedom from the methodical colonization of space by institutional powers. Its observation and documentation provide a glimpse into the social reality in which we live, revealing the dynamics of everyday life and the processes of identification and appropriation of public space by its inhabitants. This chapter sheds light on the role of Street Art and Graffiti in Arab Springs, drawing upon insights gained from interviews with artists from the Arab world, and discusses an extract from a Turin-based case study on the production of graffiti and spontaneous writings by the Arab community between 2012 and 2014.

One of the most pressing and controversial issues facing Europe in recent decades is the increasing migration of people (many of them Arabs) fleeing conflicts, political crises, poverty, and unemployment. **TRESSO's** article on *Migrants and Migration Writers* mainly concerns Italy which, due to its geographical position, functions as a bridge between Mediterranean countries. Within two decades only, the number of migrants entering Italy yearly has increased from 26,817 to 127,207.

In this regard, the intolerant and intransigent positions of various people and groups are counterbalanced by many others who believe that the contribution of migrants is an indispensable condition for the development of societies, both economically and culturally. Furthermore, every migrant must be considered first and foremost as a person with a story worth knowing. Among those who share this belief are transnational authors who have experienced migration firsthand and others who have documented it through interviews, articles and research. Hence, this essay documents the presence of transnational authors (in particular those of Arab origin) in the various fields of contemporary Italian literature. The study concentrates on those authors who speak about migration through comics; their graphic novels and journals illustrate an increasingly composite Italian society, in which different stories, customs, languages and cultures are intertwined, and convey the contribution of migration and diasporic communities to the formation of a new – and richer – Italian culture.

Fifty years of cartoons in Algeria

Jolanda Guardi, University of Turin

In recent years, the number of cartoons published in the form of graphic novels has increased (Weiner 2000). This phenomenon, which has involved several Arab authors known to Western readers, has affected many Arab countries. The diffusion of these publications in Arab countries may seem novel, but cartoons have been present in this region since the 1960s as an evolution of the satiric genre that appeared in newspapers during the Ottoman Empire (Kishtainy 1985: 37-65).

The sudden and apparent rise of contemporary graphic novels and movements, which are involved in the spread of cartoons and related graphic drawings, in all Arab countries can be read as an action against *viseity*, following Deleuze's (1975) and Guattari's (2006) definitions against visualising power in a recognisable face, a practice widely spread in leaders' discourse of Arab countries. A practice that demonstrates that the ban of physical representation belongs more to myth than to reality, and in Arab countries, iconophobia does not exist. Contemporary Arab cartoon detaches itself from the power discourse that uses images in its narration and can therefore also be defined as a political act.

To analyse the aforementioned works, images must be considered according to their meanings and concepts rather than based on the artistic value of single drawings. In recent years, these cartoons have become more stylised and less detailed, so the focus has been directed to the accompanying texts rather than to images. Often, the text itself forms a drawing, as exemplified by the slogans produced during the 2011 manifestations in Syria during Algeria's Hirak and Lebanon in 2019.

Cartoons in Algeria

Contrary to other Arab countries, where the revival of comics dates from the 1980s (Ghaibeh & Gabrieli 2017), Algeria celebrated 50 years of comics history in 2019. Though already present since the 1950s with the works of Ismail Ait Djaffar (Toutenbd 2004: 1), comics in Algeria developed mostly starting from the years following its independence from French colonialism and contributed to the construction of a specific national imagery (Howell 2010: 20).

The country witnessed a real cartoon and comic boom since the middle 1960s (Boudjellal 1991). In fact, on 19 March 1967, the first episode of an entirely Algerian comic was published as a feuilleton in *Algérie Actualité: Nār, a mermaid at Sidi Ferruch* by Muḥammad Aram. In the post-revolution Algeria (1962), to propose comics would seem odd in relation with the country's priorities. Nevertheless, although comics were not of excellent print quality at the beginning, they were everywhere and could be bought not only in big towns but also in villages (*dechra*) throughout the country (Labter 2008: 45). Moreover, comics were considered an excellent educational tool in a country strongly affected by illiteracy at the time and by the very low educational level at which France had left Algeria after its occupation.

The idea of creating an Algerian comic was first conceived in 1964 inside the National Cinema Centre by three illustrators who are important in the Algerian comics scene: Mohamed Aram (Djade), Ahmed Harun e Muhammad Mazari (Maz), and Muhammad Merabtène, who is famous as Slim and later joined the other two. The project was realised only with the publication of *Nār, a mermaid at Sidi Ferruch*, which was published as a series beginning on 19 March 1967 owing to Djade. *Nār* (fire in Arabic) was a flying policeman, and similar to Superman, he also wore a costume (but with a *nūn* on it, i.e. the letter *n*) and was summoned to solve the cases of mermaids from the planet Astra who arrived on Earth to look for seaweeds to survive. However, an animal tamer wanted to catch them. It was not by chance that the mermaids landed exactly in Sidi Ferruch because it is the same location where the French invasion troupes landed in 1830. The reference to the political discourse has been strictly connected to the comics history of Algeria since the beginning (Labter 2008).

In Arabic

Two years later, the first comic in Arabic was published: *M'quidech* (Ruhe 2009: 328), with the subtitle *Algerian Illustrated Magazine* (Ill. 1). The magazine's founder, Mohamed Aram, was driven by his will to propose an alternative to the Western publications present in the country (especially those in French or originally in French). To readers, he proposed national heroes dressed in traditional costumes, offering the opportunity to laugh about local situations relating to the cultural politics at that time. *M'quideš* was the most widespread magazine in the country for a long time, and in recent years, some issues have been re-published (Ill. 2). In the first issue, which consisted of 32 pages and was published by SNED, the state publisher, one can read: 'A group of young Algerians wanted to create for you an illustrated magazine inspired by Algeria.' Among the illustrators for the issue were Ahmad Harun and Slim. The latter wrote the story Bouzid and the diamond and introduced the couple Bouzid-Zina, which soon came to the fore of Algerian nineteenth-century art. From this moment, the wide development of comics has made Algeria the home par excellence among all Arab countries (Ghozali 2009).



Ill. 1 – Cover of *M'quideš* first number, 1978

Among the most interesting publications in Arabic between 1967 and 1990 was *Gnifed* (1971) (Ill. 3), which detached from the publications of the post-social revolution period. The magazine, signed by Djade, a promoter of comics in Algeria, was published from 1971 to 1973. Small in format (21 × 21.5 cm, 16 pages in black and white), it suffered competition with *M'quideš*. *Ibtasim* (1977) (Ill. 4) is a monthly bilingual magazine published in colour by the Ministry of Hydraulic and Valorisation of the Land, with the subtitle *Ibtasim, tabtasim lillah at-tabi'yya* (Smile because nature smiles at God). Addressed to young people, it had the goal to spread the idea of environmental conservation in advance by addressing current concerns. Directed by Maz,

it disappeared after only four issues. *Tāriq* (1979) (Ill. 5), published by the Mugiahid Museum, only had three issues, although some of the most brilliant illustrators at that time contributed to the issue. *Al-amal as-sağīr* (1986), a 26-page monthly dichromatic magazine published by the PSA (Algerian Sport Society) and directed by Brahim Guerroui, was also short-lived.

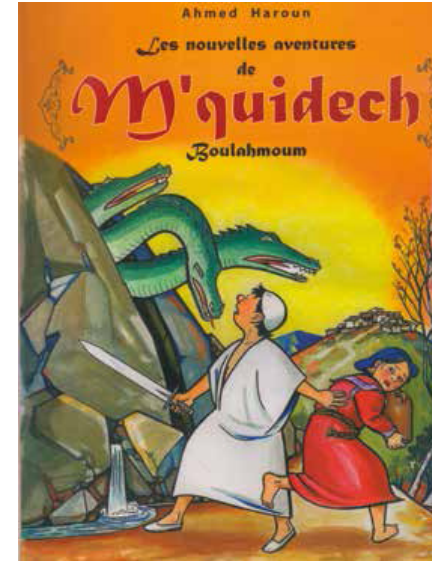
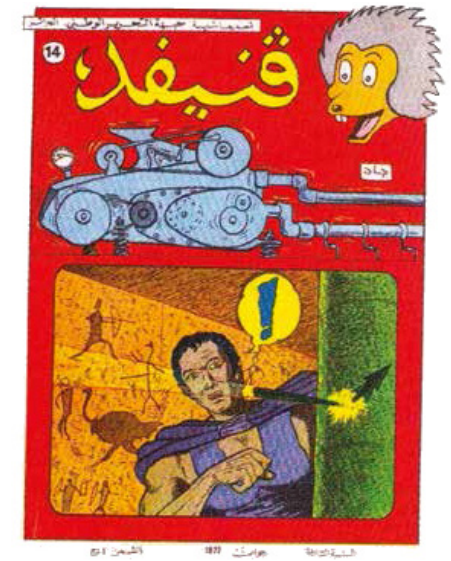


Illustration 2 – 2011 *M'quideš* reprinting by Dalimen publisher



Illustration 4 – *Ibtasim* (Smile)



Ill. 3 – *Gnifed*. The title means “the one with curled hair” and he is the name of the character (up right beside the title)

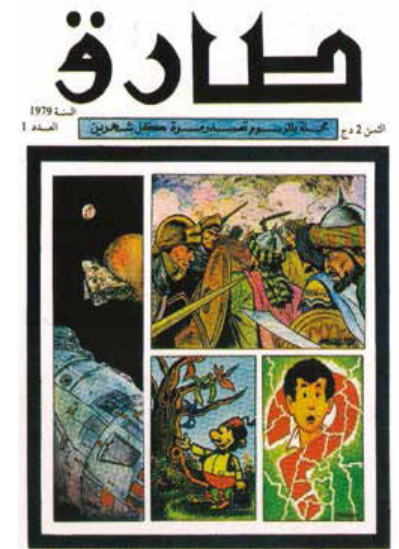


Illustration 5 - *Tāriq*

Among the many other titles such as *Adnane* (1991), *Riyad* (1992), *Nunu* (1995), and *Sindbad*, *Tim* (1989) (Ill. 6) was distinct owing to its high quality, but its publication stopped after only a few issues because of its high cost and bureaucratic difficulties. It was presented at the first Mediterranean Festival of Comics in Algiers (23–26 March 1989) and directed by Abdessalam Bouchareb. *Tim* was a more serious attempt to create a magazine of quality after *M'quidech* stopped being published in 1974. *Tim* is the name of the album's hero, who was always in the company of a little robot called Simsim.



Illustration 6 – *Tim*

As it was difficult to maintain the publication of regular issues, Algerian illustrators soon devoted themselves to graphic novels, of which several were published between 1981 and 1991. Examples include *Al-maraka* (The Battle) by Muhammad Aram, which was the Algerian Liberation War; *'Abd El-Mu'min ibn 'Ali Muwahhahad, knight of the Arab West* by 'Abbās Kabīr ibn Yūsuf (2003), a historical album that narrated the history of an Arab hero; and *Al-mašhūq as-sirri* (The Magic Sand, 1986), which contained four stories about the Liberation War.

A language in between

The first album was published in 1968 by Slim, with 10,000 copies printed and sold at the symbolic price of 0.80 Algerian dinars (Labter 2011: 56). It was entitled *Moustache et le Belgacem* on the front cover, but the back cover presented the character Slim, who was described in the following publications and became the character symbol of the author, Bouzid.

Slim published in Franco-Arabic (Azouz 2008), but he addressed himself especially to the Arab-speaking reading public, who have the cultural tools necessary to understand his humour. What is interesting about Bouzid's works, apart from the peculiarity of the characters and stories, is the language he used, in which the Algerian dialect was used as a subtext on which Slim built limericks and extremely sophisticated language games using intertextuality and the so-called meta strip (Malti-Douglas 1994: 191), with a prominently postmodern attitude.

Bouzid, who was born in 1968, did not speak the French of France; instead, he spoke Francarabe, a hybrid language that requires the reader double competence in Algerian Arabic and French. Moreover, his speech was a mixture of expressions in the Algerian dialect that refer to the Arab Muslim culture and Tamazight, the Berber language that refers to that cultural sphere, setting the scene for the sociolinguistic diversity of the country. It is not by chance that Bouzid's best friend was Amziane from Tizi Ouzu. He spoke Berber and is a nuclear physics professor (Slim 2003). This friendship was meant to overturn the stereotype that Arabic-speaking Arabs are in conflict with Berbers who struggled for the recognition of the Amazigh identity.

Though minute, Bouzid was strong, smart, and recognisable from the cultural point of view. He wore men's traditional dress (Ill. 7): large striped pants, an 'abā'ya¹, and the *kunbūš*², a bandanna composed of a piece of cloth knotted on the front. He had a moustache and used a stick. All these elements have a well-defined symbolic value (Lakhdar Barka 1999: 94). On the whole, they are meant to represent the image of the traditional Algerian male, who is considered to underscore a specific characteristic. In fact, clothes connote the character in relation to the Algerian tradition. The *kunbūš* indicates that he came from the country, the moustache is an example of *ruḡūla* (Arab virility)³, and the stick symbolises his status as an important member of his community. Bouzid's character shows a contrast between the elements that characterised him as very strong in spite of his age, very smart in spite of his rural origin, and open-minded, although he wears a traditional dress. He always fought with his bourgeois antagonist Sadik (*Sādiq* means 'sincere' in Arabic, and the name *Sadik* was used intentionally to remind readers of the French word *sadique*, which means 'sadistic'), a very wealthy and arrogant man. Bouzid had a love relationship outside marriage, which was against traditional rules, with Zina, a female character who gave birth to the 'zinettes' type, an emancipated Algerian girl who respects traditional values. Zina's face was never revealed (Ill. 7) because it was covered by the traditional *uḡār*⁴, and so were her arms, which always held the traditional *ḥayk*⁵. However, in this case, a modern and clever personality corresponded to the traditional features: according to Slim, Zina was 'an eternal challenger'. Through his characters, Slim criticised Algerian society's contradictions from its independence until today (Ill. 8) in a way that allowed him to contribute a page in the Revolution newspaper *El Moudjahid* until very recently.



Illustration 7 – Slim and Zina

To the couple Bouzid-Zina, Slim added a cat, *elgatt mīdigouti* ('the disgusted cat' in Algerian Arabic), that played a role similar to that of *Rantanplan*, the dog of *Lucky Luke*, or the worm with a hat in *Jacovitti's* strips, and somehow substituted it for the son that the couple never had.

- 1 A long dress, generally in bright colours, that men wear with or without pants.
- 2 *Kunbūš* is originally the word to denote the fabric placed between the saddle and the horse back. The word is then used to denote the bandana tied to the groom's forehead.
- 3 The reference here is to the *sayyā*, the chief of the Arab community, who is distinguished for his physical and moral characteristics.
- 4 The *uḡār* is a square finely embroidered fabric, usually white, bound behind the ears of women to cover the nose and mouth. It is part of Algerian women's traditional dress.
- 5 Zina appeared revealing her face only once in the first story of Bouzid (1969), when she told her father that she wanted to marry him; her father answered that a peasant will never have a future. The *ḥayk* is the traditional white fabric that Algerian women wear while holding it with one hand (this is why Zina's hands were always covered).

In French

Similarly to the publications in Arabic, the comics in French also focused, especially in recent years, on graphic novels and political satire instead of being published in magazines with periodical issues. Among the most important illustrators, aside from those already mentioned by Slim, is Dilem (Igonetti 2003), who started publishing in 1989 and published every day in *Le Matin*, a satirical vignette that commented on political issues and political leaders' behaviours under the title *Dilemme de Dilem* (Dilem's dilemmas), which later became *Dilem du jour* (Today's Dilem, playing with the name of the illustrator and the word *dilemma*). The French *Le Monde* described Dilem as 'le cauchemar du pouvoir, mais une revanche pour la jeunesse' (The nightmare of power, but a revenge for young people; Beaugé 2001). He was the first illustrator to propose a caricature of President Boutfliqa of the Algerian Republic with the album *Boutef président* (2000) (Ill. 9). He often targeted terrorists, which earned him a life treat in 2004. His cartoons were so sharp that in 2001, when some amendments were made to the Algerian Penal Code to limit freedom of press⁶, people called them 'Dilem amendments'. Notwithstanding censure and nine trials against him for defamation, the illustrator still lives in Algiers. He is also famous outside the country and has won several prizes, including the Cartoonists Rights Network's Award for Courage in Editorial Cartooning in 2002 and the Grand Prix de l'Humour Vache au Salon international du Dessin de Presse et de l'Humour in France in 2007. He is also a member of the Cartooning for Peace Foundation, founded by the UN based on the Danish cartoons about Prophet Muhammad's issue in 2005.

Another important illustrator is Farid Boudjellal, who has been in the market since 1978 and created the character Abdullah, whose adventures were first published in 1980 on *Charlie-Mensuel*. The subject of his albums was migration and the lives of migrants who lived far from Algeria. In *Abdullah raconte vos histoires racistes* (Abdullah tells your racist stories), the album of 1982, Boudjellal narrates about French society,

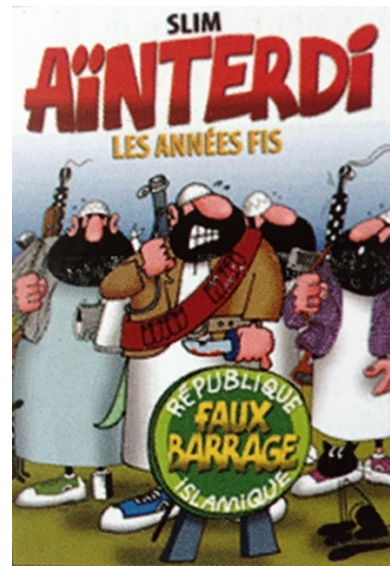


Illustration 8 – *Ainterdi* by Slim about the “black decade”, 1990-2000



Ill. 9 – Dilem, *Boutef Président*



Illustration 10 – Farid Boudjellal, *Ramadan*, 1988

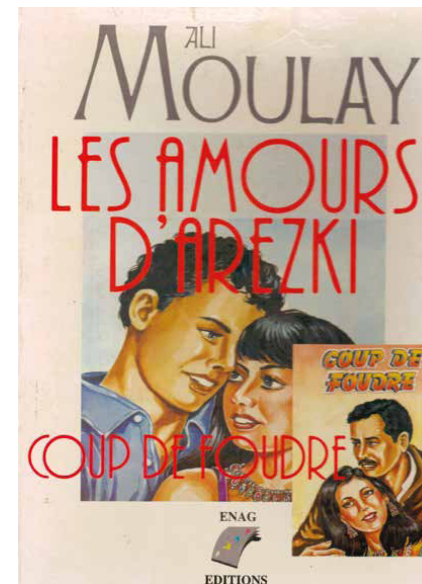


Illustration 11 – Ali Moulay, *Les amours d'Arezki*, 2002

taking inspiration from the letters that readers sent to newspapers. In another album, *Ramadan* (1988) (Ill. 10), he tells the story of an Algerian family who lived in the Belleville neighbourhood in Paris during the month of Ramadan. Boudjellal focused on the second generation and on how traditions change in the migration country.

Another interesting author is Ali Moulay, who studied at the Fine Arts School of Algiers and the National School of Fine Arts in Paris. He published six cartoon albums and 150 books for children. In 2016, he received first prize at the FIBDA, the International Cartoons Festival of Algiers, and continues to work until today. His works are characterised by love stories, a sensitive subject in Algerian culture. For example, *Les amours d'Arezki* (Arezki's loves; Ill. 11), the book published in 2002 on the occasion of the 40-year anniversary of cartoons and caricature in Algeria, contains two stories: one on which the title of the book was based and the other entitled *Coup de foudre* (Love at first sight). In *Les amours d'Arezki*, we find Hayat, who was in love with Arezki, a young and brilliant lawyer, who was fascinated by a rich and married woman with whom he fell madly in love. *Coup de foudre* tells the story of young Kahina and her difficult relationship with her mother and stepfather. The plot is simple, but the story deserves to be read because, in the end, the lovers are reunited. Moulay's romantic vein goes on in time, and the last two albums, *Belle et rebelle* (Beautiful and rebel) and *Amour de jeunesse* (Youth loves), published in 2018, represent loving relationships.

Lonès Dahmani, who signs his work simply with the pen name Dahmani, is from the second generation. He began his career in the 1990s with strips published in *El Watan*, *Liberté*, and the satiric newspaper *El Manchar*. He has lived in France since 1996, where he published some albums, including *L'humor au temps du terrorisme* (Humor in time of terrorism) and *La coupe du monde en BD* (The World Cup in form of Comics), both in 1998. In 2017, he published what is considered his more accomplished work: *Oualou en Algérie* (Ill. 12). In the Algerian language, *Oualou* means 'nothing', which is also the name of

6 These amendments provide for a sentence from 2 months to 1 year for journalists who 'offend' the president or the state Institutions.

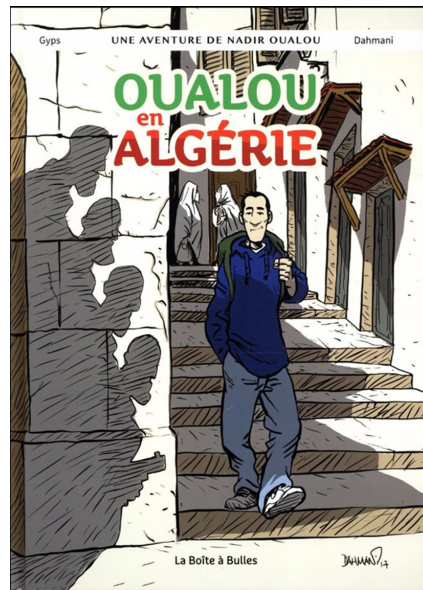


Illustration 12 – Lounes Dahmani, *Oualou en Algérie*, 2017

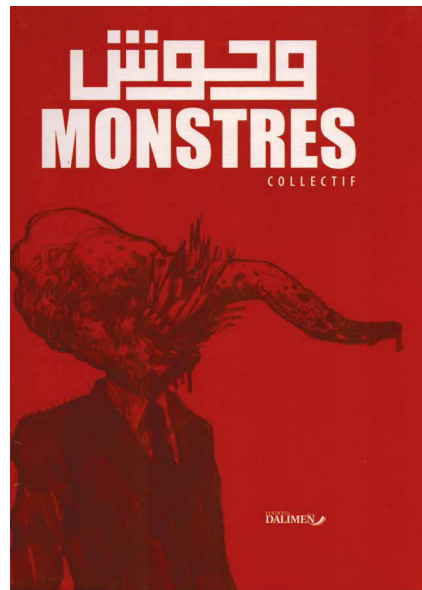


Illustration 13 - *Wuḥūš/Monstres*, 2011



Illustration 14 – *Bendir*



Illustration 15 – The first Comics and Caricature National Festival poster, which took place in Bourdj ElKiffane in 1986, created by Slim

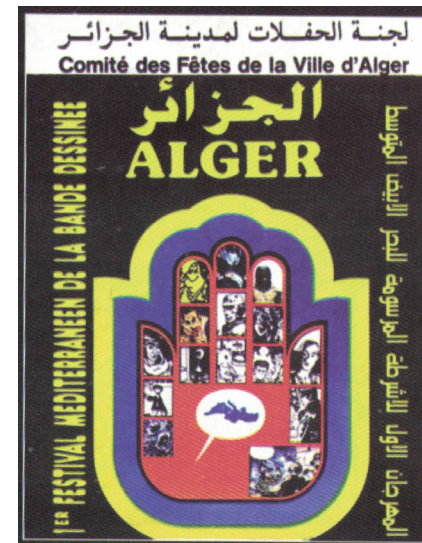


Illustration 16 – Comics Mediterranean Festival cover, Algiers, 1989

the main character, whose first name is Nadir (i.e. Nadir Oualou), a private investigator who had to search in Algiers for the daughter of an Algerian woman who lived in France⁷. The story is one of Oualou's adventures in Algeria in a period marked by terrorism with a subtle vein of humour, especially when it underscored behavioural differences between Algerians who live in Algeria and those who live in France.

Some more recent developments and trends in comics are presented in *Wuḥūš/Monstres* (2011) (Ill. 13), a collection of stories drawn by young artists that features works in Arabic and French. Twenty stories whose main subjects are 'monsters' were intended in various ways. In the introduction, also written as comics, when a desert inhabitant asked the author, 'You, Mr. Rumi [foreigner], you live in drawings... why? Do they get you money?' the author answered, 'No! But this way I can tell things I wouldn't dare

speak of in words' (*Wuḥūš/Monstres* 2011: 13). In fact, the monsters in the collection included incest violence, torture, crime, and ghosts, that is, all faces of monstrosity. At the same time, other comic magazines began to be published, such as *Bendir* (Ill. 14), which is regularly released in the market.

The Algiers FIBDA is the only festival in an Arab country that has a dimension, structure, and participation of international breadth. Funded by a grant from the Algerian government through an organising committee of the Dalimen publisher, which publishes comics, it has another peculiarity: its president is a woman, Dalila Nadjem. The FIBDA did not emerge from scratch. The first Algerian comics exhibition was held in 1982, from 26 April to 10 May, when the Italian Cultural Institute in Algiers organised an exhibition entitled *Comics and Cartoons*, where the works of 11 Algerian authors were presented. In the same year, in August, the popular council of Algiers organised another exhibition that presented the works of *M'quidech* illustrators at the Mouloud Feraoun Gallery. In the following years, several exhibitions followed. In 1984, the 'Days of comics and cartoons' was organised in Algiers by the Cultural Centre, to which many illustrators participated, including the fathers of the genre. However, the 'mother' of the FIBDA is without a doubt the First National Festival of Comics and Caricature in Bourdj ElKiffan, organised in Spring 1986 (8 April to 2 May), whose poster was created by Slim (Ill. 15), with the participation of Algerian⁸ and non-Algerian illustrators. The Bourdj ElKiffan festival took place until 1989, when

⁷ The title could then be read in two ways: 'There's nothing in Algeria' or 'simply 'Oualou in Algeria'.

⁸ Apart from the quoted names, I recall di Mahfoud Aïder, illustrator for *M'quidech* and founder of the magazines *Sindbad* and *Scorpion*. He is the author of the album series *Les aventures de Sindbad le marin* (Adventures of Sindbad the sailor) and contributed to the collective work *Dessine moi l'humor* (2006). He also worked for *ElBendir* (Ill. 16). In 2011, he published *Les aventures de Sindbad el Harrague* (Ill. 17). In the same year, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from FIBDA.

the 'ball' was taken by Algiers, which organised the first Mediterranean Festival of Comics at the People's Palace of the capital from 23 to 26 March of that year (Ill. 16). Besides Algeria, Egypt, Spain, Italy, Morocco, Greece, and Turkey also participated in the festival. The original idea was to build an itinerant festival, one that should take place each year in a different Mediterranean country, but after the first edition, the project was aborted. In the following years, some events took place in several towns, but they were suspended during the black decade of terrorism (1990–2000). The FIBDA was revived in 2008 and continues to be held until today. It remains the reference for the history and update of comics in Arab countries.

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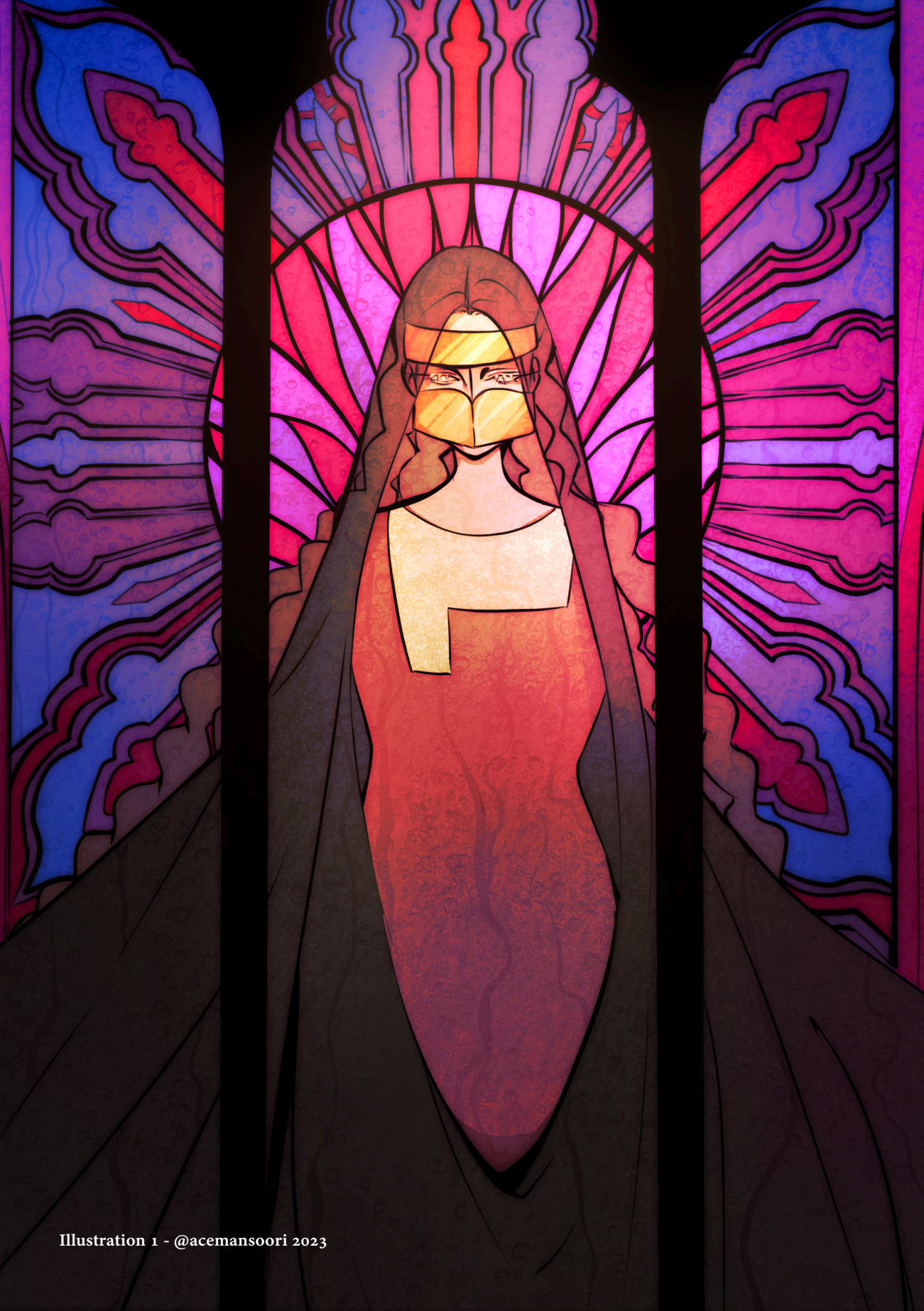


Illustration 1 - @acemansoori 2023

Illustrations, Comics and Graphic Novels from the UAE

Sarah L. Nesti Willard

Abstract

This chapter overviews emergent communities of illustrations, comics, and graphic narratives from the United Arab Emirates. The data collected is from ethnographic online and on-site observations and direct interactions with Emirati artists and publishers.

It briefly discusses how comics and graphic narratives have evolved in the last 20 years, and it elucidates how these art forms avail social media to gain prominence and recognition. It then introduces a group of 21 Emirati artists, all different in style and concept, who have been chosen to represent a new illustrative trend: Khaleeji comics and illustrations. Their first group exhibition is with the University of Turin, in collaboration with the Lab Anzaar, organised by the Department of Literature and Modern Languages. The works of art discussed in this chapter are those exhibited in Palazzo Aldo Moro, Turin, on the 15th of May 2024. Emirati artists are introduced, and their work is briefly described. The chapter also emphasizes the importance of defining a modern pop-cultural identity within the region.

Introduction

The development of illustrative trends in the United Arab Emirates is a rather new phenomenon. The new millennium started with the promotion of Emirati culture and heritage to protect and revamp the UAE's history. Cultural foundations, museums, and heritage cities popped up within a short period (Derderian, 2017), thanks to a sudden cultural boom supported by the Emirati government as well as private institutions (Al Qasimi, 2016). All artistic sectors were affected: the fine arts, the conservation, and the publishing industry. While great attention has been always given to fine arts and museum studies, Gulf pop culture has been hardly discussed in academia. This is mainly because commercial art (as in design and illustration) developed in the last fifteen to twenty years, when communities of graphic artists and illustrators started developing their designs and promoting them through different social media platforms. From then, the production of comics, commercial illustrations, and graphic novels was first witnessed within the country.

From rags to tech-riches

The history of Emirati comics goes back to the 1970s, when the children's magazine *Mâjid* was first issued in 1979, and when other comic strips within periodicals started to emerge. Some of the names of prominent Emirati artists working in that period were Hassan Sharif, who later migrated to conceptual art, (Oum Cartoon, 2016), and the makers of *Mâjid*: Ahmad 'Umar, along with cartoonists Ahmad Hijâzî, Bahjat 'Uthmân, Muhrî al-Dîn al-Labbâd and Georges Bahgory, a team of Egyptian designers involved in the creation of the children's magazine (Douglas & Malti-Douglas, 1994).

In the 1980s and 1990s, with the advent of satellite TV, many foreign programs appeared on Emirati TV screens; these were mainly Walt Disney cartoons and Japanese animé, which were imported and then dubbed into standard Arabic, and broadcast on children's channels across the Gulf (Alharbi & Baines, 2015). At that time, it was easier and cheaper to import entertainment, since the UAE still lacked a proper entertainment industry, especially in the field of animation (Sayfo, 2017). Even if cartoons are not comic magazines, this evolution is fundamental, because it affected the interests and drawing styles of the current generation of Emirati illustrators (Nesti Willard & Tariq, 2021).

In the early 2000s, aided by a governmental vision aimed at promoting the preservation of Emirati heritage and culture, many publishing houses, including those specializing in children's books, started flourishing (Al Qasimi, 2016). To date, the publishing sector is in continuous expansion, and very much focused on increasing the quality and visibility of Arabic content (Daschadhury, 2006). In this landscape, many Emirati illustrators started to undertake freelance careers as designers and content creators.

Furthermore, thanks to the technological boom and the huge advancements of social media platforms witnessed in the 1st decade of the 2000s, life became easier for the community of newly formed artists. With new technologies such as digital tablets and programs like Procreate, Photoshop, Illustrator, and Clip Studio Paint, artists started working digitally, cutting some of the basic art-related expenses and enhancing the quality of their art through the many available digital effects. With social media platforms like Instagram, Tiktok, Behance, Pinterest, Ko-fi and Linktree, among others, illustrators manage to stay connected, exchange information, organise events, and sell their art (Nesti Willard & Tariq, 2021), without having to incur further expenses such as office spaces and specialised studios.

Who are the game players?

