

La rivista di Arablit

semestrale di letteratura e cultura araba moderna e contemporanea

Anno XV, numero 30, dicembre 2025



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THE GRAPHIC NOVEL ADAPTATION OF A MODERN CLASSIC: A MULTIMODAL READING OF *AL-LIṢṢ WA 'L-KILĀB*

CRISTINA DOZIO*

This paper examines the adaptation of classics of Arabic literature into graphic novels, a successful type of narrative in the global and regional publishing industries. Its aim is to chart the undergoing adaptation projects and to examine the graphic novel al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb (The Thief and the Dogs, 2024), based on the famous novel by Naḡīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006), the first release within the broader Naguib Mahfouz Project. Before delving into the case study, this paper explores the potential of comics as a medium by applying the theoretical framework of multimodal and adaptation studies. These considerations are coupled with an overview of the Arab comics production at the beginning of the 2000s and after 2011. Then the relation between classics and the comic art is examined with reference to the contemporary Arab cultural production providing some insights about canonization, intersemiotic and interlinguistic translation, before making a list of classics turned into graphic books. Finally, al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb is examined to understand the main adaptation techniques, the aesthetic choices, the publishers' aims, and the resources available for new readers.

To celebrate a century from Italo Calvino's birthday, the Italian Cultural Institute in Tunis invited five Tunisian writers to discuss the legacy of this world-famous author, whose works have also been translated into Arabic¹. Each writer engaged with one of the essays that compose *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*², a classic in its own. This project was enriched by a collective exhibition of illustrations by Tunisian artists inspired by Calvino's most famous novels³. This beautiful initiative exemplifies a new way of promoting a cultural dialogue across the Mediterranean through a multimedia and multimodal approach: the written word becomes spoken word and image in a process of re-elaboration that borders on adaptation.

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¹ The project *Dialoghi tunisini su Calvino* was curated by Chiara Comito and took place in Tunis in 2023. It resulted in this volume: C. Comito (a cura di), *Calvino a Tunisi*, Mesogea, Messina 2024.

² I. Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, Garzanti, Milano 1988.

³ The exhibition *Calvino: oltre il visibile* was curated by Anna Gabai and Abir Gasmi and was held in the bookstore Mille Feuilles, La Marsa, Tunis, in October-November 2023. The illustrators are Ahmed Ben Nessib, Sonia Ben Salem, Ayen Mbarki, Seif Eddine Nechi, Othman Selmi, Kamal Zakour.

All these ideas inspire this article, which deals with the adaptation of some classics of Arabic literature into graphic novels, a successful type of narrative in the global and regional publishing industries. This paper illustrates the peculiarities of comics as a medium within the framework of multimodality and adaptation studies, pointing out this medium's hybridity and the circularity of the adaptation process. Since both these theoretical approaches highlight the relevance of the cultural context, this paper overviews the evolution of the ninth art in the Arab world, in particular charting the main changes that occurred in the early 2000s and after 2011. Over these decades, Arab comics have developed new resources for making meaning, including an increasing hybridity with other forms of art. To study this hybridity, this contribution discusses the relation between literature and graphic novels with examples from the Arab world and lists some graphic novel adaptations of classics, a common practice worldwide and a new phenomenon in the Arab market.

As a case study, this paper examines the graphic novel *al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb* (The Thief and the Dogs, 2024)⁴, based on the famous novel by Naḡīb Maḥfūz (1911-2006)⁵, in order to understand the main adaptation strategies within the broader project of reviving the cultural heritage of the Egyptian Nobel laureate. The analysis will focus on the characters' design, space representation, and key elements maintained from the literary text (such as dialogues and metaphors). It will examine the multidirectional relation between the two texts and what surrounds them, including the website of the *Naguib Mahfouz Project* and previous adaptations available online. This case study allows investigating how multimodal communication with a new audience, through graphic novels and online, redefines narratives, the notion of classics, and translation.

To approach these complex issues, the next paragraph defines multimodality and adaptation with a special reference to comics.

1. Multimodality and Comics

Comics have great potential for adaptation, since they are a multimodal and collaborative form of art: «Comics rely on the interaction of symbols to create meaning, possibly by the interaction of different kinds of symbols (say, pictures and words placed together) or by a sequence of images in relationship to one another. Comics are a collaborative medium in which the creator reduces the ideas that the creator wants to communicate into a finite set of symbols and the reader

⁴ Naḡīb Maḥfūz; Muḥammad Ismā'īl Amīn (script); Mīḡū; Ġamāl Qubṭān (drawings), *al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb – riwāyah muṣawwarah*, al-Maḥrūsah-Dīwān, al-Qāhirah 2024; Naguib Mahfouz; Mohamed Ismail Amin (scenario); Migo; Jamal Kobtan (art), *The Thief and the Dogs*, translated by Mai Serhan, El Mahrousa-Diwan, Cairo 2025.

⁵ Naḡīb Maḥfūz, *al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb*, Hindāwī, Windsor 2022. First edition: Dār Miṣr, al-Qāhirah 1961.

adds in additional information in the process of decoding the presentation»⁶.

Moreover, comics show a certain degree of flexibility, since they circulate across various media – such as newspaper strips, magazines, books, and digital platforms – and often go through processes of reprint⁷. These considerations are also valid for the graphic novel⁸, which is variably defined as the long form of comics, a long and complete narrative deserving esteem for its literary and artistic merits, a novel in the form of comics, a storytelling medium, a genre, and a marketing label.

To better understand these definitions, it is useful to recall how mode and media are conceived by multimodal social semiotics⁹. A mode is a socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning. In the age of multimodality, different modal resources can be used to do specific semiotic work, combining writing, speech, image, music, gesture, and so on. For instance, writing has sentences organized through grammar and syntax, textual resources to frame its units and graphic resources, whereas image has resources such as position of elements in a framed space, size, color, shape, and icons, as well as resources such as spatial relation and movement. Modes have to be considered together with the medium, which has a material and a social aspect, since it materially is the support through which meaning is realized and socially is the result of semiotic, sociocultural, and technological practices¹⁰. Both modes and media have different affordances, *i.e.* potentials and constraints for making meaning. Thus, it is relevant to understand that both of them are culturally shaped and are modified by social and technological change.

