

With Spray, Paint ‘The She!’: A Semiotic Panel to Graffiti on Iraqi Women in Tahrir Square, Baghdad (October 25th, 2019)

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Abstract

This study seeks to identify and analyse the semiotic elements in graffiti on Iraqi women displayed on the walls of Baghdad’s Tahrir Square during the October 25th, 2019 demonstration. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the researchers gathered 19 samples of graffiti created by anonymous Iraqi artists through various internet sources. Adopting Peirce’s Semiotic Triangle Model, the study unveiled that Iraqi women’s graffiti in Tahrir Square was interpreted to articulate peaceful messages about Iraqi women. Upon analyzing the data, the findings further uncovered intriguing insights, showcasing women’s diverse figures and contributions in the sense that: (3) graffiti as a figure of liberty and peace, (6) graffiti as a figure of human rights activism, (1) graffiti as a figure of steadfast prayer, (2) graffiti as a figure of love and devotion to Iraq, (3) graffiti as a figure of protest, (2) graffiti as a figure of suffering due to sectarianism, and (2) graffiti as a figure of Iraq. The findings concluded that semiotic elements go hand in hand with the corresponding graffiti inscriptions (whether in Arabic or English) in encrypting Iraqi women’s figures.

Keywords: *Graffiti, Tahrir Square, Baghdad, Iraqi Women, Peirce’s Semiotic Triangle.*

Introduction

Signs are increasing daily in various shapes and designs; the proliferation of signs in individuals’ lives makes semiotics a compelling field of knowledge and an essential tool to unveil the hidden, encrypt the codes, and facilitate the task of interpreting artwork including spatial art. Numerative academic fields face difficulties referring to the spatial art category they investigate, though it is crucial for scholars to be crystal clear in defining what they are examining (Ross, 2016). As a significant property of the human community, spatial art integrates *graffiti, public art, street art, urban art, mural art, the new genre of the public sphere*, and even *linguistic landscape*; graffiti is the researchers’ main concern in this study. It is worth noting that scholars have not identified exact distinctions between the various terms used to describe such arts. This does not come from scratch as the researchers noticed the overlapping and interchangeability of the terms among scholars in the literature. In addition, the variability and inconsistency of terms referring to this field of knowledge is due to the continuous investigation and exploration processes in developing and enriching the field (Readers may kindly refer to Taher and Halawachy, 2024, ch.2).

Graffiti originally appears to be little scratches or a code that requires encryption. The literature revealed that the best decoder of graffiti is the science of semiotics. Halsey and Young (2006) and Haworth et al., (2013), as cited in Alonso (1998, p. 2) traced the definition of graffiti to its most basic form as “little scratching,” as described by Reisner (1971) and Abel & Buckley (1977). In a word, most graffiti subcategories are illegal and subversive but can also be powerful tools for powerless people. Phillips (1999) as cited in Shobe (2020, p. 4) believed that graffiti is a medium of communication that rests somewhere between art and language and he further asserted that graffiti is the simplest form of human communication. In this way, Philips’s description highlighted graffiti writing as language and art. Alderman and Ward (2008) in Shobe (2020) argued that when modern communication methods are disrupted during disasters, spray-painted messages on walls become the most basic way of communication.

The Arab Spring Movement in the Middle East (2011) distinguished graffiti on the walls in more than one Arab country when the public launched their revolutions against their regimes. Following January 25, 2011,

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in Egypt, the protesters painted conspicuous images on Cairo's walls glorifying the revolution's political goals and the martyrs. Tracing back graffiti in Iraq, it was present in the Cold War in Baghdad, in 1953. The reclamation of public space by leftist political activists was notably characterized by the use of graffiti, writing, and street art. This form of expression was observed in the adornment of garden walls around suburban houses in Baghdad with depictions of hammers and sickles, accompanied by slogans such as "Back home, criminal Dulles", and "Dogs of Wall Street, left us alone".

