Representations of Violence and Exile in Leila Abdelrazaq' *Baddawi*

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Abstract Leila Abdelrazaq's graphic memoir *Baddawi* (2015), an example of postmemory and testimonial writing, reconstructs her father's childhood and teenage memories in the eponymous refugee camp in Lebanon. This chapter analyzes the graphic representations of violence and exile in Abdelrazaq's work and the possibilities of illustrating both through a non-naturalistic approach. Through visual and thematic analysis, this chapter attempts to answer whether Abdelrazaq is finally able to meet the ethical challenge of representing violence and Palestinian refugee identity in a comic suitable for all audiences.

Keywords Exile. Symbolic violence. Systemic violence. Graphic memoir. Testimonial narrative. Palestine. Ethics.

Summary 1 Introduction: The Palestinian Conflict and the Comics. – 2 Documenting Memory and Atrocity in Comics: Postmemory and Testimonial Writing. – 3 Ethical Implications of Representing Violence and Exile. – 4 Representing Objective, Systemic and Symbolic Violence. – 5 Representing Exile: Out-of-Placeness as Identity. – 6 Conclusions.

1 Introduction: The Palestinian Conflict and the Comics

Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* is a graphic memoir that tells the story of Ahmad, a Palestinian boy born in Baddawi refugee camp in Lebanon after the Zionist paramilitary organization Irgun raids his family's village in 1948. Leila Abdelrazaq is a Palestinian author and activist who was born in Chicago in 1992. Her father happens to be Ahmad,

Baddawi's protagonist. Her graphic memoir fuses family stories and Palestinian history, becoming a repository of Palestinian memory.

Many graphic novels have turned their attention to Palestine as an "unholy land of conflict" (Fischer 2013, 201). It is the case of the acclaimed *Palestine* (2001) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009) by Joe Sacco, *Waltz with Bashir* by Ari Folman (2009), based in the eponymous film, the graphic travelogue *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City* (2012) by Guy Delisle and Irene Nasser's *Budrus* (2013), portraying an unarmed protest movement through the eyes of a 15-year-old girl. Although all these graphic novels are non-fiction narratives and all of them address, albeit from different perspectives, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from a personal stance, Abdelrazaq's is the first graphic memoir in English in which the narrator and the protagonist are family related. It is also the first that focuses on the experience of exile.

Although comics have always been connected to social commentary, the number of autobiographic comics that bear visual witness to traumatic events and crisis has multiplied since the first edition of *Maus* (1986). The recent monographs and edited volumes analyzing comics as a form of memory, witnessing, autobiography and documentary (Chute 2016; Mickwitz 2016; Ahmed, Crucifix 2018; Mickwitz, Horton, Hague 2019; Nabizadeh 2019, among others) give proof of the increasing number of graphic narratives dealing with this content. As Chute argues, "the essential form of comics – its collection of frames – is relevant to its inclination to document" through the succession and accumulation of frames presented as evidences (2016, 2). It seems that Abdelrazaq shares this view of comics since she started using the medium "when I began looking for a creative outlet that would allow me to explore the types of political themes I was interested in" (Abdelrazaq qtd. in Ghanem 2018).

This chapter examines the graphic representations of violence and exile in Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* as the two poles of Palestinian history since 1948 and the possibilities of illustrating both through a non-naturalistic approach, promoting a stronger engagement with readers without reproducing or reenacting trauma. It follows Slavoj Žižek's categorization of violence (2008) and Edward Said's reflections on exile (1992; 2001; 2012), while drawing from comics studies to approach the specificities of the comic medium. As we will see, Abdelrazaq uses a two-fold strategy: the story she narrates is deeply personal – her father's and his family's –, but the graphic treatment and the narrative genre the author chooses to do so – the coming-of-age story – make the story universally appealing, prompting its readers to identify themselves with a simply-drawn boy and his yearn for a safe future.

2 Documenting Memory and Atrocity in Comics: Postmemory and Testimonial Writing

Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* shares with Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza* an interest for bringing into focus historical episodes and personal stories that otherwise might have passed unnoticed. Or, as Edward Said argued in his introduction to Sacco's *Palestine*, a narrative concerned with the point of view of "history's losers" (Said 2001a, iv).

