

The Arabic Graphic Novel and the Death of the Author The Dialectic Between the Algerian Text and Western Theory

Dr. Mezdaout Wassima

w.mezdaout@univ-setif2.dz

Modern and Contemporary Literature – Setif 2. University of Setif2, Algeria

Submission Date: 10.06.2025 | Acceptance Date: 01.10.2025 | Publication Date: 12.02.2026

Abstract:

The graphic novel is considered a narrative form that has developed recently to provide a dynamic depiction of social, political, economic, and intellectual-cultural conditions, as it represents a space for experimentation and free expression. Here, comics appear as a discourse open to interpretation, often surpassing the author's intent, embodying the reader's participation in producing meaning.

The hybrid nature of this discourse reshapes narrative relations, enabling the reader to produce significance. This reinforces Barthes' idea of textual openness and the multiplicity of interpretive levels, surpassing the notion of a single meaning (the death of the author). Based on this, the focus of this paper revolves around the extent to which the theory of the "death of the author" can be applied to the Algerian graphic novel specifically, in Roland Barthes' conception, to assess the ability of this discourse to produce meaning independent of the author's intent and the degree to which this meaning is liberated from the author's references and identity.

The paper begins by identifying the most evident differences between the premises and foundations of the Arabic text and Western theory. Based on the divergence of references, it highlights the main difficulties encountered when applying Western theory to the Arabic text in general, such as: the methodological regulation of concepts (concept of text, concept of author, concept of language...), as well as other problems: (translation, consideration of context...).

It then examines the principles of Barthes' death-of-the-author theory and its relation to comics in general, before dedicating a section to its reception in Algerian criticism. This is done through presenting the nature and specificities of comics in Algeria and examining the extent to which this theory can be assimilated, clarifying both facilitating and opposing factors. Finally, the paper offers a brief analysis of practical examples (from the most famous Algerian comic novels) in two parts: one concerning the difficulty of applying the death-of-the-author theory, and the other concerning the possibility of applying it.

It concludes that the death-of-the-author theory in the Algerian graphic novel is not theoretically rejected; however, it is simultaneously not literally applicable in practice due to the nature of the Algerian text, its cultural and social contexts, and the nature of the Algerian Arab reader.

Text of the Paper:

The stark debate between the nature of the Arabic text and the references of Western theory represents one of the most prominent and central issues in modern and contemporary literary and critical studies; it reveals the intertwined cultural and intellectual confrontation between two fundamental systems: the Arabic text system with its rhetorical and Qur'anic roots, oral and narrative traditions, and heritage on the one hand, and the Western theoretical system, established through philosophical, semiotic, deconstructive, structuralist, and postmodern trajectories on the other. This debate is not merely a cognitive-cultural-intellectual clash; it constitutes a zone of interaction and mutual overlap, which has been strongly pronounced since the 1960s, with the introduction of structuralism and semiotics into Arab criticism, and deepened further with deconstruction, hermeneutics, reception theory, and cultural criticism today.

The fundamental differences in the main premises of the Arabic text and Western theory can be summarized as follows:

Arabic text foundations:

- Most Arabic texts rely on reference constants, including:
 - Arabic rhetorical traditions derived from *ijaz*, *bayan*, metaphor, style, eloquence...
 - Reference to Arab-Islamic heritage linking language with identity, religion, spirit, and nation.
 - Historical connection with the foundational text (Qur'an).
 - Roots in oral and narrative contexts that shaped Arab taste through poetry, oratory, and storytelling.

Western theory foundations:

- Reliance on other references, notably:
 - Philosophical references from ancient Greek philosophy, then modern philosophical perspectives: rationalism, phenomenology, structuralism, deconstruction...
 - European modernity, based on secularism, individualism, and separation from the sacred.
 - Focus on writing traditions rather than oral features.
 - Separation of literature as an art from religion and metaphysics.

Due to these differing references, critics encounter an evident clash of concepts when attempting to apply a Western theory to an Arabic text with divergent roots, as if forcing the content to fit a vessel that does not respect its essence and specificity. A major cause of this clash is the divergence of concepts — despite efforts to minimize terminological issues and to make critical terms and theoretical concepts “universal,” they remain products of specific cultural contexts. Their meanings inevitably differ due to the distinct Arab cultural environment.

