

Strategies Sectors | **Culture & Society**

Telling Graphic Stories of the Region: Arabic Comics after the Revolution

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Comics: a Rich Heritage in the Region¹

Comics, especially those for children, have been around in the Arab world for over 70 years. But recent years have witnessed a sudden rise in the number of comics that target adult audiences, particularly since the uprisings, and with it an unprecedented growing interest and avid following.

The comic genre in the Arab world has not grown from nothing; its seeds stem from the region's wealth of local heritage and experiences.² Magazines of today, such as *TokTok*, like to remind their audiences of this history, regularly featuring comic figures from local heritage in its pages, in order to emphasise that the art is rooted in a rich past, and not a mere replication of the West (Bank).

"As far as the general public in the Arab world was concerned, comics and animation films were for a long time nothing more than children's entertainment," notes art historian Charlotte Bank (Bank). Although the adult graphic novel appeared in the Arab world as far back as the early 80s in Lebanon,³ it was localised and did not spread or spill over to other Arab nations. In Egypt, as in most Arab countries,

most of the earlier comics targeted children and it was not until the arrival of Shafei's *Metro* in 2008, with its controversial content widely covered in the media, and the long history preceding it, that the adult graphic novel genre publicly emerged and comics targeting adults became more widespread in Egypt and the region.

A Decade of Growth: Paving the Way

The foundations were laid for the spread of comics with the cautious revival of the genre in the mid-2000s through a series of independent adult-focused comics. The unveiling of the personal narrative *Le Jeu des Hirondelles* by Zeina Abi Rashed, depicting her childhood during the Lebanese civil war, the rise of the local superhero *Malak* from the cedar trees of Lebanon in the form of a comics series, the formation of *The 99*, from Kuwait, depicting a more moderate face of Islam in the wake of 9/11, and the launch of the alternative and experimental Lebanese comic periodical *Samandal*, which gained a following locally and throughout the region, all paved the way for a larger following of adult comics. With the culmination of Egypt's first graphic novel Shafei's *Metro* in 2008, an "autopsy of a fragmented society waiting for a revolutionary moment to shake off the endemic corruption infesting its parts" (Gamel), the stage was set for the genre to play a sig-

¹ This article studies adult comics and does not cover children's comics. Although they have a strong presence today, they were not greatly affected by the uprisings. These magazines were the training ground for many artists contributing to the adult genre today, and are far more professional and skillfully produced than their predecessors.

² Starting as early as the 1920s, its true emergence began in the 50s with children's comics, which became very popular, such as Egypt's *Sindibad*, and the long standing *Samir*. In the 60s and 70s imported and translated comics took over the market, with American superheroes, *Disney* and French and Belgian comics. The late 70s and 80s responded with a number of locally made comics for children, such as the pan-Arab *Majed* from UAE, the popular *Bisat el Rih* and *Ahmad* from Lebanon, and *Majalati* in Iraq, and a shy but persistent number of adult comics first appearing in Lebanon with *Carnaval* and *Freud* by JAD, and the comics collective *JADWorkshop* with their publication *Min Beirut in 1989*.

³ Georges KHOURY (JAD)'s comics *Carnaval*, and Sigmund *Freud*, and numerous editorial comic strips

nificant role and present itself as a form of expression to be taken seriously.

The art's newfound emergence and initial recognition was reinforced by the launch of the 2008 comic festival in Algeria, FIBDA, as well as by other successful initiatives since.

Expressing a Revolution: the Rise and Spread during the Uprisings

The Arab uprisings, and the fall of the centralised states and governments, greatly affected the spread of comics, accelerating it through their use as a medium for commentary, criticism and dissent. The Internet and social media ensured a widespread dissemination, while the reduced control over the press and media allowed for more private publishing, and the international attention the art form attracted substantially elevated the place of comics in the region. Early on, the sudden onslaught of the 'revolutions' brought with them a sense of euphoria, as people realised their ability to generate change. Individuals took to the streets visually expressing their rebellion against the archaic systems in place, using street art, banners and cartoons, which reached the public through the Internet. Young artists challenged the old mediums of expression and brought the fresh artistic language of the street and popular culture to the fore. The uprisings gave "fresh impetus and new, immediate social relevance to this young art form" as noted by art historian Charlotte Bank, where the work of young comic artists now came into focus (Bank).