Abdelrazaq's graphic memoir – much like Sacco's documentary comics – bears witness, becoming a memory artifact. Unlike Sacco, she records family memories without documenting in detail the larger context. *Baddawi* narrates the story of Ahmad, Abdelrazaq's father, and his family: how they flee their ancestral home in Safsaf, Galilee, and become permanent refugees, first in the camp of Nahr al-Bared in Northern Lebanon and then in Baddawi, which opened in 1955, covering Ahmad's childhood and teenage years (1959-1980) until he abandons Beirut to pursue university studies in the US. As Cheurfa has pointed out, *Baddawi* is related to Sacco's and some of the most renowned comics authors in account of its focus on bearing witness as a "graphic life narrative which follows the testimonial tradition of postcolonial witness comics such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*" (Cheurfa 2020, 364). Like these authors, Abdelrazaq uses black and white exclusively, similarly to the rest of her comics and artistic production. Her drawing style is austere, but her essentialism contrasts with the dynamism in the layout: each page shows a varied display of compositions and panel shapes, alternating black backgrounds and white backgrounds.

Since the author was not a direct participant of the action, but a listener of the stories shared by her family (Abdelrazaq 2015, 123), Abdelrazaq is a secondary witness (Jilovsky 2015), 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. For Jilovsky,

> 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)

Those strategies include a preface situating her father's story within the historical context of the Palestinian exile and a glossary which highlights and expands information of socio-political agents involved in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – Irgun, PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), Intifada, Mossad, Political Factions in the Lebanese Civil War, UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) – and cultural references about

food, geographic locations or festivities. There are also different paratexts, such as the use of family photographs included at the end of the graphic novel.

In addition, Abdelrazaq acknowledges the absence in her testimony in the dedication page of her graphic novel, while at the same time invoking other secondary witnesses to similar migration stories: "for all those children of immigrants who have not forgotten their parents' stories" (Abdelrazaq 2015, 7). The author expands this acknowledgment in the preface, clarifying that "the story you are about to read isn't about only my father" (2015, 11). By doing so, she draws a direct connection between the story of her father and his family and the context in which it happened; at the same time, she documents Palestinian history without attempting to summarize it, but through an individual story, her father's. This connection is symbolically evoked using geometric and floral patterns integrated in the illustrations. The author clarifies after the preface that they are *tatreez* designs from traditional Palestinian embroidery (2015, 13). This graphic motif acts as a visual thread embroidering the collective and the individual, family and history, memory and document, past and present.

Abdelrazaq's graphic memoir is an example of postmemory (Hirsch 1993; 2013). As Hirsch reflects, postmemory is the intersection of generational past and transferred trauma, between historical memory and family transferred memories: "At stake is precisely the guardianship of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a living connection and that past's passing into history" (2013, 202). Testimonial authority is then extended from ancestor to descendant, even if Abdelrazaq had no direct connection with the historical atrocities narrated in her memoir. Her graphic recreation of such a past functions as a homage to those who experienced such atrocity, as a recipient for her families' memories, and as the vindication of the visibility of the silenced and the repressed. Thus, the question of memory and bearing witness is a matter of political activism as a way of voicing silenced stories/histories for Abdelrazaq:

Memory is important to me as a Palestinian because of the way that oral histories and narratives of oppressed people are systematically erased. I'm also just interested in the way that memory is inconsistent, impacted by a person's feelings towards an event or their present political circumstances, changes as it turns into a story that is passed down between generations, and the way that memory, as it exists in the mind, toes the line between reality and imagination. From a creative standpoint, I think there are a lot of interesting things you can do when retelling memories because of all of these layers. (Abdelrazaq qtd. in Ghanem 2018)

Besides voicing "erased" oral "histories", the author is aware of the inconsistencies of secondary witnessing as a reproduction of transferred memories, but she also emphasizes on the creative possibilities of such retelling. Reproducing family stories within a historical context furtherly explored in the graphic novel turns Abdelrazaq into a spokesperson of the Palestinian cause through the reception of the individual archive of her father's and her family's memories. This position illustrates the connection between individual and collective histories, since "individual archives also reveal emotional connections while functioning as nodes where individuals can engage with broader groups and communities" (Ahmed, Crucifix 2018, 282). The structure of the graphic memoir through short chapters organized chronologically, each one involving a specific memory, abounds on the notion of the individual archive and the inconsistencies and ellipsis of retelling.

In the case of *Baddawi*, the individual and the collective memory are intrinsically connected with violence and exile. Abdelrazaq reconstructs her father's childhood and adolescence interspersing them with episodes of the Nakba and the events marked by it, such as the Six Day War and the Lebanon Civil War. The Nakba, 'catastrophe', was an extended operation of ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 which caused a massive exodus and the dismemberment of the historic Palestine. As Masalha states, the Nakba is fundamental for the Palestinian collective memory and "the most traumatic event in the history of the Palestinian people" (Masalha 2012, 1). Abdelrazaq chooses this event to open her graphic memoir as a turning point for her family and for all Palestinians, an episode in which history and subjective experience converge.