Similarly, adaptation studies pay attention to multimodality, intermedial transfer, and cultural-related specificities of the medium, in our case comics. Investigating this phenomenon across various media, Hutcheon provides a comprehensive definition of adaptation that describes it both as the product and the creative/receptive process: (i) an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works; (ii) a creative and an interpretive act of

⁶ R. Duncan R.; M.J. Smith, *How the Graphic Novel Works*, in S.E. Tabachnick (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Graphic Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, p. 8.

⁷ B. Davies, *Comics and Multimodal Storytelling*, in Ahmed Maaheen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Comics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023, pp. 125-142.

⁸ A. Hescher, *Reading Graphic Novels, Genre and Narration*, de Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2016; A. Tosti, *Graphic Novel. Storia e teoria del romanzo a fumetti*, Tunué, Latina 2016; S. Calabrese; E. Zagaglia, *Che cos'è il graphic novel*, Carocci, Roma 2017.

⁹ G. Kress, *Multimodality. A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, Routledge, London-New York 2010, pp. 79-83.

¹⁰ J. Bezemer; G. Kress, *Writing in Multimodal Texts. A Social Semiotic Account of Designs for Learning*, in "Written Communication", 25, 2 (2008), p. 172.

appropriation/salvaging; (iii) an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work¹¹. New directions in this field of study highlight the relevance of understanding adaptation as a circular movement that challenges notions of origin, authorship, fidelity, and popularization¹². In this respect, five main theoretical issues in current research can be identified: «First is the question of fidelity, which adaptation studies universally addresses. Second is the attempt to open up the field to a broader variety of media relations beyond the usual novel-to-film relationship. A third important trend is the way that some contributors consider adaptation as a multilevel rather than a one-to-one relationship (for example, one poem interpreted into one painting). Fourth, the book probes the idea that adaptation may not be a one-way transport from source to result, but a two-way, dialogic process. Finally, some chapters examine the way that global theoretical frameworks (intermediality or genetic criticism, for example) can be used in adaptation studies»¹³.

Even if these trends place adaptation against the backdrop of more comprehensive theories regarding cultural transfer and intermediality, the relationship between literature and comics is still a «difficult match»¹⁴ (see below par. 3). In comparison to cinema, graphic novels based on literary source texts are not so common as one might expect¹⁵, thus have received only partial scholarly attention¹⁶. Despite some obstacles, there is a positive change in the critical recognition of comics (alongside their commercial success) which encourages a circular exchange across sources and media. Thanks to this recognition and circularity, adaptations of literature into comics contribute to redefining the long-lasting issue of fidelity in terms of creativity: comics are not the opposite of highbrow literature, nor ancillary illustrations

¹¹ L. Hutcheon; with S. O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Routledge, London-New York 2013 (second edition), p. 8.

¹² J. Bruhn et al., 'There and Back Again': *New Challenges and New Directions in Adaptation Studies*, in Id. (eds.), *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions*, Bloomsbury, London 2013, pp. 1-16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁴ J. Baetens, *Comics Adaptations. Fidelity and Creativity*, in Ahmed Maaheen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Comics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023, pp. 143-165. See also J. Baetens, *Adaptation et bande dessinée: Eloge de la fidélité*, Les Impressions Nouvelles, Brussels 2020.

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning the adaptation of comics into films, including some famous examples from Middle Eastern cultures: Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (4 voll., 2002-2003) was adapted into a film (2007); the film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) was adapted into a graphic novel (2009).

¹⁶ For adaptation studies across media, including comics, see: A. Gaudreault; T. Groensteen (dir.), *La transécriture: pour une théorie de l'adaptation. Littérature, cinéma, bande dessinée, théâtre, clip*, Nota Bene/CNBDI, Montreal-Angoulême 1998; B. Mitaine et al. (dir.), *Bande dessinée et adaptation: Littérature, cinéma, TV*, Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand 2015.

of literary works with didactic purposes.

Since both multimodal and adaptation studies remark the importance of taking into consideration the cultural-related medium specificities, the next paragraph explores the evolution of Arab comics over the last decades, pointing out the increasing recognition of the artists' creativity and new affordances generated by digital communication.

2. Arab Comics and Graphic Novels

Independent comics for adults are relatively new in the Arab world. However, their antecedents can be found in the satirical cartoons published in the press since the late 19th century and comics for children released in Egypt and Lebanon since the 1930s¹⁷. In both cases, there was an exchange between the local and the global spheres, since artists were influenced by international trends and some characters were adapted for the Arabic audience¹⁸. While the industry of children's comics developed and some great artists emerged, the first comics for adults appeared in Algeria in the late 1960s and in Lebanon around the 1980s. It was only at the beginning of the 2000s that a growing number of artists created alternative comics for adults (*qīṣaṣ muṣawwarah* or *kūmīks*) to be distributed independently¹⁹. Once again, they interacted with the international scene in terms of training, influences, and multilingualism, but fueled their stories with local themes and a language that resonates with their, albeit small, audience.

This phase began with the Lebanese magazine *Samandal* (Salamander), whose first issue was published in 2007, and continued with the big resonance of the first Egyptian graphic novel (*riwāyah muṣawwarah*), *Mitrū* (Metro) by Maḡdī al-Šāfi 'ī²⁰. The real turning point was 2011 when the changing socio-cultural environment encouraged various artistic projects that contributed to subversive culture both in terms of themes and language. As Høigilt remarks, comics commented on relevant themes such as authoritarianism, gender relations, the politics of youthfulness, and the social and political implications of language use²¹. In a climate of loosened censorship, similar experimentations were conducted in graffiti, cartoons, poetry, blog literature, and satirical litera-

¹⁷ A. Douglas; F. Malti-Douglas, *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1994.

