Tra visibile e leggibile: dal fumetto alla graphic novel

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Tra visibile e leggibile:
dal fumetto alla graphic novel

A cura di
Isabella Pezzini e Patrizia Violi

SCRITTI DI

BARBIERI, BUSI RIZZI, CORRAIN,
GARBELLI, GRECO, MONTANI, PELLITTERI, PIZZATI,
RONZONI, ROSSI, TERRACCIANO, VIRGOLIN

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Khaliji Off-panels: Rethinking Cultural Identity and Gender Narratives in Arabian Gulf Comics
Cristina Greco

Abstract

This contribution explores the role of Arabian Gulf comics in shaping and reflecting cultural identity and gender representation. In recent years, we have seen a growing interest in comics within the Arabian Gulf, including webcomics concerning key traditions and cultural assets. The exploration of identities in the Gulf comics sits at the crossroads of cultural heritage, rapid social transformations, and artistic innovation, questioning prevalent stereotypes whilst proposing elements that contribute to a more living cultural heritage. Furthermore, Gulf comics demonstrate a profound dedication to transmedia storytelling, seamlessly being across various media platforms. The paper examines how comics within the Gulf region blend traditional influences with broader cultural themes, rethinking cultural identity and gender narratives while defining hybrid identities. Through the semiotic analysis of a representative corpus of Arabian Gulf stories, this research explores how these narratives integrate both traditional and contemporary elements, becoming a space for cultural criticism and functioning as a laboratory of freedom.

Keywords: cultural identity, gender representation, gulf comics, transmedia storytelling, cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

Comics have always occupied a prominent position within the realm of cultural narratives. Its syncretic nature not only engages the audience but also functions as a mirror that reflects prevailing social norms and values while questioning and challenging the status quo. The Arabian Gulf, characterized by rapid socio-cultural transformations, has emerged as a fertile ground for examining the interplay between media, gender, and cultural identity representation in specific contexts such as the one under study.

Indeed, in recent years, there has been a significant transformation in the landscape of popular culture and media in the Arabian Gulf, which has resulted in an increase in the production of comics that tend to reflect cultural identity

but also the complexity of gender narratives. Added to this is the development of digital media, through which comic creators have begun to represent individual and collective identities through self-narratives. We could discuss the negotiation made in place by comics of complex questions concerning heritage preservation and modernization, gender roles, and collective identity.

As part of a broader study on media discourses and cultural identity in the Arabian Gulf, this article argues that comics that originated in the region function as semiotic texts that embed and contest dominant cultural narratives, functioning within what Jurij M. Lotman (1990) conceptualizes as the *semiosphere*, a space of semiotic heterogeneity where meaning is generated through the friction of competing cultural codes.

The emphasis on the region is, thus, primarily driven by the consideration of the recent developments concerning comics production, which was previously almost unrepresented within these countries. Furthermore, the opportunity to observe phenomena within an area characterized by a strong juxtaposition between heritage and modernization and rapid socio-cultural transformations made the research even more needed. Within this scenario, the present paper responds to a theoretical gap in the literature concerning the study of comics from a cultural identity perspective. The semiotic analysis will contribute to the understanding of how these emerging narratives construct and redefine the meaning of cultural identity and gender roles, highlighting the medium transformative potential in reflecting and shaping societal perceptions within the semiosphere and over its boundaries. In this context, comics emerge as a significant tool, given their ability to reflect and influence identity construction in an era of profound fragmentation. The study of cultural identity and gender representation requires paying attention to the interactions between culture, self-representation, and representation of others, which is useful in defining and redefining cultural identities.

2. Theoretical framework

In this context, comics emerge as a significant tool, given the ability to reflect and influence identity construction in an era of profound fragmentation. The study of identity, specifically within the field of visual cultural texts, requires paying attention to the interactions between culture, self-representation, and the representation of others, which is useful to define its own cultural identity. Cultural fragmentation and identity construction in contemporary society represent a crucial backdrop to the current research about comics in the Arabian Gulf. Employing comics as a research tool to enhance our understanding of the socio-cultural transformations and their impacts on the existing narratives related to gender roles and cultural identity means going beyond the formal representations and stereotypical images of the Arabian Gulf. The concept of cultural fragmentation could be defined as a dynamic framework of cultural identity characterized by the interplay between a strong desire for change and an intrinsic need, as reflected in cultural texts, to preserve collective memory alive through its valorization and socialization. There is increasing attention to how to transfer it to the new generations through innovative languages and systems that engage and resonate with them.

The concept of fragmentation, analyzed by the semiotic lens, can be explained

by the idea of semiosphere developed by Lotman (1990). Indeed, it refers to complexity in terms of interrelations alive among diverse phenomena, such as fragmentation, hybridization, and negotiation. It contrasts with the idea of a globalized unique space that will instead tend to homogenize identities. In the Gulf semiosphere, the fragmentation results from multiple factors, including migratory flows, exposure to different cultures within and outside its boundaries, and hybridization processes. The plurality can be explained through the concept of identity, defined as a complex and continuous process in which the identity is built on a relational attitude, in which the other is an integral part of the identity (Lévi-Strauss 1977). The concept of value belonging to each element is intrinsically linked to its difference from other elements. Articulated by Paul Ricoeur (1990), who posits that "individuality" is intertwined with "otherness", this concept places emphasis on "otherness" as a crucial component of the meaning of "individuality." Thereby, we believe that to thoroughly comprehend the uniqueness of identities, a focus on interdependence and its relational context in which identities are formed is needed. This perspective is further linked to the collective memory, whose concept transcends the collection of individual memories, indicating that what we remember is influenced by the communities and societies to which we belong (Halbwachs 1980). In a specific passage, in transcending individual memories, collective memory becomes part of the identity of culture and, in the meaning we embrace here, shaping and being shaped by narratives, symbols, and practices passed down from generation to generation (Assman 1995). This concept is linked to Lotman's concept of culture as a non-hereditary memory of a community in a continuous process of self-interpretation. This is to concisely express how we want to look at Gulf Arabian comics and the opportunities to critically analyze them to understand how they are shaped by socio-cultural transformations and how they shape the way gender roles and identities are portrayed and perceived through cultural texts.

Within this framework lies the critical conception that cultural identity is not a static, isolated entity but rather a dynamic expression of an evolving construct shaped by the interrelation among historical narratives, collective memory, and power relations (Hall 1990). To explore this dynamic condition, feminist media theory can help in understanding the role of media texts, actively engaging in constructing as well as deconstructing patriarchal ideologies and unequal power dynamics, renegotiating existing hierarchies, rethinking women's agency, and influencing the possibility for collective self-understanding and self-determination (van Zoonen 1994). Building upon these considerations and through the semiotic analysis, we can be more attentive to the specific historical, sociocultural, and political contexts in which comics are produced and consumed. The rapid sociocultural transformations happening in the Arabian Gulf testify to a change in people's perception of patriarchal norms affecting everyday life practices. We can mention the rapid transformations in Saudi Arabia concerning lifting the ban on women driving and the possibility for women to travel without a guardian (Greco 2021). The UAE exemplifies the changes underway, reflecting Jurij M. Lotman's dualism between gradual movements and changes happening as explosions (2009). These transformations have also influenced gender dynamics and perceptions of female figures within Gulf society. Indeed, "archaic stereotypes of women unable to drive, treated

as second-class citizens and not encouraged to work or study can sometimes dominate Western perceptions of the feminine status of the entire region" (Al Marri, Caielli 2019: 51).

