



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

The Representation of Collective Trauma Experience of the Palestinian Refugees in Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi*

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Abstract

This article aims to navigate the representation of the collective trauma experience of Palestinians in the poignant graphic novel *Baddawi* (2015) by Leila Abdelrazaq. This study examines how stories of violence, displacement and exile such as the Safsaf massacre and Al-Naksa are not just historical events but lasting sights of pain and resilience for generations. The research uses a qualitative methodology that includes close reading of images-text interplay, panel structure, visual motifs, symbolic framing, and temporal and spatial mapping. Drawing on Alexander (2004), Eyerman (2001, 2004), Smelser's (2004) and Erikson's (1976) cultural trauma postulates, this study is concerned with how narrative and graphic elements collaborate to construct, circulate, and inherit suffering on collective level. Rather than distinguishing trauma as a purely psychological rupture or individual experience, cultural trauma occurs when the members of a community perceive a particular rupture as a threat to their collective identity and it persists beyond generations through their collective consciousness. The symbolic imagery such as checkpoints, maps, traditional tatreez patterns, as well as muted lines and minimalistic drawing have been utilized in the text to integrate trauma into corporeal and spatial realities. Denied futures and historical absences continuously shape identity have been portrayed in the form the transitional area of refugee camp. The protagonist Ahmad is raised in a Lebanese refugee camp amid family members who are always talking about a country that has vanished from the map and a lost home. Finally, the article argues that *Baddawi* does more than narrate trauma; it stitches memory, endurance, and longing into visual form, presenting the ongoing Palestinian experience as a tapestry of loss and hope, sustained and transmitted



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

through both story and image.

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1. Introduction

The growing criticism in the field of trauma studies has given rise to new forms of art and literature to represent the unbearable sufferings of individuals and communities. The turn of the new millennium at the end of the 20th century witnessed a great number of traumatic narratives, which can be subsequently termed as a new subgenre: “the trauma graphic novel” (Romero-Jodar, 2017). The graphic works of Art Spiegelman, Dave Gibbons, Paul Hornschemeier, Joe Sacco, Alison Bechdel, Craig Thompson, and Marjane Satrapi, Alan Moor, along with many others, have helped to establish the trauma graphic novel genre and brought attention to a range of problems related to loss, trauma and suffering under the impacts of war, political conflicts, illness, abuse, subjugation and oppression. Such narratives have helped establish trauma as an acceptable subject matter for graphic form. In order to create a rich and compelling narrative experience, graphic novels combine words and images in a distinctive way. They can effectively and immediately convey both the physical and emotional aspects of the experience, which makes them particularly well-suited to explore challenging and emotionally charged topics like trauma. The graphic novel about trauma can take many different forms, from fictionalized accounts of cultural or historical trauma to autobiographical accounts of one's own personal trauma.

Over the last three decades, there has been a significant evolution in the scholarly discourse to study trauma both as a psychological phenomenon and a cultural construct. More recently critics such as Craps (2013), Balaev (2014), and Rothberg (2019) have highlighted the need to address collective experiences of trauma with cultural relevance, whereas early trauma theories concentrated primarily on individual and psychic wounds particularly those related to Holocaust and other noteworthy Western historical atrocities. This critique paved the way for the development of cultural trauma theory, which moved beyond the individual psyche to account for group-level meaning-making processes. Alexander's sociological model of cultural trauma defined it not by the intrinsic properties of a given event but by the interpretive work done by social actors who frame that event as a threat to collective identity. According to him, cultural trauma arises when a group



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

collectively experiences a catastrophic event that deeply scars its shared consciousness, imprinting lasting memories and fundamentally altering the community's sense of identity and its trajectory into the future (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). Alexander's approach emphasizes that trauma is not inherent in violence itself, but in the narratives that groups construct around it, using media, symbols, performance, and memory institutions.

In particular, the cultural and historical atrocities experienced by Palestinians represent a category of trauma that defies simple psychological classification. Rather than isolated, clinical traumas of the individual mind, this trauma is chronic, collective, and culturally embedded. This involves the systematic erosion of social fabrics, historical continuity, and communal memory under trauma conditions. This study uses the Collective Trauma Theory as a more suitable framework, because of the severe and prolonged nature of Palestinian's trauma. Moving beyond the Freudian psychoanalytic practice, the cultural trauma theory views trauma as a shared experience of suffering and socially mediated process in which groups undergo a rupture so profound that it permanently alters their collective identity (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). By employing this framework in conjunction with graphic narrative theory, this study aims to demonstrate how visual storytelling, particularly through graphic novels like *Baddawi*, creates, maintains, and challenges communal trauma and memory by utilizing this framework.

