Using graffiti as a communicative and expressive tool in popular protests

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Abstract

The article aimed to discover how graffiti was used to express the demands of protesters in Iraq in late 2019 and to identify the signs and contents contained in those writings and images. The author used mixed methods: discourse, thematic and semiological analysis, and qualitative analytical methods to analyze eight graffiti images according to three aspects: implied meaning, signification, and interpretation. The results demonstrated that protest artists used their talents to express the goals and demands of the protesters in a very imaginative and direct way. The article's findings also demonstrated that some graffiti semiotics aligned with patriotic, linguistic, and moral messages. These messages confirm that the protest was legitimate, the requests were legal, and the methods were civilized.

Keywords: [graffiti art; protest communication; semiotics].

1. Introduction

Human discourse has developed in direction, significance, expression, and perception, and man has been able to employ most of his sensory and expressive capabilities in human communication and embody his potential in a visible, tangible, striking, and effective manner. Among the possibilities that man employed in communicating with the other is language and image and the combination of them, which renewed the spirit of rebirth and enthusiasm, narrowed the gap between the ruler and the ruled, brought the distance between the distant and the near closer, and provided strength for the disadvantaged, and the absent a presence. Furthermore, the authority could no longer hide and hide behind money, prestige, and the military. The picture comes at the forefront of the means of expression that carries a lot and summarizes many, and as it has been said in this regard, a thousand words cannot speak with the eloquence of a single picture.

From here, the image is semiologically a sign of a function based on a triple system of relations, which are the material of expression: colors, lines, and distances. The forms of expression are the symbolic formations of things and people, and the content of expression includes the cultural content of the image on the one hand and its semantic structures formed for this content on the other hand.
Graffiti is a visual language expressed through writing or drawings on walls, buildings, sidewalks, and other public areas. Graffiti is frequently made with spray paint, markers, or other tools and can range in complexity from basic words and slogans to intricate murals and designs (LAC, 2023). Graffiti allows it to be used as a means of opposing marginalization trends in the media and society, and it also carries special informational characteristics that other media (communications) cannot provide. Communicating through graffiti allows new audiences to be addressed and educated. Additionally, graffiti supports movement goals by communicating information, framing events, mobilizing and motivating activists and residents, and competing for space (Hess & Mulyana, 2022).

Writing graffiti connects its creators to the world, reflecting their subjective, varying relationships. Thus, it aims to confirm existing theories, investigate how various living bodies conceive of, and speak about what they do (Fransberg et al., 2021). According to Ryan (2016); Tolonen (2021). Graffiti writers and street painters experience therapeutic effects from painting, recognizing the profound physical and emotional experiences that arise throughout the creative process.

In the October Revolution 2019, the Iraqi protesters added most of the elements of semiology to show their demands, state their goals, and express their opinions. They were famous for their distinguished "graffiti" artworks, which included great values and purposes that fit the objectives for which they came out. This article will reflect on these artistic images and their value implications and semiotic evidence.

1.1 The Problem Statement

Protest practice regarding mechanisms, methods, and influence has developed in recent decades. This change comes from societal and political life development and a digital communication environment that has brought distances closer, reduced gaps between individuals and mixed cultures, and enhanced knowledge of rights and duties. The mechanisms of the protest scene did not stop there; still, new and creative cases of protest expression emerged, including the establishment of art exhibitions and the presence of artists, creators, and talented people. The presentation of artworks articulates the protesters' demands, expresses their opinions and trends, and contributes to delivering messages that come to be revealed to the world.

The protest movement of October 2019 in Iraq came to protest the deterioration of government services provided to the people, the lack of job opportunities, electricity cuts, random arrests, and so on. It has been noticed that there is a remarkable transformation in expression and the employment of various artistic and literary skills such as poetry, drawing, plays, and drama. The most prominent of these works were the drawings and images that filled the walls of the tunnels and banners with expressive images of protest significance, in which protesters (from various cities in Iraq) expressed what they wanted.

Hence, a fundamental problem emerged in the effectiveness of protest communication and its impact on public opinion. This problem is represented by a new artistic revolution that accompanied the October mass movement and the use of artistic products that combine art and content in an expressive form that is unable even to speak, or more precisely, that is not always
available. Ability to express it: How did the protesters use their pens, feathers, and creativity to semiotically embody the protest situation through their drawings, pictures, and artwork (graffiti)? What are the most prominent artistic features that they put in those drawings and pictures, and what are the semiological values and connotations that the protesters sought to highlight?

