

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

“We Will Not Forget”: Violence and Trauma through Children’s Eyes in Graphic Novels Authored by Middle Eastern Women

Baddawi, Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood, and A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return

Auteur : SOLETI Maeva

Promoteur(s) : BRAGARD Véronique

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Master en langues et lettres modernes, orientation générale, à finalité didactique

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Mémoire réalisé par

Maeva Soleti

Promoteur(s)

Prof. Véronique Bragard

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Introduction

Political conflicts and wars claim countless lives each day. According to statistics compiled by Our World in Data, approximately 3.3 million people died as a result of armed conflicts between 1989 and 2022, with 650.000 of these deaths occurring in the Middle East (Herre, 2024). As we write this thesis, individuals continue to endure traumatic events in wars, genocides, and other situations of violence. Art has long served as a medium for expression, emotional release, connection, protest, and, at times, healing. Whether through music, paintings, sculptures, writings, or drawings, artists have used their works to convey personal and collective experiences. For instance, Shirin Neshat's visual art explore the complexities of gender and identity under Islamic law via a juxtaposition of photographs and texts in Farsi, Tammam Azzam's digital collages and paintings explore themes of trauma and destruction and make political statements, Mona Hatoum's art addresses exile, marginalization, and oppression, Mahmoud Darwish's poems dealt with themes of identity and exile and became a voice for Palestinian people, and Hoda Barakat's novels examine the Lebanese Civil War and its aftermath, delving into the psychological effects of war. The list of Middle Eastern artists who use their art as a medium for sharing and healing is extensive.

This thesis focuses on graphic novels rather than comics, as graphic novels are typically known for delving into more serious topics and experimenting with techniques and themes, catering to a mature audience and often benefiting from a longer format. However, this distinction between graphic novels and comics has become increasingly blurred, as many comics today explore complex themes and push the boundaries of the medium. For example, Jennifer and Matthew Holm's *Sunny Side Up* addresses addiction, while J. Torres and David Namisato's *Stealing Home* explores Japanese internment camps and racism in Canada. Despite this overlap, we decided to analyze three graphic novels written by Middle Eastern women to highlight their unique perspectives and approaches. A graphic novel is a book-length work of fiction or non-fiction that tells a story through a combination of words and drawings. Today, comics and graphic novels take up increasingly more space in our bookstores and deal with essential topics such as war, abuse, trauma, mental disorders, and societal issues. This medium is frequently used by artists hailing from underprivileged regions of the world to convey the realities of their lived experiences. Two of the authors studied in this thesis, Leila Abdelrazaq and Marjane Satrapi, clearly stated in the preface of their graphic novels that their artwork was made for them to be seen and to show that Palestinians, in *Baddawi*, and Iranians, in *Persepolis*, do not

forget what their communities have endured (Abdelrazaq, 2015; Satrapi, 2008). The literary theorist Haya Saud Alfarhan explains that “[...] *Baddawi* utilizes the visuality of the comic form to assert a fundamental right to exist and to narrate the experience of the lives of the dispossessed—in this case, of Palestinian refugees.” (Alfarhan, 2020, p.159).

The selected graphic novels for this thesis are Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi*, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and Zeina Abirached’s *A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return*. These contemporary works, autobiographical or biographical, all authored by Middle Eastern women, address trauma, violence, witnessing, and resilience. A cursory glance at their respective covers reveals a shared stylistic choice: a black-and-white child-like graphiation. This similarity in style prompted us to investigate how the authors play with this stylistic and its meaning. We chose to focus on the representation of violence and trauma, dominant themes in these graphic novels set during times of conflict and war. In exploring how violence and trauma can be depicted, we encountered various concepts such as “dark” writing and introjection, among others, which provided insights into the dynamics of portraying these experiences. Jeanne-Marie Viljoen, in her book *War Comics: a postcolonial perspective*, introduces the concept of “dark” writing. Viljoen argues that including the ineffable in graphic narratives is crucial for giving voice to victims, counteracting societal indifference towards wars and conflicts, representing trauma as a collective experience, and shifting readers’ perspectives (2021). “Dark” writing involves representing the unrepresentable in a non-mimetic way, which draws attention to the process of how violence occurs, compels readers to actively engage with the narrative, and “holds the potential of developing an ethical position from which to share experiences of the violence and trauma of war” (Viljoen, 2021: 48-49). With “dark” writing, authors point out the violence without repeating it, readers can therefore feel the violence without seeing it through the various techniques employed. The authors in our corpus have innovatively represented violence and trauma, engaging readers powerfully in their narrative.

Extensive research has already been conducted on *Persepolis*, examining its narrative and visual techniques. Notable studies by Hilary Chute highlight Satrapi’s use of colors, the dynamics of remembering, the juxtaposition of historical and personal, the power of a minimalist style, and the position of the graphic novel as a feminist work (2008, 2010). Other scholars have analyzed the child protagonist (Marks, 2017), the position of the witness (Gilmore, 2011), and the representation of trauma more generally (Nabizadeh, 2019). Numerous studies on *Baddawi*, such as Haya Saud Alfarhan’s research on the innovations of

Leila Abdelrazaq, show how representing historical and personal violence gives a shape and a voice to Palestine (2020). *A Game for Swallows* has also received scholarly attention, with studies focusing on themes such as the use of space and interculturality, the sense of community (Precup, 2019), and the ethical representation of violence (Szép, 2014).

In this thesis, we aim to compare these works and examine how they represent trauma and violence with specific artistic choices. These artistic choices include the specific use of black and white, the use of child protagonists, the child-like graphiation, and the juxtaposition of personal and historical events. We will examine how monochromatic colors convey the depth of memories and emotions, direct the readers' focus to symbols highlighted by contrasting colors, and point to the normalcy of violence. The use of black and white allows for non-realistic representations with low iconicity, inviting readers to engage their imagination. By adopting a child's perspective, Abdelrazaq, Satrapi, and Abirached present a naïve view of the conflicts, contrasting the innocence of children with the horrors of wars. This approach illustrates the impact of violence and trauma on victims' lives while fostering empathy in readers. The childish graphiation allows a more authentic object that aligns with the choice of characters and the narrative. Lastly, the blending of historical and personal events underscores trauma as a collective experience, highlighting the effects of conflicts on the daily lives of those living in conflict-affected areas. Our objective is to understand the mechanisms behind the representation of violence, particularly the horrific violence caused by war. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of trauma and violence representation in graphic novels written by women from the Middle East.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter explores the concepts of trauma, violence, and the voices of women, ending with the introduction to the corpus. In the section on trauma, we explore the concept tracing its evolution from its Greek definition to contemporary understandings, with a focus on its influence on literature and comics. This subchapter discusses how literature has shaped trauma theories with Sigmund Freud who had turned to literature to elucidate traumatic experiences, basing his theory on a story from Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* to explain how individuals are perpetually haunted by their traumatic memories (Caruth, 1996: 2). It also explores how comics have expanded the boundaries of trauma representation, including the possibilities of healing through art, intergenerational trauma, the memory work of the authors under study, and, finally, bearing witness to trauma in a Middle Eastern context. The second subchapter defines violence,

explores concepts such as slow violence and “dark” writing, and analyzes the various techniques employed to represent violence. The concept of slow violence is explained by Nixon as a type of violence that cannot be seen, occurs gradually and has a strong impact that is dispersed across time and space (Nixon, 2011). This conceptualization is significant because, in the graphic novels analyzed, violence is portrayed not only as a physical phenomenon but also as a psychological one. The characters grapple with the constant fear of being the next victim, illustrating how the pervasive threat of violence can permeate every aspect of daily life. In the third part of this chapter, we focus on the emergence of women in the comics industry and the new perspectives they bring to the medium. The final section of this chapter introduces the corpus in detail, including the publication objectives, a summary of the works, the historical context, and literature reviews.

In the second chapter, we delve into the concrete analysis of the artistic choices made by the authors and their contributions to the narrative. The first part of this chapter explores the representation of children in literature and graphic novels. It examines how children offer new perspectives to critique the prevailing social order in literature and how they are depicted in comics. This theoretical framework is then applied to the works under consideration, analyzing how these portrayals foster empathy, humanize the “Other”, and enhance understanding of the realities faced by Middle Eastern people. We further explore the strategic choice of child-like graphiation and how it aligns with the choice of characters and offer ethical insights via the tensions created by this style. The second subchapter focuses on the child representation in the Middle East, looking at signs of differences or universalism in the portrayal of children. We then analyze the representation of children as powerful characters who are symbols of resistance and resilience. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the psychological concept of introjection and its application in graphic novels. Clifford Marks, in his article “Wise beyond her years: how *Persepolis* introjects the adult into the child”, adapts the psychological concept of introjection to comics studies. He argues that, in comics and graphic novels – especially autobiographical ones – the process of introjection occurs when authors blend their adult insight with their childhood experiences, creating different layered temporalities (2017). The adult self of the authors makes decisions regarding which childhood events to portray and how to depict them, creating tensions and bridging child and adult perspectives.

The third and final chapter delves into the deliberate use of black and white in the graphic novels under consideration, exploring color theories, influences from other authors, and the

expressive potential of monochromatic colors. It investigates how these elements convey the weight of memory, the emotions of the characters, and highlight the routine nature of violence. We highlight how the use of black and white forces readers to look at the unfolding events and the symbols, engaging readers with the drawings. Finally, we exemplify these findings with extracts from the corpus.

Growing up in a small town with a diverse community of people from various nationalities, we were exposed to a wide range of narratives from the Middle East. As we matured and became more aware of media portrayals, we noticed a pervasive depiction of Middle Easterners as dangerous and fundamentally different from “us”, the Westerners – a portrayal that we found completely at odds with what we had experienced. As our knowledge and awareness on global issues increased, we became even more conscious of the biased portrayals of the Middle East in the media and how it served the interests of the West. Our discovery of graphic novels authored by Middle Eastern women has considerably enriched our knowledge by giving us access to a more intimate insight, revealing a rich tapestry of perspectives from their home countries, along with the historical and political conflicts that shape their lives. We approached the exploration of these graphic novels as learners and were astonished by the powerful portrayals that challenged the dominant Western narrative. It felt important to analyze how the authors were able to achieve that and the meanings behind every stylistic choice. Through this thesis, we aim to delve into the mechanisms of representing violence and trauma. This research is not merely an academic pursuit; it is a way to do our part and shed light on important narratives.

1. Setting the frame: Trauma, Violence, and Women in literature and comics

Trauma: a concept that has shifted over time

The word trauma has changed over time, evolving to a more complex term, both in its definition and use. As observed in the COHA, the Corpus of Historical American English, the word “trauma” started its ascension in our vocabulary in the sixties and has now reached its highest frequency (2023). From this evidence, we may assume that “trauma” is familiar to a lot of people. For some, it may refer to historical events like the Shoah or the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For others, it may be associated with more personal events like accidents, physical or sexual assaults, abuse, torture, etc. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines “trauma” as: 1 – an unpleasant and upsetting experience that affects you for a long time, 2 – a mental state of extreme shock caused by a very frightening or unpleasant experience (LDOCE, no date b). As a result, “trauma” is recognized as an experience caused by a violent event that deeply affects humans for a long period of time.

To have a better understanding of the term “trauma” we should inquire about its origins. The word “trauma” comes from the Greek language and was originally used as a medical term to describe a physical wound. The term was then reconceptualized in the late 1890s by many European psychologists, one of them being Sigmund Freud. The latter developed trauma theories to understand his patient’s atypical behaviors which did not seem to be caused by a physical event. His analyses led to an understanding of trauma as “an event so overwhelming that it cannot be processed normally at the time of its occurrence, so that its memory is effectively blocked but returns to haunt the victim until it is appropriately confronted and dealt with.” (Kurtz, 2018, 3). Further to these analyses, the use of the term “trauma” evolved from simply describing a physical injury to defining any profound emotional distress that affects a human being. With this reconceptualization, “trauma” became an important point of focus in medicine. However, the term was not widely used by the population at that time. The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) shows that the frequency of the word “trauma” only started to rise in the sixties. This period was only a short time after the Second World War and the Holocaust, the persecution and murder of millions of Jews. Understandably, many people started to use the term “trauma” to talk about the awful events that happened during this period. Gradually, the use of the term expanded beyond the context of war to encompass a wider range of stressing experiences. In the aftermath of such a war, there is a need to understand how

everything happened and how it impacted society. Annette Wieviorka argues in her book *L'ère du témoin* that no other event has generated as many reactions and testimonies as the Second World War (2002: 12). It became crucial for survivors to testify and share their experiences with others. Testifying became essential because, after the Shoah, Jews needed to share their stories to avoid being forgotten. Annette Wieviorka states that: “L’écriture devient alors besoin vital de garder la trace d’événements qui défient l’imagination et de s’assurer l’immortalité” (2002: 34). People began writing books, driven by the will and necessity to remember. This objective is also present in the graphic novels analyzed for this thesis and will be discussed later.

Some scholars have argued that the term “trauma” has become too general and is often used as a “blanket term thus reducing the descriptive usefulness” (Connolly, 2011). To address this issue, Kijak and Funtowicz introduced the concept of “the syndrome of the survivor of extreme situations” (1982: 26). They argued that the term better captures situations that are unprecedented, where human rights are violated by other human beings, victims witness torture and killings, and endure social isolation. This type of collective trauma can have profound effects on the psyche. As Laud and Auerhahn explain, in their study about forms of traumatic memory, it can lead to the creation of a void, resulting from “the collapse of the imaginative capacity to visualize atrocity” (1993: 288). In the graphic novels under study, this void is often represented by black panels, symbolizing a trauma so profound that it can only be depicted as an empty space filled with meaning.

The influence of literature and comics on trauma

Literature has significantly shaped the cultural understanding of trauma, providing a medium through which its psychological and emotional consequences are explored. Many authors have used novels, memoirs, and poetry to delve into traumatic experiences, offering readers deep insights. For instance, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that delves into the traumatic experience of slavery, or Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* that explores mental illnesses. These works, along with many others, have enriched the broader discussion on trauma and its shaping through their compelling narratives. The foundational work in trauma theory emerged significantly in the 1990s, with scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, and Shoshana Felman focusing on the testimonial literature of Holocaust survivors to develop a literary theory based on the

concept of trauma (Delage & Gaultier, 2015: 3). Prior to their work, Sigmund Freud had also turned to literature to elucidate traumatic experiences. Cathy Caruth, in her book titled *Unclaimed Experience: trauma, narrative and history*, explains that Freud, to exemplify his theory that individuals are perpetually haunted by their traumatic memories, referenced a story from Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Caruth, 1996: 2). In the story, a man named Tancred wounds his beloved in a battle and later, unknowingly, wounds her again by slashing his sword at a tree. Freud used this example to demonstrate that the experience of trauma repeats itself even when the survivor is unaware of it. Caruth argues that "if Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experiences, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" (1996: 3). We can therefore state that the link between literature and trauma studies has been established for a long time. Agnès Delage and Maud Gaultier argue that after the nineties, trauma theory expanded beyond the corpus of Holocaust testimonies to encompass any possible traumatic experience (2015: 4). They further state that "Le trauma mémoriel est entendu dès lors comme une matrice du rapport contemporain à la mémoire dans lequel l'expérience historique locale se subsume dans une communauté mémorielle globale" (2015 : 4). This suggests that memorial trauma is understood as a framework for contemporary memory, where local historical experiences are integrated into a global memorial community. Literature has been crucial in shaping our understanding of trauma, its mechanisms, and its impact.

However, comics have pushed the limits of trauma representations even more. The main example of this phenomenon is Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991), a work so intertwined with trauma and memory that it has spurred significant research and redefinition of the relationship between trauma and comics. In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman documents his parents' story during the Holocaust while depicting the creative process of the graphic novel itself. Spiegelman gathers testimonies related to Holocaust survival to uncover his history and share it with the world. Art Spiegelman challenges the traditional boundaries of trauma representation in various ways in *Maus*. As Salihi argues, "Maus engages a subjective and introspective exploration of the self, emphasizing the complexities of memory, trauma, and the construction of personal narrative" (2024: 1875). Spiegelman creates multiple selves to explore and communicate his personal trauma. By doing so, and by employing zoomorphism, he distorts reality to distance himself from it, allowing a different approach to the themes of dehumanization, survival, and transgenerational trauma. Through this double narrative, manipulation of temporalities, and depiction of how memories and testimonies function,

Spiegelman redefines the boundaries of trauma representation, creating a new method of documentation. Spiegelman proves with his work the power of the medium and of art in dealing with trauma, illustrating how memories and trauma operate within the human psyche.

This comic allowed a turning point in how modern comics now represent and document trauma. Many comics move away from the trauma aesthetic, which is the dominant shape that trauma took, by rejecting the ‘Caruthian model of trauma’ in favor of alternative ways to document it (Davies, 2020: 10). Cathy Caruth argued that trauma is characterized by its delayed impact on individuals, like Sigmund Freud. Therefore, she emphasizes the importance of understanding trauma through its aftereffects (1995: 5). Caruth also contends that traumatic events impact the psyche in such a way that they resist narrative representation due to the workings of memory – victims can recall events but never fully comprehend them (Mambrol, 2018). With this argument, Caruth and many researchers limit trauma to the unrepresentability of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This concept of trauma unrepresentability remains a foundational model for many researchers in trauma studies. However, other scholars, such as Alan Gibbs, criticize this “trauma theory” for oversimplifying the complex nature of traumatic experiences and potentially leading writers to shape their work to conform to that ‘trauma aesthetic’ (2014: 5-9).