Previously, magazines and publications were the only platform for viewing comics, and in most Arab nations these were issued and controlled by the State, which limited the selection, content and, as a result, the choice.⁴ The genre was further restricted by the limited opportunity for publication due to a lack of support; apart from the state-run periodicals, adult comic albums were self-produced, and independently funded (Khoury).⁵

⁴ Realising the important role of comics in affecting the younger generation, Syria, during the 70s and 80s, went as far as prohibiting regional comic magazines, allowing only the state-released *Oussama*.

⁵ "Despite the fact that there has been an active comic scene in Syria for many years, not many graphic novels have been published there to date. Several attempts to start up comic magazines for adults ultimately failed due to a lack of sponsorship" (Bank).

⁶ The comic publication *TokTok*, portraying the Egyptian street, was initiated by five artists from backgrounds in graphic design, cartoons and illustration; Shennawy, Rahma, Andeel, Makhlof, and Tawfiq, now well-known comic stars in their own right.

⁷ SELMI, Othman, *Spark: when Arab Spring Blossoms in Tunis*, 2012

⁸ *BD Koumik* 2012 featured 14 artists, including Nadia Khiari, creator of the popular satirical cat *Willis from Tunis*.

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As most comic magazines in the Arab nations were issued by the State, the fall of the centralised governments opened the door to privately published magazines. Magazines tackling adult issues emerged in the region and proved highly popular, particularly among the youth. The well-designed and skillfully illustrated *TokTok* magazine, founded by five young artists, was launched in Cairo in early 2011, bringing hundreds of enthusiasts together for its opening.⁶ After his novel *Metro*, Shafei launched the more political *Al Doshma*, while *The 9th Art* magazine produced by Shennawy and dedicated to the promotion of this art followed soon after. Tunisian comic artist Othman Selmi documented the trigger of the revolution in *Spark*.⁷ In Morocco, Mohamed Amine Bellaoui, AKA Rebel Spirit, published *Le guide Casablancaies* 2014, about his hometown Casablanca, and produced the magazine *Skef Kef*, which brought up issues from the street. Various comic collectives emerged during this time, such as the Syrian collective *Comic4Syria*, whose work appeared solely online through social media thus ensuring anonymity and, therefore, their protection, and who posted reactions to their predicament, and the Tunisian collective *Bande de BD*, which published the comic *BD Koumik*.⁸

Contesting Censorship

Artistic expression in all its forms has, for a long time, been dominated by heavy censorship in most Arab countries, and the call for freedom from oppression and from the stifling censorship plaguing the Arab

nations was among the main aims of the uprisings. The revolutions helped to widen the scope of freedom of expression and broaden the margins of censorship, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, allowing the comic medium to expand (Villa). Young comic artists, aided by the recent rebellions, are now “experimenting with new and more subversive styles to look at Egypt’s realities” (El Deeb).

The visual language of comics offered a powerful alternative to the written word, enabling comics and cartoons to reach a wider audience. Moreover, living in a world with a prevailing image culture made the medium far more influential (Gameel). Comics and cartoons in particular have become a significant medium to express dissent in places such as Syria, where political repression is strong (Mawad). Previously unable to show their controversial work, comic artists were now not only able to share it, but gained large followings.

Unfortunately the practice of artistic censorship continued to dog artists even after the old regimes fell and new leaders were appointed. In Tunisia it took on a new form, shifting from state to religious censorship (Bousquet). This applied to other nations as well, as was evident in Egypt’s post-Mubarak era, and Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood’s harsh crackdown on the media and all forms of expression. Although comics have not endured the same fate as political cartoons,⁹ being a relatively new medium and less known for targeting adult issues, artists making comics critical of their oppressors have already resorted to posting anonymously on the Internet, in fear of brutal reprisals.

An Online Presence of Defiance: the Role of the Internet

Accessibility through the Internet, social media and mobile phones played a major role in the advance of this medium, greatly increasing readerships and its dissemination, but also acting as a means of evading censorship, pushing boundaries and, most importantly, attaining anonymity from aggressors.

With little support and insufficient opportunities for publication, many turned to the Internet to showcase and share their work, thereby opening the door to new opportunities. Comic art and comic artists, previously limited to local enthusiasts and a very marginal readership, were now available to a wider audience. The democratisation of the uprisings led to an increased openness to the West, but also to other Arabic experiences; comic artists were introduced to the works of their lesser-known counterparts in the region, discovering and networking with each other.