¹⁸ Mickey Mouse was adapted for Arab children and the translations of Tintin enjoyed success in the Arab world. Besides American superheroes, in 2007 Teshkeel Comics created *The 99*, featuring a team of superheroes based on the 99 names of God in Islam.

¹⁹ J. Høigilt, *Comics in Contemporary Arab Culture: Politics, Language and Resistance*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 2019.

²⁰ Maḡdī al-Šāfi 'ī, *Mitrū*, Dār Malāmiḥ, al-Qāhirah 2008.

²¹ J. Høigilt, *Comics in Contemporary Arab Culture*, cit., p. 6.

ture, all of which exploited the potential offered by physical and digital spaces – the street and the social media – through multimodality²².

In fact, this cultural production transcends magazines. Among the workshops and festivals, it is worth mentioning *Festival International de la Bande Dessinée d'Alger (FIBDA)* launched in 2008, *Middle East Film and Comic Con (MEFCC)* held in Dubai since 2012, and *CairoComix* organized since 2015 by al-Šāfi'ī and Šinnawī. As regards prizes and academic initiatives, the American University of Beirut (AUB) hosts the annual *Mahmud Kahil Award* among the activities of the Rada and Mutaz Sawaf Center for Arab Comics Studies. Social media and digital technologies have a strong impact on circulation, since many artists publish the digital versions of their work, making it accessible to a broader audience and increasing their networking chances²³. As regards networking, many initiatives revolve around collectives such as *Samandal* in Lebanon, *TokTok (TūkTūk)* in Egypt²⁴, *Lab619* in Tunisia, and *SkefSkef* in Morocco. Similarly, dissemination about the ninth art relies on digital technologies and collaboration among professionals of the industry, as is the case of the website *Oum Cartoon*²⁵ and the catalogue *Arab Comics Today*²⁶.

While collectives and magazines were central in the 2010s, solo artists favouring the long form have recently emerged. With a focus on Egypt, al-Šāfi'ī is still a leading figure and continues publishing his works. Besides him, it is worth mentioning two younger artists who live across continents and languages, exploiting the potential of digital communication for creativity and visibility: Ġanzīr (Ganzeer) and Dīnā Muḥammad (Deena Mohamed). Known as a street artist in the 2011 Revolution, Ġanzīr is among the creators of the graphic novel *Fī šaqqat Bāb al-Lūq* (The Apartment in Bab El-Louk)²⁷, winner of the *Mahmoud Kahil Award*. In 2016 he started publishing in English the serialized graphic novel *The Solar Grid*, online first and later in print

²² On poetry, see L. Casini, *Le poesie della rivoluzione egiziana e la loro riproduzione come testi multimodali in YouTube: al-Midān (La Piazza) di Abd al-Rahmān al-Abnudi*, in “LEA – Lingue e letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente”, 1, 1 (2012), pp. 533-545. On blog literature, see T. Pepe, *Blogging from Egypt. Digital Literature, 2005-2016*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2020.

²³ Nevine El Nosseri, *Arab Women's Revolutionary Art. Between Singularities and Multitudes*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2023, p. 124.

²⁴ F. De Angelis, *Graphic Novels and Comic Books in Post-Revolutionary Egypt: Some Remarks*, in “La rivista di Arablit”, 9-10 (2015), pp. 23-37.

²⁵ J. Guyer, *Oum Cartoon*, available at: <https://oumcartoon.tumblr.com/> (last accessed 13 November 2025).

²⁶ Lina Ghaibeh; S. Gabrieli (eds.), *Arab Comics Today: The New Generation*, The Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arab Comics Initiative (AUB)-Alifbata, Beirut-Marseille 2017.

²⁷ Dunyā Māhir; Ġanzīr; Aḥmad Nādī, *Fī šaqqat Bāb al-Lūq*, Dār Mīrīt, al-Qāhirah 2013.

form²⁸. Dīnā Muḥammad made her debut in 2013 with her viral webcomic *Qāhirah* (Qahera/Victorious) which tackles issues such as sexual harassment, equality and the Islamist discourse through its eponymous veiled heroin²⁹. Her big project is the graphic novel trilogy *Šubbēk lubbēk* (Your Wish Is My Command)³⁰, that she has self-translated into English and is having a great international success thanks to its translation into various languages.

3. *Adaptation of Classics into Comic Art*

As illustrated in the previous section, Arab comics are a recent cultural production and they are taking the road of the graphic novel, following a global trend. This is confirmed by the case study of this paper, *i.e.* the graphic novel adaptation of a modern classic by Maḥfūz. This section discusses some issues about the complex but productive relationship between literature and graphic novels (see above par. 1), with a focus on the adaptation of classics. These considerations will be applied to the Arab cultural field to provide a framework for the adapted literary works listed below (see par. 4).

The first aspect to take into account is the sophistication of comics and graphic narratives since the 1980s. From the perspective of cultural studies, Croci remarks on the hybridity of comics as a medium that combines words and image, literature and art³¹; moreover, this hybridity is visible in their ability to mediate between highbrow and lowbrow culture by appropriating canonical culture through intertextuality and using its accessible language and the artists' creativity to inscribe subversive meanings. Croci also notes that British graphic novels re-elaborated the formal conventions of fantasy and romance, whereas U.S. graphic novels experimented with autofiction, everyday realism, historical narratives, and journalism, all of which were not mainstream literary genres³². These genres are currently the most productive ones in both Arabic literature and graphic novels, blurring the boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow culture, as well as those between fiction and non-fiction.

Through this process of sophistication, which includes both original works and adaptations, the graphic novel is nowadays considered as a full-fledged literary/artistic genre. According to Baetens, this evolution and positive critical recognition go hand in hand with a new approach to adaptation, «that is now replacing the old-fashioned antagonism between fidelity and

²⁸ Ganzeer, *The Solar Grid*, available at: <https://thesolargrid.net/> (last accessed 13 November 2025).