New narrative mediums have also appeared to deal with the complexities of representing such politically and culturally embedded traumas. Particularly comics and the graphic novels, as Chute (2016) establishes in *Disaster Drawn*, have become powerful medium for the visual witnessing and testimonial storytelling. Graphic novels such as Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* illustrate the capacity of sequential art to convey the affective, embodied, and communal dimensions of trauma that often elude conventional prose narratives.

1.1 Methods of Analysis

Using qualitative approach, this study analyses Leila Abdelrazaq's graphic novel *Baddawi* (2015) through a close reading of visual, textual and narrative elements. The focus is on how graphic elements express collective trauma and draw on formal comics theory (McCloud, 1993; Groensteen, 2007), cultural trauma studies (Alexander, 2004, Eyerman, 2001, 2004, Erikson, 1976), and visual semiotics. The analysis undertakes a



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

close examination of visual form, panel arrangement, silhouetting, symbolic motifs, graphic weight, expressive anatomy, iconic solidarity, visual braiding, chronotropic disruption, textual and narrative techniques. The material includes a selection of pages from *Baddawi* (2015), focusing on scenes that illustrate exile, memory and transmission of trauma. Considering graphic novel as a visual record as well as a cultural text, this study examines the visual and textual components which are used to encode collective trauma, enabling the study of cultural memory under trauma through sensory representation, formal structure and content. The analysis section quotes original text from *Baddawi* are in uppercase as originally drawn in the novel.

1.2 Framework of the Study

The groundwork for understanding trauma as a social condition, not merely an event, has been laid by Erikson's theoretical insights. This framework elaborates how trauma transforms a group's understanding of its past, articulate its present and transform the future.

The landmark study *Everything in Its Path* by Erikson (1976) in the paradigm of collective trauma perceives trauma beyond the individual psyche. Erikson has defined trauma as a collective experience, as a "blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community," in contrast to psychiatric models that concentrate on personal injury. He examined the disastrous aftermaths of Buffalo Creek flood, Erikson observes that trauma can not only fracture individual life, but it affects the entire fabric of social life. When subjected to terrible events, communities experience a long-lasting disruption in shared meaning, coherence and trust which bind the community in a collective whole.

The focus on identity as social infrastructure is the thing which distinguishes Erikson's collective trauma framework, where he establishes that identity of the individual is not build in isolation, rather it is derived through their embeddedness in communal norms, cultural traditions, locality, family and shared contexts. When such a group is hit by a disaster, these relational fabrics are torn apart, and the resulting trauma is collective. Thus, the damage is cumulative to memory, rituals and shared moral order, not just to bodies and property. Opposed to the being a single instant of impact, Erikson's (1976) input introduces the idea of trauma as a form chronic rupture, which lingers as a prolonged cultural disintegration, loss of continuity and disorientation. Making his framework highly relevant in the field of cultural trauma studies, this contribution has later influenced



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

thinkers such as Jeffrey Alexander and Ron Eyerman who has expanded his concepts to broader historical ruptures such as colonization, forced migration, and genocide.

In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Alexander (2004) builds his concept of cultural trauma by extending and expanding upon Erikson's foundational theory of collective trauma, especially as developed in Erikson. Erikson examined how disasters can "damage the bonds attaching people together and impair the prevailing sense of communality." He defines collective trauma precisely:

By collective trauma ... I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. ... 'I' continue to exist, though damaged ... but 'we' no longer exist as a connected pair or ... larger communal body (Erikson, 1976, p. 154–155).

This moving passage captures Erikson's view that the devastation of a community is not just a physical loss but a collapse of shared identity "we' no longer exist", illustrating that trauma is fundamentally social and relational. Alexander picks up this thread and advances it significantly. He integrates Erikson's sociological insight into a broader cultural framework. Where Erikson describes *how* community is shattered, Alexander asks *why* certain disruptions become narrative crises that demand meaning, memory, and identity revision. He writes "Traumatic status is attributed... not because of their actual harmfulness... but because these phenomena are believed to have... affected collective identity" (Alexander, 2004, p. 9).

