The visualization and representation of gender in Egyptian comics, what is the fuss all about?

Sara Hany Shaker Rizkallah

Follow this and additional works at: https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds

Recommended Citation

APA Citation

MLA Citation
Rizkallah, Sara Hany Shaker. The visualization and representation of gender in Egyptian comics, what is the fuss all about?. 2015. American University in Cairo, Master's Thesis. AUC Knowledge Fountain. https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/106

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at AUC Knowledge Fountain. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of AUC Knowledge Fountain. For more information, please contact thesisadmin@aucegypt.edu.
The American University in Cairo
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

The Visualization and Representation of Gender in Egyptian Comics, What is the Fuss All About?

A Thesis submitted by

Sara Rizkallah

Submitted to the Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

August 2015

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Gender and Women’s Studies
in Middle East/ North Africa

Gender and Women's Studies in the Middle East/ North Africa specialization

has been approved by

Dr. Jennifer Terrell _______________________________
Thesis Adviser
Affiliation: LAW/IGWS
Date ____________________

Dr. Amina El Bendary ______________________________
Thesis Second Reader
Affiliation: ARIC
Date ____________________

Dr. Hanan Kandil ______________________________
Thesis Third Reader
Affiliation: Cairo University
Date ____________________

Dr. Martina Rieker ______________________________
Department Chair
Date ____________________

Nabil Fahmy, Ambassador ______________________________
Dean of GAPP
Date ____________________
Dedication

To the three most important members in my life: my mother, my sister, and my father. This thesis would have not come to the public, without the support of all you. Mum, you taught me that no matter what I should never give up. You made me believe that I will always reap all the hard work I did. Thank you for tolerating all the panic attacks, the nervous breakdowns and most of all my weird terminology. Thank you for your faith in me and for teaching me that I should never surrender.

My tech-savy sister, you have been a wonderful support throughout this journey. I will never forget how I used to wake up early in the morning to fix every electronic device I broke and take your opinion of the material that I have written. Thank you for teaching me all the organizational tricks in Microsoft word while writing. The placement of the comic stories would have not been possible without your assistance across this thesis.

Daddy, you never doubted my skills as I did. Thank you for your encouragement. Thank you for working as a driver for me throughout this journey. I will never forget our silly jokes while commuting from the AUC fifth settlement campus to our house and my ever complaining remarks about why did I do this to myself?
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my appreciation to my thesis advisor to Dr. Jennifer Terrell. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to be creative, to learn new things about gender, and for giving up your summer time for me. Thank you for your patience and understanding. You have set an excellent example of excellence as a researcher, mentor, and instructor and most important as a friend. I will always remember our interesting discussion and analysis about the stories and how I never thought to do something like that except under your supervision.

Prof. Hanan Kandil, it is always an honor to work with you. There are not enough words to describe half of things we witnessed together across the past seven years. You were there to help me no matter what time or day of the week whether in my professional or personal life.

I am also grateful to Dr. Amina El Bendary for her guidance and insightful comments across this thesis. All of the comments have been of great help. You opened up new areas of discussion that slipped over me. Thank you. It has been a pleasure to work with you and hopefully this is just the beginning of more collaborative works.

This research would have not been completed without the assistance of my friend Mariam Arafa, for her outstanding work in translating the comic stories and her patience for adjusting and amending the content; making sure to deliver the Egyptian sense of humor. My sincere thanks go to my friends and colleagues both at the Center for Gender and Women’s Studies at the American University in Cairo and the British University in Egypt, for reading earlier drafts of this thesis and sharing their thoughts and interesting ideas. Special thanks for Menna Mourad for tolerating my ever complaining remarks about the studying and finishing pressure and her continuous support throughout this process.
The research would also have not been possible without the support of my wonderful students at the British University in Egypt in the Political Science Department, who always kept saying to me: “You can do it”. Special thanks go to Nour M. Nemr for her continuous help in the editing process.

I would like to extend my ultimate thanks to my interviewees. My research would have not come to light without your cooperation and trust, and your amazing willingness’s to sacrifice your weekends and day offs to sit and talk with me.

Very special thanks to my family’s encouragement who have been a core support to get and finish my degree. Thanks to Hala William, Hayam William, Alaa Fahmy, Emad Hanna and finally my two wonderful cousins Nour and Farah.
Abstract

This thesis investigates gender visualization in Egyptian comics published in 2011 and afterwards, focusing on three main themes: the veil, violence against women, and the role played by women during post-revolutionary Egypt. The three main comics utilized in this study are: *TokTok* magazine, *Al-Shakria*, and *Qahera*. The main purpose of the study is to examine whether these three comics re-inscribe or challenge the stereotyped gender representation of women in the previously mentioned themes. By examining these three comics, this thesis argues that the binary conception of gender is no longer based on stereotypes of men and women, of masculinity and femininity. Instead, Egyptian comics are a channel through which strong clichés are dissolved. As this thesis shows, the visualization of gender is no longer associated with the portrayal of beauty and sexuality (slim, attractive, fit); reproducing a stereotyped visual gender knowledge. Rather, in Egyptian comics, gender relations can be separable from the existing visualization in our society. I argue that Egyptian comics do not perpetuate the visualization of gender stereotypes and that through these comics, new practices of gender visualization are witnessed.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: Narratives in Comics........................................................................................................... 1

Why Study Comics?........................................................................................................................................ 1

Literature Review .......................................................................................................................................... 7

What is A Comic? .......................................................................................................................................... 7

What Have Comics Offered Women? ............................................................................................................. 12

Comics in the Middle East ............................................................................................................................. 14

Conceptual Framework: Is it Representation or Visualization or Both in Comics? ................................. 16

Methodology .................................................................................................................................................. 21

Organizational Structures’ of TokTok and Al-Shakmgia ............................................................................. 25

Chapter Outlines .......................................................................................................................................... 29

Chapter One: A Historical Background about Comics in Egypt, Comics Then and Now ................. 31

Chapter Two: The Veil, Worn for Other Purposes .................................................................................... 55

Chapter Three: Against the Stereotyped Representation of Violence Against Women .................. 90

Chapter Four: The Post-Revolutionary Situation of Women in Egyptian Comics .............................. 138

Chapter Five: Is the Egyptian Comic Medium Really a Powerful Platform? To What Extent Can It Reach the Audience? ............................................................................................................ 165

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................... 167

Limitations and Future Recommendations ................................................................................................. 167

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................... 173
List of Figures

Figure 1 32
Figure 2 32
Figure 3 33
Figure 4 34
Figure 5 35
Figure 6 36
Figure 7 37
Figure 8 39
Figure 9 39
Figure 10 41
Figure 11 41
Figure 12 42
Figure 13 49
Figure 14 50
Figure 15 57
Figure 16 58
Figure 17 63
Figure 18 64
Figure 19 65
Figure 20. 1 70
Figure 20. 2 71
Figure 20. 3 72
Figure 20. 4 73
Figure 20. 5 74
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TokTok</td>
<td>توك توك</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Shakmgia</td>
<td>الشكمية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qahera</td>
<td>قاهرة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu Nazzara Zarqa</td>
<td>أبو نظرة زرقة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaykh al-Hara</td>
<td>شيخ الحارة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hukm Qaraqush</td>
<td>حكم قراقوش</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Lata’if al-Musawwara</td>
<td>اللطائف المصورة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Kashkhul</td>
<td>الكشكول</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khayal El Dhill</td>
<td>خيال الظل</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Awlad</td>
<td>الأولاد</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarbush</td>
<td>طربوش</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galabias</td>
<td>جلبياة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Masri Effendi</td>
<td>المصري افندي</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibn El Balad</td>
<td>ابن البلد</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafigha Hanem and Sabe’ Effendi</td>
<td>رفیغة هانم و السبع افندي</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bint Al-Balad</td>
<td>بنت البلد</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zar</td>
<td>زار</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bint Al-Suq</td>
<td>بنت السوق</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mu‘allima</td>
<td>المعلمة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Ashbaal</td>
<td>الاطفال</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busat Aal Reeh</td>
<td>بساط الريح</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Moghamer</td>
<td>المغامر</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic Title</td>
<td>English Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qais wa Layla</td>
<td>Qais and Layla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Antar wa ‘Abla</td>
<td>Antar and Abla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zakiyya al-Dhakiyya</td>
<td>Zakiyya the Wise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turath</td>
<td>Heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Ars</td>
<td>Arc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dar al-Hikma</td>
<td>House of Wisdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction: Narratives in Comics

Why Study Comics?

In the Middle East, where young activists are targeted violently and systematically for their political expression; comics continue to claim space on the page where allegories, humor, and satire flourish with no placid representation of static consensus. Comics are becoming a valuable window into the mentalities and politics of young adults with their transmission of socially defined norms for children, their frequent politicization, and their geographical expansion from West to the East & vice versa.

In the foreword of Joe Sacco’s, *Palestine*, Edward Said discusses how comics have shaped his way of thinking. Unlike other art forms, they entail rebellious thought via its creative colors and panels. According to Said, comics are characterized by their contested and eccentric insight into freedom of expression. In comics, there are no boundaries to freedom of speech, including the denigration of religion. As Ahmed Okasha highlights, one of the comic artists working in *TokTok*, and Mohammed Ismail, a comic script writer, each artist and writer is free to decide on his/her own story until Mohammed Shennawy, the editor and one of the founding members of *TokTok*, collects and edits the issue to be distributed (interview with the researcher, 22 March 2015). As Okasha eloquently notes: “sometimes Shennawy does not even know what material you are going to give him”. He (i.e. Shennawy) only inquires about how many pages each artist would deliver. According to Okasha, he never removes nor adjusts the
storylines offered, and if there are amendments, it is usually to satisfy the printing requirements (interview with the researcher, 22 March 2015).

Even though Egyptian comic magazines are not exposed to any form of censorship from a supervisory or regulatory body, an incident of a mother shouting and yelling at Al-Shorouk bookstore attracts customer’s attention to the works of *TokTok*. The mother complained to the bookstore administration for selling such disrespectful material on their stands; leading Al-Shorouk to withdraw all the available copies of *TokTok* from all their branches and refusing to sell it anymore. During this particular moment, I instantly decided to buy the issue from another bookstore to know what the fuss was all about. Unfortunately, this particular issue was sold out in other bookstores. But I did not give up. I reached Mohammed Shennawy, one of the founding members of *TokTok* and its editor, through a colleague, and he sent me a website page that had archived the first five issues. I instantly opened the issue that brought about this turmoil and finally fed my curiosity. In the issue, there is a story “The Skin”, revolving around a man named Ibrahim who wants to have sexual intercourse with his wife, but refuses to do it because he does not like the taste of her lipstick. Yet, the wife insists on wearing this lipstick and the husband tries to tell her that he wants to feel the texture of her skin rather than the flavor of the lipstick. The story ends when the husband wakes up from sleep understanding that the advice given by his friends can lead to a devastating course of action, i.e. killing her. This is when we see sexual apathy between them. The telling of the story continues with the husband giving up on his wife, refusing to engage into any sexual behavior. He remains married but with a constant fear of this nightmare called the lipstick. At this particular moment, I made a
decision to write my thesis about gender issues in Egyptian comics, focusing on the discussion of issues that are highly important in today’s politics on Egyptian streets. I wanted to assess how Egyptian comics are a reflective lens of what is happening in the society and whether they are a new tool in fighting against the gender stereotypes in Egyptian society.

I chose to analyze the issue of the veil because once again, an ongoing culture war in Egypt has been brought to the forefront after the call of Sherif Al-Shobashi, an Egyptian writer, who asked women to remove their head veils (hijab) all together in Tahrir Square (“Writer Calls for Taking Hijabs Off”: 2015). He explained that girls as young as 4 years old are being forced to veil at some schools. He also clarified how Islamists and other conservative groups compel women to wear headscarves arguing that this is how morality will spread in Egyptian society. Al-Shobashi critiques this logic, inquiring “If the hijab is a sign of leading an honorable life why do so many women serving time in prisons wear the veil?”. He even went further highlighting that “99 per cent of Egypt’s prostitutes are also veiled”. These were the exact words said by Al-Shobashi during a television show with Amr Abdel Hamid on Channel 10. One month later, a photo appeared on Facebook of a woman alleging that she received a black eye for removing her veil. According to Nehal Kamal, “Whoever wants to take off [the hijab], it doesn’t come as easy as those who put it on; Don’t kid yourselves when you say anyone can take off the hijab if they want” (Chatterjee, Debapriya 2015). The massive amount of comments received on her Facebook account praising the attacker who hit her led me to think: if this woman is not veiled, will she have escaped the violence experienced everyday on the streets of Cairo, whether it’s verbal or physical? Probably not. Since 2011, violence has been described as an “epidemic” starting from the mass political gatherings in Tahrir Square until today. As Human Rights Watch
(2014) highlights, 500 women were sexually assaulted by mobs in Egypt between 2011 and 2014. Although violence can be perpetuated against someone of any sex and gender, in Egypt, it usually violence exercised by men against women.

Yet, through the platform of Egyptian comics, the visualization of these gender issues is a completely different story. Egyptian comic magazines like TokTok, Al-Shakmgia and the online comic Qahera, veiled women are not placid consenters to their domination or passive acceptors of societal arrangements. Instead, they re-imagine themselves between the dichotomies of the self and the other. In this thesis, I show how Egyptian artists, via comics, have compiled alternative images for veiled women, undercutting the stereotyped representation of Western media images and the assumptions of ontological experiences under the veil. Throughout the main three comics I aim to highlight how comics have been able to disrupt conventional narratives about masculinity and femininity and the male gaze in the area of the veil. By investigating the visual realm of comics, it is interesting to explore how visuals operate in their depictions of cultural difference. As the Chapter titled “The Veil, Worn for Other Purposes” elaborates, the veil is not only a symbol of religiosity and piety; it is also a part of the everyday subjectivities of Egyptian women.

Until now, there has been a gap in literature in terms of the visualization of gender issues through a platform like comics and whether they have a role in the replication of negative images in Egyptian visual culture emerging since 2011. This thesis is an attempt to explore such issues. It is a first step towards a larger discussion about the role played by comics in Egyptian culture and their representation of women and thus I have divided the discussion into three sections: the veil, violence against women and the representation of women during this moment. As Carleton argues (2013), comics are not only instruments for the continuous representation of evil versus
good but also it is means through which alternative histories and narrations of racialized groups are being shared (as cited in Boyd, Jamie 2015:9). Through comics we experience the world as depicted and visualized through the lens of the person behind the pen (Mona Damijul in 90 Years Arab Comic Symposium 2015). Comics present a number of visual and verbal clues in order to follow a plot, enter the story world, and engage with characters. These clues are not placed at random, and they establish a relationship between you, as the reader, and the teller of the story, the narrator.

In the Middle East, storytelling about everyday lives is often conditioned by the current political climate and media infatuation with extremism in the region. Thus, it is vital to have a space to engage with storytelling that highlights the diversity of talents and perspectives from within the region. But why comic books? As a medium, comics are older than film, television, and video games, and yet there has been resistance from the academic community to examine and analyze them as a coherent medium (Ndalianis 2011:113). Through comic books, we learn from a young age how to read with our imagination, inviting us to experience the world beyond us as imagined through the eyes of the illustrator. They allow us to encounter memories, families, war, death, trauma, joy, laughter, passion and of course zombies. Even though, it is a universal popular art form, loved by devoted readers, illustrators, editors, and writers in the West and the Middle East; the comic book industry has been dominated by the superhero genre with the introduction of Superman in Action Comics in 1938. This hoped to attract a large, youth-oriented audience in the West (Ndalianis, Angela 2011:114). Despite the huge sales of Action Comics, comics are typically perceived as a “kid’s medium” or more specifically, “a young boy’s medium” (Ndalianis, Angela 2011:114). Thus, it has been seen as the lowest form of popular culture. In the West, the comic industry came to a halt with the publication of the influential
comic book *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, by Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham arguing that the visualization of violent and sexual depictions in crime and horror comics encouraged like-minded behavior in children (Ndalianis, Angela 2011:114). The images of bloods, fights, and zombies have all contributed to the delinquent mind of youth culture.

With comic’s re-configuration in the 21st century through new media technology such as digitals; their presence has been even more widespread. They are no longer available only in its printed format; but also through audiovisual media (Ndalianis, Angela 2011:114). For instance, in *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (1991), Timothy Corrigan shows how comic book characters like Batman have been brought to cinema screens relying on the narrative and visual properties of comics. As Martyn Pedler argues on the reproduction of the aesthetic nature of the superhero comic book genre in the cinema, comics are not exposed to a continuous process of editing and filtering to achieve high sales. Instead, it is left for the reader to decide on when to flick across the pages (as cited in Ndalianis, Angela 2011:114).

Certainly the attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 in Paris, shocked many and compelled their attention to the works of comic artists around the world, with particular questions on Islam and the Middle East. Fresh curiosities have been sparked in the wake of this incident about the role of visual culture, particularly illustrated commentary and storytelling in the form of comic books, cartoons and magazines and the power they have in discussing issues ranging from Muslim identities in Europe to the rule of authoritarian regimes across the Middle East. The visual representation of Prophet Mohammed shedding a tear and holding a sign saying: “Je suis Charlie” provoked many comic artists like Makhlof, who is an Egyptian, to argue that *Charlie Hebdo* has not only critiqued Islam but also other religions.
Since its establishment, it has not been only famous for its controversial depictions on Prophet Mohammed but also its defying portrayals of political leaders.

**Literature Review**

**What is A Comic?**

Comics are defined as “a narrative sequence with speech balloons” (David Carrier as cited in Pratt Henry 2009:107). Other theorists like Greg Hayman and Henry Pratt interpret comics as “juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative” (Pratt Henry 2009:107). However, Scott McCloud says that comics consist of “images in deliberate sequence”, his subsequent discussion and choice of examples clearly show that he has a sequential narrative in mind which organizes the images and text. On the other side, Will Eisner (1985) defines comics as “sequential art”, a series of pictures that are meant to follow one another in order to relate a story. They are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, Scott 1993:9).

One of the defining features of the comic medium is the element of narrative. Prominent commentators such as David Kunzle posit that comics “tell a story which is both moral and topical” (as cited in Pratt, Henry 2009:107). Similarly, Robert Harvey illuminates that comics are a “narrative told by a sequence of pictures” (as cited in Pratt, Henry 2009:107). So how does an artist narrate in comics? And what is so distinct about the structures and strategies that comics utilize?

The process of narration in comics is based on the articulation of images within a sequence. As Pratt notes, “pictures are crucial to the narrative construction of comics: words alone will not do all the narrative work” (2009:107). In comics, words are employed in four
different forms. The most famous of the medium, is the “word balloon”. It is the “speech or thoughts of a character that is presented within the panel with some pictorial indication that connects them directionally to that character” (Pratt, Henry 2009:108). The second obvious way of seeing words in comics is often represented in a box or in a caption outside the panel. The main purpose of this text is not to communicate dialogue, but to serve as narration, i.e. it refers to the voice of the individual recounting the story, whether they are one of the characters or an impersonal narrator. It is an act of expression to move the story forward changing its time or scenery. Third, there are sound effects. These usually occur inside the panel, and are drawn in a typeface that reflects visually the timbre and volume of the sound that they portray. Finally, the depiction of words can take place in a panel, when, for example, a street sign or book is portrayed (Pratt, Henry 2009).

But why is it important to have pictures in comics? What value do pictures add to their narratives? The visual depictions of comics hold profound meaning in relation to its narratives in two ways. First, the ‘balloons’ indicate relations that visually replace literal explanations. For instance, the type, shape or color of the balloon informs the readers of the character’s position relevance to ‘power-relations’ and his underlying psycho-social conditions. Second, comics visually depict sound effects. Such depictions enable the artist to amplify, convey and impact the reader more vividly than by the mere employment of words. A picture also has the power to frame the scene in a particular way, directing the reader’s perception of spatial relationships within it. Through a comic image, an artist is able to provide the reader a sense of the place in which the story occurs (Pratt, Henry 2009). They are able to depict the emotions and mental states of the characters represented in the comic strip without using words. In comics, we can just tell by looking that the character is angry.
Any comic artists base their narration through the articulation of images within a sequence. They read the world in their peculiar way, codifying and styling reality depending on their perception. Thus, a comic drawing is evaluated through its specific enunciator (Groensteen, Thierry & Miller, Ann 2013). For example, in *Reading Comics*, McCloud makes an excellent contribution that comics are a reflection of the subjectivity of perception of the comic creator. He shows how that instead of saying “This is What I’ve seen”, the artist says “This is what it meant to me”, that is to say: “this is how I saw it”. Paul Valery even asserts this by showing that “drawing is not form, it is a way of seeing form” (as cited in Groensteen, Thierry & Miller, Ann 2013:85).

The narrator, in this case the comic creator takes the role of mediator between the reader and the story, expressing a point of view on the events recounted. This act of expression has been defined differently under theories of narratology by various theorists. For Todorov, this is an act of *vision*; Genette sees it as *focalization*; Stanzel as an *indirect transmission* and finally by Banfield as *subjectivity*. As the three authors highlight a comic book cannot be complete without its narrative nature. Under theories of narratology, the questions that have been raised are: who sees, who speaks, and with what authority. In comics, readers are exposed to a split narration for the positioning of both verbal and visual enunciators. Even though both enunciators, usually share similar perspectives; on being examined separately, they can be analyzed differently due to their different modes of intervention.

For Genette, narratology has to answer two questions who is speaking? And who can see? These two questions define narrative perspective, which he refers to as focalization. There are three main types of focalization; zero focalization, internal focalization and finally external focalization. Zero focalization entails the presence of a narrator who recites the thoughts and
emotions of all characters present in the comic. Internal focalization focuses on narrating the opinionated view of one character in the whole comic story. Finally, external focalization exemplifies the representation of the physical features of the character with no access to the way they think (Groensteen, Thierry & Miller, Ann 2013: 83). Yet, the comic image directs the reader to a certain viewpoint on the action or the subject being represented. A comic reader would probably understand it from a particular angle at a particular distance. As Henri Van Lier highlights, “an image necessarily contains indices, that is to say telltale signals, which include its framing or placement within the field of vision” (as cited in Groensteen, Thierry & Miller, Ann 2013:84).

Vision is “culturally constructed, it is learned and cultivated, not simply given by nature” as W.J.T. Mitchell argues in his famous article, “Showing Seeing” (2002:166). Vision is not only related to the perception of particular individuals, but also to the complex relationships of human societies. As David Morgan elaborates on the important role of visual representations:

Visual culture is what images, acts of seeing, and attendant, intellectual, emotional, and perceptual sensibilities do to build, maintain, or transform the worlds in which people live. The study of visual culture is the analysis and interpretation of images and the ways of seeing (gazes) that configure the agents, practices, conceptualities, and institutions that put images to work (2005: Chapter 1, Introduction).

Vision is heavily involved with the ways of seeing and being seen in societies, that influences the construction of the social. Mitchell (2002) clarifies that the study of the social construction of visual experience represents a “pictorial turn” that permeates a whole variety of fields and disciplines (p.172). For instance, comic readers whether or not acknowledge the availability of a narrative agent, of an individual recounting a story, cannot ignore the fact that these comic images they are looking at “have been drawn and that they are artifacts” (Groensteen, Thierry & Miller, Ann 2013: 85). As Mitchell mentions, the visual is produced in relation with the existing
ethics and politics within particular societies; involving an epistemological process on how
someone is seeing and being seen. According to Mitchell (2002), visual culture does not only
focus on images, but on its tendency to picture or visualize existence. Thus, visualization
changes gender from an unmediated category of historical analysis to a vehicle of specific
representations. Griselda Pollock traces some of the historical representations of 'visual gender'
from the 1970s to the present. She argues that “feminist cultural theories of the image have
moved along a trajectory from an initial denunciation of stereotyped images of women to a more
exact assessment of the productive role of representation in the construction of subjectivity,
femininity, and sexuality” (1999:229). However, Pollock reminds us that ‘images of women’
were often used to sell certain products, recalling that “images are densely rhetorical products of
material, social and aesthetic practices” (Griselda Pollock 1999:231). As Mitchell elucidates
(2013), the power in comics is that they “take the stereotype and deforms or disfigures it,
exaggerating some features or rendering the figure of the Other in terms of some subhuman
object in order to ridicule and humiliate” (p.20).

In comics, there is a complex relationship between the told through the words and the
shown via drawings, but as already said “the shown is itself a told” (Groensteen, Thierry &
Miller, Ann 2013:83). Within the narrative genre and particularly narrative theory, comics are
often defined as a visual narrative form. They combine two languages, the visual and the verbal.
This duality of the two languages provides a wide space for uncertainty and contradiction,
making comic strips an interesting site for the examination of unconscious messages. This is
why the comic can be analyzed in three distinct ways: either in isolation, in its visual or textual
series, or through the intersection of these two series (Groensteen, Thierry & Miller, Ann
2013:83).
What Have Comics Offered Women?

Comics seem more straightforward than written texts. Because they have images, it appears that everyone understands immediately what is going on in their pages. As a narrative tool, comics sit in the location between reality and story-telling. It is a platform through which modes of lies as well as truths can be represented in every story. Through the illustration, the reader can see a totally different version of the physical world, through the depiction of certain pictorial images and accounts. As Ana Merina argues in “Women in Comics: A Space for Recognizing Other Voices (2001)”, comics are a very important tool that artists use providing different perspectives of the world. Comics are not only a platform for social critique; it is also a medium for representing political and ideological themes. Today, there are many young creative artists who have a passion for comics and are eager to use it to narrate their stories. Comics have been able to reach out to the masses, providing stories that appeal to a diverse audience.

Through comics, women have made spaces for themselves as producers of culture in male dominated fields. As Trina Robbins argues in her book *The Great Women Cartoonists* (2001), comics gave space for women who felt marginalized by sexism by the male dominated *Underground Comix* in the U.S. The book consists of various comic collections; where there is one chapter dedicated to the 1970s *Wimmen’s Comix*. The comics address issues of feminist concerns including homosexuality, sex, and politics. Women use the medium of comics to establish a feminist reclamation of story-telling, writing the narratives of women onto the face of a male-dominated art form, applying and developing a feminist perspectives to the comic medium (Chute, Hillary 2010). For example, in “Sequential Tarts: Gender Intervention in American Comic Book Culture (2006)”, Paul Lope analyzes what he terms “modes of gender intervention”: which are ways that people have intervened to change gender representation in
popular culture (page 2). These modes of gender intervention are represented through two main actors: the comic artists and consumers. In his article, Lope questions whether an artist or a consumer asserts modes of gender intervention by representing a female perspective or identity. He explains that artists do not have to be women to enact gender intervention or to argue for feminist claims. For instance, Lope mentions the work of the male artist Terry Moore in *Strangers in Paradise* (1999) that develops a female centered approach, depicting various female characters and their experiences. He further elaborates in his article on the female centered web titled “Sequential Tart” that provides a space for female comic fans to share and discuss their interests in comics without any intervention or harassment from misogynist fan boys (Lope 2006). According to Lope, these women found a community with each other in the space of the web comics particularly when they are ignored or not taken seriously in a larger comic community. It important to highlight that gender is “a social concept referring to psychologically, sociologically or culturally rooted traits, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies” (Gordfaramrzi, M. & Kazemi, A. 2010:110). It is a medium in which individuals experience their social world. As a concept, it is constructed by human society linked with culturally established correlates of sex” (Gordfaramrzi, M. & Kazemi, A. 2010:110).