By embracing this interdisciplinary framework, the studies can add more critical insights to decolonial discourses challenging the tendency to homogenize women's experiences in the Global South (Mohanty 1984). Indeed, through this lens, the intersectionality perspective mitigates essentialist narratives surrounding gender representation and cultural identity, and the recognition of diverse forms of agency.

In more recent studies, Coleman, Ferreday (2010) propose the concept of *hope* as a feminist affective orientation, intertwined with critique, temporality, and transformation. In this sense, Gulf comics can be read as affective passages in which concepts can be linked to the revalorization of gender roles. In this context, comics redefine dominant patriarchal narratives, signaling emerging spaces of feminist possibility, precisely rooted in the tension between tradition, change, and creative expression that we find in the Arabian Gulf comics. Based on feminist comics and gender studies (Gibson 2016), media scholars have demonstrated how women in non-Western contexts are represented in cultural texts functioning as a space of transformation (Hoigilt 2017). This approach emphasizes the importance of amplifying women's perspectives and representation from and within the region renegotiated in cultural texts that center on everyday life experiences, self-determination processes, and forms of cultural identity. It involves exploring and documenting forms conveying local expressions that authentically define their realities within a specific socio-cultural context.

In recent studies exploring the intersection of decolonial studies in the Middle East and feminist theories, understanding local identities and forms of digital resistance takes center stage. In these developments, representations of gender and Muslim women tend to challenge Eurocentric ideologies. Such research shifts attention to Muslim feminist geographies and non-Western epistemologies (Noxolo, Hamis 2023), looking at the digital space as a place to subvert dominant ideologies. Recent studies highlight how a decolonial feminist perspective is able to embody itself in the digital sphere, reclaiming narrative authority, as in the case of Iraqi female Twitter users' presence (Mustafa 2024) in reference to veiling practices as forms of digital resistance capable of reorienting social norms (Greco, Leone 2025).

This condition would be achieved through the composition of stories that, while referring to the nature of a collective instance, address the matter of individual experiences from which to draw to give substance to the narration. *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi stands as the most notable example of how comics and graphic novels provide glimpses into personal experiences while simultaneously reflecting broader cultural narratives, such as gender stereotypes, collective traumas, and socio-cultural changes. Through the use of autobiographical discourse, Marjane Satrapi's novel indeed chronicled the author's formative years but also posited a critical space of the complexity of cultural identity, collective and individual, during and after the Islamic Revolution. The fact that some authors have decided to give a new voice to certain historical events, traditions, and everyday practices through comics invites us to reflect on its ability to reduce the complexity of historical and social issues and to implement

strategies in the selection of what will become a memory, revised in the light of contemporary sensitivity (Greco 2014). We could talk about meanings that are not fixed but instead are part of an endless chain of signification, which means that each sign refers to another sign, which in turn refers to another one, creating an interconnecting flux of meaning. As argued by Umberto Eco concerning the broad yet strong category of unlimited semiosis,

> The very richness of this category makes it fertile since it shows us how signification (as well as communication), by means of continual shiftings which refer a sign back to another sign or string of signs, circumscribes cultural units in an asymptotic fashion, without ever allowing one to touch them directly, though making them accessible through other units (1976: 71).

In other words, and in seeking a correlation to our object, this perspective rethinks the notion of a fixed cultural identity, suggesting instead that it is a negotiation in process, redefined by the interactions with other intrinsic and extrinsic elements. In the specific case of the Gulf semiosphere, it would refer to the symbols of cultural identity represented within comics and other expressive forms, such as architectural motifs, historical and heritage narratives, and traditional clothing, taking the form of a not simply repository of meanings but as a constantly resignified and reinterpreted system.

In this context, studying comics through the intersection of diverse theoretical approaches becomes substantial to understanding how narratives tell stories while revalorizing symbols, as indicated by the increasing investment in comics and scholarly attention to it, which reflects and affects the Gulf semiosphere and its identities.

This research orientation provides us with conceptual tools to understand whether Gulf comics play a role in decolonial memory activism. Indeed, to advance our critical inquiry, we consider an important question that may guide the future development of our research. Specifically, it is about whether comics within and from the Gulf region can serve as a decolonial tool, challenging and destabilizing dominant knowledge systems and ideologies. We found this development particularly evident in forward-thinking projects, mainly those involving digital technologies, art, and popular culture.

3. Cultural Narratives in MENA Comics: A Review of Emerging Research

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in studying the intersection of visual narratives, cultural identities, and gender representations in the Middle East and North Africa, emphasizing cultural and collective memory. In fact, a growing body of research examines how visual narratives, including comics, reflect and shape evolving conceptions of cultural identity in a rapidly changing socio-cultural context. The study of comics in the MENA region has grown, employing a critical and cultural studies framework for exploring the interconnection between gender and cultural dynamics embedded within Arab comics. Documenting the historical evolution of comics in the region represented a crucial foundation for these studies, tracing the changes that happened, leading comics to become a space for artistic experimentation and social reflection (Douglas, Malti-Douglas 1994). In this context, it is also

important to consider how Gulf society, specifically the younger generation, is reflected within cultural texts. Mary-Jane Deeb (2012) focused on the character of the superheroes depicted in the comics book *The 99*, emphasizing how the stories and the historical and fictional traits of the protagonists relate to the issues faced by youth in the Arab semiosphere during that time.

The perception of modernity and social debates on issues concerning gendered discourses and cultural identity in popular culture, examined by the emerging literature in the Arabian Gulf, started in recent years with a focus on the local production, also in terms of comics, cartoons, and illustrations representative of the region. In Sayfo's study (2017), Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are defined as latecomers to animation production. However, despite the first animated cartoons appearing in the region as early as the 1970s, significant growth did not occur in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf until the 2000s. This was actually caused by a lack of infrastructure and trained personnel, which prevented the development of homegrown animation production. Starting in the 1970s, indeed, phases of the production process, when not the entire process, were outsourced to foreign animation studios. This high level of involvement of non-national artists hindered the formation of a production with a determined Saudi Arabian and Gulf visual identity. Considering that specific evolution, according to Sayfo, it is more appropriate to define this production through terms like "Saudiness", "Kuwaitiness", "Emirateness", and "Omaniness" (2017: 71). In concordance with previous research, but focused on the United Arab Emirates production and women illustrators on Instagram, a study focused on the United Arab Emirates illustration scene documented an emerging trend among young Emirati female illustrators adopting the Janapese animé and manga style to construct a subtle commentary on local traditions while revealing cultural inhibitions (Willard, Tariq, 2021). With the advent of a significant investment of national resources and the search for a visual identity, scientific literature has also enriched its view by incorporating various theoretical and methodological approaches interested in the study of the renewed conception of comics, animation, and illustration, demonstrating awareness and claiming its own cultural visual identity. This is demonstrated by a growing interest in research embracing a more critical and analytical approach. The study of the linguistic forms in mediating gendered conflict talk found the multimodal social semiotic analysis a key tool for the understanding of Emirati sociocultural values and idioms represented in *Shaabiat Al-Cartoon* (SAC), one of the most successful Emirati animated sitcoms (AlMaazmi 2021). This shift can be translated into a growing focus among artists on the authenticity of thematic choices, which is also supported by the possibility of expressing their art through the digital semiosphere. A study centered on Emirati comics and illustrations employed an ethnographic observation and insights from experience throughout an Emirati comics and illustration exhibition (Willard 2024). The author remarked that the exhibited works represented authentic expressions of the UAE's people, culture, and identity and that they could be considered "avant-garde pop-cultural products reflective of a newly-formed illustrative movement" (2024: 34).

