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**GRAPHIC NARRATIVES OF WOMEN IN WAR: IDENTITY  
CONSTRUCTION IN THE WORKS OF ZEINA ABIRACHED,  
MIRIAM KATIN, AND MARJANE SATRAPI**

**ABSTRACT:** By applying terminology from trauma theory and a methodological approach from comics scholarship, this essay discusses three graphic autobiographies of women. These are *A Game for Swallows* by Zeina Abirached (trans. Edward Gauvin, 2012), *We are on our Own* by Miriam Katin (2006), and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (trans. Anjali Singh, 2004). Two issues are at the centre of the investigation: the strategies by which these works engage in the much-debated issues of representing gendered violence, and the representation of the ways traumatized daughters and their mothers deal with the identity crises caused by war.

**KEY WORDS:** Gendered violence, graphic narrative, identity, trauma.

My article examines identity construction in three contemporary graphic narratives, *A Game for Swallows* by Zeina Abirached (trans. Edward Gauvin, 2012), *We Are on Our Own* by Miriam Katin (2006), and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (trans. Anjali Singh, 2004). These graphic narratives are autobiographical in nature; their protagonists and narrators are girls; they all take childhoods troubled by armed conflict and war as their topic. *A Game for Swallows* takes place in East Beirut in 1984 during the Lebanese civil war; *We Are on Our Own* is set in Budapest and the Hungarian countryside in 1944-1945; while the Islamic Revolution and the war with Iraq in Iran are covered in *Persepolis*.

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As mentioned, the protagonists are (little) girls, and they are also daughters: in 2002 Marianne Hirsch argued for the importance of the role of daughters in the transmission of trauma. Hirsch regards the mother-daughter relationship as exemplary, a model on which she bases what she calls “allo-identification” with the victim and witness of trauma. Allo-identification happens “by adoption”, not by family ties: trauma narratives are most often family narratives or personal memoirs, where family ties help or hinder—but most definitely influence—relatives in their relations with the traumatized family member. Hirsch’s concept of “allo-identification” disregards such ties: “by adoption” anyone can make an effort to identify with the traumatized. This approach also offers a way out of debates about authority or legitimacy in speaking about or researching trauma (“Marked by Memory” 86-87). Hirsch writes:

if identifications learned and practiced within the family can be expanded to cross the boundaries of gender, family, race, and generation, then the identification between mothers and daughters form a clear example of how a shared intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, based in bodily connection, can be imagined (“Marked” 77).

In this paper I examine medium-specific ways of representation of what Hirsch called “shared intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance,” and how this space is re-created by the graphic narratives of *Abirached*, *Katin*, and *Satrap*. I rely on concepts introduced by research on the Holocaust, such as “embodied memory,” “deep memory,” or “testimony,” but use them in a more general sense, to refer to traumatic experience caused by war. I examine how the experience denoted by these terms is rendered as comics in the above listed graphic narratives. But, above all, I am interested in the representation of women and the ways they reshape their identities and roles in armed conflict.

This paper is concerned with comics, an essentially visual medium. Comics’ touching upon the topic of trauma is parallel to a certain shift in the concept of witnessing and testimony, enabled by a technical shift in recording media. The first archives of Holocaust testimony contained spoken or written narratives. Later, the possibility of audiovisual recording changed the researchers’ perception of trauma and memory. Pinchevski (2012) states that the creation and investigation of deep memory, memory preserved by the body and the senses, would not have

been possible without the use of audiovisual recording techniques and the operations they allow for—forwarding, rewinding, pausing, playing again.

Parallel to this technological change, critical as well as artistic interest has turned towards the visual and the performative. A “visual discourse of trauma” has been forged (Hirsch’s term, “Marked” 72), and I would like to argue in this paper that graphic narratives are part of this discourse. The body has been reevaluated as a keeper of secrets, as the medium in which embodied memory manifests (Hirsch and Spitzer 156-157).