In May 2011, artist Renae De Liz launched and tweeted for a comic anthology created entirely by women. Through her efforts, a Kickstarter page was created to raise $ 25, 000 for the printing costs; and in less than 24 hours, the project raised $109,000 within this time framework. The project of *Womanthology* has been a complete success for its ability to discuss the tensions accompanied with gender and its visibility. Through *Womanthology*, the marginalized and minority voices in comics are included and the inequitable gender politics of mainstream comics are being discussed. *Womanthology* looks beyond gender as its primary element of analysis,
appealing to diversity and its attempt to raise the visibility of all groups in society. It is an instrument through which gendered means of production are being challenged for anyone working in the comic industry and want to pursue their own feminist goals (Scott, Suzanne: 2013). It is important to mention Womanthology because it does not only include the works of female comic artists across the world; but also the acknowledgment of female fans roles as producers and consumers of the comic industry. It is a platform to circulate freely and widely female comic works between both the West and East.

**Comics in the Middle East**

In the Middle East, the material written and discussed on comics is minimal. The primary text that fills this void is Douglas and Malti-Douglas, _Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture_ (1994). The book shows the importance of comics in formulating political discourse and particularly the socialization of young children. As the authors write in the book “Arab strips reflect their societies cultural and political tensions while the societies and their strips participate in some of the debates” (p.8). Throughout the entire book, the authors focus on four main themes. First, is the imposition of Western cultural values on Arabs. Second, is the representation of political leaders like Gamal Abed El Nasser and his ideology of Pan-Arabism. Third, is the treatment of women which is illustrated through the little girl Zakiyya, who counterweighs the subordinate female images in other strips (pp.139-43, 156-67, 194-97). Finally, the fourth theme analyzes the emergence of Islamic comic books and magazines, and the authors conclude their analysis with a very important question: “Will the likely future growth in the Islamicization of Arab popular culture continue to allow an indigenous comic strip industry to check the increasing influence of Western media” (p.227)?
In “Arab Comics: 90 Years of Popular Visual Culture”, scholars and artists met at Brown University for an afternoon symposium, highlighting the ancient and emerging field of comics in the Arab world. The conference began with Nadim Damluji’s presentation of “The Violence of Localizing Western Comics for Arab Children”, explaining the two distinct periods in comic production. He argued that a shift which began in the 1960s, has occurred where the entire Arab comic medium focused on translating works coming from the West. Today, however, there are collaborative efforts between Arab and Western comic artists. In “Propaganda in Comics in the Arab World: From Nationalism To Religious Radicalism” Lina Ghabeh talked about the role played by state-sponsored comics in nationalist propaganda. She also discussed how privately sponsored comics by Christians or Muslims’ both featured religious propaganda. According to her, even though Arabic children comics began with fantasy story lines, by the 1960s and 1970s, “The idea of Arab nationalism affected every aspect of the comics”. During the conference, artists also joined the symposium. Fadi Baki, one of the founders of the Lebanese comic magazine *Samandal*, made clear that comics in the Middle East are not the same across the region. “A Lebanese comic is not an Egyptian comic, nor an Algerian comic”. As pinpointed in the symposium, different countries were influenced by different traditions. For instance, Egyptians were affected by British colonialism; whereas, Syrians were more influenced by Russia and Lebanese and Algerians by the works of French comic artists due to their long history with each other. The symposium concluded with its discussion about the issue of censorship in comics and how censorship is not solely coming from the state but rather from the publishers and authors own fear about their ability to sell their work. For example, this has been one of the main reasons Baki, author of *Samandal* avoids talking about sex (Arab Comics: 90 Years of Popular Visual Culture Symposium 2015).
Until today, there are still considerable obstacles facing the circulation and development of comics in the Arab world including the lack of financial investments, a network for artists and fans, and a space to archive all materials. Yet, some of these obstacles have been resolved due to some of the efforts of Ahmad al-Huwwari and Mohammed Ismail. As Ahmad al-Huwwari explains, “our main goal is to return this art form to the people. This is archiving. The new generation isn’t aware of the iconic history of Arab comics, the Golden Age, where comics would come out weekly and sell really well” (as cited in Al-Saadi, Yazan 2013). Al-Huwwari is the main administrator of arabcomics.net, a website devoted to the collection of Arabic comics. The three main aims of the website are: scanning Arabic comics, translating foreign comics, and finally providing a space for fans and artists to discuss and interact together. The site includes comic works ranging from the publication of Lebanese Dar-al-Marafi, and old Miki comics. Although women are actively involved in the website, they are limited in numbers due to the nature of the comic field as a male dominated area according to Al-Huwwari. He reports that the majority of females come from Lebanon, which seems to be natural for its role as center for comic development. Arabcomics.net is only the beginning; there are other initiatives such as Arab-comics.byethost15.com, Comics4Arabs.com, Comixawy and thecomicsman.blogspot.com. These sites will ensure the survival of an Arab comic culture that is historically evident (as cited in Al-Saadi, Yazan 2013). It is not only online platforms that pay attention to the importance of Arab comics; but also documentaries like “Comex BElMasry (Egyptian comics)” that compiles the history of Egyptian comics, which is further discussed in the coming chapter.

Conceptual Framework: Is it Representation or Visualization or Both in Comics?

This research examines how artists are transforming the visualization of gender stereotypes in Egyptian comics and how they are striving to move beyond the binary notions of
masculinity and femininity, redefining social relations in the above mentioned themes. Visualization is the production of meaning through images. By using visualization, I appeal to the imagination, and fantasy of the comic artists. Visual and literary devices present in a comic activate the psychological side of vision during a process of visualization consisting of imaging, dreaming and remembering. While studying comics, it is important to remember that one sees something and then studies the process of visualizing literary texts. The work of comics do not only involve a process of seeing; but also a concept of vision that can be conventional, artificial, or contradictory. The way illustrators see the world is really important, because through the visual aspect of comics, social differences and gender stereotypes are either re-scribed or challenged.

I utilize the term visualization, because it is through “visual conventions” that we “perceive and transmit our understanding of the world around us” (Gilman 1992:223). In comics, visual conventions can be found where the existing social realities is not “presented” but rather “represented”. These representations used by comic creators shape our understanding of how we look upon ourselves as well as others. Visualization does not only involve the capturing and portrayal of physical objects around us. It also entails the emotions and feelings intertwined with the objects. Visual imagery, the core component of visualization, becomes one of the effective communication tools to deliver abstract and intangible ideas since the dawn of man. Through visualization, I am able to appeal to the imagination of the illustrators and how they show attributions attached to the aforementioned themes in the fictional world of comics. It is important to remember that visualization allows readers to see the unseen, the main idea that is hidden in the story narrative but is still projected. On the other hand, representation shows the
interrelationship and interactions between the comic artists and their depictions of physical objects in reality. And this is how I use both terms.

The representation of individuals and social conditions can be characterized by a “use of a model” that continues to inform our perception around only one homogenous image (Gilman 1992). As a consequence, the process of representation entails producing stereotypes that can be “covert” or “overt” as Gilman explains (p.223). Thus, these stereotypes whether covert or overt, direct the reader to see the relationship between the portrayal of a particular individual in the comic and their ascribed qualities depending on their physical appearance. Through images, one is able to filter the eyes of any reader to see only one “single, dominating meaning” (Hart and Daughton 2005:191). Representation relates to two relevant meanings: one is to speak on behalf of someone or to describe someone or something as it exists in the real world through language (Oxford English Dictionary). As Stuart Hall highlights, “representation is the production of the meaning of concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the ‘real world of objects, or the fictional objects’ ” (2003:3). Thus, a representation process entails an association between the daily interactions of individuals in real life and the understanding we carry for them in our heads. However, in comics, the power of the image lies in its ability to represent the “Other”. Due to its combination of visual and verbal narratives, comics can alter representational practices by showing difference and altering existing meanings in societies. As Hall highlights, “difference can be positive”, “it signifies, it speaks” (230), it is necessary for “the production of meaning”, the “formation of language and culture”, and the “creation of social identities and the self as a sexed subject” (p.238). On the other hand, difference can be “negative”, in which it involves aggression against the other (p.238). Yet, it is important to recall that all comic stories are encoded and decoded. They are
produced within a specific cultural setting for readers to decode. According to Hall, there are three ways for decoding comic narratives. The first one is a dominant hegemonic reading that involves receiving the message of an image or text without questioning it. The second way entails a process of reading that allows the viewer to derive an alternative interpretation despite the representation of a certain image and text. The final way of decoding marks an oppositional stance where the reader disagrees with the ideological theme presented; rejecting all the storylines narrated. And this is one of the dilemmas of this thesis.

The existence of binaries and stereotypes that aim to reduce or fix meaning is what makes comics an attractive medium through which to study representations. Unlike cartoons; comics have the ability through storytelling and visual-verbal features to tap into “the consciousnesses and unconsciousness’s of the readers”. Thus, when looking at the comics of Qahera, TokTok and Al-Shakmgia, we do not only address political commentary that criticizes those in power; but also a form of social commentary that shapes gender stereotypes and relations in a particular society. As Edwards (2001) reminds us, cartoonists have a “role as journalists and commentators” (p.2141), something we should always keep in mind when analyzing the comic stories. In comic stories, we construct meaning, using representational systems, concepts, and signs. As the constructionist approach of representation explains, it is through the daily interactions and processes that societies construct meaning about the world around us.

The constructionist approach provides space to see how comic artists offer and construct imaginary narratives but still relate to the everyday sufferings of women. As Chapter Three highlights through the story of “The Evolution of the Egyptian Female”, harassment continues to be an epidemic that exists across the streets of Cairo. Yet, Mohammed Tawfik, the comic artist, projects a constructed image of flawed female characters with more than one eye, arm and leg;
making his own visualization about the body and harassment. He constructs his own meaning about harassment, by focusing on its impact rather than its acts as will be discussed in Chapter Three. Meanings are not only transferred through the existence of people and things around us in the material world. Rather, representation is a language system or whatever system individuals used to represent the constructed meanings of our everyday life (Hall, Stuart 2003). Through comics, it is not only the construction of particular images, and narrative sequence to deliver a particular message; but also the deployment of words. This is why the intentional approach of representation of Hall is used to show how sometimes words used by the artists intend what they should mean; imposing or challenging certain meanings on the narratives presented throughout the stories. The intentional approach is useful because it shows how certain terminologies associated with a masculine nature like pimp (mozza) and pussy cat are employed in a positive way by female characters in the stories. For example, in Chapter Three, the story of “Half Way Through” highlights how terms like pussy cat do not entail a negative connotation related to a woman’s sexuality but rather how the female is sweet and beautiful. Through the intentional approach, I am able to assess how the comic creators use the intended meanings of terms but in a non-canonical sense. The terms present in the storylines are reflective of the everyday colloquial language by individuals on the streets particularly harassment, and yet there is an artistic twist on changing their nuance. In the majority of comics in this thesis, there is a new awareness of gendered terms moving away from the conventional. The intentional approach illuminates how comics do not mirror and reflect the representation of a traditional patriarchal society in Egypt and gives new insights to terms often associated with violence.

It is within this framework of understanding comics and through Hall’s approach of constructionist and intentional representation, that the meanings of veil, violence, and political
participation of women are examined in Egyptian comics. I seek to analyze the way comic illustrators frame gender and the female body when representing women in relation to the themes I have discussed. By utilizing these representation approaches in my examination of *TokTok, Al-Shakmgia*, and *Qahera*, I explore how there is no replication of the stereotyped representation of women as objectified sex objects like in the majority of comic magazines. As well, one is able to investigate the newer representation of women’s roles as nurturing mothers, devoted wives, and obedient daughters; and their representation of empowered subjects despite all the difficulties they are exposed in real life. They are able through the platform of comics to discuss or challenge these issues. This approach is useful because it shows how gender is a fluid variable that changes in different places, timings and social conditions. It is a performance, it is the actions and behaviors that you do at particular times, rather than a universal who you are (Butler, Judith 1990). In comics, women’s subjectivities are not reduced and represented in terms of their sexuality; rather Egyptian comics show the construction of women with power and agency in their everyday life despite the limited presence of female comic artists working in the magazines.

**Methodology**

This thesis is an attempt to study how gender visualization of the veil, violence, and political participation of women are depicted in *TokTok, Al-Shakmgia*, and *Qahera* with a primary focus on the stories in *TokTok*. I rely on discourse analysis to explore these depictions, with material gathered from interviews, prior research, and the comics themselves. Based on a juxtaspostion of these three comics I developed the aforementioned themes of the thesis. I choose these comics for the following reasons. First, *TokTok* and *Al-Shakmgia* are adult comics and are not exposed to any form of censorship from any governmental institution in Egypt. I selected *TokTok* because it comes out every three months and has been distributed since 2011; with its 13 issues classified
as the most popular selling adult comic magazines. Artists from TokTok participated in various conferences in Algeria, Lebanon, and Morocco. In contrast, I picked Al-Shakmgia because it consisted mainly of male artists and writers despite the fact that it is a feminist comic launched under the auspices of Nazra Feminist Organization to address violence against women. Moreover, Qahera is used because it is an online comic and is the first Egyptian comic written from a female perspective addressing misogynist on Islam and women. In this thesis, I analyze Qahera because it shows an Eastern perspective that challenges the racialization of veiled women. The differences of working conditions in TokTok and Al-Shakmgia as discussed by the interviewees and the limited female presence in a feminist comic magazine like Al-Shakmgia, coupled with the nature of comics themselves are some of the reasons to utilize a discourse analysis to explore the stereotyped visualizations and representations of women in the areas of veil, violence, and active political participation.

Across the comics analyzed in this thesis, it is through the efforts of the researcher and discourse analysis tools that certain conclusions are arrived at. Comics are assessed depending on the subjective perception of an individual. For instance, Chapter Two discusses a controversial story titled “Um Sodfa”, that is one of the controversial anecdotes. As a researcher, I look at how the female character is being veiled; refusing to conform to the typical Western representation of them; challenging feminine qualities attributed to them. Yet, it is important to mention how other readers perceive the character of Um Sodfa as a bully, reflecting and representing women in local Egyptian neighborhoods. On the other side, Um Sodfa is also seen as a witch, a main character in all Egyptian folklore stories.

In general, discourse is defined as language in action. It also refers to specific communicative events that take place through written or oral forms of language. For instance, a
discourse is not only about the expressions of individual authors and speakers; it becomes into a distinct text based artifact/object/entity. Moreover, it includes semiotic practices such as photography and non-verbal communication/visual communication (Van Dijk 1993:146). It is critical in asking questions on how specific discourses like comics are deployed to challenge or reproduce gender roles and identities. Discourse analysis acknowledges how artists employ both language and images that have both personal and social cognition including personal memories, knowledge, opinions, and shared memories with a particular group (Jakoaho 2012).

In this thesis, one of the tools of analysis is pragmalinguistic analysis in which the linguistic and pragmatic of the comics are analyzed. Yet, it is important to highlight that pragmalinguistic is not sufficient, because in comics, there are both a verbal and a nonverbal code. As a consequence, a semiotic analysis is incorporated to study anything cultural signs and symbols. For semiotics, signs consist not only of words, but also images, sounds, gestures and objects. A semiotic analysis studies how meanings are made but also examines the construction and maintenance of reality. For example, semiotic codes can include anything ranging from food, social codes and a garment system.

I utilize discourse analysis, to illustrate the processes of meaning in both language and images through the medium of Egyptian comics. By using discourse analysis, I look at the physical appearances of women, their features, their clothes, and the spoken language used by them; along with the space occupied by characters in the comic stories. I examine how male comic artists reproduce or subvert gender stereotypes through visual-verbal elements. Discourse analysis incorporates anything that has meaning such as: a color, a word, a sound, a photo, an illustration, a movement, a posture, and a gesture. It exposes newer meanings, about gender visualization and the ability of the Egyptian comic medium to transform and challenge social
realities. Also, discourse analysis provides space to assess whether comics are a tool of communication perpetuating the everyday reality about gender representation.

Besides the comics themselves, I also interviewed artists in an effort to gain more insight into their motivation and also explore the working dynamics of different publications. I conducted a one-to-one interview via Skype with Mohammed Tawfik and Hicham Rahma, two of the founding members of TokTok. I have also done a group interview with a number of comic artists from Al-Shakmgia. This allowed me to provide new information that has not been covered by secondary sources, specially information relevant to Egyptian comics and gender. Also, the interview created a platform from which to discuss relevant issues that are not directly addressed in the comics. For example, I was able to address the limited presence of female comic artists despite the publication of a feminist magazine like Al-Shakmgia.

Based on the preceding discussions out of the comics, the methodology I have chosen, and finally my interactions with the artists, I will examine the following questions:

1. To what extent comic artists and writers perpetuate the visualization of gender stereotypes?
2. How are the issues of the veil, violence, and revolution visualized in the space of Egyptian comics? Are they heavily discussed or sidelined?
3. Can we witness through the platform of Egyptian comics new practices of gender visualization?

In the remaining pages of this chapter, I specify the organizational structures of each comic and highlight the background of artists in an attempt to show their diverse backgrounds. I conclude this chapter by clarifying the division of the entire thesis.
Organizational Structures of *TokTok* and *Al-Shakmgia* and Background of the Artists

In *TokTok*, the founding team consists of five men: Mohammed Shennawy, Mohammed Tawfik, Mohammed Andeel, Makhlouf, and Hicham Rahma and this is one of the main reasons that made me curious to know why no women are on their team. Mohammed Shennawy, *TokTok*’s originator, studied art and began his career by working for an Egyptian comic magazine titled *Alaa El Din* from 2000 to 2009. Later on, he joined *Al-Dostour* Egyptian newspaper. Today, he pursues his career as a graphic designer and is famous for drawing posters and logos for events like the Music Festival in the French Cultural Institute in Egypt. Along the same line, Mohammed Tawfik, one of *TokTok* founders is a graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Animation Department, Helwan University. He works in various kid’s comic magazines like *Bassem* (started from 2006 until 2014) (Saudi Children magazine), *Tout* (Kuwaiti Children magazine), *Noona* (Egyptian Children magazine) and *Majid* (Emirates Children magazine). In addition, some of his comical drawings have been available in adult comic magazines such as *Kartoon* (a Polish adult comic magazine) and *CafCaf* (a Turkish adult comic magazine). Also, Tawfik is famous for his comic strip *Al-Morshdy* in *Al-Dostour* newspaper from 2008 to 2010. He is currently working in *Samir*, an Egyptian comic magazine tailored for children under the auspices of Dar Al-Hilal. On the other hand, Hicham Rahma is a graduate of the High Cinema Institute, Animation Department. He begins his early career by working in *Al-Dostour* newspaper and *Maijd*. Today, he works as a graphic designer at Matter Branding Company in Zamalek. On the other hand, Mohammed Andeel is famous for his controversial cartoons on social media particularly during Mohammed Morsi’s presidency. He started his career by working for the privately owned *Al-Dostour* newspaper under the veteran cartoonist Amr Selim. For several years, his illustrations in *Al-Masry Al-Youm* Egyptian newspaper have also been a
source of discussion among Egyptians. Today, he is one of the main cartoonists for Mada Masr. Andeel, at 29 years old, is the youngest founder of *TokTok* and the most popular. Finally, Makhlouf breaks social taboos with his creation of the comical character of SuperMakh a daily comic in *Al-Dostour* newspaper in 2008; discussing issues like sexual harassment explaining the factors for its persistence in Egyptian society. After *Al-Dostour* newspaper closed under Ibrahim Issa, Makhlouf joined *Al-Masry Al Youm* newspaper as a cartoonist.

All of the founding members got to know each other through working on *Al-Dostour* from 2005 to 2010, an Egyptian newspaper with a passion to present newer form of comics in Egypt. Ibrahim Issa, the editor in chief of *Al-Masry Youm* gave straight forward instructions to mock all of the policies of the Mubarak regime. This is why *TokTok* founders wanted to move away from politics and address the livelihoods of regular Egyptians. As Chapter Four discusses, at the beginning *TokTok* aimed to shed light on existing social problems in Egypt but with the uprising of 25th January 2011, the content of the magazine had to change. *TokTok*, a quartely magazine that started through a youth group in 2009, signals the transportation vehicle used by the majority of Egyptians throughout the streets of Cairo; witnessing the everyday lives of individuals from the smallest alley to the largest in Cairo. It also symbolizes the echo sound of knocking on the doors. Through its name, the founding members have been intentional to deliver the message that the magazine is not stratified talking about the concerns of poor Egyptian groups and particularly vulnerable groups.

Inspired by the success of *TokTok* magazine, Nazra aimed to share the storytelling of minority groups and marginalized groups through a safe space like comics. Yet, the project lagged behind for no adequate reasons. When taking charge, Fatma Mansour, the editor, searches for current successful adult comic magazines in the Egyptian market, making sure to hire the
professionals in the field, which is why the majority of comic artists working for TokTok are the same ones employed in Al-Shakmgia. According to Fatma, TokTok is a source of inspiration for her because it came out right before the revolution, through an independent youth group that financed their own comic group. They offer a visual art that discusses the everyday realities of Egyptians with an aim not to sell a commercialized product. When meeting Fatma at Nazra in Garden City, she explains how it took a year to prepare the first issue of Al-Shakmgia, an occasional magazine that finally came to being in October 2014. I asked Fatma if it is possible to attend one of the comic workshops held recently by Nazra to explore how they emerge with the stories they depict in the magazine; but unfortunately Fatma informed me that these are closed sessions only for the artists to express their intimate feelings without being judged. She stresses that Egyptian comic artists can be counted on two hands. According to Fatma, it is really important to include male comic artists because she wants everyone to read the magazine, from individuals working on gender and feminism to the whole Egyptian public. She argues that the concept of gender is hardly understood by the majority of Egyptians today and this is why she liked to explain it through an interesting platform like comics. When joining the art initiatives of Nazra, Fatma loved to use art and not academia or political activism to reach a wider range of audience who are not particularly interested in knowing the meaning of gender and feminism. When searching for the female comic artists, she illuminates how it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. According to Fatma, female comic artists are hard to find because it involves improvisation outside conventional narratives and that females are still shy to express themselves compared to men. The limited number of female artists in the comic field is attributed to the fact that unlike males they are not able to stay out late to market their comics. Any employer in the comic industry is hesitant to employ a female for fear that her father will restrict her time. As
Fatma argues, it is rare to find a female artist graduating with a specialization in comics, rather the majority of them are from the Faculty of Fine Arts or from other majors. When I asked her about the magazine name, she explained that *Al-Shakmgia (the Jewelry Box)*, is a piece that you find in all households and across all social classes; and that the magazine is going to tackle one specific social problem. Yet, even though *Al-Shakmgia* is distributed with the support of *Nazra*, which is a group that aims to form an Egyptian feminist movement; believing that feminism and gender are both political issues and need to be integrated into the public and private sphere; the majority of its team members do not have background in gender. For instance, Mohammed Hagrasy, one of the comic artists, is a graduate of the Faculty of Science, who developed his passion for comic art. On the other hand, Mohammed Ismail, a script writer, is a graduate of the Faculty of Arts, Philosophy Department, who hopes to raise awareness about the comic industry in Egypt, as Chapter One elaborates. Finally, both Hadeel Mohammed and Ahmed Okasha are graduates of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Helwan University.

On the other side, Deena Mohamed, the creator of *Qahera* explained at the conference “The Only Thing Worth Globalizing is Dissent” in Town Gallery house that *Qahera* is an online comic, that was first published in English in June 2013; and it tells the story of a superheroine fighting against Islamophobia and prejudice against hijabi Muslim women. Through *Qahera*, the creator aims to address some of the misogynistic articles on websites that foster misconceptions of Islam in the West. Given its success in the West, Deena Mohamed decided to bring her work to an Arabic speaking audience on September 5th, 2013; discussing issues like sexual harassment, protests, nationalism, and music. It is important to mention that the latest strip of *Qahera*, published on 28th July 2015, talks about the social stigma attached to women’s attire and how each type of clothe connotes a specific meaning. For Mohammed, there is no specific timing
during the year upon which Qahera is circulated due to her busy schedule of studying at university.

Chapter Outlines

The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One provides a historical background about comics in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Egypt. It aims to explore how female characters have been represented across Egyptian comics; investigating whether there has been a shift in the depictions and representation of gender roles.

Chapter Two elucidates how comic creators through the platform of comics are able to challenge stereotyped conceptions of veiled women. This chapter discusses the work of Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood, and Naif Mutawa, The 99, because these are the first comics to address the issue of the veil from an Eastern perspective. It also examines how the veil in Egyptian society emerges in the stories as just a piece of cloth in the Egyptian comics. In this chapter, I show how comic creators are able to challenge the racialization of veiled women to distinct group.

Chapter Three attempts to show how violence, one of the attributes of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, can be exercised and caused by women. It argues that comics have challenged the stereotyped representation of Egyptian womanhood and their femininities. It also shows how through the platform of the Egyptian comic medium, violence is not only directed by men against women.

Chapter Four sets out to examine the political role of women during post-revolutionary Egypt and how women found space in comics to express their sense of agency. I explain how ordinary Egyptian women are participating in the political arena; challenging the stereotyped
connotations about how Egyptian housewives and female government employees that they do not actively participate in the political arena. It reveals the rejection of the discourse of Egyptian women as helpless nurturing mothers and wives and instead shows their participation as active citizens in relation to voting and protesting. In a way, it challenges the view of Egyptian women as victimized, oppressed, powerless individuals.

Chapter Five, the conclusion, examines to what extent is the Egyptian comic medium has been powerful in reaching a wide audience. It assesses the distribution and marketing strategy of both *TokTok* and *Al-Shakmgia* and whether they have presented new social meanings of veil, violence, and political participation; and newer concepts about the visual knowledge of gender. This chapter also presents my findings based on discourse analysis and my concluding remarks.
Chapter One: A Historical Background about Comics in Egypt, Comics Then and Now

In this chapter, I find it necessary to trace the history of the Egyptian comic medium to examine how women have been situated within historical and societal context in this platform. The primary goal of this chapter is twofold: first, to provide historical narration about comics in Egypt, particularly given that this thesis is one of the first attempts to discuss comics in the Egyptian context. Second, to bring attention the study of gender within the field of Egyptian comic scholarship and how it asserts or rejects its conventional representations. It also shows how comics like Al-Khan, creates spaces for resistance and is an opportunity to contest political power.