Within this contradictory dimension, the exploration of gender representation and cultural identity in comics remains a pregnant and constantly evolving discourse, both in terms of their translation into the discourse of the media and

cultural texts and their impact on social norms and official regulations. Let us think, for example, of the strong changes in terms of everyday practices, such as driving for women in Saudi Arabia (Greco 2021), or the legitimization of the image of women, for example, in advertising before an absent present, or even the possibility for women to travel without having to be accompanied by a guardian (Boero, Greco 2022). By integrating the previous and new perspectives and empirical evidence, this work aims to cover a theoretical gap in the existing literature about cultural identity and gender representation within the Arabian Gulf to offer a comprehensive approach for future research in light of the rapid sociocultural changes happening in the region. The research focuses on what in comics exhibits a level of strength that is more pronounced here than in other visual media. This allows us to establish a framework for meaning-making within comics. This establishes the passage towards a semiotics of comics that pays closer attention to the study of the verbal-visual system. The aim is to analyze the text in light of its syncretic quality and draw insights from the translation mechanisms that occur between the two systems (Greco 2014).

4. Methodology

This article discusses the representation of gender and cultural identity within Gulf Arabian comics. In doing so, it employs the semiotic analysis of a corpus of selected comics from the Gulf region following criteria of representativeness combined with an ethnographic approach, including observation and non-structured conversations with comics' readers and social media users. I analyzed a corpus of comics and digital comics strips to explore the sociocultural dynamics reflected by these texts. I identified the propedeutic tools useful for the definition of the corpus in the following thematic focuses to ensure representativeness in terms of variation of the dynamics characterizing the Gulf production and the region's cultural identity. The choice has been made on topic criteria, which means the themes that connect local and global influences to obtain a corpus representing the intersection between cultural identity and gender representation. In the second step, attention has been given to various genres and modes of the discourse, such as bio-comics, realistic, superheroes, and humoristic comics. This diversity allowed us to explore how similar and divergent themes could be explored through the use of different discursive strategies. Other criteria that guided the corpus selection are the geographic one since the research focuses on the Arabian Gulf comics and the availability of the material in a context where the comics are still limited compared to other realities. To address the research limitations and recognize the prevailing trends in comics within the Gulf region, we also considered the digital presence of comics and comic strips based on the observed scarcity of production on certain topics. Consequently, I also had to include examples regardless of the origin of production, whether it was a spontaneous artistic creation or the result of a commissioned work from institutional or curatorial entities. Additionally, I considered the accessibility of the chosen examples, including those that reached an international audience, although not based in the region, to identify some of the neuralgic points of gender representation and cultural identity. Moreover, I have chosen comics from both renowned and emerging comic artists to include a variety of perspectives. The semiotic analysis allows us to

understand profoundly how these cultural texts convey cultural and identitarian meanings. In conducting the analysis, I focused on the semiotic modalities that differentiate comics from other visual mediums, given by the pronounced nature of the verbo-textual relationship.

As regards the ethnographic approach, direct observation has been conducted during events, such as the Comi Con Arabia, the Middle East Film, and Comic Con, to collect data about consumers and everyday practices about comics. The non-structured conversations helped take in consideration people's perceptions, which can offer insights into how comics reflect and influence contemporary culture. While analyzing comics from a semiotic perspective, these insights have been considered, highlighting the importance of a socio-semiotic approach for studying the emerging cultural text within the Gulf semiosphere. This integrated methodology, as proven by other research carried out in the Gulf region regarding Saudi Arabia's food heritage and perspective (Greco 2021), and Saudi advertising campaigns related to the lift of the ban on women driving (Greco 2022), can offer a more contextualized and profound reflection on the gender and cultural identity representation within the Gulf comics.

5. Khaleeji Off-panels

Popular culture, including comics, becomes the place where experiences and escaping traditional narratives tend to express themselves, providing an alternative voice to the community and generating a critical reflection on identity and belonging. In recent years, we have seen a growing interest in comics and graphic novels within the Gulf, including bio-comics relating to key traditions and cultural assets. In the particular developing context of the Arabian Gulf, comic artists are increasingly exploring narratives that offer a more complex and varied portrait of the culture itself and of male and female characters. In exploring these themes, a form of auto-communication and a search for self-determination becomes evident, approaching the boundaries of the autobiographical genre. On the other hand, the storyline of superhero narratives functions as a means to express off-panel topics, such as gender representation and cultural identity.

5.1. Female Figures and Gender Narratives: Real Superheroines and their Counterparts

For instance, in "The 99", while various elements show the crucial role of cultural traditions shaping these narratives, the reflection on gender representation is instead present but as a subtle cue. Indeed, while there is much knowledge about the portrayal of women in comics, the topic of how Muslim female characters are portrayed is still in its initial stage. Naif Al-Mutawa's *The 99* is an interesting example. Published by Teshkeel Comics, *The 99* was first released in Kuwait in 2006 after receiving approval from the country's Ministry of Information, after which it was released globally. The title is significant in itself as it is inspired by Islamic culture and religion, referring to Islamic teaching that God has a hundred beautiful names or attributes, one of which is Allah. Al-Mutawa draws on this tradition and produces superheroes, most of them teenagers, each embodying one of the 99 Names and attributes of God (Fig. 1). The story begins in Baghdad in the mid-13th century, when the Mongol invasion threatens the great city and, more importantly, Dar al-Hikma, or "The House of Wisdom".
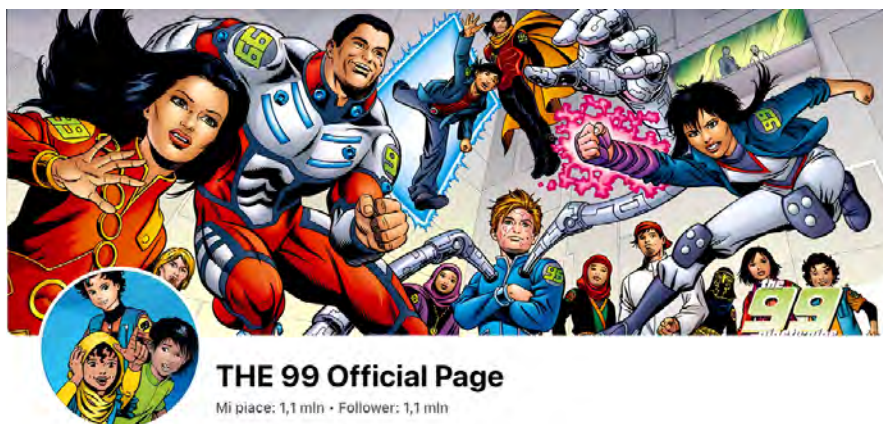
Fig. 1. Screengrabbed from *The 99* Official page, Facebook (March 20, 2025).