With this new form of representation, Spiegelman contradicts Theodor Adorno’s statement made in 1949: ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (1997: 34). This consequently brings us to the question of the representability/unrepresentability of trauma. Many critics contend that trauma is inherently unrepresentable and unspeakable. However, Hillary Chute argues in her theoretical work *Disaster Drawn* for the potential of comics to ‘intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking what I think of the risk of representation’ (2016: 5). Jeanne-Marie Viljoen argues that in the West the concept of trauma is viewed as “pathological and unspeakable” and it is dangerous as it portrays “the victims as voiceless and undermines or even dismisses their testimony” (2020: 3). She explains in her book *War Comics: a postcolonial perspective* that this process of “not telling” creates an acceptable distance between “object and mind”, allowing us to separate ourselves from the horrific political violence that we observe (2020: 4).

Healing through words and images

Art can also have a therapeutic function and is a powerful tool to express difficult emotions associated with a traumatic event. For many years now, a new concept has flourished in therapy: healing through writing, also known as art-therapy. It is used for people who have suffered from a range of trauma, going from physical to sexual abuse and to contexts of war. It is also used for people who suffer from various psychological and neurological problems such as bipolarity or autism. The psychologist Michael Hanes explains in his article “Catharsis in Art Therapy” that when undergoing this type of therapy, patients are required to use art to summon emotional responses rather than intellectual ones (2000: 71). Art therapy sessions consist of a variety of techniques, drawing, creating music, collages, painting, or writing among others. During the therapy, patients can use art as a cathartic tool such as the case of Amy explained by Hanes. Amy, a sixteen-year-old female, had been sexually abused by her stepfather. During her therapy sessions, she produced an effigy of her abuser to later stab it with sharpened pencils (Hanes, 2000: 70). This process allowed a sort of catharsis, as defined by Hanes as “a process that alleviates tensions and anxiety through the expression of emotions that have been hidden or restrained, or the existence of which has been unrecognized” (2000: 70). It allowed Amy to discharge herself from this traumatic experience to later observe it and work on it. Art therapy can also be used as a tool to learn how to navigate emotions. The art therapist Marie-Odile Brêthes used this technique with a patient with bipolar disorder who was in a low phase. The patient went from drawing her sufferings to more optimistic visions of the world, which allowed her, with a psychiatric following, to be in a better mental state (Brêthes, 2014).

Writing sessions are currently organized in many psychiatric centers to help people deal with a wide range of traumas. François Emmanuel argues that researchers in psychiatry have concluded that art is effective for healing because writing enables individuals to externalize their thoughts, understand their complexities, and give shape to previously unconsidered ideas (2021: 115). By writing about their traumas, people can gain perspective and observe the underlying mechanisms. Emmanuel states “Écrire pour réinstaller un récit premier, second..., écrire pour déposer, recréer la scène sur une surface d’inscription afin de s’en détacher, écrire pour ainsi remobiliser, faire jeu avec, les représentations figées par l’effroi” (2021: 120). This process of healing through writing was effective for many writers, such as Primo Levi, who survived the Shoah and later wrote about it to testify to the events in the camps and to cope with this horrific ordeal. Emmanuel further notes “Quelque chose a été déposé sur la page, et le voici

doté d'une vibration propre. L'objet-texte est là, à la fois fruit d'un travail personnel, portant la marque intime de son auteur, et pourtant donné, accordé à l'autre à ce niveau d'humain et d'universel qui est celui de toute forme d'art." (2021: 121). This highlights the power of art, which can heal writers on a deeply personal level while resonating universally, connecting the writer's intimate experience with a broader human understanding. The graphic novels within our corpus share this power, as they vividly depict personal and historical traumas in ways that connect with readers and foster empathy through various stylistic techniques.

Intergenerational trauma

When discussing trauma in general and after analyzing the graphic novels under study, it became clear that intergenerational trauma plays a significant role in the authors' narratives and lives. But what exactly is intergenerational trauma, and how does it manifest?

The Holocaust profoundly impacted psychoanalytic theories on trauma. As Jucovy notes "denial and repression reigned during this period of silence" (1992: 282). For a long time, people struggled to openly discuss the atrocities and to find therapists who could address these unthinkable events. It was only in the seventies that an interest was put on the children of survivors, as it became apparent that they had a higher tendency towards emotional problems (Connolly, 2011). Judith Kestenberg's work in the early 1980s was pivotal in studying the psychological effects on the second generation, meaning children of survivors, providing methods for their treatment (1982). Her findings have been corroborated in subsequent research, indicating similar psychological impacts on children of survivors from various repressive regimes (Connolly, 2011). The term intergenerational trauma, also known as multigenerational trauma or historical trauma, is defined by the American Psychological Association as "the transmission of trauma or its legacy, in the form of a psychological consequence of an injury or attack, poverty, and so forth, from the generation experiencing the trauma to subsequent generations" (APA, 2023). Connolly identifies a key component of intergenerational trauma as "the incapacity on the part of survivors to remember, to mourn, and to symbolize trauma" (2011).

The authors of the graphic novels in our study challenge the prevailing silence through their memory work, a concept defined by the scholar Nina Fischer as "an individual's conscious, voluntary, and methodical interrogation of the past within collective frameworks,

predominantly the familial one” (2015: 2). In their narratives, Abdelrazaq documents her family’s history since the Nakba, Satrapi reflects on her past life in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, and Abirached explores her childhood during the Lebanese Civil War. These authors engage in a critical examination of their pasts or their families’ histories within a collective framework. Fischer argues that “memory work – which is then given literary form – is the only way of engaging with the reality of losses and voids, the limits of imagination, and the remnants of a family’s past” (2015: 2). Graphic novels serve as an effective medium for this memory work, as they merge textual and visual elements, offering a deeper engagement for the authors with their traumatic memories.

A systematic study by Cindy Sangalang and Cindy Vang analyze empirical literature to analyze transgenerational trauma in refugee families (2016). They start their research by arguing that traumatic experiences endured by refugees, both prior and during their immigration, can lead to long-term mental health issues and psychological distress, effects that can persist long after resettlement (Sangalang & Vang, 2016: 745). They state that “accordingly, there is increased recognition that war-related post-traumatic stress extends beyond the individual to affect families with potential long-term effects on the health and psychological well-being of individuals in subsequent generations” (Sangalang & Vang, 2016: 745). Refugees, individuals forced to leave their country because of war or other situations of violence, carry the burdens of their traumatic experiences, and often pass these on from one generation to the next. The study conducted by Sangalang and Vang compared literature from parents having lived the Holocaust, conflicts in the Middle East, the South-East Asian wars, and the Khmer Rouge genocide. They found out that parents from the Middle East exhibited significantly higher levels of trauma symptoms and that children of these traumatized parents showed “higher levels of depressive symptoms, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, attention deficiency, and psychological stress” (Sangalang & Vang, 2016: 752). This evidence underscores the existence of intergenerational trauma and its pronounced impact on refugee populations.

In the graphic novels analyzed, especially in *Baddawi* as Leila Abdelrazaq narrates the story of her father, this trauma passed on from parents to children can be observed and felt. Although Abdelrazaq never experienced life in refugee camps or in Palestine herself, she still feels the pain, frustration and anger felt by her family and Palestinian refugees at large. Her graphic novel acts as a memory work, as explained above, aiming to illuminate the realities of life as a refugee. Through her narrative, she skillfully interweaves personal and historical events,

underscoring her profound connection to her heritage and cultural identity. Trauma undeniably pervades the graphic novels under consideration, often passing from one generation to the next due to its substantial psychological weight. Unfortunately, the sociopolitical situations in Iran, Palestine, and Lebanon remain precarious, mirroring the challenges faced by the authors and their families in the past. Many people still seek refuge elsewhere, and the trauma associated with displacement continues to haunt both individuals and families. By creating these graphic novels, the authors not only preserve their histories but also offer a poignant critique of the ongoing struggles faced by their communities.

In summary, defining trauma is complex, as it manifests uniquely among individuals. However, comics provide a versatile medium that enables diverse representations of trauma. As argued before, it is important to depict the unrepresentable. Comics can, by pushing the limits of trauma aesthetics, break the silence and represent the traumatic experiences in many ways. Some authors, such as journalist and comics author Joe Sacco, document every detail of the wars in a photorealistic style. Others, like Spiegelman, document traumatic experiences through memory while using metaphors, loose lines, and playing with several temporalities on the same panel. Others choose a more abstract way of representing violence using lines, dots, or blank pages.

Bearing witness to trauma: comics as a freedom to explore and express

Comics are an effective medium for bearing witness because they offer a wide range of possibilities and are not limited to a specific aesthetic. Authors can decide their level of presence in the narrative, incorporate metaphors – as seen in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* for example – and choose whether to use photorealistic or abstract styles. They also have the freedom to select colors, and to use either electronic or handwritten formats, among other creative choices. Since comics combine visual and textual elements, creators can manipulate various stylistic aspects to add depth and layers to the narrative. Moreover, in the context of war and conflicts, as is the case in our corpus, comics allow the documentation of the collision between History and personal history. There is this ability to juxtapose different temporalities and perceptions on one page that shows “the powerful interpenetration of private and public histories” (Chute, 2016: 213).

As our study concentrates on authors from the Middle East, it is important to understand the etymology and meaning behind the word ‘witness’. In Arabic, the words ‘witness’ شاهد (shahid)

and ‘martyr’ شهيد (shaheed) are derived from the same root. Both share the meaning of witnessing or testifying. The word ‘shaheed’ has another layer of meaning referring to sacrifices for faith. In English, the word ‘martyr’ comes from the Greek word μάρτυς (martys) which means “witness”, here the term is not tied to religious sacrifice. In both languages, the words for ‘martyr’ share a linguistic link with the concept of bearing witness. As Viljoen argued: “This suggests a deep understanding that buried under the notion of witnessing is an immersive and embodied understanding of pain.” (2020: 36).

Naji al-Ali is often considered the most popular artist in the Arab world. A study conducted by Orayb Aref Najjar on Naji al-Ali argues that “Whereas poetry continues to be important, political speech has migrated to cartoons” (2007: 256). This study demonstrates how cartoons have become the preferred medium for political resistance in Palestine. Naji al-Ali was a Palestinian refugee in a Lebanon camp who first studied painting and then chose to draw comics for their more direct impact and ability to reach a wider audience in their daily lives. He used to draw his cartoons on the walls of his refugee camp and was discovered by the novelist Kanafani who decided to publish them in the *al-Hurriya* – Freedom – magazine. In his cartoons, he denounces Israel, the implications of the US in the conflicts, and Arab Regimes in general. There are many important symbols in his works such as embroidered Palestinian clothes, or the key of a Palestinian home, but the main symbol of resistance is a child. Handala is an eternal child who witnesses the unfolding of political and religious events and who is always represented turning his back on the reader. Naji al-Ali promised that the readers would see Handala’s face once Palestinians were free and on their land. Unfortunately, Naji al-Ali never had the chance to draw the character’s face as he was assassinated in 1987. Hillary Chute argues in *Disaster Drawn* that Handala is “a figure for witness” in the Arab world, teaching the readers to “understand the impact of the political situation shaping Palestinian lives”, all through a “child’s gaze that records the scene” (2016: 212). His style and his child character influenced a lot of Palestinian cartoonists, such as Leila Abdelrazaq for her graphic novel *Baddawi*, and artists in the world being “a voice for the voiceless” (Najjar, 2007: 282).

In the Middle East, especially in countries with persistent conflicts, a strong tradition of bearing witness exists. Authors want to testify to their survival and tell their side of the story, emphasizing the importance of truthfulness and remembering. Hillary Chute, in her article “The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*” argues that Satrapi’s graphic novel *Persepolis* is “framed diegetically, and externally in her introduction, by injunctions to ‘never

forget': it is the defining project of the text." (2008: 97). In fact, Marjane Satrapi affirms in her introduction that she created this project with the goal of not forgetting: "One can forgive but one should never forget." (Satrapi, 2008: 2). This argument is also present throughout the narrative, especially through her relationship with her uncle Anoosh who tells her their family history and asks her to remember it. In the introduction of *Baddawi*, Leila Abdelrazaq asserts "This book is a testament of the fact that we have not forgotten" (2015: 12). She further contends that for Palestinians remembering constitutes an act of resistance against the ongoing ethnic cleansing by Israel since 1947 (Abdelrazaq, 2015: 12). In *A Game for Swallows*, Zeina Abirached does not explicitly state the objective of her graphic novel, but she discusses it in an interview where she explains: "Il fallait rendre compte de ce mode de vie très particulier que l'on avait pendant la guerre, de cette ville qui était en train de disparaître" (Roger-Lacan, 2020). It is therefore evident that the theme of "not forgetting" is present in all three graphic novels in our corpus. Another objective that is common in this literature is to impact Western readers who may not be aware of the realities depicted. As argued above, comics are an effective medium to achieve their goal as they allow the juxtaposition of different temporalities and histories. When talking about bearing witness in these contexts, we immediately think of literature as resistance. In these comics, you can find representations of typical foods, embroideries, spices, tapestries, stories, etc. This is meant to resist the suppression of their culture by other nations.

In our corpus, various forms of witnessing are present, encompassing both primary and secondary roles. Golnar Nabizadeh, a researcher specializing in visual representation, life narrative and trauma studies in 20th and 21st century fictions, analyzed the depiction of trauma and witnessing in *Persepolis* (2019). In her research "Narrating trauma in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*", she argues that Marjane Satrapi can be regarded as both a primary and a secondary witness. *Persepolis* is an autobiographical novel, where Marjane Satrapi depicts events from her childhood that she both experienced and observed, highlighting her role as a primary witness. However, she can also be considered as a secondary witness as she remediates the past through imagined memories (Nabizadeh, 2019). In her graphic novel, Satrapi employs the perspective of her younger self to narrate her childhood experiences amidst the Iranian Revolution. Chute argues that: "Satrapi's embrace of the perspective of youth for her narrative is a way for the author to return to and present the historical events of her childhood with a matter-of-factness." (2008: 97). This approach captures the evolving awareness of Marji for the political context of her country. Satrapi's narrative technique therefore involves engaging with

memory in a dynamic way, “by triangulating between the different versions of herself represented on the page.” (97). Comics allow this depiction of different temporalities on a page via the combination of visual and textual elements.

It is difficult to remember and represent our memories truthfully and often authors choose to disrupt them for the narrative. Taking once again the example of *Persepolis*, there is a chapter titled “The Shabbat” in which a bomb explodes in Marji’s street. The bomb landed on the Baba-Levy’s house, killing Jews and friends of the family who were in their house to celebrate Shabbat. Marji walked through that street with her mother and saw her friend Neda’s hand with her bracelet still on it. In the graphic novel, Marjane is twelve years old, but she was eighteen when this horrible event happened. With this example, we can observe how Satrapi breaks the temporal framework of her memory. *Persepolis* not only recounts Satrapi’s personal history but also delves into the intricate process of remembering, showcasing how memory involves a continuous dialogue between past and present selves. In her graphic novel *A Game for Swallows*, Zeina Abirached shares her childhood experiences in Lebanon as a primary witness who lived through and observed the conflict.

In *Baddawi*, Leila Abdelrazaq does not share her own story but that of her father, making her a secondary witness. María Porras Sánchez defines a secondary witness as “someone who was not present at the time in which the events took place but who was exposed to her father’s memories of those events” (2021: 145). According to Jilovsky in *Remembering the Holocaust*, “bearing witness for the secondary witness means adopting strategies to overcome the lack of physical presence as well as explicitly acknowledging this lack of presence in their testimony, whether through form or content” (2015: 34). Abdelrazaq employs various strategies in her graphic novel, such as the inclusion of a preface to explain her position and the historical context, and providing a glossary with explanations and definitions for historical and cultural aspects. Abdelrazaq successfully reaffirms her position throughout the narrative, making her work a good example of postmemory (Hirsch, 2013). This concept, studied by Marianne Hirsch, describes “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Postmemory, n.d.). This concept is closely linked to intergenerational trauma, where trauma is passed down from one generation to the next. Artists who are secondary witnesses reimagine the past lived by their family to honor those who suffered and to give voice to those who were silenced. Their artwork, filled

with questions of memories and bearing witness, becomes a form of political activism by voicing the silenced (Porras Sánchez, 2021: 146). Leila Abdelrazaq is conscious of the challenges of portraying memories as a secondary witness. Her constant connections to the historical context allow her to convey the emotional testimony of her father while placing it within the broader collective memory, powerfully linking the personal and the historical.

Having defined various aspects of trauma – its evolution as a concept, its influence in literature and comics, the phenomenon of intergenerational trauma, the role of witnessing, and the potential for healing through art – and having examined these in the context of our selected graphic novels, we now turn to the question of what causes trauma. It is logical to consider the underlying factors and conditions that give rise to traumatic experiences, with violence emerging as a central theme in the narratives under study. Violence in these graphic novels manifests in multiple forms, ranging from slow violence, to the more overt acts of torture, shootings, bombings, and sexual assaults. It is therefore essential to delve into the concept of violence itself – its definitions, forms, and implications. We must examine how violence is represented, considering both the artistic and narrative strategies employed. Furthermore, we will explore the impact of these representations on readers. How does the portrayal of violence affect the audience's understanding and empathy? By doing these analyses, we aim to uncover how these graphic novels not only reflect the harsh realities of living in conflict-affected areas but also critique the systems that perpetuate violence. Graphic novels, with their unique potential as a medium, can both depict and challenge traditional representations of violence.