For instance, the concept of “text” in Arabic studies is closely linked to rhetoric, linguistic examples, the Qur'an, and Hadith. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd states: “The text in its essence is a cultural product.” In Western studies, however, it is primarily linked to philosophical and

semiotic concepts, often connected to structure, language, deconstruction, and sign. The term *texte* in foreign languages derives from the verb *texture*, meaning to weave, implying a series of syntactically and semantically woven sentences and utterances.

Similarly, the concept of “author” in the Arabic context refers to a central figure with moral and historical authority, while Western theories view the text as more important than its author. In the Arabic context, the reader is seen as a direct recipient; Western theory transforms the reader into a new producer/agent (the one who creates meaning / reception theory).

Other important concepts for literary and critical practices include language, which in Arabic thought is considered sacred, an identity, heritage, and spiritual medium. In Western studies, it is viewed as a “system of signs” subject to deconstruction and objective study. These examples illustrate why using Western theory to analyze an Arabic text directly creates a misalignment between concept and context.

This conceptual issue is compounded by a persistent problem arising from translation, which plays a decisive role in shaping the debate; most Western theories arrived in Arab criticism through translation, creating problems such as terms that cannot be precisely conveyed (e.g., Textuality, Discourse, Subject, Signifier, Author-function, Deconstruction), which were translated as: “نصّية”, “خطاب”, “ذات”, “الدال”, “وظيفة المؤلف”, “التفكيكية”... but do not carry the same Western connotations. Even literary genres themselves were translated into terms that do not fully reflect their essence (e.g., “theater”), according to many critics and specialists.

The issue of context consideration also arises, as theory is translated away from its philosophical background, resulting in truncated or confused readings. Therefore, theories must be “localized” within Arab culture to avoid accusations of alienation and rupture with heritage. Translation has also led to multiple equivalents for a single term, making the concept unstable:

- → Deconstruction: تفكيكية / تفويضية / هدمية
- → Discourse: خطاب / خطابية

This type of translation has generated a debated space, raising many questions about understanding the Arabic text itself. The core of the debate lies in three central points:

- Divergent intellectual and cultural references between the Arabic text and Western theory.
- Conceptual mismatches in fundamental concepts between the two systems.
- Arrival of Western theory to Arabic texts via various translators without full control over semantic gaps and interpretive tensions according to theoretical context and localization of the theory.

Death of the Author Theory (Roland Barthes):

Roland Barthes’ theory (Death of the Author, 1967) is one of the most important critical theories, positing that the text does not carry a fixed meaning determined by the author. Rather, it is a fabric of signs that can produce multiple meanings depending on various factors, such as social context, experiences, culture, reading time, and the reader’s background. Meaning is not presented in the text by the author as a ready-made entity but is a process in which the reader is a fundamental participant.

Barthes says: “The reader is born only when the author dies,” which shifts the author’s authority as the one who determines meaning. The author becomes merely the weaver of the text, not its owner, since the text consists of cultural voices, quotations, symbols, linguistic structures, mental images, and semantic fields, intersecting multiple discourses, making it a living entity continuously open.

The principles of this theory make the Arabic graphic novel, being multimodal in nature, a more suitable form for applying Barthes’ theory. In classical textual novels, the author appears to control the narrative even if trying to remain neutral. In comics, meaning is distributed across multiple active media participants, such as the illustrator, text author, coloring expert, page designer, and visual director. This participatory process can thus break the idea of a single author. Even if the illustrator and writer are the same person, the visual language remains somewhat independent of the author’s intent, as the image opens another space for interpretation beyond the words.

“The reader produces meaning through the gutters: between each panel exists a gap. These gaps are not silent; they enable anticipation of movement, bridging absent time, and inferring events to build meaning. This is Barthes’ point: ‘The reader is the maker of meaning, not the author.’ The image is inherently ambiguous and multilayered. Interpretation belongs to the reader, not the author.”

In the graphic novel, the reader does not follow the text linearly, as in traditional novels. Instead, they focus on details, pause at images, respond to rhythm, and concentrate on the relationship between text and image, making reading an act of visual and interpretive direction. The reader is tasked with giving the work its final form.