Visual images . . . do more than to *represent* scenes and experiences of the past: they can communicate an emotional or bodily experience to us by evoking our own emotional and bodily memories. They *produce* affect in the viewer, speaking *from* the body’s sensations, rather than speaking of, or representing the past (Jill Bennett paraphrased in “Marked” 72. Hirsch’s emphasis).

Representing the body is a central issue in graphic narratives. In particular, the body and its small gestures are a central topic in Abirached’s *A Game for Swallows*. Abirached frequently bases her page layout on a series of geometrically designed, extremely similar panels. Yet there are minute differences between the panels, which are to be deciphered by the reader. These are sometimes comical, sometimes they contain drama. Reading *A Game for Swallows* is made considerably slower by this technique, as the reader has to work to spot these differences between gestures, or to trace the stages of arrested movement. The body is, again, central, while its representation is more dramatic in *Persepolis*, where we see tortured bodies, massacres and executions, as imagined by a little girl (Chute 103). For example, Marji sees an almost organic unity between bodies and the flames consuming them, or imagines the tortured and cut up body to be hollow. In *Persepolis* the human body is drawn in a deliberately naïve way, with simplistic tools. No shading is applied, neither is the convention of perspective. The resulting style, which Chute calls “often-gorgeous minimalism” (99), emphasizes the fragility of the human body by its very inadequacy.

The body does preserve memory, and the mixed media artworks Hirsch favours in representing memory are close to comics in their approach. The way Hirsch describes mixed media artists Tatana Keller and Jeffrey Wolin could be a characterization of the goals of the comics authors this paper examines:

These artists both search for forms of identification that are nonappropriative. The mixture of media and the multiple responses they elicit, the oscillation between reading and looking, in particular, create a resistant textuality for the viewer (“Marked” 88).

By their very mediality these artworks consciously evoke the problematic nature of remembering: the difficult work needed to bridge the gap between generations, and the danger of appropriating somebody else’s pain (“Marked” 78-87). Comics have the potential to offer a similarly sensitive, “mediated access” (88) to trauma: comics can be the tool of allo-identification. Art Spiegelman’s name seems to be unavoidable in an essay dealing with the representation of transmitted trauma in comics. *Maus* (1986) is not only the first book-length graphic narrative that was a major success outside the comics world, it is also one which showed the wider public that there are no thematic restrictions in the representational strategies of comics.

*Maus* has been criticized widely for representing Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. Spiegelman follows the tradition of “funny animal” comics, while Abirached, Katin and Satrapi draw humans and human bodies. It seems that representing suffering or bodies in pain is always in the centre of ethical questions (see Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*): should images of violence be reproduced and shown? The fact that comics are a drawn medium can serve as an answer to these dilemmas. Hirsch states that photographs of war victims place viewers in the position of the weapon holder (“Surviving Images” 24). Regardless of the time difference, looking at these photos can mean re-victimization: we can “unwittingly” repeat “the acts of the perpetrators” (Jacobs 228). Drawing allows for a representation of victims without re-exposing them to the gaze of the oppressor. Via a certain visual simplification that is a trademark of comics (McCloud 30), an individual can be represented in a few characteristic lines: these make him/her recognizable, but also leave enough space for readers to fill in the gaps with their imagination, and to identify with them.

I consider it significant that these graphic narratives were written by, and are about, women. For decades, Holocaust testimonies, as well as the testimonies of the second generation, were narrated by men (Disch and Morris 13), and many survivors and scholars were, as Abrams and Kacandes put it, “uncomfortable with” the idea of “Holocaust gender studies” (17).

Yet trauma, gender, and the Holocaust are related (Abrams and Kacandes 17). As Marianne Hirsch states, “the position of the daughter as historical agent is not the same as that of the son” (“Marked” 88).