Exploring violence in Comics: depiction and effect

When thinking about violence in comics, the first examples that come to our minds are superhero comics where can already be seen on the cover characters getting ready to fight, or even already fighting with important onomatopoeias like “BOOM” or “RAAARRRGHHH”. The Marvel and DC comics are really representative of violence in general with their images of blood, weapons, fights, vivid colors, and the many sounds they make. In our study however we do not focus on this type of performative violence. It is therefore important to redefine violence to understand its implications in the graphic novels analyzed.

The term “violence” can have many definitions depending on the context and the approach taken. As argued by Yves Michaud, the first assumption we make about violence is that it

consists of a use of force that entails physical damage (2014: 31). The examples of violence that this definition highlights are murders, torture, or physical fights that end with actors being injured. In his definition, Yves Michaud adds that violence can be sudden or long-term and that, moreover, it can be insensitive. The example he gives to demonstrate his point is when famines are organized by a state to scare away another population or to exterminate them (2014: 34). In this example, we already see that our first definition is not complete. In fact, here there is no direct use of force onto the other actor, but it clearly has consequences that may be physically observed through the effects of famine. It is therefore important to complete our definition of violence to grab all its aspects and understand its behavior. Sherry Hamby, a researcher in psychology, claimed that four essential elements must be considered for the definition of violence to be complete. Hamby argues that “violence is a behavior that is (a) intentional, (b) unwanted, (c) nonessential, and (d) harmful” (2017: 168). It is important to deconstruct this definition to understand its depth. The first element of the definition refers to the non-essential aspect of an act for it to be recognized as violent. We can use a domestic conflict to exemplify this element, where violence between partners is not necessary, and therefore non-essential, to resolve the conflict. The other aspect of this definition is the question of consent. In the case of more “violent” sexual practices like BDSM, if consent is given by all actors, then the “violence” is wanted. A violent act is defined as a behavior involving aggression, whether physical or psychological, that is not consensual. With regard to the “harmful” element, she argues that the definition of harm as: “results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” is too narrow as it tends to refer only to “extreme harm” (Hamby, 2017: 174). Her conclusion is that harmful acts do not need to be extreme to have lasting impacts and that it is on its lasting impact that the definition should focus (Hamby: 174). The last aspect of the definition is the intentionality. This element could appear as clear but she adds that intent cannot be limited to when the perpetrators admit their desire to cause harm. She concludes by stating that: “Intent to engage in reckless and dangerous behavior, where the harmful outcome could have been foreseen if not explicitly intended, has long been recognized to also form intent sufficient to define an act as violent.” (Hamby: 175). Hamby’s definition allows an understanding of violence as something beyond physical harm to include various forms of harmful behavior such as sexual harassment, mental abuse, forced famine, child neglect, and many more. With this definition, Hamby expanded the knowledge of violent behaviors from physical acts to include anything that fits within the framework of the four points of her definition. Needless to say, there are limits to this definition, and one

could always delve deeper into the subject. However, for our purposes, we will leave it at that, as it already provides a solid basis for the analysis of our corpus.

Another concept related to violence and important to define in our thesis, as it appears in the graphic novels under study, is Nixon's term "slow violence". He explains this term as a type of violence that cannot be seen, occurs gradually and has a strong impact that is dispersed across time and space (Nixon, 2011). He argues that it is a sort of violence that is not observed as such. Kinds of slow violence are, for example, climate change, global conflicts, deforestation, and toxic waste, among others. Nixon, in his conceptualization of this specific violence, makes connections between humans and non-humans and how these relations have significant consequences. Violence cannot solely be seen as something isolated, which we will analyze in the following chapters. As links between humans and nonhumans have been made here, it is also important to observe the different levels of violence that take place between humans. This line of thought leads us to Crenshaw's theories on intersectionality. Initially, this term was coined in the context of feminism to explain that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage compound themselves and create obstacles for women of color (1989). This means that a black woman or a woman of color will suffer from both sexism and racism. This highlights the fact that it is an interconnection of different structures that oppress people. We can link this to the concept of violence and how it does not operate in isolation but rather through interconnections with various dimensions.

Going back to comics studies, and the present research, we will analyze how violence is represented: in comics' forms, aesthetics, historical aspects, and constructions. In fact, in comics, words and images meet, creating a unique dynamic suited to representing violence and various other elements, as it can also manipulate time and space. This particular combination that is found in comics allows artists to push the limits of unrepresentability and depict ideas and emotions that cannot be conveyed through words or drawings alone. The author's drawings convey a new level of meaning to the narrative and allow the readers to see how violence works, how it affects people, and how they work or not through it. The researchers Davis-McElligatt and Coby, in their book *BOOM! SPLAT!: Comics and Violence*, explain that: "By externalizing the internal, cartoons can stage a critical dialectic between the function of power, between those harmed and those causing harm, and between the reader and the creator's universe" (2017: 4). An example that is outside our corpus but that was striking in this combination of words and images to represent the unrepresentable is Katie Green's *Lighter*

Than My Shadow (2013). This graphic novel is about the author's struggle with anorexia. What is impressive is that the reader can feel the constant weight of Katie's thoughts throughout the comic. In fact, Katie is constantly followed by a black shadow, made of sharp lines, that grows bigger and appears overwhelmingly heavy. This shadow adds a new level of meaning to the narrative and allows the reader to haptically feel the struggles of Katie's journey. Moreover, the graphic novel is physically challenging to hold due to its weight and format. As readers, we bear witness to the violence depicted on the panels.

Jeanne-Marie Viljoen introduces the concept of "dark" writing in relation to the representation of violence. As discussed in the first chapter, Viljoen observes that there is a Western tradition of viewing trauma as "pathological and unspeakable", which can be dangerous because it often portrays victims as voiceless or dismisses their testimonies (2020: 3). She also contends that representing violence is crucial to counteract societal indifference towards it. By not recounting traumatic experiences, a distance is created between the "object and mind", allowing people to emotionally detach from what they observe (2020: 4). In the Western tradition, it is more common to portray trauma and violence in a realistic manner. Viljoen argues that: "Insisting on a direct and 'accurate' approach to violence that approximates 'the truth' restricts us to the realm of representational knowledge." (2020: 4). Therefore, she introduces the concept of "dark" writing to expand the notion of representation to encompass the unrepresentable/unspeakable. It is important to include elements that are difficult to describe, and representation need not be strictly mimetic. Furthermore, Viljoen asserts that observing trauma creates a bodily response in readers, and that "'dark' writing may give us the means to represent pain as a collective experience of a community, across generations, across body and mind as a complex of representation and experience." (2020: 9). In summary, "dark" writing is essential for depicting and sharing traumatic experiences as it incorporates the unrepresentable and engages readers in a bodily experience that fosters a sense of collectivity. The comics medium, via its combination of images and words, facilitates a more embodied approach to representation and has a greater impact on readers. Additionally, "dark" writing allows a more ethical approach to witnessing trauma as it requires readers to shift their perspectives and adopt a "position of not knowing" (Viljoen, 2020: 29). Joseph Darda asserts that "the autographic presses the reader to reconsider the assumptions she brings to the text and the basic framework through which she understands the so-called other" (2013: 34). The autographic medium compels readers to assume a new position, to set aside preconceived notions, and to engage with the authors' past and the challenges of narrating trauma. Readers are asked to construct

the narrative, from this position, they “comprehend it from the inside rather than as a detached outsider” (Darda, 2013: 34). This aspect makes graphic novels, particularly autographics, an ethical medium for representing and observing violence. When reading graphic narratives, readers must actively interact with both the narrative and the images, thereby becoming witnesses of the depicted violence. The reader bears the responsibility of observing and understanding the mechanisms underlying violence, which is why graphic narratives are considered, by Chute, Viljoen and Darda, “an ethical form of representation”. (2020: 49). Later in the thesis, we will argue that the drawing techniques further contribute to this ethical representation.

As argued, comics are a powerful medium to convey violence, as they combine visual imagery and narrative to include intense emotions and actions effectively. Their popularity created debates around their negative impact on young readers. In the 1950s, comics had become highly popular among children and adolescents, leading to a scrutiny of their content. In 1954, the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*. In his book, he argued that comics were a cause for juvenile delinquency because of their violent imagery. Moreover, he argued that reading violent comics encouraged antisocial behaviors (Davis-McElligatt & Coby, 2017: 6). This book led to an investigation held by the United States Senate around the impact of comic books on young people. The Comics Code Authority (CCA) was therefore established in 1954 as a self-regulation by the comic book industry to avoid governmental regulations. The Comics Code allowed the censorship of a few comics. It addressed concerns about crime and horror comics but also some considered as “problem areas” such as sex, violence, or content that could be criticized (*Comic Book Legal Defense Fund*, n.d.). It also emphasized respect for government, parental authority, and adherence to proper grammar. These regulations caused the downfall of many publishers. All the debates reflected broader societal concerns about children and the effects of their engagement with various media such as video games, comics, and TV shows, among others. It took 57 years for comics to be free of their regulations. This period in the history of comics highlights the permanent tensions in art between creative expression and societal norms.

In our corpus, violence is omnipresent as the narratives are situated in times of conflict and war. The violent acts take various forms and are depicted through diverse techniques. Eszter Szép in her article “Graphic Narratives of Women in War” argues that in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, violence is integral to the construction of Marji’s identity, allowing the reader to observe her

gradual loss of innocence (2014: 28). At the beginning of the graphic narrative, young Marji envisions violent events in her imagination. When her mother tells her about the torture her father endured in prison, Marji attempts to understand the experience by placing herself in a similar situation. Her grandfather was confined in a cell filled with water for hours, leading Marji to take a bath to see how it felt, she then says: “My hands were wrinkled when I came out, like Grandpa’s.” (Satrapi, 2008: 25), clearly illustrating her childhood innocence. As the narrative progresses, Marji’s awareness of violence deepens, and she imagines the acts of torture in a less naïve way, which completely overwhelms her (2008: 53). When she becomes an adolescent, she loses her innocence entirely. A pivotal moment occurs following her friend’s death in a bombing, represented by an entirely black panel (2008: 142). Satrapi refrains from depicting this awful event, instead the black panel with the sentence “No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger” powerfully conveys Marji’s emotions (2008: 142). In the following chapter “The Dowry”, her mother tells her what the fundamentalists do when they arrest young girls, they rape them. Unlike her younger self, who might have envisioned this scenario through a childish lens, the older Marji remains in a state of shock devoid of innocence. Marjane Satrapi’s techniques in *Persepolis* of representing violence in a non-realistic and “naïve” style align with Viljoen’s notion of “dark” writing by conveying the unrepresentable through non-mimetic means. Furthermore, as previously discussed, readers must actively engage with the panels and gutters to fully comprehend the complexity of the violence depicted. The reader becomes a witness to the horrific events, learning alongside Marji. This approach fosters a more ethical form of reading.

In *Baddawi*, Leila Abdelrazaq also chooses to represent violence with low iconicity. This means that, in contrast with Joe Sacco’s hyper-detailed work, her graphic novel lacks realistic details, which therefore portrays violence as less traumatic. She especially employs this technique to represent Israeli soldiers, a topic that will be discussed in the chapter on the use of colors. Readers must use their imagination to fill in the blanks left by the stylistic techniques Abdelrazaq employs. She underscores the constant presence of violence and its normalcy through her narrative. In the chapter “The School Bus”, Ahmad and one of his brothers are on a bus when his brother puts his arm out the window and gets shot. They are not frightened by the situation; they go to their older sister’s place and then to the hospital. The scene in the hospital demonstrates the normalcy of the situation, as they casually talk about school and show no surprise at the shooting, only concern. This is just one of many instances in the graphic novel

where Ahmad is close to death. Abdelrazaq uses shapes and colors to represent violent acts, never realistically depicting the dead bodies or the soldiers.

Women's voices in graphic narratives: the emergence and influence of women cartoonists

In recent years, a remarkable transformation has occurred in the world of comic literature, as an increasing number of women have emerged as prominent storytellers. Traditionally overshadowed in a male-dominated industry, these creators have brought fresh perspectives to the genre. In contemporary comic literature, the representation of gender and its interplay with thematic elements such as violence has garnered significant academic attention. This subchapter explores the rich contributions made by women in graphic narratives, focusing on how their works address themes of intergenerational trauma, identity, and social challenges. By analyzing these narratives, we gain insight into how women have not only asserted their presence in the industry but have also reshaped the medium to tell stories that resonate with readers. Via their art, women invite us to witness the world through their eyes, offering perspectives that are as diverse as they are compelling.

In recent years, an increasing number of women have emerged as prominent voices in the realm of comic literature. Many works of non-fiction within this genre are authored by women, forming the basis of our corpus analysis. These works combine text and drawings to depict real events, offering a unique lens through which to examine their narratives. Hillary Chute in her book *Graphic Women* refers to these works as “graphic narratives”, instead of graphic novels, arguing that comics are the ideal medium for conveying traumatic events. She states that: “The cross-discursive form of comics is apt for expressing that difficult register, which is central to its importance as an innovative genre of life writing.” (Chute, 2010: 2). According to Chute, the combination of visual and textual elements allows creators to explore and push the boundaries of the trauma aesthetic, taking “the risk of representation” (2010: 3).

It is essential to revisit the emergence of women in comics, as for many years they occupied marginalized roles within the comic industry. The 1970s marked a significant turning point, with the underground comix scene and the feminist movement creating spaces for women to express their voices. Pioneers such as Trina Robbins played a crucial role by creating the first all-women comic book titled *It Ain't Me Babe: Women's Liberation* (Chute: 20). This milestone

was soon followed by the influential anthology series *Wimmen's Comix*, which ran from 1972 to 1992. Initially organized by a group of ten women, including Robbins, this series provided female cartoonists with the opportunity to explore a wide range of topics from a feminist perspective (Chute: 21). Subsequent innovations in the realm of underground comics include the pioneering lesbian comic book by Wings which was titled *Come Out Comix* and the *Tits & Clits* by Farmer and Chevely created as a response to the pervasive sexism in male-produced underground comics (Robbins & Valenti, 2013: 135). Robbins and Valenti argue in their book *Pretty in Ink* that these publications progressively featured more women creators, fostering a tradition within underground comics that provided opportunities largely absent in the mainstream superhero comics industry (2013: 136).

This era coincided with a surge in self-published and small-press black-and-white comics, which were more accessible to readers as they were available in bookstores. However, this flourishing period was followed by a decline in visibility for women cartoonists. Robbins and Valenti explain that the primary issue was the bookstore sales model, which operated on the presumption that women did not read comics, leading to insufficient or nonexistent stocking and restocking practices (2013: 143). In response to this marginalization, the “Riot Grrrl” movement was initiated in the nineties by Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman. Aligned with the third wave of feminism, this movement rapidly gained momentum across the country (2013: 145). Wolfe and Neuman published the first Riot Grrrl zine, which expanded significantly with the advent of affordable printing and photocopying technologies, enabling widespread self-publication. These zines covered a range of topics from music to sexuality, and the “concerns of many creators were sexism, rape, violence, homophobia, racism, machismo, human rights abuses, and religious pressure” (2013: 145). The emergence of women cartoonists was a direct reaction to their exclusion from the industry and was closely tied to feminist movements. Comics became a powerful medium for women to voice their protest and raise awareness. Robbins and Valenti argue that despite these advances, breaking into established publishing houses like Marvel or DC remained challenging for women into the first two decades of the 21st century (2013: 157).

The publication of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* was instrumental in popularizing the graphic novel format, offering new opportunities for creators who wanted to do something different than superhero comics. This “new” format, combined with the feminist slogan “the personal is political”, enabled many women cartoonists to achieve success through graphic memoirs.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* pioneered this trend, followed by notable works such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Miriam Katin's *We Are on Our Own*, Sarah Glidden's *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*, and Zeina Abirached's *A Game for Swallows* (Robbins & Valenti, 2013: 161). Numerous autobiographical graphic novels written by women were published during this period, encompassing a wide range of themes from war and abuse to food and relationships. This growing interest can be attributed to the increased accessibility of these graphic novels in major libraries. In the current century, the rise of digital platforms has further enhanced accessibility, allowing creators to share their work directly with readers through webcomics. Although the comics industry remains predominantly male, significant progress has been made. From initial invisibility to achieving widespread publication and readership, women cartoonists have successfully asserted their voices and established their presence in the industry.

Persepolis can be considered a feminist work, defined by Sara Ahmed as "books written, tattered and worn, books that gave words to something, a feeling, a sense of an injustice, books that, in giving us words, gave us the strength to go on" (2017: 1). In her graphic novel, Marjane Satrapi adopts not only a child's perspective but also a female gaze on the conflict. She depicts various aspects of the conflicts while highlighting the particular difficulties faced by women, such as dress codes and greater restrictions. When portraying violence, Satrapi employs an abstract style with low iconicity techniques, using black and white contrasts. Although the violent acts are depicted, they are not rendered in excessive detail. In the chapter "The Dowry", when Marji's mother explains what happens to young girls who are arrested, which is rape, Marji does not even imagine the situation. Satrapi chooses to not represent the sexual violence described in the text. Marshall and Gilmore argue in their article "Girlhood in the Gutter" that by doing so, Satrapi mirrors the culture of silence and invisibility surrounding sexual violence (2015: 109). In our society, discussing sexual violence is already challenging. The question of its representation has sparked many debates regarding its impact on readers. Concerns have been raised about whether depicting violence, sexual abuse especially, might perpetuate further violence against women. Illustrators have the choice to represent it or not, but it is not the depiction itself that determines whether a work is feminist. It is the narrative techniques around it and the way the text engages readers. Leena Romu argues that "the task is rather to examine how the text communicates the feminist idea that sexual violence is about power, not about sex" (2021: 200). In *Persepolis*, it is clearly explained that sexual violence is a question of power, here, in the example given, imposed by a guardian of the revolution. Satrapi portrays

the Islamic Revolution as particularly oppressive to women, who suffer from various forms of violence. In summary, instead of depicting violence in a realistic form that could border on voyeurism for some readers, she allows readers to imagine the violence while guiding them through the text.

