

A Boy and a Gun: Exploring Silent Responses to Violence in Riad Sattouf's *L'Arabe du Futur*

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Abstract

Franco Syrian graphic novelist Riad Sattouf paints a vivid and contrasting picture of a traumatic childhood in his well celebrated series, *L'arabe du futur: Une Jeunesse dans le Moyen Orient* (*The Arab of the Future: A Childhood in the Middle East*) published between 2014-2015. Through text and image, the reader is given a glimpse into the wanderings and travails of an immigrant multicultural family. Sojourns in countries like Syria and Libya where children are routinely confronted with violence from a tender age mark the work. This paper aims to explore the varying behaviour patterns evident in children growing up in conflict-ridden regions and under the ever-watchful eye of dictatorial figures at home and in society, as depicted in Sattouf's work. The study brings out the duality of reactions to violence: silence as seen in the self-reflections, and re-engagement in violence that routinely surfaces in the observational accounts. Further findings lead us to conclude that most societies depicted in Sattouf's memoirs are plagued by an intergenerational cycle of violence that impacts younger members and perpetuates similar behaviour through mimicry. The stifling silence that accompanies violence in the work is not restricted to cases involving children alone but is reinforced in instances of barbaric behaviour towards other vulnerable sections of the community: women, the underprivileged and animals. Silence comes across as the invisible force permeating the novel: by rendering victims powerless, stifling opinions of individual thinkers, privileging majoritarian views alone, and doing away with opposition to aggression, it ultimately acts as a corollary to violence.

Keywords: Children; Conflict; Graphic memoir; Silence; Violence.

Introduction

In recent years, graphic novels have captured the attention of many and are no longer considered merely as a source of entertainment but also used as a tool in educating the masses. With masterpieces like *Maus* (*Art*

Speigleman, 1991), *Persepolis (Marjane Satrapi, 2008)* and *Munnu (Malik Sajad, 2015)*, this medium has been successfully explored by authors and illustrators alike to highlight historical events, ethnography, and politics of various countries. The widespread popularity of such works has led to their use in educational institutions in various domains and even for the purpose of edifying the youth. The blend of text and illustrations enhances reader engagement. Readers are provided with a clear picture of the story; authors benefit from the choice of conveying ideas through words or images. Even a few panels of pictures devoid of text and vice versa can deliver a gripping message. Graphic novels also lend well to autobiographical writing. Authors portray real life stories and experiences, much to the fascination of readers.

A celebrated graphic novelist in the autobiographical genre is Riad Sattouf who writes in French. Initially known for his cartoons in the famous weekly, "Charlie Hebdo", Sattouf has succeeded in carving a niche in the world of literature in recent years with series like *L'Arabe du futur: Une Jeunesse Dans le Moyen-Orient (The Arab of the Future: A Childhood in the Middle East)*. The first volume was published in 2014 and earned him the prestigious Fauve d'or award in 2015. His series titled, *Les Cahiers d'Esther (2016-2020)* was much acclaimed and followed by an animated adaptation. Apart from these, he also rose to fame for his cinematic production, *Les Beaux Gosses (2009)*. Although Sattouf was born in France, his attachment to his father's native country, Syria is undeniably evident in *L'Arabe du futur*. This autobiographical graphic work tells the tale of an immigrant family in six volumes, and evokes the issues attached to assimilation and acculturation, with a subtle stress on loss of identity. Like Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Sattouf's *L'Arabe du futur* recounts events that unfold in the Middle East, in a society shaped by war, dictatorship, political ideologies, pan-Arabism, and antisemitism. The story begins in France and then shifts to Libya and Syria with constant shuffling between these countries across the panels of the four volumes chosen for this study.

We began our study with the question: would children living in sombre scenarios with a high propensity to violence, give in to enhanced aggression or seek solace in a silent retreat unto themselves? Secondly, how would positive reinforcement of violence by those in authority influence children in their formative years? We sought to examine these questions in light of narratives from Sattouf's autobiography. In an attempt to study the complex relationship between silence and violence, our study focussed on scenes dealing with verbal and physical violence and on response patterns that reinforced silence via restrained speech and suppressed agency

in victims. Given the image-centricity of this literary work, we included an examination of the design elements especially with respect to opposition in order to see if opposing themes like violence and silence were reflected through the imagery.