²⁹ *Qahera the webcomic, not the city*, available at: <https://qaherathesuperhero.com/> (last accessed 13 November 2025).

³⁰ Dīnā Muḥammad, *Šubbēk lubbēk* (3 voll.), al-Maḥrūsah, al-Qāhirah 2018-2021.

³¹ D. Croci, *Cultura per parole e immagini: il graphic novel*, in N. Vallorani (a cura di), *Introduzione ai Cultural Studies*, Carocci Editore, Roma 2016, pp. 125-141.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

creativity, the former threatening the use of literary models given the danger of reducing adaptation to illustration, the latter even more aversive to literary source texts which are seen as an obstacle to the development of personal storytelling»³³. The relationship between the source literary text and the comics adaptation is not exclusive nor derivative, but is situated in a palimpsest of multimodal narratives, in which textual and visual elements are transferred across media, time, and cultural contexts.

This transfer is particularly fascinating in the case of classics, whose re-readability is relevant for both adaptation theory and the practice of graphic novels adaptations. Wondering why adaptations (of all kinds) are so omnipresent if they have long been seen as inferior, Hutcheon identifies a number of reasons: new media have fueled an enormous demand for all kinds of stories; part of the pleasure comes from repetition and variation; there is financial appeal; adaptations have the subversive potential of inscribing new meanings; and they keep the source text alive³⁴. Sanders agrees that this multi-directional exchange between the canon and adaptation has several advantages: adaptation relies on the literary canon for a shared repository of storylines, themes, and characters, while it contributes to the masterpieces' vitality; the adapted text increases its prestige and, in the case of a classic, affirms its status as ever-green, with positive repercussions on the status of the adaptation as well³⁵. Focusing specifically on the comic art adaptations of Scandinavian classics in multiple languages, Storskog adds another interesting dimension to this relationship: adaptations of classics might be seen as «narratives of nostalgia» for the preservation of cultural heritage³⁶. Indeed, all these approaches to classics converge in the graphic novel *al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb*, as will be illustrated below (par. 5). Nevertheless, it should be remarked that existing scholarship deals almost exclusively with the Western canon, a gap that this paper aims to fill³⁷.

Through adaptation and intermedial and interlinguistic translation, classics reach various audiences across time. Another key issue for our case study is the audience's involvement thanks to the peculiarities of comics as a medium: reading comics is a dynamic process or, as Tabachnick and Saltzman put it, an «augmented reading experience» that perfectly fits into today's ex-

³³ J. Baetens, *Comics Adaptations*, cit., p. 147.

³⁴ L. Hutcheon; with S. O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, cit., pp. 5, 176.

³⁵ J. Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Routledge, London-New York 2016, p. 12.

³⁶ C. Storskog, *Afterlives. Scandinavian Classics as Comic Art Adaptations*, Nordic Academic Press, Lund 2023.

³⁷ S.E. Tabachnick; E.B. Saltzman (eds.), *Drawn from the Classics: Essays on Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works*, McFarland, Jefferson 2015. The centrality of the Western canon is evident from the case studies, however examined from various approaches. Even the first example of visual adaptation of classics with pedagogical aims is drawn from the Western tradition: the *Classics Illustrated* series begun in 1941 and continued until 1971.

perience at the age of screens³⁸. Therefore, graphic novels might bring a younger audience closer to classics and might be used for pedagogical purposes. Besides this kind of involvement, it is true that the Arab audience is familiar with the adaptation (*iqtibās*) of classics on screen, both as films and TV series³⁹. Moreover, contemporary Egyptian cultural productions have widely experimented with multimodality, combining verbal, visual, and aural modes⁴⁰. This usually leads to a deep engagement of the audience that actively contributes to the interpretation of open texts, recognizes the subversion of formal and thematic conventions, and perceives the materiality of the medium through the body (including digital editions and audiobooks). Some literary works insert visual elements (emojis, illustrations, etc.), as examined by Pepe and Abdelmessih⁴¹. For instance, *Istiḥdām al-ḥayāh* (Using Life, 2014) by Aḥmad Nāḡī and Ayman al-Zurqānī is a multimodal novel that mixes classical and contemporary verbal narratives, graphic art, popular music, and film making, opening up to multiple temporalities and a plurality of cultural narratives.

4. Arab Classics for New Readers

As it was the case of Nāḡī and al-Zurqānī, the graphic novel *al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb* is a collaborative project: Muḥammad Ismā'īl Amīn is the scriptwriter, Mīḡū and Ḡamāl Qubṭān are the comic artists, Ḥusayn Muḥammad contributed to inking, Rihām al-Sayyid took care of the graphic project, and 'Alī Ḡalāl designed the title on the book cover. This is the first book of a series of graphic novels based on Maḥfūz's novels: the second adaptation already released is *Mīrāmār* (Miramar, 1967)⁴², to be followed by *Awlād ḥāratinā* (Children of Gebelawi, 1959, 1967). Among the creators, Mīḡū has been working on these adaptations for a long time, since he published the first chapter of the latter novel in *TokTok* (2012)⁴³.

³⁸ S.E. Tabachnick; E.B. Saltzman, *Introduction*, in Id., *Drawn from the Classics*, cit., pos. 201 (Kindle edition).

³⁹ A. Nicosia, *Il romanzo arabo al cinema*, Carocci, Roma 2014; T. Pepe, *Le retour de Dhāt: du roman au feuilleton télévisé*, in R. Jacquemond; F. Lagrange (dir.), *Culture pop en Égypte. Entre mainstream commercial et contestation*, Riveneuve, Paris 2020, pp. 87-130.

⁴⁰ L. Avallone, *Autori egiziani degli anni Duemila. Blogosfera, graphic e postmoderno: nuovi linguaggi nel panorama letterario arabo*, in "Kervan-Rivista Internazionale di studi afroasiatici", 13-14 (2011), pp. 25-46.

