



Exploring the Experiences and Practices of Arab Female Cartoonists

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Exploring the Experiences and Practices of Arab Female Cartoonists

Afraa Alyoussef

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

February 2025

Candidate Declaration

I hereby declare that:

1. I have not been enrolled for another award of the University or other academic or professional organisation whilst undertaking my research degree.
2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.
3. I certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.
4. The work undertaken towards the thesis has been conducted in accordance with the SHU Principles of Integrity in Research and the SHU Research Ethics Policy, and ethics approval has been granted for all research studies in the thesis.
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Acknowledgement

"The pursuit of knowledge is a transformative journey, one that allows the mind to soar beyond boundaries." These words, imparted to me by my late father, Ghassan, remain deeply etched in my heart, serving as an enduring source of inspiration and strength.

I extend my deepest gratitude to my beloved mother, Lamis, and my son, Karam, whose unconditional love, encouragement, and unwavering support have been the foundation of my resilience. Their steadfast support has been the driving force behind the completion of this thesis.

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Abstract

Editorial cartoons frequently challenge conventional representational norms with the aim of defying expectations, critiquing prevailing views, persuading audiences, or offering alternative perspectives. This research investigates the experiences and creative practices of Arab female cartoonists, focusing particularly on how they navigate the intricate social, cultural, and political contexts of their work. Central to this study are the key factors that shape these experiences, which include the influence of patriarchal discourse in both the political and social domains, gender relations, and various forms of censorship, including self-censorship.

This enquiry employs a diverse methodological approach that incorporates interviews, case studies, autoethnography, and visual analysis of selected cartoons to reflect these cartoonists' various approaches within their respective social and political environments. My dual role as both an Arab female cartoonist and a researcher provides a unique perspective on this topic, thereby enriching the study's depth.

Academic resources on this topic are notably scarce, highlighting the need for increased research into and dissemination of knowledge about Arab female cartoonists. A more comprehensive understanding of the contexts in which they operate and the factors that influence their work may assist the Arab female artists of future generations in discovering their authentic voices and establishing their place within the intellectual and cultural landscape.

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Chapter One: Introduction

A 2013 study examining handprints in Palaeolithic cave paintings reported that approximately 75% of the prints had been produced by female hands. Many such cave paintings in southern France and northern Spain are estimated to be between 12,000 and 40,000 years old. Despite the millennia that have passed since their creation and despite the current age of rapid technological advancement and visual communication revolution, the gender data gap and the erasure of women's cultural contributions persist (Perez, 2019; Hessel, 2022). The absence of women's perspectives from the collective knowledge base exacerbates the gap in interpretive practices within society (Fricker, 2007).

This research focuses on Arab female cartoonists, a group that is often rendered invisible by various cultural, political, and social factors. In its exploration of these cartoonists' working conditions and experiences, this study aims to make a valuable contribution to the existing literature, shedding light on the normative landscape in which they operate and pursue self-expression.

These cartoonists' work has received considerable attention, particularly in the present digital age, when social media platforms have become vital spaces in which artists can share their art and engage with audiences globally. However, such platforms also present challenges, such as audience outrage, public backlash, and, occasionally, online harassment.

As a researcher and a cartoonist, my engagement in the field has profoundly influenced my personal and academic journey. These cartoonists' courage and creativity compelled me to pursue a more profound understanding of their

experience and to reflect on my own experience, which culminated in this doctoral research project.

My research has afforded me the opportunity to engage with several of these artists, obtaining first-hand insights into the challenges they face and the motivations that underlie their work. My drive to research Arab female cartoonists manifested in a complex interplay of personal involvement and scholarly pursuits. Far from a mere academic endeavour, my research constitutes an intimate journey that is intertwined with the fabric of my identity as both a researcher and an Arab female cartoonist. I found myself reflecting on the ways in which my own identity as an Arab woman influenced my art and how I used work to negotiate my identity within my cultural and social context. This inspired me to examine my cartoons from this critical perspective and to perceive them as part of a broader dialogue about identity, resistance, and self-expression.

The research took me across borders – both physical and metaphorical. I delved into archives, scoured libraries, and conducted interviews with female cartoonists, authors, and journalists from across the Arab world. These conversations were more than mere academic inquiries; they were exchanges of lived experiences.

As my research progressed, I found myself at the intersection of two worlds: the world of the researcher and the world of the artist. Although distinct, these roles began to merge, each informing and enriching the other. My research enhanced my understanding of the cultural and social contexts that shaped these artists' works, while my own experiences as a cartoonist allowed me to approach the research with empathy and insight that could not be gleaned from books alone. As such, my perspective was simultaneously that of both an insider and an

outsider, and my personal experiences enriched and complicated my scholarly lens.

However, this research project is far from complete: it is a continuing process that will continue to evolve as I explore more avenues and discover new voices. While the project has been deeply personal, shaped by my identity and experiences, it is also a scholarly pursuit that has the potential to make a significant contribution to a broader understanding of Arab female artists and their role in shaping the cultural landscape. It will facilitate scholarly inquiry into the work of underrepresented female artists, enhancing a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of their contributions to the artistic canon.

The role of digital media in the evolution of Arab female cartooning is a burgeoning field ripe for exploration. As social media platforms become increasingly vital spaces for artistic expression and political commentary, our understanding of how Arab female cartoonists navigate and utilise these platforms will provide important context for their work in the near future.

1.1 Research Objectives

This research was born out of my intense fascination with the vibrant yet often underrepresented world of Arab female cartoonists. As both an Arab cartoonist and a researcher, I found myself captivated by the unique stories and creative expressions of women who, like me, navigate the complexities of identity, culture, and society through their art. However, the more I delved into their work, the more I realised how little scholarly attention had been afforded to their experiences and the sociopolitical contexts that shape their art. This realisation motivated me to

explore this uncharted territory and led to the formulation of three central research objectives that would guide my journey.

1. **Exploration of Experiences** and Practices of Arab Female Cartoonists: To investigate the work and life conditions of Arab female cartoonists, considering the unique regional particularities that influence their experiences.
2. An analysis of **Sociopolitical and Cultural Context**: To identify and examine the various factors that shape the experiences and work of Arab female cartoonists. The aim of this objective is to illuminate the intricate interplay between art, politics, gender relations, and society.
3. Insights into **Navigating Gender, Cultural Identity, and Creativity**: To understand how Arab female cartoonists navigate and address issues relating to gender relations, cultural identity, and artistic expression. By **examining the strategies, techniques, and themes employed** by these artists.

1.2 Structure and Orientation

Chapter One serves as the dissertation's foundation, providing an in-depth overview of Arab female cartoonists' contexts and backgrounds. This chapter outlines the research rationale, highlighting the significance of exploring the artists' experiences and contributions within their unique sociocultural and political environments. In establishing the study's core objectives and themes, this chapter aims to orient the reader by providing a clear understanding of the project's purpose and direction.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive literature review that critically examines the existing body of work relevant to the study of Arab female cartoonists. This chapter explores critical theories, findings, and debates within the fields of gender studies, media studies, and censorship in the Arab world. Through a critical analysis of the literature, this chapter situates the study within the broader scholarly discourse, identifying gaps and underscoring the unique contribution

that this research makes in its exploration of the intersection between art, gender, and cultural identity in the Arab world.

Chapter Three details the research methodology employed in this study. This chapter provides a thorough explanation of the research design, including the selection of participants, data collection methods, and analytical procedures, including visual analysis and NVivo qualitative research data analysis software. Particular emphasis is placed on the qualitative approaches used to capture the nuanced experiences of Arab female cartoonists, focusing on reflexivity to ensure a transparent and reflective research process. The chapter also discusses the iterative nature of data collection and analysis, addressing potential limitations and the steps taken to mitigate them. It also explains the ethical procedures and considerations.

Chapters Four to Eight are individual case studies, each of which provides an in-depth exploration of Arab female cartoonists' experiences, perspectives, and works. Chapter Four investigates the lives and artistic trajectories of four cartoonists, drawing on narratives from video sources, email correspondence, and articles. These personal accounts are intertwined with a comprehensive visual analysis of the artists' cartoons, offering a nuanced understanding of the sociocultural contexts that influence them and are reflected in their art. This chapter emphasises each artist's unique voice and motivations while situating their work within broader societal narratives.

Chapter Nine will adopt an autoethnographic approach, integrating my own personal experiences with a visual analysis of selected cartoons. In this chapter, I shall reflect on my journey as both a researcher and a participant in the context of the study, using autoethnography to provide a deeper, more personal perspective on the themes under investigation. By weaving together narrative

reflections with a critical examination of cartoons, this chapter aims to contextualise visual analysis within the framework of broader cultural and social experiences. As I shall illustrate in the methodology chapter, my autoethnographic approach, along with the embedded visual analysis, will facilitate an introspective exploration of how personal identity influences and is influenced by my cartoons' visual and thematic elements.

Chapter Ten systematically presents and discusses the study's findings and traces direct connections between them and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Through a detailed analysis, the chapter explores how the findings answer the research questions and enhance our understanding of the ways in which Arab female cartoonists navigate their creative practices within their sociopolitical contexts.

Chapter Eleven concludes the dissertation by summarising the key findings and reflecting on their theoretical contributions and implications. This chapter briefly reiterates how the research advances our understanding of Arab female cartoonists experiences and productions. This chapter also presents my personal reflections and perspectives as the research project arrived at its conclusion. It additionally offers recommendations for future research, suggesting potential areas of inquiry that could further explore and build on the insights gained from this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

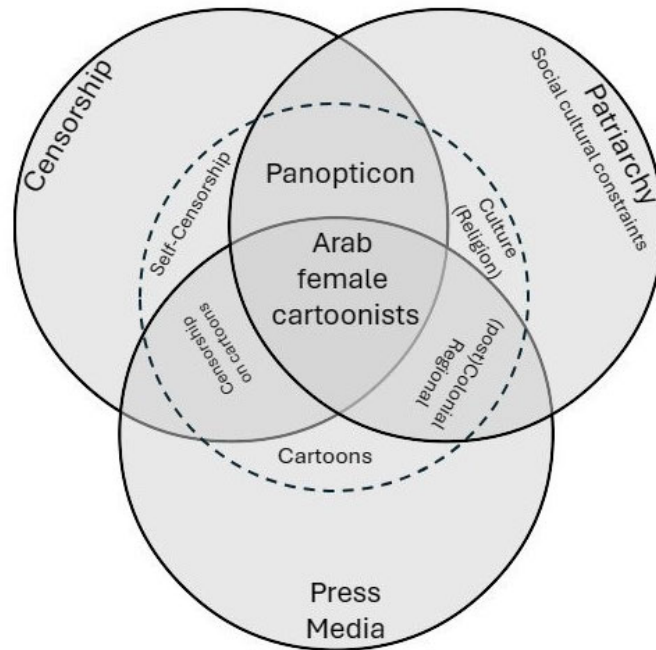
The Arab World denotes a geopolitical and cultural region consisting of 22 states spanning North Africa and Western Asia. While these nations are primarily unified by a common linguistic heritage in the Arabic language, they also share intersecting historical experiences, religious traditions, and postcolonial legacies. Despite this shared heritage, the region is characterised by considerable diversity, encompassing a broad spectrum of ethnic groups, religious affiliations, and political systems.

To understand Arab female cartoonists lived experiences and working conditions, it is crucial to appreciate the intricate social, cultural, and political contexts in which they live. In this chapter, I began by contextualising the Arab world's social, cultural, and political landscape, which forms the foundation for the subsequent analysis of their experiences. Furthermore, the chapter unveils the multifaceted political and cultural complexities characterising the Arab social fabric to provide a nuanced perspective on the diverse elements shaping the societal framework in which these artists emerged and worked. Throughout this review, the historical trajectory was pivotal in elucidating the emergence of patriarchal values that affect women's lives in the region, including those of female artists and cartoonists.

This literature review centres on three primary categories that relate directly to the factors that shape the experiences of female cartoonists living in Arab regions and their artistic productions: 1) The *patriarchal discourse* and repressive parties in their political and social manifestations in the region, and *gender inequality*, particularly women's status and position within the Arab social hierarchy and the

margin of their intervention in the public sphere; 2) *censorship* over intellectual and artistic productions, including *self-censorship*, integrated and reinforced by the previously mentioned factors; and 3) media and cartoons, particularly from the perspective of gender and regional particularities.

Figure 1. Literature review diagram



As Figure 1 illustrates, the literature review chapter mainly revolves around three interconnected areas that are crucial for comprehending the experiences and artistic outputs of female cartoonists within Arab regions. This multifaceted exploration will offer a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics that shape their work along with the challenges they face.

1) Patriarchal Discourse and Gender Relations: This section examines the patriarchal discourse and gender relations that are deeply rooted in the Arab world, analysing historical and contemporary gender dynamics in the region. I undertook an examination of colonial and postcolonial legacy in the region, shedding light on its contribution to the prevailing patriarchal values and

discussing how these legacies have influenced the perception and treatment of women and how these relationships impact female cartoonists.

2) Impact of censorship and self-censorship: This section scrutinises the pervasive influence of censorship on intellectual and artistic expressions in the Arab world, including the state and institutional censorship that controls the dissemination of politically and culturally sensitive content as well as the pressure exerted by social conventions. Both government and non-state censorship have created a mechanism of self-imposed limitations that have led to self-censorship. This chapter explores the effects of censorship and self-censorship on female artists from psychological and professional perspectives.

3) Cartoons in the Arab press and media: This section explores the role of political humour and satire in the Arab press and media, highlighting how female cartoonists use them as tools of resistance against various forms of oppression. The section also discusses the historical development and significance of satire in Arab culture.

2.2 Patriarchal Discourse in the Context of the Arab World

The limited roles assigned to women and junior household members in societies and states that prioritise male dominance necessitate a more comprehensive examination of how patriarchy functions. This includes exploring the ways in which women conform to, adapt to, resist, challenge, and rebel against patriarchal authority and dominance.

The concepts of gender equality and female empowerment are intrinsically linked to women's ability to exercise agency and voice their opinions (Gill & Ryan-Flood, 2010). It is thus necessary to unravel the complexities of gender relations and the

perpetuation of patriarchal norms in the Arab region and the ways in which they affect Arab women's lives and experiences. This discussion focuses in particular on how these constructs have influenced not only women's societal position but also their perspectives on identity and self-knowledge. Understanding this dynamic will help to shed light on its impact on the endeavours of female cartoonists in their artistic productions and lived experiences. As such, this literature review explores the multifaceted dimensions and characteristics of patriarchal discourse in the Arab region, tracing its roots, transformations, and continuities through various historical periods.

The discourse surrounding patriarchy in the Arab region is deeply entwined with the region's historical trajectory, which saw it transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society. This transformation marked the emergence of symbolic religious, cultural, political, and social constructs that significantly influenced enduring norms. Therefore, this chapter further examines the substantial impact of the *colonial and postcolonial* context on numerous Arab countries, highlighting the paradoxical scenario wherein colonialism both challenged and entrenched patriarchal structures. The literature reflects how the newly independent Arab states were obliged to grapple with colonialism's legacy as they strove to construct national identities and often leveraged patriarchal symbols with the aim of forging cohesive national identities, sometimes at the expense of women's freedom and gender equality.

This review is guided by the following relevant theoretical framework. Postcolonial theory offers valuable perspectives on how colonialism continues to shape gender relations in the Arab world, exacerbating the identity crisis that

particularly affects women and younger generations. Feminist theory evaluates the impact of patriarchal values on societies and women's visibility.

It is essential to consider how gender interacts with other dimensions of identity, such as class, religion, and cultural norms, in shaping the lived experiences of Arab women.

The next section explores various scholars' views regarding the definitions and key features of patriarchy. These definitions can vary in nuanced ways, and this review aims to synthesise these diverse perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of how patriarchy is defined and characterised in academic discourse.

2.2.1 Key Concepts and Characteristics

Various scholars have defined and analysed patriarchy in different contexts, highlighting the hierarchical nature of social relations and the systemic advantages afforded to men over women. For instance, Joseph and other scholars define patriarchy as a system of social relations that privileges male seniors over juniors and women in both the private and public spheres (Joseph, 2000).

As a concept, 'patriarchy' is central to the feminist movement; however, its use as an analytical tool has become increasingly linked with the feminist agenda for women's emancipation that gained traction during the 1980s (Maktabi & Lia, 2017). Expanding on the concept further, Carol Christ (2016) provides a functional definition of patriarchy:

Patriarchy is a system of male dominance, rooted in the ethos of war which legitimates violence, sanctified by religious symbols, in which men dominate women through the control of female sexuality, with the intent of

passing property to male heirs, and in which men who are heroes of war are told to kill men, and are permitted to rape women, to seize land and treasures, to exploit resources, and to own or otherwise dominate conquered people. (Christ, online, 2016)

Ortner (2022) offers a more nuanced perspective, arguing that patriarchy is not based solely on gender but is also influenced by other social hierarchies and inequalities, highlighting its complex and multifaceted nature. Patriarchy does not operate in isolation but consistently interacts and intersects with other forms of power, transcending mere sexism or negative male attitudes. It emerges as a pervasive and adaptable structure, a framework of male relations within which these attitudes are generated and sustained. In essence, patriarchy enshrines men's authority over both women and other men. This system fundamentally operates as a binary gendered power structure, wherein men wield authority and power over women (Ortner, 2022). Ortner further elaborates that

Male power is itself an intersectional formation, grounded not only in gender difference but in other hierarchies of inequality—race, sexuality, and ableness. (Ortner, 2022, p. 307)

This power, Ghoussoub adds, manifests through rigid social norms that dictate certain behaviours and expectations for both men and women (Ghoussoub, 2000).

Walby similarly presented the concept of patriarchal discourse as a social system and structure, emphasising the importance of terminology in this definition, not least the term 'social structure', which highlights these power dynamics' societal origins – that is, they are devoid of any biological foundation that rationalises men's dominance over society or their superiority to women (Walby, 1989).

Walby's perspective aligns with those of Criado Perez (2019) and Butler (1997), who also contend that these power structures are socially rather than biologically constructed. These social norms are formulated, cultivated, and sustained by society's most powerful, not only shaping how women perceive themselves but also influencing the broader societal perception of women. These implicit guidelines operate alongside established societal and political regulations (Butler, 1997).

The concept of male supremacy is deeply entrenched in and permeates various aspects of society, as Patriarchal narratives have long dominated the humanities, art, literature, and music. Such narratives, presented as objective truths, continue to impact how women's self-perception. The persistent portrayal of male-dominated perspectives reinforces societal structures that uphold male dominance, influencing both individual self-perception and collective societal norms (Criado Perez, 2019).

The history of humanity, the history of art, literature and music, and the history of evolution itself, all have been presented to us as objective facts. But the reality is, these facts have been lying to us. They have all been distorted by the failure to account for half of humanity - not least by the very word we use to convey our half-truths. This failure has led to gaps in the data. A corruption in what we think we know about ourselves. It has fuelled the myth of male universality. And that is a fact. The persistence of this myth continues to affect how we see ourselves today. (Criado Perez, 2019, p. 21)

Ghoussoub (2000) also examined the intricate constructions of male values and their pervasive influence on societal norms and revealed how entrenched notions of masculinity often emerge from rigid social norms that dictate acceptable

behaviour for both men and women (Ghoussoub, 2000). Gender identity, then, is not an inherent biological trait but rather is a product of cultural and social influences (Butler, 1988; Walby, 1989). This notion aligns with de Beauvoir's oft-cited assertion that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (de Beauvoir, 1972, p. 301). In view of its relevance to identity and the notion of the socially constructed self (Butler, 1988), this perspective necessitates an exploration of gender definition.

Michel Foucault's (1977) exploration of modern systems of power reveals how individuals become enmeshed in a network of constraints and prohibitions that renders them docile and integrates them into institutions that shape their mental processes (Foucault, 1977). This network operates within a framework of patriarchal political and social structures, disproportionately impacting women and reinforcing their subordination (Paglia, 1990) so that they compliantly conform to societal norms (Berger, 2014).

In *Femininity and Domination* (1990), Sandra Lee Bartky applies Foucault's insights to women's gendered experiences. Bartky examines how women internalise patriarchal power structures, leading to their self-objectification and psychological oppression. She argues that these oppressive mechanisms manifest through embodied practices and social norms that disempower women while simultaneously seducing them into complicity. Bartky's analysis elucidates how patriarchal values take root in women's minds, thus perpetuating their subordination (Bartky, 1990).

Building on the above, Amina Zarrugh (2020) defines gender as a set of learned social norms and expectations based on one's assignment to the male or female category at birth. These norms form a system that has evolved throughout history and across cultures. Zarrugh emphasises that the Arab region in particular

experiences persistent gender inequality owing to the complex interplay between gender and religion that has been further shaped by historical, political, and social factors (Zarrugh, Ryan, & Rizzo, 2020).

Several scholars, including Ishaq (2009), Abu-Lughod (2013), and Denzy (2014) have challenged the commonly held perception in academia and media that Arab women are inherently submissive (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Denzy, 2014; Ishaq, 2009). However, the patriarchal systems of the Arab world are upheld by two fundamental pillars: social structure and legal frameworks. The first pillar involves deeply entrenched social and family norms that dictate gender roles and expectations; the second is legally grounded, often modelled in terms of personal status laws that are interpreted according to patriarchal readings of Shari'ah principles (Fargues, 2005).

The complex interplay between colonialism, gender, and cultural identity, challenging traditional religious interpretations and advocating for a deeper understanding of the role of women in Islam and other religions (Cooke, 2000). For instance, Ahmed (1992) highlights the debate over the hijab in Egypt at the end of the 19th century that sparked a societal divide and indicated the emergence of a new discourse under colonial rule. The colonial perspective viewed the hijab as a symbol of oppression among Muslims, one of the notions used to justify European colonisation (Ahmed, 1992; Fargues, 2005).

Maktabi and Lia (2017) explored the evolving nature of patriarchy in the Middle East and North Africa region and underscored the complex interplay between gender, age, and power structures, highlighting how patriarchy manifests in and adapts to various sociopolitical contexts (Maktabi & Lia, 2017). Patriarchy in the Arab region is defined as a system that privileges older males over younger ones and women in both the private and public spheres. This kinship-based power

structure differentiates the Arab approach to patriarchy from Western feminist understandings by intertwining gender and age hierarchies (Joseph, 2000). Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of 'bargaining with patriarchy' suggests that women's autonomy in Muslim-majority societies is more restricted than it is elsewhere, owing to such societies' persistent male dominance and the limited roles available to women and younger members (Kandiyoti, 1988). The Arab uprisings that began in 2010 afforded scholars such as Browers (2020) new opportunities to explore challenges to patriarchal dominance. After the uprisings, women's political activism increased, with notable improvements in gender parity. However, setbacks in several nations, such as Egypt, highlight ongoing challenges relating to issues of gender, class, and race (Ryan & Rizzo, 2020). Despite some indications of patriarchy's gradual weakening, male control remains deeply embedded in the region's economic, social, cultural, legal, and political spheres (Maktabi & Lia, 2017; Al-Masry, 2019).

Hisham Sharabi's *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (1992) introduced the notion that Arab societies are experiencing a form of distorted change, which he terms 'neopatriarchy'. This concept illustrates how traditional patriarchal structures persist despite modern influences, leading to social, political, and moral decay (Sharabi, 1992). However, Aghacy (2009) has emphasised the need to challenge traditional monolithic views of masculinity by framing it as a multifaceted and dynamic construct. Her study highlights that patriarchal systems impact both Arab men and women, causing both to suffer. Focuses on the role that authoritarian regimes play in shaping and restricting Patriarchal identities, Aghacy explored how men in such contexts are simultaneously enforcers and victims of patriarchal power. She underscores

these societies' oppressive nature and their pervasive effects on all individuals (Aghacy, 2009).

An examination of the historical roots of the shift towards patriarchy in the Arab region and the establishment of male centrality is crucial to understanding current gender dynamics and its impact. Appreciation of how these norms and beliefs have evolved over time will help us to grasp their deep-seated influence on the psychology of both women and men and how they shape the social fabric as a whole, as discussed in the next section.

2.2.2 Historical Perspective: Pre-colonialism

In *A History of Masculinity* (2022) Ivan Jablonka traces the historical evolution of masculinity, examining how definitions and expectations of manhood have changed over the centuries due to social, political, and cultural transformations (Jablonka, 2022). In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner (1986) noted that the direction of change is always from societies that were matrilineal and matrilocal to societies that become patrilineal (tracing descent through the male lineage) and patrilocal (residing with the husband's family), never the opposite (Lerner, 1986).

The suggestion that the earliest human societies centred women, worshipped female deities, and implemented matrilineal inheritance systems is supported by compelling archaeological evidence (Saini, 2023).

Historians and anthropologists, including Al-Sawwah, Kayali, and Al-Qemany, have argued that the civilisations of Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt were matriarchal societies (Al-Qemany, 1993; Al-Sawwah, 2002; Kayali, 2018). This

preceded the rise of monotheistic religions that recognise a male God the Father as the creator of nature (Paglia, 1990).

Judeo-Christianity, like Greek worship of the Olympian gods, is a sky-cult.

It is an advanced stage in the history of religion, which everywhere began as earth-cult, veneration of fruitful nature. (Paglia, 1990, p. 8)

Artefacts and ancient texts attest to women's prominent status in pre-Chalcolithic societies (Al Majidi, 2016; Al-Sawwah, 2002; Kayali, 2018; Saini, 2023). The female principle, which symbolised life, goodness, love, and prosperity, occupied a dominant position, particularly during the early Bronze Age (Fraze, 1981). Women's bodies were recognised as sacred by virtue of their fertility and ability to give birth (El Saadawi, 1971). However, from approximately 3000 BCE, changes emerged in societies, driven by economic factors, including the transition towards greater community stability, marked by a shift from the nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to settled farming communities (Al Majidi, 2016; Saini, 2023). The three primary monotheistic religions in the Mesopotamian region worship a male god who is credited with having created the universe. Through history, sky cults largely replaced earth cults, and male deities came to occupy a position of supremacy over symbols of the feminine (Al-Sawwah, 2002; Kayali, 2018).

The rise of individual property ownership brought significant changes as legislation and social norms began to favour men, leading to the development of societies that prioritised the protection and preservation of patriarchal family structures (Ahmed, 1992). Men gradually assumed power over women, subjecting them to control and marginalisation, particularly with the advent of urban centres and the ascendance of male warriors (Christ, 2016; Frazer, 1981; Kayali, 2018). The establishment of male dominance over women coincided with

the introduction of agriculture, as humans began to settle and accumulate property, such as land and livestock (Ahmed, 1992).

These early societies witnessed the increasing influence of elite, powerful men and regulations governing women's lives across all social strata that became progressively more constrictive (Saini, 2023). This reinforcement of gender-based roles further exacerbated social disparities and gave rise to class hierarchies. Ultimately, the prevailing norms shifted towards patrilineality, thereby solidifying the dominance of male-centred social structures (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001).

An exploration of civilisation's matriarchal roots reveals that women wielded substantial influence in societies and within families, contributing through childbirth, nurturing, governance, innovation, spirituality, art, law, and healing (Rich, 1995).

The elevation of women to the heights occupied by goddesses was a reflection of their status within society before the systems characterised by the patriarchal family, land ownership and division into social classes came into being. (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 189)

However, the groundwork had been laid for this shift towards a patriarchal social system, and 'the heavens reflected what was happening on the ground' (Saini, 2023, p. 99). As goddesses were superseded by gods, women gradually lost their power and authority to men. The mystery of the female body with its hidden sexual organs and the impossibility of proving paternity were uncertainties that became intolerable to men, who consequently sought guardianship over women to assuage their own anxieties about the ambiguity of women's sexuality (El Saadawi, 1980; Paglia, 1990). Men sought to assert dominance over women's

sexual autonomy to secure their lineage and safeguard their property so that they might bequeath it to their offspring, and thus they gradually prevailed in society (Kayali, 2018). The growth of the earliest states and empires was based on population expansion and the establishment of defensive armies. These emerging societies' ruling elites needed young women to have as many children as possible and for the young men to be raised as willing warriors. Virtues such as loyalty and honour were enlisted to support these fundamental objectives. Traditions and religions, in turn, developed in alignment with these same social codes (Saini, 2023).

Within this framework, there emerged a pressing demand for a legal code that would propel the transition towards a family structure spearheaded by an unassailable paternal figure and societies governed by an absolute male authority. Concurrently, religious beliefs that were centred around a singular deity exerted a transformative influence on women's social, economic, and religious standing, further consolidating male dominance over women (Kayali, 2018).

The growing necessity for a legal framework steering the development of a family structure dominated by an absolute patriarch culminated in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. These legal documents, formulated circa 2000 BCE, left an indelible mark on Mesopotamia's legal and social frameworks. Their evident preference for male power and control had profound implications for Arab women's social standing, particularly concerning their Personal Status Law (Al Majidi, 1997).

I found it necessary to include a brief historical contextualisation referencing the Code of Hammurabi as a deliberate intervention to confirm commonly held assumptions about the origins of patriarchal structures in the region. The Code offers compelling evidence that patriarchal norms were already embedded within

the legal and institutional fabric of society long before the emergence of monotheistic religions. By drawing on this early legal system, I aim to highlight that the foundations of patriarchal order were culturally and socially constructed, and subsequently codified, independent of religious doctrine. This historical framing serves to underscore that patriarchy in the region is not solely a religious legacy but part of a deeper societal continuum. Such a perspective is critical for understanding how long-standing social formations continue to shape contemporary gender dynamics.

The Code of Hammurabi comprises a collection of principles and rules formulated during the rule of the Babylonian king Hammurabi (c. 1800–1900 BCE), written in cuneiform on a basalt stela, which was both a legal record and a tool for royal propaganda. The Code consists of a series of edicts, many of which illustrate a class-based system of justice and impose harsher penalties for crimes against the state than against individuals (Janes, 2019). The Code of Hammurabi constituted the first comprehensive compilation of legal texts encompassing various aspects of life. Notably, it incorporated laws pertaining to women and marriage and is often recognised as one of the first codifications of women's sexual behaviour (Kayali, 2018; Lerner, 1986).

A crucial aspect of these laws is their consistent inclusion of a divine mandate, emphasising the king's authority to rule, establish justice, and legislate. This linkage between the king's authority and the divine mandate played a pivotal role in establishing the patriarchal system, ultimately empowering men with authority and control (Kayali, 2018, p. 125).

Hammurabi's laws were etched onto a stele, an upright basalt monolith that is now housed in the Louvre in Paris. A relief carving at the top of the stele depicts Hammurabi receiving symbols of justice from the sun god Shamash, highlighting

his divine authority to uphold justice (Slanski, 2012). The stele is strikingly phallic in shape, suggesting a connection between these inscriptions and the patriarchal social system that has characterised the region ever since.

Figure 2. Hammurabi's stele, Louvre, 2023



Another example of the ascendancy of Patriarchal values can be seen in a clay tablet from the 12th century BCE found in Ashur in Iraq and now housed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. This legal text gives men the right to dictate women's dress and determine their ranking in the social hierarchy based on Patriarchal values. This clay tablet proves the veil's function as a social code long

before the followers of Islam adopted the veiling of women as a signifier of religious and social identity.

Figure 3. My photograph, Law book. Pergamon Museum, Berlin, 2023

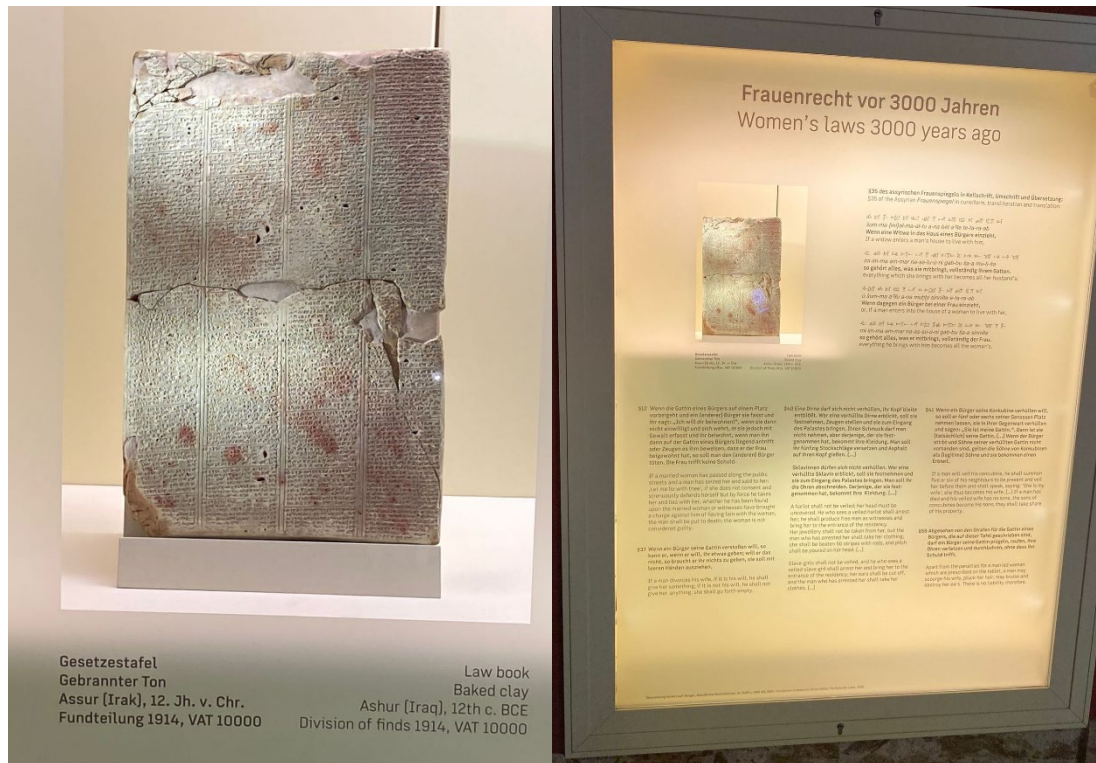


Figure 4. Detail - 1 (ibid.)

... wenn er ihn oder seine seiner Genossen Platz
nehmen lassen, sie in ihrer Gegenwart verhüllen
und sagen: „Sie ist meine Gattin.“. Dann ist sie
[tatsächlich] seine Gattin. [...] Wenn der Bürger
stirbt und Söhne seiner verhüllten Gattin nicht
vorhanden sind, gelten die Söhne von Konkubinen
als [legitime] Söhne und sie bekommen einen
Erbteil.

If a man will veil his concubine, he shall summon
five or six of his neighbours to be present and veil
her before them and shall speak, saying: ‘She is my
wife’; she thus becomes his wife. [...] If a man has
died and his veiled wife has no sons, the sons of
concubines become his sons; they shall take share
of his property.

**§59 Abgesehen von den Strafen für die Gattin eines
Bürgers, die auf dieser Tafel geschrieben sind,
darf ein Bürger seine Gattin prügeln, raufen, ihre
Ohren verletzen und durchbohren, ohne dass ihn
Schuld trifft.**

Apart from the penalties for a married woman
which are prescribed on the tablet, a man may
scourge his wife, pluck her hair, may bruise and
destroy her ears. There is no liability therefore.

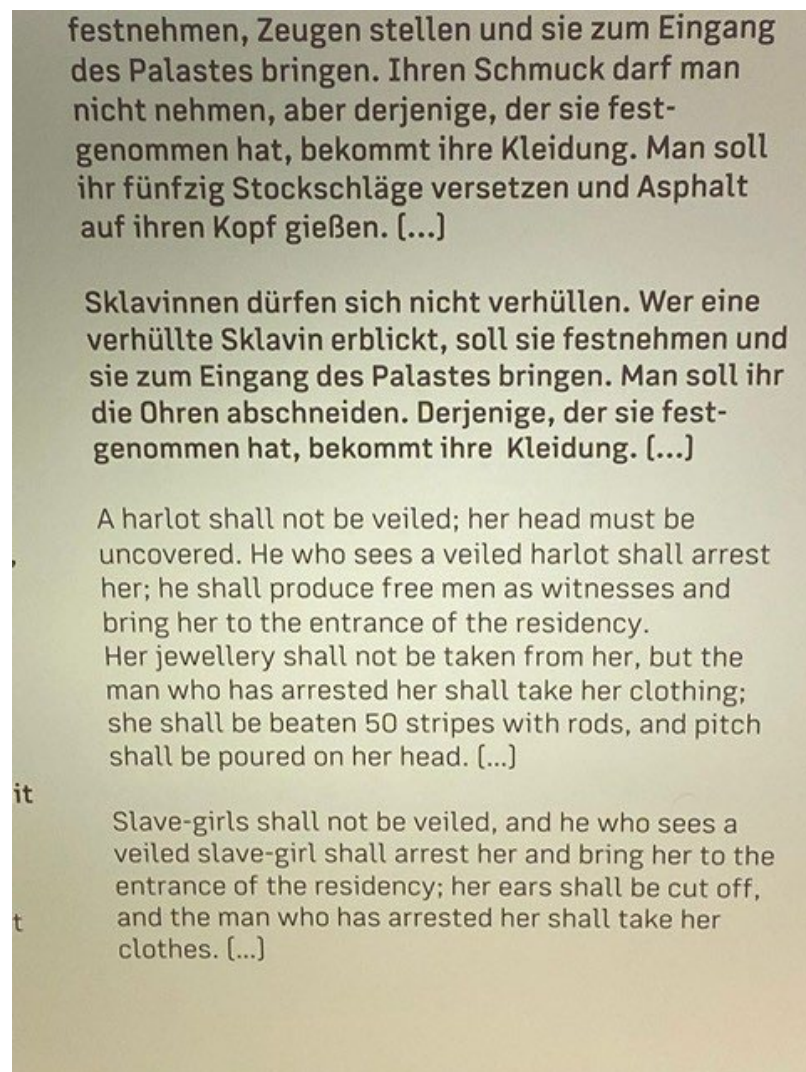
The law written in this baked clay tablet (detail – 1) states:

If a man will veil his concubine, he shall summon five or six of his
neighbours to be present and veil her before them, and shall speak,
saying: ‘She is my wife’; she thus becomes his wife. [...] If a man has died

and his veiled wife has no sons, the sons of concubines become his sons; they shall take share of his property.

Apart from the penalties for a married woman which are prescribed on the tablet, a man may scourge his wife, pluck her hair, may bruise and destroy her ears. There is no liability, therefore.

Figure 5. Detail - 2 (*ibid*)



The law written in this baked clay tablet (detail – 2) states:

A harlot shall not be veiled. Her head must be uncovered. He who sees a veiled harlot shall arrest her; He shall produce free men as witnesses and bring her to the entrance of the residency. Her jewellery shall not be taken

from her, but the man who has arrested her shall take her clothing; she shall be beaten 50 stripes with rods, and pitch shall be poured on her head. [...]

Slave-girls shall not be veiled, and he who sees a veiled slave-girl shall arrest her and bring her to the entrance of the residency; her ears shall be cut off, and the man who has arrested her shall take her clothes. [...]

The above inscription attests that women were subjected to harsh punishments as a result of laws that were established by men for their own gain. Additionally, in accordance with these regulations, women were treated as personal belongings.

Once codes were created and meaning given two categories, they had to be policed for fear of transgression. And that's exactly what's seen over time in the historical data. Laws around marriage, divorce, and adultery in Mesopotamia become harsher for women as time passes. Their freedom and privileges are slowly eaten away. At the same time, over centuries, working women gradually disappeared from the historical record. If there's attention on what women are doing, it's increasingly on their loyalty as wives, mothers and citizens. (Saini, 2023, p. 162)

Throughout the extensive human history of the Mesopotamian region, where the subjugation of women within family structures first became institutionalised and codified in law, women's status has progressively deteriorated. This, in turn, played a pivotal role in bolstering male dominance within the public sphere (Lerner, 1986).

Certain symbolic elements derived from the theological narratives of the region offer critical insights into the transformation of women's status throughout its

historical trajectory. The notion that Eve was created from Adam's rib reinforced women's subordination to men. Such narratives have lent support to the social hierarchy and patriarchal values in societies worldwide, including the Arab region (El Saadawi, 1980). Another example may be found in Sumerian myth, in which the snake symbolised healing and life, from which the word snake: 'حَيَّة' – meaning 'life' in Arabic – derives. However, this meaning changed over time from a symbol of healing to a symbol of evil and sedition. The woman's position was diminished from that of giver of life to that of the seductive woman lacking wisdom, who was created from man's rib (Al Majidi, 1997; El Saadawi, 1980). With the rise of monotheistic faiths, goddesses were increasingly condemned as pagan idols and associated with nature worship, witchcraft, and sexual permissiveness. In the book of Genesis, for instance, when Eve is punished for her transgression in the Garden of Eden, she receives the proclamation, 'Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'. This statement served to indicate the shift in society and gender roles as patriarchal attitudes became increasingly ingrained (Saini, 2023).

These new social, economic, and political systems required sacred legitimacy. The male deity, the 'sky father', became increasingly prominent at the expense of the sanctity of female deities, 'earth mothers', and their representatives on earth: women. As men's connection to the sacred grew, so too did women's association with the sinful and evil, which had a significant impact on social values and customs overall (Al-Qemany, 1993; Al-Sawwah, 2002; Kayali, 2018). After the Akkadian shepherds penetrated deeper into Mesopotamia's agricultural land, the female deities' position changed, and the mother goddess was no longer worshipped as the mysteriously powerful source of all fertility and life. The primacy of divinity passed to the male creator god, who became the absolute

spiritual power, and whose earthly representatives – men – became masters in the pastoral society with its patriarchal social systems, in which men and their god are dominant (Al-Qemany, 1993).

The transformation of sexual ethics and religious values during the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal structures is exemplified by the following case. Among the most ubiquitous titles of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar was 'Qadishtu', which was also the title of the priestesses of Ishtar who practised sacred sexual rituals (Frazer, 1981). In Arabic, the name became 'Qadissa', meaning 'saint' (Al-Qemany, 1993). In other words, the concept of holiness was stripped from the priestesses of sex and fertility and realigned with the ideal of chastity. Chastity in patriarchal societies prescribes a life of virginity and 'transcendence' of the sexual or of devotion to one man under the supervision of patriarchal social systems (Kayali, 2018). Under such systems, a man has the right of ownership over the bodies of the 'his' women and is morally and legally entitled to punish them should they deviate, up to and including killing them in what is termed an 'honour' crime (Joubin, 2013).

While cultural and social definitions of the attributes of masculinity and femininity vary, individuals can only rarely transcend the confines of societal expectations. The prevailing ideology and underlying sexual and cultural differences that shaped the relationship between the dominant and dominated have long characterised Arab society (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). The ascendancy of patriarchal ideologies adversely affected women's self-perceptions as men assumed positions of authority. As the above discussions illustrate, patriarchal societal narratives propagated the belief that women were responsible for humanity's expulsion from paradise, and notions of a woman's honour became closely intertwined with her sexual chastity and fidelity to one man. An illustrative

instance is the transformation of Qadishu, who, having performed sexual rituals while serving in the temples of female deities, was reconceptualised as a virgin saint. The rigid structures of modified beliefs and social values were biased in favour of men (Abu Zayd, 1999), and honour crimes were committed to punish women's deviation from abiding social norms. The hymen, a physical marker of female virginity, signifies women's purity and respectability. By inciting in them fear that their good reputation will be lost or corrupted, patriarchal culture exerts pressure on women to remain virgins while segregating them from men (Odeh, 2010).

Thus concludes the exploration of the Arab region's transition towards and institutionalisation of patriarchal systems. The preceding investigation examined the evolution from a matriarchal stage to a patriarchal structure of societies. This transformation derived its legitimacy from sacred and religious legislation, along with its interpretations, firmly embedding itself in the collective consciousness of both men and women, albeit to varying degrees.

The patriarchal values that were first established as described above derived significant strength from several centuries of colonial presence in the Arab region. The section that follows explores how analysis of interactions between colonisers and colonised will enhance our understanding of the intricate gender dynamics that were at play both during and after the colonial era.

2.2.3 Arab Women, Colonialism and Post-colonialism

This section will critically examine the ramifications of colonial and postcolonial policies on the Arab cultural and social landscape. This examination encompasses several key dimensions, shedding light on the cultural identity crises that arose as a result of the presence of colonial powers and their attempts to exert control and impose their values, particularly given the stark divergence

in religious backgrounds and belief systems. It further explores the intertwined concepts of nationalism and honour, focusing on honour's inherent connection to women's chastity and how this association imposed significant constraints on women's freedom and limited their involvement in the public sphere, even in a postcolonial context.

The above literature review demonstrated the presence of patriarchal authority and its structures in the Arab region considerably before the area's colonisation (Ahmed, 1992; Kayali, 2018; Sharabi, 1992). Inevitably, patriarchal power dynamics played a crucial role in the institutionalised colonial ideologies and practices, and precolonial and postcolonial forms of patriarchy have intertwined in modern nation-state construction (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). The current manifestations of patriarchy in Arab society result from the overlapping influences of the colonial and indigenous spheres (Sharabi, 1992).

Spencer-Wood (2016) elucidated how the interplay between indigenous concepts of patriarchy and European notions of colonial patriarchy exacerbated indigenous women's disenfranchisement. She analysed how male dominance was frequently upheld through culturally sanctioned, systematic, institutionalised oppression that was perpetrated by both colonial and indigenous men. European policies and laws established the institutional gender segregation of colonised bodies, conforming to the hegemonic Western gender ideology that cast women as subordinate domestic figures dominated by superior, public men. Women's and men's respective responses to this 'patriarchal colonialism' created complex dialectical power dynamics and negotiations between the colonisers and the

colonised, reflecting a continuous struggle and adaptation on both sides (Spencer-Wood, 2016).

Gender and sexual power dynamics are not specific to one historically recorded role, interaction or relationship, but are part of the systematic expression of the institutional structures of 'patriarchal colonialism.' Feminist theories reveal how patriarchal power dynamics permeated all aspects of European colonialism and especially how these dynamics were enacted through colonial institutions. Radical feminist analyses reveal that the debris of 'patriarchal colonialism' includes the continuing subordination of women through culturally condoned, widespread, and institutionalised male violence that survives in various forms to contemporary times. (Spencer-Wood, 2016, p. 488)

In *Neopatriarchy*, Sharabi (1992) analysed the profound and wide-reaching impact of imperialism on Arab societies, illustrating how it has shaped their political, social, and cultural structures in ways that reinforce neopatriarchal dynamics and obstruct authentic modernisation and development. He argued that European imperialism imparted a dual legacy of enlightenment and terror, introducing certain positive aspects of modernity while primarily exploiting and terrorising the colonised populations, resulting in long-term psychological and social damage. Imperialism implemented a form of governance that was reminiscent of the medieval sultanate, characterised by personalised power and extensive state control over all facets of society. This imperialist system fostered a passive citizenry and sustained social and political inertia. Islamic fundamentalism emerged as a significant political and cultural force in response, drawing from traditional Islam while simultaneously evolving into a militant

movement that opposed European domination and advocated for a return to a perceived Islamic golden age (Sharabi, 1992).

In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Laila Ahmed (1992) emphasised the importance of examining women's societal positions within the new social complexities arising from the cultural clash between coloniser and colonised (Ahmed, 1992), which subjected Arab women to additional social pressures and increased adherence to patriarchal norms and restrictions (Sakr, 2004). Despite the conflict between male natives and colonisers in colonised cultures, their respective patriarchal discourses have consistently upheld the subordination of women through institutionalised and culturally accepted male oppression, which persists today in various forms (Spencer-Wood, 2016). Modern-day discourse on women in the Arab world remains deeply embedded within a patriarchal framework that encompasses the social, cultural, and legislative domains (Abu Zayd, 1999).

Contemporary representations of the Middle East and North Africa often depict more rigid gender hierarchies and greater exclusion of women from the public domain. (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001, p. 10)

Statistical data indicate that Arab women's participation in public affairs ranks among the lowest globally (Corm, 2017). Moreover, according to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, the Middle Eastern and North African regions continue to exhibit the most substantial gender gap (60.9%) (Global Gender Gap Report, online, 2021).

Scholars including Ahmed (1992) and Kandiyoti (1988) have demonstrated how the Arab region's history of foreign invasions, political conflicts, and cultural and identity crises stemming from colonial and postcolonial influences has exerted a profound impact on its social structure (Kandiyoti, 1988). Extended periods of

foreign occupation in the 19th century, from the Ottoman Empire to British and French colonialism, coupled with the depletion of sovereignty and resources, have left an enduring imprint on the region. It was repeatedly impressed on the colonised people that their cultures and beliefs were inferior, which instilled in them fears centred on a loss of their identity and traditions (Saini, 2023). Consequently, Arab societies reinforced patriarchal interpretations of local culture and religious texts that affected the formulation of laws and legislations that relied heavily on jurisprudence and interpretations of religious scriptures (El Saadawi, 1980; Mernissi, 1975). Consequently, in complicity with colonial authorities, Arab male legislators attained a position of increased authority, 'claiming a monopoly on speaking in the name of God' (Mernissi, 2002, p. 160). Religious leaders – already powerful figures – assumed even greater significance and publicly opposed and criticised women's liberation movements, which they perceived as associated with Western imperialists (El Said et al., 2015).

2.2.4 Postcolonial Identity Crisis

This discussion will explore the enduring legacy of colonialism in perpetuating social and political crises that further reinforced the pre-existing patriarchal structures within these societies (Sharabi, 1992). The entrenchment of these values has led to profound and lasting consequences, particularly for women and children (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). Amid these shifts, the drive to preserve local culture repeatedly emerged across Arab, Islamic, and European contexts. This discourse was inextricably linked to broader debates on identity, nationalism, and the ongoing tension between colonial and indigenous values (Ahmed, 1992). Societies within the Arab region felt threatened by the colonists' authority over them. In response to this perceived patriarchal injury, they strongly identified their nations' honour with the chastity of their women. Consequently, Arab men sought

to protect and defend their honour by means of reinforced possession and guardianship of women's bodies. This precipitated a grave political and cultural identity crisis during the postcolonial era (Abu Zayd, 1999; Said, 1993), and a culture of subjugation and subaltern endures, perpetuated by a combination of patriarchal beliefs and political oppression (Badawia, 2013; Spivak, 1988).

In her acclaimed essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) considers the ways in which colonialism's aftermath markedly heightened the women's social subordination.

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly affected. The question is not of female participation in the insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is 'evidence.' It is, instead, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (Spivak, 1988, p. 5)

According to Syrian feminist and political activist Nahid Badawia, the Arab region is characterised by prevalent patriarchal orientations, wherein the norms of subordination and hegemony hold sway. She contends that rebellion against the familial father figure and challenging the oppressive authoritarian regime are inseparable endeavours for women, who find themselves bound by societal expectations that demand conformity. To escape these expectations, women must often confront the struggles they face within their own homes.

Consequently, politically active women experience social exclusion and marginalisation (Badawia, 2013).