This idea, attributed not to the brute facts of an event but to its symbolic effect on identity, is a refined version of Erikson's emphasis on communal rupture. Alexander acknowledges Erikson's theory of social bonds and identity and then deepens it with a constructivist turn: trauma must be narrated, represented, and framed by cultural actors. It must be claimed and imprinted in collective memory in order to reshape group identity. Erikson told us that traumatic events can break "we"; Alexander explains how societies actively rebuild "we" by transforming social pain into cultural trauma.

While Erikson foregrounds the destructive aftermath, "a blow to the basic tissues of social life", Alexander highlights the creative work of culture and agency. He tracks the social steps involved: defining victims, attributing blame, reworking memory, and eventually embedding trauma into symbolic practice. In this way, trauma according to Alexander is not just suffered, it is also performed, and as a result of this trauma process, the "we" that Erikson's opinion disappears, is reshaped in culturally resounding way. By



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

integrating Erikson's collective trauma framework, Alexander (2004) offers an enriched understanding of trauma in his seminal collaborative work with Eyerman and others, the *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, as: "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways' (Alexander, p.1). On pages 9 and 10, he insists that trauma is not the result of the inherent violence or abruptness of an event but rather the perceived damage such an event inflicts on a group's sense of identity. He writes, "Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness, but because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity" (Alexander, 2004, p. 9). Here, trauma is revealed not as something intrinsic to events, but as a social construction grounded in shared meaning systems and collective expectations.

Dealing with traumatic events on a psychological level for a person and a group of individuals on a collectivity level are two different things. Individual victims respond to traumatic events or injuries with "denial, repression, and working through," but collectives focus on "symbolic creation and framing" (Alexander, 2004, p. 3). The threat to the established collective identity, according to Alexander, is what eventually results in the formation of shared cultural trauma. Individuals may experience psychological suffering as a result of traumatic injuries. Neal claims that "Just as the rape victim becomes permanently changed as a result of the trauma, the nation becomes permanently changed as a result of a trauma in the social realm" (2005). Eyerman (2001) defines trauma as holding the impact of an astounding event on the life of a group. The inner catastrophe leaves wounds and scars on the memory that cannot be erased and later influences the later behaviour in much unexpected ways.

Keeping in view the postulates of cultural trauma theory, this study intends to analyse the techniques, narrative strategies, or visual elements the selected text employs, to seek answers for the following research question.

1.3 Research Question

- How does *Baddawi* visually and narratively reframe Palestinian refugees' collective suffering as a form of cultural trauma and generational experience?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Trauma Theory: From the Individual to the Collective



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

Early discussions of trauma largely grew out of Holocaust studies and psychoanalysis. Thinkers such as Cathy Caruth (1996), Dominick LaCapra (2001), and Shoshana Felman (1992) described trauma as a psychic wound, something delayed, unspoken, and difficult to fully capture in words. Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, framed trauma as an “incomprehensible event” that resurfaces belatedly through memory and language. While this body of work was groundbreaking, it has also been criticized for its narrow focus on Eurocentric histories and for treating trauma primarily as an individual psychological burden.

Later scholars widened the lens. Craps (2013) and Rothberg (2019) noted that such theories often overlook the lived realities of colonized, displaced, or occupied peoples. Cultural trauma theory emerged in response, shifting attention from the individual psyche to the collective. Erikson (1976) described trauma as something that can “damage the tissues of social life,” while Alexander (2004) defined it as a communal process where suffering becomes woven into group identity through shared narratives. Eyerman (2001), studying African American memory of slavery, showed how trauma can persist across generations, even for those who did not directly experience it. These frameworks allow us to read Palestinian trauma not as a set of isolated psychological injuries but as a collective rupture, sustained and transmitted through cultural forms of storytelling.

2.2 Visual Culture, Trauma, and Graphic Narrative

Most cultural trauma research has emphasized texts and sociological accounts. At the same time, studies of visual culture and comics reveal how graphic narratives convey trauma in ways that language alone cannot. Anderson Bliss (2014), in *Picturing the Unspeakable*, shows how comics use spatial design, gaps, and absence to depict the unspeakable. Richardson et.al. (2023) argue that comics do more than represent events, they weave memory, body, and material form together, mirroring trauma’s layered temporality. Viljoen (2021) demonstrates how war comics can capture colonial and postcolonial violence, with particular resonance for Middle Eastern contexts.