Nature of the Graphic Novel:

The graphic novel is, in short, an illustrated novel, manifesting as a narrative work based on sequential art alongside text to create a complex story, often equating to literary novels in terms of theme and depth. It is an artistic form built on the conscious integration of image, script, and language, through visual design and techniques of temporal and cinematic segmentation.

Thus, it is a hybrid narrative structure consisting of:

- **Linguistic text:** reflected in internal narration, dialogue, and even commentary.
- **Visual text:** reflected in illustrations and camera angles, through color, composition, movement, and facial expressions.

In this way, the image in the graphic novel is not an added feature but part of the narrative language itself. It expresses what words cannot convey, while text complements what images do not show. Dialogue is one of the most important features of the graphic novel, manifested in three forms:

1. **Redundant dialogue:** where image and dialogue represent the same thing, helping the reader remain anchored in the narrative, though less artistic.
2. **Counterpoint dialogue:** creates deep layers of meaning and expands interpretive possibilities; the text and image may conflict in what each conveys.
3. **Complementary dialogue:** the image shows an event, and the text adds feeling, reflection, or background; this prevails in mature graphic novels.

Cinematic and temporal segmentation is also important for building comics, relying on:

- transitions between times via frame shape or page color
- rhythm (slow-fast)
- high and low angles
- montage
- close-ups
- wide shots

This visual sequence represents time not only through linguistic narration. Visual language and facial expressions carry immense semiotic energy, conveying emotion, mood, and dynamism in ways words alone cannot. The active role of the image often leads to condensed language, emphasis on dialogue, and brevity, while allowing for representing dreams, memories, and even hallucinations through temporal overlap, multiple voices, and diverse visual symbols. Its hybrid nature enables a dual capacity, combining drawn imagination and linguistic interpretation.

These factors show that the graphic novel provides a fertile space to embody the idea of the death of the author because it:

1. Is a literary genre based on multiple voices and languages.
2. Opens numerous fields for interpretation (written/visual/auditory).
3. Makes the reader an active participant, visually and linguistically, in meaning production.
4. Creates narrative gaps which the reader fills, becoming author and producer.
5. Makes it difficult to rely solely on the image itself, as it often escapes the author's intent.
6. Turns the work as a whole into a shared project, represented by a network of signs, not a single voice.

However, this possibility does not negate the existence of theoretical challenges, which stand prominently against its application. The primary reason is the difference in the Arab context that produces Arabic comics, fundamentally different from the contexts that generated these theoretical foundations. This can be summarized as follows:

- Comics in Arab culture are often linked to the author's name and personality, their social status, and prominently within the narrative work, because the Arab audience is accustomed to interpreting the text by referring to key references, most importantly: the writer's biography, ideological background, and to a greater extent, their religious or political affiliation. In addition, emphasis is placed on their personal experiences and viewpoints, often derived from statements made during official interviews. This makes Barthes' idea (Death of the Author) seem incompatible with general Arab taste.
- Comics are often linked to autobiography or social stance, as many Arab illustrated novels belong to: autobiographical literature, diary literature, illustrated journalism, and social critique, where they start from documenting reality, such as the comics of Naji al-Ali, or Lebanese and Egyptian comics associated with political events. By their nature, autobiographies lead the audience to search for the real author, making their "death" practically more difficult.

- Arab comics are often associated with a humanistic, ethical, or moral message; they serve as a critique, protest, or educational guidance. Accordingly, the audience approaches them seeking the author's intended message, i.e., working to discover the author's intent. This approach directly contradicts Barthes' theory, which denies the centrality of intention.
- Barthes' theory requires that the text be capable of creating a complex network of signs, ensuring its openness, whereas most Arab graphic novels are based on individual efforts closely linked to social and political reality, with similar stylistic approaches, making them less experimental in terms of visual-narrative structure, and therefore less complex and open.
- Graphic novels generally involve overlapping and collaborative efforts of the screenwriter, illustrator, colorist, and designer. However, the presence of the writer often dominates over the illustrator and other collaborators, particularly in Arab comics, due to the author's fame or because the audience, valuing oral and written text, assesses the text more than the artistry of drawing, coloring, and design. This reconstructs the author's (writer's) authority and thus hinders the application of the Death of the Author concept.
- Arab comics are sometimes linked to political and religious taboos, subjecting them to censorship and blame, making the author responsible for its content and messages. In this responsibility, the supposed author's authority is explicitly reinstated, contrary to Barthes' theory.