There are different communities of Emirati and UAE-based artists, each with a particular illustrative style, audience, and products. The first Emirati manga and animé communities were formed in the 1990s. Their productions peaked between 2011 and 2016, when a few Emirati-based projects in manga style were conceived: *Torkaizer*, *The Empire of N*, and *Emara*, all short animé productions, originally aimed at becoming proper TV series, and a manga, *The Gold Ring* (volume 1 & 2), among others smaller publications (Croucher, 2013). Unfortunately, these productions ended due to exorbitant production costs, internal disagreements, and lack of further support (Al Rei, 2022). There are many events aimed at sustaining Emirati-Japanese pop culture, which allows young illustrators to display and sell illustrations, comics, graphic

narratives, T-shirts, and handicrafts. These are the *Middle East Film and Comic Con* convention (MEFCC), held yearly in Abu Dhabi, the *Otakon*, *Mas Mash*, and *ArtFest*, one of the most recent conventions.

Other smaller enterprises, among which *Mangaya*, *Kadi Art*, *Mend Hero Academy*, and *Imperium Comics* offer training and publication opportunities for young artists. To date, Mend Hero Academy and Imperium Comics have released a few publications: *Khalifa* and *Deeko Comics* and *Pop-Corn*, under Mend Hero Academy's label, and *Framing* volumes 1 and 2, released by Imperium Comics. In an interview with the managers of the latter publishing house, it was revealed that the compilation of the books was a challenge, as the producers had to juggle production and copyright costs to secure a decent income from their sales.

An original yearly publication sponsored by the Sharjah Art Foundation is the *Corniche* comic book collection. *Corniche* features alternative comics, some of which can be considered introspective works of art and are genuinely original in style and concept. According to Nasir Nasrallah¹, the editor in charge of the collection, the concept which led to the first book developed from a three-day comic workshop in 2019. Fifteen local artists were invited to create a short comic to be produced and showcased at Focal Point, Sharjah Art Foundation's annual art book fair. Initially, the artists intended to print and produce their comics as independent publications, but then it was decided to compile them into a single book. Since then, the project kept growing from year to year, and in 2023 fifty-two artists were featured in the book. The *Corniche Books* initiative aims to publish yearly comic anthologies and build a strong community of artists, who are considered a growing family of local and regional experts with different skills, levels, and backgrounds. By allowing the publication of personalized stories and different artistic styles, the preservation of a localized taste is ensured.

On the other hand, Sandstorm Comics, a government-supported enterprise announced to the public in March 2022 (Khaleeji Times, 2022), aims to become the epicenter of Middle Eastern comics by sponsoring local and international productions. Sandstorm is forming a solid comic book industry able to compete with other publications on an international stage. Their stories are mainly authored by Emirati writers, but the illustrators are professionals from different backgrounds. This is because, according to Mo Abedin, Sandstorm's founder, many local illustrators still lack the skills to work in such competitive settings, as proper training is still lacking in the country². However, according to the tycoon, this is only a matter of time, as more Emiratis are attracted to this emerging industry, and educational institutions are making steps forward to accommodate the industry demand.

Besides small and bigger businesses, there have also been independent collections, sponsored by individuals. Some of these publications are *Shama Manga*, authored by Hamda Alseiari, *Afra the Tattletale*, by Eman AlMessabi, *Oil* by Khaled Aljaberi, *Gafshish*, by Abdulla Alsharhan, and the beautifully illustrated novel *Adversities After The Collapse*, authored by Sumaia Alamoodi, to mention a few. These are artistic forms with no economic ties; they reflect the enthusiasm of this new generation of artists and are uncompromised grassroots productions.

¹ The information on the Corniche Books is paraphrased from an excerpt personally written by Nasir Nasrallah in December 2023 to support research on comics within the UAE.

² This information was retrieved through an online discussion with Mo Abedin in February 2022.



Illustration 2 - @sono_moza February 14, 2023

Precious gems

Emirati pop cultural productions, such as graphic narratives, comics, memes and illustrations, are still unknown outside the Gulf region, nor are they discussed in academia. There are many graphic novels about the Middle East authored by Western authors and imported into Middle Eastern countries; however, few are Middle Eastern products exported abroad (Høigilt, 2019).

With regards to Emirati comics and graphic novels, their production is still at its grassroots. It will take a few years before well-established products become internationally renowned. Furthermore, local productions are often difficult to locate. Similarly to locally produced books, comic and graphic novel collections are niche productions and, because bookstores are scarce, they are

hard to come by (Dünges, 2011). They are advertised online on specific platforms, and to get a copy, one must often contact the author or the publishing house, or even order it through the author's social media page and get it delivered through courier services. Besides these, however, there is a more diverse type of art form, which cannot be bought, nor printed, but only shared. These are digitally created comic strips – some more humorous and others more illustrative – which only circulate in cyberspace. These represent a new development of comics: those images, accompanied by text – mostly written in Emirati Arabic – shared for fun as memes, have become increasingly popular among broader audiences. Illustrators pursuing this type of art gain recognition and monetary rewards through advertisement and sponsorship. To discover these artists and their work, the best way is perhaps to connect on social media and, once one artist is located, the social media algorithm feeds similar artistic posts (Hirzalla and van Zoonen, 2017). In cyberspace, their celebrity is mostly earned through a digital 'word of mouth' process, achieved through accessing the illustrations and commenting on them with likes and other emojis.

The 'Khaleeji illustrators' project

The Khaleeji project stems from the need to give visibility to Emirati illustrative productions in academia and international audiences. The ultimate aim is to share this group and its niche products with other cultures and societies. When looking at these productions, it becomes clear that Khaleeji illustrations and comics reflect the need of an emerging society to affirm a new identity, a form of expression that, even if it seems borrowed from other cultures, emerges transformed and becomes purely authentic. The Khaleeji illustrators' case is one of many other forms of expression belonging to postcolonial movements.

The internationalization of Khaleeji illustrators is therefore achieved with a group of exhibitions and symposia that reveal and discuss their work, their roots, and developments in different locations. Their first group exhibition takes place in Turin, at the Aldo Moro palace, under the sponsorship of the University of Turin and, specifically, with the help of the Department of Modern Languages and the research group Anzaar, led by Professors Maria Claudia Tresso and Jolanda Guardi. Their second stop is in Spain, where their artwork will feature within the Museu del Còmic i la Il·lustració in Barcelona, in collaboration with Diana Villanueva, José Luis Villanueva, and Paco Baena. The illustrators' third appointment is in September 2024 at the Manarat al Saadiyat Museum in Abu Dhabi, where new artworks are showcased, and a catalogue accompanies the show. The fourth – and perhaps not final – appointment is at the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Exeter University, in collaboration with Dr. Sarah Wood, along with the support of the University of Plymouth in the UK and the United Arab Emirates University in the UAE. Publications on the events will follow.



Illustration 3 - @yoakemae.san December 29, 2021

May 15, 2024: artists and artworks

'Perceptions of a Culture: Illustration, Comics and Graphic Narratives from the United Arab Emirates' (in Italian: *Percezioni di una Cultura: Illustrazioni, Fumetti e Narrazioni Grafiche dagli Emirati Arabi Uniti*), held at Aldo Moro Palace, Turin, Italy, for two consecutive weeks, is a group exhibition displaying the artwork of twenty-one Emirati visual artists. They have worked on displaying perceptions – either collective or personal – of their country and culture. Within this text, they are represented with their artist's name as it appears on Instagram. Artists are categorised according to their style and subject matter. The first group introduced in this essay adopts manga and anime styles for their drawings, therefore attaining characteristics from the Japanese culture. These artists are @acemansoori, @mbm85, @sono_moza, @yoakemae.san, @dodie.alexander, @shama.manga and @iman.almessabi. The first five artists seldom use text in their images and rather concentrate on the image, its colours, and its decorative elements, which often assume symbolic connotations. For example, @acemansoori's picture represents a woman emerging from a purple-red background similar to a ray of light and draped into a long, colour-changing abaya³.

³ Long, dark garment used by Middle Eastern women. It is usually worn on top of normal clothing.



المجد لأهله ولا يهته سليل المجد إذا تطاير غبار ولا تمس إنعوله
وعندي خبز الرمك إذا البقا يشتد إمصيرة وجاهرة للعض مشكولة

Illustration 4 - @ash.jan May 28, 2021

The image is within a tryptic window and resembles the 1920s Deco style, but also the stained-glass windows of medieval churches (Ill. 1). Similarly, @mbm85's image displays strong colours and concentric lines in the depiction of a woman entangled in water. Although the woman is drawn in manga style, she wears a *burqa*⁴ and a *kandoora*⁵, typical Khaliji garments. Artist @sono_moza, instead, defies the concept of love by showing a young couple embracing. This image challenges societal rules of decency and privacy, as in Emirati culture it is not proper to display any sign of affection in public (Ill. 2). Interestingly, the artist speaks to her audience about intimate life, reminding everyone that, after all, humans have unanimous sentiments despite cultural rules.

Among the group, there is a picture of Sheikh Zayed al Nahyan, sitting in a turquoise chair and turning his head to the left. This image resembles the portraits of UAE leaders often displayed

in shops all over the country. Sheikh Zayed (Ill. 3) is the most beloved leader and the founder of the country; because of this, he is often referred to as the father of the UAE. Interestingly, @yoakemae.san, the artist of Sheikh Zayed's illustration, called the image *Baba Zayed*, where 'baba' means 'father' in the Arabic language. Artist @dodie.alexander instead, chose to represent a soldier holding the flag of the UAE. Both the representation of Sheikh Zayed and the soldier are symbols of protection and loyalty to the nation.

Celebrating Emirati life and culture are indeed the drawings of @iman.almassabi; the first is a representation of a tiny girl popping out from a *finjan* (cup), placed next to a *dallah* (coffee pot). With references to Andersen's fairy tale *Thumbelina*, this picture represents Emirati hospitality, symbolised by that specific coffee-drinking ritual (Douglas and Malti-Douglas, 1994). Next to it, by the same artist, a young boy is dancing the *Ayalah*, a traditional Emirati dance performed by males only. Similar to this picture is @jan.ash's, who illustrated an older man holding a stick, ready for the dance, surrounded by *finjans*, a dirham coin, and standing in front of a wind tower, which is a typical architectural element of Gulf countries. Below, a text in Arabic praises the ancestry relevance of the man (Ill. 4).

4 A face-covering garment typical of the Khaleej region, often used by elderly ladies.

5 Traditional dress, often colourful, embroidered at the neck and cuffs and often worn under the abaya.

Moving away from only images, artist @shama.manga is the creator of manga comics with a local taste. Her character Shama is leading an eventful life at the office where she works, where all sorts of issues happen (Ill. 5). Shama, often challenged by her boss and colleagues, is able to quickly point out issues and resolve them professionally. She represents a stereotyped image of a young female who tries to balance family life with work and, perhaps like other Emirati women, she prefers the latter to house chores. More oriented toward chibi manga are the artworks of @asamiart and @bekagami247. @asamiart's picture represents a character gesticulating with a hand gesture shared by both Arab and Italian cultures: the holding up of one's hand while pinching the fingers together is a sign one must wait among Arabs, while Italians use it to ask 'what do you want' or 'what are you saying', with an annoyed connotation (Lucarelli, 2022). @bekagami247, instead, exhibits a drawing reflective of the achievements of Hazzā Al Mansoori, the first Emirati involved in a space mission in 2019 (Elsa & Ponce de Leon, 2019). Instead of Hazzā, however, we can see a camel and a grandma wearing a spacesuit, relaxingly burning *bukhoor*⁶ on Mars' red dunes. This image alludes to the future generation of Emiratis who, wherever they go, bring their traditions along. Similar to this theme, is @aliasaifak's illustration of all things Emirati: hero Hazzā Al Mansoori in taking off in his space capsule, Sheik Zayed is holding the UAE flag and is followed by Sheiks, ministers and leaders of the country. In the background, the Burj Khalifa along with other landmarks representative of the UAE are hinted at.

Illustrators @issablack, @mnarwah and @al3sham_ move away from Japanese influences, exploring themes of the self. @issablack focuses on his female character *Laquisha*, represented working out, within the top section of a double panel and, at the bottom, she is depicted following a diet. The illustration is representative of the many women obsessed with weight loss, a constant trend in the UAE. Illustrator @mnarwah uses her avatar to recreate stories of introspection and positive attitudes toward the world. In the four displayed images, Mnarwah the avatar is surrounded by Arabic texts, where words of wisdom are written either concentrically or below each illustration.

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6 Wood chips soaked in perfume and oil burned on charcoal.



Illustration 5 - @shama.manga May 31, 2021



Illustration 6 - @alikhawani.art January 8, 2021.

The text reminds the character to act wisely, think positively, and not pay heed to derogative comments. The last panel is addressed to male Emiratis, and states 'communication is paramount'. This is a feministic invitation to establish a fluent dialogue between women and men, as often the two genders have difficulties in communicating openly with each other, due to cultural reasons. The Arabic texts either unfold concentrically around the avatar character or are subtly incorporated within the image's background, as if they were the voices in the character's head, reminding her to stay focused and positive at all times. This search for inner strength and positivism is part of a tribal and nomadic attitude called *asabiyyah*, which is a feeling of identification based on positive values turning inward instead of negative values turning outwards (Findlow, 2000), a moral and religious identity strongly felt among Gulf residents. @al3sham_, instead, portrays a female character wrapped up in her own hair, giving visibility only to her face. Hair, especially long, is a symbol of beauty in Arab cultures; however, in this case, hair seems to function as a blanket, and it could represent the need to protect oneself from the outer world. This thought is enhanced by the fact that the character is a female and is often seen as the most delicate and fragile gender.

Similarly, artist @alsharhan represents his female character Gafshish (*spoon* in Emirati Arabic), trapped in a rather tight circular cage, surrounded by beautifully stylised blue birds that, ironically, are resting outside the cage. In Emirati culture, the female is often seen as a gender to be protected and taken care of; this overprotectiveness often results in the limitation of women's freedom (hence, their 'incarceration' in a gilded cage).

Artist @sumaya_alamoodi represents another form of trauma: the loss of identity, the feeling of being dispersed after a conflict. Her graphic novel, *Adversities After the Collapse*, recounts two siblings who go through hardship after the collapse of the Abbasid civilization, when the Mongols swept across Asia, slaughtering, and conquering Arab settlements. The tale, a masterpiece of poetry and intricate illustrations, highlights the courage and resilience of the two Arab survivors who managed to find their path to safety through the reading of stars and technological tools such as the astrolabe.

On a more comic tone, @i_maryah and @khaledaljabri illustrate family relations, with an emphasis on each member as indispensable for the co-existence of a strong family nucleus. While @i_maryah speaks of life at school according to her young avatar character Maryah, @khaledaljabri's image illustrates a man and a woman hugging, with two small children floating across their kandura and abaya.

A more esoteric representation is @alikhawani.art's magician: a lonely wizard is sitting on a stool offering his services. Created during Coronavirus times, this image represents the desolated job landscape reigning at that time: the wizard is jobless, without an audience, waiting to be hired. However, there is a hint of hope: the small white dog, represented in the picture and hiding behind a sign, is not only an accessory within the illustration, but the revelation of a humanitarian gesture, as the little dog was adopted by the illustrator in real life (Ill. 6).

Finally, @kmezaina and @momoarchive's black and white drawings visually recall an ancient, tribal past, with images of metamorphic creatures and dismayed Bedouins. The first is a representation of a huge carpet-looking phantom, named *Blaze*, who flies across the Arab skies softly transporting Khaled, the illustrator of the homonymous comic. The second is an epic representation of a volcano exploding, and Bedouins running away to seek shelter. Perhaps this is a reminder that one cannot avoid fate after all, and it comes when least expected.

Conclusive remarks

The works of art described in this chapter, featured in the exhibition 'Perceptions of a Culture: Illustration, Comics and Graphic Narratives from the United Arab Emirates', can be considered avant-garde pop-cultural products reflective of a newly-formed illustrative movement. They should be perceived as *comics-as-expression* (Mazur and Danner, 2014), or genuine creations that reflect cultural perceptions, personal and collective experiences, and views of creative individuals; they are truthful representations of the UAE and its people, culture, and identity.

Overall, a strong sense of loyalty to the country, admiration for leaders, and the search for a balanced and positive life trickle through their illustrations. But also, an undoubted awareness of keeping the subjects light, and the avoidance of pushing boundaries toward excess, making sure contents are contained and properly curated. At times, a feeling of entrapment emerges from underneath crafted lines, softened colors, and beautiful ornaments: like baroque volutes, opulent illustrations engage spectators with all sorts of visual gimmicks, focusing on the decorations and stifling the metaphors within visual messages.

According to many, artistic expression should have no boundaries. Both Mirgani and Nayek warn against a mono-dimensional portrayal of society, where output is mostly controlled by governmental institutions (Mirgani, 2017) and manipulated by corporations, who seek to commodify avant-garde trends to eventually sell their products back to the middle class (Nayek 2021). This scenario can be relatable to most Emirati illustrators' products, often tailored to satisfy governmental commissions and institutions that aim to highlight the greatness of the country. However, for how muffled their voices might seem, certain messages slip through in more conservative and less anarchic manners. Their subtle mode of discussion is definitively worth investigating.

Emirati artists, through their illustrators, are calmly and persistently shaping new meanings to attribute to their culture. Conceptually, they oscillate between Eastern and Western customs and traditional and modern values. Despite the many societal challenges, these illustrators have followed their call, embracing a Western concept of making art - the idea of the freelancer, illustrator, and artist as a spokesperson advocating for one's culture. Emirati illustrators want to create, to be acknowledged for what they do, and to be recognised as part of a global conversation.

Through the programmed exhibitions, the work of Emirati illustrators will meet new audiences; new points of view and information about different cultures will be generated and shared. It is hoped that these art forms are appreciated abroad as much as they are in their country of origin and are understood within the context within which they are created.

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Graphic Novels as a Reflection of Egyptian society: the case of *Metro*

Miriam Zatari and Paola de Ruggieri

Abstract

Miriam Zatari and Paola de Ruggieri's article examines the history of comics in Egypt, where the medium is considered a leading cultural example. After a brief introduction to the history of Arab comics, Zatarì and de Ruggieri trace their evolution within the Egyptian context, where the medium evolved from illustrated stories for children in the late 19th century to more complex and elaborate forms that also target adult audiences. In particular, she examines the first graphic novel created in Egyptian Arabic: *Metro*, by Magdy El Shafee (2008). It is a thriller/love story set in the dungeons of modern-day Cairo; the story reflects the author's firm and courageous stance against the corruption of the Egyptian ruling class. The story also tackles taboo topics such as sexuality. The illustrations are intricately intertwined with the language, skillfully depicting a sketch of today's Egyptian youth, especially those young people who, even if well-educated, feel trapped in a country plagued by corruption and a stagnant social landscape.

Introduction

Comics are a widespread artistic form, consisting of drawings and text, representative of different subjects and topics. Those freed from the constraints of commercial seriality are often defined as the 'ninth art'¹.

This transformation has required a long re-evaluation of the medium, which has taken place throughout the world and in which Arab artists have also participated in recent times.

The creators of this development have had - and still have to - tread a path by no means without danger²: censorship, whether self-imposed or dictated from outside, has influenced and limited artists' productions³. Today, young generations of Arabs, feeling responsible for future changes, are

1 Pellitteri M., *La nona arte secondo Umberto Eco (The Ninth Art according to Umberto Eco)*, in *Doppiozero*, 26.04.2019, www.doppiozero.com/materiali/la-nona-arte-secondo-umberto-eco (cons.30.05.2020)

2 Di Marco S., *Fumetto e animazione in Medio Oriente Persepolis, Valzer con Bashir e gli altri: nuovi immaginari grafici dal Maghreb all'Iran (Comics and animation in the Middle East Persepolis, Waltz with Bashir and others: new graphic imagery from the Maghreb to Iran)*, Latina, Tunué, 2011, p. 5.

3 Morayef S., "Arab comic artists discuss adversity and censorship", in *Middle East Eye*, 19.08.2015, www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/arab-comic-artists-discuss-adversity-and-censorship-1238753338 (cons. 12/05/2020)

acquiring new creative skills to deal with complex realities marked by ongoing conflicts and a stale situation of uncertainty. One of these tools is comics⁴.

This essay aims to unveil comics as a form of expression, but also as subtle tools able to reveal reality intensely and engagingly. Comics are not only vehicles for fictional stories but also productions documenting our history, albeit in an unconventional way. In this context, we will look at *Metro*, one of the first graphic novels published in the Arab world; an analysis of the novel's plot will be provided, as well as its graphic representation. Ultimately, the influence of this graphic novel is highlighted within the world of media communication.



Micki Magazine, n. 168, 1964, published by Dar Al-Hilal, Egypt

An overview of the history of Egyptian comics

There are two distinct production zones within the Arab world, marked by different geographical areas, historical and socio-cultural factors: the Maghreb, with a strong French influence, and the Mashreq, with two poles represented by Beirut and Cairo⁵. This analysis focuses almost exclusively on Mashreq and Egyptian comics⁶.

Arab artists, and especially Egyptians, like to locate the origins of their art in the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians, or in the illustrations of the collection of tales *Kalīla wa-Dimna*⁷, or the fascinating tales of the mediaeval *Maqāmāt*⁸, going back to a tradition that is thousands of years old⁹. Despite the claim to these ancient roots, the production and dissemination of comics in both the Maghreb and the Mashreq happened when children's magazines were born and spread¹⁰.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, several children's booklets with extensively illustrated stories [qīṣaṣ muṣawwara] appeared. They predominantly had educational purposes and were circulated in schools. One example is *Samīr al-Saghīr* [Little Samir], who was published in Cairo in 1893¹¹.

4 Di Marco, *cit.*, p 112.

5 Wolk D., *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, Boston, Da Capo Press, 2008, p. 6.

6 Vigna B., *I fumetti nel Maghreb*, Olbia, Thapros, 2012, p. 7.

7 Raccolta di apologhi composta in sanscrito tra il IV e il VI sec. d. C. L'opera fu tradotta nel VI sec. dal sanscrito in pahlavico (versione perduta) e poi nell'VIII sec. dal pahlavico in arabo.

8 Opere in prosa rimata della letteratura araba dei secoli IX-XII.

9 Douglas A. e Malti-Douglas F., *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 2.

10 Gameel M., "Egyptian comics: A history with a revolutionary flavour", in *Al-Akhbar English*, 30.09.2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/21779> (cons. 29/01/2018)

11 AA. VV., in *L'Orient-le-jour*, www.lorientlejour.com/article/570923/La_bande_dessinee_au_Moyen-Orient.html (cons. 17.05.2020)

In the 1940s and 1950s, a new type of comic magazines started to circulate along with the already existing children's periodicals, and their purpose was to entertain children. These were serial, weekly, or monthly magazines, and their success was considerably far greater than that of their predecessors. Among them was *Al Awlād* [The Boys] first published in Egypt in 1923. This was the first magazine entirely for boys, and its purpose was both educational and entertainment. In addition to a series of columns of educational games or crosswords, it featured eight pages of comics recounting the adventures of a group of children, with the story told in rhyme under each vignette. The characters, like the backgrounds, were carefully drawn and reflected Arab characteristics¹².



al-Mizmār, Iraqi children's magazine from 1970

In the 1950s, thanks to two government-funded publishing houses, two new magazines were launched: *Sindibād*, published by Dar al-Maaref in 1952, and *Samīr*, published by Dar al-Hilal in 1955¹³. These would play a fundamental role in the development of Arabic comics¹⁴, as their structure included the graphic elements typical of the comic genre: the fluidity of the characters' movements and the use of balloons for the dialogues. The content was localised: every detail within the drawings, from the clothes of the characters to the setting of the scenes, referred to the Egyptian lifestyle. As for the language, in *Sindibād* literary or standard Arabic was used: this is highly formal and it is the official language used among



(Educational games full of nationalism) in the children's magazine *Samīr*

12 Damluji N., "The Forgotten Awlad: Pre-1950 Comics in Egypt", in *Medium.com*, <https://medium.com/@ndamluji/the-comic-book-heroes-of-egypt-703of6a884fd> (cons. 17.05.2020)

13 Khouri G., "A Brief History of Arabic Comics", in *Articles & Essays*, <http://jadarticles.blogspot.it/2007/05/brief-history-of-arabic-comics.html> (cons. 17.05.2020)

14 De Angelis F., "Graphic Novels and Comic Book in Post-Revolutionary Egypt: Some Remarks", in *La rivista di Arablit*, anno V, n. 9-10, p. 28, http://larivistadiarablit.it/riviste/articoli_rivista/graphic-novels-and-comic-books-in-post-revolutionary-egypt-some-remarks (cons. 05.05.2020)

all Arab countries; hence, it conferred a certain rigidity to the texts, and reflected the magazine's educational intentions - as well as its international pan-Arab intent. *Samīr*, on the other hand, was the first to use colloquial or dialectal Arabic, which denoted a more widespread and popular register, specifically addressing a local audience.

According to Douglas and Malti-Douglas, in the 1950s Arab comics were influenced by Western - especially American - productions. Foreign comics were imported, translated and often adapted into 'Arabic' versions¹⁵. This was the period when Disney, DC and Marvel comics penetrated the Middle Eastern market through translations and adaptations. The same happened with Japanese comics. These comics aroused great interest among young audiences, who soon preferred them to local products because they were livelier and less burdened with didactic or ideological intentions¹⁶. However, the importation of comic books has never been a neutral process and several changes were made in the translations of texts. For example, characters such as Superman (Nabil Fawzi for the Arabs) or Batman and Robin (renamed Sobhi and Zakhour) underwent minor adaptations. For others, the revisions were such as to make their identity peculiar and sometimes original, as in the case of Mickey Mouse (Miki), introduced as early as 1936 in *Al-Atfāl* [The Children]¹⁷, who underwent a veritable process of 'Egyptianization'¹⁸. Egyptian revivals of Western characters served as a statement to imply that the original characters were idols belonging to another culture, potentially dangerous to the Arab culture in many ways.

Thus, some Arab writers saw the spread of foreign comics not only as an economic danger and a possible threat to local production but also as a moral one, as vehicles for ideologies alien to their own culture. Their views were shared by many, and this reaction made the artists, publishers and the readers aware of the importance of their own identity, and the consequent desire to develop their products.

From that period, comics became increasingly imbued with social and cultural elements and, towards the beginning of the 1970s, with political ones¹⁹. Most children's magazines of that time were under the state's monopoly, and soon became vehicles for Arab ideologies and mass communication channels. Political parties started to use them as a means of propaganda, and funded comics that explicitly supported their ideas. One example among many is the Egyptian

15 Douglas e Malti-Douglas, *cit.*, p. 3.

16 Khoury G., "La bande dessinée d'expression arabe de 1950 à nos jours", in *Takam Tikou*, 11.03.2011, <https://takamtikou.bnf.fr/dossiers/dossier-2011-la-bande-dessinee/la-bande-dessinee-d-expression-arabe-de-1950-a-nos-jours> (cons. 17.05.2020)

17 Millet B., Samir, Mickey, "Sindibad et les autres. Histoire de la presse enfantine en Egypte (1987)", *Dossiers du Cedej*, CEDEJ, Le Caire, 1987, <http://books.openedition.org/cedej/503?lang=it> (cons. 12/05/2020)

18 Douglas e Malti-Douglas, *cit.*, p.10. Also Damluji N. gives us some examples of the localisation of Mickey Mouse in Egypt, in which he identifies a "welcoming" strategy of Western imperialism ("Made For You and Me: Localizing Disney's Imperialism for an Egyptian Audience", in *Hooded Utilitarian*, January 2011, www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2011/01/made-for-you-and-me-localizing-disneys-imperialism-for-an-egyptian-audience/ (cons. 20/05/2020)

19 Di Marco, *cit.*, "Prefazione", p. XII.

magazine 'Usāma, published in 1969, which became a veritable tool of nationalist propaganda²⁰.

However, this excessive ideologization of comics led to a gradual decline in children's interest in highly politicised and militarised Arab characters. Conversely, they preferred imported foreign characters, which, although somewhat alienating, were more vivid and capable of stimulating the exuberant imagination of their age²¹.

Consequently, local productions entered a period of stagnation that lasted until the late 1980s. The revival began with the Lebanese magazine *Samīr*, which took up the original purpose of its Egyptian namesake: it represented a strong pan-Arab production with entertainment purposes²². In 1979 it was followed by *Mājid* (named after the 15th-century Arab navigator Ahmad ibn Mājid), published in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Its geographical spread, covering practically all Arab countries, as well as the size of its audience and the frequency of its publication (weekly), make it the most influential children's magazine in the Arab world to date²³. Although the publishing house is Emirati, the magazine can only be considered as such from an administrative point of view: it was founded by an Egyptian journalist, Ahmad 'Umar, and its editorial staff includes some of the most important Egyptian cartoonists, such as Hijāzi and El-Labbād, who were able to give Mājid a much higher artistic standard than many other magazines of its kind²⁴.

Egyptian comics trends in the 1980s

Since the 1980s, in Egypt - as well as in the whole Arab world - a production of indigenous and original comics took off²⁵. There was a keen interest shared among a group of artists to revisit imported models and manipulate historic iconographic schemes, such as those from the United States, to create a new form of comics able to reflect themselves and their audiences.

Initiatives aimed at establishing local production houses started sprouting. One of the examples is the Egyptian *Ak Comics*, founded in 2004, which aimed at disseminating the first superheroes in the Middle East²⁶, and *Teshkeel Comics*, founded in 2006 by the Kuwaiti cartoonist and psychologist Naif Al-Mutawa²⁷.

Once again, the scope of these comics seems to be educational: they provided younger generations with a set of positive role models with Middle Eastern values and beliefs and, at the same time, instilled a sense of belonging, pride and optimism.

20 Ghaibeh L., "La propagande dans la bande dessinée arabe: du nationalisme au religieux", in *Takam Tikou*, 2011, <http://takamtikou.bnf.fr/dossiers/dossier-2011-la-bande-dessinee/la-propagande-dans-la-bande-dessinee-arabe-du-nationalisme-a> (cons. 11/05/2020)

21 *Ibidem*.

22 Khoury G., "La bande dessinée", *cit.*

23 Douglas e Malti-Douglas, *cit.*, p. 151.

24 *Ivi* p. 152.

25 Machin D. e Van Leeuwen T., *Global Media Discourse: A Critical Introduction*, London, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2006, p. 36.

26 Di Marco, *cit.* p.116.

27 On al-Mutawa and his superheroes, see in this text Brossa B., "New Models Inspired by Islam: Naif al-Mutawa and the 99", in this compilation.



Metro, Shihab and Dina.
www.africaemediterraneo.it/blog/index.php/argomenti/un-mondo-fatto-a-strisce/ (cons. 18.05.2020)

However, within the Arab world, the expansion of comic readership to adult audiences has been slow²⁸. To explain this phenomenon, we must take into account two obstacles that slowed down the development of comics: the lack of sufficient funding to guarantee a stable and flourishing production and the lack of recognition of the comics, which were eventually revalued thanks to festivals and exhibitions organised in various cities of the Arab world²⁹. The purpose of these initiatives is to validate the relevance of the ‘ninth art’, and to recall its essence rooted in traditions. In fact, satirical cartoons have a long and traditional history in the Middle East and, besides children’s magazines, Arab comic productions have often focused on caricature, irony and satire³⁰.

Egyptians are known among Arabs as *awlād al-nukta* [children of the joke] for their distinct sense of humour. This humour camouflages opportunities for reflection and criticism; through cartoons, artists express their thoughts on politics and regimes, trace the connection between past

and present, and reveal developments within the social system in the Middle East³¹.

A graphic novel in Egypt: *Metro*

The socio-political changes that Egypt has undergone in recent decades have contributed to the emergence of a new sensibility that has found expression in various artistic forms: film, graffiti, music, photography, calligraphy, literature, and comics³².

One of these is the Egyptian graphic novel *Metro*, which can be perceived as both a novel and a comic, and therefore perfectly fits the idea of ‘graphic novel’, as Umberto Eco defined it in his essay *Apocalyptic and Integrated: Mass Communications and Theories of Mass Culture*³³.

As such, it is an example of the new sensitivity of Arab designers and their desire to explore innovative paths in the field of literature and drawings combined. *Metro*’s audience extends to the

28 Gameel, *cit.*

29 Qualey M. L., “The Capital of Arab Comics: Algiers, Beirut, Cairo, Or Dubai?”, in *Arablit Quarterly*, 15.04.2012, (cons. 24/04/2020) <http://arablit.org/2012/04/1the-capital-of-arab-comics-algiers-beirut-cairo-or-dubai/>

30 Caridi P., *Arabi invisibili, Catalogo ragionato degli arabi che non conosciamo. Quelli che non fanno i terroristi*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2007.

31 De Angelis, *cit.*, p. 60.

32 Brown J., “Comic spring in the Arab world”, in *CBLDF*, Agosto 2012, <http://cblfd.org/2012/08/comic-spring-in-the-arab-world/> (cons. 25/04/2020)

33 Eco U., *Apocalittici e integrati, Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa (Apocalyptic and integrated: Mass communications and theories of mass culture)*, Milano: Bompiani, 1994.

adult world and is a revolutionary literary panorama that brings to light issues such as corruption, nepotism, and sexuality³⁴. Similar is the case for *‘Imāra Ya‘qūbiyān* [Yacoubian Palace], written by the Egyptian writer ‘Ala’ Al-Aswāni, which was published in 2002 after being rejected many times because of its themes, and eventually becoming a bestseller in the Arab world and abroad.

Al-Aswāni is recognized as one of the intellectuals whose works expressed dissent against the regime of former president Hosni Mubarak³⁵. Like *‘Imāra Ya‘qūbiyān*, *Metro* fits within the context of the Arab revolutions of 2011, as it is perceived as pre-revolutionary literature.

In 2008, when *Metro* was published, its author Magdy El Shafee, together with the publisher Mohamed Sharkawi (al Malāmih), faced severe issues: both were tried and had to pay a fine of 5,000 Egyptian pounds (around €700) and were ordered to destroy all copies of the comic. To provide an exhaustive example, a scene contained in one single page has been accused of being offensive: the images showing Shihab and Dina naked and embracing in bed, clarifies the nature of the relationship between the two. The impact was such that: “The regime was neither used to nor prepared for this new form of expression, but it immediately equipped itself to silence it”³⁶.

The censorship was caused by the disturbance of public morals as well as by the criticism of the regime of the President Hosni Mubarak and the depiction of some high-ranking members of his entourage³⁷. It has been noticed that many of *Metro*’s more explicit books have remained on the local market, perhaps because few of them have painted such a vivid portrait of the reality of early twenty-first century Cairo³⁸.

Defined as a thriller, a love story, a novel of metropolitan politics set behind the scenes and in the underbelly of the fascinating and decadent Cairo of the 21st century³⁹, *Metro* features a character called Shihab as its main protagonist. Shihab is a young software engineer who lives in Cairo and is bankrupt. He is the prototype of a young erudite man, very capable but with no chance of success in a country where the rules of the system rely on corruption, family cliques, the greed of bankers, businessmen and policemen ready to tear each other apart or protect each other when it suits them. Shihab feels trapped in a cage: outside it, are the businessmen and the corrupt state, while inside it, linger the poor and wretched, unable to escape.