According to Mernissi (2001), the oppression that Arab women endure stems from the confidence crises experienced by who she terms 'desperately fragile men'. These men have been subjected to oppression under colonial rule and postcolonial tyrannical regimes (Mernissi, 2001, p. 8). Those subjected to external oppression often become the oppressors within their domestic spheres, as oppression originating from larger institutions may spread to families and individuals, thus creating a perpetual cycle. Individuals facing oppression from authoritative entities may, in turn, perpetuate this oppression, wielding it over the women and children within their own families (Hindess, 1996).

Post-independence, men experienced a sense of powerlessness owing to the state oppression to which they had been subjected following an extended period that was marked by colonial domination and persistent conflicts. Consequently, they frequently sought to control the women within their households (Said, 1993). Similarly, Joubin argued, '[As] man is increasingly politically marginalised over the years, his aggression towards women only augment' (Joubin, 2013, p. 14).

The postcolonial Arab world places significant emphasis on national and cultural identity and on women's role within the family for the preservation of this identity. Women who challenge the patriarchal norms risk being accused of having betrayed their local culture. Many perceive challenges to local culture and norms as tantamount to acceptance of Western standards and values (Hoigilt, 2019). Meanwhile, Western perceptions continue to regard local cultures and beliefs as obstacles to women's agency and freedom: 'The use of women's bodies in discursive battles between local nationalists and foreign colonisers is not a relic

of history but continues into colonial and postcolonial present in the Arab world.’ (El Said et al., 2015, p. 234).

In *Women and Power in the Middle East* (2001), Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomovics emphasised that women’s position caught between the contradictions of universalist constitutions and the postcolonial unease that burdened them with the responsibility for upholding national authenticity (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001).

For a long time anyone attempting to address questions relating to women’s human and citizenship rights in the Middle East came up against a persistent tendency to articulate these issues with exclusive references to Islam. With hindsight, it is possible to recognise that this was not merely the product of a lingering Orientalism but was also indicative of the profoundly ambiguous terms under which women were incorporated into the postcolonial nation-states of Muslim societies: as part beings caught between the contradictions of universalist constitutions defining them as citizens, of Shari’ah-derived Personal Status Codes limiting their rights in their family, and of a postcolonial malaise burdening them with being the privileged bearers of national authenticity. (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001, p. 52)

This crisis often advantages those who already occupy positions of authority. The perception of women as the guardians of the cultural and social conventions by whose limitations they are confined may yield the tragic outcome whereby those who dare to resist may be accused not only of betraying their society but also of betraying themselves (Saini, 2023). This resonates with Spencer-Wood’s above-cited assertion that local patriarchal discourse and the colonial patriarchy concurred regarding the persistent subordination of women through

institutionalised and culturally accepted male domination (Spencer-Wood, 2016). Scholars such as Smail Salhi (2004) have explored women's complex situations in postcolonial contexts, noting that liberation from colonial rule did not translate into liberation for women. Under colonial rule, efforts to preserve tradition and safeguard honour often involved restricting women's participation in the public sphere. Despite women's active participation in their countries' struggles for independence, they were subsequently silenced and denied the opportunity to challenge the dual oppression of colonialism and patriarchy once national independence was achieved. Women thus faced a dual form of repression imposed by both the colonising and the colonised males (Smail Salhi, 2004).

A nationalistic discourse emerged, driven by constant threats from external forces that lacked connections to the place, history, or culture (El Said et al., 2015; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). National honour became inextricably linked to men's ability to protect and uphold the dignity of their female family members. This interconnection perpetuated the symbolic weight attached to the preservation of women's honour alongside the notion of the nation's honour, thereby exacerbating Arab women's subjugation to patriarchal control (El Said et al., 2015; Hoigilt, 2019). They encountered an additional layer of marginalisation, experiencing a dual form of exclusion despite their active engagement in resistance movements against colonialism and their substantial contributions to society in the form of labour (Hoigilt, 2019). As Saini noted, women were burdened with the responsibility of preserving national and cultural authenticity (Saini, 2023), which has led to the crucial observation that women themselves may occasionally inadvertently reinforce and perpetuate patriarchal values by raising children to conform to the norms and conventions that have been established by men (Ghoussoub, 2000; Mernissi, 2001). This dynamic is evident

in situations wherein mothers endorse and facilitate practices such as genital mutilation for their daughters or in the distinct gender roles that their daughters observe during their domestic upbringing (El Saadawi, 1980; Ghoussoub, 2000).

Men are there positioned at the thresholds and have often attempted to police the mobility and conduct of their sisters, daughters, companions, wives and comrades, sometimes – quite often in fact – with the complicity of their mothers and other senior women. (Ghoussoub & Sinclair-Webb, 2000, p. 9)

Despite having personally experienced the physical and psychological pain associated with female genital mutilation, some older women permit the continuation of this harmful practice, at times circumventing the law to subject their daughters to it (El Saadawi, 1980). Their rationale is rooted in the belief that such practices prepare their daughters for societal expectations and the fear that, if they do not undergo this rite of passage, girls may struggle to find suitable husbands within their communities. Despite the moral ambiguity associated with such practices, they may also be perceived as pragmatic choices when few alternatives appear to be available (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). This is particularly relevant because individuals often remain unaware that their consciousness has been shaped by external forces, leading to illusions about their identity and potential. This subtle and frequently invisible indoctrination of dominant ideologies is particularly significant for women, who exist in a world that is saturated with patriarchal perspectives (Berger, 2014; Criado Perez, 2019; Rich, 2018).

This historical exploration of patriarchy in the Arab region has revealed a complex and evolving dynamic that has persisted from antiquity through the colonial period

and into the postcolonial and independence era. It has also revealed the ways in which this dynamic has affected women's lived experiences and rights.

The above discussion explored the intersection of historical patriarchal discourse in the Arab region, examining its implications in the context of colonial and postcolonial influences on the political, cultural, and social landscape. This exploration has highlighted the complexities of gender relations, the challenges that women face, and the perpetuation of patriarchal values across generations, highlighting how historical, cultural, and colonial factors have shaped these complex dynamics.

This research focuses on patriarchy's effect on Arab female cartoonists, who must navigate societal expectations, gender norms, and their creative expression. This research project will further investigate how these influences shape the content and scope of their work, particularly in terms of how they address issues relating to women's rights, social norms, and cultural expectations within their cartoons.

This environment influences their visibility, lived experiences, and the psychological factors that affect their work. Examination of these intricate relationships will allow us to better appreciate the challenges and influences that have shaped Arab women cartoonists' contributions and expressions.

2.3 Censorship and Self-censorship

'To expand the boundaries of human freedom, we must first identify them'.

(Jansen, 1988, p. 25)

Throughout history and across cultures, individuals, institutions, and governments have sought to control the flow of information and ideas as a means

of maintaining authority and shaping public perception (Post, 1988). Nodes of power, education, privilege, and gender politics regulate the discourse in such a way that dissenting or countering voices (Jansen, 1988) – particularly especially those of marginalised and underrepresented groups such as women (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Foucault, 1982) – are largely silenced.

This section of the literature review aims to explore the multifaceted dimensions of censorship and self-censorship, highlighting the intersection between freedom of expression, societal norms, and political pressures.

Having examined the patriarchal discourse in the Arab region within the colonial and postcolonial context above, here, I shall consider studies on censorship definition, forms and mechanisms, particularly addressing the gendered aspects of censorship and the ways in which women navigate these issues within patriarchal communities.

This will be followed up by an overview of the impact of censorship on artistic and intellectual production, with a particular emphasis on culturally sensitive communities and further consideration of the censorship of artistic content on virtual platforms, including relevant examples.

The review then explores the censorship of editorial cartoons drawing on examples from the intellectual debates that surround the Danish cartoons and their connection to religious sensibilities. This is complemented by a review of the literature centred on self-censorship and its strong connection to women's self-censorship in conservative societies.

In the context of this discussion, it is essential to include several observations that are strongly connected to broader theoretical discussions regarding the ways in which pervasive surveillance shapes and controls individual behaviour. These

observations, which are linked to architectural examples drawn from daily life, interrogate the impact that constant surveillance exerts on Arab women's psychology within the boundaries of domestic life. This analysis is conducted through a Foucauldian lens, considering the Panopticon as an instrument of surveillance and self-regulation, as Foucault discussed in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Foucault, 1977). This will help to forge the connection between patriarchy, surveillance, and self-censorship, thereby highlighting the link to gender disparity within censorship and self-censorship. It is necessary to consider this connection in addressing the research question of how Arab female cartoonists negotiate their creative expression within a complex social and cultural environment.

The boundaries between the concepts discussed in this review – patriarchy, surveillance, censorship, self-censorship, and gender disparity within censorship – are inherently overlapping, leading to significant intersection in the following discussion. This section highlights some of these connections.

2.3.1 Censorship Forms and Mechanisms

'There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.' (Foucault, 1990, p. 27).

Foucault's above-quoted assertion suggests that silence is not merely the absence of speech but is, in fact, a complex and active element within communication and power structures. Different types of silence serve various strategic purposes, shaping and controlling discourses in subtle ways (Foucault, 1990), and censorship is a mechanism through which power operates to produce and control knowledge. However, censorship transcends the confines of state control and becomes a pervasive force that manifests in multiple spheres beyond governmental authority (Foucault, 1982). Adopting a similar position, Jansen

(1988) argues that censorship serves as a mechanism by which those who occupy positions of power may accumulate and produce the requisite knowledge to assert control over people or ideas that challenge established systems (Jansen, 1988):

The powerful do not just have the first and last say, they do not just control access to the podium, Presidium, or pressroom, they also determine the rules of evidence, shape the logic of assertion, and define the architecture of argument. The powerful are not just talk, they are makers and shakers who draw the lines in language and life which others dare not cross. (Jansen, 1988, p. 7)

While state-led censorship persists, it is crucial to recognise that censorship can originate from diverse sources, weaving itself into the fabric of societal, cultural, and even the individual realms, and that the dynamics of power manifest as a result of social, religious, or cultural domination over individuals (Foucault, 1982). These sources shape individual subjectivity by establishing a profound connection between one's identity and self-knowledge (Foucault, 1982; Butler, 1997).

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990) argues that power structures, rather than simply silencing topics, often encourage specific types of discourse that wield control and influence over societal norms and behaviours (Foucault, 1990).

In *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation*, Post (1998) discussed the transformation of censorship discourse and emphasised Foucault's significant influence, viewing power as dispersed and pervasive and rendering censorship a normative part of social practices. This interplay between power and censorship highlights the intricate web of control that shapes both

individual lives and society at large (Post,1998; Foucault, 1982). Thus, power becomes the arbiter of which knowledge is permissible and which social practices are deemed acceptable or unacceptable (Foucault, 1982; Butler, 1997).

The above discussion demonstrates that censorship is implemented in two distinct ways. First, explicit censorship takes the form of external prohibitions enforced through state regulations and institutional authority. Governments and governing bodies often impose restrictions on information and expression, stifling the free flow of ideas (Joubin, 2013; Harris, 2022; Jansen, 1988). Second, censorship also functions in a more subtle and implicit manner when wielded by non-state powers. These dominant social and cultural practices act as agents of control that hinder the free circulation of ideas and expression and challenge the very notion of 'individual autonomy' (Mascus, 1998, p. 9).

Judith Butler's 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution' (1988) explores how power manifests in language and identity (Butler, 1988). She posits that censorship functions not only through explicit prohibitions but also through implicit norms that dictate that which may be said and that which remains unspeakable:

[I]mplicit operations of power that rule out in unspoken ways what will remain unspeakable. Such implicit or ambiguous forms of censorship may be more efficacious than explicit forms in rendering certain kinds of speech unspeakable. (Butler, 1998, pp. 249–250)

These unspoken boundaries, therefore, are effectively 'enforcing a limitation on speakability' (Butler, 1997, p.130):

If we do not remain restricted to the legal definition of censorship, we are in a position to ask how the very regulation of the distinction between speech and conduct works in the service of more implicit forms of

censorship... if censorship, however, is a way of producing speech, constraining in advance what will and will not be acceptable speech, then it cannot be understood exclusively in terms of juridical power. (Butler, 1997, p. 128)

In his 2015 article, 'Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After', Bunn also advocates for a more nuanced understanding of censorship that transcends the traditional binary oppositions that are traced between repression and freedom. He explores the development and implications of New Censorship Theory, emphasising the roles that ideology and hegemony play in maintaining social order. Bunn argues that state censorship is merely one of many tools used to control public discourse, highlighting the complex mechanisms through which power and control are exercised (Bunn, 2015):

New Censorship Theory sees censorship as a diffuse, ubiquitous phenomenon in which a host of actors (including impersonal, structural conditions) function as effective censors. These 'structural' forms of censorship may be based upon the effects of the market, ingrained cultural languages and grammars, and other forms of impersonal boundaries on acceptable (and indeed intelligible) speech. (Bunn, p. 27)

Beyond the traditional top-down imposition of restrictions, New Censorship Theory has significant implications for contemporary society, highlighting the ways in which social and structural forces shape what may be said and thought. It suggests that to understand censorship, it is necessary to acknowledge these pervasive influences, which are deeply embedded in societal norms and power structures. Cultural norms, prevailing ideologies, and collective attitudes give rise to a subtle yet potent form of censorship. These unwritten rules and societal expectations function as invisible constraints, shaping and limiting discourse

within communities. They dictate what is acceptable, fostering a self-regulating mechanism that permeates various aspects of human interaction from public discourse to artistic expression. These influences are particularly pronounced for marginalised groups, who experience amplified constraints and silencing within these societal frameworks (Harris, 2022; Ramsoomair, 2019). In this context, when one understands how social and structural forces shape permissible discourse, it will be possible to investigate how various forms of censorship constrain artistic expression.

Given the dearth of critical material on Arab women's creative work, I adopt a broader approach to address this gap. The next section will explore scholarly perspectives on how censorship dictates acceptable forms of creativity.

2.3.2 Gender Perspectives

As noted above, Butler argues that the idea of freedom of expression includes the vital act of 'speaking out', a dynamic process that involves dialogue, exchange, and participation between individuals (Butler, 1997). However, Butler emphasised that the importance of recognising freedom as a cornerstone of social existence is closely linked to the achievement of gender equality and to the freedom to 'speak out' in a gender-equitable manner (Butler, 2013).

Janice McFarlane explores the pervasive nature of censorship against women, emphasising the ways in which deeply entrenched societal norms and language perpetuate gender bias and marginalisation. McFarlane argues that, from birth, women are subjected to a world in which language and societal structures inherently devalue their contributions, wherein men are labelled 'active' and 'rational' while women are conversely deemed 'passive' and 'emotional'. This biased framework extends to all societal institutions, which include government,

the military, religious authorities, and education, which are predominantly controlled by men, further entrenching male dominance (McFarlane, 1990).

Meredith Tax (1995) defines gender-based censorship as any action or system that silences women's voices, prevents their works from reaching audiences, or delegitimises their experiences and perspectives. Unlike conventional notions of censorship as limited to state suppression, gender-based censorship encompasses the cultural, familial, societal, and market-driven mechanisms that enforce silence or marginalisation. Tax argues that this form of censorship is deliberately wielded as a tool with which to maintain patriarchal dominance, thereby preventing women from challenging social, political, and cultural inequities. The systemic silencing of women impedes societal progress, equality, and democracy (Tax, 1995).

Gender-based censorship takes various forms, ranging from overt violence and state suppression to more subtle forms, such as societal exclusion and commercial pressures. Self-censorship is one such manifestation, whereby women are compelled by the fear of backlash, societal rejection, or violence to silence themselves. This ingrained suppression often stems from cultural norms that discourage women from expressing themselves. Moreover, women's works are frequently marginalised or trivialised as 'unserious', 'shrill', or overly 'feminine', which further delegitimises their contributions. Religious and political silencing also plays a significant role, as women writers are often targeted if they address taboo topics, challenge patriarchal systems, or critique religious ideologies. For instance, Egypt's Nawaal El Saadawi faced censorship owing to her medical writings and feminist critiques of Islamic traditions. Similarly, within the cultural and familial sphere, women's voices are often suppressed in the interest of maintaining traditional roles or preventing the revelation of 'family

secrets'. Fathers, husbands, or male relatives may undermine or appropriate women's work to restrict their independent identities and maintain control. Gender-based censorship's multifaceted nature underscores its pervasive impact (ibid.).

Women in the Arab region face even greater challenges, particularly concerning social pressure (Schwartz, 2009). The patriarchal discourse that prevails within Arab societies vehemently upholds patriarchal ideals across various social spheres (Ghoussoub, 2000), and the portrayal of gender dynamics often emphasises strict gender hierarchies (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). Consequently, women are subject more significant restrictions with respect to their public and political participation owing to the combined influence of social, cultural, and political forces (Hankir, 2019). Institutionalised inequality additionally fosters self-censorship among women, who often remain silent in a bid to avoid repercussions (McFarlane, 1990).

Similarly, scholars such as El Saadawi (1971) and Mernissi (1991) explored how cultural and religious norms perpetuate gender-based censorship in the Arab world, although Mernissi's work emphasises that the roots of Islamic societies' female subjugation lie not in Islam itself but in patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts (Mernissi, 1991; El Saadawi, 1971). Mernissi also highlights women's role in early Islamic history, showcasing how their contributions have been systematically erased or forgotten in a bid to maintain male dominance (Mernissi, 1992).

Other scholars, including Abdulla in her article 'Culture, Religion, and Freedom of Religion or Belief' (2018), argue that the complex interplay between culture and religion is often oversimplified, particularly when it intersects with human rights violations or gender inequality. Abdulla asserts that culture and religion are

deeply intertwined, with the result that distinction between them is misleading. She provides examples of practices like female genital mutilation, which, while not mandated by religion, are culturally influenced by religious contexts (Abdulla, 2018).

The above discussion will be expanded in the section that focuses on the Arab region's distinctive social characteristics and the issue of self-censorship among Arab women.

2.3.3 Censorship of Artistic and Intellectual Productions

Art censorship is driven by a complex interplay of factors, including political governance, economic interests, social relations concerns, and ideological commitments (Post, 1998). Censorship inevitably impacts the arts, often in complex and contradictory ways. The ongoing debates regarding what constitutes acceptable art and who gets to decide to highlight the perpetual tension between freedom of expression and societal norms (Fitzpatrick et al., 2002); however, the academic discourse on censorship emphasises the nuances and complexities of the art censorship process. For instance, Kirstie Imber's chapter 'Silenced Voices? The Censorship of Art in Iran' in *Censoring Art: Silencing the Artwork* (Kennedy & Coulter, 2018) critiques the ways in which Western reports on Iranian censorship often portray it as an unmitigatedly repressive force. Their work argues for a more nuanced understanding that recognises the productive aspects of censorship in giving rise to new forms of visibility and engagement. Censorship, therefore, should be regarded as a more relational, fluid, and productive process. It is recast as a causational model that eludes reduction to a circumscribed and predefined set of institutions and activities (Kennedy & Coulter, 2018). Judith Butler has previously argued that censorship is implicated in the very material it seeks to censor 'in ways that

produce paradoxical consequences' and that it contributes to 'making the object that it also constrains' (Butler, 1998, p. 247).

The debate surrounding censorship in art encompasses a wide array of perspectives, ranging from those that advocate for conformity to societal morals in artistic expression, to those championing absolute creative freedom. Censorship's proponents often argue that art should align with societal values and norms, maintaining a sense of decency and moral integrity. This view contends that art is best positioned to thrive when it operates within the bounds of common decency, as adherence to societal morals helps to maintain social harmony and prevent the dissemination of harmful or offensive content. This perspective is often supported by historical precedents, wherein artists produced enduring masterpieces despite operating under specific moral and ethical constraints in a way that is reminiscent of earlier great artists who operated within the limitations of their eras (Barbour, 2010). According to this viewpoint, art thrives best when maintained within reasonable limits. This perspective advocates for a sense of responsibility and ethical consideration in artistic expression, emphasising the importance of aligning creative output with societal values and moral standards. Proponents of this viewpoint frequently invoke historical precedents, pointing to eminent artists who, despite the limitations imposed by the cultural and moral contexts of their times, managed to produce enduring masterpieces. In essence, this argument posits that by adhering to a certain level of decorum and respecting societal norms, artists can contribute to the community's overall well-being and harmony (Louay, 2006; Asad, 2013).

By way of illustration, an exhibition arranged by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art during the late 1980s featured the contentious artwork *Piss Christ* by Andre Serrano. The photograph, which depicts a crucifix submerged in

a cup of the artist's urine, sparked considerable controversy. The subsequent debate prompted Congress to reduce funding to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in response to the controversy surrounding *Piss Christ* and similar pieces (Fitzpatrick et al., 2002; Holpuch, 2012). This specific incident highlights how conflicts over artistic expression, particularly where sensitive subjects are concerned, can carry substantial consequences for public arts funding (Fitzpatrick et al., 2002).

However, a counterargument emerges from those who champion the primacy of artistic autonomy and unbridled creative expression. This perspective challenges the notion that artists should be confined by predetermined boundaries, contending that true innovation and artistic brilliance often arise as a result of pushing against established limits. Those who advocate for unrestricted artistic freedom, including Butler (2013) and Imber (2018), argue that the imposition of constraints stifles the potential for groundbreaking works that may challenge societal norms and provoke valuable discussions (Butler, 2013; Imber, 2018). The evolving nature of this discourse further involves considerations of cultural relativism, wherein the acceptability of artistic expression is considered through the lens of diverse cultural perspectives. That which might be deemed offensive or provocative in one cultural milieu may be celebrated as a bold and necessary statement in another (Post, 1998). This recognition of cultural diversity contributes layers of complexity to the conversation, urging a nuanced understanding of the contextual factors that shape perceptions of decency and acceptability (Marcus, 1998; Blackwood, 2018).

Contemporary art discourse deems critically minded artists' capacity to elicit responses from both the state and the public invaluable to fostering discussions (Blackwood, 2018). The need to scrutinise moments of silence within censored

artworks is also emphasised. This focus on apparently silent and invisible aspects can yield alternative insights into the significance and impact of socially and politically engaged art (Imber, 2018). Moreover, technological advancements and the rise of digital platforms have contributed new dimensions to the debate, as I shall explain below.

2.3.4 Censorship on Virtual Platforms

An examination of this aspect of the literature review is crucial to my research because it helps to highlight how algorithms and censorship may disproportionately impact Arab women cartoonists. Given digital platforms' global nature, the visibility and dissemination of their work can be significantly shaped – or restricted – by these systems. Algorithms often prioritise certain types of content while marginalising others, and censorship mechanisms – whether explicit or implicit – can suppress voices that challenge dominant narratives or address sensitive sociopolitical issues.

We are in a new age of suppression with censorship on the rise in many different forms... Limiting what people see and digest is about controlling a narrative for the mass in both the physical and virtual realms. (Harris, 2022, p. 8)

Censorship's parameters have evolved significantly with the advent of new modes of expression, reflecting modern society's complexities and rapid advancements in information and communications technology (Gorzeman & Korenhof, 2017). The digital era presents unique challenges owing to the social media and virtual platforms that, while they empower individuals to share ideas globally, also raise concerns about misinformation, hate speech, and harmful content (Gillespie, 2018). Consequently, censorship now extends beyond content moderation to include governmental and authoritative attempts to control

information flow and suppress dissent by restricting access to these platforms. This ongoing struggle highlights the need to balance free expression with diverse perspectives and inclusivity in society (Harris, 2022).

Gillespie's *Custodians of the Internet* (2018) explores the complexities of censorship in the digital age, including the intricacies of content moderation on social media platforms, and reveals how these platforms function as gatekeepers, shaping the public discourse through their content policies. He argues that content moderation constitutes an exercise of power, wherein platforms make hidden decisions that reflect economic interests, public relations concerns, and adherence to specific ideological stances (Gillespie, 2018; Manokha, 2018). Economic interests drive platforms to censor content that may harm their profitability or public image. Additionally, these platforms' ideological commitments often lead to the suppression of content that deviates from the dominant ideological narratives (Lyon, 1994). Automated systems are designed to filter content, often leading to unintended biases and errors that disproportionately affect certain types of expression, including art. These algorithms' limitations hinder their ability to accurately distinguish between explicit content and artistic expression, and this technological limitation frequently results in the censorship of art that includes nudity or other controversial themes, regardless of its artistic merit (Harris, 2022).

This digital censorship also exerts a profound societal impact. This control over visibility constitutes a form of power that extends beyond traditional state censorship and embeds itself in the very fabric of digital communication. As platforms continue to evolve, the challenge of balancing the need for moderation

with the need to protect artistic freedom and expression (Gillespie, 2018; Harris, 2022).

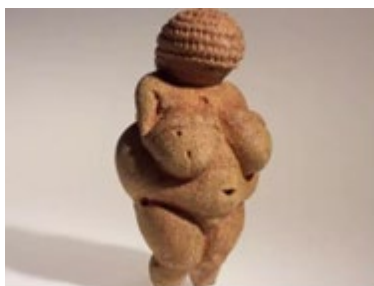
Gorzeman and Korenhof's (2017) study entitled 'Escaping the Panopticon Over Time: Balancing the Right To Be Forgotten and Freedom of Expression in a Technological Architecture' explores how search engines, social media platforms, and other online services create a surveillance-like architecture by retaining and making accessible vast amounts of information, thus contributing to a 'Panopticon over time' effect whereby past actions and opinions remain perpetually visible. The authors frame the web as a 'Panopticon over time', illustrating how search engines create a surveillance-like architecture (Gorzeman & Korenhof, 2017, pp. 73–90). The pervasive role of surveillance in modern society, particularly with the rise of computerised record keeping, prompts ongoing legal and sociological debates regarding the threats to privacy posed by electronic surveillance and the balance between social benefits and risks (Manokha, 2018).

David Lyon in *Electronic Eye* (1994) eloquently stated that no single metaphor or model is sufficient to fully encapsulate contemporary surveillance but that important insights may be found in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Bentham's Panopticon. Though technologically outdated, Orwell's dystopian vision accurately highlights the role that information and technology play in social control, emphasising human dignity and the social divisions that are inherent in surveillance. By contrast, the Panopticon provides a framework for social analysis in these modern contexts, underscoring subordination through uncertainty and the pervasive nature of power in social relations and offering insights that are of particular relevance in the age of subtle, computer-based surveillance. Lyon goes on to express his reservations about excessive reliance on Foucault's panoptic

model, stating that the Panopticon application is not without its challenges. While computerisation blurs the distinctions between discrete spheres of surveillance, it cannot wholly eliminate these distinctions. The Panopticon does not offer a comprehensive explanation of surveillance. Furthermore, its role as a means of exclusion may be diminishing in advanced societies, overshadowed by the dominance of consumerism and leaving only a minor role for harsher panoptic regimes (Lyon, 1994). This is contrary to Manokha's (2018) argument in 'Surveillance, Panopticism, and Self-Discipline in the Digital Age' that 'the Panopticon is still relevant but is actually more relevant now than it was with respect to Western society of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (Manokha, 2018, p. 233).

Specifically in relation to art works, I have examined Harris' (2022) work *Censored Art Today* to illustrate how the algorithms of digital platforms often misunderstand artistic content, hindering their ability to distinguish between explicit content and artistic expression. Harris stated that the 30,000-year-old statue of Venus of Willendorf (Ishtar in Mesopotamian civilisation) was banned on Facebook (now Meta) in 2017 on the grounds that the nude figurine was 'dangerously pornographic' (Harris, 2022). This figurine, which is exhibited in Vienna's Natural History Museum, has been reproduced in countless publications since its discovery in 1908 (*Daily Mail*, 2018, online).

Figure 6. Venus of Willendorf, Vienna's Natural History Museum, 2023



Censorship, in both its explicit and implicit forms, is widespread on social media platforms, and a significant factor contributing to this is the algorithms' design. As of 2023, however, the algorithms used in social media have faced challenges in distinguishing between explicit content such as pornography and artistic photography that contains nudity. Software engineers argue that the complexities involved in making accurate distinctions hinder their ability to appropriately filter such content (Harris, 2022).

Larsen et al. (2021) observed that the internet and social media may be regarded as double-edged swords. On one hand, digital media provide various tools that facilitate information-seeking, collaboration, and publishing, potentially broadening the range of perspectives and themes shared. On the other hand, digital media also provide numerous possibilities for surveillance, facilitating the direct and open posting of harassing or threatening comments to reporters. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter offer rapid and borderless channels for the dissemination of messages (Larsen et al., 2021).

This dynamic can lead to both wider audiences and increased exposure to criticism and threats for cartoonists, as I shall explore in the next section,

particularly in the context of editorial cartoons and censorship, as highlighted by the intellectual debates surrounding the Danish cartoons.

2.3.5 Editorial Cartoon and Censorship - Danish Cartoons

Dealing provocatively with taboo topics is, consequently, one of the abiding pre-occupations of any cartoonist who ever seeks to be more than a tame comic entertainer. On the other hand, the medium in which cartoons are published, the newspaper, exerts a countervailing conservative pressure on subject matter and presentation. (Manning, 2004, p. 26)

As Manning emphasises, cartoonists often struggle to avoid explicit and provocative sarcastic expressions that lead to confrontations (Manning, 2004). In many cases, they are perceived as a threat that results in escalated censorship so that the cartoons are prevented from reaching their audience (Göçek, 1998). Censorship and restrictions are inevitably intensified when cartoons address topics of religious and cultural sensitivity, given the correlation between strong religious and cultural sentiments and the inclination to support the limitation of artistic and cultural expression (Dunkel & Hillard, 2014). This is bound to ignite considerable controversy and prompt ethical discussions, as exemplified by the Danish cartoon, a key example that encompasses censorship and satire.

The year 2005 marked a significant division in the public sphere when a Danish newspaper published cartoons that portrayed the Islamic prophet Muhammad (Keane, 2008). This publication sparked a debate surrounding the limits of freedom of speech and the obligation of artists and the media to honour religious sensitivities (Harkness et al., 2007). The issue was rendered particularly sensitive by the fact that the representation of figures has consistently been a contentious matter within Islam. The prophet Muhammad discouraged the depiction of

figures, and it continues to be considered undesirable; and depicting the prophet Muhammad, even in a seemingly harmless or satirical fashion, is profoundly offensive and blasphemous to Muslims (Bahnasi, 1997). Despite this, several intellectuals, including Porter, asserted that this prohibition should be understood within the historical context of widespread apprehension about idol worship in the pre-Islamic era in the region (Porter, 2020). The debate surrounding where the line on limiting freedom of speech should be drawn has persisted for decades, but the controversy surrounding the Danish cartoons brought it to the forefront of global discussions.

In this context, scholars including Butler (2013) have reflected on the concept of authority which determines the limits of acceptable expression and what falls within the realm of the unacceptable. Her analysis raises the essential question of where precisely the line between that which is perceived as a legitimate critical expression and that which may be construed as offensive or objectionable by different individuals or communities should be drawn. Her exploration also prompts a deeper reflection on the complexities of coupling free expression with consideration of its attendant responsibilities. Striking a balance between promoting open discourse and protecting against harm or discrimination requires a nuanced approach (Butler, 2013).

Flemming Rose, the cultural editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* who was instrumental in the cartoons' publication, has consistently defended his stance, invoking the fundamental right to publish material, even if some perceive it as 'offensive'. According to Rose, for the editor, the task of curating a

newspaper must not be constrained by concerns about potential insults or controversies (Rose, 2006):

This was the culmination of a series of disturbing instances of self-censorship. Last September 2005, a Danish children's writer had trouble finding an illustrator for a book about the life of Muhammad. Three people turned down the job for fear of consequences. The person who finally accepted insisted on anonymity, which in my book is a form of self-censorship. European translators of a critical book about Islam also did not want their names to appear on the book cover beside the name of the author, who is a Somalia-born Dutch politician who has herself been in hiding. (Rose, 2006, p. 56)

The aforementioned Somali author is Ayyan Harisi, a socialist from Somalia who advocated for reform within Islam. In view of the risks to her safety, she sought refuge in the Netherlands (*The Independent*, 2007).

Butler (2013) contended that intellectual dialogues not only align with but enhance the practise of freedom while also playing a pivotal role in mitigating hate speech and fostering understanding. Criticism entails the active questioning of widely accepted ideas, which offers the opportunity to bridge gaps while nurturing a sense of belonging. Butler argues that inflexible positions inevitably lead to intellectual stagnation and constraints, fostering entrenched perspectives on both sides of the argument. Embracing open and thoughtful discussions, devoid of dogma, is imperative for stimulating intellectual development and cultivating a more nuanced understanding of intricate issues:

If one objects to learning about the meaning of the injury at issue because one fears that such an understanding will directly imply illegal proscriptions

of speech, then one embraces a certain norm at the expense of understanding itself - an anti-intellectualism that characterises forms of moral dogmatism, whether secular or religious. Not only would one prefer to remain ignorant, but one embraces one ignorance in the name of unyielding moral principles - a comic and tragic position, to be sure (Butler, 2013, pp. 95–96)

Critics of the cartoons' publication, such as Asad and Mahmood, argue that the transgression of cultural or religious boundaries, particularly those concerning sacred figures such as the prophet Muhammad, can incite hatred, division, and violence. From the critics' perspective, the promotion of tolerance and mutual understanding should take precedence over testing the limits of freedom of expression. They suggest that the issue's roots may lie in the very nature of liberal discourse, which harbours internal contradictions and practices of dominance while ostensibly safeguarding freedom of expression. The tenets of Western liberalism can encounter significant challenges when confronted with different a cultural habitus or group that diverges from the Western narrative. Such encounters may occasionally result in the marginalisation and discrimination of those who do not conform to the prevailing norms of Western liberalism (Asad, 2013; Mahmood, 2013). In his work 'Cartoon Violence and Freedom of Expression' (2008), David Keane stated that the regulation of hate speech in the West often parallels the suppression of offensive racial speech. Future generations may regard the mistreatment of religious groups with the same distaste as past racial stereotyping. Cartoonists should be able to work free from threat provided they remain within legal boundaries, and if religious defamation is deemed intolerable, the law must change to reflect this, thus obliging cartoonists to exercise restraint and consideration – traits that are not readily

associated with their profession (Keane, 2008). Satvinder Juss supports this stance in his article 'Religious Satire' (2022), arguing that while blasphemy laws are not the solution, the recognition and exercise of moral restraint in free speech can help prevent harm and foster a more inclusive and respectful society (Juss, 2022).

Battaglia's (2012) article also contends that the discourse surrounding free speech distracts from the prevailing inequalities and contradictions within the liberal tradition. He dismisses attempts to challenge these disparities and the associated violence while urging an exploration of more pertinent approaches that tackle the root causes of inequalities and the resulting tensions:

Without endorsing the violence of many of the Islamic protests over the Danish cartoon controversy, I wish to draw attention to the possibility that beneath the weight of the fantasy of the free speech narrative, perhaps there is little else one can do besides push back. The free speech narrative displaces attention from the inequalities and contradictions within the liberal tradition by discrediting a movement's attempt to challenge such inequalities (and violence). As critics from all across the political spectrum have rallied behind Denmark's fight for freedom of the press, I believe there is white noise behind Jay Leno's jokes and the South Park episode - noise that says behind Bluitgen's book and behind the free speech narrative, there is another story of agitation and control. (Battaglia, 2012)

Finally, as Dunkel and Hillard noted in 'Blasphemy or Art' (2014), religious sensitivity is not exclusive to Muslim groups (Dunkel & Hillard, 2014). This sensitivity is exemplified in the controversy that arose in relation to cartoonist

Gerald Scarfe's portrayal of Benjamin Netanyahu during the construction the separation wall in Palestine in 2013 (Saba, 2013).

In summary, the censorship of cartoons in relation to culturally sensitive topics is a complex and contentious issue. On the one hand, the concerns surrounding the avoidance of the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes or the depiction of cultural groups in a manner that is disrespectful, or demeaning are legitimate. On the other hand, however, the line between censorship and cultural sensitivity may occasionally become blurred, prompting debates about the extent to which cartoons should address or depict certain topics. As the discussions above have demonstrated, satire has the potential to be both powerful and provocative. This underscores the importance of exploring the concept of censorship in this study on Arab female cartoonists, as it directly shapes their experiences, creative expression, and professional opportunities. The section that follows focuses specifically on aspects of censorship in caricature within the Arab world.

2.3.5.1 Censorship on Cartoonists in the Arab Region

State censorship is often perceived as a characteristic of the developing nations that are frequently labelled as the 'third world' (Mehta, 2009). The conventional Western perspective typically regards censorship as a practice that is associated with backward and uninformed societies. However, it would be erroneous to claim that the Western world has entirely eradicated censorship (Jansen, 1988; Asad, 2013; Post, 1998). Trevor Mostyn (2002) also stated that the story of freedom of expression worldwide is disheartening and is not exclusive to societies that identify as Islamic. He argued that the Arab world, in particular, has performed poorly in this regard. Mostyn observed a strong link between the stringent control of thought and the chronic cultural threat from the West, compounded by the burdens of colonialism and post-colonialism, as well as the threat that emerged

from the creation of Israel (Mostyn, 2002), which supports the notion of a link between a threatened culture and the control of thought, as discussed above in relation to patriarchal discourse in the Arab world.

Cartoon censorship is particularly significant because cartoon images possess a concise and fixed nature, yet within a single frame, they encapsulate history, culture, gender, and social relationships. Utilising this condensed form, cartoons can recontextualise events and evoke various references. Like graffiti, jokes, and other forms of popular culture, cartoons disrupt our acceptance of official images as absolute truth. As such, they hold power, and cartoonists often find themselves working in highly censored and controlled environments (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). Cartoons are subject to stringent censorship laws and regulations that aim to uphold societal norms and values, often with the priority of preserving religious and moral integrity across many Arab countries (Hoigat, 2018).

Schwartz et al. (2009) provided an in-depth analysis of the obstacles to the production and distribution of creative works in the Middle East. These challenges are closely linked to the region's political and social climate, characterised by deficits in political rights, women's rights, and knowledge. They stated that the primary barriers identified include censorship, whereby most Arab countries employ government censors to restrict content that is deemed politically, morally, or religiously sensitive, often with the support of religious institutions (Schwartz et al., 2009).

This scene is clearly evident on Arab journalistic platforms, which, in turn, impacts the cartoon industry and the mechanisms by which cartoons are published and circulated (Khazen, 1999). According to Amin (2002), press freedom in Arab nations and Arab journalists' professional activities remain imperilled by a censorial political atmosphere that is typically entrenched within a single

dominant political entity. Both overt censorship and self-censorship persist within the Arab news media landscape and journalism education systems (Amin, 2002).

Examples from satirical publications in the Arab world, which I shall highlight in the media and cartoon chapter focused on satirical gazettes in Syria and Egypt, provide some historical context to political cartoons and censorship. Such instances illustrate the crucial role that satirical publications play in the Arab world, serving as a platform for political dissent and critique and often carrying significant personal risks for their creators.

2.3.5.2 Foucauldian Lenses- Surveillance Leading to Self-censorship

Male surveillance and patriarchal control over women lead to self-censorship (Schwartz, Helmus, Kaye, & Oweidat, 2009), which resonate with Foucault's (1977) conceptualisation of the Panopticon metaphor – that is, constant surveillance that subjects women to the male gaze, particularly within domestic spaces.

While this topic is expansive and likely warrants a dedicated study, I shall briefly address it here to underscore the intersections and overlaps among the various items of literature reviewed for this study.

The topic's inclusion in this study is aimed at highlighting the complex interplay between external surveillance, self-censorship, and gender relations and the ways in which these dynamics influence the social environment and creative expression of Arab female cartoonists.

Foucault's work, particularly *Discipline and Punish* (1977), draws on Bentham's idea of the Panopticon to analyse the rise of disciplinary institutions in Western societies from the early 19th century, which significantly influenced modern surveillance studies (Foucault, 1977). Some scholars, including Haggerty and

Ericson, increasingly argue that the Panopticon metaphor is overused, advocating the development of post-Foucauldian theories (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000). However, scholars such as Manokha (2018) have argued that the Foucauldian Panoptic theory is more relevant now than it was in the 19th century and that Foucault's insights into power dynamics, obedience, and the relationship between discourse and practice also remain highly salient (Manokha, 2018). Foucault noted that panoptic settings promote self-discipline and self-restraint and thereby render coercion unnecessary, noting that such settings induce individuals to exercise power over themselves (Foucault, 1977). As noted above, Michel Foucault highlights how societal norms, disciplinary practices, and institutional structures collaborate to internalise control within individuals, leading them to self-regulate their expressions and actions (Foucault, 1982; Foucault, 1990). Surveillance plays a crucial role in reinforcing social inequalities, given that those who have less power are often more susceptible to intrusive monitoring (Lyon, 1994).

Jeremy Bentham conceived the idea of the Panopticon in the late 18th century as a design for an institutional building that would allow a single watchman to observe all inmates without their awareness. This architectural setup was intended to induce a state of conscious and permanent visibility that would ensure the automatic functioning of surveillance (Bentham, 1995).

Foucault argued that the Panopticon symbolises the transition from sovereign to disciplinary power, reflecting a shift in the mechanisms of control that society wields. He posited that the Panopticon creates a sense of omnipresent surveillance, whereby individuals internalise the gaze and regulate their own behaviour accordingly (Foucault, 1977). This extends beyond prisons to various institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and workplaces, locations in which

surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms exert a pervasive presence (Foucault, 1982).

Numerous studies have elaborated this idea in explorations of how surveillance technologies and managerial practices embody Panoptic principles. Lyon (1994), for example, discussed the proliferation of surveillance in modern society, arguing that technologies such as CCTV and digital monitoring systems function as modern Panopticons, exerting control over individuals' behaviours in public and private spheres (Netz, 1994). Jansen (1988) also highlighted this, stating that the limitation extends beyond the confines of physical space to permeates through physical barriers and reach into the inner realms, thus creating a form of internal Panopticon design that serves as the foundation for internal control and self-censorship (Jansen, 1988):

Discipline is no longer limited to the Penitentiary, Factory, school, asylum or military regiment. It now penetrates the privacy of the home, so that even the physical arrangement of furniture in the typical American living or 'family room' comes to resemble the layout of Bentham's Panopticon. (Jansen, 1988, p. 23)

Surveillance's infiltration into the private sphere is evident in the architectural design of several traditional homes in the Arab world. These spaces' layout often resembles that of Bentham's Panopticon, symbolising Foucault's surveillance mechanism, whereby the structure facilitates constant observation and reinforces control within the household.

The beautiful architectural structures of houses and palaces in the old city of Damascus, for example, open only onto interior gardens (as shown in figure number 7). Consequently, everything around the house may be observed from

the central courtyard, while everything happening in the inner courtyard is visible from anywhere in the surrounding rooms and connecting walkways. While such layouts protect women from the external gaze – a drive for protection that may be attributed to conservative social values and the region's long history of colonial presence – they place women and children under the constant surveillance of the family's male figures.

While many interpretations of the Panopticon have focused on its coercive aspects, the above discussion centres its role in promoting self-discipline and self-censorship.

Figure 7. A house in the old city of Damascus (Medium, 2017)



The example offered above illustrates the connection between patriarchal values and women's self-censorship, revealing how deeply ingrained patriarchal values influence women's psychology and behaviour (Gavrilets, 2020). In her work 'Sources of Self-censorship' (2019), Ramsomair stated that the rigid gender roles and expectations to which women are subjected and that often induce them to engage in self-censorship are not merely personal choices but are influenced by broader patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's freedom (Ramsomair, 2019). The segregation of men and women in tandem with the differentiation of domestic and public spaces in Arab society has been a prevailing convention in the region for centuries: 'Only desperately fragile

men create such a drastic thing as the harem' (Mernissi, 1975, p. 8). This fragility was exacerbated by the policies of Ottoman, British, and French colonialism, which reinforced negative biased perceptions of Arab peoples as culturally, socially, and biologically inferior (M. ASI, 2022).

In *Femininity and Domination*, Bartky (1990) explores the daily experiences that contribute to the internalisation of inferiority and its effect on women's self-perception. Drawing on Foucault's theories, Bartky analyses how patriarchal power structures inflict this sense of inferiority on women. She illustrates this with the example of a woman who checks her makeup multiple times per day to ensure that her foundation has not caked or that her mascara has not run; who worries that the wind or rain will ruin her hairdo; who frequently inspects her stockings to check whether they have bagged at the ankle; and who meticulously monitors everything she eats to avoid putting on weight. According to Bartky, this woman has become a self-policing subject, akin to an inmate of the Panopticon. This relentless self-surveillance, Bartky argues, constitutes a form of obedience to patriarchy (Bartky, 1990).

When approached from this perspective, it is evident that the normative patriarchal environment fosters self-censorship among women in the Arab region. This internalisation of patriarchal norms leads women to limit their own speech and behaviour to avoid social ostracism and potential repercussions (Jubain, 2013).

This discussion of the Foucauldian Panopticon serves to connect the literature review chapters on patriarchy, censorship, and self-censorship, thereby

illustrating the intricate link between patriarchal social values, censorship, and self-censorship

The section that follows will probe the concept of self-censorship further, particularly as it relates to women.

2.3.5.3 Self-censorship

In this section, I shall examine the factors that contribute to self-censorship and its greater prevalence in conservative societies owing to fears of social repercussions, particularly for women. The section's aim is to obtain greater insight into how self-censorship affects Arab female cartoonists' work. While censorship is characterised by the power to regulate speech, self-censorship sees the roles of censor and censored merge within a single subject, culminating in the suppression of one's own attitudes and expressions (Cook & Heilman, 2010).

Debates about censorship distinguish between governmental and non-governmental restrictions on speech (Ramsoomair, 2019), and regardless of whether censorship is perceived as a legal-political power or extended to include social and economic power, such debates typically refer to a censor who exists independently of the censored. Self-censorship is thus understood as a censored's response to this external censor. In some key cases, however, individuals censor themselves even in the absence of an external censor (Cook & Heilman, 2010).

Self-censorship, then, may be broadly understood as the process by which individuals or entities voluntarily suppress their own expressions in a bid to avoid negative consequences (Shen & Truex, 2021). Individuals withhold their genuine opinions owing to fear of reprisal or social ostracism or political repercussions (Ramsoomair, 2019). In authoritarian states particularly, individuals may pre-

emptively silence themselves for fear of punishment (Wedeen, 1999; Shen and Truex, 2021), and in such cases, self-censorship involves personal and collective decisions that are influenced by external threats (Larsen et al., 2021). All societies implement both written and unwritten rules that are sufficient to induce fear without the need for explicit regulations and legislation (Said, 1994). This fear may become deeply ingrained in the individual's subconscious and prompt them to establish their own boundaries of expression (Butler, 1998).

John Horton's (2011) 'Self-Censorship' contemplated the intricate dynamics and moral process at play in self-censorship. Horton highlighted the inherent tension between the perception of the self-censor as both the author and the instrument of censorship, noting that self-censorship may be motivated by various factors, such as fear of repercussions or an aversion to offending others. Despite these motivations, self-censorship may be regarded as both a personal choice and a subtle form of external control, rendering it complex and morally ambiguous. Horton suggested that such ambivalence is crucial to understanding self-censorship, as it encapsulates the uneasy coexistence of autonomy and external influence in the self-censor's decision-making process (Horton, 2011). Individuals constantly monitor the opinions of those around them, including those that are reflected in the media, in a bid to determine whether their own views align with those of the majority or minority (Hayes et al., 2005). The tension between the desire for free expression and the constraints imposed by societal and political forces is particularly relevant to writers and intellectuals, who are obliged to navigate – and occasionally subvert – these constraints to express their ideas (Baltussen & Davis, 2015).

In 'Sources of Self-Censorship' (2019), Nicole Ramsoomair examined how social distancing, ostracism, and other forms of social punishment can transform the

productive discomfort of intellectual challenges into unwarranted self-censorship. Such negative perceptions induce individuals to eschew certain topics so as to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or incurring backlash (Ramsoomair, 2019). This over-reliance on and internalisation of norms can undermine freedom and creativity, resulting in internalised hegemony and self-censorship (Shimauchi, 2024). These power dynamics – whether political, social, religious, or ethnic – significantly affect individuals' sense of identity and self-awareness and shape their behaviour and adherence to societal norms over time (Ramsoomair, 2019; Butler, 1997; Bunn, 2015; Cook & Heilman, 2010).

Notably, self-censorship is more prevalent among women than it is among men (Adamska et al., 2022), suggesting a persistent gender disparity in relation to self-censorship, particularly among conservative and patriarchal communities (Ghoussoub & Sinclair-Webb, 2000). As a result, many women choose silence as a form of self-protection rather than openly opposing the established order and norms: 'One may silence or be silenced, keep silent out of respect, rage, fear or shame, or even as a mode of resistance' (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010, p. 1).

Buchanan and Husain (2022) observed self-censorship's persistent relevance in the digital age and on virtual platforms. They noted that while social media serves as an important outlet by which women in Arab and Islamic societies can access information and engage in self-expression, their husbands or male relatives often monitor their online activities and may restrict their access and interactions, provoking frustration and compromising their personal freedom while upsetting the family dynamic. Many women consequently use pseudonyms and privacy settings in a bid to circumvent these restrictions, despite the risks associated with social transgression (Buchanan & Husain, 2022). The discussion below will

explore in detail how these dynamics relate to cartoons specifically and thereby to Arab women cartoonists.

2.3.6 Self-censorship and Cartoons

In the realm of cartooning, self-censorship represents a complex interplay between artistic freedom and societal and political constraints. When cartoonists navigate the delicate balance between the expression of controversial or provocative ideas and adherence to the boundaries imposed by cultural norms, political climates, and potential repercussions, they pre-emptively limit their creative expression so that they might avoid backlash, legal troubles, or personal endangerment. Cartoonists, like other artists, must often navigate the dual pressures of personal restraint and external expectations, leading to a nuanced and morally complex self-censorship practice (Freedman, 2008).

As previously mentioned, Horton observed the tension between seeing the self-censor as both the author and instrument of censorship (Horton, 2011), and we noted that this tension is particularly pronounced for artists and intellectuals (Baltussen & Davis, 2015). While cartoonists are creators who strive to express their unique perspectives through satire and commentary, they frequently become instruments of censorship owing to external and internal pressures (Falardeau, 2020).

Self-censorship is a widespread issue in the field of cartoons (Cook & Heilman, 2010), and particularly for female cartoonists (Falardeau, 2020; Kennedy, 2018), who typically encounter more significant societal and cultural pressures that profoundly affect their experiences, shaping their creative processes and their work's content (Ramsoomair, 2019). This prompts them to engage in a

meticulous appraisal of what is considered acceptable as distinct from what might attract scrutiny (Kennedy, 2018).

The scarcity of critical literature on Arab female cartoonists highlights a significant gap in the academic discourse surrounding this subject, and comprehensive studies focusing specifically on self-censorship among Arab female cartoonists are notably lacking. My aim here is to explore the impact of censorship and self-censorship on the environment that Arab female cartoonists inhabit as well as their artistic production practices and experiences. The synthesis of various scholars' perspectives offers insights into the issues surrounding censorship that can impact artists' and intellectuals' freedom of expression. This section in particular highlights the multitude of contextual factors that lead to self-censorship for fear of repercussions. These factors, both internal and external, within and beyond the digital domain, include government pressures, social norms, gendered stereotyping, and surveillance.