I propose that the shift towards a more gender-sensitive perception of narratives of trauma of the Holocaust, a process that, according to Disch and Morris, began in the 1980s (11), contributed to the birth of Abirached’s, Katin’s and Satrapi’s graphic narratives of trauma. Comparing the representation and the role of the mother in Spiegelman’s *Maus* to the mother in *We are on our Own*; or Anhala, the neighbour in the grandmother’s role, in *A Game for Swallows*; or the maternal characters in *Persepolis*, reveals that a significant change has indeed happened in the representation of women in graphic narratives dealing with trauma. In *Maus*, the mother, Anja, is missing: she committed suicide after the war, her diaries have been destroyed. Her husband speaks for her. Moreover, the husband, Vladek states: “she went through *the same* that me, TERRIBLE!” (*Maus I*: 158. My emphasis in italics.) In *Maus*, whatever we get to know about the missing mother is based on Vladek’s account of her. This account is most of the time unchallenged by Artie, the son, who is interviewing his father about the Holocaust.

Whenever an episode in Vladek’s testimony centres around Anja, she is portrayed as physically and mentally weak. We are informed that she weighs only 39 kilograms (*Maus I*: 30), and she is unsuccessfully hiding the pills she takes for her nerves. She is prone to hysterics (*I*: 122) and is deeply depressed after the birth of her first son (*I*: 31). In the concentration camp she is portrayed as weaker than the others, and thinks of suicide (*II*: 53). In Vladek’s narrative there are only two occasions when Anja is active and willful: she translates communist messages into German, but gives it up when Vladek threatens to leave. When she does not let their first-born son be taken by a Polish family, Vladek gives in, but is still bitter about it (*I*: 81).

Naturally, Artie is aware of the one-sidedness of his father’s story, and his constant asking for Anja’s misplaced diaries is his way of maintaining awareness of the lost maternal narrative. This also makes the readers aware that Vladek’s story is only a construct—and so is Artie’s own. At one point, for example, he pictures his mother with the attributes of a saint, with a bright halo against a black background, and in a posture similar to praying. She is saying: “Don’t leave me alone again. I’m *terrified*

while you're gone" (*I*: 140). At another point, in an insert of Spiegelman's early graphic story about how his mother's suicide affected him, Anja is portrayed as huge and frightening (*I*:103). As the title of the insert, "Prisoner on Planet Hell," suggests, the death of his mother is an incomprehensible trauma imprisoning Artie.

When Vladek finally admits that he has burned Anja's diaries, Artie calls his father a murderer. We can understand Artie's frustration; however, he needed Anja's memoirs not exclusively to rediscover his mother's voice, but to make his own work more perfect. "I wish I got mom's story while she was alive. She was more sensitive . . . It would give the book some *balance*" (*I*: 132). If Anja's text had survived, it would have been recycled into Artie's story. This hiatus left by the mother's story reminds us, on the one hand, of the danger of appropriating somebody else's story, and, on the other hand, it signals that silence, forgetting, and loss are all parts of remembering.

A similar attempt at reconstructing the mother's lost story is present in Miriam Katin's autobiographical graphic narrative, *We Are on Our Own*. This book is the author's attempt to come to terms with what happened to her parents in 1944-1945. At the same time, it is also a record of Katin's construction of her own identity. Various features are designed to authenticate the book: first, the subtitle, "A memoir by Miriam Katin"; then the copies of the parents' letters written in Hungarian; and, finally, a reprint of a photograph captioned "Miriam Katin with her Mother. Photo taken in 1946." The similarity of the girl in the photograph, and the little girl in the black and white panels, creates the narrative's visual link to Katin's biographical persona. Yet the graphic narrative itself centres on moments when maintaining identity is (almost) impossible. The first sign of this is that the girl, whom we have been advised to identify with Katin, is called Lisa in the story.