34 Alev A., “The Yacoubian Building, by Alaa Al Aswany, trans Humphrey Davies”, in *The Independent*, 16.02.2007, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-yacoubian-building-by-alaa-al-aswany-trans-humphrey-davies-436484.html (cons.13/05/2020)

35 Heshmat D., “Riwayāt al-ḡadhb wa-al-thawra”, in *Al-jadaliyya*, 08.12.2011, www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3450/ (cons. 15/04/2020)

36 El Shafee, *Metro, cit.*, p. VIII.

37 AA. VV., “Nuove traduzioni: Metro, di Magdy El Shafee, pubblicato negli USA (ma censurato in Egitto)”, in *Editoriaraba*, <https://editoriaraba.com/2012/06/06/nuove-traduzioni-metro-di-magdy-el-shafee-pubblicato-negli-usa-ma-censurato-in-egitto/> (cons. 18.05.2020)

38 AA. VV., “Magdy El Shafee on the English Edition of *Metro*”, intervista con Magdy El Shafee, in *Arablit Quarterly*, 02.08.2012, (cons. 10/05/2020) <https://arablit.org/2012/08/02/magdy-el-shafee-on-the-english-edition-of-metro-censorship>

39 Valentino G., “Ecco il graphic novel *Metro* censurato in Egitto perché pornografico”, in *La Repubblica Na*, 08.05.2011, https://napoli.repubblica.it/cronaca/2011/05/08/news/ecco_il_graphic_novel_metro_censurato_in_egitto_perch_pornografico-15965302 (cons. 10/05/2020)

Looking for a way out, Shihab organises an ‘honest’ bank robbery⁴⁰ with his friend Mustafa. While he is stealing money from a mysterious briefcase, Shihab inadvertently uncovers a dangerous conspiracy. As a consequence, Shihab reveals, almost by accident, an articulated picture of how corruption has spread in Cairo and of the decadence of a static reality with little social mobilisation. Bankers, multinationals, politicians, and corrupt journalists are all portrayed in the story, as well as the police, who are brutally against pro-democracy activists. Among the latter is Dina, a generous and revolutionary journalist, full of hope, who never misses a demonstration. It is this hope, combined with the love that the cynical Shihab feels for her, that allows the two to see a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Particularly significant is the last panel of the comic, set in the Cairo metro: here, Shihab asks Dina to go outside, while in the background an arriving train is announced. The subway is important as a symbolic element, metaphorically associated with the ‘cage’ system the Egyptian regime uses to suffocate and oppress its people⁴¹. In addition, subway stations mark the rhythm of the story itself: the chapters are punctuated by the stations bearing the names of Egyptian cities and some presidents, such as Saad Zaagloul, Anwar al-Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, and, of course, the very famous - and beloved - father of pan-Arabism, Gamal Abdel Nasser. One of Nasser’s mottos stands out in the station dedicated to him: *Bi-naqūl al-kifāya wa-l-ʿadl* [We say it’s too much... and (we want) justice]⁴² A well-suited slogan that wraps up the tale with a subliminal feeling of saturation that pervades the first pages of the illustrative work.

The connection between *Metro* and its readers is evident in the author’s choice to use people’s language. The text is not written in standard Arabic, or the official language of Arab countries -, but in the *ʿammiyya* [popular] variant, or Egyptian dialect, the language spoken by everyone. Only in this way the vitality of prose unfolds and tells a clear story in a fluid and dynamic way. This language was chosen because “when you make popular art, you take the words of the people, the words of everyday life, the language of the street...”, as El Shafee remarked in a video interview on the YouTube channel of the *Il Sirente* publishing house⁴³. The *ʿammiyya* language of *Metro* is a rough, blunt language, sometimes as explicit as the visual content: this was one of the reasons why all copies of the graphic novel were burned.

To conclude, in *Metro* you can hear the slogans and shouts that fueled the demonstrations that have rocked the Arab world in recent years.

Concluding remarks

In previous, recent and actual Arab comics the reflection of the events that the artists witness is always tangible, making it an excellent vehicle for informing and disseminating their way of perceiving society and the world⁴⁴. After all, comics are a universal medium with a rich history in the Middle East.

From a mere entertainment tool for children to a vehicle of propaganda, in the Arab world as in the West, comics have undergone a long journey of transformation and slow evolution, to the point of becoming aware of their validity to exist as a worthy form of expression⁴⁵ and to reach an expressive maturity in graphic novels.

40 Jaggi M., “The Godfather of Egyptian Graphic Novelists: Magdy El Shafee”, in *Newsweek*, www.newsweek.com/godfather-egyptian-graphic-novelists-magdy-el-shafee-65109 (cons. 15/05/2020)

41 El Shafee M., *Metro*, Italian translation Pagano E., Fagnano Alto, Il Sirente, 2010, p. 4, 21, 26, 28.

42 El Shafee M., *Metro*, Il Cairo, Dār al Malāmih, 2008, cit. p.80.

43 Tangherlini L., “Metro Graphic Egyptian Protests Street Uprising / Magdy El Shafee”, in www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZIagjKnlKc (min 6:26, cons. 18/05/2020)

44 From the presentation page of the travelling exhibition *Arab Comics Exhibit*, www.arabcomicsexhibit.org/exhibit (cons. 02/5/2017)

45 Bank Ch., “Swimming against the Tide”, in *Qantara.de*, <http://en.qantara.de/content/comics-artists-in-the-arab-world-swimming-against-the-tide> (cons. 02/5/2017)



“Autoritratto. Io: italiana e palestinese!” [Self-portrait: I, Italian and Palestinian!] (2020), Miriam Zatari

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Lawīn minwassalik yā Mārī? Lebanese feminism told through words and images

Chiara Capparelli

Abstract

This article focuses on the graphic novel *Lawīn minwassalik yā Mārī?* created by the Lebanese researcher Bernadette Daou. The work summarizes the history of nearly a century of feminist battles in Lebanon, through the stories told by the four main fictional characters. These were inspired by the testimonies and personal experiences of activists and women artists from different generations, whose efforts have contributed to the making of this project.

The first part of this article outlines the feminist Lebanese movement, starting from the country's independence in 1943, up to modern days. The history of the movement is divided into four waves: the first, which started with the country's independence, is characterized by the important participation of women in the national liberation movement. The second began as a result of the disappointment over the defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War, which caused the questioning of nationalist ideas and the emergence of a leftist movement. The third wave developed in 1990, as part of the preparation for the participation of Lebanon in the Beijing conference, held in 1995. The fourth and final wave formed because of the anti-war and anti-globalization movement, and it coincides with the beginning of the new millennium.

The subsequent paragraphs include an introduction to the author and her graphic novel, a description of the story's plot, the characters, and their stories, with a consequent text analysis of the works.

This analysis confirms that this graphic novel documents the hardships of generations of women who have long fought for their rights, and whose stories are not publicly known. Hence, this study is a further confirmation that graphic novels, often considered fictional media, are increasingly becoming texts used to document the power struggles of female groups.

A brief history of the Feminist movement in Lebanon

Lebanese feminism cannot be fully understood unless it is contextualised within the postcolonial legacy that shaped, and still shapes, politics in Lebanon. This factor, common to many other postcolonial societies, creates particularly complex problems for activists, who are continually blamed for their mindset, believed to derive from Western powers¹. In short, the history of colonialism and Western hegemony marks all political and social movements in the Middle East².

The history of Lebanese feminism is divided into four waves³; it sees the direct involvement of activists and it is connected to social and contextual changes within the country. Most studies on the subject in the Arab world have roots in the 19th Century and coincide with studies of social movements, such as the women's demonstrations.

During this period, known as the *Nahḍa*, or the Arab 'Cultural Renaissance', the issue of women became central. The pioneers of the *Nahḍa* saw women's conditions as the cause of the backwardness of Arab and Islamic societies and asserted that the rebirth of these societies had to be intrinsic to the rebirth of women⁴. Early activists for Lebanese women's rights formed organisations and published their activities in newspapers to demand the right to education. Thus, in the 1920s charitable organisations and magazines, such as '*al-Fatāh*' [The Girl] (1918) and '*Fatāt al-Waṭan*' [The Girls of the Nation] (1919) proliferated. In most women's periodicals, however, gender equality meant almost exclusively recognizing the social role of the mother: the magazines perpetuated the discourse that women's liberation lay not in their political or financial independence, but in being a good wife and mother.

The *Nahḍa*'s cultural fervour, however, was disrupted by political tensions in the region and the rise of national liberation movements. Although Lebanese feminist activism had emerged long before Lebanon's independence, this was the time when it gained the most strength, paving the way for the above mentioned four waves. The demand for women's political rights remained a top priority for this generation of pioneers, who believed that the Country's independence was closely linked to the possibility of acquiring new rights and freedoms⁵. As a result, the feminist movements, as well as the national liberation movements, saw independence as an integral component of women's identity. This belief led the feminist agenda to align with paternalistic traditions and the sectarian system, both deeply rooted issues in Lebanese society and politics, and to focus on women belonging to the middle class. This happened because this first generation

1 Corrao F.M., Violante L., *L'Islam non è terrorismo*, Il Mulino, 2018, pg. 78-89.

2 Daou B., *Les féminismes au Liban: un dynamisme de positionnement par rapport au patriarcat et un renouvellement au sein du "Printemps Arabe"*, Master's thesis, Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut, October 2014.

3 The expression is from Stephan R., *Four Waves of Lebanese Feminism*, 2014, pg. 13 and passim.
<https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/620850/1/rr-rootslab-feminist-movement-building-lebanon-070819-en.pdf>

4 Traboulsi F., *An Intelligent Man's Guide to Modern Arab Feminism*, Al-Raida, Volume XX, Nr. 100, Winter 2003, pg.15,
www.alraidajournal.com/index.php/ALRJ/article/view/439/437

5 Abisaab M., *Militant Women of a Fragile Nation*, Syracuse University Press, 2010.

of activists supported women's right to vote⁶, political representation and education. However, these women, who belonged to a narrow economic and cultural elite, had little awareness of other women's real needs and showed no interest in fighting for them.

The second feminist wave arose as a result of the disappointment over the defeat of Egypt, Syria and Jordan by Israel in the Six-Day War (1967). Despite their separation at the organisational level, feminist associations of this period were mostly connected to political parties and their ideologies, without having an independent political agenda. Thus, it was part of a process aimed at annexing and containing the feminist committees, forwarded by the political parties and their leaders, whose priority remained the emancipation of the society, to which women were subordinated.

The outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) also had a significant impact on the evolution of the feminist discourse to the extent that the violent armed confrontation stifled the idealism and cultural fervour of the 1960s.

The third wave began in the postwar context, in 1990, mainly characterised by the preparation for the participation at the Beijing Conference on Women, held between the 4th and 15th of September 1995. This conference was one of the most significant events of the period, as it marked a turning point for the global agenda on gender equality.

"The fundamental transformation that took place in Beijing was the recognition of the need to shift the focus from women to the concept of gender, recognizing that the entire structure of society, and all relations between men and women within it, needed to be reevaluated. Only through such a fundamental restructuring of society and its institutions could women be fully empowered to take their rightful place as equal partners with men in all aspects of life. This change represented a powerful reaffirmation that women's rights are human rights and that gender equality is a matter of universal concern for the benefit of all."⁷

The conference also drafted the celebrated Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, unanimously adopted by 189 countries, which set a series of goals to achieve women's equality in twelve areas of concern. Lebanese women activists considered this conference a pivotal event in the development of the feminist movement in Lebanon, as it gave the women's rights agenda legal recognition and independence from political parties.

Several milestones were achieved during these years by the third-wave activists. Among the most important was the right for married women to join business enterprises, partnerships, and limited liability companies⁸. Also, in 1994 Lebanese women diplomats could keep their jobs in case they married a foreign man⁹. In December 1995, women were granted legal authority to life insurance

6 Beyond Reform and Development, *Patriarchy and Sectarianism Gendered Trap: Baseline of Women in Politics – the Case of Lebanon*, 2017.

7 Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW),
www.un.org/en/conferences/women/beijing1995

8 Amendment of Articles 11,12 and 13 of the Trade Law of 12/24/1942 on 11/04/1994,
www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/LawView.aspx?opt=view&LawID=194149

9 Repeal of the second paragraph of Article 39 of the bill implemented by Decree No. 1306 of June 18th, 1971, www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/Law.aspx?lawId=194141

contracts, no longer having to seek permission from their fathers or husbands¹⁰. This period marked a turning point in the history of Lebanese feminism: thanks to the Beijing Conference, activists were able to develop their strategies, the vision of the movement was reshaped, and gender violence, positive discrimination and other topics were discussed for the first time.

The fourth wave of feminism in Lebanon was born out of the anti-war and anti-globalization movement and is generally made to coincide with the beginning of the new millennium. Autocratic structures and old alliances were slowly disappearing, while new emerging ones served as a bridge between the third and fourth waves. Activists of this generation often took a critical stance against earlier feminist organisations, mainly on the issue of women's sexual and reproductive rights, a topic neglected until then. Issues such as sexual diversity or the legal vulnerability of under-represented and discriminated groups (LGBTQIA+ migrant workers) were central to the debates of activists in the early 2000s, in line with the same principles for which LGBTQIA+ movements around the world were fighting. One of the goals of this fourth wave was also the achievement of ever-greater economic and political empowerment for women, especially concerning gender quotas. In 2004, thanks to the founding of Helem¹¹, the first LGBTQIA+ organisation in Lebanon and the region, many organisations concerned with diversity and sexual rights followed suit. Although Helem was created to focus on LGBTQIA+ issues, it has its roots in the anti-imperialist movement that led it to adopt anti-sectarian, anti-racist and anti-xenophobic positions, eventually focusing on social work, particularly among marginalised communities. The organisation has been active in campaigning for domestic workers' rights and provided Palestinian refugees with civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights in Lebanon, while also giving support to those refugees fleeing persecution because of their sexual orientation. In July 2006, Helem was one of the first organisations to react to the Israeli aggression that initiated the second Israeli-Lebanese conflict and to join the solidarity movements that arose during the attacks. The gay and lesbian community centre in Beirut became part of the city's most active headquarters during the four weeks of the bombing. Along with the allies of the anti-war movement, environmentalists, student groups, collectives, and Palestinian refugee associations, Helem joined Samidoun¹², an independent solidarity campaign working to rescue civilian refugees and war victims. The total number of refugees in Lebanon had reached one million: the Samidoun campaign, which ended in December 2006, managed to provide direct assistance to 10,000 people across thirty-two displacement centres. A distinctive feature of these activists was their use of the Internet, and especially social media, as a means of communication that succeeded in creating an international network of feminists. Significant legal achievements of the past decade include the repeal of the

10 Amendment of Article 997 of the Code of Obligations and Contracts on 12/08/1995, www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/Law.aspx?lawId=198470

11 Helem is the first LGBTQIA+ rights organisation in the Arab world, officially founded in Beirut, Lebanon in 2001. Its mission is to lead the struggle for the liberation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex, transgender, queer (LGBTQIA+) and other people with non-conforming sexuality and/or gender identity in Lebanon and the SWANA region from all kinds of violations of their individual and collective civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, www.helem.net/about#about

12 Samidoun: Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network is an international network of organizers and activists working to build solidarity with Palestinian prisoners in their struggle for freedom, <https://samidoun.net/about-samidoun/>

possible reduction of punishment for honour killings (2011)¹³, the passage of the law criminalising domestic violence (2014), the repeal of the possibility of acquitting the rapist who agrees to marry his victim (2017)¹⁴, and the passage of a law criminalizing sexual harassment in the workplace (2020).

Lawīn minwassalik yā Mārī?

Bernadette Daou is a Lebanese researcher at Université Saint Joseph in Beirut who specialises in the sociology of social movements in Lebanon, with a focus on the evolution of feminist causes in the 20th Century. In the summer of 2019¹⁵, Daou decided to publish her research using a multidisciplinary medium: comics. Through text and images, this medium tells the experiences of women activists and explains issues of gender, class, and race. Her choice was influenced by Yazaan al-Saadi, a Syrian-Canadian graphic journalist, researcher, and critic who joined Bernadette in writing the script, thus being the only man (and the only non-Lebanese) among the artists creating the comic. "We thought comic books would be an extraordinary educational tool", Daou and Al-Saadi said in an interview conducted by MiddleEastEye, "In the summer of 2019 we started discussing the idea of a comic book, and when the uprising broke out in Lebanon, we thought the time was right"¹⁶.

Daou and Al-Saadi's signature work provides a comprehensive picture of the Lebanese feminist movement through the narratives of four fictional characters who, by narrating their personal and family histories, show the birth and development of the movement. The characters and their stories are inspired by the testimonies of different generations of women activists who were interviewed by Daou during her research, and by the personal experiences of the artists involved in the creation of the comic. Indeed, as anticipated, except for Al-Saadi, the artists are all Lebanese women, who have a strong emotional connection to the work's central theme. The illustrations were created by five female artists: Razan Wehbi (*The Reunion* and *The Flood*), Rawand Issa (*Marie's Story*), Tracy Chahwan (*Nidal's Story*), Joan Baz (*Haifa's Story*) and Sirene Moukheiber (*Noura's Story*). The work was published online on the 4th of March 2021 in collaboration with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in Beirut¹⁷, and is free to download in both Arabic (Lebanese) and

13 Repeal of Article 562 of the Criminal Code.

14 Repeal of Article 522 of the Criminal Code.

15 In 2019, a series of riots broke out in Lebanon due to the government's inability to find solutions to the economic crisis, the caravan, corruption and unemployment. This period, referred to in the press as the "Tax Intifada," led to the fall of the Hariri government, www.thegazelle.org/issue/166/opinion/lebanon-intifada-protests-downfall-regime

16 Morelli N., 'Where to, Marie?': *Lebanese comic book tells forgotten stories of country's feminist struggle*, www.middleeasteye.net/discover/where-to-marie-lebanon-feminist-comic-book

17 The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is a German nonprofit foundation that promotes political, social and cultural initiatives throughout Germany. Internationally, it participates in cooperative development projects and promotes dialogue among socialist forces, movements and organizations, left-wing intellectuals and nongovernmental organizations. Grants funding to young scholars through university and doctoral scholarships, www.rosalux.de/en/foundation/about-us

English. The Arabic-to-English translation, entitled *Where to, Marie?* is edited by Lina Mounzer, while the website, www.wheretomarie.net, is edited by Layal Khati.

Plot and characters

The structure of the text contains a narrative that serves as an introduction and interlude between the stories, and four stories. The first scene introduces Lara, a Lebanese feminist activist who, during a political debate, is continually interrupted by some men, to the point that she cannot express her opinion¹⁸. Demoralised, she decides to return home but is stopped by a group of women who invite her to talk about what happened. The group gathers in the sheltered courtyard of the Azarieh shopping centre, an important meeting place for protesters, and this is where the stories begin. One by one, the protagonists narrate their experiences, giving voice to different generations of activists. The first is Marie, the oldest of the group, who was born before the birth of Lebanon. She is part of the first generation of activists who fought for independence from the French mandate. Marie tells of her parents who, at a time when there was no law to protect workers, organised union meetings and protested against the French management. In 1950, Lebanon's government did not grant women the right to vote. Marie then decided to join the League for Women's Rights. When in the League, Marie, along with her comrades and other activists, started to organise demonstrations, collect signatures, visit numerous cities, and plan events such as Women's Week. Thanks to this effort, ten years after the country's independence from France, women obtained the right to vote and to run for Parliament.



Illustration 1 - Marie's story, page 6

¹⁸ The debate in question relates to the protests that took place in Lebanon in 2019, which began around the time Daou and Al-Saadi began working on their project. Attending several meetings related to the protests, Daou notices that the men present were in the habit of constantly interrupting the women's speeches and therefore decides to open the work with this very scene.



Illustration 2 - Nidal's story, page 16

The second protagonist is Nidal, born in 1956 under a dark cloud. This year is remembered as the 'Suez crisis' and saw the myth of national unity collapse in Lebanon and, which came with a severe economic crisis. The following years were marked by the defeat (in Arabic *al-Naksa*) in the aforementioned Six-Day War. It was at that time that Nidal joined left-wing student groups, participating in protests on the sly from her parents. She recounts how, although male comrades encouraged women to form committees, they did not want them to follow a feminist agenda. In 1978, during Israel's invasion of Lebanon, Nidal met her husband, but the joy of marriage was interrupted only a few years later, in 1982, by the second Israeli invasion. Disillusioned by the



Illustration 3 - Haifa's story, page 26

rampant violence, which was disconnected from the ideals they had embraced, Nidal and her comrades began organising demonstrations against the war, which once more forced women into traditional roles related to caring for the wounded.

At this point Lara asked Haifa, who was born in Beirut a few years before the outbreak of the civil war, to tell her story. Because of the complicated political situation, Haifa and her family fled to Cyprus, where she and her brother spent a peaceful childhood until 1990, the year when the war ended. When she got back to Lebanon, Haifa enrolled at Saint Joseph's University, where she was able to connect with various NGOs and engage in feminist activities. These organisations provided new tools for organising the work of the feminist agenda and helped Haifa, other activists and founders of the Maḥkama an-Nisā' al-'Arabiya [Arab Women's Tribunal] to become the runner-up to the 1995 Beijing's World Women's Conference. This event constituted a historic moment because it "gave the women's rights agenda legal recognition [...] and provided a framework within which to work for real legislative change."¹⁹ Finally, Haifa recounts all the important achievements of her generation, including the abolition of honour killings and the possibility for women to engage in commercial activities.



Illustration 4 - Noura's story, page 36

19 Lebanon Support interview with Fahima Charafeddine, Chair of the National Committee for the Follow-up of Women's Issues, Beirut, March 6th, 2018.

The last to tell her story is Noura who, unlike the other women, decides not to dwell on details of her childhood. Noura talks about the attacks of the 11th of September 2001, which occurred the same year she started college, and the demonstrations against the war in Iraq in which she participated along with her classmates and family members. It was during one of these demonstrations that Noura got to know a group of LGBTQIA+ activists and inquired online about their initiatives. In 2005, in the wake of tensions arising from the assassination of the former Lebanese premier Rafiq al-Hariri, Noura and her companions decided to establish an independent feminist group: intersectional, against racism, homophobia, and patriarchy. At the end of 2010, the Arab Revolutions broke out, and Noura tells of the great protest against the Lebanese confessional system held in Beirut in February 2011. Finally, she lists all the achievements of women activists of her generation, such as the establishment of a domestic workers' union.

Dreaming together of a better future, the protagonists realise that this is the first time they have openly discussed their situation when suddenly a violent thunderstorm hits the city, and some of them scatter to help those in trouble. While some of the protagonists decide to go home, one of them suggests they meet again, to continue telling other stories. The final line of the story closes a circle: Haifa asks 'Where to, Marie?', a phrase that probably has a double meaning: a literal one, since Haifa offered to take Marie home, and a metaphorical one, as if questioning the direction in which the world of women is headed to. The final illustration features a cat in the foreground sitting on the lunar soil and observing the Earth on fire, and about to be hit by a meteorite.



Illustration 5 - Last page of the work, page 51

The struggle for women's rights thus becomes a thread linking the personal experiences of the protagonists spanning almost a century of history. It could be argued that Lara, the activist who links the stories of four generations of feminists, is also the reader who questions the events of the country, and who wants to learn from the mistakes and experiences of past generations to build a better future. The feminist struggle is intertwined with the class struggle and with the crises that have periodically brought Lebanon into dramatic situations.

Following the publication of the work, many readers wondered whether the final scene of the comic book symbolised the explosion of the Beirut port on the 4th of August 2020, but the author explained that the script and the illustrations had already been completed before the catastrophe.

Analysis of the work

The temporal structure of *Lawīn minwassalik yā Mārī?* is characterised by numerous flashbacks. These are plot devices that help re-enact past events in the present and occur whenever one of the protagonists tells her story. The time frame of the background story is 2019, a period marked by numerous protests in Lebanon, while the time of the events occurring in the protagonists' flashbacks encompasses about seventy years of the country's history. The narrator's point of view coincides with the character telling the story, and it varies from one chapter to the next. Consequently, the story offers multiple points of view.

As already anticipated, the graphic novel was illustrated by five female artists; there is, however, a disconnect between the different stories, because of each illustrator's different style. After completing the writing of the script, Daou and Al-Saadi held meetings, both individually and as a group, to best adapt the artistic style of the female cartoonists and their input to each story's historical period. The main features of the characters had already been outlined by the writers, but each artist was then given the freedom to choose which chapter to draw and to do so following their style. Rawand Issa decided to take on Marie's story because she felt she had an emotional connection with her:

“Marie is the same age as my grandmother, and as a child, I felt very close to her. She told me many stories that I still treasure today and that inspire me in my work. [...] Although our generation has different needs and demands, it cannot be denied that it was the older women who paved the way for us.”²⁰

The plates drawn by Issa seem to follow strict rules: when the narrated events occur in the present, the background of the plates is black, and the vignettes are in colour. On the other hand, each panel in which Marie tells her past has a grey background and the vignettes are in black and white. The characters are drawn with very angular lines and marked features, and the depiction of the surroundings is kept to a minimum.

²⁰ Morelli N., ‘Where to, Marie?’: Lebanese comic book tells forgotten stories of country's feminist struggle, www.middleeasteye.net/discover/where-to-marie-lebanon-feminist-comic-book

Meanwhile, Tracy Chahwan, undoubtedly the most accomplished artist of the group, explained her mixed feelings towards the chapter dedicated to Nidal:

“Using a 1970s/80s aesthetic was fun, but working on Nidal's story was particularly intense, especially because I had to illustrate the country's civil war on a single page. It was not easy to decide what to depict about such a complex war. I discussed it with friends and decided to keep some of the more visually ‘iconic’ events such as the Holiday Inn²¹ fire during the hotel war.”²²

Chahwan remarked that Nidal's story reminded her of her mother's experience, such as the horrors and disillusionments of the civil war and the trauma that resulted from it, along with the displacement of people, the succession of economic crises, and the overall violence. Chahwan's illustrations of Nidal's flashback are characterised by the heavy presence of the colour red, along with the usage of black backgrounds. Historical elements of the 1970s/80s are evident in several details, such as the hairstyles and clothing of the characters, appliances such as radios and televisions, and other designs typical of that period.



Ill. 6 - Photo of the demonstration against the denominational system, 2011
<http://secularist.org>



Ill. 7 - *Lawīn minwassalik yā Mārī?* Book cover

²¹ The hotel war was a sub-conflict that took place between 1975 and 1977 during the civil war in Lebanon, during which the Holiday Inn, one of the most powerful symbols of the economic boom that had been built three years earlier, was destroyed. www.lejournalinternational.fr/Beirut-Cicatrici-di-guerra-1-2_a3343.html

²² Morelli N., ‘Where to, Marie?’: Lebanese comic book tells forgotten stories of country's feminist struggle.

Haifa's story was drawn by Joan Baz, an established graphic designer and educator. Her panels are certainly the freest from classical patterns: there is no clear division between vignettes, and many feature individual illustrations laden with meaning. The faces of the characters are often featureless, while Haifa has glasses and lips.

Sirène Moukheiber informed that, when she received the first draft of the script, she immediately felt a connection with Noura's dialogue, because of the similar conflicts the illustrator had with her parents²³. Moukheiber's panels are loosely structured, with vignettes overlapping illustrations and covering the entire page. The characters are drawn with refined, thin lines and are the most realistic.

The last story is illustrated by Razan Wehbi, who therapeutically embraces Lara's story, a character who is rejected by her fellow men when trying to express her opinion. To be able to best express Lara's anger and frustration, Wehbi imagined Lara was attending the first protest of her life²⁴.

Even if each of the artists used their own style for the story they illustrated, there are common features that give the comic book a certain uniformity. One of these is, for example, the consistent use of red and blue. Red is famously associated with strong emotions, such as pain, boldness and passion. Blue, in contrast, is associated with positivity, tranquillity, and confidence. The two colours were used to express the contradictions and tensions within the feminist movement. Moreover, red and blue represent fire and water; the last pages of the novel illustrate a surreal scene in which the city of Beirut is flooded because of a rainstorm and is on fire but at the same. The co-presence of these catastrophic events symbolises the opposite feelings of the Lebanese people: despair and anger are always accompanied by hope in something that will wash the pain away.

Finally, what deserves attention is the cover illustration by Sirene Moukheibe. The image, also depicted on page 43, shows a crowd walking with open umbrellas under heavy rain. This image takes inspiration from a photo depicting a protest against Lebanon's confessional system, which took place precisely under a storm on the 27th of February 2011. Daou, who was among the organisers of that protest, says the rain symbolises the country's deepening crisis, and the floodings stand for the popular revolt against catastrophes such as patriarchy, capitalism, and dictatorships.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

Conclusion

Lawīn minwassalik yā Mārī? informs us that feminism in the Arab world is not a borrowed Western ideology, but a movement developed within Lebanese society and culture. Lebanese women have always fought for equality and social justice, against confessional status laws and patriarchal structures.

Consequently, comics are a suitable medium to represent important issues such as those mentioned in this article²⁵, as they simultaneously represent both the crowd and the individual's voice: to narrate the experiences of diversity, the cartoonist needs to represent each character individually in their uniqueness, bringing out their identity and experience.

Through the experiences of fictional characters, *Lawīn minwassalik yā Mārī?* traces nearly a century of Lebanese history and the accounts of feminism, of courageous women who pass the baton from generation to generation, to build and maintain an equality that is continually challenged. With the apparent lightness and immediacy of graphic novels, the stories of Lara, Marie, Nidal, Haifa, and Noura, their fears, and their experiences, document the struggles of entire generations of women who have always fought for their rights, and of whom too little is known.

²⁵ Caridi P., *Arabi invisibili, Catalogo ragionato degli arabi che non conosciamo. Quelli che non fanno i terroristi*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2007, pag. 59

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An alternative to Marvel's Western superheroes: The Islam-inspired 99 by Naif al-Mutawa

Benedetta Brossa

Abstract

This chapter explores the comic book series *The 99* created by Kuwaiti psychologist Naif Al-Mutawa, first published in May 2006. The comic book features ninety-nine superheroes, each embodying one of the ninety-nine names of God, as mentioned in the Quran. Al-Mutawa intended to provide new literary and educational role models rooted in Islamic traditions, distinct from mainstream Western superheroes. Moreover, he aimed to present an alternative image of Islam, countering negative stereotypes often perpetuated in Western media, while promoting universal values such as dialogue and tolerance towards religious, cultural, and physical differences.

The first part of this essay sheds light on Naif al-Mutawa's background as a clinical psychologist working with individuals affected by political and religious persecution: through his academic work, he recognized the psychological consequences of the instrumentalization of religion and the effects it has on people.

The second part of this essay illustrates the significance of the ninety-nine names of God in Islam and how al-Mutawa carefully utilised them in the comic book.

In the third and fourth sections, the plot of the series is discussed, and a closer look at the comic's emblematic characters is taken. The superheroes attained their powers from magical stones, preserving the knowledge once housed in the countless books of the Baghdad library, destroyed by the Mongols in their 1258 conquest of the city. The narrative highlights the 'superpower' of culture in fighting prejudices and fostering multicultural solidarity.

The chapter concludes by describing how this comic book generated both praise and controversy in the Middle East and the West. While many appreciated the work for its positive representation of Islam, others deemed it blasphemous or viewed it as a vehicle for Islamic propaganda. Despite the criticism, the comic book gained great success globally.



Introduction

The first issue of the comic “Al-99” [*The 99*] was released in May 2006, and was sold in Kuwaiti newsstands. The comic book, created by the Kuwaiti psychologist Naif al-Mutawa¹, was written in Standard Arabic. It was published by Teshkeel Comics, a publishing house founded by al-Mutawa in 2003, which became the official partner of the Middle Eastern branch of the U.S. Marvel Entertainment, which published the English version in August of the following year. The story features ninety-nine superheroes, each embodying one of the ninety-nine Names by which God is referred to in the Quran.

Al-Mutawa intended to provide new literary and educational role models based on Islam, rather than examples imported from other cultures, as is the case with many Western superheroes (al-Mutawa, 2009). At the same time, the author aimed to convey an image of Islam different from that often portrayed in Western media, showing that the values of this religion are shared by those of other faiths. Thus, the comic emphasises dialogue, solidarity, and tolerance towards those with a different religion, culture and ethnicity.

Through numerous allegories and references, *The 99* seeks to promote the importance of culture and information as primary tools against discrimination. The comic immediately garnered attention in both the Middle East and the West; however, while it was highly appreciated worldwide, it also faced strong criticism. For example, in the Arab-Muslim world, some viewed the comic as blasphemous, while in the West, it was perceived by some as Islamic propaganda. Al-Mutawa belongs to the movement of authors who aim at redefining Islamic culture for future generations, specifically through comic books. Through them, he hopes to reach a broad youth audience and to convey the positive values of Islamic religion and its tradition to young Muslims. In a letter to his children, published by the BBC, he wrote:

“There are extremists among us, as in any other civilization and religion, but they do not represent us” (2014). He highlighted that Muslims, influenced by negative opinions formed on Islam in recent years, unconsciously absorb this negativity, eventually thinking less of themselves (2010). Al-Mutawa belongs to the movement of authors who aim to redefine Islamic culture for future generations, specifically through comic books. Through them, he hopes to reach a broad youth audience and to convey the positive values of the Islamic religion and its tradition to young Muslims. In a letter to his children, published by the BBC, he wrote:

“I would have returned to the same source from which others took violent and hateful messages and, unlike them, I would have offered messages of tolerance and peace. [...] I had to find a way to reclaim Islam from the hijackers who had taken it hostage”

(al-Mutawa, 2009)

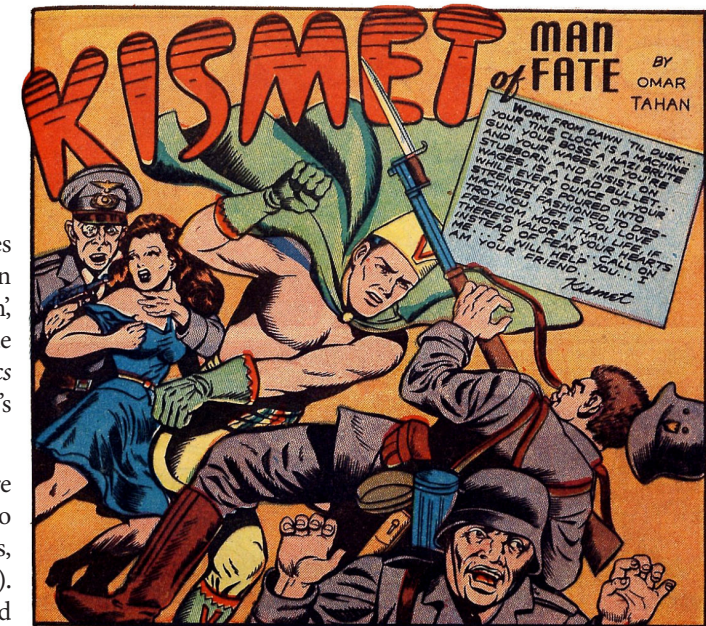
Comics, Superheroes and Islam

One of the first Muslim superheroes appeared in 1944 in *Bomber Comics*, in the guise of Kismet, the ‘Man of Faith’, a figure who fought the Nazis alongside the French. However, *Bomber Comics* was a Western production and Kismet’s traits remained superficial.