Spiralling Silence and Violence: Society and Children

The narrative of the child Riad, and his family as they move between France, Syria, and Libya traces numerous parallels and highlights divergent aspects related to culture, language, and belief systems. Contrasts form the mainstay of the work and bright colours are often shockingly juxtaposed. The author succeeds in seamlessly interweaving apparently contrasting tropes like silence and violence in varying degrees across the frames. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, a German political scientist postulates that individuals with an opinion contradictory to that of the majority are often afraid of expressing their thoughts in fear of rejection and isolation. Consequently, they opt for a silence-based response, ultimately resulting in the muting of an entire peripheral community. She uses the term *Spiral of silence* (1974) to describe this ripple effect. This spiral of silence is subtly brought out by Sattouf in *L'Arabe du futur* through prominent characters with consistently empty speech bubbles. The silence becomes doubly deafening in scenes where discriminatory glances, harsh voices, physical and psychological battering, and bomb explosions rudely punctuate the silence. According to Johan Galtung who theorized on Cultural Violence through the *Conflict Triangle (Cultural Violence, 1990)*, certain societal cultures legitimize violence and accept it. This is a result of their beliefs and attitude towards violent acts. In Sattouf's series, through Riad and other muzzled characters, we see silence spiralling in societies where violence is routinely accepted as a norm, thus reflecting Galtung's findings.

Children and adolescents figure prominently in Sattouf's narrative of a largely traumatized childhood. Through scenes taken from his formative years, the reader is given a unique perspective of children growing up in conflict-ridden zones. Although silenced by the surrounding aggression at times, they also manifest a violent side and indulge in barbaric acts when left to themselves. In various scenes, the author highlights how children innocently embrace violence and develop a taste for it.

Not only is the series *L'Arabe du futur* centered around characters of children; the narration too is from a child's perspective. Furthermore, the style of illustration involving linear and simplistic forms filled in with flat patches of colour reflect a child's innocence. The language used is easily

comprehensible and Sattouf narrates events as if he were experiencing them for the first time, thus accentuating the childlike lens through which he chooses to render the work. We find here a correlation with the theory of *Tabula Rasa*, popularized by John Locke (1690) in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The mind of the child is like a clean slate at birth which is then gradually filled in through encounters with the surrounding environment. Consequently, the child who initially begins his journey with a neutral perspective (a clean slate), slowly forms his own opinions based on specific life experiences. This progression is evident across the four volumes of *L'Arabe du futur* and is strikingly displayed through the chapter cover pages depicting Riad's evolution through the use of objects like guns that grow in size. Little Riad encounters violence and these childhood experiences will fill up his clean slate in distinctive ways. Will violence result in silence or further accentuate the already reigning brutality? While Riad persistently opts for silence like his mother, many others including children give in to cruel assaults on weaker targets. This may be interpreted as a manifestation of displaced anger. According to Silvi Saxena (2021), Displaced Anger is when anger is directed or projected towards a source other than something or someone who actually caused it.

In Sattouf's series, adults are shown frequently encouraging and reinforcing barbaric acts among children, thus contributing to a taste for violence at a young age. Moreover, there is a transmission of violent behavioral patterns from one generation to the next. Intergenerational violence suggests that children who live in the company of aggressive offenders tend to display enhanced levels of aggression. Very often this transmission is based on social learning and genetics (*Sytske Besemer, 2017*).

Discussion

In *L'Arabe du futur*, the reader is shown firsthand the severe effects of exposure to violence at a tender age. The dopamine rush and the display of excitement on the faces of little children are not just conveyed through written text but also clearly illustrated in the author's linear drawings. For example, on one occasion the children of Teir Maalah, a town in Syria, appear to amuse themselves in a simple game that involves torturing an innocent puppy. They kick and toss the helpless animal around and then further showcase their sadistic nature by stabbing the puppy with a pitchfork and mutilating the helpless creature ("*...puis un garçon un peu plus âgé, que les autres est arrivée avec une fourche et l'a plantée dans le chien..... ensuite un vieux type est arrivé et a donné un coup de pelle dans le chiot et sa tête s'est envolée...*", Sattouf, *L'Arabe du futur*, Volume 1, p. 144-145). Parallels

may be drawn here with behavior exhibited by adults like Abdel Razak, Riad's father whose aggressive nature is displayed in a similar manner. While Riad happily plays with a puppy that his mother's family ultimately adopts, Abdel Razak is disgusted at the sight of the animal and kicks the puppy in a manner reminiscent of the children in the first volume of the series ("*J'ai horreur des chiens!*", Sattouf, *L'Arabe du futur, Volume 4, p. 166*). Such repetitions of violent scenes point to an intergenerational transmission of violence with children imitating adults who condone violence and themselves engage in aggressive acts.