Patriarchal societies frequently affirm and enforce gender disparities within societal expectations. As the above review has demonstrated, women are typically expected to conform to specific behavioural standards, an expectation that significantly impacts their personalities and modes of self-expression, particularly in public spaces. The studies considered emphasised the relationship between patriarchal values, censorship, and self-censorship and traced connections between these themes and gender dynamics. The section that follows examines the complex interplay between media and cartoons.

2.4 Media and Editorial Cartoons

Here, I aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the complex relationship between media and editorial cartoons, particularly emphasising female artists' and intellectuals' presence in the Arab press and media landscape. My primary

objectives are to explore the historical evolution of editorial cartoons as a significant medium for satire and political critique and to examine how these cartoons function as tools of resistance within the sociopolitical fabric of the Arab world. This section thus offers a nuanced understanding of the professional factors that influence the work and experiences of Arab female cartoonists. It further explores the broader social and political context to appreciate how gender, politics, and cultural norms shape the production and reception of media content. This chapter revisits themes and topics I explored earlier, including censorship and patriarchy. These topics are not isolated but rather are interwoven with the broader discourse on media, cartoons, and women in the Arab region.

2.4.1 Historical Background

Beginning with its earliest manifestations and tracing its evolution over time, this study aims to create a comprehensive timeline to illustrate the position and significance of Arab women cartoonists in relation to the profession's broader history. Accordingly, I shall explore older forms of political satire, including traditional methods such as storytelling, shadow plays, and oral folk heritage, which have played significant roles in the expression of social and political views that might otherwise be silent (Kishtany, 1985).

Political cartoons and humour may be traced back to ancient stone carvings (Hoff, 1976; Earle, 2021), and these early expressions laid the foundation for the evolution towards more sophisticated artwork that conveyed the artist's political opinions and responses to contemporary affairs. This is exemplified by ancient Pharaonic satirical caricatures that boldly challenged royal authority (Alshammah, 2021).

Figure 8. Papyrus with satirical vignettes, 1250–1150 BCE: a lion plays senet with a gazelle, British Museum, 2023



The lion and gazelle are depicted in a satirical context, adopting human-like roles to parody human behaviour. The hunter (lion) engages with its prey (gazelle), illustrating a reversal of roles where the boundaries between strength and vulnerability blur. The wolf is shepherding the sheep, further emphasising the inversion of natural order. This contrast between opposites generates an ironic and humorous dynamic, serving as a form of social commentary.

Archaeological findings indicate that caricature representations may be traced back to ancient civilisations, with evidence of their existence in Africa, Mesopotamia, and some regions of Europe (Salisbury, 2012). In 'The Story of Caricature', Hamada argued that cave drawings and figurine styles exhibit striking resemblances to modern cartoon styles, particularly in their forms and proportions (Hamada, 1999).

Cave paintings, which served as the earliest form of pictorial representation, played a crucial role in laying the foundation for contemporary cartoons and illustrations (Salisbury, 2012). In her book *Invisible Women*, Perez (2019) suggested that many prehistoric cave paintings were the work of female artists, so that an art form to which women have contributed since its inception

paradoxically overlooks the significant contributions of its female practitioners (Perez, 2019).

Around 3000 BCE, ancient civilisations produced a wealth of stylised or anatomically distorted drawings and figurines portraying female deities, including Ishtar, the goddess of fertility, war, love, and sex in Assyrian and Babylonian culture (Al-Sawah, 2002; Saini, 2023). Numerous Ishtar figurines have surfaced throughout Mesopotamia, characterised by exaggerated sexual features, such as enlarged breasts, a swollen belly, and exceptionally large hips and buttocks (Al-Sawah, 2002). Such exaggeration allowing humans to express the divine and the spiritual in religious rituals and symbols (Mithen, 1996). Remarkably, contemporary cartoonists and illustrators continue to use several of the techniques and features associated with these ancient, exaggerated artworks (Salisbury, 2012; Alshammah, 2021). For instance, Eladl, a female Egyptian cartoonist featured in this study.

Khaled Kishtainy's (1985) book *Arab Political Humour* examines humour's historical evolution within the Arab political landscape in a detailed exploration of its role and significance. Kishtainy situates Arab political humour within the broader historical context of political humour studies, linking it to the sociopolitical discourse of the Middle East. Kishtainy's work serves as a crucial reference point for understanding how humour functions as a form of political expression and resistance in Arab societies. Kishtainy noted that during the pre-printing era, satire and humour in the Arab world were expressed through storytelling, shadow play, and the rich oral folk heritage. These popular vehicles for satire facilitated

the scrutiny and criticism of the political and social shortcomings of those in authority (Kishtainy, 1985).

Shadow play involved the projection of shadows of two-dimensional figures that were approximately 30–50 cm tall onto a white screen. Historians suggest that shadow puppets may have originated in shamanic rituals and were well-established in the Arab world under Ottoman rule in the 16th century (Senyer, 2009). The tradition of shadow puppetry thrived because it offered an outlet for the agitation and anger that often arose in response to Ottoman rule, and it became a powerful tool for social commentary that allowed people to express their grievances and dissent in a creative and entertaining manner (Kishtainy, 1985).

Shadow-play productions in the Arab world typically centred on two main characters: Karagoz and Ewaz. These iconic figures became vehicles for satire and humour, capturing the essence of the people's emotions and frustrations. The witty and comical interactions between Karagoz and Ewaz afforded audiences both a source of amusement and a means of confronting various issues, albeit indirectly. Shadow play served as a vibrant platform for social

humorous expression in the Arab world, not only providing entertainment but also fostering a sense of unity and resilience among the people (Senyer, 2009).

Figure 9. Shadow-play Figure. Pergamon Museum, Berlin, 2023 (photograph author's own)



Shadow plays were renowned for their ironic and parodic portrayal of political and social matters. However, censorship often inhibits political humour to protect those in power and safeguard various political, ideological, and economic interests (Harris, 2022).

The interplay between censorship and satire has long been a significant aspect of political and social commentary in the Arab world and beyond (Nitz, 2008; Kishtainy, 1985). In the Arab context, public performances – particularly plays – emerged as powerful vehicles for satire, attracting wide audiences and skilfully conveying subversive opinions that could not be openly expressed (Kishtainy, 1985). However, this expression was not without its challenges. European colonisers in the 19th century sought to suppress political dissent through stringent censorship, targeting newspapers, books, caricatures, and various forms of artistic expression (Goldstein, 1989). The advent of printing technology further complicated these efforts, as it expanded the reach and impact on dissenting voices (Netz, 1997). Censorship has thus long been a persistent force

that has consistently shaped political discourse either by directly repressing content or by subtly influencing the context in which such content is produced (Kemp, 2014). During the colonial era in the Arab world, censorship played a pivotal role in shaping political satire. Early satirical newspapers in Syria, for example, emerged as powerful resistance tools against the French mandate. Such publications deployed sharp, targeted humour to challenge colonial authority (Kishtainy, 1985).

In 1927, the first Syrian weekly satirical political gazette, *Al-Mudhik al-Mubki* – ‘The Weeping Jokers’ – was established by the Syrian cartoonist Habib Kahhaleh, with the French mandate as its primary target. However, it was subjected to multiple suspensions by French authorities and pro-French Syrian leaders, including the Syrian president Taj al-Din al-Hasani (Syrianhistory.com, 2013; Hamada, 1999), and Kahhaleh himself was subject to multiple arrests by the authorities. Nonetheless, he was highly admired among the Syrian people and was elected to the first independent Syrian Parliament shortly after Syria gained independence in 1946. However, the publication did not outlive Kahhaleh for very long following his death in Damascus in 1965 (Syrianhistory.com, online, 2013).

Although its staff endured repeated arrests and occasional closures, the magazine and its cartoons enjoyed a higher degree of freedom than that of later publications in the Syrian press. *Al-Mudhik al-Mubki* dared to publish caricatures of prominent figures in the political arena, including country’s president, as the cartoon below illustrates. However, caricatures of the president or any political officials and religious figures are completely censored in the contemporary Syrian press (Al-Emam, 2015).

Figure 10. Kahhaleh, *Al-Mudhik al-Mubki*, 1927 (Syrianhistory, 2013)



Another example of a fearless colonial-era Arabic satirical gazette emerged in Egypt in 1877, initiated by the multilingual Arab journalist and playwright Ya'qub Sanu, hailed as Egypt's Molière. Ya'qub Sanu (1838–1912) published the first satirical gazette in Arabic. Titled *Abou Nadira Zarka* ('The Man with the Blue Spectacles'), it featured cartoons, serving as a dedicated platform for humour (Kishtainy, 1985).

Sanu used this publication to fearlessly criticise the political corruption of the British occupying officials and their Egyptian supporters, particularly targeting Khedive Ismail, the Egyptian ruler of that era. He deployed humour and sarcasm to expose the deficiencies in social norms and conventions (Janay, 2012). Owing to its liberal and revolutionary stance, however, the magazine faced suppression and harassment from the censor, prompting it to change its title multiple times. Sanu's courageous critique of the Khedive's politics ultimately saw him exiled to France, where he persisted in his satirical endeavours, launching other humorous gazettes. The Egyptian press remained the primary platform for Arabic cartoons until 1925, when Michael Tays established another influential satirical newspaper

in Iraq: *Kannas Al Shawari*, which translates as 'The Street Sweeper' (Kishtainy, 1985).

These examples highlight cartoons' significant position in the history of political humour in the Arab world, illustrating their role in challenging colonial authority and oppression. Cartoonists faced various forms of repression, including censorship, imprisonment, and exile, as authorities sought to silence dissent. The drive to restrict the freedom of the press persisted from the colonial period through to post-colonialism, with only limited expansion in the scope of expression that was permitted in Arab media (Mostyn, 2002).

The existing literature offers no mention of the Arab women who actively engaged in political humour or satirical storytelling. This systemic marginalisation highlights a gap in the documentation and appreciation of the contributions made by Arab women in these fields.

2.4.2 Role of Editorial Cartoons in Media

The literature on editorial cartoons emphasises their importance as a communicative tool that blends art, humour, and political commentary. Editorial cartoons, also known as political cartoons, constitute a unique form of visual commentary that utilises satire and caricature to provide insight into and critique of political, social, and cultural issues (Linus, 2009). Medhurst and DeSousa (1981) asserted that editorial cartoons function as a form of visual rhetoric, whereby the cartoonist employs artistic techniques to convey a message that is both critical and persuasive (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981).

Political cartooning emerged in 18th-century Europe, driven by sociopolitical upheavals and the rise of mass print culture. Artists like William Hogarth pioneered a form of sequential visual satire that laid the groundwork for modern

comics. Hogarth's moral engravings and the works of contemporaries such as James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson offered visual critiques of societal corruption, class structures, and political power. Earle (2021) emphasises that these works demanded active engagement from viewers, blending exaggeration with moral commentary to communicate messages to an increasingly literate public. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, technological advancements in printing and rising literacy rates facilitated the integration of comics into mainstream newspapers. Figures such as Rodolphe Töpffer in Switzerland and Thomas Nast in the United States contributed to institutionalising comic strips and political cartooning as key press elements (Earle, 2021). These visual narratives carried sharp critiques of social and political institutions. The influence of these traditions soon extended beyond the Anglophone world, inspiring press cultures globally to adopt cartooning as part of their own editorial practices, thereby embedding the form within a transnational tradition of dissent and visual storytelling.

Cartoonists view their craft as a powerful weapon with which they can expose and satirise abuses of power in a bid to hold those who are influential accountable. Consequently, editorial cartoons may not invariably elicit laughter, but they nonetheless challenge established norms (Zazil Reyes García, 2019).

Connors (2005) expanded on this with the observation that editorial cartoons often reflect and shape public opinion by framing events and personalities in specific – often exaggerated – ways. This framing is achieved through the use of symbolism, caricature, and humour, which can highlight the absurdities or contradictions that are at play in political and social narratives (Connors, 2005).

Humour and satire are not merely forms of entertainment but also serve as tools for critique and resistance against authority (Eagleton, 2019).

As Edwards and Winkler (1997) noted, editorial cartoons occupy a unique space in which artistic expression intersects with journalistic integrity. This duality allows political cartoonists to convey messages that might be considered too provocative or controversial were they expressed verbally (Edwards & Winkler, 1997).

In 'A Definition of Caricature and Caricature and Recognition', David Perkins (1975) explored the concept of caricatures, emphasising their distinction from realistic portraiture. Perkins defines caricatures as symbolic representations that exaggerate a subject's individuating features, thus differentiating them from traditional portraits. Perkins also addresses the relationship between caricature and humour, noting that while humour is often associated with caricatures, it is not a necessary component of them (Perkins, 1975).

Editorial cartoons serve as visual representations of their creators' ideas and opinions and typically centre on current events. As such, they must be produced under strict time constraints to meet publication deadlines. The primary objective of editorial cartoons is to prompt readers to contemplate the prevailing political matters of the moment (Perkins, 1975). Owing to their close connection to contemporary social or political issues, cartoons serve as a key resource for the historian and have occasionally been used to investigate how a wide spectrum of society lived (Howells, 2009). However, employing cartoons as sources in this way is not without its difficulties: while they may offer evidence concerning institutions, practices, and events, many cartoons cannot be fully understood out

of context or taken at face value to mean only what their overt message appears to say (Palmeri, 2008).

According to Morris (1992), editorial cartoons can crystallise complex issues into easily digestible visual narratives, thereby influencing public attitudes and opinions. Cartoons' visual nature allows them to bypass linguistic barriers and appeal to a broader audience, making them an effective means of swaying public sentiment (Morris, 1992). Moreover, the humour and satire that editorial cartoons invoke can serve to both engage audiences and subtly propagate ideological messages, thereby reinforcing or challenging dominant societal narratives (Conners, 2005). However, these cartoons' influence is not uniform but rather is mediated by a range of factors, including the audience's pre-existing beliefs and media literacy as well as the cultural context (Greenberg, 2022; Palmeri, 2008).

Because laughter reveals the stupidity of the laughable when it is taken up by marginalized subjects in lampooning the absurdity of an established structure, it becomes a powerful resource to empower the oppressed. Laughter turns the table: the oppressed, once they get the laugh, take a superior position with respect to the oppressor. The legitimacy of the oppressor, reduced to the laughable, is at stake. (Yun, 2019, p. 294)

When the oppressor becomes the object of ridicule, their legitimacy is diminished, and their authority is rendered uncertain and precarious. Caricature thus emerges as a tool of rebellion and, consequently, a threat to those in positions of power.

In *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humour in British Literature*, Regina Benjamin, MCooke, DCooke, D (1994) contends that while it is true that traditional forms of masculine humour have recorded their revolt against the inequities of various social systems, women's use of humour transforms them

into outlaws who challenge the status quo. According to Barreca, women's humour is vital in challenging oppressive conventions, providing female readers with both a critique of and an alternative perspective to the dominant cultural ideologies that constrain and subjugate them. Barreca asserts that women can gain valuable insights through humour, mounting an opposition to the prevalent patriarchal culture by ridiculing it (Barreca, 1994).

Satirical art can serve multiple purposes in contexts of oppression. As a tool of resistance, satire is particularly effective in facilitating communication, fostering solidarity, and mocking oppressors by means of parody and thereby diminishing their perceived threat (Slanski, 2008). This leads us to our next discussion, which focuses on how cartoonists – especially women – utilise humour and satire as both a means of resistance and a cathartic outlet.

2.4.3 Arab Female Cartoonists

Walter Benjamin suggested that laughter may be a catalyst for breaking or subverting established representational and social structures (Benjamin, 1978). In 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious' (Strachey, 1963), Freud stated that jokes are imbued with hidden meanings and often express unconscious aggression, sexual desires, or critical attitudes and that, as such, they may be used as a social tool to express otherwise unacceptable thoughts in a socially acceptable manner. Freud's analysis of jokes also considers the audience's role in the exchange, suggesting that a joke's effectiveness is contingent on the listener's shared knowledge and unconscious desires. Freud suggested that jokes also provide insight into the workings of the unconscious mind and serve as a means by which individuals may cope with psychological tension and societal constraints (Freud, 1963). Jokes and humour serve as mechanisms for the liberation of suppressed thoughts and emotions, often those pertaining to

subjects that are deemed taboo or socially unacceptable. Thus, they provide psychological relief by temporarily lowering the defences of the superego, allowing for the expression of repressed desires or impulses (Freud, 1963; Eagleton, 2019).

In exploring the intersection of humour and gender, Isaak (1996) offered a compelling perspective on how women utilise humour as a tool for empowerment and resistance, asserting that 'women have a special purchase on laughter as a strategy of liberation' (Isaak, 1996, p. 14). Isaak's analysis is grounded in psychoanalytic theory and the argument that humour serves as a form of rebellion against societal constraints, creating a space in which women can explore and assert their identities beyond traditional gender roles (Isaak, 1996). Humour, in this sense, is a powerful tool for social change and self-expression (Gibson, 2023) that arises from a desire among female humourists to assert themselves against centuries of male-dominated oppression (Falardeau, 2020). However, the contributions of female cartoonists and their work in political humour have long been overlooked (Streeten & Tate, 2018). In particular, the presence and contributions of Arab women in this field are quite limited (El-Sheikh, 2020).

Although there has been a general increase in studies of cartooning and comics in recent years, the experiences and achievements of Arab women in this sphere have received far less attention than they deserve (Falardeau, 2020). This lack of representation is not only detrimental to the appreciation of cartooning's broader history but also perpetuates the marginalisation of Arab female voices in the cartooning realm (Nasser, 2017). The scarcity of resources and studies explicitly devoted to women's contribution to political humour is obvious (Kishtainy, 1985). The persistent exclusion of female cartoonists from literature and documentation is exemplified by Alhaissen's (2018) book *Caricature in*

Morocco. While Alhaissen's study focuses on Moroccan caricatures throughout history, however, he fails to acknowledge the contributions that female cartoonists, such as Riham El-Hour, have made to the field. Instead, the book includes a quotation from journalist Rachid Niny that perpetuates a gender stereotype, asserting that the complexity of political cartoons makes them easier for men to understand than women. (Alhaissen, 2018).

Nasri's (2017) investigation of Arab women's involvement in political cartooning reveals a spectrum of engagement with women's status and rights issues, encompassing ideas that male cartoonists may not have conveyed (Nasri, 2017). However, these artists are significantly lacking platforms and support (Ghaibeh, 2017). The 'Cartoohonna' website was launched in 2009, with the aim of providing readers with archives and information pertaining to Arab female cartoonists (Arabcartoon.net, online, 2009). Unfortunately, the site faced closure in 2010 as a result of inadequate funding and support. At its peak, the platform featured fifteen talented cartoonists, most of whom are no longer actively pursuing their careers in the profession (Arabcartoon.net, online, 2009).

Nasri (2017) also stated that between 2011 and 2014, Egyptian female cartoonists exhibited remarkable courage in pushing artistic boundaries, despite the threat of legal repercussions that could potentially criminalise their work (Nasri, 2017). A prominent example of this is Doaa Eladl, who found herself accused of blasphemy on the grounds of a cartoon in which she depicted Adam and Eve. Eladl's intention was to criticise the government's attempts to impose a new constitution on the Egyptian people. Her experience attests to the high

stakes and risks inherent in the use of cartooning as a means of expression during that period (Almasry-Alyaoum, 2013).

Two years after the Arab uprising, the political landscape in Egypt remained largely dominated by two powerful players – the military and the Muslim Brotherhood (Nasser, 2017). However, for women who were actively engaged in the profession, it was the burden of social pressure that weighed most heavily on them (Nasri, 2017; Hincks, 2019). As Jordanian cartoonist Amjad Rasmi noted, caricature often entails the adoption of a confrontational and biting approach, which may be perceived as a masculine trait. Additionally, societal norms in the Arab world continued to limit women's access to the political domain and restrict their participation in public life. Consequently, women remained marginalised in the field of caricature, despite their undeniable artistic and intellectual capabilities (Rasmi, Arabcartoon.net, online, 2010).

El-Sheikh (2020) also highlighted the fear that poses an obstacle to many Arab women in the artistic and creative fields. Women artists, particularly in the satirical and political realm of caricature, often succumb to the reality of fear and face the threat of bullying. The societal taboo in Jordan continues to hinder women from freely expressing themselves through editorial cartooning, reinforcing the barriers imposed by societal norms (El-Sheikh, 2020). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, where editorial cartooning emerged in the 1960s (Almohissen, 2015), women faced significant obstacles in entering the field. It was not until 2005 that Hana Hajjar became the first known female political cartoonist in the country, publishing her first cartoon and breaking new ground in a traditionally male-dominated domain (Shalhoub, 2006). Cartoon Home Network International's exhibition entitled 'Refuse to Stay Silent: Stop Violence against Women Worldwide', which was held in Norway in 2022, showcased thirty carefully selected works at the prestigious

Norwegian National Cartoonist Gallery (CHNI, 2022). However, Arab female cartoonists were notably absent from the exhibition – an absence that is particularly surprising, given the relevance of the exhibition's theme to the issues with which Arab women must contend.

In his study entitled 'Taboo metaphonymy, gender, and impoliteness: how male and female Arab cartoonists think and draw' (2022), Abdel-Raheem emphasises that within Arab cultures, powerful psychological and social judgements are associated with the use of bold humour, particularly expressions relating to sex, bodily excretion, and religion. He further emphasises that this cultural context in particular creates a significant challenge for women, whose social reputations may deteriorate if they employ humour or irony that is deemed 'impolite' or inappropriate, in stark contrast to the positive reception that men who engage in such expressions receive. The study reinforces the need to dispel the stereotypes and dismantle societal barriers that perpetuate gender-based disparities in expression and creativity (Abdel-Raheem, 2022).

According to articles by Nasser and Nasri, women cartoonists significantly increased their efforts to express themselves after the Arab uprising in 2011 (Nasser, 2017; Nasri, 2017). More than a decade later, however, the margin for expression available to these women remains limited, and the institutional support and necessary funding for editorial cartoons (which are distinct from comics) remain scarce (Abdel-Raheem, 2022). Meanwhile, several female cartoonists in the Middle East fear the consequences of speaking out (Falardeau, 2020).

The literature mentioned above highlights the dynamic interplay between an artist's environment and their creative output, underscoring the influence that cultural power wields over artists (Chadwick, 1990). The dominant culture's

ideology influences art profoundly, shaping its content, production, and reception and dictating what is valued in the arts, often marginalising alternative voices (Bourdieu, 1984); likewise, Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) argued that mass culture propagates consumerist values, reinforcing rather than challenging power structures (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944). Art then reflects and reproduces societal norms and stereotypes, policing the boundaries of acceptable expression (Hall, 1997; Foucault, 1977). Eagleton has argued that humour has the potential to either challenge or uphold social norms, depending on how it is used and the context in which it is presented. While it can serve as a powerful means of social critique and transformation, it can also reinforce existing power structures (Eagleton, 2019).

This influence is evident in the Arab world, as demonstrated by a 2022 study published in *Sada* magazine that explored the perspectives of 14 female artists from eight Arab countries on the challenges they face in their artistic work, particularly with respect to freedom of expression and self-censorship. The artists were asked whether they felt as though they could freely express their ideas and whether they perceived self-censorship as impacting their work. While two of the artists did not respond, two others felt that self-censorship was necessary if one wished to respect societal norms. Three artists acknowledged that restrictions limited their creative expression, and the remaining participants believed that they could express themselves freely provided they adhered to cultural and social conventions. Hence, Arab female artists often implement self-censorship owing to their conservative cultural and religious backgrounds or for fear of criticism and persecution (*Sada*, 2022). The article illustrated the strong connection between

religious and cultural emotions, cultural upbringing, social responsibility, and the Arab female artists' experiences and productions.

Having examined the limited literature available on women's involvement in political humour in the Arab region, the next section will explore another critical area of the interaction between media and women. The chapter will explore how media representations shape and are shaped by gender dynamics and the significant impact that these portrayals exert on societal perceptions and the experiences of women working in the field.

2.2.4 The Media and Women

This section discusses the Arab world's media landscape as it relates to gender dynamics, providing insights into women's complex status in the media context. The discussion will address women's position in terms of both their representation and their roles within the media workforce.

Researchers working in media studies have demonstrated that women are less frequently featured in media than men and often face barriers to reaching leadership positions, leading to lacking female perspectives in media worldwide (Byerly & Ross, 2006). However, media and the press throughout the Arab region have a poor record of female representation (Sakr, 2004). Arab women working in media cannot count on the freedom necessary to meet the requirements of their profession as they face significant challenges when producing content that criticises taboo or forbidden topics (Abu-Fadil, 2004). For instance, Mostin (2002) argued that much of the press is funded by conservative regimes, which limits the extent of permissible speech and criticism. Organisations, including media companies and cultural institutions, exercise censorship to maintain a favourable public image and avoid controversy: 'Newspapers published in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries exercise a form of self-censorship,

carefully avoiding issues linked to religion, moral issues or members of the region's ruling families' (Mostyn, 2002, p.34).

In 'The Politics of Love', Joubin (2013) also discusses how drama producers in Arab countries are dependent on financial support from the oil-rich Gulf and thus avoid engaging with religious topics. Ideological bias further complicates the media's landscape in the form of commitments that may be political, religious, or cultural and that shape what a given society deems to be acceptable (Joubin, 2013). The oppressive regimes that are in place in most Arab countries also impose severe restrictions on political opposition (Miller, 1996), affording women little room for the freedom of speech that they require to tackle topics relating to religion or politics in the press and media (Abu-Fadil, 2004). Any programme or drama that touches on women's issues is censored and filtered in line with government guidance (Abu-Lughod, 2001).

However, in analysing the underlying causes of this restrictive environment, two key factors must be considered. First, we should avoid the unconditional acceptance of Western-based discourse, which often perpetuates the stereotypical image of Arab women as universally oppressed and voiceless. The traditional image of Middle Eastern women that Western media has long perpetuated portrays them as oppressed and exoticised beings who are subject to the control of men and religion (Ahmed, 1999; Said, 1979). Such discourse often emphasises the practice of veiling, thereby reinforcing the stereotype of a powerless, imprisoned woman who stands in dire need of Western liberation (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Said, 1979). However, these very women increasingly challenge this generalisation, asserting their agency and rejecting such narrow depictions (Eltantawy, 2013). These stereotypes are deeply intertwined with the cultural and identity crises that were intensified by the region's colonial and

postcolonial contexts. Media and journalistic platforms have fuelled the tense dialogue between Western discourse and Eastern national identities, and this dynamic has exerted a significant impact on gender politics in Arab media, in which the representation of women often becomes a battleground for weightier ideological conflicts (Kraidy, 2010). Scholars including Ahmed, Said, and Abu Taleb have argued that The Western perception of superiority over Arabs has been used over time to justify colonialism, often portraying the West as 'good' versus the 'ugly' Eastern other and thereby legitimising notions of racial superiority and political authority (Ahmed, 1992; Said, 1978; Abu Taleb, 2009). The media's involvement in such discourses supports various power manipulations and political interests, influencing people's perceptions (Salhi, 2004; Abu Taleb, 2009). This reflects the wider conflict between political Islam and Western democratic principles, particularly with respect to secularism, individual rights, and gender equality (Edam, Shaari, & Aladdin, 2023; Heinemann & Lamloum, 2009).

A key aspect of this conflict is the way Arab women are portrayed in Eastern media discourses, where persistent stereotypes confine them to traditional and restrictive roles (Sakr, 2004; Farag, 2024). These portrayals are deeply embedded in media representations, reinforcing cultural norms and societal expectations that limit women's agency and visibility (Salhi, 2004).

At the heart of these representations lies the concept of identity, which Van Dijk (1998) defines as a complex mental construct encompassing both personal and social dimensions. On a personal level, identity is shaped by an individual's unique experiences, self-perception, and personal history, while the social dimension reflects one's membership in various groups that share common norms, values, and social positions (Dijk 1998). Building on this framework, Amin

(2018) demonstrated that media content and structure are often influenced by prevailing societal cultures and thus reinforce traditional concepts and stereotypes, not least where women are concerned. Media outlets in many Arab countries – whether state-owned or privately controlled – are often subject to government regulations that shape their content such that it reflects existing power structures and cultural norms, including gender roles and expectations (Amin, 2018).

Reem Obeidat (2002) highlighted that women's influence remains constrained, despite the increase in female graduates from journalism programmes and female entrants into the Arab media industry. These constraints are often a result of women's underrepresentation in leadership positions (Obeidat, 2002). In most Arab countries, women working in the media are primarily employed as entertainment programme presenters, with few occupying administrative roles or positions in decision-making. Particularly few women own media outlets. This lack of female ownership and leadership extends to artistic production companies and advertising firms, and media productions characterised by an absence of female leadership predominate (Hall, 1997; Jubain, 2013). Owing to these industries' inherently patriarchal and profit-driven nature, they tend to perpetuate prevailing stereotypes and approach women's issues with an attitude characterised by negativity and indifference, which reflects a broader pattern of women's underrepresentation and marginalisation (Amin, 2018).

2.4.5 Digital Platforms

The emergence of digital platforms has created a double-edged sword for women in Arab media, offering both opportunities and challenges (Wheeler, 2004). On the one hand, these platforms provide women with unprecedented freedom to voice their opinions, engage with wider audiences, and challenge the traditional

gender norms that legacy media tend to reinforce. For example, social media allows Arab women to participate in social movements and provoke collective actions (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011), facilitating knowledge exchanged and providing a platform for the discussion of social issues in a dedicated women's space. Thus, it provides them with a voice and empowers them by facilitating communication and self-expression (Elareshi & Ziani, 2019), improving networking and advocacy among women's groups (Obeidat, 2002). On the other hand, digital media platforms expose women to cyber harassment, gender-based violence, and censorship, which can stifle their expression and deter their participation. While social media can be empowering, it also subjects women to increased scrutiny and backlash, particularly from society's more conservative segments of society. These issues are further exacerbated by the digital divide in the region, as not all women have equal access to digital tools and platforms and so their reach and impact are limited (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Consequently, the internet in the Arab world remains predominantly 'a male domain' (Wheeler, 2004; Edam, Shaari and Aladdin, 2023).

Women's underrepresentation on digital media platforms undoubtedly perpetuates gender stereotypes, reflecting the broader societal structures that influence these spaces. While digital platforms offer women opportunities to challenge entrenched gender norms and amplify their voices, they also present significant risks. For Arab women, in particular, their male relatives' online presence may restrict their autonomy and inhibit their engagement and self-expression.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has traced the evolution of editorial cartoons as a potent medium for satire and political critique to explore how these cartoons serve as vital tools of

resistance, both reflecting and challenging the Arab region's sociopolitical landscape.

Central to this analysis were the perspectives of female artists and authors who contribute to Arab media and cultural discourse. In previous sections, I highlighted the limited literature on Arab female cartoonists and explored the complex political and social environment of the media and press in the Arab world, acknowledging that this environment exerts a considerable impact on the work and lives of Arab female intellectuals. This context is essential for understanding the unique experiences of female cartoonists in the region.

In conclusion, this chapter provides valuable insights into the broader dynamics of gender, cartoons, and media in the Arab world so that we can better appreciate the diverse voices that shape the region's cultural narrative and the critical role that media and cartoons play in expressing and challenging prevailing norms and ideologies.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

If we look at the research as an attempt to find out about things and people and the complexities of communication, research becomes fascinating (Berger, 2014, p. 31).

This study is grounded in qualitative research, a methodological approach that has long been implemented with the aim of illuminating the unseen and the unknown and providing a platform for voices that are often marginalised or overlooked (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

In this section, I shall outline the methods that I employed in this research project to obtain insight into Arab female cartoonists' experiences and practices. In recognition of the complexity and diversity inherent in this endeavour, I adopted a multifaceted approach. The methods that I adopted include a combination of approaches that I selected based on their interpretive capacity to address various aspects of the data gathered. Moreover, use of multiple methods can help recontextualise visual content (Rose, 2016).

The data collection process is described in detail, including the participant selection criteria, the interview process, and the collection of relevant articles and autoethnographic data. The Data Analysis section details the use of NVivo 12 software for systematic thematic analysis, the development of themes and sub-themes, and the visualisation techniques employed to identify patterns and relationships within the data and thereby extract meaning from the transcripts. The iterative phases of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) will be

described. Employing critical discourse analysis proved beneficial for uncovering and interpreting nuanced findings (Dijk, 2011).

The chapter also explores the dual role of the researcher as both an academic and a female cartoonist from the same region as the participants and discusses the ways in which this insider perspective enriched the research and yielded valuable insights. In her exploration of the intersection of feminist theory and methodology, Nancy Naples (2003) emphasised the researcher's role as an engaged participant, arguing that feminist research often involves the researcher being deeply embedded in the communities they are studying (Naples, 2003). The lines between my research and my personal and professional lives are inextricably intertwined, and as a practitioner within the very field I am investigating, I am an engaged researcher. Far from blurring the boundary between insider and researcher, this approach acknowledges the strengths and challenges associated with occupying both roles (Milan, 2014). This insider status has afforded me unique access and insight and has allowed me to engage in detail with my fellow Arab female cartoonists' experiences and perspectives. However, this status also requires me to navigate the potential biases and assumptions that are inherent in my status as part of the community I am studying.

By embracing transparency in my methodological approach and through the careful consideration of the reciprocal influences between my insider knowledge and scholarly analysis, I aim to contribute a nuanced and authentic perspective on the experiences of Arab female cartoonists, ensuring that my research is both rigorous and reflective of the artists' lived realities. Ultimately, I approached this research as a process of meaning-making rather than mere truth discovery. In

this context, my subjective perspective became a source of strength, enriching the analysis and enhancing my understanding of the subject matter.

3.2 The Multi-Layered Analytical Framework

Here, I shall briefly outline the primary objectives of this research as a reminder of their connection with the analysis process:

1. **Exploration of Experiences** and Practices of Arab Female Cartoonists: To investigate the work and life conditions of Arab female cartoonists, considering the unique regional particularities that influence their experiences. **(Who?)**
2. Analysis of **Sociopolitical Context**: To identify and examine the various factors that shape the experiences and work of Arab female cartoonists. This objective aims to illuminate the intricate interplay between art, politics, gender relations, and society. **(In what context?)**
3. Insights into Navigating Gender, Cultural Identity, and Creativity: To understand how Arab female cartoonists navigate and address issues related to gender relations, cultural identity, and artistic expression. By **examining the strategies, techniques, and themes employed** by these artists. **(How?)**

The methods employed in pursuit of these objectives include examinations of the primary data collected through interviews, case studies, autoethnography, and

visual elements (cartoons). This laid the foundation for a detailed and multi-layered understanding of the subject matter, as the diagram below illustrates:

Layers	Type of Analysis	Textual Analysis	Visual Analysis	Integration of findings
Layer 1 Research question 1 (RQ1)	Interviews, Case studies, Visual analysis of the cartoons, Autoethnographic analysis	Autoethnographic reflection on interviews, transcriptions, and comments	Auto-visual analysis focusing on semiotic analysis	Integration of textual and visual reflective analysis
Layer 2 (RQ1)	Identify patterns, themes, and sub-themes using NVivo software for a systematic organisation and coding of qualitative data	Categorisation and labelling of textual data, focusing on recurring themes	Categorisation and labelling of visual data, focusing on recurring visual themes	Integrating textual and visual analysis during the labelling and categorisation process
Layer 3 (RQ2–3)	Systematically identify, analyse, and interpret patterns and themes	Focusing on context and strategies, identifying key themes and sub-themes	Semiotic analysis/visual ethnography of visual data to uncover underlying meanings and cultural messages	Conduct analyses separately; then, synthesise the results to allow a holistic understanding
Layer 4	Discourse analysis for a detailed understanding of the underlying meanings and insights	Examination of narratives, ideology, and concepts through a review of the relevant literature		Integrate textual and visual discourse analyses to explore overarching narratives and ideologies

3.2.1 Explaining the Multi-layered Analytical Approach

This research employs a multi-layered analytical approach that integrates both textual and visual analyses to comprehensively explore Arab female cartoonists' experiences and expressions. The methodology is designed to address the research questions via a structured, systematic process while permitting nuanced interpretation of both textual and visual data.

3.2.1.1 Layer 1: Autoethnographic Analysis (RQ1)

The first layer of analysis is rooted in autoethnography, a method that blends autobiographical elements with ethnographic research to critically reflect on personal experiences within a broader cultural context. In this stage, I commented on the data, focusing on the analysis of the comments and insights that I derived from the interviews with the cartoonists. I conducted a semiotic analysis of the visual data in parallel to uncover the deeper meanings and cultural messages embedded in the cartoons. These analyses were initially performed independently to facilitate a detailed exploration of each data type. However, the findings were later synthesised to provide a holistic understanding of the cartoonists' strategies and thematic contexts. This stage included autoethnography and auto-visual analysis, in which I examined my own visual work, applying semiotic principles to understand the underlying meanings of and cultural codes in these visual expressions. During this stage, I contextualised my role as both researcher and participant, acknowledging the subjective influences that shape the research process.

3.2.1.2 Layer 2: NVivo Coding and Categorisation (RQ1)

I utilised NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to code the interview transcripts and visual data (i.e. the cartoons). This process entailed the

identification of key labels and sub-labels and categorising them into meaningful themes.

3.2.1.3 Layer 3: Themes and Sub-Themes (RQ2–3)

During this stage, I identified themes and sub-themes within the data, particularly those relating to the cultural and sociopolitical context and the strategies that the cartoonists employed. I employed thematic analysis to examine visual and textual data, enabling the identification and interpretation of recurring themes and patterns within the datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.2.1.4 Layer 4: Discourse Analysis

The final layer of analysis is discourse analysis, which seeks to understand the broader narratives, ideologies, and concepts that emerge from both the textual and visual data. This layer involved a critical examination of the narratives within the interview data alongside a review of the relevant literature on visual culture, gender, and media studies. Concurrently, I integrated the visual analysis narratives of the cartoons, paying particular attention to how the cartoonists visually constructed and communicated ideologies and cultural discourses. The integration of textual and visual discourse analyses in this layer provided a comprehensive view of the overarching narratives and ideological frameworks that shape the work of Arab female cartoonists.

This multi-layered approach ensures a rigorous and nuanced analysis that addresses the subject matter in all its complexity by considering both its textual and visual dimensions. Through the systematic layering of autoethnography, thematic analysis, semiotic analysis, visual ethnography, and discourse analysis, this methodology offers a comprehensive framework within which Arab female cartoonists' rich and multifaceted expressions may be explored. I shall now

provide a more detailed explanation of each step that the analytical process entails.

3.3 Data Collection

The research methodology involves a multifaceted data collection process that encompasses the following strands:

- Interviews
- Case study including documentation and coverage of Doaa Eladl's charge of blasphemy
- Autoethnography
- Visual analysis of the selected cartoons for all the above

Each step facilitates a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the visual materials that connects them with their political, cultural, and social dimensions.

3.3.1 Interviews

'Interviews enable researchers to obtain information they cannot gain by observation alone' (Berger, 2014, p. 159). Qualitative interviews serve as an effective method that can benefit researchers who seek to understand participants' subjective perspectives, particularly in feminist studies, for which the exploration of individual experiences is crucial (Roberts, 2020). Qualitative interviews allow researchers to engage directly with participants and explore their personal stories. These interviews provide participants – particularly women – with a platform on which they can articulate their experiences in their own words, shedding light on the gender-specific challenges they face (Hesse-Biber, 2012). However, those who are oppressed by societal forces have a unique awareness of the mechanisms of denial and repression. Therefore, interview data must be understood within the context of power relations and institutional constraints, with

the acknowledgement that while individual narratives are important, they must be connected to broader political and social contexts (Naples, 2003).

The interviews for this study were conducted during the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and thus took place primarily using computer-mediated communication. I also utilised various mobile apps, including WhatsApp and Messenger and made follow-up phone calls using these apps. The interviews were audio- and video-recorded, and notes were captured using a mobile device and a personal laptop. The implementation of semi-structured interviews with open questions enabled me to follow a flexible interview guide or protocol, which included a set of questions designed to explore the research topic or area of interest. The open-ended questions encouraged participants to provide detailed responses and elaborate on their perspectives, enabling me to gather rich and nuanced data. While the interview guide served as a framework, I had sufficient flexibility to ask follow-up questions, probe for further information, and explore unexpected avenues that emerged during the interview. This flexibility allowed for a conversational and interactive approach, fostering a deep understanding of the participants' viewpoints and generating valuable insights.

My aim during the interviews was to gather information about the cartoonists and thus understand their backgrounds and the challenges they faced in their field, specifically those associated with their gender. I also sought insights regarding the limitations that hindered their work or prevented them from publishing within the social and political contexts of their respective countries. Additionally, I inquired about their experiences with censorship – both external and self-imposed – in the field of cartooning. I provided the written questions in Arabic, the native language of all the participants, and the online face-to-face interviews were also conducted in Arabic. The original Arabic question sheet and a

translation in English may be found in the appendices in addition to the video and the interviews' associated correspondence.

The interview steps include the following:

1. Research and Network: Research online platforms, social media, art communities, and relevant organisations to identify Arab, female cartoonists.

2. Establish Communication Channels: Once potential cartoonists have been identified, contact them through email, social media messages, or professional networks. Given my position as a cartoonist, networking within these communities also allows me to uncover additional contacts and use established ones. I introduced the purpose of the data collection clearly and provided a detailed research information sheet (Sheffield Hallam University format), which was attached to the consent forms.

Several factors influenced the process by which I obtained the participants' consent:

- **Limited Presence:** Very few Arab female cartoonists actively work and publish their editorial cartoons in the Arab press and on Arab media platforms. Some Arab countries, including Iraq, Qatar, Libya, Mauritania, and Yemen, have no registered female cartoonists.
- **Willingness to Participate:** Not all of the cartoonists whom I was able to contact were willing to participate in the research. The appendices include a log of my communication with the cartoonists.
- **Sensitivity of the Topic:** The research topic required careful consideration in view of its sensitive nature, particularly with respect to the cultural, religious, and social issues within the region as well as the constraints imposed by the politically restricted environment.

Consequently, some cartoonists withdrew their participation after the interview. These factors necessitated a nuanced and respectful approach to ensure that the issues under consideration were ethically and accurately represented.

3.3.2. Gather Data on Cartoonists

Digital ethnography extends beyond the mere collection of digital traces (Møller & Robards, 2019); it requires that the researcher engage actively with the phenomenon under study (Pink et al., 2016). In the context of my research on Arab female cartoonists, my focus was on publicly accessible data and interactions. I did not merely observe and analyse the content; rather, I immersed myself in the relevant online material, including articles and posts that were relevant to the cartoonists' experiences and expressions.

I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with Lena Merhej, from Lebanon, and Sara Qaed, from Bahrain, using the online platform Zoom and followed up with emails and messages exchanged via Messenger and WhatsApp. Communication with the other participants – Hana Hajjar, from Saudi Arabia, and Riham El-Hour, from Morocco – included phone calls and written exchanges via emails and Facebook Messenger. This included queries about their education, training, career trajectory, the ramifications of their publications, their social environment, and any notable challenges that they had faced.

3.3.2.1 Archival Exploration

In 2019, I had the opportunity to visit the American University of Beirut and access its Arab Comics and Cartoons Archive. During this visit, I worked closely with Associate Professor Lina Ghaibeh, an expert in the field, to investigate the presence and contributions of Arab female cartoonists. Unfortunately, this visit

revealed a noticeable lack of registration or documentation of women contributing to the field.

Doaa Eladl Case Study

When the cartoonist Doaa Eladl declined to participate in my research, I respected her decision and privacy. Rather than gathering information directly from the artist, I focused on publicly available sources, including her published works, interviews, articles, social media posts, and other content that she has made accessible. I also considered secondary sources that discuss the cartoonist's work and influence, including academic papers, reviews, critiques, and analyses by other scholars or critics. I further analysed a selection of her cartoons, paying attention to their themes, techniques, styles, and publishing and censorship ramifications, all of which can provide valuable insights without requiring direct input from the cartoonist. I placed the cartoonist's work within a broader cultural, social, and political context to ensure valid and fruitful analysis of her work.

I applied research ethics throughout by avoiding unverified claims or assumptions about the cartoonist's intentions or personal life. The use of multiple sources and data types enhanced my findings' credibility and reliability. I clearly documented my methodology, data sources, and any limitations of the research to ensure full transparency. My case study included an introduction outlining the case study's objectives and significance, an analysis of the cartoonist's work, the contextual background, and a conclusion summarising the main points. Adherence to these

steps ensured that I conducted a comprehensive and ethical case study, even without the cartoonist's direct participation.

3.3.3.2 Autoethnography

The autoethnographic method used in this research project benefited from my unique position as both a researcher and a cartoonist who grew up and lived in the same region and inhabited the same cultural, social, and political contexts as the participants. Autoethnographers often face considerable challenges, such as the need to balance personal storytelling with academic rigour, manage potential emotional exposure, navigate an academic landscape that may undervalue personal methodologies. Nonetheless, to embrace one's own vulnerabilities and emotional responses is to enable the creation of narratives that are not only rich but also authentic, thus fostering a deep connection with one's readers. Autoethnography's reflexive approach, wherein the researcher's interactions with participants and personal reflections are continually revisited and reinterpreted, facilitates an iterative process that enhances our understanding of both the self and the cultural contexts under consideration (Scott-Hoy & Ellis, 2007).

Having collected data using action research, in-depth interviews, and participant observation, I need to come to grips with my experience as an involved and situated researcher who is an integral part of the research and writing process. I don't feel neutral or authoritative about my project; I feel part of it, vulnerable and aware of the things I still don't know or understand. Surely experience and subjectivity are important parts of understanding what happened and why. (Scott-Hoy and Ellis, 2007, p. 128)

The above quotation encapsulates the challenges that researchers who are embedded in their subject matter must confront, highlighting the importance of

experience and subjectivity in the research process. As a qualitative research methodology, autoethnography offers a unique lens through which researchers can explore and analyse their personal experiences in relation to broader cultural, social, and political contexts. Rooted in the principles of ethnography, which traditionally involves the in-depth study of cultures through participant observation and immersion (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), autoethnography extends this approach by positioning the researcher as both the subject and the investigator. This dual role facilitates a process that is profoundly reflexive, whereby the researcher's own experiences become the primary data source, facilitating an intimate exploration of how individual experiences are both shaped by and reflect larger cultural phenomena (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). While ethnography typically focuses on external cultural groups, autoethnography emphasises the researchers' internal narratives of the researcher. However, both methodologies are guided by the common goals of narrating and analysing experiences with the aim of furthering cultural understanding. The reflexivity that is inherent in autoethnography is aligned with the ethnographic tradition of critically examining the researcher's influence on the study, which blurs the boundaries between the two approaches and highlights their complementary nature.

Contemplation of my own experience afforded me valuable insight into the environmental conditions and psycho-social atmosphere in which the cartoons were created in addition to the elements that shape and affect the emergence, experiences, and cultural output of Arab female cartoonists. My engagement in autoethnography as an Arab female cartoonist entails an approach that is structured yet flexible and that integrates personal experiences with cultural and

social analysis. Below, I list the steps that are required to carry out this method effectively.

The primary focus of this autoethnography is to critically examine the ways in which cultural norms influence and shape my identity and creative expression as an Arab, female cartoonist. In contemplating my personal experiences, my aim is to offer a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges that Arab female cartoonists must confront, particularly in terms of navigating the intersections of gender, culture, and artistic freedom. I aim to contribute to the discourse on cultural identity, gender, and creative expression by offering a perspective that is both personal and reflective of broader societal issues.

In conducting a comprehensive literature review on autoethnography, I aimed to acquire the necessary tools to effectively situate my personal narrative within a broader scholarly context. Autoethnography allows researchers to critically reflect on their own experiences and to position themselves within the cultural, social, and political landscapes that they inhabit (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). To anchor my analysis, I incorporated a diverse range of literature that includes the theoretical underpinnings of autoethnography and its application in exploring patriarchal discourse. Scholars including Holman Jones (2005) and Chang (2008) emphasise autoethnography's potency in challenging dominant narratives, making it an ideal framework for critiquing the patriarchal structures that permeate the region and culture under study. Engagement with these theoretical frameworks provided a robust contextual foundation for my analysis,

ensuring that my personal narrative is not isolated but, rather, is connected with the broader sociopolitical discourse.

Data for Autoethnography: Personal Narrative History

In my personal narrative, I reflected on my own experiences as a female cartoonist and my career's trajectory. This reflection included an exploration of the challenges that I have faced, the inspirations that have driven my work, and the cultural and political contexts that have influenced my creative expression. Autoethnographic methods have provided a valuable framework for this introspection, allowing me to critically examine how my identity as a woman in a predominantly male-dominated field intersects with broader societal and cultural forces (Chang, 2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In situating my narrative within the sociopolitical landscape, I was able to contextualise my experiences, highlighting the ways in which cultural norms, gender dynamics, and political discourses have affected my work as a cartoonist (Holman Jones, 2005).

I was able to trace connections between my personal experiences and cultural background. This reflection was guided by two theoretical frameworks, cultural studies and feminist theory, which emphasise the importance of situating creative work within its cultural and historical context (Butler, 1990; Hall, 1997). For instance, I considered how my cartoons addressing gender issues resonate with the gender and power relations within my culture and how my work aligns with or challenges prevailing narratives within the political sphere. This reflective process not only deepened my understanding of my work's cultural and political

implications but also highlighted the ways in which my cartoons serve as both personal expression and social commentary.

To analyse my cartoons, I employed the same rigorous criteria that I applied in selecting other cartoonists' work. This involved focusing on cartoons that address topics that many consider taboo, those that have precipitated judicial cases or professional repercussions, and those that express challenges relating to the data I collected from interviews and other sources.

3.3.3.3 Critical Self-Reflective Practice

This practice requires that I consistently critically examine my own biases, assumptions, and positionality to ensure that I maintain awareness of the ways in which my background, experiences, and personal perspectives have influenced both my analysis and interpretation. By critically reflecting on these issues, I aimed to maintain a high level of self-awareness and authenticity throughout the research process. The importance of such reflective practice is well documented in qualitative research methodologies, wherein researchers are encouraged to acknowledge their subjectivities in the interest of enhancing their work's rigour and credibility (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003). Reflection on one's positionality is particularly crucial in research that involves personal narratives or autoethnography, as it helps to recognise the power dynamics and potential biases that may shape the research outcomes (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Furthermore, this reflective practice aligns with the concept of reflexivity, which is central to feminist research methodologies. Feminist scholars argue that by critically engaging with our own positionalities, we can better understand how our identities intersect with the social, cultural, and political contexts we study, ultimately leading to more nuanced and ethically sound research (Haraway, 1988; Alcoff & Potter, 1993). This ongoing self-reflection thus not only enhanced

the authenticity of my research but also allowed me to navigate the research context's complexities with greater sensitivity and ethical awareness.