By the 1970s, Arabs and Muslims were often portraying villains in superhero comics, often in the guise of terrorists, bandits, or evil sheiks (Shaheen, 1994). In that period, the comics industry had exploited and capitalised on the role Arabs had in Western imagination, against the geopolitical backdrop of the Suez Canal crisis in the 1950s and the oil embargo in the 1970s. After 9/11, Muslim terrorists became even more frequent in comic strips. Probably the most striking example is Frank Miller’s *Holy Terror* (2011), which tells the adventure of superheroes Fixer and Natalie fighting to foil an Al-Qaeda attack. The comic begins with a quote attributed to Prophet Muhammad, which leads to mistakenly associating a group of extremists and terrorists with Islam.

At the same time, clumsy attempts at positive representation of Arab and Muslim characters were made. Among these, is the much-criticised Dust, a Marvel superhero included in the *X-Men* series, who fights terrorists wrapped in a tight and sensual niqab². Additionally, Dust was never given a central role, nor a story title, as were the Arab-Muslim characters who appeared in the *Punisher War Journal* (Marvel), *The Authority* (DC Comics), and *Gen 13* (Image Comics, later DC Comics). According to Santesso, the cliché of white men trying to save brown women from brown men recreates the caricature of the helpless, repressed Muslim woman crushed under patriarchal regimes (2021, p. 105).

In the last few years, however, the world of comics has seen the emergence of new, more complex Muslim superheroes. Besides *The 99*, it is worth mentioning the Muslim Pakistani-American Kamala Khan, also known as Ms. Marvel; Latifa from Saudi, who fights mutants in a post-apocalyptic world, and Qaheera, acting against misogyny on the streets of Cairo and deconstructing the widespread binary opposition of Arab patriarchy and Western feminism (Dubbaty, 2017). These superheroes are created by Arab and/or Muslim artists and feature as main protagonists in comic journals.



1 For the Arabic names of contemporary people, here and elsewhere, I report the spelling commonly used in written sources and on the web.

2 Dress that covers the entire body, including the head and face, leaving only the eyes uncovered.

The academic world has also become aware of the development of this new literary phenomenon, producing increasingly prolific literature on the subject. The interest in comics has also spread in the Arab world during the last decade. In 2012 the United Arab Emirates inaugurated its first comics and pop culture festival in Abu Dhabi, followed by Pakistan in 2014, Egypt in 2015, with Cairo Comix and Saudi Arabia in 2017.

The ninety-nine names of God in Islam

Naif al-Mutawa's ninety-nine superheroes combine their powers to combat enemies embodying negative values such as selfishness, arrogance, or the thirst for power. The number ninety-nine is the number of Names by which, in Islam, God is designated in the Quran. In the Sunnah, the 'Tradition' of Prophet Muhammad, the second source of Islamic religious doctrine after the Quran, it is stated that: "To God belong ninety-nine Names, one hundred less one; whoever memorises them will enter Paradise" (Scarabel, Preghiera Sui Nomi Più Belli, 1996, p. 47-48). However, it is not specified which these names are, where they can be found, or why their number is precisely ninety-nine. Many scholars have proposed lists of divine Names, obtained by different methods of identification based on the school of thought to which each of them belonged (Ibrahim & Soto González, 2017). The most universally accepted list today is the one compiled by al-Walīd (died in 810), which includes about eighty Names identical to those found in the Quran. As for the remaining names, they are derived from both the Quran and the Sunnah using *qiyās*, or analogy, a method of extracting Names from verbs or actions referring to God in these texts. In Islamic religion, the ninety-nine Names of God are very important as they are considered the 'vocalised representation of His attributes' (Mandel, 1995, p. 3). They are, therefore, the means through which believers conceive God (Scarabel, 2000).

Naif al-Mutawa and his collaborators were aware of how delicate the idea of using God's 99 Names could have been, and made sensible choices on how to represent these Names. For example, the Arabic definite article 'al-' was intentionally eliminated from the names of the characters because this form is equivalent to the English expressions 'the Almighty', 'the Omnipotent', etc., and is exclusively used to designate God (Stade, 1970). Furthermore, each of the twenty-five main characters was assigned a Name of God based on an attribute that humans could also possess (al-Mutawa (2014). None of their names belong to the category of 'attributes of essence' i.e., the Names of God that correspond to a characteristic intrinsic to the divine essence and do not depend on something external on which their action is exercised, such as the One, the Holy, the Living, etc. (Scarabel, 1996, p. 106).

Introducing Naif al-Mutawa and 'The 99'

Naif al-Mutawa has been teaching clinical psychology, cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy, creative writing, and communication at Kuwait University for about twenty years. He is the founder of the Soor Center for Professional Therapy and Assessment, a Kuwaiti professional source of a broad range of psychological services. Furthermore, he also had worked with former prisoners of war in Kuwait and survivors of political torture at a hospital in New York. Through his work experiences, the psychologist learned about individuals who suffered for upholding their political or religious beliefs. This made him reflect on the psychological consequences of the instrumental use of religion, which were explored through a study at Kuwait University.



In this study it was revealed that, when speaking of an undefined 'Party of God' and extremist behaviours, the study's participants pointed fingers at Islam even when the party and the extremist group belonged to another religion or community. This outcome proved the theory of consistently associating negative images with this religion, especially after the tensions between the West and the Middle East after the 11th of September 2001 (Trevino, Kanso, & Nelson, 2010). As a Muslim psychologist, Al-Mutawa was concerned about how people perceive themselves, especially in the Arab-Islamic world and, as a father, he worried about the models his children would refer to. It is through these reflections that he conceived a comic based on figures from the Islamic tradition as literary models to convey universally shared values, regardless of any social, religious, and cultural affiliations its readers might have. As Al-Mutawa explains in a TED Talk (2010), "It is only by associating positive images with something that those negative ones can be uprooted."

The story

The comic series tells the story of a group of superheroes whose power derives from a magic stone known as the Stone of Light. The superheroes' ninety-nine stones encapsulate all the knowledge housed in the rich Abbasid library of Baghdad, the Dar al-Hikma [House of Wisdom], which was destroyed by the Mongols in 1258³. Like the volumes of the library, containing diverse topics from different countries, these Stones of Light retain each a property, which is personified by those who find the Stones.

3 The Dar al-Hikma library was formally established in the 9th century by the Abbasid caliph Abū Ja'far 'Abd Allāh al-Ma'mūn. He transformed the private library of his father Hārūn al-Rašīd into one of the most important cultural and literary centres of the time. The Dar al-Hikma stood out at the time, not only for the incomparable number of volumes it housed, but also for the prolific translation activity that was practised within it and for the eclectic character of its works, which went beyond the uniquely religious theme characteristic of European libraries of the time. During the capture of Baghdad by the Mongols, the library was destroyed. It is even said that the Tigris River, which runs through the city, turned black due to the ink from all the books that were thrown into it. See, among others: Lyons J. (2009), *The House of Wisdom: how the Arabs transformed Western Civilisation*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

The story begins with a flashback to the destruction of the library in Baghdad. The historical event is depicted with great fidelity, with the difference that in the comic, the librarians foresee the disaster and create a magical potion through which they manage to save the content of the books and transfer it into the Stones of Light. This narrative is created to explain the origin of the Stones, to emphasise the importance of knowledge, and to protect it from those who seek to destroy it. Contemporary references to the destruction of libraries, museums, and cultural sites by Islamic extremist groups and foreign powers, such as the U.S. attacks in Iraq in 2003⁴, are depicted in the story (Deeb, 2012). Consequently, those who commit these acts of violence are portrayed as enemies and highlight ignorance as a drive to commit such despicable actions.

At a later point, the Stones of Light are secretly taken to Andalusia, where they remain safe for over two centuries until when the Spanish conquer Granada⁵. Here, the stones spread throughout the world. The story then shifts to the present day, where ninety-nine people from different countries have been chosen to be the ‘bearers’ [hāmīl, from ḥamala, meaning “to bear”] of the Stones of Light and their powers. The superheroes do not choose the stones; rather, the stones find the right person to safeguard them. Initially, the chosen ones misuse their supernatural gifts, as they do not know how to manage them, ending up being manipulated by others who exploit their superpowers. To address the situation, Dr. Ramzi Razem, the alter ego of al-Mutawa, establishes the Foundation of *The 99*, which aims to find these ninety-nine characters and turn them into superheroes fighting against evil with their acquired powers, which have to be used justly and with moderation.

A particular characteristic of the Stones of Light is their ability to self-renew, adapting to the era and context in which their ‘bearer’ lives. This is central to the differentiation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters in the story. The protagonists know how to adapt their powers to the present, whereas their antagonists seek to prevent stones and characters from evolving. Behind this creative choice lies a reference to Islamic currents adhering to radical interpretations of the Quran, in contrast to those with a tolerant reading of sacred texts. Other allegories within the story are the association of the Stones of Light, embodying all the knowledge, and the library in Baghdad. Specifically, the Stones become a symbol of culture, a power capable of defeating prejudices, discrimination, marginalisation, intolerance, and anti-progress.

4 On the devastation caused by the US attacks in Iraq in 2003, see: Al-Shawi, N. A. M. (2008). Burning Libraries in Baghdad the Unexpected Destruction of Cultural Heritage after the War of 2003. In: *The Annual Conference of the Nordiska Konservatorförbundet Sverige*. Goteborg, Sweden.

5 As is known, the Arabs conquered the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century and within a few decades managed to control the entire peninsula, which they named al-Andalus. Over the following centuries, various dynasties took control of the region, not without armed clashes. The Arab presence in the peninsula definitively came to an end in 1492, when the Catholic armies of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon conquered the city of Granada. See, among others: Menocal, M. R. (2002), *The Ornament Of The World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

A closer look at some key characters

One of the main superheroes in the comic is Darr (Ḍārr), a paraplegic boy from the United States who can inflict and alleviate pain. The Name of God aḍ-Ḍārr means ‘The One who harms’, and, like many other Names, it cannot be understood without its subsequent Name, an-Nāfiḥ [The One who benefits]. The harm caused by God to creatures is only harmful from their perspective, while from His perspective it is part of a harmonious plan He has set (Scarabel, 1996). Similarly, Darr’s power could be a tool to harm others, but, when associated with other superpowers of *The 99*’s team, it takes another meaning and becomes an added value in the service of a greater mission aimed at the common good. Darr carries a lot of suffering and resentment due to the car accident that led to his current physical condition and the death of his parents. However, Dr. Ramzi teaches the young superhero how to channel this energy positively (Deeb, 2012), turning the boy’s handicap into a positive asset.

Mumita, whose epithet is ‘the destroyer’, is a Portuguese girl with extraordinary speed, strength, and agility, who can also destroy objects that surround her. With Mumita, the author seeks to dismantle stereotypes related to female characters, where women are often portrayed as seductive *femme fatales* or as those who stand out only through cunning, in contrast to the physical strength of men⁶. This traditional image is overturned by assigning the power of destruction to a woman⁷. The Arabic Name of God al-Mumīt has the same root as the word ‘death’ and is translated as ‘The One who causes death’. This Name does not necessarily have a negative connotation; it is usually associated with the Name that precedes it in the list, namely al-Muḥī, ‘The Giver of Life’. Together, they convey the idea of God as the One who gives life to earthly creatures and, as every beginning, it implies an end (Scarabel, 1996).

Then comes Raheema (Raḥīma). Ar-Raḥīm is one of the two most frequently used Names in the Quran and represents, together with ar-Raḥmān, the fundamental nucleus of God. The two Names are usually invoked one after the other and together they constitute the so-called *basmala*⁸, the formula with which almost all the chapters of the Quran (the suras) begin. The formula is also recited before reading any part of the sacred text. Both Names contained in the *basmala* have the same linguistic root from which the words ‘mercy’ and ‘uterus’ derive. This might explain the choice of assigning this name to a female character. The mercy that characterises ar-Raḥīm differs from that of ar-Raḥmān because the former is reserved for those who manage to earn it, while the latter is addressed to all living beings without any distinction. Raheema, therefore, is an eleven-year-old Syrian girl who helps people act with mercy.

Batina is perhaps one of the most original characters of *The 99* and undoubtedly one of the most cited by critics. She is a Yemeni girl almost completely covered, except for her eyes, in a long black and gold dress. The name of the superhero comes from al-Bāṭīn, which means ‘The Hidden’. God is ‘The Evident’ [Zāhir] because He manifests in creation, but He is also ‘The Hidden’ because He

6 On the female image in the illustrations of Arabic children’s books, see, in this text, Makhloufi S., “Children’s Literature in the Arab World”.

7 For the role of the Islamic woman in popular culture, see: Arjana, S.R. (2018). *Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism, and Popular Culture*. London: Lexington Books

8 The *basmala* consists of the phrase “bi-smi llāhi ar-raḥmāni ar-raḥīm”, which is usually translated into English as *In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful*.

is not directly perceptible to man (Scarabel 1996: 133). Batina can become invisible and reveal hidden people and objects. There is no explicit reference to her religion and clothing, which resembles a niqab; however, many critics have often rushed to justify it in religious terms. Batina explains that she is very shy and, for this reason, prefers to hide behind her dress; However, on some occasions, she reveals her face. The superhero's religious affiliation is left to the reader's interpretation. Her long black dress can be considered a superhero disguise or a religious attire that, as the girl demonstrates, does not limit her freedom. Batina shows how a woman's success and positive qualities are not necessarily linked to her physical appearance or dress style.

The last character is Rughal, the story's antagonist. Dark and unsettling, he is the descendant of his namesake Rughal, who in 1490 tried to seize the power of the Stones of Light embedded in the ceiling of an Andalusian fortress *Ḥiṣn al-Ma`rifa* [Fortress of Knowledge]. The evil intentions and spirit of his forefathers were passed down until Rughal, who leads an organisation similar to Dr. Ramzi's. Like the latter, he aims to gather all ninety-nine superheroes, but his ultimate goal is to concentrate their powers for personal use. The character of Rughal alludes to all those fanatics blinded by an ideology or thirst for power. The author associates him with Islamic fundamentalists who exploit knowledge of religious texts, instrumentalizing their messages. Rughal is always depicted in dark, old-fashioned clothes, and in anachronistic settings. These details show his refusal to adapt to modernity, just like religious groups clinging to the traditions of the origins of Islam and ending up clashing with reality.

Contrasting reactions

Before publishing the comics in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, al-Muttawa had to obtain approval from the Information Ministries of those countries. He approached an Islamic investment bank to secure the necessary funding for his project; then, he obtained religious legitimization to avoid Islamic morality issues (al-Mutawa, 2014). The comic gained enormous success in the Arab world. A few years later, international media (CNN, The Guardian, and Financial Times, among others) spoke about *The 99* with enthusiasm.

Simultaneously, the comic faced strong criticism from both the Muslim Arab world and the West. Some Kuwaiti integralists whose social media profiles were associated with radical Islamic organisations, strongly criticised the author, and even spread the hashtag #WhoWillKillDrNaif (Schonfeld, 2014). In 2014, the Grand Mufti⁹ of Saudi Arabia condemned the work with a *fatwa*¹⁰, accusing it of blasphemy, and convinced authorities to ban the comic from the national market. Eventually, a comprehensive explanation by the author¹¹ clarified issues and his work returned to Saudi newsstands. Meanwhile, in the United States concerns were raised that the comic might be too Islamic, therefore threatening American values. Some conservative blogs labelled it a means of 'Islamic propaganda' (Lev, 2011) and 'a new and particularly insidious form of cultural jihad' (Geller, 2011).

9 The most authoritative position among Sunni jurists in a Muslim country.

10 Legal response on issues concerning Islamic law or religious practices.

11 See: Al-Mutawa N. (2014). The latest challenge of 'The 99' superheroes is tackling a fatwa. *The National*. April 26. Available at the link: www.thenational.ae/the-latest-challenge-of-the-99-superheroes-is-tackling-a-fatwa-1.262154

Despite these criticisms, the comic's popularity grew significantly. The forty-two issues of *The 99* were translated into many languages and an animated series inspired by the comic is currently available on YouTube in standard Arabic and English. Six special issues of a miniseries in collaboration with DC Comics were also released, where the ninety-nine characters fight evil alongside American superheroes from the Justice League of America¹². As noted by Santo (2014), to make *The 99* more appealing to Western audiences, al-Mutawa specifically adapted his products for Western marketing. Thus, *The 99* has become an intermedial commercial brand supported by other marketing strategies such as a theme park in Kuwait, an online video game by the animation studio Aardman, several commercial products, and a documentary called *Wham! Bam! Islam!*.

Naif al-Mutawa achieved enormous success with *The 99*, winning numerous awards¹³, including the Eliot-Pearson Award for Excellence in Children's Media from Tufts University, USA, and the 'Marketplace of Ideas' Award from the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations. Additionally, he was nominated for eleven consecutive years (2009-2020) among the 500 most influential Muslims by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center in Jordan, and Forbes China included him among the seven most influential designers in the world.

Conclusion

The 99 emerges as a narrative rich in teaching and allusions to the real world. Its settings and themes allow readers, especially those in the Middle East, to identify with the story and its characters. The societal issues faced by the superheroes and a detailed representation of diversion and inclusivity, make the comic compelling and relevant to different audiences.

The comic is part of the recent production of comics by Muslim and/or Arab authors who intend to propose alternative role-models to Western ones. They do so by elevating characters from the Arab world, Muslims or inspired by elements of Arab and Muslim traditions as protagonists.

Despite some criticism and controversy, *The 99* has gained global popularity; its success demonstrates that narratives deviating from conventional models can convey positive and educational messages in a light and entertaining manner. Al-Mutawa has created a comic that stands out for its ability to engage a wide audience and convey values of tolerance, solidarity, and acceptance of diversity.

12 Team of American superheroes told in a series of comics published by DC Comics. These include Batman, Wonder Woman and Superman.

13 The list is available at the link: www.al-mutawa.com/awards-recognitions



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Reality in comics: how to depict the Arab world through comics

Paola de Ruggieri

Abstract

De Ruggieri studies the impact that graphic journalism has on audiences; through this analysis, the article claims that graphic journalism should be held in the same regard as more traditional forms of reportage, in terms of importance and accuracy. To demonstrate this claim, the article develops around the description and analysis of comic strips reporting on events and realities from the Arab Islamic culture, authored by graphic journalists of Western origins. The works analysed in this chapter are *Palestine, an Occupied Nation* (by Maltese-American Joe Sacco), *Chronicles of Jerusalem* (by French-Canadian Guy Delisle), *Persepolis* (by Iranian-French Marjane Satrapi) and *Waltz with Bashir* (by Israeli Ari Folman and David Polonsky). The situations are different and very complex, and each author has his way of telling the story; however, the four authors use a type of storytelling that involves readers through text and the power of images.

Introduction

Slowing down the learning process

Today, due to the development of technology and the growing relevance of social media, people have access to a great amount of information. We live in a world where news is delivered instantly, as there is a growing need to know what is happening right away. While we can easily acquire immediate knowledge, we might lack the understanding of the truth behind the facts.

Often, through the news, the image of Arab peoples and their cultures has been distorted by Western ideas and concepts. Often, non-Arab people develop their ideas of Arab people, which in most cases, is inaccurate. It is not an easy task for Western writers and journalists to give a comprehensive picture of the Arab reality, as they often fall into simplifications and stereotypes, failing to reveal authentic features or details.

But... What about slowing down, leaving aside textbooks, newspapers, and television? How about enjoying a moment in the company of images and dialogues, of different kinds of narratives?

Among various forms of journalism, a different, highly effective means of information is emerging: comic or graphic journalism¹:

Literally, it should be translated as 'graphic journalism'. This is a very vague concept that stems from an initial misunderstanding: the desire to use the adjective 'graphic' to bypass the term 'comics,' in search of greater cultural legitimacy. Today, for everyone, the concept of 'graphic journalism' is synonymous with 'comic journalism,' and thus: comic journalism.²

The grip images have on readers can be strong and direct: through images, readers project themselves into the story: through the visualization of others' lives, they bring these realities closer to their own.

In a graphic journal, images do not accompany the article: they are the article. We cannot speak of 'illustrated' journalism, as every element within the article becomes an image, clear and visible, and the final work is somewhere between a comic strip and a newspaper article.

Within graphic journals, journalists explicitly offer their view on the world, expressing it not only in words but also - and especially - in drawings. They faithfully report both the reality of people and places and those that journalists see and cannot ignore. As Joe Sacco asserted,

'You become part of the story. You can try not to tell your presence, but you are still involved'.³

Graphic journals show reality as a part of the experience of one or more characters, often including the journalist. In this way, the product may be more 'fictional' but, at the same time, it is more engaging than a newspaper article, even if slower to read.

A comic strip requires a long time to create and to read. In a comic book, the reader must pay attention to the dialogue, the captions, and the pictures. Hence, this thorough process becomes a strength, allowing readers to indulge in the pleasurable act of reading.

This article aims to demonstrate how comic strips can be used to create a critical awareness of a particular culture or situation. Therefore, I have deliberately chosen works by cartoonists and journalists from different Middle Eastern cultures. In graphic journalism, the author's and the reader's point of view can be similar, as is the effort to understand a different reality and culture.

1 A journalistic technique used by cartoonists that uses the structure of the graphic novel to develop the narrative in panels collected in a single volume. On the history of graphic journalism and its techniques, cfr. Gubitosa C., *Il Giornalismo a Fumetti, raccontare il mondo col linguaggio della nona arte*, Salerno, Nicola Pesce Editore, 2018.

2 Fasiolo F., *Italia da fumetto*, Latina, Tunuè, 2012, p. 4.

3 Joe Sacco, *Palestina, una nazione occupata*, Mondadori, Milano, 2002, p. 9.

Graphic Magazines

One voice from the Middle East

Waltz with Bashir

*Waltz with Bashir*⁴ was created by Israeli artist David Polonsky⁵ and by screenwriter Ari Folman⁶. It was first conceived as an animated movie, broadcast in 2008⁷; only at later stage were the drawings translated into print.

Despite its international acclaim, the animation was banned in Lebanon because of its content. However, this did not prevent it from being pirated: it was indeed clandestinely screened in Beirut in January 2009⁸.

With regards to the book, it shows a series of events taking place in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War⁹, and during the massacre in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps¹⁰. The narrative of the events is not linear: *Waltz with Bashir* is a psychological comic, based on the memories of an Israeli soldier (Folman) who was fighting in Lebanon during the conflict.

In the story, the protagonist is haunted by memories and weird dreams. After the recurring nightmare of being chased by twenty-six dogs (Ill. 1), retracing the events becomes a necessity for this war veteran. The moment he realizes that twenty-six is the same number of dogs he killed during a war operation, Folman decides to get in touch with some people who could

4 Ari Folman, David Polonsky, *Valzer con Bashir*, Roma, Rizzoli, 2009. The title refers to a specific scene in the film (also present in the comic book) in which a soldier moves as if dancing and shoots in front of a poster of Bashir Gemayel, a politician assassinated during the Lebanese war in 1982.

5 Award-winning Israeli illustrator and art director: in 2008 he won the Ophir Prize of the Israeli Academy of Film and Television for the art direction of *Waltz with Bashir* and the Cinema Eye Honours decoration award.

6 Israeli screenwriter and composer, whose collaboration with Polonsky was cemented in 2017 with creating the comic book adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

7 Israeli animated documentary premiered in 2008 and was nominated for 'Best Foreign Film' at the 2009 Golden Globes, 'Best Soundtrack' at the 2008 European Film Awards, 'Best Foreign Film' at the 2008 British Independent Film Awards and 'Best Foreign Film' at the 2009 César Awards.

8 Anderman N., "Israeli Film on Lebanon War 'Waltz with Bashir' Shown in Beirut", *Haaretz*, on-line, 01/02/2009, in www.haaretz.com/1.5065340 (cons. 28.05.2020).

9 The First Lebanon War, also known in Israeli military circles as 'Operation Peace in Galilee', was part of the conflicts between the Arab world and Israeli forces. The war, which began in June 1982 and ended in 1985, pitted Israeli forces and the South Lebanese Army against Amal, Hezbollah, the PLO, al-Fatah and Syrian militias. The literature on the subject is endless: among the most interesting texts refer to Di Peri R., *Il Libano contemporaneo. Storia, politica e società*, Roma, Carrocci, 2017.

10 The massacre in the Sabra district and the Chatila refugee camp, both on the western outskirts of Beirut, were carried out by the Lebanese Phalange and the so-called "Army of South Lebanon", with the collaboration of the Israeli army on 18 September 1982. The victims, all civilians, were mostly old men, women and children, and the estimated death toll according to sources, is between 762 and 3,500.



Illustration 1



Illustration 2

explain this haunting image (Ill. 2). In this way, the real events of the 1982 tragedy are brought to light. The perception of the massacre and its subsequent devastation becomes impactful in those vignettes without text: these illustrate atrocious actions ordered by the Israeli commanders, which appear to Israeli soldiers as violent, inhuman, and unsensible. Illustration 3 depicts some Israeli soldiers hiding on a hillside becoming aware of the massacre their comrades are perpetrating.

At the end, it is revealed that the protagonist's amnesia is caused by his guilt for the atrocities he committed. This guilt and dissatisfaction guide the reader through each page of the comic, allowing him to embark on a double journey: historical, as he learns about the attacks, the bombs, the deaths, and the actual events; and psychological, as he lives through the memories which slowly become clearer, unravelling the protagonist's deep anguish.

Western perspectives Palestine

*Palestine*¹¹ is a 1996 graphic novel by Maltese-American cartoonist and journalist Joe Sacco. This work, like many others by this author, is an excellent source of information on Palestinian people and their customs. The book takes the form of a long narrative and discusses life in the Palestinian territories occupied by the Israeli militias. This work could be described as the most comprehensive and exhaustive of the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issue. The historical analysis of the conflict (from the first settlements after the signing of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 until the early 1990s) blends in history with the consequences for the civilian population and the perception of the Palestinian refugees. Even though this is a comic strip produced by a Maltese-American journalist, the Palestinian voice is represented.

A striking topic, often brought up in Palestinian homes is conflict, which is a recurring topic of discussion within the book. Stories of war and captivity fill Palestinian living rooms. Joe Sacco could not ignore this detail: conflict is part of Palestinian life, and by turning the pages of this comic, the reader can empathise with the protagonists of the story.

An example can be a simple cup of tea: it is probably well known that tea is one of the most widely consumed beverages in the Middle East, but the role attributed to it in the pages of this comic strip reveals a function that goes beyond the mere act of drinking. As the reporter discovers, tea is a ritual of hospitality that the author witnesses whenever he enters a new home, and it is impolite to refuse it. From beverage to ritual, tea also becomes a ritual that every Palestinian claims, even in prisons, where a committee is set up to distribute it among the inmates. (Ill. 4)

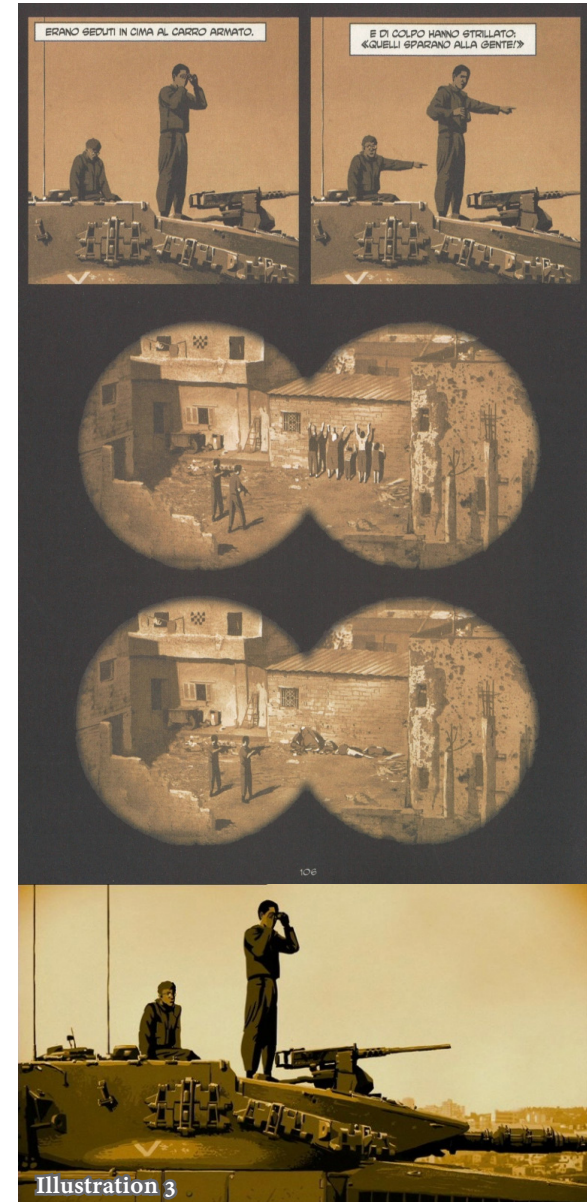


Illustration 3



Illustration 4

11 Joe Sacco 2002, *cit.*

In the same way that he reveals such a superficial, yet profound detail about Palestinian culture, Joe Sacco addresses a much-debated topic: the *hiġāb*, the Islamic veil (Ill. 5). In a passage within the book, the relationship between Muslim women and their *hiġāb*, is revealed. From dialogues among women, the desire to wear it emerges. The perception of the veil as an 'obligation' is peculiar to Western thinking, whereas for Palestinian women it is a habit, a tradition, a sign of cultural and religious belonging, and sometimes even an act of protection (Ill. 6).

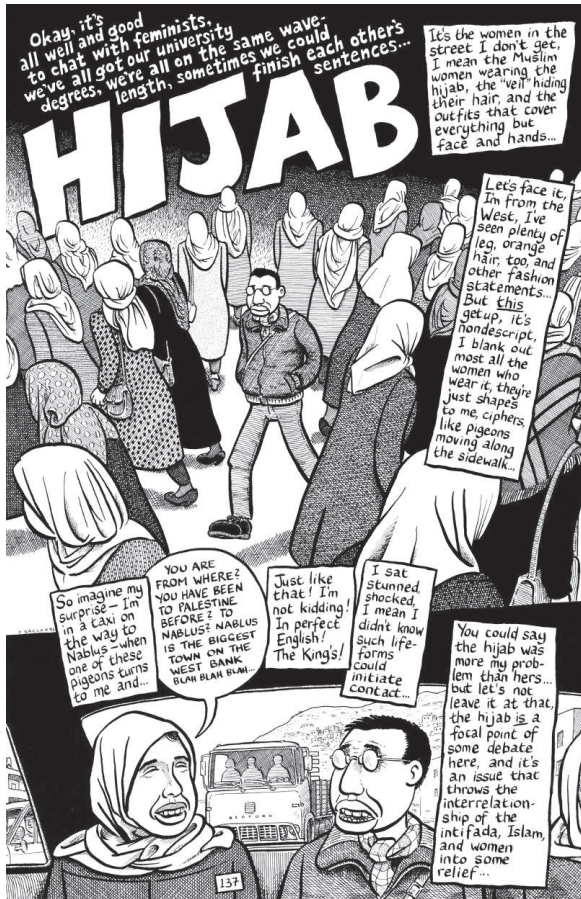


Illustration 5

No Sleep Till Shengal

Another comic worth looking at is *No sleep till Shengal*, created by young cartoonist Michele Rech (known as Zerocalcare), who is currently one of the most famous cartoonists in Italy. *No Sleep Till Shengal* tells the story of the author's journey to the northern area of Iraq, more specifically to the Ezidi community of Shengal.

The book was published in 2022, twenty-six years later than *Palestine*. At this point, the role of graphic journalists gains more importance: they become cartoonists who not only make headlines but also gain authority from this endeavour. We have an example of this in Zerocalcare's comic,



Illustration 6

when, within the text, he justifies his presence in Shengal and his work as a graphic journalist to an Iraqi intelligence officer (Ill. 7). With a highly self-deprecating and sarcastic tone, Zerocalcare's comics acquire authority and value within the journalistic sphere. When reading the book, the reader can understand the importance of Zerocalcare's role as a journalist. The author appears to be driven not only by his own curiosity and desire to tell, but also by the knowledge that describing reality is important and might have an actual impact on people.

"When nobody speaks...slaughters happen", these are the words used by the Elbak, head of the Kurdish cultural center in Rome, when he suggests to Zerocalcare to draw this comic. The exchange between the two, in just two simple strips, explains the combination of comics and reporting; when Zerocalcare wonders about the importance of his comic production and what impact it could have on changing people's minds, Elbak clarifies that the cartoonist's aim is not to have a direct political impact but to simply describe, narrate, and show reality (Ill. 7).

Similar to Joe Sacco's, Zerocalcare's gaze is external to what he sees; however, there are many similarities between the two works, even though they are more than twenty years apart.

As in *Palestine*, the narrative is in black and white and focuses on the descriptions of the conflicts, the political and less subjective reasons why it all happens, along with undiscussed realities. The cartoonist observes and narrates each home or cultural center he visits, conveying memories of the conflicts and disproportionate amounts of tea (Ill. 7).

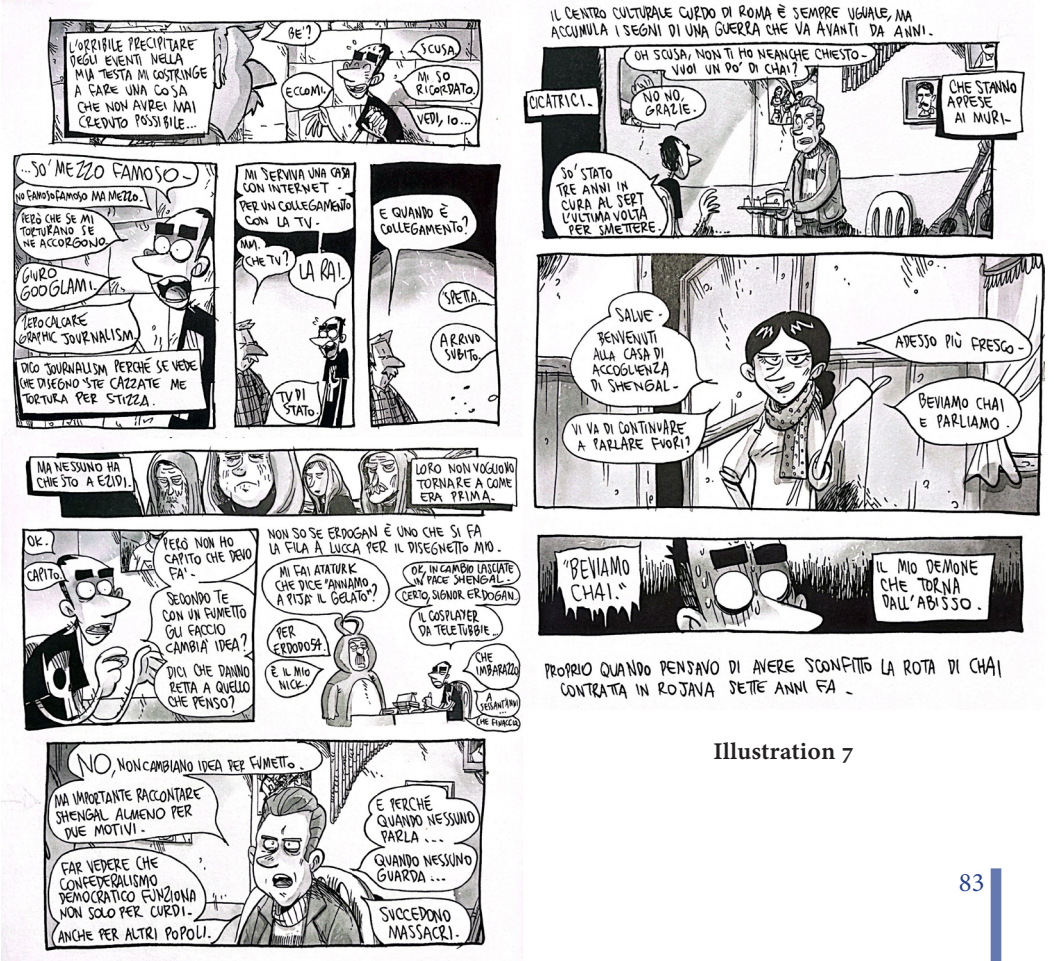


Illustration 7

Unlike Joe Sacco, who does not question the authority of his role, Zerocalcare is closer to the readers; he too struggles to understand not only the reality around him but also the importance of the task he has undertaken. Zerocalcare feels the burden of what he is being asked to accomplish.