1.2 The importance

The importance of the article comes from the importance of the subject itself. On the cognitive and scientific level, it represents a new addition to the semiological readings of societal trends, revealing the communicative development that the Arab person resorts to and showing the civilized touch in expressing his demands and rights. On a practical level, the article opens prospects for researchers to conduct similar studies, which may contribute to the wheel of change and present new protest scenarios that enhance the influence of public opinion and, at the same time, give official bodies perceptions of the quality of the upcoming public discourse, and thus develop appropriate mechanisms and treatments to respond to the demands and rights.

1.3 The aims

The article aims to reveal the semiotic aspect of the artworks accompanying the October protest movement in Iraq 2019, the implications of those works, the messages the protesters intended to convey to the concerned authorities, and how they were employed to express their humanitarian and social demands.

1.4 Terminology

Protest communication: It is a communication process in which information, symbols, and signals are sent from the sender (the protester) to the recipient, whether he is a party directly related to the protest (the protester), or an indirect relationship (one of the parties influencing the protester’s decision), intending to inform. In protest communication, all available and possible communication means are used, such as face-to-face, mass, televised, broadcast, or published in the press, websites or social networks, verbally, or written, illustrated, carved, woven or announced in any communicative form, including even through envoys.

Graffiti is the plural form of graffito, which means scratch or stroke in Italian. Graffiti is used for writing or pictures that are scratched, scribbled, painted, or inscribed on the wall (Carollina, 2023, p. 97). It can be defined as public creative art pieces in urban spaces produced by self-motivated individuals or collectives (Fransberg et al., 2021, p. 362). Graffiti is a broad system of texts, images, and various symbolic combinations in which personal and public issues, literature and art, daily life, and customs are intertwined, From the Bible to the COVID-19 outbreak, from love confessions to political rebellion and resistance, the walls surrounding us carry all these problems silently and pass them on to others (Yernzkyan & Gasparyan, 2023, p. 89).

It can be defined as an expressive, civilized written style using surfaces, walls, or streets to communicate ideas and express political and societal positions. It is edited by hand and in the language of the street by words, symbols, signs, graphics, drawings, inscriptions, or writing on the walls in an aesthetic tinge in form, color, or type to express a specific supportive or protest message with a peaceful or violent symbolism, and the reality of the pension.
Semiotics: “Semiotics is defined as a science that studies the life of signs within society” (Aiello & Van Leeuwen, 2023, p. 28). It is also defined as “a sign system that enables human beings to get the meanings of codes and signs in events, text, verbal, and non-verbal (visual) expressions” (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023, p. 97).

2. Review of Literature

Semiotic analysis is based on philosophical, theoretical backgrounds that deal with the issue of visual perception and judging the whole through the parts, for example, the phenomenological theory, which is the *philosophical direction* that was considered the most influential in the twentieth century. Leaving all prejudices to analyze everything manifested by consciousness (Kunzmann et al., 2007) to identify and describe the essences while avoiding the separation between the subject and the object and science and the world by focusing on the realities (Culler, 2004).

2.1 Semiology

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) used semiology in his book (Lectures on General Linguistics). In his view, semiology is a science that studies the life of signs from within social life. Language as a system of signs expresses a specific thought.” While Charles Peirce (1839-1914) called the science of signs the term sémiotique, which in his view is based on logic, phenomenology, and mathematics, describing semiotics as “a necessary introduction to logic, which is a branch of a general science of symbolic evidence, based on the formulation of hypotheses and deduction of results from them, and the analysis of statements and the evidence appears. Barthes (1993) defines semiology as “the game of clues, that is, the ability to establish a true multiplicity of things in the same restored language.” Semiotics is the deep study of the text, diving into distant meanings, reading between the lines, and trying to discover the idea the writer wants to convey indirectly (Mahmood, 2015).

Among the most famous elements of semiotics or semiology are (Al-Orabi, 2007; Azzam, 1996; Chandler, 2008)

1) **The symbol** is a sign chosen to suggest its original reference. The colors of traffic lights, for example (green, red, and yellow), are used idiomatically to symbolize walking, standing, and slowing down. Examples of the symbol are language, numbers, and national flags.