In each work, the authors address themes of intergenerational trauma, violence, conflict, war, loss, family, community, and culture. They convey their memories or those of their family members, putting them on paper for others to read. Satrapi and Abirached depict themselves during childhood, sharing their realities to the world. By portraying themselves and their families as resilient individuals who raise their voices, they create a deep emotional connection and empathy for readers through their unique perspectives.

An introduction to the corpus

***Baddawi* by Leila Abdelrazaq**

Leila Abdelrazaq is a Palestinian-American author, illustrator, and activist born in Chicago. Her works primarily explore issues related to diaspora, refugees, history, memory, and borders. In 2020, she completed her MA in Modern Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Michigan, focusing her research on Palestinian futurist art and post-national imaginaries. She is also the co-founder of Maamoul Press, a small press and collective that supports art made by marginalized creators from comics to printmaking to book art. In 2015, her first graphic novel, *Baddawi*, was published by Just World Books and was shortlisted for the 2015 Palestine Book Awards. Just World Books is a publishing house whose main aim is to ‘expand and enrich the discourse in the United States and worldwide on issues of great international concern’ (Just World Books, 2024). They publish books of many genres, most of them connected with the ‘Middle East and with war and peace issues more broadly’. On their About Us page we can find a quote from Leila Abdelrazaq: ‘Just World Books makes resources and space for much-needed conversations accessible to people, helping to increase public understanding around some of the most critical issues of our time.’ These statements demonstrate that the goal of the publishing house is to educate a Western audience on important international issues. This is what Leila Abdelrazaq seeks to do with her comic. In all her artworks, from comics to posters to blog entries, Abdelrazaq focuses on themes related to

Palestinian culture, history, and resistance. She actively advocates for Palestinian rights, using her art as a tool for education, raising awareness, and activism.

Leila Abdelrazaq's graphic narrative *Baddawi* combines the personal life of a child with the historical events happening in Palestine and in the refugee camps. In her preface, she introduces the history of Palestinian refugees, starting with the Nakba, and then further explains the historical and political events in the narrative. Understanding the political context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essential to comprehend Abdelrazaq's objectives. The establishment of Israel in Palestine was the culmination of a complex series of historical events. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of Zionism, a nationalist movement advocating for the return of Jews to their ancestral homeland in Palestine, spurred by widespread anti-Semitism and persecution in Europe (Laqueur, 2003). In 1917, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration in which they favored the "establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine" (Cleveland & Bunton, 2009: 163). After World War I, the League of Nations granted Britain a mandate over Palestine, during which Jewish immigration increased significantly. The Holocaust intensified international sympathy for the Jewish cause. Cleveland and Button state that: "As the extent of the Nazi atrocities became known, the public conscience of the West came to embrace the notion that the settlement of the surviving Jews in Palestine could atone for the horrors that Western civilization had inflicted upon them." (2009: 261). Despite Arab opposition, the plan was accepted by the Jewish leadership. The conflict started with the Nakba, or "catastrophe", decided by a group of Zionists on 10 March 1948. It was decided that they were going to expulse Palestinians from their territory and the Zionist soldiers were given detailed instructions: "large-scale intimidation; laying siege to and bombarding villages and population centers; setting fire to homes, properties and goods; expulsion; demolition; and, finally, planting mines among the rubble to prevent any of the expelled inhabitants from returning." (Pappé, 2006: 15). The ethnic cleansing took six months and more than "half of Palestine's native population had been uprooted". (2006: 16). Ilan Pappé is an Israeli historian and in his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* he states that what happened is a crime against humanity and that it should be recognized as such. However, it has been ignored, systematically denied, and not recognized as a historical fact or a crime (2006: 16). The number of Palestinian refugees is over 5 million across the Middle East, with refugees living in camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and within the occupied territories, often under difficult conditions and with limited rights (UNRWA, 2021). The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and subsequent wars led to the division of Palestinian territories into the West Bank and the Gaza

Strip, governed by separate entities. Nowadays, this ongoing conflict still escalates significantly, leading to severe humanitarian crises.

In her graphic narrative, Leila Abdelrazaq wants to tell the world about the complex situation of Palestinian refugees and their homeland. *Baddawi* explores the Palestinian refugee identity through her father's childhood in a refugee camp in northern Lebanon named Baddawi. Ahmad is a Palestinian boy who grows up in this refugee community where the border between happiness and violence is blurred. The reader follows the protagonist in moments of joy such as his holidays at his grandparents' house where he can swim as much as he wants, to moments of despair when Palestine seems even more far away. In this graphic novel, as in Palestinians' lives, political and personal events are very much entwined. As Leila Abdelrazaq argues in a podcast, it all started with a need to tell the story of her father so that people, who are not familiar with the Palestinian context, would see the complexity of Palestinians. With the character of Ahmad, she tried to show that you cannot separate the political and the personal. However, Ahmad is not exclusively defined by the political circumstances (Khoury, 2016). Palestinians are victims in a conflict with Israel that denies their statehood and humanity. Leila Abdelrazaq portrays Palestinians as human beings who deserve rights and exhibit resilience; they stand firm to ensure that their story and culture are not forgotten. This comic, as Leila affirms in her video presentation (Just World Books, 2024), is made for a Western audience because Palestinians already know all these stories.

Numerous studies have been conducted on this graphic narrative, with one being particularly noteworthy. Haya Saud Alfarhan, a researcher specializing in world literatures and cultural studies, analyzed the elements at play in *Baddawi*. She explains that "[...] *Baddawi* utilizes the visuality of the comic form to assert a fundamental right to exist and to narrate the experience of the lives of the dispossessed—in this case, of Palestinian refugees." (Alfarhan, 2020, p.159). *Baddawi* transcends the boundaries of a typical graphic novel, as Leila Abdelrazaq skillfully employs the comics medium to depict personal and historical events, thereby giving a presence and a shape to the Palestinian narrative (Alfarhan, 2020, p. 154). Alfarhan (2020) further argues that *Baddawi* holds a significant position within the realm of resistance literature from the Middle East. It actively engages the reader as an agent, asserting its right to existence, and representing violence through symbolic visuals. The depiction of Palestinian lives and experiences is crucial, particularly given the historical and political context of the Nakba, an event that many people have failed to acknowledge, and some continue to deny.

Abdelrazaq's work seeks to humanize Palestinians, striving for their recognition as individuals with rich lives and cultures. While Ahmad is the main character of the graphic narrative, it is his mother and grandmother who embody the connection to Palestinian land and culture. His mother narrates stories about their homeland and teaches Ahmad how to prepare traditional foods, thereby preserving their cultural heritage. In the chapter "The Marble", when Ahmad attempts to earn money through gambling, his mother intervenes and suggests he gather thymes from the mountains. She uses the thyme to make za'atar, a traditional Palestinian dish, imparting cultural knowledge and traditions to her son. This highlights the significant role of the mother as a cultural guardian, emphasizing the importance of maintaining traditions in the face of efforts to erase their cultural identity. As the narrative is based on the memories of the author's father, and is, therefore, more male-centered, it does not provide direct access to the experiences of women during the conflict. However, the text does contain sentences indicating that women are subjected to rape and violence (see p. 17 in *Baddawi*). Despite the absence of a woman's perspective, the importance of women within the refugee community is evident through the portrayal of mother figures. These characters underscore the crucial roles women play in preserving cultural identity and providing stability, even amidst the turmoil of displacement and conflict. By sharing these narratives with a Western audience, *Baddawi* aims to foster understanding and empathy, bridging cultural gaps.

***Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi**

Initially released in France in two separate volumes titled *Persepolis 1* and *Persepolis 2* in 2000 and 2001, respectively, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, a combined version of the first two volumes, was published two years later in English by Pantheon Books. Two other parts were added and are titled *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*. However, in our thesis, we will exclusively examine the childhood experiences of the author and therefore the first part of the entire volume. The author is Marjane Satrapi, a woman born in 1969 in Iran amid several conflicts. *Persepolis* can be considered a graphic memoir as she depicts her own life and experiences. In *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, the part we focus on, she recounts her childhood in Tehran from 1979 to 1984.

The graphic novel starts with Marjane, a girl from the upper-middle class being forced to wear a veil to go to school by the new Islamic government. In this first part of the story, the reader follows the journey of Marji, a young girl who wants to become a prophet, with God and her raising awareness towards political consciousness, reading a comic about dialectic materialism and books about the revolution. The reader discovers with Marji the various conflicts and their consequences on the everyday life of her family and friends. Marji comes from a westernized family. By this, we mean that they have a more liberal approach to education and religion. They share banned books with their daughter; they continue to party, drink alcohol, and listen to Western music. The reader follows the changing attitudes of Marji towards society and sees her becoming a rebellious young girl who only wants to be “educated and liberated” (Satrapi, 2008: 73). This graphic memoir involves the reader in the political and societal events while being in the personal life of Marji. Despite the awful events happening because of the war, there is still this lightness of childhood and laughter with friends. An example would be in the chapter “The Key” where the author explains the country ritual which is hitting yourself and even flagellating yourself during the religious ceremonies. The girls in this chapter make fun of this situation and continue to be silly while being under a strict Islamic government. This is a good example of how people live through conflicts and how children can be resilient. Satrapi clearly explains the reason why she wrote her graphic memoir. She wants to show that Iran is not only “fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism” (Satrapi, 2008: 2). Her goal is to represent the real Iran and to emphasize the memory of those who fought for Iran’s freedom and who lost their lives to this cause, like her uncle Anoosh. Satrapi stresses the importance of remembering: “One can forgive but one should never forget” (Satrapi, 2008: 2). This is an argument that can also be found in Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi*’s preface where she states that Palestinians will never forget.

As in *Baddawi*, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* features an important introduction that immerses the reader in the historical context of Iran from the second millennium B.C. to 2002. Marjane Satrapi provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of Iran’s rich history, tracing its evolution from the ancient Medes in the seventh century B.C. to the modern Islamic Republic. This historical backdrop sets the stage for understanding the complexities of Iranian society and the personal narrative that unfolds in the graphic novel. Satrapi begins by explaining the rise and fall of the first Iranian nation created by the Medes, later overtaken by the Persian Empire in the sixth century B.C (2008: 1). During this period, Iran was known as Persia, and it was only in 1935 that it was renamed Iran under the rule of Reza Shah. Satrapi highlights Iran’s

wealth, which made it a target for foreign invasions. Reza Shah, who reigned from 1926 to 1941, was an army officer who led a coup against the Qajar dynasty and seized power. He sought to modernize Iran by constructing infrastructures such as a railway, roads, schools, hospitals, and the first university (Arfa, 2024). He aimed to end Iran's political chaos and reduce foreign control, particularly from Britain and Soviet Russia following World War I (Arfa, 2024). However, during the Second World War, Reza Shah's declaration of Iran as a neutral zone led to the occupation of the country by the Allies and his subsequent deposition. His son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, known as the Shah, succeeded him.

In 1951, Mohammed Mossadeq, then prime minister of Iran, nationalized the oil industry, which led to an embargo by Britain, halting oil exports and severely impacting the economy (BBC News, 2020). In 1953, Mossadeq was overthrown in a coup orchestrated by the British and US intelligence services, and the Shah returned to power with a campaign to modernize the country. However, growing discontent with the Shah's regime culminated in his departure from the country in 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1980, Iran entered a war with Iraq that lasted for eight years. The story of *Persepolis* begins in 1980 under the Islamic rule, a period marked by the enforcement of conservative social values, the denial of women's rights, the imposition of Islamic dress codes, and the creation of militias and clerical organizations to suppress Western cultural influence (Avery et al., 2024). Before the Islamic government in Iran, women's rights were limited, though progress was made when they acquired the right to vote in 1963. Despite this, women could not have custody of their children and needed written permission from their husbands to travel. The Islamic Republic further entrenched Sharia law, "the exclusion of women from judgeship, the imposition of Islamic code of dress on women, and inclusion of strict Sharia rules in the judiciary" (Royanian, 2005: 1). This system is complex because, while women are excluded, they are also included in public life and their right to vote is maintained. Two types of women's activism emerged: the women in favor of the Islamic government and the secular women. Marjane Satrapi depicts these complex oppositions in her graphic novel *Persepolis* to illustrate the realities of living in Iran.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, examining its narrative and visual techniques in conveying complex themes. Notable studies include Hilary Chute's "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*", which explores the visual and narrative techniques employed by Satrapi to juxtapose historical and personal events, the use of black-and-white drawings, and the dynamic of remembering. In her book *Graphic*

Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics, Chute further discusses the power of a minimalist style to convey profound political and emotional messages, and the position of *Persepolis* as a feminist work, illustrating the struggles of women in patriarchal societies. Clifford Marks, in “Wise Beyond her Years: How *Persepolis* Introjects the Adult into the Child”, analyzes the blending of the adult self into the childhood narrative, adding layers of complexity. Leigh Gilmore, in her essay “Witnessing *Persepolis*: Comics, Trauma, and Childhood Testimony”, examines how the graphic novel serves as a powerful medium for expressing the inexpressible aspects of traumatic memory. Golnar Nabizadeh’s “Narrating trauma in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*” discusses the political role of humor in representing traumatic memory and the notion of post-memorial witnessing, bearing witness to personal and collective histories. These studies collectively underscore the richness of *Persepolis* as a work that intersects autobiographical narrative, historical testimony, and the unique capabilities of the graphic novel format. In our analysis, we will build upon this research by conducting a comparative analysis with Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi* and Zeina Abirached’s *A Game For Swallows*, focusing specifically on the representation of violence through Satrapi’s techniques.

***A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return* by Zeina Abirached**

Zeina Abirached is a Lebanese cartoonist who delves into the memories of her life in Beirut in her graphic novels. She was born in 1981 in Beirut and therefore experienced the Lebanese Civil War firsthand. In 2004, she travelled to Paris to share her comics and try to be published. In 2006, her first graphic novel *Beyrouth Catharsis* was published in French, marking the beginning of her desire to share her experiences in Lebanon. Her first work is a “livre-objet” (Rouxel, 2019) that unfolds in three parts, corresponding to the three floors of her childhood building, with each floor also unfolding into two. The reader is free to explore the building in whichever direction they choose and to immerse themselves in the lives of the characters. Her next graphic novel focuses on the same building at 38 Youssef Samaani Street. Published in 2007 in French and 2012 in English, *A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return* is about one troubled night in their building in 1984, during the Lebanese Civil War. Zeina Abirached, who is three at the time, lives with her parents and her brother on the second floor of this building located in East Beirut, the Christian part of the city separated by a “green line” from the Muslim part. One night, her parents decide to visit Zeina’s grandmother who lives only three blocks away. When the parents do not return on time, all the neighbors gather to take

care of the children and wait for the arrival of the parents. There is a tense atmosphere even if the adults are trying to lighten the mood with coffee and games.

In this graphic novel, in opposition to the others under consideration, there is no clear explanation of the historical context. There is no preface explaining the Lebanese Civil War to the readers. The book only includes a map of Lebanon and the surrounding area from 1975 to 1990 (Abirached, 2012: 8) and many descriptions of the structures of the streets. In an interview, she argues that her graphic novel is: “Ce sont des tranches de vie, la guerre racontée à partir du quotidien : on ne sait rien, politiquement parlant, des conflits qui sévissent à l’extérieur – la guerre est racontée en creux et reste perpétuellement hors champ.” (Rouxel, 2019). This is a huge difference with *Baddawi* and *Persepolis* where the authors specify the historical context. Here, Zeina Abirached focuses on the personal and how her family lived through this civil war. In her interview, she states that she is not an activist and that she is not interested in showing the context of the war but rather the impact of the war on the private sphere. She argues that it is up to the reader to delve deeper into the history if that is their wish (Rouxel, 2019).

The Lebanese civil war, spanning from 1975 to 1990, was a multifaceted conflict rooted in a complex web of religious, political, and social tensions. Prior to the war, Lebanon’s political landscape was marked by major tensions due to its sectarian system for power sharing among the three leading religious communities: the Maronites, the Sunnis, and the Shi’a. It was agreed that these communities would share power and be equally represented in public employment and cabinet posts (Makdisi & Sadaka, 2005: 61). However, maintaining a balance proved difficult, leading to the emergence of a weak state. Despite this, Makdisi and Sadaka argue that “the pre-war years were characterized by periodic parliamentary elections, religious freedom, relatively free expression and association, the peaceful change of presidents and cabinets, and the growth of sectarian and non-sectarian political parties” (2005: 62). External factors also contributed to the civil war. Historians agree that the conflict erupted as “a result of growing division between those Lebanese who supported the right of Palestinian resistance to stage operations against Israel from Lebanese soil, and those who opposed it” (Sune, 2011).