The visual grammar of comics, panels, gutters, silences, distortions, and repetition—provides a unique toolkit for representing trauma. Quadraro and Tota (2021), in their work on slavery’s depiction in visual art, add that trauma in visual forms is not only *shown* but also *performed* through cultural symbols and aesthetic choices. This perspective is especially relevant to Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi*, where Palestinian motifs intertwine with traumatic memory.



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

2.3 Palestine, Memory, and Graphic Storytelling

Palestinian cultural production has long grappled with themes of memory, loss, and resistance. Said (2000) described exile as an “unhealable rift” that shapes cultural identity, while Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry captures how everyday rituals carry the weight of collective grief. Abu-Lughod (2010) highlights how memory and resistance are deeply gendered, rooted in both private and public life.

In visual form, Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (2001) received wide attention, though critics often focused more on his journalistic presence than on the formal strategies of comics. Palestinian-authored graphic novels, by contrast, remain relatively understudied. Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi* (2015) holds a distinct place as one of the first Palestinian graphic novels written in English. While rooted in autobiography, its scope is collective. Reviews in outlets like *Middle East Monitor* and *Electronic Intifada* note its portrayal of exile and displacement, but sustained academic attention to its visual grammar has been lacking. The way *Baddawi* uses embroidery patterns, za’atar, Handala, panel breaks, and spatial chronotopes to encode trauma has yet to be fully examined. Bringing these strands together clarifies the central problem:

1. Trauma studies have moved from individual psychology toward collective frameworks, yet cultural trauma theory has rarely been systematically applied to visual media.
2. Comics scholarship demonstrates the medium’s power to represent trauma but has not fully integrated cultural trauma approaches in analyzing Palestinian works.
3. Palestinian literature and oral testimony have been widely studied, but *Baddawi* has not received sustained scholarly analysis, especially regarding its visual strategies of cultural and intergenerational trauma.

This study addresses that gap. It investigates how Abdelrazaq fuses image, motif, and narrative to represent Palestinian cultural trauma, showing how graphic storytelling can sustain and transmit collective memory in ways that are both visual and deeply cultural.

1. Analysis and Discussion

Abdelrazaq not only portrays collective trauma in *Baddawi* through enduring conditions of exile, inherited loss but also through historical violence. The collective suffering of Palestinians is visualized as a structural and sustained process through the visualization of Safsaf massacre to the memory of practice of Za’atar preparation. Based on the notion of cultural trauma (Erikson, 1976; Eyerman 2001;



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

Alexander, 2004), this graphic novel frames trauma as a shared, ongoing loss that shapes identity and space. Visual techniques including symbolic motifs, fragmented landscapes and faceless silhouettes reinforce Said's (2000) and Ahmed's (2004) notions on emotional geography and spatial estrangement.

The book's cover page visually embeds the Palestinian exilic experience as a collective trauma. Without using a single word, the figure of barefoot Handala, standing with his back turned to the viewers, and arms firmly clinched, presents the generational division and emotional toll of Palestinian exile. Naji al-Ali was the first to create the figure of Handala, which is widely recognized as an icon of Palestinian resistance. His reflection as Ahmad repositions an individual story within a collective register of dispossession. The faceless static figure of Handala captures what Erikson (1976) describes as a "blow to the basic tissues of social life," a trauma that renders the self both silent and symbolic. The protagonist's portrayal as Handala raises his character beyond individuality. His stiff and emotionally restrained posture symbolizes forced maturity of the children who have to grow old before time. This reinforces Eyerman's (2001) idea that once internalized, cultural trauma becomes an integral part of identities of future generations. The child's silence and stillness are not signs of peace, but of unresolved grief, inherited resistance, and emotional entrapment. The page is framed by Palestinian embroidery motif, appearing without verbal explanation, functions much like what Halbwachs (1992) describes as "social frameworks of memory", visual cues that encode identity, tradition, and continuity. Even in the absence of homeland, such cultural symbols offer a scaffold upon which memory can be rebuilt. The recurring presence of these embroidered patterns throughout the novel creates what can be called visual braiding (Groensteen, 2007): a repeated aesthetic element that ties disparate moments of displacement together into a continuous cultural thread.

The graphic weight and visual contrast make the cover more significantly powerful. An impression of suffocating space, representing the void left by loss of home, land and sovereignty is created through the heavy stark background. The contrasting white embroidery child's outlined figure stands out as a sight of cultural resistance and endurance. This otherwise simple visual interplay aligns with Smelser's (2004) argument that cultural trauma results when events disrupt collective meaning and identity.