⁴¹ Marie Thérèse Abdelmessih, *Strategies of Engagement in Using Life: A Multimodal Novel*, in "Interfaces", 38 (2017), pp. 105-126.

⁴² Naḡīb Maḥfūz; Muḥammad Ismā'īl Amīn; Muḥammad Sarsāwī (script); Mīḡū; Ḡamāl Qubṭān; Ḥusayn Muḥammad (drawings), *Mīrāmār – riwāyah muṣawwarah*, al-Maḥrūsah-Dīwān, al-Qāhirah 2024.

Only years later, he found a suitable publication venue within the frame of the broader *Naguib Mahfouz Project* launched by Dīwān, an independent publisher based in Cairo⁴⁴. After securing the author's publication rights in 2022, the book covers of his masterpieces were redesigned by some young artists; despite the different styles, all the drawings are surmounted by author's name in Arabic calligraphy, which makes the series recognizable. This visual identity is reinforced by Dīwān's online store that sells some merchandise (bags and bookmarks) using the image of the author in a nostalgic fashion. Two years later, Dīwān started its cooperation with al-Maḥrūsah for releasing the graphic novel adaptations, since this publishing house is specialized in this genre and has a strong visual identity also for its fiction books. al-Maḥrūsah, in fact, has also published the graphic novel *al-Ayyām* (The Days) based on the famous autobiography by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973)⁴⁵.

Miḡū's interest in classics is shared with his co-author, Ġamāl Qubṭān, a Palestinian comic writer based in the UK. Among his works is the adaptation of the opening pages of *Riḡāl fī 'l-šams* (Men in the Sun, 1962) by Ġassān Kanafānī (1936-1972)⁴⁶. Another Palestinian reference is Maḥmūd Darwīš (1941-2008), whose editorial published on the magazine "al-Karmil" (1981) was the source of inspiration for a visual contribution published on the magazine of the Tunisian collective *Lab619*⁴⁷.

Going back to the Egyptian scene, these are some interesting examples of intermedial and interlinguistic translation. The first is an episode of the novel *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964), written in English by the Egyptian Waguīh Ghālī (Waḡīh Ġālī, 1927-1969) and adapted in Egyptian Arabic by Andīl (Andeel) for *TokTok* magazine⁴⁸. This novel, that challenges the notions of Egyptianness and youth, was a cult book in the early 2000s⁴⁹. The second ex-

⁴³ Miḡū, *Awlād Ġabalāwī*, in "TokTok", 6 (2012), pp. 52-60. This chapter is available on Miḡū's Facebook page, under the title *Children of Gebelawi*: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1826586334022821.1073741835.1362882650393194&type=3>. Miḡū's profile is available in Lina Ghaibeh; S. Gabrieli (eds.), *Arab Comics Today*, cit., pp. 52-55. To read one of his stories in English, see Migo Rolzz, *The Last of the Bunch*, in "Words Without Borders", 25/02/2013, available at: <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2013-02/the-last-of-the-bunch/> (last accessed 13 November 2025).

⁴⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/naguibmahfouzproject/> (last accessed 13 November 2025).

⁴⁵ Ṭāhā Ḥusayn; Muḥsin 'Abd al-Ḥāfīz (script and drawings), *al-Ayyām – riwāyah muṣawwarah*, al-Maḥrūsah, al-Qāhirah 2024.

⁴⁶ Ġamāl Qubṭān, *Abu Qais*, in "Arabpop", 6 (2024), pp. 142-137.

⁴⁷ Rāniah Maḡdūb (script); 'Issām Smīrī (drawings), *Laysat ḥarbanā*, in "Lab619", 6 (2016).

⁴⁸ Andīl, *Bīrā fī nādī al-bilyārdū*, in "TokTok", 4 (2011), pp. 5-10.

⁴⁹ M. Lynx Qualey, *Beer in the Snooker Club: Egypt Then and Now*, in "AGNI", 30/01/2018, available at: <https://agnionline.bu.edu/blog/beer-in-the-snooker-club->

ample is the graphic novel *Les couleurs de l'infamie* based on the homonymous novel (1999) by the Francophone Egyptian writer Albert Cossery (1913-2008), who spent most of his life in France; it was adapted by Golo, a French artist who has been living in Egypt and has published his cartoons in the local press; then this version was translated into Arabic by a publisher based in Alexandria⁵⁰. The last example followed the opposite route: thanks to its translation into French, the Egyptian novel *al-Laġnah* (The Committee, 1981) by Ṣun' Allāh Ibrāhīm inspired Thomas Azuéllos for a graphic novel; this adaptation was translated into Arabic by Nool, an imprint that works between Cairo and Paris with the mission of developing the comics market in the Arab region⁵¹.

Another thriving pole of the comics industry is North Africa, where the Tunisian 'Uṭmān al-Sālimī is currently working on the graphic novel adaptation of *Ġawlah bayna ḥānāt al-Mutawassit* (A Journey around Mediterranean bars, 1935-1936) by 'Alī al-Dū'āġī (1909-1949), a classic of travel literature. Besides this project, the Tunisian artist _Z_ has adapted the short story *Cristal* (1976) written by the activist Gilbert Naccache (1939-2020) during his political detention in Borj-Roumi⁵²; both _Z_ and Naccache choose French for their artistic expression. This graphic novel was released by Alifbata, a French leading publisher of comics whose catalogue includes another adaptation: *Le pain nu* by Abdelaziz Mouride (1949-2013) based on the novel *al-Ḥubz al-ḥāfi* (For Bread Alone, 1972) by Muḥammad Šukrī (1935-2003)⁵³. In this case, the artist is probably as famous as the author, since Mouride is the pioneer of Moroccan comics, known for his prison memoir *Dans les entrailles de ma patrie* (1982)⁵⁴ and for launching the magazine *Bled'Art*.