It is becoming a mother, a significant change in a woman's identity, which triggers the adult Katin's growing awareness of her parents' history. In the colourful panels depicting the present, 1968-1972, we can see the adult Lisa's insecurity and uncertainty concerning life, and concerning the cultural orientation of her son. She is insecure in the maternal ward: "So peaceful here. Everyone seems so calm and secure. One can almost believe that it can last" (Katin 6). Panels showing the grown up Lisa talking about her loss of faith interrupt the narrative of the World War II

events. In these panels of the world war, the small Lisa is frequently shown while looking for or trying to contact God. For the little Lisa, her open, enthusiastic and protective relationship with dogs is a mirror to her relationship with God. She contemplates: "Is there a doggie God in doggie heaven?" (17). In this relationship the roles are playfully interchangeable: "I am helping my bestest friend to eat. I am the god of my doggie" (34). The disappearance and death of dogs she loves deeply shakes her faith in God. The narrator comments on the death of Lisa's dog with the following words: "And then, somehow she knew that God was not the light and God was not the darkness, and not anybody at all. Maybe, God was not . . ." (69). By the end of the book we get a glimpse of the depth of Lisa's crisis. The little girl is portrayed kneeling with a fork in her hand, with which she has just stabbed a male toy figure. The page contains only this one panel, which is surrounded by blackness, by extremely dense lines of black pencil. After all the hardship during which her mother tried to protect her, the little girl now turns against her mother: "And what if mommy burned that God after all" (122).

The mother, Esther Levy, is trying to protect her daughter from the horrors of war. She has to burn all her past and go into hiding: she destroys all the photographs of her family, as well as the letters from her husband and relatives. She has to assume a new identity, that of "a village girl with an illegitimate child. A servant in the city". (18). In the fake documents she must betray the father of her daughter: "father unknown. A bastard." (18). She has to become a different person to stay alive and save her daughter. This metamorphosis is most striking if we compare the new Esther with how the old one was represented. I believe that by portraying her mother as a cosmopolitan lady, fashionably dressed, wearing high-heels and skirts above her knees, Katin turned the style and rhetoric of Nazi propaganda against itself.<sup>1</sup> Katin's representation of her mother can be interpreted as a visual answer to Nazi propaganda, which represented Western women in sexually provocative situations and with visual attributes similar to those used by Katin in the representation of her mother. For example, leaflets dropped in 1944 on the Allies in

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<sup>1</sup> Art Spiegelman did the same when he chose to represent Jews as mice. Spiegelman's visual world was motivated by "the visual stereotypes of Third Reich symbology, [...] editorial cartoons depicting Jews as hook-nosed, beady-eyed *Untermenshen*, creatures whose ferret faces and rodent snouts marked them as human vermin." (Doherty 74).

Italy to demoralize them hinted that the wives and girlfriends left at home cheated on the soldiers. These women were very decorative, wore high-heels and skirts that left their legs to be seen. Propaganda would never have allowed a similar representation of, the bodies and clothing of Aryan girls and mothers. At the opening pages of the book Esther is portrayed as similar to the Aryan stereotype of the Western woman, and thus the edge of the insult is taken.

The change of clothing, from a lady to a peasant girl, also illustrates the freedom the mother gives up when she takes refuge in the country. But even by giving up her lifestyle she cannot protect herself or her daughter from the war. Although the child is depicted as small and naïve, the atrocities gradually destroy her naivety. One of the most poignant sequences is when the German officer returns to the farm where Esther and Lisa are hiding. This time he has not come for wine, but for Esther. He gives chocolates to the little girl, who is sharing them with her dog while her mother is raped, and thinks that the officer is “such a nice man. Maybe he is God. The chocolate God” (42).

The deaths of the dogs and the dubious roles of men all add up to the burst of frustration that is triggered by the freshly returned father’s renunciation of God. Under a table, in the safety provided by the long tablecloth, Lisa kills a doll with a ball-bomb and cuts a male figure into pieces with the sharpest object in the book, a fork. As already quoted, she accuses her mother of being responsible for her crisis. This final panel of the book radically reinterprets the action of 1968-1972, represented in colourful panels: Lisa’s becoming a mother, her doubts concerning her new identity, the responsibility that the cultural education of her son means to her. In the present we see mother and daughter talking on the phone—a mediated attempt to bridge the emotional distance we only get to understand at the very end.

Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* shows, similarly to Katin’s work, that it is nearly impossible to preserve the innocence of childhood during war. The parallel processes of maintaining and losing innocence are illustrated several times. Violence is Marji’s everyday experience, and as such it is part of her construction of identity. There is violence in each childhood story she is told. Her grandfather, for example, had to spend hours in a cell filled with water. As a means to identify with him, Marji stays in her bathwater for a very long time. Later she tries to imagine the martyr of the war slogans. When she is picturing the motto “To

die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society” (115), we see a martyr laying on his back, covered in a black blanket under his waist, a pillow under his head, screaming of pain. Seven dark lines are attached to his arms, his blood is channeled towards the edges of the panel. His body is very stiff, and society cannot be seen. This most unrealistic representation is capable of illustrating the horror Marji lives with. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, the visual simplicity of Satrapi’s drawings protects the victim from the aggressor’s gaze.

While martyrdom was interesting and even attractive for the child Marji, it becomes a horrifying and imagination-blocking experience for her adolescent self. After glimpsing her friend’s corpse, a completely black panel illustrates her horror. She wishes to be blind, she wishes to lose her voice: “No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger” (142). As Marji experiences more, she will think in a less visually inventive way. We can read rather than see her thoughts after a girl of her age is raped and murdered. “All night long, I thought of that phrase: ‘To die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society.’ Niloufar was a real martyr, and her blood certainly did not feed our society’s veins” (146).

When the adult Marjane returns to Iran after her four-year stay in Austria, the cult and rhetoric of martyrdom makes it unbearable for her to walk in the city. Streets named after martyrs and slogans advocating martyrdom make her feel alien in her own country. A further step in the process of alienation is when she draws a martyr in order to be admitted to university. Although she uses Michelangelo’s “La Pietà” as a model, her drawing reproduces the official fundamentalist portrayals of martyrdom and women. A veiled woman is holding a dead martyr; her body is reduced to only an outline. Marjane takes the first step to compromising the values she has believed she stands for, though her intention by applying to university was not to integrate into fundamentalist society.

To find her identity, Marji is experimenting with a wide range of roles. These come from a mixture of Western and Eastern cultures: God’s disciple; the prophet; the witness; the punk as allowed by Islamic rule and the punk as allowed by Western freedom; the consumer; the homeless; and the wife and the divorcee, to name a few. However, the “repressive air” (248) of Iran does not give her enough room to construct herself. Meanwhile, she is constantly challenging both the Western perception of the

Islamic woman and the Western perception of the modern Western woman. Women who Marjane meets in Austria seem rather naïve, in spite of their freedom, with an emphasis on their sexual freedom.

As far as Iranian women are concerned, instead of being veiled, unidentifiable, and oppressed, they are shown as individuals who find ways to show their integrity. “In *Persepolis*, pictures of the veiled woman reject the stereotype of the Muslim voiceless woman” (Claudio, comicsgrid.com). Marjane unveils the code-system behind the aesthetic of covering up: “With practice, even though they were covered from head to foot, you got to the point where you could guess their [women’s] shape, the way they wore their hair and even their political opinions”(296). Islamic women in *Persepolis* are constantly pushing the limits by wearing makeup, shorter veils or maintaining a double life.

For Marjane, the embodiment of integrity and femininity is her grandmother: she does not make compromises, always follows what is morally right, and keeps jasmine petals in her bra. Marji has a strong, physical connection to her grandmother: her message, “be true to yourself” (150) is inseparable from her embrace.

Physical contact is central in providing comfort and safety to the child protagonists in Zeina Abirached’s *A Game for Swallows*. The little Zeina and her brother are frequently shown hugging or holding each other. The adult characters embrace them, wrestle with them, or sit them on their laps. A sense of safety is also given by a beautifully decorated wall hanging, which is constantly seen in the background. The little Zeina is attracted to this wall hanging: it provides a small yet fixed point of reference in the massive darkness the characters are frequently depicted against (46).