The literature on the history and development of the Egyptian comics has been scarce within academic research. Newspaper comic strips as well comic magazines have been often ignored despite their huge popularity in recent years. In Egypt, comics came to the forefront with the early works of Ya’qub Sanu and his influential satirical journal Abu Nazzara Al-Zarqa [The Man with Blue Glasses] in 1878 (Moosa, Matti 1997:42). Through Sanu’s satirical plays and cartoons, a new genre of comedy emerged in Egypt. Sanu satirized the various conditions of Egyptian society without missing an opportunity to ridicule the despotic rule of Khedive Ismail in Abu Nazzara Zarqa. Although Sanu cartoons avoided mentioning Khedive by name, he sarcastically called him “Shaykh al-Hara” [i.e., Chief Man of the Quarter], which is the lowest level of the administrative ladder (Moosa, Matti 1997:42-43). For example, one of the famous comedies Sanu presented, was al-Qirdati (The Monkey Showman), depicting an authoritarian greedy ruler whose voracious lust for money led him to impose high taxes on impoverished people (Moosa, Matti 1997:47-48). At the same time, another caricature portrayed Hukm
Qaraqush (The Rule of Qaraqush) showing the oppression of the poor *fallah* (peasant) and the forced labor he had to endure everyday from the landowners (Moosa, Matti 1997:47-48). After the reintroduction of the 1881 press law by Sir Eldon Gorst (Consul-General in Egypt from 1907-1911), Egyptian comics spread very quickly in the period leading up to the 1919 revolution (Ettmüller, Eliane 2011). As claimed by the Egyptian caricaturist Ahmad an-Na’im, “right from the beginning, journals were not interested in using caricatures as gap fillers or funny pictures […]. Rather, caricatures were to play an active role in the [daily] events and propaganda in the nationalistic period which Egypt underwent before and after the revolutionary uprisings […]” (as cited in Ettmüller, Eliane 2012:141).

From the pen of Ya’qub Sanu’a came the earliest image of the female depicting the Egyptian nation (Baron, Beth 2005: 3-4 & 59). Titled “The Cholera: The Eleventh Plague of Egypt” and published in 1883, the image portrays a dying queen lying on the ground, who is surrounded by male figures representing European powers (Figure 1). At the other side of the queen, there is an image depicting Alexandria completely destroyed,
with the Egyptian army defeated by the British at Tel al-Kabir, with England speaking: “I first brought war. Today I bring you cholera” (Baron, Beth 2005: 59). A year later, Sanu’a circulated the second image of “The Killing of a Nation”, depicting Egypt sitting in a chair on stage with Prime Minister Nubar on one side and Lord Cromer on the other side, trying to force her to take a drug; with both of them grabbing her arms (Figure 2). At the other side of the stage, Khedive Tawfiq digs her grave, while women are mourning over the graves of their husbands and children. Figures representing Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and Balkan nations witness the scene from boxes in the theatre. Egypt asks the sultan to save her from the “two doctor-assassins” (Baron, Beth 2005:59).

In Egypt, the woman as representative of the nation continues to persist in *al-Lata’if al-Musawwara* in the early 1920s. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how in figure 3, the Egyptian nation is depicted as a young baby girl who is being distracted by a toy that Lord Milner—a British statesman and colonial administrator who is dressed as a nanny is holding-- instead of giving her the bottle written on it “independence” (Pollard, Lisa 2000:70-71). This representation seems to suggest that Europeanized motherhood gave nothing to Egypt except false promises of independence, showing that the Egyptian nation is always in need of protection (Pollard, Lisa 2000:70-71).

Throughout this decade, a female character often symbolizes the Egyptian nation; in which artists continue to personify their roles as mothers nurturing the future generations for the nationalist cause. Or, as mentioned above in the *al-Lata’if al-Musawwara*, sometimes the Egyptian nation is viewed as a young baby girl who needs care, justifying colonial expansionism
within countries. The female figure is always used for its maternal and supportive characteristics that ensure the nation’s survival. As highlighted in figure 4, “mother Egypt”, the woman is dressed in traditional attire, sitting on the back of the Sphinx. She is seen breast-feeding the infant “Bank Misr”, which was founded in 1920 by a group of Egyptian landowners and industrialists as a means of funding an independent, Egyptian economic policy (Pollard, Lisa 2005: 67). As the image caption reads (figure 4):

This image represents the new-born Bank Misr, being breastfed the milk of his mother. And who is his mother? None other than the Egyptian Nation, the beloved, splendid Egyptian Nation…… The children seated next to her represent the child’s older brothers [foreign banks]…. who ask themselves: Will the baby live? Will the baby live? We say: Yes the baby will live if he continues to nurse from the breast of his mother! (al-Lata’if al-Musawwara 2 August 1920 and Pollard, Lisa 2005:68)

Along the same lines, the satirical magazine *Al-Kashkhul* was founded in 1921 by the Al-Wafd Party to fight for independence from the British. *Al-Kashkhul* hired Juan Sintes, a Spanish teacher at the new Royal School of Arts to draw the caricatures. However, two years later, the actress Fatma al-Yusuf financed the journal *Ruz al-Yusuf*, which competed with the caricatures of *al-Kashkul*. By hiring the Armenian artist Alexander Sarukhan (1898-1977), Yusuf guaranteed the success of her journal. Sintes and Sarukhan, together with Rifiqi, became the foreign fathers of modern Egyptian caricature. They taught the first generation of Egyptian caricaturists, Rakha (1911-1989), Abd as-Sami (1916-1985), Salah Jahin (1930-1986) and
George Bahgouri (1932), whose cartoons were published in various newspapers and satirical magazines. At the same time, a competitor magazine named, *Khayal El Dhill* (The Shadow of Plays) was launched by Ahmed Ahmed who hired Rifki, a Turkish cartoonist living in Egypt during that time (Ettenmüller, Eliane 2012).

In the aforementioned journals, motherhood has been the common trope for representing women; emphasizing their roles as nurturing mothers for newer generations, along with their veils. Through these images, artists disseminate the important role women played in the ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction, and transformation of the nation. When women are symbols for a motherly state, the women of that state must act within the narrow range of behavior that the symbol implies; they cannot be warriors, their main goal is procreation (Lombardo and Meier 2014: 24). The restriction on women’s role is grounded in their gender roles as the emanating sources of cultural values, activities and norms. Hence, purity of women, according to social provisions dictates what is frowned upon and what is accepted for a woman to do. The impact of these boundaries on women is further emphasized by antagonizing and contradicting behavior to impact the family’s and nation’s integrity (Nagel, Joane 251-256).

In nationalist terms, infringing the integrity of a woman’s body through rape is a symbolic action that infringes the integrity of the nation as a whole. Hence, rape became one of the most prominent weapons to articulate conquest achievements in intra- and inter-state conflicts and this has been the first trend of female representation within the Egyptian comic medium (Lombardo and Meier 2014: 24-25).

Nevertheless, in 1923, with newer issues of *Lata’if al-Musawwara* and *al-Kashkul*, the veiled Egyptian woman was overshadowed by the illustration Figure 5.
of the “new woman” (Baron, Beth 2005:73). As shown in figure 5 female clothes changed very quickly; with the veiled woman removed and replaced with the image of a modern woman driving a car and navigating dangers on the road. In the image, the woman’s figure is seen as a symbol for progress and development and not as a biological body only giving birth to children. It is interesting to note how through the above mentioned satirical journals, the artists have been able to highlight the contradictory representations of the female body and its metaphorical use of gender. For instance, during the interwar period, a woman’s body symbolized the nation. Women are seen as biological reproducers of the members for national collectives. They are considered active agents in transmitting and producing national culture, particularly since they are the ones nurturing and educating children. Also, women are reproducers of the symbolic boundaries of national groups through restrictions on sexual or marital relations, exemplified in the virginity or inter-group marriage norms, or the punishment of adultery. Not only that, women are markers of depicting national differences, through for instance their dissimilar clothing as shown in figure-6- between the woman symbolizing Sudan and the woman symbolizing Egypt (Floya, A. & Davis, Y 1989: 7-8).

On the other hand, with the recognition of Egyptian independence in 1922 and the implementation of a new constitution in 1923, one can see a completely different representation of a woman in satirical comic magazines. In a way, women were challenging the prevailing gender order that has been legitimized for a long time in order to fight against British
colonialism. As seen in figure 5, women were becoming empowered independent individuals driving their own cars; taking charge of the wheel. They are not relying on any male members to avoid any obstacles faced and this is clearly evident with the non-existent of male characters in the image.

The Egyptian comic expanded further in 1923, with the publication of *Al-Awlad* (The Boys), with its presentation of indigenous characters as they lived in Egyptian society. The characters in *Al-Awlad* were often depicted wearing *tarbushes*, with men dressed in *galabias* making sure to assert an Egyptian authentic identity; challenging the expansion of British culture. This magazine continued publishing for 10 years. Instead of focusing on female characters during that time, one can see a new pattern of discussing the living conditions and experiences of Egyptian employees, Egyptian peasants, and Egyptian workers. The focus was no longer on how to challenge the expansion of British colonialism but rather how Egyptians lived and maintained their Arabic language, culture, and civilization (Comex BelMasry Documentary 2013: Unpublished).

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Egyptian caricature became a tool to criticize national and international politics. Artists had the opportunity to draw satirical pictures with political content. For example, *Ruz al-Yusuf* repeatedly made use of the personification of the little man of the street (*al-Masri Efendi*), which was designed by Alexander Sarokhan (1898-1977). *Al Masri-Effendi* (Mr. Average Egyptian), an Egyptian short middle class citizen, who is wearing a *tarbush* and glasses as highlighted in figure 7; is a character known for his sense of humor and intelligent sarcasm and not by the arrogance of the aristocratic class. *Al-Masri*
Effendi was a symbol of expression about the political status in Egypt after the 1919 revolution, showing the struggles over the parliamentary and ministerial seats. Through the character of al-Masri Effendi, Sarukhan illustrated the negotiations between the Egyptian palace and the British for the formation of various governments that would hinder any efforts by the Wafd party to come to power. Unlike Abu Nazzara Al-Zarqa, Lata’if al-Musawwara and al-Kashkul, females bodies were no longer considered the idealized representation of a nation’s sanctity, but rather an effendi, a man who worked in the bureaucracy in Egypt. The common man was pictured as the core of Egypt, a source of national pride, and Islamic heritage.

Yet, at the end of day, Al-Masri Effendi was a simple employee working in the archives who always prayed to God to have patience and a hot meal on the table. However, with the outbreak of the Second World War, the Brotherhood Ali, Mustafa Amin, and Rahka agreed that a new face was needed to the character of Al-Masri Effendi, particularly with the development of new events. As a consequence, the character of Ibn El Balad was developed with his primary function to witness events in the streets. Through comics, artists have been able to show the new different emerging classes that have made fortunes in new industries and were asserting themselves in Egyptian society. In comparison to the effendi class embodied through Al Masri Effendi, other emerging classes like the tradesmen and awlad-al balad, the craftsmen, butchers, grocers, plumbers, purveyors of fruits and vegetables, and merchants started to experience very good economic success.
With the advent of the 1952 revolution, comical works continued with the couple *Rafigha Hanem and Sabe’ Effendi* consisting of an obese woman and a small man with a long moustache (figure 8). Rahka, the illustrator decided to present these comic characters to demonstrate the control Egyptian wives had over their husbands. Through this comical work, one can see the return and assertion of women as wives like before, but with showing how they utilized more power in the households and controlled their husbands. This comic shows the reversal of gender roles mirroring some of the realities of what was happening in Egyptian society during this moment of history, particularly when four years later, most of Egyptian men joined the war in Palestine. Another important comic character created by Rahka was the character of *Bint Al-Balad* to challenge all the negative connotations attributed with the word *baladi*. By drawing *Bint Al-Balad*, the artist intended to satirize Western traditions, particularly British ones. She was famous for her ridiculous comments towards anything Western. For instance, in one of the comic strips, while listening to jazz music in a dance ballroom, she makes a ridiculous comment, saying what about the zar music.

Through comics, the identities attributed to women as highlighted in the character of *Bint al-Balad* gives a chance for the reader to understand many of the social realities around the roles they had other than being a housewife (figure 9). For instance, *Bint al-Balad* is also known as *bint al-suq*, daughter
of the market, for she is taking charge of a family-owned shop or stall. She is an outspoken, self-sufficient, independent and courageous individual. Also, Bint al-Balad, can be a widow becoming a mu’allima (literally teacher or master), employing others, usually men. She runs the business inherited from her husband and hires gangs of thugs to deal with the competition. Women who are administrating these operations are usually perceived of as “men”, showing how feminine qualities of dependence and softness are given up to continue managing their family’s establishments. While enjoying her work environment, Bint al-Balad can also be a wife, depending on her husband and raising her children; having power primarily in the household (Zuhur, Sherifa 1992: 122).

It is interesting to note how Rahka equipped Bint-al-Balad to do many things. She can be covering her hair but not veiled. She refuses to change her usual form of dress including her mandil and malayya for the hijab while still asserting her modesty and religious piety. If she wore the hijab, this means that it has been imposed upon her. She goes out on the streets to administer the family business, but does not go to the mosque to pray. She only visits shrines and attends saints festivals (Zuhur, Sherifa 1992: 123). It is important to mention Bint al-Balad because it is a personification of the many roles done by baladi women in Egyptian society. Through comics, they are able to break their stereotyped representation as housewives and show their participation in the labor force at all levels.

In 1956, comics became a kid’s medium with the publication of Sindbad by Dar Al-Hilal, which had stiff competition from Samir. When Samir was first published, the popularity of Sindbad declined to the extent that after the publication of few issues of Samir; Sindbad was discontinued. During the 1960s, Samir stories were designed for Arab nationalism and acted as the voice of the Egyptian government during 1964-1965. Its cover pages comprised of famous
politicians, which had not appeared before. Like Sindbad, Samir could not compete with TinTin for its colorful pages and with the production of a new comic magazine Maged, which started attracting most of Samir’s readers. But in the 1970s, the Lebanese publishing houses invaded the comic industry issuing magazines like: Al Ashbaal, Al Moghamer and Busat Aal Reeh. As one of the interviewees highlights in the documentary “Comex BelMasry”, comics would have not flourished in the Middle East without Egypt and Lebanon. Egypt was the spark in translating comics, but Lebanon was the trigger for their distribution (Comex BelMasry Documentary 2013). In this instance, comics were utilized for socializing young children, revitalizing the gender order of women as biological producers and nurturing mothers, and encouraging men to go to war (Comex BelMasry Documentary 2013).

In the 1970s, Qais wa Layla the famous characters in Arabic literature were renovated by Salah Jahin criticizing the platonic love as shown in figures (10, 11 respectively)—along with the characters of ‘Antar wa ‘Abla in which Jahin satirizes people who only depend on their physical strength rather than their brains. Also, Jahin tried to express the situation of Egypt after Sadat’s open door policy through the character of “Egypt” which is represented by a fat female peasant with a tiara on her head that says Egypt. Through this character, Jahin wanted to represent the authentic rural Egypt criticizing the idea of the foreign monopoly in commercial activities (i.e. the idea of foreign complex). In the 1980s and 1990s, the whole comic industry faced a downward slope with the majority of the Lebanese publishing houses closed down due
to the Lebanese civil war. New works came out like *Maged* from the Emirate and *Bassem* from Saudi Arabia, which depended on Egyptian artists and editors (Comex BelMasry Documentary 2013). In the comic magazine *Maged*, a regular series named Zakiyya al-Dhakiyya (Zakiyya the Clever) emerges focusing on the cleverness and wit of Egyptian girls rather than their sexualized bodies. As one can notice in figure 12, Zakiyya is visualized wearing glasses and looking similar to an Arab Dilton Doiley.

In the magazine, she is always placed in a hierarchical position over her young brother and sister for her ability to supply and analyze information. Her strong character is further emphasized with the inability of other adult males present in the comic strip to compete with her as a spokesperson. Her capacity to discuss issues ranging from politics to science has challenged the stereotyped connotation that these topics are of masculine realms. For example, in one of the strips, the creators depict a fight between Zakiyya and her brother that happens to be a manifestation of the conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact and the political alliances that were emerging. Calling her brother a dictator and arguing about the geo-political-ideological shifts, Zakiyya is the only character able to explain what is going on in the world during that particular moment of history. Unlike the majority of comics, the world for Zakiyya is not formed around lipsticks and fashion trends in order to find a suitable husband but rather about a world system that has placed states in different blocs.

The character of Zakiyya is not only a rejection of the existing assumptions about Arab females in general, but also about the dichotomies between rich and poor, North and South. For instance, the unjust practices
observed by British soldiers against Egyptian peasants in the Dinshaway incident have been explored in one of the issues. Through the comic, Zakiyya exposes the image of reality; recognizing how British presence on Egyptian lands have led to the death of an innocent young peasant woman who had nothing to do with politics and was just trying to earn a living. The miserable conditions and racist behavior against poor people or people of a different color did not only exist in colonized countries, but were also evident in the West. Challenging the hypocrisy of the United States, Zakiyya narrates how a black man wished to marry a white woman whom later was killed by a hooded Klansman holding a rifle and shooting only because he is black. Through Zakiyya, one is introduced to the visual and verbal representation of race; seeing how racial identity is being rendered. As Zakiyya concludes: “And the wedding becomes a funeral”. By adopting this kind of story, Zakiyya rejects the traditional iconography of the US as the land that embodies freedom of speech and promotes human rights; instead producing her own version of liberty.

It is important to highlight that Ahmad Umar, one of the creators of Zakiyya intended to present a female comic character to attract a wider audience of female readers as well as challenge boys to do as well; moving beyond the construction of female characters as unintelligent individuals whose roles are only to be mothers. For example, in an academic competition, Zakiyya leads the girl’s team, beating the boys’ team in one of the strips; showing how girls can be smarter than them (Douglas & Malti-Douglas 1994:156). After the competition, she informs her friends about the important role played by Indira Ghandi, the prime minister of India and her accomplishments in the Indian National Congress Party. By introducing such a narrative in the comic, the creators are disseminating the idea that females can be great leaders like men. Their roles are not only constricted to doing household activities and obeying the
commands of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Instead, their alternative representations are only made possible through comics; showing the power they have through their accumulated knowledge and information. The reasons for refusing to depict Zakiyya through idealized forms of beauty are twofold. One reason is that Ahmad Umar was afraid that giving her both beauty and intelligence might create jealousy in his female readers. Second, he wanted the magazine to reach poor and populous areas in Egypt producing something that puts *turath* in strips, speaking about the divisions of class and social hierarchy between males and females within Egypt (Douglas & Malti-Douglas 1994).

Across the majority of comics discussed in this chapter, the construction of gender is central to the construction of nations. In the political domain, men are the rational and masters of two genders; while women continue to be in a subservient position and the irrational gender. But through the character of Zakiyya, artists stepped out of what is generally known as restricting gender definitions and moved into a political realm by challenging its manly nature. A direct message comes out through this character showing how comics create space for females to discuss issues of a forbidden nature. Instead of focusing on sexualized images of females, artists utilize an imagery that portrays females as more powerful than men; implying that Egyptian women have future potential to lead with their knowledge. Throughout this comic, women are not isolated from the outside world—a world that was socially and politically considered a masculine realm.

In 2003, *AK Comics* became the new trend in the Middle East producing what has been called the Middle East first superheroes. The establishment of *AK Comics* and the creation of its four superheroes *Zein*, *Rakan*, *Jalila*, and *Aya* were the invention of Ayman Kandeel, a businessman who owns investment and finance companies and is a professor of economics at
Cairo University. Kandeel did not only finance *AK Comics*, but also created all of the characters and their roles. The three major characters of *AK Comics* are depicted in the near future in imaginary Middle Eastern cities. For instance, Rakan is a medieval barbarian. Zein is a professor, a time-traveling descendant of the Pharaohs. Jalila is a Wonder Woman-type scientist who received her superpowers from an explosion at a nuclear plant. In normal life, Jalila is an ordinary girl looking after her brothers, one who is a drug addict and another one who always hangs out with gangs. On the other hand, Aya is a North African law student who has no superpowers, but uses her brain and depends on her agility, technological equipment, and martial arts skills to fight for justice and gender equality. In contrast, the character of Rakan is a medieval Arab swordman-warrior raised by a sabertooth tiger and only kills when he defends himself. It is interesting to note that the *AK Comics* have been met with some resistance from Egyptians. Any issues relating to religion, sensuality, and love are constantly avoided by the AK Comic Company despite the existence of the shapely characters Jalila and Aya. As Al-Telbany explains (2006), some subscribers have been offended because of Jalila’s curvaceous shape while others without backgrounds in comics, were troubled because the characters do not look like Egyptians.

According to Walid Al Tabany, a former producer of *AK Comics*, the strip was no longer issued due to administration problems in the production company along with huge financial losses. In “Comex BelMasry” documentary, he discusses how they were publicly known in the West due to interviews conducted on channels like CNN, BBC, and Belgium TV and how the Western world were surprised in the delay of introducing the superhero genre to Middle East audiences. He explains how the first four issues were done by foreign artists and writers; and later issues consisted of works by the comic readers (Comex BelMasry Documentary 2013).
In February 2008, the first Egyptian graphic novel *Metro* by Magdy Al Shafee discusses Mubarak’s unjust regime, in particular, the Ministry of the Interior. The novel is seen as one of the first cultural texts, expressing the attitudes of Egyptian people, regarding the miserable living conditions and unequal opportunities for youth. It also presents the diverse sufferings across classes in society. It is humorous to see how *Metro* got its popularity in Egypt and the West after the authoritarian regime attempted to censor the work but instead gave the writers an interesting marketing strategy. On April 8th, 2008, the 6th April Youth movement protested to in support of workers in El-Mahalla El-Kubra and the rising food prices. The police authorities arrested everyone in the movement and took custody of all the members of *Metro* at their office in Garden City. All of the copies of *Metro* distributed to bookstores like Shorouk and Diwan were confiscated as well. In Shorouk, one of the vendors was taken into custody for selling a copy to a customer; knowing nothing about the contents of the graphic novel. Al-Shorouk bookstore contacted Ibrahim Al Mu’allim, the chairman of Al-Shorouk, who was attending a festival in London at that time about the “Arabic Book”; hearing that an Arabic book had been confiscated and its creator imprisoned. According to Shafee, this was one of the main reasons *Metro* got known not only to Egyptians but also to a wider Western audience (Comex BelMasry Documentary 2013).

It is interesting to note that it is through human rights violations during Mubarak’s regime that the meanings of words and images can be powerful enough to encourage the prosecution of Shafee. He explains in the documentary “Comex BelMasry” the negative side of his court case and talks about the ridiculous questions the prosecutor asked about particular terminologies used in the novel, such as what is meant by the word ‘Ars. Shafee discusses how he abided by what the lawyer told him to do which is respond with the answer: “This graphic novel is fictional work
depending on imaginary characters”, which is actually not true. As every character narrated in the novel is a representation of individuals he met daily. It is surprising to me that an individual who is passionate for comics produced a piece that would have such an impact in Egyptian society.

The everyday conversations of gossiping, rumors, and jokes that people share while riding different types of transportation form an important aspect of understanding culture. They are considered parts of social information that have been ignored in most social and political analysis. Yet, through the comic platform people have a chance to reflect on their common concerns and complaints. As Scott McCloud highlights, in *Understanding Comics* (1993), one of the most interesting features about comics is their interpretation, their power to present a social discourse, that is based on context and meaning. Through the visual and verbal world of comics, we find an inter-textual quality that links the story world with the real world. A comic is powerful because it has the ability to grasp the inconsistencies between the virtual and real world; providing another representation of local events and societies. As Nancy Dziedric and Scot Peacock argue, “today comic books are widely considered to be potentially capable of complex and profound expression as both literary and visual art forms” (as cited in Duncan, Randy & Smith, Matthew 2009:1).

Comics have been the voices of many vocal dissidents in pre-revolutionary Egypt. Tarek Shahin, an Egyptian cartoonist is the author of the comic strip *Al Khan* (an online Egyptian comic), which ran under the auspices of *The Daily News Egypt*. Originally published in May 2008, *Al Khan* narrates the return of Omar Shukri, who left his banking job in London and returned home to Egypt (*Al Khan Comic Website*). All of the events presented from 2008 till 2011 end with the momentous period of protests in Tahrir Square. The main comic characters
-consist of Nada Saleh a journalist, Omar Shukri a publisher and former banker, Yunan Salib a photojournalist, Dr. Anwar Abutaleb a general practitioner, and finally Big Falafel a street beggar.

Nada Saleh is the fictional editor of the Al Khan magazine and identifies herself a social liberal. However, her boss Shukri sees her as a communist rather than a liberal. Nada, a rebellious woman both at home and work, leads her to controversial arguments particularly with Shukri, whom adopts a capitalist approach to political and social issues. Yunan Saliba, Nada’s best friend is a 40-year old Coptic Christian who still lives at his family house. He has been working as a photographer for Al Khan for the past twelve years. However, his family hoped that he would change tracks and eventually choose the right career: a medical doctor. Another key character in Al-Khan is Anwar Abutaleb whom represents a large proportion of the Egyptian population. Abutaleb is married to Aisha, a veiled woman with whom he has seven children. In the comic, he is always depicted with Shukri having shisha at the local qahwa (i.e. coffee shop) joking around his right in Islam to exercise polygamy. Finally, the character Big Falafel is an astute, over-sized street beggar who is aware of all the events occurring in the streets of Cairo and is the main source for Nada in her journalistic work. Big is not only the guy familiar with his neighborhood, he is the voice of reason in the streets of Cairo (Al Khan). When asked about the choice of name, Shahin says Big Falafel was the only character whose name he chose “just for a laugh” (Sandels, Alexandra 2008).
Al-Khan is successful in criticizing the hegemonic discourses of the Egyptian state showing the power of a comic in disrupting the dominant representations of an existing regime (Mitchell, Laura, 2013). Shahin, the comic illustrator is able to dispute the stability discourse offered during the Mubarak regime; providing a different vision of Egypt and its people. For example, as shown in figure 13, Shahin depicts Nada with a gas canister that signifies the voice of the National Democratic Party (NDP), highlighting that if the gas canister explodes; the Egyptian state will be in complete chaos and that the discourse of stability is the safest route forward for Egypt (Mitchell, Laura 2013:39). By performing other forms of actions as can be seen in the strip like voting for another party, the gas canister would explode. Yet, within the context of comics like Al-Khan, cartoonists are offering an alternative representation of a discourse that is not present in reality (Berg, 2009).