3.3.3.4 Integration of Visual and Narrative Elements

I strategically incorporated sketches and cartoons that I created during challenging moments in the writing process. These visual elements were not merely decorative; they served as powerful tools with which to illustrate key points, emotions, conflicts, and fears, thereby enhancing the storytelling aspect of my narrative.

The value of integrating visual elements into narrative research is supported by a growing body of literature that highlights the value of multimodal approaches in qualitative research. Visual media, such as drawings and cartoons, can convey complex emotions and experiences that might otherwise be difficult to express verbally (Knowles & Cole, 2008). They offer an alternative mode of representation that can capture the nuances of lived experiences, particularly in autoethnography, in which personal stories are central to research (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Autoethnography's introspective and self-reflective aspects may be integrated with visual approaches for the purpose of examining the researcher's personal and cultural experiences (Pink, 2007). By incorporating my own sketches and cartoons, I was able to visually articulate the emotional landscape of my experiences, imbuing the narrative with greater profundity and representing my experiences more holistically (Mannay, 2016).

Throughout the autoethnographic work, I have also maintained confidentiality and handled sensitive information appropriately, considering the ethical implications of sharing personal experiences in which other individuals were involved. I was

also mindful of the need to respect and extend sensitivity towards cultural norms and personal boundaries in both my narrative and my interactions with others.

3.3.3.6 Data Collection from Cartoons

Images are made by human beings and therefore have embedded in them much information about their makers. Thus, although images may be seen as primary sources for the study of what has been shown, all visual texts are primary sources for the study of their makers. (Howells, 2009, p. 3)

While cartoons constitute one of this research project's primary sources, they also serve as instruments for exploring the experiences of the cartoonists who created them. In this section, I shall outline the methodology used to select the cartoons that I assembled from the body of cartoons created by Arab female cartoonists based on selection criteria focused on thematic relevance, particularly gender-related issues and taboo topics. Notably, some cartoons were included in this study on the basis of their involvement in legal actions or ensuing social and institutional complications, which I analysed to understand the incidents' specific contexts and, where possible, to explore the perspectives of the cartoonists involved. I further assembled detailed information on the case studies' publication platforms, target audiences, recurring themes, and artistic influences to ensure a thorough understanding of the cartoonists' work.

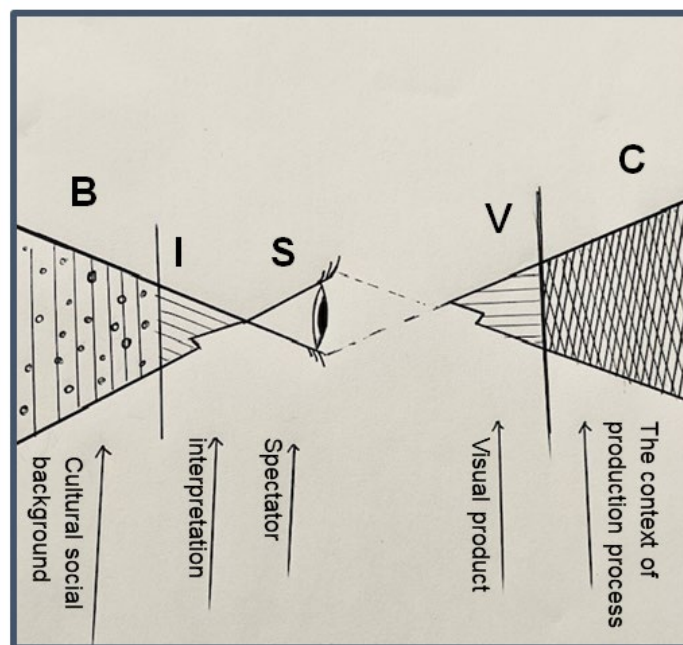
I also engaged in comparative analysis by juxtaposing cartoons that were similar and that were the work of multiple cartoonists. This method facilitated the comparison and matching of artworks, the identification of similarities and common factors, and the analysis of the underlying messages conveyed by cartoonists from various Arab countries. For example, I analysed several of my cartoons in comparative perspective alongside those of Doaa Eladl, noting the similarities and differences in artistic styles and thematic choices. I also traced

comparisons between Eladl's work and that of Sara Qaed, highlighting shared visual elements and common conceptual themes. This comparative approach was intended to uncover broader patterns, trends, and insights within the works of Arab, female cartoonists.

3.3.3.5 Utilising Insider Perspectives in the Visual Analysis Process

Figure 11 visualises the process involved in interpreting visual data, establishing its connection with the five focal points approach, as discussed by Berger (2014), Mitchell (1994), and Rose (2016).

Figure 11. Diagram representing visual analysis from the perspective of an insider researcher (Alyoussef, 2022)



This approach emphasises the analysis of the artwork, artist, creation process, and audience in addition to the context in which the creative process takes place. My aim in visually representing these elements is to demonstrate how the visual product (V) is significantly influenced by contextual factors (C) as well as how its

reception and interpretation can vary depending on the individual spectators' (S) unique experiences and backgrounds.

The self-reflection process gives rise to a distinctive perspective that emerges when the contextual factors align with the researcher's personal understanding and interpretation. This alignment facilitates a more profound and distinct interpretive process, as the visual product (V) is produced by the spectator (S), who simultaneously serves as the interpreter, researcher, and artist. This layered perspective facilitates a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the visual data, as my dual role offers an insider's perspective that is both empathetic and critically informed. Rose (2016) asserts that 'the interpretation of methodologies requires a broad understanding of cultural dynamics' (2016, p. 132), and I am confident that my research is firmly grounded in an understanding of the cultural dynamics that have affected my personal experience.

3.4 Cartoon Visual Analysis Methods

Visual images effectively communicate valuable information about and insights into our world (Howells, 2009; Barthes, 1979), supporting our understanding of cultures and societies (Howells, 2009).

Weber and Mitchell (2004) have argued that visual images can capture complex and nuanced meanings that may be difficult to express through words alone. As such, their incorporation can enhance the depth and credibility of qualitative research, making it more engaging and relatable to a broader audience (Weber & Mitchell, 2004). Cartoons may elicit emotional responses, facilitate empathy, and provoke critical thinking. The cartoons examined in the present study served as effective tools for communication among the cartoonists and combined with other data, yielded valuable insights into the topic at hand. Meticulous analysis of these cartoons uncovered intricate details and nuances that contribute

significantly to a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the cartoonist's social and cultural dynamics. By deconstructing these cartoons, I highlighted the themes, cultural references, and sociopolitical contexts embedded within them. This analytical process allowed me to identify patterns, power relations, and ideologies that may not be immediately evident from textual analysis alone.

Visual ethnography, as defined by Pink, is a 'collaborative and reflexive exercise' that adapts to various disciplinary perspectives and theoretical principles (2021, p. 40). This approach allowed me to engage deeply with the visual artworks (cartoons) that the cartoonists created and to approach them not only as cultural artefacts but also as visual narratives that reflect and critique the sociopolitical contexts within which these artists operate. This methodology focuses on continuous reflection, enabling a rich, nuanced understanding of the cartoons' cultural significance (Pink, 2021).

Cartoons frequently capture ephemeral and intangible elements and offer profound insights into the lived experiences, emotions, and perspectives of individuals and communities. This is particularly critical in investigations of cultural and social contexts, in which visual representations serve as a powerful medium that elucidates the processes through which identity, power, and resistance are negotiated and expressed. Cartoons have proven particularly valuable in this research project in terms of articulating the often-unspoken conflicts and contradictions that are evident in the works of many female cartoonists. They offer a unique lens through which underlying societal tensions and disputes are rendered visible, elucidating the complex dynamics at play within the Arab cultural and social milieus.

Berger's five focal points method provides a comprehensive framework for visual analysis that centres on five critical elements: the artwork itself, the artist, the

medium, the audience, and the societal context (Berger, 2014). This method emphasises a holistic approach to understanding visual materials, considering not only the intrinsic qualities of the artwork but also the broader context in which it is created and received. Each focal point offers unique insights: the artwork's formal and aesthetic properties, the artist's intentions and background, the characteristics and implications of the chosen medium, the audience's reception and interpretation, and societal influences.

Similarly, Mitchell's analytical framework poses a series of interconnected questions: 'Who or what represents what to whom with what, and where and why?' (Mitchell, 1994, p. 420). This approach systematically organises these questions into the categories of artist, artwork, audience, medium or platform, and underlying message. Mitchell's framework emphasises the dynamic relationships between these elements and highlights how representations are constructed and communicated within specific cultural and historical contexts. By focusing on the interactions between the artist, the artwork, the audience, and the medium, Mitchell's method underscores the complexity of visual communication and the multiplicity of meanings that can be derived from a single image.

This study synthesises Berger's and Mitchell's approaches to conduct a rigorous visual analysis of the assembled cartoons. My aim in integrating their theoretical perspectives is to provide a multi-dimensional understanding of the visual materials under examination. The investigation begins by analysing the artwork, scrutinising its formal elements, its stylistic features, and its thematic content. It then considers the artist's background, intentions (this is particularly relevant in autoethnographic approaches), and creative process, thereby situating the artwork within the broader trajectory of the artist's oeuvre. The medium or platform through which the artwork is presented is also examined, in

acknowledgement of the ways in which various media can shape the reception and interpretation of visual messages.

Who: Each cartoon selected for analysis is associated with the respective female cartoonist and her background, education, values, and views on gender-related subjects. This information was accumulated through interviews, articles, correspondence with the cartoonists, and web information.

What: The analytical process included paying close attention to the cartoons' visual elements, including the composition, symbols, visual cultural references, colours, and other visual techniques that the cartoonists employed.

How: The analysis explored the techniques and mediums that the cartoonists employed to represent the visual elements in their cartoons. This included an analysis of their artistic style and the mediums they chose to convey their message.

Why: I aimed to decipher the symbols and values depicted in the cartoons and understand what they represent. In essence, I sought to uncover the underlying message conveyed through visual representation. Additionally, I explored how the cultural meanings embedded in the cartoons reflect contemporary popular culture and examined the contexts in which the cartoons are produced and circulated.

To Whom: Where possible, the study investigated how various audiences interpret and respond to the cartoons' visual and thematic elements and how cartoonists tailor their work to engage with their audience effectively. Where applicable, I incorporated the audience's interaction on social media, including

their comments, cultural background, and gender – for example, the interaction with Sara Qaed's cartoons on Instagram.

3.5 NVivo Textual and Visual Data Analysis

3.5.1 Translation and Transcription

The first stage of analysis entailed the translation and transcription of the interviews. This initial step laid the foundation for a detailed and multi-layered understanding of the subject matter.

Transcription is a crucial element in qualitative research and has proved particularly useful in my research of Arab female cartoonists. As McMullin (2023) highlights, the transcription process is crucial in uncovering profound insights and meaningful patterns within the data. It is essential to engage thoroughly with the data during transcription and to avail of this valuable opportunity to immerse oneself in the material and to engage in repeated review in the interest of a more in-depth understanding (McMullin, 2023). This process is not merely a mechanical task but also entails critical decision-making that includes selecting appropriate transcription conventions, determining the level of detail required, and discerning what information may be excluded without losing the essence of the interview.

In my research, I chose not to use transcription software in acknowledgement of the importance of making reflexive and iterative decisions in qualitative-led research. I also recognised that my active engagement in the transcription process was essential to the research. This direct involvement allowed me to obtain a balanced understanding of the data, which is particularly crucial when

researching culturally sensitive topics, such as those under consideration in this study.

The initial layer required a meticulous approach to annotating and contextualising the transcriptions and translations of the collected material. This foundational step commenced with the translation and transcription of interviews and correspondence from Arabic into English, ensuring that cultural nuances were preserved. Transcription of the spoken interviews into written form necessitated multiple reviews to capture the participants' precise wording as well as any significant non-verbal cues that they might have used. During this process, I identified areas in which participants' statements lacked clarity or detail and addressed these gaps by inserting annotations and comments into the text. These annotations provided necessary clarifications and contextual information from additional sources and enriched the transcriptions with relevant external information to offer a comprehensive understanding of the participants' cultural, social, and political contexts. Specific passages in which the participants articulated their hesitations, concerns, and instances of self-censorship were highlighted, which helped to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data. The comments made during this stage served as the first layer of thematic analysis, pinpointing significant themes and points of discussion that would guide further in-depth analysis.

3.5.2 Reflexivity and Transparency

Etherington (2004) suggested that reflexivity requires researchers to function on multiple levels simultaneously. This necessitates our being conscious, in the moment, of the factors that shape our internal and external responses while also maintaining an awareness of what influences our relationship with the research topic and participants. These personal, cultural, or theoretical influences play

crucial roles in guiding our interactions during the research process and how we ultimately represent our data (Etherington, 2004).

In qualitative research, the integration of the researcher's initial interpretations, emotional responses, and raw thoughts into the analytical process is both legitimate and valuable. Reflexivity, as Finlay (2002) noted, requires that the researcher ongoing reflection on their role and impact throughout the research process, with personal insights contributing to a deep understanding of the data (Finlay, 2002). Etherington (2004) further argues that acknowledgement of the researcher's emotions and responses can lead to authentic and meaningful interpretations, thereby enriching the analysis (Etherington, 2004). Charmaz (2006) similarly emphasised that analysis often begins during transcription, making these initial insights integral to the overall process (Charmaz, 2006). To ensure the findings' credibility while incorporating these personal insights, reflexivity allows researchers to critically reflect on their influence on the data, maintaining a balance between subjective interpretation and objective analysis (Ahern, 1999; Tufford & Newman, 2012). The participants' stories offer researchers a window onto the social and cultural contexts in which these narratives are formed. Narratives enable researchers to collect, systematically analyse, and present individuals' stories as they are shared, potentially challenging conventional and contemporary understandings of reality, knowledge, and identity. Consequently, narrative inquiry has emerged as the most appropriate methodology with which to capture participants' perspectives through the stories that they recount about themselves (Etherington, 2004). As such, the use of personal reflections as analytical tools, provided they are critically examined, facilitates a more in-depth understanding of participants' experiences (Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Ultimately, by transparently integrating

these insights with systematic analysis using tools such as NVivo, researchers can achieve a rigorous approach that enhances their findings' depth and trustworthiness (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Integrating these elements into the analysis not only enriches the research but also aligns it with established qualitative research methodologies, ensuring a comprehensive and credible study.

The integration of my initial interpretations in my thesis provides a foundational layer that guides the reader through my thought processes as I engage with the data. My narrative, which reflects my personal journey and insights, enhances the richness of the analysis by providing context and depth, illustrating how my positionality and reflexivity have influenced my interpretation of the data.

The analysis of the interviews is presented not as isolated segments but as part of a cohesive narrative that threads its way through the thesis. This method captures the essence of participants' experiences through descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual commentary, in which the researcher's role in making sense of these experiences is explicitly acknowledged and critically examined (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By including this reflective narrative, my analysis critically engages with the data, creating a dialogue between the female participants' voices and my own interpretations. The use of NVivo significantly enhanced this process by facilitating the systematic coding and organisation of both textual and visual data. This software facilitated the identification of key themes and patterns, ensuring that the reflective narrative was grounded in a thorough and organised analysis of the data. As a result, NVivo software helped

to structure the critical engagement between the participants' perspectives and my own, providing a clear framework for integrating and interpreting the data.

3.5.3 Importing Data into NVivo

NVivo employs thematic analysis to examine and identify themes within data and to systematically analyse and record these themes and patterns. This process uses a three-phase coding procedure to create meaningful and established patterns. The analyses were performed via the following steps:

- **Organising files:** In this phase, I organised the data into separate files for participants, autoethnography, and the collected cartoons. These files served as the primary sources from which I elicited the themes. I purposefully combined the text and images, considering the cartoons as a form of expression that complements and enhances the textual content.
- **Coding Themes:** This step involves interrogating data to sort the different codes into potential themes and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes, such as the main factors affecting the participants' experiences and the frequency with which these themes occurred in the data. Initially, I categorised the data into eight primary themes, and each primary theme was further subdivided into, on average, three main sub-themes. The data guided the creation of additional sub-themes and informed the ratio of confirming versus resisting for each factor. For example, within the theme of self-censorship, I identified sub-themes that included 'Fear and anxiety' and 'Internalised norms and values'. Under the sub-theme 'Fear and anxiety', I created three nodes to capture how participants coped with these emotions. Some participants

resorted to ambiguity in their work to avoid potential repercussions; others avoided controversial topics; and some chose to remain silent altogether.

- **Reviewing Themes:** During this phase, I refined and reviewed the themes at multiple levels. Each theme and node were meticulously examined to ensure that it accurately represented the coded data. Subsequently, I reviewed the sub-themes and sub-sub-themes to identify the specific aspects of the data that they captured, ensuring that the themes were coherent, consistent, and distinct. This iterative process continued until the point of saturation was reached for each node and theme.

Discussing the Findings

Having created and reviewed the coherence of the themes and sub-themes, I analysed each node's presence in the data, examining such factors as the ratio of reflection, patterns, and relationships between the nodes and themes. Visualisation of the nodes and codes facilitated a clear understanding of these relationships as well as the ways in which they reflected the data and the participants' perspectives. For example, the chart illustrated the prevalence of self-imposed limitations throughout the data, detailing the frequency of occurrences and identifying factors that were specifically related to gender. Additional visualisation tools in NVivo, including word clouds, were used to identify the most frequently repeated expressions and words. These analyses and visualisations informed the final analysis and discussion, culminating in a detailed written account that synthesised the data extracts and analytical insights into a coherent narrative.

This iterative process, which began with initial coding (category identification) before progressing to intermediate coding (selecting core categories until data

saturation was reached) and theoretical coding, reinforced the category framework that supports critical discourse analysis. This critical stance aids in the formulation of crucial goals (van Dijk, 2013). The categories that emerged from the NVivo analysis, combined with the discourse analysis of the themes, were useful in identifying the discourse strands and patterns that are aligned with ideological structures (Atteneder & Rodriguez-Amat, 2024). This process increases the potential for 'understanding and explaining necessarily complex social phenomena that require a multidisciplinary approach' (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 2), effectively utilising data resources and media specificity while maintaining a reflexive stance that ensures critical examination of data, power dynamics, and sociopolitical contexts (Atteneder & Rodriguez-Amat, 2024). Critical discourse analysis allows researchers to transcend mere surface meanings to reveal the deeper, often implicit, significances that shape social interactions and institutional practices, making it an ideal approach to exploring complex social phenomena.

Discourse analysis further provides a framework for examining how different social groups are represented and how these representations influence public perceptions (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). This approach is particularly relevant in the context of this research which goal is to understand how societal discourse perpetuates inequalities and exclusion (van Dijk, 2008; Naples, 2003). By analysing the discourses that emerge from the collected data, the study can identify patterns of inclusion and exclusion, power dynamics, and how certain narratives are privileged over others (Naples, 2003).

3.6 Limitations and Reflexivity

Acknowledging limitations helps to provide a transparent understanding of this study's scope, potential biases, and constraints in data collection or

interpretation. Additionally, reflexivity allows us to critically examine our own positionality, assumptions, and influences on the research process, ensuring a more nuanced and self-aware approach to the findings (Finlay, 2002).

[The] real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representator. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that representation is *eo ipso* implicated, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth,' which is itself a representation.' (E. W. Said, 1978, pp. 272–73)

Representations are indeed tied to language, culture, institutions, and the political context of the representing entity. In alignment with Said's perspective, I also believe that these factors inevitably influence and shape representations. In recognition of the near impossibility of attaining a completely 'true' representation, this study employs interconnected and overlapping methods to furnish a broad perspective on the topic at hand. The underrepresentation of diverse voices within this demographic constitutes a significant methodological limitation in terms of researching Arab female cartoonists. The sociopolitical and cultural constraints at play in various Arab countries may induce many female cartoonists to engage in self-censorship or to wholly avoid engaging with controversial topics, with the result that any portrayal of their true perspectives and artistic expression will inevitably be incomplete. Furthermore, the reliance on digital communication and social media platforms for data collection may exclude those who are less active online, thereby omitting significant voices. These factors collectively limit the findings' generalisability, and the complex realities and experiences of all

Arab female cartoonists may not be fully captured. One participant's refusal to allow the publication of her interview represents another limitation and resulted in the loss of valuable data and insights.

During the data collection process, I encountered several unexpected challenges that affected the overall research findings:

1. Self-censorship: Many participants were cautious about disclosing sensitive information that might have yielded richer insights into their experiences. Moreover, the fear of reinforcing Western stereotypes about Arab culture and Arab women limited the participants' trust in research that was undertaken at a UK university. This mistrust inhibited the participants' willingness to engage fully and to share information candidly, with the result that the breadth of the data collected was restrained.

Secrets and silence played a profound role in this endeavour, particularly when analysing the female participants' reflections on their experiences (Rayan-Flood and Gill, 2010).

Critical reflection on epistemology and methodology have foregrounded notions of voice and representations. This has been particularly important in feminist research that aimed to contribute to an emancipatory project of bringing women's voices in from the margins. (Rayan-Flood and Gill, 2010, p. 2)

2. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic significantly hindered my ability to attend relevant events and conduct face-to-face interviews. While the shift to virtual communication platforms offered a degree of flexibility, it

posed its own challenges in terms of building rapport and capturing the nuanced non-verbal cues that are often crucial in qualitative research.

3. Navigating cultural sensitivities: In the interest of respectful and ethical engagement with participants, it was necessary to engage in careful consideration and to maintain adaptability throughout the research process. Understanding and navigating cultural sensitivities was paramount in maintaining the participants' comfort and trust. This required a keen awareness of cultural norms, communication styles, and ethical considerations that were specific to the Arab context. Adapting the research approach to respect these sensitivities while still aiming to gather comprehensive data contributed an extra layer of complexity to the research process.

3.6.1 Strengths of the Research Methodology

3.6.1.1 *Diverse Data Sources*

I intentionally drew on a diverse range of data sources in the interest of obtaining a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the cultural context and meanings embedded in the lives of female cartoonists. The full complexity of their experiences cannot be captured through a single one-hour interview. Rather, the study is enriched through the incorporation of the cartoonists' contextualised artistic creations and the valuable insights into their perspectives that they offer. The integration of my own experiences and visual work facilitates an in-depth and textured interpretation of the participants' realities as well as my own.

3.6.1.2 *Utilisation of NVivo Software for Thematic Analysis*

My employment of NVivo software facilitated a thorough and systematic thematic analysis with the efficient organisation, coding, and retrieval of large volumes of qualitative data and a meticulous and detailed examination of the emerging themes. This software provided a visualisation analysis technique that was

centred on nodes and coding, thereby enhancing the overall rigour of the research process.

3.6.2 First-hand Perspectives

The inclusion of first-hand accounts from the cartoonists themselves in addition to my own personal reflections in line with the autoethnographic method imbued the analysis with considerable depth and authenticity. As both a researcher and a female cartoonist from the same Arabic region as the participants significantly enriched the research in several ways. As an insider, I possess an intrinsic understanding of the cultural, social, and political contexts within which the participants operate, allowing for nuanced interpretations of the data. My dual role also informed the interview questions' design and the data collection methods, ensuring that they were relevant and sufficiently probing and that they ultimately elicited insightful and detailed responses.

My personal experiences as a female cartoonist also contributed valuable autoethnographic insights that to the analysis by allowing me to draw parallels and contrasts with the participants' narratives. This perspective also ensured a greater degree of contextual sensitivity in the data interpretation process, minimising the risk of misinterpretation or oversimplification. Moreover, as a member of the same community, I am committed to accurately and authentically representing the voices and experiences of Arab female cartoonists and to applying ethical responsibility in the research and ensuring respect for the participants' perspectives. These factors collectively contributed to a nuanced, credible, and comprehensive exploration of the cartoonists' experiences.

3.6.3 Contextualised Visual Analysis Process

The visual analysis process was carefully designed to account for the prevailing political and social discourses and their influence on the visual output, particularly

in the realm of caricatures. By situating the visual analysis within the broader sociopolitical context, I was able to reveal the nuanced ways in which cartoonists navigate and respond to their environment. This approach not only highlighted the interplay between art and society but also underscored the significance of visual media as a form of sociopolitical commentary.

In determining the methodological approach that was best suited in this research project, I adopted that suggested by Howells (2009), which encourages a comprehensive exploration of both the content of the artwork and the artist's environment and specific position within the artistic domain (Howells, 2009). It was crucial to appreciate the interconnectedness between the artwork and the artist's social and cultural contexts, as the cartoons often reflect broader societal narratives in addition to the artists' individual experiences and intentions.

3.6.3.1 Leveraging Bilingualism

The selected approach was reinforced by an extensive examination of the pertinent literature – which encompassed both English and Arabic sources – on Arab nations' political, social, and cultural milieu within their historical framework. This bilingual literature review provided a comprehensive and enriched understanding of the regional context that was characterised by diverse perspectives. Scholarly articles concerning patriarchal discourse in the region were meticulously reviewed, yielding critical insights into the systemic gender dynamics influencing Arab, female cartoonists. I also thoroughly investigated the published materials documenting the works of Arab female cartoonists, from the first documented Arab female cartoonist in 1999 to those working today. The

ability to engage with sources in both languages ensured a more nuanced and authentic representation of the cartoonists' experiences and contributions.

Being bilingual in English and Arabic significantly enhanced my ability to establish a rapport with the participants and to deepen my cultural understanding within the research context. This linguistic proficiency not only facilitated more authentic and meaningful communication with the participants but also plays a crucial role in accurately interpreting and analysing the cultural references embedded in cartoons. The researcher who understands both languages is better placed to grasp the subtle nuances and context-specific humour that may be present in the cartoons, which are often rooted in cultural expressions that are unique to the Arab world. This dual-language capability is particularly valuable in the context of research focused on Arab female cartoonists, for whom language, culture, and visual art are deeply intertwined, ensuring that the analysis remains both culturally sensitive and contextually accurate.

3.7 Ethics Considerations

Ethics issues in research are typically concerned primarily with participants' protection, and researchers are morally obliged to safeguard participants' identities when required (Mason, 2002). This research was conducted in line with Sheffield Hallam University's Research Ethical Conduct guidelines in recognition of the importance of social research's moral implications (Denscombe, 2007). My collaboration with the interviewees engendered a friendly atmosphere between me and the participants. When required, anonymity and confidentiality were waived, and agreements were sent in writing via email. Furthermore, I addressed all ethical considerations that arose in relation to the autoethnography when

others' personal experiences were involved. In all cases, the participants' consent to recording the interviews was obtained prior to proceeding.

To comply with data protection guidelines and ensure data security, the video recordings of the interviews were stored securely, along with all transcribed interviews. Moreover, I was careful to consider the research findings' ethical implications and public dissemination.

3.8 Closing Notes

In acknowledging this research project's imperfections and incompleteness of this research, it is essential to recognise that each individual's unique experiences and beliefs inevitably shape their perspective. As Edward Said argued, our understanding of reality is inherently subjective, and truth itself is merely another form of representation (Said, 1978). This methodology chapter reflects a comprehensive effort to mitigate these influences through the adoption of an approach that was both diverse and robust.

The methodological approach underwent considerable evolution from the research project's inception to the writing of this conclusion. The project's trajectory was neither linear nor straightforward, and I encountered numerous challenges and obstacles that often led to frustration and doubts regarding the project's feasibility. In such instances, however, I reminded myself of my significant progress in terms of understanding the research material itself.

As noted above, it is impossible to present a pure and absolute 'truth'. Nonetheless, the process that led to the results and discussion was both constructive and unprecedented in terms of the depth to which it explored the female artists' experiences. This journey intersects with various intellectual and social issues within the context under examination, including the impact of

political, cultural, and social structures; the influence of gender and social expectations; and the social hierarchy that prevails in societies that are striving to modernise. These complex and often-unspoken factors contribute layers of nuance to the analysis.

While acknowledging this research project's inherent subjectivity and limitations, this methodology chapter demonstrates an approach to researching complex realities that is rigorous and culturally sensitive approach. This methodological evolution underscores the intrinsic value of the research process itself. The adaptive approach facilitates a profound and comprehensive discussion of the cartoonists' experiences while maintaining the research process' integrity and authenticity.

Chapter Four: Lena Merhej

Figure 12. *Words Without Borders*, 2022



4.1 Introduction

'I will only speak to myself and say: I will not be silenced or encumbered by injustice.' Lena Merhej, SoBeirut, 2022

The first case study that I shall discuss that of the Lebanese comic artist and cartoonist Lena Merhej. I shall analyse several of her cartoons within the context of Lebanese political culture and in relation to gender differences and censorship.

Many women in Lebanon work in the film industry, the press, the arts, and other creative media outlets, with the exception of caricature (Merhej, 2021). I shall complement my visual analysis of Merhej's work with data from an interview that I conducted online in 2021.

Lebanon's inequitable legislation continues to negatively impact women's civil rights in relation to travel and child custody. However, Lebanon permits greater freedom of the press and the arts than some of its neighbouring Arab countries, and the social restrictions that it imposes on women are minor compared to other Arab societies. For example, couples who have different religious affiliations may

register a civil marriage in Beirut, the only Arab capital that offers this possibility to such couples.

While teaching an Illustration course, my class had 19 female illustrators and only three male illustrators. In a similar situation in the graphic design class, females outnumbered males in Art and Design. However, the editorial cartoon field is entirely dominated by males and is not very welcoming to women cartoonists. Lena Merhej (Alyoussef interview with Merhej, 16 November 2021)

Cartoonists and humourists in Lebanon enjoy greater freedom of expression than their counterparts in other Arab countries (Hoigilt, 2019). Lebanon is unique among Arab countries in allowing its current president and head of state to be satirised and ridiculed. The stand-up show Comedy Nights, performed in Alhambra theatre, frequently breaks political, sexual, and religious taboos.

Lena Merhej is a Lebanese storyteller, cartoonist, and illustrator based in France. She was the director of the Beirut Animated Festival and worked with *Tosh Fesh*, a Lebanese magazine that promotes comics and animation in Arab countries. Merhej has illustrated over twenty-five Arabic children's books and exhibited her work both locally and internationally (Words without Borders, 2022). She produced illustrations for *As-Safir* newspaper and in 2007 co-founded *Samandal* comic magazine, a volunteer-led, non-profit organisation (Alyoussef interview with Merhej, 16 November 2021). However, along with her three founders at *Samandal*, she was sued and fined exorbitant sums of money following the magazine's publication of several cartoons that were judged to be religiously

irreverent. *Samandal* was also the first comic magazine to feature an age 18+ rating on its cover to indicate that its content is aimed at an adult readership.

Figure 13. *Samandal's* 12th issue cover, 2009, by Merhej (*The Middle East Monitor*, 2020)



Born in 1977, Merhej grew up in Lebanon and witnessed the Lebanese war at first hand. Her lived experiences inspired her desire to educate children and young people regarding war's trauma, using illustrations and comics as her medium. Her academic interest centred on the ways in which images and visual narratives influence human consciousness, communication, and ways of thinking. In 2015, she was awarded a Doctorate in Visual Studies for her dissertation entitled 'Analysis of Graphic Narratives: War in Lebanese Comics' at Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany. Merhej subsequently taught comics and graphic design at the Lebanese American University (LAU) before relocating to France, where she continues her work in graphic novels.

I included Lena Merhej in this research project on the basis of her work in editorial caricature at *As-Safir*, a well-known Lebanese daily publication. Her work

concerning Arab women's issues, gender relations, and sexualities reveals considerable courage and exceptional boldness in tackling such complex topics. As such, analysis of her work and her practice, including the strategies that she employs to communicate that which is untold, occupied an essential position in my research. *Samandal* has contributed significantly to adults' awareness of this medium of expression (Morelli, 2020), and it is widely regarded as the first Arab underground comics platform since 'underground comix' emerged in San Francisco during the 1960s (Kennedy, 2018).

Merhej's dedication to the employment of cartoon drawing as a means of promoting causes and fight for women's rights was abundantly evident from the interview data. Despite the financial constraints that they faced Merhej, and her colleagues persisted in their belief in the importance of providing a platform for free expression and political and feminist cause-driven cartoons, ultimately realising the vision of *Samandal*. In the interview, Lena discussed her various sources of inspiration, which encompassed Arab feminist literature, music, and her personal experiences and expressed her inclination towards conveying and sharing her own stories through drawing and art:

My experiences are my first source of inspiration, often triggered by music, design and literature. Right now, I am reading Joumana Haddad's 'I killed Scheherazade' and thinking about the role of the storyteller being a woman, being Arab and being from Beirut, in addition to my expertise in narrative perspective. So, I use writing and drawing as a way to reflect on my experiences, capture significant moments and revise them. (Merhej, SOB, 2022)

A highly educated and technically skilled illustrator, Merhej is adept in the visual expression of complex ideas. She has contributed work to many periodicals, such

as *Jeem*, whose website states that it is ‘a feminist media organisation that aspires to a world in which prevailing narratives regarding gender, sexuality, the body, and sexuality in the Arabic-speaking region and diaspora communities are inclusive and challenge patriarchal stereotypes’ (*Jeem*, 2022). In 2017, she participated in the Oxfam Gender Justice and Women’s Rights International Campaign (Gender Wiki, 2022). Her experience of cartooning for *As-Safir* and other publications sharpened her political and social awareness, and she described her stance on gender issues and Arab feminism as follows:

I am a woman, and each woman is a feminist if she advocates her rights and her status in society. Women in Lebanon cannot pass their nationality to their children, and women can be prevented from travelling by their male guardians. Hence, by law, women do not enjoy the same citizenship rights as men. (Merhej interview, 16 November 2021)

4.2 The ‘Lebanese Recipes for Revenge’ Case

4.2.1 Context

Merhej describes *Samandal* as a purely professional platform for cartoons and comics aimed at Arab audiences. The magazine’s editorial team organised exhibitions and workshops in addition to providing a platform for new, young, and early-career comic artists. Merhej’s background in visual narrative inspired her to launch a mini project aimed at reflecting on several everyday colloquial idioms in the Arabic language. In 2009, *Samandal* published Merhej’s cartoons on Arabic popular idioms were published alongside others, and there ensued a backlash that led to a juridical case against the comic magazine. The public attorney charged *Samandal*’s three founding cartoonists, including Merhej, with inciting sectarian strife, denigrating religion, publishing false news, and defamation. The artists knew from informal sources that religious authorities in Beirut had

complained about the cartoons and pressed for government censorship of *Samandal's* cartoonists' work (Merhej interview, 16 November 2021). The Minister of Information wrote to the Minister of Justice to request litigation against *Samandal* on behalf of 'Christian personalities' who had deemed two of the published cartoons to be religiously offensive. Following five years of legal proceedings, *Samandal's* three founding members were found guilty and required to pay fines of 10,000,000 Lebanese Lira each – equivalent to \$20,000 – or to serve two years in prison (Alyoussef interview with Merhej, 16 November 2021). The cartoonists declared that they had no hidden agenda or intentions to offend any religion or sect and that they believed several cartoons had been selectively taken out of context to be presented as proof of blasphemy. One of the editors stated, 'We are speaking to our society, and we want to push to create debate and discussion, but at the same time, we don't want to insult' (Ragin, 2017).

Figure 14. The story of the Samandal judicial case by Merhej, NC State University, 2017



Entitled ‘What happened, by Lena Merhej’, the above drawing represents Merhej’s visual depiction of the incident. Merhej’s decision to include her full name in the title box was a bold one in which she asserted ‘I am the author, and I take full accountability for any of the following’.

Panel 1

The first panel from the top is headed with a sentence that reads, ‘*Samandal* published its seventh edition, titled “Revenge”’. Two characters appear in the panel: the salamander (from which the magazine derives its name and logo) and a wise man depicted as a traditional Eastern spiritual mage or teacher. The salamander represents both the magazine and the project’s aspirations, while the wise man represents a traditional mentality that coheres around conveying received wisdom through stock phrases. It is highly likely that the man is intended to represent the Chinese philosopher Confucius in light of his quotation of the

well-known Chinese expression 'Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves'. Samandal replies, 'But revenge does not always require violence'. The salamander's comment reveals that neither of the cartoonists intended to offend or insult. The animal stands upright, facing the wise man fearlessly, and opens his mouth wide to 'say' what he thinks. His hands make a questioning gesture, with the eyes wide open. Rendered in white, the animal contrasts with the wise man's black outfit and stands out against the grey background against which they are both depicted.

Panel 2

The second panel from the top depicts four people whom the cartoonist identifies in the surmounting sentence. The text states that 'an unknown party submitted a complaint to the Minister of Information, who submitted a complaint to the Minister of Justice, who in turn instructed the Attorney General to sue the magazine'. The Arabic text includes a minor spelling mistake, perhaps because the artist is more concerned with relating (drawing) the story or as a result of Merhej's francophone educational background. Each character's costume represents their position, and the text is intended to be read from right to left, as befitting a comic targeting Arabic speakers. The figure on the right is rendered merely as a dotted silhouette to indicate the hidden identity of the individual who first mounted the complaint. Posture and gestures signal denunciation, threat, and intimidation, and the gavel in the last man's hand (the final verdict) is poised to fall unjustly against the cartoonists.

Panel 3

In the last panel, the cartoonist depicts herself standing alone with a speech bubble containing the words 'All this happened because of my story (the Fousfous's recipes)'. Dense black lines radiate out to the edges of the panel from

the white void space in which she stands: if these are taken as emanating from her, they may be representative of fear, stress, and confusion. Alternatively, if we read them as converging on her lone figure from all directions, they may be inescapable shafts of hostility and aggression. The character's posture, gesture and facial expression indicate confusion, bewilderment, sadness, and disappointment. Lena's lines are relaxed and bold. She is less interested in presentation than she is in relaying the narrative and communicating her message. In creating her own visual account of the event, she has documented it from her perspective, recording and communicating her objections to both 'What happened' and other narratives or representations of the events leading to the trial.

In 2016, Merhej convinced The Department of Design to host a symposium on Comics and Censorship. The department invited an international panel of free speech advocates and legal experts – Dr Irina Chiaburu, Charles Brownstein, and Rana Saghie (who had supported *Samandal* with legal advice during the court case) – to discuss cartoonists' rights to freedom in the face of censorship in three countries: Russia, America, and Lebanon. The symposium concluded that artists and the press in Lebanon are prevented from tackling certain political issues, war-related affairs, and religious matters that constitute solid taboos (Merhej interview, 16 November 2021; LAU, 2016), let alone other Arabic countries.

Figure 15. The symposium brochure, LAU, 2016

Spring 2016

Comics and Censorship

Lena Merhej, Irina Chiaburu, Charles Brownstein and Rana Saghie

Symposium

This symposium addresses the necessity to draw the guidelines for creating comics about sensitive topics or what is considered taboo topics by general authorities in Lebanon and abroad. The speakers on this symposium will discuss the extend with which one can push the limits of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in comics.

PROGRAM Thursday

6:00-6:15 pm
Welcoming address
Dr. Lena Merhej

6:15-6:35 pm
Censorship of Comics As The Exercise of Social Control
Charles Brownstein

6:40-7:00 pm
Finding Censorship's Blind Spots: Late Soviet Experience
Dr. Irina Chiaburu

7:00-7:20 pm
Censorship on artistic freedom
Rana Saghie

7:20- 7:30 pm
Closing statement

7 April 6:00pm

LAU, Beirut Campus, AKSOB 903

Lena Irmgard Merhej (PhD) studied Design and Technology at the Parsons School of Design (MFA). Her research, "Analysis of Graphic Narratives: War in Lebanese Comics" at Jacobs University in Bremen, granted her a doctorate degree in Visual Studies in 2015. Her animations received international awards as well as the comics magazine Samandal that she co founded.

Charles Brownstein is a prolific and sought out lecturer on the history of comics and censorship who has addressed audiences across the United States, as well as in Japan, Canada, Norway, and the United Kingdom. He currently serves as the chair of the Banned Books Week Coalition.

Irina Chiaburu holds an MA and a PhD from Jacobs University. Her research on the "Subversion in Soviet animation during the Brezhnev era" addresses the conflict between the creative Soviet intelligentsia and Brezhnev's censorship apparatus.

Rana Saghie has a Masters in Political Science from the "Institut d'Etudes Politiques" France. Since 2005, she worked on legal proceedings, corporations' law and strategic social consultancies that include the Artistic Freedom in Lebanon: Update on Censorship in Lebanon (2015).

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School of Architecture and Design
www.sard.lau.edu.lb

السَمَنْدَل
مَجَلَّةُ كَيْفِيَّةٍ فِي كَلَامِهَا
شؤون المرأة والحرية والديمقراطية

Merhej stated that in selecting cartoons for publication in *Samandal*, the founders exercised only professional standards without engaging in censorship, wishing the magazine to be a platform for freedom of expression. Despite being a non-profit organisation with no political agenda, the entire project faced a closer threat as it became subject to censorship by both the state and other institutions. In Merhej's cartooning career, the issue of funding emerges as one of the most crucial factors that impact female cartoonists' work. The dearth of financial support for platforms addressing women's and gender-related matters in the Arab region significantly affects Arab female cartoonists' contributions and outcomes (Alyoussef interview with Merhej, 16 November 2021).

4.3 'Lebanese Recipes for Revenge' – Visual Analysis

Figure 16. Merhej, 'Lebanese Recipes for Revenge', (*Samandal*, 2009)



In this section, I shall analyse the cartoon for which Lena Merhej was sued and fined in 2009. Investigation of the cartoon's semiotics will elucidate the cartoonist's experiences, emotions, and message in addition to revealing her approach to reveal communicating with her readers. Moreover, the unique opportunity of interviewing the cartoonist and listening to the narrative from her own perspective provides valuable insights into her experience. As noted in the methodology chapter, it was vital to understand the context in which the cartoons were produced (Rose's site of production and circulation) and the artist's perspective. Analysis of the connection between visual elements, symbols, and connotations (Rose's site of image) is instrumental in decoding the visual elements within their context. Far from being neutral, images embody the power inherent in accumulation (Rose, 2016, p221). This contextual visual data analysis and discourse analysis helps to elicit how the social and ideological environment

shaped the artist's experience and how she reflects these in her visual narrative and cartoons.

Following an interview with Merhej, I sought out the cartoon she had mentioned, considering it to represent a pivotal moment in her career. Unfortunately, the *Samandal* magazine website was no longer accessible. However, I managed to find the cartoon on a different platform, as it had been featured in numerous articles that discussed the issue of freedom of expression in the Arab press. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the project's objectives, I sought the complete recipe booklet.

To begin, I immersed myself in the 'Recipe for Revenge' cartoon, allowing it to permeate my thoughts and approaching it with a fresh perspective. I aimed to grasp the central theme, and the overall message conveyed. Subsequently, I contemplated the finer details, which included examining the structure, perspective, and layout of the page panels. I also analysed various visual elements, including characters, symbols, denotation, connotation, text, medium, colours, and styles, and considered various contextual factors, such as the reinforcement of or challenge to stereotypes and related events. I further contemplated the target readership and anticipated feedback and reactions while undertaking further analysis.

In *Samandal's* seventh issue, which was entitled 'Revenge', Merhej published a series of cartoons titled 'Lebanese Recipes for Revenge'. As noted above, Merhej wished to reflect on several common Lebanese phrases that are in everyday use – for example, a saying that is best translated as 'I will smash your head in' – and she attempted to illustrate these phrases in her drawing. The booklet included several phrases, each of which was accompanied by daring imagery. The phrase

'May [God] burn your religion', for example, is accompanied by an image of a Christian and a Muslim being soaked with petrol and set on fire.

Merhej strategically divided the cartoon into a sequence of panels, which permitted the message's gradual delivery and a humorous ending. In line with the direction of Arabic text, the squares are arranged to present the story from right to left. The booklet's title 'Recipes for Revenge' is reflected in the artwork's arrangement as a series of similarly themed recipes, which creates a cohesive narrative.

4.3.1 Visual Elements

The woman in the cartoon's top left is the drawing's main character, as suggested by her size and the bright colours used to represent her. She is the stereotypical image of a Middle Eastern woman as usually represented in cartoons. This depiction is difficult to understand at first glance, given that it is the work of a cartoonist who is known for defending women's rights and gender equality. It was thus necessary to study the entire booklet to determine what the artist sought to convey. This giant character occupies most of the space on the first page, and the tiny tips of the feet of the people who are carrying her are visible. Only a single figure emerges from under her dress, saying 'I can no longer bear her'. The pages that follow depict this woman cooking up recipes of violence and revenge, killing several people with every recipe. On the penultimate page, the woman dies, and a person cries out for joy, celebrating her death. On the final page, the cartoonist depicts the souls of those who have been killed by her recipes as they ride on clouds. Quietly and calmly, they repeat, 'Justice has come to the city'. The cartoonist lived through the Lebanese Civil War and suffered as a result of its impact on her life, family, and country. She wished to convey to future generations (and this is consistent with the sentiments she expressed in the interview) the

ugliness of war and of violence in all its manifestations, from hateful and abusive language to deadly conflict. In Arabic, the word 'war' is a feminine noun. Considering the cartoonist's cultural and educational background, it is likely that her use of such stereotypes is intended to protest against rather than to reinforce them.

The more diminutive stature of the character on the top right suggests his less powerful position relative to the main character and further implies that he may be a child, a citizen of the nation, or a minor member of a community. He holds the ingredient list with a submissive, obedient body language that suggest coerced rather than voluntary compliance. The other characters are also small in size. They are passive rather than active, and they are subject to violence, acting in line with the powerful character's will. The size difference between the hands and the miniature characters implies their puppet-like nature under the control of the more powerful.

In accordance with shared conventions, the symbolic significance of the burning of a man who is wearing a cross symbol indicates a Christian individual (Gilian, 2016). The three main Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – have the greatest presence in the Arab region and are typically symbolised by, respectively, the cross, the six-pointed star of David, and the Islamic crescent. The cartoonist has distilled the phrase 'Burn your religion' into the image of the immolation of a man wearing a cross on his robe.

The next panel depicts a veiled woman rather than the Islamic crescent. Here, the cartoonist's choice was indexical rather than symbolic. While some critics stated that the person in the second panel is a Muslim imam, the diminutive figure resembles a veiled Muslim woman more than an imam. Veiled women are ubiquitous in Lebanon's streets, shops, and public spaces. The ticked boxes at

the bottom of the page indicate that the task has been completed. The Arabic phrase 'May [God] burn your religion' is effectively a curse that conveys the speakers with that their target you to suffer and lose your religious identity, the core of your existence. Ticked boxes indicate that all characters on the list were burned, and the mission was accomplished.

The presence of ash and smoke in the final panel suggests that the curse has been fulfilled. However, the task at hand does not conclude there. The gradual reduction of the size of the people is a gradually achieved visual effect that creates the impression that the action depicted is ongoing. Furthermore, the reduction in size of both the text and the characters conveys a growing caution, considering the sensitive nature of the words written within the speech bubbles. Towards the bottom of the page, smaller individuals may be seen demanding the burning of other religious sects and thereby evoking the memories of the sectarian conflict that plagued Lebanon during the civil war of the late 1970s. This portrayal highlights violence's contagious nature, as each group seeks to inflict harm on the perceived enemy from its own perspective. Other speech bubbles feature the words 'Buddhism', 'Vegans', and 'Censorship', drawing attention to additional subjects of scrutiny and potential targets.

Figure 17. Merhej, Detail from 'Lebanese Recipes for Revenge' (Samandal, 2009)



In the absence of any explicit dress codes, speech bubbles, or recognisable symbols to provide clear context, the intention behind the representation of the two small figures in the bottom left remains ambiguous. However, the body language depicted implies that the character on the right is issuing instructions to the figure on the left, which may suggest that a power dynamic is in play. The figure on the right resembles a man with authority, while the figure on the left might be interpreted as a woman or a subordinate individual who is following the given instructions. The unspoken message in this scene might be interpreted as 'burn the power/authority/regime,' alluding to a desire to challenge or overthrow established sources of control.

As Rose argued has argued, it is essential that the researcher consider what is absent or has been left unsaid. The absence of certain elements may be equally significant and informative as explicit statements: 'Discourse analysis also involves reading for what is not seen or said. Absence can be as productive as explicit naming. Invisibility can have just as powerful effects as visibility' (Rose, 2016, p. 213).

The text in the large thought bubble at the top right reads, 'the fourth recipe...mmmm'. The letter 'm' denotes thinking, as the dominant woman character ponders what to do in her next recipe. The text on the top left lists the

ingredients of a recipe for the burning of a religion. The small figure on the top right is listing 'the ingredients', and the words on the board are: 'matches and a gallon of fuel'.

The small next set of words at the bottom of the page indicates that the burning (aggressive language) is continuous and that more actions are to follow. The first three words from the left are 'Vegan', 'Buddhism', and 'Druze' (a minority monotheistic Abrahamic religion). The fourth word is 'Judaism', whispered by the small figure; the cartoonist uses a dashed line to connote fear and hesitation. The final word is 'Censorship': the character resembled a young person who is eager to acquire greater freedom of expression and who is screaming aloud as indicated by a speech bubble contained within a zigzag line to indicate an explosion of emotion. Question marks at the end of each word suggest questions: Are we going to burn (....) as well? Or could we burn (....) too?

The two people at the bottom left remain silent, possibly representing that which has yet to be told or that may be unspeakable.

Merhej typically employs digital media in her artistic practice. On this particular occasion, however, she opted for ink and watercolours as her chosen media. By deliberately restricting her palette to shades of blue and yellow, she effectively directs the viewer's attention towards the symbols that encapsulate her intended message.

Merhej's distinctive style and lines clearly reflect her artistic background in illustration and visual storytelling. Her approach often exhibits a simplified quality that is evocative of children's drawings. The fluidity of her lines gracefully traverses the page, capturing a sense of freedom and drawing from a childlike perspective. By reducing the imagery's complexity, Merhej clearly and effectively

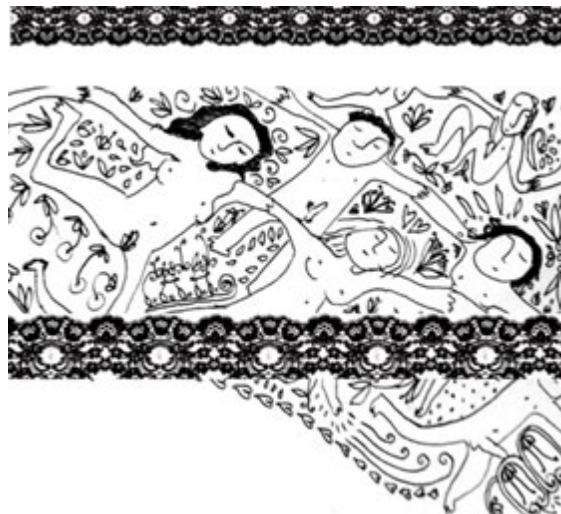
communicates her message. She chooses to rely on bold and simple lines to convey the narrative, prioritising storytelling over intricate presentation. Her drawings may occasionally appear to have been hastily executed or stripped down, as the primary focus remains on the power of narration. Merhej's emphasis lies less on aesthetics and more on the presentation of an alternative visual narrative.