As many history buffs know, Baghdad's library does not survive – the Mongols destroy it and burn every boo – but Al-Mutawa explores the human imagination and shows us an untold story of librarians and scholars preserving the library's knowledge in a mystical context through the gems known as Noor Stones ("Noor" is the Arabic word for "Light"). The Noor Stones were taken to Andalusia and stored in a fortress, but one man's thirst for power caused the fortress to explode and scattered the stones across the world. We are taken to the present day in Paris, where a scholar named Dr. Ramzi Razem searches for the lost Noor Stones with his organization "The 99 Steps Foundation". There are many naysayers to Dr. Ramzi's presentations who call it a myth until one day, something extraordinary happens… Those who are able to activate the Noor Stones are called gem bearers. We later learn that the Noor Stones choose their bearers, so they are useless if possessed by anyone other than the one who is meant to bear them.

The characters do not carry weapons that help them resolve situations in a violent way, which is also one of the thematic isotopies of solving problems without weapons and of the dialogue between East and West to create a balance between traditions and modern culture. Mutawa had experienced this, having spent most of his adult life in the United States while writing children's books about inclusion and prejudice. In concordance with what was found in the scientific literature, the graphic style is based on the existing American comics. However, the interesting aspect is in the use of Islamic archetypes, in the construction of the theme of individual Muslim virtues used to build collective power, and in its setting in the Middle East. This aspect is different from American comics like Marvel and DC that follow a Judeo-Christian archetype in which the heroes have enormous power but are marginalized by the world. *The 99* have alter egos due to the fact that they have their super names and their real names. The first female character introduced in the story is an 18-year-old Dana Ibrahim (Fig. 2) in the United Arab Emirates. She is the daughter of a wealthy father, which makes her a target for many criminals.

Fig. 2. Screengrabbed from the National. Super heroes Noora, left, and Jabbar from the comic book series *The 99*.

In fact, in the story, Noora is kidnapped for ransom and then frees herself by her own strength given by an inner power. Noora is not saved by anyone and taken to the headquarters of *The 99*, she fights to free herself against all odds – this shows us that she has free will; she has control over her captors and refuses to fall victim to her state of captivity. Even though beaten, injured, and exhausted after days of digging, she refused to give up and found the Noor Stone not simply because she chose to but thanks to the willpower that exists within her. Noora has fascinating powers, such as spreading waves of light within herself, deflecting the darkness that exists within her enemies, and detecting who is trustworthy, as she can see what is inside people. She can also create optical illusions to make herself and the other 99 members invisible. There is a scene in the comic where the characters are being chased and, to disperse the crowd, Noora makes a miniature "copy" of herself running down the other side of the street, while in reality she is hiding in an alley. The "copy" people are chasing is just a trick of the light. Probably the most interesting part of Noora's character is that much of the scenario I described above parallels that of the Prophet Mohamed. Although Mohamed was not kidnapped, he was meditating in a cave when he first received God's revelation from the angel Gabriel. Similarly, Noora is in a dark tunnel where she encounters the mystical Noor Stone, which clearly has divine implications as it represents an attribute of the 99 names of God. An interesting aspect to note is that there is not a single panel in which the female character of Noora is objectified or exploited and is consistently represented through the value of modesty.

Another notable female character in *The 99* is Amira Khan (Fig. 3), a British-Pakistani teenager who makes her first appearance in issue #5. With her Noor Stone, she is Hadya, The Guide.
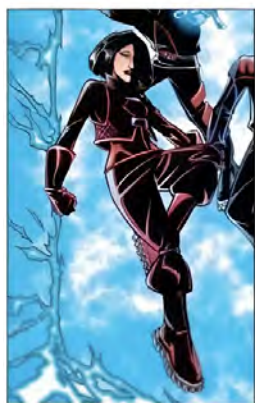
Fig. 3. Screengrabbed from www.comicbookreligion.com (March 20, 2025).

She has the ability to map cities, countries, and even entire solar systems. As written in the comic, her "brain functions like a satellite telephoto lens and global positioning system", and her maps are sometimes so detailed that they project as three-dimensional images that move around her. Like Noora, Hadya's attire is relatively modest. One could argue that she is drawn stereotypically in leather in her superhero costume, but there is nothing extremely provocative about it. What is important is that she is given some background for her character: we see her living with her uncle, suggesting that she has lost her parents (although nothing about this has been mentioned so far), and we see her trying to figure herself out. Neither Noora nor Hadya wears the hijab, but there is an Iranian female character named Buran who does. Although she is not a gem bearer, she plays a prominent role in helping the group on their missions. When we first see her, she is wearing the hijab while showing some of her hair, which shows how wearing the hijab is not about the theme of female submission. The dialogue in the scenes featuring Buran is characterized by the manner of ironic speech, which offers sarcasm and humor to balance Dr. Ramzi's often serious tone. Al-Mutawa said that he chose to include a mix of Muslim women who do and do not wear the hijab, and this is important because it shows the audience how diverse the Islamic community is.

The 99 is a synthesis of East and West, a reflection of a man born and raised in a religious family in Kuwait City but who attended college in the United States and still spends part of the year in New York City. Many of the people who help Mutawa write and draw "The 99" are American comic book artists who have also worked on "Spider-man", "Batman", and other mainstream titles. Muslim clerics believed that comic books were antithetical to Islam because human superheroes take their names (such as "The Mighty One" and "The Light") from those attributed to Allah. Additionally, "Noora", "Hadya the Guide", and many of the other female crime fighters in "The 99" do not wear hijabs or other conservative

religious garments. Over 20,000 copies of the original comics were sold, outselling all other comics in the Arab region except for the Superman and Spiderman (Holy) editions.

The backlash Al-Mutawa faced due to the success of *The 99* was astonishing. The series was banned in Saudi Arabia upon its release and a fatwa (a legal declaration issued by an Islamic religious authority) was issued by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and only after years of legal battles was it allowed to be released. One of the main factors behind the pushback in the Arab world is that some believe his ultimate plan is to connect all 99, thus creating an image of Allah, which is blasphemous in Muslim tradition. The idea was to reposition Islam not only in the West but also among Muslims themselves, for example, with regard to the issue of the representation of the female figure. While we can find some similarities between *The 99* and *X-Men*, the comic is a huge step in the right direction for Islamic literature. The 99 borrows elements from Islamic culture and creates an original thematic-figurative isotopy that introduces us to strong-willed and positive female characters. Stereotypes about Muslim women are broken even without overemphasizing the femininity of the characters and the roles they play, and the writers instead focus on making the characters real, people we can relate to. Mutawa's work has inspired *Marvel* and *DC Comics* to create more diverse characters, like *Ms. Marvel*, a female Muslim character.

Moving through another aspect of comics about and within the Gulf region, the comic *Shamma* (Fig. 4) by the Emirati artist Hamda Saad exemplifies the use of the manga style mentioned above to represent local narratives and adapt it to traditional and cultural symbols.

Fig. 4. *Shamma* screengrabbed by Arab News (March 20, 2025).

The theme of the protagonist's everyday life, who has been promoted to the head of the department at work, is part of a broader narration on the complexity of being in a new role, managing her private life, and highlighting the difficulties of being a woman. This thematic focus is anchored to the figurative isotopy of the cultural implications of depicting a female character in Emirati national dress and the broader societal challenges arising within this framework concerning the stereotypical representation of the Muslim feminine figure. In this context, *Shamma* subverts the dominant narrative that portrays Arab women as passive figures by depicting the protagonist as an ambitious professional. The visual elements tied to the cultural identity and its relation to gender representation are emphasized by the *abaya*, the traditional garment that, when recontextualized through the comics panels, undergoes a process of revalorization, reinforcing not only its status of cultural heritage but conveys values such as self-determination and cultural expression. By doing so, Shamma prioritizes marginalized perspectives and challenges dominant Western narratives. In fact, by centering the narrative on the experiences and practices of everyday life of a young Emirati woman, it contributes to the deconstruction of Western orientalist tropes that portray Muslim women as a monolithic figure of victimhood.