Which Arab classics are adapted into graphic novels? For sure, some masterpieces of the Egyptian, Palestinian and Tunisian canon are chosen, but there is also room for prison writing, *bildungs* narratives, and experimental writing dealing with alienation and making use of dark humor, all of which

egypt-then-and-now/ (last accessed 13 November 2025).

⁵⁰ A. Cossery; Golo, *Les couleurs de l'infamie*, Dargaud, Paris 2003. Translated into Arabic by Dīnā 'Alī as *Alwān al-'ār*, Fabrica Art Factory, al-Iskandariyyah 2015.

⁵¹ T. Azuéllos, *Le Comité – Une fable égyptienne librement inspirée du roman de Sonallah Ibrahim*, Cambourakis, Paris 2016. Translated into Arabic as *al-Laġnah*, Nūl/Nool, Cairo-Paris 2021.

⁵² _Z_, *Le Seigneur des rats – d'après la nouvelle de Gilbert Naccache*, Alifbata-Nirvana, Marseille-Tunis 2025; G. Naccache, *Cristal*, in *Le Ciel est par-dessus le toit. Nouvelles, contes et poèmes de prison et d'ailleurs*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 2005.

⁵³ Abdelaziz Mouride, *Le pain nu – d'après le roman de Mohamed Choukri*, Alifbata, Marseille 2019.

⁵⁴ Rahal [alias Abdelaziz Mouride], *Dans les entrailles de ma patrie. À propos de la détention politique au Maroc*, édition des CLCRM, Bruxelles 1982. Second edition: *On affame bien les rats*, Tarik-Paris Méditerranée, Casablanca-Paris 2000.

lends themselves to inscribing new meanings and are appealing for a younger audience. Moreover, graphic novel adaptations blur the boundaries between genres (novels, short stories, episodes) and languages. In this respect, French plays a key role because it is part of the Arab cultural production, on the one hand, and on the other it gives access to the strong comic industry of *bande dessinée*. Artists and readers are often well-versed in more than one language, but there is a special attention for re-inserting such works in the Arab world through translation. This confirms what the Moroccan critic Kīlītū (Kilito) says about classics: the Arab and European traditions coexist in the readers' background⁵⁵. In his contribution, Kīlītū also mentions a novel by Maḥfūz whose character lists four classics by Ibn Ḥaldūn to be read by aspiring writers⁵⁶. This circular approximation to the Nobel Prize Winner leads us to examining the graphic novel adaptation of one of his most famous books.

5. *Maḥfūz Strikes Back*

Naǧīb Maḥfūz is perhaps the best-known Arab writer, whose fame spans not only across the Arab world, but also internationally since he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. A prolific author who experimented with a great variety of themes and styles, he is both a canonical writer and one of the greatest innovators of the novelistic genre. This innovation is well exemplified by *al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb*: written right after *Awlād ḥāratinā*, it belongs to his post-1952 production that breaks with the previous realistic style through an emphasis on the internal world, multiple narrating voices, interior monologue, flashbacks, and concise language⁵⁷. This formal experimentation allows to tackle some existential themes such as alienation, justice, and disillusionment embodied by the main character Sa'īd Mahrān, a thief recently released from jail who wants to take his revenge on the people who put him there: his traitorous former accomplice 'Alīš Sidrah, who has stolen his ex-wife Nabawiyyah and his daughter Sanā' from him, and Ra'ūf 'Alwān, his political mentor who has betrayed his revolutionary principles. However, his bullets go astray killing innocent people instead of their intended targets. Sa'īd momentarily takes refuge by *al-šayḥ* al-Ġunaydī, whom he used to visit as a child with his father, and by Nūr, a sex worker and friend. How-

⁵⁵ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Per questo leggiamo la letteratura classica*, traduzione di M. Cassarino, in "Le forme e la storia", n.s., XVII, 2 (2024), pp. 141-149.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁵⁷ Mohamed Mahmoud, *The Unchanging Hero in a Changing World: Najīb Maḥfūz's al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb*, in "The Journal of Arabic Literature", 15, 1 (1984), pp. 58-75; Rashid El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz. The Pursuit of Meaning*, Routledge, London-New York 1993, pp. 99-104; M. Hartman, *Re-Reading Women in/to Naguib Mahfouz's al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb* (The Thief and the Dogs), in "Research in African Literatures", 28, 3 (1997), pp. 5-16.

ever, in his flight, he is haunted by his nightmares and the entire State apparatus, the “dogs” of the title.

To examine the graphic novel adaptation, it is useful to recall previous adaptations and the visual imagery attached to this text. Following the Egyptian writer and literary critic ‘Abd al-Nabī⁵⁸, intericonicity predates the novel itself, since the thief Maḥmūd Amīn Sulaymān made headlines in 1960 for his robberies in celebrities’ houses and his murders, probably inspiring the author. The novel was soon adapted into a film (1962) directed by Kamāl al-Šayḥ starring Egyptian icons, such as Šukrī Sarḥān as Sa‘īd and Šādiyah as Nūr. Then two television series were released, in 1975 and 1998 respectively. Even though the graphic novel’s younger audience might not be familiar with these audiovisual products, they are available on digital platforms and more information can be retrieved on dedicated websites⁵⁹.

These visual references (especially the 1962 movie) are crucial for the characters’ features in the graphic novel, especially considering that there is an appendix dedicated to them. For instance, ‘Alīš is tall and thin, with a gangster look. He is closer to his cinematic rendition than to the book description: «Ilish Sidra came into the room, a loose garment swelling round his barrel-like body, his fat round face buttressed by a square chin. His huge nose had a broken bridge»⁶⁰. To give another example, the daughter’s main features (white dress, dark hair, and her expression) in the novel’s description are kept in the comics adaptation, but some details inevitably are missing: «After what seemed a thousand years, the girl appeared. She looked surprised. She was wearing a smart white frock and white open slippers that showed henna-dyed toes. She gazed at him, her face dark, her black hair flowing over her forehead, while his soul devoured her»⁶¹.