Literature Review

Grffiti: Background

It is argued that graffiti is of Italian origin, derived from the word "Graffiare," which means to scratch or write. Graffiti writing has been around for as long as human communication has existed. (Christen 2003; Teixeira, Otta & de Oliveira, 2003; Jena 2012; Daly 2013, as cited in Mangeya, 2014, p. 1). Scholars traced graffiti practice back to the Age Stone or Paleolithic age. Zoughebi and Kasmi (2020, p. 5) listed several researchers (e.g., Apple, 2006; O'Doherty, 2012; and Daly, 2013) who believed that graffiti is the oldest form of communication. Other scholars such as Shillington (1989) as cited in Alonso (1998, p. 2) originated graffiti back to ancient Egyptians who invented Hieroglyphic writing; the world's most famous form of writing. Besides, Teixeira et al., (2013) as cited in Mangeya (2014, p. 1) stretched the practice of graffiti to Lascaux cave in France (15000 BC) and Serra da Capivara National Park in Brazil, meanwhile, Jena (2012) and Daly (201), took a more literal approach, tracing graffiti to biblical times concerning the writing on the wall by an invisible hand in the book of Daniel. Graffiti, according to Kristina Milnor, an assistant professor of classics at Bernard College in New York, began to take off in the late 18th C. and early 19th C. when tourists to Pompei began talking about the graffiti on the wall. Graffiti had always existed, but no one had ever discussed or showed any interest until studying old art became popular (Lewisohn, 2008, p. 26). This area of knowledge appeared vividly in periods 1970s and 1980s with the rise of a genre of music known as Hip-Hop culture in the United States of America. A revolutionary and revivalist movement such as the Civil War and Second World War paved the way for young urban to use graffiti as a tool for expressing their feelings and desires by targeting public walls resorting devices such as pens, pencils, and etches were among the common devices for writing graffiti before the 1960s while spray paint in aerosol cans is a more recent one. (White, 2018, pp. 5-6).

Al-Yassiry (2020, p. 1423) remarked that "[a]rtistic achievements over time have links to the human being and his basic needs. Freedom and demanding rights are among the most important human needs". Recently, Iraq witnessed a protest which broke out on October 1st, 2019 and was renewed on October 25th, 2019. This sole revolution in the contemporary political history of Iraq brought to the forefront graffiti unearthing a key issue in the Iraqi community; which is "Iraqisity". Protesters were appealing to get their country back as it was lost; the researchers believe that "We want a country", as scratched on Tahrir Tunnel, in the protesters' slogans and pictures or even anthems, is the umbrella key issue under which economic, political, social, and other issues are embraced. Undoubtedly, the artistic paintings in this Movement sent peaceful messages to the world about Iraqi women's inner and outer sides. In her study, Zadin (2021) attempted to decode the Iraqi woman's figures in the mural paintings of Tahrir Square during the October Protest from social and artistic perspectives. She came up with some connotations about the paintings on Iraqi woman concluding their rankings: *political* was ranked (73%), *social* (13%), *economic* (3%), *religious* (2%), *aesthetic* (5.5%), and *theoretical* (3.5%).

Worth noting is that Zadin's study is the only study available in the literature tackling Iraqi women's representations in Tahrir Square; one part of which sounds to match the researchers' objectives considering the political, social, and religious connotations of Iraqi women's representations /graffiti on October 25th, 2019 Movement. The researchers observed this notable gap in the literature where no attempt was geared to investigate graffiti in Iraq, in general, and Iraqi women's various representations in the linguistic and /or the semiotic realms. The current study is built on this gap aiming to identify the semiotic elements of Iraqi women's representations and interpret the peaceful messages of the Iraqi artists' graffiti via this vandalism in Tahrir Square, Baghdad (October 25th, 2019) where Iraqi women were painted in different shapes.

Previous Study: Graffiti in the Semiotic Shell

Semiotics is a vast and inspiring field of knowledge that explores the complexities of signs and symbols. Some people believe that semiotics encompasses the entire knowledge of the universe. It is a novel field of knowledge that was introduced to research in the early 20th C. and it remains pivotal in shaping many other fields. (Sojodi,2004, pp.46-51, as cited in Panahi et al., 2016, p. 86).

Jean Baudrillard's work is recognized as a foundational semiotic exploration of graffiti writing, particularly in the context of his contributions from 1976 to 1998. His analysis offers critical insights into the signification processes inherent in graffiti, positioning it as a significant form of communication within contemporary urban spaces (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi,2017, p. 7). According to the two researchers, the study of Baudrillard viewed graffiti as a form free of “content and message” and further described it as a “self-referential” referring to itself without any external meaning or reference that is to say “empty signifier” but the two researchers believed that Baudrillard linked the emptiness of graffiti to the strength and power of graffiti. This “emptiness” paved the way for researchers to “scramble the signals of Urbania and dismantle the order of signs”.

Graffiti, as a form of discourse and language in its own right, contains more than one mode of language. In today's technology-driven era, it would be unfair to label graffiti as mere scratches or inscriptions seen in public places. Moreover, it would also be illogical to consider the verbal category as the only mode of language.(Shohamy, 2015, p. 168). Additionally, Jaworski and Thurlow (2011) as cited in Wisniewska (2020, p. 431)supported this viewpoint and argued that verbal discourse is not the only discourse that exists in the public space and that it “...interacts with other discursive modalities: visual images, nonverbal communication, architecture, and built environment”. As a distinct art form, graffiti encompasses a wide range of categories, shapes, and styles that go beyond just inscriptions.