These tensions culminated in the outbreak of the civil war on April 13, 1975, beginning in a Beirut suburb between members of the Maronite-dominated Kataeb party and members of Palestinian organizations. In the war’s initial two years, fighting primarily occurred between

Christian parties allied with the government and the PLO and its Lebanese allies (Makdisi & Sadaka, 2005: 66). West Beirut was controlled by the PLO/Lebanese coalition, predominantly Muslims, while East Beirut was controlled by Christian parties. Between 1978 and 1982, external forces entered the conflict, with Israeli and Syrian troops becoming involved. In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and the troops laid siege to West Beirut. The United States then brokered an agreement that led to the PLO's forced departure from western Beirut and Lebanon, while Syrian troops withdrew from West Beirut. This phase of the war saw fierce fighting, resulting in the destruction of many towns, the killing of hundreds of civilians, poor economic and social conditions, and significant emigration. It is estimated that over 144,000 died because of the war, with tens of thousands forced to leave the country to seek refuge (Ministry of the Displaced, 1992). It was in this context that Zeina Abirached grew up, a period of violence and conflicts that lasted throughout her childhood in Lebanon. Her graphic novel hints at these horrors without fully explaining the political and historical context, focusing more on the community and the survival.

While studies have been conducted on this graphic novel, they are not as numerous as those on the other two works under consideration. Moreover, most of the existing research focuses on themes of space and interculturality, which are not the primary focus of our thesis. Consequently, we did not examine these studies in depth. However, two relevant pieces of research merit attention for our study. The first is Mihaela Precup's "'I think we're maybe more or less safe here' Violence and Solidarity during the Lebanese Civil War in Zeina Abirached's *A Game for Swallows*", from the theoretical book *Contexts of Violence in Comics*. Precup argues that the narrative techniques employed by Zeina Abirached allow her to represent a form of nostalgia for her childhood in Beirut, while simultaneously avoiding the romanticization of living in a conflict zone. Abirached portrays the harsh realities of life under conflict without providing graphic details and without diminishing the suffering of her subjects (2019: 76). Precup also discusses the strong sense of community throughout the graphic novel, which helps the individuals survive, and how the use of black and white supports this narrative of the inside. The other pertinent article, written by Eszter Szép and titled "Graphic narratives of women in war: identity construction in the works of Zeina Abirached, Miriam Katin, and Marjane Satrapi", focuses on the representation of gendered violence and the construction of identity for daughters and mothers traumatized by war. Szép emphasizes that these works address the experiences of girls, who are also daughters, linking this with Marianne Hirsch's theory on the role of daughters in the transmission of trauma, which is different from sons. Hirsch introduces

the concept of “allo-identification”, based on the model of the mother-daughter relationship, which posits that anyone, not just family members, can identify with the traumatized (2002). Szép argues that comics are an effective medium for allo-identification through their juxtaposition of images and text. Readers can empathize and identify with those suffering through their portrayals. She further adds that, in contrast with photographs, drawings allow for the representation of victims without re-exposing them to the gaze of the oppressor (2014: 24). Victims are depicted in a way that makes them recognizable, yet leaves room for readers’ imagination and identification. Szép asserts that “*A Game for Swallows* is possibly the most optimistic narrative of the three, yet is not exempt from identity crisis caused by war” (2014: 32). Our analysis of the graphic novels under study led us to a similar conclusion: *A Game for Swallows* is more optimistic in its representation of trauma, conveying a sense of nostalgia while still depicting the harsh realities of living in a war.

2. The child's gaze: a multifaceted tool

The representation of children in literature and graphic novels

Children are omnipresent in the graphic novels under study for this thesis, serving as the primary lenses through which we witness the unfolding events. Through their eyes, readers simultaneously discover the horrors of war, prompting critical questions: Why children? What unique contributions do they make to the narrative? How are they depicted? To address these questions, this chapter will undertake a multifaceted analysis. We begin by examining the role of children in literature and graphic novels, highlighting their distinctive portrayals and how these representations force us to address questions of hegemony and forms of violence. We will investigate the depiction of children in Middle Eastern traditions, tracing their representation from the medieval period to the present day, and identifying how Abdelrazaq, Satrapi, and Abirached use child characters to counter prevailing discourses about differences. We will also explore how these child protagonists are portrayed within our corpus, examining the broader implications of their characterizations. What insights do these children offer? How do their portrayals affect the narrative? We will find that child characters position readers as learners and witnesses. Finally, we will delve into the psychological concept of introjection, analyzing its application within the graphic narratives under consideration.

A brief introduction to children's narration in literature

Many writers employ child protagonists in their novels, including Charles Dickens who frequently used young characters to drive his narratives. In her article "Narrating as a Child Reading as an Adult: Ways of Employing a Child Narrator in the American Novel", Šárka Bubíková argues that it is during the modern era that children were seen as "better suited for a truer insight into the nature of things" (2011: 265). Children, with their innocence and limited understanding of the world's complexities, can reflect on it in a truthful and unfiltered manner. Their naïve point of view allows them to articulate thoughts and observations that adults often cannot express openly. Bubíková also contends that many American writers use the child's voice to "challenge authority" (2011: 265). This is achieved through the children's freedom of speech, which enables them to critique the prevailing social order more freely. Children provide a lens through which life and society can be observed in a simpler and purer form. In a study analyzing the child narration in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Mohammed and Abd Alhadi highlight how Lee employs the child protagonist, Scout, to foster empathy and illustrate

her journey of understanding the harsh realities of life, particularly “the racist culture of Southern United States to represent the blind reaction to racism prejudices” (2020: 154). Through Scout’s innocent perspective, Lee effectively highlights societal injustices and encourages the readers to reflect critically on issues of racism and prejudice. By employing child narrators, authors can bridge the gap between innocence and experience, offering a unique vantage point that is both poignant and impactful. This narrative strategy not only enhances storytelling but also serves as a catalyst for social commentary.

In literature, instances exist where an adult perspective is interwoven with the child narration, resulting in two focalizers and creating a dual perspective. This juxtaposition of viewpoints not only enriches the narrative but also provides a more nuanced understanding of the story. Such a dual perspective can also be found in comics and will be further explored in a following subchapter titled “Introjecting the self”.

Bridge the gap: the depiction of children in comics and its contribution

Before diving into the depiction of children in graphic novels, it is pertinent to examine the origins of child characters in comics. Comics frequently feature child characters, such as the famous Boule & Bill and Calvin & Hobbes, among others. This prevalence of child characters can be attributed to the perception of comics as a form primarily intended for children (Nell, 2020: 126). Maaheen Ahmed, in her study “Children in Comics: Between Education and Entertainment, Conformity and Agency”, argues that comics were seen as childish and this idea influenced their target audience, leading to a large child readership; nonetheless, many child characters also appealed to a broad adult readership (2019: 2). One of the earliest and most influential examples is Richard Outcault’s Yellow Kid. This character, despite being a child, was primarily read by adults because of his engagement with political and social themes. Maaheen Ahmed, in “Reading Children in Comics: a sociohistorical mapping”, posits that Outcault chose the Yellow Kid because “the child character was an effective and affective means of capturing social issues of urban slums” (2021: 5). By employing a child character, Outcault was able to soften the harsh realities of immigrant life in America. His drawing technique, which presented the Yellow Kid in a ‘flat’ manner, elicited emotional responses from readers and required them to actively engage to bring the character to life. Another famous child protagonist in comics is Hergé’s Tintin, who embodies goodness and righteousness, often standing in stark contrast to the adult characters. Maaheen Ahmed suggests that the ambiguity

surrounding Tintin's age enhances reader identification with the protagonist (2021: 8). She further asserts that: "Through his highly abstract form and identity, Tintin is the locus where his young readers' desires negotiate the spaces of imagination and childhood entertainment with those of his adult creators" (2021: 8). Thus, the age and the artistic depiction of Tintin play crucial roles in the dynamics between children and adults.

In the graphic novels analyzed, child characters are depicted as being in a state of becoming, meaning that, as argued by Ahmed in her study about the sociohistorical mapping of children in comics, they represent "a past stage on the way to adulthood" (Ahmed, 2021: 6). This depiction creates a tension between past and present selves, the child and the adult, and their perspectives. Adult authors revisit their own childhood, or those of family members, to narrate their stories that encompass heavy themes such as war, loss and violence. While child characters in comics often avoid adult concerns like death or love, in the graphic novels under consideration, these themes are central. The child protagonists do not have a choice, they are forced to look at death in the eyes and to confront it. Maaheen Ahmed argues that when "facing adult themes and seriousness, the children's main weapons include avoidance and laughter" (2021: 9). In our corpus, when children encounter violence and horrific events, they cope through laughter with friends or family, or by distancing themselves from the violence, sometimes symbolized by a black page. This coping mechanism is analyzed in further detail in the sections titled "Exploring violence in comics" and "Forcing the gaze".

Nelly Feuerhahn also emphasizes the connection between children and laughter, stating that "the laughable is confused with the most primitive of emotions, such as the childish sources of art" (1998: 251). Maaheen Ahmed contrasts this with the focus on personal anxieties in graphic novels, as opposed to the collective and social anxieties in traditional comics (2021: 13). However, in our corpus, there is a pronounced focus on the interplay between personal and historical trauma. Collectivity and community, depicted as neighbors gathering in one room when the bombings begin and taking care of each other in *A Game for Swallows* or friends playing and laughing together after an awful event in *Persepolis* and *Baddawi*, are crucial in times of conflict and war. Readers are thus able to simultaneously understand personal trauma and grasp the collective and social trauma endured by individuals.

In terms of psychoanalysis, childhood is often considered the source of inexplicable adult trauma. Psychologists frequently explore their patients' childhood to understand their adult

experiences and sufferings. In the graphic novels under study, the past of the protagonists or their parents continues to haunt them as adults. By sharing these stories and revisiting their past, some degree of healing can occur and be revealed. This process of articulating, and drawing, personal and social trauma can be therapeutic. Moreover, the profound connection that artists feel with their narratives can resonate with readers, fostering forms of empathy.

In his theoretical approach to comics *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994), Scott McCloud argues that the way illustrators represent their characters significantly influences readers' reception. Illustrators can depict their characters in a range of styles, from hyper-realistic, akin to photography, to highly abstract, resembling icons. The choice of style impacts how people relate to the characters. McCloud states that "The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe." (1994: 31). In the graphic novels under study, all the characters are portrayed in a minimalist style, allowing millions of individuals to identify with them. McCloud also argues that when faces are represented in a less realistic way, readers engage with them differently. McCloud explains that a realistic drawing conveys a clear message, while a more abstract drawing requires readers to perceive the message, demanding more effort (1994: 49). In the works under consideration, the authors aim to educate and shed light on their family stories. Their use of minimalist drawings fosters greater reader participation and identification, enhancing the educational and emotional impact of their narrative. The drawing techniques of characters in graphic novels are crucial, as they add various layers of meaning. Their low iconicity allows for the representation of violence in a less traumatic manner and leaves room for the readers' imagination. The faces of the characters appear universal, and it is easier for readers to identify with them. This low iconicity of characters' faces also carry an ethical significance. Judith Butler argues in her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* that a tension is necessary for an image to be ethical. She explains that, to be ethical, there must be a face that tries to represent the human but at the same time fail and show its failure to "capture" the human in total (2004: 144). Darda transfers this idea to comics study and state that "as an icon, the face of the other of the graphic memoir comes through in its attempt but failure to represent the human, the memoirist's past self" (2013: 36). These tensions are evident in the portrayal of characters across the three graphic novels in our study, marking them as engaging with ethical questions. Darda further elaborates:

In order to be an ethical form that *destabilizes* acts of historicism and *obligates* the reader to attend to the other, the autographic must arrive as a series of scenarios that act and reenact archival structures of understanding, maintaining the reader's attention on and in tension with the face of the other (2013: 40 – italics present in the original article)

Baddawi, *Persepolis*, and *A Game for Swallows* adhere to this principle by compelling readers to engage with the narrative, placing them in a position of not knowing and immersing them within the story through drawing techniques. The low iconicity of the characters' faces maintains readers in a state of tension, making these memory works open to ethical questions. It is also important to note that, ethical engagement requires readers to do more than simply identify with the other; they must recognize the other as "living, exposed to non-life from the start" (Butler, 2009: 15). This recognition moves beyond empathy, calling for a deeper acknowledgment of the other's humanity.

The use of child characters in graphic narratives is particularly compelling as it blurs the lines between genders, nationalities, and culture among others. We already argued that many individuals can identify with characters drawn in a less realistic style. The fact that these characters are children adds another layer of relatability, as their physical appearance does not clearly indicate whether they are male or female. It is easier to identify with children as their experiences are universal, everyone has once been a child. Moreover, children's clothing is less gendered than adult's clothing, they convey less class and genre differences. While readers may discern their gender through names, a child can be seen as everything and anything at once. This allows readers of any gender - male, female, or non-binary – to see themselves in these children, who are simply trying to survive and maintain their innocence in a space of conflict. This process fosters greater empathy, as readers experience the horrors of war through the eyes of a child who could be anyone they know.

Children are often perceived as innocent, vulnerable, and lacking agency. This social conception elicits stronger emotional responses from adults when they see images of children in wars and conflicts. It is also well-known that adults generally have an instinctual desire and an ethic responsibility to protect children. Consequently, adult readers are more likely to empathize deeply with child characters, experiencing their struggles and fears more intensely. Furthermore, children in narratives often convey hope and resistance. The juxtaposition of what children represent with the brutality of war amplifies the emotional impact on readers, as they

witness the profound effects of conflict on the innocent. The portrayal of children in conflicts not only serves to humanize the “Others” but also to bridge the gap between readers and characters, fostering a deeper emotional connection. This approach encourages readers to see the children not merely as distant victims but as individuals deserving of empathy and protection, enhancing the narrative’s power to convey the human cost of war.

Setting the cultural context: children and the Middle Eastern perspective

The background of authors profoundly influences their writing and the creation of their characters. An author’s cultural context and personal experiences plays a significant role, especially in how they envision and represent children in their works. The concept of childhood varies widely across different cultures, impacting the portrayal of child characters in literature and art. While children maintain the same essence universally, their depictions are shaped by cultural norms, societal expectations, and historical contexts unique to each region. In Islamic visual culture, depictions of children have evolved from medieval times to contemporary media, reflecting broader societal values and power structures. This chapter explores the representation of children in Islamic contexts, particularly focusing on their depiction in cartoons and graphic narratives.

Since the early medieval period, the model child in European imagery was the infant Jesus, depicted in countless artworks and representations. In contrast, Islamic visual culture contained few depictions of children, though such portrayals date back to the medieval period. Karimi and Gruber, in their study about the child image in Muslim context, argue that children at that time were not depicted to stand out or be symbols, “rather, they provide evidence for teacher-student relations and learning methods in the medieval Islamic world as well as personifications of cultural knowledge as passed down from one generation to the next.” (2012: 1). Most medieval and early modern Islamic texts portray children as arousing love and needing to meet their parents’ expectations. Other writings describe them as ignorant and vulnerable creatures, “threatening to the stability and order of the adult world” and therefore education and discipline were seen as essential. (Karimi & Gruber, 2012: 2). To discipline children, violence was of common use. It is important to pinpoint that the situation differs for female or male children. A deep-rooted preference for males has led to systemic discrimination of female children and women. They were seen as unnecessary and a waste of money. Karimi and Gruber note that this preference led to many female infanticides and is still present in some regions, like India,

where “resources poured into raising a female child are still seen as an investment with limited return.” (2012: 4).

The advent of lithography in the Middle East during the nineteenth century marked a significant shift, as print culture became a crucial part of the region’s political landscape (2012: 4). This period saw the child’s image being used to critique societal norms and political regimes. A popular example is Naji al-Ali’s cartoons of a young boy named Handala, representing the collectivity, who witnesses the horrors of war silently and became a symbol of Palestinian, and Arab, resistance and identity. Karimi and Gruber argue that, in contemporary times, diasporic and exiled artists from the Islamic world have increasingly used the concept of childhood and images of children to reflect on their countries of origin (2012: 15). Using images of children can be a problematic approach as it can infantilize victims, stripping them of their agency and oversimplifying their trauma responses and the political contexts in which they exist. In the graphic novels examined in this thesis, characters are not depicted as passive victims who suffer in silence. Rather, they are given a voice; the authors portray their complexities and acknowledge their resilience and agency.

The portrayal of children as active agents in comics is crucial to understand the implicit and explicit meanings of childhood and the operation of power structures in Islamic societies (2012: 19). In periods of conflict, the child’s voice serves as an inventive form of free speech. Examples can be found in the corpus analyzed with Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* in which young girl Marji offers a critical voice and exposes the hypocrisy of a regime that wants to control everyone, especially girls. In Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi*, young Ahmad serves the same role and the reader learns alongside him the violence of a conflict. Children in Zeina Abirached’s *A Game for Swallows* are symbols of hope and resistance, creating more empathy. The reader lives through these child characters and learns alongside them the secrets and structures of power behind a conflict.

In this analysis, we focused on the Middle East, as it is the region where the graphic novels under study are set. This focus prompts several pertinent questions: Is the portrayal of children in the Middle East fundamentally different from that in Western contexts? Do cultural differences significantly impact the depiction of children? Furthermore, is this distinction still relevant in contemporary times? It is arguable that each child is unique because of their personal experiences and cultural background. Nonetheless, it can also be discussed that all children

share a common essence. Childhood universally represents a period of discovery, both of self and of the surrounding world. Children engage with the world with a new gaze, often serving as ideal characters to depict society in a truthful manner. The authors of the graphic novels under consideration endeavor to challenge and transcend the discourse about differences. Their objective is to counter the portrayal of individuals from the Middle East as the “Others”, characterized as dangerous, and instead represent them as individuals who share common human experiences with people worldwide. The use of child protagonists is instrumental in achieving this goal, as the universal experience of childhood allows for broad identification and empathy. While it is still valuable to examine the historical and cultural context that shape the depiction of children in different regions, it is essential to recognize that these portrayals ultimately serve a similar purpose. They aim to foster empathy, enhance understanding, and offer new insights into the realities of the world.