![Figure 13](image-url)
Comics are not only characterized by humor and satire, they transmit and share public knowledge and opinion at particular times (Mitchell, Laura 2013). They have the power to display on the ground realities of uneven wealth and resource distribution among various classes within particular societies. For instance, one series of Al-Khan titled “The Privatization of ENECO” represents the negative consequences of the privatization policy and its impact on the majority of Egyptians. Published on July 1st, 2008, Al Khan elucidates the contradictions between the liberal capitalists and the socialists, drawing attention to the fact that the rapid development of privatization has only benefited the rich class with many of the poor people struggling to find their subsidized bread. In an indirect way, the comic illustrator is sending an outright message to the audience that the processes of economic liberalization and privatization brought about the stability discourse have actually failed. The discourses prevalent in Al-Khan mark the beginning of protest action, with the uprising of Egyptians fighting against the unjust liberal policies enforced by the Mubarak regime. The availability of fictional characters and storylines within comics bring to the forefront a different image of the national identity of individuals, whom were no longer accepting the existing status quo in Egypt (Dunnett, 2009).
Prior to 2011, *Al-Khan* portrayed an image of “an Egyptian protester” encompassing the various revolutionary experiences, showing the affirmative identity of people fighting for an end to Mubarak’s oppressive regime (Mitchell, Laura 2013). This stance is represented through the character of Yasser Shoukry on February 25th, 2009, a TV host, calling out Egyptians to go to the streets; making sure that today’s youth are not going to be the tools of the Mubarak government. Through the power of imagination, Shahin is able to use satire within the comic platform not only to ridicule certain policies; but also to present the restrictions on the turnout within the Egyptian domestic context before the eruption of the 2011 revolution. As can be seen in figure 14, the situation in Egypt is visualized in a status of democracy denial showing the strategies of the NDP to consolidate their power within the country (Mitchell, Laura 2013). *Al-Khan* mirrors the corrupt regime of Mubarak, exposing practices of ballot stuffing, vote buying, and accessing polling booths for more than once. The visual and verbal narratives in *Al-Khan* construct a certain image of Egypt that lead to the 2011 revolution. The narratives presented comprise a visuality of resistance against the dominant discourse of the Egyptian state (Mitchell, Laura 2013:50).

The discourse presented in *Al-Khan* comic offers a powerful lens through which readers are able to analyze the everyday lives of Egyptian people. It showed how Egyptian people can be active subjects, who understand protester agency and the importance of their voice to rebel against the repressive rule of the Mubarak regime. *Al-Khan* comic played an essential role in the representations and visualizations of the Egyptian people reclaiming their own public space and affirming their own identities and narrating their own version of the story. Egyptians have been able to voice their political opinions through an online comic like *Al-Khan* challenging the dominant scripts of the state. It mocked the authoritarian regime of Mubarak; countering the
discourse of stability and supplied a different narrative. As highlighted by the above mentioned strips, the living conditions of Egyptians have been characterized by suffering and distress rather than the alleviation of poverty promised through the discourse of stability.

Popular art forms like comics have given a chance to Egyptians to share their collective grievances and a medium to protest. It is interesting to note how through such a medium, the Egyptian citizen is presented through a new identity, an identity of a protester fighting against an unjust regime. Through *Al-Khan* comic, a visuality of state hegemony and visuality of resistance in Egypt is being portrayed (Mitchell, Laura 2013:39). *Al-Khan* gives new insights on how comics are becoming an apparatus of resistance challenging any arguments put forward by a political regime. The visual element present in *Al-Khan* comic provides a clear understanding of the events leading up to the uprising of Egyptians on the 25th January 2011.

With the circulation and continuation of *Al-Khan* comic on the worldwide web before 2011, the Egyptian cartoonist does not only critique the political discourse; he makes critical views about social and culture taboos in Egypt that are often received wrongly by the wider Egyptian public. He discusses issues ranging from the veil, patriarchy, and violence. Throughout his strips, he shows how women wearing the niqab continue to be harassed; showing how the Egyptian legal system has been a complete failure in this regards. It depicts how women decide to veil themselves after incidents of sexual assaults for fear of society’s perception of them. *Al-Khan* also challenges the misogynist interpretation of Islam by Sheikhs in the areas of marriage, around the acceptability of husbands hitting and attacking their wives. The comic of *Al-Khan* is not seen as only as form of political commentary; but also a social one.

Yet, it is interesting to see the shift in the areas of political participation and violence after the 25th January uprising. Egyptians are becoming fearless discussing political ideologies,
participating in constitutional referendums and women are fighting against all the patriarchal connotations. In one comic, a woman wearing the niqab slaps her husband’s neck while riding with him on a motorcycle for harassing other women on the street.

In 2011, comics started to be directed towards adults rather than children like *TokTok* magazine, *Autostrade* comic book, *Out of Control*, and *You are free*; along with initiatives like *Combo Mag* which gathered a large number of artists and writers that did not have space to print or distribute their works. Ahmed Abaza, the head of *Combo Mag* recounts how the magazine team started to call various artists and writers whom would be interested to join, giving them 5-10 pages and printing their stories for free allowing them to use whatever style they like from Japanese Manga to Disney to the French Style. Abaza notes how he is going to collaborate with Kryptonite stores because they are the only megastore that specialize in distributing comics across Egypt (Comics BelMasry 2013).

It is with no doubt that the comic medium lends itself either to simplification or exaggeration. As discussed in this chapter, comics convey certain meanings of the position of the female body during particular moments of history. They demonstrate how the stereotyped representation of the female continues or stops depending on the perceptions of cartoonists and how they identify their roles in the society they live in. The images provided above show the contradictory representation of women in three different ways: first, a woman is seen as a symbol for the nation. Second, a woman is depicted as an independent rational individual and third as *mu’allima* employing others to ensure the survival of family business. During the early history, comics have been featured as spaces of resistances against British colonialism, asserting the gender order to fight against this enemy. However, with the progression of the comic industry, one can see that there has been a visuality of resistance (as mentioned above by Al-Khan) that
emerged against the unjust regime of President Mubarak, having nothing to do with the existing gender order. Everyone, males or females were suppressed by the regime. It is important to sketch a history of Egyptian comics, because this thesis is one of the first attempts to discuss them critically.
Chapter Two: The Veil, Worn for Other Purposes

This chapter highlights that through the comics of *TokTok*, *Qahera*, and *Al-Shakmgia*, comic creators are able to challenge conceptions of veiled women and their power. The chapter shows that the discourses prevalent in the comics’ stories relate to the everyday lives of Egyptian people on the streets and their neighborhoods. Egyptian comics broke the stereotypes of the veil as something that is oppressive, forced upon women and that it is just a regular piece of cloth like any others they choose to wear in public. Dress is a language through fabric. Used to mark identities and difference, the veil is not just a small piece of material, but also a powerful symbol of resistance and dissent. On the other hand, a majority of women wear the hijab to uphold Islam’s code of modesty. Even though most consider the veil as a symbol of religious adherence, the veil has been influenced by changing fashion throughout history due to socio-cultural and political factors. Thus, it is an item of clothing that is perpetually “pregnant with meanings” (Ahmed 1992, p.166). The hijab becomes a sign for visual contestation between freedom and agency, oppression and retrogression. As a form of dress, it functions as non-verbal communication, in a two-way interaction that serves both as a sender and receiver of messages (Arthur 2000 & Shirazi 2001). As Fatema Al Mernissi highlights, “The Hijab, the Veil”, the concept of the veil is three dimensional and the three dimensions often blend into one another. She writes,

The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight. The root of the verb *hajaba* means to “hide”. The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. And finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden. So we have not just tangible categories that exists in the reality of the senses-the visual, the spatial-but also an abstract reality in the realm of ideas (1991, p.93-94).
Yet, the meaning of the hijab is often misrepresented by non-Muslims. As Leila Ahmed explains, the veil continues to be an indicator of oppression in the Western cultural narrative and anyone refusing to take it off is described as anti-feminist (1992, p.162). In Muslim cultures, veiling is not only about subordination, oppression and religious markers, but also about “expression”; it (i.e. veiling) is a performance to shape others’ impressions (Billard 2009:120 as cited in Anna, Anthro 2012).

For example, Naif Mutawa’s visualization of Muslim women in *The 99* moves beyond the conceptual dichotomy of oppressed or free veiled women and allows for a fuller appreciation of the multipronged range of issues facing Muslim women. He shows the multiple belongings, roles and status of women within their communities, capturing and illustrating their diversity. The story of *The 99* starts with the invasion of Baghdad in the eleventh century by Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, whose armies destroy the famous Dar al-Hikma (i.e. House of Wisdom)\(^1\) and discard all its books into the Tigris River. To preserve the knowledge of precious books, some librarians throw *The 99* gemstones into the river to absorb the knowledge. These gemstones, which have special powers, also called Noor Stones are scattered all over the world to be found later by Dr. Razem Ramzi. Dr. Ramzi administers *The 99* Foundation in Paris, travels around the world to gather the gem-bearers, the individuals whom are channeling the special properties inherent in the stones to fight evil (*The 99* & Shirin, Edwin 2012:174).

Even though *The 99* is not an Egyptian comic, it is important to mention it because it is considered the first comic produced from the Middle East addressing a Western audience about the misconceptions over Islam and veiled women. Through *The 99*, Mutawa hopes to reconcile

---

\(^1\) A major intellectual center during the Islamic Golden Age.
Islam back to its proper image. As Naif Mutawa explains after the attack on the World Trade Centers in 9/11:

I had already made a decision that I needed to find a way to take back Islam from its hostage takers, but I did not know how. The answer was staring me in the face. It was as simple and as difficult as the multiplication of 9 by 11: The 99. So at the age of 32, I uncapped my pen to create a concept that could be popular in the East and the West. I would go back to the very sources from which others took violent and hateful messages and offer messages of tolerance and peace in their place. I would give my heroes a Trojan horse in the form of the 99. Islam was my Helen. I wanted her back. (Deeb 2012: 393)

Inspired by The 99 names of God, the characters in the comic magazine seek to extol characteristics such as generosity, mercy, and wisdom that were often ignored when describing Islam in American comics. Through The 99, there is a new breed of Muslims: those with a new epistemology of rationalism that is embedded in superheroes to reverse the deeply rooted trend of Islamophobia that continues to poison Western media and societies. Instead, it is the voice of reason (aql) that is being used to interpret and analyze the multiple discourses and identities of resistance and subordination.

For example, in the story of “Light and Dark” from issue 1, the reader is directed to Dr. Ramzi’s first encounter with a young Emirati woman named Dana, whom later on
came to be known as Noora, whose special ability allows her to delve into the souls of everyone when she meets them (Edwin 2011:175). Her powers allow her to discern light or good, darkness or evil, as if through an x-ray vision (Figure 15).

In the comic frame, the evil that Noora sees is marked in black to signify the degree of depravity in an individual. The powers of Noora mirror the Qur’anic concept of Allah as Al Noor or light, where “Allah is the light of the heaven and the earth” (Ali 2006, p.876). Through her superpowers, she transforms into a brave and confident woman. Yet, Noora’s confidence is heavily traumatized due to her past. She can never forget how she was abducted and tortured for a ransom that her wealthy father refused to pay (The 99 and Edwin 2011:175). She tries to escape by digging a tunnel, but she is constantly haunted by her abusive experience. She even recalls her suffering later on in the airport when she sees a man resembling one of her kidnappers. In a moment, she is reminded of her persecution and her face turns pale with fear (Figure 16). However, she does not abandon her father when he was later kidnapped despite feelings of hatred and guilt towards him. As she tells Dr. Ramzi, “I hated him Dr. Ramzi, I hated him so much. But he’s my father” (Al-Mutawa and Nicieza 2009c, pp. 19–21).

By writing such a story in the first issue, Mutawa is informing the reader that discrimination against girls still persists in Muslim cultures. He is showing that Muslim Arab countries are still accused of guilt for their unjust behaviors towards women and he does not
deny it. However, instead of focusing on such unfair practices, Mutawa reformulates the story to highlight that even though Noora remembers her father as someone who gave her up to the kidnappers whom abducted her, she recalls how in Islam, Allah ordered us not to say a word of contempt nor repel any of them. Instead, the comic artists direct the reader to recall how “the Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor (Israa 23)” and “spread over them humbly the wings of thy tenderness and say: O my Sustainer! Bestow Thy grace upon them, even as they cherished and reared me when I was a child” (17:24).

The character Noora becomes a symbol of mercy rather than vengeance, illuminating the peaceful nature of Islam. It is even interesting to note how the first female character mentioned by Mutawa, even though a Muslim, is not wearing the veil, the niqab, or the chador. Instead, the character is visualized in a stylish and attractive design in contrast to the stereotyped image of a Muslim woman wearing a “body bag” (Goodwin 2002:334 as cited in Edwin, Shirin 2012:193). In The 99, Naif Mutawa decides to introduce the first female character unveiled in relation to gender oppression, similar to what happened with Noora and her father. This sends a direct message to the Western readers, that the veil is not the signifier of women’s oppression in Muslim countries but rather the existence of some cultural practices that continue to treat women as sexual commodities, as evident with the abduction of Noora and her father’s rejection to pay the ransom. The production of cultural objects such as comics (in this case The 99) is a form of social activity that constitutes a work of art reflecting the existence of complex realities across the world. Through the social space of The 99, Mutawa has been able to spread another image of Muslim women who are not veiled, generating different perceptions of them. The field of comics
is a “structured space with its own laws of functions and its own relations of force” (Johnson, R. 1993: 6) having a high degree of autonomy from other fields that have been able to challenge misconceptions of Islam and Muslim women. The success of The 99 is not only evident because of its redesigning of the concept of superhero, but also its ability to foster an inter-cultural understanding about Muslim women in the West.

It is interesting to note that Endemol, a German company bought the animation rights for a television adaptation to The 99 (Edwin, Shirin 2015:174). And more recently, the American cable channel The Hub, a joint venture between Hasbro and Discovery, announced that it was adding The 99 to its list of fall programming, making Al-Mutawa one of the most sought after Middle Eastern writers (Edwin 2015:174). As Beaty argues (2007), The 99 is a departure from the “traditional aesthetics of comics production” (p.95) that have been able to reconcile the antagonisms to the existing narratives of Islamophobia and the oppression of Muslim women; highlighting that comics are not only made by cartoonists for commercial purposes. They also represent different cultural industries that are linked to different groups in societies. It is not only created for the affluent, but also for the less-educated masses of society. The comic field is a platform of cultural production that is characterized by high levels of cultural and economic capital; in which a number of social actors like Naif Mutawa compete for different sets of resources, not only economic ones but also cultural compelling the reader to examine and visualize about the righteous image of Islam and Muslim women (Bourdieu 1993).

Unfortunately, the stereotypical images of veiled women have continued to enter the mainstream by reinforcing demeaning narratives on Middle Eastern cultures. For example, Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s short film, Submission presents an image of an oppressed Muslim woman that is subjected to rape, violence, injustice, and incest (as cited in Nayebzadah, Rahela 2008:108). Orientalist ideas
about Muslim women have managed to distort much of our understandings. Words such as the veil, polygamy and violence continue to be associated with the oppressed veiled woman. Yet, scholars like Lila Abu-Lughod instructs us to understand that the veil “must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency” (2006, p.3). As a piece of cloth, it does not seclude women from society, but rather it “legitimizes their presence inside it” (Ahmed 1992, p.224).

For instance, in Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood, Marjane Satrapi starts her narrative with the introduction of the veil in the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Shah’s overthrow. The issue of the veil is not presented via a young woman, but rather through a child’s eyes. Through a chapter named the “Veil”, the readers are exposed to Marji’s recounting of the re-veiling of Iranian society. She illustrates how veiling can be both a sign of inclusion and exclusion from public space. She notes that:

Then came 1980. The year it became obligatory to wear the veil at school. We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to. And also because the year before, in 1979, we were in a French non-religious school where boys and girls were together. And then suddenly in 1980, all bilingual schools must be closed down. They are symbols of capitalism, of decadence […]. We found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends. (Satrapi 2003: 3-4)

Through this graphic novel, it is interesting to note how in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini mandated that a new Islamic dress code for women has been set including the veil. For any woman refusing to adopt this kind of dress, she is under a constant threat of death. The veil, became a mean of flouting government control. It had nothing to do with morality and religiosity, but has been used by an authoritarian state to impose its power over Iranian women. Rather than a marker of status, emancipation or empowerment, the veil symbolizes patriarchal control exercised by Khomeini to have ultimate control. After revolution it was not only women forced to adopt their veils, but men who were not allowed to wear neckties and bowties as they are symbols of the cross and the oppressive West and this practice continues today. Through Persepolis, it can be seen that the
return to the veiling discourse was not to repudiate Western dictates and foreign identities in Iran; but rather to consolidate the power of the governing elite. This is clearly evident with Marij’s representation of the discriminatory policies of Khomeinini against women. Even though *Persepolis* is not an Egyptian comic, it is important to mention because it is the first graphic novel to be written from a female perspective and the first one to address the political implications of the veil for someone growing up in the Orient. Also, it corrects some of the Western misrepresentation of the veil that emerged even before the bombing of the World Trade Centers in 2001. Through *Persepolis*, the reader is always reminded that the visual work of comics “does not exist in their pure form, they are always contaminated by the information the rest of our senses (hearing, touch, smell) providing us with different texts and discourses” (Shohat and Stam 1998:55 as cited in Volkmer, Ingrid 2012:419).

Across the three comics of *Al-Shakmgia, TokTok* and *Qahera*, veiled women are not represented as one dimensional characters as highlighted above. They are not closed-minded, submissive oppressed individuals but rather the main characters and even super heroines. *Qahera*, a *hijabi* super heroine “captures a girl’s struggles for identity and recognition in a time (i.e.2011) when being a female was nothing but a disadvantage in Egypt” (Lili Hornyai). The creator of *Qahera*, Deena Mohammed, a 19 year old Egyptian graphic design student, decides to name the superheroine Qahera, which signals Cairo and also refers to the conqueror, omnipotent, vanquisher, and victorious superheroine that fights against the injustices of women in Egyptian society. Mohammed felt compelled to challenge the misogynist articles written by Egyptians and non-Egyptians in English about veiled women. As she explains:
I wanted to create a superhero to face some of the things that frustrated me, [especially the patriarchy and misogyny evident in post-revolution Egypt]. I feel like there is a need for female Muslim superheroes who actually deal with the real-life issues we face instead of fictional super villains (because let’s face it, half of the things Muslim women have to deal with feel like they’ve been concocted by super villains) (Grigsby, Hope 2015:2).

It is even interesting to note how she emphasizes that Qahera is a “superhero who wears a hijab, not a superhero because she wears a hijab”. Like the rest of superheroes, Qahera uses her tremendous power of strong hearing along with her weapons that include a katana, staff, and a hijab-lasso to teach her perpetrators a lesson. Through the imagination and drawing of Deena Mohammed, one can see the creative use of the hijab in fighting against injustices. An online comic like Qahera provides leverage countering the stereotypes of the veiled woman as a secluded individual; showing how a hijab-lasso can be actually liberating. The images of veiled Muslim female bodies continue to provoke intense reactions and feelings, both from Muslims and non-Muslims. Yet, it is through Qahera’s platform that the Western preoccupation of rescuing the veiled oppressed women has been dropped. Largely essentialized by Western media, and presented as rarely speaking, Dina Mohammed decides to show Muslim’s women agency and freedom of choice.
It is interesting to note how Deena Mohamed challenges the characterization of veiled woman as someone unable to speak for herself; refusing to depict her within the generic stereotype of the oppressive individual. As seen in figure 18, FEMEN takes the role of emancipating veiled woman doing exactly the same like male chauvinists; reinforcing the labeling of veiled women as victims of religion. In the comic, it is obvious to witness how FEMEN are assuming that their voices are the only normative universal feminist reason; believing that they know veiled women better than they know themselves. Yet, through the narrative present in Qahera, veiled women’s agency comes to the forefront; imposing and exercising their ideological
power and dominance over men as well as feminist groups like FEMEN (Figures 18, 19).

Why does the act of veiling remain troubling for many to accept till today, when “one or two generations ago, hats were commonly worn by women in churches” (McDonough, Sheila 2003, p. 141). Also, looking back in history, “It was never argued, for instance, even by the most ardent nineteenth-century feminists, that European women could liberate themselves from the oppressiveness of Victorian dress (designed to compel the female figure to the ideal of frailty and helplessness by means of suffocating, rib-cracking stays, it must surely rank among the more constrictive fashions of relatively recent times) only by adopting the
dress of some other culture” (Ahmed 1992, p. 224). It is even interesting to highlight how Victorian dress has been criticized by various groups of women and that has not been linked to their liberation. Instead, their liberation has been framed in relationship to men, not in relationship to a different culture or different set of women like what is happening with hijab.

So why do Western feminists expect Muslim women to remove their veils? Why should Egyptian women abandon their cultural ways to adapt to those of the West? Through Qahera, the various situations of Muslims is not reduced to a single item of clothing, but rather concerned about the humane and just treatment of women. Through an indirect way, Deena Mohammed tries to deliver the message that women should be judged for their actions and behaviors and not how much cleavage they are able to show. Qahera opens up “a space for the reader to pause, between the panels”, giving a chance for them to analyze what they see and read (Gardner, Jared 2012:154). For instance, it is interesting to note how Deena Mohammed uses only the colors of black, white, and grey in her comic panels; in which the grey color is restricted to Qahera only. Deena Mohammed, the creator sets the background of the comic to show the world of absolutes Qahera lives through. Evidently, she is visually marked with the grey color to show her distinct identity in the various surroundings. She sets a new platform of a Muslim veiled woman identity. By introducing the grey color, Mohammed informs the reader that there is a new order or ideology and delivers the message that Qahera’s veiling is not a form of oppression or inequality. Instead, Qahera represents a new form of the Islamic woman, one who does not conform to the stereotyped images of Muslim women and who represents her own version of the veil. Instead of using the veil as a marker of otherness and as a heuristic shortcut to denote Islamic extremism; the veil is a revived signifier that she is reformulating and redefining according to her purposes. Every time she fights against savior ideologies, violence, or sexism; she is showing a new
perspective of Egyptian Muslim women. Every panel through the whole five parts asserts that Qahera is rooted in strength and independence. As the above comic panel highlights (figures 18, 19), Qahera stresses this fact when dealing with FEMEN who are trying to save her from the veil oppression. She eloquently elucidates that: “You seem unable to understand that we do not need your help”. She, Qahera becomes a direct opposition to those thinking of Muslim women as voiceless individuals. As Samaa Abdurraquib posits, “Muslim women who choose to veil are constantly combating the discursive construction that labels them as always oppressed, it becomes difficult to hear voices that assert otherwise” (2006:59). The West always tends to forget that the pro-veiling discourse emerged during colonial domination; determining its meaning and setting the terms for it (Ahmed, Leila 1992: 235). The hijab is a symbol of change rather than oppression; it is not only related to a personal and a moral decision but also symbolizes a kind of social sisterhood to women (Zuhur as cited in Bullock, Katherine 2002:95-96). Through the platform of an online Egyptian comic, the character of Qahera asserted otherwise. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, the power in comics is that they “take the stereotype and deforms or disfigures it, exaggerating some of its features” (Mitchell, W.T 2013:20).

When meeting Dina Mohammed at a conference event, it was interesting to note that Dina herself was not veiled. Instead, she wore a Western style of dress, including a chemise, jeans and Nike shoes. The conference itself was conducted in English and the sponsors for it came from a university in the United Kingdom. It came to my mind during that particular moment Chandra Mohanty’s piece Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity where she addresses a major flaw with the definition of power and how that relates to Qahera’s depiction of the power struggle among diverse groups of women. Mohanty (2003)
argues power is always divided into two distinct groups: the powerful versus the powerless. With women always perceived as the powerless group; their shift into the powered group means taking over men and dismantling their power. Thus, a new hierarchy emerges where women become powerful and men remain powerless. But the dilemma is that men or women as a group are not all powerful or powerless. It is important to mention that “women are not a homogenous group or category, even though this is a common assumption in the Western world” (Mohanty, Chandra 2003:39). And it is precisely that these contradictions and classifications that Mohammed brings to the forefront through her comic. Mohammed challenges the representations of Third World women as victims of male violence, their dependence on husbands, and victims of arranged marriages.

**Reasons for Veiling**

There is no doubt that some women in Egypt utilize the veil as tactic to gain respect in a male dominated society where it is difficult for a woman to gain autonomy. For other groups of women, the veil is an affordable form of clothing particularly for the lower middle class who cannot afford expensive Western attire (Bullock, Katherine 2002:85-135).

Wearing the *hijab* allows women to associate themselves with the economic values of upper-middle-class women while still dissociating themselves from the customs they find problematic. Thus the *hijab* signals women’s resistance to the economic pressures of their class inequalities and expresses their attempt to rise in the social hierarchy while retaining their sub cultural identity (MacLeod 1991:135).

For many others, the veil is a marker of fidelity and sexual purity for women who want to get married. It is also a form of dress to avoid men’s harassment on the streets; relying on how other people should treat veiled women in public spaces. In addition, the hijab is a means to liberate themselves from male gazes; taking in charge of their own bodies. It allows them physical
mobility feeling free from the male gaze. Finally, the hijab is not a mark of oppression; rather it is a sign of liberation that protects them from a sexiest society (Bullock, Katherine 2002:85-135). It is a form of self-defense against the Egyptian male “tradition” of “harassing women by the most demeaning and undignified words, gestures, and touching” (Yefet, Karin 2011:104).
Translation: “An Egyptian Tale”

Girl: “Any girl my age dreams to have a wonderful love story, in which the one she loves sees her as the most beautiful girl in the world.”

“These dreams may stay in her mind throughout her life.”

“For example, she may imagine going to work with her husband or her lover wearing what she wants.”

“But my dreams are different.”

“Maybe because I have a vast imagination that despite its vastness still cannot leave reality.”

“Because without this imagination, I may commit suicide or blow myself up in a public square.”

“What shall I do when I hear my neighbor Kimo speaking about what he will do to his colleague’s organs every night, while we both know that he means to make me hear his silly talk to see how I will react.”

“I have to make my imagination work and imagine what he says something else.”

Kimo (in her imagination): “Goodbye Princess. May you return to your palace with all goodness, hope and brightness.”
Translation: “An Egyptian Tale Continued”

Girl: “But the problem is not only in what I hear.”

“The problem is also in the spaces that are not estimated well.”

“And the hands that deserve to be cut.”

“I have to get back to my imagination and see it differently.”