The studies on the semiotics of graffiti writing have been approached by myriads of global researchers. The most influential theories of semiotics after the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure are Charles Sanders Peirce's Triadic Vehicle Sign Theory and Kress and Van Leeuwen's Social Semiotic Theory (2001). The former focuses on the individual's interpretation of signs and symbols, and the latter reflects Halliday's notion of semiotic resources emphasizing social and political contexts of society.

Zoughebi and Kasmi (2020) conducted a qualitative study, more precisely a semiotic analysis of graffiti, and adopted the earlier version of Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Triangle (object, representamen, and interpretant). The researcher's goals were to locate, examine, characterize, and elucidate the significance of a few chosen pieces of graffiti in Bejaia city in Algeria. The data that was collected included visual and verbal samples of graffiti and further interviews with people of Bejaia conducted for further analysis. The study also sought to answer two questions: (1) Which languages are used in graffiti?, and (2) Do the languages represent Algerian identity or not? The study found that graffiti in Bejaia City reflected Algerian identity and social realities, with the majority taken from both artistic and non-artistic perspectives. Overall, the study contributed to grasping the significance of graffiti in expressing Algerian identity and reflecting social reality in Bejaia city.

Rubdy (2015)examined the semiotics and contents of graffiti on Mumbai streets, directed at commemorating the Mumbai Terror Attack on November 26, 2008, A Social Semiotic/Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; Scollon and Scollon, 2003), and further Content Analysis of the accompanying bilingual discursive texts were combined to investigate graffiti on Mumbai streets “...to examine what meanings they construct for its viewers as well as sign producers” (p. 281).

In an interdisciplinary study, Gómez (2022) examined the visual semiotics of street art during the pandemic time in Colombia. To contextualize street art and its transformative potential, Gómez examined three epistemological turns in the direction of a descriptive and contrastive framework. First, the spatial turn clarified how space and street art functioned as a framework of conflict and life that appealed to viewers' social and political sensibilities. Second, he reinterpreted some pictures using Peirce's theory as a guide. He

further explained how they functioned as theoretical objects connected to indices, symbols, and signs. The political turn was grounded in Rancière's writings, in which he made a conceptual and substantive comparison between politics and aesthetics as an act of visibility on which liberation is objectively based.

Although challenging but interesting to study and examine graffiti practice, one gets a comprehensive insight by interpreting the graffiti of that society. Graffiti is likely to reveal the identity of communities with tremendous hidden religious, political, and social ideologies. Mirzaalikhani (2011) investigated the semiotics of Iranian graffiti during political transformation in two different periods—visual and verbal graffiti of two periods analyzed using Roland Barthe's notion of signs. The study investigated methods that were noticed with the development of technology during and after the revelation in terms of myth, metaphor, colour, form, and symbol.

To end up, Stampoulidis et al. (2019) analysed street art within the framework of cognitive semiotics; “...the transdisciplinary field for the investigation of meaning-making, combining concepts and methods from semiotics, cognitive linguistics, and cognitive science” (Konderak 2018; Sonesson 2012; Zlatev 2015; Zlatev et al. 2016 as cited in Stampoulidis et al. (2019, p. 1). Stampoulidis et al's. synthetic study analysed fieldwork data i.e., photos and interviews which were collected from central Athens (2014-2017) to build a “conceptual toolbox” based on Sonesson's works (2008, 2013, and 2014). The researchers further analysed specific street art samples to demonstrate this approach. Despite contradictions, the researchers aimed to test the profitability of such a hermeneutic approach in analyzing figurative expressions, primarily metaphors, in Athena Street art. The study revealed that metaphors can be expressed in a variety of semiotic aspects other than language and such a framework may improve research on semiotics of contemporary metaphors. Finally, they recommended adopting such a framework for analyzing digital art, advertising banners, sand drawings, oil paintings, etc.

Reviewing the literature, it is clear that the semiotics of graffiti on women, in general, and Iraqi women more particularly have not been introduced to the field of semiotics. The researchers attempted to fill this gap by investigating the graffiti of Iraqi women in Tahrir Square during the peaceful protest (October 25th, 2019).

Objectives of the Study

The current study aims at:

identifying the semiotic elements of the Iraqi women in graffiti created in Tahrir Square, on October 25th, 2019,

encrypting the various Iraqi women's codes adopting Pierce's approach,

clustering Iraqi women's representations under women -gender issues; and

showing the effective link between the written scratches and the Iraqi women's representations in the graffiti to convey peaceful messages.