In an interview⁶², Miḡū explains his aesthetic choices for the characters’ design and other issues. The graphic novel is in black and white to immerse readers in a constant tension, respecting the noir spirit of the novel and drawing inspiration from the style of U.S. artists. In terms of length, the novel is compact, about a hundred pages divided into eighteen chapters, whereas the

⁵⁸ Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Nabī, *al-Liṣṣ wa ’l-kilāb (al-riwāyah al-muṣawwarah) Sa‘īd Maḥrān yaẓhar min jadīd*, in “Saudi Criticism Lab”, 2024, available at: https://engage.moc.gov.sa/saudi-criticism-lab/articles-and-studies/article/?item_id=437 (last accessed 13 November 2025).

⁵⁹ A very accurate website about Maḥfūz’s oeuvre and its several adaptations is the digital encyclopedia: <https://naguibmahfouz.com/about> (last accessed 13 November 2025).

⁶⁰ Naguib Mahfouz, *The Thief and the Dogs*, translated by T. Le Gassick and M.M. Badawi, revised by John Rodenbeck, Anchor Books, New York 2008, p. 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶² Omar Sharara, *Naguib Mahfouz: stories redrawn. About graphic novels inspired by the works of author Naguib Mahfouz*, in “Zāwiyah tālitah”, 17/12/2024, available at: <https://zawia3.com/en/naguib-mahfouz/> (last accessed 13 November 2025).

graphic novel is a continuous text of the same length. To reproduce multiple narrating voices, the third person narrator's voice and Sa'īd's interior monologues appear in rectangular boxes, while dialogues are contained in speech balloons. As regards technical issues, the font of the first edition is very sharp and difficult to read; after some negative feedback, it was replaced in the second edition.

Another interesting aspect to examine is the representation of space. From the perspective of multimedia studies, the visual mode imposes the unavoidable affordance of showing the distance between characters and their position in space, determining a commitment on the part of meaning makers⁶³. This mode-related affordance is exploited by comics as a medium: adaptation studies recognize the advantage of comics over prose concerning their immediate and rich representation of space. In particular, Boschenhoff and Pointner note that this is relevant for scenes that convey a sense of claustrophobia; when the characters' own associations, whether positive or negative, are reflected in the space surrounding them, we can speak of atmospheric space, usually situated between polarities of bright/dark, familiar/strange, safe/threatening, etc.⁶⁴. Analyzing various adaptations of *Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis, 1915) by Kafka (1883-1924), they point out the potential of visualizing an enclosed suffocating space that conveys the character's feeling, whereas extended metaphors might fall into the trap of being reified in images.

These considerations also apply to our case study, since Sa'īd's incarceration does not end once he leaves prison, but extends throughout the narrative because of his constant feeling of being trapped. When he hides in Nūr's apartment, beyond the monumental cemetery of Bāb al-Naṣr, he can catch a glimpse of the external world through a small window⁶⁵. In a very effective scene of the graphic novel, the open space visible out of the window contrasts with the room's enclosed space where the protagonist has a nightmare because Nūr has not come back and he is devoured by worry and hunger (93-94, fig. 2). While he is lying in bed, the rays of light filtering through the window resemble the bars of a prison cell (94) and he faces a sort of trial in which justice is embodied by towering figures with stern faces (94-95). In the next two splash pages (each of them consisting of a single panel), the main character is fractured (96) and falls into the vortex of madness (97, fig. 3). Despite being monochrome, this graphic novel plays effectively with light and

⁶³ J. Bezemer; G. Kress, *Writing in Multimodal Texts*, cit., p. 176.

⁶⁴ S.E. Boschenhoff; F.E. Pointner, *Classics Emulated. Comic Adaptations of Literary Texts*, in "The CEA Critic", 72, 3 (2010), pp. 86-106. For an intermedial analysis of comic adaptations of literary texts according to narratological categories, see S.E. Boschenhoff, *Tall Tales in Comic Diction*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, Trier 2013.

⁶⁵ Nağīb Maḥfūz; Muḥammad Ismā'īl Amīn (script); Mīğū and Ġamāl Qubṭān (drawings), *al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb*, cit., pp. 55-57, 62-63, 80, 93. Henceforward, the page numbers are mentioned directly in the text.

darkness, which is a recurring metaphor in the literary text⁶⁶.

Space also reinforces the recursivity of the story, since Sa'īd moves across the city in a spiralling way⁶⁷. He repeatedly goes to Ṭarzān's café, on the edge of the desert beneath al-Muqaṭṭam hill. At the beginning, this place is portrayed as a good hideout thanks to its secluded location, at the bottom of the hill (28 and 30). However, as the tension of the manhunt grows, the desert resembles the barren surface of a distant planet to express the protagonist's loneliness (78 and 99). Similarly, the protagonist takes refuge at the *ṣayḥ*'s house in al-Darrāsah quarter. Also in the representation of this place there is a strong contrast between inside/outside and some recurring elements: the dialogue between the two characters – a series of round-shaped balloons alternating between each speaker on a single page, not divided into panels – takes place inside the house under the moon that can be seen through the window; the *ṣayḥ*'s religious wisdom is reinforced by the soundscape coming from the courtyard where the disciples perform the *ṣūfī* ritual of *dīkr*, as the protagonist's father used to do as he was a child. In the first occurrence (43, 44, fig. 1), this ritual is part of Sa'īd's nightmares and anxiety is conveyed by the *ṣayḥ*'s movements, his figure surrounded by a multitude of identical disciples, and the elongated word «Allāh» for invoking the name of God. In the second occurrence (105-106), the chant is indicated by jagged balloons to distinguish it from the dialogue⁶⁸.