2) **The sign**: In the sense of the signifier, for example, the word (human) is a sign that denotes a person. The iconic sign, such as images, graphs, maps, models, and models, is followed by the indicative sign, which is what is between it and its signification, such as the sign of smoke on fire, and the idiomatic sign, which is what a group of people agreed upon based on a specific convention and not between it and what it indicates.

3) **A semantic unit** is the smallest meaning or extension unit reflecting semantic contrast. However, the single word is the most important semantic unit because it constitutes the most important basic level of semantic units. Semantics comprises the vocabulary or lexicon of an individual. Syntagmatic, diachronic, grammatical, componential, and lexical semantics are all subdisciplines of semantics. It is the study of meaning, including a set of tools: “knowledge
encoded in the language's vocabulary and in its patterns for building more elaborate meanings, up to the level of sentence meanings (Kalelioğlu, 2019, p. 318).

4) **Code:** It is an essential concept in semiotics. The code is a set of practices that users of communicative media are familiar with and employed in a broad cultural context. "Dususser" stressed that signs have no meaning alone and do not carry meaning alone, except when interpreted in terms of their relationship. The conventions of codes in semiotics represent a social dimension.

The interpretive reading of the picture is a grammatical reading with logical foundations based on language, perception, perception, and interpretation. In its reading, the image depends on two main poles: the specific pole, which is descriptive of its nature and components, so a question is asked, “What does the image say?” and the implicit pole, which is the interpretive pole, and it investigates the question “How does the picture say what it wants?” With these two poles - the two poles of semiotic function - the semiotic function is completed. Achieving the form of the content of the image because the interpretation of the image, like every interpretation, needs to build the assumed contexts through what is directly given, and this interpretation cannot take place without restoring the initial meanings of the components of the image (Bulabid, 2010).

### 2.2 Graffiti Goals

Graffiti has several goals, such as expression of opinion by highlighting political and social commentary (Zaimakis, 2015), creating public opinion by analyzing and evaluating the semantic, social, and cultural content of graffiti and its impact on the formation of public consciousness (Porozov & Klusova, 2021). Graffiti artists engage in storytelling, using specific, stylized language that requires interpretation by writers and viewers.

According to Barthes (2011), the linguistic text that comes next to the press photo exercises one of the following two functions: (1) *Ancrage function*, the verbal text directs the perception of the recipient and leads his reading of the image so that it does not exceed certain limits in interpretation. It leads him to a pre-selected meaning, and this function is most common in still images such as press photographs, advertising posters, etc. (2) *Relais function*, i.e., the linguistic text adds new connotations to the press image so that its connotations are integrated and fused within the framework of greater unity, speech becomes very important in the cinema, where dialogue does not have a simple explanatory function. Still, it pushes the movement, putting in messages and meanings not found in the press and still images. Still, it is the most common in moving images, such as cinema, television films, and animations. Additionally, Muharremi-Kastrati and Muharremi (2020) claimed that the purpose of graffiti is to beautify the city, engage as many young people and creative individuals as possible, and let people forget about the problems surrounding them and politics for a brief period.

### 2.3 Graffiti Art Styles

There are many graffiti styles, but most are shaped freehand, digitally, or engraved, such as tag, wildstyle, bubble letters, block letters, throw-up, stencil, calligraffiti, Gothic/blackletter, heaven-spot or heaven, piece, 3D graffiti, composite photorealism, illustrative artworks, well-supported...
words, laneways/street art, photorealism, digital graffiti...etc. *Engraving* means etching on the wall, leaving permanent scars. It is also called scratchiti, which requires the artist to use a sharp tool, such as a stone, to scratch or engrave a material(Gogerly, 2012). *Graffiti drawing* means using images, graphics, shapes, text, and linguistic elements (sentences, phrases, terms, words, and/or letters) to express public issues and situations. Once the protester finishes drawing or pasting a picture, the picture turns into a letter or message that has a specific function on the basis that it stems from a particular idea that brewed in the painter's mind(Courtesy, 2010). *Digital graffiti* is the form of graffiti that has been digitalized. This can be done in various ways, whether through scanned images or more intricate and complex designs with high-end design applications(Lewis, 2022).