Moreover, the lack of gutters and no frames suggest movement through time. This absence of panelling works to collapse chronology and suggests a suspended moment of



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

timeless exile. As suggested by McCloud (1993), such symbolic and non-sequitur frames engage the readers with what *remains*, rather than what happens. On the whole, the cover of Baddawi visually and symbolically stages the collective wounds of the Palestinian people. It does so through a convergence of icons (Handala), mnemonic patterns (embroidery), graphic weight (darkness vs. light), and spatial structure (absence of panel sequencing). Through these layered techniques, Abdelrazaq transforms Ahmad's stillness into a powerful visual thesis: cultural trauma is not only remembered, but also worn, stitched, and passed on.

Another stark depiction of personal and collective Palestinian personal memory is observed on page 17. The 1948 Safsaf massacre is portrayed with page's divided visual structure, where the grey shaded top half plunges into black bottom and creates a visual chronotope of decent. A moment of historical occurrence is fossilized into collective memory through the transition from light to darkness. As the narration states, "OCTOBER 29, 1948. THE IRGUN STORMS IN AND ETHNICALLY CLEANSSES SAFSAF" (Abdelrazaq, 2015, p. 17). This declarative statement is more than a historical timestamp; it marks the beginning of a cultural wound that continues to shape identity and memory. The figures of the victims are deliberately drawn in faceless silhouettes, bound hands, downcast postures, and erased identities. Their anonymity is not a negation of subjectivity but a visual technique to represent collective suffering. The victims become more emblematic and less individualized, not what they are, but what has been done to them. In this way, Abdelrazaq draws on Groensteen's the concept of "iconic solidarity," where depersonalization visually universalizes the experience of violence, aligning with Erikson's (1976) notion that trauma creates a rupture in the shared fabric of meaning. The sense of doom is intensified by the black shadow trails behind the men, which functions as the symbolic representation of impending death. A spectral presence is evoked by these looming figures projecting imminent death. The metaphorical use of shadow draws the reader the reader into a temporal overlap of past memory and suffering of the present. The visual recurrence of bound limbs and eyeless faces counterparts Halbwachs' (1992) theory of collective memory which holds that traumatic memory is socially reconstructed through symbolic forms. In contrast to victims, the two Israeli soldiers are partially silhouetted and marked by posture and expression. A chilling depiction of cruelty made casual, can be observed on one soldier's open mouth suggesting laughter. This juxtaposition illustrates what Smelser (2004) calls the meaning-making function of trauma representation, where



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

the structural dynamics of violence are etched into the form itself.

The narration then shifts from distant historical account to intimate familial testimony. Ahmad recalls: “MY TETA WAS AMONG SEVEN MEN SHE HID IN A BUILDING WHILE THE MEN WERE LINED UP, SHOT, AND KILLED” (Abdelrazaq, 2015, p. 17). This fusion of communal trauma with generational narration exemplifies the mechanism by which cultural trauma is transmitted, not through formal history, but through intergenerational storytelling. Eyerman (2001) emphasizes that such inherited narratives serve as identity-building tools for communities in exile, making suffering not just remembered but formative.

Another layer of trauma, gendered violence is introduced by the brief mentioning of “THREE GIRLS WERE RAPED” (p. 17). This moment is lightly portrayed but powerfully states the often-silenced dimension of communal trauma where women’s bodies become the battlefield. This gendered aspect expands the understanding of atrocities of Nakba, as a matrix of violation, psychological and territorial along with displacement. Overall, the page represents the combination of inherited suffering and historical atrocity. Abdelrazaq constructs visual grammar through spatial contrast, narrative layering and silhouettes, of the trauma echo through generations. A continuous pulsation of the past event of the massacre of Safsaf continues through the pages as memory and identity, and trauma is encoded in the form, tone and lineage.

A profound spatiotemporal collapse into an endless condition of uprootedness, as a chronotope of displacement is presented at page 18. As argued by Bakhtin (1981), chronotopes are not merely backdrops or settings but configurations of worldview, where narrative meanings, ideological tensions and social relationships are crystallized in time-space structures. The use of large single-panel layout, rather than sequential panels, presents a visual decision that suspends temporal flow and emphasizes the vastness and permanence of collective loss. The dominant dark background continues here, engulfing the figures in a darkened landscape with tatreez patterns, gestures continuity amid crises.