The protagonists have to share a small, confined space during air raids: the safest room in the building is the Abirached family’s foyer. As the neighbours arrive, the foyer gets more and more crowded. The main setting, the crowded foyer is represented as a geometrically organized space, always subject to minor changes. Abirached’s representational strategy is preoccupied with issues regarding space and bodies in space. The book opens with a map of “Lebanon and Surrounding Area 1975-1990” and is followed by a one-page landscape of East Beirut, dominated by a black sky (9). This is succeeded by eight stills of the streets of Beirut, two per page (10-13). We can see traces of life and armed fighting, yet there are no people and there is no narration. The stillness and

muteness are broken only temporarily by narration, action and a greater number of smaller panels (14-23). The action depicted deals with the physical separation of parents and children, the characters stand lonely against the black background. "I think we are more or less safe here", says the grandma, looking at the blackness beside her (23). We turn the page (24-25), and we face a double-page of black and white chaos. The caption, "here is all the space we have left . . ." helps us realize that this is a map. "Here" is written in the top right corner, in a white balloon: it is a tiny round space in the angular maze of streets. Another double-page panel follows: here the space of streets is deleted by whiteness, so that only two narrow strips of streets are left at the two sides. Beirut is cut in two, a white nothing is between the two parts. Turning the page (28-29) we find both the space of the city and the space of the comic book page further deconstructed: little islands are left of what used to take up a double page. This pair of pages looks as if it has been censored: perhaps censored by the instruments of war: "snipers, oil drums, containers, barbed wire, sandbags." Whiteness which used to sign undiscovered territories on maps is now the indicator of inaccessible space. The series of one-page panels continues, we see the demarcation line of oil barrels: space that is taken yet belongs to nobody.

The confined and crammed foyer, the only habitable room in the family apartment, which is at the same time the place of human relationships, stories and physical contact, is forever juxtaposed to these vast opening panels of the book. In the absence of the parents, Anhala minds the children. She has been a maid all her life, and is now their neighbour. Rosary in hand, Anhala makes coffee and cakes to comfort whoever is stressed. She is a grandmother-surrogate who is portrayed in front of the wall-hanging more often than any other character.

As we are informed on the back cover, the idea of this book originates in a moment when Abirached saw her grandmother in a documentary, saying: "You know, I think maybe we're still more or less safe here." As discussed above, "here" is a concept this book does not take at face value. While the vast empty city is juxtaposed to the foyer busy with life, the page layouts themselves call attention to their very own spatiality. In graphic narratives, style is always part of meaning (Hatfield 61), and Abirached's two-tone, geometrical and repetitive style contributes greatly to her message. Often, upon first looking at the page we see horizontal and vertical lines, angles, curves, circles, which turn out to be

people, furniture, or details of the wall hanging. Abirached utilizes some of the key working mechanisms of comics: when she designs her page layouts to be this geometric, she builds on the tension between the ways we interpret an individual panel and a sequence of panels, as well as on the tension resulting from the conflicting reading strategies required by reading a sequence and a whole page (Hatfield 36-67). The geometricality and regularity of Abirached's style result in a certain page-level rhythm, a constant playfulness. However, this very geometricality and regularity clearly suggest a sense of order, a sense of people and things having their place. The chaos of war that haunted Katin's and Satrapi's graphic narratives is here replaced by the geometric companionship of people, of order in design, and order in human relationships based on love. Yet the foyer, which provides the frame for the action and the stories told in the book, is hit by a shell, and the inhabitants have to flee. Leaving becomes part of little Zeina's identity: soon she learns to write her name, and in the same process, she is transforming her signature to a ship, and the surface of striped paper she is writing on, to sea.

*A Game for Swallows* is possibly the most optimistic narrative of the three, yet it is not exempt from the identity crisis caused by war that is central in *Persepolis* and *We are on our Own*. I strongly believe that graphic autobiographies, of which I have examined only three in this paper, can offer eye-opening accounts and representations of traumatic events and the process of overcoming them. Comics have proven their potential in representing even the most disturbing topics, while graphic autobiographies also have historical referential claims. The medium of comics sits between literature and the visual arts and has produced accounts of those caught between the frontlines. That is, women.

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