3 Ethical Implications of Representing Violence and Exile

The author is certain about the capacity of comics as a medium for shedding light on social and political themes like those she approaches in *Baddawi* by presenting them in a fragmentary, unpretentious way:

> It's also dealing with a lot of political and social themes that people might at first think are complicated […] comics are really good because they're more accessible and they break things down and they're not pretentious. You can explain what you believe, and people will engage sometimes in what you believe as well. (Abdelrazaq qtd. in Sawyer 2018, 3)

Seeking for the reader's engagement, Abdelrazaq deploys a didactic activism: comics are the accessible vehicle to teach readers alternative beliefs. As Alfarhan argues, graphic life narratives from the

Middle East are often framed within a universal human rights rhetoric which "facilitates empathy-fueled reading practices that do not force the reader to question or contend with their own role or subject position" (Alfarhan 2020, 155). However, Alfarhan also notes, *Baddawi* does not participate of such rhetoric by presenting a subjective experience – Ahmad's individual story – within the larger context of Palestinian history (2020, 156-7). In this sense, it offers a subjective counter-narrative of history. As Said argued referring to comics read in his childhood, they "played havoc with the logic of a+b+c+d and they certainly encouraged one not to think in terms of what the teacher expected or what a subject like history demanded" (2001a, ii).

As Chute points out, documentary comics frequently involve "an ethical attempt to represent intimately those ignored in the world arena" (2016, 201). But it is an ethical attempt that calls for an ethical response. For Alfarhan, this is especially apt for confronting and provoking Western readers, "denying them the ability to empathize without feeling historically implicated in the violence to which [the protagonist] is subjected" (2020, 159). By engaging readers in such a counter-narrative, Abdelrazaq's work becomes an ethical reading which connects with Palestinian history through her father's individual experience, highlighting "the worldliness of Palestinian difference" (Feldman 2020, 1).

Baddawi is also an example of the ethical compromise in the politics of representation in many graphic life narratives. For Naghibi, Rifkind and Ty they show:

> a shared affective and ethical drive toward balancing depictions of deplorable refugee, migrant, and immigrant conditions with representations of individual and collective agency, resilience, organizing, care, and resistance. (2020, 297)

Abdelrazaq uses two strategies for balancing ethically the refugee condition and violence with individual resilience in the story: the graphic treatment of atrocity and the coming-of-age theme.

Both strategies are present in one of its referential works, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-03). Its global success turned it into a model for different coming-of-age autographics from and about the Middle East, opening a path to shed light on personal, sociopolitical and cultural issues in the Arab/Muslim world (Reyns-Chikuma, Ben Lazreg 2017, 758). Cheurfa considers that *Baddawi* "models itself in terms of style and subject" on *Persepolis* (2020, 364). It follows the same austere, monochrome aesthetic, defined by García (2015, 280) as the antithesis of detailed exuberance of mainstream comics.

Abdelrazaq's graphic style is characterized by a low level of iconicity that keeps the quantity of details to the minimum: the backgrounds are simple – basic drafts of house interiors, street views,

landscapes –, the figures are flat and scarcely characterized, their features cartoonish. In the paratexts at the end of the volume the author includes a photograph of his father when he was a child, so it is easy to see that she makes no attempt to recreate his physiognomy nor to caricaturize any of his features. In this choice we see an authorial mark of style – no other character in the comic is drawn with naturalistic features, except for the leaders of the political factions in the Lebanese Civil War (2015, 44, 119) – but also an attempt to present Ahmad as an average boy. Thus, the iconic simplicity promotes an identification with the reader. As McCloud describes (1993, 36-7, 41), the cartoonish, simplified style of certain comics promotes an empathetic engagement. A cartoonish face with no personalized features, with no individuality, acts as an "empty shell" (1993, 36) in with readers project themselves. A cartoonish boy such as Ahmad, drawn with no attempt to portray realistically the author's father, calls for an identification reader-character. Revealingly, the *tatreez* designs which connect different chapters are reproduced in a more naturalistic way than figures and backgrounds: as we will see, they function as visual metaphors for the deep-rooted affiliation of exiles with Palestine.