Intergenerational violence is further perpetrated by positive reinforcement by adults at home and in the community at large. The reinforcement may be by favourable responses to children's aggressive acts or by appreciative silence. In the first volume, when Riad meets his cousins, Anas and Moktar for the first time, he finds himself involuntarily dragged into a tussle wherein he is left feeling isolated. Adults present in the room appear to show appreciative consent through positive body language and lack of reprisals. While Riad's cousins fight, they also mockingly call him "Yahoudi" which means "Jew" in Arabic ("*Ce mot provoqua une grande excitation: tout le monde me tomba dessus*", Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur, Volume 1, p. 78*). Verbal violence both compounds the physical attack and proves the prejudice and xenophobic attitude that drive aggression. In numerous instances Riad and his mother are shown to be targets of anti-semitist sentiments ("*Ta mère aime les juifs ! ...Anas et Moktar, ils disent que maman et moi, on est juifs*", Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur, Volume 1, p. 137*).

The author uses incidents such as these to reveal the stigma attached to the Jewish minority community for historical reasons linked to the Arab-Israeli war (1948-49). Clementine, Riad's mother is Jewish and remains a silent witness to the aggression against her son, although her facial expressions clearly show her disapproval. Riad too follows suit and adopts a passive non-retaliatory stance to his cousins' taunting. These restrained attitudes are common in Sattouf's work. We conclude that Clementine and Riad have been driven into a spiral of silence, sensing that their opinions will be neither valued nor appreciated by the majority community in Syria. In contrast, the other mothers in the room are shown laughing at the sight of the fighting children. Their laughter positively reinforces such acts in the children, who are consistently shown engaging in aggression against each other. The entire society is thus rife with violence; acceptance and support for brutal acts are repeatedly seen throughout the work. The rising gradation in aggressive content may be traced to Galtung's theory of *Cultural Violence*. We note the gradual evolution of a child from the

tabula rasa state to a being who chooses aggressive manifestations following repeated positive reinforcement from elders and the community. In the introductory pages of the first two volumes, readers are met with the illustration of Riad in his early years innocently holding a pistol in his hand which is also present in a similar manner in the second volume. The size of the pistol increases as Riad grows. The pistol serves as a subtle indicator of increasing exposure to violence among children. The imagery of the pistol delivers the message of spiralling violence and is further reinforced through the use of colours: the early pages of the work note a predominance of blue in pastel shades. These are symbolic of calm and serenity and describe a peaceful early childhood. As Riad grows, later pages showcase indifference, disdain, hostility, discrimination, and finally open aggression and brutality through the violent acts that are both described in words and painted in colors synonymous with rage: red and black. Riad, like every other child exposed to violence in the memoir, will also sway toward aggression. The earlier described incident where he meets his cousins, ends with a shift in Riad's behavior: initially, he runs to his mother to find solace amidst the violence, towards the end of the account, his thoughts are suggestive of the appeal of aggression and he is drawn to re-joining the fight with the cousins (*"Bien qu'ayant eu très mal, j'avais quand même envie d'y retourner ! J'étais attiré, aimanté par la violence !"*, Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur*, Volume 1, p. 78).

Violence is not to be connected solely with Syria and Libya in Sattouf's work. It raises its ugly head even in France where Riad is mocked in school for his foreign-sounding name. The scorn leads to isolation and eventually to silence. In one instance he is punched by a boy and starts bleeding, but chooses not to retaliate. His father on the other hand, encourages revenge and reprimands his son for not responding to the violence with equal aggression (*"Bien sûr que je me mets dans mes états ! Tu aurais dû te retourner et lui planter ton couteau dans son œil à ce chien !"*, Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur*, Volume 4, p. 190-191). Unlike Riad's mother who is peace-loving and submissive, Razak appears as the authoritarian role model for his son. His sporadic lectures on life and the narrator's notes reveal an undying devotion for dictators like Muammar Gaddafi, staunch support of conflict, and aggressive action in politics as well as in daily life scenarios. Razak becomes the very incarnation of the oppressive dictator as he forces his views on little Riad, thereby crushing his son's individuality and ideas. At times Riad holds back from informing his father of the violence meted out to him in fear of disappointing him (*"Je n'ai pas parlé des coups de bâton, car j'avais peur que mon père me trouve faible"*, Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur*, Volume 2, p. 24). Riad looks up to his father and stands in awe of him; he silently

follows Razak's orders without question. In the first volume, when Riad shows Razak his drawing of a Mercedes, the father ridicules the shape of the circular wheels and insists that the wheels be rectangular despite his son's logically correct reasoning in favour of circular wheels. Ultimately, Riad silently accepts his father's opinion and adopts his views without any further questioning ("*Mais tes roues elles sont plates! Elle ne peut pas bouger, ta voiture!C'est pas vraiment ça...Dessine-la comme moi...*", Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur, Volume 1, p. 31*). This is probably due to the fact that he places his father on a high pedestal and looks upon him as a role model.