According to the literature, most political graffiti comprised placards affixed to prominent communication routes. Justifications for this type of graffiti encompass the imperative for message legibility and production expediency in such expansive areas. Interestingly, posters are more typically utilized on public property, while other types of graffiti are primarily found on private property. Political graffiti’s protest philosophy could potentially lead to this outcome. Moreover, a distinct group of citizens who held different values from those who produced other graffiti may have inspired political graffiti(Hána & Šel, 2021).

### 2.4 The graffiti and protest communication

Protest communication is the essence of graffiti art, through which the protester presents his perception, opinion, and purpose of what surrounds him and what he considers unfair or usurpation of rights so that the recipient realizes the artist’s intentions and protest goals. It is a human process that comes from the human being and the circumstances surrounding him, which determines how he perceives and selects from stimuli what he pays attention to, as he is active and interactive in the perceptual situation. Protest graffiti is a form of visual activism that provides a democratic space for demonstrators to articulate their narratives(Correa, 2023). Lennon stated that when protest movements change and adapt, graffiti is also uniquely suited to shapeshift with them(Lennon, 2022).

Finally, graffiti, which began as a writing activity, evolved with the experimental methods it used, evolving into an art form and taking its place as street art today. Today, street art turns walls into canvases, reflects the city's spirit, and expresses it in an aesthetic, figurative, and abstract style. It can be said that “street” is now just a concept that corresponds to where this work is done. Graffiti also interacted with various disciplines to transform into street art and benefited from the techniques of the disciplines with which it interacted(Erdem & Aker, 2022).

### 2.5 October 2019 Protests

The October 2019 demonstrations erupted in Baghdad and the rest of the southern governorates of Iraq to protest the country's deteriorating economic conditions, the spread of administrative corruption, and unemployment. The demonstrators' demands reached overthrowing the ruling regime, the government's resignation, forming an interim government, and holding early elections. The security forces confronted these demonstrations violently, as demonstrators killed about 740
people since the protests began. Over 17,000 were injured during the demonstrations, including 3,000 people with disabilities. In addition to the arrest of many protesters, as well as cutting off the Internet in Iraq, the most prominent chants were: “The revolution continues until the homeland is restored”, “Youth revolution”, “Revolution of the homeland”, “Revenge for the martyrs”, “We want a homeland,” and some slogans that activists started The protest environment led to the birth of new mass newspapers (the tongue of the free revolutionaries), including the newspaper (Najaf "sit-ins" - its first issue was published on Nov. 23, 2019, in Najaf) and the newspaper (Al Tiktok) which was written, edited and distributed in the sit-in square - Tahrir Square), in addition to the launch of the broadcast of the (Al-Tahrir TV) screen in the capital, Baghdad and Tahrir Square, specialized in various programs and news and events of the revolution in all its details(Alrubai3i, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1 Method

The article adopted semiological analysis as a qualitative analytical method to focus on how meaning works in texts and images through structural deconstruction. Semiological analysis is a set of techniques and steps to search for formulas for completing the semantic cycle in a specific format. The scientific method detects, analyzes, and criticizes the meaning in a system and criticizes the constituent elements of this meaning and its laws(Kristeva, 1997). This type of analysis aims to study the signs and symbols in the context of social life and the laws that govern it.

By following the American Saussure rule in tracing the semiotic signs in the composition of the graffiti, starting with its shape and internal and aesthetic organization, and ending with the use of colors and depth of the image, three aspects were addressed: first, the implied meaning to which the words lead alone and can be reached without an intermediary; second, signification, which is a central concept around which semiotic activity is organized in its entirety. It is the process of producing meaning; the third one is interpretation, which refers to taking the meaning other than the meaning of the words by going beyond the apparent to the hidden, i.e., diverting the word from the likely meaning to the likely meaning of the evidence associated with it. By adopting these aspects, and more specifically, a sample of protest images will be identified through a semiotic focus on the implied meaning, connotation, and interpretation of public graffiti as a social and democratic practice on both the social and political levels. The community included the technical materials (drawings, pictures, and writings) in which the Iraqi protesters expressed their positions during the protest in October 2019 in Iraq in protest of the spread of unemployment and in opposition to the economic and security policies at the time.