Nevertheless, the graphic treatment of atrocity is also framed within Abdelrazaq's non-naturalistic, simple style. Violence is never explicit, although dead bodies and victims of violence are recurrent. Victims and perpetrators are represented with an even lower level of iconicity than the rest of characters. Corpses are represented as featureless blank silhouettes. Explicit violence is therefore simplified and codified through these blank silhouettes, so Abdelrazaq reproduces it without traumatizing the reader. In *Baddawi*, as in many other testimonial comics focusing on historical trauma, the question is not *whether* atrocity can be represented but *how* to represent it (Huyssen 2003, 122). Through codification and fragmentary nature, comics like *Baddawi* ask for the direct participation of the reader, encouraging them to "fill in the blanks" which are suggested but not explicitly described. It is a form of asking the reader to invest creatively and productively in the story (Nabizadeh 2019, 4). Kidd argues that it is more effective to expose young readers to historical trauma rather than protecting them, disguising violent events under certain guise or presenting condescending stories (2011, 196). Abdelrazaq's style, in this sense, is the opposite to Joe Sacco's: Sacco saturates his narratives with details and give his characters a high level of iconicity, in an attempt to document facts in a journalistic, objectivist account. On the contrary, *Baddawi* does not attempt to document her story at a formal level. Even if she provides historical information within the text, her graphic treatment of that information is not documentary: violence is present but codified through low iconicity. In the absence of realistic details, drawings are less traumatic.

In order to know if *Baddawi* disturbs its potential readers, one should consider its ideal recipient. Upon its publication, some reviewers and librarians considered it a young adult graphic novel (Karp 2015; McLeod 2015).[1] A different reviewer considered it a crossover, "an ideal introduction to Palestine for people of all ages" (Davis 2015).[2] Taking into account Abdelrazaq's considerations of comics as a medium for introducing complex political and social themes and presenting an alternative rhetoric to mainstream media regarding Palestine (Sawyer 2018), we can presume that the author did not address his graphic memoir to a young readership intentionally. However, this is a frequent feature in crossover narratives, since most of the times "there is no authorial intention when adult fiction crosses over to young readers" (Beckett 2009, 28). Whether it is addressed to young readers or not, violence and atrocity are presented subtly through a non-naturalistic and codified approach, as we will further explore in the next chapter. Therefore, the graphic memoir documents history in subjective way without traumatizing the reader. There is an ethical compromise with the story and the protagonist's memories, but also with the potential reader, whose sensitivity is not thwarted by the recreation of explicit violence.

It is worth mentioning that *Baddawi* is marketed as a "coming-of-age story" in its back cover, a thematic framework that usually engages with young readers.[3] Coming-of-age stories often make use of the motif of life as a journey, focusing on the growth of the main character from youth to adulthood. Ahmad's story also involves such a journey of self-discovery in the midst of the larger context of Palestinian history and exile. When his (mis)adventures start in 1959 he is a as a first-grade student, when *Baddawi* ends in 1980 he is a twenty-year-old adult. By adopting the conventions of this genre – depicting a young character who grows up, matures and faces different crises, confronting crucial choices that determine his future life – the author turns Ahmad's individual plight into a recurrent model of the coming-of-age story, promoting identification, especially among younger readers.

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1 See also Van Tech Library recommended readings at `http://www.vantechlibrary.org/summer-reads--for-students-in-grades-8-and-9.html`.

2 See also The Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center recommended readings at `http://smithsonianapa.org/bookdragon/baddawi-leila-abdelrazaq/`.

3 Beckett mentions that the American Library Association created the Alex Awards for adult-to-child crossover fiction: "often the novels awarded have young protagonists and many are coming-of-age stories that appeal to teenage readers" (2009, 32).

4   Representing Objective, Systemic and Symbolic Violence

The pull of the Nakba's memory becomes evident in the graphic memoir. Even if the event took place before Ahmad was born, the introductory section is devoted to this event. Ahmad's parents were two of the 750,000 Palestinians who lost or fled their homes and became refugees. Their village, Safsaf, was raided on 29 October 1948 by Zionist soldiers who killed 50-70 people (Masalha 2012, 86).[4] Abdelrazaq's paternal grandparents escaped a narrow death and then walked to a refugee camp in Northern Lebanon, transferring to Baddawi, the camp that gives the graphic memoir its title, where most of their sons and daughters were born and raised.

Therefore, *Baddawi* opens with a violent episode which also marks the beginning of the Palestinian diaspora. Violence and exile go hand in hand in the case of Ahmad and his family, in the case of the Palestinian people, and also in the graphic memoir.

In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Slavoj Žižek differentiates three types of violence (2008, 12): subjective (perpetrated by clearly identifiable individuals or groups, such as crimes or terrorist acts), objective (without a clear perpetrator, sometimes passing unnoticed behind the subjective type of violence, such as racism or discrimination), and systemic (the ominous result of political and economic systems). He adds a complementary category, symbolic violence, embodied in language and its forms (2008, 1). Žižek argues that the violent origins of the state of Israel linger through a state-sanctioned violence at present (2008, 120). In the Palestinian-Israeli context, systemic violence coalesces with objective violence (perpetrated by the army or the paramilitary groups, for instance) and subjective violence (violent attacks performed by individuals).