Accordingly, applying the Death of the Author theory to Arab graphic novels faces strict challenges, generally summarized as the strong presence of the Arab author socially and culturally, the absence of analytical and semiotic traditions for comics as a collaborative product, the dominance of realistic and political narratives, and the inability to restrain the Arab audience's pressing desire to read the author's intentions, based on a production structure that ties the work to the author's biography, compelling the author to conform to societal and censorship constraints that hold them responsible for meaning. Thus, applying the Death of the Author in Arab comics remains possible only until it encounters the cultural and reading context.

Death of the Author in Algerian Criticism:

The Death of the Author theory appeared in contemporary Algerian criticism within several academic works and university research in the fields of linguistics and semiotics, particularly in studies following structuralist and post-structuralist criticism, discourse analysis, and the reception of contemporary French theories. However, this reception was mostly theoretical and academic rather than practical, due to the clear connection of the Algerian text to personal experiences such as colonialism, war, language, identity, and migration. This leads the Algerian reader, upon receiving the text, to automatically return to ingrained questions concerning the author's character, political and social experiences, and historical, religious, and ideological relations. This revives the author rather than excludes them, as the context necessitates linking the work to its creator.

Reception of Algerian Comics:

Algerian comics are generally read as eyewitness testimony to reality, entrusted with questioning authority or documenting memory, which brings the author to the foreground, as the work becomes a stance more than independent writing. Examples include:

- Production of some magazines such as *La Bouche*, *El Harraga*, *Chouf Chouf*.
- Work of artists like Slim (SLIM), Ammar Zouai, Mahdi Mardassi, and others.
- Local “manga/comics” initiatives like Z Link and “DZ manga.”
- Miscellaneous works ranging from political, social, satirical, to fictional themes.

These experiences reflect that comics in Algeria are not only a classical past but a dynamic, evolving field seeking experimentation. Thus, they can be considered contemporary comics aligned with developments in art and creativity. Their particularity lies in addressing mostly local issues such as corruption, bureaucracy, illegal migration, national memory, and social transformations, often in the context of political critique. This drives the audience to seek the author as a witness and social critic, undermining Barthes’ theory, as it tightly links the message to its creator.

Unlike global comics (such as *Watchmen* or *Maus*), Algerian comics remain more direct, less symbolic, closer to political satire, and less reliant on multi-meaning techniques. Therefore, they do not provide sufficient space for the audience to become a producer of meaning in Barthes’ sense.

From this perspective, applying the Death of the Author theory in Algerian comics faces several obstacles, the most important of which are:

- The strong presence of realistic and political reading, due to linking the work to the artist’s biography and personal experiences, and direct reliance on historical context in interpretation.
- Dominance of political and social comics, resulting from the decline of semiotic and experimental approaches.
- The perception of comics as a tool of protest before being an interpretive art.

For these reasons and others not mentioned here, the Death of the Author theory in Algerian comics is not theoretically rejected but is simultaneously not practically applicable due to the nature of the Algerian text, its cultural and social contexts, and the nature of the Algerian Arab audience.

Practical Examples / Algerian Comics:

I. Difficulty of Applying the Death of the Author Theory:

1. The character Bouqlaa in Slim (SLIM) comics –

His character (Bouqlaa) is one of the most famous satirical figures. Like other characters (e.g., Zeina and Bouzid), the authority of Slim, as the author, dominates the work, as the audience fully understands that Slim (the author) comments directly on reality, including topics such as bureaucracy, congestion, the high cost of living, and mismanaged administration. The comic’s references thus rely on the artist’s stance on bureaucracy and daily corruption, linking the work’s satire and irony directly to the author’s personality and political audacity in an environment constrained by social, political, and religious censorship.