3.2 Data collection

The author employed a sample of (8) figures to collect the data required to address the research problem. These graffiti figures were published on Facebook from October to December 2019 by Iraqi (protesters) artists. The following table shows us the titles and types of these graffiti:

Table 1: The sample of The Iraqi (protesters) artists' graffiti published on Facebook from Oct. - Dec. 2019
The basic rule followed by the semiotic lies in the composition of the image, starting with its form and internal and aesthetic organization and ending with the use of colors and depth of the image. Ferdinand Dussaucer put forward the term sémiologie. The French semiotics used it according to their fields to distinguish their work from the global sémiotique, divided into Eastern Italy, Europe, and the United States (Saussure, 1962).

Our current study in the analysis of graphitic matter relies on the semiotic function, as Barthes (2011) called them, in both levels: descriptive and interpretive. Thus, the supposed contexts are built through what gives the form directly, and then the interpretation by restoring the initial meanings of the elements that make up the image. We will answer the following questions: how the protesters utilized their writings, feathers, and creativity in the semiotic embodiment of the protest situation through (graffiti), the most prominent artistic features they put in those drawings and images, and the semiological values and connotations they sought to highlight.

4. Findings

The analysis included an intentional group of images and graffiti drawings that the artists implemented to support the protest. To answer the research problem’s results, the author chose a group of these works, excluding those similar in expression and internationalization. The following table shows us the most famous artworks analyzed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure title</th>
<th>graffiti type</th>
<th>symbolic elements</th>
<th>values and signs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We want a homeland</td>
<td>wall graffiti</td>
<td>old woman</td>
<td>innocence, integrity, and patriotism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sons of Dhe Qar to Change</td>
<td>digital graffiti</td>
<td>archaeological ziggurat of Ur</td>
<td>the cultural and historical dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfriendly Match</td>
<td>wall graffiti</td>
<td>protesters and security forces</td>
<td>the unequal equation between the protesters and the security forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting</td>
<td>wall graffiti</td>
<td>Iraqi Sumerian civilization</td>
<td>the human and national identity, peace, and love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No place for criminals</td>
<td>digital graffiti</td>
<td>the map of Iraq</td>
<td>cultural human diversity, Refusing corruption and outside interference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi Angry</td>
<td>wall oil painting, acrylic graffiti</td>
<td>cartridge, tucktuck, face mask</td>
<td>severe suffering sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birds of freedom</td>
<td>digital graffiti</td>
<td>martyr’s shirt stained with blood, tuk-tuk</td>
<td>integrated scene of the protest poor people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am here for my right</td>
<td>wallpaper painting graffiti</td>
<td>Iraqi flags,&quot;Tuk Tuk&quot;</td>
<td>anxiety and hope</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4818043
We want a homeland.

Figure 4.1: A graffiti-style painting entitled: We Want a Homeland, by the artist Waleed Naif, published on Facebook in October 2019

The image above is graffiti showing an old woman with the words “We want a homeland” written on it, which is very important regarding the protesters' motives. She carries the Iraqi flag, and behind her is the Freedom Monument in Baghdad amid crowds of demonstrators. The drawing showed the characteristics of Iraqi women, such as innocence, pride, integrity, and patriotism. It was clear that the implied meaning was women’s participation with the protesters for the sake of love for Iraq and belonging to it and its culture. The significance of the image is popular participation and the fact that all people, regardless of their ages, have one concern: Iraq. The interpretation of the graffiti is that the protest was for Iraq, and there are no selfish goals, as evidenced by the fact that the elderly woman is at the forefront of the demonstrators, and in her hand and heart is nothing but Iraq. The artist wanted to express the people's enthusiasm for change. Women here are an icon of participation and change.
The figure above indicates social and cultural values historically and geographically related to Iraq. One such indication is the archaeological ziggurat of Ur, which carries a cultural and historical dimension to Iraq. The ziggurat is in the province of Dhi Qar in south of Iraq, where the spark of protests erupted and continues until writing this paper (two years later). The painting bore the words "Sons of Dhi Qar to Change" and wrote the word "Change" in large, bold, red font. The red color and the font size for the word change indicate the insistence on changing for the better, no matter the cost, even if it requires self-sacrifice. The first emanating from Ur's ziggurat was another sign of defiance, persistence, and patience.