Baddawi offers plenty of examples of objective violence performed by soldiers of the Irgun, the Israeli and the Lebanese armies, in Safsaf (Palestine) before Ahmad was born, and then in Baddawi refugee camp in Lebanon through raids and bombings.

In her introduction, Abdelrazaq presents her most salient graphic strategy when representing violence: Israeli soldiers are depicted as black silhouettes without features, they are only identified in account of their helmet, gun, and an exaggerate threatening grin full of teeth. Whether they are members of the Irgun, one of the Lebanese political factions or the Israeli Defence Force, soldiers are indistinctly represented as these black featureless silhouettes throughout the graphic

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4   As Abdelrazaq mentions in the glossary (2015, 118), the paramilitary group Irgun was absorbed into the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), the Israeli army, normalizing the ethnic cleansing. Masalha (2012, 85-6) and other sources (Benvenisti, Gans, Hanafi 2007, 119; Khalili 2007, 167) also hold the IDF responsible for the Safsaf massacre.

memoir. They reappear in Ahmad's dreams with a slight difference: their contours become wavy. There is a clear identification between the real soldiers and the nightmarish soldiers, both are the monsters in Ahmad's story and the monsters in his dreams. Abdelrazaq is aware of the fact that she is demonizing the soldiers, but she does not feel responsible for giving them an "objective" representation:

> So, I thought "Okay, if I'm going to this then there is no room for the other side. I'm responsible for my dad and my dad's story, I'm not responsible for keeping balance". I don't think there's any such thing as keeping balance, it's bullshit. Everybody has their bias and anyone who thinks they're not bias is usually white. Anyway, 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)

Abdelrazaq shows her commitment to memory and bearing witness by sticking to the facts of his father's story. At the same time, her activist choice is a way of (un)balancing the usual rhetoric in mainstream media when reporting violence in Palestine:

> even right now when reporting on what's happening 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 solider who's killing people. (Abdelrazaq qtd. in Sawyer 2018, 5)

If, according to Abdelrazaq, mainstream Western media hide the responsibility of the soldiers, she mimics and reverses such rhetoric by demonizing and depersonalizing them, depriving them of individuality. By doing so, the author also shows the clear connection between objective violence and systemic violence. Her depersonalization strategy is a tool for denouncing the individual responsibility behind the state-sanctioned, systemic violence.

The author also highlights the underlying systemic violence in the Palestinian-Israeli-Lebanese context by evoking the constant objective violence or reproducing symbolic violence in most of the chapters. As in the case of the Safsaf massacre, the author presents different episodes of objective violence. In the chapter "The Cluster Bombs", the wife of one of Ahmad's cousins is killed in her house in Baddawi while baking as a result of an Israeli bombing (Abdelrazaq 2015, 62-3). The kneading and the fighter planes appear side by side, creating an incongruous visual analogy: for precarious lives surrounded by conflict, violence and domesticity go hand in hand.

Ahmad's family moves to Beirut when the climate of violence becomes overwhelming in the refugee camp only to discover a city also

immersed in the preliminaries of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). In fact, violence is such a common occurrence that it is part of daily life, as we see in the chapter "The School Bus": Afif, one of Ahmad's younger brothers, is shot in his arm when he points a finger gun outside the window in the bus to school (Abdelrazaq 2015, 75). The reader cannot see who has shot him, but there are no textual references pointing at the shooter either. Ahmad takes his brother to their sister's apartment, and they go together to a nearby hospital. In the waiting room, Ahmad and his sister comment casually on Ahmad's progress in school (2015, 77). Characters show concern but no surprise, and there is not a single allusion to the responsible for the violent attack. This double ellipsis (graphic and textual) illustrates the recurrent presence of violence and its internalization by refugees, who endure and deal with it without any second thoughts. Objective violence becomes invisible but remains a permanent threat for Ahmad, who almost dies in a bombing in the streets of Beirut while buying groceries in another episode that goes uncommented (2015, 111).