Razak's reinforcement and appeal of violence, intolerance toward signs of weakness in the face of aggression, in-acceptance of individuality, create conditions that drive his wife and son to silence as a form of submission. In the case of Riad, admiration tempers the silence and will eventually lead to an acceptance of violence in stray instances; with Clementine, the silence that begins as a respectful and loving response becomes pronounced in a tragic reversal of fortunes. Clementine who is shown writing Razak's doctoral thesis in France in the initial pages gradually loses the written word and then the spoken word in public and private space. In Libya, Clementine is silenced at the radio newsreader job, and once in Syria in the company of a discriminatory social milieu that values silence in women, and brands her as a Jew, she chooses to withdraw into a shell of her own. Through instances of verbal violence, condescending attitudes, and scornful behaviour meted out to her in the community and at home, she is reduced to a pale shadow of herself in subsequent sections of the work.

In her research article, Amy Morin (2021) explores the Social Learning Theory stressing the fact that people learn by watching others. Similarly, the Bobo doll experiment performed by psychologist Alberta Bandura (1961) shows how children who watch their parents act aggressively towards the doll have strong tendencies of doing the same. Razak offers Riad a gun and takes him on his first hunting expedition. On this occasion Riad watches in admiration: his father is walking around proudly on the look-out for prey ("*Tu vois c'est ça qui est génial avec la terre. Elle te donne les plantes que tu cultives, et la viande que tu peux chasser avec ton fusil*", Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur, Volume 2, p. 71*). He finally shoots a bird, the gunshot and the sight of blood leaves Riad dumbfounded and startled at first. However, he soon turns indifferent and even carries the dead bird home in a bag ("*Cinq minutes plus tard, je ne ressentais plus rien pour ses oiseaux*", Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur, Volume 2, p. 73*). Involvement in aggressive sports like hunting and exposure to such acts in the presence of adults who accept, condone and encourage violence leads children like Riad to

change their reticent attitude toward violence. Aggression thus becomes acceptable to them as though part of a normal childhood. The children Riad frequents in Syria are repeated victims of corporal punishment. The barbarism toward children appears normalized and acceptable and the very same victims become perpetrators of violence themselves. Children inflict physical and mental suffering on each other and engage in aggressive acts during playtime. Children are shown to inhabit internal spaces riddled with conflict-induced wall cracks, or staring out of windows dreamily onto a vacant area. The emptiness in urban areas weighed down by strife is reflected in the silence of voices. In a society that pressurises conformity and derides individuality, characters speak their mind very less; children hardly express themselves in sane and age-appropriate communication. Even when they speak, the proliferation of words is but the reinforcement of a deafening silence of their individual selves and original thought. Their speech bubbles display repetitive propagandist or discriminatory ideas reinforced by elders. Conversations among children center around hatred for the Other (Jews), or involve mocking stances toward weaker children, thus manifesting the development of bully behaviour. It is apparent that the latter has its origins in adult behaviour that propagates violence toward the weak and the Other and stifles their voice.

In many frames of Sattouf's autobiographical series, particularly those of Syria and Libya, children are seen playing with toys designed and inspired by war: toy guns, tanks, soldiers. Although the children pretend-play with plastic soldiers, they engage in a real role play where each child identifies with the toy soldier character and becomes a victim of preconceived notions linked to warring communities. Israeli soldier figurines are portrayed as traitors and Syrian ones as brave heroes (*"Les soldats syriens étaient en plastique vert...Ils avaient des postures de guerriers valeureux. Les soldats israéliens étaient en plastique bleu...et des attitudes de traîtres"*, Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur, Volume 1, p. 125*). These ideas are enforced by a society that promotes cultural violence and silences the opinions of the minority. The soldiers are plastic products of a society at war. They fuel a taste for violence in flesh and blood as children have fun amidst make-believe war scenes or real gory brutality. Parents and elders seem to support and encourage the very games where children learn to take sides in battle at a tender age. Those in authority use violence which trickles right down to the youngest members of the community.