Conclusion

The pen is mightier than the sword

These works present a simplified representation of reality, but this does not mean that they are less truthful.

Every cartoon, every drawing, every detail is a denunciation, and probably it is much stronger and more effective than any newspaper article or a television report, thanks to its straightforwardness.

These characteristics make comics a medium for disseminating knowledge in an open and varied manner, able to range from images of despair and desolation to the simplicity of a joke.

What emerges is a new form of raw journalism, direct as any form of reportage. Graphic representation may make reality more pleasing to the eye, but it does not make it easier to read, as the visual imagery draws the reader deeper into the story. In the end, the reader may feel as nauseated by the scenes of violence as by the very sweet mint tea, as if he or she could have witnessed the former and enjoyed the latter in first person.

A new perception of comics

At the beginning of the 21st century, this form of journalism was held in low esteem. As the years went by, graphic novels gained more respect and were elevated to the status of the “ninth art”. According to the famous Italian writer Umberto Eco:

the comic strip is an industrial product, commissioned from the above¹²

What Eco means by this definition is that the function of comics is held in high regard, and, like other arts, comics have an actual role, a mission that we can sometimes call ‘divine’. In this way, comics appear to be not just a form of popular culture that emerges ‘from below’.

Although this new form of art is still far from being perceived as a proper means of information, in recent years we have witnessed a gradual increase in its social prestige and cultural acceptance. This is witnessed by the fame of *No Sleep Till Shengal* and its author Zerocalcare, which has grown outside comic circles’ niches.

Even if most comic readers are mostly interested in surreal and fantasy worlds, the number of those interested in the description of reality and history through comics and graphic narratives is growing.

Can comics influence public opinion?

To what extent do comics influence public opinion?

The recent political events of October 2023 – or the new conflict between Israel and Hamas – affected the participation of the cartoonist Zerocalcare in the Lucca Comics Festival: as the Israeli Embassy sponsored the festival, the artist, along with two Israeli cartoonists invitees, refused to take part in the event.

The motives behind Zerocalcare’s choice, as he explained in a lengthy article published in *Internazionale*, were purely personal and not political (link to mentioned article: www.internazionale.it/reportage/zerocalcare/2023/11/03/zerocalcare-lucca-comics-fumetto). Nevertheless, they have managed to cause quite a stir. It is striking to see how Zerocalcare’s choice has provoked comments from politicians and editors (such as Matteo Salvini and Maurizio Gasparri, editors of *Il Foglio* and *Libero*), but also from ordinary readers, with accusations of anti-Semitism and politicisation, as well as accusations of having influenced the decision of Israeli cartoonists not to participate.

This is an example, albeit a small one, of how cartoonists and authors, along with their products, have impacted the social sphere: in the article published in the *Internazionale*, there is criticism towards the cartoonist’s choice and the expectation of his positionality. This gives the cartoonist a new authority in the exchange of information, and a new advocative role, which is of great socio-political responsibility.

¹² Eco U., *Apocalittici e integrati. Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa*, Milano, Bompiani, 2001.

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Children's Literature in the Arab World

Samia Makhloufi

Abstract

This chapter explores the profound transformation that Arab children's literature underwent in the last two decades. The literary genre broke free from its educational connotations and began to offer creations centered around the child, their desires, dreams, doubts, and fears. A new universe was brought to life, closer to the reader's daily reality, reflecting their concerns, joys, experiences, and whims.

Examples of such productions are the Egyptian series *Awwal Marra* and the Jordanian *Al-halazūna*, which address problems typical for many children, such as fear of the dark, reluctance to do schoolwork, and the thrill of doing something for the first time, serenely and reassuringly.

Another important innovation has been the introduction of heroines in children's books. Lively female protagonists emerged, conveying the values of equality and respect for rights. An example is the series featuring Farhāna, a girl who defies traditional feminine stereotypes of elegance and composure, mischievously getting into all sorts of trouble. The presence of women in publications also reflects the increasing involvement of female professionals in the field of kids' literature.

Additionally, the landscape of children's literature has been enriched with new genres such as comics and novels, although picture books and short stories remain the most popular and receive the greatest investment from publishers. Moreover, in recent years, there has been a newfound interest in books dedicated to children aged 0 to 3, aiming to introduce potential future readers to the joy of reading.

In summary, the 2000s witnessed a deep transformation in Arab children's literature, with a shift towards more relatable and diverse storytelling, the emergence of female protagonists who challenge gender norms, and the exploration of new themes and genres.

Introduction

For a long time, children's literature in the Arab world¹ has not been adequately valued. In recent times, the first story dedicated to children was published in the Egyptian magazine *Rawdat al-madāris al-miṣriyya* [The Garden of Egyptian Schools], edited by Rifā' al-Taḥṭawī and published in Cairo in 1870. The magazine aimed to spread knowledge and arts among school-age children simply and inexpensively. However, it had a highly didactic and moralizing tone that was not very appealing to its audience, as it did not rely on illustrations.

At the beginning of the 20th century, different illustrated books for Arab children started being published. A great example is the work of the Egyptian Muḥammad 'Uthmān Jalāl titled *Al-'uyūn al-yawāqiz fi al-amthāl wa-l-mawā'iz* (*Eyes Open to Proverbs and Admonitions*)².

These books were exported from Cairo to the entire Arab world and beyond, reaching young audiences in Muslim countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, where Arabic is widely spoken as the language of religion. Similar was the situation in Latin America, which became a preferred destination for migratory flows from the Middle East.

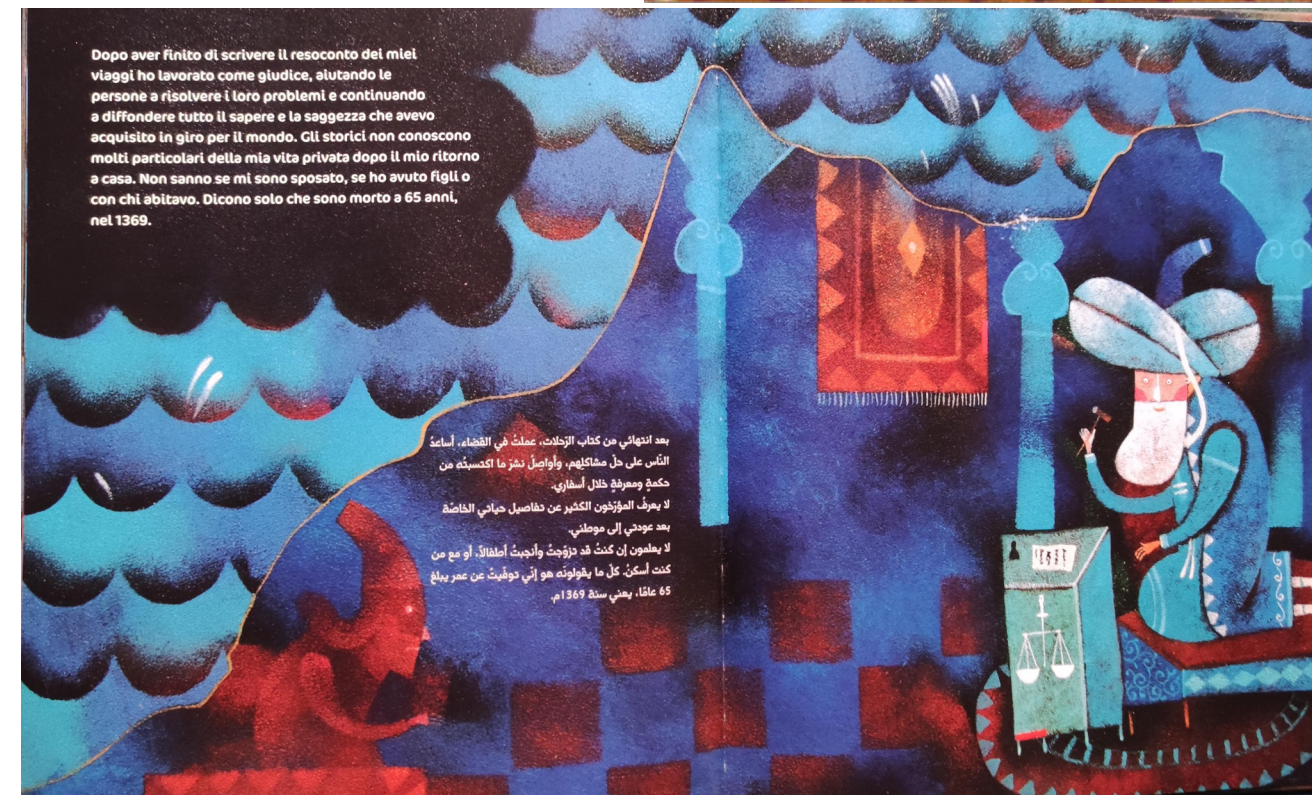
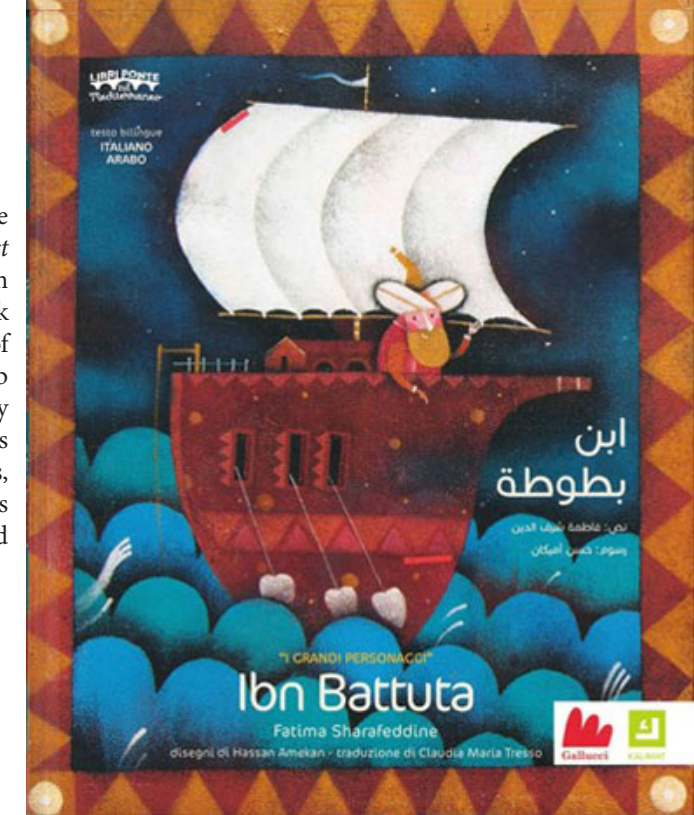
For a long time, this literary genre was perceived as an educational tool, a complement to school education aimed at refining the moral upbringing of young people. Consequently, it presented itself as a universe distant from the playful needs of children. In Arabic children's books, traditional stories from the historical and cultural heritage, biographies of great scientists or prominent figures in politics, the military, and religion, as well as informative texts on the functioning of machinery and natural history, dominated. Fairy tales had a strong moralizing character: the protagonists, whether children, animals, or historical figures, were presented as examples of positive values and were proposed as models for identification, while the illustrations had a purely explanatory function and mainly supported the text.

In recent decades, Arabic children's literature has significantly transformed, moving away from its purely didactic and moralizing nature. Today, authors and publishers have dedicated themselves to creating works that captivate and engage young readers, allowing them to explore the lives of prominent cultural and historical figures from the Arab world creatively and enjoyably.

1 Unless otherwise indicated, the drafting of the first two paragraphs was made possible thanks to the consultation of the articles by *Al-ḡamā'a* (2015) and *Al-ḡazira* (2015), conversations with representatives of Arabic publishing houses present at the Bologna Children's Book Fair (2018 and 2019 editions), and the valuable collection of Arabic children's literature preserved at the Biblioteca dei ragazzi "Salaborsa" in Bologna. The assistance of Antonella Saracino was also important, whom I would like to thank for providing me with a copy of her master's thesis in Foreign Languages for International Communication titled "La situazione editoriale della letteratura per l'infanzia in lingua araba" (The Editorial Situation of Children's Literature in Arabic), defended at the University of Lecce in the academic year 2009.

2 M. M. 'A. Al-Nadwī. (2014). "Adab al-aṭfāl fi al-adab al-ḥadīth." *Al-dā'i*. 38/12. Available online at: <https://darululoom-deoband.com/arabicmagazine/> (accessed 20/05/2020). Also, see www.lisanarb.com/2019/08/pdf_91.html (accessed 20/05/2020).

A notable example of this evolution is the publication of *Ibn Battuta: The Greatest Traveler* by Kalimat Publishing, written by Fatima Sharafeddine. This book narrates the extraordinary adventures of Ibn Battuta, one of the most famous Arab explorers, through language specifically adapted for children. The story has been translated into multiple languages, including English, enabling young readers from around the world to discover and appreciate Arab cultural heritage.



What sets this work apart from past publications is its non-moralizing approach. It employs simple language accompanied by vibrant illustrations that assist young readers in following the story. Moreover, the author allows Ibn Battuta to speak directly to young readers in the first person, establishing an immediate connection between the traveler and the children. This element enables children to interact with the author during their reading experience, making them feel an integral part of the narrative. Through direct dialogue, children can ask Ibn Battuta questions, express their emotions, and actively participate in the storytelling. This form of interactive engagement enhances the learning process and stimulates the curiosity of young readers, making the reading experience more meaningful and memorable.

An example of a study on gender identity in picture books

There have been numerous studies on picture books in both Western and Arab countries³. The purpose of this literary genre is to entertain children and introduce them to written language, while also conveying essential themes such as exploring the world, understanding daily life, festivals, nature, and different occupations. It educates children about values like freedom, justice, and solidarity, addressing their fears, concerns, and accompanying them through the joys and difficulties of interpersonal relationships.

The peculiarity of these texts is their presentation without specific cultural and geographical characteristics, allowing for the transmission of universal and timeless rules. In this context, where reference points are absent or not well-defined, characters - whether human, animals or anthropomorphic creatures differentiated by gender, age, and role - play a fundamental role. These characters convey values of equality, but often the predominance of the male gender. This is pointed out by a research conducted in 1994 on 537 picture books published in France, which revealed that, while male presence within the stories acquires a social function through their engagement in the world outside the home, female presence is confined to family contexts, and their occupational roles are mostly limited to teaching and childcare⁴.

A deep renewal

The 2000s marked the development of Arabic children's literature, representing a qualitative breakthrough and a profound renewal. Firstly, the literary genre began to shed its educational aura, and started offering a series of creations focused on the child, their desires, dreams, doubts, and fears. This shift brought forth a universe closer to the reader's everyday reality, a world that reflects their concerns, joys, first experiences, tantrums, and mischievous acts. We can refer to this literary variety as 'mirror books' precisely because they reflect children's real-life experiences. For example, during this period, the book series *Awwal Marra* [First Time] was released by the publishing house Dār al-Shurūk (Egypt), which addresses the many first events that shape a child's life, such as their first day of school or their first pair of glasses, and so on. Similarly,

3 A brief overview of this topic can be found in C. Brugeilles, I. Cromer, and S. Cromer. (2002). Male and Female Characters. *Population*. 57, 2. March-April. 237-267

4 *Ivi*. 243-244 and 246-254.

Al Salwa Publishing House (Jordan) launched the series *Al-halazūna* [The Snail], which peacefully and reassuringly tackles issues that children may face, such as fear of the dark or reluctance to do homework.

An important innovation is the introduction of heroines, female protagonists who assert themselves in a previously male-dominated universe. These spirited and mischievous girls convey values of equality and respect for individual rights. An example is the series by the Egyptian Elias Publishing House, written and illustrated by Rania Hussein Amin, featuring the protagonist Farhāna, whose name means 'Joyful'. Farhāna is a character who breaks the female stereotypes of elegance, composure, and gentleness. She is a girl with unruly hair who gets into all sorts of mischief. She resembles characters found in books by Bianca Pitzorno's *Storia Delle Mie Storie*, which narrates the adventures of Graziella, a poor girl guilty of having broken shoes, living in a basement in a very poor neighborhood, using Italian interspersed with dialectal phrases, and above all, being assisted by the School Patronage⁵. With her disheveled clothes, dried snot in her nostrils, and blond and long, but greasy and tangled hair, Graziella is a character who does not fit the mold of a well-behaved girl⁶.

In recent years, the examples of new heroines have become numerous. In the illustrated book *Lam Akun Aqsid...* (I Didn't Mean To...) published by Asala (Lebanon), the protagonist keeps getting into trouble despite her best intentions. From Yomad editions (Morocco) we must acknowledge Zaina, a girl passionate about horses and equestrianism, among others.

The presence of women in these publications reflects the increasingly significant involvement of professional women in the field of early childhood education and children's literature. Authors like Hanane Alsaadi and illustrators like Rahma Alrahbi, whose work will be examined in the following pages, contribute to this trend.

The renewal of children's literature has also meant the introduction of new themes that were previously cautiously avoided, such as disability or war. In addition to these themes, the landscape of children's literature has also been enriched by new genres such as comics⁷ and novels. However, picture books and short stories remain the most widely written and read, and the ones in which publishers invest the most. In recent years, there has also been a completely new interest in books dedicated to children aged 0 to 3 years, aiming to engage potential future readers and introduce them to the joy of reading.

5 B. Pitzorno. (1995). *Storia delle mie storie. Miti, forme, idee della letteratura per ragazzi*. Parma: Pratiche. 88-90.

6 R. Caso. (2015). Scrivere per l'infanzia. Itinerari di formazione al femminile nei romanzi di Bianca Pitzorno. *Sinestesiaonline*. n. 11. Marzo. 14.

7 For information about Arab comics in general and the characteristics of comics in both the Maghreb and the Mashreq regions, please refer to the contributions by Jolanda Guardi and Miriam Zadari in this same volume.

The female figure in stories⁸

In recent years, the publication of picture books underwent significant developments, and the genre begins to present characters in various themes and situations that shape their life journey.

An example of this production is *Halā tajālu ḥayātaha ahlā* (Halā Makes Her Life Sweeter), with text by Hanane Alsaadi and illustrations by Rahma Alrahbi, published by Alaalam Alarabi (Dubai, UAE) in 2016. Another example is *Fayrūz fatāt al-rummāna* (Fayrūz, the Girl of the Pomegranate), with texts by Rania Zainab Dhahir and illustrations by Jueyl Aashkar, published by Academia International (Beirut, Lebanon) in 2014.

Halā makes her life sweeter

Halā is a girl who loves to eat and spends her free time indulging in sweets, which makes her a bit overweight compared to her classmates. However, she doesn't realize this until they point it out to her in a mean way, which makes her feel bad. She understands the situation and immediately feels uncomfortable. This emotional state makes her reflect and look for a solution. Halā decides to spend her free time helping those in need by delivering food packages to them on her bicycle, and she involves her younger brother in this initiative. This activity not only helps Halā lose weight and overcome her physical discomfort but also earns her a school award for her great work, making her classmates reflect on their initial mockery.



In this picture book, there is a near-to-total absence of male figures, except for Halā's younger brother and the school janitor. It naturally makes us wonder if it is an intentional representation of a utopian world managed and organized, written and illustrated by women. Furthermore, the male figure of the janitor, in addition to holding a humble role, is always portrayed with a grumpy and wrinkled appearance, which does not depict him as a happy and fulfilled character. This leads us to think that the male figure is sidelined and overwhelmed by the power and joy of girls, since the majority of the characters are female students who will become the women of tomorrow in a new and modern society, free from gender discrimination.

8 The drafting of this section specifically refers to the text by M. Terrusi. (2012). *Albi illustrati. Leggere, guardare, nominare il mondo nei libri per l'infanzia*. Rome: Carocci. 10-21.

In the following illustration (below left), Halā extends a helping hand to the needy, specifically the janitor, who, as we have seen, is the only adult male figure throughout the picture book.

In a subsequent image, the figure of Halā's younger brother, who follows the protagonist, emphasizes the importance of Halā's role as the guide to the male character. The illustration (below right) depicts the protagonist who, with the help of her brother, has succeeded in her endeavor and conveys a strong sense of happiness, hope, and freedom, marked by the presence of the green bicycle and Halā's windblown hair (while still happily chubby). This green bicycle reminds us of the Saudi film *Wadjda*, written and directed by Haifaa Al-Mansour, released in theaters in 2012. Both in the story and the film, we find the same hope and thirst for freedom that Halā and Wadjda (the film's protagonist) experience, as they do not get discouraged and strive to achieve their dreams.



وفي المَدْرَسَةِ لَمْ يَعْذُ أَحَدٌ يَرَى حَلَا
مُرَبَّعَةً عَلَى مَقْعِدِهَا الْمُعْتَادِ وَحَوْلَهَا
أَكْيَاسُ الْبَطَاطَا وَالْقَطَائِرُ وَالْعَصَائِرُ.
رَغِمَ أَنَّهَُا كَانَتْ تَأْتِي بِحَقِيبَتِهَا
الصُّخْمَةَ، وَتَعُودُ بِهَا كُلَّ يَوْمٍ وَقَدْ
صَارَتْ فَارِغَةً تَمَامًا.



مُنْذُ ذَلِكَ الْيَوْمِ لَمْ يَعْذُ أَحَدٌ يَرَى حَلَا مُنْجَبَةً عَلَى الطَّعَامِ؛ وَلَا مُنْشَغَلَةً بِهِ؛
فَقَدْ كَانَتْ، بَعْدَ أَنْ تُنْهَى وَاجِبَاتُهَا، تَدْخُلُ إِلَى الْمَطْبُخِ، وَلَا تَخْرُجُ مِنْهُ إِلَّا وَهِيَ
تَحْمِلُ صُنْدُوقًا يَمْتَلِئُ بِالْعَلْبِ، تَضَعُهَا عَلَى الْمَقْعِدِ الْخَلْفِيِّ لِذَرَاغَتِهَا، وَتَنْطَلِقُ
مُسْرِعَةً، يُرَافِقُهَا أُخُوها أَحْمَدُ الصَّغِيرُ وَهُوَ فِي غَايَةِ السَّعَادَةِ.

Another significant aspect that the book emphasizes with the presence of Halā's younger brother by her side is the importance of teamwork, collaboration between genders, which is crucial for social and cultural progress.

Fayruz, the girl of the pomegranate tree

This story tells of a village whose population produces pomegranates that they are not allowed to eat due to a law imposed by the elders many years ago. Not only does the law prohibit the consumption of pomegranates, but it also forbids happiness, joy, fun, and above all, the use of colors. The villagers, therefore, lead a very serious and ordinary life, devoid of music, dances, and amusement, and every element in the village is gray. Only the pomegranate is vibrant and colorful, with its flaming red symbolizing the liveliness and joy of life, which is missing in the village and its inhabitants. Without questioning the absurdity of this law, they have always accepted it without asking too many questions.

However, one day, the birth of a baby girl fills her family with so much joy that their house and her mother's clothes become colored. The girl is born completely colored, very different from the other villagers. She has purple hair, sky-blue eyes, and lips as red as pomegranate seeds. Moreover, her parents gave her a name of a magnificent color: Fayruz, which means 'turquoise' in Persian (and also in Arabic). Fayruz grows up cheerful, happy, and very curious, and she often plays near the pomegranate tree, picking its fruits and eating them, thus breaking the law that has governed the village's life for many centuries.

However, once she starts school, her classmates isolate the girl because of her colors. Only three children stand by her side, as they understand that in Fayruz's colorful world, their dreams and hopes come to life. Their friendship leads them to create an impromptu theater in the village square, in an attempt to somehow convert the villagers to the world of colors. The four children build a huge box, filling it with drawings, stories, toys, colorful dreams, and lots and lots of pomegranate seeds to bring more life to the entire show. The spectacle transforms the village from a sad and gray place into a beautiful, colorful, and vibrant one, rediscovering joy and happiness for its inhabitants.

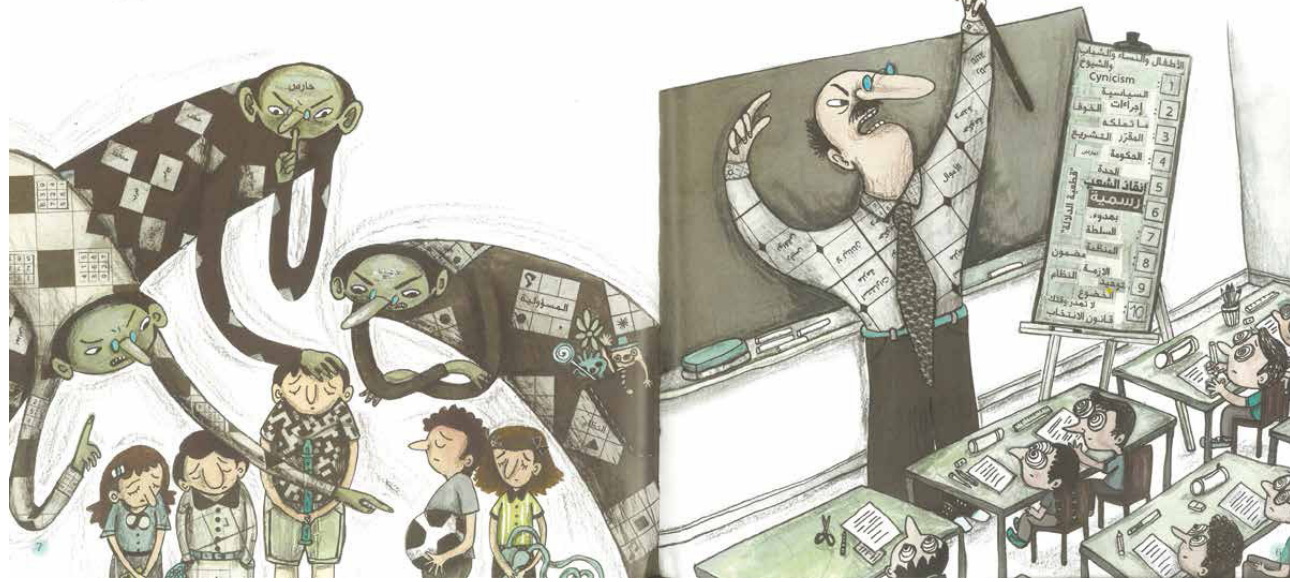
The first pages of the book depict images of grumpy, tired adult characters and a gloomy, colorless atmosphere. By considering these two scenes, we can see that the first one portrays adults intent on stifling children's curiosity and their desire to play and discover. The adult's hand placed on the child's head represents the adult's attempt to control the child, an authoritarian control that does not allow for objections. As for the children, they are depicted with sad expressions, looking down, almost feeling guilty for the games they hold in their hands instead of using them for fun. These illustrations serve as a metaphor for a social context in which children represent a controlled population and adults represent authoritarian rulers of the country. The second scene depicts a group of children listening to their teacher mesmerized, expressing the group's inability to actively receive what is being transmitted to them, i.e., their inclination to passively face real life.

Fayruz is born into a family full of joy, and it is precisely this that makes her curious, questioning everything and, above all, breaking the sacred law of the village. She realizes the absurdity of such strict rules that, far from bringing benefits, only bring sadness and collective fatigue.

فَيْرُوزُ فَتَاةِ الرُّمَّانَةِ



كان صغار القرية يقدسون مدرسة واحدة حيث يتعلمون القراءة والكتابة بالإضافة إلى الطاعة واحترام القوانين وعدم أكل الرمان. جميعهم يتكلمون بصوت منخفض. عيونهم موجهة إلى الأرض دائماً وممنوع عليهم الضحك واللعب والفرح. إلى أن حدث في صباح أحد الأيام شيء غريب، شيء سوف يغير حياة كل من في القرية وبالخصوص حياتي.



قالت فيروز: «أنا أعرف كيف أشعد هالة». ثم ابتسمت وأخرجت من جيبها حبوب الرمان وقالت لهالة: «لا تخافي، تذوقيهما، لن تؤذيكِ. أنا أكل منها دائماً ورائيا أيضاً». بتردد أخذت هالة حبات الرمان ووضعتها في فمها، فتلوتت وجنتاها وصفائرها باللون الرمهي. ضحكت هالة ضحكة جميلة، موسيقية، عالية ورائنة ترد صداهها في أرجاء المدرسة.

ومنذ ذلك اليوم وكلما لمست هالة بيدها حبوب الصوف تلوتت الخيوط بكل الألوان، فباتت تصنع دمي جميلة ملونة بكل الأشكال.

أصبحنا أنا وفيروز وهالة صديقات نشارك أحلامنا وقصصنا وكل ما نفكر به، وبقي ما نفعله سراً بيننا. لم يفهم بقية الأولاد في الصف ماذا يحدث، فقرروا ألا يتكلموا أو يلعبوا معنا ما عدا صبيًا واحدًا يدعى وليدًا.



To dismantle prejudices, I propose the invitation that Fayrüz extends to the villagers:

“It is our right to rejoice, dream,
spend a joyful childhood
and a true life in a green and healthy place.
It is our right to grow up happy and strong,
Making our voice heard and realizing our dreams
With curiosity and knowledge”.

Aware of the need to break the existing law that forbids eating pomegranates, being happy, and being curious, the protagonist seeks companions with whom to share her games.

For any socio-cultural change to succeed, support from a group, even if small, is essential. Therefore, as we have seen, Fayrüz involves some companions in her venture, sharing with them the pleasure of eating pomegranate seeds. Thus the process of change in the village begins, born from the sharing of a forbidden fruit among the young, in defiance of the rules set by the elders.

In the final pages of the book, the author introduces a symbolic figure: Walīd. The character is represented as a great daydreamer, who enters the scene collaborating with Fayrüz. The inclusion of a male character at this stage of the narrative clearly emphasizes the fundamental role of gender collaboration for the success of the ongoing change. While the female figure initiates the revolution, collaboration with the male gender is necessary. Furthermore, the chosen name for the companion is not arbitrary. Walīd, derived from the verb walada, meaning ‘to generate, give birth’, conveys the idea of ‘newborn’, implying the desire to give birth to and make the change concrete, involving even the adults.

In the last pages of the book, the four children are depicted as happy and colorful, sowing pomegranate seeds as they leap towards the left side of the book. This direction, in the Arab cultural tradition where writing proceeds from right to left, carries an important message: the beginning of a journey towards the horizon, hence towards tomorrow, progress, and hope. Concluding the book with this strong message provides a positive perspective for the future, with the awareness that we are only at the beginning of a long process of renewal and the determination to continually work towards improving the world we live in, sowing it with the seeds of hope, commitment, and tenacity with joy.



فَإِذَا وَجَدتَ بُدُورَ رُؤْمَانٍ عَلَى الْأَرْضِ وَشَعَرْتَ بِفَرَحٍ غَرِيبٍ دَاخِلَ قَلْبِكَ، تَأَكَّدُ أَنَّنا مَرَرْنَا
 مِنْ هُنَا، وَمِنْ دُونِ أَنْ تَشْعُرَ سَوْفَ تَرْتَسِمُ عَلَى وَجْهِكَ ابْتِسَامَةً لَطِيفَةً، وَسَتَسْمَعُ مَعَ
 دَقَّاتِ قَلْبِكَ لَحْنًا جَدِيدًا... لَحْنًا سَعِيدًا.



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A universal call for peace and tolerance: the calligraffiti of eL Seed

Manuela Talarico

Abstract

Born in Paris to Tunisian parents, artist eL Seed seeks the union of the Arabic calligraphic tradition with the art of graffiti. Growing up far from his Arab roots, in his teenage years he returned to his parents' home country to understand the roots of his culture and traditions. This article explores eL Seed's artistic vision, a result of the exploration of his own cultural identity and personal technique. The main subject of his works is the Arabic language, which has a dual function: while the work appears dynamic and connected to everyday reality due to its aesthetic beauty and complicated interweaving, it also becomes a carrier of universal messages related to the community and the place where they are made. This dual function led the author to the analysis of the sociocultural aspect of the Manshiyat Naser site (or Garbage city), part of his project 'Perception' (2016). Here, the artist was able to create a language that unites people of different cultures. He questions the reasons behind the condition of communities living in socially marginalised and degraded urban areas. 'Perception' represents this denunciation and was promptly rewarded: in 2016, eL Seed received the title of Global Thinker and the UNESCO Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture, giving him worldwide fame. In eL Seed's works, there are recurring messages of unity, peace, and tolerance that lead to a universal dimension: one does not need to know the Arabic language to understand them, because the calligraphic form manages to capture the soul and heart of the viewers through its movement and essence. Other important projects made by eL Seed are Declaration (Dubai, 2014), Lost Walls (Tunisia, 2014), Mirrors of Babel (Toronto, 2018) and Secrets of Time (Cairo, 2022).



Calligraffiti

Calligraffiti represents a visual art form that combines calligraphy and graffiti to communicate a message through the aesthetic alteration of written words. In other words, calligraphy is the conscious effort to transform a word or group of words into a visual composition¹.

Artistically similar to writing, it differs from the latter by the context in which it emerged and the message it conveys. Calligraffiti was created in one of New York City's most degraded neighbourhoods, the Bronx, as an art of protest, and *calligraffiti* is an art movement that exploits the calligraphic dimension with a purely aesthetic purpose.

eL Seed

eL Seed² is a renowned calligraffiti artist. He was born on the 21st of August 1981 in Paris, where his parents had moved from Gabes, Tunisia. At the age of 16, driven by a strong passion for art, he approached the world of writing and, in 1998 he began painting the walls of Paris. Having travelled to his home country several times to rediscover his roots, traditions, and the culture to which he belongs, eL Seed began studying the Arabic language and was seduced by the beauty of its calligraphic form. In the meantime, he continued the studies he was undertaking and obtained a degree in economics and marketing. In 2006 eL Seed moved to New York, where he began working as a business consultant. However, a few years later he felt the need to paint and moved to Canada, to Montreal, where he met Hest, a French graffiti artist³. This was a pivotal meeting in eL Seed's artistic career, which he recalls with the below statement:

“I met this guy called Hest in Montreal, a French graffiti artist. He encouraged me to paint. After I saw his work, I realised I no longer wanted to paint in Roman letters. We painted together for three months, and then he moved to Indonesia. But I always tell him, that without him, I wouldn't be here today.”⁴

Through this encounter, not only did eL Seed develop his artistic technique but also created a new, distinctive artistic style that he called “calligraffiti”: the union of graffiti and Arabic calligraphy.