Merhej drew this cartoon to publicise the colloquial phrase *yohruq deenak*, which may translate as 'May [God] burn your religion'. The cartoon depicts a priest and a veiled woman (or it might be an imam – a Muslim prayer leader) being set on fire. As noted above, this cartoon was published in *Samandal*, which was a non-profit project that the cartoonists themselves financed (Alyoussef, interview with Merhej, 16 November 2021). Although their work is considered taboo in neighbouring Arab countries, *Samandal's* editors understandably expected greater freedom in Lebanon, which is known for its relatively liberal environment. However, the legal case brought against the founders, who were convicted of crimes against religion and fined \$60,000 on the basis of their work, almost put the magazine out of business. The three editor-cartoonists launched a fundraising campaign entitled 'Help *Samandal* fight censorship and continue publishing comics in Beirut'. One of the editors commented, 'We respect all religions equally and have no interest in targeting any single one for ridicule. However, we have no respect, and in fact much contempt, for those who use religion as a way of exercising their power and tightly policing public discourse' (*The Guardian*, online, 2015)

Merhej has made significant contributions to the field of cartooning throughout her career, with her prolific publication record, active participation in exhibitions and events, and engagement in lectures that highlight visual storytelling's vital

role in addressing critical social issues, such as equality, gender, and freedom of expression, and denouncing wars. Despite her experiences with *Samandal* and similar initiatives, Merhej continues to exhibit bravery in creating cartoons that challenge societal taboos and restrictions. Through her work, Merhej showcases not only her abundant talent but also her character, which is marked by generosity and courage. She fearlessly resists the constraints of self-censorship – a struggle that I, as a cartoonist, can relate to and have not completely overcome. Several of her publications and cartoons attest to this, including her album *The First Time* (أَوَّل مَرَّةٍ), a series of cartoons in which each page addresses the first time that the main character had an intimate experience. The work was published on the Makhzan website in their second periodical, “Feminisms,” issued in September 2015 (Makhzan, 2022). Some cartoons feature nudity and are deemed inappropriate, especially within the Arabic sociocultural context.

Figure 18. From *The First Time* album, Makhzan, 2022



Chapter Five: Sara Qaed

Figure 19. Left: Sara Qaed, photograph from her official website (now unavailable); Right: Self-Portrait, Cartooning for Peace website



5.1 Introduction

My second case study focuses on Sara Qaed, who was born in Bahrain in 1990. The case study highlights her transition from working in Bahrain to relocating to the UK and the recognition that she attained for her cartoons in Arab press platforms. I shall further examine several of her cartoons in light of their relevance to gender disparities and the impact of censorship. I shall incorporate insights from a 2021 online interview to ensure that her unique perspective as an Arab female cartoonist is captured.

Qaed's portfolio showcases multiple vibrant and skilfully crafted cartoons that tackle crucial subjects, such as refugeeism, women's issues, corruption, power dynamics, the human condition, and societal paradoxes. Her noteworthy contributions to the field have garnered recognition, leading to her appointment to the committee for the International Women Cartoonists Competition in 2019 (Qaed, 2019). Qaed's artwork successfully elucidates topics that are otherwise frequently disregarded, leaving a lasting impact in the realm of Arab cartoons.

During the initial stages of our interview, Qaed explicitly conveyed her desire that the conversation would remain unaffected by Western stereotypical perspectives

concerning veiled Muslim women, arguing that Western media discourse has excessively exploited the connection that is often drawn between the hijab and limited freedom of expression. Prior to the recording, Qaed sought my reassurance that this research is committed to maintaining an objective standpoint by avoiding common stereotypes and Western attitudes of superiority towards Middle Eastern women specifically.

The social and political conditions in Bahrain and the Gulf region differ from those in Lebanon, where Merhej worked, particularly with respect to the degree of freedom available to women. As highlighted in the previous case study, Lebanon is renowned in the Arab world for its relatively high degree of freedom of expression compared with its Arab counterparts. Despite the challenges faced by Merhej, these constraints are comparatively less than the restrictions encountered in the journalism and cartoon industries in Bahrain, where Qaed was born and worked for several years. Qaed concurred with this viewpoint and observed the complexity of the situation in the Gulf region, where both regimes and other institutions implement censorship (Alyoussef, Interview with Qaed, 17 November 2021).

Qaed's interest in drawing was inspired by the work of the influential and prominent Palestinian cartoonist Naji Al-Ali (1938-1987) (Alyoussef, Interview with Qaed, 17 November 2021). Throughout her career, Qaed received continuous support and encouragement from her father. While still in secondary school, she took a significant step towards financial independence by having some of her cartoons published in the *Al-Nakbaa* newspaper. Although she herself comes from a religious and conservative background, Qaed does not shy away from addressing religious issues in her work. In fact, she has fearlessly published several cartoons that critique certain practices within religious and

cultural institutions. Over time, Qaed established her own distinctive style and niche, focusing her cartoons' topics on women, refugees, social inequalities, and political persecution.

In July 2019, Qaed was recognised for her satirical drawings with an award from the Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought in Berlin (Ibn Rushd, 2019). Her drawings cleverly mock and critique authoritarian regimes while conveying powerful messages about humanitarian issues, such as refugees and displacement. Notably, her work stands out for its technical courage and sophisticated use of symbolism, taking satirical caricatures beyond conventional boundaries (Aldustour, online, 2019). Qaed's deep passion for the visual language of caricature prompted her to explore a range of methods, materials, and modes of presentation, resulting in an experimental approach to her artistic practice (Ibn Rushd online, 2019).

Qaed is adamant that absolute freedom has its limitations. In her work, she consciously avoids addressing certain subjects, such as sexual content and nudity. For instance, she declined a contract from a magazine in Beirut that was focused on sexual education owing to her unease about the creation of cartoons involving nudity or sexually explicit themes (Alyoussef, Interview with Qaed, 17 November 2021). While she openly criticises Israeli policies and practices in the occupied territories, she does not direct criticism towards Judaism itself. Similarly, she critiques certain practices within specific Muslim groups but maintains her respect for Islam. As a devoted Muslim woman, Sara exercises caution in publishing certain cartoons to prevent the risk of misinterpretation (Said, online, Rassif 22, 2020, my translation).

Qaed explained that the pursuit of cartooning as a profession inherently entails work that is contentious and often confrontational. Cartoonists are required to

regularly comment on public affairs and establish a connection with their audience. During the interview, she noted that most Arab female cartoonists engage in occasional rather than full-time cartooning and that these interruptions or pauses in their output can significantly impact their work. Additionally, she shared that at the time of the interview, she primarily published her work through her personal social media accounts and website in the absence of a platform on which she could publish (Qaed, Alyoussef interview, 2021).

Following the conclusion her year-long contract with the *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* publication, Qaed's presence in the profession was primarily limited to occasional publication on various platforms within the Arab online press. This sporadic publishing pattern has affected her ability to maintain a consistent presence in the field. The nature of newspaper contracts heightens this challenge, as they typically offer short-term agreements, some lasting for just one month or even for a single cartoon. Consequently, Qaed stated that it is difficult for her to rely on cartooning as a stable source of income. Rather, she regards it as a personal diary and a tool with which to comprehend the world. She turns to illustration and other drawing projects to sustain her financial livelihood (ibid.).

Qaed has earned recognition and esteem as a female cartoonist both within the Arab world and internationally. However, she highlights that cartoon production is often not regarded as a 'serious' profession in the Arab world. She occasionally encounters the question, 'So what do you do besides this hobby?', which indicates a profound lack of understanding or acknowledgement of this career's potential (Abwab, 2018).

Qaed declared that newspapers generally do not impose explicit regulations on her work. However, an unspoken understanding between the cartoonist and the

editor subtly guides Qaed's approach to align with the newspaper's ideological and political orientations. She elaborated,

Similar to how I need to adjust the visual aspects of my cartoons, such as their scale, size, and orientation (portrait or landscape), to fit the specifications set by the publisher, I also seek to align my ideas and cartoon topics with the permissible content outlined by the platform's policies. I recognise the need to adapt within these parameters to ensure my work can be published (Alyoussef, Interview with Qaed, 17 November 2021).

According to Qaed, cartoonists are primarily responsible for setting their own boundaries and limitations. While growing up in a conservative neighbourhood with various religious factions in Bahrain, she was exposed to diverse perspectives that motivated her to challenge taboos and question conventions. During the early stages of her career as a cartoonist, she had to convince her mother that drawing faces in her cartoons did not contradict her faith and beliefs. As noted above, Islam considers the depiction of faces to be an imitation of the divine act of creation, which is the preserve of God (Bahnasi, 1997). However, Qaed considers herself fortunate that her family did not repress her, and she successfully navigated other obstacles in her past, such as social pressure and censorship. She also acknowledges that the pursuit of editorial cartooning as a profession presents unique challenges for women who must constantly grapple with limitations (Qaed, Alyoussef interview, 2021)

5.2 Visual Analysis of Qaed's Cartoons

Since 2018, I have been assembling a collection of cartoons created by Sara Qaed. Several of these were obtained from her former personal website, which is no longer accessible. She informed me that she now showcases her cartoons

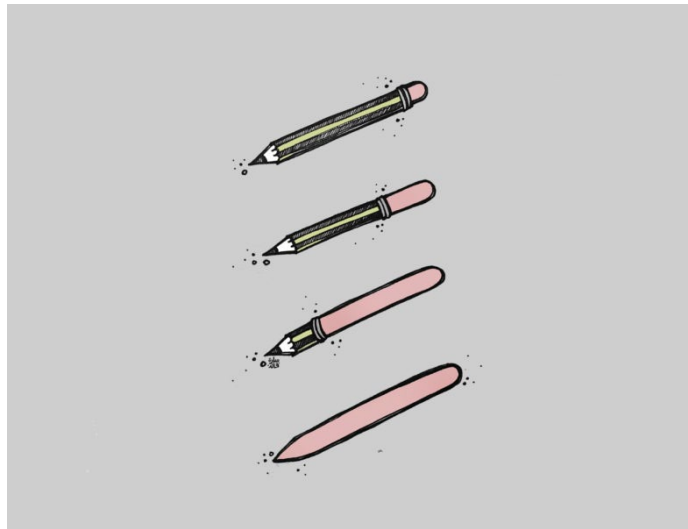
on her personal Instagram account instead. I located Qaed's cartoons on various platforms, including Cartooning for Peace and Rassif 22. Specifically, I selected samples that focused primarily on work with the subject matter and treatment that might be considered bold or controversial (particularly when produced by a woman) by Arab publications' standards.

I shall begin my analysis by approaching each cartoon with a fresh perspective, allowing myself to fully absorb Qaed's drawings, their content and aesthetics. I focus on identifying the central theme and the overarching message that it conveys and further address the following aspects:

1. Structure and Special Features: this includes examining the perspective and layout employed in Qaed's cartoons and paying attention to how the visual elements are organised.
2. Visual Elements: I closely observe the characters, symbols, denotation, connotation, text, medium, colours, and styles that she utilises in a bid to understand how these elements contribute to its overall impact.
3. Context: I explore how Qaed either reaffirms or challenges stereotypes and how these stereotypes connect to relevant events or situations.
4. Feedback/Reactions: I gather insights into the feedback and reactions that her work has generated, particularly on Instagram and Facebook.

By examining these elements, I aim to obtain a comprehensive understanding of each cartoon's artistic and communicative significance.

Figure 20. Qaed, 'n.d.' Cartooning for Peace, online



5.2.1 Structure and Special Features

Qaed's artistic style typically embraces minimalism, allowing her to break free from the constraints of intricate details to deliver a more direct message. Her cartoons often feature a light-coloured background that is devoid of perspective. As Rose suggests, 'The special organisation is not innocent.' (Rose, 2016, p. 73). Perspective produces a specific relationship between the image and the spectator (ibid.), and eye level is determined by the position of the lines' vanishing point, where the rays of the vision converge. The viewer then might be positioned above the vanishing point, and so the viewer has power over the image. Conversely, when the viewer's eye level is below the vanishing point, the image is imbued with power over the spectator (Kress, Gunther; Van Leeuwen, Theo, 2006). In this context, Qaed's work, with its absence of perspective, compels the reader to determine their own perspective in relation to the visual elements, the decision thus rests with the viewer or reader. While contemplating and reflecting on her work, I found myself experiencing a range of different positions.

5.2.2 Visual Elements

The main element in this cartoon is the pencil, a symbol of the expression of ideas through writing and drawing. The pencil is equipped with an eraser, indicating the

correction and erasure of those ideas. By degrees, the eraser grows to dominate the mark-making pencil, eating it in four stages. In the fourth stage, the pencil disappears, and a void has the last word. Qaed prefers to omit words from most of her drawings, thereby creating an active space to accommodate the viewer's imagination. In this context, the placement of Qaed's signature in the image holds a clever connotation, strategically positioned just below the third pencil, which is on the verge of being erased. This placement may be interpreted as a subtle warning to the reader not to be silenced by the dominating force of the 'eraser'. Her signature serves as a final signal, the final glimpse of a person before they are engulfed by an overwhelming silencing process.

5.2.2.1 Medium

Qaed's creative process involves the use of ink on paper to draw her cartoons, which she then captures with the camera on her mobile phone. She further refines her artwork by editing it using Photoshop software. She deliberately eschews the use of a scanner, believing that it may compromise the inherent beauty of hand-drawn elements. From a colour perspective, Sara tends to employ subtle and sombre tones, carefully balancing saturation and value. Notably, many of her drawings feature a distinct blood-red spot that emerges from one corner of the frame.

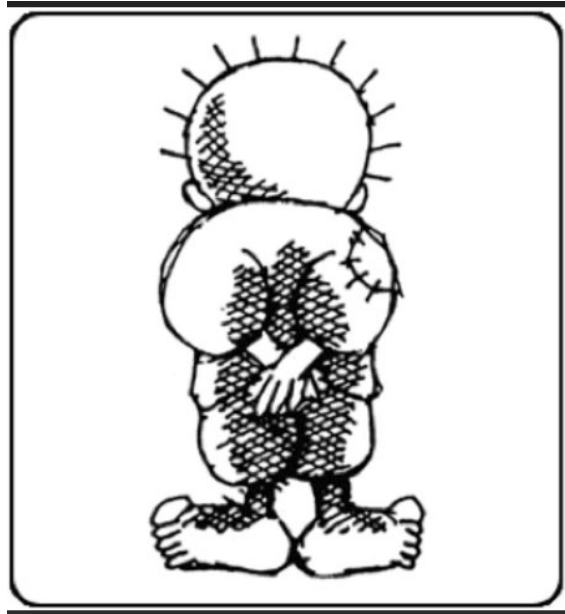
The image below depicts one of Qaed's cartoons, which she shared with me as an unedited example of her work prior to its undergoing editing in Photoshop:

Figure 21. Qaed, prior to digital editing, artist's collection, 2023



Qaed's work is clearly influenced by Palestinian cartoonist Naji Al-Ali as she draws inspiration not only from Al-Ali's artistic style but also from his political perspective concerning the occupied land of Palestine, which is apparent in many of her own cartoons.

Figure 22. Hanzala, 'the Palestinian defiance symbol' by Al-Ali, 1969



Qaed uses Photoshop software to do the final editing and colouring and occasionally animation, as illustrated by this example from her Facebook account ([Chickens](#)).

Qaed's work carries a distinct and unmistakable quality that is characterised by a powerful and unique personal style. She possesses a remarkable ability to infuse a sense of animation into her still images through her energetic drawing techniques. Notably, the outlines that Qaed uses in her artwork are intentionally uneven, and she strategically incorporates dots and other minor marks around the lines to create an illusion of movement. In the cartoon mentioned above, the pencil appears agitated, engaged in a struggle against the overwhelming advance of the eraser, a struggle that captures the image's inherent tension and conflict.

5.2.2.2 Context

Qaed's 'pencil' cartoon is published on the website Cartooning for Peace, which was launched in 2009. The website was created following a symposium entitled 'Unlearning Intolerance' that was held in 2006 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Twelve cartoonists from different backgrounds met to reflect on

cartoonists' editorial responsibility. As a result of this encounter, the initiative known as Cartooning for Peace was established. This initiative serves as a global network comprising dedicated editorial cartoonists who utilise humour as a means of advocating for cultural respect and freedoms (Cartooning for Peace, online, 2019). Qaed is among the numerous cartoonists featured on this website, where she showcases a permanent display of her cartoons on her personal profile.

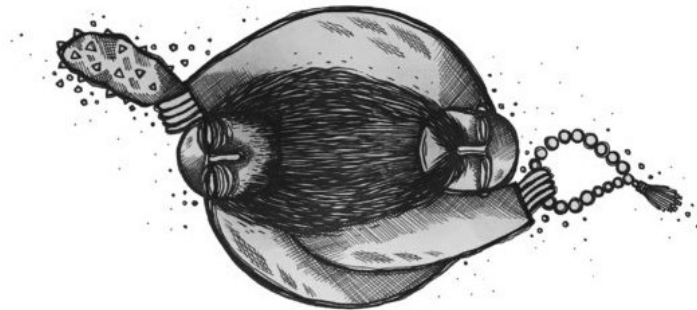
While Qaed may have utilised a commonly recognised connotation associated with the pencil as a symbol of expression, the context in which it is employed remains creative. Despite its deceptive simplicity and ease, her artwork effectively communicates a challenging message. Specifically, she portrays the limitations that the drawing itself imposes. Visual depictions of silencing and threats to freedom of speech often manifest through the symbolism of closed or obscured mouths. Similarly, the censorship of writing and writers is frequently exercised by restricting or obstructing their access to the tools of their craft. In this regard, the pencil holds particular significance as the most intimate, immediate, widely accessible, and affordable tool for many artists and cartoonists.

The four pencils illustrate a gradual process of silencing, and thus the cartoon delivers a stark warning regarding the narrowing margin of what can be 'spoken'. Censorship threatens to devour – is, in fact, devouring – the pencil, against a background (of history, reportage, protest, resistance) that is literally blank. During our email correspondence, the cartoonist suggested that this work could also be read from the bottom to the top, with the pencil gradually growing as the eraser returns to its normal size, signifying an escape or return from having been silenced to freedom of expression. I contend, however, that this suggestion that the cartoon may also be read upside-down constitutes an attempt to preserve

hope. If Sara had wanted us to read the sequence in any other order than from top to bottom, the stages in the pencil's shrinking could have been presented in a circular layout, as is the case in some of her other cartoons.

Untitled Cartoon (no title, no date, and no signature):

Figure 23. Qaed, 'n.d.' Cartooning for Peace, online



Structure and Special Features

As noted in relation to the 'pencil' cartoon shown in Figure 23, Qaed intentionally neglects traditional perspective and vanishing point, and in this instance, it is appropriate to read the blank background as 'the ground', as the viewpoint is one that comes from above, looking down at the subject. Recalling Leeuwen's theory regarding the role of perspective in influencing and sometimes determining the relationship between the image and the viewer, the perspective adopted in this cartoon inevitably gives the spectator a degree of power in the right to question what is taken for granted. This circular central block is the only block that occupies the space in this cartoon. The background is empty and devoid of any disrupting

elements. Qaed seeks to guide the viewer's eye to this mass with the insistence that their gaze remain fixed as they ponder and reflect.

Visual Elements

Characters

The cartoon's two main characters are intertwined and presented as two sides of the same coin, both of which are simultaneously visible. The overlap that makes it difficult to discern where one character begins and the other ends is integral to cartoon's message, as Qaed's deft employment of this visual device conveys a complex idea. Her simple yet powerful lines strike directly at the heart of the matter. The two male characters are equal in size and rendered with similar colours, expressions, and features. One has a long, full beard with a shaved moustache to indicate his ideological background and fundamentalist affiliations with a politically extremist iteration of religion. The other wears a thick moustache that extends to meet and blend into the extremist's beard. Neither character has a mouth, and they do not speak, having no interest in dialogue's potential as a tool. Their eyes are tightly closed, and so they see neither one another nor anything else, and closed, self-contained knot that they form, in tandem with the obstinacy of their expressions, suggests that insight is also not among their strengths.

Symbols:

The man without a moustache holds the *misbaha*, a set of prayer beads rooted in Muslim tradition and spiritual practice. While the mere act of holding a *misbaha* does not inherently signify religious extremism, Qaed uses it as a signifier of the bearded man's identity because most sheikhs and Muslim leaders wear them. The other figure holds a primitive wooden club, which denotes the intolerance in

which the relevant discourse is rooted – a discourse that can swiftly turn to violence. This cartoon contains several cultural/referential codes, including the men's costumes, facial hair styles, and the prayer beads, all of which are evocative of Islam.

Berger has argued that context plays an essential role in communication (Berger, 2014). Analysis of this cartoon within its political and cultural context reveals that it possesses a wealth of symbolism and connotation while also exhibiting remarkable boldness. Qaed, an observant Muslim from a conservative Muslim family, spent her formative years in Bahrain – a country that implements strict adherence to Islamic customs and traditions. Although she currently resides abroad, her Bahraini upbringing significantly shaped her perspective.

In combination, the *misbaha* (prayer beads), the beard, and the shaven moustache serve as symbols of extreme religious fundamentalism in this cartoon. This ideology has aligned itself with the totalitarian political discourse that has permeated parts of the Arab world in recent decades. This discourse fails to represent the diverse religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds of Bahrain's various peoples and sects, a diversity that enriched the town where Sara Qaed grew up, as she herself emphasised during the interview.

The extremist holding the *misbaha* portrayed in the cartoon is intimately – inextricably – linked to his primitive club-wielding counterpart. Together, they represent intolerance and violence, highlighting the connection between extremist religious ideologies and oppressive actions and emphasising the detrimental consequences that these have for society as a whole. The circular knot that binds the characters effectively represents the painful and relentless cycle of violence, counter-violence, and political-religious extremism, whose consequences are disproportionately borne by ordinary people. Qaed uses

metaphor and analogy to evoke the stereotype of the prevailing repressive discourse for the purpose of critiquing and condemning it. Notably, the image has no accompanying text.

Qaed, whose background lies in visual art, typically avoids including text or commentary in her cartoons. The inclusion of commentary in this specific image would eliminate its inherent ambiguity while also attracting the attention of censors and potentially putting the cartoonist at risk. The cartoon is presented without a title, date, or signature, which further contributes to its enigmatic nature.

Medium

As with most of her cartoons, Qaed initially created this artwork by drawing with pen and ink on paper. She then photographed the drawing and applied edits using Photoshop. This cartoon can also be found on Qaed's dedicated page on the Cartooning for Peace website.

Following the conclusion of several short-term contracts with various magazines, Qaed now primarily publishes her cartoons on Instagram. Interestingly, her work on this platform has attracted the attention of not only Qaed's fellow Arab women cartoonists but also the well-known American cartoonist Liza Donnelly. While Qaed acknowledges that she cannot rely solely on cartoons to generate a stable income, her output on Instagram remains remarkably prolific. Despite the financial challenges that she faces, her passion and drive to create new work continue.

During our conversation, Qaed mentioned that she listens to the news while carrying out her daily household chores and then seizes any opportunities that might arise to channel her observations and reflections into her cartoons. This process allows her to comprehend and interpret the world around her in addition

to expressing her opinions on public affairs through her artwork. At the time of writing, Qaed's [Instagram](#) page has approximately 4,000 visible posts, almost all of which are her own cartoons.

A significant portion of Qaed's work centres on Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands, wherein she criticises the occupier's policies and their impact on the Palestinian people. Additionally, approximately 10% of her cartoons critique the oppressive political regimes that operate in several Arab countries. However, the most substantial portion of her corpus addresses the injustice that women face as a result of social and political practices, both on a global scale and within local Arab contexts. Qaed's critical exploration of global politics and current events attests to the keen attention that she affords to global news and current affairs. Her wide-ranging engagement with these issues reflects her deep commitment to shedding light on the various injustices that are at play worldwide.

Fundamentalism and political intolerance are widely acknowledged as problems that plague humanity. These issues hold particular sensitivity in the Arab world by virtue of their entanglement with cultural identities. The criticism of extremist groups that have strayed from authentic and tolerant religious practices can pose a risk, as it may attract hostile or unwanted public attention from individuals and parties who are unable or unwilling to differentiate between Islam and extremist Islamism. In the next cartoon under analysis, Qaed exhibits a remarkable display of constructive and respectful courage, navigating these delicate themes with care while aiming to shed light on the subject matter while maintaining a sense of dignity and fairness.

Figure 24. Qaed, 2023, Instagram

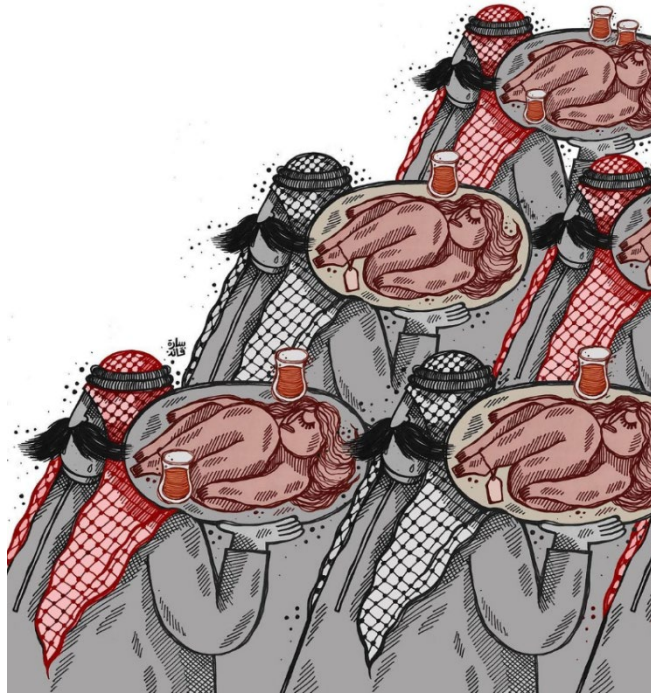


Structure and Special Features

Figure 24 illustrates the cartoonist's view, which is critical of the Taliban regime, specifically the Taliban's limitation of girls' education. The cartoon depicts a young girl boldly throwing papers at a Taliban member. Each paper contains a single word – *Iqra'a*, which translates as 'read' in Arabic. As the first word that God uttered to the prophet Muhammad during the divine revelation, this phrase holds significant cultural value within the Muslim community and serves as a powerful symbol, representing the love for learning and knowledge that is deeply embedded in Islamic beliefs. In a striking act of defiance, the girl takes this divine instruction to 'read' and literally hurls it in the man's face. In doing so, she protests against a regime that restricts girls' education in the name of a religion that fundamentally emphasises the value of reading. This particular cartoon was published on Instagram and garnered attention, receiving six comments, three of

which were in defence of the Taliban's regulations, highlighting the issue's divisive nature.

Figure 25. Qaed, 2023, Instagram



The cartoon shown in Figure 25 evokes men's perception of women as mere objects for consumption, while all the men depicted wear headscarves indicating their Arab heritage. The critique that this cartoon attracted centred primarily on the notion that the cartoonist was employing stereotypical representations to convey prevalent notions regarding Arab women's marginalised status and their treatment at the hands of Arab men. The cartoon elicited diverse reactions, with differing interpretations and viewpoints emerging from the audience. Of the 12 comments it received on Instagram, eight expressed condemnations towards the cartoon. Significantly and problematically, six of the eight negative responses were authored by women. The critical feedback shed light on the complexities and sensitivities surrounding the depiction of gender dynamics and cultural

identities. Nonetheless, the cartoon showcases Sara Qaed's deep concern for women's issues.

Figure 26. Qaed, 2022, Instagram



Qaed is one of just two Arab female cartoonists who published cartoons in response to the tragic death of Mahsa Amini in Iran in September 2022. Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, died in a hospital after three days in a coma following her arrest by Tehran's morality police for allegedly violating hijab laws. Reports suggest officers beat her head with a baton and slammed it against a vehicle (Gritten, 2022).

In this particular cartoon, Qaed presents a complex interplay of ideas surrounding free will and freedom of expression, which become a matter of life and death. The illustration portrays seven characters, each of whom exhibits wounds and scars, struggling with nooses that are tightly wrapped around their necks. Among these, only one character has her long hair exposed, and notably, she alone succeeds in severing the rope that would otherwise strangle her to death. While Qaed does not align with the Western classification of veiled Muslim women as universally

oppressed, her advocacy for women's freedom of choice is striking. Although Qaed herself wears a veil, she stands in solidarity with the idea that women should have the agency to make their own choices, reflecting her nuanced perspective and her commitment to supporting women's empowerment.

The majority of Qaed's extensive corpus is independently published on her social media pages. Despite the considerable effort she invests in creating new cartoons, Qaed's motivation stems solely from her passion and dedication to the craft itself. However, the drawings that she shares on her personal accounts across social media platforms generate no financial returns for the artist.

This observation raises wider questions regarding the recognition and acknowledgement of Qaed's talent and accomplishments as a cartoonist. It further highlights a potential lack of professional opportunities for Arab women in this field, particularly for those who wish to address challenging and controversial topics. Despite having won the prestigious Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought award in Berlin in 2019, this gifted and prolific cartoonist still lacks a permanent and regular platform as a cartoonist in a printed newspaper or online publication. Consequently, she relies on other projects and employment to secure her income and maintain her independence.

Sara Qaed fearlessly rises to the demands that her career demands of her. While she, like many artists, is undoubtedly influenced by the cultural, social, and political context in which she was raised, she refuses to be confined by it. She continuously pushes boundaries and bravely communicates her thoughts and ideas with a level of honesty that is fuelled by her deep understanding of the political world. Her work is not only original and technically accomplished but also carries a profound sense of passion and sophistication. Qaed acknowledges the immense power that imagery holds. By relying solely on visual expression, with

most of her cartoons free of any accompanying text, she effectively bypasses and transcends the written and spoken debates that often surround her subject matter. This approach enables her to communicate directly and evoke profound emotions, presenting a perspective that resonates with audiences on a deeper level. As Qaed herself has stated,

Cartoons have a unique ability to capture my attention instantly and without any prior deliberation. At that moment, the ideas and perspectives of the 'other side' effortlessly reached me. It's like encountering a new language that opens doors I didn't know existed, allowing me to grasp the essence of the message at first glance. (Qaed, Abwab, online, 2018)

Chapter Six: Hana Hajjar

Figure 27. Hana Hajjar (abouthether.com, 2022)



6.1 Introduction

Hana Hajjar, my third case study, is an artist and cartoonist who was born in Saudi Arabia in 1979. She discovered her talent for drawing cartoons at the age of 12 and is considered Saudi Arabia's sole known female editorial cartoonist (Alyaum, 2006). Her cartoons address political figures, societal practices, and various issues that include gender inequality, politics, and sport. Hajjar courageously occupies a conspicuous position by virtue of Arab female cartoonists' rarity, particularly in her home country of Saudi Arabia. When I began collecting data for my research, I reached out to her, and to my delight, she responded with great kindness. We spoke on the phone a couple of times and then corresponded by email. In addition to her work as a cartoonist, Hana is a wife and a mother and has a great passion for horse breeding. She is a talented

woman from a family that values knowledge: her father actively encouraged her in her education and her pursuit of a career as a cartoonist despite the prevailing stereotypes and their associated challenges (Alyoussef personal correspondence, 2021). Hana explained that drawing became a medium through which she could convey her emotions effectively, and she consistently credits her late father as having been a significant influence in encouraging her to express and present her ideas through cartoons and art. She fondly remembers her father's support and guidance throughout her career (Alyoussef, personal correspondence, 2021).

Hajjar emphasises the importance of drawing in her life as a personal outlet that allows her to think aloud critically in addition to expressing her emotions, whether anger towards the prevailing gender inequality or disapproval of certain social behaviours. When Hajjar was in secondary school, she was asked to participate in a local competition promoting the responsible use of water as part of a national campaign. She was awarded first prize and soon became captivated by humour's power to shed light on important issues (*Arabnews*, 2010). Later, in 2005, she began sharing her cartoons with the English-language newspaper *Arab News*, marking the beginning of her professional journey as an editorial cartoonist (Mubarak, 2007). Throughout her career, she created cartoons that address social and political themes, which she described as venturing into dangerous territory (Alawsat, 2010). However, among the female cartoonists included in my research, it proved particularly difficult to locate Hana's cartoons online, despite her daily publication in *Arab News* over several years. This difficulty may stem from technical issues associated with the *Arab News* platform, as their archives are not publicly available. Furthermore, Hana's personal website is currently unavailable, and the link to it is not functional, despite my attempts to access it

through various browsers. Her Twitter and Instagram accounts have only limited content related to editorial cartoons, and the same goes for her Facebook portfolio.

Hajjar acknowledged that women are inadequately represented in this field. She said that she disregarded other obstacles and criticisms that she faced throughout her career as a cartoonist as her passion for her profession outweighed them – although the specific nature of these obstacles and criticisms is not specified. When I inquired as to whether she counted restrictions on freedom of expression among the challenges she encountered, she briefly acknowledged its impact. She explained that she set self-imposed boundaries on her cartoons to ensure that her ideas could be conveyed without causing harm or offence. While her work contains elements of criticism and protest, she is mindful of the need to maintain a balance that aligns with her personal moral, educational, and social values. In this way, she navigates the challenge of freedom of expression by finding a middle ground that satisfies her artistic vision while respecting ethical and societal considerations (Alyoussef, personal correspondence, 2021). I would like, at this point, to restate that most of the female cartoonists whom I interviewed as part of this research expressed scepticism and intellectual reservations about the question of freedom of expression, owing to its frequent misappropriation by Western discourse, which often promotes a superficial and generalised perspective when addressing women's oppression in the Arab world. Consequently, whenever this question was explored, it consistently and understandably elicited an element of resentment and led to a diminished response.

While both male and female cartoonists are subject to various sources of pressure, which may vary based on context, region, and policies, I was

particularly interested in discussing with Hana Al Hajjar the unique pressures that she has encountered as a woman in this field and the strategies she employs to navigate and address these challenges. Hajjar said,

No, it has never posed difficulties for me because I never dwelled on it. I have always moved forward with a determined stride because, for me, the cartoon is not just a career, but a deep passion. The presence of women in this field holds great value and significance because women contribute with distinct points of view, which naturally differ from those of men. (Alyoussef, personal correspondence, 2021)

She added, 'Throughout a considerable period of time I actively expressed critical thinking, addressing various issues and concerns. I consider all these endeavours as a cherished legacy. I was not a passive observer; instead, I used my voice, to express ideas.' (ibid). Hajjar stated that women's limited presence in the field of editorial cartoons was likely attributable to a combination of two factors. First, she believes that women may hesitate to publish their critical viewpoints in the press. Additionally, the underrepresentation of female voices in Saudi media at the time contributed to this disparity (Alawsat, 2010).

Specifically, in an interview on the online platform Alyaum in 2006, Hajjar addressed the participation of Arab women in the field of caricature as follows:

The lack of women entering the cartooning field is not limited to the Kingdom [Saudi Arabia] alone but is a prevalent trend across many Arab countries. The reason behind this remains uncertain. It is possible that men have historically dominated this profession, leading to a perception that it is exclusive to them, and this perception may have caused hesitation and caution among women. Additionally, caricature has been closely

associated with politics, and it is commonly believed that women may not naturally be inclined towards politics. However, as women cartoonists, we must challenge these notions and prove otherwise. Women are creative individuals who can showcase their artistic talents in addressing issues and raising awareness. It is essential for us to demonstrate our excellence and defy stereotypes, showcasing that women can excel in this field and contribute unique perspectives. (Alyaum, online 2006)

Throughout our interactions, including the written interview and phone conversations, Hajjar did not exhibit a significant preoccupation with the specificity of being a female cartoonist. At that time, she was the first and only woman to have published editorial cartoons in Saudi Arabia. Press and media outlets apparently place considerably greater emphasis on this than she herself does. She stated that conflicts occurred with official, cultural, or social entities occurred only rarely because she adhered to her cultural norms and observed the boundaries of what should or should not be expressed. Hajjar exercises personal control her artwork's boundaries, choosing what she will and will not depict. For example, she intentionally avoids religion and sexuality as topics, and she has established these boundaries on the basis of her own convictions. She emphasises that she remains true to her Muslim identity by refraining from creating any art or cartoon that contradicts her beliefs (Johnson, online, 2009).

Nonetheless, Hajjar clarified that the prevailing perception of female cartoonists in Saudi Arabia is characterised by the notion that, in contrast to their male counterparts, women lack the endurance and stamina to sustain a long-term presence in the field. She added that she is fortunate to have had unwavering support from her parents throughout her career. However, the demands of family and the responsibilities of raising children appear to have exerted pressure on

Hajjar, with the result that she has stepped away from her profession; since 2011, she has not published any cartoons, with the exception of sporadic instances in which she shared informal drawings on social media platforms covering general themes (Alyoussef, personal correspondence, 2021).

In response to an exhibition showcasing Hajjar's caricatures in Saudi Arabia in 2010, journalist Ebtihal Mubarak commented that despite the promotional poster for the event, which featured a frightened man being chased by a laughing woman with a paintbrush (symbolising her occupation as a cartoonist), Hana Hajjar appears to afford little emphasis to the aspect of being a woman in a predominantly male-dominated field. Rather, her artwork contains subtle and humorous satirical remarks that can target both genders, depending on the subject matter (Mubarak, online, 2010).

6.2 Visual Analysis of Hajjar's Cartoons

Figure 28. Hajjar, 'Untitled' (Johnson, 2009)



Hajjar's drawings capture the societal challenges that women face, shedding light on the negative aspects of their experiences. Figure 28 evokes the intricate and

precarious situation of Arab women who are subject to intense scrutiny from society. The lone woman in the drawing stands surrounded on all sides by hands that hold magnifying glasses, subjecting every aspect of her person, appearance and behaviour to relentless close scrutiny. The hands that grasp the magnifiers in the cartoon are masculine, as is evident from the white sleeves indicating the traditional Saudi male attire. Another male hand extends towards the woman, holding a lit match ready to ignite the fuse that trails out from under her long black dress, symbolising her imminent danger of being burned. The woman appears to be visibly fatigued, drained, and filled with fear.

Figure 29. Hajjar, 'Untitled', (Arab News, 2010)



In the cartoon shown in Figure 29, Hajjar criticises the prohibition of numerous cultural events in Saudi Arabia during the 2000s on the basis of claims that these events were incompatible with local culture. Accompanied by an English caption (*Arab News* is an anglophone publication), the cartoon shows a group of women arriving to attend a fashion show. No male individuals exhibit any interest in attending such an event, but the women's access is barred by a single snarling and enraged man who has nailed planks of wood over the gallery door,

preventing the women from entering. He brandishes a placard that states 'Closed! It's against our culture.'

This perspective underscores the resonance between external influences such as colonialism and the reinforcement of traditional norms and values, a pattern evident across many Arab countries that experienced colonisation at the hands of the French, English, and the preceding Ottoman rule. In some instances, the Ottomans exploited and manipulated cultural elements as a means of reinforcing and legitimising their occupation, leading to the promotion of radicalisation and distorted forms of conventions (Kandiyoti, 1988). Other authorities, such as the French mandate and the British colonisers, attempted to modify indigenous cultures, thus jeopardising identity, nationality, and honour. Heightened adherence to traditions and customs thus emerged as a response aimed at safeguarding these essential rights (Saini, 2023; Joubin, 2013).

This resonates with Mernissi's analysis highlighting the interconnectedness between colonialism and the tendency to overemphasise adherence to long-standing customs and cultural identity. For example, according to Mernissi, Morocco has historically attracted the attention of foreign powers seeking to colonise the nation with the result that the responsibility of preserving ancient traditions and customs increasingly fell on women's shoulders. Despite her mother's efforts to challenge it, Mernissi's father justified maintaining a harem in their household as a means of upholding tradition. He argued that the country was undergoing challenging times owing to the presence of foreign armies and emphasised that their culture was under threat. Consequently, he believed that it

was crucial to exercise strict adherence to certain traditions as a means of protecting cultural identity (Mernissi, 1975).

This dynamic was also evident in Saudi Arabia during the period when Hajjar's cartoons were published, as the perceived threat of Western influence intensified efforts to safeguard Islamic culture and values. In response, there was a heightened emphasis on the preservation of traditional customs, with women often positioned as the guardians of cultural identity and morality in the face of external pressures.

Figure 30. Hajjar, 'Untitled' (Satirarkivet.se, 2010)



Figure 31. Hajjar, 'Untitled' (Google Images, 2010)



In Figures 30–31, Hajjar portrays the issue of discrimination as it relates to appearance and sexual harassment against women when they apply for positions predominantly controlled by men. This is further compounded by the gender disparity that persists in relation to job opportunities, whereby women enjoy fewer opportunities and less likelihood of success than men, as signified by the weighing scales. Hajjar acknowledges that venturing beyond conventional boundaries, albeit cautiously, is crucial for driving progressive changes: ‘I enjoy creating thought-provoking and contentious cartoons and I strive to encourage deep contemplation, yet I am mindful of not exceeding societal limitations’ (CNN, 2010). Hajjar admitted that when her cartoons were rejected, she would typically proceed to publish them on her personal website, HanaHajjar.com. As stated previously, however, her website is no longer available, for unknown reasons.

My review of online interviews, published articles, and personal interactions with Hajjar reveals that she recognises the significance of respecting her environment’s cultural, social, and religious norms. She considers this to be both appropriate and necessary, and she stated that while she expresses societal discontent through her art, she nevertheless exercises caution so that she can

maintain her employment and can continue publishing her work (Alyaum, 2010: CNN, 2010).

Chapter Seven: Riham El-Hour

Figure 32. Riham El-Hour (*The Moroccan World News*, 2016)



7.1 Introduction

Riham El-Hour is a Moroccan woman of Palestinian origin born in Kenitra, Morocco, in 1977. She was Morocco's first female cartoonist and the first woman to be part of the Union of Moroccan Professional Cartoonists (Falardeau, 2020). El-Hour developed a passion for cartoons during her childhood. In the year 2000, her work was recognised by UNESCO, which had a profound impact on her life and marked the beginning of her professional career. El-Hour was among a distinguished group of 100 influential women recognised in 2016 by the BBC in its annual list highlighting women's significant contributions to various fields. The list also included the Egyptian cartoonist Doaa Eladl alongside other notable Arab and international women (Igrouane, 2016; BBC, 2016).

El-Hour grew up in a family of educational professionals for whom culture occupies a prominent place. She spent most of her free time reading the books available on the bookshelves of her family home. From an early age, she found herself attracted to the world of expression through drawing with brushes and

colours, with her parents' encouragement. She scribbled the family's neighbours' walls, until her family provided her with a box of paper and colours and asked her to stay away from people's walls. El-Hour considers the UNESCO Protecting Cultural Heritage prize that she was awarded in 2000 to have been the first step in her career as a cartoonist. The prize motivated her to intensify her contributions to national competitions in her country, Morocco, with the support of her family and some of her teachers (Alyoussef, personal correspondence, 2021).

In our written correspondence, El-Hour expressed her appreciation for the support and professional guidance that she has received from her male counterparts in the field of editorial cartoons:

Influenced by my family environment and fellow artist friends' support, I was drawn to cartoon drawings. My cartoonist colleagues have always been generous in offering guidance, advice, and support, and they played a significant role in shaping my professional journey in the cartoon field. They encouraged me to participate in caricature exhibitions and festivals, particularly the annual Chefchaouen Festival, which gathers cartoonists from all over Morocco. (Alyoussef, personal correspondence, 2021)

In her own words, El-Hour expressed that the art of caricature gave her a voice and served as a powerful means of breaking the silence that surrounds women's issues and patriarchal discourse. She became an active participant in the conversation through her drawings, by entering her work in competitions, and by participating in exhibitions:

Through the art of caricature, I also discovered a powerful tool for breaking the silence on societal issues, particularly in advocating for women's rights and fighting alongside them for equality and other important causes. This

was evident through two exhibitions at the Mohammed V Theatre in Rabat. These exhibitions aimed to highlight the contributions and achievements of these extraordinary women in Moroccan society (Alyoussef, personal correspondence, 2021).

In discussing the challenges she encountered, El-Hour shared that the most challenging factor for her was the struggle to obtain a secure platform on which she could publish her cartoons regularly. While she found occasional opportunities in women's magazines, these publications were often vulnerable to the threat of closure from the lack of advertising revenue and low readership, resulting on more than one occasion in the loss of her job. Like Lena Merhej, the Lebanese cartoonist discussed earlier, who emphasised the lack of support and funding for artistic and cultural projects centred on Arab women's issues, El-Hour notes the scarcity and precarity of related platforms:

Regarding the challenges I faced, they primarily revolved around the difficulty of finding a journalistic platform that would embrace my cartoon work and provide me with a dedicated space within their daily columns. However, it did not take long for me to discover a suitable outlet in certain women's magazines that focused on women's issues. These magazines, however, eventually ceased publication due to various constraints, such as limited readership, lack of advertisements, and financial limitations. (Alyoussef, personal correspondence, 2021).

In a 2020 study of female cartoonists worldwide, Mira Falardeau interviewed Riham El-Hour. Their discussion encompassed various aspects of her career as an Arab female cartoonist, and El-Hour asserted that she does not perceive direct censorship at work but rather observes self-censorship among editors with respect to what they publish on their platforms. Provided one adheres to the

newspaper's guidelines and the editors' approach, no obstacles to publication will be encountered: 'At home [Morocco], even if there is no censorship in terms of power, there is some rather upstream, at the head of the editorial directions' (Falardeau, 2020, p. 227).

El-Hour reiterated and reaffirmed this point in our correspondence in the following year, 2021. According to her, freedom of expression remains a constant and pressing concern for all cartoonists, male and female, owing to the sharp language, direct style, and satirical approach that they adopt when confronting issues that are politically and economically sensitive. She asserted that her work has never been hindered by limitations on freedom of expression, observing, however, that throughout her career, she has adhered to the editorial plan and strategy of the magazine or newspaper for which she works, which encompasses 'legal requirements and national values.' (Alyoussef, El-Hour interview, 2021).

The outcome of the interview with Riham El-Hour highlights her unique perspective as a pioneer in the Moroccan cartooning industry. Contrary to expectations, she reported that she had not encountered challenges that were specifically related to her gender. Rather, she emphasised that as a woman in a male-dominated field, she has been afforded considerable support and encouragement, with male colleagues treating her like family. El-Hour also reflected on the significance of female cartoonists in the Arab political and cultural scene, noting their ability to bring fresh perspectives and effectively express the concerns of women on the emotional, intellectual, and social levels. She considers their presence to be representative of a welcome shift away from entrenched patriarchal narratives (Alyoussef, El-Hour interview, 2021).

While Morocco's first professional female cartoonist and her Egyptian counterpart, Doaa Eladl who I will discuss next, both clearly acknowledge the

support they have received from male colleagues and peers in this traditionally male-dominated field, it is reasonable to speculate that their experience may differ from that of other female cartoonists whose names remain unknown, those who may not have succeeded in establishing themselves in the profession owing to a lack of comparable support. Riham El-Hour acknowledged women's limited presence in this field without explicitly outlining the reasons for this or directly connecting such scarcity to a prevailing male-dominated mindset. She expressed her desire to witness an increase in the number of Arab female cartoonists contributing to satirical art within the Arab press without mentioning specific names or examples that might serve as references for further research.

7.2 Visual Analysis of El-Hour's Cartoons

Figure 33. El-Hour (www.vh.ma, 2017)



El-Hour drew the cartoon shown in Figure 33 in protest against Morocco's guardianship law, which requires adult women to seek approval from a male guardian should they wish to travel, marry, or be released from prison. They may

be required to obtain their guardian's consent to work or access healthcare (www.hrw.org, 2016). The cartoon again incorporates the imagery of chains and keys. The man has possession of the key to the padlock of the chains that are shackling the woman's feet, and he is on the verge of swallowing it, symbolising the total elimination of her hopes for freedom and emancipation. The figure of the woman, who is depicted with suitcases as though preparing to embark on a journey, whether for work, leisure, personal reasons, or on a professional assignment, finds herself bound by the chain of male guardianship. El-Hour here employs digital tools to add vibrant colours to the cartoon with the aim of conveying the message in a straightforward manner without concerning herself with perspective. This cartoon is widely recognised as the centrepiece of El-Hour's collection and has been extensively shared across numerous articles and platforms.

Figure 34. El-Hour, 'Untitled' (Cartoon Movement, 2017)



The cartoon shown in Figure 34, which was published on the Cartoon Movement website in 2017, depicts a man who is wielding a hammer and striking at the female symbol that lies on the ground. The man's facial expression reveals that he is angry, and the white lines that surround him and the hammer as well as the lines that suggest the female symbol's resistance convey strong emotions and frustration. Despite the man's furious attempts to destroy the symbol, he fails and,

instead, begins to crumble and decay owing to the violence of his actions. In fact, the man harms himself more than that which he seeks to destroy, as the arc of the hammer's force travels through the female symbol without shattering it while the attacker who fractures and crumbles away from behind with each blow he strikes. The man's decay can be attributed to the realisation that the harm he attempts to inflict on the woman is detrimental not only to women and womanhood but also to men and society at large, ultimately resulting in a self-destructive act. El-Hour's work consistently demonstrates a genuine passion and interest in women's issues, and the paucity of publicly available examples is disappointing. As with Hana Hajjar, and despite El-Hour's consistent publication of her artwork on a daily basis over several years, I could find only a minimal number of her published cartoons. Most of her artwork could only be found on her personal Instagram page.

As Morocco's first renowned female cartoonist, Riham El-Hour, who launched her artistic career in 2000, represents a breakthrough in a field long dominated by men. As noted in the literature review, El-Hour's omission from a book about caricature in Morocco was particularly striking to me, particularly considering that she was actively participating in exhibitions and publishing her cartoons in various periodicals at the time. This omission is evident in Ibrahim Alhaissen's 2018 book on cartoons in Morocco, which spans approximately 150 pages but does not mention Riham El-Hour (Alhaissen, 2018).

Riham El-Hour's work has also faced criticisms of being over-cautious, subdued and simplistic. Chourouq Nasri notably expressed this viewpoint in her article

entitled 'The Liberating Force of Art, Humour, and Social Media: Women Cartoonists of the Arab Spring' in 2017, stating:

Riham Al Hour and Mya are the country's only women cartoonists. But they both failed to exploit the potential impact of cartooning. Their humour is unsophisticated and is characterised by a desire not to shock or confront. Their style is "old-fashioned", and the symbolic language they use is rather explicit and stereotyped. (Nasri, 2017, p. 172)

Unfortunately, since her full name has not been supplied, I have been unable to identify the Moroccan female cartoonist referred to above only as 'Mya'.

In the context of Nasri's critique, I feel compelled to acknowledge that prior to embarking on this research, I initially tended to adopt a harsher view of the artistic contributions of Arab women cartoonists. However, as I reflected on what I read and what I learned from those who kindly took the time to respond to my questions, my admiration for their accomplishments in this challenging and demanding field grew exponentially. I developed a deeper appreciation of the courage with which they forged ahead across such difficult terrain. These women have exhibited remarkable bravery by stepping forward and engaging in the struggle to reclaim their voices and make themselves heard through their art.