Man 1 (in her imagination): “My sword will always be wielded for your protection.”

Man 2 (in her imagination): “Your comfort is my personal responsibility, Princess.”

Figure 20. 2
Translation: “An Egyptian Tale Continued”

Girl: “This adds to the hands that I don’t get if their intention is good or bad.”

“And sticking in the crowd is for sure not even an inch close to goodness.”

Voice (in her imagination): “Princess, the royal dragon is under your command.”

Figure 20. 3
Translation: “An Egyptian Tale Continued”

Girl: “But imagination will not make you understand what the toktok driver is actually doing.”

“But this time I left imagination and focused on the mirror.”

“Because you have to notice his staring on your breast while he takes the bumps fast.”

“But, at the end, you have to run to your imagination before losing your mind.”
Translation: “An Egyptian Tale Continued”

“Then, you arrive to work.”

“After every inch of your body has been harassed.”

“To find your manager waiting for his turn.”

“Imagination is the key (solution).”

“All the fantasies and dreams that make me patient throughout the day.”

“Are nothing compared to the final dream.”

“And the best dream.”
But in the story of “An Egyptian Tale” in *Al-Shakmgia*, it is completely a different story (figures 20.1 to 20.5). The veiled body is not the means through which women’s bodies are preserved from men’s harassment and their gazes in the streets. Instead, the female character does not employ the veil to protect herself from male gazes but rather works with it to live a normal live. The artist deploys the gaze and directs our attention not only to the visibility of the male characters, but also to how the female character utilizes a preexisting gaze to escape the everyday harassment on the streets. For Mokhtar Zein, the comic artist, the gaze does not only symbolize the eye or the look, but also who sees the seer. Perhaps the best way to differentiate between the look and the gaze is through Lacan’s interpretation, “I see only from one point but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (Lacan 1998, p.72). As figures 20.2 & 20.3 highlight, the female character uses her eye to see the gaze not simply as a projection of the other looking upon her; but rather through which she plays with her own image, mapping herself within the comic panel according to the coordinates of her own desire. Within the visual realm of the comic panel, the female character plays with her image where she can be seen from all sides; but cannot see herself. Refusing to see herself from the view of harassers, she decides to represent her own ideal image that shows a unified and fully identified self. In this story, the female’s sexuality is renegotiated through the visual element of the comic; which can be seen through the female’s character navigation and her predetermined role as a spectacle of the macro-gazes².

---

² The male gaze is attributed to Laura Mulvey essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Pleasure” that has been published in 1975. In this essay, she elaborates how women in films are usually represented as “objects of the gaze”- meaning as “objects of desire”. Throughout films, audiences always perceive characters from the perspective of a heterosexual male and this is the reason for the representation of women as sexual objects.
For example, when one of the men grabs her breasts on public transportation, she turns the narrative the other way around where she imagines herself riding in a royal horse car along with the same two men guarding and protecting her from any invasion of privacy. Throughout this story, the female character uses the veil to make a self-conscious individual image, “an image linked to all other imaginative and idealized visualizations of the human body” (Hollander, Anne 1993: xiv). In this story, the veil is not used as a symbol of protection but rather as a part of a woman’s lived subjectivities in modern day Egypt. This comic is important because it bridges the imaginary with the everyday, giving a chance for women a sense of emancipation of their sufferings.

When interviewing Fatma Mansour, the editor of Al-Shakmgia about this particular story, she discussed how they never informed Mokhtar Zein, the comic artist, on how to visualize the female imagination. I asked her, why when portraying her through her imagination, he decided to draw her unveiled? And the reply I received is that, there is never a princess who is veiled. She continued to assert during the interview, “this is the visualization of the comic artist himself”. She argues that in this story, even though the female character wants to feel her sense of beauty, she remembers that she needs to wear a whole bunch of clothes layers to avoid the harassment on the public transportation; and this narrative, in this comic, the veil is not related to a woman’s oppression but rather as a tool to liberate the character from male gazes (interview with the researcher, 11th June 2015).

It is worth recounting how the ending of the story is something completely different than the one printed in the issue distributed. Fatma remembers how originally Zein depicted the female character holding a dagger in her hands moving towards all of the harassers to kill them all in her imagination. In an attempt to change the stereotyped image of Nazra as a group of
angry feminists, Fatma the editor of *Al-Shakmgia*, tells Zein that they do not want to propagate for violence, so why not instead resort to the path of justice and file a case in court. She explains how *Nazra* wants to challenge the stereotyped representation of angry radical feminists whom are always shown as men haters, wanting to destroy and break everything in front of them. In these comics, the visualization of gender is not linked to the depiction of social norms of beauty and sexuality (slim, attractive, fit, heterosexual) reproducing a complex combination of binaries but rather a new visual knowledge of gender. The comics show that habits about visualized gender are based on a longstanding, culturally rooted notion of everyday lives. The hybrid forms of visualizing gender particularly presented in comics, allows for a polysemous, that is multiple decodings of gender relations in Egyptian society.
Translation: “The House of Um Sodfa”

Figure 21. 1
Translation: “The House of Um Sodfa Continued”
Knocking on the door
Um Sodfa opens the door and finds no one
Translation: “The House of Um Sodfa Continued”

Kids: “ohhhhhh”

Kid 1: “You knocked and ran away!!”

Kid 2: “You weren’t afraid?!?”

Kid 3: “He said he entered Um Sodfa’s house.”

Kid 4: “You crazy!” / “You naughty.”

Kid 4: “When you entered the house, was it really haunted?”

Mr. Mohsen (the grocer): “Why didn’t you clean in front of the shop you silly kid?”

Figure 21. 3
Terrible workers...

Oh my goodness!

Ah, come Ramzy, I need to speak to you.

Don’t be upset when I speak harshly to you.

I do it for your own good. You know I have no one to depend on but you.

That’s why I’ll send you on a mission that only you can do.

Um Sodfa owes us money. Go ahead champ and get them for us.

Ramzy: “No! I beg you Sir. Please! Please!”

“Return me back home to the countryside, please Sir!”
Translation: “The House of Um Sodfa Continued”

Mr. Mohsen: “Don’t be afraid. I’ll tell her from here.”
“Bring whatever you can from her.”

Ramzy: “Oh, my wasted life!”

Mr. Mohsen: “Um Sodfa, you haven’t paid your dues for a year and a half.”
“You ….. woman”

Boom noise
Translation: “The House of Um Sodfa Continued”

Mr. Mohsen: “My money!”
Ramzy: “Help, Sir!”
“Please, take me to my mother.”
Banging noise
Translation: “The House of Um Soda Continued”

Man 1: “Oh my God.”

Ramzy: “That’s it Sir. The stairs suddenly cracked and fell alone. I didn’t feel anything until I saw her in front of me.”

Man 2: “How about calling the fire station to bring her down. Poor her.”

Man 3: “Why would we bring her down? She never comes down anyway.”

Man 2: “How about we collect money for her to fix the stairs. It is a pity to leave her like this.”

Mr. Mohsen (mocking Man 2’s kind heart): “Find a solution for this Hany Shaker who is sitting with us.” (on overacting singer)

Man 3 (to Mr. Mohsen): “Where are you going?”

Mr. Mohsen: “Stay up there hanging, and anyway I’ll get my money by any means.”
It is interesting to note as shown in the story of “Um Sodfa” in *TokTok*, that the traditional gender roles have been dissolved (figures 21.1 to 21.7). Visually, gender is no longer characterized through the superficial markers like the veil, long dresses, and jewelry for women. It is no longer socially constructed as a binary code of man/woman versus masculinity/femininity. Instead, gender is staged around numerous aspects of everyday lives including the veil, the day-to-day interaction and social realities. Egyptian comic artists have offered new questions on gender relationships in their society by engaging it through the production of comic art. The question of how a “woman” is represented visually and how the body is emphasized and domesticated in newer forms is a key and opens a whole new set of interpretations. Even if veiled women are depicted as housewives, they are no longer revealed as the voiceless, the subordinate individual. Instead, they are depicted in active, oppositional stances accompanied with rebellious captions as can be seen in the story of “Um Sodfa”. In being veiled, the women in these images “consciously use culturally mandated appearance norms to achieve their personal ends” (Weitz, Rose 2001: 683). Simply because the veil is a traditional symbol of Muslim Egyptian women dress, this does not mean that it cannot be put into new expressions. As Sherine Hafez writes, “these bodies… offer novel forms of corporeal practices that as they appropriate systemic forms of discipline and regulation also reconstitute them into new and personal ways of expressing counter discursive means of resistance” (2014:175). In other words, comic artists are redefining the meaning of the veil criticizing the patriarchal structures that uphold the veil as a tool to control women’s bodies and modesty. The veil is not only a sign for female virtue; it is a piece of a cloth signifying rebellion against hegemonic oppressive forces in society as shown in the story of “Um Sodfa” (Hafez, Sherine 2014: 176). As
Sherine Hafez articulates, the veil becomes the symbol of resistance for the corporal body of women in society. This new identity and connotation attributed to the veil is the outcome of re-arranging the individual experience to the societal practice writ large. In more condensed words, the veil in comics – although holds meanings propagated by patriarchal relations- empowers women to oppose this oppression, not fall for the traps of hegemonic patriarchy. It is just that comics visualize the veil in a new way of expressing resistance, sending an outright message to the viewer to not categorize veil.

When discussing the story of Um Sodfa with Mohammed Tawfik, one of TokTok founders, he explained how the West make their own stories about the Middle East through their own comics and media platforms, which contradicts everything about us in our Egyptian society. He continued saying that the West always make the narrative about the veil that it is oppressive to women and that the veil is imposed on women by Egyptian men against their own will. The Egyptian man is always depicted as a violent bully when treating women. This is similar to the reason why Anwar (the cartoonist sketching this story), decided to draw the normal life of an Egyptian woman in the suburbs of Cairo who wears a conservative dress, which is the normal clothing for the majority of women in these neighborhoods (interview with the researcher, 1 June 2015).

Comic artists move beyond the representations of female bodies and their costumes, addressing complex gender issues that are to be explored in the storylines offered. As Julia Round argues in “Can I call you Mommy? Myths of the feminine and superheroic in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean’s Black Orchid (2010)”, the potential of a comic to merge text and graphics together prove to be one of the ways to transform gender norms. Through comics, gender is a construct that can be re-inscribed and subverted to challenge existing cultural norms.
The story of Um Sodfa does not only offer an alternative model of power but also transgress the norms of femininity within the Egyptian comic genre.

In Um Sodfa, the woman is no longer constructed to satisfy the desires of the male spectator’s gaze and the perceived pleasures in heterosexual relationships (Crane 1999: 542); producing the feminine body with the male viewer in mind (Berger, John 1987). The feminine body is not represented as thin, free from unwanted hair, deodorized and perfumed (Orbach 1978:20-21) despite the overwhelmingly large number of male fan comic books (Jones 2004: 33 as cited in Scott, Suzanne 2013). By showing the story of Um Sodfa in TokTok, women are not treated as “objects” of desire but rather as human beings. Women are not treated as instruments for the objectifier’s intentions. They are not marginalized and defined as the other in a society dominated by Egyptian men. Rather, Egyptian women have a voice among the public. Even the veiled Egyptian woman in a wheel chair shown in figure 21.3 does not give up towards the physical brutality and aggressiveness of such a patriarchal society. In this story, one can see the reversal of gender representation, in which Um Sodfa deviates from the feminine characteristics associated with softness and kindness and the stereotyped representation of women who are wearing the veil. Through the character of Um Sodfa, one sees the traits of masculinity including confidence, responsibility, and discipline. As seen in figure 21.5, Um Sodfa despite not paying the accumulated bills to Mr. Mohsen, the grocer she is keen that tomorrow all the stuff that she needs is going to be delivered. Throughout the narrative, there is an assertion on how Um Sodfa is a responsible individual, rejecting to be a victim due to her physical disability; not behaving in the way society expected for her. She is disciplined in the sense that she takes charge of her life, with watering the cactus at the last panel. The power of Um Sodfa is evident with her not speaking a single word in the entire narrative. As we sometimes say “power lies in silence”.

87
A comic has the “potential to open up new troubled spaces” (Whitlock, Gillian 2006:976), lifting up the burden of the reading processes and the repetitive lines as Mohammed Ismail highlights, a writer both in TokTok and Al-Shakmgia. He explains that through a simple drawing, the intended message of the story can be delivered. A look at The 99, Persepolis, Qahera, Al-Shakmgia and TokTok panels show that they do not consist of vicious stereotypes, particularly for women and gender relations. Gender roles are not designed to market for the entertainment and consumption of hetero-normative audiences. Instead, they show the contradictions in depicting not only the veil, but also gender relations. As Mitchell states,

“.the tensions between visual and verbal representations are inseparable from struggles in cultural politics and political culture... issues like “gender, race and class”, the production of “political horrors” and the production of “truth, beauty, and excellence” all converge on questions of representation. (Mitchell 1995, p.3).

Unlike film, TV, literature or theatre, comics have the “possibility of immediate discussion” at a particular historical juncture. As Bourriaud highlights, “I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time” (1998, p .16).

In the Middle East, many contemporary artists have engaged with different issues regarding women through their creative practices that expose comic artwork that correlates to the visibility of their culture. This visibility through comics highlights the inherent social issues within said cultures and contradictions, which may otherwise remain unacknowledged. For example, to examine class and gender, photographers like Carrie Mae Weems, uses certain narratives to project her own personal experience. She elaborates that her role as an artist involves crafting out the chaotic daily-instances and critiquing its shortcomings to realize a ‘historical moment’.

Oppressed, weak, powerless these are the stereotyped images of veiled women. Always classified as easy and soft targets upon which acts of Islamophobic hate are conducted. The
practice of veiling is no longer synonymous with religious fundamentalism which has been the prevailing discourse since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As Leila Ahmed discusses, popular perceptions of the veil have been imposed through colonial views of Middle Eastern women as an “exotic” subjugated “other”. Yet, within the Egyptian comic framework, comic creators look beyond this piece of cloth, showing that veiled women are not, homogenized group and are not forced to wear the hijab. Seen in this light, comics challenge existing arguments of wearing the veil, ranging from its expression of following Allah’s commandment in Islam, to its religious piety, and protection from the male gaze. The understanding of the veil in Egyptian comics is not related to gender oppression and its association with self-segregation; instead it facilitates the inclusion of women on the streets of Cairo as shown in the story of “An Egyptian Tale” in Al-Shakmgia. As well, though the representation of “Um Sodfa” in TokTok, the narratives around the subordination and inequality of veiled women have been completely rejected. Through the visualization of these female characters, one would think that all these stories revolve around the veil; but while focusing on the verbal aspects of the comics these stories narrate the lived subjectivities of everyday. Egyptian comics give a chance to the reader to see beyond the reductionist perceptions of the veiled body as an “other”, whereby women are oppressed and repressed by Muslim men; giving no chance to Western discourses to be the primary referent in such an issue. In this context, Egyptian comics are a valuable source to explore this veil ignorance.
Chapter Three: Against the Stereotyped Representation of Violence Against Women

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”

Simone de Beauvoir

This chapter explores how Egyptian comics provide a different account of violence against women. It demonstrates how women’s femininities are not the only reason for exercising violence. It also shows how comic artists are moving beyond the binary notions of masculinity and femininity, providing a new definition of hegemonic masculinities. It elucidates real life incidents of violent exposure and the traumatic consequences of it.

How to define a woman? In her most famous work, The Second Sex, de Beauvoir argues that the meaning of what it is to be a woman is given by men. A woman is always defined through the acknowledgment of her body. She is always recognized in terms of her perceived ability to be objectified, possessed and finally mastered. Thus, the concept of a woman is a male concept: she is always viewed as an “other” because the male is the “seer”; he is the subject and she is the object. Yet, for de Beauvoir, a woman’s body is a site of ambiguity, for it can be used as a vehicle for freedom or oppression. In her book, she points a path for self-recovery to women, highlighting:

Woman is enticed by two modes of alienation. Evidently to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration; but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be the object, the Other—and the Other nevertheless remains subject in the midst of her resignation. The true problem for woman is to reject these flights from reality and seek self-fulfillment in transcendence (Simone de Beauvoir as cited in Butler, Judith 1986: 42-43).

In other words, women should move beyond their anatomies of their bodies and identify themselves doing activities unrelated to their sexuality. But unfortunately, in contemporary
societies, the concepts of masculinity, femininity, manhood, womanhood, sexuality, and other enactments of ‘doing’ gender are tied to how one presents oneself of a particular sex (Butler, Judith 1986:41). Often, these performances are shaped and characterized by the cultural expectations for what is considered acceptable and ideal for a perceived gender identity (Butler, Judith 1986:42). Men and women are located in a position of choice where they have two options: either to comply or subvert such norms.

Today, the construction of a man and a woman is visualized through the consumption of various products through advertisements, movies, billboards and comic strips contributing to one’s presentation of the self to gender identity. Most of these media platforms permeate through our lives, presenting a wrong image of gender relations; distorting how we see ourselves and what we perceive as normal and desirable for men and women. From the clothes, hairstyles, accessories that media outlets project in their images, they often perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limited perceptions of gender. The continuous representation of these traditionally accepted gender relations often results in the normalization of violence against women. Men are portrayed as “active, adventurous, powerful, sexually aggressive and largely uninvolved in human relationships” (Wood, Julia 1994:32) along with the stereotyped representation of women as sex objects, beautiful, thin, and incompetent (Wood, Julia 1994: 32-33). For instance, in mass media, men are never portrayed doing household activities. When depicted in such activities, they are often seen as incompetent in elements like homemaking, cooking, and childcare (Wood, Julia 1994: 31-35).

It is important to remember that the visual impact of an image is one of the most immediate platforms to influence people in societies. Through a glimpse, an image can convey feelings; building societal and cultural ways of seeing through which people interpret and
understand the outer world. Thus, a visual response does not only entail an image that is an outcome of a personal experience, but also could be a product of pre-determined, profit-driven marketing strategies. As Carolyn Kitch (2001) argues, since the 19th century, mass media forms like magazine covers and print advertising have always utilized the female body to re-inscribe societal, political and cultural values. Through this re-inscription, stereotypical roles and idealized images of women’s beauty have been institutionalized. A quality named “beauty” has become the image every woman wishes to embody and the desire of every man to have it (Naomi Wolf, in the *Beauty Myth* 2013).

But what is exactly beauty? And who defines it? An ideal woman in patriarchal societies is often constructed in relationship to men. In such societies, women are in a constant challenge to enhance their bodies to conform to the male model of a perfect woman. “Whether or not the image is attainable, women are trained to see this image as normal and beautiful, hence desirable” (Dicstein, Hydi 1999). The female body is framed to fulfill the desires of the male gaze; ignoring and forgetting that these images of idealized beauty have lingered in our perceptions through different forms of mass media (Susan Bordo as cited in Dicstein, Hydi 1999). It is a shame that women in print media, cinema, advertisement, photography and fashion magazines depict the female body as a blank canvas with no identity. Instead, the female body is used as a masquerade for the woman’s true identity.

Female representations in popular culture are often generated by economically powerful media conglomerates. Their ability to reach out to a wide audience across societies has helped them to propagate “idealized beauty” images influencing their own views on female bodies (Grover, Ashley 2013:2). A female body is transformed into what Michel Foucault terms the “docile body”. Their bodies are disciplined and normalized to fit into the existing social norms.
In other words, women behave according to the expected social norms of femininity. Their actions and ways of life become constrained to a “normalized persona” (Thorpe, H. 2008: 207); with them being categorized and identified through only one element; that is beauty. Beauty becomes a commodity ingrained in societies due to the continuation of an entrenched system of capitalism serving the continuation of the existing social discourse (Catherine Chaput as cited in Grover, Ashley 2013:3).

Women are only worth their appearance, this is the message that the mass media continues to disseminate. Lipsticks and mascaras are becoming the markers of this idealized beauty that has been institutionalized by the mass media (Grover, Ashley 2013:3). Today, a woman is more likely to see her body from an outside perspective; evaluating herself depending on her level of perceived attractiveness to others rather than her skills (Knauss et al 2008: 634). An objectified body consciousness emerges out of this normalized beauty and becomes heavily rooted in the female psyche through the internationalization of popular media (Knauss et al 2008:634). Thus, beauty becomes a form of structural violence, oppressing women into conforming to the standardized notions of beauty offered by the mass media, causing anxiety and fear. Through beauty, we witness violence that causes physical harm and emotional strain due to the existence of a liberal market oriented system with an aim to make profit only. As a result, forms of gender aggression targets women’s bodies to exercise power over them, generating forms of violence and control. Women become victims of violence at the hands of corporate interests. As victims of structural violence, women do not have a choice except to get this image of an idealized beauty. The images of women bodies in popular media are represented in a way

---

3 Structural Violence is a term “commonly ascribed to Johan Galtung, which he introduced in the article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" (1969). It refers to a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs".
that teaches women that their physical existence is for visual stimulation and that it is all about aesthetics. “Women’s bodies continue to be more reflective of the patriarchal norms and instrumentality; imposing visual aesthetic codes of femininity rather than expressions of a self-determined individuality” (Giddens 1991:219 as cited in Dey Sourav 2012:6). For instance, advertising of women’s bodies conventionalizes what is conventional, such as hierarchical gender roles (Evring Goffman 1979:84). A visual stimulus is being bombarded via the dissemination of various pictures in the media; producing an intensive and dependent society (Harris and Lester 2002:1).

The representations and emotions visuals carry throughout the media are remembered more than words. In contrast to words, visuals have the ability to deliver information instantly with no barriers (Newton and Williams as cited in Lowe, Miriam 2007:16). An image is not only a snapshot of reality. It is a sight which has been “re-created or reproduced” (Berger, J. 1972:9). The reproduction of such an image involves everything from deciding on whom to include or exclude, with what tools and what colors. As Berger pinpoints, what dictates the image is the way we see things. The way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe. Thus, the reproduction and the interpretation of the image is an entirely subjective (Berger 1972). For instance, the comic artist’s “way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the paper. Although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing” (Berger 1972:10). Unlike news photos, comic images do not offer themselves as literal visual-transcriptions of the real world (Hall 1973:188).
Translation: “Half Way Through”

And, we broadcast the funeral of the last man in the world led by Ms. Safaa Al Mahdy, the President of the Arab Republic of Egypt and her friend John Elton, the American President.

Having mentioned that Mr. Hamada Ahmed El Tohamy, known as the last man in the world, survived the spread of y2h1 virus that eliminated all the men in the world.

Mother: “Won’t you watch the funeral, Kitty?”

Olfat: “I wish mum, but I have to catch up the Somali delegation at the airport.”

Figure 22. 1
Mother: “What has the last man in the world done while he was alive for them to visit his grave?!!!”
Olfat: “The man died mum, don’t bother.”
Mother: “Idiots, I swear.”
Olfat: “Goodbye duckling”
And finally the world bid farewell to the last man, turning planet earth into literally free of men.
Olfat: “Good morning, Driver Zainab.”
Zainab (the Driver): “Happy (Honey) morning Ms. Olfat. The airport, God willing?”
- We put our faith in Allah
- “Did you hear the news? The President will issue a law banning imitating men…”
- “It has overly spread. I can’t get those women who can’t live without men!!!”
- “Because you, you were born after men were almost extinct, that’s why you’ll never understand those women…see how they are walking in the street?!!”

Translation: “Half Way Through Continued”
Translation: “Half Way Through Continued”

- “They are crying over the last man, idiots!”

Olfat: “Men are a stage that ended from the world, let’s focus on the future.”

- “Welcome, it is an honor to have you in Egypt.”

Delegation: “When will we see the last man’s grave?”

Olfat: “It hasn’t been opened for the public yet, but they will open it within this week.”

Delegation: “OK, we want to visit Dr. Reem’s museum.”

Olfat: “Don’t you want to rest today?”

Delegation: “We are not staying for long in Egypt, and we want to visit many places.”

Olfat: “OK. Driver Zainab, go to Dr. Reem’s museum.”

- “Here is the laboratory where the virus that eliminated men was created and where Dr. Reem committed suicide. Later, the laboratory was turned into a museum.”

Figure 22. 3
Visitor 1: “What made her do this?”

Visitor 2: “Dr. Reem experienced a gang rape in downtown and the accident affected her, so she dedicated herself to the virus that killed all men.”

- “This is the laboratory where the virus was produced, people.”
- “Can we visit Talaat Harb Street today?”

Olfat: “I don’t know whether this is a good idea or not.”

Visitor 2: “Since we knew that this is the street in which most of the harassments took place during men days.”

Sellers: “Make us sane! Make us sane! We are selling for free. Come and buy before we become sane.”

- “Bra for ten! Bra for ten!”
- “Jeans, all sizes!”

Figure 22. 4
Translation: Half Way Through Continued

- “Bra your size, come and try it on.”
Visitor: “Thank you. I don’t want.”
Seller: “Hey Sweetie, What a tough day! It’s getting dark and we didn’t sell anything.”
Olfat: “Please, let us walk behind each other so as not to get lost in the crowd.”
Sellers: “Check those foreigners”
- “Cool! I won’t leave them.”
- “A suit, Brownie? A cotton suit…original Egyptian cotton.”
Visitor: “Thank you. We don’t want.”
Seller: “An Egyptian suit, instead of that curtain you’re wearing.”
Visitor: “By the way, I speak Arabic.”
Seller: “Nothing is better than Arabic. Make me profit, Brownie and put a decent suit on like elegant people.”
Visitor: “Why are you calling me Brownie? And what’s wrong with my outfit? Learn how to behave before selling.”
Seller: “Anything wrong dear Samah!!”
Translation: Half Way Through Continued"

- “They are being arrogant because we are poor.”
- “Then, they will not get out of here without being beaten.”
- “Wait and see what will happen women.”

Olfat: “You crazy!!”

Seller: “Each woman gets in to take revenge from them.”

- “They don’t like our clothes women and are coming to make fun of us.”

Figure 22. 6
Translation: Half Way Through Continued”

- Doctor: “What happened is an individual case and does not represent the Egyptian people.”

Interviewer: “Doctor, this is the first harassment case in the new world and it occurred in Egypt. How can you take it that easily?”

Doctor: “Because I trust the Egyptian people and I know how religious by nature we are, besides you feel something is fishy about the situation.”

“Your resignation?! Doctor, don’t let what happened to your daughter in Egypt affect you. You are the most important Doctor in our viruses department. Don’t surrender to your sadness.”

Doctor: “I am not surrendering because of my sadness over my daughter. I finally found a goal for my life and I understood what Dr. Reem wanted to do. She went half way and I will complete the rest.”