The graffiti artist wanted to say that Dhi Qar Governorate has become an icon of protest in Iraq. Protests and objections to government policies began with it, and then the widespread protest movement occurred in Baghdad. The other governorates did not witness a protest movement, as in Dhi Qar and Baghdad. Still, all Iraqi public opinion moved in support of the demands of the uprisings there, and perhaps they participated in them.
Unfriendly Match

Figure 4.3: A drawing on the wall entitled "Unfriendly Match" by the artist Mahmood Shubber, posted on Facebook in November 2019.

The piece shows the state of the clash that the protesters were subjected to by the security forces at the time, which led to the injury of many people and the death of others. The digital graffiti piece included several symbols of protest: the martyr, the mother, the tuk-tuk, the symbolic building of the protest, protesters' victory, and there was also text written in irregular handwriting confirming that “Unfriendly Match”. All these symbols carried a connotation of optimism despite the harm, death, and sadness. Everything in the picture expresses the unequal equation between the protesters and the security forces. The protesters do not even have powerful transportation. The signal was clear that the match was not friendly, while the protesters expressed their demands in a friendly and peaceful way. The image was an icon of the expected victory, and the message was clear from the protesters: to continue, whatever the sacrifices, until achieving the victory and implementing their demands for reform.
The art is of a woman wearing a scarf embroidered with shapes belonging to the Iraqi Sumerian civilization. It indicates the human and national identity that the artist added to the image of women. Next to it is a window on which a dove stands, a symbol of peace and love. Another meaning included in the female character's graffiti is peace and security. The woman is the security of the home, the son, the husband, the brother, and society; therefore, she is always a symbol of peace for the nation. This piece included symbols of seeking safety and calling for peace, as women represent the safety of society and a sign of psychological and social stability. She expects peace and sees in the dove hope and a sign to achieve peace. The woman and the dove are both icons and signs of peace. Here, graffiti artists intensify the symbolism of peace during the protests, and the protesters are being targeted, harassed, and shot.
No place for criminals

The piece includes formal and textual elements, representing an expressive protest sign. Here is the map of Iraq, with pictures of the palms hand-painted in different colors to indicate the colors of the Iraqi spectrum and the religious, national, and cultural human diversity. He wrote above the picture: “Oh, corrupt, thieves, religion brokers, killers, Iran, you have no place in this Iraq.” Moreover, it is signed below the picture with the words "Iraq October Revolution 2019". The significance of this painting is, "We all Iraqis reject thieves, murderers, and Iranian interference in our country". The significance of the image: The protesters’ message to politicians and sectarians includes a directed and declared appeal: We all, no matter our colours, sects, and nationalities, will remain united and one people, despite the politicians’ attempts to stir up differences. Here, graffiti appears as an icon of unity and meeting among members of society.

Figure 4.5: A digital graffiti, titled "No Place for criminals," by artist "Jawdet Haseeb" posted on Facebook, during the month of December 2019

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4818043
The figure above is an artwork of acrylic (*Iraqi Angry*) on canvas, 80 x 80 CM, consisting of a cartridge for gas, a wheel of (tuck-tuck), and a face mask. The artist wrote in a post published on Facebook: "They are hated, but we love them." By these things and tools, he means the cartridge, the gas, the tuk-tuk, the face mask, and all these things that were imposed on the protesters. He placed these objects in the hands of characters in his drawing in different areas, once in the hand, once in the abdomen, and once in the head, in reference to the issue of the injuries that most of the protesters were exposed to as a result of shooting by the security forces. The characters in the picture were wearing as little clothing as possible to show people they were peaceful and defenseless, with no weapons other than demands for peace and safety. The artist wants to say that all these things are not what is required or expected, but rather, they are signs of severe suffering and a difficult confrontation with the government, but they have become a daily routine of the protests. These things are disliked, but they become symbols of sacrifice, the defence of rights, a milestone for the 2019 protests.
The artwork “Birds of Freedom” contained one of the most prominent means of transportation for demonstrators: the “Bajaj,” which is known in Iraq and some countries of the Arab world as “Tuk-Tuk.” On it was hung a shirt stained with the blood of one of the protest martyrs, who appeared to be the driver. It represents a complete scene of protest. Although he was unarmed and killed, his wealth was a tuk-tuk that he bought for a few dollars, mostly for the poor. The significance of this artwork is that the protest movement resembles the revolutions of the hungry (Britannica, 2024): the Egyptian Hungry Revolt carried out by the Egyptians against King Pepi II (2278 - 2184 BC), the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, Despite the failure of the revolution, it is one of the most important events in the modern history of Hungary, as it formed the cornerstone of the modern Hungarian national identity (Berend, 2015). Many revolutions and protests occurred because of injustice, hunger, and oppression. The Iraqi protesters may not accept describing their revolution as a revolution of the hungry for fear that it will be understood that they went out just for food. I personally heard this from some of them. They said it is true that there is widespread hunger and that people have the right to protest their starvation, but they said that hunger for food is not worse than hunger for dignity.
I am here for my right