Violence and impunity follow the protagonist wherever he goes, suggesting a never-ending cycle for the Palestinian refugee. When the situation in Beirut becomes unbearable with the Civil War, Ahmad asks his parents to return to Baddawi, where the UNRWA school is still open. One of his relatives, the butcher Abu Muhammad, dies during an Israeli bombing. The episode, as in the case of the previous ones, is evoked graphically but readers do not actually see the killing nor a graphic depiction of the body. They take place outside the page, in the gutters, "the rich empty spaces between the selected moments that direct our interpretation" (Chute 2009, 342). These gaps are productive, since they are the "basis of the discontinuous language of comics" (Groensteen 2007, 132). Far from obscuring meaning, these ellipses force the reader to use their imagination to recreate what is happening because, as Mikkonen states: "segmented sequences and fragmentation function as a provocation to meaning-making" (2017, 18).

Like their executioners, victims of violence are also featureless. Bodies are shown as blank silhouettes but, unlike the black and threatening executioners, they are represented in shading or even black, with bullet holes. These undifferentiation strategy recreates atrocity without reproducing it and causing further trauma, as we have argued in the previous section.

The everyday nature of violence is also present in chapters which might seem optimistic or cheerful at first time, like those in which Ahmad plays with his friends in Baddawi. Schoolground games frequently end throwing stones (Abdelrazaq 2015, 24) and one excursion to hunt birds ends with Ahmad being shot with lead bullets by an older boy (2015, 54). The occurrence of building a raft with balsa wood, which ends with hilarious consequences, hides the threat of death by water (2015, 59-61). All these chapters involve symbol-

ic violence in one way or another, even pointing at the psychological damage caused by systemic and objective violence. In yet another hunting excursion, Ahmad's rifle explodes hurting his hand. The last page in this chapter is a full-page panel in which Ahmad and his two friends are represented as black silhouettes with rifles and a *kufiyah* (2015, 89). The image powerfully reminds the reader of the black silhouettes of the army soldiers, insinuating that these boys might grow up to become Palestinian soldiers.

Besides symbolic violence, the graphic memoir also exhibits poverty, discrimination, nepotism, problems for accessing education and lack of opportunities. All of them are constant presences in Ahmad's daily life in Baddawi and Beirut and can be also considered systematic forms of violence. This encroaching circumstance makes Ahmad realize that his life has come to a standstill, an illustration of Han's claim that "a society dominated by the hysteria for survival is a society of the undead, capable neither of living nor of dying" (Han 2018, 35). In order to move forward and escape violence, Ahmad chooses exile.

5 Representing Exile: Out-of-Placeness as Identity

For Palestinians, violence and exile go hand in hand. The Nakba, as we have seen, involved a massive ethnic cleansing and the establishment of a settler-colonialist state on the majority of Palestinian territory. But also about 90% of the population was driven out from their lands and homes "by psychological warfare and/or military pressure and a large number at gunpoint" (Masalha 2012, 2). The result was 750,000 refugees, who were barred from returning. For those in exile, Palestine became an "essentially lost world" (Said 2012, 14).

Said defines exile as an individual experience in connection with a collective, as an exterior experience that marks inner life: "exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation" (Said 2001b, 177). Many descendants of those who went into exile have never set foot in Palestine, many others do not longer have any relatives living there, as in Leila Abdelrazaq's case. However, she considers herself Palestinian and has become an activist for the Palestinian rights (Sawyer 2018, 4). She represents the "spirit of resilience" that Said assigns to Palestinian people (1992, 9) by bringing into focus the Palestinian diaspora in most of her works and also by promoting SWANA and Arab American comics creators through her independent publishing company, Maamoul Press.

As a second generation exiled Palestinian, her narrative proves that "Palestinian life remain dispossession, exile, dispersion, disenfranchisement and, by no means least, an extraordinarily widespread

and stubborn resistance" (Said 1992, 9). Even if Abdelrazaq's graphic memoir is an example of postmemory, exile continues to be an "essential sadness [which] can never be surmounted" (Said 2001b, 173).

The cover of the graphic memoir concentrates all the evocative and symbolic charge of exile. Besides alluding to the refugee camp in Lebanon, the title *Baddawi* "is derived from the word 'Bedouin': *nomad*" (Abdelrazaq 2015, 18). Nomad identity is indirectly represented through the *tatreez* designs that frame the cover, the same graphic motif that serves as unifying thread through the different chapters. For Abdelrazaq, this motif is a representation of exiled Palestinians, as shown in her work *A Map of Palestine*, a hand-painted mural for her solo exhibition in the Arab American National Museum.[5] The mural was a monochromatic world map where different areas around the world, those populated by the Palestinian diaspora, were marked with red *tatreez*. A thread stems from each of those areas, all of them converging in Palestine. The transnational presence of Palestinians and their connection with their home country highlights their reality, a diasporic existence that is "part of their lives, part of their very identity" (Žižek 2008, 128).