The strategic choice of the child’s graphiation

The concept of graphiation is a crucial element in the study of comics and graphic novels. As Baetens asserts in his research about graphiation, it involves “l’*énonciation spécifique de celui ou de celle qui trace aussi bien les dessins que les textes des planches et de l’album*” (1996 : 225). Each author possesses a unique graphiation, which encompasses the distinct manner in which they draw and write their narratives. This process is inherently embodied, reflecting the personal and stylistic choices of the creator. As readers, we interpret the story through an examination of this graphiation. Authors are mindful of how their work will be received, and Baetens suggests that it is through recognizing the graphiator’s gestures that the audience can reconstruct the narrative and uncover the intricacies of its creation (1996: 227).

In the graphic novels under study, the graphiation displays notable similarities. The graphiators opt for black-and-white illustrations rendered in a simple, child-like style, devoid of intricate details. The narrative is straightforward and easy to comprehend, even when dealing with complex historical events. However, the style of the text is not childish, the voice of the adult self can be perceived. This approach of using simplistic drawings and narratives effectively complements the child protagonists who recount their stories. The graphiation is deliberately aligned with the perspective of the narrators, enhancing the authenticity of the narrative voice. Furthermore, the choice of black-and-white illustrations underscores a desire for simplicity and abstraction. This decision to avoid hyper-detailed drawings is intentional, reflecting a conscious

artistic choice. In a graphic novel, all elements – the text, the sounds, the lines, the colors – coexist and interact to create multiple layers of meaning. This interplay contributes to the depth and richness of the narrative, allowing readers to engage with the story on various levels. The childish graphiation encountered in the graphic novels within our corpus helps immerse the readers in the child's perspective.

In subsequent analyses, we will explore how these elements of graphiation contribute to the overall impact of the graphic novels examined. This examination will reveal the nuanced ways in which graphiation enhances the narrative and emotional resonance of the stories told.

Children as informants and resilience symbols

Children are the main characters in each graphic narrative under consideration, conveying hope and resilience. While these children each have their own singularities, shaped by their distinct experiences in different countries, they all share the common challenge of living through conflict. Despite these harsh circumstances, they find ways to survive, maintain their childhood, and be recognized as human beings. They stay strong while facing the horrors of wars and violence, giving us hope.

In *Persepolis*, Marji is immediately recognizable as a powerful character. Marjane Satrapi does not portray her younger self as a vulnerable Eastern girl needing rescue from the West. Instead, she re-centers the narrator, challenges the rescue paradigm, and acknowledges the girl as a citizen. As Gilmore and Marshall note in “Girls in crisis: Rescue and Transnational Feminist Autobiographical Resistance”: “No longer representative of static subaltern silence, girls emerge in these narratives as figures of sympathy represented by politically active women autobiographers.” (2010: 668). Through Marji's depiction as a young girl, Marjane Satrapi effectively elicits compassion and sympathy, employing this technique to use her graphic novel as an educational tool for Western readers. By illustrating Marji's experiences, Satrapi educates Western audiences about the nuanced realities of the East, thereby complicating simplistic representations of Muslim men as inherently violent and Iranian life as uniformly repressive (2010: 680). In doing so, she critiques the Western “savior” discourse and contrasts her younger self with fundamentalists through her engagement and interest in Western pop culture. Positioning young Marji as the narrator encourages readers to learn alongside her, transforming them into witnesses of the events depicted. Gilmore and Marshall argue that Satrapi's female

characters are always provided with individual names and distinctions, showcasing the diversity and complexity of Iranian women (2010: 683).



Figure 1 - Panel from p.3, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by M. Satrapi, 2008 by Vintage,



Figure 2 - Panel from p.5, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by M. Satrapi, 2008 by Vintage,

This is exemplified at the beginning of the graphic novel in the chapter “The Veil”, where she introduces the various girls in her class, illustrating the diversity of women in Iran, including those both supporting and opposing the Islamic revolution (figures 1 and 2). Through the presentation of individual singularities among the girls, Satrapi challenges the prevalent Western perception of Muslim women as a group of females indistinguishable from each other, thereby restoring their humanity. With this starting chapter, the reader is immediately placed in the position of “the other ones” (Whitlock, 2006: 976) looking at a culture different from their own. Her female characters, whether they are children or adults, are portrayed as powerful, actively protesting, protecting their families, maintaining their traditions alive, laughing, playing, and defying restrictive rules.



Figure 3 - Panel from p.76, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by M. Satrapi, 2008 by Vintage,

In the chapter “The Trip”, little Marji is eleven years old and a meeting against fundamentalists is about to happen. Despite her eagerness to participate, her father perceives the situation as too dangerous. Nonetheless, her mother says this important sentence: “She should start learning to defend her rights as a woman right now!” (Satrapi, 2008: 76). This shift in her mother’s behavior is significant, drawing a connection between the revolution and the suppression of women’s rights, while affirming their agency as women. This episode illustrates how Satrapi refrains from depicting them as mere victims of the events; instead, as Gilmore and Marshall argue, girlhood becomes a state of political consciousness and feminist critique, empowering women as active agents of resistance (2010: 689).

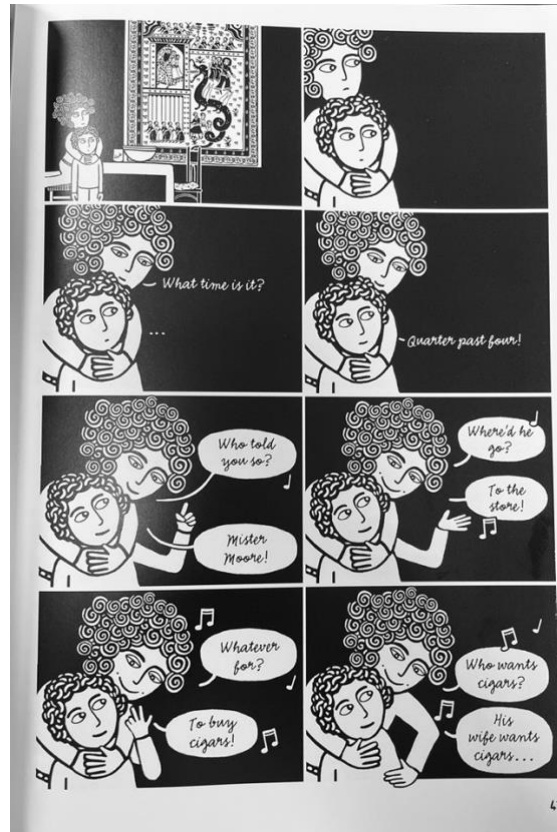


Figure 4 - Panel from p.47, *A Game for Swallows* by Z. Abirached, 2022 by Graphic Universe, Minneapolis.

The graphic novel *A Game for Swallows* created by Zeina Abirached is also autobiographical, but it differs from the other graphic narratives of the corpus in significant ways. *A Game for Swallows* focuses more on the interactions within the apartment and the community formed among the neighbors, rather than on the broader political and historical context. Abirached provides minimal explanation of the external circumstances, requiring the reader to conduct their own research to understand the full context. When depicting the exterior of the apartment, Abirached illustrates buildings shielded by containers and sandbags, as well as streets and maps indicating the route to her grandparents' house or the remaining safe spaces in the city. These exterior scenes are always empty, reflecting the danger posed by snipers and bombs. Even when events outside occur, such as the death of Chucrí's father or the long lines of cars waiting at the gas station, Abirached never depicts people in these scenes. The only time characters appear in the street is when she and her family leave Beirut at the end of the graphic novel. The narrative begins with two children, Zeina and her brother, waiting for their parents to return from visiting their grandmother. The children are portrayed as innocent yet courageous from the start, with Zeina answering the phone and saying "No, I'm not afraid" (42). Within the small community they have created in their building, the children are important, and the adults take care of them

by engaging them in cooking sessions, songs, games, theatre, and gossip. Adult Zeina Abirached provides extensive explanations about the other characters and the context of their lives via the text, including about the person they have lost because of the war. In contrast, child Zeina is less “vocal” and does not participate much in the conversations, which is a marked difference from the active child characters in Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi*. Although it is Zeina’s story, her child perspective serves as a gateway to focus on the stories of the other characters in the building, suggesting that the child’s viewpoint is less central to the narrative’s exploration of the community’s collective experience.

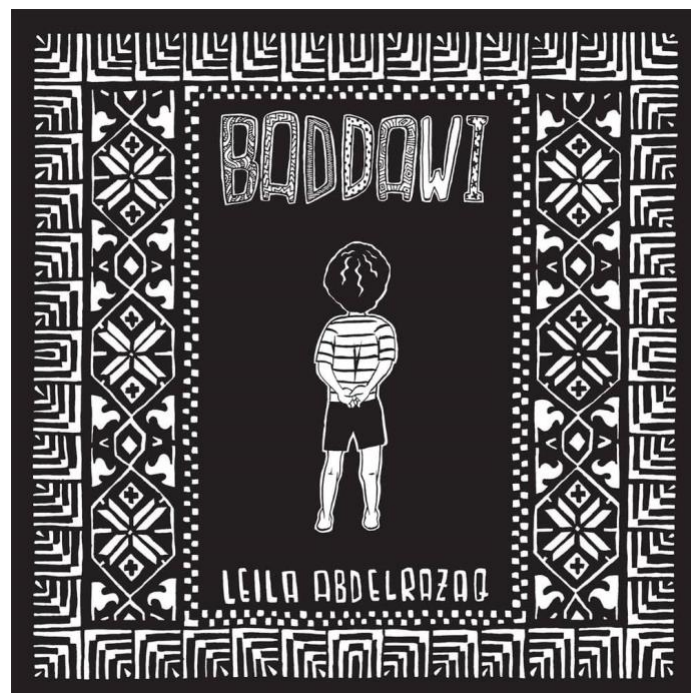


Figure 5 - Cover, *Baddawi* by L. Abdelrazaq, 2015 by Just World Books, Charlottesville.

Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi* stands apart from the other graphic narratives analyzed as it is not an autobiography but rather a portrayal of her father’s childhood. In *Baddawi*, Abdelrazaq “confronts and challenges the Western reader, denying them the ability to empathize without feeling historically implicated in the violence to which he is subjected.” (Alfarhan, 2020: 159). This graphic novel centers on Ahmad, a child, which inherently invites empathy. Moreover, the narrative compels the reader to fully experience the historical events, leaving no room for detachment. Readers must recognize and acknowledge the characters as humans and citizens with rights, distinguishing *Baddawi* from *A Game for Swallows*. From the cover, readers understand that the young boy is a symbol of resistance and resilience. Abdelrazaq employs the

well-known Middle Eastern symbol of Naji al-Ali to tell not only the story of her father but also the story of every Palestinian. Naji al-Ali's little boy Handala is a powerful symbol of resistance that represents everyone. Naji al-Ali always drew Handala in political cartoons to denounce the horrific events happening to Palestinians and the historical and political contexts surrounding them. Leila Abdelrazaq mirrors this with the character of young Ahmad, who witnesses the dreadful events occurring in refugee camps. The readers observe, along with him, the bombings and the fear in the streets. The story of her father is the story of every refugee, perhaps explaining why his face is not depicted in a hyper-realistic style. This abstraction allows the author to represent anyone, even the reader, fostering greater empathy and emotional connection while maintaining awareness of the political and historical contexts. Readers continuously follow the child's perspective, witnessing him play with his friends, go to school, care for his family, and have a girlfriend – activities of a “regular” child. This relatability helps readers see themselves in Ahmad and his friends. However, the narrative also includes the bombings, shootings, massacres, and arrests that disrupt his life. Readers cannot look away from these events. By creating the graphic narrative from a child's perspective, Leila Abdelrazaq elicits empathy towards Palestinian stories while pushing readers to recognize Palestinians as human beings deserving rights and protection, always situating the narrative within its political context. Abdelrazaq excels at portraying Palestinians not as mere victims but as powerful individuals who will not forgive and whose youth will never forget.

Introjecting the self

The 1930s marked a significant point in the history of comic books, a period when they began to be distinctly marketed towards youth (Marks & Aldama, 2017: 7). Although comic strips had been published in newspapers since the late 19th century, it was during the 1930s that the marketing strategies fundamentally linked childhood with comics in the collective consciousness. Despite their association with children, comics have always been created by adults, who often use them to reflect adult concerns and societal issues. Marks and Aldama argue, in their study “Wise Beyond her Years: How *Persepolis* Introjects the Adult into the Child”, that through the lens of child and adolescent characters, authors can explore complex themes, offering insights into “the realities that surround them” (2017: 7). Therefore, it can be argued that the narrative in comics consists of many layers and temporalities, bridging the perspectives of child characters and adult authors.

Among the works under consideration, two are autobiographical, wherein the authors revisit their memories, retrace their past, and meticulously arrange their experiences to share with readers. This autobiographical approach highlights the power of graphic novels to challenge the censorship of trauma telling and provide a medium for sharing these stories. By intertwining personal recollections with historical facts and visual storytelling, these narratives offer an impactful means of resistance and resilience, enabling women to reclaim their histories and voice their truths. Extensive studies have been conducted on Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, particularly focusing on how her narrative valorizes women's subjectivity and the power of her memoir as a tool for asserting the female "I", like Gillian Whitlock's "Autographics: The Seeing "I" of the Comics", Hilary Chute's "The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*", Chute's *Graphic Women*, Gilmore and Marshall's *Girl in crisis*, and Clifford Marks and Frederick Aldama's "Wise beyond her years: how *Persepolis* introjects the adult into the child", among others. These studies are crucial for understanding the mechanism behind childhood and comics and for applying these insights to the other graphic narratives in the corpus.

Before delving into the analysis of *Persepolis*, Clifford Marks and Frederick Aldama introduce a significant psychological concept which is introjection. According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology (2018), introjection is defined as: "a process in which an individual unconsciously incorporates aspects of external reality into the self, particularly the attitudes, values, and qualities of another person". The term, coined in 1909 by psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, complements the Freudian concept of projection. While introjection involves internalizing the qualities or characteristics of external objects, projection involves the self unconsciously attributing its own identity or emotions to external objects as a defense mechanism (Marks & Aldama, 2017: 167). A connection can be established between the psychological concept of introjection and Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemory". According to Hirsch, "'Postmemory' describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (*An Interview With Marianne Hirsch* | Columbia University Press, 2016). This concept implies that individuals incorporate memories of their parents and grandparents into the self. These concepts are closely interrelated in the context of familial trauma. In comics, especially in autobiographical comics, the process of introjection can happen when the author blends their adult insight with their childhood experiences, creating different layers of temporalities and a powerful narrative.

Clifford Marks argues that for Satrapi to recreate her past through a child's perspective, to “reconstruct the child's voice”, she must “introject her adult consciousness into the childhood representation of her life experiences” (2017: 166). This process also makes historical events more accessible and relatable through the perspective of a child character. Many adults utilize introjection when retelling childhood stories. Satrapi's memoir is a deliberate effort to break down negative stereotypes about Iranians. The adult perspective, represented by the adult Marjane, actively shapes the narrative by choosing which personal childhood experiences to highlight or omit and how. This process of selection helps to “guide a Western reader into a rich understanding of the Iranian culture under textual consideration” (Marks & Aldama, 2017: 167).



Figure 6 - Panel from p.142, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by M. Satrapi, 2008 by Vintage,

An example of introjection can be found in the chapter “The Shabbat”, where a bomb had exploded on Marji's friend's house. Marji walked past the Baba-Levi's house and saw her friend's bracelet “still attached to... I don't know what...” (Satrapi, 2008: 142). In this scene, young Marji pretends not to notice the severed hand, she uses her imagination to distance herself from the horrible event. However, adult Satrapi employs introjection to convey to her audience that her childhood experiences carry significant cultural and political weight. Young

Marji detaches herself from the event, while adult Marji draws a black panel, enabling adult readers to understand the situation's gravity and its importance.



Figure 7 - Panel from p.102, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by M. Satrapi, 2008 by Vintage,

Another striking example is the comparison Satrapi makes between a battlefield and a party (figure 7). This comparison is on the last two panels of the chapter titled “The Key” in which Satrapi discusses the situation of the young fighters, flagellation rituals, and girls making fun of them. It is the maid who introduces Marji and her mother to the concept of the key, which supposedly opens the doors of heaven for young boys. This key, made of plastic and painted in gold, is given to poor boys to recruit them for the battlefields. These boys are promised that once they reach heaven “there will be plenty of food, women, and houses made of gold and diamonds” (100). Marji is anxious that her cousin might receive the golden key, but he is not part of the lower class and thus will not receive it. Her cousin invites her to her first party, where young Marji dances happily. Here, adult Satrapi uses introjection to draw a parallel between children dancing and children dying on a battlefield. She depicts the same body movements, using the narrative to attract the reader's attention by saying “I was looking sharp” (102). By doing so, she visually and textually links the two events and portrays the complex concepts of

ignorance, class, and political sacrifice. In conclusion, she enriches her childhood memories with complex images and concepts, making the broader story of many people compelling and unavoidable for readers.