Figure 22. 7
But in the comics of *TokTok*, *Al-Shakmgia* and *Qahera*, it is a completely different story. Comic artists rather than simply adopting versions of femininity emulating the rest of mass media representations, they actively seek to redefine and rearticulate the meaning of women’s femininities. They actually resist and subvert normative discourses of femininity, visualizing women’s existence in a completely different picture. In mass media, when portraying a woman, it usually follows three ways of representation: the first is depicting her through an idealized image of beauty; second is exposing her private life and the arguments she has with her husband and children; and finally demonstrating how talented she is in her work. Yet, if a woman is represented as independent, rational, successful, the theme is that her personal life undermines her professional achievements. In *TokTok* and *Al-Shakmgia*, alternative models are being integrated into the official mainstream Egyptian culture. For example, in the story “Half Way Through”, women are able to negotiate their self-identities beyond the binary notions of the body as masculine and feminine. The images of women are not characterized by their large bust sizes, slim figure, bare legs and half-naked appearances. Egyptian comic artists are not interested in creating decorative art; instead they want their comic art to discuss important issues and challenge how women are being represented. Unlike cinema, they do not visualize women within a specific structure of representation that pertain idealized values of womanhood. Instead, women are reacting and participating in unconventional ways that are not entrenched in the existing social norms.

As the above story of “Half Way Through” highlights, male Egyptian comic artists attempt to overcome this patriarchal and social control in Egypt. It is interesting to note how they depict fat, ugly women in attempt to neutralize their sexual identities as females. As Orbach argues, “Fat is a way of saying “no” to powerlessness and self-denial, to a limiting sexual
expression which demands that females look and act a certain way, and to an image of womanhood that defines a specific social role. Instead, “overweight” woman creates a crack in the popular culture’s ability to make women mere products” (1978: 33-4). For example, in the 1960s, Beynon shows how American comic illustrators presented new images of masculinity and made new subversions of male and female characters (2001:146). As the above story illuminates, it is through the updated new images of female characters that have come into existence, marking a dramatic departure from normative models of masculinity, along with newer forms of violence. In these comics, hybridity has replaced the familiar stereotypes in Egyptian comics, where it is not only men harassing women; but women harassing women as well.

It is interesting to note how the comic artists reverse the concept of hegemonic masculinity that has always been entrenched in our society till today. The term coined by the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell refers to the qualities different cultures assigned to men and how these traits allow them dominance over women (2005:832). In media culture, hegemonic masculinity is identified through five main features which are:

(1) when power is defined in terms of physical force and control (particularly in the representation of the body), (2) when it is defined through occupational achievement in an industrial, capitalist society, (3) when it is represented in terms of familial patriarchy and (4) when heterosexually defined and centered on the representation of the phallus (Trujillo 1991: 291-292).

In other words, hegemonic masculinity re-inscribes gender practices that perpetuate the positional dominance of men over women and their superiority in society. A gender order is maintained consisting of multiple masculinities and femininities working within a gendered hierarchy of structured power relations. Hegemonic masculinity becomes the most desired practice reinforcing demonstrations of heterosexuality, aggression, and assertiveness among men (Connell, Raewyn 2005:848).
In this story, the Egyptian concept of hegemonic masculinity has been reversed; adopting the activities and traits that are exclusively masculine. The narrative presents radical revisions of socially acceptable masculinity. It is certainly seen from the perspective of female characters that men do not exist in this comic. This story of “Half Way Through” in Al-Shakmgia is indicative of the extent to which the subversion of the masculine is a representation that is truly counter to what is perceived as normal and real by Egyptian society. The effectiveness of its portrayal of women in such a way contradicts the reader’s preconceived notions of acceptable gendered behavior. For instance, it is interesting to note how the comic creator delivers the message that values associated with masculinity like competitiveness, need, control, aggression, and violence can lead to devastating outcomes of chaos in a particular community and that it can be performed by women (Connell 2005). In this story, artists are smart in eschewing that words like pussy cat and honey, words often associated with an act of harassment, a form of violence, can be used differently, referring to the beauty and sweetness’s of a particular individual. “Half Way Through” demonstrates the power of a comic. As this story shows, beauty does not only entail a person’s physical appearance, but also means having qualities that delight the senses and the mind.

Violence, one of the attributes of masculinity, informs the standards of masculine behavior and influences one’s social surroundings. As Connell explains, violence is a central element of masculinity, in which their acts of aggression are often celebrated in contexts such as war and sport (2005:833). Yet, in the content of the story shown above, female characters from Olfat, to the visitors, to the Somali delegation, they typically present a prototype of masculinity which exalts values such as physical strength, recklessness, along with their tenacious adherence to harass women on the streets—i.e. the complete opposite of feminine qualities. It is not only
men who can be masculine and violent against women; it can be women hitting and attacking other women. Unlike mainstream media formats, in this story men are not the ones represented as perpetrators of all forms of violent acts. Instead, violence, one of the main elements of hegemonic masculinity is made and remade depending on the emerging social trends and structures. In “Half Way Through”, men are not the ones engaging in sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo, invoking discourses of hegemonic masculinities and acting through an ideology of supremacy that gives them authorization (figures 22.1 to 22.7). That is why in this story, we cannot so easily define masculinity as that which men do or how men interact because that implies that women cannot appropriate aspects of masculinity or that masculinity and maleness are one and the same. As Connell argues, a single definition of masculinity is not practical (2005:836-845). Masculinity entails different behaviors from speaking out with a loud voice, working in a position of power to acts of aggression as can be seen in “Half Way Through”. As Gail Simone explains on Women in Refrigerators website “not every woman in comics has been killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had other life derailing tragedies befall her, but given the following list…. It’s hard to think up exceptions” (as cited in Phillips & Strobl, 2013: 166). However, these stories clearly offer a different perspective.

Fatma Mansour, the editor of Al-Shakmgia, argues that harassment is not only sexual and would still exist in different forms even if all men became extinct. According to her, in this story, there is a line going beyond gender. The issue of harassment is no longer about a man versus a woman, but rather about power structures that are buried and the ignorance of knowing the other. In the story, she explains how they tried to move beyond the internalized gender norms that transcend a particular moment in Egyptian society; showing that patriarchy is not
something always related to men. Instead, patriarchy exists through the reproduction of both men and women that is transferred through generations. The creators of this story tried to remain neutral by even showing two female characters that are crying over the extinction of men, recalling the same attitudes and behaviors that have been exercised before (figure 22.3). This story in Al-Shakmgia is important because it shows that harassment is not only sexual, but also verbal.

While discussing the story of “Half Way Through” with Fatma, it is interesting to note that its creators were not convinced on producing it this way, with their very limited knowledge about gender related issues. They are not feminists yet through their comic art are able to find and locate a common ground to connect with the wider audience; knowing that harassment is a case that related to them both. At the beginning, Fatma pinpoints how she organized a feminist orientation session for both the artists and writers, explaining and breaking down the concepts like the difference between gender and feminist movements (first, second, and third wave) in a simple way where they are now more aware of gender. An interesting anecdote she discusses is how Hicham Rahma, the comic artist of this story, started to follow the sport of squash for women in Alexandria, saying out loud that he is a feminist now and very interested to discuss women’s sport groups; discussing with Fatma the weaknesses of some of the foreign squash teams. Now, he is getting introduced to terminologies that he has not dealt with before. As Fatma argues, comic creators are not necessarily feminists and yet through their comic art are able to dissolve the boundaries between the gender intellectuals and the majority of the Egyptian public. The aim of Al-Shakmgia is not only to deliver a gender perspective, but also show the other side of it (interview with the researcher 5th June 2015).
In “Half Way Through”, Rahma, elaborates that the script was sent to him and that the reason drawings have been done that way is because he had to fit the script of the story. While discussing the story with him, I ask, why did he decide to draw the female characters working in male dominated jobs like driving a TokTok (figure 22.2: Zinab the driver), joining the military (figure 22.1) and work in high ranking positions like being diplomats (figure: 22.3: the Somali Delegation)? He replied by saying that he meant nothing by it. As he shared with me, “everything is drawn spontaneously in relation to the characters of the story”. Rahma asserts that unlike caricature which usually has an implicit message through its illustrations; comics are more based on narration through which artists are able to project their own opinions. Then, I inquired why in this story “Half Way” in Al-Shakmgia unlike “Spiced Shame” in TokTok”, all of the drawings are colored and not black and white like the other one? He responded by stating that there is no specific reason for that and that it is not related by any means to the quality of paper nor competition. He stated that there is a comic named “Sin City”, which has been made into a movie, where it was completely done in white and black colors, except with the red color of the blood.

It seems that through the Egyptian comic, artists are disagreeing with the myths and beliefs supportive of violence against women; visualizing it as damaging for all the parties involved even if they are only women. This story creates a reality that does not reinforce dominant power relations exposing the reader to experiences and events moving beyond the confines of their private space. Unlike movies and TV, comic stories like the one mentioned above, are not exposed to filtration processes cutting down content; focusing only on violence and pervasive language. The comic panels are not portraying simplistic, misleading characters relying on clichéd and archetypal representations of women as the seductress and the victimized
women. Instead, comic artists are conveying the consequences of the large scale of violence against women. With no single narrative, comic artists have an ability through their images to show that violence is not only verbal; but also physical. Unlike Western comics, the Egyptian comic magazines do not create super-heroines that were generally spin offs of male characters; instead their stories seldom represent women in sexual manners that are often attributed to the acts of violence committed against them.

Comics are different from paintings and motion pictures because in their strips motion appears through human projectors unlike movies. When glancing over the comic, the reader is separating the narrative into short sequences of interlocked images broken by jump cuts. With each sequence, we understand the topic presented because the gap between successive images is relatively small. Within the sequences, we are willingly moving back and forth; willing to keep the continuation of the story through the narrative deployed through the image. By viewing visual images of the comic, an entire scene can be done by the artist enabling the spectator to form their own assumptions about what is depicted. Comics employ narrative sequences as those extended in literature. As Hadyen White argues, “to raise the question of the nature of the narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and possible even on the nature of humanity itself” (as cited in Carrier, David 2000: 48). The nature of our perceptions is structured around the images and their sequences in comic panels (Carrier, David 2000). Unlike traditional narrative painting, comics have the ability to present various subjects in an exciting way. Comic images have the power to influence our ideologies and how we interact with the internal world (McAllister, M. et al 2001:4-5). By supplying narratives and imagery, it constructs an ideology of beliefs around the contradictory realities in societies. For instance, research has suggested that many people receive their information on sexual assault and sex offenders from different
sources of media (Katz-Schiavone, Levenson & Ackerman 2008:292-293). They are often used referring to real problems that exist in society (Bainbridge 2007). As a popular culture medium, it addresses issues that affirm or reject the dominant ideology and the demarcations for acceptable behavior (McAllister, M. et al 2001).

But even though, comics tend to address real life issues, women in comic books are often visualized in two main ways: either helpless and in need of rescue by a hero or they are key characters in the story (Robbins, Trina n.d). The majority of the female characters are ascribed passive roles in which they are sexualized objects for protection. Even if they are represented as unquestionable strong characters in the male-dominated comic industry; the narrative shifts to their categorization as sex symbols with male characters taking advantage of them. Thus, their position of a hero becomes blurred, with them being a victim instead (Robbins, Trina n.d). This oversexualization of comic characters coupled with the sexual violence perpetrated against them reifies rape myths reinforcing the “cultural artifacts that contribute to the cultural construction of hegemonic masculinities” (Phillips and Strobl 2013: 148). The rape myth which is generally defined as the “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false is widely and persistently held, serving to deny and justify making sexual aggression against women” (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994: 134). Examples of rape myths often involve women who precipitate rape by wearing certain types of clothing, by acting in a certain way or by making personal choices such as being out in public, alone at night.

Yet in the story titled “Thistles” in TokTok; it is a completely different narrative (figure 23). Throughout the images of the story, Reem, the comic artist, argues against all the rape myths that imply that the woman “asked for it, wanted it, or lied”. Instead, she facilitates a myth through sequence of images that do not depict near-rape scenes against women nor images of
decapitated females. For example, it is interesting to note that the entire attire of the female character is covered by thistles implying that even if someone decides to harm her in any possible way; she is able to protect herself by pinching them through her outfit. At the same time, she initially feels scared by the hands that are approaching her and trying to touch her face. But once she senses she is safe, she starts to uncover herself. What is so interesting about this story is that it does not include a single word; instead the interpretation of the story is left for the viewers to make their own decision about it. For me, when I reach the end of the story, I conclude the meaning of the story is that no matter what men do, men cannot be trusted for the actions they conduct, as we say in colloquial Arabic “You can never trust what men are going to do to you”.

Figure 23
But then I flip across the images and see that the female character gives tacit consent to the hands that are touching her body. The female character does not perform an act of resistance to what the hand is actually doing to her body. Even her facial expressions show a neutral stance in which she does not rebel against the hand by biting, spitting, burning, screaming or even crying. Instead, she completely submits to it to the extent that she allows the hand to touch her naked breasts/body.

In this story it is interesting to note how the male perpetrator does not use power, force, and violence to commit the rape/sexual assault (him eating the woman); instead he uses his sweet emotional tender touch to do the action. This visualization of the incident challenges the societal prescribed gender roles in Egyptian society influencing how women and men are supposed to be acting as perpetrators. For the majority of comic magazines or books, they reinforce a narrow view of what constitutes rape: a violent, brutal event that is usually brought on by the victim. The way rape is visualized in comics allow readers to think that the burden should be placed on the female for acting in a way that provokes someone to rape her, and that if she is raped, she does not fight hard enough to make the perpetrator stop. But in “Thistles”, there is a visuality of sexual assault that does not consist of any form of violence. Instead, the sexual assault takes place smoothly where at the end of the story the man swallows the female character (figure 23). This story is important because it transforms the stereotyped image and concept of rape as a violent act. Unlike the unrealistic portrayals of sexual assault in some of the comic books, the story Thistles does not contribute and reinforce rape myths in societies, allowing males and females to embrace inaccurate ideas about how to approach sex. It does not depict the perpetrators as mentally ill or unable to control their sexual impulses; sending a wrong message to readers about the types of people who commit rape and its prevalence in
everyday society. Through the power of images, Reem, the comic artist is sending the message that rapists are not special kinds of people, suggesting that perpetrators are not crazy nor impulsive and that they could be anyone from your community.

According to Rahma, one of the founding members of TokTok, Reem, the Algerian comic artist who created this story, met with him and Shennawy during “FIBDA” (Festival International de la Bande Dessinée d’Alger) in Algeria, which is the most important event for comics across the Arab world. During this conference, Rahma and Shennawy met a number of Algerian artists including Reem. They really liked her artistic works, publishing her story in issue 7 of TokTok. Rahma elaborates that TokTok is open for all artists from the Arab world and not only Egyptians. Throughout TokTok issues, you can find a diverse group, including Lebanese, Moroccan and even Tunisian artists. He even encourages the contribution of female artists because this would change TokTok’s perspectives on a wide range of issues. When inquiring about the limited presence of female artists in TokTok, he replied “I honestly do not know”. He explained that one of his role models is Frida Kahlo, a female Mexican painter, who draws women in peculiar ways; arguing that TokTok doors are opened to everyone whether males or females to join. For instance, he talks about the issue of sexual harassment and how women are constantly bothered by men in the streets. But for him, an Egyptian man, he can walk in the streets wearing shorts and no one will dare to say a word. That is why he believes if such an experience is projected in a comic, it is better to portray and narrate it from the point of view of the female artist. A female artist senses how women are caged while walking freely in the streets, looking at the issue from a different perspective. For Rahma, comics give a chance for the other to actually speak for themselves. As Chute argues, “the disgust and the pleasure that the visual carries is related to a bodily rhythm of reading, further underscored and prompted by
the rhythm of the visual-verbal page, a rupturing alienation between affects” (Chute, Hillary 2010: 71). The aesthetic and coercive nature of rape is narrated visually, giving a chance to the reader to interact with its complexity (Tolmie, Jane 2013: as cited in the introduction). In “Thistles”, the identity of the hand is not revealed until the end of the story in which a face appears with a masculine chin that eventually eats her. The masculine chin symbolizes that it is a man who was trying to approach the woman from the beginning, but his identity is left to the viewer to decide upon. For instance, this man can be her husband and this story could be about marital rape. Or this man is just a colleague in work whom she liked and trusted to go further with him. Or this male character is her brother psychopath who rapes her due to his psychological illness. In the majority of the comics, the visualization of the rape of a female character appears to be more about the effect this act of violence has on the male protagonist than the trauma experienced by the victim. Thus, comics have succeeded in drawing the brutalization faced by females in another way; breaking down the conventional archetype of females as victims.
Translation: “Spiced Shame”

Figure 24. 1
Translation: “Spiced Shame Continued”

Cairo…An abandoned building in a popular neighborhood…

Man: “Couldn’t you catch him Ashraf?”

Ashraf: “He is a runner, a hard one.”

And I entered my small abandoned house.

Alaa: My name is Alaa, and this is me in the photo.

You don’t have to ask why Ashraf and his friends are chasing me.
You also don’t have to ask why my face doesn’t appear.
But I will simply say. My face is deformed.
Translation: “Spiced Shame Continued”

I will narrate a story that seems unfair to me.

On Eid day, I have to celebrate with my friends in downtown (Wust el-Balad)

Man 1: “Look, look.”

Man 2: “Oh, we should take them to the house.”

Girl 1: “Not again!”

Seller: “A toy for the boy.”
Translation: “Spiced Shame Continued”

Man 1: “Why don’t you come home with me, chick?”

Girl 1: “You son of …..”

Alaa: Then, she suddenly threw her bag at me that had eyeliner, 40 pounds, her ID, tissue, 2 pounds (coins), lipstick, and a charm.

The charm made me in time ….
Translation: “Spiced Shame Continued”

A face without features, this is what happened.

Oh boy, it’s 6 o’clock, the plastic surgeon’s session appointment.

Man 1: “We will catch you handsome. Come here!”

Sign: Dr. Mahmoud Waly, The British Academy for Sciences.

Bell rings.

Figure 24. 5

119
Translation: “Spiced Shame Continued”

Dr. Mahmoud: “I am Dr. Mahmoud Waly. How are you doing now?”

Alaa: “Like crap.”

Alaa didn’t tell you anything of reality in the last two pages.

Alaa really went out that day to harass girls.

Alaa: “Go home Adel.”

Girl 1: “Did you see that handsome guy behind us?”

They sat on the coffee shop in downtown.

He invited her for a cup of coffee in downtown.

Girl: “Alaa, no, no, no, don’t!!!”
The girl’s family is from Upper Egypt, living in Imbaba.

Alaa: God please forgive me. God please forgive me. What have I done?

Alaa felt guilty, until he couldn’t see his own features.

So, Alaa’s features are there under the mask, but psychologically he couldn’t see himself.

Dr. Mahmoud El-Sayed Waly, a Psychiatrist: “The problem now is in Ashraf and the girl’s brothers. They are from Upper Egypt.”

Alaa: “My face!”

Dr. Mahmoud: “The girl’s chastity.”

Figure 24.7
Translation: “Spiced Shame Continued”

“I am Dr. Mahmoud. Yes, he just left now.”

Ashraf: “Good job Ramadan. You could open the flat door.”

Ramadan: “You’ll pay me for opening the door?!!”

Man: “Can you see what that guy has?!”

Ramadan: “Ashraf, do you know English well?!”

Ashraf: “That dirty guy takes Tramadol, son of the bitch!!”

Motorcycle sound

Ramadan: “He arrived.”

Ashraf: “Hide.”

Figure 24. 8
Translation: “Spiced Shame Continued”

Alaa: Silly Doctor! He keeps prescribing me Tramadol and it’s not my type.
Oh, holly crap!
Ok!
Ashraf: “This is a payback for my sister, you son of ….” (This is my sister’s revenge, you son of …)
Translation: “Spiced Shame Continued”

Gun shots
Alaa: “Your sister??!”
Gun shot
Translation: “Spiced Shame Continued”
Ashraf: “May the harassers and rapists go to hell!”

Figure 24. 11
Yet, in “Spiced Shame” in *TokTok*, Hicham Rahma does not only make a twist about rape, but also sexual harassment and honor shame in Upper Egypt with two violent acts in one story (figures 24.1 to 24.11). He tells me that he takes a long time to figure out the idea of his stories, first drawing sketches and figuring out the shapes and appearances’ of the characters in order to ensure that he has no difficulty in narrating the story. He does this because a comic artist can accidentally portray a drawing that contradicts the intended message of the story and its script. But usually what happens according to Rahma is that a script gets written and then a casting process happens deciding which roles he is going to give the characters in the narrative. He argues that when the facial elements of the man disappeared, he lost a very strong component, which is communication that allows him to correspond appropriately with others, and exposing him to high levels of emotional and psychological distress. Rahma wants to show how women exposed to rape or sexual harassment in an aggressive way loses a part of herself. So what about a man that loses everything from his facial expressions to his emotions. He pinpoints how in the story he confers about the customs and norms of the families living in Upper Egypt, who care about a girl’s honor, that is a large part of a man’s honor. As Rahma argues, he positions the man in the shoes of the women to make them feel the other sufferings they deal with after the act of violence conducted against them. As figure 24.3 highlights, unlike the majority of media outlets, the women are not to be blamed for their behaviors nor their clothes; and they cannot be held responsible for the rape or harassment incident; instead it is the man who is responsible.

As a reader for this story and a student specializing in gender studies, I appreciated how it elucidates that there are forms of violence perpetrated against other family members for preserving honor. For instance, most attempts of revenge in the name of honor take the form of
killing as shown in figures 24.8 to 24.10. In the majority of cases, as can be seen in figure 24.9, the male perpetrator is either beaten, attacked with a sharp tool, strangled, or shot with a gun. In Upper Egypt, there are several forms of violence against women that are linked to violations of honor that remains a secret. A lot of the violent acts conducted against women are often perpetrated by their families as a preventive measure to ensure that the woman does not say anything. It is important to note how through “Spiced Shame” the crimes of honor, is not restricted by gender. Men can also be the victims of honor killing by the family members of the woman with whom they are perceived to have an inappropriate relationship or even the doctor treating the male character. Although, honor crimes are targeted more towards women, they are in no way restricted to women as highlighted by “Spiced Shame”. In crimes honor it is not always the men who play the primary role, rather in many cases women play a crucial part in the killings. Women are key players in ensuring the initial limits of sexual regulations and playing a decisive role in killing women including their own daughters. For instance, I cannot escape noticing how at the beginning of the comic, there are two female characters; one dressed in all black and the other in all white and while they resemble each other there are distinct styles. But Rahma does not reveal the identity of female in white, leaving the readers to decide on her location in the entire story. It is intriguing to me that there is no reference through the comic panels on who actually reports the rape incident of the female character to her brothers. As the story highlights, it is not Dr. Mahmoud nor Alaa’s friend and definitely not her brothers; then who is it? One can assume that it is probably the other female character dressed in white. As Siham Abdul Salam reports in “Crimes of honour in Egypt”, in the year 2000, it has been reported that 10% of the murders committed in Egypt in 1999 are “crimes of honour” (sharaf). There are cases of girls killed by family members who think they have fallen pregnant through
illegitimate sexual relations or girls whose periods stop due to anemia such conditions being revealed at the autopsy, along with the fact that the girl is a virgin. While talking with Rahma via Skype, the most intriguing aspect that caught my eyes in the story is how he drew women in such an ugly appearance in both TokTok and Al-Shakmgia. This representation of women, he argued that he is not sending a message that women have always had bad intentions nor a sexist behavior on his part. He told me by drawing this way, he is not conveying a particular message to the reader that even if you are not good looking, you will get harassed and raped. He likes to draw it this way and that is why he decides to depict it like that in the story.

The goal of TokTok and other comics like Al-Shakmgia, according to Mohammed Tawfik, another founding member of TokTok and an Egyptian comic artist is not to provide solutions for existing problems in Egyptian society like harassment, rape, and other acts of violence; but rather to have a platform where they are able to discuss all these issues without censorship. He believes that comics are a strong platform for women to discuss their sufferings. But I interrupted Mohammed telling him, isn’t this a bit contradictory? At the end of the day, most of the drawings and scripts whether in TokTok or Al-Shakmgia were written by male artists and writers. For Mohammed Tawfik, he does not see any difference between a male and a female artist depicting women’s sufferings and distress in comics. He stressed that what is the problem with knowing a man’s perspective in areas like sexuality or other issues through comics. According to Tawfik, comics have the room to elaborate on both perspectives from two sides and are an interesting platform for freedom of expression. Also, it attracts the reader through its dazzling pictures, lifting up the burden of reading and this is why it is a powerful tool to disseminate a message. At the same time, unlike Egyptian cinema, there is no supervisory institution that overlooks and censors comic works before publishing it publicly.
Translation:” The Evolution of the Egyptian Female”

Teacher: “This is the latest picture of the Egyptian females in history books.”

“But biologists explain the reason behind its current evolution …”

Figure 25. 1
Translation:” The Evolution of the Egyptian Female Continued”

“The hair was the main weakness of the Egyptian female and a source of trouble.”

“That is why it is the first thing that changed in time.”

“And because of sayings that negatively affected the female’s psyche, the ears were also removed”

Man: “How sweet! How sweet!”

Figure 25. 2
Translation:” The Evolution of the Egyptian Female Continued”

“The ear shrunk”

“To prevent hearing ugly words and sayings.”

“And through years of evolution, eyes appeared at the back of the head to warn the Egyptian females from the closeness of any harasser.”

“After the growth of the eyes, a significant change took place, which is the obvious growth in the size of the mouth and throat.”

“To be able to scream and yell at the harasser to scare him, seeking people’s help.”

Harassers: “Come to daddy.”

Lady: “Help!!!”

“Later on, a third and fourth arm started to grow, one to cover her breast, the other to hold her bag, and a third to cover her butt.”
Translation:" The Evolution of the Egyptian Female Continued”

“Then, her breast became flat and also her butt! This is because both are the most areas that suffer from harassment!”

Lady: “Enough!”

Teacher: “I guess we all understand now.”

Students: “Clear Mr.”

“There will be a better chance of living only for those selected by nature…by the principle of heritage power…for any chosen diversity will tend to be out of evolution and development to a new shape.” Charles Darwin
It is interesting to note how in the story of the “Female Evolution” (figures 25.1 to 25.4) in *Al-Shakmgia*, Tawfik uses the comic platform to show the paradox of trauma witnessed by female characters due to harassment. Trauma, which leads females to develop defensive mechanisms to avoid harassment, is clearly shown in the story where women’s bodies are evolving by adjusting their physical appearance and bodies; removing their hair and becoming bald to avoid hair pulling, shrinking their ear’s size to avoid the insulting statements and having multiple eyes to avoid the attack by harassers from their backs as figures 25.2 to 25.3 show. Tawfik, the comic artist is very smart in eschewing the comical and humorous part of the platform, but still able to approach the traumatized impact of harassment through panel rhythms and the visual structures of the pages. As Anne Whitehead argues, “the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives characterized by repetition and indirection” (2004:3).