Questions of the Study

How do anonymous Iraqi artists' graffiti portray Iraqi women in Tahrir Square during the demonstration on October 25th, 2019?

To what extent do the written scratches in graffiti support figuring out the representations of Iraqi women?

Methodology

The Study Design

A descriptive approach was adopted to analyze the data as it suited the research topic and its goals. In academic research, it is imperative to avoid skimming the surface when addressing research inquiries. Qualitative research involves “digging deep” into the subject matter by gathering diverse data types and examining them from multiple perspectives. A qualitative approach is necessary to comprehensively understand the phenomenon under investigation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Additionally, qualitative research is the study that pertains to understanding social processes in their natural surrounding i.e., it tackles the nature of phenomena including their quality, various manifestations, the context in which they exist, or the viewpoints from which they might be observed (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Thus, the current study employed a qualitative approach to expansively interpret the graffiti on Iraqi women in Tahrir Square during the peaceful protest (October 25th,2019).

Sample

The research sample included (19) coloured graffiti painted on both sides of Tahrir Square, Baghdad (2019 – 2020) with materials and colours (e.g, paint, oil, and pastel colours) that were chosen purposefully among other paintings to include only Iraqi women. It is significant to point out that the researchers excluded certain names, nicknames, and even individual letters found in some graffiti samples. The researchers based their decision on the intuition that the inscriptions likely did not originate from the artists themselves, but rather may have been added by passersby(see Table 1).

Table 1. Websites Cited for Graffiti in Tahrir Square (October 25th, 2019)

Graffiti No.	Internet Links
1	https://twitter.com/Hamzoz/status/1216356677659824128 (Retrieved on November 14, 2023)
2	https://www.pinterest.com/pin/849913760954721937/feedback/?invite_code=13b47aa7a71943ccb6d16d82bfe5684a&sender_id=849913898336288305 (Retrieved on November 10, 2023)
3	https://web.facebook.com/iraqistreetart/photos/a.121334226027774/127796002048263/?type=3&paipv=0&eav=AfaCrtGX7xuw14r1d8mEfpvaoTmYsw9Z9oMIvZQ5K3luVpC2AoaHg74URbUDluYxi3Q&_rdc=1&_rdr (Retrieved on November 14, 2023).
4	https://baghdadtahrirart.net/projects/murals/الجانِب-الأيسر-من-التفق/ (Retrieved on November 10, 2023)
5	https://web.facebook.com/iraqistreetart/photos/a.121334226027774/125978005563396/?_rdc=1&_rdr (Retrieved on November 10, 2023)
6	https://assafirarabi.com/en/36482/2021/03/06/a-paradise-of-colors-the-iraqi-self-as-beholds-itself-in-a-different-mirror/ (Retrieved on November 4,2023)
7	https://www.pinterest.com/pin/549298485802436389/ (Retrieved on November 2023)
8	https://x.com/3z0ooz/status/1215773259746217985 (Retrieved on November 10, 2023)
9	https://www.newarab.com/opinion/colonial-feminism-and-un-liberation-women-iraq#article-0-slider-0 (Retrieved on November 4, 2023)
10	https://baghdadtahrirart.net/projects/murals/الجانِب-الأيسر-من-التفق/ (Retrieved on November 2,2023)

11	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/gallery/2019/nov/26/murals-of-baghdad-the-protest-art-in-pictures (Retrieved on November 14, 2023)
12	https://www.pinterest.com/pin/849913760954721293/feedback/?invite_code=1bb3723cedd74d12b315a102caa532af&sender_id=849913898336288305 (Retrieved on November 14, 2023)
13	https://www.pinterest.com/pin/849913760954721394/feedback/?invite_code=e6d8b7234f874455b36f3cc3277bbfeb&sender_id=849913898336288305 (Retrieved on November 10,2023)
14	www.traveladventures.org/continents/asia/tahrir-square-tunnel-wallpaintings11.html (Retrieved on November 14,2023)
15	https://www.pinterest.com/pin/706502260288741421/ (Retrieved on November 10, 2023)
16	https://fanack.com/human-rights/features-insights/we-better-help-the-arab-millennials~160976/ Retrieved on November 10, 2023)
17	https://raseef22.net/article/1085831 (Retrieved on November 10, 2023)
18	https://www.pinterest.com/pin/849913760954721961/feedback/?invite_code=19501e09546c4ed398e1d2bfd88e33e2&sender_id=849913898336288305 (Retrieved on November 12, 2023)
19	https://www.pinterest.com/pin/849913760954722037/feedback/?invite_code=7c55c944ca814c96ae6d7d5190113904&sender_id=849913898336288305 (Retrieved on November 12, 2023)

Model

In this study, the researchers adopted the Peircean Model, namely, the Triadic Model which embraces three basic elements: Representamen, object, and interpretant. These elements can be viewed briefly below.