In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi highlights the everyday life of women and girls in Tehran. Through her graphic narrative, it is possible to discern different versions of her self being at play. The first sentence in the first chapter sets the tone, Satrapi says: “This is me when I was ten” (3). This sentence creates the impression of merely showing a picture to someone, thus distancing the adult Satrapi from young Marji. Two panels later, the perspective shifts as the reader is brought into the schoolyard with Marji. Next to this panel of innocent children entering a schoolyard, Satrapi depicted an adult protest. This interplay of panels highlights the introjection of Satrapi’s adult self into the childhood narrative. Marks and Aldama argue that: “As readers, we respond more powerfully to a child innocently experiencing life-changing events, like being forced to wear a veil, than we would to a traditional adult recollection of the past.” (2017: 170). Satrapi calls upon the reader’s empathy towards children, encouraging them to recognize these children as innocents rather than the dangerous “Other”.

Zeina Abirached, in *A Game for Swallows*, also employs introjection throughout her narrative. Her child self speaks sparingly, however, her adult self interrupts the memories to explain the lives of the characters and their losses to the readers. For instance, Abirached recounts the story of a neighbor, Ernest, who was a French teacher and entertained the children by performing *Cyrano de Bergerac*. She reveals that Ernest had a brother, Victor, who was killed by a sniper. Abirached adds these explanations about characters in her depiction of that particular night in her apartment. A few pages later, she revisits the character of Ernest, explaining that he watered his plants every Wednesday, and adds “Later, we learned that Victor was killed on a Wednesday afternoon” (Abirached, 2022: 97). Abirached introjects her present self into her past memories to add depth to her recollection of a particular night in Beirut, enriching the narrative with additional layers of meaning.

Satrapi not only employs introjection but also effectively uses the medium of comics to convey deeper meanings. In *Persepolis*, she portrays Iranians as human beings, not so different from the West, who are primarily concerned with the safety of themselves and their children. This representation counteracts the Western idea that Iranians are the “Others”, perceived as fundamentally different and dangerous. Marji is the daughter of a Westernized, upper-middle-

class family influenced by Marxist ideas. She is a relatable character, familiar through her tastes in music and fashion, as well as her political beliefs. These elements invite readers to “see themselves in the characters” (Marks & Aldama, 2017: 167). Gilmore supports this idea, arguing that: “Both a chronicle of personal and political turbulence as well as a careful exercise in educating its Western readers, *Persepolis* aims not only to teach these readers how to think about the Middle East broadly and Iran specifically, but also how to feel” (2011: 157). Satrapi denounces the gender differences and the power structures imposed by the Islamic revolution. By using a child character, she creates a space where adult readers can form an emotional connection with the historical context and the people depicted in the narrative.

3. Behind colors: black and white as a conscious choice

One immediately noticeable aspect when comparing the graphic novels under study is their exclusive use of black and white. As argued throughout this thesis, every artistic choice holds significance, whether it pertains to the narrative or the illustrations. When Abdelrazaq, Satrapi, and Abirached render their characters in a non-realistic style with low iconicity, they create a space for readers to identify with the characters and experience the story from the inside, thus offering an ethical position. This abstraction allows readers to engage more deeply with the narrative, assuming a new vantage point that amplifies the authors' voices and facilitates a more profound educational experience. We have previously analyzed the strategic use of child characters and their impact on the narrative, noting how they foster a deeper emotional connection with the audience. We also emphasized the importance of graphiation – the unique style and visual signature of the artwork – in shaping the reception of these graphic novels. By employing a child-like drawing style, characterized by simplicity and a lack of intricate details, the authors align their visual approach with the child protagonists' perspectives. This alignment enhances the authenticity of the narrative, allowing for a more genuine connection for the readers. In this chapter, we delve into the deliberate choice of a monochromatic color scheme and its implications. The use of black and white in these works is not merely an aesthetic preference but a conscious decision that strengthens the narrative's impact. This chapter aims to analyze this monochromatic approach, exploring how it contributes to the overall narrative and enhances the representation of violence. We will start by delving into color theories, then discuss various influences on this artistic choice, explore the expressive capabilities of black and white, and finally, consider how this approach directs and forces the readers' gaze.

Color theory

Colors in art have always been of significant interest. Painters like Georges Seurat explored color theories, collaborating with chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul to test the chromatic circle of light. Seurat applied this scientific technique to his paintings to create more light and make his colors more vibrant (S., 2019). Others, like Wassily Kandinsky, argued that colors could evoke physical reactions in the human body and that each color, particularly blue and yellow, produced distinct sounds. In comics, the use of colors has been highly influenced by market demands, financial considerations, and technological advancements. When colors began to be used in newspaper comics, sales soared. The use of primary colors between black lines became a recognizable hallmark of American newspaper comics. Scott McCloud argues, in his

theoretical approach to comics, that colors were initially employed to create visual shocks, with no consideration for their emotional and psychological impact (1994: 188). The shift in the use of colors came from Europe, with authors like Hergé and Caza recognizing that colors could play a significant role in storytelling. They realized that colors could express states of mind or add multiple layers of meaning to the narrative (McCloud, 1994: 190). While financial considerations still influence the use of colors today, many authors choose to work in black-and-white for reasons beyond cost. McCloud asserts that “The differences between black-and-white and color comics are vast and profound, affecting every level of the reading experience” (1994: 192). He explains that black and white drawings allow readers to more easily perceive the artwork and its meaning, bringing it close to language itself (1994: 192). This heightened clarity and focus can intensify the emotional and psychological impact of the narrative, making, in our case, the depiction of violence starker and more compelling. The exclusive use of black and white in our corpus is a deliberate artistic choice that enhance the narrative by providing a clear, powerful medium for conveying complex themes and emotions.

Influences

Figure 8 – Handala by Naji al-Ali, Handala.org
Cartoons about resistance. Accessed on 15 May 2023.

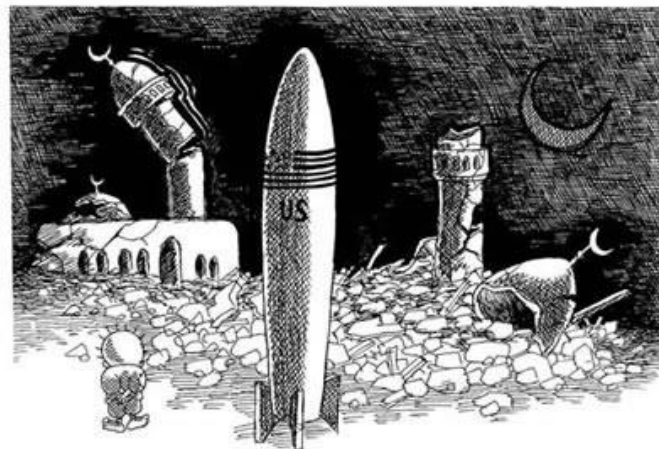


Figure 9- panel from p.64, Baddawi by L. Abdelrazaq, 2015 by Just World Books, Charlottesville

As stated in the previous chapters, Naji al-Ali exerts a major influence on the Arabic world, particularly on one of the authors under study in this thesis. It was therefore evident to start our analysis with his work to then compare it to those of the corpus. Since childhood, Leila Abdelrazaq was greatly influenced by Naji al-Ali's work, although she only understood its impact after digging into Palestinian history. In a video on the publisher's website, Leila Abdelrazaq affirms that it is al-Ali's use of heavy symbols and dark imagery that impacted her (Just World Books, n.d.). These drawings, the top one by Naji al-Ali (figure 8) and the bottom one by Leila Abdelrazaq (figure 9), have been chosen because of the similar topic they tackle. Both denounce the United States involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, they also share similarities concerning their style: both are drawn in black and white, and we can argue that it is an expressionistic style of drawing. In both panels, a child protagonist turning his back to the reader is depicted along with war imagery represented by missiles. On page 64 of *Baddawi* (just before the panel in Figure 9), a bomb has exploded, and people are gathering the remaining unexploded bombs. On one of them, the label "Made in USA" can be read which firmly denounces the implication of the United States in the conflict. The latter is also denounced in Naji al-Ali's drawing. The use of black and white enables the illustrator to draw a black background that lays emphasis on the important symbols, here the destruction made by American missiles. Therefore, Naji al-Ali's influence is noticeable when comparing drawings; by the style, the colors, the lines, and the topics they tackle which also emphasizes the fact that Abdelrazaq's art is a form of resistance work. However, differences can be observed. In Naji al-Ali's panel, Handala watches the destruction, and the reader has to watch it with him. There are a lot of sharp lines in the sky which could portray the illustrator's anger. In Leila Abdelrazaq's drawing, Ahmad moves away from the event, creating two focuses for readers, the more evident being on the bomb and the other on Ahmad. There are not a lot of details, the readers' gaze goes from the bomb to Ahmad. The illustrator gives the impression of despair in Ahmad's walk and with the black ink that takes a lot of space. The use of colors and black-and-white in graphic novels is a significant aspect of their visual storytelling, serving various thematic, emotional, and narrative functions.

Expressive capabilities



Figure 10 - panel from p. 48, *Baddawi* by L. Abdelrazaq, 2015 by Just World Books, Charlottesville

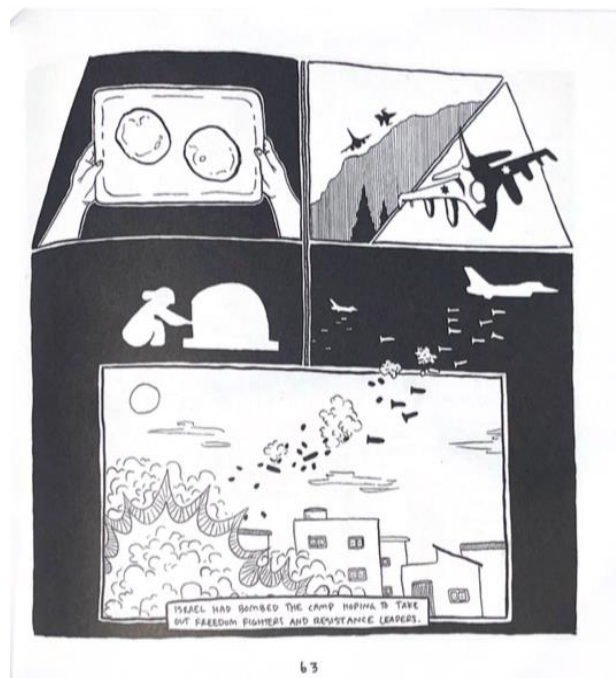


Figure 11 - panels from p. 63, *Baddawi* by L. Abdelrazaq, 2015 by Just World Books, Charlottesville

The use of black backgrounds is a technique that can also be found in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Zeina Abirached's *A Game for Swallows*, and many other graphic novels from the Middle East. Several reasons could explain this use of colors such as cultural considerations, economic constraints (Baetens, 2011), topics, and expressive potential. In this part, we will focus on the last aspect that we have just mentioned. Hillary Chute argues about the expressive capabilities of graphic narratives by affirming that the use of black backgrounds creates a visual emptiness that symbolizes the thickness and depth of memory (2010). In *Baddawi*, the author/illustrator retraces her father's story and memories of his childhood as a Palestinian refugee. She has recollected and put together pieces of memories, which she illustrated afterwards. Those stories are filled with joyful moments such as children playing after a small win for the Palestinians (see Figure 10), but also with painful moments where Israeli missiles fall from the sky (see Figure 11). In those panels, readers can observe the clear difference between those events due to the color of the background; from white to black, from simple to heavy. Here, the black background conveys the heaviness of Ahmad's memory and therefore brings another level of meaning for readers. These colors also allow to create movements in the panels, offering fluidity.

In Zeina Abirached's *A Game for Swallows*, the majority of the backgrounds are black. This technique gives the impression of being stuck in a place and having no other options. The use of these black backgrounds complements the storytelling. As explained before, this graphic novel is about a group of people having to survive the conflict in East Beirut. They spend most of their days in a small room of one apartment, the safest place in the building. All the neighbors gather in this small room and wait for the bombings to pass. In this room, there are not a lot of movements, they wait, they talk, they eat, and they tell stories. The black and white colors help this representation of the stillness of time. Moreover, the black backgrounds show the thickness of this horrible period the author had to go through, it gives the impression of anxiety and oppression.

Forcing the gaze

In addition to facilitating the understanding of emotions and memories, the black backgrounds force readers to look at the unfolding events that are, by contrast, highlighted in white. The readers' gaze cannot get lost in a detailed background and is therefore attracted to the symbols in white. This technique has a powerful effect on readers who can feel the thickness of the memory, visually and haptically, due to their active engagement in the narrative. Hillary Chute also highlights, in *Graphic Women*, the power of black-and-white drawings in capturing the attention of readers in the context of violence. She makes this argument regarding Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and it appears relevant for analyzing the expressive potential of these colors:

The minimalist play of black and white is part of Satrapi's stated aim, as with avant-garde tradition, to present events with a pointed degree of abstraction in order to call attention to the horror of history, by re-representing endemic images, either imagined or reproduced, of violence (2010: 145)

In *Baddawi*, the same process can be found as the graphic novel shares a lot of similarities in terms of style and topic with *Persepolis*. In fact, they both offer insights into the lives of individuals intertwined with complex political conflicts, and both are resistance narratives, deeply rooted in their specific cultural and historical contexts. More than the themes they share, they also share stylistic elements like symbols and the use of monochromatic colors. The use

of black and white in *Baddawi* and *Persepolis* enables the illustrator to depict events in a non-realistic style. By not showing explicit violence, via colors and lines (with blood and realistic portrayals that can sometimes tend to voyeurism), Leila Abdelrazaq and Marjane Satrapi are able to create a new level of meaning, draw attention to symbols, and emphasize the horrors that have taken place. This stylistic approach has the potential to have a more significant impact on readers as they have to be active in imagining and feeling the depicted situations instead of just passively observing them. An example can be found in the chapter “The Shabbat” in *Persepolis* (see figure 6), where a bomb has exploded on Marji’s street, striking her friend’s house. Her friend died and Marji discovered her bracelet among the debris from the explosion. Instead of depicting this moment realistically, Satrapi chooses to draw a black panel to emphasize the atrocity of the scene without visually traumatizing the readers. Moreover, the black panel conveys a range of emotions that are even more impactful, complemented by the accompanying narrative “No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger” (Satrapi, 2008: 142).

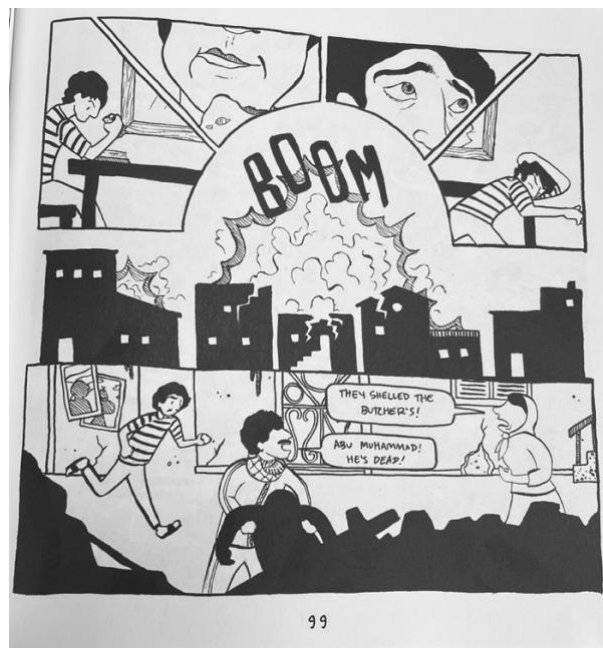


Figure 12 - panel from p. 48, *Baddawi* by L. Abdelrazaq, 2015
by Just World Books, Charlottesville

Examples can also be found throughout *Baddawi*, such as in the chapter “The Lumber”, where a bomb has exploded, killing the butcher Abu Muhammad, Ahmad’s friend (see figure 12). The background of the panel is detailed, showing Ahmad running to the scene and two people trying to help. While the fear, despair, and sadness are evident on Ahmad’s face, the details of the scene are not shown. Instead, Abdelrazaq depicts a black silhouette to represent the corpse of Abu Muhammad, compelling readers to imagine the scene. The body, positioned prominently

in the foreground of the panel, forces readers to engage with it despite being depicted as a mere black silhouette. This leads to the conclusion that comics about war and violence do not need to be visually traumatic to have a profound impact on readers. Viljoen introduced the concept of “dark” writing to expand the notion of representability, and argued on the importance of including traumatic elements that are difficult to describe and do not necessarily have to be mimetic (2021: 4). The authors of the graphic novels analyzed successfully depict highly traumatic elements in an abstract and non-realistic form through the use of black and white, engaging readers ethically and powerfully in their narratives. Black and white offer these abstract representations and at the same time point to the normalcy of violence (Chute, 2010). In fact, in Iran, as in Palestine and Lebanon, where *Persepolis*, *Baddawi*, and *A Game for Swallows* are set, violence is an everyday act during conflicts. People hear and experience bombings and shootings every day, and they have to live through it. They find ways to survive and still enjoy life, especially children. The simplistic use of black and white allows the authors to convey the repetitive nature of bombings and mass killings. The black backgrounds create an impression of repetition, which in turn imparts a sense of normalcy. They appear to be part of a vicious circle, perpetually following one another and commencing once more.

The use of monochrome colors in the corpus



Figure 12 - panel from p. 71, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and The story of a Return* by Marjane Satrapi, 2008 by Vintage, London.