The "out of placeness" (Said 2012) suggested in the title is furtherly emphasized by the presence of Ahmad with his back turned to the reader and his hands folded behind. It is a very evident reference to Handala, a character created by the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, perhaps the most popular artist in the Arab world (Chute 2016, 212). Al-Ali also abandoned Palestine as a refugee when he was ten. Handala was the protagonist of all of his comics strips, a barefoot ten-year-old boy who never grows up nor turns his back to the spectator, a silent witness of the events in front of him, from the brutality of Israeli occupation to the corruption of Palestinian political parties. If in Abdelrazaq's work *A Map of Palestine* Handala is the one holding the threads that unite the diasporic existence, Ahmad impersonates Handala in *Baddawi*'s cover. As the original Handala, both characters stand as symbols of Palestinian refugeehood, contributing to creating a site for the construction of Palestinian refugee and Arab identity (Najjar 2007, 258).

The tribute to Handala as a symbol of Palestinian exile is also a memento of the compromise between the collective and the individual in testimonial narratives. Although both characters bear witness implicating the readers in the events at hand, Ahmad's story relies in the individuality of his experience as an exile: Handala is a faceless,

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5 *Drawing in the Diaspora: Comic Art & Graphic Novels by Leila Abdelrazaq*. Arab-American National Museum, Dearborn, Michigan (November 12, 2016-April 19, 2017). https://arabamericanmuseum.org/exhibition/drawing-in-the-diaspora-comic-art-graphic-novels-by-leila-abdelrazaq/.

fictional boy who stands for Palestinian exile; Ahmad stands for a real boy with a real story, one of the countless examples for the same event. It is through his individual experience that he contributes to Palestinian memory (Naghibi, Rifkind, Ty 2020, 300). However, as we have seen, his individual experience is fictionalized through low iconicity and graphic essentialism, and through the use of the coming-of-age motif.

Beside its cover, *Baddawi* is replete with visual metaphors evoking exile. One of the first pages features a large panel framed by a *tatreez* design with a view of Safsaf at dawn, a tree, and Ahmad's parents up front (Abdelrazaq 2015, 16). This nostalgic vista abruptly changes with the above-mentioned attacks of the Irgun (2015, 17). However, when Ahmad tries to imagine what Palestine would be like, Abdelrazaq recovers the image of the dawn and the tree framed by *tatreez* while listening to her mother's stories (2015, 34). It is noticeable that Ahmad's happy memories with his friends are also set at dawn (2015, 56, 58). Also, the few chapters without any allusions to symbolic or objective violence involve a remembrance of Palestine. These frequently include memories related to food – as when Ahmad goes to pick up herbs for his mother for the preparation of the traditional Za'atar – or festivities – like the Eid in Ramadan, celebrated with card games, food and "stories of Palestine" (2015, 39). Stories about the lost homeland are the stronghold of Palestinian identity; memory is preserved in them in connection to food and traditions as a means of retaining cultural identity.

Nevertheless, identity is always fragmentary for exiles. The sense of homelessness pervades every aspect of Ahmad's life. He is always on the move to escape violence and travels between Beirut and Baddawi, "whichever seemed safer at the time [...] Ahmad was always trying to outrun the war" (Abdelrazaq 2015, 101). However, the war catches up with him even in his nightmares. Nostalgic reminders of Palestine are not enough for him to create a permanent haven. Said writes that "exiles feel [...] an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people" (2001, 177). Ahmad embodies this premise when the time comes to decide whether to stay in Beirut/Baddawi or go to the US to study and begin a new life. Such a choice is dramatically represented in a full page: above, the dawn, an adult Ahmad with a blonde wife and two kids, a house with a car and a fence dividing the scene; underneath, Ahmad and the silhouette of an Israeli soldier in the familiar, broken landscape of wartime Lebanon (Abdelrazaq 2015, 108). The choice is a mutually exclusive binary opposition: staying and facing a violent existence, even death, or leaving for good to survive and pursue the American dream. Ahmad opts for the second. The immediate threat of violence disappears, although the exiled condition remains.