Chapter Eight: Doaa Eladl

Figure 35. Doaa Eladl (Wikipedia, March 21, 2023)



8.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the experiences and practice of Doaa Eladl, an acclaimed Egyptian cartoonist born in 1979 in Damietta, whose work, notable for the strength of its draughtsmanship, both highlights and disrupts the prolonged dearth of female cartoonists in the Arabic press. This case study will include an overview of her life and the obstacles she has faced (including an accusation of religious defamation) as well as a visual contextual analysis of several of her cartoons. This will help elucidate this cartoonist's work and experience, situating it in relation to my research questions and in relation to the work and experience of the other cartoonists discussed. I should state at the outset that I did not succeed in securing Doaa's participation in a personal interview. Therefore, my

analysis will rely on interviews that Eladl gave with the BBC and the literature available in publications and on online platforms.

Eladl is currently working for *Al-Masry Al-Youm* ('The Egyptian Today') newspaper and is known for her satirical cartoons, which are robustly characterised by political, social and cultural themes. She graduated with a degree in Fine Arts from Alexandria University in 2000 (Irancartoon, 2020) and began publishing her cartoons in 2005 (Genderiyya-Wiki, 2020). In addition to political corruption, Eladl's cartoons have addressed numerous sensitive gender-related issues, including sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, and child marriage. In 2016, she was included among the BBC's list of the year's 100 most inspirational and influential women (BBC, 2016). She was also named as one of the most inspirational women in 2016 and 2017 in the Mahmoud Kahlil Award for political cartoons in Beirut (Cartoon Movement, 2018).

In 2012, the lawyer Khaled El-Masry, the Secretary General of a group called ('ironically,' as Eladl commented in a 2013 interview with *Al-Masry Al-Youm*) the National Centre for Defence of Freedoms, filed a complaint against Eladl on the grounds that she had defamed religious prophets. The cartoon to which he objected depicts an Egyptian man with angel wings lecturing Adam and Eve. The man tells Adam and Eve that they would never have been expelled from heaven if they had voted in favour of the new draft constitution in the Egyptian referendum in 2012 (Benjamin, 2013; Zin-Eldeen, 2012). An investigation was launched by

the Attorney General but was dropped after Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi left office (sampsoniaway.org, 2013).

Figure 36. Eladl (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2012)



In the cartoon (Figure 36), the angel tells Adam and Eve, 'If you had said 'yes', as I did, to the new constitution, you would not be expelled from Heaven!!' Eladl argued that Khaled El-Masry had misinterpreted her work and that the drawing was far from blasphemous. She explained that her caricature criticised the claim that some sheikhs had made on satellite TV channels – namely, that voting 'yes'

(to the new constitution) would take the voters to heaven while voting 'no' would see them sent to hell (Basant, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 2012).

Figure 37. Eladl, 'Constitution of the Muslim Brotherhood' (Cartoon Movement, 2012)



Following the accusation of blasphemy, Eladl published the cartoon shown in Figure 37 to lampoon restrictions on expression under the rule of the Islamist political party in Egypt in 2012, which had come to power after Mubarak was ousted. The cartoon depicts freedom of expression (represented by the ink pen) being sentenced to death by the sheikh who holds the book of the Islamist fundamentalist constitution. Although she was glad to have witnessed the ousting of Mubarak in 2010, Eladl was vehemently opposed to the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood that succeeded him, believing that women's situation worsened in the aftermath of the Tahrir Square revolution.

Although she is an observant Muslim and wears the hijab voluntarily, Eladl felt that it was her duty to use her caricatures to defend her own and other women's

rights against those who used their own interpretations of religious texts to control and dominate (Benjamin, 2013). Although she represents herself wearing the hijab, in her vast collection of work on online platforms and in her book, she depicts her female characters in clothes that would be considered bold according to the dress code of Arab and Muslim women. This might be interpreted as a critique of stereotypical views of Arab women.

8.2 50 Drawings and More About Women

Most of the awards that Eladl has received from several international contests and organisations have been in recognition of her work concerning women's rights and status. She also published a book on the same theme containing over 50 cartoons dedicated to women's rights in general and Arabic women's rights specifically. 'I am a woman', Doaa says, 'and I have been exposed to most of the disrespectful conduct towards women which I criticise in my cartoons' (Channel 4 News, online, 2017). She also observed that, to the best of her extensive

knowledge of Arab cartoonists' works, most of these issues have gone unaddressed (ibid.).

Figure 38. Eladl, book cover for 50 Drawings and More about Women (2016)

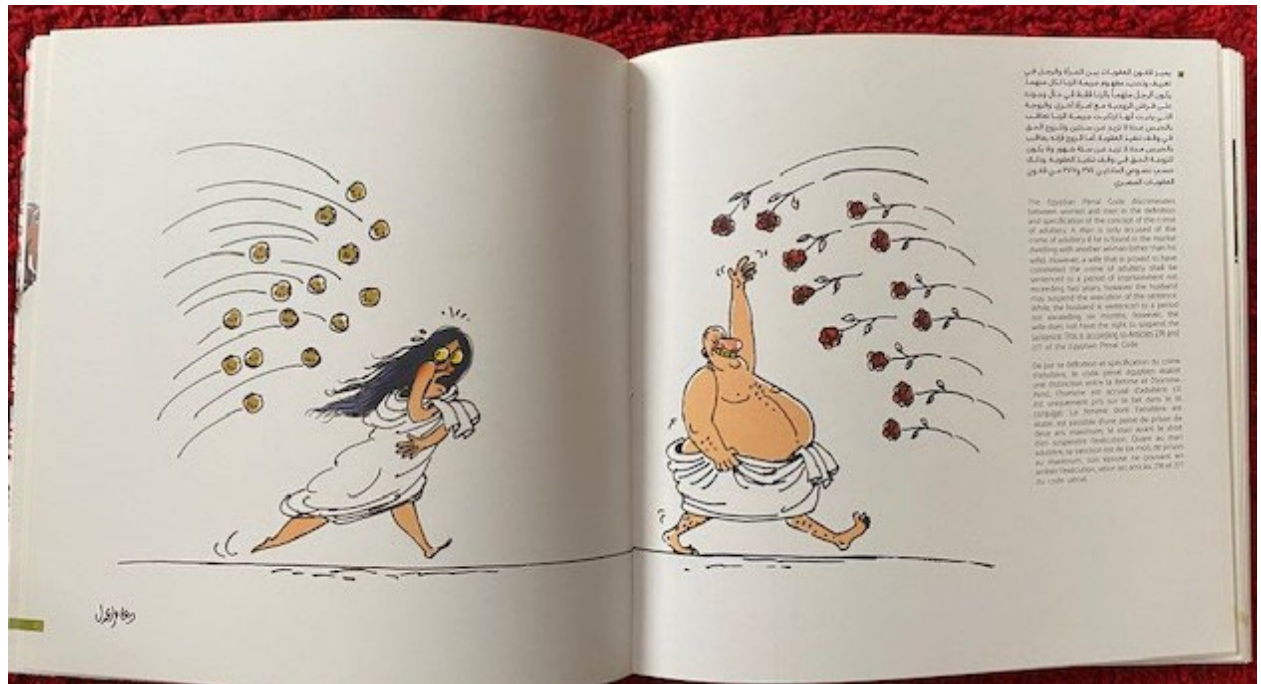


Eladl's preoccupation with defending the status of Arab women is evident in her book, for which she enlisted the assistance of a personal status law expert and researcher, Siham Ali. Among the subjects treated is the law that discriminates against women, accompanied by a cartoon that deals with that specific issue, some examples of which will be considered below. Eladl states in her introduction to the book:

I have decided to collect my drawings on women over the past years in one publication, with the dozens of drawings I did in collaboration with various feminist organizations in and out of Egypt, which have added much to my information and experience. To this compilation I added new

drawings dealing with controversial issues never caricatured before, i.e. Laws discriminating against women. I highlighted some of them, as they would need several books and studies. (Eladl, 2016, p.4)

Figure 39. Eladl, Gender discrimination in adultery, in 50 Drawings and More about Women (2016, p. 45)



The above example illustrates how Eladl displayed her cartoons accompanied by the discriminatory regulation or code under consideration – in this case, the Egyptian penal code. The text on the right explains that the code discriminates between men and women in defining and specifying the crime of adultery. According to Articles 274 and 277 of the Egyptian Penal Code, a married woman whose adultery is established shall be punished with detention for a period not exceeding two years. An adulterous husband, however, is detained for only six months, with the possibility of a suspended sentence, and only if he commits adultery in the house he shares with his wife. The cartoon highlights this law's bias in favour of the man through the drawing of the couple who have been caught in the act of fleeing with the bedsheets hastily gathered up to conceal their nakedness. However, while the adulterous man triumphantly saunters away, a

conquering hero receiving acclaim and roses thrown by admirers, the shamed and terrified woman cowers away from the stones that are hurled at her.

Actual social conventions and norms reveal an even wider gap in favour of men. Men's sexual adventures are a matter of pride and boasting, socially received with indulgent laughter and winks; the man's social status will go unharmed and may even be enhanced by his reputation as a philanderer. Meanwhile, the consequences for women are considerably graver, as she faces condemnation, disgust, and social exclusion, including the risk of violence and femicide.

8.2.1 Female Genital Mutilation Cartoon

This thought-provoking cartoon addresses the customary practice of female genital mutilation, depicting a man standing on a ladder and reaching up between

a pair of female legs, depicted as young branches budding with leaves, with a pair of scissors poised to cut the single flower at the junction of the thighs.

Figure 40. Eladl, 'Female genital mutilation' (Cartoon Movement, 2013)

female genital mutilation



Eladl commented on this cartoon as follows:

I criticize habits that I think are wrong and should be totally reconsidered, like female circumcision, which does not stem from the Muslim religion at all. Some Muslim scholars say female circumcision is a crime against humanity and unrelated to Islam. Yet it is still practised in Egypt's

countryside and, unfortunately, in the name of religion. (Benjamin, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 2013)

As mentioned earlier, Eladl has published numerous cartoons to raise awareness of the social practices that cause both physical and mental harm to women of all ages and backgrounds. She seeks to distinguish these habits from the false religious legitimacy that they have acquired from having been embedded in the collective consciousness through custom and tradition. The cartoon shown in Figure 40 concerns female genital mutilation, which is widely practised in Egypt, particularly in remote villages and rural Upper Egypt Al Sa'eed, which has led to the deaths of many women. The cartoon was published on various platforms, such as the Cartoon Movement in 2013, and was also included in her book in 2016.

Eladl distributes her visual elements wittily within the space that the cartoon provides. Ignoring perspective, she focuses on her characters' size and volume and their proportions relative to one another. The man holds his black scissors (the colour of malice in Arab culture) to cut the red (the colour of seduction and passion) flower that represents the intimate female organ. The visual representation gives the possibility of immediate access yet also ambiguity. The cartoon is distinguished as an effective form of communication by its capacity to use simple lines to address long-standing and harmful social problems. However, when analysing visual signs and symbols in caricatures, it is essential to have a deep understanding of the prevailing culture and norms so that one might better understand the cartoonist's underlying message. Gillian Rose makes this point in her book on visual methodologies when she states that to comprehend the dominant codes and referent systems requires a broad understanding of cultural dynamics (Rose, 2016, p.132). Similarly, I would argue that as a researcher of

Arab descent, I possess a robust understanding of the 'cultural dynamics' outlined by Rose as well as having experienced their ramifications in my own professional and personal life.

The stark contrast in size between the male and female figures conveys a tone of irony and sarcasm. The man, depicted with a grimly down-turned mouth beneath a large black moustache, holds oversized black scissors. The scissors' black colour may link them metaphorically to the moustache, which is emblematic of machismo in Arab culture.

8.2.2 A Woman's Voice Is *Awrah* (Forbidden)

Eladl drew the cartoon shown in Figure 41 in 2012 (the date is visible in the lower left corner), and it was published on several platforms, including on the Cartoon Movement website in 2013, where it was accompanied by the following text:

The Voice of Egyptian Women. This cartoon is selected in our project 360 Degrees for the theme of women's rights after the Arab Spring and is based on a comment by Rona Elgebaly: 'The new constitution's articles do not talk about women's rights or freedoms and do not respect the international treaties that protect her dignity. Therefore, I see that if the constitution is implemented the woman will go backward again and things will get worse. There are articles that the constitution should have addressed, and freedom should have been given to women in many issues. The new constitution does not give rights to the divorced woman nor the woman as the only breadwinner and did not guarantee the female worker equal rights. The only thing it leads to is allowing 13-year-olds

getting married. Many rights have been wasted that should have been protected'. (Cartoon movement, online, 2013)

Figure 41. Eladl, 'A woman's voice is awrah' (Cartoon Movement, 2012)



The cartoon criticises the extremist groups that target Egyptian women, particularly at the social level. Eladl sought to highlight some ultra-extremist religious groups' argument that a woman's voice is *awrah* (forbidden), and the graphic features convey her visual messages with striking clarity. The man on the left of the drawing has a shaved moustache, indicating his affiliation with Islamist extremism. The man's long black beard becomes a hand that is clamped over the mouth of the woman who stands beside him to silence her. Its strength is represented by the muscles' apparent flexing as it tightens its forceful grip on the

mouth, evidenced by the two small, curved motion lines above the beard that, in the language of cartoons and comics, signify the concept of active motion.

Figure 42. Republished in 2013 titled 'A Woman's Voice is a Revolution' (w-t-w.org, 2013)



The cartoon was republished with its new title after the celebrated activist Shahenda Maklad was attacked by a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood during a sit-in outside the Presidential Palace, causing widespread outrage in 2013. Maklad's activism did not centre solely on women's rights but focused more generally on the country's independence and elevation. Maklad has a long history of activism, having spoken out against the ruling authority in her youth, led peasant workers in the fight against feudalism, participated in the struggle against the regime of ousted Egyptian President Mubarak, and joined protests and demonstrations organised by the 'Kefaya' movement. She was involved in the demonstrations of June 30, 2013, which voiced rejection of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule. She had first caught the attention of the world's press in 1965 when she interrupted the presidential motorcade of Abdel Nasser and Che Guevara on a visit to Kamsheesh to present them with a petition of demands from the people in her village; when Abdel Nasser's car stopped at the bridge, she approached him, shook hands with him and his guest, delivered the president a

message from the peasants, then addressed Guevara saying: 'We are the peasants of the revolutionary village of Kamsheesh'. This incident saw the village become a global shrine that was attended by world dignitaries that included the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and feminist author Simone de Beauvoir (Alahram, online, 2016; Mahmoud, online, 2016). Eladl revised her cartoon's title from 'A woman's voice is *awrah* (forbidden)' to 'A woman's voice is a revolution' and added the words 'A salute to Shahenda Maklad' to the bottom right of the drawing.

Eladl's works betray her strong engagement with left-wing intellectual ideas that few (men or women) dare to express through drawings. This engagement is particularly remarkable when the cartoonist's committed religious background is considered. Her rigorous analytical approach insists on a distinction between that which is properly doctrinal – that is, originating from scripture – and that which is not, particularly later accumulations and accretions of social customs and practices, including those that are oppressive and harmful to women. Below is another example of her work demonstrating her resistance to fundamentalism in Egypt.

Figure 43. Eladl, 'Veiled', 50 Drawings and More about Women (2016)



Figure 44. Eladl, 'Untitled', 50 Drawings and More about Women (2016)



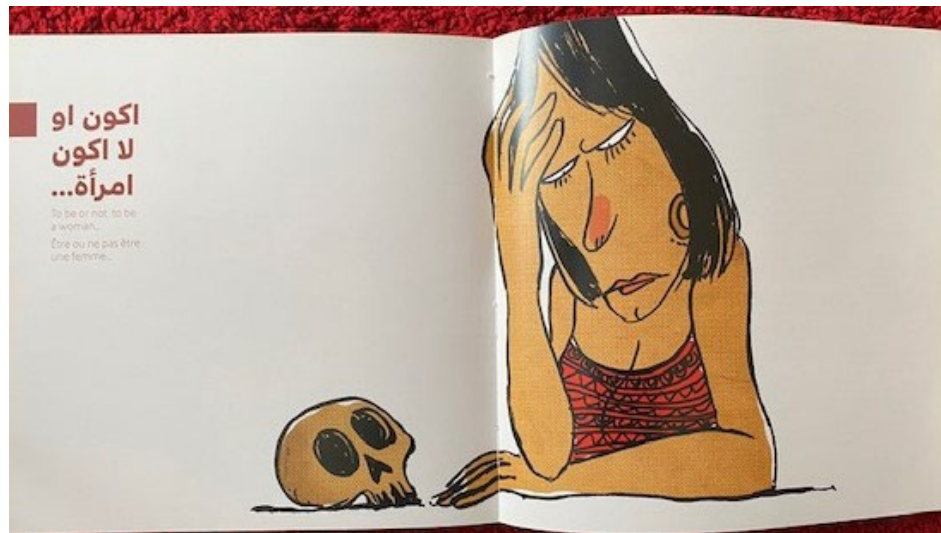
In several press interviews, Eladl has acknowledged her good fortune in having the support of her male colleagues in the newspaper for which she works. Figure 44 hints at her work as a lone female practitioner in a male-dominated profession. She appears as an unveiled woman striding confidently among male co-workers. As in previous cartoons, Eladl uses the size differences between characters to convey meaning, and the woman in this cartoon stands taller than her male

counterparts. The cartoon further conveys a symbolic connection between the men's long, thick moustaches and the woman's flowing hair, which are linked together in a chain that suggests equal collaboration between the men and the woman, who apparently operate on the same level. This impression is reinforced by their matching dark business attire, identical folders, and their shared air of self-possession as they stride forward. However, closer examination reveals a subtle critique: despite the semblance of unity, the group consists of four men and only one woman, highlighting the imbalance in representation and suggesting that true equality is still far from having been realised.

8.2.3 To Be or Not to Be a Woman

Eladl's book, *50 Drawings and More about Women*, warrants special attention here as an outstanding resource within the existing literature: it stands out as the sole collection of cartoons featuring Arab women that have been drawn by an Arab woman herself. The cartoons offer a unique perspective on the challenges that women encounter on a daily basis both within and beyond domestic settings. The comments on the cartoons are presented from right to left, following the Arabic reading direction and page order.

Figure 45. Eladl, 'To be or not to be a woman', 50 Drawings and More about Women (2016)



Eladl is resolute in conveying her perspectives on gender-related matters throughout the book. The initial section explores social norms and traditional attitudes pertaining to women, illustrating cultural conventions that have been heavily influenced by patriarchal values that are ingrained in the collective consciousness. The focus shifts to Egyptian personal status law and its penal codes in the second section, including the above-mentioned example concerning the discriminatory nature of adultery laws against women.

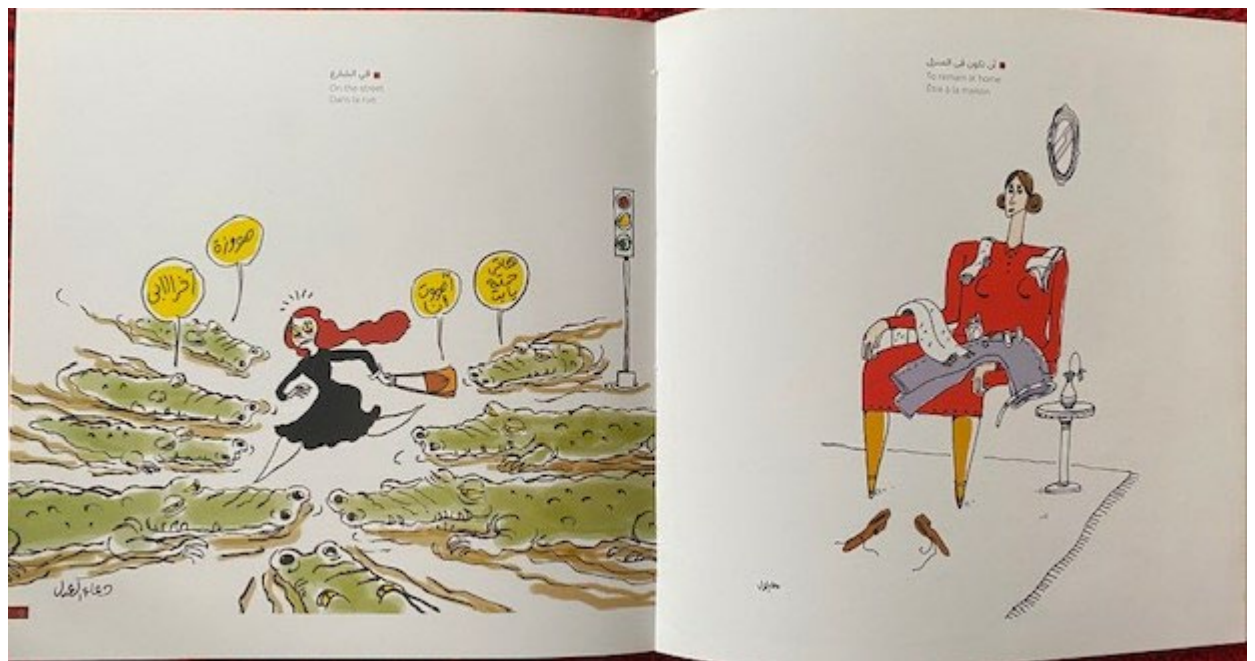
Immediately after the introduction, *50 drawings and more about women* opens with the above thought-provoking cartoon depicting a woman who appears to be contemplating her existential situation and the profound fate that awaits her. The cartoon portrays the dilemmas she has encountered and that she continues to confront, all of which will be explored further in the book's subsequent pages. The caption accompanying the artwork reads 'To be or not to be a woman...' in Arabic, English, and French, inviting readers whose linguistic backgrounds are different to engage with the drawing's profound message.

The skull's presence in the caricature serves as a Shakespearean reference, as reflected in the commentary, and it effectively conveys the intended message. In

gazing at the skull, the woman appears to confront the unknown and the unsettling. Meanwhile, the skull gazes back towards her. The sadness and anxiety evident on the woman's face reflect her contemplation of past troubles and her concerns about the future that lies ahead.

Eladl's drawings are renowned for their incorporation of wide cultural references. For example, Hala G. Sami (2015) acknowledged the skill with which Eladl enriches her cartoons through the integration of concepts that already hold significance in popular culture. This approach allows her to engage intelligently with her readers and effectively convey her messages. This is exemplified by her portrayal of the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, who held iconic status in Egyptian and Arab culture during the seventies and nineties and whose impact endures to this day. Using Umm Kulthum's portrait and song lyrics, Eladl adeptly places them in different contexts, exhibiting her wittiness and adeptness in using the familiar to explore new perspectives and insights (Sami, 2015).

Figure 46. Eladl, 'To remain at home' (R), 'On the street' (L) in 50 Drawings and More about Women (2016, pp. 8–9)

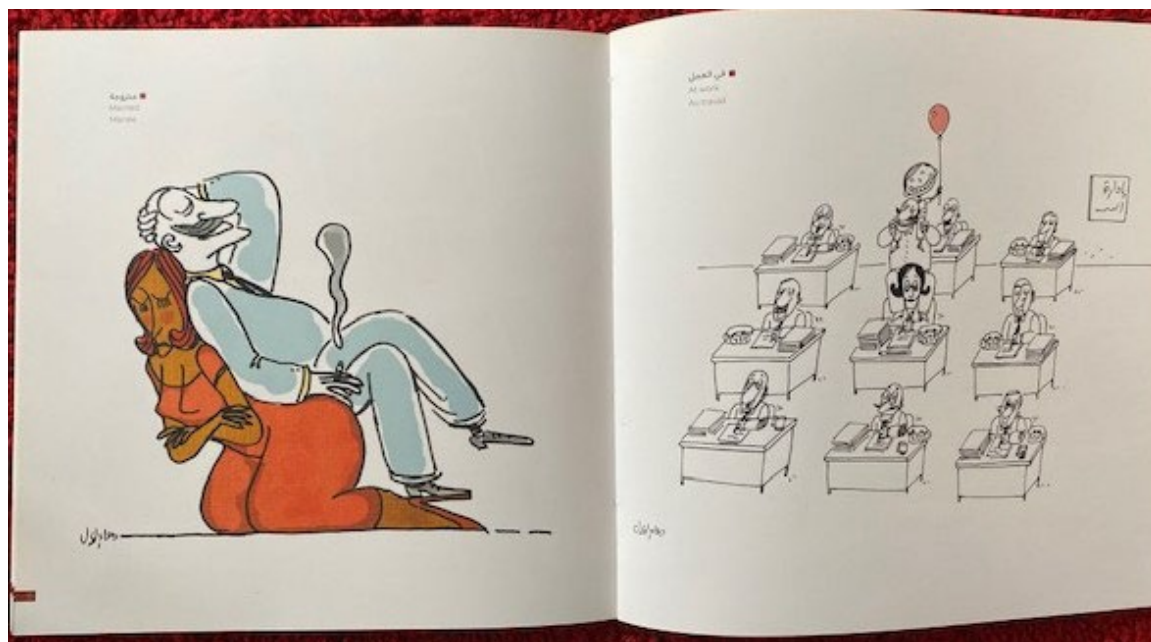


The drawing on the right depicts women's domestic status, regardless of whether she is employed or not. Domestic chores typically fall to women and constitute a significant additional workload, particularly if she also works outside the home. It is customary for a woman to say as a joke – albeit not without a degree of bitterness – that she now prefers being unemployed because she cannot bear the combined burdens of paid work and unpaid domestic labour. As the drawing reveals, although she is entrusted with all these burdens, she occupies a marginal position in the house. A common proverb in Arabic states that a person is no more than a chair leg, indicating that a person is a decoration or piece of furniture with no power of decision or right of opinion. The title of the drawing, 'To Be at Home', offers a glimpse into the psychological implications of women's experiences of neglect and confinement within domestic boundaries.

On the opposing, left-hand side page, the cartoon titled 'On the Street' explores the sexual harassment to which Egyptian women are subjected in the street, where verbal and occasional physical harassment is a frequent and public occurrence. She portrays the perpetrators as crocodiles (signifying predation and

a lack of humanity and sympathy) because, in Arab culture, the crocodile's thick skin represents insensitivity. Speech bubbles contain colloquial vulgarisms of the sort with which women are routinely catcalled and harassed in public spaces.

Figure 47. Eladl, 'At work' (R), 'Married' (L), 50 Drawings and More about Women (2016, pp. 10–11)



In the cartoon on the right, titled 'At Work', Eladl's drawings further emphasise her views of Egyptian women's daily battles. Here, the working woman seated at her desk has accumulated a more significant backlog of uncompleted work than her male colleagues owing to the additional burdens of marriage and motherhood that she must bear. On the left, the cartoon titled 'Married' depicts a woman who is being used as a chair on which her husband rests comfortably, using the heel of her shoe as a footrest. The woman's anger and frustration are clearly conveyed by her flushed cheeks and evoked by her red dress. Meanwhile, her husband, calm and relaxed, smokes his cigarette and unwinds.

8.2.4 Discrimination and Girls' Education

The comment on the cartoon in Figure 48 states 'In some poor villages and Upper Egypt, low-income families still prefer educating their sons to their daughters.'

Figure 48. Eladl, 'Girls' Education', 50 Drawings and More about Women (2016, p. 23)



This cartoon resonates with the subject matter Perez's book *Invisible Women*, in which the author demonstrates how the fact that the world's systems have been largely designed by men for men has affected women's lives. Government policies, medical research, technology, workplaces, and media systematically ignore half of the population, which profoundly impacts society (Perez, 2020). Eladl wittily addresses the issue with her depiction of a young girl standing in front of a book, which represents 'the portal of learning'. The door handle is higher than the child's head, and from her viewpoint, she cannot see what we can – that this forbidding closed door is the cover of a gigantic book. However, even if she had the key to the lock and could reach the handle, it would still be of no use; with a

startled and dismayed expression, she perceives the sign, as on a public lavatory, that clearly indicates 'Men Only'.

8.2.5 Stop Violence Against Women

The cartoon in Figure 49 was also republished in Eladl's 2016 book. Again, playing with the contrast in size, the diminutive stature of the man, who strains on tiptoe and holds an axe with which he attempts to topple the monumental female leg that towers over him, indicates a cluster of male anxieties. In *Scheherazade goes to the West* (2001), Fatima Mernissi examined the deep-seated fear of impotence among Arab men, highlighting how masculine literature has reshaped both literary and verbal narratives in response to anxieties about women's power. She points out that even the famous 'One Thousand and One Nights' had an alternative version that Mernissi's grandmother related to her. Interestingly, Mernissi observes that the two versions differ depending on the narrator's gender, highlighting how gendered perspectives influence approaches to storytelling (Mernissi, 2001). Men fear that they will appear weak next to a strong and independent woman. The enraged man in the cartoon, characterised by his large black moustache and the axe, barely reaches halfway up the female leg that he attacks. It appears that this realisation, the stark contrast in physical stature, fuels his anger.

Figure 49. Eladi, 'Violence Against Women' (Cartoon Movement, 2012)



8.2.6 Art as a Means of Emancipation

This penultimate drawing in Eladi's collection (Figure 50) hints at her overall message to her readers. Her career as a cartoonist enables Eladi to express herself and her thoughts, and caricature appears to liberate her from that which Bourdieu termed 'habitus' – the 'second nature' that individuals develop as a result of the rules and conventions that permeate society and shape human awareness and experience (Bourdieu, 1991). The dancer in the drawing executes a graceful elevation of one leg, with such strength that the chain shackling her ankles is broken. Rather than the pale pink of classical ballet tights, the dancer's powerful athletic legs are the shiny black of the barrel of a fountain pen, the same symbol of artistic expression that was on the executioner's block in the 2012 cartoon 'Constitution of the Muslim Brotherhood'. Indeed, the dancer's legs terminate in ink pen nibs rather than pointe ballet shoes, suggesting that her

artistic practice facilitates her liberation from all the limitations and restrictions – both internal and external – of the society in which she was raised.

Figure 50. Eladl, 'Untitled', in 50 Drawings and More about Women (2016, p. 23)



The importance of exploring Eladl's experience is that she has escaped some of the limitations and obstacles with which other Arab female cartoonists, including myself, have struggled, a point that I shall elaborate further in my autoethnography. Eladl was supported by her male colleagues and had access to a daily newspaper platform as well as having her work published on other virtual platforms. She received local and international recognition and was awarded numerous times. She managed to navigate social and cultural pressure, including the judicial case that accused her of blasphemy, without being discouraged or intimidated into silence; on the contrary, her visual vocabulary exhibits a greater degree of daring. Contemplation of Eladl's copious production

and bold content reveals this artist to be singularly situated within the scene of Arab women cartoonists. She is unusual as an Arab woman who fits the requirements of an editorial cartoonist: published in a daily political and social newspaper, her highly political work is recognised, known, and enjoys a significant degree of popularity among readers throughout the Arab world.

Chapter Nine: Autoethnography – Afraa Alyoussef

Figure 51. 'Self-portrait 2013' (personal archive)



9.1 Introduction

In light of my dual role as both a researcher and an Arab female cartoonist within the context of this research, I deemed it necessary to write about my personal experiences, as they reveal critical aspects of my perspective as a female cartoonist and reflections on my surrounding context. Autoethnography blends autobiographical elements with critical analysis with the aim of exploring and understanding both individual experiences and their cultural significance. It involves self-reflection and an exploration of cultural contexts. Reflection on one's cultural experiences can enrich the research and enhance one's self-understanding as well as the understanding of the circumstances that have played a formative role (Tony, 2014). My objective in this autoethnography is to reveal the correlation between self-awareness and cultural and social identity, to offer an enriched understanding of the research topic, and to add my own insights

into the experiences of the Arab female cartoonists included in this study and perhaps also those who have remained invisible.

Writing my story has supported my development of self-understanding and my understanding of my emotional experiences. Reflection on my observations of injustice, domination, and inequalities has heightened my understanding of the factors that have influenced my consciousness and experiences.

This approach prioritises the cultivation of critical and interpretative abilities to obtain a deeper understanding of the interplay between my own encounters and the prevailing gendered discourse within the cultural and social framework. This methodology served the understanding of individual engagement with cultural limitations by situating personal experiences within the broader context. Initially, I had some reservations about the use of autoethnography as an analytical approach, perhaps stemming from my introverted disposition or from social pressures that cause me to feel vulnerable when exposed. However, self-narrative proved to be a valuable research methodology for exploring my emotional and intellectual experiences.

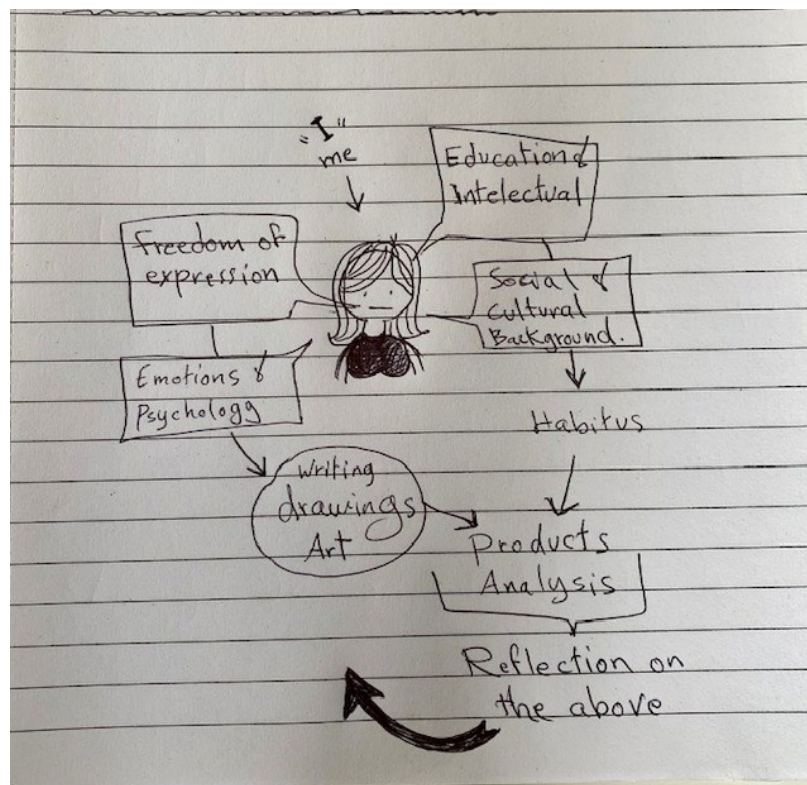
Proof is elusive when it comes to human affairs. Social nexus is not a laboratory, laws of cause and effect are trivial when it comes to the soul, and the meaning of events and actions is to be found elsewhere, as in the

mix of emotion and reasoning that took the anthropologist on her or his travel in the first place. (Taussig, 2011, p. XI)

Reflecting on the complexities of my own experiences, which encompass moments of both happiness and sorrow, I recognise the significance of giving voice to these experiences.

The below planning sketch that helped me to determine how best to extract the critical elements from the self-narrative discussed in this chapter. I dissect my own experience, tracing the social, educational, and cultural threads, the environment in which I was raised, and how that shaped my consciousness and perspective in order to find out how these factors have influenced my artistic output.

Figure 52. Research sketch



This preliminary sketch was useful in establishing connections between my personal artistic output and its broader cultural, social, and political context. I

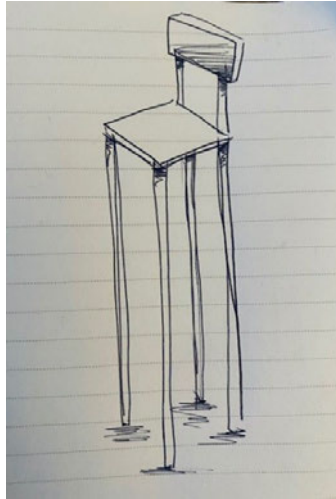
outlined my experience based on analysis of my drawings, undertaking a semantic analysis of the visual components and introducing information about the context in which each drawing was created as well as the associated or subsequent emotions. My autoethnography comprises several elements and stages, as follows:

- Reflections on my emotions, observations and thoughts based on visual analysis of my cartoons and recollection of the contexts and circumstances in which they were created.
- Reflections on the relevant literature and theoretical observations to lend context and support to my analysis (e.g. patriarchal discourse in the region and associated culture).
- Drawings selected primarily from my cartoon portfolio. The narrative structure will be based on analyses of the cartoons and their associated experiences, thoughts, social and cultural dynamics, and emotional drivers. While chronological order is considered, it may not be the main structural element.
- Consideration of the ethical implications of sharing personal experiences involving others and maintenance of confidentiality and anonymisation throughout this autoethnography if necessary.

My first cartoon and the initial development of my drawing abilities

When I was eight years old, I sketched a chair with exceptionally high legs, similar to the one in the drawing below. Its purpose was to prevent my cousin, who had a habit of breaking my toys, from reaching my toy box on top of the wardrobe.

Figure 53. Copy of drawing from memory, estimated date of original: 1981



My experience of utilising drawing as a means of altering or rectifying reality constituted a momentous childhood discovery that marked the genesis of my love of cartoons. I perceive cartoons as a means of reframing events and evoking connections and associations, and they have helped me to challenge the purported truth of authoritative images and ideas. As an overprotected only child from a lower-middle-class household, I spent most of my time alone and at home, and I filled this time with hobbies, chiefly reading and drawing. I recognised from a young age, in the late 1970s, that I was subject to different rules and norms as a female than the men around me. Although diverse ideological influences were at play in Syria during that period, cultural and social practices remained conservative and sustained a bias in favour of patriarchal values (Kayali, 2018). Even during the left-wing wave influenced by the Soviet Union, a notable disparity persisted between intellectual concepts that advocated women's parity and the biased societal norms that shaped actual experiences.

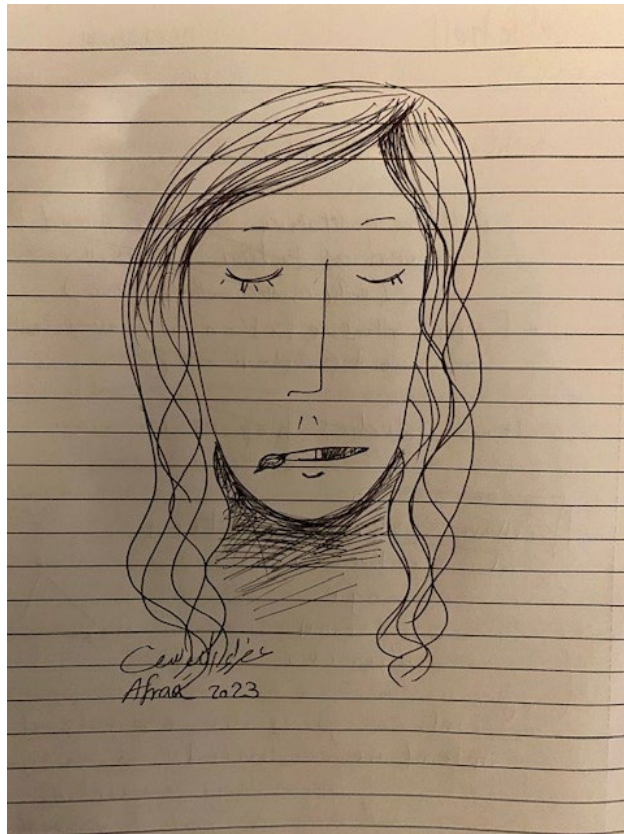
Although I was raised in a family that was not excessively conservative, I witnessed numerous endeavours on the part of those around me to convince my father to marry another woman so that she might bear a male child, a suggestion that my father consistently countered. Growing up, I observed this as a contradiction: although the majority of my family members and their friends held

leftist and secular inclinations, as a female, I was still obliged to conform to the conventions established by a conservative, male-dominated society that determined my social life and dictated my conduct.

The ability to generate alternative realities by re-creating and modifying the existing one empowers me to create a space that makes the tangible world more tolerable. When the material world proved to be distressing, my imaginary domain offered an outlet for creative expression and agency. My addition of several extra centimetres to the sketched wooden legs of the blue chair was an act of power that had a significant impact on my emotions and exerted a persistent influence on my life up to the present moment. The cartoonist can draw on exaggeration and humour to convey their perspective and reveal what lies beneath the surface visuals and literal meanings: 'For exaggeration to be comic, it must not appear as an aim, but rather as a means that the artist is using in order to make manifest to our eyes the distortions which he sees in embryo' (Bergson, 2008, p. 20).

This ability supported my growth, both spiritually and personally, so that I could more easily adjust to my environment and release any resentment that I might be harbouring towards human imperfections and social constraints. Reading allowed me to escape from reality while also offering an insight into other worlds, but it was drawing that haunted me and that became my most effective means of expression. Even as I contemplated writing the plan for this autoethnography, I used drawing as a means of overcoming writer's block, as in the example I am sharing below. This sketch illustrates drawing's capacity to liberate me to say that which I cannot express verbally, as symbolised by the paintbrush that replaces my mouth. My brush serves as my voice.

Figure 54. Alyoussef, 'My voice' (personal notebook, 2023)



While my parents supported my decision to study in Damascus University's Faculty of Art, my broader social circle espoused contrasting opinions regarding the hierarchy of professions in the Middle East, where medicine occupies the position of highest regard, followed by engineering and law. The relatively low status of the arts as a professional calling exerted an enduring impact on both my career and personality and ultimately shaped my satirical outlook to which my drawings gave expression.

9.2 Crisis Among Male Intellectuals (Skyscape)

Figure 55. Alyoussef, 'Skyscape' (Al-Fonoun magazine, undated)



While the house in which I grew up was modest, it contained a rich library of books that encompassed many and varied schools of thought, literature, poetry, history, and classic and contemporary drama. For example, our shelves contained the complete works of renowned Moroccan feminist and writer Fatima Mernissi as well as the literary contributions of Nawal Al-Saadawi, a physician and author who explored the challenges that Egyptian women confronted within the cultural context of the Arab region. We also owned books by Al-Sawwah and Al-Qemany, two secular thinkers and historians whose work was dedicated to exploring the origins of religions and mass cultural formation in the region of the Fertile Crescent and Mesopotamia. Among my friends, I belonged to the fortunate few who had the opportunity to read a covertly copied edition of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which was banned in Syria along with numerous

other countries. While my parents curated our library and facilitated my access to some forbidden texts, allowing me the freedom to criticise and question subjects considered taboo by many of my peers, the intellectual freedom that I enjoyed was misaligned with the social constraints I encountered. Consequently, I experienced a persistent dissonance – one that remains very much with me – between my sense of personal intellectual freedom and its incompatibility with a certain set of social expectations, which prevented me from fully embracing a lifestyle that aligned with my intellectual pursuits.

These circumstances provided the stimulus for the cartoon shown in Figure 55 in which the bookshelves of the home library extend upwards into the sky, rising from the ceilingless domestic space to the clouds and towering over the small figure of an intellectual male seated in the armchair next to the reading lamp. It fills me with anguish and remorse to recollect that the male figure depicted in this cartoon symbolised my father. At the time the cartoon was produced, I failed to comprehend how this loving father who had taught me the value of critical thinking and who had allowed and encouraged me to explore multiple diverse schools of thought, simultaneously imposed such apparently unreasonable restrictions on my social freedoms. While I blamed my parents as a teenager, I now have sufficient understanding to acknowledge that their choices were not entirely within their control. I have come to recognise that I would be similarly compelled to safeguard my own children (especially daughters) were I obliged to navigate that society while avoiding isolation and exclusion. Hegemonic processes are difficult to counteract, as Berger argued: 'Hegemony is defined as ideological domination that is invisible because it is all-pervasive' (Berger, 2014, p.111). For example, from that period to the present, sex education was and remains absent from

Syria's educational curricula as is also the case in numerous other Arab countries.

I recall diligently sketching and inking one book after another with the intention of capturing what I had read and absorbed from the many books in our home library, books that had formed my understanding and shaped my perspective. In reality, however, I encountered significant social constraints, as symbolised by the caged woman who gazes through the bars at the man who reads in comfort and who holds the keys to her freedom. Cages are a recurring visual symbol in my cartoons, and over time, the cage within me grew as a result of my increasing conformity to societal norms and the limits that I learned to impose on myself. The world in which we live is constructed on history, ideologies, cultural concepts and literature that are distorted by the failure to account for half of humanity and as Perez argued, 'This failure has led to gaps in data and corruption in what we think of ourselves' (Perez, 2019, p. 21). Both Judith Butler and Edward Said argued that there exist within any given society established rules, both explicit and implicit, that are enforced by oppressive powers. The dominant discourse, political dictatorship, social conventions, or religious dogma foster a narrow allegiance that stifles creativity (Said, 1996; Butler, 1997).

Butler has also argued that gender constitutes a social performance through which women either conform to or challenge traditional concepts of womanhood and that this gender performativity, which is instrumental in upholding societal norms, is culturally and socially constructed (Butler, 1997). This resonates with my own experiences of the role that I was expected to play within the social context in which women must secure and maintain a good reputation and social approval. Normative behaviour and conventions result from a traditional social setting that is established over time. Social normalisation both imposed on and

inculcated in me a fixed perception of who I am or who I should be. The imposition of gender performance on the self-emerged from long-standing societal stereotypes surrounding womanhood and the expectations of how femaleness should be performed. While I do not share in Butler's wholesale rejection of femaleness' biological basis and tend to agree with other scholars, such as Saini and Paglia, who acknowledge gender's biological aspect (Paglia, 1990; Saini, 2023), my own experiences have offered direct evidence of how gender performance has been influenced and shaped by dominant cultural norms within mainstream society. These societal pressures are not limited to specific politically or religiously conservative ideological groups but also extend to individuals who espouse secular and socialist beliefs. Gender is not solely constructed through discourse and performance but is deeply intertwined with social and economic systems.

The changes we see through time are gradual and fitful, stealing into people's lives over generations until they couldn't imagine themselves any other way. After all, this is how social transformation usually works: by normalising what would have been unthinkable before. (Saini, 2023, p. 18)

I largely refrain from including textual explanations or captions in my cartoons, a preference that partly derives from my desire to maintain an open space for multiple interpretations and to allow readers to engage in their own creative processes. Additionally, I find a sense of security in the absence of words and the space it creates for the protective veil of ambiguity.

After I graduated, I occasionally collaborated with *Al-Fonoun* magazine, a publication dedicated to covering media and theatre-related productions. The above cartoon, 'Skyscape' was published in *Al-Fonoun* magazine around 1999

(an estimated date because I do not have a print copy of the magazine, it is not available digitally, and the issue is missing from the editor's archive, as he informed me in a phone conversation).

Below, I shall discuss my early days as an emerging cartoonist and shed some light on the challenges associated with political censorship in the Syrian media. I shall also discuss an instance of censorship that I believe was not specifically influenced by my gender but nonetheless highlighted and compounded the existing challenges associated with being a woman in this profession.

9.3 The Sculpture

Figure 56. Alyoussef, 'Untitled' (*Al Thawra*, 2000, copy 2013)



After graduating in 1999, I embarked on a career as a freelance cartoonist in addition to working with a weekly supplement associated with a prominent official Syrian government newspaper, *Al Thawra*. The periodical focused predominantly on contemporary cultural and intellectual topics. During one particular week in 2000, I sent the editor a cartoon that depicted a sculpture of a conquistador-type figure whose commanding pose and luxurious attire exuded power and status. However, the sculpture's shadow revealed an enfeebled old man. My intention with this cartoon was to convey the inherent vulnerability that underlies the arrogance of power, with the message that decay, and weakness reside beneath

authority's external carapace. I created the cartoon to express my opposition to the oppressive political pressure that women encountered in most aspects of our lives in Syria. I distinctly recall the caution with which I attempted to mitigate the boldness of the idea and evade censorship, concealing the message of protest within a historical statue and relying on the temporal distance to provide some cover. To my surprise, the editor distorted the drawing's message without my permission by including a caption that would further obscure the cartoon's meaning in the eyes of the censors. The inserted comment diverted the focus from the covert political message, transforming it into a toothless joke with a connection to Shakespearean literature. I was infuriated by the editorial intervention on the cartoon's publication and promptly contacted the editor to query the rationale behind this decision. His response was unequivocal: 'It is advisable to steer away from any hint of political issues'.

In distorting my cartoon's message, the editor had effectively eliminated the opportunity for commentary and critical inquiry regarding the Syrian state and its authority. In an apparent effort to preserve and safeguard his own position, he sought to neutralise my cartoon's impact by completely altering its message, which he believed ventured beyond the boundaries of political tolerability; this act of self-censorship exhibited limitations that might be even stricter than those imposed by the government censors. According to Foucault, governments utilise society itself as their main mechanism of control, which leads individuals to regulate and police themselves (Foucault, 1982). Self-censorship induced me to make my cartoons' messages as discreet as possible where sensitive subjects were concerned and to refrain from including textual elements in most cases. Similarly, it prompted the editor to impose a misleading message on my cartoon without consulting me. This incident had a profound impact on my artistic

expression and caused me to narrow the boundaries that I had set for myself when creating cartoons.

In the next section, I shall examine the ramifications that gender inequality and the prevailing hierarchical structure have had with respect to my experience of the cartooning profession and my artistic output. In particular, I shall examine a cartoon that demonstrates how political and societal pressures blend to aggravate an already iniquitous context.

9.4 The Cage

Figure 57. Alyoussef, 'The Cage' (Facebook, 2010)



The fearful editor who imposed boundaries on himself and subsequently on me illustrates how individuals and societies operate through the complex interplay of power dynamics, oppression, cultural influences, and prevailing discourses that shape political and social hierarchies. In the context of gender relations, men

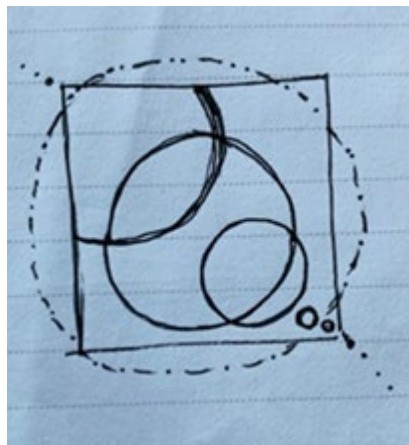
largely oppress women, whether they hold positions of power or are themselves ruled and oppressed by a more dominant entity. Within the Arab world, as in most societies worldwide (albeit to a different extent), men occupy a dominant position over women. However, it is crucial to recognise that men themselves suffer under the oppression of higher authorities, whether through political suppression or through societal and cultural pressures. In the above cartoon, the clothing of the man confined within the outer cage reflects his lower-middle-class status, while the dominant upper hand that holds both cages exhibits the accoutrements of masculine power dressing – a crisp shirt, expensive cufflinks, and the end cuff of a formal blazer – symbolising higher social status and greater financial/political power. The external blue frame evokes a Foucauldian notion of an overarching system of control, illustrating how everyone is bound within a web of power and oppression and emphasising the layered and pervasive nature of these dynamics. This frame serves as both a boundary for the reader and a means of highlighting that additional cages and layers of oppression exist. The frame restricts the viewer's space, suggesting the existence of multiple cages and various levels of domination. The smallest inner cage contains a trapped woman whose crouched, restricted position indicates her vulnerability and powerlessness.