The representamen: the visible shape that the sign takes – the 'sign vehicle'.

An object: anything to which a sign refers (or depicts).

An interpretant: the effect generated by a sign or the meaning derived from it.

Reviewing the literature, it becomes apparent that the Semiotic Triangle was widely embraced by scholars and researchers as an effective model for analysing various categories of artwork. Its application yielded successful results, solidifying its significance in art analysis. Another thing to consider is that anonymous Iraqi artists highly depended on using signs and symbols in creating murals as a means of meaning-making. Therefore, Pierce's model is significant and helpful for interpreting them. Considered an antique model, adopting Pierce's model in this study would revive the model to be adopted in social science and pave the way for other researchers to do so. This is why the researchers decided to thoroughly evaluate the signs in the data using Pierce's model.

Data Analysis

Iraqi Women as a Figure of Liberty and Peace

Historically, the Roman goddess Libertas, the robed female figure, was one of the most symbolic icons of the French Revolution. It appeared on the coins of France, Mexico, and the U.S. Later, the famous French sculptor, Auguste Bartholdi, sculpted Libertas which "...was given to the United States as a gift in commemoration of its upcoming centenary of independence" in 1984 (Moreno, 2004). Enough, Figure (1) represents the Statue of Liberty, a universal symbol of democracy and freedom, and it stands as a beacon of hope for Iraqis and Iraqi women, in particular. Moreover, it echoes the ideals of the Statue of Liberty reflecting the Iraqi civilians' aspiration for freedom and self-determination. The woman holds the Iraqi flag in her right hand symbolizing Iraq's independence and sovereignty. Two white doves in the woman's left hand with the white background both symbolize peace and hope suggesting the Iraqis' deep yearning for a better future.



Figure 1. Iraqi Women as a Figure of Liberty and Peace

The dawn of a new era for Iraqi women is shown in the orange robe, which is as vibrant as the light of sunrise. The black lines of the robe symbolize the unwavering strength required to see the change while the orange fuels the flames of change. Besides, the diadem on the head reinforces the message of the sovereignty in Iraq. Raising the Iraqi flag, the woman conveys the message which reads: "The Iraqi civilians' desire to get their freedom and independence". The mask could be interpreted in multiple ways: (1) it could symbolize anonymity, (2) it is possible that the mask is a means of silencing individuals, in general, and women in particular, and (3) it may refer to the Iraqi women's role in motivating her people to live in a healthy place where there are no fatalities. To be noted, the COVID-19 pandemic was prevalent at the time of the protests. What supports the semiotic interpretation, which was articulated earlier, is the graffiti's text which is written in English, rather than in Arabic, in a way to address wider international communities. It sounds like an Iraqi woman speaking to the world saying: "I prefer risky freedom over peaceful slavery". The Iraqi women protesters believe that true freedom is worth fighting for, even if it means risking their lives which is represented in the two opposing phrases, viz. "risky freedom" and "peaceful slavery". The graffiti art serves as a powerful reminder of the Iraqi women's resilience and their unwavering commitment to freedom. Despite the challenges Iraqi women face, they cannot be silenced in their pursuit of freedom and democracy. In this sense, Figure (1) serves as a testament to Iraqi women's unwavering will to attain equality.



Figure 2. Iraqi Women as a Figure of Liberty and Peace

for women. The sun is a universal symbol of hope and new life. The woman's face is not clearly shown and masked which reflects those Iraqi women, in general, are always shadowed and have been silenced for long years. The woman dressed in black emphasizes the Iraqi women's power, seriousness and determination as protesters in Tahrir Square asking for a free peaceful country. Also, the blue colour of the background makes the message stand out and further represents a sense of confidence in Iraqi women claiming their rights. To sum up, the word "IRAQ" which is written in bold black capital letters on the wall, attracts global attention to the idea that the Iraqi women protesters need to take their country back after harsh years. They are demanding their rights which is emphasised in the Arabic

In the same vein, Figure (2) conveys a similar message yet with different semiotic elements. The image of a woman raising the Iraqi flag, which is centred in the middle of sunlight, signals hope and a new beginning



Figure 3. Iraqi Women as a Figure of Liberty and Peace

expression: “# نريد وطن” (Lit.: We want a homeland) further represents women’s desire and ambition for a free and unified Iraq. It is worth considering that the Arabic phrase is highlighted with a hashtag, making the message more prominent and noticeable (see also Figure 3 for a similar interpretation).

Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Human Rights Activist

Figure (4) depicts a woman with one hand holding a rose and the other one bleeding which is wrapped tightly with a bandage; it bleeds and the blood is poured into the word “جراحي” (Lit.: my wounds). The two hands signify two conflicting ideas. On one hand, the rose is a universal symbol of beauty, delicacy, love, and hope. It alludes to the Iraqi woman’s hope for a brighter future—one that is full of love and peace for her nation. The bleeding hand, on the other hand, wrapped with a bandage, portrays the harsh reality and struggle that women faced in the protest in Tahrir Square. The blood seeping into the word “جراحي” assures that Iraqi women sacrifice for the sake of a good future. Despite these challenges, the dove on her shoulder represents peace and hope; the absence of her eyes, blending into the black background suggests a sense of anonymity and ambiguity of the Iraqi woman’s identity. The text accompanying the artwork reads: “صوت المرأة عورة لكن أصبح ثورة حتى جراحي لا تثنيني عن حقي” (Lit.: The voice of women is a shame but it became a revolution; even my wounds cannot deprive me of my rights) to support my claim. Historically, Iraqi women have been marginalized, and stigmatized and were not allowed to express themselves. This may be linked to some societal expectations or cultural norms that view women’s participation in public as insignificant. But the sentence, viz. “لكن أصبح ثورة” (Lit.: But it became a revolution) gives the statement a sudden twist demonstrating women’s dare and courage to break the societal norms and become a symbol for change. An Iraqi woman is no longer silent. The sentence, which reads: “حتى جراحي لا تثنيني عن حقي” (Lit.: Even my wounds cannot deprive me of my rights), asserts that women’s casualties and injuries in the protest cannot stop them from fighting for equality and justice.



Figure 4. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Human Rights Activist

It is worth mentioning that women have encountered various restrictions and mistreatment due to societal norms. However, Tahrir demonstrations have witnessed a significant increase in women’s involvement. They have fearlessly voiced their opposition to inequality, unemployment, and corruption while demanding their rights. Despite encountering harassment and violence, women have remained steadfast in their pursuit of a brighter future.

What appears in Figure (5) is promising too and it serves the issue at hand. A woman’s head with four eyes wide open is a striking symbolic feature that can be interpreted in two ways. First, it refers to the double vision of Iraqi women. The ability to see both the past and the future is signified in the two pairs of eyes. First, the woman may acknowledge the difficulties of the past while holding out hope for a better future. Second, the four eyes may represent omniscience, awareness and an elevated level of consciousness. The Iraqi woman is surely aware of her surroundings and the hazy future. The two interpretations reinforce each other to come up with the theme of women’s rights. The symbol of the broken shackles with the unlocked lock together with the text which reads: “قيود المرأة انكسرت” (Lit.: Women broke free from their constraints) is a strong emblem of liberation. The Iraqi woman is breaking free from the restraints, possibly societal expectations or political persecution, which tie her neck hindering her freedom over time.



Figure 5. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Human Rights Activist

Figure 6. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Human Rights Activist



Figure 7. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Human Rights Activist

The broken shackles indicate a win over struggle and a step towards realizing her full potential. The white background symbolizes hope and peace which is reinforced with a blue rectangular shape to assert tranquillity and peace. The four red coloured squares refer to Iraqi women's sacrifices in achieving their goals. Unlike white diamonds, the four black coloured diamond shapes represent strength, power, and a call for action regarding Iraqi women's rights and willingness to stand against the traditional conventions. In a word, Figures (4) and (5) serve as powerful reminders of the Iraqi woman's ongoing struggle to get her rights in Iraq. Both graffiti capture the Iraqi women's experiences and their unwavering pursuit of equitable society in a quite peaceful manner (Readers may kindly refer to Figures 6,7,8 and 9 which raise the same issue).



Figure 8. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Human Rights Activist



Figure 9. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Human Rights Activist

Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Steadfast Prayer

Figure (10) embraces four figures of women. In the right-hand side of the graffiti, as appears in the foreground, the woman is holding a shroud in her hands. She appears to be waiting to receive the corpse of her martyred son possibly. The woman is holding the shroud in a way supplicating to the Almighty Allah; it is the only way to find strength and endurance. The woman's Iraqi black folkloric garment (Abaya) symbolises mourning and sadness for her loss. The shackles around her neck symbolize the Iraqi woman's powerlessness when losing her beloved in what is said to be peaceful protests. In such a case, Iraqi women can do nothing but prepare the shroud and offer supplications. The woman's face is covered by the Iraqi flag representing Iraqi women's commitment to their country. They are willing to sacrifice their beloved for the sake of their nation. Despite their grief, these women remain strong spiritually and unwavering in their faith. In a powerful image, one woman is seen raising the Iraqi flag while kneeling in prayer; she is looking up praying Allah to keep her homeland safe. The black colour of the women's dresses creates a sombre atmosphere opposing the white background which provides a glimmer of hope. Despite the challenges they face, the Iraqi women continue to have faith in Allah and believe that He will provide them with peace and tranquillity.