Through the visual arrangement of the story, Tawfik is indirectly requiring the active mental participation of the reader to generate the undesirable consequences of psychological and physical trauma of harassment. As Hillary Chute notes “No Towers is riveted to showing the efficacy of the comic medium for traumatic representation” (2007:236). For the artist, he is not only representing trauma but also the negative consequences of trauma. As Mohammed Tawfik and Mohammed Ismail observe in the end of the story, it is not only about the issue of harassment but rather about how the females survive harassment and recover from it. Comic images represent incidents of reality but only through the abstraction and visuality of the illustrator; delivering and amplifying that meaning through the strip (McCloud 1993:30). The visual modes of the comic form make available new ways to push against the unrepresentable. “Female Evolution” challenges the normality of women as we witness from the beginning of
their struggles from harassment. Rather than clearly delimiting the trauma of harassment witnessed every day by women on the streets; Tawfik develops an aesthetic connection between the suffering and harm of harassment that is present and materialistic in real life; catching the reader between two poles. At one pole, the reader can sense that trauma is unpresentable, and yet on the other pole trauma has occurred. As this story highlights trauma is not transmissible through words or images; implying that suffering from harassment has two distinct but related traumas: the trauma experienced by the females for the malformation of their five senses and bodies (optical, sensory, auditory and so on…..) and the trauma experienced by the forthcoming generations for an act of harassment that disfigured their entire evolution for such an act of violence. As Tawfik highlights, comic stories are based on real life experiences on the streets of Cairo; demonstrating that even if there are imaginative elements within the stories, they are connected with real stories that artists and people have experienced.

Violence does not only happen through the rape and violent acts against women. The physical intimidation of men by other men is also evident in Egyptian comics, where the stories narrated are a real exposition of the unjust living conditions and treatment of poor Egyptians. In “It has already happened”, Mohammed Tawfik recalled how he presents a real incident that he witnessed. The story begins with Mohammed along with two other artists doing an animation series, trying to figure out how they are going to do the background serial that talks about the suburb in Cairo. So Mohamed inquires, what should we do? They decide to bring their cameras taking snapshots of the poor and slum neighborhoods in Cairo. They believe that the right place to go is Raml Baeulac on the Nile Corniche. According to Mohammed, the difference between this area and the nearby tremendous buildings is huge. Once Mohammed and his colleagues enter the area of Raml Baeula, people think that they are journalists coming to publicize the
problems of their community. This is why women start cheering, making zaghareet, thinking that Mohammed and his colleagues are journalists coming to expose the humiliation and sufferings of their communities. In Raml Baeulac, the main problem is that big businesses want to kick out individuals living in this area to build large enterprises like the ones on the other side due to its location on the Nile. While on the other hand, what Mohammed and his colleagues want to do is just to take pictures of the place. Noise starts to spread over the place and this when body guards (as described by Mohamed in the interview, they were huge), from the large rich buildings are going to cause harm to Mohammed and the rest. On the other side, the poor Egyptians in the Raml Baeulac are welcoming Mohammed along with the other two. What is so interesting that Mohammed illuminates how they are going for a completely different aim having nothing to do whether with the poor people living in Raml Baeulac or the body guards. They just want to take some pictures for their project.

But instead, the whole issue developed to the extent that the body guards are coming to arrest and kick Mohammed and the other comic artists believing that they are coming to disrupt the current status quo. As Mohammed noted, “We were about to die”. He continued to talk about how he makes an imaginative twist in the story, where one of his colleagues is traumatized leaving the whole comic field and drawing; and now working in a Shawmera shop. Mohamed explained to me that he does that to have a sort of comedy in the story rather than making it all dramatic.

This story is important because it shows that community violence persists as a major problem in Egyptian society despite considerable attention from televised media. It demonstrates how exposure to community violence is a risk factor for the development of emotional and behavioral problems among young people living in these communities and others.
as well like Mohammed and the other two comic artists. Through the context of this story, the focus is not only on the experience of those directly and individually affected but also about the macro-level factors such as the social, economic, and structural organization of neighborhoods that lead to violent exposure. For example, research has shown that “community violence is disproportionately higher among the poor and among those who live in densely populated urban areas” (Aisenberg, Eugene 2008:298). But in the above mentioned story, it is the complete opposite. Despite living under conditions of high stress, individuals living in Raml Baeulac use the cohesiveness of their community as a counterbalance to the neighborhood’s experience of violence from the rich who live in the buildings on the other side and their body guards. As Mohammed Tawfik argues, in our comics, we are not really interested in analyzing and critiquing political issues (the inadequate provision of services to these neighborhoods and the failure of the former Mubarak government to deliver them) but rather monitoring the normal societal lives of Egyptians conveying how they deal with one of the issues mentioned above.

This chapter reveals that the male-centric production of comic magazines in Egypt does not result in a hyper-masculine character presentation of males and hyper-sexualized presentation of females performing acts of violence against each other. Instead, the analysis indicates the shift towards different forms of violence other than that exercised by men against women. While female comic artists are almost non-existent in the above mentioned stories, except in “Thistles”, it is surprising to find that the hegemonic gender norms are not dominating the representation of both men and women. Instead, forms of hegemonic masculinities that are always associated with men’s behavior are performed by the female characters. Women are drawn fatter and stronger; reflecting that even the most ugliest, hideous, and outspoken are harassed and attacked even with the extinction of men. Comic creators try to create a woman
with masculine characteristics of authority, physical strength, and empowerment; challenging the interplay of culturally embedded notions of what constitutes a woman and her behavior. As the story of “Half Way Through” elucidates, there is no ideal model of femininity and masculinity. In the medium of Egyptian comics, in which graphic representations communicate ideas, the issue of violence is not visualized in its stereotypical representation. Even in the act of rape which is usually depicted through a violent act; Reem, the Algerian artist is able to represent the terror of it with no single word, capturing its aggression, brutality and inhumanity. Though rape is clearly condemned in “Thistles”, it is through the story of “The Female Evolution” that the comic artist evokes the trauma and sufferings for another act of violence which is harassment. Unlike the story in “Thistles”, Mohammed Tawfik visualizes the negative consequences of harassment in concrete form rather than expressing its content symbolically or metaphorically as Reem does with rape. Rape which is not only an unacceptable form of violence, it is also one of the reasons for another form of violence which is honor killings in Egypt as clearly evident in the story of “Spiced Shame” by Hicham Rahma. As this chapter highlights, in the Egyptian comic magazines, violence is not only directed by men against women; it is also among rich and poor communities on the streets of Cairo and among diverse groups of women.
Chapter Four: The Post-Revolutionary Situation of Women in Egyptian Comics

Revolution is the triumph of freedom; its organization is based on spontaneity, not on the dictates of a “hero” who imposes himself through violence. It is a continuous and systematic elevation of people, following the lines of a hierarchy, and creating for itself one by one the organs that the new social life demands (as cited in Meyer, Mathew 2003:497).

Antonio Gramsci

This chapter aims to show gender representation and their visualization in Egyptian comics during post-revolutionary Egypt; in which it is ordinary Egyptian women participating in the political arena; showing how their own forms of agency and challenging the stereotyped connotations about how Egyptian housewives and female government employees do not actively participate in the political arena.

2011 was characterized by global protests and the wide dissemination of revolutionary imagery. Residing in inner-city squares like Tahrir, protesters were loaded with chanting words surrounded with military barricades; articulating demands and complaints with faces beaming with despair and saying: enough. Yet, the 2011 revolution has been described by its leaderless nature of its protests (Agata A, Lisiak 2014). The reasons protesters refused to have “a representative face came forward as the avatar of the revolution; for if the police had been in possession of such a face, they would have been quickly arrested and tortured the body connected to it” (Mitchell, William 2012:9). Nevertheless, in Tahrir Square, the “empowered revolutionary woman” protesting was a regular feature of images of the 25\textsuperscript{th} January uprising (Pratt, Nicola 2013). Women protesters stood side by side with men calling for the downfall of President Mubarak. Some have even argued that the participation of women during the January 25\textsuperscript{th} revolution have represented a redefinition of existing gender norms and order (Pratt, Nicola}
As Nicola Pratt (2013) notes in *Jadaliyya*, the new gender order was clear from the beginning through Asmaa Mahfouz statement on social media, “If you think yourself a man, come with me on the 25th January. Whoever says that women should not go to protests because they will get beaten; let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25th”. This statement clearly highlights that Mahfouz challenged men to join her in demonstrations, implying that men had become women, while women like Mahfouz were more courageous than men fighting against the fierce police brutality to protect their honor (Pratt, Nicola 2013). The words of Mahfouz implicitly showed the “masculinity in crisis” that was evident in the local governance under Mubarak (Pratt, Nicola 2013).

During this transitional moment, women have responded by offering their counter-narratives and self-representations despite the violence exercised against them. With their active participation in Tahrir and utmost courage, women have fought every single effort to exclude them from the public sphere. For instance, Samira Ibrahim raised a court case against the military for having been subjected to the so-called virginity tests by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), with her bravery celebrated through graffiti images along with the ubiquitous graffiti image of “*sitt al-banat* (the blue bra girl)” (Hafez, Sherin 2014:173). Through these representations, according to Pratt (2013), “women are reinscribing their victimization as resistance against dictatorship, and in the process of redefining “authentic” Egyptian womanhood”. During revolutionary moments, a woman’s body can be a symbol of revolutionary ideals or a symbol of the failure of the revolution (Agata A, Lisiak 2014). For instance, the image of the Egyptian “woman in a blue bra” represents the failure of revolutionary ideals, yet it remains a symbolic significance for the thousands of women marching throughout the streets of Cairo the day after the assault protesting against the military brutality (Hafez, Sherine 2014:26).
As Mona Abaza (2013) argues, the blue bra became “a central item for expressing dissent” to the extent that graffiti artists like El Teneen depicted a Supergirl wearing a blue bra and a red superheroine cape, with a red word on her chest referring to thawra: revolution (Agata A, Lisiak 2014). Since 2011, different forms of art like graffiti and street art have proliferated across public Egyptian walls reclaiming agency in the public space; creating their own historical narratives. An enormous number of talks, articles, lectures, papers, dissertations, panel discussions, documentaries and exhibitions have been created on the subject. Yet it is surprising that there has not been any material or knowledge produced about the role of Egyptian comics that marked an important space even before the eruption of the 2011 revolution and its representation of women during this transitional period.

**What did Egyptian comics do before and after the revolution?**

Before the 2011 revolution, according to Hicham Rahma, comic strips existed in Al Dostour newspaper criticizing issues from the inheritance case, the violence of the Ministry of Interior against the Egyptian public, and the corruption of the educational institutions in Egypt. He recalled how he did a strip with Ahmed Al Aidy (a writer), that sketches a man who has won a car through Coca-Cola and below it another strip that shows Gamal Mubarak getting the presidency, only because he is Mubarak’s son. I wondered if Rahma and other artists working in Al-Dostour have been exposed to arbitrary arrests due to their works and he said no. While working in Al-Dostour, Rahma had some concerns like being questioned about his political affiliations. He argued that inside Al-Dostour there was an affirmation of freedom of expression, for each artist to depict their illustrations in their own ways with straight forward instructions by the editor in chief Ibhraim Issa during that time to criticize the policies of the Mubarak government, the United States, Russia, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Working from 2005 to
early 2008 in Al-Dostour, Rahma did not experience any problems regarding any illustration he did. But he discussed that he had to do illustrations related to the themes of the article presented by the editor in chief (who mainly wrote about political issues) and this is when he decided to be one of the founding members of TokTok, to be able to share topics they discussed over the qahwa.

As the interview between Rahma and myself continued, I asked him whether the Egyptian revolution in 2011 had any role in informing the Egyptian comic field, helping it to come to the forefront. He instantly said no. Instead, he stated that the revolution had an impact on the lives and works of artists; allowing them to witness for the first time things like huge protests, gun shots in Tahrir Square, military barricades everywhere and curfews. As Rahma stressed, the 2011 revolution led comic artists to work through their imagination creating artworks that showed their daily interaction with it, communicating their opinionated views via illustrations. But the 2011 revolution did not really assist in expanding the Egyptian comic field despite the fact that the first issue of TokTok was published on 19th January 2011, only one week before the eruption of the revolution. Was it something intended? I inquired Rahma. He stated that that it was such a weird coincidence. He told me that they started to work on TokTok in 2009 and decided to publish in 2011. While working on it, the calls for joining the 25th January 2011 had been taking place through social media platforms like Facebook. The majority of Egyptians joined the protests in Tahrir Square, with the utmost aspiration that President Mubarak would change the organizational structure of the government. This is when the founding team said it is good that TokTok came to the public during that time; conversing about what will TokTok do after the revolution; illustrating that the way they designed TokTok before the revolution was completely different. Before the revolution, according to Rahma, it never came to their minds to
speak about politics and all they wanted to do was to shed light on the existing societal problems in Egypt. It is interesting to note that three members of the founding team Andeel, Macklouf, Shennawy (as well as Tawfik and Rahma) used to draw caricatures in oppositional newspapers that ridiculed the Mubarak regime; and before the revolution they all agreed not to do the same thing in TokTok and decided to move away from political topics. Yet, after the outbreak of the 2011 revolution, the content of the magazine altered some parts. The 2011 revolution gave a chance to TokTok to talk about a range of issues that were forbidden to talk about before. According to Rahma, if the revolution had not taken place, most of the topics discussed in TokTok would have been very superficial. The revolution helped the artists to shape their ideas.

With most of the founding team stationed in Tahrir Square during the revolution, it is interesting to note that in one of the marches, they observed that someone was holding up the first issue of TokTok, showing the military man on the cover page. He noted that they did not sell TokTok in the Square; but decided to discuss the revolution indirectly in the following issue released in April 2011. He recounted how he made a story named “He Tells You” that shows how during the time of revolution, no one ever knew where the piece of information was coming from. In the story, we do not know the source of information. This when Rahma visualizes “He Tells You” through a ghost that spreads lies and rumors; and has a strong influence on people’s behavior. He argued how the Egyptian revolution is always related to recounting all the positive practices that we experienced during it. Nevertheless, one can sense during the interview he was upset when questioning why in the last issue there was not an indirect reference to the events of June 30th. Rahma, like the majority of Egyptians went out on the streets to topple President Morsi, until the issuing of the 4/7 statement, with SCAF taking charge of the country until the election of President Sisi. His justification was that during the revolution, we had a wonderful
dream with huge ambitions that suddenly collapsed. For Rahma, the events of June 30th 2013 led to a feeling of desperation and disgust with him making clear that a comic artist does not like to draw things he does not like nor be influenced by and deciding when is the suitable timing to present such an event. By doing that, TokTok would turn into a political journal according to Rahma. Speaking forcefully, Rahma highlighted that TokTok aims to present issues completely different from Egyptian journalism and television. He suggested that the revolution did not end till today. Instead, he shows how the revolution brought about our worst behaviors in Egypt like sexual harassment and insecurity.
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience”

Figure 26. 1
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience Continued”

Cairo

In another age

Man: “Two cans of Bilmont, Socrates”

And before girls’ names became Rania, Abeer, and Yara

Girl: “Did you see Powder Magazine girls?”

Teacher: “Each one, stand up and say your name out loud.”

Names: Ahmed, Zeinab, Mohamed, Cariman, Ahmed, Mohamed, Mohamed, Ahmed

Goma’a

Students laugh out loud.

Angels singing:

“Life goes on, between smiles and sadness, where one lost his way, and another who followed his conscience.”

Figure 26. 2
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience Continued”

School girl: (singing) “Friday, Ooh Friday, why did you come Friday? Friday is off, tomorrow is Friday, Oh Friday.”

“And once came a groom to her, but no one gets engaged to Goma’a except a Sheikh, so he will get engaged to Goma’a.”

Mr. Zakaria: “I will show you how you can make fun of me!”

“Open your hands.”

Goma’a: “I swear that’s my name Captain Zakaria, I mean Mr. Zakaria, I swear.”

“Enough mum please with that Goma’a Shawal hairdo. I’ve had enough already.”

Song: “Each sadness is followed by happiness. This is the truth that is forgotten.”

Girls: “Congratulations, Goma’a!”

“Congratulations!”

“What is the groom’s name?”

“Congratulations!”

“It must be Khamis (Thursday).”

Goma’a: “No, his name is Saeed (happy).”

Figure 26. 3
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience Continued”

“The university admission letter came, and I will enter Faculty of Education”

“So I can teach you how to behave.”

Friday at the University

Lecturer: “You answer the question. But first, what’s your name?”

Goma’a: “Mrs. Saeed Saleh.”

Students laugh out loud.

Angels singing: “We are born in nine months and we strive. This is not a distinction, all people are equal.”
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience Continued”

Old man singing: “On the evil to people whose status became well, and the hardworking who faced many obstacles and who is misfortunate. He got up to fix things, they told him no way. He said with hard work and patience, God turns all to the best.”

Governmental Office

Mohamed (Colleague): “Congratulations Miss for the appointment. Come let me show you your office and introduce you to the colleagues. It’s a pleasure to have you.”

Goma’a: “Mrs.”

Mohamed (Colleague): “This is Mrs. Esteglal, beside her is Mr. Fahim, the oldest employee in the office, and this is Mr. Ahmed the office boy.”

“Your office is the one on the left, beside me.”

“My name is Mohamed. Call me Hamada, Mousy, or Mems. What about you, what’s your name?”

Goma’a: (yelling) “Stand up well! My name is none of your business! Are you going to be my friend?!”

“If you want to talk to me, call me Mrs. or Ms.”

“All of you call me Mrs.! We are coming to work not to become friends.”

“As for you Mr. Beheem (Cow), you can call me daughter.”

Voice: “Call the Doctor, Mr. Fahim’s heart stopped again.”

Figure 26. 5
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience Continued”

Voice: “Good morning Mrs."
Deputy: “It is just a morning.”
Voice: “Can you please sign this paper, Mrs.?"
Deputy: “Leave it on the desk.”
Voice: “The papers are accurate I swear Mrs. this is not a misprinting, it is just dirt.”
“Please forgive me this time and don’t deduct from my salary please.”
Deputy: “Why don’t you read the statute to understand, you dumb!”
Office boy: “Your tea, Mrs. Director”
Head of Department: “Leave it on the desk.”

Employee: “How can I finish it? Mrs. Elham is off today and the stamp is in her drawer.”
Head of Department: “I don’t care about Mrs. Elham and Mrs. Yousra. The file has to be completed in the morning.”
“We will not postpone people’s errand’s because of your laziness.”
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience Continued”

Ahmed: “Mum, mum, mum!”
Mother: “Yes, Shafinaz.”
Ahmed: “I want the money to pay for my private lesson.”
Mother: “Open the drawer and take what you want.”
“Come here, Ahmed.”
“What are you wearing you kid? Are you going to a masquerade?”
Father: “Why have you become that dumb since you entered the high school?”
Ahmed: (singing) “Collect your wounds sad boy and leave, another step and all your pain heals, and dream with an open eye and don’t sleep, until you reap the flower of your dreams.”

Head of Department: “What is this Mr. Ahmed?”
Mr. Ahmed: “This is the license of the land of …”
Head of Department: “I know it is damn license! What is that nonsense you want me to sign?”
Mr. Ahmed: “Mrs. Director, just read the name in the signature part.”
“You know it all, Director. You know well this is out of our hands, we just follow the orders.”
“Also, you know, Director, these wealthy people don’t forget who help them.”

Figure 26. 7
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience Continued”

Head of Department: “Are you crazy, you silly Ahmed? How dare you tell me this? Orders follower you say it to your mother not here in my office. And you are coming to my office with your own will. Get out you son of bitch!”

General Manager: “What can we do with that stupid woman? She will not do as told, and my position cannot take any interference.”

“Hang on bro, until we see what we will do.”

“There isn’t a way other than that those people deal with it themselves.”

“Hello?”

Lady: “Good morning Mrs. Director.”

“May I take three to four hours of your time?”

Employee: “Who is that woman sitting with the Director, Mr. Mohamed?”

Office boy: “I don’t know Mr. Mohamed, but she seems to be from the top echelons of society.”

Employee: “What a hero!”

Head of Director: “I am not threatened.”

Lady: “I am not coming to threaten you. What I’m trying to tell you is that what you are doing is not in your favor.”

“The people whom on behalf of I am coming to talk to you don’t like those who hinder their interests.”

Head of Department: “Who are those people?”

“It must be one who has a Shawarma Restaurant, and went to drink coffee in the Lieutenant’s office, believing that he became the new Ahmed Ezz. I know these people, they are spreading in the country.”

Lady: “If you want to know, open the window.”

Head of Department: “Why will I find him hanging on the tree?”
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience Continued”

Hajj Mohamed Ahmed
Supportive of the poor
Permanent parliament member
Congratulates you on the Mango Season

Head of Department: “Do you think you threatened me like this? Do you think I’ll surrender and give up on my principles that easy?

“You know? I’ll participate in the coming elections, competing against him next time? I will kick this silly man out from the parliament.

“It seems that you don’t know me well you woman.”
“I am the Director.”
Lady: “I know much about you Mrs., and believe me we have so much in common.”

“I would also like to tell you that you will not make it.”

“People know you and they trust you. You are surely the Director. But, can you write your name on a banner and hang it in the streets for everyone to see?”

“Think of your children, Director.”

“We got caught up in the talk and I didn’t introduce myself to you. My name is Reda, Mrs. Reda Abdel Aal. You see how we are the same.”

“People like us cannot live but in the shadow.”

“Goodbye Mrs. Friday.”

Heavy hours pass for Goma’a, heavy, long, and tiring hours. She is torn between thinking and despair.
Then, she starts laughing.

Figure 26. 9
Translation: “Ms. Refaat’s Conscience Continued”
Friday of Anger
Your candidate for the Parliament.
Friday of Purification.
Purifying the Corrupt Society.
Friday of Holding On.
A Million in the Parliament.
Enough is Enough.
Friday of Salvation.
Friday of Change.
For a Better Life.
A Million in the Parliament.

Friday of the Poor First.
Friday of Victory.
Friday of the End
The End of Corruption.
Friday of Salvation and Enough.

Figure 26. 10
In *TokTok*, one of the stories “Mrs. Refaat’s Conscience” (figures 26.1 to 26.10) is interesting because it does not simply illustrate the role played by women during the revolution. Instead, it offers an alternative representation of women who were not present in Tahrir Square; fighting against all the corrupt practices in governmental institutions during the revolution that were usually ignored by the media. Through this story, the female character “Friday” perceives social and political contradictions; taking action against oppressive elements of reality. Even though, she did not face military and police brutality like the others in Tahrir Square, she used her inferiority complex; due to being ridiculed for her name her entire life; she uses her anger at this to fight corruption in governmental institutions. She is seen as an empowered subject; using her inferiority complex to enter the political field; transferring all the ridiculous connotations; from something being negative into doing some positive deeds without giving up her own principles.

In this story, one can sense the pedagogical process of conscientization that leads women to actively reject established rationalizations of unequal power relations and oppression in the governmental institutions. As Freire argues in *Cultural Action for Freedom*, conscientization does not involve the passive acquisition of knowledge embedded in peoples’ mind but rather it is an active process fighting against the harmful practices and contradictions; creating new solutions to solve problems related to their own oppression (as cited in Carleton, Sean 2014:161). In other words, as Freire explains, women are trying to see themselves as potential changers of their social circumstances. The comic illustrator in this story is constructing a visual narrative that does not show the struggles of a female government employee; but directs the reader to the political class struggle that even continued in post-revolutionary Egypt as shown in figure 26.8.
The story of “Mrs. Refaat’s Conscience” empowers women to tell their stories, creating a different narrative that speaks directly to the everyday lives of women through an art form that is current and relevant to them. As Mohammed Tawfik argues, *TokTok* encourages women to break the “culture of silence” they are usually surrounded with.

Comics are an excellent vehicle for ideology. They can help reinforce the dominant order, or, on the contrary, they can be an important medium for consciousness raising. They reflect the society and the historical moment in which they are created. They are not only a product of economic structures, but they also summarize class struggles, political circumstances, ideology, aesthetic fashions, and their own relationship to mass communication, media, film, and literature (Miguel Angel Gallo 78-79:85 as cited in Sanchez Perez 2012:148).

Then, what are we seeing about women during revolutionary moments in comic magazines like *TokTok*? In 2011, much media attention focused on Egyptian women’s non-conformity to many social conventions and norms during the toppling of President Mubarak. Yet, in June 2013, when women’s participation reached new heights, it was sidelined. Hardly featured in mass media, the unconventional displays of women’s agency on the streets of Cairo have been often ignored.
Translation: “The Disintegration of the Family”

Borsa Coffee Shop…Downtown
Man 1: “No Aya, we must boycott the referendum.”
Mother: “The revolution will succeed and the youth’s voice will be heard.”
Tarek: “Shisha is terrible today, right?”

Communication Company…Fifth Settlement
Man 1: “Did you see man? They captured Waleed while hanging anti-Constitution posters.”
Man 2: “No way! Honestly it’s useless anyway. The result is already known!”
Man 3: “Look, Morsi will be back God willing, and we will return to legitimacy.”

The Complex Building, Second Floor
Lady 1: “Look! We will all say yes! Not only yes! But yes to Sissi! The only one who could save the country.”
Lady 2: “Yes! He is a real hero (lion), and he is also handsome!”
T.V. Presenter: “Tomorrow Egyptians decide their fate in a real democratic celebration of the new Constitution referendum, in a step towards democracy and to restore Egypt’s place among the major countries.”
Mother: “Tarek sweety, did you take tomorrow off so we can go participate in the referendum? And you Aya, you don’t have to go to the university tomorrow. We will all go to the committee, and then I’ll invite you in El-Tabei.”
T.V. Advertisement: “Participate in the Constitution Referendum! Yes for Democracy! Yes for the Future!”
Tarek: “Mum, leave me alone coz I’m not going to that thing. Your posters hanging everywhere are enough.”
Aya: “Yes mum, we aren’t kids anymore.”
Translation: “The Disintegration of the Family Continued”

Mother: “Shut up you son of a bitch! Stop misbehaving! That stupid revolution drove you crazy!”

“If your father, may he rest in peace, had heard you! He sacrificed his life in war for one like you to come and speak! Let me die and relax from what you do.”

Tarek: “Mum, stop that T.V. series attitude! Leave dad out of it!”

“Look I’m not going! I’m not gonna participate in that farce.”

Aya: “Let’s go and just choose No, without telling her anything.”