In the analysis of comics and the construction of cultural identity and gender narratives, Huda Fahmy's comic strips serve as an exemplary case of how humor can be used to convey messages that are difficult to express through other mediums. Despite not being a comic artist based in the region, Huda Fahmy is strictly connected to it throughout her family history. Her mother is originally from Saudi Arabia and later moved to the United States. Moreover, Huda Fahmy has won many praises for her insightful storytelling, which engages with issues pertaining to being a Muslim woman. While humorously showing the everyday challenges posed by Western narratives and stereotypes historically associated with Arab women, her comics provide an exploration of the complexity and richness of the Gulf cultural identity. In the comic book *Yes, I'm Hot in This* (Fig. 5), Huda Fahmy explores the challenges of being an American Muslim woman, debunking stereotypes about her culture.
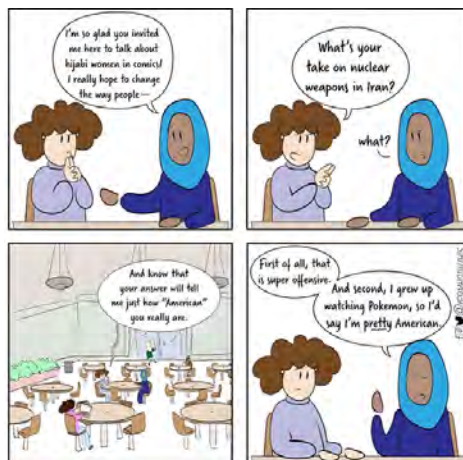
Fig. 5. Panel *Yes, I'm Hot in This*. Screengrabbed from Facebook, @yesimhotinthis (March 20, 2025).

From answering common questions about her hijab to sharing anecdotes about her daily life in an abaya, Fahmy openly addresses misconceptions about Muslims and the Gulf region's cultural identity.

Through this perspective, the panels explore collective emotions rarely highlighted throughout other mediums, offering readers a different point of view. This representation favors a wide range of passionate states, ranging from *aggression* to *insensitivity*, highlighting the varied emotional landscape that these narratives evoke through dialogues, with "hijabi whistles" expressions ("go back where you came from", "Why does your husband make you wear it?", etc.). Umberto Eco (2004) emphasizes that meaning is not fixed but rather negotiated in the process of translation (negotiating: "Mouse or rat?"). Similarly, Fahmy's comics engage in a negotiation of meaning by representing the experiences of Muslim women in the context of Western culture. In this direction, there are other examples, *Lala Comics*, created by Umm Sulayman, a British-Algerian Illustrator and cartoonist who grew up between the Arabian Gulf and the UK.

This commitment of Gulf Arabian comics to prompt a reflection on genre narratives through a language that does not express them directly but requires the reader to have the cognitive and emotional capacity to recognize them in order to cooperate in the construction of meaning is extremely evident in a webcomic, which clearly stands out from the use of ironic discourse and sarcasm. *Hijab Girl*, by Saudi artist Sarah Al-Hazmi, published in 2021, addresses relevant social issues, challenging traditional cultural and gender representations (Fig. 6).
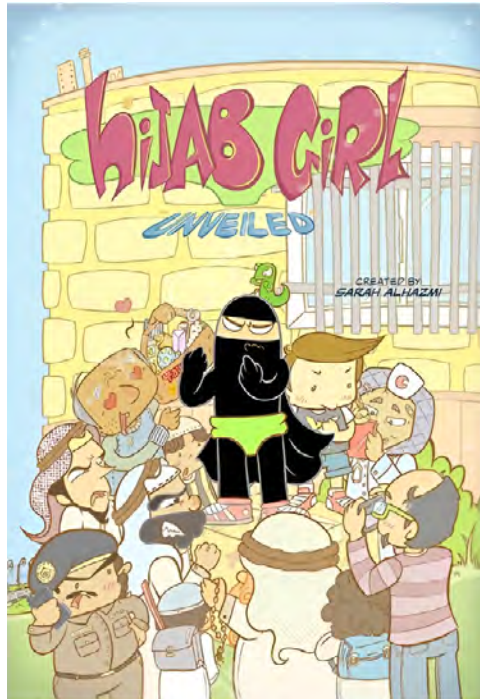
Fig. 6. *Hijab Girl*. Screengrabbed from cargocollective.com (March 20, 2025).

The story begins with the protagonist, a young Saudi girl, who is hit by a car and finds herself flying through the air, landing on a pair of green underwear. This event attracts the attention of a young man named Fady, who witnesses what happened and thinks he is in front of a superheroine, becoming her helper (Fig. 7).

Although she does not face alien threats or mechanical monsters, *Hijab Girl* fights against ignorance, indifference, and complacent enemies that often prove more stubborn. As indicated in an article about an exhibition of Arabic comics that reflect the socio-political culture of the region, *Hijab Girl* employs the trope of the superheroine even though the protagonist does not challenge any evil character or alien invader, but it functions as a metaphor for the challenge to ignorance and passivity.

The panels refer to local cultural elements through personal stories that offer insights into the cultural identity of the region and the social changes taking place. We find, therefore, thematic-figurative isotopies that focus on two central semantic axes: cultural identity and gender dynamics. In the case of cultural identity, it is articulated through visual and verbal references to Saudi culture and the Islamic religion, through the representation of the local urban context and the use of traditional female and male accessories and clothing. These elements are not represented as static but as part of a dynamic system that oscillates between tradition and modernity, also through language and the use of ironic discourse.

Fig. 7. *Hijab Girl*. Screengrabbed from cargocollective.com (March 20, 2025).

On the other hand, gender dynamics are articulated through the figure of the protagonist herself, whose being and doing combine collective traditional traits with individual will. In fact, the setting of *Hijab Girl* is crucial to understanding its meaning (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. *Hijab Girl*. Screengrabbed from cargocollective.com (March 20, 2025).

From the first panel, the setting is that of the Saudi urban context. However, on a second reading, we can identify visual and verbal devices that could not be recognized by an incompetent reader. In this sense, we can refer to the thought of Roman Jakobson (1921), who proposes a reflection on the ambiguity of the concept of realism with reference to the artistic current, considering that the term has a double meaning: what the author proposes as a realist, and what the judge evaluates as such. Obviously, this has to do with the individual relationship between the judge and the work, giving value to the subjective point of view. In this sense, we would speak of conventional realism, based on the ability of those who enjoy the cultural text to recognize the traits that compose it and their relationships.

In the case of comics, this also concerns the property of the drawing when it is constructed in such a way as to generate an effect of similarity. However, as Eco (1997) reminds us, it is not the sensation itself that is produced but an impression of it. The panels in *Hijab Girl* do not present a realistic quality of drawing, but they include strong cultural references at a visual figurative level

with respect to the typical elements of Saudi urban space, as well as traditional female and male clothing. At a textual level, figurativity is found in the dialogues between the protagonist and the male figures, as well as in the form of sarcasm. The choice of a female protagonist who wears the hijab, the reference to the superheroine who is not such, refers to cultural identity while expressing resilience. This has to do with the operation of completing the text, a system of nodes in which the cooperation of the Model Reader is activated (Eco 1979). Without knowledge of the Saudi urban context, the reader can hardly grasp the degree of verisimilitude of the work. That impression of a feeling of similarity would, therefore, fall by reducing the text to a humorous comic strip without any perceptible deep meaning, leading to a failure to activate the effect of a sense of truth, that textual effect whose recognition represents the starting point for the identification of that specificity of the text, which is fully manifested in what it generates or could have generated (Pezzini 2007).