As men experience a decline in power in relation to the state, they mitigate their own sense of oppressed victimhood by exerting authority over women and becoming oppressors themselves. Rebecca Joubin explored a specific aspect of gender relations and social-political dynamics in her book *The Politics of Love: Sexuality, Gender, and Marriage in Syrian Television Drama* (2013). Joubin noted that amid the challenging political circumstances in Syria, the prevailing response from men often sees them channelling their anger into an assertion of authority

over women in an attempt to compensate for their own feelings of powerlessness. Over time, men's diminishing political influence in tandem with increased oppression has engendered an elevated aggression towards women (Joubin, 2013, p.14). Joubin's book was published three years after I created the double cage cartoon, highlighting the similarities in our critique of gender and power dynamics in the region during that period. This perspective, which other authors echoes, emphasises that while women's subordination by men is significant and troubling, we should not overlook the subordination of men themselves, which is also established through social, economic and political class interactions (Ghoussoub & Sinclair, 2000).

While analysing the cages cartoon, I created a diagram to help me examine the visual composition and structural elements that I employed to convey the underlying concept and communicate the intended message.

Figure 58. Alyoussef, research sketch, 2020

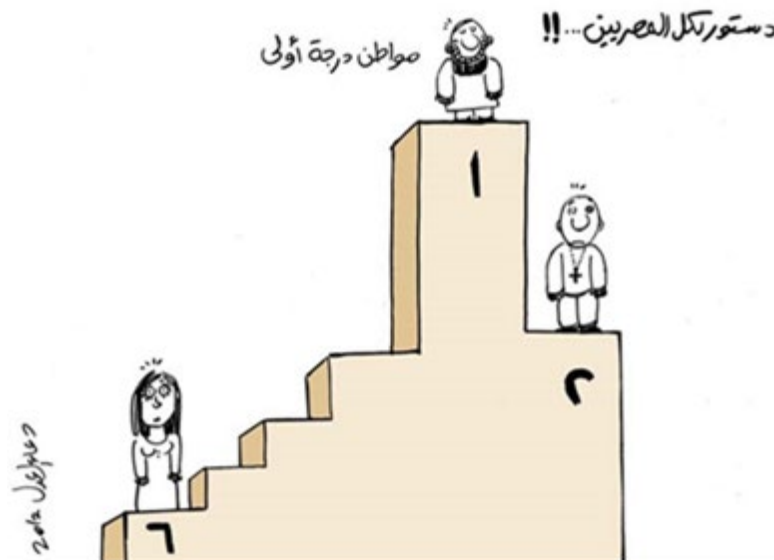


The spatial arrangement and visual hierarchy here create a sense of open-endedness in both directions. Moving from the upper side downward, it becomes evident that a higher authority exerts oppressive control over each lower level. Beyond the cartoon frame's visible boundaries is the implied presence of a superior power that exerts its influence invisibly, though the intention is that the

spectator should sense its weight and impact. The diagram's lower right-hand corner of the diagram includes some smaller circles that signify the existence of yet more marginalised groups, potentially representing those women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

This reflection prompts a comparison between my own drawing, and one created by the Egyptian cartoonist Doaa Eladl, discussed in the previous chapter, with the aim of juxtaposing our perspectives across differences in time and geographical region.

Figure 59. Eladl, 'The new constitution' (Arab cartoon website, 2012)



In 2012, Eladl published a cartoon representing the hierarchy at play in Egyptian society and law, showing the status accorded to minorities and women in the constitution and regulations imposed by the Muslim Brotherhood government after the revolution in Egypt. Her cartoon conveys the ways in which the constitution prioritises Muslim men over men from minority backgrounds and gives precedence to all men above all women. The cartoon depicts an Olympic-style podium with a man from a Muslim background positioned in the top place and with text next to him stating 'first-class citizen' while the text on the right

reads: 'Constitution for all Egyptians...!!'. In second place is a man from a different religious background (he wears a cross to symbolise his Christian affiliation). Finally, six levels down, as the number '٦' in Arabic suggests, is the woman, in sixth place, not third, to illustrate the extent of the gender gap in society. The striking visual gap between the second level and the sixth level, where the woman stands, conveys the cartoonist's criticism of women's legal and social position under the new constitution.

The depiction of the sequence of oppression in my cartoon protesting political and social injustice in Syria and Eladl's unequal podium may be read together in the context of the findings of Joubin (2013) and Ghoussoub and Sinclair (2000) towards an understanding of the existing structural imbalance that has influenced and shaped our lives and our artwork. As far as the financial and other reward structures of the profession are concerned, I shared the 'Cage' cartoon on my personal Facebook account and page and among my portfolio pictures on numerous other platforms. I received no financial compensation for this cartoon nor for most of my other work. Like many female cartoonists, I publish my art primarily as a means of expressing my perspectives and views on the world around me, while relying on other fields for income. The absence of any adequate financial reward highlights the precarity that often characterises this profession, particularly for women.

9.5 Crucified

Figure 60. Alyoussef, 'Crucified' (Facebook, 2009)



Male domination is so rooted in our collective unconscious that we no longer even see it... and manages to perpetuate itself so very easily that it is often possible for the most intolerable conditions of existence to appear as acceptable and even natural. (Bourdieu, 1991)

The above quotation from Bourdieu illustrates why male dominance is such a pernicious force in society. Historically, gender-based societal norms impose restrictions on individual freedom and behaviour. Virtues such as loyalty and honour have been co-opted in service of these societal norms and, over time, traditions and religious practices evolve in accordance with the social codes they reinforce (Saini, 2023). In the Middle East in particular, patriarchy's dominance is closely interwoven with the structure of social relationships (Ghoussoub & Sinclair, 2000). In the case of Syria, as in many other countries, patriarchal discourse has long been established across various aspects of social, cultural, and political life; the difficulty in resisting it stems from its concealed nature, as it

remains hidden beneath layers of norms and conventions, deeply embedded in the social fabric. According to Wendy Brown, once individuals embrace self-governance, a significant part of the battle against oppressive external authority shifts towards and within themselves (Brown, 1998). This internal battle entails resisting deeply ingrained misconceptions within our thought processes, self-imposed censorship, and barriers and boundaries that we have drawn for ourselves.

The inversion of the female symbol in the cartoon shown in Figure 60 evokes the crucifix, a Christian symbol of suffering, pain, and sacrifice. Consequently, the altered symbol conveys a fresh meaning: the oppression of women on the basis of their gender, the cross that they have no choice but to bear. The crucified woman wears a crown of thorns, and blood drips from her hands, which are nailed to the arms of the cross, and from her feet into the hole at the circle's centre – typically positioned at the top of the symbol , inverted here, it forms the base of the crucifix. I created this cartoon during a very difficult period in my life. I was unhappily married, a mother to a four-year-old son and facing unemployment and financial hardship. I felt trapped by my circumstances and powerless to control my own fate. In despair, I resorted to silence within the confines of my home, and in seeking to express my pain and to feel any sense of agency or power, I returned to drawing. My cartoon portfolio includes various iterations of this drawing, featuring both colour and black-and-white versions, depicting women in different costumes and at various ages. These multiple copies in my file reflect the profound personal connection that I felt with the cartoon's message, the enduring impact of having found a way to express my emotional pain during the

time I created it, and the ongoing importance of my ability to speak these truths through my work.

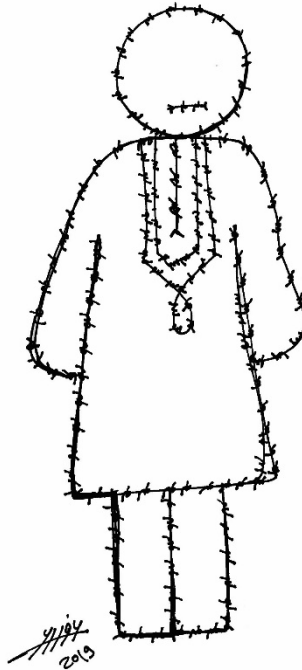
Connotations are born out of cultural codes, norms, and ideologies, and they often operate subtly to shape our understanding and perception of the world (Berger, 2014). Examination of the connotations attached to signs can allow us to uncover the hidden meanings, power dynamics, and social ideologies embedded within various forms of communication. For example, Barthes emphasises the importance of looking beyond signs' literal meanings to discover and decode communication's symbolic, cultural, and contextual layers, encouraging critical analysis and interpretation to reveal signs' deeper connotations and implicit messages (Barthes, 1972). This cartoon invoked symbolic meanings, utilising the cross as a representative sign that extends beyond its religious connotations. For me, the cross symbolises anguish and the journey through suffering. In combining the female symbol with that of the crucifix – an instrument of the public spectacle of punishment and pain – the symbol acquires a secondary significance and thus creates a new context for a different perception.

At that time in my life, I espoused the belief that much of my anguish was rooted in my gender and the societal expectations imposed on me as a woman. I was well aware that pursuing a divorce would be challenging, both financially and socially, owing to the social stigma it carried. As in Eladl's cartoons, the portrayal of women as overlooked furniture, trapped in the domestic sphere, I also felt neglected and undervalued yet unable to walk away. Every available alternative was fraught with its own difficulties, and for several years, I found myself trapped

in a seemingly inescapable predicament, just like the woman suffering on the cross of her own womanhood.

9.6 Barbed Wire

Figure 61. Alyoussef, 'Barbed Wire' (Facebook, 2019)



According to Adrienne Rich, women's honour in Western societies has traditionally been associated with their chastity: virginity until marriage, and absolute fidelity to their husbands thereafter; meanwhile, honesty has not been highly valued in women, who have frequently been portrayed as unpredictable, deceitful, and indecisive. Men, by contrast, have been expected to prioritise truthfulness in facts rather than emotions. Nonetheless, they have continually lied (Rich, 1979). Gender, sexuality, chastity, and virginity also play significant roles in Arab societies and culture. The social reputations of Arab women and their families is significantly influenced by factors such as the concept of hymen,

virginity, chastity, and the lack of freedom to express their sexuality (Joubin, 2013).

In *Women and Power in the Middle East*, Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomovics state that

Just as honour has offered a measure of protection to family members, it has also been a measure of controlling behaviour, especially women's. The notion of family honour reinforces patriarchal power by circumscribing women's sexuality, movement in social arenas and, to some degree, economic opportunities. (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001, p. 6)

Within the patriarchal system, a trade-off is required when it comes to personal freedom, particularly for women, as they navigate notions of belonging within the family, tribe, or clan and the security and protection that accompany this belonging. This perspective resonates with Ahmed's and Saini's viewpoints, which acknowledge that the rise of the patriarchal system occurred simultaneously with the evolution of the notion of individual ownership and properties for the male descendants. Consequently, fathers had a vested interest in their male offspring to ensure the proper inheritance of their property and land within their lineage (Ahmed, 1992: Saini, 2023).

Here, it is relevant to cite the findings from Ahmed Abdel-Raheem's 2022 study, which investigates distinctions between Arab men and women in the use of language in the texts that accompany caricatures. The study's outcome revealed that Arabic-speaking cultures are characterised by significant psychological and social judgements surrounding the use of prohibited language, including expressions relating to sex, bodily functions, and religion. Furthermore, women's utilisation of humour and irony is often met with negative social evaluation,

labelled as impolite or inappropriate. By contrast, men typically enjoy a more positive reception when they employ such expressions. Women who exhibit aggression, whether overt or veiled, are often perceived by men as a sexual challenge (Abdel-Raheem, online, 2022). Judgements pertaining to the use of forbidden language fall within a broader spectrum of psychological and social sanctions that significantly affect our margin of freedom of expression both as individuals and especially as women. Consequently, when women aim to declare their thoughts publicly, whether through creative writing, artwork, or any other means of self-expression, such prohibitions play a crucial role. My cartoon 'Barbed Wire' sought to convey the complexities of these constraints, which operate on our bodies, our minds, our behaviour and our speech, from both within and outside ourselves.

The next cartoon elucidates some of my emotions as a woman with a background in art and a passion for satirical drawing and the ways in which these served as immensely significant tools of rebellion with inevitable consequences for the dynamics of my social relationships. In 2014, I created a drawing based on my critical view of Western culture, its pretensions, hypocrisy, and double standards,

particularly regarding freedom and democracy. This artwork depicted the Statue of Liberty, symbol of freedom in the West.

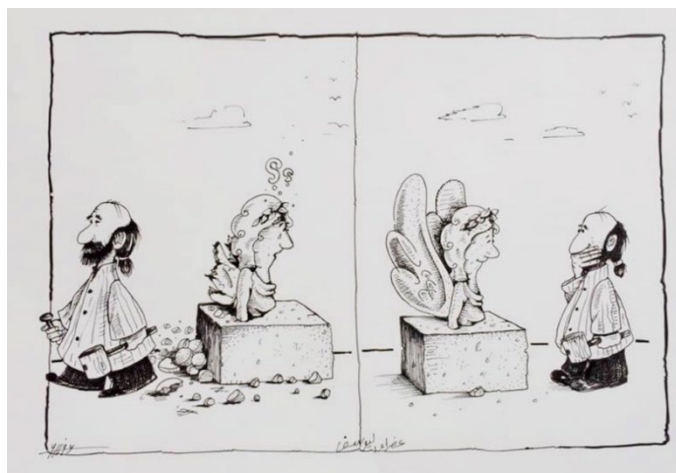
Figure 62. Alyoussef, 'The Statue of Liberty' (2014)



Hidden under her long flowing dress, the woman's feet are shackled with a ball and chain. While the woman ostensibly holds her head high and brandishes the torch of freedom aloft, she is in fact imprisoned on her pedestal, unable to take a single step in any direction.

9.7 The Sculptor

Figure 63. Alyoussef, 'The Sculptor' (Facebook, 2007)



In 2007, I created a cartoon with two drawings intended to be read from right to left (the direction of Arabic writing). The drawings depict a sculptor who initially crafts a statue of a winged woman but after reflecting, he elects to destroy her

wings, leaving her bewildered. As I attempt to uncover the contexts behind these caricatures' creation, I vividly recall the events and emotions tied to them, much like the memories and emotions evoked by old photographs. This cartoon was created at a time when I needed to explore and express my dissatisfaction with my status during my marriage. Economically inactive and reluctantly trapped in the role of an incompetent housewife most of the time, I felt marginalised within my own home. I was still learning the English language and moving between towns and cities every six months according to the location requirements of my former husband's job. I was regarded as lacking in useful skills, and my artistic pursuits were viewed as a waste of time. As the years passed, my drawing became a source of annoyance and the subject of numerous arguments on the grounds that it did not generate income, did not constitute real work, and diverting my attention from my management of household responsibilities – that is, the real (unpaid) work that I ought to be doing. The motivation behind my portrayal of the sculptor and the winged statue in drawing 1 of 2 thus becomes evident: It symbolises my happy anticipation of receiving my husband's support, enabling me to fly and pursue my ambitions. The shattered wings depicted in drawing 2 of 2 signify a pivotal shift; my life partner considered my passion for drawing to be superfluous and of no value, and so I would receive no support for creating the conditions necessary for me to pursue an artistic career but would be as static and passive as the stone figure of my drawing. The vandalised statue's dismayed expression in the second drawing is an accurate representation of my perceived inadequacy and powerlessness in the situation in which I found myself.

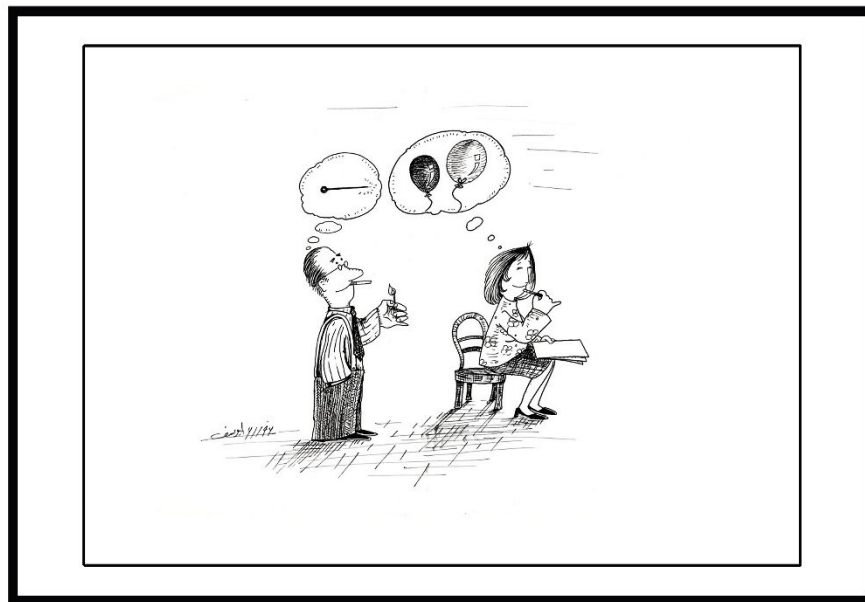
In addition to the cages, wings and marionette strings are recurring visual elements in my cartoons. These elements symbolise my yearning for freedom, authenticity, and autonomy; over time, however, the desire has waned as I have

increasingly conformed to societal norms and have grown older. Sometimes, I believe that this diminishing longing has also contributed to a decline in the urge to pick up the pen and create cartoons. Anger has invariably been the strongest driving force behind most of my drawings, guided by my need to challenge harmful conventions and express my rejection of unacceptable realities. This is the other emotion that may be perceived in the statue's facial expression after her wings have been destroyed: the satirist's frustration and disappointed idealism. The sculptor walking indifferently away from the damaged statue held an additional significance for me, symbolising how, in the process of striving to conform to societal expectations of marriage and prioritise my role as a 'good' wife, I transformed into someone who was no longer the subject of my partner's affection. My identification with the statue symbolises a sense of powerlessness on the one hand and of surrender to external influences on the other; it reflects how I felt during that period when I experienced the simultaneous loss of my career pursuit and breakdown of my marriage.

Always within this context and conveying a comparable message, I created the next artwork, which conveys the anguish that I experienced in seeking to validate my vocation as a cartoonist and have it acknowledged as a serious profession. The unforeseen reactions from those around me, who deemed non-profitable occupations to be unimportant professions or mere hobbies, detrimentally affected my self-perception and prompted me to consider altering my entire career.

9.8 Balloons

Figure 64. Alyoussef, 'Balloons' (Facebook, 2006)



This cartoon depicts a woman seated on a chair and deeply engrossed in the ideation stage of a new creative project. Positioned behind her is a bespectacled man in braces, who is smoking a cigarette and contemplating ways in which he might sabotage or impede her project's progress. The man's attire suggests that he is a highly educated intellectual. Thought bubbles are employed in the cartoon rather speech bubbles, emphasising that creativity and ideas may be stifled before they are ready to be verbalised or expressed. The man in the cartoon is seeking to suppress the woman's ideas before she has even had an opportunity to materialise them on paper.

This once again demonstrates the psychological elements that inhibit creativity when talent is undervalued or when limitations are imposed on an artist's freedom of expression. My personal experiences and research attest that women frequently encounter such situations, and the long-standing discussion regarding potential disparities in the expected performance between genders. The stereotype of the humourless woman remains prevalent and has endured for decades if not centuries (Abdel-Raheem, 2022). The vibrant balloons that occupy

the woman's thoughts are released with enthusiasm and joy, as is evident from her content absorption in her work, unaware of the pin that is targeting her emerging balloons of creativity. For many women, the page of the sketchbook or notebook open on their lap is destined to remain blank.

9.9 Mouth

Figure 55. Alyoussef, 'Mouth' (Facebook, 2006)



In my home country of Syria, substantial barriers against the establishment of a free press have been in place since the 1970s, severely limiting journalists' independence. By 2006, when I created this cartoon, fear affected everyone, including myself. During my brief and modest career as a cartoonist, I frequently stared at a blank paper, contemplating numerous ideas but never daring to draw

them. Ultimately, I poured my deferred ideas into this cartoon, which still evokes in me a sardonic smile tinged with pain.

During the 1980s, state authority exerted substantial pressure that affected the entire population, with women bearing a particularly heavy burden. As the state regime tightened its control, women's political and public engagement declined as they adopted more passive and domestic roles. Throughout that period, Syria was in a state of political turmoil both internally and externally and was grappling with a significant economic blockade; I can still distinctly recall the sense of wonder I felt as a child on tasting a chocolate-coated biscuit brought as a gift from Beirut by one of my father's friends.

Throughout the early to mid-1980s, Damascus experienced a series of terrorist bombing attacks perpetrated by the Muslim Brotherhood and aimed at destabilising the Syrian government led by Hafez Al-Assad, Syria's then president. Al-Assad faced an assassination attempt alongside the bombing of the Ministry of Media and Information in Damascus, where my mother worked: miraculously, she and her colleagues survived.

In response, the president and his troops forcefully tightened their control over the country, intensifying intelligence activities and imposing arbitrary sentences and arrests. The climate of fear that was thus created affected everyone, not only those actively engaged in opposition. The mere contemplation of rebellion or expression of any form of opposition to the regime became synonymous with madness: 'In February 1984, security had become God' (Miller, 1996, p. 305).

I distinctly recall an escalation in instances of harassment against women who did not wear veils by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and the harassment of veiled women by armed associates of the president's brother Rifaat Al-Assad

(Hafez Al-Assad's brother) during the events of the 1980s. This brought to mind Ann Telnaes' cartoon, 'Men: Stop telling women what to wear', which was published in the *Washington Post* in 2016. The animated cartoon depicts two men, one who appears to be a religious extremist and the other a secular man, with a woman trapped between them. Without consulting the woman as to her preference (indeed, with no dialogue or discussion of any kind), the religious man thrusts a niqab over her bikini-clad body while the secular man strips it off her in a sequence that repeats indefinitely (Telnaes, 2016).

Figure 66. One frame from Telnaes' animated cartoon (2016)



I recall another incident in which my friend and I were walking down the street. She was wearing tight jeans, and a passerby used a medical syringe to spray her legs with a burning chemical substance. She was lucky to have escaped without sustaining severe burns, possibly because the attacker was scared and lacked control. The memories of those days and the fear experienced by Syrians, particularly by women and girls, remain deeply embedded in my mind and in the minds of others of my generation. The incident involving my friend was not an isolated occurrence. During that time, extremists would spray burning liquid on any female person who dared to wear tight trousers in the streets. The severe

conflict between Al-Assad and the Muslim Brotherhood was intensifying at that time, impacting all Syrians' lives (Seale, 1989; Deeb, 2011).

As a female cartoonist who was born in Syria in 1976 and lived there until 2004, I have first-hand experience of the situation, and I observed such incidents in person. The emotions that those events elicited continue to affect me. Consequently, after an extended period of time away from my home country, I desired to convey how fear was deeply rooted in my person and countless others. I drew numerous cartoons that portrayed the impact of chronic fear and of political and military oppression as well as the less visible influence of repressive social and cultural forces. In the 'Mouth' cartoon above, I depicted a person who was devoid of any means of expression patiently tending a plant that has blossomed into a mouth, symbolising the emergence of a voice. I created this cartoon as a testament to my personal struggle. In my private garden of thoughts, I quietly sow seeds, hoping for a future in which my voice will resonate and be acknowledged.

In reflecting on the main figure in this drawing and the reasoning behind my depiction of a male watering the plant, I am reminded of my intentional use of linguistic conventions. In this context, I adopted masculine imagery to represent humanity as a whole rather than exclusively referring to men. This aligns with the flexibility of the Arabic language, in which terms such as (شخص) ('person') and (إنسان) ('human') are inherently gender-neutral, encompassing both males and females.

In this cartoon, I chose a restrained black-and-white palette as a reflection of my pessimistic outlook at the time. However, I intentionally included clouds as a

subtle symbol of hope, representing the potential for positive change even in challenging circumstances.

9.10 The Inner Prison

Figure 67. Alyoussef, 'The Inner Prison' (unpublished, 2009)

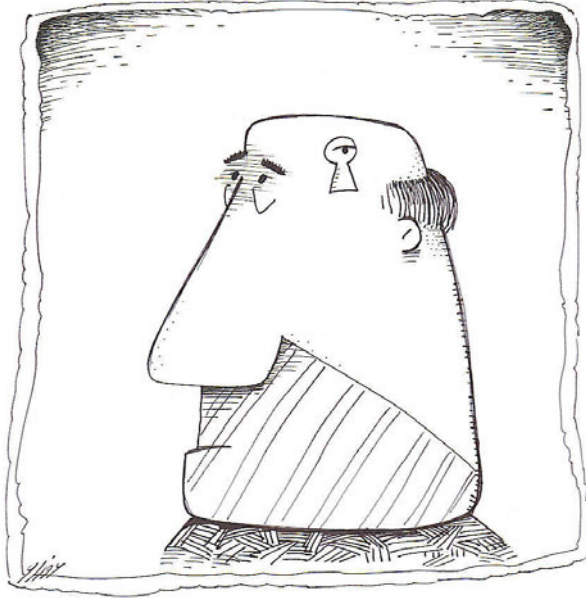


In 2009, in the context of censorship and self-censorship, I created the cartoon that I titled 'The Inner Prison'. The bars that confine the character are symbolic of prison bars and have carved their grooves into and all the way through his body. As such, the prison is within rather than a structural imposition of external material. Along with his small bag of possessions – a symbol often associated with travel and migration – the man in the cartoon carries his prison and his fear with him wherever he goes.

I created the cartoon below, titled 'Self-censorship', to convey similar feelings of apprehension, confinement, and limitations that we impose on ourselves as artists. Even within our own minds, in private and secluded spaces, we find ourselves hesitant and fearful. The censor in this cartoon penetrates the human mind through the keyhole, signifying its ability to intrude into the realm of private

thought. Furthermore, the censor may very well be the 'inner' censor, as intimate and inseparable as the prisoner and the intangible bars in the previous drawing.

Figure 68. Alyoussef, 'Self-censorship' (private collection, 2021)



9.11 Justice

Figure 69. Alyoussef, 'Justice' (Facebook, undated)



The figure of Justice here paradoxically symbolises the absence of justice and serves as a comment against judicial and social deficiencies. My intention in this drawing was to convey the notion that the powers that are apparently responsible for upholding and dispensing justice are, in fact, rooted in injustice on account of the marginalisation of individuals who are disadvantaged, powerless, and disproportionately affected by corruption and other failings of the system. In this work, I consciously avoided clothing the characters in attire that reflected a specific region, culture, or society, an intentional decision that stemmed from my belief that human flaws transcend these categories. It serves as a reminder that no particular group is exempt from imperfections. Nevertheless, the robes worn by the man in the upper part of the cartoon serve as a symbolic reference to his association with judicial, social and cultural authority in societies that place significant value on such markers. The impoverished man who is literally and pictorially 'beneath' him is devoid of social, political, or financial influence and

bears the entire burden of the system that possesses legislative and juridical power.

Cultural and social norms are similarly imposed on specific segments of society by an elite class that monopolises knowledge and authority. This phenomenon is further compounded by gender dynamics in society. Misrepresentation and biases based on age, social class, gender, and ethnicity also operate against equality of access to justice. Those who are marginalised as a result of their social status or gender are often suppressed by society's more powerful members (Spivak, 1988). This exerts a double impact on women who are denied a voice both within their families and in their wider communities. As in the 'Cage' cartoon discussed above, the women in our societies find themselves subjugated by the dominant elite as well as by men who are sometimes fearful and resentful.

The figure of the man who is carrying Justice wears a weary and disheartened expression, while the man above him wielding his scales appears to be carefree, with a contented smile on his face. The stone pedestal on which the upper man stands resembles the capital of a classical column, hinting at historical oppression. I drew a classical column to suggest that this oppression is 'set in stone' and has the potential to persist into the future. Values and norms that have accumulated throughout history remain unchallenged and unaccountable, entrenched in the beliefs of the past and presiding over the present, with no evident signs of imminent change. However, the legs of the man who supports the weight of the old system are trembling, implying fatigue and the threat of collapse.

I have repeatedly postponed writing this section of my thesis. On the one hand, as I mentioned earlier, discussing personal matters and expressing my emotions about them is extremely challenging for me. On the other hand, self-censorship

has profoundly permeated my mind and soul, making it difficult to silence the cautionary voice that has constantly unsettled me and made me uneasy while writing. I must confess that while searching names and events from those times in Syria to ensure the accuracy of documentation and dates, fear compelled me to revisit my browser history and delete all traces of my search – a situation redolent of ‘Orwellian’ emotions. I openly acknowledge that I have revisited a problematic period in my life and a research topic that has both presented challenges and yielded insights.

In *Islam and Democracy* (1992), Fatema Mernissi goes beyond examining women's issues solely through the societal lens of gender, education, culture, and religious influences but also reflect on the crisis of political forces and the dynamics between the rulers and the ruled, oppressors and oppressed. The concept of fear emerges as a prominent theme, as is evident in seven of the ten sub-headings: Fear of Democracy, Fear of Free Thinking, Fear of the Past, and Fear of the Present. Another significant work that has influenced my research is *Circles of Fear* by the Egyptian thinker Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (Abu Zayd, 1999). Both authors explore the topic of women in the Islamic and Arab world extensively, presenting remarkable insights and a perspective free from the prevailing Western discourse. I was personally deeply influenced by both books’ regarding their broader outlook on issues of power, fear, and oppression, whether related to gender or beyond. I am surrounded by these ‘circles of fear’, which have become a part of my existence, and many of them are ‘adorned’ with metaphorical moustaches in my drawings.

As I continuously strive to liberate myself from the constraints of externally imposed norms and to oppose their internalising influence, I encounter the inherent dilemma when the self becomes the central node of power and control

and I am confronted with the challenge of resisting my own fears, as aptly noted by Brown:

Although a fully autonomous self is impossible, those who dare to follow their instinct for freedom inevitably have to overcome these paradoxes on the path of the never-ending process of self-cultivation. As an option, Foucault proposed shaping individual subjectivity through the force of creativity, virtually transforming everyone's life into a work of art. (Brown, 1998, pp. 313–24)

In seeking to attain freedom through my drawing, I also turned to the art of satire. This shrewd and elusive art has the potential to challenge conformity associated with expectations from the female gender and it opened up significant cracks to counteract my 'circles of fear' as I engaged in a running battle of alternating victories and strategic retreats. Nevertheless, committing to the act/art of drawing and the practice of self-expression constitutes one of my greatest achievements to date, as it served as a remarkable instrument with which I could attain sufficient fulfilment and psychological balance to allow me to proceed with my life.

According to Freud, when we diminish our oppressors through ridicule and find amusement in their flaws and failings, we experience an indirect sense of pleasure and power in triumphing over them. This victory emerges in the laughter of a third party – the passive observer – who joins us in laughing at the oppressors (Freud, 1963). Through my drawings, I can reclaim power, and in this realm of satire, I acquire the power to challenge established norms and conventions while acknowledging that more obstacles remain to be overcome.

When I relocated to the UK in 2004, I attempted to establish financial independence and build a stable life but, as mentioned above, my former

husband's profession required frequent moves within the UK and so I struggled to maintain stable employment. Consequently, I resorted to working remotely as a freelance illustrator, primarily collaborating with Arab publishing houses. As technology progressed and email became commonplace, I persevered and submitted cartoons to Arab magazines and platforms. Unfortunately, these endeavours often resulted in little or no payment. Eventually, I reoriented to pursue a career as an author and illustrator of children's literature, which provided me with a modest income. After several years in Britain, I realised that my marriage had run its course, and this left me as an unemployed single mother with no financial stability, compelling me to start anew with only a basic command of the English language. This transition was accompanied by certain stigmas and the societal stereotypes associated with being a divorced woman, both in my home country and among elements of the Arab community in Britain. However, I was fortunate to receive unwavering support from my parents, and I then shifted my focus towards studying and working while raising my son, leaving the profession of caricature behind and using it solely as a tool for personal catharsis, emotional survival and equilibrium.

My drawings presented above include no accompanying comments or textual elements. Most of them include a subtle rebellion against the contradictory nature of prevailing social and political structures in addition to the iniquitous dynamics sometimes present in human relationships.

Over time, these dynamics become entrenched as conventions and norms, gradually attaining acceptance among those who are governed and oppressed and ultimately silencing the demand for rights that have been lost or eroded. My cartoons frequently incorporate visual elements that include barbed wire, cages, locks, keys, and wings that are either chained or broken. Their visual composition

often points to a hierarchy that negatively impacts individuals' lives, as exemplified by my cartoon featuring a cage within a cage in an indefinitely extending oppression. However, my instinct is to resist this tendency and seek to inspire both others and myself to think beyond the limitations that have been referenced throughout this study.

Chapter Ten: Analysis and Discussion

10.1 Introduction

This chapter represents a pivotal point in the dissertation as it marks the transition from the individual case studies presented earlier to a broader thematic analysis. While previous chapters have focused on the unique experiences and perspectives of individual Arab women cartoonists, the aim of this chapter is to uncover shared patterns and common themes among them. By merging the insights derived from various data sources – such as interviews, visual texts, and autoethnography – it seeks to identify collective experiences and recurring motifs and themes within their experiences and work. This approach not only highlights the case studies' individuality but also strengthens the research through its revelation of the interconnected narratives and shared challenges that define the experiences of Arab women cartoonists, offering a comprehensive understanding of their contributions and struggles. The chapter also seeks to link these discussions to the literature review, enhancing the overall understanding of the subject matter.

10.2 Chapter Structure

This chapter will follow the structure of the analysis process. In the first section, data analysis steps, I shall present data in the section in which I introduce the labels and sub-labels utilised in constructing the nodes in NVivo. Then, I shall explain each label and sub-label with relevant references, examples, or quotations provided to support the analysis. The labels and sub-labels will be displayed using visual charts and images from NVivo to examine the relationships between the labels and to analyse the ratio of references in a manner that is not quantitative but that rather seeks to identify patterns and occurrences. Following

this, I shall provide a thorough discussion of the observations, again using visual charts and images to support the analysis. The themes and sub-themes will be explored in detail, and the interpreted and analysed data will be discussed in connection with the literature review conducted for this research. This will be presented in the data analysis section. The chapter will then discuss the significance of gender-related influences in shaping the participants' professional and personal lives. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main findings, emphasising their significance and contribution to the existing body of knowledge.

The table below provides an overview of the layered analytical approach that was thoroughly detailed in the methodology section of this study. I include it here both as a reminder and to demonstrate how the chapter's structure is built on the same analytical framework and in relation to the research objectives. Each layer represents a distinct analytical phase, beginning with an autoethnographic reflection on interviews and personal experiences and continuing through practices with NVivo, thematic exploration, and, finally, all combined in the discourse analysis. By integrating textual and visual analyses at each layer, the chapter aims to provide coherence with the previous initial analysis in light of the literature review.

10.3 NVivo Data Analysis

10.3.1 Preparing the Materials

In the first step, I translated the interviews and correspondence from Arabic to English. This required not only linguistic precision but also cultural sensitivity to ensure that nuances and idiomatic expressions were faithfully captured. Meanwhile, I transcribed the spoken words from the interviews into written form, which entailed listening to the recordings multiple times to ensure accuracy and completeness. The transcriptions included verbatim accounts of the participants'

statements, capturing their exact words and any significant non-verbal cues, such as pauses or emphases.

As I elaborated in the methodology chapter, the relationship between the researcher and the subject in social sciences and ethnography has been widely debated. Scholars such as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) have suggested that qualitative research often benefits from the researcher's immersion, blurring the lines between observer and participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

While conducting and transcribing the interviews, my mind was brimming with impressions, emotions, and engagement. Writing these lines now allows me to establish a 'safe distance' from both the data and my earlier self. I acknowledge this duality in my research approach: first, by recognising that my initial emotional responses and raw thoughts are inherently connected to the data that I later analysed using NVivo and second, by drawing on my personal insights as valuable analytical tools while maintaining a necessary distance to ensure the findings' credibility.

This reflexive practice helps maintain the balance between being an insider and a researcher, thereby ensuring a rigorous analytical distance from the data (Anderson, 2006).

10.3.2 Transferring the Material into NVivo

The data were first transferred to NVivo for systematic analysis. Initially, the files were classified to ensure proper organisation and to facilitate subsequent steps, divided into three main categories: data from interviews and case studies, autoethnography, and visual elements (cartoons). The integration of the Arab female cartoonists' work into the data analysis process using NVivo software benefits considerably from the principles outlined in the textual-visual thematic

analysis (TVTA) framework. Developed to address the methodological gap in integrating visual and textual data, the TVTA offers a structured approach that equally values both data types and synthesises them coherently (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). The first phase of this framework aligns with the established thematic analysis process described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves familiarisation with the data, coding, and theme identification followed by reviewing and defining these themes. The second phase, in which the TVTA framework's novelty truly lies, involves systematically comparing the visual data – such as the cartoons created by these Arab female cartoonists – with the textual data obtained from interviews or other narrative sources. This comparison is guided by four key questions: What in the images supports or reinforces the textual data? What contradicts it? What does the image reveal that the text does not? And what does the text reveal that is absent from the images? This phase is crucial for exploring how visual and textual data interact and for facilitating a deeper understanding of how the cartoons complement, contradict, or enhance the narratives that the cartoonists share, thereby enriching the overall analysis of their work (Trombeta & Cox, 2022).

10.3.3 Labelling and Categorising via NVivo

In the context of this research, the final phase of NVivo data analysis is critical for capturing the full complexity of the cartoonists' experiences as expressed through both their artwork and their narratives. This phase involves synthesising the findings from both visual data (cartoons) and textual data (interviews, personal reflections), identifying patterns, and reporting the integrated results. It is crucial, then, to move on from the initial steps of labelling and categorising the data to discussing the emerging themes and sub-themes. This approach will ensure that the analysis highlights the cartoons' artistic and cultural significance and reflects

the cartoonists' nuanced personal and sociopolitical experiences, as conveyed through their visual and verbal expressions (Trombeta & Cox, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

10.3.4 Themes and Sub-themes

The analysis during this phase moves from initial coding to a more abstract and integrative level. At this stage, I identify the broader patterns and concepts, known as themes, which emerge from the coded data. These themes encapsulate the data's essence by capturing the overarching ideas that recur across different segments of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Meanwhile, sub-themes provide further granularity, breaking down the main themes into more specific components that reveal different facets of the broader theme. This process entails a significant interpretative effort to understand the significance of the data and how these themes relate to the research questions. The development of themes and sub-themes is crucial for synthesising the data into a coherent narrative that allows meaningful conclusions and insights to be drawn from the data.

The stages of creating labels and sub-labels and themes and sub-themes are interconnected but distinct, operating at different levels of abstraction and serving different analytical purposes. It is crucial that the differences between these stages be appreciated to ensure a thorough and effective qualitative analysis.

10.3.5 Key Differences

Abstraction Level: Coding (labels and sub-labels) concerns specific data segments and is focused on identifying and categorising data at a granular level. Meanwhile, themes and sub-themes involve the synthesis of these codes into broader, more abstract categories that capture the essence of the data.

Purpose: The coding stage is focused primarily on organising and managing data, while the theme development stage concerns interpretation and understanding.

Themes provide a more comprehensive and integrated understanding of the data than the initial codes.

Analytical Focus: Labels and sub-labels are concerned with what is present in the data, while themes and sub-themes are aimed at interpreting why it is significant and how it contributes to the overall understanding of the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

10.4 Labels and Sub-labels

During this stage, I identified and coded the data by assigning each part of the data to labels or nodes via NVivo. I reviewed the codes and continuously added sub-codes until no new node emerged, achieving saturation.

I shall describe each of these labels and sub-labels and their significance and relevance throughout the corpus. This helps with identifying the patterns that will lead to ideological discourse analysis later in this chapter. Although this data process includes some numbers, they are used only to feed a qualitative approach, as in studying patterns and occurrences to gain insight into their impact on participants. I used visualisation and descriptive counts as a concise method to present the data. These counts provide a solid foundation for ideological

discussion that will emerge from combining the described labels into ideological frames. The labels and sub-labels are presented in table format.

10.4.1 The relevance of labels

Label – level 1	Label – level 2	Label – level 3	Files	References
Censorship			14	54
	Culture Constraints			
		Gender-related		
		Nudity and sex		
		Religious sensitive		
	Government censorship			
		Exercise authority		
		Professional repercussions		
	Social pressure			
		Gender-related		
		Norms and conventions		
		Nudity and sex		
Cartoon as a tool of resistance			5	26
	Attaining psychological balance			
		Achievement and purpose		
		Recognition of personal struggle		

		Strategies and tools		
	Tool for altering reality			
		Create		
		Escape		
	Tool to resist oppression			
		Challenge limitations		
		Ridicule authority		
Cultural and social influences			23	75
	Gender-related			
		Externally imposed		
		Internally imposed		
	Identity and Values			
		Externally imposed		
		Internally imposed		
	Social constraints			
		Externally imposed		
		Internally imposed		
External support			3	15

	Family Support			
	Father support			
	Support from male colleagues			
Financial causes			2	15
	Career shift			
	independence			
	Lack of platform			
Male domination of the field			9	22
	Editors and platforms			
	Male cartoonists			
Patriarchal structures and patriarchal values			18	71
	Culture and believes			
		confirm		
		Resist		
	Institutional framework			
		Juridical complications		
		Legal bias		

		Professional complications		
	Social norms			
		Constraints		
		Gender gap		
		Invisibility		
Self-censorship			7	27
	Fear and anxiety			
		Ambiguity		
		Avoidance		
		Silence		
	Internalised norms and values			
		Confirming		
		Questioning		

Table 1. Table of labels and sub-labels

The first three columns represent the different levels of labelling used during the analysis of the corpus. The 'Files' column indicates the number of files in which the labels were found, while the number in the 'References' column shows the frequency of each label's appearance through the data. It is important to emphasise that this is not intended as a quantitative analysis; the number of files is not entirely precise owing to the architecture of the data storage. Nevertheless,

it will be used for the initial description and is useful for identifying patterns and the labelling occurrences within the corpus. This dataset overview ensured that no data were overlooked and that all linkages and relationships were identified.

10.4.2 Explanation

1. Censorship: This label focuses on the various forms of censorship experienced by the participants, including any cultural, social, and political restrictions, and their strategies for navigating these constraints while continuing to express their viewpoints.
2. Cartoons as a tool of resistance: This label captures how Arab female cartoonists use their creative work as a tool for resistance and psychological resilience, integrating various themes relating to their expression of their voices.
3. Cultural and social influences: This label addresses how cultural and social norms, particularly those relating to gender in Arab societies, influence the

personal and professional lives of female cartoonists, shaping their work and public reception.

4. Self-Censorship: This label explores forms of internalised censorship among Arab female cartoonists, whose fear, anxiety, and personal values influence their creative and professional decisions.

5. Patriarchal structures and values: This label highlights how patriarchal structures impact gender conformity, the professional environments that Arab female cartoonists inhabit, and the challenges they face within their field.

6. Male domination of the field: This label concerns the specific challenges that the participants face in what is a male-dominated industry, including professional isolation and a lack of recognition.

7. External support: This label examines the crucial role of external support from family members – particularly fathers – as well as male colleagues in Arab female cartoonists' professional trajectories.

8. Financial causes: This label explores how the achievement or lack of financial independence affects participants' careers, influencing their creative decisions, their pursuit of opportunities aligned with their values, and their ability to build sustainable careers.

10.4.3 Relationships, Ratios, and Patterns

The section that follows offers a detailed account of the above labels and sub-labels, examining their relationships, ratios, and patterns. This phase was crucial for comprehending the data and facilitated the identification of preliminary connections to the emerging themes and sub-themes. I used the below snapshot

to sketch over and highlight numbers and ultimately decided to include it in the study as a visual aid.

Figure 70. Snapshot from NVivo

Name	Files	References
Censorship	14	54
Cultural constraints	2	20
Gender related	2	7
Nudity and Sex	1	1
Religious sensitivities	2	15
Government censorship	2	20
Social pressure	2	12
Cultural and social influences	23	75
Gender related	9	38
Identity and values	3	10
Social constraints	3	38
External support	3	15
Financial causes	2	15
Male domination of the field	9	22
Patriarchal structures and masculine values	18	71
Culture and beliefs	3	32
Confirm gender expectations	2	13
Resist gender expectations	2	8
Institutional framework	5	23
Juridical complications	1	2
Legal bias	2	7
Professional complications	1	5
Social norms	5	47
Constraints	2	15
Gender gap	2	20
Invisibility	2	15
Self-censorship	7	27
Fear and anxiety	4	15
Internalised Norms and Values	3	10

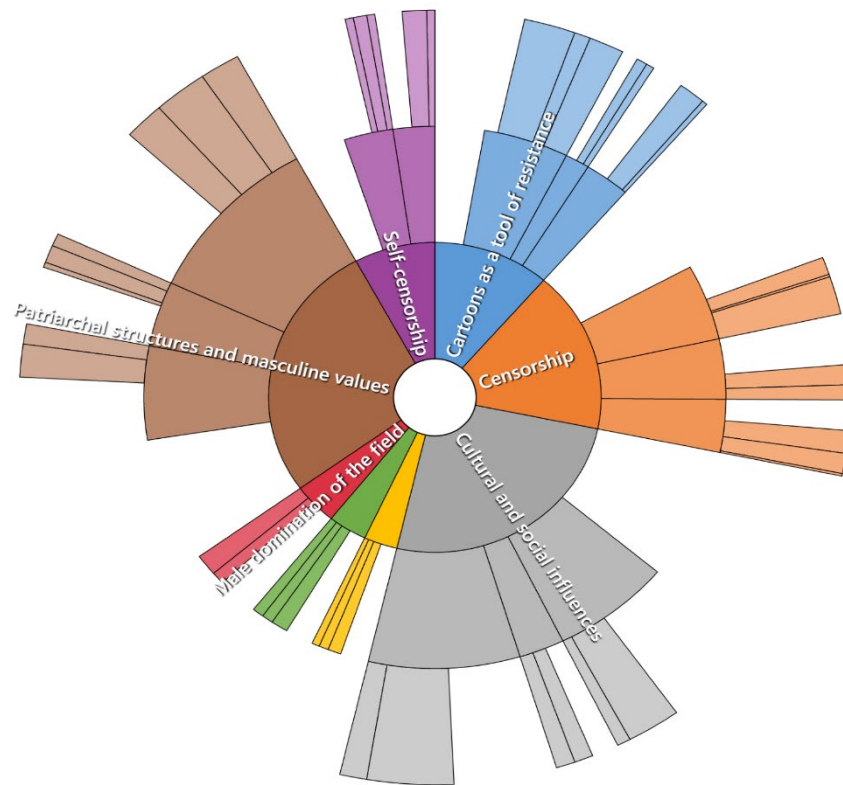
As the above snapshot from NVivo indicates, the ‘Censorship’ node comprises 54 references drawn from interviews, cartoon topics, Eladl’s case study, and autoethnography. Of these, 20 references pertain to government and political constraints, while another 20 relate to cultural constraints, with an additional 12 references highlighting social constraints. This substantial number of cultural and social contributions to censored content underscores the significant impact of external pressures on Arab female cartoonists’ freedom of expression. It should be noted that this captures only the external cultural and social pressures,

although clearly distinguishing these from internal pressures remains challenging owing to their intertwined nature.

The 'Patriarchal structures and values' node contains 71 references, making it the second highest after the 'Cultural and social influences' node, reflecting their significant interconnection. This node encompasses factors that are rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, scaffolded by social norms, and supported by institutional frameworks. Notably, 47 of the 71 references pertain to social norms and conventions, constituting the highest number within this node. Cultural beliefs account for 32 references, with 13 specifically indicating Arab female cartoonists, thus confirming gender expectations, compared to a mere 8 references to where they resist these expectations. This distribution underscores the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures and values on Arab female cartoonists' work and lives, as I shall discuss in a later section of the present chapter.

Figure 71 was extracted from the visualisation feature in NVivo software and presents a 'sunburst' chart that represents the entire dataset's nodes and labels.

Figure 71. Sunburst chart depicting data nodes



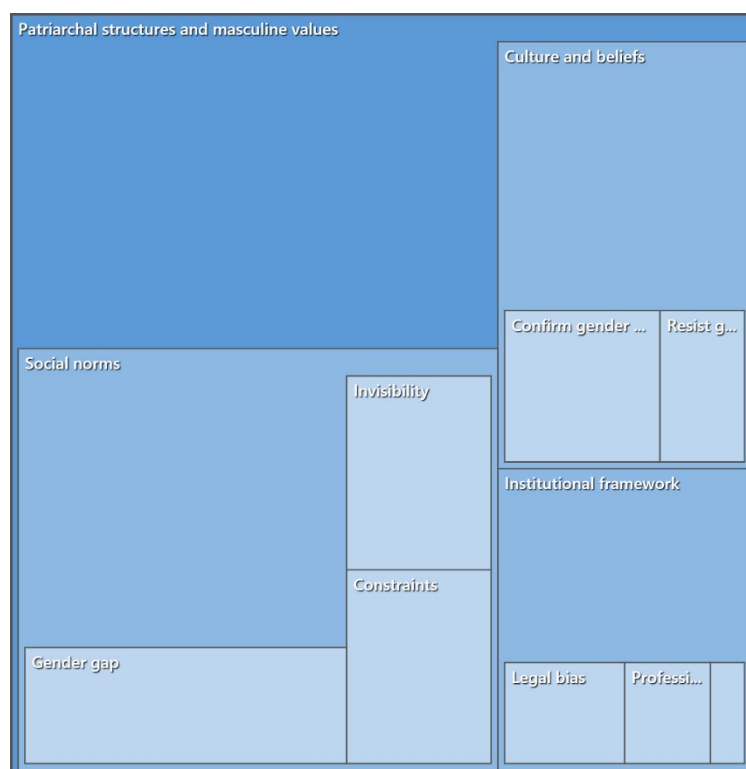
Patriarchal structures and values' nodes

Figure 71 represents the predominant factors that the data analysis identified, with cultural and social influences emerging as the most significant. These are closely followed by influences relating to the patriarchal values at play in social, legal, and institutional frameworks. Specifically, 75 references were categorised under cultural and social influences, while 71 references pertained to patriarchal and values. This distribution underscores the fact that most cultural and social challenges that the participants encountered are intricately linked to the dominance of patriarchal discourse within their communities. The pervasive influence of patriarchal values not only shapes societal norms and expectations but also reinforces the structural barriers that limit Arab female cartoonists' freedom and visibility. For example, Bahraini cartoonist Sara Qaed acknowledges

‘that pursuing editorial cartooning as a profession presents unique challenges for women, as they constantly grapple with various limitations’.

Figure 72, extracted from the visualisation feature in NVivo software, presents a ‘tree map’ chart that represents the patriarchal structures and values nodes.