Both the dialogues and the chant convey a sense of incommunicability that leads the protagonist to escape, meeting his tragic end in the cemetery where he is chased by policemen and dogs. Throughout Maḥfūz's novel, dogs are a hunting metaphor representing all the suffocating elements in the protagonist's fight for justice, such as social constraints, oppressive authorities, and personal feuds⁶⁹. The graphic novel follows the literary text by mentioning this metaphor in the main scenes, but there is less room to develop it as extensively as in Sa'īd's interior monologue of the original. Nevertheless, the depiction of dogs in the epilogue is very effective thanks to their size and the use of onomatopoeia (108, fig. 4).

⁶⁶ This recurring metaphor is particularly effective when Nūr, whose name means "light", is involved. For an analysis of the novel's unconventional representation of female characters, see: m. cooke, *Men Constructed in the Mirror of Prostitution*, in M. Beard; Adnan Haydar (eds.), *Naguib Mahfouz: From Global Fame to Local Recognition*, Syracuse UP, Syracuse 1993, pp. 106-125; M. Hartman, *Re-Reading Women in/to Naguib Mahfouz's al-Liss wa 'l kilab*, cit.

⁶⁷ In the paratext, there is a map of Maḥfūz's literary space that is supposed to become a digital interactive resource for the whole series.

⁶⁸ In this passage, the graphic novel mixes two scenes of the novel from chapter 17 and 18. Overall, the graphic novel selects some lines of the original dialogues, thus respecting Maḥfūz's style and linguistic register.

⁶⁹ For an analysis of crime in his novels, see A. Buontempo, *Il crimine nell'opera di Naḡīb Maḥfūz*, in "La rivista di Arablit", II, 3 (2012), pp. 66-77.

Conclusions

This paper has mapped the graphic novel adaptations of Arab classics, an emerging cultural product in an industry that has witnessed a rapid growth in the past decades due to some artistic and socio-cultural changes in the region, in a constant dialogue with the international scene. The list of adapted literary works confirms the centrality of Egyptian and Palestinian literature in the canon, while also opening up to cult books and works written in languages other than Arabic. Moreover, it has been noted that the Egyptian audience is familiar with multimedia productions and the insertion of visual elements in contemporary literature. The analysis of *al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb* has focused on the characters' design and space representation with its potential for enriching the literary text through intericonicity and the artist's own experience, considering that almost sixty years have passed from the novel's publication. This reading might successfully be applied to the whole series to further explore the degrees of adaptation and the adapter's aesthetic choices.

This graphic novel adaptation stimulates new readings of this classic for new audiences, even though it has been remarked that the readership of comics in the Arab world is still limited. As Hutcheon says, «[a]daptation, as evolution, is a transgenerational phenomenon»⁷⁰. Thus, besides the medium specificities of comics, it is important to consider the new generations' engagement in a digital environment and the ninth art as an industry. Therefore, looking beyond the pairing adapted text/adaptation, this paper has demonstrated that multimodality surrounds the whole *Naguib Mahfouz Project*, including its website, the book covers, and the merchandise. This project reinforces the standing of all actors involved, such as the publishers (Dīwān and al-Mahrūsah) and the artists, combining the rediscovery of cultural heritage with business goals. The digital scenario makes previous adaptations available on demand, changing the perception of textuality. Moreover, the critical vocabulary of adaptation studies is also hybrid since it comes from various fields including narratology, film studies, cultural studies, and art.

Since multimodality and adaptation are everywhere, it is also possible to say that translation is everywhere. Adaptations contribute re-defining inter-semiotic and interlinguistic translation: indeed, adaptation studies employ some theoretical concepts of translation studies, such as fidelity, source text/derivative text, and creativity, enriching the critical debate in both fields. In particular, the circulation of Arab graphic novels based on literary texts might be seen in parallel with the trend of retranslating modern Arab classics into European languages, as it is happening with the revised new editions of Mahfuz's novels in Italy.

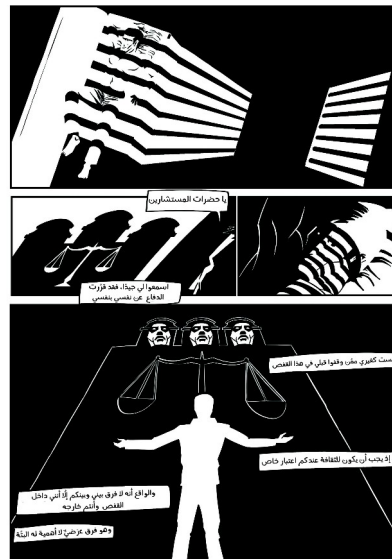
⁷⁰ L. Hutcheon; with S. O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, cit., p. 32.

Images⁷¹

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



⁷¹ Naḡīb Maḥfūz; Muḥammad Ismā'īl Amīn (script); Mīḡū; Ḡamāl Qubṭān (drawings), *al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-kilāb – riwāyah muṣawwarah*, al-Maḥrūsah-Dīwān, al-Qāhirah 2024, pp. 43-44, 93-94, 97, 108. © Migo / YA Comics Studio – Adaptation of Naguib Mahfouz's *al-Liss wa-l-Kilab*. All the images are provided courtesy of the artist (Migo).

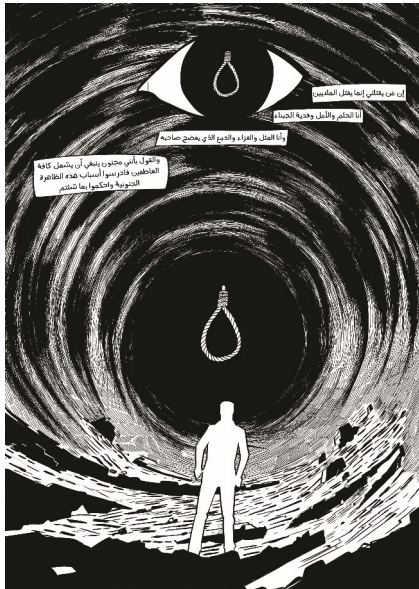


Fig. 3



Fig. 4