5.2. Gulf Digital Narratives: The Intersection of Heritage and Contemporary Identity

In analyzing these works, we must also consider the role of digital platforms in their creation and dissemination[1]. In the Gulf region, many cartoonists and illustrators use social media and online platforms to share their work, creating new forms of community and dialogue around their narratives, literally engaging the public through the model they are helping to develop in the United Arab Emirates of participatory culture. In this way, comics demonstrate a deep dedication to transmedia storytelling, seamlessly expressing their art on various media platforms, with a notable emphasis on social media.

The innovative aspect, therefore, also concerns artistic practices and modes of communication,

closely connected to immediacy, periodicity, and the establishment of a more direct exchange with the reader. Furthermore, the absence of format constraints and editorial censorship means that authors are free to experience not only the narrative, genre and graphic dimension of comics but also and above all the field of meta-comics, when comics go beyond themselves to narrate comics and so on to return.

Based on these considerations, I chose to work on these texts not only for their exceptional characteristics and geographical origins but also for how they build a memory map. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects concerns the process of transformation of the texts, which goes from a narrative of testimony to a critical reflection on the nature of images by the comic strip through individual memory, different from the collective one reconstructed by the media.

A notable example is the work of Khalid Mezaina, an Emirati artist whose work often explores the intersection of heritage and contemporary life. His narratives provide a window into the complex process of constructing identity in a rapidly changing society. One of his works, in particular, is a digital comic strip titled *Karak Run!*, depicting an elderly Emirati woman in search of a cup of Karak! (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9. *Karak Run!* Screengrabbed from Instagram @kmezaina (March 20, 2025).

Through visual narratives, the panels not only celebrate UAE cultural symbols but also stimulate a dialogue about preserving these traditions and their transition, or translation, into the contemporary world. The panels illustrate significant elements of the Emirati semiosphere, employing the traditional burghu as the central motif. This element stands in contrast with the bright colors of the character's attire, exacerbating the interplay between heritage and contemporary influences, reflecting the evolving identity of the UAE society. If we look at the portrayal of facial features in comics, we know that its particularity is not only to distinguish characters, but it is essential to communicate emotions, particularly in the absence of narrative descriptions or to support the relationship text-image. In *Karak run!* the representation of facial features serves as a conduit for the broader cultural contexts in which the story is set, but what connects all the elements is the passional status of the protagonist, emphasized as the main emotion of the story, becoming a passion

for the reader, according to the three types of emotions identified by Daniele Barbieri (2005). Despite the face being covered by the burghu, emotions and reactions are visible through the gaze and lead the reader to understand the evolution of the story, exacerbated by other visual expedients. In fact, the story becomes more intriguing as the character moves from a traditional appearance to using the phone to find a coffee shop and book a ride. This juxtaposition showcases the landscapes of the Emirates while the character opts for a ride in an Arabian Oryx instead of calling an Uber. It is here that figurativization goes beyond the visible and the readable, approaching the sensorial act and forms of contact. Webcomics not only take charge of the relationship between verbal text and image, but define the link between playful and aesthetic values, encouraging passionate processes and skills on the part of the reader. The blog interface suggests the user scroll down to explore the panels and follow the evolution of the story[2]. The graphic style lends itself to involving the reader in a more immersive experience. This short comic shows how comics can tell a complex story, suggesting a world rich in cultural and historical references with very few words and in a few frames. Each single panel appears to be constructed with extreme care, showing unexpected facets in the representation of women. In this way, the characteristic of comic language, which is essentially elliptical, is exacerbated: the reader is not shown all the phases of a story or a single action, but significant fragments are selected, as highlighted by Pascal Lefèvre (2005).

This also has to do with the elements that are gradually arranged within the space of the panels, the shapes they assume, the position of the character, the gaze, the chromatic qualities that change, and, finally, the shifting of the frame limit that evokes the emotion of surprise and produces a rhetorical effect of summoning the reader. Furthermore, it must be considered that although digital comics retain the essential characteristics of sequential art in the passage from one panel to another, they differ when text and images fill the space triggered by a click or a scroll that follows the vertical reading, creating a hybrid mechanism. In this case, we can clearly observe a dynamic interaction between the visual representations of traditional Emirati clothing and contemporary elements, symbolizing the continuous tension between the past and the present.

Many artists draw on shared cultural experiences, historical events, heritage symbols, and folklore to place their narratives within a broader Emirati context. In doing so, they move from the narrative of the self, using comics as a device. Of course, narrating the self is reinforced by the very idea of being on social media. But here, it is a not being able to do, translated into being able to do thanks to the languages of comics. An example is biocomics. For example, the artist known only by the pseudonym "Sono Moza" published on social media panels often incorporating elements of Emirati oral traditions and historical references, such as the traditional dresses or practices, contributing to the preservation and evolution of collective memory through a contemporary medium (Fig. 10). Such depiction invites the reader to enjoy the beauty of the forms and to look for intertextual references within the composition of the panels.

Fig. 10. Sono Moza online panels. Screengrabbed from Instagram @sonomoza (March 20, 2025).

By placing the collective and cultural symbols of the Emirates against the background of the characters' individual stories, these objects are actually marked, becoming more intense precisely because they are familiar and recognizable. This happens through the possibility given to the reader to recognize realistic elements in a fictional space.

Through detailed illustrations of traditional dress, costumes, and evolving celebrations, these comics strengthen collective memory among Emirati readers and educate a wider audience while also strengthening the Emirati semiosphere. In the context of Sono Moza's online panels, the Emirati semiosphere comprises a rich fabric of symbols, narratives, and discourses that inform and shape the production and interpretation of cultural texts, like in the case of the practices of dining situated on the floor. The backgrounds and environments depicted reflect the architecture and urban landscape of the UAE, such as the Museum of Future in Dubai. This visual context helps situate the narrative within Gulf culture and traditions, offering a more authentic immersion and connection to cultural identity (Fig. 11). In this way, the panels contribute to the circulation or recirculation of cultural signs and symbols, contributing to the preservation and socialization of collective memory. On the other hand, intertextuality connects the local with the global, creating a link with the external reader. For instance, a panel depicts the *Family Guy's* characters with the background of the Burj Al Arab (Fig. 11).

Other panels focus on gender dynamics, allowing for the subversion and recontextualization of cultural tropes and gender narratives, offering an alternative perspective that broadens the range of voices that challenge dominant discourses (Fig. 12). In some of the panels published on social media, figurative and thematic isotopies that reflect everyday life become evident, alongside the representation of gender dynamics. In this context, the narrated story represents a challenge to traditional gender expectations (Fig. 12).