Neighbourhood streets, markets, homes, leisure spaces, and schools are all infiltrated by aggression. No space seems safe for a child and as Riad withdraws into himself and adopts a stance of silence imitative of his

mother, the reader sees the violence taking over his inner consciousness. Scenes painting his nightmares are common and bring out terror for the father figure through a raging bull that moves from the physical plane (the television set where it has been placed by Razak) to the psychological dimension as an allegory of his many fears fuelled by surrounding violence at the hands of cousins, companions, and teachers. Nightmares and fevers are psychosomatic symptoms of a deeper malaise nurtured by a society that propagates violence toward its young and prevents self-expression thus blocking outlets for better stress management. As Riad grows, his concerns become more acute, responsibilities linked to childhood weigh on him, and he dreads joining school because of the negative reviews he receives. Riad's school in Syria is painted in gruesome strokes: a female teacher reigns on the children forced into quiet submission through harsh words, threats, and corporal punishment. The bright red brings out the repressed rage of the suffering children and the blood and pain that becomes an inevitable part of school life. The trauma of incomplete school work, of reaching late to school is brought out through nightmarish scenes (*"Deux seulement ? Dernière chance. Si jamais je passe parmi vous et que j'en trouve un qui n'a pas fait ses devoirs et ne s'est pas dénoncé, il est mort."*, Sattouf, *L'arabe du futur*, Volume 3, p. 13). Riad, like many others, fears his teacher and school is transformed into a dreaded space where brutality triumphs. Through a space characteristic of childhood experiences, contrasts are brought out between the gory scenes in the Syrian school and the passivity in French schools. Ironically, Riad's short school experience in France is shown as strangely unfulfilling as he restrains his individual artistic talent in an attempt to fit in. Although teachers in French schools are shown to be overly protective of children and prevent overt aggression, other issues like underperformance, and infantile behaviour plague children. Violence is some form or the other is shown to permeate all societies and, in both spaces, Riad silences his voice and curtails his free artistic expression.

The autobiography's contrasts extend to larger spaces through colour shifts. The palette moves from blue to yellow to red as Riad moves from France to Libya to Syria. The child is placed in a peculiar situation as he moves between spaces. He remains an outcast in all three, his opinions are often brutally crushed in most situations, in other instances he chooses to remain silent in fear of being rejected or harassed by the majority. Acceptance is out of reach to Riad and he remains a victim of prejudice and bias at the very least. On some level, he mirrors his father's obsession with acceptance in a society that is considered alien. Riad follows Razak in his playful fascination for the toy bull- a symbol of violence and rage- that Razak religiously carries around in his suitcase and showcas-

es on top of the television. The bull haunts Riad's dreams in Syria as he grapples with an authoritarian father, a submissive mother who fails to protect, aggressive cousins who torment, an indifferent grandmother who remains insensitive, and a cruel teacher who terrorizes. As people around give in and succumb to violence (neighbourhood aggression, community conflicts, honour killings, dictatorship, and war), several children are seen quietly observing, respectfully imitating, and silently expressing repressed emotions through the same medium of violence.

Conclusion

Sattouf's series explores the intergenerational and intersocietal transfer of violence. The narration appears to subtly condone aggressive acts on weaker targets like women, children or those belonging to a minority community. Not just families and communities, but entire societies are shown in the grip of violence with references to political figures linked to oppressive regimes like Muammar Gaddafi, Hafez al-Assad described in a glorified tone. In societies where power is associated with violence, a trickle-down effect would be natural. Through an apparently innocuous and humorous rendering, page after page of the work exposes the behavioural patterns of innocent children who become victims of exposure to violence from a tender age. The resulting impact is a propensity toward violence aimed at weaker targets and a defensive silence when faced with powerful aggressors. Silence and violence thus come together in a cyclic relation as children come out as victims transformed into executioners. Defence mechanisms may also be at play as children grapple with low self-esteem induced by recurring violence and attempt to reverse the balance of power through indulgence in violent acts themselves. In a society that condones and propagates the use of aggression, children acquire some agency and power by adopting as a weapon the very source of their trauma. While silence is resorted to as the immediate reaction to aggression meted out by a power-wielding figure, violence becomes the eventual response to reinstate the victim with a sense of respect and normalcy in a society that normalizes the use of force.

In a graphic novel, the therapeutic value of art cannot be understated. Riad is often shown sprawled sketching his impressions. It would appear as though if he cannot speak, he can and will sketch, thus mitigating his silence through artistic agency. His encounters with the growing violence in his surroundings are illustrated through guns and bulls, both of which are synonymous with blood and gore, and are shown in increasingly greater dimensions as the story progresses. Riad's childhood cannot be divorced

from his adulthood and although the later volumes fall outside the scope of this study, it is significant that Sattouf the adult has redeemed himself and found a voice through his art. The graphic memoir speaks volumes of his impressions and registers all that he probably was prevented from narrating as a child. The childhood silence appears to have found an outlet in the sketches; numerous scenes testify to Riad sketching within the graphic novel. In a larger dimension, the graphic novel itself is a testament to attempts to overcome the trauma and counter the forced silence with voice and agency.

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