At the centre of the panel, the ghostly spectral grey silhouettes of a man, woman and a child are drawn, moving silently along the winding path. This aesthetic mirrors the visual technique used on the previous page to depict the bound victims of the Safsaf massacre, creating a bridge between those who perished and those who survived through flight. In a spooky contrast to earlier pages, the Israeli soldier is drawn here white against a dark background, flipping the visual code of presence and absence. The final textual



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

panel quietly devastates: “THEY THOUGHT THEY WOULD BE ABLE TO RETURN HOME SOON ENOUGH...” (p. 18). The ellipsis functions not merely as a pause, but as a rupture, symbolizing unfulfilled return and the myth of temporariness that haunts refugee memory.

The symbolic inversion and nonlinear chronotopes showcase that exile for Palestinians is not a linear event, rather a structural wound that defines and destabilizes their identity across time and space. Abdelrazaq manifests such structural inequality by rendering humiliation through something as ordinary as footwear. The deprivation here is not of homeland or violence of war, but it is the steady erosion of self-worth. Through symbolic lighting, spatial separation, and narrative tone, pages 25–26 capture how exclusion becomes embodied, pressed into the very posture of a child staring through glass.

Pages 27–28 of *Baddawi* depict Lebanese hostility and the psychological effects of living under constant threat, capturing how trauma is sustained not only through remembered violence but also through the perpetual fear of authority. This anxiety is intensified through the visual organization of these pages. The Lebanese army headquarters is drawn with a zoomed in perspective, dominating the composition and amplifying the omnipresent surveillance. Abdelrazaq visualizes the institutional machinery of repression and the structures that reinforce a group’s subordinate position., what Alexander (2004) calls the *institutional carriers* of cultural trauma. The narrative quickly escalates to reveal that a Palestinian was arrested for merely raising his national flag. This moment is recounted in understated but chilling prose: “HE PUT UP THE PALESTINIAN FLAG OUTSIDE THEIR HOUSE. WHEN THEY FINALLY LET HIM OUT, HE WAS COVERED IN BRUISES. THEY BEAT HIM UP.” (p. 27). This line transforms national identity into a crime, signalling how even symbolic acts of self-assertion are met with suppression. This is an instance of cultural trauma when a group's expressions of belonging are consistently delegitimized or punished. Such exclusion of identity fits within Eyerman’s (2001) framework.

Ahmad’s father is portrayed as a Palestinian refugee navigating Lebanese society on page 28 of *Baddawi*, which employs a conventional three-row panel layout to depict the fragmented and conditional existence of Ahmad’s father as a Palestinian refugee navigating Lebanese society. Yet despite the structured sequencing of the panels on this page, the linearity is disrupted through subtle visual metaphors. Especially, the first panel, features vertical text boxes positioned like architectural columns, forming visual “pillars”



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

that divide the image. These textual elements don't simply convey narration; they reinforce the thematic separation at the heart of this scene. The narrative fragmentation mirrors Ahmad's father's own life, divided between home and work, between identity and survival. This tension between mobility and belonging evokes Jeffrey Alexander's (2004) theory of cultural trauma, where social systems embed exclusion so deeply that the injured group is perpetually marked as "other."

Another instance of collective trauma is observed through the portrayal of internalization of humiliation and socioeconomic deprivation on page 30, emphasizing how childhood under displacement is shaped not only by external violence but also by social pressure and the erosion of innocence. This act of entrepreneurship, a kid exchanging marbles with money, reveals Ahmad's desire to gain social status through material means. It is the reflection of the reality that in refugee life, even self-worth is mediated by access to goods. The marbles, once symbol of childhood play have, become instruments of hierarchy and survival. Their function as a visual motif supports a recurring theme in *Baddawi*: that no aspect of life under displacement is untouched by trauma. This incident becomes symbol of cultural trauma, as Eyerman (2001), and Alexander (2004) have argued, where trauma reshapes identity in a such a way that it does not transcends generations through memory, rather it travels through the community's daily negotiation with loss, shame and survival.