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The uprisings pushed the use of this medium, both that of comics and the Internet, to another level. “Cartoons and comic strips can convey ‘subversive narratives’ and, like mobile-phone images, are easily uploaded to social media sites,” noted cultural writer Malu Halasa in *Syria Speaks* (M. O. Halasa). The activists took advantage of the ease with which they could upload their work and spread it through social media, enjoying the anonymity it allowed them.¹⁰ Notably, in 2013, an anonymous comic collective from Syria created the social media page *Comic4Syria*, posting comics expressing the turmoil in their country. In her introduction to the book *Syria Speaks* on art during the uprisings, Halasa compares their work: “As opposed to the essentially monolithic propaganda of the regime, the anonymous [online] group Comic4Syria has spearheaded a growing movement of multidimen-

⁹ The crackdown on cartoons and cartoonists was inevitable and was widely practiced during the uprisings. And while cartoons have an inherent ambiguity that is difficult to pinpoint, this did not stop oppressive regimes from resorting to violence in order to silence cartoonists’ voices, as was evident in the attack on cartoonist *Ali Farzat*, who had his hands broken and was left in hospital (Mawad).

¹⁰ In Tunisia, Nadia Khiari regularly posted the popular character *Willis from Tunis*, a cat that criticised the post-revolution state of affairs.

sional revolutionary symbolism that has encouraged dialogue, debate, free expression and contestation” (M. O. Halasa).¹¹

Locality: Language and the Status Quo

With the uprisings came the collapse of state propaganda and pan-Arab nationalism, and the emergence of a focus on local issues and problems. Although the revolutions played a role in the spread of comics, not all the comics produced during this time were directly concerned with the uprisings. Egyptian comic artist Hicham Rahma declared, “We want to make a revolution within comics... We don’t want to make all our comics about the revolution, we want to bring a new wave of comics into Egypt” (Marasligil).

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The status quo, social issues and life in the streets, feature prominently in the comics, with a noticeable sense of locality dominating in both content and form. Previously unheard of, personal narratives came to the fore, as did criticism and humour. Backgrounds of Arab cities, most often obscured in most of the older comic strips, were now depicted in their crowded, dusty and grim detail. Women featured with the hijab or traditional dress appear in the frames, speaking local dialects. Unlikely street characters and local stereotypes feature, such as Shenawy’s humorous parking attendant in *TokTok* and the brutal policeman in *Skefkef*.

The local Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese and Tunisian dialects made a comeback during the uprisings, evident in all the comics produced, when the majority of older comics were written in classical or literary Ara-

bic, evoking the pan-Arab nationalism of the era they were created in.¹² This brought comics closer to their public ensuring their place as a popular medium.

Joining the Milieu: the Role of Women as Authors and Characters

Although the uprisings brought about a newfound sense of freedom and challenged the state of political affairs, they also highlighted the social problems plaguing the countries they started in. The comic platform offered a stage from which to criticise the status quo, forcing many previously unspoken issues to the surface. Women’s issues came to the foreground and were featured prominently as a major concern. These concerns were addressed as the main themes in some magazines, with entire editorials dedicated to the subject or through the introduction of powerful female characters. Additionally, while cartoons tend to be a male-dominated field in the Arab world, from their onset as an adult medium, comics in this region seemed to gather a reasonable number of female authors and artists, evident in the contributors to the contemporary comic publications.¹³

Magazines tackling the marginalisation of women and their continuous harassment surfaced among the regional comics being produced. *TokTok* addressed women’s issues in various episodes, and dedicated an entire editorial to the subject of harassment. Strong female characters have also come to the rescue of women, such as the formidable *Qahera a superhero*, cleverly playing on the word ‘Qahera’ which is the Arabic word for *Cairo* and translates as ‘the defearer.’ *Qahera* features a female Muslim superhero who “combats misogyny and islamophobia amongst other things” according to her creator *Deena Mohamad*, as posted on the website where the comic appears (Mohamad). 2014 saw the comic series *Diaries of an Arab girl* on the web, talking about the daily struggles of women in the Middle East through its main character *Majida* and her two friends (Ahmad).