The painting, painted by a (11-year-old) child, expresses what every Iraqi wishes, regardless of his age, and is evidence that anxiety and hope stem from the depths of every Iraqi person. All the elements of the art were child protesters, Iraqi flags, and "Tuk Tuk", the symbol of the October 2019 protests. The significance of the artwork is that even children are partners with adults in their view of the future. The protests have achieved unity of direction and spirit and unified demands and goals. There was a phrase launched in many of the protest movements that the world witnessed, especially in the Arab world. The phrase was “I am coming down to take my rights,” meaning we are here to take my rights. The phrase was written by the child artist in his drawing in Arabic. The drawing contained most of the elements of the protest, such as (Tahrir Square, tuk-tuk, the Iraqi flag, children, protesters...). This production's attractive and beautiful side is devoid of all signs of suffering, such as martyrs and blood, which is a natural reflection of the life children hope for.

5. Discussion

According to the findings, graffiti artists in Iraq focused their artwork on embodying the protest demands, the reason they participated, and culture. According to Konda (2021), Graffiti art constantly seeks solutions to the formal problems of each stylistic period, and it is a symbol of empowerment for oppressed youth during social unrest. Graffiti offered an artistic solution to a social problem, specifically systemic racism. Graffiti's stylistic transformation or promotion into street art as a global and institutional phenomenon came after its cultural value.
What is impressive is the distinguished way Iraqi protesters express the beautiful values expressed in their graffiti, so the title of each piece of graffiti is highly expressive. Many artists presented graffiti about peace, the civic movement, and patriotism in this context. Most of their works came in the form of characters or figures that renounced violence and raised the national flag, and its slogan was freedom, as in a piece titled “Birds of Freedom.” It also included several artworks presented by protest artists, such as photographs, wall paintings, writing, abstract paintings, and plastic paintings, and the use of the digital environment to design and publish many of their works to support the movement and express its demands clearly. Graffiti artists have provided a tool for individuals to express resistance and fight violence nonviolently. Art has become an outlet for emotions and anger, as in the piece (An Angry Iraqi," which expressed fear, difference, and opposition. He conveyed the message and meaning more without using long speeches that usually lose their power immediately after hearing the echoes of their last sentence. In more succinct words, street artists have succeeded in attracting attention, expressing emotions, and communicating opposition to oppression(Kądrzycka, 2022).

Some graffiti presents social dimensions that fall within physical symbols in their semiotic meaning to produce and interpret the meaning in each symbol, and many works have focused on physical symbols such as facial expressions, head gestures, accompanying texts, and aesthetic symbols(Chandler, 2008). The most prominent expressions we mentioned are graffiti and pictures that include images of the old woman, which formed the features of her tired, sad face. Her face was full of symbols and signs rejecting injustice, which is a clear social and political message. This message was represented through graffiti: (We want a homeland).