A quiet counterbalance of shame and moral ambiguity previously exhibited on page 31, is offered on the very next graphic page. The trauma of exile is told through the sensory invocation of Za'atar, the traditional Palestinian food. This creates an edible connection to the lost homeland that cannot be accessed physically. This page resonates Smelser's (2004) conception that trauma is not a wound that bleeds, but a permanent mark left on the collective psyche. Za'atar thus not just become food but resistance, a flavourful gesture of refusal against erasure. A critical narrative moment that captures that emotional train of hope, deepening the collective trauma of exile, is powerfully demonstrated through the words of Ahmad's mother: "NEXT TIME YOU GATHER THYME FOR THE ZA'ATAR, IT WILL BE IN PALESTINE" (p. 34). This premature promise of return to homeland becomes retrospectively tragic. This statement registers trauma not in the form of violence, but in longing, a longing deferred across generations.

In Abdelrazaq's narrative, the event of Al-Naksa, the 1967 war, also referred to as *The Setback*, is not portrayed as an isolated historical moment, but as an accumulation of



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

injuries that deepen an already-existing national wound. The narration describes the war as part of a “CAMPAIGN OF REPEATED ATTEMPTS AT ETHNIC CLEANSING” (p. 35), a phrase that situates the Naksa not merely as military conquest but as a deliberate and sustained trauma strategy aimed at erasure and fragmentation.

The way the community's wounds are presented depends heavily on the language used. The narrator encourages the reader to view trauma as continuous and cyclical rather than episodic by referring to the Naksa as the "SECOND NAKBA." This validates Eyerman's (2001) contention that when a group is influenced by the experience of suffering as a component of its history narrative, cultural trauma becomes a fundamental component of collective identity. The Naksa built upon the Nakba, reflected and extended its legacy rather than replacing it. The reader is forced to bear the weight of the violence through both text and visual where more than 300,000 Palestinians have been displaced. The artistic choice heightens the emotional depth of the Naksa in keeping with Erikson's (1976) idea of trauma as a blow to not only individuals but also to the "basic tissues" of community and continuity. The entire page is covered up with a full splash panel, a large, borderless frame, visually representing the weight of the event. Abdelrazaq here defies the temporal logic by doing away with conventional gutters and sequential panels and she holds the emotive turmoil of battle. The lack of structural confinement reflects the breakdown of homeland, identity, and memory.

This creates a visual metaphor, which is most pronounced in the landscape itself. Broken homes are shattered; the forces of violence turn the place into a cracked landscape. This fractured landscape, at once the battlefield, says so much more than a tale of razed stones. The land becomes a wounded body, covered in the wreckage of occupation and imposed resettlements. This is how Baddawi transforms the historical narrative into a tactile experience: the page does not show war only in its abstractions, it makes him feel war as something forever irreparable.

The fractured road linking the devastated villages implies forced relocation, uprooting, and the breakdown of social cohesion. It also evokes the endless nature of exile, reversing any sense of narrative linearity or end. This illustrates how historical trauma disturbs not only physical locations but also narrative intelligibility itself; Smelser's (2004) theory of trauma as a "meaning making" problem is pertinent here, as the visual landscape rejects closure or harmony.

The trauma here is subtle, embedded in what is *not* said or seen directly: the



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

enduring absence of homeland. As the narration states, “THOUGH THE FAMILY COULD NOT RETURN TO PALESTINE, THEY STILL HELD STRONG TO THEIR TRADITIONS” (Abdelrazaq, 2015, p. 36). The continuity of Palestinian identity despite dispossession is prevalent in this simple statement.

This moment echoes what trauma theorist Erikson (1976) considers the quiet violence of collective trauma, a constant emotional injury that does not erupt but leaks into daily life. The page’s emotional tone is soft but it’s a declaration of presence within absence, joy amid loss. . Yet this joy is contained within the limit of a refugee camp which is surrounded by the invisible walls of exile. Visually, Abdelrazaq deploys contrast to narrate trauma.

After the visual density and darkness, the page 36 introduces more white space, softer expressions, and lighter tones. Nevertheless, the shades of night motionless frame the panels, creating a liminal graphic environment where festivity is indistinguishably linked to memory. Along with the complete darkness, the night it carries emotional residue, a reminder that even during Ramadan, the spiritual rhythm of home is expatriate. Smelser’s (2004) framework of trauma as a lasting inscription is appropriate here: the pain of loss is not dynamically unfolding, but it is *ever-present*, a scar underneath the skin of celebration.