¹¹ The comics of this collective however brutal, do not exclude humour, with a series about a very unfortunate opposition fighter *Abou Mouss el Madsouss* who is snatched on and continuously gets caught or beaten up by the *Shabiha*.

¹² Although many Egyptian comics from before nationalism were in the colloquial dialect, this slowly diminished in favour of the classical language.

¹³ Notably, earlier comic artists such as *Loujaina al Asil*, *Miriam Jabal Amel*, *Zeina Abi Rashed*, *Newal Louride*, *Joumana Medlej*, *Lena Merhej* and *Michele Standjofsky* paved the way for an increasing female contribution to comics in the region.

However, the appearance of *Shakmagia* (Jewellery box) in Egypt, at the end of 2014, as the first feminist comic magazine especially dedicated to promoting their plight and “looking to address issues facing women and men from a feminist and human rights perspective” as claimed by the magazine, was a clear sign of the importance of this issue and the urgent need to present it.

It could be said that with the revolutions many taboos have been dropped; in this case, the woman has been brought down from her pedestal and iconic status of either mother or sister upholding all morals in society, and now appears as a character like all others, who is not perfect and can be made fun of. She is in bed with her lover in *Metro*, harassed on the streets in *Shakmagia* and defies the male population in *Qahera*.

Regional and International Initiatives on Arab Comics

The already bubbling scene and clear interest prepared the platform for a cascading number of important pioneering initiatives and relevant events significant to Arabic comics as a cultural form both locally and internationally. The launch of the *Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative*, at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon 2014, aimed at archiving comics from the region, as well as the scholarship, promotion and teaching of this art form as a regional practice, marked a significant moment for comics in the region. *Between Cadres* (BECA), *Egypt Comix Week* that opened in September in Cairo and Alexandria, was the first large-scale event in Egypt dedicated to comics. The successful and well-attended *Arabic Comics Symposium*, held at the Lebanese American University in Beirut this spring, reinforced the importance of comics and brought forward various issues. Egypt also awaits an upcoming comic festival in the fall of 2015, and the *Mahmoud Kahil Award*, which honours the region's comic and cartoon illustrators, is expected to be announced for November of this year.

The international response to this medium played a role in the attention it attracted, but also in recognising its place in the arts locally. In 2012, the *Erlangen*

Comic Salon XV in Germany dedicated a large exhibition to comics in the Arab world, a first of its kind gathering artists from all over the region and exhibiting and presenting their work while initiating discussions on the form. The Arab American National Museum in Dearborn Michigan, hosted *Creative Dissent: Arts of the Arab World Uprisings* in early 2014, an exhibition on art and protest in the Arab world including comics. Rhode Island's Brown University held the symposium and exhibition *Arab Comics: 90 Years of Popular Visual Culture* in March 2014, said to be the first of its kind in the United States specifically directed to this genre. The prolific book *Syria Speaks: Arts and culture from the frontline* (M. O. Halasa) presented these popular art forms to the world through their documentation.¹⁴

Conclusion

Growing from a long and rich history, comic art in the Arab world rapidly spread after the uprisings of recent years. Adult comics previously limited to local enthusiasts and a marginal readership, with the aid of the Internet, developed as a medium of expression, criticism, satire and dissent. Comics' localities were brought into the foreground in the works, through the use of colloquial dialects and by depicting their contextual realities, as was the case for social and women's issues and concerns.

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Emerging from the child-oriented constraints of the past, the language of propaganda enforced by the State and the lack of recognition and support, adult Arab comics have emerged and are developing, anchoring their newfound fame in lasting success and respect for the genre.

¹⁴ The Spanish based NGO, *Fondacion Al Fanar* aims to promote cultural relations in various spheres with the Arab world, by showing facets of the Arab reality and disseminating and translating different cultural expressions from Arabic, including comics.

For the people who participated in the revolutions, there is no way back. Regardless of whether democracy is imposed or if totalitarian regimes return, comics for adults are now an established genre in the Arab world, and there is no return. Comics may be censored, their authors prosecuted... but the genre is here to stay.

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 - La Furie des Glandeur*
 - Makhbar 619* (Tunisia)
 - Samandal* (Lebanon)
 - Shakmagia* (Egypt)
 - Skefkef* (Morocco)
 - TokTok* (Egypt)