Next morning

Mother: “Hurry up kids so we don’t run late.”

Tarek: “I shouldn’t have listened to you.”

Aya: “It will pass man, don’t worry!”

Mother: “Oh boy! What are all those people?!!”

Foreign Journalist: “Good morning, I am a journalist and I wanted to ask you why will you say Yes? I mean, what will you choose today?”

Man: “Take care! She might be from Al Jazeera team who ruin the country!”

Soldier: “Do you have your journalist identity card?”

Journalist: “Yes! Yes!”
Translation: “The Disintegration of the Family Continued”

Inside the Committee
Tarek: “What is this?! I knew it! Where are the curtains?”
Aya: “Lower your voice!”
Man 1: “Why do you need a curtain? Do you have something to hide?”
Man 2: “This boy belongs to the Brotherhood. Can you see his beard?”
Committee Officer: “You’ll mark with the pen here!”
Tarek: “Yes, but I… I…”
Man behind: “Go on man, mark Yes so we can leave.”
Girl behind: “Let me post the photo on Facebook!”
Mother: “Come kids, dance with us and have fun.”
Tarek: “What are you looking at you silly boy?”
Aya: “Oh boy! Mum will bring us a scandal.”

Following day in Borsa:
Man: “No Aya, you betrayed the revolution oath like this.”
Lady: “The revolution will succeed! And the youth will be free of the parenthood power!”
Aya: “I’m weak.”
Tarek: “Shisha is terrible today, right?”
Communication Company
Man (hit): “I should have listened to you and boycott the referendum.”
Man 2: “See, if Morsi just returns with the legitimacy, everything will be okay God willing.”
The Complex Building
Lady 1: “It was an amazing day really! We danced and had fun, but my hips are a bit aching my friend.”
Lady 2: “As for me, my back is killing me, but I do anything for Sisi.”
Broadcast: Yesterday night, around 98% voted Yes for the new Egyptian Constitution that moves towards democracy and puts an end to the rule of the Party and the single voice! Egyptians voted Yes! Yes for Egypt’s unity!
Nevertheless, in the story of “The Disintegration of the Family” (figures 27.1 to 27.3) in *TokTok*, what was happening on the streets of Egypt during the two days of the constitutional referendum, shows the expression of a female agency, that did not focus on how a respectable woman should behave in the political public framework. Instead, the story concentrated on challenging patriarchal mores that have been internalized through years of discipline. It is only through the platform of Egyptian comics, that this exercise of power by Egyptian women is seen as a form of rebellion against the long embedded system of acceptable behavior. By dancing and singing to the tune of *teslam al ayadi*, a song produced immediately after the 30th June to celebrate the military ouster of President Morsi, women resisted prescribed notions of how they should act in the political and public sphere (figure 27.3). Dancing became a powerful tool functioning as a way of understanding how Egyptian women voice their struggles and selves during such political transitions. As Randy Martin argues, dance does not only take place to “explore the politics of dance but also to see what dance has to offer politics” (2015:45). By dancing, a body is activated and called into action; accentuating the power of dance with mobilization and agency (Martin, Randy 2015:45). Dance, becomes a form of agency, in which it is “understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)” (Saba Mahmoud as cited in Gilman, Lisa 2011:168). As this story shows in figure 27.3, it is the character of the mother that was able through popular art forms like dancing and singing, to attract other Egyptians to join the referendum. Unlike her daughter and son who adopt different political views on the constitutional referendum; they did not persuade others through their own ways. The story does not only reflect the interesting mobilization strategy of dancing used by the
mother; but also represents the different political views among the family members, whom were not even trying to convince each other with their affiliations despite growing up in the same environment. As figure 27.1 highlights the mother only pressures her son and daughter to go and vote but does not direct them on whether to vote Yes or No in the constitutional referendum. After reading the whole 14 issues of *TokTok*, it is interesting to note that the stories mentioned above were the only ones discussing the political situation of Egypt during this transitional moment. As can be seen in the stories of “Mrs. Refaat’s Conscience” and “The Disintegration of the Family”, the leading characters are usually women who exercised agency to ensure their presence in the political arena. Even though in both stories the characters are identified through their roles as a nurturing mothers and dedicated wives; yet, the focus on the stories is not on how they take care of their household and raise their children. Instead, the stories are about how these women created a space for themselves to let others know that they exist. It is interesting to highlight that all the stories in *TokTok* discussing the post-revolutionary situation in Egypt, had
female characters playing the leading roles in the narrative rather than male ones, acknowledging their roles as active citizens.

It is important to mention that this chapter is more focused on *TokTok* because in *Al-Shakmgia*, there is no reference to any story that discusses the role played by women either during the 2011 revolution or afterwards. It is even interesting to note that though the main theme of *Al-Shakmgia* is violence against women, it does not mention any story talking about the virginity tests, the sexual assaults, beatings, and stripping women experienced to during the revolution and afterwards. It also overlooks the continuous perseverance of women in joining the protests and their calls for their rights despite the outrageous breach of their bodies.

Yet, in *Qahera* that women have become superheroes, refusing to retreat
into their domestic spheres during the revolution. Women in *Qahera* were determined, bold, and even dominating their male partners. They have not been intimidated by the continuous harassment in Tahrir Square, asserting their will to exercise political expression. It is in *Qahera* that we find the real text on how women enacted a state of exception in Tahrir. *Qahera* adequately represents what was happening for women during the revolution, and is a reflection on the discrepancy of Egyptian law. Women are positioned heroically, repudiating to be victims of sexual crimes, and are being imbued with agency despite the existence of an unjust legal system. They are represented as ethical defenders of innocents, who take law in their own hands and become an arbiter of it. *Qahera* offers expediency towards justice that is often devoid and deficient in the real world. It is a representation of the state of exception witnessed by women in Tahrir, showing how applications of justice seen in contemporaneous events are often ignored. As can be seen in figure 28.3, *Qahera* is reluctant to use force except when needed. She is a superhero and role model for young women today because she sends an outright message that women have power within themselves to make all the changes they want, including political ones.
Independent comic magazines are becoming more available than before in which it is no longer characterized as a kid’s medium. Due to their self-financing mechanisms, artists are able to draw freely without any possible intervention. Their success is proven evident with comics like *TokTok* developing art initiatives with Harvard University to do similar projects like the comic books of *You are free* or *It has already happened* with the aim of gathering comic artists to discuss Middle East issues. With both entities meeting at the Sharjah Book Festival at the United Arab Emirates and agreeing on such a project; it gives a chance particularly for Egyptians to express their cultural views without any enforced ones. *Muktatafaht*, a Middle East Comics Anthology, an initiative by the Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies; it aims at the exploration of comic arts work coming out of the Middle East with a particular focus on the potential its visual narrative for teaching and learning.

Figure 28. 3
In this chapter, the comic framing of female characters did not neglect how they were framed as active political agents. The coverage of the stories was not structured around their political accomplishments and potential in terms of motherhood. Instead, the comics reported how the character of Friday and the mother in the “Disintegration of the Family” accessed the political platforms, in terms of their status as independent Egyptian citizens. As citizens, both of them have the right to protest and vote. Through these stories, the narrative of how motherhood plays an important role in spurring her biological children to vote the same way as her is completely rejected. With the mother dancing in “The Disintegration of the Egyptian family”, she endorsed an emancipated position of women living in an Egyptian patriarchal society. In the comic, dance is seen as a form of agency reshaping the ways in which women are engaging with social change in the popular culture sphere. A woman is not only identified through her association with the home and her ability to correct male behavior only in the household.
Chapter Five: Is the Egyptian Comic Medium Really a Powerful Platform? To What Extent Can It Reach the Audience?

The current comic scene in Egypt managed to develop its own specificity; employing a strong diversity of genres and forms. To achieve a certain level of sustainability in the production field, *TokTok* magazine founders decided to avoid relying on financial support from donors and aimed at creating a sustainable product by covering all the expenses with the income made from sales. Even with the support of the EU Fund for six issues, *TokTok* founders specified that there has been no interference whatsoever in their comic art. Comics like *TokTok* are not only depending on their marketing strategies and the distribution of their copies among, Townhouse Gallery House, Alf bookstores, Diwan, Omar Bookstore (Downtown Branch), the Virgin Store (City Stars Branch), Café sufis Zamelek, Al Balad library in front of the American University in Tahrir, Al-Tanimya bookstore, Gallery Falak Garden City, and News Bookstore in the governorate of Cairo; but also allocating some of its 1000-1500 copies among the governorates of Menya, Assiut, Port Said, Alexandria, Aswan, Tanta and Luxor.

On the other hand, the team of *Al-Shakmgia* followed the same path as *TokTok* distributing their 1000 copies to Town Gallery House, Bikkiya Masr el Gedida, Al-Maadi, Falak Garden City, Sufi Zamalek, Alexandria, Mansoura, with 300 copies sold during the launching event. Like *TokTok*, the first issue of *Al-Shakmgia* have been seen a complete success as noted by Fatma Mansour, the editor. Despite receiving support from foreign feminist NGOs, the team completely rejected any imposition or intervention whatsoever in the production and presentation of their comic art. With the online version of *Al-Shakmgia* on Kotobna, an online platform, Fatma Mansour argues that the magazine has been one of the most downloaded materials. *Al-Shakmgia* along with the Fanar NGO decided to translate the stories into Spanish for an art
exhibition touring all over the world. Even with the interest of the foreign donors to know what the comics are actually talking about; Fatma continued to assert during the interview that their target is not about the West but rather the Arabic speaking audience.

To even ensure a wider audience, the founding teams like TokTok decided to alter their marketing strategy. TokTok is no longer going to be placed on the shelves with the rest of the books; it is going to be put by the cashier desk. It is going to be sold on the newsstands in kiosk. In addition, a new application will be featured via Apple Store for the magazine to be widely accessed through Apple devices like iphones, ipads, and smart phones. According to Hicham Rahma (one of the founders), by doing this, one can have access to learn about Egyptian culture and all that is going on the streets of Cairo from an insider’s perspective (Interview with the researcher 5th June 2015).

The publication of TokTok’s first five issues on: https://www.behance.net/gallery/6317455/TokTok: marks the beginnings of a new era of adult comics in Egypt, that is highlighted through the below mentioned comments on the website: “gamdiiiiiiiin awe, hya di kol ela3dad ?? wlw 7bet ashtriha , agibha mmin”, “love it”, “amazing work”, and “Gamda gedaaaaan”. As said by Shennawy, “We are trying to keep our audience and still do whatever we want” (worlds without borders 2011). TokTok continues to be represented as the comic magazine born on Tahrir Square. But in fact, working on it started a year before the revolution. “We wanted to make a revolution within comics” says Hicham, “We don’t want to make all our comics about the revolution, bringing a new wave in comics” and this is exactly what they did through their representations of the gendered female body.
Conclusion

Although comics have been a major facet of Egyptian life since 1878, few scholars have examined the role played by this medium in the construction and representation of gender. In Egypt, during the early beginnings of history, the comic medium has been used by political leaders for self-glorification and an instrument for fighting colonialism. Yet, with the start of a new millennium, comics have been a protest media condemning the abuses of power and teaching the Egyptian masses new social meanings. Through comical illustrations, artists beginning with Ahmad Hijazi rejected all forms of authority and hierarchy whether in the Egyptian state or even among the households. Hijazi’s anarchism is evident through the character of Zakiyya showing how progressive and informative female characters can be; refusing the gendered patriarchal hierarchy in the majority of households. In the world of children’s magazines and comic strips, Hijaz was able to deliver his political messages, sharing some of its radical messages that have been virtually unkown. It can be said that through this representation of the character of Zakiyya in Maijd comic magazine, there has been a more open treatment of gender. As Kathleen Turner argues, “the simplicity, immediacy, and directness of the form’s techniques provide potent perspectives on women’s roles” (p.1). They have the power to project a complete fantasy, representing the values, fears, and expectations of society differently from other forms of popular culture like television, cinema, and advertisements. At one point, comics feed the dreams of their readers, “projecting the world they wish to see or dream about, in which the plots they fear or expect or hope for are played out in fantasy terms” (Chmaj 1972:311-312). Yet, they are very complex; operating on different levels presenting often contradictory messages regarding femininity, female bodies, and women’s relationship to men.
For instance, the multiplicity of visualizations of the female body in comics allows us to see the many different situations we encounter in our everyday lives. Through comics, we are accorded freedom to determining how bodies and identities can be always redefined and reformulated. It is undoubtedly evident that the Egyptian comic art has been geared towards the male viewer, with many comic images featuring naked female bodies to satisfy their gazes. Female bodies are put on display for the male gaze, lying down in a powerless pose to satisfy men’s desire. By contrast, women in TokTok, Al-Shakmgia, and Qahera have been pictured as active, powerful subjects able to negotiate the everyday difficulties; finding innovative solutions for their problems. We learn visually that women can be identified through male defined features such as physical strength, dominance, and aggressiveness. The apparent lack of distinct gender differences across the narratives presented implies that TokTok, Al-Shakmgia, and Qahera are inclusive of all genders. It can be argued that artists have been successful with their treatment of female characters in both their appearances and their uses of terminology; bringing in new knowledge about gender. Across the three main themes of veil, violence, and political participation of women analyzed throughout this thesis, it can be noticed that the three comics of TokTok, Al-Shakmgia, and Qahera have been successful in reflecting the miseries and concerns of different strata in Egyptian society, particularly women.

The comic platform has been one of the channels of communication bringing unspoken issues to the surface. Today, comics reflect heated debates discussing contextual realities along with their colloquial dialects; breaking many taboos and presenting different images of conventional stereotypes. For example, women’s issues persist to be featured as a major concern. Yet, the comics of TokTok, Al-Shakmgia and Qahera do not invite traditional, heterosexual gendered patterns of looking in the areas of veiling, violence, and particularly revolutionary
moments such as the 25th January uprising. In these comics, women are liberated from the established myths about motherhood, domesticity, and chastity, providing a new way of prescribing their behavior. As this thesis shows, Egyptian comics are moving away from the traditional stereotyped inscriptions of the gendered body through the imagination and creative artwork of the illustrators; yet with an attempt to provide an adequate description of women’s sufferings in Egyptian society. For instance, TokTok dedicated a whole issue to the subject of harassment. Along the same lines, strong female characters like Qahera have come to fight against all negative connotations with the veil. And with the appearance of Al-Shakmgia in 2014, it was clear that there is an urgent to present all issues concerning women such as violence. Comics became a weapon denouncing the increased levels of injustice. In its various forms, they have the ability to throw a different light on people’s conceptions of themselves more so than the formal media.

Stories featured both in TokTok, Al-Shakmgia and Qahera show the determination of comic artists to reject established socio-cultural models of veil and violence replacing them with unique and shifting conceptions. Throughout these comics, women whether (or not) they have children with those bodies, to whether (or not) form families - the narratives constructed are not a series about what men do and how do they see women. As this thesis highlights, gender visualization in Egyptian comics is not focused around the objectification of women but rather about the dissolution of conventional stereotypes. Stereotypes are not necessarily only negative (Richard Dyer: 245-246). But also play the role of representing and categorizing people to make sense of the society around them and maintain order. For instance, through these comics, the veil is not seen as marker of religious connotations or a sign of oppressiveness. Instead, it is portrayed as a standardized form of dressing for some women in Egypt and sometimes as an
instrument to avoid men’s harassment on the streets. Despite these efforts by women to avoid this act of violence by veiling, artists through their comical illustrations, show the diverse effects of such violent acts including trauma and honor crimes. Thus, they offer a cultural understanding of the veil and its representation; showing how comics created a space for women to move beyond the accounts of femininities and masculinities. Comics do not replicate the labeling of men as perpetrators and women as victims and put forward a new gender knowledge about how women are becoming their own decision-makers. The story lines given to women are not of a sexiest nature where female characters are taken care of differently like *Qahera*.

The visual stereotypes known from traditional visual media are not imitated in the Egyptian comic medium, with this thesis explaining how comics provide new practices of gender visualization. By examining the aforementioned themes and looking at the previously mentioned research questions, this thesis concludes that there are no stereotypes of gender roles in Egyptian comics, with the majority of female characters not represented in passive roles. Artists realize that stereotypes, while easy to communicate and relate to in a short period of time, they clearly have no role in their depictions of gender. Therefore, creators begin to put serious efforts into discussing gender-sensitive issues, with their stories appealing to everyone. According to them, the narrative available in the comic panels should be appealing to everyone and not reduced to stereotypical traits of gender. Artists use visual narratives in comics to raise awareness on how interpret signs and symbols within a particular culture.

**Limitations and Future Recommendations**

While I believe that this thesis provides new insights on a variety of issues like veil, violence, and political participation of women in Egyptian comics, it opens new areas for future
research as well. With proper access and resources, a parallel study from the point of view of both male and female fans can be very informative in relation to the aforementioned themes, to investigate whether they believe that comics offer newer understandings. It is without any doubt that fans will have different perceptions of the stories being narrated. Accordingly, it would be expected that they provide different explanations of gender that have not been identified through the comic platform. On the other hand, discussing topics that relate more to men in comics such as career, money, sports, and sex will be an interesting attempt to see how these issues are depicted similarly or differently from male and female comic artists; examining whether they reinforce or challenge stereotypes. Also, this study can be considered as a pioneer attempt to discuss taboo issues like homosexuality in a conservative society like Egypt through the emerging space of comics. Future research can, therefore, proceed from this point to further investigate this issue. Finally, it can mark the making of an electronic digitized database collecting all Egyptian comics.

Although the research has reached its aims, there are some unavoidable limitations. First, the non-contribution of the majority of Egyptian female comic artists except Hadeel Mohammed has been one of the main challenges. Second, the non-documentation of comic magazines and books in Egypt, and the inaccessibility to many resources has made it very difficult to examine all resources that could have enriched the research sample even more. It is important to mention that Mohammed Shennawy, the person who had most of the material he compiled himself through his personal efforts, and who is one of the founding members of TokTok, was unavailable. That is why the comics of Persepolis, The 99, TokTok and Al-Shakmgia have been collected here. At this point, it should be noted that in both the American University Library and Cairo University, there is no section or a newsstand for adult based comics or comics from the
Middle East for any researcher aiming to do a primary study about it. Third, except for the work done by Douglas and Malti-Douglas (1994) in the area of Arab comic strips, there is very limited scholarly discussion of Egyptian comics, which made providing a precise description of the medium one of the main challenges in this thesis. Fourth, one of the limitations of this study was the inability of the researcher to access the “Arab Comic Books Guide and Database” offered by the American University of Beirut, which provides the conceptual and historical aspects of Arab comic strips, books, and graphic novels as well as the drawing and cartooning techniques. It is believed that these resources would have added substantially to the thesis. Fifth, for several reasons, I was unable to attend conferences such as Middle East Film and Comic Con and International Festival of Bande Dessinée in Algeria, which are considered the two most important events for gathering comic artists and publishers; announcing the best Arab comic work.


Bullock, Katherine (2002). Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes [Online Version]. The International Institute of Islamic Thought. Accessed from https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=mpb8gYhokTwC&pg=PR7&lpg=PR7&dq=Rethinking+Muslim+Women+and+the+Veil:+Challenging+Historical+and+Modern+Stereotypes&source=bl&ots=HN0IcM3OaC&sig=DMBLIGFp3CRIkzvGKmcPACU4XBU&hl=en&sa=X&ei=g6ePV-DIG0UIfUgLAH&ved=0CBsQ6AEwADgK#v=snippet&q=Zuhur&f=false


Duncan, Randy & Smith, Matthew (2009). *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* [Online Book]. A & C Black. Accessed from [https://books.google.com/eg/books?id=dTN54Zv0lp4C&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=today+comic+books+are+widely+considered+to+be+potentially+capable+of+complex+and+profound+expression+as+both+literary+and+visual+art+forms&source=b&ots=4dRUCJh0o&sig=bH3kvJxrLn6HwIH0jB6IXabnPM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=1tPVeuzMcXZyAP2wKPwCg&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=today%20comic%20books%20are%20widely%20considered%20to%20be%20potentially%20capable%20of%20complex%20and%20profound%20expression%20as%20both%20literary%20and%20visual%20art%20forms&f=false](https://books.google.com/eg/books?id=dTN54Zv0lp4C&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=today+comic+books+are+widely+considered+to+be+potentially+capable+of+complex+and+profound+expression+as+both+literary+and+visual+art+forms&source=b&ots=4dRUCJh0o&sig=bH3kvJxrLn6HwIH0jB6IXabnPM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=1tPVeuzMcXZyAP2wKPwCg&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=today%20comic%20books%20are%20widely%20considered%20to%20be%20potentially%20capable%20of%20complex%20and%20profound%20expression%20as%20both%20literary%20and%20visual%20art%20forms&f=false)


Gardner, Jared (2012). *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty First-Century Storytelling* [Online Book]. Stanford University Press. Accessed from [https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=epynqSJYX_wC&pg=PA154&lpg=PA154&dq=a+space+for+the+reader+to+pause,+between+the+panels&source=bl&ots=if5XVBA5_J&sig=lQepLgkrnVBVx6XtYbwR6tb00eA&hl=en&sa=X&ei=xJyPVcrNHsi0Ucf4gfAP&ved=0CCAQ6AEwA#v=onepage&q=a%20space%20for%20the%20reader%20to%20pause%20&f=false](https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=epynqSJYX_wC&pg=PA154&lpg=PA154&dq=a+space+for+the+reader+to+pause,+between+the+panels&source=bl&ots=if5XVBA5_J&sig=lQepLgkrnVBVx6XtYbwR6tb00eA&hl=en&sa=X&ei=xJyPVcrNHsi0Ucf4gfAP&ved=0CCAQ6AEwA#v=onepage&q=a%20space%20for%20the%20reader%20to%20pause%20&f=false)


Gilman, Lisa (2011). *The Dance of Politics: Gender, Performance, and Democratization in Malawi* [Online Book]. Temple University Press. Accessed from https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=2zlQMHQvUeQC&pg=PA170&lpg=PA170&dq=dance, +agency,+and+politics&source=bl&ots=VHm2xM3aZD&sig=HfUartuIY8n5fFzj_1NFSNmayZv8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CDEQ6AEwBGoVChMLu8ni89KWxgIVR4ssCh3MPg4d#v=onepage&q=saba&f=false


Hassan, Nadia (May 24, 2007). “Beyond the ‘Oppressed Veiled Muslim Woman’, Breaking Barriers, Bridging Differences and Creating Dialogue”. MA Comparative Women’s Studies in Culture and Politics, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Utrecht University.


Hollander, Anne (1993). *Seeing Through Clothes* [Online Book]. University of California Press. Accessed from https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=CSItqzbG9nIC&pg=PR14&lpg=PR14&dq=an+image+linked+to+all+other+imaginative+and+idealized+visualizations+of+the+human+body%E2%80%9D&source=bl&ots=okPIJNz7BX&sig=t0FasBTm9YxuqLxiVn-KgdLU7nE&hl=en&sa=X&ei=srmPVbKrAaqgqwOk117ICw&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=an%20image%20linked%20to%20all%20other%20imaginative%20and%20idealized%20visualizations%20of%20the%20human%20body%E2%80%9D&f=false


Makhluf, Zein & Mahmoud, Rashid. Executive Summary of the Study on Women in a Society Dominated By Male Values: Case Study of Honor Crimes As one of the forms of Violence Against Women. Accessed from http://www.google.com/eg/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CB0QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fdbvjpegzift59.cloudfront.net%2F64941%2F131711-rpXHm.pdf&ei=iPuQVcvRJMmwsAHvz4jwDg&usg=AFQjCNFhrujRAyoYDZDg1T0kAXELUrRetg&bvm=bv.96783405,d.bGg

184


Mazg (Producer) & Mohammed, Ismail (Director)(2013). Comex BelMasry. Egypt (Unpublished)


Mitchell, W.J.T. (2013). *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* [Online Book]. University of Chicago Press. Accessed from [https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=l6KDBQAAQBAJ&pg=PA20&lpg=PA20&dq=take+the+stereotype+and+deforms+or+disfigures+it,+exaggerating+some+of+its+features&source=bl&ots=EvZDJv_fvt&sig=8ipcd0tMVehJ97RW9Ool8IKtD4&hl=en&sa=X&ei=QqGPVfKUF4urUf7oqegN&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=take%20the%20stereotype%20and%20deforms%20or%20disfigures%20it%2C%20exaggerating%20some%20of%20its%20features&f=false](https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=l6KDBQAAQBAJ&pg=PA20&lpg=PA20&dq=take+the+stereotype+and+deforms+or+disfigures+it,+exaggerating+some+of+its+features&source=bl&ots=EvZDJv_fvt&sig=8ipcd0tMVehJ97RW9Ool8IKtD4&hl=en&sa=X&ei=QqGPVfKUF4urUf7oqegN&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=take%20the%20stereotype%20and%20deforms%20or%20disfigures%20it%2C%20exaggerating%20some%20of%20its%20features&f=false)


The study of visual culture is the analysis and interpretation of images and the ways of seeing (gazes) that configure the agents, practices, conceptualities, and institutions that put images to work.


Pollard, Lisa (2005). Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and


Tarek, Sherif (2015, April). “Veil or No Veil, Egyptian Women are often Stigmatised, or Worse”. *Ahram Online*, Accessed from http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/151/128817/Egypt/Features/Veil-or-no-veil,-Egyptian-women-are-often-stigmati.aspx


**Comics**

*Al-Masri Effendi*. Accessed from *Al-Jazeera Online*.

*Al-Shakmgia Magazine*.

*Biit Al-Balad*. Accessed from https://www.google.com.eg/search?q=%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%AA+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%AF+%D8%B1%D8%AE%D8%A7&biw=1093&bih=506&tbnid=L98dt8As-u4JqM%253A%253Bfml4k2gaf2emEyM%253Bhttp%25253A%25252F%25252Fwww.artsgulf.com%25252F58081.html&source=iu&pf=m&fir=L98dt8As-u4JqM%253A%253Bfml4k2gaf2emEyM%253BcXqiEPB4eowHZfBjIeTcMx9n5E%3D&ved=0CDQyJc&ei=4YGbVYXeIWMksAH3taigBg


*Madame Thin and Seven Effendi*. Accessed from https://www.google.com.eg/search?q=%D8%B1%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9+%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%85+%D9%88+%D9%A8%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%26tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=n-bVdeVLsafsgHBrbiYAw&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAQ&biw=1093&bih=506#imgrc=gV5Vq2XLnosutM


*Qais & Laila and Antar & Abala*. Accessed from https://www.google.com.eg/search?q=%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD+%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%86+%D9%82%D9%8A%26tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=JYCbVbSvGYGaspH611SoDA&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAQ&biw=1093&bih=506#imgrc=gV5Vq2XLnosutM


*TokTok Magazine*. 