Figure 72. Patriarchal structures and values



The size of each segment in the chart corresponds to the frequency and significance of each sub-label derived from the data analysis. References to social norms reveal that patriarchal values predominantly manifest in the form of societal expectations, shaping the cartoonists’ personal and professional lives. Notable sub-issues within this label include the gender gap and invisibility, highlighting the existence of significant barriers to recognition and equality. The ‘Culture and beliefs’ label illustrates the internal and external pressures that relate to cultural expectations, with participants struggling to strike a balance between conforming to and resisting these norms. Specifically, 13 references confirm the participants’ adherence to cultural beliefs and values while only seven resisted,

indicating a majority tendency to conform. The 'Institutional Framework' label, supported by 23 references, underscores the impact of formal and systemic barriers, such as legal biases and professional repercussions, reinforcing gender inequality. Overall, the chart effectively demonstrates that patriarchal structures and values significantly impact the participants' work and experiences and are instrumental in shaping their professional trajectories.

Male Domination in the Field

The difficulty in attaining visibility and accessing platforms as a result of male dominance in the field constitutes a significant challenge that often leads to career shifts. The data indicate that this is a significant concern for many participants. This shift is frequently driven by the financial instability associated with the cartooning profession, compounded by the societal and institutional barriers that limit their opportunities and recognition. For example, Lena Merhej emphasised that this lack of platforms and resources limits the visibility of women's voices and perspectives.

External support and Independence

Support from family, particularly fathers, and external sources is crucial for these participants' success and resilience. All practicing and publishing female cartoonists in this study reported that they receive support from their family members, particularly their fathers. For example, the external networks constituted by male colleagues play a crucial role in the success of Doaa Eladi and Riham El-Hour (interviews by A. Alyoussef, 2021).

Self-Censorship, Censorship and its connection to Cultural and social influences

Figure 73. Sunburst chart of Self-censorship node

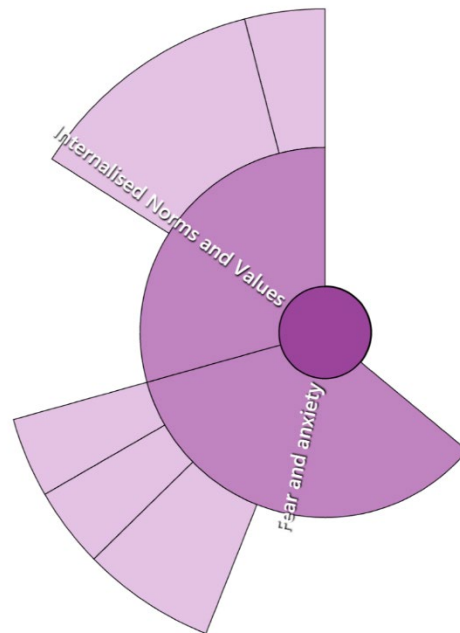


Figure 73 illustrates the reference ratios pertaining to the self-censorship node, which contains 27 references. This figure, while lower than the 54 references pertaining to external censorship, underscores the prevalence of self-censorship that is driven by deeply internalised norms and values. Notably, almost half of these self-censorship references pertain to internalised ‘Cultural and social values’, with nine references arising from adherence to personal beliefs and identity and only three challenging these values. Again, this pattern suggests that participants often engage in self-censorship to avoid internal conflict or guilt associated with deviation from societal, cultural, or familial expectations. Fear and anxiety driven by the potential for social and legal repercussions as well as internalised societal and cultural norms often engender conflict and guilt for artists who are contemplating deviations from mainstream expectations.

The nodes chart reveals that fear drives participants to adopt various mechanisms in response to controversial issues. Three references indicate a

complete avoidance of such topics, five references reveal the use of ambiguity to obscure criticism, and three references document instances of complete silence. That is, half of the participants refrain entirely from communicating their ideas.

The descriptive account above relied on a detailed exploration of the content for the labels and sub-labels. These labels serve as the foundational elements that structure the data, organising it into manageable units. However, as the analysis progresses, it becomes essential to move beyond these individual codes for the purpose of identifying the broader patterns that emerge across the data. Here, the analysis of themes and sub-themes comes into play. By examining the relationships between the various labels and sub-labels, researchers can begin to discern how these categories merge into larger, more cohesive themes. The themes will represent the overarching concepts that encapsulate the deeper meanings and insights that emerge from the data.

10.5 Themes and Sub-themes

As noted above, the identification of labels and the connections between them helps set the stage for the identification of broader themes and sub-themes. This next step entails discerning the common themes and sub-themes that naturally emerge from the labels that were previously identified within the corpus. These themes serve as building blocks for models of understanding that are both common and transversal across the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The table below presents the main themes and sub-themes that emerged based on a systematic review of these labels. This thematic development process progresses the analysis beyond the immediate data to facilitate a higher level of abstraction. The analysis thereby reveals deeper ideological values embedded

within the text, offering a clearer understanding of the underlying meanings and perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017).

The table of themes and sub-themes:

Themes	Sub-Themes
Cartoons as a Tool of Resistance	• Attaining Psychological Balance - Achievement and purpose: power and voice - Recognition of personal struggles - Strategies and Tools • Tool for Altering Reality - Create or escape • Tool to Resist Oppression - Challenge limitations - Ridicule authority

Censorship	• Cultural Constraints, - Gender-related - Nudity and sex - Religious Sensitivities • Government Censorship - Exercise Authority - Professional Repercussions • Social Pressure - Gender-related - Norms and conventions - Nudity and sex
Cultural and Social Influences	• Gender-Related Influences, - Externally imposed norms - Internally imposed norms • Identity and values - Externally imposed norms - Internally imposed norms • Social constraints - Externally imposed norms - Internally imposed norms

Self-Censorship	• Fear and anxiety - Avoidance - Ambiguity - Silence • Internalised Norms and Values, - Confirming - Questioning
Patriarchal Structures and patriarchal Values	• Culture and beliefs - Confirming gender expectations - Resisting gender expectations • Institutional framework - Juridical complications - Legal bias - Professional repercussions • Social Norms - Constrains - Gender gap - Invisibility
Male Domination in the Field	• Editors and platforms • Male cartoonists in the field

Financial causes	• Career Shifts • Independence • Lack of platforms
External Support	• Family support • Father support • Support from male colleagues

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes.

1. Cartoons as a Tool of Resistance

- Attaining Psychological Balance

Cartoons serve as a powerful medium through which Arab female cartoonists can voice their resistance against various forms of oppression and societal constraints. The analysis suggests that the work of Arab female cartoonists may be regarded as a form of activism, whereby their artistic choices serve as intentional strategies for negotiating and resisting the limitations that their cultural environments impose on them. The sub-themes below elaborate on how these participants use their work to achieve psychological balance, empowerment, and voice. The attainment of psychological balance for many participants highlighted that the act of creating cartoons helps them to maintain psychological and emotional stability using the following:

- Achievement and Purpose: Power and Voice:

Cartoonists' art affords them a sense of achievement and purpose. This sub-theme highlights that the three female cartoonists articulated their experiences of

having gained a voice through their cartoons, while one reference specifically noted that the act of cartooning empowers the cartoonist.

Examples:

Voice: Hana Hajjar: ‘... I was not a passive observer; instead, I used my voice, to express ideas’.

‘I will only speak to myself and say: I will not be silenced or encumbered by injustice’. Lena Merhej, SOB, 2022

Power: In my autoethnography, I conveyed that cartooning represents an ‘act of power’.

- Recognise Personal Struggle:

This sub-theme captures the profound personal and cultural challenges that the participants faced, as reflected in their interviews and work. The data highlight the ways in which art serves as a reflection of their experiences and adversities, underscoring the personal struggles that shape their narrative and creative processes. The cartoonists’ personal and cultural identities are intricately woven

into the fabric of their work, making their art a medium for navigating and documenting these struggles.

Examples:

Autoethnography – Afraa Alyoussef: 'I created this cartoon as a testament to my personal struggle'.

Lena Merhej: '...thinking about the role of the storyteller being a woman, being Arab and being from Beirut'.

- Strategies and Tools:

Cartooning allows these artists to document their experiences, thoughts, and emotions in a way that transcends conventional storytelling. It thus becomes a medium through which emotions that might otherwise remain unexpressed can be conveyed. Cartoons' visual nature enables these artists to communicate complex feelings and ideas in a manner that is both accessible and impactful. This process not only helps the artist to comprehend their own emotions but also allows them to share these insights with a wider audience, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. This sub-theme underscores the fact that cartooning is not merely an artistic practice but is a vital strategy for

emotional expression and a tool for navigating and interpreting the complexities of the world around them.

Examples:

Sara Qaed views her cartoons as a personal diary and a tool for comprehending the world around her.

Hana Hajjar explained that drawing became a medium through which she could convey her emotions effectively.

Cartoonists use satire to adeptly highlight societal absurdities and provoke critical reflection, often employing humour to ridicule authority figures and structures.

For many cartoonists (four quotations), their work functions as a personal diary, providing them with a vehicle through which they can document and process their experiences and emotions. This artistic practice is a valuable tool with which the cartoonists can understand and interpret the world around them. Consequently, drawing has become a powerful medium that they can use to communicate complex ideas and challenge prevailing narratives.

- Tool for Altering Reality

This node examines how cartoonists utilise their art to create spaces that render the tangible world more bearable, enabling them to envision and advocate for a better reality. Within this context, four references illustrate that cartoonists aspire

to create alternatives to the existing reality, while three references indicate a desire to escape from it.

Examples:

In my autoethnography, I explained how 'Being able to generate alternate realities by re-creating and modifying the existing one gives me the feeling of being able to create a space that makes the tangible world bearable'.

- Tool to Resist Oppression

Cartoons serve as a cathartic tool that provides relief from strong or repressed emotions and offers a means of resisting and critiquing oppression.

- Challenge Limitations and Ridicule Authority

Participants use humour to undermine oppressors and emphasise the absurdity of oppressive systems.

Examples:

The cartoonist Riham El-Hour: 'Through the art of caricature, I also discovered a powerful tool for breaking the silence...'

Autoethnography: 'In this satirical realm, I gain some power to challenge established norms.'

2. Censorship

Censorship constitutes a formidable challenge for Arab female cartoonists, significantly influencing both the content and the dissemination of their work. This pervasive issue not only infiltrates the political environment and public sphere but is also deeply embedded within the social and cultural fabric that surrounds these artists. The themes that emerged from the data highlight censorship's

multifaceted nature, revealing its various manifestations and effects on Arab female cartoonists. These themes include the following:

- Cultural Constraints

Issues specifically relating to gender restrict the topics and themes that female cartoonists can address as well as the ways in which they view themselves and the ways in which they express themselves – for example, they confirm the gender role expectations that limit their work as well as their self-perspectives.

- Gender-related censorship: Female cartoonists reported that they face additional scrutiny based on gender-specific expectations.

Example:

‘Sara acknowledges that the pursuit of editorial cartooning as a profession presents unique challenges for women, as they constantly grapple with limitations’.

- Nudity and Sex

Nudity and sex are generally regarded as taboo subjects for cartoonists in the Arab world. Most platforms prohibit such topics. For female cartoonists, addressing these topics can entirely devastate their social reputation within Arabic communities. Consequently, most Arab female cartoonists voluntarily refrain from depicting such themes. This voluntary abstention intersects

considerably with the theme of self-censorship, which I shall discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.

Example:

Sara stated that she ‘consciously avoids addressing certain subjects, such as sexual content and nudity’.

- Religious Sensitivities

Most Arab female cartoonists avoid engaging with religious topics, particularly those that critique prevailing cultural and religious concepts. Cartoonists who address such sensitive issues may face severe repercussions, including social disapproval, legal action, or even the shutdown of their platforms. For instance, Doaa Eladl faced judicial trial as a result of her cartoons that mentioned Adam and Eve as explained in detail in Doaa’ chapter, and the Salamander platform experienced closure and fines as a result of Lena Merhej’s cartoons. These

examples underscore the high stakes involved in tackling religious themes within their art.

This topic emerged as particularly sensitive throughout the data, with some participants voluntarily avoiding it as a means of adhering to their own identities and cultural values.

Examples:

When Hajjar 'is mindful of maintaining a balance that aligns with her personal moral, educational, and social values'.

- Government Censorship: Political authorities impose strict regulations that limit freedom of expression.
- Exercise authority: Censorship is often used by those in power as a tool with which to maintain control.
- Professional repercussions: Artists may face professional consequences if they tackle controversial subjects.
- Social Pressure

Societal expectations and pressures further restrict the topics that cartoonists feel safe in addressing.

3. Cultural and Social Influences

This node contains the highest number of references elicited from the data that demonstrate its significant effect on Arab female cartoonists' experiences and output. This theme includes the following:

- Gender-Related Influences

Among the 75 references, 38 are categorised under 'Gender-related influences', with 20 specifically identified as externally imposed constraints affecting Arab female cartoonists. For example, Sara Qaed elucidated the unique challenges confronted by women, emphasising their perpetual negotiation with various limitations.

- Internally imposed norms:

Five references are specifically identified as internally imposed constraints on Arab female cartoonists.

For example, Afraa Alyoussef frequently employs cages as visual symbols in her cartoons. She also remarked, 'I am surrounded by these "circles of fear"; they have become a part of my existence. Many of them are "adorned" with metaphorical moustaches'.

- Identity and Values:

This concerns how cultural identity and personal values influence the cartoonists' content and experiences.

Distinguishing between externally and internally imposed factors with respect to identity and values is challenging, as the data reflects an equal distribution, with seven references attributed to each category.

- Social Constraints:

These are the restrictions imposed both externally and internally by societal norms.

Numerous social constraints are externally imposed, as evidenced by the data, which shows 32 references to externally imposed constraints compared to 10 references to internally imposed ones. Regarding external elements, for example,

the Moroccan study suggested – and one of its authors asserted – that women’s understanding of political cartoons is inferior to that of men. Meanwhile, instances of internally imposed constraints are also notable, particularly those in which cartoonists voluntarily refrain from addressing certain topics, which intersects with the self-censorship node. In addition, Hana Hajjar from Saudi Arabia

emphasised that she remains true to her Muslim identity by avoiding the creation of any art or cartoons that contradict her beliefs.

4. Self-Censorship

Self-censorship is a common practice among Arab female cartoonists, driven by internalised norms and societal pressures. This theme explores:

- Fear and Anxiety:

Emotional impacts that lead to self-censorship and silence.

- Avoidance: Three references indicated that participants deliberately avoided controversial topics in a bid to remain safe.
- Ambiguity: Five references indicated that participants were using ambiguity to disguise criticism and avoid direct confrontation.

For example, when Afraa Alyoussef stated that she intentionally exercises discretion in producing her cartoons' messages.

- Silence: Three references indicated that some participants choose silence over expression in certain occasions to avoid repercussions.
- Internalised Norms and Values:

Deeply internalised norms influence the cartoonists' experience.

- Confirming: Adherence to societal expectations to avoid conflict is evident from nine references. For example, Qaed quoted 'Cartoonists are primarily responsible for setting their own boundaries and limitations'.
- Questioning: Cartoonists experience internal conflict when they challenge norms, as indicated by three references. For example, Afraa Alyoussef noted that the 'self becomes the central point of power and control'.

5. Patriarchal Structures and Values

This theme includes 71 references, with sub-themes that include the following:

- Culture and Beliefs: 32 references divided between the following sub-theme:
 - Confirming gender expectations: 13 references indicate that the participants adhere to traditional gender roles – for example, Afraa Alyoussef stated that ‘I confirm to societal norms as I grow older’, and Hajjar imposed strict boundaries on herself with respect to culture and identity.
 - Resisting Gender Expectations: Seven references show that the participants attempt to challenge and resist stereotypical gender roles, as

exemplified by the fact that Qaed was among only two female cartoonists to have published a cartoon pertaining to the case of Mahsa Amini in Iran.

- Institutional Framework:

This node was created to demonstrate the role that institutional structures play in reinforcing gender biases. The number of nodes was 23 out of 71 patriarchal values influences, distributed as follows:

- Juridical complications: These include the legal challenges and biases that female cartoonists face, as exemplified by Doaa Elad's accusation of blasphemy when she published a cartoon that included religious figures.
- Legal bias: This included 7 references to discriminatory legal frameworks that disadvantage women – for example, Lena Merhej: 'by law, women do not enjoy the same citizenship rights as men'.
- Professional repercussions: Five references illustrate the career repercussions that arise from the marginalisation of female cartoonists and the fact that their contributions go overlooked.

- Social Norms:

Forty-seven references elucidate the societal constraints that restrict female cartoonists' freedom and visibility. These constraints are categorised into the following sub-themes:

- Constraints: Fifteen references indicate that societal constraints inhibit the artistic expression of the participants. For instance, Sara acknowledged that the pursuit of editorial cartooning as a profession presents unique challenges for women, who must constantly grapple with various

limitations. Furthermore, Afraa Alyoussef stated that ‘challenging taboos is viewed as a threat to local conventions’.

- Gender gap: The disparity between male and female cartoonists with respect to opportunities and recognition is a significant issue, as nearly half of the references within the ‘Social Norms’ theme pertain to the gender gap, with 20 out of 47 references highlighting this concern. This is exemplified by Afraa Alyoussef’s cartoon depicting a man holding the key to a woman’s prison, symbolising the societal constraints and the lack of freedom imposed on women.
- Invisibility: The lack of visibility and recognition for female cartoonists is a prominent issue, as evidenced by 15 references in the data. For instance, Lena Merhej reflects on the complexities of her identity, ‘thinking about the role of the storyteller being a woman, being Arab and being from Beirut’.

Qaed provides another example in her acknowledgement that the pursuit of editorial cartooning as a profession presents unique challenges for women.

10.6 Discussion – Discourse Analysis

The Arab female cartoonists’ experiences reflect a complex interplay of the social, cultural, and political forces that significantly shape their professional and personal lives. This analysis reveals several key points that illuminate the challenges and strategies that these artists employ to navigate a restrictive environment.

10.6.1 Patriarchal Discourse and Values

The work and experiences of the participants are profoundly shaped by the intricate interplay of political, religious, and cultural ideologies in the region

(Slyomovics, 2001). These ideologies' patriarchal nature was noted by Joseph (2001): 'Women often pay the price for their political participation in ways that men do not' (Joseph, 2001, p. 39). The severity of these consequences can vary depending on factors such as social class, family dynamics, and financial autonomy (Slyomovics, 2001; Abdel-Raheem, 2022).

As discussed in the literature review chapter, most Arab states post-independence has not only reinforced but also exploited the control exerted by communities, which are often deeply rooted in patriarchal values (Hoigilt, 2019). This exploitation is particularly evident in the ways in which states capitalise on existing social structures to maintain control over the population, often under the guise of protecting cultural and religious traditions.

This resulted in oppressive political environments. Families and communities sometimes act as a buffer against state oppression, providing protection against external threats. However, these social structures are themselves deeply patriarchal (Slyomovics, 2001; Joubin, 2013), and while they may offer some level of support or protection, they impose significant restrictions on women's autonomy and freedom of expression. For Arab female cartoonists, this means that even within the protective confines of their families or communities, they often encounter limitations that curb their ability to express themselves freely.

The patriarchal discourse that permeates these social structures perpetuates gender-specific challenges, which are particularly acute for women in creative fields. Arab female cartoonists, who often seek to challenge societal norms and critique political and social injustices, are obliged to navigate a landscape in which their freedom of expression is severely limited. This dynamic compels them to adopt strategies such as self-censorship or the use of subtle, coded imagery to

convey their messages without provoking backlash from either the state or their own communities.

The Arab female cartoonists' experiences are shaped by a complex interplay between state control and patriarchal social structures. While these women may find some degree of support within their families or communities, this support is often accompanied by significant restrictions that limit their creative freedom.

The fact that all participants received support from their fathers – a key male figure in their lives – suggests that this support was not merely beneficial but indeed necessary within the context of these artists' experiences. In patriarchal societies, including those in the Arab world, male approval often holds significant weight, particularly within the family structure. A father's endorsement can provide the social legitimacy that is crucial for women pursuing careers in fields that are traditionally dominated by men or deemed inappropriate for women.

For the Arab female cartoonists, their fathers' support likely provided them with the validation and protection needed to navigate the societal and professional challenges they faced. In cultural contexts in which women's public and creative roles are often scrutinised or restricted, a father's backing might help mitigate societal pressures and criticisms in addition to offering a sense of security and encouragement, allowing the artists to take creative risks and challenge societal norms through their art (Joseph, 1996; Moghadam, 2004): 'Essentially, women artists had to have a powerful man (which might include God) looking after their interests' (Essel, 2022, p. 9).

The father's role as a male authority figure within the family may help to counterbalance external patriarchal forces. In supporting their daughters' artistic endeavours, these fathers subvert traditional gender expectations, providing a

form of empowerment that is crucial in restrictive environments. This dynamic underscore the importance of having male allies within the family, whose support may be pivotal in helping female artists to assert their identities and pursue their creative ambitions despite broader societal constraints (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Kandiyoti, 1988).

10.6.2 Censorship and Creative Expression

Censorship significantly shapes Arab female cartoonists' work. Legal and political frameworks and cultural policies impose restrictions with regional variations in the degree of supportiveness towards creative freedom. In Arab countries that are more politically liberal, these cartoonists may experience slightly greater latitude in their political commentary, but they still operate within restrictive social and cultural parameters. The participants often use subtlety and coded imagery in their drawings to navigate these limitations.

Examination of the scope of freedom of expression in the Arab world has profound implications for its practitioners, including Arab female cartoonists. Press freedom levels vary significantly across different countries in the region (Sakr, 2004), with some states imposing stringent controls on media and public expression, while others offer greater leniency. This variance creates a complex landscape that Arab female cartoonists must navigate in their creative and professional lives.

Those working in more restrictive environments may find themselves adopting more ambiguous techniques to communicate their ideas, while those in freer settings might still grapple with the internalised pressures of cultural norms.

10.6.3 Norm Internalisation and Self-Censorship

One of the dominant themes identified is the pervasive fear of social and legal repercussions. This fear underscores the profound influence of societal and

institutional pressures on the participants' lives, both professionally and personally. Such findings align with work by Butler and Ghossoub, who highlight how social norms and cultural values – particularly in conservative societies – exert a significant impact on individuals, especially women (Butler, 1988; Ghossoub, 2001). The study's participants must often navigate a narrow margin of political and social commentary, with the boundaries for acceptable critique varying considerably across different regions. The constraints in more conservative areas are particularly stringent, necessitating a high degree of self-censorship. Their fear of social isolation influences their willingness to express opinions publicly. As individuals gauge whether their views align with the majority or minority on the basis of social networks and the media, this can lead to pluralistic ignorance, whereby individuals erroneously believe that their opinions are unpopular. This misperception can result in a spiral of silence (Hayes et al., 2005).

The internalisation of societal norms emerges as another significant theme, particularly the ways in which it shapes the behaviour and creative output of these artists. Norm internalisation refers to the process by which individuals absorb and embody their environment's cultural and social values, influencing their actions and decisions. This process is evident in the participants' tendency to conform to expected behaviours in both their personal and professional lives. As Gavrilets and Richerson (2017) suggested, behaviour according to norms often becomes an end in itself, simplifying social interactions and promoting group cohesion (Gavrilets and Richerson, 2017).

This internalised discipline leads to a form of self-censorship, whereby the participants regulate their speech and artistic expression in a bid to avoid transgressing societal boundaries. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault's

concept of internalised control provides a theoretical framework for understanding how power operates through norms and institutions to create self-regulating subjects (Foucault, 1977). This self-censorship process is particularly pronounced among Arab female cartoonists, who often eschew controversial topics, such as sex, nudity, and agnosticism, while resorting to strategies of avoidance and ambiguity. This aligns with Judith Butler's (1988) analysis of implicit censorship, whereby unspoken societal rules dictate what can be said and that which must remain unspoken, leading to self-imposed limitations on expression (Butler, 1988). These unspoken boundaries effectively 'enforce a limitation on speakability' (Butler, 1997, p.130).

10.6.4 The Struggle Between Autonomy and Conformity

The tension between autonomy and conformity emerges as a leitmotif in the Arab female cartoonists' experiences. These artists exist in a state of contradiction, embodying transgressive tendencies through their art while simultaneously adhering to conservative values. This duality creates an inherent tension that they must constantly manage, resulting in internal conflicts that they may struggle to reconcile. This delicate negotiation process may result in that which Khalil and Kraidy (2009) describe as a form of 'creative schizophrenia', whereby artists must constantly navigate between their artistic impulses and their societies' values (Khalil and Kraidy, 2009).

This struggle is particularly evident in the participants' efforts to balance their desire for creative expression with the need to conform to societal norms and cultural identities. The persistent tension between these competing forces highlights the broader issue of autonomy versus conformity in the creative industries, particularly within conservative environments. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony (1971) provides a useful lens for understanding how dominant

cultural norms and values exert a subtle yet pervasive influence over individual behaviour and expression (Gramsci, 1971). The strategies that participants employ to navigate this terrain reflects the wider sociopolitical dynamics at play, wherein their resistance is often circumscribed by the need for social acceptance and professional approvals.

10.6.5 Cartoons as a Tool of Resistance

Arab female cartoonists use their art as a potent tool for expression and resistance that allows them to critique societal absurdities and oppressive systems, transforming their creative expression into tools of resistance. This process allows them to articulate complex ideas and emotions while also enabling them to gain a voice and visibility. The empowerment derived from this artistic practice is multifaceted, providing a platform for self-expression and serving as a form of activism that empowers these women to have their voices heard.

As mentioned earlier, Freud discussed that humour operates as a form of human behaviour that reveals unconscious desires and conflicts and often functions as social tools that enable individuals to express thoughts that might otherwise be deemed socially unacceptable (Freud, 1963). Walter Benjamin (1978) similarly posited that laughter can serve as a catalyst for the breakage or subversion of established representational and social structures (Benjamin, 1978). Thus, like Freud, Benjamin highlighted the fact that jokes and humour have the ability to challenge and critique prevailing norms. As a physical act and a socially coded behaviour, laughter encompasses a spectrum of emotional responses, including joy, sarcasm, derision, and nervousness. Although often spontaneous, laughter

is influenced by cultural norms and functions as a form of communication that conveys a variety of emotional states (Eagleton, 2019).

For the Arab female cartoonists who participated in this research, these theories on humour and laughter are particularly resonant. In environments in which direct criticism may be met with severe repercussions, humour and satire become vital tools of resistance. The ability to embed complex critiques within seemingly innocuous cartoons allows these artists to address sensitive and controversial topics while avoiding direct confrontation. This approach is not merely a creative choice but is a necessary strategy for survival in restrictive environments. These cartoonists harness humour's power to help them navigate the intricate balance between self-expression and societal expectations, using their art to assert their voices in a space in which they have traditionally been marginalised.

These cartoonists' work exemplifies humour's capacity to serve as both a shield and a weapon – protecting the artist while simultaneously launching subtle yet powerful critiques against the constraints that their sociopolitical contexts impose. Thus, their cartoons are not merely artistic expressions but acts of defiance and resistance.

10.6.6 Financial Independence

Virginia Woolf's influential essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) underscores the necessity of financial independence and private space for women who wish to engage in intellectual and creative pursuits. Woolf famously asserted that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (Woolf, 1929) in a statement that is highly relevant to female artists and cartoonists, who have historically faced similar challenges to those that Woolf identified as affecting women writers. Just as Woolf argued that financial security and a dedicated space are crucial for literary creativity, these elements are equally

essential for visual artists wishing to produce their best work. Female artists and cartoonists often grapple with limited access to funding, studio space, and institutional support compared to their male counterparts. This disparity can inhibit their ability to pursue their craft full time, explore innovative ideas, and achieve recognition in their fields. Financial autonomy ensures that women can sustain themselves independently through their art, while private space facilitates uninterrupted focus and the freedom to experiment and refine their techniques.

As Linda Nochlin famously argued in *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1977), the conditions within the arts – and countless other fields – are profoundly oppressive and discouraging for anyone who lacks the privilege of being born white, male, and, ideally, middle-class. The root of the problem, Nochlin insists, does not lie in biological determinism: women are not held back by their stars, hormones, menstrual cycles, or ‘empty internal spaces’. Rather, the blame rests squarely on our institutions and systems of education. Nochlin emphasises that education encompasses far more than formal schooling, expanding it to include the entire social and cultural framework in which we are immersed from birth, the framework that shapes our understanding of symbols, roles, and possibilities within society (Nochlin, 1977). Nochlin’s argument resonates so strongly because it is rooted in undeniable facts rather than abstract theories. Women’s exclusion from art history is not a result of their natural ability or supposed ‘gendered’ talent – it is a consequence of systemic barriers.

10.6.7 Overview

The culturally entrenched male domination within the Arab collective psyche has become so deeply embedded as to go largely unnoticed today. It seamlessly aligns with expectations, making it difficult to question or challenge its existence. Both men and women continue to harbour the symbolic structures of this

dominant androcentric unconscious (Bourdieu, 1991), which directly influences individuals without any need for physical constraints. This power merely triggers the code that is inscribed deep within the individual's subconscious. Consequently, women readily conform to its dictates, voluntarily suppressing their abilities to compete and voice their opinions according to the gender-specific rules of the game. Societal norms slowly and gradually permeate people's lives across multiple generations until it becomes difficult to imagine any alternative. This gradual normalisation is the typical trajectory of social transformation, whereby that which was once inconceivable becomes a commonly accepted norm.

The stranglehold of patriarchal power lies in how deeply woven it has become into so many of our cultures. More than anything, humans are cultural creatures. We feel the need to belong, to have a history, to feel that our existence has some meaning beyond ourselves. Without connections to the past, we would have no reference point from which to build our identities. But where do we turn when our cultures are both something we want to protect and the sources of our oppression? (Saini, 2023, p. 265)

A sense of group belonging and conforming discourages individuals from venturing beyond pre-established boundaries, particularly when it comes to acts that are as bold and exposed as the publication of a satirical cartoon drawn and signed by an Arab woman.

The interconnection between our roles in society and our identities is rendered more profound by the conviction that our communities might unravel if we fail to fulfil these roles. For women, however – particularly Arab women in the colonial and postcolonial eras – this complexity intensifies as they are often perceived as

both guardians and wards of their culture. Women who dare to resist may not only face accusations of betraying their society but also confront the painful sense of betraying their own identities. The phrase 'I have never faced any problems with censorship as long as I...' recurred several times during the interviews, suggesting that certain conditions must be met. Such conditions may involve not transgressing the boundaries that editors have established, adherence to publishers' policies, or abiding by social norms and cultural codes. However, censorship is censorship at whichever level it operates at – internal, individual, external, or societal – and at whichever point in the artistic, creative, production or publication process at which an idea is suppressed rather than expressed.

Arab female cartoonists often grapple with profound internal conflicts as they strive to express their ideas while also remaining in alignment with their political, social, and cultural identities. This internal struggle is rooted in the tension between their desire for creative freedom and the rigid constraints imposed by their environments. On one hand, these artists are driven by a need to challenge societal norms, critique political structures, and address sensitive topics such as gender inequality, censorship, and human rights, particularly women's rights abuses. On the other hand, they must also navigate the deeply ingrained cultural and religious values that dictate acceptable behaviour and expression within their communities. This dichotomy obliges them to constantly balance their roles as both artists and cultural adherents, often resulting in self-censorship as a means of mitigating potential backlash and preserving their social standing. The fear of professional repercussions or being socially ostracised or even facing legal consequences further complicates this balancing act. Consequently, Arab female cartoonists frequently exercise subtlety and ambiguity in their work, embedding their critiques within culturally acceptable frameworks to maintain their artistic

integrity while adhering to societal expectations. This ongoing internal conflict highlights the complex interplay between personal identity and the broader sociopolitical landscape in which these cartoonists operate.

Arab female cartoonists utilise their art to attain psychological balance, achieving a sense of purpose and empowerment by means of their creative endeavours. Cartooning thus serves not only as a therapeutic outlet but also as a powerful means by which female cartoonists can voice their struggles and aspirations and attain voice and visibility. These artists use satire and humour to adeptly highlight societal absurdities and critique oppressive systems, thus transforming their personal experiences and emotional diaries into formidable tools of resistance and articulating complex ideas and emotions. The empowerment derived from this artistic practice is multifaceted, not only providing a platform for self-expression but also serving as a form of activism that these women use to assert their voices in spaces in which they have traditionally been marginalised.

This study also benefited from the visual analysis that yielded insights by means of the access to unspoken words, utilising the aforementioned methods and analyses, and its synthesis with the profound insights that the literature review provided. For example, several cartoons by the Arab female cartoonists under consideration in this research project include visual elements that represent cages, chains, broken wings, and gazing eyes that appear to penetrate the human mind, conveying the cartoonists' personal struggles and limitations. In other instances, the participants exhibited the ability to design their own spaces, define boundaries, and challenge physical or psychological constraints. For example, recurring motifs similar to Qaed's windows, Eladl's broken chains, and wings appear frequently in my cartoons. These symbols reflect a desire for

emancipation from psychological and internalised limitations and boundaries, as has been analysed in detail in previous chapters.

10.7 Closing Notes

This chapter has explored the four layers of analysis to demonstrate how this analysis helped with addressing the research objectives.

As a researcher, I found that the process of translating and transcribing the interviews both challenged and enriched the analysis, transforming it into a profoundly personal journey of distancing and recognition. This process was crucial in the first layer of the analysis, in which I navigated the meanings underlying the interviewees and participants' contributions. The awareness that emerged from this initial analysis served as a milestone that helped me to establish a rigorous distance between my initial views and the data. It simultaneously allowed me to recognise and reflect on my own experiences and context as a female cartoonist.

This insight is directly relevant to the first research objectives: '1) Experiences (individual): Explore the experiences and practices of Arab female cartoonists, considering unique regional influences on their work and life (Who?)'. The second layer of analysis across the interviews and the analysis of the cartoonists' visual work highlighted the cartoonists' perspectives and experiences, which were shaped by their regional contexts and life circumstances. The use of NVivo to identify labels and categories further illuminated patterns of expression and illuminated continuities in how these artists articulated their experiences.

These patterns informed the development of the third layer of analysis, in which themes and sub-themes were constructed for the purpose of grouping these patterns across the data. This analysis contributed to answering the second

research question: '2) Themes – transversal context: Analyse the sociopolitical context to identify factors shaping their art, highlighting the interplay between cartoons, politics, gender, culture, and society (In what context?)'. The themes and sub-themes provided discursive models that address the third research question: '3) Strategies of navigation: How do these cartoonists navigate these factors by examining their strategies, techniques, and themes (How?)'.

The integration of textual and visual analysis facilitates a deeper exploration of these narratives' construction and their manifestation in both the content and form of the cartoons. This approach facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the strategies that these artists employ to navigate their sociopolitical contexts.

The fourth layer synthesises all preceding insights through a comprehensive discourse analysis. This layer goes beyond merely identifying themes and patterns; it delves into the narratives, ideologies, and concepts that underpin the Arab women cartoonists' experiences and expressions. By examining these elements through a review of the relevant literature, the fourth layer integrates both textual and visual discourse analysis to explore the overarching narratives and ideologies that influence these artists' work.

In synthesising the layers of identity negotiation, shared experiences, thematic exploration, and strategic navigation, the fourth layer of analysis illuminates how Arab women cartoonists engage with and challenge the dominant political and social ideologies in their environments. The discourse analysis is thus the culmination of the research process, offering a thorough examination of how these cartoonists interacted and affected by the factors that shaped their life and

work experiences. Each layer of analysis built on the preceding layer, facilitating a fuller understanding of the research topic.

The complexity of the Arab female cartoonists' experiences cannot easily be quantified simply by counting instances of bans on specific cartoons and attempting to reduce their experiences to a mere presence or absence. Rather, this topic comprises multiple layers of perspective. For these cartoonists, the creation of cartoons serves as a mechanism for reproducing their own identity and exploring alternative images of themselves.

The decision to speak out against gender oppression might be measurable, but resistance can manifest in various forms. The experiences of Arab female cartoonists defy simple measurements and are profoundly influenced by personal agency, social context, and the quest for self-expression.

Arab female cartoonists' experiences are profoundly shaped by various critical factors, including a lack of funding and numerous significant challenges. These artists risk social isolation and exclusion, among other challenges.

Editorial cartooning, as we have observed, is an unconventional genre that empowers artists to rebel against the constraints of traditional visual discourse. It serves as a tool to voice opposition against oppressive or restrictive mainstream narratives. However, when the absence of institutional or social protection makes it impossible to speak out, silence may be the only safe recourse. The fear of repercussions and the absence of sufficient support have prevented several talented female cartoonists from fully expressing their creative voices.

The inherent tension between Arab female cartoonists' transgressive artistic impulses and the conservative values they ought to adhere to highlights the complex interplay of self-censorship, cultural expectations, and personal identity.

Understanding this dynamic is crucial for understanding the experiences of Arab female cartoonists and the broader implications for their artistic outputs.

Chapter Eleven: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have discussed the experiences and practices of Arab female cartoonists, focusing on the various dimensions of their experiences within their cultural and social contexts. The chapters have explored the implications of patriarchal discourse on their lived and professional experiences, illuminated the diverse challenges that the cartoonists articulated, examined the complex dynamics of their creative practices as expressed through various media platforms, analysed the unique aspects surrounding their participation in political and social discourse, and investigated the strategies that they use to sustain and navigate their artistic practice through all of the above.

In this concluding section, I wish to synthesise and summarise the crucial and extensive insights yielded hitherto by the literature review, the specific methodological approach and contribution, and the extensive findings about Arab women cartoonists. In a final note, I shall outline potential avenues for future research into the experiences of Arab female cartoonists and the role of art in social change.

In the literature review chapter, I have examined studies available in both Arabic and English, focusing on three central themes that significantly affect the lives of women in the Arab world, particularly those engaged in intellectual, cultural, and artistic fields. These themes' impact is further magnified in the context of art forms that are inherently rebellious and provocative, such as cartoons, and the themes include the pervasive influence of patriarchal discourse, its manifestations within institutional, professional, and social life, and particularly its impact on the lived and professional experiences of Arab women working in fields traditionally

dominated by men. This patriarchal discourse, which has existed in the region for millennia, emerged with the transition to a society that grants men significantly greater freedom and more privileges than women. Its roots may be traced back to ancient civilisations in Mesopotamia and its surrounding areas. However, research attests that the colonial threat to local identities and cultures – particularly the colonialist's condescending attitude towards these cultural identities – significantly reinforced patriarchal discourse. For men, safeguarding a woman's honour became both a compensation and a symbol for the threatened nation and identity. This discourse persisted into the postcolonial period and continues to this day, albeit in different forms.

Moreover, studies on editorial cartoons inevitably intersect with the subject of censorship dictated by political and social forces, whether explicit or implicit. State-imposed censorship, often enforced on the press, media, and artistic platforms by regulatory bodies, exerts substantial pressure on artists, regardless of gender or social class, though its implications are more extensive and enduring for women. Social censorship, which is rooted in cultural and societal norms, imposes a disproportionate burden on women, subjecting them to severe censure and ostracism if they are perceived to have deviated from their expected roles. This effect is exacerbated by the decision-makers' and other authorities' reliance on exclusively patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, which occupy a particularly revered status in the Arab world. The core issue, prominent feminist scholars in the Arab academic and cultural spheres have highlighted, lies in the fact that local culture has afforded these patriarchal interpretations a degree of

sanctity, thereby creating an additional layer of normative behavioural expectations from women who possess a significant level of inviolability.

This, in turn, has profound implications, particularly for women who participate professionally in satirical art and social critique. Various factors emerge that constrain the spaces for expression, fostering an internalised censorship that is driven by fear and that may induce the female artist to impose boundaries on herself before she even publicises her work on the available platforms.

The final theme addressed in the literature review concerns media, women, and caricature in the Arab world. The interplay between social, cultural, and political dynamics forces Arab women working in the media field to navigate a complex environment that prevents them from advancing to positions of authority and leadership. This is supported by testimonies from women working in the media, sourced from both secondary materials, such as articles and literature, and from primary sources in the form of direct testimonials shared for the purpose of this research. These accounts illuminate the multifaceted challenges and obstacles that any woman working in caricature must navigate if she is to avoid feeling compelled to quit the profession and abandon her art.

It is essential to recognise the significance of the role played by satirical style, which is a cornerstone of caricature art, in challenging established norms and providing an outlet for anger and witty critique. Art of this nature is inherently rebellious in its forms, ideas, and expression. Its rebellious nature is amplified when the pen is wielded by a woman in contexts that have posed significant constraints on the female person.

The literature explored in this project has played a valuable role in highlighting and further exploring the extent to which Arab women cartoonists' professional

lives are often neglected by researchers. This has also opened up a new realm of awareness for me as an Arab female cartoonist whose career has encountered numerous challenges and inspired me to further explore the underlying reasons behind the obstacles.

In the adoption of appropriate methodologies, this research journey has been neither simple nor linear; rather, it has been a winding path that evolved and changed over time. This journey began with an extended data collection period that commenced even before this research project formally began, driven by my work and interest in this field. I gathered data on female cartoonists and their work from various sources in both Arabic and English. Subsequently, I initiated contact with the cartoonists, engaged with them, and invited them to participate in this research.

Next, I began recording interviews with the participants, adhering to the ethical research procedures. I then began analysing the cartoons mentioned in the interviews and those published on print and digital media platforms, focusing on topics that were relevant to the discussion, in line with the criteria for the selection of cartoons that were detailed in the methodology section.

This was followed by the translation and transcription of the interviews. This phase presented significant challenges for me as a researcher, particularly in terms of balancing the accurate documentation of the participants' voices with the need to address contextual gaps through the addition of verified information and adding my clarifying comments during the process. The effort to achieve this

balance culminated in an enriching analytical layer on which I elaborated in the methodology section.

The incorporation of visual analysis of the selected cartoons within the contextual writing of the interviews also proved to be highly beneficial in constructing a thorough and multifaceted analysis. The narratives that the cartoonists themselves provided during the interviews were crucial to the visual analysis of their works. The research's analytical perspective was significantly enriched by the intertwining of the two strands into a single narrative context.

The cartoons were studied systematically, with the integration of social and political analysis derived from the literature and the words of the cartoonists, including myself, resulting in a holistic understanding of each participant's personal perspective and professional experiences in their cultural and social contexts.

As both a researcher and a participant in this study, it was essential that I consider my personal perspective. The adoption of the autoethnographic method proved the most effective means of achieving this. This decision was filled with mixed emotions and self-reflections that illuminated aspects and experiences of my personal and professional life that I had not previously acknowledged. The critical dialogue that emerged between my personal experience and those of the other cartoonists, particularly in light of the shared linguistic and cultural context, was instrumental in leading towards conclusions that would have been difficult to attain via other methods.

This was followed by an analytical process which advanced the research to a more abstract level. All textual and visual data were input into NVivo software, which facilitated the creation of labels, categories, and sub-categories, grouping

them into themes and sub-themes. This process ultimately contributed to the final stages of analysis and discussion within the framework of critical discourse analysis, whereby all previous analyses and discussions were synthesised into an applied analytical level, representing the culmination of this project's findings.

The interconnected and overlapping methods adopted in this study provided a broader and more comprehensive view of the topic under investigation.

Each individual is bound by unique experiences and beliefs that inevitably influence perspectives. However, by engaging in dialogue with other Arab female cartoonists, artists, and authors, I obtained insights that might not otherwise have been forthcoming.

Several key insights emerged from the research, including that Arab female cartoonists often experience internal conflicts that arise from the tension between their desire for creative freedom and the stringent constraints that their surrounding environments impose on them. On the one hand, they are driven by the need to challenge unjust societal norms, critique political oppression, and address sensitive issues, such as gender inequality and censorship, not least violations of women's rights. On the other hand, they must navigate entrenched political, cultural, and social values that dictate what is acceptable and what is taboo. Cultural and social conformity has become so deeply internalised that it is difficult to distinguish between externally imposed obligations and commitments that have been internally generated on a psychological level.

Fears of professional repercussions, social ostracism, and even legal consequences further complicate this precarious balancing act. Consequently, Arab female cartoonists frequently employ ambiguity in their work, embedding their critiques within humorous frameworks that help render the criticism more

socially and culturally acceptable. This strategy allows them to maintain their artistic integrity while they continue to adhere to societal expectations. This ongoing internal struggle underscores the complex interplay between personal identity and the broader social and political landscape within which these cartoonists operate.

Arab female cartoonists utilise their art to achieve emotional and psychological balance. Cartoon drawing serves not only as a therapeutic outlet but also as a powerful medium through which they can express their struggles and aspirations and possibly gain both voice and visibility. These artists use visual satire and humour to subtly highlight the absurdities of social injustice and critique oppressive regimes, thereby transforming their personal struggles into tools of resistance. For us all, cartoons not only provide a platform for self-expression but also function as a form of activism that empowers us to assert our voices in the spaces in which we have been traditionally marginalised.

The recurring symbols in the cartoonists' drawings serve as the most eloquent and critical expression of the status quo; the cartoonists use visual elements such as cages, chains, broken wings, and piercing eyes that appear to penetrate the human psyche to articulate these lived challenges and conflicts. In other instances, the interviewed participants exhibited the ability to create for themselves spaces that transcend these boundaries and challenge physical or psychological limitations. For example, recurring symbols such as open windows, broken chains, and outspread wings reflect a desire for liberation and emancipation from external and internal constraints.

Arab female cartoonists often struggle to secure a daily – or, at the very least, consistent – platform on which they can publish their work, which is essential for advancing their careers and acquiring recognition among a readership.

Unfortunately, various factors ensure that this opportunity remains largely inaccessible, including insufficient funding, ideological divergences, and numerous political and cultural constraints. At the time of writing, only one female cartoonist – Doaa Eladl – consistently publishes her work on a daily basis and her name is closely associated with the esteemed Egyptian newspaper, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, which is known for its extensive and established readership. Other Arab female cartoonists, even if they have achieved national and international recognition, enjoy only sporadic access to publishing platforms. They may secure short-term, temporary, or occasional contracts, sometimes lasting as little as a month or limited to a single event, as exemplified by the cases of Sara Qaed from Bahrain and Riham El-Hour from Morocco. To date, no magazine or periodical platform specialising in women's issues has employed or engaged an Arab female cartoonist with the express purpose of portraying political and social matters from a woman's perspective. This situation, in turn, affects the cartoonists' financial independence, as they must sometimes choose between pursuing their careers as cartoonists and maintaining their financial independence, which dictates their decisions and life choices.

While writing my autoethnography for this research, I was acutely aware of the concept of cultural duality, as discussed in the literature review section. I experienced immense pressure to engage in self-censorship during the writing process. My analytical mind encouraged me to examine and reflect on the factors and events that shaped my experience, while my emotions, concerns, and fears simultaneously urged caution and secrecy. At times, a reassuring voice reminded me that this research is solely for academic purposes, with the option of refraining from publication and restricting access to the dissertation within the confines of the university library. This realisation taught me that such thoughts themselves

were manifestations of self-censorship and fear. Consequently, the writing process became a process of constant decision-making with respect to writing, deleting, and sometimes reinstating paragraphs, while other sections were permanently removed and never restored.

Reflecting on this process, I considered how my practice of drawing cartoons was similarly self-censored prior to publication. These introspective reflections guided me back towards the limitations and factors that impact the female cartoonist's work, which is essential not only for myself but also for many others who share similar contexts or even aspects thereof. I now realise that before embarking on this research journey, I underestimated the extent to which it would penetrate my soul, consciousness, and subconscious mind. I was once particularly struck by a post that a Syrian poet and writer shared on her Facebook page: 'How will we liberate a woman who is completely convinced that she is free?'

This study's findings highlight several areas in which further research is required to enhance our understanding of the cultural, social, and intellectual dynamics in the region. One area that warrants more comprehensive exploration is the visual connotations of architectural structures and their ties to male-dominated cultural frameworks. For instance, the manifestation of Foucault's panoptic analysis in certain governmental and domestic buildings and its implications for individuals and society, represents an area that is critical for further study. Similarly, the monument on which the laws of Hammurabi – laws that were profoundly imbued with values – is strikingly phallic in form, suggesting that it warrants closer examination in this light.

These symbolic parallels, which are deeply rooted in regional culture and history, should be investigated for their influence on contemporary cultural, social, and intellectual life. While this study touches on these examples in the context of their

relationship to patriarchal discourse and its manifestations in the region, these areas require more focused research. The expansion of our inquiry into these visual symbols will deepen our understanding of such imagery's potential to shape and reinforce prevailing cultural narratives, ultimately fostering greater awareness and critical analysis.

The literature review also highlighted a significant gap in scholarship pertaining to the art of Arab caricature, comics and political satire, particularly in relation to the present study's topic of interest: Arab female artists. Academic references in both Arabic and English that address the experiences and works of women in this field are notably lacking. Similarly, the role that humour and satire play tools for resistance in Arab society also requires more focused scholarly attention. An investigation of the ways in which satire and cartoons contribute to or challenge social norms and gender dynamics would yield valuable insights into their potential as instruments for social change. The gaps identified by the present research project underscore the need for continuous investigation of key topics that stand at the intersection of culture, gender, and the visual arts.

The scarcity of Arab female cartoonists perpetuates the misconception that cartoon drawing is predominantly a male domain, which may further dissuade potential female cartoonists from entering the field. Women's underrepresentation in the industry has resulted in limited mentorship opportunities for aspiring female cartoonists, and this in turn may demotivate women from pursuing careers in this field. The inequitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and platforms for showcasing artwork often puts women

at a disadvantage, making it more difficult for them to break into the profession and obtain the recognition that their talents merit.

The quest for equitable representation and meaningful inclusion of women in media encompasses areas that lie far beyond the realm of editorial cartoons. This study's primary objective was to bridge the gap in knowledge about Arab female cartoonists, shedding light on the broader issue of Arab women's marginalisation. In examining how women have been either denied or granted opportunities and spaces to voice their perspectives and challenge prevailing patriarchal norms, I sought to uncover these ideologies' roots and psychological implications. The struggle for equity in the editorial cartoon industry is, in essence, a struggle against the wider pattern of marginalisation that has the potential to pave the way for transformative change by advocating for Arab female cartoonists to be afforded the recognition that they deserve within the field.

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Appendix

Thesis chapter(s)	Research study	Ethics review reference	Approval date
Chapters 4 - 7	Interviews (Exploring the Experiences and Practices of Arab Female Cartoonists)	ER19200388	3/8/2020

Converis - Ethics Review - Approval with Advisory Amendments

1 message

converis@shu.ac.uk <converis@shu.ac.uk>

6 August 2020 at 18:04

To: "Alyoussef, Afraa" <[REDACTED]>

Dear Afraa

Title of Ethics Review: [Exploring the Experiences and the Practice of Arab Female Cartoonists](#) Ethic
Review ID: ER19200388

The University has reviewed your ethics application named above and can confirm that the project has been approved.

If you have a query regarding your application, please contact your Faculty Ethics Administrator in the first instance. HWB -

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you success with your study

Kind regards,

Ethics Research Support