Along the same line are the online panels by Aysha Al Hamrani that describe the character's experiences in the life of an Emirati woman, using visual metaphors that subvert stereotypical representations of Arab women and men (Fig. 13). The author's Instagram profile is the space in which the panels and characters come to life, entering into direct reference with other visual languages, such

Fig. 11. Sono Moza online panels. Screengrabbed from Instagram @sonomoza (March 20, 2025).
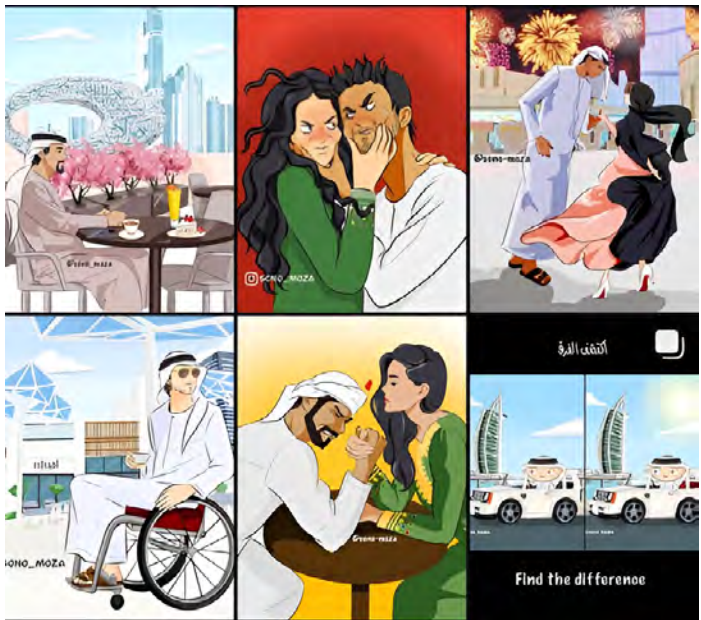

Fig. 12. Sono Moza online panels. Screengrabbed from Instagram @sonomoza (March 20, 2025).

as photography. The visitor can, in fact, recognize that degree of similarity, or rather its effect, with respect to the author. The character in her strips has traits that identify him with the author. We could talk about the illusion of a stable and unified autobiographical subject constructed in the interaction between the author and the self in comic strips and bio-comics.

Fig. 13. Screengrabbed from Instagram @mnawrah (March 20, 2025).

The autocommunication plays a fundamental role in narrative self-construction, functioning as a process of interpretation and meaning-making process that can facilitate intercultural communication and drive socio-cultural transformations. Through webcomic panels, Al Hamrani delves into the character's personal experiences, reflecting on themes of family, tradition, and the rapid social changes within Emirati society. His panels are characterized by a distinctive visual style that combines traditional Emirati aesthetics with modern comic storytelling techniques, offering readers a unique look at the complexity of balancing tradition and modernity.

While many representations of gender in comics can be passive or objectified, the character here emerges as a figure of power, determination, and action. Her presence highlights that women can be active protagonists in their lives, challenging the idea that modesty equates to weakness. With her attitude, the character represented within this comic embodies this idea of gender performativity, challenging cultural expectations regarding the role and representation of gender in society.

6. Discussion. Intertextuality, cultural identity, and gender representation.
*   For a Typology of Arabian Gulf comics.*

The exploration of identities in Gulf comics sits at the intersection of cultural representation, social dynamics, and artistic innovation, sometimes highlighting prevailing stereotypes and proposing innovative elements that contribute to a more inclusive and dynamic cultural narrative.

Through this lens, *The 99*, Shamma illuminates the complexities of cultural

representation and the potential for redefining gender roles within contemporary contexts.

The explored examples demonstrate their richness in intertextual references to pop culture, current events, and shared experiences, contributing to its richness and resonance within contemporary society. Eco's concept of intertextuality highlights the ways in which texts are cited and influenced by other texts, enriching their meaning through layers of cultural references and associations (Eco 1976). For instance, the influence of manga on the production of Emirati comics highlights how these works can integrate, negotiate, and translate the distinctive elements of manga within Arabian Gulf history, characterized by its own symbols and signs, contributing to the creation of third texts, loaded with meanings regarding the typologies of culture and their translation.

The characters encountered embody a fusion of Western and Eastern cultural symbols. While their aesthetic inspiration may recall Western comic conventions, their identity connects them to the traditions and cultural values of the Arabian Gulf, thus creating a hybrid identity that reflects the complexity of cultures. In this regard, comics serve as a place of cultural critique and creativity through intertextual play, inviting readers to participate in a dynamic dialogue that crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries. This movement between cultural authenticity and hybridity is also clearly represented through Arabic and English texts or juxtapositions of traditional and modern images that challenge Western assumptions about women and gender dynamics. In particular, Roland Barthes (1957), through his concept of *myth*, provides a theoretical framework to understand how dominant ideologies and cultural narratives influence our understanding of gender roles and identities. Barthes argues that myths are cultural constructions that reflect and reinforce society's values and beliefs. In the context of this comic, the representation of the characters challenges the traditional myth that women who wear the hijab are passive or oppressed, highlighting how myths can be subject to contestation and reinterpretation through popular culture and the media.

Finally, Homi Bhabha's theories of hybrid culture and the "third space" (1994) offer an important perspective on how cultural identities are negotiated and constructed in the era of globalization. With the fusion of Western and Eastern aesthetics, these comics embody this idea of cultural hybridity, offering a new and innovative representation of the experiences of Muslim women and men who challenge traditional cultural and religious dichotomies.

In Gulf comics, one can observe how characters and stories not only reflect local culture but also interact with external influences, creating a kind of intercultural dialogue. Through the representation of "other" characters, the comics activate a process of negotiation and exploration of identities. In Arabian Gulf comics, this exploration intersects cultural representation, social dynamics, and artistic revolution, sometimes highlighting dominant ideologies and proposing elements that contribute to a more dynamic cultural narrative.

The analysis narratives revealed two primary categories that emerge through the lens of the theoretical model of the semiotic square (Greimas, Courtés, 1986), the elementary structure of signification. We can, therefore, identify the opposition of two terms, *presence* versus *absence* of the cultural identity. Elements of the Gulf culture act as central visual symbols. These are not just decorative elements but signs that recall the Islamic and Gulf traditions.

However, as emerged from the analyses, these referents are revalorized in the context of the comic, assuming values linked to strength, affirmation of the self, and gender dynamics. In the case of the hijab, for example, it becomes an integral part of the character's identity, an emblem of opposition to conformism, challenging Western collective perceptions and rethinking traditional local roles. The other opposition that emerged from the analyses is that relating to the representation of gender as *negative* versus *positive*. The latter emerges in several characters who are often depicted as strong, active, and determined women and men struggling with the quality, challenges, and humor of the protagonists. This characterization opposes a stereotypical construction in particular of the female figure in her being a passive victim, therefore in the term of negative representation. An articulation of this type determines values such as strength, resilience, perseverance, and self-affirmation. On the basis of these axiologies, it is possible to identify typologies of comics that integrate the themes of cultural identity and gender representation in the selected examples. Based on the observations conducted and the data collected, together with informal conversations and the analysis through the semiotics perspective, they can be classified according to the emerging values in the narration of cultural identity and gender dynamics, divided into absence, presence, acquisition, negotiation of cultural identity, positive or negative gender representation. Therefore, we identify four typologies. Comics that celebrate tradition and cultural identity: among these are those that use visual and narrative symbols, reinforcing cultural identity and continuity with heritage.

Shamma, for example, uses the abaya as a reinterpretation of the symbol linked to cultural pride that challenges Western perceptions that associate it with the practice of oppression. Comics that challenge tradition and cultural identity: in this case, these are examples, such as *Hijab Girl,* in which the protagonist takes on the role of a superheroine, questioning patriarchal stereotypes, that question the implications of cultural norms through ironic discourse without denying or abandoning them. Comics that negotiate between tradition and contemporaneity include comics that balance cultural heritage elements with contemporary themes and figures.