Bouqlaa appears as a simple drawn character: exaggerated features with a comedic appearance indicating the popular class, combining humor, intelligence, sharp wit, and critical sense. Thus, applying the Death of the Author theory here is difficult, as the audience often follows the work primarily focusing on its references and realistic-social contexts, sometimes because it is created personally by the author (Slim).

2. The issue of illegal migration in Algerian comics:

Algerian comics often depict illegal migration with realistic drawings. They are read as testimony or a humanitarian outcry, where the audience primarily searches for the author's stance on the phenomenon. The illustrator presents lived experiences or real events. Since they are often presented as social documentary work, the audience does not let the author disappear. This is even more evident in political and historical caricatures, where the audience seeks truth, relying primarily on the author's personality and audacity. Therefore, the author cannot be excluded according to Barthes' perspective.

II. Possibility of Applying the Death of the Author Theory:

Some Algerian attempts in fantasy or adventure comics, though modest, open broader possibilities for reception and application of the Death of the Author theory because:

- The work is freed from realism and the author's personal experience.
- The image is rich in indirect symbols and meanings.
- It allows the audience to produce meaning independent of the author's intent.

Thus, the more Algerian comics move toward fantasy or surrealism, the more independent the text becomes and closer to the possibility of the Death of the Author in Barthes' perspective.

From these examples, it is clear that:

- The Algerian Arab audience tends to read comics as directed discourse, not a text freed from its creator.
- It is very difficult to apply Barthes' Death of the Author theory to political, social, and realistic comics in Algeria.
- The closest Algerian comic models to accommodating Barthes' theory are fantasy, artistic, and experimental comics because meaning is open and not personally linked to the author.

Conclusion:

This discussion shows that Algerian comics face intense debate regarding the Death of the Author theory, mainly concerning the limits of theoretical possibility and practical difficulties. Theoretically, they possess multiple narrative and visual structures and the potential to adapt to collective production processes, making the comic text capable of liberation from individual authorial authority, granting the reader a central role in generating meaning, fully consistent with Barthes' conception.

However, achieving this is confrontational in critical practice. It is necessary to allow objective reading of Algerian comic texts as autonomous semantic entities through the development and localization of semiotic and textual approaches, and enhancing the independence of reading from subjective references.

Practical application in the Algerian context faces clear challenges, generally represented by the dominance of intentional reading linking the creative work to the author's identity and experiences, alongside weak specialized criticism and the sensitivity of topics discussed in comics (such as historical memory and identity issues), which reinforces returning to the author as a witness and interpretive reference.

References

See: Hashim Mirghani Al-Haj Ibrahim, *From the Author to the Text: A Critical Approach to Roland Barthes' Concept of "Death of the Author"*, Journal of Arabic Sciences – Issue 26 (1434 AH) / 2020-02-25.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *The Concept of the Text: A Study in Qur'anic Sciences*, Arab Cultural Center for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, Beirut, 3rd edition, 1996, p. 10.

Fadel Thamer, *The Second Language*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, 1st edition, 1994, p. 72.

See: Hashim Mirghani Al-Haj Ibrahim, *From the Author to the Text: A Critical Approach to Roland Barthes' Concept of "Death of the Author"*, previous reference.

See: Ma'araji Omar, "Death of the Author: The Beginning of Reception in Roland Barthes," *Image and Communication Journal*, Issue 7, No. 1 (2018), p. 112.

Ibid.

Ibid.

See: Amr Jaseen, *The Art of Comic Stories (Comics)*, Ru'ya Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 2017, p. 12.

See: Mahmoud Qassem, *Comics in the Arab World: A Historical and Artistic Perspective*, Jazirat Al-Ward Library, Cairo, 2018, p. 21.

For further reading: Muhammad Al-Sheikh, *The Image – Interpretations and Representations*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Beirut, 2013, pp. 16–25.

<https://www.cartooningforpeace.org>, accessed 30/11/2025, 16:32.

<https://arabcomics.net>, accessed 30/11/2025, 13:12.

Appendix:

- Appendix: om Slim comics, for example, showing character features employed in Algerian comic narratives, sourced from: <https://www.cartooningforpeace.org>

CORPS & PSYCHISME

P-ISSN: 2496-4476 E-ISSN: 2273-1571

Volume 13/ Issue 1/ 2026