1 Carrier (2013) “Calligraphy Meets Graffiti: Calligraphy at Leila Heller Gallery.” <https://artcritical.com/2013/09/16/calligraffiti-at-leila-heller/> (cons. 20/05/2023)

2 eL Seed (in arabic *al-Sīd*) is the stage name chosen by the artist, who wishes to keep his identity confidential. His signature is characterised by the presence of the capital letter “L” because, according to the artist, the handwriting is more balanced. In this and other cases, where not otherwise specified, the information in this article was provided to me personally by eL Seed, whom I have contacted several times on Instagram from summer 2020 to the present.

3 Hest¹, who currently lives and works in Paris, is a graffiti artist but also expresses himself through painting, so his style lies somewhere between these two artistic expressions. See P. Zoghbi, D.K. aka Stone, *Arabic Graffiti*, From Here to Fame, Berlin, 2011, p.109.

4 Cfr. The interview with eL Seed on TED Blog (2015) <https://blog.ted.com/el-seed-uses-calligraffiti-to-transcend-language/> (cons. 21/05/2023)

The artist creates his works in public spaces, in institutions and art galleries of international cities such as Dubai, Cairo, Paris and London. His first Italian exhibition, entitled “Tradizione Proverbial [Proverbial Tradition]” was held in 2017 in Milan at the Patricia Armocida Gallery. The exhibition presented a series of medium and large canvases on which eL Seed had decided to paint proverbs, because the message they communicate is universal, and at the same time, they invite the viewers to question themselves and the reality that surrounds them⁵.

The artist's great skill lies in being able to create a language that unites peoples and different cultures around the world by questioning the prejudices arising from communities living in degraded urban areas characterised by the phenomenon of social marginality. The Perception project, for example, realised in 2016, clearly denounces social marginalisation and, at the same time, showcases the artists' great communicative ability. The same year he was rewarded with the awarding of the title of ‘Global Thinker’, granted to activists, politicians and intellectuals active against human rights violations, and the UNESCO-Sharjah prize for Arab Culture. These are two important recognitions that allowed eL Seed to achieve worldwide fame. In 2015, the international organisation TED recognised him as one of the TED Fellows of the Year, for supporting social progress through his work.

Other important projects include *Declaration* (Dubai, 2014), *Lost Walls* (Tunisia, 2014), *Mirrors of Babel* (Toronto, 2018), and *Secrets of Time* (Cairo, 2022). Worth mentioning are eL Seed's collaborations with Louis Vuitton for the *Foulard d' Artiste* project in 2013 and with Canadian cosmetics company MAC for the packaging of the 2019 make-up collection. His studio, the place where he designs his works, is currently located in Dubai⁶.

The calligraffiti of eL Seed: the search for identity

While still a teenager, eL Seed felt the need to rediscover his roots, and the choice to paint calligraphy in Arabic stems from his search for his own identity:

“I perceive my calligraffiti as a tangible expression of my search for identity, both as an individual and as an artist”⁷

The exploration of one's own cultural identity also allows eL Seed to develop his technique, which consists of creating the work from a quotation or line of poetry that conveys a universal message and at the same time, it represents the place and the local community where the artworks are being created. For this reason, eL Seed paints calligraffiti only after a careful study of the area, which involves a few careful steps. The first is his introduction to the local people. Consequently, he asks the local population to tell him about the place and its traditions, so that his idea becomes a development of those traditions and ultimately, when accomplished, his work becomes intertwined with the people, as if it was a part of them.

5 Cfr. Patricia Armocida's gallery website (cons. 21/05/2023): www.galleriapatriciaarmocida.com/it/esposizioni/tradizione-proverbiale-el-seed

6 Cfr. eL Seed's personal website: <https://elseed-art.com/> (cons. 21/05/2023)

7 Cfr. Middle East Eye website (2015) www.middleeasteye.net/features/tunisian-el-seeds-mural-affair (cons. 21/05/2023)
Middle East Eye: leading Middle East news portal, founded in 2014.

eL Seed spends a lot of time researching the socio-political history of places, reading texts by local authors and carefully choosing the quotation that will be incorporated in his work, which should be meaningful first and foremost to those who live there. As for tools, the artist uses spray cans, brushes, and chisels, because his creations can be both pictorial, painted freehand, and sculptural⁸.

The message that eL Seed communicates with his works has a strong emotional impact on the viewers who, even if unable to decipher the interweaving of the Arabic letters to grasp the meaning of the words, are moved by the beauty of the Arabic calligraphy. The recurring messages in his works call for peace, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence, in the conviction that art can break down stereotypes and inequalities between peoples.

The Perception project in Cairo: UNESCO award winner

eL Seed realised the Perception project in the neighbourhood of Manshiyat Naser - also known as 'Garbage City' - located at the foot of Mount Mokattam, 20 minutes away from Cairo. The area is currently inhabited by the Coptic Christian community known as the *zabbālin* (Arabic for 'rubbish collectors') because of the rubbish sorting work its members have been doing for several decades (now the estimated number of people collecting rubbish amounts to 70,000-80,000). This work is the main source of livelihood for the community: the inhabitants collect about 3,000 tons of rubbish daily from the residents of Cairo, load it onto donkey-drawn carts, and take it to their neighbourhood - which is a large open-air dump. Each inhabitant has his or her task and, thanks to specially constructed facilities for various forms of artisanal recycling, the waste sorting system works perfectly⁹.



8 Cool Hunting website (2015) 'Everything I do has a message. I try to draw inspiration from the place where I paint; I try to bring messages that are relevant to the people there' <https://coolhunting.com/culture/el-seed-2015-ted-fellow/> (cons. 21/05/2023)
Cool Hunting is a magazine that focuses on current trends and cultural patterns.

9 Cfr. Rai News website, "Journey among the Zabbalins in Cairo's Garbage City" (cons. 21/05/2023). Rai News: internet portal for information services, launched in 2013.

As a resident demonstrates in the documentary *Zabbaleen trash town*¹⁰, work is organised to ensure proper sorting. The plastic is washed and shredded with a special machine, collected in large bags, and finally sold to recyclers. Another key recycling component is the pigs that feed on the organic waste. The sorting, in short, allows the inhabitants to implement separate waste collection by offering a rudimentary, but highly effective service.



eL Seed began the project in 2009, after hearing about the decision of the Ministry of Health and the at the time Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to slaughter 300,000 pigs from the Manshiyat Naser neighbourhood, following the spread of the H1N1 virus. This decision would interfere with the aforementioned organic recycling system¹¹.

At the presentation of the Perception Project¹² as a Ted Fellow, eL Seed maintained that the inhabitants manage to sustain the city's economy through their efficient and globally profitable recycling system, accusing prejudices against the *zabbālin*.

10 Documentary directed by A. Somov "Zabbaleen Trash Town un'intera comunità in Egitto che vive di rifiuti". (2017)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwrZfZPFIVo (cons. 21/05/2023)

11 Vita magazine website, article by G. Meroni 'Swine fever. Egypt decides extermination for all pigs' (2009), (cons. 21/05/2023):
www.vita.it/it/article/2009/04/30/febbre-suina-egitto-decide-sterminio-per-tutti-i-maiali/88682/
Vita: magazine dedicated to social reporting, economic and environmental sustainability.

12 El Seed shares the story of its project at the TED fellow programme, 'A peace project, painted through 50 buildings'
www.ted.com/talks/el_seed_a_project_of_peace_painted_across_50_buildings?language=it
(cons. 21/05/2023)

With this project, not only did eL Seed improve the aspect of the neighbourhood, but he also managed to break the stereotypes and prejudices against the Coptic community. In this context, the art of calligraphy presents itself as a true form of communication. The title of the work, Perception, fully illustrates the message of the artwork, and proposes to its viewers to improve their perceptions and learn to see their surroundings positively and turning the spotlight on this denigrated community through the beauty and message of solidarity of the calligraphiti.

The realisation of the Perception project

After five years of planning, eL Seed and his team reached the Manshiyat Nasser neighbourhood to finally start the artistic project. Only after lengthy discussions with Father Samaan, the head of the Coptic community of the zabbālin, and Mario, the stage name of a local artist, did the team manage to get approval for the project and the support of the locals. eL Seed wanted to paint the calligraphy on fifty buildings in the neighbourhood, creating an anamorphic work that can be observed from one vantage point: the top of Mount Mokattam. Manshiyat Nasser is divided into two areas: the residential, located in a lower area, which houses the sorting plants and warehouses where waste is stored, and the upper area, located on the slopes of Mount Mokattam, which is considered sacred by the Coptic community, as it is home to the rock church of St. Simon, the destination of many pilgrimages. The Church, located inside a quarry carved into the rock, has a semicircular shape and in the 1970's was equipped with an amphitheatre that can accommodate up to 20,000 people. eL Seed believes that this church on Mount Mokattam, a source of pride for the local community and for all Copts around the world, is the perfect point from which his work can be observed¹³.

Furthermore, in this specific work, the verbal message, i.e. the written word, carries a universal message. The sentence painted by eL Seed in Arabic calligraphy on the walls of 'Garbage City' consists of a quotation from the Coptic bishop St. Athanasius of Alexandria (295-373), which states: *'In arāda aḥad an yabṣura nūr al-shams, fa-inna 'alayhi an yamsaḥa 'aynayhi / Anyone who wants to see the sunlight clearly needs to wipe his eyes first'*¹⁴.

According to what the artist said during the presentation of his work as a Ted Fellow, this quotation perfectly reflects the spirit of the project. On his website, he wrote: 'I question the level of judgement and misperception that society may unconsciously have towards a community based on its differences'¹⁵. Art, therefore, becomes a bridge of peace between peoples, and the quote from St. Athanasius of Alexandria makes us reflect on how fundamental it is to know and understand before judging.

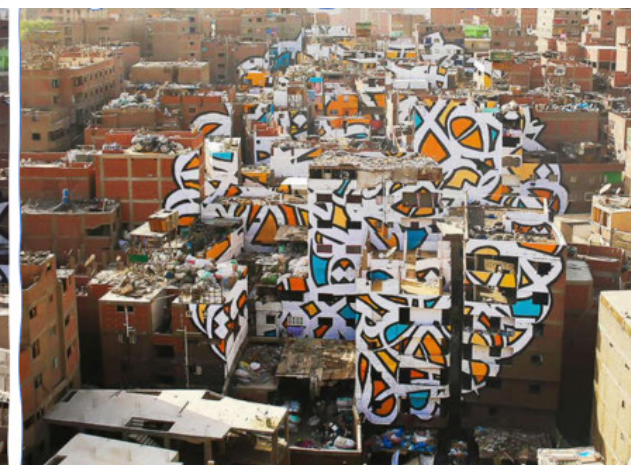
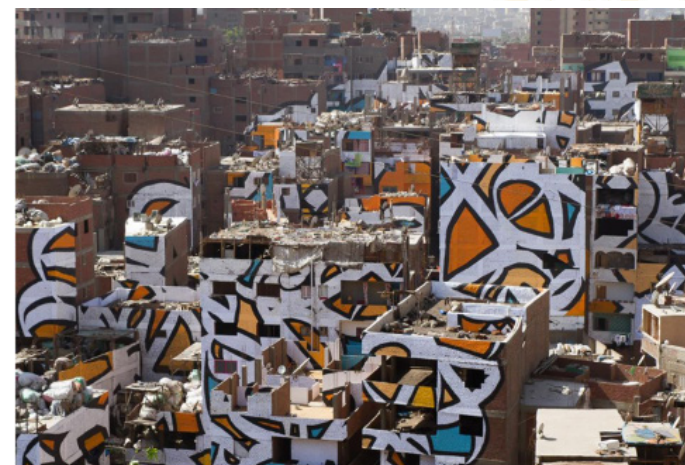
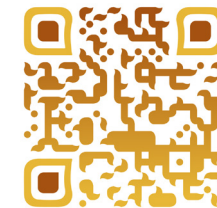
Thanks to the collaboration of the inhabitants of Manshiyat Nasser and the team of artists and collaborators from France, North Africa, the Middle East and the United States, eL Seed began painting the enormous calligraphy. Hundreds of litres of paint and a dozen hoists were required

¹³ Cfr. Website Search Gate article by K. Wiacek "The Cairo Garbage City as a self-sufficient "Inner City" pdf, (2020) www.researchgate.net/publication/340413655_The_Cairo_Garbage_City_as_a_Self-Sufficient_Inner_City (cons. 21/05/2023)

¹⁴ Cfr. el Seed's personal website: <https://elseed-art.com/> (cons. 21/05/2023)

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

for its realisation. The eL Seed team and the residents of Manshiyat Nasser collaborated in the realisation by filling in the spaces in the Arabic script drawn by eL Seed in yellow, white, blue and black. Others took care of assembling and dismantling equipment and scaffolding. The people working with eL Seed and his team had no idea of the design being formed and how it would look like, because the artist only wanted to show the work after its completion. Admittedly, the phosphorescent white paint illuminated by UV light reflectors at night makes the writings of eL Seed visible from the streets of the neighbourhood, where they appear fragmented and isolated (although united by the calligraphic mark); however, the work can only be admired in its full beauty from Mount Mokattam.



Conclusion

This essay highlights the beauty of the Arabic calligraphic tradition combined with the art of graffiti art, emphasising the importance of the messages that the most famous contemporary Arabic calligrapher, eL Seed, intends to communicate through his works.

The main subject within his creations is the Arabic language, which performs a dual function. First, through the pliability of its letters, elegantly interwoven with one another, the work appears dynamic and perfectly connected to everyday reality. Consequently, these characters and words become the bearer of universal messages, current and relevant to the community and the place where they are created.

This dual function appears clearly in the work 'Perception', where eL Seed considered the socio-cultural aspects of the Manshiyat Nasser neighbourhood in Cairo. In this work, the location and its community become an important inspiration for the artist and by interweaving the semantic content of the phrase with the beauty of the written Arabic language, they allow a strong emotional impact on the viewers. Furthermore, the recurring messages of unity, peace and tolerance in eL Seed's works lead to a universal dimension, where it is not necessary to know the Arabic language, as the calligraphic form succeeds in capturing the soul and heart of the viewers through the movement and sinuosity of its letters. The artist aims to allow viewers to appreciate the aesthetics of the writing (especially coloured with strong, highly visible hues) and, at the same time, prompts them to reflect on the world that surrounds them. His works challenge the stereotypes and prejudices that ignorance dictates.

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- P. Zoghbi, D.K. aka Stone, *Arabic Graffiti*, From Here To Fame, Berlino, 2011, p.109.

Video resources

- Documentary directed by A. Somov 'Zabbaleen Trash Town an entire community in Egypt living off waste'. (2017) www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwrZfZPFIVo (cons. 21/05/2023)
- Video TED fellow, "A peace project, painted through 50 buildings" www.ted.com/talks/el_seed_a_project_of_peace_painted_across_50_buildings?language=it (cons. 21/05/2023).



Street Art as a form of protest: Haifa Subay

Tullia Armano

Abstract

This article explores the great communicative power of Street Art, an artistic current born during the 90s in New York after the spread of Graffiti Art, which soon developed as a form of political and social protest. During the Arab Spring, Street Art became the main medium used by Arab street artists to denounce the regimes.

This article focuses on the Yemeni street artist Haifa Subay, who started painting murals for an artistic campaign of her brother Murad. In 2017, a little after the start of the Yemeni civil war in 2014, Haifa Subay decided to pursue a career as a street artist by creating her first artistic campaign called Silent Victim, which aimed at keeping alive the memories of the war crimes suffered by the Yemeni people. Thanks to her work and her social commitment, in 2019 the artist was invited to participate in the Singapore Biennale, where she presented an unpublished exhibition entitled “War and Humans”.

The same year, however, the political situation in Yemen worsened and Haifa Subay moved to the south of the country, where she began to work on her second artistic campaign entitled *Women and War*. The artist aimed to portray women as victims of war, through an angle that showed their strength and courage, as a message of hope to the Yemeni people. In 2022, in recognition of her artistic activities in support of women’s and children’s issues, Haifa Subay was awarded the Prince Claus Foundation ‘Seeds Award’.

This article concludes with an unpublished interview with Haifa Subay dated January 2023, where her artistic and social work in Yemen is further discussed.

The birth of Street Art

In the 1970s, the African and Latin American population of the New York district of the Bronx developed a new musical genre: Hip Hop. This term was used for the first time by Keith Wiggins (stage name: Keef Cowboy), a member of the American musical group Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five, to imitate the “hip, hop, hip, hop” rhythm at which soldiers usually march. He dedicated the sound to a friend who was about to enlist in the army. The chant became so popular that Wiggins decided to include it in his show¹. Since then, the expression ‘Hip Hop’ started to be used as a term to encompass four artistic subcultures: break dance, rap music, disc jockeys [DJs] and graffiti². At that time, the mass media began to use the term ‘graffiti’ to refer to a phenomenon that was spreading among young people: the writing of their names or pseudonyms on various types of urban surfaces. From this culture the practice of ‘tags’³ developed, or the writing of signatures on any surface, especially on trains.

¹ McDonald F., 2013, p.162-164.

² Ivi, p.154.

³ Ivi, p. 164.

In the 70s, tags became famous thanks to a boy who wrote his signature, TAKI 183, multiple times on the walls of Manhattan. This specific signature caught the attention of a journalist who wrote an article for the New York Times entitled *TAKI 183 Spawns Pen Pals*⁴. Consequently, TAKI was the first New York graffiti artist to be mentioned in a newspaper. He is now considered the father of contemporary graffiti. Over a short period, graffiti exploded into a colorful and stylish art form, often adopting the scale of a mural⁵.

As of the 1980s, graffiti started to be exhibited in galleries. Viewers, who until that moment had only seen graffiti as acts of vandalism, were often shocked by the radical messages implicit in that new art form. In the 90s metropolitan writing spread considerably, and, at the same time, new drawing techniques began to appear, such as stencilling, a technique that made it possible to create captivating and sophisticated images⁶. This popularity also opened the door to a new movement, soon defined as Street Art.

Nicholas Alden Riggle provides a comprehensive definition of this art movement and argues that, like Pop Art, Street Art is a critical response to the modern separation of art and life: while the former challenges modernism by allowing everyday objects to enter museums, Street Art does it by bringing art out of museums, inserting them into the fractured flow of everyday life. In short, like the works exhibited in art galleries, even those created on the street are formally engaging, and are capable of generating a sudden aesthetic experience in the eyes of the beholder⁷. Another characteristic of Street Art is the many styles available to artists: stencil art, sticker art, mosaic art, installation art, and poster art.

Street Art in the Middle East

In the Middle East, Street Art has developed with different implications: some art forms are illegal, whereas others are part of urban planning. The production of this art form, however, reached its peak in 2011, when the Arab Spring started.

In Egypt, where the riots started in January 2011, Street Art quickly spread to demand political changes, denounce the regime and the oppressors, and express the solidarity of the Egyptian rioters with those of other Arab countries⁸. The artworks created during that period were mostly made with stencils: *The Girl in the Blue Bra* (Ill.1) and *Nefertiti in a Gas Mask* (Ill.2)⁹ are works that have become famous symbols of resistance. Other subjects often portrayed were martyrs of the Egyptian revolt, such as Sheikh Emad Effat¹⁰, killed by the military.

4 www.nytimes.com/1971/07/21/archives/taki-183-spawns-pen-pals.html

5 www.taki183.net/

6 McDonald F., 2013, pp. 193-194.

7 Riggle N. A., 2010, p. 243.

8 Khatib L., 2013.

9 DeTurk S., 2019, p. 22.

10 Emad Effat was a highly regarded Muslim scholar who taught at Al-Azhar Mosque and at Dar Al-Iftaa, the Muslim world's leading institution for legal research. He died during the Egyptian Arab Spring in 2011, when the military police violently repressed the sit-in in front of the Egyptian government building in Tahrir Square in which Effat had taken part (Khazbak R., 2011).



Illustration 1 - "The girl in the blue bra"



Illustration 2 - "Nefertiti in a gas mask" El Zeft

In Palestine, however, Street Art was not initiated by its citizens. The first works were signed by the Bristolian street artist Banksy, who in 2005 went to the separation wall erected by the Jewish state between Israel and Palestine in the West Bank barrier and painted nine murals highly critical of the wall's function. According to the artist, the wall is to "transform Palestine into the largest open-air prison in the world"¹¹.

In the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, where welfare and development policies are pursuant of a creative city model, much space has been given to Street Art. Since 2014 several related events have taken place, such as the Dubai Canvas Festival¹², which is open to local and international participants¹³, the Dubai Waterfront Market Murals competition¹⁴, and the Freej initiative for Dubai Expo 2020¹⁵. In these cases, artists aim to present Street Art as a highly expressive art form that can be enjoyed by all.

Street Art in Yemen

Similar to Egypt, Street Art in Yemen experienced its period of maximum development in 2011, coinciding with the outbreak of the Arab revolts.

11 *Ivi*, p. 72.

12 *Ivi*, p. 167.

13 *Ivi*, p. 155.

14 Jalal M., 2023.

15 Biz Today, 2020.



Illustration 3 - “Women make peace”, Haifa Subay (work exhibited at the Singapore Museum of Art)

One of its best-known representatives is Murad Subay who, inspired by the peaceful protests of the Revolutionary Youth, launched his first Street Art campaign in 2011¹⁶. His goal was to embellish the walls of buildings destroyed by the war and to actively involve Yemeni citizens in the realisation of his artistic project¹⁷. This initiative was the springboard for the artistic career of Murad Subay and other street artists such as Thiyazen al-Alawi, Tamam al-Shaibani, Muhammad al-Shari and Haifa Subay. Operating within a context of profound political instability, war, and economic and health crises, these artists aim to draw international attention to the problems afflicting Yemen, denouncing war crimes, and giving the Yemeni people a voice through their art.

Haifa Subay

Street artist Haifa Subay was born in Dhamar, Yemen, in 1992. She grew up in the capital Sana'a, where she graduated in economics and commerce¹⁸. Her passion for art developed in childhood; however, only in 2012, when peaceful protests turned into an armed conflict that devastated her country, did Haifa begin to draw in the street, actively participating in the artistic campaigns launched by her brother Murad.

¹⁶ Grenier E., 2021.

¹⁷ Alviso-Marino A., 2014, p. 2.

¹⁸ Al-Masna'ai N., 2022.



Illustration 4 - “Sananjū ma’an” [We will survive together], Haifa Subay

In 2015, the Saudi-led coalition bombed Yemen's cities, affecting the already difficult situation in the country¹⁹. A year later, in 2016, Haifa lost her job, thus joining the growing number of young Yemenis unemployed due to the war. After months of growing frustration, on the 17th of August 2017, Haifa created her first work as a solo artist: a mural depicting a group of women and children huddled behind a dark corner. The work, titled *Khalfa al-damār* [Behind the Destruction], was the first in her *Ḍaḥāyā ṣāmitin*²⁰ [Silent Victims] campaign. This includes 13 murals aimed at highlighting the human conditions of the war in Yemen²¹ through stories of famine, victims of landmines, destruction of schools, and the marginalisation of women and children. Her murals depict countless stories of starving children, of women whose husbands have been mercilessly killed or have been made disappear, and of people living in extreme economic hardship, exposed to violence and sexual abuse.

During her career as an artist spokesperson for the suffering of the Yemeni people, Haifa found herself forced to face the distrust of the local population and the resistance of the authorities, not used to seeing a woman painting on the street. Over time, however, some women and children became passionate about her work and joined her by painting murals recounting war crimes to save them from oblivion²². Through her work, Haifa Subay has managed to inspire many people,

¹⁹ Khan B., 2022.

²⁰ Artistic campaign currently underway.

²¹ Aziza S., 2018.

²² Khan B., 2022.

creating a group of women who help and support her during her campaigns. They find relief from negative experiences through their artistic engagement. On March 8, 2018, International Women's Day, Haifa and her group decided to create a series of murals denouncing the suffering of Yemeni women. The artwork, entitled *Al-yawm al-'ālamī li-l-mar'a* [International Women's Day] depicts a woman covering her eyes with one hand and her mouth with the other, symbolising the unspeakable and unacknowledged suffering of the female population of Yemen²³.

On August 9 of the same year, Haifa launched an appeal for peace through a social media campaign entitled *Ḥamlat al-ḥamāma*²⁴ [Campaign of the Dove]: through one of her posts, both on her Instagram page and on Facebook, she encouraged her followers to participate in the campaign by posting a photo of themselves on Instagram holding a drawing of a dove and the hashtags #Dove_Campaign and #Peace_for_Yemen. By making this campaign social, Haifa's message was that everyone, regardless of country, educational level or social class, could advocate for peace. By doing this, she managed to bring her initiative to a global audience.

In 2019 Haifa was the first street artist invited to the Singapore Biennale entitled "Every Step in the Right Direction", where she painted a series of murals on a 22-metre-long²⁵ wall at the Singapore Art Museum. The exhibition, entitled "War and Humans" consists of 9 works: some are part of the *Silent Victims* campaign, while others are unpublished, like the artwork entitled *Women Make Peace* (Ill.3), which also appeared on the cover of *Al Raida*²⁶ magazine.

In the same year, Haifa Subay was among the 4 finalists of the twelfth Benesse Prize, awarded to artists of the Singapore Biennale whose art critically and experimentally reflects wellness²⁷ as a theme.

After 2019 the political situation in Yemen worsened and the Houthis tightened control over the capital Sana'a, banning, among other things, Street Art. When the city authorities confiscated Haifa's art tools, they also threatened to arrest her²⁸. The artist was stopped from working on the *Silent Victims* campaign²⁹. That year the attitude of people in Sana'a and the north of the country changed. At the beginning of her career, Haifa Subay was encouraged and supported by many. Over time, however, fear of the Houthi regime increased, leading people to despise and criticise works of art. As a consequence, the artist moved to Aden in 2020, where the political situation was less difficult than in the north, and the authorities allowed Haifa to continue painting.

On the 17th of December of the same year, Haifa Subay launched her third campaign, *al-Nisā' wa-l-ḥarb*³⁰ [Women and war], focused on women in times of war. The artist aimed to portray women

23 Aziza S., 2018.

24 Artistic campaign currently underway.

25 Misbah I., 2022.

26 *Al Raida*, vol.43, n. 1, August 2019. See www.instagram.com/haifasubay/?hl=en

27 Established in 1995 by the Benesse Corporation, the prize was awarded for the first time at the Venice Biennale in the same year and has been the official prize of the Singapore Biennale since 2016, presented in collaboration with the Singapore Art Museum. (www.lasalle.edu.sg/about/awards-showcase/benesse-prize) See Adachi T., 2019.

28 Molina S. F., 2021.

29 Abdessamad F., 2021.

30 Artistic campaign currently underway.

not only as victims but also as positive and hopeful individuals, who urged people to continue living during times of war. The first mural of the campaign, painted on the 17th of December 2020, is titled *Sananjū ma'an* [We Will Survive Together] (Ill. 4) and is a self-portrait of the artist who was in her sixth month of pregnancy. Haifa, like many other Yemeni women, risked having to face premature birth due to lack of medicines and inefficient sanitation, but despite this, she continued to paint to inspire the culture of social change among its people. According to Bendle, Yemen is one of the worst countries in the world for women³¹.

With her third campaign, the artist underlined the importance of women as messengers of peace in Yemen. But, while various organisations, including the Peace Track Initiative³², have repeatedly called for the inclusion of women in the peace process³³, their political participation remains almost non-existent, as they make up just 0.3 percent of the Yemeni parliament³⁴. Consequently, Haifa Subay has tried to empower women with the potential to influence the conflict using the voice of Street Art.

Overall, this art form is believed to be an effective means of communication, as it directly involves people on the street³⁵; furthermore, it is considered a democratic way of expression because it is within everyone's reach and is not affected by censorial legislation. People involved in Street Art can experience it firsthand; they can also have a chat with the artist and talk about their issues³⁶.

In 2021, the artist created two more murals for the aforementioned *Women and War* campaign. The first, *Umūma* [Motherhood] (Ill. 5), is a self-portrait in which Haifa holds her newborn

31 Bendle O., 2019.

32 NGO whose operations are guided by CEDAW, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and its subsequent resolutions on women, peace and security, and internationally agreed human rights frameworks. (<https://reliefweb.int/organization/pti>)

33 Molina S. F., 2021.

34 Bendle O., 2019.

35 Molina S. F., 2021.

36 *Ibidem*.

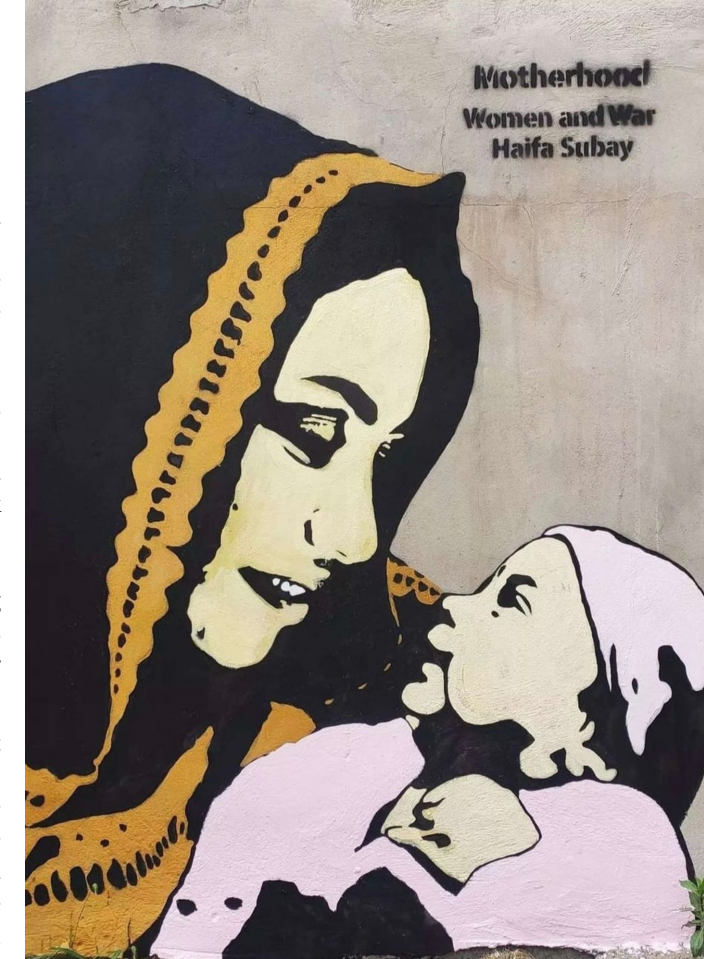


Illustration 5 - "Umūma" [Motherhood], Haifa Subay

daughter Nadine in her arms³⁷, while the second, *Al-mar'a laysa kis li-l-mulākama* [The Woman is not a Punching Bag], was made in January 2022 and depicts a red punching bag with the title of the mural written on it³⁸.

On the 3rd of September 2021, after returning to Sana'a, Haifa painted the mural entitled *Fī intizār al-salām* [Waiting for Peace] (Ill. 6) on the wall of her parents' house, as she was still not allowed to paint on the walls of her city³⁹. The work, commissioned by the Nobel Women's Initiative [NWI]⁴⁰,

37 www.instagram.com/haifasubay/?hl=en See also the workshop "Parliamoci con l'arte", organised by the Anzaar Laboratory at the Museum of Oriental Art (MAO) in Turin, where this work was presented. www.anzaar.unito.it/home-page/eventi/conclusi

38 www.instagram.com/haifasubay/?hl=en

39 *ibidem*.

40 Non-governmental organisation established in 2006 based in Canada, uses the prestige of the Nobel Peace Prize and brave women to magnify the power and visibility of women working in countries around the world for peace, justice and equality. <https://reliefweb.int/organization/nwi>

depicts the Yemeni people lining up for peace in the same way they line up for food and services, with black doves flying overhead to symbolise hope as a rare commodity for citizens.

In October 2022, Haifa Subay received the Prince Claus Foundation's⁴¹ *Seeds Award 2022*⁴² in recognition of her artistic activities in support of women's and children's issues during the war in Yemen⁴³.

To date, Haifa Subay is still advocating for peace in Yemen with two artistic campaigns⁴⁴. Her greatest wish is that the war in Yemen ends as soon as possible and for this, she urges her people not to surrender:

"Through my art I try to transmit a positive message to other women to wage the war with non-violent alternatives. Hopefully street art can contribute to seeing the world in a different way to end this pointless war. We should not surrender."⁴⁵

Interview with Haifa Subay (carried out via e-mail on the 25th of January 2023)

TA: First, I wanted to start this written interview by complimenting you on your work. Your murals, in addition to being beautiful, have a great communicative power and a glance at them is enough to understand the serious suffering that the war is causing to Yemeni women and children. You started painting your murals in Sana'a in 2012 but, due to the worsening political situation in Yemen in 2020, you moved to Aden, where you continued to paint. Then, in 2022 you returned to the capital, where you painted the mural "Waiting for peace" on the wall of your house in collaboration with the Nobel Women's Initiative. Have you been able to paint since then? What is the situation in Yemen now?

HS: No, I have not painted since then, but will paint in the coming days again! It is getting worse; nothing changes except for the worse! Day by day human rights become worse, especially since when Houthies Militia controls the Capital as well as the north. There is a great restriction on the freedom of women in particular. When I moved about a month ago to the city of Aden, my sister and [her] daughter were not allowed to travel to Aden without the presence of a Mahram, which means a man who is related to us such as a father, brother or husband, so my father had to make a written declaration signed by the competent authorities to allow us to come to my house in the city of Aden. There are also restrictions on working women and women's clothing as well!