Many images came in this style as a comprehensive sign and symbol of rejection of the injustice and suffering experienced by members of Iraqi society, including unemployment, health neglect, and a lack of appreciation for those with degrees. Iraqi protest artworks were characterized by their diversity in form, content, and significance, and thus, the artistic features varied accordingly. Most of them included textual titles to decode the meanings beyond the elements of the figure. The Iraq map and flag have been included in many graffiti, in both forms, drawings, and text. One of the most prominent Iraqi governorates that witnessed protests, in addition to Baghdad, was Dhi Qar Governorate, which is a governorate that often protests poor services, widespread unemployment, and the arbitrariness of officials. Dhi Qar presented many martyrs and wounded, so some artists dedicated some paintings to it, such as “Sons of Dhi Qar for the Change”. Meanwhile, the Iraqi woman has had an effective presence in various symbolic roles: the paramedic girl, the strong girl, and the Sumerian woman who loves Iraq (eg. “awaiting”). Other significances have appeared in protestors’ behaviors, such as the symbolism of TUKTUK, to indicate the humble protestors.

The works of male artists displayed women as a basic symbol in their art, which means that this is clear evidence of the correct and positive view of the position of women in Iraqi society. Artists are a confident and conscious elite who look at every woman respectfully, as she is the mother,
sister, daughter, life partner, and man’s partner in building. And community leadership. Therefore, women were an element present in many graffiti pieces, with various indications and meanings, which we mentioned above. All graffiti and digital artists' works included high values, representing the determinants of the movement, its path, and its purpose. Among the most prominent values that emerged during the analysis of the artistic material are the following: Renouncing sectarianism and exposing its advocates, calling for unity and fraternity under the banner of the country, demanding justice for the oppressed, empowering women and enhancing their role in society, feeling the other, highlighting the high goal of the renaissance of Iraq, giving love and belonging to the country and its children, raising peace and security as unified human demands, cooperating and supporting for protecting the country, and emphasizing that the people are the source of power and decision.

Graffiti artists expressed the rights of the people by depicting some situations demanding their right to change and announcing that the people are the source of the authorities, such as “an unfriendly match”. In addition to the argument for the powerful role of art in peace and conflict transformation, one factor amplifying the global scope of protests is the art of protest. Protests are almost universally rooted in a particular place (street, square, digital global space), but they can also be global in scope. Although local political issues raise the frameworks of participation in protest art, they are broader than they may seem at first glance (Kądrzycka, 2022).

The graffiti expression space allowed all members of society to express their demands and rights. Children also participated in drawings that they published on social media in conjunction with graffiti on the streets and walls carried out by major artists. One of the examples presented by the children is “I am here for my right,” which is a painting in which the child painter expresses his demand for his right as he participates in the demand with adults. This is further evidence that the Iraqi family has realized with all its members that they have rights and are now expressing them through means of communication represented by drawing and graffiti. This is what Kądrzycka (2022) pointed out: art is not limited to those in social movements. However, rather it may emanate from individuals at the lowest level of the social structure - those who feel that they are vulnerable to suffering, so drawing, graffiti, and artistic works are the preferred means of expressing rejection.

Through their graffiti, the protesters tried to form a comprehensive societal identity that rejects sectarianism and condemns its advocates, especially since sectarianism has caused devastating problems for the unity of members of society, weakened the political system, and dismantled the values of citizenship. Therefore, a generation of young people was born with a sense of teamwork based on life experiences and synergistic interaction with other people or the environment, which motivated them to continue rejecting wrong situations through these drawings as a marketing tool. This example was represented by the graffiti entitled “No Place for Criminals”. Joy and bliss in a shared passion and pride in the appreciation of one's work are positive feelings associated with graffiti. Self-image is linked to emotions, which drive artists to evaluate their generation and others in society(Pérez-Izaguirre & Reglero, 2023).
The diversity of the connotations and symbols included in the graffiti of the Iraqi protesters confirms the loss of most of the elements of democratic and civil life, the most important of which are peace, independence, freedom, and transparency. The great message contained in the graffiti protest is the civilized way of expressing an opinion and calling for peace and freedom.

6. Conclusion

Our methodology demonstrates that the protest-graffiti semiotic works represent a qualitative shift in the expression of opinion and a civilized indicator of the cultural and human dimension that has reached society. Artists have realized that they are an integral part of societal mobility. Perhaps they are the best ones to express their aspirations and hopes in a sophisticated and rewarding artistic way. They presented pictures of what the media and human rights organizations failed to do. It was clear through the Iraqi artworks that the protesters employed all their abilities to convey their voices to the world, and it happened. Graffiti is the renewed face of all protest movements over time. I have used images, language, color, symbols, and signs to create an artistic icon with purpose, meaning, and impact.

7. References


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