Ahmad's comings and goings from Baddawi to Beirut, his precarious existence as a refugee exposed to daily violence, discrimination, nepotism or poverty, and the impossibility of returning "home" attest for the exile's "discontinuous state of being" (Said 2001b, 177). This interrupted existence is a constant reminder of what is left behind, Palestine, but Palestine's projection also hovers above Ahmad's future. Around the same time, he receives an acceptance letter from an US college, his parents recommend him to marry his friend Manal. In his imagination, the prospect of marrying Manal involves staying in Lebanon in the midst of violence (Abdelrazaq 2015, 112). Abdelrazaq recreates a literal crossroads to represent this turning point in Ahmad's life: Ahmad is presented in a full page with two roads: one traverses Lebanon, the other the US; in the distance, as the sun at dawn, a map of Palestine inscribed with *tatreez*. Both roads seem to lead to Palestine, although this could also be a golden mirage. Whichever road he takes, his choice for the future will be always tainted by what is left behind, Palestine. Going to the US is yet another detour to attain that end, a choice prompted by survival, not an end in itself. Again, Ahmad is represented as Handala but, unlike al-Ali's original and *Baddawi*'s cover, he is no longer a child, but a soon-to-be adult facing adult life and adult choices. With these visual metaphors including crossroads and parted ways, Abdelrazaq introduces a common motif in coming-of-age narratives: a protagonist who matures when making vital choices which will be determining for their adult life.

6 Conclusions

In *Baddawi*, Abdelrazaq places her father's subjective experience at the center of Palestinian diaspora. Her family's individual archive sheds light on a wider context, Palestinian collective experience, offering a counter-narrative of history without documenting such context in detail. As a memory artifact and an example of postmemory, *Baddawi* evokes the dynamism of such a subjective experience in account of its rich layout and structure of short chapters: an array of independent memories that illustrate some of the most salient episodes of Ahmad's childhood and youth. As a secondary witness, Abdelrazaq acknowledges her position and the gaps in her testimony.

Abdelrazaq's originality strives in her use of family memories to create a personal story, but instead of documenting the larger context of the Palestinian conflict in detail or to present her characters realistically or even recognizably, she opts for two narrative strategies that depersonalize such story: on a graphic level, by using a low degree of iconicity which allows the identification reader-character, on genre level, by assimilating the coming-of-age motif. The author

treads her own path turning her subjective family memories not into a fictionalized documentary.

Furthermore, fragmentation can be effectively transformed into a creative device. Since readers can fill gaps and ellipsis productively, the fragmentary nature of comics in general and of *Baddawi* in particular echoes the fragmentary nature of memory. Such fragmentary nature also calls for the "nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal" nature of exile (Said 2001b, 186). Homelessness provoked by violence and exile is kept at bay thanks to stories. In Baddawi, the only memories devoid of violence are related to stories of Palestine. Stories, passed from one generation to another, become a home for Ahmad and his family: "Ahmad wondered what Palestine would be like. He thought of his mother's stories" (Abdelrazaq 2015, 34). These oral stories were told by Ahmad's elders to Ahmad, and by Ahmad to Leila, who in turn tells them to us through her graphic memoir. Abdelrazaq's text becomes yet another link in the chain of stories interconnecting subjective experiences within history, as *tatreez* connects exile experiences, memory and Palestine.

Systemic and symbolic violence permeates every aspect of Ahmad's life, from his everyday activities to his dreams and his games with his peers. Ahmad's choice of leaving Lebanon and his family to pursue university studies in the US is a way of avoiding systemic and objective violence, although it is a prolongation of his diasporic experience.

In terms of representation, the absence of explicit violence and its graphic codification involves a productive exchange between reader and author to engage with Palestinian memory. The threatening silhouettes of Israeli soldiers stand for the ruthless violence experienced by Ahmad and Palestinian people; the author depersonalizes and demonizes the soldiers depriving them of individual features in order to criticize the rhetoric in the representations of the Palestinian conflict in US mainstream media.

Like Naji al-Ali's character Handala, Ahmad is endowed with a "moral entity" (Sacco 2009, ii) in his compromise with Palestinian memory, becoming a symbol of the Palestinian diaspora. But unlike Handala, his subjectivity makes his plight differential and unique. In addition, *Baddawi* also calls into the reader's attention the ethical implications of transferring the "pain of others" (Sontag 2003) when documenting violent episodes of history. As a secondary witness, Abdelrazaq's role in voicing silenced histories/stories without trivializing the exposed events and without causing further trauma is fundamental. The author uses a two-fold strategy to represent violence and exile for engaging the reader without traumatizing them. On the one hand, a non-naturalistic and simple graphic treatment of atrocity by which victims of violence become featureless, blank silhouettes. On the other, the use of the coming-of-age story, frequently seen in crossovers for illustrating narratives of

growth, resilience and resistance while promoting an identification with the reader.

Therefore, *Baddawi* manages to balance the individual and the collective experience of violence and exile, turning Ahmad's individual plight into a symbol of the Palestinian diaspora, but effectively presenting that experience as a universal motif, a coming-of-age story, suitable for engaging a wide range of young and adult readers.

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