41 The Prince Claus Foundation, established in 1996 in honor of Prince Claus van Amsberg, aims to support, honor and connect artists and cultural workers in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe, especially where cultural expression is under pressure. <https://princeclausfund.org/about>

42 The Seeds Award is presented annually to 100 emerging artists whose artistic work addresses pressing social and/or political issues within their local context. <https://princeclausfund.org/prince-claus-seed-awards>

43 <https://princeclausfund.org/awardees/haifa-subay>

44 Abdessamad F., 2021.

45 Molina S. F., 2021.

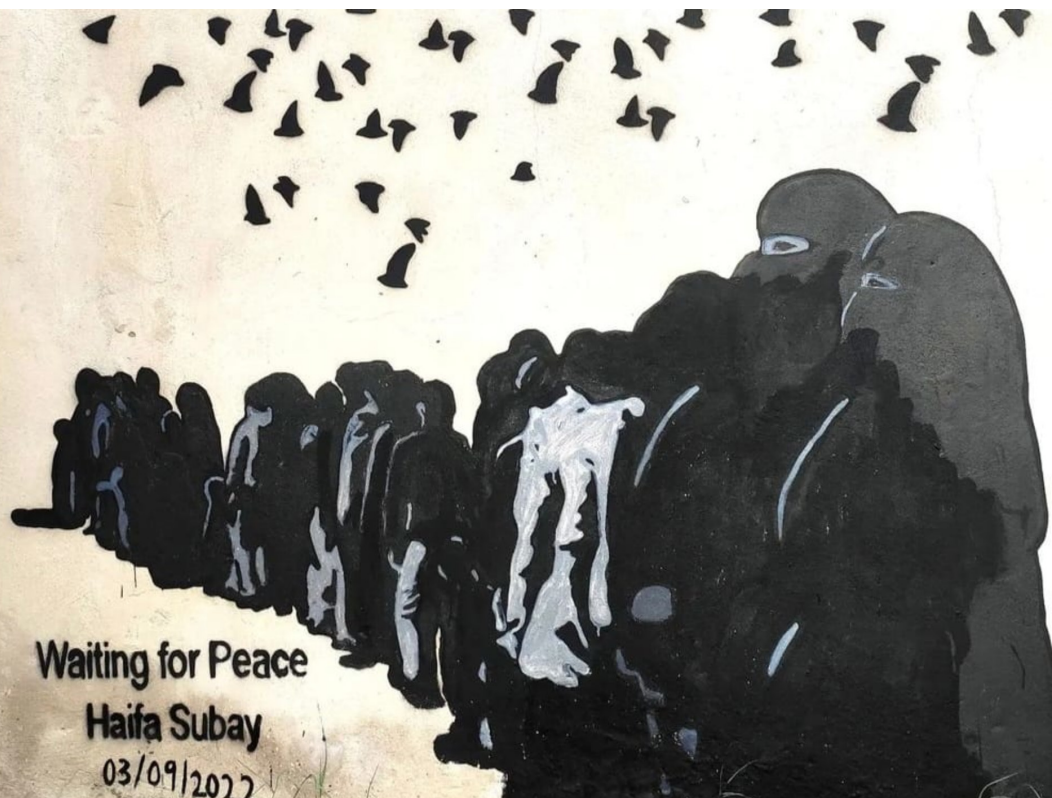


Illustration 6 - "Fī intizār al-salām" [Waiting for peace], Haifa Subay

TA: As an advocate for peace in Yemen, what is your biggest fear?

HS: My biggest fear is that the war will continue for many years and that peace will be far from my country. We have lived through very difficult times, and I think that the more time that passes, the more I feel that peace is fleeing away from us. I fear that our children will live what we lived through in terms of war and difficult circumstances.

TA: In your opinion, is there anything that could be done at a national level to alleviate, even slightly, the suffering of the Yemeni people? And is there anything other countries could do to concretely help Yemeni citizens?

HS: I think that the loud voices calling for an end to the war and for a radical solution to the war that has been going on for years is what it should be, whether from those inside Yemen or from other countries. Pressure must be placed on all parties to the war so that the war ends once and for all, and not just a truce after a truce, and with a guarantee for the safety of all citizens and that no assassinations will be carried out after the end of the war.

TA: Given your experience, what advice would you give to women who, like you, want to do something concrete to help the victims of the war in Yemen? And to those who want to pursue a street artist career in the country, what would you suggest?

HS: As for women, I hope that they will have the strength and courage to achieve their dreams and whatever can ease the burden of the life we live in, not only in art; there are many fields in which women can work and contribute to making a great change in society. In the current situation, especially in northern Yemen, I do not advise, based on my experience, carrying out any artistic works in the street to prevent the arrest of street artists. The situation is very tense for everyone who says *no* and for everyone who objects or implements actions that are not within the agenda of the Houthi militia.

TA: Your works arise from the need to do something to end the conflict in Yemen and to give a voice to the silent victims of this war. Do you think you would have pursued a career as an artist anyway if there hadn't been conflicts in the country? If yes, who do you think your subjects would have been? If not, what other path would you have taken?

HS: Yes, I would have been an artist anyway. Before the war, I had been practising art since I was a child, and I used to make plastic paintings, but of course, it would not go outside the framework of art. The topics of my campaigns are not only during the war, but most of these issues were exacerbated and increased in frequency during the war. We have been suffering for many years, perhaps for decades. The situation for women is not good at all, and the end of the war will not change much unless there is community awareness and deterrent laws that guarantee women's rights.

TA: A few years ago, you became the mother of a beautiful little girl named Nadine. Has the experience of motherhood, which unfortunately was lived in a context of war where there is no possibility of accessing medicines and adequate medical assistance, greatly influenced your art?

HS: The experience of motherhood definitely affected the art that I do, I became more careful about myself and to be safe and not to put myself in front of the cannon as they say! I have also become calmer and more deliberate when making decisions, especially those that require great audacity. I think of my child first and foremost, and I have also begun to put myself in the place of any woman who has children, and I know that any decision a woman takes will stem from the fear inside her for her children. I am also thinking of adding the childish element in my paintings, one way or another.

TA: In the interview you gave to Farah Adbessamad for *The Markaz Review* I read that you started painting on the street with your older brother, Murad Subay, but still managed to keep your artistic styles separated. Regarding the artistic style, I wanted to ask you: is there any artist, Yemeni or foreign, who has particularly inspired you and who, consequently, has influenced your style? Or was your artistic style born spontaneously while drawing in your notebook as a child?

HS: Since my childhood, I have painted differently. I indeed used to look at the paintings of great artists, and I grew to love art because of the beauty and artistic legacy that they left us, I love a lot of the works of Salvador Dali, Van Gogh and Picasso as well, but from my point of view, I do not see any similarities between my paintings and the paintings of these great artists. So, in my opinion, I have not been influenced by any other artist.

TA: While researching on the Internet I noticed that your brother Murad Subay is called the 'Yemen's Banksy', but, I believe that your works are closer to Banksy's style. From my point of view, both in your works and Banksy's the prevailing colour is black and you both draw attention to your subjects by not putting a background around them. Furthermore, you both use irony which, albeit subtle, has a great impact on those who observe your works; for example, your mural 'Just a Leg' shows a boy holding his leg, which was amputated by a mine, wrapped as a gift, while Banksy's mural "Bomb hugging" depicts a little girl hugging an air missile as if it were a stuffed animal. Do you believe these similarities are true? Do you think your communication styles are similar?

HS: In fact, I love Banksy's works very much and he is such a great artist, but I did not think beforehand that there would be similarities between my works and his artworks. My works may be simpler and stem from the harshness of the experience and the war we live in. Perhaps, as you said, the colours are similar, but it is just a coincidence. The black colour is one of my favourite colours, and it reflects the darkness of the situation. In the tragedy that we are going through, I focus on the presence of colours such as black, red, yellow, and grey, and these colours attract the viewer, and from my point of view, they are the colours that most reflect the beauty of the murals.

TA: Street artists usually sign their works under a pseudonym and often try to hide their identity; instead, you have always signed your works using your first and last name and you have always shown your face, both in photos, next to your murals, and in your self-portraits *We will survive* and *Motherhood* which are part of the campaign *Women and War*. Why this choice?

HS: Since my childhood, I have been proud of my love for art, and I never thought of hiding my identity! This is a personal thing, and every artist has the right to hide or show his identity. I respect the choice of any artist.

TA: During your artistic career you have received several awards, including the unedited exhibition “War and Humans” at the Singapore Biennale and the “Seeds Award 2022”. What are your near future goals as an artist? And what is the biggest dream you would like to achieve?

HS: As for my dreams and aspirations, I certainly hope to implement a lot of artworks that shed light on the most important issues in Yemeni and humanitarian affairs. I also hope that the day will come when the war in Yemen will end, and peace will prevail in Yemen and that art will play a major role in community change and awareness.

TA: Have you ever thought about asking for collaboration from other street artists, even foreign ones, to help you spread your message worldwide through art? Do you think it could be doable? Do you think it would help your cause?

HS: In fact, there was a cooperation between me and a company in Paris that printed five murals of my artworks and I participated in one of the events they organised. Also, one of my murals was displayed in the California Museum in cooperation with an artist in America. Certainly, it would be good to do more collaborations.

TA: Today you are an accomplished street artist with 3 ongoing campaigns, an advocate for peace in Yemen, the mother of a beautiful little girl named Nadine and much more: what is the phrase, poetic verse or word that best represents you?

HS: A woman and an artist mother who paints for the voiceless.

TA: While I was doing research, I saw that you finance your paintings through the sale of cosmetics or by selling works of art. Since I couldn't find further information, I wanted to ask you: do you buy and sell cosmetics online or do you have a shop? And are the works of art you are selling your own?

HS: In fact, several years ago I was working in the trade in cosmetics, but to be honest with you, I did not find myself in it, and despite my art being blocked during that period, something was telling me that trade is not what I like to continue doing and that art is my destiny. And I must go back to practising it and focusing on it. Yes, I sell my own paintings.

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Street arts, graffiti and spontaneous writings from the Arab Spring to the walls of Turin

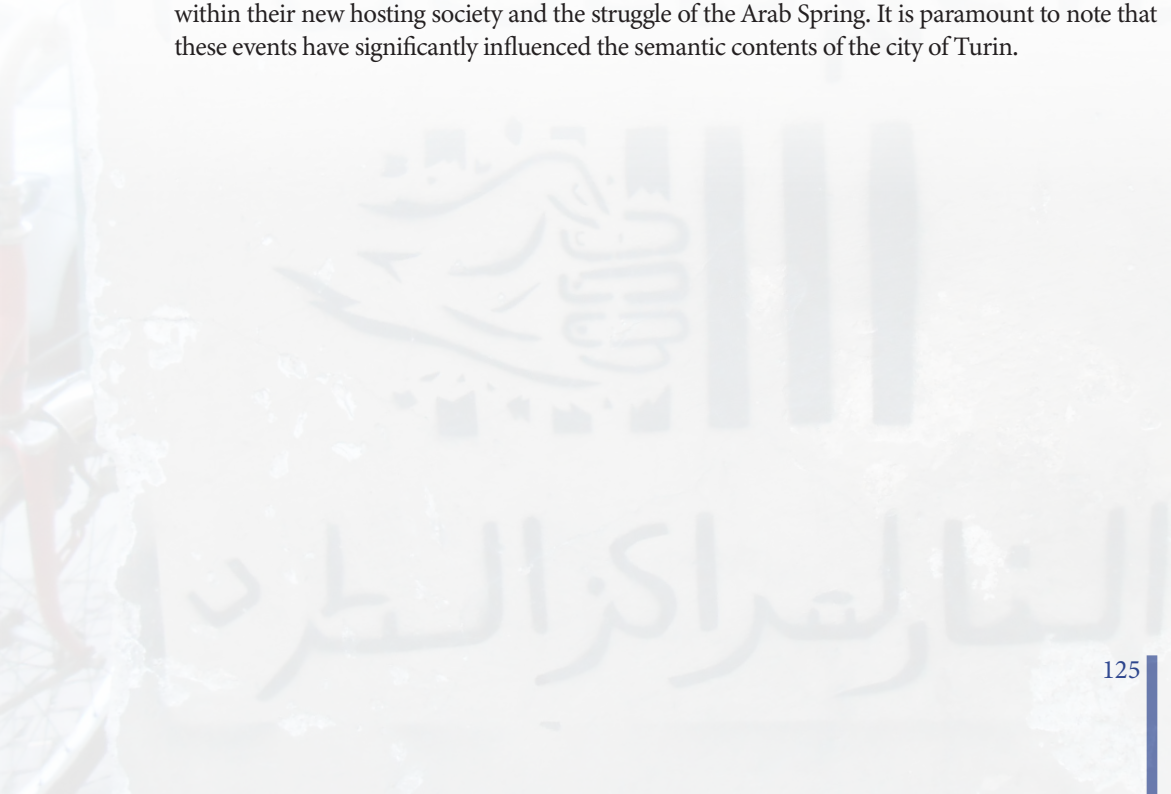
Spaces of Memory and Resistance

Lucia Aletto

Abstract

Graffiti is a contemporary and widespread urban practice that symbolizes rebellion and seeking freedom from the methodical colonization of space by institutional powers. Its observation and documentation provide a glimpse into the social reality in which we live, revealing the dynamics of everyday life and the processes of identification and appropriation of public space by its inhabitants. In today's globalized world, the issue becomes more complex because people, along with their voices, move from one society to another in an increasingly intense flow (Blommaert, 2012).

The first section of this chapter sheds light on the role of Street Art and Graffiti in Arab Springs, drawing upon insights gained from interviews with artists from the Arab world. The setting of the Arab Spring appears to be a decisive starting point for the second part of the article, which discussed an extract from a Turin-based case study on the production of graffiti and spontaneous writings by the Arab community between 2012 and 2014. Through the observation and study of graffiti and spontaneous writings produced by Arabs on the walls of Turin, the article highlights the deep link between the struggle for the social vindication of young Arab immigrants' rights within their new hosting society and the struggle of the Arab Spring. It is paramount to note that these events have significantly influenced the semantic contents of the city of Turin.



Introduction

For an attentive analysis of the city in which we live, we need to pay greater attention to all those processes of sense-making inscribed in uncommon places and in the practices that individuals and groups develop and adopt. According to Lefebvre¹, the sense of a place is the result of its modes of use, marked by both authorized and unauthorized practices, and how it is experienced by those who inhabit it and those who pass through it, whether they are natives, foreigners, or migrants. In this regard, graffiti plays a key role in the interpretation of social-urban relations. The term graffiti is used in this contribution to refer to practices, including street art², that seek to interact with the city without the pretense of asserting something specific. Instead, they are noticed through alteration of the semantic and spatial field of the places in which they operate. Graffiti is employed in the urban landscape as an unconventional means of claiming space and contesting the prevailing political trends. They affirm local and alternative senses of who belongs and what is considered important in debates about politics. The narrative of the city is rewritten by interweaving experiences and memories, perceptions and personalities in search of meanings. Graffiti as a means of political protest and communication are an indicator of public sentiment because they have a social function, as well as historical weight. The Arab Springs³ visual culture and political expression were significant manifestations of this form of expression. Since 2011, walls have become a forum for political and social debates all around Arab countries and, although social networks such as Facebook and X played an essential role in organizing protests and demonstrations in the streets, graffiti was a formidable means of communication available to the public and had no implications with government censorship. New discourses addressing taboo topics such as the relationship between Islam and modernity, gender issues, national identities, to the ambiguous relationships with the culture of European colonists, were approached. Graffiti has served as one of the many revolutionary new expressive languages, perhaps the most incisive because of its visual impact, straightforward and involving. As a medium, it is one of the most uncontrolled, clandestine, illegal and anti-institutional. If graffiti practices must be contextualized socially and culturally, in today's globalized world the issue becomes more complex because people, as well as their voices, move from one society to another in an increasingly intense flow (Blommaert 2012). In the years after the Arab Spring, there has been an unprecedented flow of migration from the Arab world to Europe. In addition to the significant changes in the Mediterranean region, these events have also led to the free circulation of narratives that have materialized in European societies, weaving a dense network of relationships with the social contexts from which many Arabs have fled. Turin is an interesting example: words used in the riots of the Arab Spring were expressed through graffiti, or rather, writings on the walls.

1 Lefebvre H. (1996), *Writings on Cities*, introduction and editorial arrangements by Kofman E., Lebas E., Blackwell Publisher, pp. 115.

2 Despite the wide, heterogeneous, and complex area of detection of this phenomenon, and should be excluded from the list of what can be considered Street art graffiti, the origins of these two practices are both related to the themes of illegality, partial anonymity and the absolute absence of mediators. This approach will enable us to clarify the concept, which will thus exclude all the numerous areas of public art that are traditionally understood, and instead focus on the qualities of social contestation, non-institutionality and spontaneity.

3 The Arab Spring a series of spontaneous uprisings that broke out in several Arab countries from 2010. These uprisings formed part of the revolutionary pro-democracy movement known as the Arab Spring.

This article is an extract from a Turin-based study on the production of graffiti and spontaneous writings by the Arab community between 2012 and 2014⁴. Without attempting to provide an exhaustive account of the complex socio-political and cultural events that led to such revolts, the first section points out the role of street art and graffiti in the Arab Springs, drawing upon insights gained from interviews with artists from the Arab world. Testimonies of the Lebanese artist and activist Selim Mawad, the Yemeni artist Haifa Subay⁵, and the Syrian painter Aziz Asmar⁶ are provided. The setting of the Arab Spring appears to be a decisive starting point for the second part of the article. In the second section, through the observation of graffiti and spontaneous writings produced by Arabs on the walls of Turin, it highlights the link between the struggle for social vindication of young Arab immigrants' rights in the new hosting society and the struggle of the Arab Spring. These events have significantly influenced the semantic contents of the city of Turin.

Spaces of a social and aesthetic revolution

Street art is not just art, it's like the newspaper of the revolution.
When you don't have newspapers, you don't have TV channels,
you will go write the news and the truth on the wall.
In time of revolution, it's the walls that are talking, not the media.

Ammar Abo Bakr² (Egyptian writer and artist)

The Arab Spring triggered a revolutionary process still in progress to date⁷. In some cases, the

4 See Aletto L. (2019) "Tatuaggi Urbani. Graffiti e scritte spontanee sui muri di Torino", in (ed. by) Tresso C. M., Guardì J., *Anzaar. Sguardi dal Mediterraneo. La produzione artistica del Mediterraneo contro stereotipi e integralismi.*, Il Leone Verde.

5 See Armano T. "Street Art as a form of protest: Haifa Subay." the previous article in this publication.

6 Video interviews can be viewed on Youtube:

www.youtube.com/channel/UCwaY8WL22StEosnhOfP6rfq

Lebanon, Yemen and Syria are extremely different Arab countries: the intention here is not to compare the social and political systems, but rather to highlight the significant role that street art and graffiti in general have had in the protests in Arab countries since 2011.

7 One of the first events to trigger the riots was the protests that followed the blatant gesture of the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in December 2010 to launch a message against the ill-treatment perpetrated by police forces. From there the famous Jasmine Revolution started. The protests in Tunisia inspired a wave of revolts across the Arab world as people rose up to protest against authoritarianism, corruption, and poverty. The causes of the 2010-11 revolutions have never been solved: the countries of the region continue to be ruled by autocratic and corrupt regimes, by negligent elites detached from the people they govern. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the ongoing economic crises in several countries, such as Iraq and Lebanon, or served as a pretext for imposing further restrictions on individual rights. The sign of social unease are people who continue to take to the streets and squares of their cities to demand real change and a break with the existing social order.

political situation has even worsened⁸, and the cultural and social revolution is still in process. On walls, Arab people wrote messages which delighted some and startled others. The demonstrations often featured the participation of artists, intellectuals and writers, who in turn served as catalysts for an aesthetic revolution. The surroundings became filled with graffiti and murals which exhibited a spontaneous and open dialogue with the participants in the protests.

These new spaces of debate, the blending of gender and the emergence of new artistic forms are characteristic features of this cultural ferment in those Arab countries that were not impacted by the 2011 demonstrations such as Lebanon, where uprisings broke out in 2019⁹. According to Selim Mawad, a human rights activist and artist from Lebanon, visual representation was a medium for debates, an open platform where manifestations took place¹⁰. «The Figure I created on the walls opened a debate. We used to end up having two or three hundred people around the painting and we would talk about what a civil state is.» After working for more than 20 years in the field of human rights and peacebuilding, Selim began to paint in the streets of Beirut during the revolution as a *continuum* of his activism. His research focuses on the utility of art: «Is art useful to make social and political change, or is art only for decoration? I always believe in what Vygotsky used to say: “If art does not disturb society, there is no point”.» Selim’s work is characterized by a reflection on the context, which he establishes through an open, constructible, and modifiable dialogue. This dialogue invites us to investigate *meaning* through participation in the reflection of all the elements of the discourse, including the artwork, the space, the context and its actors. «I used to write slogans in my paintings. [...] The way I draw is a reminder of our reality and people don’t want to look in a mirror. But after the revolution, when people had enough of the political and the economic situation, they started to understand the toughness of the message.» People and artists claimed spaces to express their opinions, to confront hostile situations and to show solidarity. «There is a moment that nobody can deprive me of during the three months of the revolution on the street. When it used to get dark, people used to light their phones, so I could continue painting, and they used to stand there for two or three hours, and they used to say “My battery is off, who’s next?” This is a moment where street art achieves its objective, whether the painting is nice esthetically or not! [...] It was amazing, this is a memory that I will never forget!» Although, after three months of revolt in Lebanon people left the street and the great murals, Selim recognizes the artistic-expressive “awakening” that led to a great diffusion of street art and graffiti during the period of the riots. «[...] The revolt¹¹ was a platform, an open gallery, and many people who hesitated to be on the streets suddenly felt safe, surrounded by other people, and protected from military and police brutality. It opened the space for people who never went in the streets. [...] And

8 The Arab Spring triggered two major refugee crises in the Neighbourhood of Europe, previously in Libya and currently in Syria. The ongoing civil war in Yemen is also a consequence of that wave of protests and riots.

9 Social Mobilization of 2019 is remembered internationally as “the year of street protests”. This year was marked by the explosion of protests in the squares in Arab countries also. The protests focused on the demand for a change not only of political personnel, but of politics in a more democratic way.

10 Interview by Benedetta Brossa and myself in October 2020.

11 Selim Mawad is referring to the Revolution of Lebanon of October 2019 with the term “revolt” instead of “revolution” because, in his words, «A revolution takes more than asking for a lower price for rice or a lower price for milk..a revolution should have ideological demand, not only life demands.»

we (artists) left something on the walls for people to think about.» The artist emphasizes that graffiti and street art in the Arab world has never been a widespread cultural practice even in Lebanon, where before the 2019 revolution there was some form of expression of the genre, but to an extremely small extent and not linked to social issues. The problem, according to Selim, is that many of the people who took to the streets to paint and write slogans such as “horriya” (freedom), “thawra” (revolution), “peace and love”, did not have the fundamental tools to create an ideological political debate, «[...] Because they are not politically educated or politically involved and because we are not used to dealing with social issues through street art on a daily basis.» Another important issue the artist discusses is the process of institutionalizing graffiti, as well as the influence of urban policies on artistic expression. After the revolution, many artists who attempted to create art on the streets were subsequently hired by famous galleries to draw on walls, paint on hotels, or construct buildings. There is a thin line that separates political and commercial street art; nevertheless, Selim stresses the importance of street art not being confined in galleries to a reserved *bourgeois* audience. «When I put my painting in a gallery, I want money for it, but when I put my painting on the street I don’t! Street art should be consumed by the street, by people! It is like a tuna can, it has an expiring date: after a while, somebody will come and wash it out.» As Selim Mawad points out, we must not forget the profound difference between the various Arab countries and their policies of government, without confusing Lebanon with Libya, Iraq, Syria, or Egypt. In the latter, street art and graffiti as a performance of resistance in the 2011 Tahrir Square revolution are some of the most visible claims to the reappropriation of the urban landscape. They were used as an authentic and alternative media tool and they became a visual trace of this re-appropriation. Under the Mubarak regime, Tahrir Square had been fenced off under the pretense of building an underground garage¹². During the revolution, the public spaces had been occupied and recaptured by thousands of protesters and graffiti and street art evolved into a collective tool for asserting one’s previously denied existence and disseminating narratives obscured by the official media. Selim Mawad, who used to go to Egypt during the revolution to strategize and prepare for the revolt in Lebanon, testified that in Tahrir Square a memory of resistance was built. By paying tributes to those who were abducted or killed during the revolts, new symbols and alternative cultural references started emerging. «People were exploring different forms of protest; they were even exploring their ideology. [...] During the revolution we wanted people to document facts to preserve the memory of an *époque*, of a time in history, a moment, a feeling.» It is worth noting that the visual apparatuses of propaganda in many urban landscapes in the Arab world before 2011 consisted of portraits and slogans of the president-dictator. In such situations, any intervention on walls not controlled by the institutions becomes a manifestation of dissent, as it subtracts that space from the monopoly of the state, turning it into a revolutionary space. For example, several Syrian teenagers were arrested and tortured for writing anti-Assad graffiti¹³ on the wall of their school in Darraya¹⁴. In that context, the revolutionary nature of graffiti was evident, and the regime immediately repressed it. Despite the harsh repression, many artists in Syria have taken steps to counter the obscurantist narrative of the government. «[...] Drawing on the destroyed walls is not easy: sometimes some stones fall on us, sometimes the plane starts shelling again in the areas where we are drawing. [...] Through the

12 Mitchell W. J. T. (2021), “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation”, *Critical Inquiry* , Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 8-32, *The University of Chicago Press*, pp. 21.

13 The text of the graffiti was “Your turn is coming, doctor”.

14 www.aljazeera.com/program/featured-documentaries/2017/2/10/the-boy-who-started-the-syrian-war

drawings, we want to show the whole world that we are a region where there is culture, that we are creative people who love life.» Those are the words of Aziz Asmar, a Syrian painter from Binnish, in northern Idlib, who lived in Lebanon for twenty years. Due to the pressure of Hezbollah, Aziz decided to come back to Syria in 2015. The war had already begun, and he decided to take part in the struggle artistically. «I started painting when I saw this destruction and the indiscriminate killing of people. I did it for friends, the relatives of the children killed under the bombs or who found themselves with the destroyed houses. [I want] to ensure that our voices and the crimes of this war reach the whole world.» Today he continues to work tirelessly, painting on the destroyed walls. Besides the Syrian Revolution, Aziz's murals include messages of solidarity to struggles elsewhere in the region and beyond, as well as those caught up in humanitarian crises. Aziz Asmar uses art and culture graffiti to give children spaces of hope and affection in a place drastically marked by war. «[...] Children have been wronged in wars. For this reason, I try to get them out of the atmosphere of war. A large part of them are orphans. [...] Some of them tell me to paint on the walls of their house or the neighborhood in which they reside. I feel I must make them smile and keep them away from war. I help them to draw to express their dreams and aspirations, and make them happy, [...] in schools and streets.» Through this experience, children are given an outlet to express their frustrations.

The situation of some of the countries involved in the Arab Spring has deteriorated significantly. Despite this, it is undeniable that street art and graffiti have become tools for social protest, spreading awareness in the world, and providing reassurance to the local population. «[...] This is a universal language, all people of the world can understand it. For this reason, I keep drawing on destroyed walls. To deliver amazing and powerful messages. [...] Praise be to God, the effect we noticed is that our message is now reaching international newspapers and stations. We, with the grace of God, have made a change to communicate our voice, and we hope that [the change] could grow in the future.»

Voices from the Arab Spring on the walls of Turin

Between 2012 and 2014, the city of Turin witnessed an exponential increase in Arabic graffiti. During those years, the majority of migrants in Italy were North Africans¹⁵. In Italy, these people faced harsh conditions while integrating into the Italian social system. As a result of the lack or inadequate reception, groups of young Arabs in Italy, as well as other European cities, have developed close ties with activists, creating a network that questions existing oppressions and presents itself as the vanguard of a new culture of solidarity between Europe and the Arab world.

¹⁵ Cfr. note 4.

In Turin, one of the main means of expression was writing on walls. These graffiti, which recall the voices of the Arab Springs' rioters, establish a connection between the revolts abroad and these immigrants, along with their migration. On these walls there is some exceptional work produced by migrants; however, except for a few studies¹⁶, there is a lack of academic research on these urban practices and their implications. When a graffiti appears on the walls of a city, the voices of those who identify with the city generate a narrative reflection on the social, cultural and political system. And if urban graffiti become a tool to read the sociocultural and political complexity of the city in which we live, they are equally valuable for the studying of its socio-linguistic connotations. When considering the contemporary urban context, where foreign languages are incorporated into the dialectic, spontaneous writings on walls play a vital role in the transformation of language. Graffiti, as a form of urban practice, reveals a complex discursive dynamic¹⁷, which encompasses multiple aspects of the city, including historical, sociocultural, linguistic, discursive, and demographic. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the social context in which we live, it is essential to examine the processes of *meaning-making* inherent in the places and the practices adopted by individuals and groups.

In this research, graffiti is used as a multidisciplinary tool to build a road map to understand the cultural and linguistic complexity of the Arab community in Turin. Through cultural border-stepping and intermingling, these artistic and linguistic practices bring about new ideas and practices, a recurrent phenomenon of today's globalized society characterized by the movement of people, their languages, and words.

1.1 Methodology: research phase in Turin

Between October 2013 and September 2014, I photographed, documented and analyzed a total of 96 Arabic wall writings in five neighborhoods of the city: San Salvator, Centro, Vanchiglia, Aurora and Barriera di Milano. In the first phase of research, every inscription representative of the Arab community in Turin was first photographed. In the corpus collected there are words and phrases in Arabic characters, others transcribed in Latin characters (Romanization) and in Italian written by Arabic speakers. This data was redistributed within a virtual map of the neighborhoods where the inscriptions were found, to create an ethno-geographical map (Ill. 1). It is no coincidence that the neighborhoods where most of the graffiti are concentrated are Aurora and Barriera di Milano: in these areas, the Arab community represents the largest foreign population by number

¹⁶ Reference is made to the following works: the very recent study by Ioanna Wagner Tsoni and Anja K. Franck (2019) *Writings on the Wall: Textual Traces of Transit in the Aegean Borderscape* - collection of graffiti produced by migrants and refugees in the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, Kos and Samo between 2015 and 2016; Gabriela Soto (2016) *Place making in Non-places: Migrant Graffiti in Rural Highway Box Culverts* - border between USA and Mexico; Kenneth D. Madsen (2015) *Graffiti, Art, and Advertising: Re-Scaling Claims to Space at the Edges of the Nation-State* - border graffiti as a challenge to national border policies; Ilse Derluyn et al. (2014) *We are all the same, coz exist only one earth, why the BORDER EXIST: messages of migrants on their way* - messages left on the walls of a Belgian police station.

¹⁷ The expression, translated from the French *dynamique expressive urbaine*, is by Ouaras K., 'Les graffiti de la ville d'Alger: carrefour de langues, de signes et de discours. Le murs parlent...'; in *Insaniyat*, no. 44-45, 2009 (<http://insaniyat.revues.org/596>, cons. 24.05.2020).



Illustration 1

of residents¹⁸. Although San Salvario and Quadrilatero were traditionally neighborhoods of immigration and still today many Arabs reside there, the wall writings recorded there are much smaller. These neighborhoods have undergone an enormous process of gentrification that is now extending to Aurora and Barriera di Milano. The redevelopment of the urban areas presupposes the renovation of the buildings with a real ‘cleaning’ of the public spaces: the graffiti on the walls have been inexorably erased over time, but few of them are still legible today.

18 See ‘Top 10 nationalities of resident foreigners by area of origin and constituency - Data as at 31/12/2013’ www.comune.torino.it/statistica/dati/pdf/stranterr/E62013.pdf

1.2 Deciphering and translation phase

In areas where different populations converge, and where oral communication takes place, Arabic dialects become hard to understand even between different groups of Arabs; in this way, language variants happen. Although there is a variety of Arabic, known as Standard or Literary Arabic, declared as a national language in all modern Arab states, only those with a certain level of education can use it in both written and oral form. For the latter, one would resort to a variant of local Arabic which we can call, albeit improperly, ‘dialect’. The issue of translation is particularly complex in Maghreb countries, as they are also influenced by the presence of Berber dialects and the widespread of the exogenous languages from former colonizers (mostly French and English, and also Spanish in Morocco). The research strategy employed in this study is short, in-depth interviews conducted with the local population. The translation of inscriptions with dialectal variety or sentences using standard Arabic is often hindered by numerous spelling and grammatical errors, which can impede comprehension of the meaning. The corpus includes, among others, Arabic words and phrases transliterated into Latin characters. Several issues remain with the situation of exogenous bilingualism present on the inscriptions, which present unusual transcriptions with French influences; their meaning is often ambiguous.

MACRO THEME	MICRO THEME
Social struggle, political struggle, resistance	Freedom and solidarity
	Against the CIEs and the police
	Right to housing
	Palestine
Morocco	Nationalism
	Territories
	Corruption
Memories and dedications	Love
	Names, <i>I was here</i>
	Best wishes
	Devotion
Religion	Protection
	Conflicts
Football	Morocco
	Egypt
Work Notices	
Goliardic	

Table 1

1.3 Observation and cataloging phase

The diversity of languages found in the collected graffiti was approached with a thematic analysis. I have thus gained a clear understanding of the diverse discourses expressed within Torino, which can be grouped into seven main themes: political struggle, social struggle, resistance, religion, Morocco, football, memories and dedications, work, and generic assertions. To make the cataloging as coherent and precise as possible, there was a further subdivision into micro-themes. The inscriptions often adhere to more than one theme (see Table 1).

Finally, linguistic rigor analysis was applied, allowing to make some considerations of the codes used to express amorous, political or religious discourses, keeping in mind that the choice codes correspond to personal choices.

Social struggle, political struggle and resistance

Of the seven narratives identified (Tab. 1), the one categorized under ‘social struggle, political struggle, resistance’ exhibited the highest number of writings (40% of the total). This figure highlights a close connection with the Arab Springs. The influx of young Moroccans, Tunisians, and Egyptians, who brought stories and slogans from their own countries to Turin, greatly influenced the social debate within the city’s walls. The places where they are found are essentially the Aurora and Barriera di Milano neighborhoods and in considerably smaller numbers in some streets in the Centre and Vanchiglia. This is a type of planned, collective and collaborative wall-writing that differs from graffiti belonging to other themes: the linguistic strategies used to convey the messages are dictated by the need to reach the entire Arab community in Turin. Moreover, the authors of the graffiti are often Italian sympathizers who make the effort to speak Arabic to establish a dialogue with young migrants. The linguistic style is concise and direct: slogans and stencils are often used to quickly execute the writing during demonstrations. There is a tendency for the Arabic sentence to be accompanied by its translation in Italian or vice versa, and the language most frequently used is standard Arabic. Significant instances of linguistic contact between Arabic and Italian were recorded in this context and sub-themes are represented by certain social issues that concern the anarchist struggle in general, such as “Support for Palestine”, “Against the Identification and Expulsion Centers (CIE¹⁹)”, “Freedom, solidarity” and “Housing rights”. Those graffiti can be traced back to the collaboration between Arab migrants and the anarchic-liberal movement in Turin from the Asilo Occupato²⁰. An example of this collaboration is the use of the Arabic word *ḥurriyya* (more commonly pronounced *ḥorriyya*): this word, which means ‘freedom’ in Arabic, has been used as a slogan in mass demonstrations and on the walls of Turin.

19 The Centres of Identification and Expulsion (CIE) have taken the name of Centres of Stay and Return (CPE) with the decree 13 of 2017.

20 The Asilo Occupato was the headquarters of the anarchist movement in Turin, evicted on 7 February 2019 after 24 years of occupation. Many young Arab migrants arrived in Turin and being often undocumented, they associated, found complicity and solidarity with the Italian activists based at the Asilo Occupato.

2.1 The neologism Harraga

Another word that emerged from the Arab Springs is the word ‘harraga’. Written in Latin and Arabic characters, it implies a real cry of struggle (Ill. 2). From the linguistic perspective it represents an interesting case of linguistic contact giving birth to a neologism. This term derives from the Arabic verb *ḥaraqā*, which means ‘to burn (qc)’. Following a series of metaphorical shifts in meaning, it spread into the Italian language as a loan from Arabic and became representative of the Arab migratory phenomenon. In Turin, it is mainly used in the semantic context of the anarchic movement based at the Asilo Occupato. The use of the term traces the slogans ‘Freedom for the arrested’, and ‘Freedom for comrades’ which are typical of anarchist dialectics, and, in this way, the expression became popular. It refers to the arrested Arab and Italian comrades and *those who burn borders or cages*²¹.