Figure 10. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Steadfast Prayer

The supplication which is written as part of Figure (10), viz. “بردا و سلاما يا بلادي” (Lit.: Hail and peace oh my country) which is intertextualized from prophet Abraham's supplication: (we (Allah) said, "O Fire! Be thou cool, and (a means of) safety for Abraham!) (Al-Anbiya 21:69). When Abraham was thrown into fire, he called out to Allah for help. He answered his prayers and the fire became cool and safe. Figure (10) represents Iraqi women's faith and belief in the power of supplication. Despite the hardships they face, Iraqi women continue to turn to Allah for help and guidance. The supplication is a symbol of their hope and their belief in Allah, the Almighty.

Iraqi Women as a Figure of Love and Devotion to Iraq

Figure (11) depicts a woman embracing Iraq's map. The woman's facelessness adds a layer of anonymity suggesting that all Iraqi women share her infinite love for Iraq. It also allows the viewer to project their own emotions and experiences



Figure 12. Iraqi Women as a Figure of Love and Devotion to Iraq

onto the figure creating a more personal connection with the artwork. The red lines on the map and the red spots surrounding the woman's lap symbolise the bloodshed and suffering which Iraqis have endured. Moreover, it highlights the sacrifices and struggles that Iraqi women have faced in history.

The woman clutches the map with her two hands tightly as if it were her child, conveying a deep sense of love and protection. The text which reads: "ما اضيعك" (Lit.: I will not lose you) further reinforces this

bond expressing her unwavering commitment to her homeland. The whiteness of the background reinforces women's hope for the future of their homeland to be safer and more secure (see also, Figure 12).

Iraqi Women as a Figure of Protest

During the October 2019 protest movement in Iraq, women of different ages participated and challenged the predominately masculine character of the protests. This unprecedented participation of Iraqi women in the protests raised many questions about women's nature, purposes, and ability. In Figure (13), a woman appears wearing a revolutionary head covering, yashmagh, while draping an Iraqi flag over her shoulders. The mask she wears is believed to be a symbol of protection against COVID-19, which was a deadly virus at the time of the protest. It also represents anonymity as it was necessary for keeping the identity of the woman safe. Iraqi females can accomplish the same missions that men can do, especially in the context of protest. This is illustrated in the fact that her scarf is for males not for females. The woman shows her dedication to Iraq by wearing the national flag on her shoulders. The woman's averted gaze suggests self-introspection and contemplation, as if she says: "This time, we are observing the world from a different perspective than before". It also suggests that women are striving and resisting. The black background in this graffiti art crystallizes the issue at hand prominently. Supporting the signs given earlier in the statement "ثوري فالثورة انثى" The word "انثى" (Lit.: female) suggests that the protest is not just about conquering the existing order, but also the protest creates a new order that is more inclusive and equitable for women. The verb "ثوري" is an imperative form of the verb in Arabic syntax. The woman in the current graffiti addresses other women to contribute to demonstrations and informs the audience that women are equal to men.



Figure 11. Iraqi Women as a Figure of Love and Devotion to Iraq



Figure 13. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Protest

The strong gaze of the woman in Figure (14) who looks directly into the audience's eyes symbolizes women's anger and seriousness for their concern. She is unveiling something significant which is a woman's role in the movement. This further interprets the women's desire for social and political change during the 2019 protests in Iraq. In addition, the woman's black dress (Abaya) creates an atmosphere of seriousness and power. This time women are serious about asking for their rights and showing off their power making a change. The phrase, namely "**Revolution of the underground**" is linked to the women's hidden forces that contributed to the protest. It may also indicate Iraqi women's new surge of activism. Again, the mask, which was used by protestors to hide their identity, was a means of self-protection from COVID-19 (see also, Figure 15).



Figure 14. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Protest



Figure 15. Iraqi Woman as a Figure of Protest

Iraqi Women as a Figure of Suffering Due to Sectarianism

Iraq is known to be a country with a diverse range of cultures, religions, and ethnicities. Its population consists of Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Christians, Kurds, Yazidi, Turkmen and other minorities.