These camps, momentary by design yet lasting by inevitability, function as images of home, spaces that comprise family and memory, but cannot replace origin. As Said (2000) conceptualizes exile not only as a physical dislodgment but as a condition of psychic disintegration. He emphasizes that exile produces an everlasting estrangement from place, a damage that no amount of nostalgic memory can repair. The exiled subject lives in “a median state, “marked by geographic and emotional discontinuity. This contributes to what could be interpreted as a *spatial trauma*, a wound tied to the inaccessibility of home. Edward Said describes exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, “emphasizing that displacement generates a condition of chronic spatial alienation and psychic loss (Said, 2000, p.173).

Abdelrazaq delicately utilizes movement as metaphor in this panel. While the image of Ahmad's entire family being transported by several taxis may seem ordinary, it conveys a deeper symbolic meaning. It presents a life characterized by movement without destination. The family travels between exile camps rather than the cities of their native country. This physical displacement echoes what Erikson (1976) described trauma as a blow to the continuity of social life. Refugees are not just spatially displaced; their



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

traditions, rituals, and milestones must be continually adapted to foreign soil.

The site seems to have a lighter visual tone, but this brightness is deceptive, with more open white space and happy characters. Thematic weight is not eliminated by graphic lightness. What these smiles must go through, camps instead of neighborhoods, UNRWA accommodations instead of family homes, is the trauma. Eid joy is genuine, but it has been relocated and altered by the terrain of loss. The reader is reminded that these kids are growing up in momentary settlements that were never intended to remain, rather than in their homeland. Ahmed (2004) suggests that emotions stick to spaces, making displacement not only a political reality but an affective condition. In this sense, refugee camps, occupied zones, or imagined homelands become emotionally charged geographies of pain, hope, or alienation (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 8–11). Smelser's (2004) concept of trauma as a structural wound is echoed here. The reunion, while emotionally fulfilling, is conditioned by fragmentation, family must gather across camps, rather than within the unified geography of a homeland. The Eid episode reinforces the fact that communal trauma does not just erupt in the catastrophic moment, it persists through the moments of joy and resurfaces through the fractured geographies and normalization of exile.

Rather than isolated acts of violence, Abdelrazaq renders collective trauma preserving through daily life across generations. Thus, this graphic novel becomes a visual archive, which does more than narrate trauma; it stitches memory, endurance, and longing into visual form, presenting the ongoing Palestinian experience as a tapestry of loss and hope, sustained and transmitted through both story and image.

2. Conclusion

The collective impacts of displacement, exile and camp life have been registered through disjointed narrative structure and minimalistic iconography in *Baddawi*. These wounds are transmitted intergenerationally, from Ahmad's father and grandfather, linking personal grief with national dispossession. As Erikson (1976) explains, collective trauma is "a blow to the basic tissues of social life... impairing the prevailing sense of communality" (pp. 154–155). This sense of rupture, of a damaged "we", is constant in both works. This study however underpins how erasure and precarity have been documented in graphic style through faceless silhouettes, fragmented domestic spheres and visual ellipsis where trauma simulate the absence of historical resolution. This visual aesthetics formally register the trauma of absence and invisibility.

Unlike Western trauma texts that often culminate in narrative catharsis or witness



Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

empowerment, *Baddawi* sustains a graphic minimalism that aligns more with what Gordon (2008) terms haunting, a social and aesthetic condition where violence is not remembered but structurally embedded. These findings thus affirm the literature's emphasis on the collective and ongoing nature of stateless trauma while introducing a nuanced understanding of how graphic novels encode this trauma in the syntax of the image: in margins, repetitions, omissions, and visual thresholds. Trauma is not merely told; it is built, pane by pane, echo by echo, onto the visual plane of the narrative.

3. Recommendations

Existing trauma theory rooted in Holocaust, 9/11, and individual psychological rupture, has insufficiently accounted for the structural, chronic and structural forms of collective trauma of the communities suffering prolonged homelessness, forced displacement and occupation. This article directly addresses such significant gaps by foregrounding the underrepresented geopolitical and cultural contexts, specifically, Palestine. Furthermore, little scholarship has explored how graphic novels emerging from the Global South visually encode and narrate cultural trauma, especially through culturally specific symbols, panel structures, and testimonial aesthetics.

Looking ahead, future research might explore trauma representations in other non-Western graphic literatures, such as those from the Rohingya diaspora, Indigenous communities, occupied Kashmir, or post-genocide Rwanda, or explore how trauma is being reimagined in digital storytelling formats such as webcomics, animation, or immersive narrative installations.

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Vol. 3 No. 12 (December) (2025)

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