Figure 13 - panels from p. 97, *Baddawi* by L. Abdelrazaq, 2015 by Just World Books, Charlottesville

Those panels (figures 12 and 13) are representative of all the arguments developed above. A child protagonist is drawn onto a black background that gives the impression of floating, in space or water, and who is trying to find some peace in really hard times. In those panels, Leila Abdelrazaq and Marjane Satrapi do not directly represent a violent act in itself, but instead symbolize the slow violence that affects people living in ongoing conflicts. Slow violence is a type of violence that cannot be seen but that occurs gradually and that has a strong impact on those experiencing it (Nixon, 2011). In *Persepolis*, it is the narrative that tells readers that the war is coming. However, in *Baddawi*, it is the illustrator's use of white symbols (the tank, the fighter plane, and the missiles) in contrast to the black background that informs the reader of the constant horrors taking place in the refugee camps. This color contrast allows for a focus on elements that destabilize the scene, specifically the floating body. Readers observe Ahmad floating peacefully, but his tranquility is immediately disrupted by the white tank cutting through the black water as it approaches him, similar to how the bombs and the plane disrupt the peace represented by the black background. This one-page layout (Figure 6) is located within the third part of the graphic novel, which is the part where the most violent acts are endured by Ahmad and the other refugees. This panel portrays the impact of war on people, announces the dark times coming, and at the same time shows the resistance and resilience of Palestinians. The play of colors enables the authors to represent different layers of temporality, movement, and significance on the panels.



Figure 14 - panel from p. 86, *A Game for Swallows* by Z. Abirached, 2012 by Graphic Universe, Minneapolis

In *A Game for Swallows*, violence is never represented visually. Instead, Abirached uses black backgrounds and words to convey such moments, like, for example, when she imagines the death of Chucri's father at a checkpoint (see figure 14). Abirached does not depict the moment of the arrest; rather, it is the narrative and the sounds that indicate what happens in these situations during the civil war in Lebanon. The "click" signals the sound of a car being turned off. Then, on the bottom panel, her narrative explains what happens at a checkpoint. Through the use of black backgrounds and white lettering, readers are compelled to focus on the narrative and to hear the sounds of the scene. Although nothing is explicitly depicted, everything can be felt, leaving readers to imagine the following events. By omitting graphic depictions, Abirached shifts the reader's focus to the psychological and emotional impact of war rather than its physicality. This technique can be more impactful for readers, as it engages their own imagination to fill in the gaps. Similarly, Abdelrazaq and Satrapi employ this technique in their graphic novels to handle events that are too painful to depict directly and to encourage readers to focus more intently on and engage deeply with the narrative.

The use of monochrome colors and a non-hyper-detailed style enable Leila Abdelrazaq, Marjane Satrapi, and Zeina Abirached to depict violence in non-realistic ways. This contrasts with the works of Joe Sacco, for example, whose hyper-detailed drawings align with his journalistic approach. María Porras Sánchez argues that while *Baddawi* frequently features dead bodies, those are represented with an even lower level of iconicity, meaning that the quantity of details is minimal, than the rest of the characters (2021: 149). Corpses are portrayed as black silhouettes with bullet holes or as white silhouettes. However, the soldiers are always made of black silhouettes with huge mouths that are filled with teeth with a crocodile-like aspect. In an interview, Leila Abdelrazaq explained that she decided to draw soldiers as monstrous silhouettes because it is not in their story that she is interested, she states that: "I just decided I don't care about faces and characters [for the army] because they can speak for themselves" (Abdelrazaq qtd. in Sawyer, 2018: 5). She felt responsible for her dad's story but not for the perpetrators' one. Moreover, she did not want readers to relate to these soldiers (Abdelrazaq qtd. in Sawyer, 2018: 5). This is another technique used by the illustrator to criticize the US and, more specifically, its representation of the Palestinian conflict in its mainstream media (Porras Sánchez, 2021: 152). This stylistic choice is aligned with her activism. In an interview she argues that: "Even right now when reporting on what's going on in Gaza, you see headlines of x number of members died. Did those people drop dead? No, they

were killed! It's like taking the responsibility away from the Israeli soldier who's killing people" (Abdelrazaq qtd. in Sawyer, 2018: 5).

By depicting them as monstrous, Porras Sánchez argues that Abdelrazaq reverses the mainstream Western media habit to hide the responsibility of the soldiers (2021: 152). By using these monochrome colors, she is able to reduce the iconicity of her characters and, hence, leave space for the imagination of the reader and its identification. Abdelrazaq chooses to focus readers' identification solely on the victims of the conflict. As humans, many may consider that we are in part responsible, as we have often turned a blind eye to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for many years. As readers, we therefore already assume this position of guilt before diving into the narrative. The graphic novel *Baddawi* offers a new perspective by depicting the personal lives of Palestinians while constantly placing us within the historical context. Through her stylistic techniques, Abdelrazaq effectively extends the boundaries of identification to reach her goal in educating about Palestine and resisting oppression.



Figure 15 - panels from p. 100, *Baddawi* by L. Abdelrazaq, 2015 by Just World Books, Charlottesville

In this one-page layout, which is also located in part three, readers inhabit Ahmad's nightmare. This panel arrives after a harsh event, the death of Abu Muhammad who was Ahmad's closest family member in the camp at that moment. The bomb that killed his relative engendered nightmares and a feeling of insecurity that Ahmad will fight by travelling from Baddawi to

Beirut, whichever place felt safer. In his sleep, Ahmad, who is depicted at the bottom of the page (see figure 15), is obsessed by all the violence surrounding him. In this panel, Ahmad can be interpreted as the next victim surrounded by monsters and dead bodies. The use of black and white enables Abdelrazaq to create various layers of meaning, and of time and space, giving the impression that all his fears are reunited in a panel, oppressing him. The dark background supports the feeling of fear and enables the author/illustrator to put emphasis on buildings being bombarded, like what just happened to the butcher. The white background, here, allows the representation found throughout the book of the black shapes of the monstrous soldiers who seem to be waiting to kill Ahmad. They appear to be made of water; the only element where Ahmad felt safe has now become as scary as all the rest. The text also indicates that Ahmad does not feel safe anymore, he tries to protect himself from the bombs and the shootings with a knife under his pillow. The use of black and white in this panel effectively differentiate between the victims and the perpetrators, the dead bodies and the soldiers. It also enables the illustrator to play with different layers and emphasize each part of the panel via the movements they create. Furthermore, this technique allows Leila Abdelrazaq to highlight the emotions underlying this traumatic memory.

Panels with low iconicity, where characters are primarily represented as shapes, can also be



Figure 16 - panel from p. 15, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and The story of a Return* by Marjane Satrapi, 2008 by Vintage, London.

found in Satrapi's *Persepolis*. A striking example of this low iconicity that leads to an abstract style of drawing that is destabilizing is the following figure. On this panel, little Marjane's parents are talking about an event that happened that night. As she is listening, Marjane imagines, and years later draws, the fire that occurred that night. With this panel, she gives readers an inside view of the cinema that is burning down. Here, the characters are represented with a low level of iconicity. There is no real face, and we can argue that they look like flames, ghosts or skeletons already, making us think of a gothic style. However, we can imagine their fear and pain through their facial expressions and the movement of their body.

Therefore, violence is not clearly represented, as it is not a realistic drawing, but can be understood and imagined by readers through its abstract style. The black background emphasizes the white bodies and their expressions forcing readers to pause and fully absorb this moment. As readers, we can enter the panel and feel the emotions it evokes. The visual is threatening even though Satrapi does not draw blood or realistic characters dying in pain. Once again, Satrapi uses her text to denounce those responsible for this violence, which moves away from the prevailing global narrative. She reasserts the truth and critiques the Western perspective of the Iranian conflict.

In Zeina Abirached's *A Game for Swallows* these stylistic techniques can also be found. Indeed, in her graphic novel, violence is not represented visually. Violent acts, like executions or bombings, are explained with words but not with images (see figure 14). Abirached does not draw what happens outside her building, she explains it with black backgrounds and white lettering. It is a graphic novel that happens in the inside, in one room of her apartment. This can be explained by the fact that Zeina Abirached was a child during the civil war in Lebanon and might not have been able to go outside. Her life was confined to the lives of the people living in her building. The setting of the narrative within a small room in an apartment adds another layer to the story. The backgrounds are consistently black throughout the graphic novel, creating an impression of time passing very slowly. Additionally, the monochromatic colors convey a sense of closeness and intimacy in a context that puts everyone in danger. The characters rely on and support each other, fostering a genuine sense of community and even family. The repetition of black backgrounds helps represent the state in which people live through a conflict, together and slowly. In her graphic novel, Abirached uses black and white to highlight both the emotional state of the people enduring the conflict and the narration that informs readers of the horrors occurring outside the apartment.

In conclusion, in this analysis, we have argued that the exclusive use of black and white is central in the graphic novels under study and serves a deliberate and potent artistic choice. This monochromatic approach enables the artists under study to depict violence in a way that is both stark and compelling. This stylistic choice allows for an abstract representation of trauma and violence, engaging readers ethically and powerfully. The use of black backgrounds and white lettering, for example, symbolizes the depth of memory and the emotional weight of horrific events. These colors create abrupt movements, as can be observed in the example in *Persepolis* with the fire in the cinema (figure 16). This technique forces readers to focus on the symbols

and the narrative, engaging their imagination and empathy in ways that more explicit depictions might not. Furthermore, the use of these contrastive colors attracts the readers' gaze to a lot of symbols and allows to point to the normalcy of violence without visually traumatizing the readers, while simultaneously reaffirming the truth through the text. This approach also aligns with the authors' activist intention, like Leila Abdelrazaq, highlighting the human cost of conflict and the pervasive influence of geopolitical forces. Finally, we argued that these colors enable Leila Abdelrazaq and Marjane Satrapi to have an abstract style and to play with the iconicity of the characters. In summary, the use of monochromatic colors is a powerful tool that amplifies the emotional impact of their stories. It facilitates a deeper connection between readers and the narrative, compelling them to confront the harsh realities of violence and conflict through a lens that is both abstract and profoundly human.

Conclusion

Breaking the circles of silence around intergenerational and personal trauma is challenging, and writing about forms of violence is even harder. As demonstrated in the present study, the works of Leila Abdelrazaq, Marjane Satrapi, and Zeina Abirached push the boundaries of the comics medium to share testimonies of what they and their families experienced during conflicts and wars in their home countries. By sharing their testimonies with the world, they give a voice to those who have been silenced: children, women, and people who were killed and who were never heard. Through their narratives, readers witness the childhoods of countless individuals from the Middle East, offering insights into the difficulties of being a child in conflict-affected areas. These memory works counter the orientalist narrative about the Middle East, which portrayed Middle Eastern people as inferior, as a group of people different from “us”, and in need of saving (Hibri, 2023). Edward Said claimed that:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (2019: 3).

Orientalism served as an ideological basis for colonialism, and orientalist perceptions persisted after the colonial period, used as a justification for contemporary foreign and domestic policies (Hibri, 2023). Muhammad Abdul Wahid argues in his study about orientalism and neo-orientalism that contemporary media and Western cultural productions played a crucial role in shaping a new Middle Eastern narrative (2023). They now portray Middle Eastern people as dangerous and barbaric, as Tuastad argues in his article “new barbarism and neo-orientalist imaginaries may serve as hegemonic strategies when the production of enemy imaginaries contributes to legitimize continuous colonial economic or political projects, as can be witnessed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” (2003: 591). Through these neo-orientalist discourses, the West legitimizes attacks against Arab culture. The works analyzed aim to challenge, protest, and assert their human rights to counter this orientalist narrative of the West via the various visual and textual techniques they employ. For instance, the use of child characters allows a form of humanization, which counters the dangerous narrative and challenges the preconceived ideas about the East.

The present research aimed to analyze the representation of violence in *Baddawi*, *Persepolis*, and *A Game for Swallows* and understand the graphic and visual techniques employed. We started by exploring trauma theories to provide a foundational understanding of the mechanisms behind trauma. We discovered that Sigmund Freud exemplified his trauma theories with a story from Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* to explain the haunting of traumatic memories, creating a trauma aesthetic that graphic novels challenge through their stylistic techniques. The graphic novel medium, with its ability to depict multiple temporalities in a single panel, mirrors the workings of memory in the psyche. Jeanne-Marie Viljoen argued that graphic narratives can challenge the notion of trauma's unrepresentability and give voice to victims, as the graphic novels under study do. By portraying their traumatic experiences, individuals can gain perspective and understand the mechanisms underlying their trauma. We also explored the concept of intergenerational trauma, noting that by drawing and writing authors challenge the prevailing silence in families who lived traumatic situations and displacements. The graphic novels analyzed are crucial memory works that bear witness to trauma, compelling readers to pay attention and reconsider their preconceived thoughts. These works pushed the boundaries of the "trauma aesthetic" and used the genre with a special purpose. The authors' objective is clear: they created these graphic novels to ensure that their communities' traumatic experiences and history would not be forgotten.

Following our exploration of trauma, we turned to the examination of the different forms of violence that cause trauma. We defined violence as it is a term that we use regularly but that we do not grasp entirely. We introduced the concepts of slow violence and of intersectionality, emphasizing that violence is not isolated but interconnected with other social factors. Thanks to Jeanne-Marie Viljoen's concept of "dark" writing, we studied the importance of portraying violence to counteract societal indifference. We found that portraying violence in a non-mimetic way is more effective because it forces readers to engage actively with the narrative, put themselves in the position of learners, understand the mechanisms behind violence, and engage ethically. The authors use the medium to denounce the impact of violence on the lives of the population via their narrative, the child characters who witness it, and the use of black-and-white drawings. We also explored the emergence and influence of women in the comics industry, particularly how they offer new perspectives on issues such as sexual assaults, sexism, racism, and human rights abuses. This discussion led to a detailed introduction of the corpus, including an explanation of each graphic novel and the historical contexts that underscore the importance of these works.

In analyzing the child's gaze, we aimed to understand why child characters are central and how they contribute to the narrative and the representation of violence and trauma. Literature often uses children to critique society with a sense of naïveté, comics use child characters to capture social issues, and in graphic novels, children confront serious themes like death, using humor and avoidance as coping mechanisms. We then examined drawing techniques and discovered that the stylistic choices authors made when drawing their child characters have a significant effect on the reading experience. By depicting these child characters in a non-realistic style, they allow for greater identification and empathy from readers, enhancing the narrative's emotional impact via readers' implication. The juxtaposition of children's innocence with the brutality of war creates a poignant contrast, fostering empathy and challenging perceptions of the Middle East as a dangerous "Other". The use of child-like graphiation aligns with the narrative, making the child's perspective more authentic. We argued that the use of child characters is essential to reaching the authors' goal of changing Western perceptions of the Middle East, as childhood is a universal experience that allows for broader identification. We also analyzed how children are depicted in each graphic novel as characters who convey hope and resilience in times of despair. These children face the horrors of wars and conflicts every day, yet they still find joy in playing with their friends and laughing like "regular" kids. The contrast between the harsh textual elements, which describe acts of violence such as body mutilation and sexual assault, and the visuals of a child's imagination of the events is striking. Their gaze adds another layer of understanding of violence and trauma, offering various emotional connections and an understanding of the impact of wars and conflicts on childhood. Finally, we explored the psychological concept of introjection and applied it to the graphic novels under study. We discovered that although the protagonists are children, the adult selves of the authors are always present, offering multiple temporalities and a richer historical perspective.

Our final chapter focused on the use of black and white, examining how monochromatic colors contribute to the narrative and enhance the representation of violence. This stylistic choice enables authors to contrast various elements, emphasize important symbols, fragment temporalities, and create distinctive shapes, such as the monstrous soldiers in *Baddawi*. We discussed the clarity and focus provided by the use of black and white. We delved into the influence of Naji al-Ali on Arabic art to see if there were similarities with the works under consideration. We then argued on the expressive capabilities of black and white: portraying the

depth of memories and emotions, forcing the readers' gaze to symbols highlighted by the contrastive colors, pointing to the normalcy of violence, and allowing abstract representations with low iconicity to leave space for readers' imagination.

Our research revealed that violence and trauma can be represented in various ways. The drawing techniques, which in the corpus are a non-realistic style in black and white with a child-like graphiation, play a crucial role in the depiction of violence and trauma. By employing these stylistic choices to represent violence, the authors compel readers to engage deeply with the narrative, assuming the role of learners. In these graphic novels, violence is portrayed through a child-like graphiation that fosters empathy and challenges perceptions. Rather than depicting violence in a realistic manner, it is illustrated as a child might imagine it. This approach invites readers to view the events through the gaze of children, encouraging them to actively engage with and interpret the narrative. As a result, these works are not only ethical and innovative but also challenge the trauma theories of unrepresentability. They break the silence of intergenerational trauma, give a voice to the voiceless, and counteract the indifference people may feel toward the events occurring in the authors' home countries. By using an abstract black-and-white child-like style to depict violence, these graphic novels provide a unique perspective that confronts and challenges the audience's understanding.

In reflecting on the limitations of this study, it is important to note that the scope was restricted to three graphic novels written by Middle Eastern women, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. A more extensive study encompassing a broader range of graphic novels could possibly yield different and more varied results. Additionally, given the subjective nature of literary and visual analysis, biases in our interpretations are always possible. Future research on this topic could benefit from incorporating the perspective of others in our analysis to mitigate potential biases. Moreover, future research could explore comparative studies between these works and graphic novels written by Middle Eastern men to investigate the potential influence of gender on the depiction of violence. Another area of interest would be to examine the evolution of violence representation over time by including graphic novels created in earlier periods. This longitudinal approach could provide deeper insights into how the portrayal of violence has changed in response to socio-political shifts in the region.

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UNIVERSITÉ CATHOLIQUE DE LOUVAIN
Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

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