This is the case of *Karak run!*, in which we see a fusion between traditional symbols, such as the burghu, and contemporary ones, such as the cell phone and the reference to the Uber ride. Comics with positive representations of gender: this typology includes comics that present female characters who challenge patriarchal norms while maintaining a strong connection with their own cultural identity, as in the case of *The 99* and *Hijab Girl*, which include the trope of the superheroine but offer an alternative vision to the hypersexualized archetypes of Western superheroes and the stereotypes of subordination and passivity of the female figure. Comics with critical representations of gender dynamics. This typology includes comics that use satire and humor as a key to criticizing patriarchal norms and Western stereotypes, highlighting social pressure from and through different cultural contexts. We, therefore, find comics such as *Yes, I am Hot in This* and *Hijab Girl*, but also the tables of Sono Mosa and Aysha Al Hamrani.

7. Conclusion

Likely, the strong presence of digital comic strips and webcomics in the Arabian Gulf is an expression of a global trend that makes comics a space of expression facilitated by the possibility of publishing one's own strips on the web, so we could say that it is just a matter of keeping up with the times. Indeed, in this context, the defining element of CCG is the significance of being a step backward. What does this imply? It suggests that the explosive aspect of comics in the Arabian Gulf is inherently linked to its innovative capacity, not novel to the medium itself, to articulate narratives that might remain marginalized or unexpressed in conventional discourses and through other semiotic systems.

In this framework, Arabian Gulf comics work as both an artistic and a social expression. We can think of them as *laboratories of freedom*, as well as metaphors for an archive. In these instances, comics, even more than in their traditional guise, on one hand, become a place of creative experimentation; on the other, they explore their ability to reorganize collective memory, all within a fictitious dimension that allows for interactive imagination. These variations highlight the dynamic nature of cultural expression and the multiplicity of experiences within the region, contributing to the ongoing transformations in gender narratives and cultural identities.

These conclusions lead to questions about the possibility of discussing these themes from a transnational perspective of shared imagination. Future research in this area will question stereotypes and myths while using comics to comprehend how cultures perceive their own gradual and dramatic social transformations. This also concerns looking at comics as the place where social activism can find a space to express voices, particularly in the digital semiosphere, and operating a crystallization of culture, its past, and its transformation, ultimately integrating it into a living cultural heritage.

Note

[1] Some of the analyzed comics and artists under this paragraph have been exhibited in the Emirati Comics and Illustration Exhibition organized and curated by Sarah L. Nesti Willard, that took place at the Abu Dhabi's Manarat Al Saadiyat in 2024.
[2] https://khalidmezaina.blogspot.com/.

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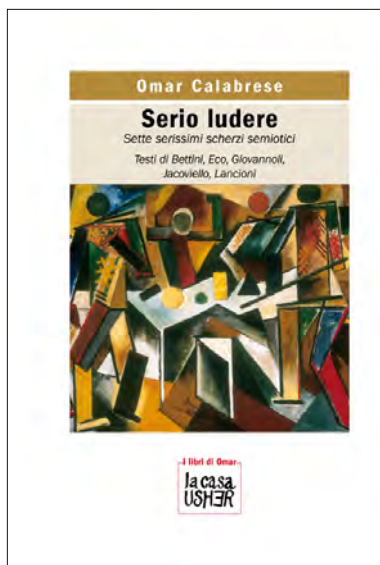II edizione; pp. 314; euro 30,00

Marvin Carlson
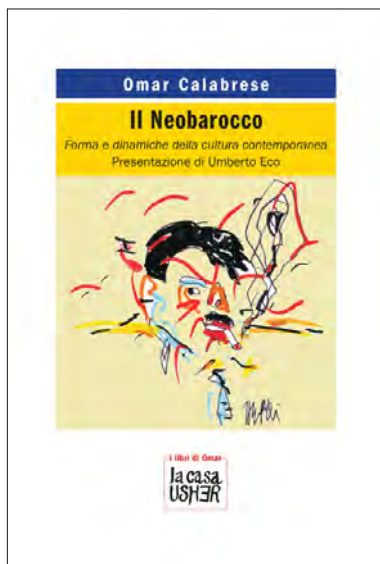*Luoghi per lo spettacolo*
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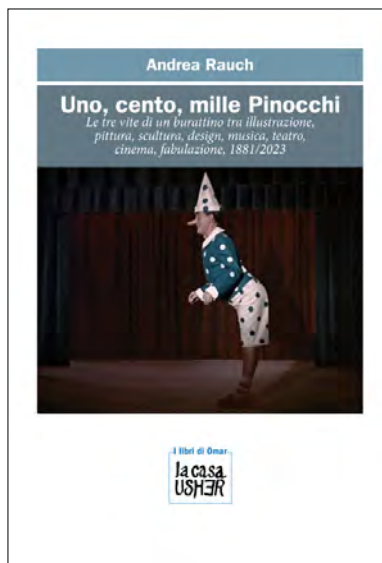
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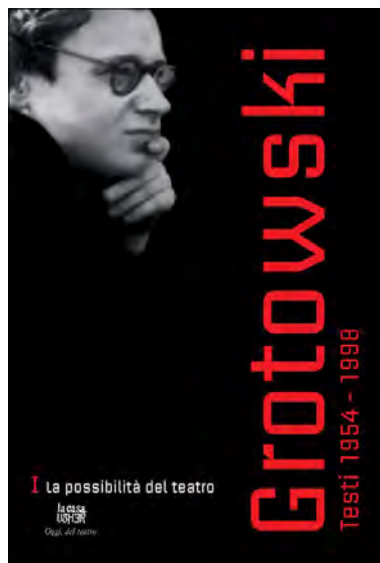III edizione; pp. 520; euro 40,00

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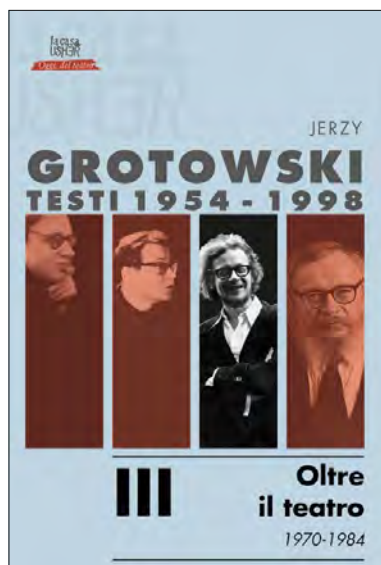*Scala e sentiero verso il Paradiso*
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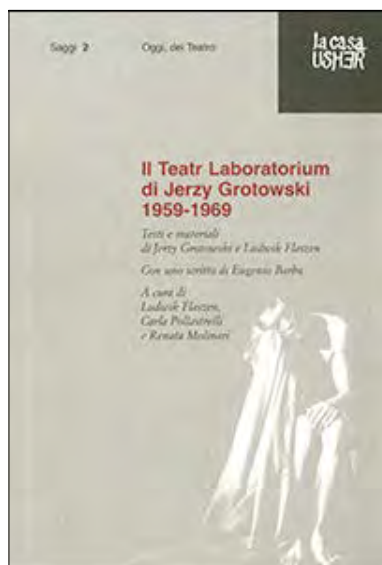Marco De Marinis
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