2.2 Right to housing

Strong evidence of the collaboration between migrants and anarchists are writings representing the fight against evictions. All the graffiti were found in the districts of Aurora and Barriera di Milano where, even today, there is a very large number of evictions. Because of that, 2016 Turin was defined “Italian capital of evictions”²². In Aurora, a real process of gentrification is underway: between 2011 and 2014 the movements for housing in Turin opposed redevelopment policies and organized dozens of resistances to evictions. Many houses have been occupied by immigrant families with the support of anarchist activists engaged in the struggle.

In one of those, there is a mural that, semiotically and semantically, conveys the concept of *horriya* [freedom] and of solidarity, and it states: ‘The house belongs to those who live in it, Freedom, Solidarity with foreign protesters’ (Ill. 3). The mural on the walls of the houses in via Canale Molassi occupied by anarchists in 2011 in the heart of Porta Palazzo was also painted collectively by the occupants.

21 <https://macerie.noblogs.org/post/2011/11/21/al-horria-lil-hrraka/> (free, non-commercial information poster run by collectives and individuals based in Turin, cons. 10/05/2020).

22 Articles from La Repubblica: https://torino.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/07/03/news/torino_impennata_degli_sfratti_nel_2016_712_-1698916_05/ (luglio 2017)



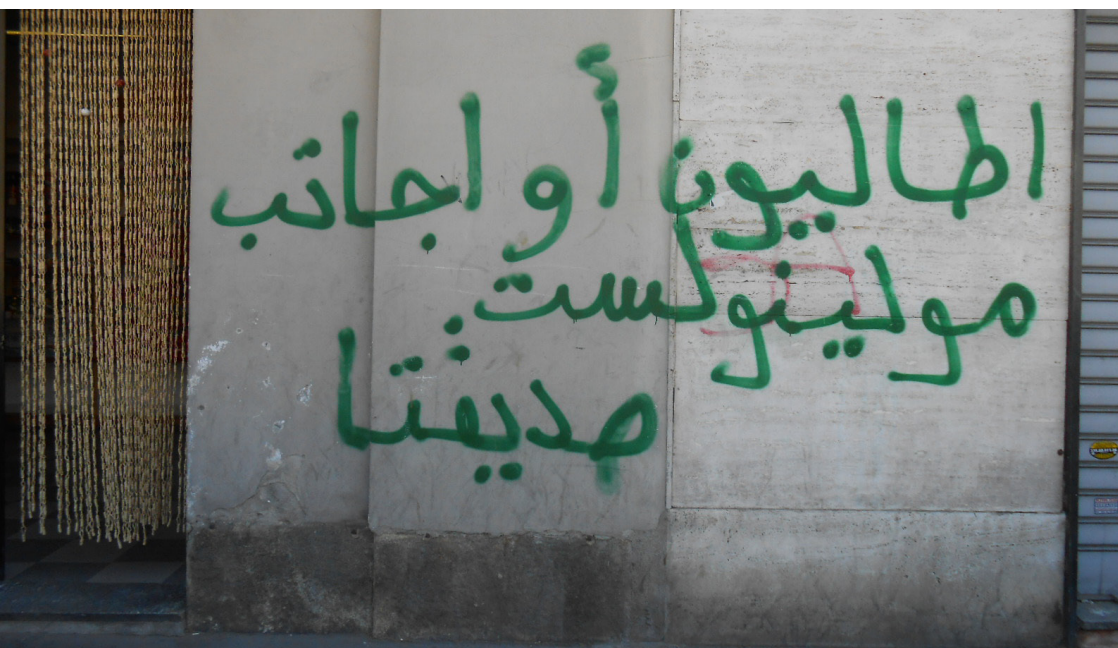
Illustration 2 - Picture by Lucia Aletto



Illustration 3 - Picture by Lucia Aletto

An interesting case on the issue of evictions in Turin is represented by the writing 'Italians and foreigners are not Molino's friends' (Ill. 4), made in the autumn of 2013. In the inscription appears an Italian surname transcribed in Arabic characters: the name refers to that Giorgio Molino, known as the 'king of the attics', owner of about 1550 dwellings all over Turin and holder of several fictitious companies. In 2011 he was investigated for exploiting the conditions of 180 immigrants from Lampedusa, whom he had crammed into buildings with half of the capacity. His activity as a swindler has been known since the 1970s. Molino was arrested in March 2019 on charges of inciting corruption. This writing, therefore, has a very close connection to the reality of the housing problem in Turin and sanctions the collaboration between immigrants and Italians fighting against these abuses of power.

Illustration 4 - Picture by Lucia Aletto



2.3 Against Detention Centers and the police

The micro-theme 'Against the CIEs²³ and the police' is particularly interesting, as it is linked with the events of the Arab Spring. Since many Arabs have fled their native countries because of authoritarian government policies, many were locked up in Centers of Identification and Expulsion. Here, they were forced to fight once more for their rights. Many of the writings and stencils carried out in this fight showed the slogan "Fire at detention centers" in Arabic, often accompanied by a translation into Italian (Ill. 5). Some of the graffiti was allegedly created during a demonstration on the walls of the Aurora district registry office by a Tunisian boy who arrived in Turin in 2012: «I also remember the procession: there were young people, militants between quotation marks in short, that is Arab proletarians who live here and are inside certain paths of struggle (...) so this writing here is interesting because it carries forward a little the speech of the Arab Spring, because some of these Arabs come from there and have passed through the CIEs in Italy²⁴».



Illustration 5 - Picture by Lucia Aletto

²³ Cfr. note 19.

²⁴ Interview conducted by the undersigned with a militant of the Turin anarchist movement on 2/04/2014.



Illustration 6 - Picture by Lucia Aletto

In the same category, there is a graffiti featuring a widely recognized acronym, namely “ACAB” (All Cops Are Bastards) but written in Arabic characters (Ill. 6). This particularity is noteworthy, especially considering the prominence of this acronym in its original English version. As evidenced in various studies²⁵, the acronym A.C.A.B. was merged into the Italian language through contact with right-wing subcultures in England. It underwent lexicalization, shedding punctuation and adopting broader political and social meanings, reflecting rebellion against the system. The inscription raises a question: is it a result of Arab-English contact or Arab migrants’ interaction with the Italian context, specifically in Turin? It would be necessary to know whether the lexeme found is in use in Arab countries. In Egypt, for example, the lexeme has been documented within ultras contexts, but, as far as we know, it has not been transcribed in Arabic characters, but the ultras who used graffiti to denounce Egyptian police brutality, even before the start of the January 2011 riots, by papering the walls of the cities with the acronym ACAB and other inscriptions²⁶. Furthermore, the place where the graffiti was found corresponds to the area of the city where Turin’s anarchist movement operates. Looking at ACAB as a semantic neologism indicating rebellion against the system (and not only hostility towards the “cops”), the dynamics of the Italian-Arabic contact appear more plausible when citing it in context with the anarchist world.

25 Nicola Guerra, ‘From the street to literature, the reckless and propitious vicissitudes of forestry A.C.A.B. The linguistic contact between Italian and English in skinhead and ultras subcultures’, www.academia.edu

26 www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2013/01/27/chi-sono-ultras-egiziani-che-scendono-in-piazza/481534/

2.4 Traces of the Tamazgha Spring

Tamazight assumed an official language status on 9 March 2011, following the uprisings in Morocco known as the 20 February Movement, which is part of the Arab Spring. It is observed that the ‘Tamazgha spring’ led to the recognition of the revised ancestral alphabet in the neo-Finagh, which claims the identity of the Berbers of central Morocco. During the same period, in Turin two graffiti written in the Tifinagh alphabet appeared on walls in Aurora. In both these graffiti emerges the word ‘Tamazight’ - ‘ⵜⴰⴷⴰⴳⴷⵓⴷⴰ’ (Ill. 7) - i.e. the name of the Berber variety spoken in the Middle Atlas. In a second writing, the authors wrote their names to claim their existence. The identity of a person, a culture, or a group of people is inextricably linked to the spoken language. A language is a treasure trove of cultural values and different points of view highlighted through sounds, lexical tools, grammatical rules, and syntax. These writings are a standard of the struggle for recognition of their cultural and linguistic identity carried out by the Tamazgha Spring. Not only do they testify to the conquest of rights by the Berber population, but they also provide evidence of the complex presence of the Moroccan population in Turin.



Illustration 7 - Picture by Lucia Aletto

Conclusion

The observation of graffiti provides a glimpse into the social reality in which we are immersed, revealing the dynamics of everyday life and the processes of identification and appropriation of public space. Graffiti represent the symbolic, social, and psychological control of space, as they are personal expression of symbolic freedom, in continuous contrast with authoritarian power. They demonstrate that the marked space does not belong to authorities, which claim its legal ownership, but to those people who live in it every day.

As regards Arab countries, the 2011 uprisings were decisive for the development of Arab graffiti, as it represented an artistic-expressive awakening, which led to the diffusion of the phenomenon. Most of the graffiti were critical of the government and created by the disenfranchised part of the population forced to emigrate because of the economic crisis. The graffiti found in Turin are a trace of that part of the population, who is denied many rights. The presence of all Arabic writings on walls in the Aurora and Barriera di Milano districts is not accidental, as it demonstrates the problem of indeterminacy and the continuous deconstructing, restructuring, and redefining of neutral areas. As such, these forms of expression are trends existing outside Turin's urban fabric, detached from defined geographical locations. In their complexity, the graffiti produced by the Arab community in Turin conforms to ethno-sociolinguistic and semiotic marking that includes multiple strategies to express the desire to speak up, break taboos and declare their presence within the city's spaces. They shape an informal and spontaneous culture that interacts dialectically with the dominant one, allowing us to perceive cultural influences generated by the presence of the Arab community. Words like *harraga* and *horriya* have entered into the common use of the Italian language; this shows that the city is a place where languages and cultures intermingle, and the results of this connivance appear on its walls. Moreover, globalization forces us to create a fresh set of analytical guidelines, challenging us to craft an ethnographic narrative that is not about the place we live in, but about mobility and its processes²⁷.

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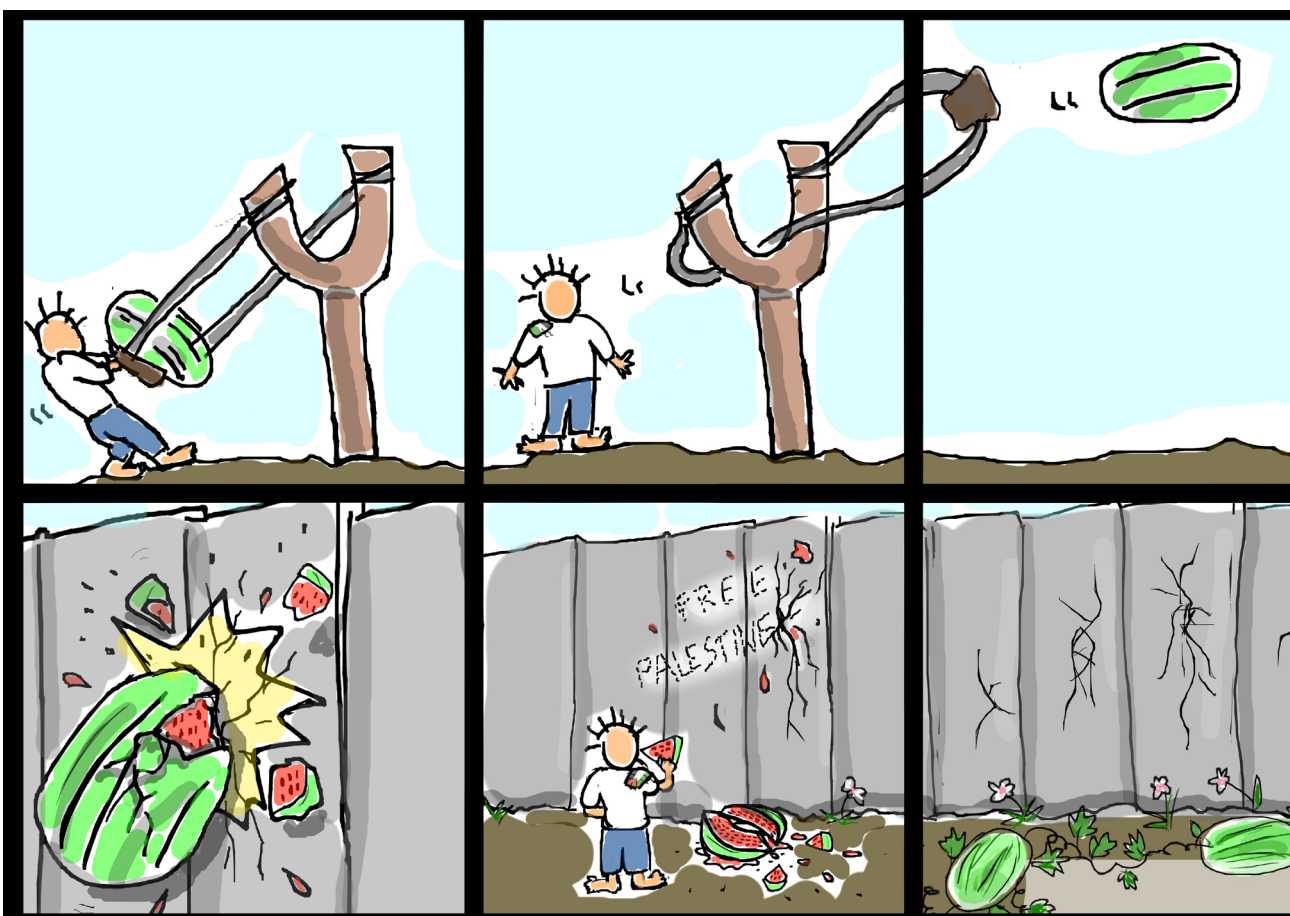
Migrants and migration writers: graphic novels and journals on migrants' stories in Italy

Claudia Maria Tresso, University of Turin

Abstract

One of the most pressing and controversial issues facing Europe in recent decades, has been the ever-increasing migration of people fleeing conflicts (especially from Syria, Libya, and sub-Saharan Africa), or political crises, poverty, and unemployment (especially from Africa and in particular from or via North African Arab countries). This issue mainly concerns Italy, which, due to its geographical position as a real "bridge" between Mediterranean countries, has seen the number of migrants increase from 26,817 in 2000, to 127,207 in 2023¹.

In this regard, in Italy, the intolerant and intransigent positions of various people and groups are counterbalanced by the conviction of many, that the contribution of migrants is an indispensable condition for the development of societies, not only economically, but also culturally. And that every migrant must be considered first and foremost as a person with a story worth knowing. Those who share this belief include many transnational authors having experienced migration firsthand and others having documented it through interviews, reading and research, who tell the stories of migrants and migration in different ways. This article documents first of all the presence of many transnational authors (in particular those of Arab origin) in the various fields of contemporary Italian literature and information. It then presents those authors who choose the medium of comics to speak about migration. Their graphic novels and journals illustrate an increasingly composite Italian society, in which different stories, customs, languages and cultures are intertwined, and convey the contribution of migration and diasporic communities to the formation of a new – and richer – Italian culture.



"Bomb Melon" (2024), Miriam Zadari

¹ Source: Italian Ministry of Interior, www.interno.gov.it/it

Introduction²

A number of transnational (or migrant) writers have been active in Italian literature for some time now. They narrate personal or family migration experiences³, thus broadening the narrative of migratory events by authors of Italian origin who narrate experiences gathered from the protagonists' own voices, or from oral or written testimonies of migrants and other sources. Transnational writers from Arab countries⁴ include authors of literary works such as Amara Lakhous (2006, 2010 and 2013; see Villa 2012, Calabretta-Sadger 2016 and Daboussi 2021) and Tahar Lamri (2002, 2006 and 2018; see Villa 2012), of Algerian origin, Igiaba Scego (2003, 2007, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021; see Groppaldi 2019) (Somalia), Randa Ghazy (2002, 2007; see Zannoni 2011) (Egypt), Sumaya Abdel Qader (2008 and 2019; see Villa 2012) (Palestine), Younis Tawfik (2001, 2006, 2011, 2019 and 2021; see Morace 2010 and Felice 2011) (Iraq), and the young poets of Moroccan origin Hanane Makhloufi (2021; see Di Cesare and Fiorentino 2022) and Mohamed Amine Bour (alias Asterio), who have recently published their first work (Rouki 2020). Italian journalism also includes names such as Karima Moual⁵ and Khalid Chaouk⁶, of Moroccan origin, Vittorio Longhi⁷ (Eritrea) and the Palestinian Rula Jebreal⁸. Finally, on the Italian film scene we find some transnational filmmakers (almost exclusively men) such as the Tunisian Hedy Krissane⁹.

If I have mentioned literature, journalism and cinema, it is because in this essay I will talk about comics, a genre that is complex to define but that, due to its interweaving of written words and images, occupies a borderline space between these and other forms of communication - or, if one

2 Some results of this research can be found as an introduction to an article I wrote in Italian on Takoua Ben Mohamed (see Tresso 2024).

3 In Italy, we started speak of 'migrant writers' quite recently, around the 1990s, see Gnisci 2005, Jaščurová 2019, Kombola 2020, Carobene and Zaccaria 2021. The expression 'transnational' or 'translinguistic' is mainly used for second-generation authors, who have not experienced migration themselves (see, among others, Benvenuti 2015 and Sinopoli 2015).

4 By 'Arab countries', I mean those countries where Arabic is the official language (*de facto* or *de jure*): Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Chad, Comoros, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Eritrea, Djibouti, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen.

5 A correspondent for Mediaset and a contributor to TG1 Rai, she writes for *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *La Stampa*.

6 A member of the Democratic Party, he writes for *ANSamed*, *la Repubblica*, *il Corriere del Mezzogiorno* and *Al Jazeera*.

7 A writer and journalist, he writes for *The International New York Times* and *la Repubblica*.

8 A writer and journalist, Rula Jebreal also works as a television journalist for LA7 (*Pianeta7*, *Omnibus*), Rai2 (*Annozero*) and the American MSNBC. She has contributed to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek*.

9 Besides having worked in several films as an actor, Krissane has made five short films with which he won several prestigious awards: *Lebess* (2003), *Colpevole fino a prova contraria* (2005); *Ali di cera* (2009); *Aspromonte* (2012) and *La festa più bellissima* (2018). See www.hedykrissane.it/

may say so, of these arts¹⁰. Precisely because of its liminal positioning, comics are nowadays used as a medium for narratives of past and recent migratory trajectories, of increasingly mestizo social contexts and of various types of cultural intersections.

The story of the migrations that has allowed Italian culture to be enriched by the presence of transnational authors, is told through many mediums: including comics (Burdett, Polezzi and Spadaro 2020; Comberiatì and Spadaro 2023).

The use of comics in the narrative of migration processes

Comics are increasingly being used to disseminate news and information and, in a globalised world where different languages and cultures intertwine, they constitute a transnational medium that narrates the individual and collective migration experiences better than others. These stories may or may not be narrated as a 'memory' or an 'autobiography' of the authors themselves, but in any case they have a documentary value because they are usually based on investigations that the authors have carried out by going on site to gather information from direct witnesses and/or by consulting primary sources. As for genres, they often intertwine and range from diary to biography (or autobiography), from historical novel to reportage, etc.

The choice of comics in this narrative is also due to the ability of comics to combine written words and images, thus giving space to the human reactions and emotions that accompany the narrated events, and allowing the description of both individuals and groups. In fact, images make it impossible to describe a whole without depicting its individual units - since in drawing a gathering, or a crowd, or a group, the artist cannot avoid outlining, more or less clearly, each individual person. In comic strips, languages can also intertwine, so that, for example, in a single cartoon there can be a conversation that takes place in Arabic (and is written in Arabic in the bubbles) in an Asian restaurant with many Chinese signs, located on a street in Rome where the advertising and shop signs are in Italian!¹¹ This is not to mention that in comics there can be a cross-cultural plurality not only of artistic forms (with individual strokes inspired by Japanese manga, American comics, French *bandes dessinées* and various traditional and contemporary art forms), but also of narrative styles. In fact, the artist can place in the comic, e.g., the photo of a newspaper article (reportage), or the screen-shot of an email on the computer screen (epistolary), a theatrical scene (theatre), the text of a poem (poetry) or even a film sequence (film) or a background song (music) with the quotation of the text and/or the notes of the melody (music)

10 Of course, literature and cinema are arts. As for the question of how to define journalism (art?, trade?, craft?), in Italy, Carlo Collodi wrote in the famous *Almanacco del Fanfulla* in as early as the second part of the 19th century: 'What is journalism? The journalists answer that it is an art' (Collodi 1872). A century later, Boal argued that 'journalism is an art, not a science; it is closer to poetry than to sociology' (Boal 1977: 102) and the discussion continues to the present day, where Grossi states that 'Journalism is an art, not a science: fragile, subject to revision, inevitably subjective. It is an attempt to describe reality' (Grossi 2022). The famous Turkish journalist and writer Kaya Genç also states: 'Journalism is the art of subtlety and nuance. I want my prose to be representative of the complications of life in Turkey'. (Giannetta 2022).

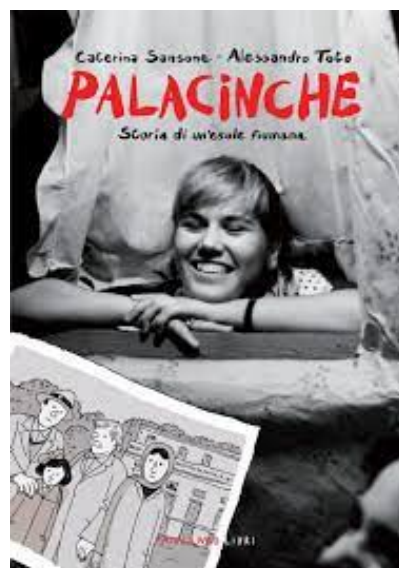
11 See Comberiatì and Spadaro 2023, where the authors argue that 'multilingualism of Italian memory is increasingly apparent in Italian Comics production'.

drawn on the staff! Of course, other traditional formats (e.g. video and cinema) also allow all these aspects to be condensed into a single medium, but compared to these, comics require the work of far fewer people and have much lower costs.

In the 21st century, a number of authors and illustrators have used comics to tell stories of migrant people and groups in Italy (Comberiati and Spadaro 2023: 491). The picture that emerges from these stories, mostly marginalised by the mainstream narrative, is that of an Italy that is the point of arrival or transit of many migratory trajectories that start from countries and situations about which the Italian reader has mostly received little information from the media and/or social media. The comic strip thus becomes a way of getting to know both another interpretation of these situations, and the impact of these situations on people's daily lives: such as in the famous graphic novel *Persepolis* by the Iranian Marjane Satrapi, which tells the collective story of Iran from the fall of the Shah and the Islamic Revolution (1979) through the autobiographical narration of the author's personal migratory journey¹².

Italian graphic novels and Journals on migrants' stories

In recent years, some of Italy's most innovative authors have told a series of familiar stories of migration, exile and displacement in comic strips, drawing an Italian social history of border mobility and transnational trajectories. This is the case of photographer Caterina Sansone and author/illustrator Alessandro Tota, and their *Palacinche: storia di un'esule fiumana* [Palacinche: the story of a refugee from Fiume (Rijeka)] (Sansone and Tota 2012)¹³. In their book, they mix texts, photos and drawings to illustrate the drama of many Italian people who left Istria and Dalmatia, which passed from Italian to Yugoslav sovereignty after the end of World War II, for other Italian regions – thus becoming refugees in their own country. Another comic book, *Chinamen, un secolo di cinesi a Milano* [Chinamen, a century of Chinese people in Milan] (texts by Ciaj Rocchi and drawings by Matteo Demonte) (Rocchi and Demonte 2017; see Burdett, Polezzi and Spadaro 2020 and Giuliani 2022), reconstructs one hundred years of stories of Chinese immigration and integration in Italy: from the first merchants who arrived in Milan for the 1906 Expo, to the first migrants in the 1920s and the formation of Chinese communities in Milan and Bologna, to the imprisonment of many of them in fascist



¹² The work, written in French, came out in four volumes (one per year) from 2000 to 2003, and in 2007, an animated film of the same name by Vincent Paronnaud and Satrapi was made from the comic strip.

¹³ “Palacinche” (or “palacinke”) is the name of sweet pancakes similar to crepes, typical of the Fiume (now Rijeka) region.

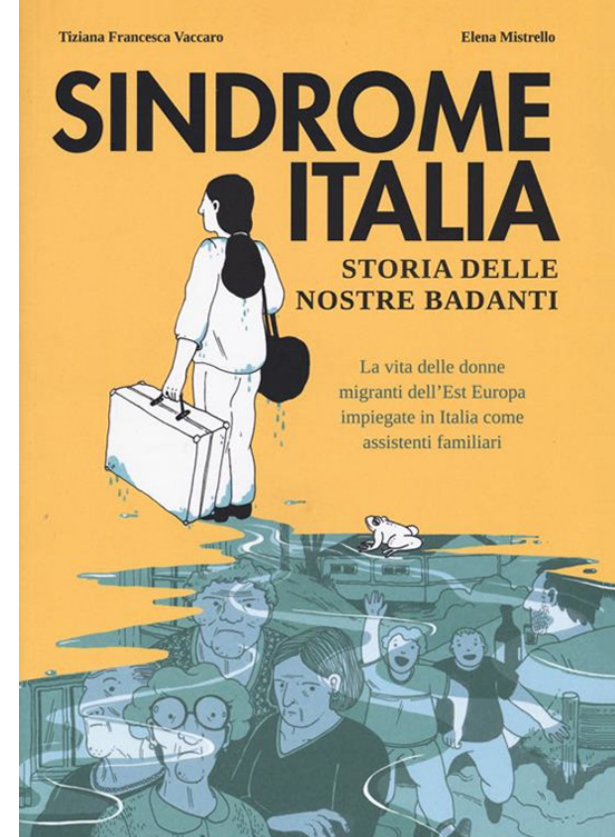
concentration camps¹⁴, to the first post-war mixed families, to the rise of the great Italian-Chinese entrepreneurs of the 1960s and 1970s. Another work worth mentioning is *Sindrome Italia. Storia delle nostre badanti* [The Italy Syndrome. History of our caregivers] conceived and written by the author Tiziana Francesca Vaccaro as a theatrical text and then turned into a comic strip with the illustrations by Elena Mistrello (Vaccaro and Mistrello 2021). Their text is named after an illness found among Eastern European women having spent several years in Italy as domestic helps and caregivers: about two million women who, having left their country, lived in the peninsula as ghosts, seeing their children and families little more than once a year and spending all their time in the employment of strangers close to death, often suffering ill treatment – not to mention the stress of caregivers, resulting from caring for the elderly and ill until they die and then losing their jobs and having to immediately look for another one. Once they returned to their country, many of them began to suffer from severe depression, lack of appetite, insomnia, weight loss and suicidal fantasies. Written in the first person, *Sindrome Italia* is inspired by the testimony of Vasilica Baciú, a Romanian woman who, like so many others, migrated to Italy to give her children a better future and, upon returning home after 10 years, developed a severe form of this disease¹⁵,

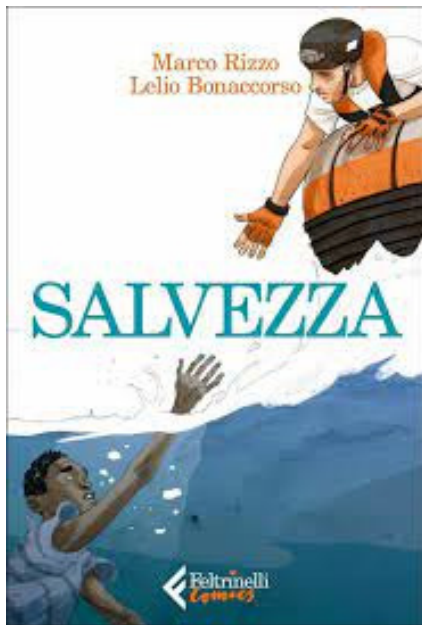
Many Italian graphic works bring together various experiences of migration, such as *Salvezza* [Salvation], the first comic strip reportage investigating the search and rescue operations of migrants at sea, for which Marco Rizzo (texts) and Lelio Bonaccorso (drawings) spent three weeks on board a rescue ship of the NGO “SOS Mediterranée”¹⁶, or *Storiemigranti* [Migrant Stories], by Nicola Bernardi and Sio (Simone Albrigi) (Bernardi and Sio 2019; see Kiran Piotti 2019), where texts, photographs and illustrations alternate to portray 32 migrants (mostly from Arab countries) that the authors have personally met in the CAS (Special Reception Centres for Refugees)

¹⁴ During the World War II, two thirds of the Chinese citizens of Italy (several hundred people) were interned in fascist concentration camps reserved for ‘subjects of enemy countries’. On this forgotten episode in Italian history see also Kwok and Testaverde’s comic strip story (2019) and Brigadoi Cologna’s essay (2020).

¹⁵ In 2021, Vasilica Baciú was the first victim of this syndrome to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, see Frascaro and Galli 2021.

¹⁶ Rizzo and Bonaccorso 2018. See also Brianni 2018, Griner 2018, Mangiavillano 2023: 574-579 and Comberiati and Spadaro 2023: 490, where the authors argue that ‘the deployment of the Mediterranean as a frontier of Fortress Europe is a powerful narrative catalyst for Comics authors in Italy’





of Imperia, Vallecrosia and Bajardo, in Liguria. Or *Stran(i)eri. Storie (a fumetti) di migrazioni* [Stran(i)eri. Stories (in comics) of migrations], in which the authors collected three stories about migration told and drawn (in comic strips) by a group of North African Arab youths housed in a reception centre in Val d'Aosta while waiting for their residence permits¹⁷.

More recent works include *La linea dell'orizzonte. Un etnographic novel sulla migrazione tra Bangladesh, Italia e Londra* [The Horizon Line. An ethnographic novel about migration between Bangladesh, Italy and London] (Della Puppa, Matteuzzi and Saresin 2021; Cappelli 2022), with texts by Francesco Della Puppa and Francesco Matteuzzi, while the drawings are by Francesco Saresin. The work tells the story of several people of Bangladeshi origin who, having arrived in Italy in the 1990s and acquired citizenship, decided in recent years to leave Italy for England in search of better opportunities for their children, who will be able to aspire to a much higher social status than they could in Italy: it is the so-called "onward migration", the "later migration", or "second migration". This is a recent phenomenon that pushes people to leave security, their jobs, their social networks, which may have been painstakingly built up, in search of better living conditions, on migration routes shaped by continuous global transformations and by the local political, social and economic situation.

In short, comics are now an increasingly popular narrative medium in Italy to tell individual and collective stories in which languages and cultures intertwine, and convey the contribution of migration and diasporic communities to the formation of Italian culture. In recent years, some transnational authors have also emerged in the Italian comics sector, and so far the best known are two women: Yi Yang and Takoua Ben Mohamed.

¹⁷ Centomo, Enoch, Farricella and Palumbo 2020, see the project of the work in Ruocco 2018 and Pisano's interview with the authors on the publication of the two volumes of the work (2020).

Yi Yang, born in China, has been living in Bologna for about ten years, where she moved to study, and she has published two books in which she tells hyper-dynamic adventure stories with very young characters in a ruthless urban context, with strong influences from Chinese and Japanese manga and anime (Yang 2021 and 2022).

As for comics that tell stories straddling languages and cultures, it is worth mentioning the work of Takoua Ben Mohamed, of Tunisian origin. Ben Mohamed is an award-winning author and journalist living in Rome¹⁸, who tells stories of migration and migrants. First, she published two works (*Woman Story* and *Sotto il velo*) with comic strips about her own experience as a Muslim woman growing up in the suburbs of Rome and ironically dealing with prejudices towards Arabs and Islam (Ben Mohamed 2015 and 2016; see Spadaro 2017 and Tresso 2024). She then went on to produce a series of graphic stories telling stories of migration and migrants: both her own and that of her family, who came to Rome to reunite with her father, a political exile in Italy (Ben Mohamed 2018 and 2021; see Spadaro 2020 and Tresso 2024), as well as those of other peoples in countries where Ben Mohamed has travelled as a journalist together with members of the Italian NGO WeWorld (*Un'altra via per la Cambogia* and *Crescere in Mozambico* [Another way for Cambodia and Growing up in Mozambique])¹⁹.

¹⁸ Some of the prizes awarded to Ben Mohamed include the Moneygram Special Award for Art and Culture (2016); Prato Open City Award (2017); Muslim international Book Award (2017); Best comic book work for interreligious and intercultural dialogue (2017); Special award for best graphic journalist at European level - Evens European Journalism Prize (2019) and 'Woman of the year' for D magazine - *La Repubblica delle donne* [The Republic of Women] (2021).

¹⁹ Ben Mohamed 2020 and 2022. See Raffaelli's interview with Ben Mohamed (2022) and Notari 2020.

Sotto il Velo



Takoua Ben Mohamed

Becco Giallo

Conclusions

To conclude, and moving from the novel/journalistic genre to the news genre, we can mention an interesting work by Pietro Scarnera: *Mediterraneo* (Scarnera 2015; Custagliola 2015). Published on the *Graphic News* website, the first Italian portal of graphic journalism, *Mediterraneo* is an infographic on the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean starting from the dramatic accident of 3 October 2013 off the coast of Lampedusa, in which 363 people died.

If at the beginning of this essay, I mentioned literature, journalism and cinema, it is because comics, thanks to their being an interweaving of written words and images²⁰, are located in a borderline space between literature, journalism and cinema, intersecting with these and other art forms. This flexibility allows it to narrate a series of past and present migratory trajectories and to tell the story of the people who, coming from different cultures, have been part of the migratory process. This process has existed in Italy for a long time and has contributed to shaping today's Italian society, recounting in their specificity – and at the same time as a whole – how those intertwined forms and artistic styles, cultures, languages, foods and habits from different cultures, but characterising today's Italian society, have formed.

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²⁰ There are also wordless comic books: among them, it is worth mentioning the great masterpiece of comics literature on migration, the wordless book *The arrival* by the Australian author Shaun Tan (2006).

²¹ Unless otherwise noted, websites were accessed on 11 January 2024.

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The purpose of this book is to highlight how these visual arts, which are often interconnected, have found ways and strategies of asserting a composite and fruitful Arab cultural identity, different from clichés and away from mainstream narratives, which often describe it as monolithic and unchanging.

These arts constitute a valuable medium to counter and overcome many prejudices and stereotypes of the 'other'.



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**STUDI ASIATICI
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ANZAAR [Glances] is a Research Laboratory and Creative Activity Hub of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and Modern Cultures at the University of Turin (Italy), which explores contemporary visual arts of the Arab world. This book, a result of collaboration between Anzaar and the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), is edited by Claudia M. Tresso and Jolanda Guardi, professors of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Turin, and Sarah Nesti Willard, Visual Studies Coordinator at the Department of Media and Creative Industries, CHSS, UAE University, UAE.



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