After 2003 Iraq suffered severely due to sectarian conflicts. Consequently, women were often the victims of sectarian tensions in Iraq. Hundreds of Iraqi women have lost their husbands, children, and loved ones as a result of the sectarian clashes. Nevertheless, they stood still fighting against sectarianism, extremism, corruption, violence, poverty, and homelessness. Still, many women in the October demonstrations paid their lives for their ambition and vigour.



Figure 16. Iraqi Women as a Figure of Suffering Due to Sectarianism

Figure (16) shows the Iraqi flag surrounding different members of the family and different sects and ethnicities. The Iraqi flag unites all Iraqi groups and sects under one name which is Iraq; the homeland for all. The husband's presence outside the flag, who is unclothed and torn apart, suggests that he is no longer among the living and is a victim of sectarian conflicts. The woman inside the flag, interpreted as the deceased husband's wife, is looking at Iraqis to engage and feel her suffering. The importance of family to Iraqi women is equal to the importance of having a homeland. The Arabic expression which reads "نريد وطن" (Lit.: We want a homeland) shows women's yearning for a homeland and further the Arabic phrase "للمة الوطن#" (Lit.: homeland contains different sects and ethnicities) reinforces anti-sectarian clashes in Iraqi society. When a woman loses her husband, she loses not only a partner but also a confidant protector and provider. She may also feel lost and alone, unsure of how to move forward without him; this is represented



Figure 17. Iraqi Women as a Figure of Suffering Due to Sectarianism

in the loneliness of a woman inside the Iraqi flag. Summing up, the whole message decoded in Figure (16) is evidenced in the Arabic elegy that connotes the woman's grief and lamentation at the loss of her husband to signify her deep love and loyalty to her deceased husband. The background of graffiti which is a mixture of a variety of colours being red, yellow, and dark blue symbolizes a cloud which, in turn, stands for uncertainty and change as clouds constantly shift and change. Despite the uncertainty, the yellow colour provides hope for a new Iraq. Despite her pain and grief, the Iraqi woman finds the strength to carry on, motivated by her love for her family and her commitment to her community (see also, Figure 17).

Iraqi Women as a Figure of Iraq

Figure (18) vividly embodies the essence of Iraq, portraying the spirit of the nation through the compelling representation of a woman who is enveloped in the Iraqi flag. The woman appears to be suffering from tension, sick of conflict, and hypnotized, which is likely a result of the ongoing instability and insecurity in Iraq. Her unbound black hair is a powerful representation of the uncertain futures that Iraqi women face. The sun emblem, in its incomplete state, conveys a hint of unwavering hope for a better future. The white background further tracks the journey path of peace in Iraq. The hash-tagged phrase "#SAVE THE IRAQI PEOPLE" in the Iraqi four colours of flag, highlights the urgent need for humanitarian assistance to help Iraq and Iraqi citizens, who have been disproportionately affected by conflict that has been caused by external forces.



Figure 18. Iraqi Women as a Figure of Iraq



Figure 19. Iraqi Women as a Figure of Iraq

This moving composition serves as a potent call to action, imploring the international community to increase awareness and provide assistance in the quest for peace and stability for the people of Iraq (see also, Figure 19).

Conclusion

Banksy says: "Well, they started the fight and the wall is the weapon of choice to hit them back"; it is the wall then which acts as a platform enabling citizens to express their repressed feelings and desires, especially during protests. The core of this study is analysing Iraqi women figures painted on the walls of Tahrir Square (October 25th, 2019). The total number of graffiti under investigation was 19 samples; all of which included figures of Iraqi women which were located on the walls of Tahrir Square, Baghdad (October 25th, 2019). Adopting the Peircean Semiotic model, results showed that Iraqi women represented different

figures :(3) graffiti as *a figure of liberty and peace*, (6) graffiti as *a figure of human rights activist*, (1) graffiti as *a figure of steadfast prayer*, (2) graffiti as *a figure of love and devotion to Iraq*, (3) graffiti as *a figure of protest*, (2) graffiti as *a figure of suffering due to sectarianism*, and (2) graffiti as *a figure of Iraq*.

Limitations and Future Work

Limitations

The researchers experienced uncertainty regarding the availability of the investigated samples in Tahrir Square for photography purposes due to the reason that graffiti and the corresponding signs might be erased at the time of conducting the current study. Consequently, they chose to source the samples from online websites (see Table 1).

Future Work

Building on the findings of the present study, the researchers suggest conducting a study focused on the images of Iraqi men depicted on the walls of Tahrir Square in Baghdad (October 25th, 2019). This study aims to explore the concept of gender perception within the Iraqi community in the context of protest and revolution.

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