

## *A Man's Skin*, a graphic novel on gender-based violence to wear some else's shoes

*Pelle d'uomo*, un romanzo grafico sulla violenza di genere  
per 'vestire' i panni dell'altro

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

# ABSTRACT

*A Man's Skin* (2020) by Hubert and Zanzim is a graphic novel published in France and translated into several languages. The work is set in Renaissance Italy and tells the story of Bianca, a young woman forced into an arranged marriage with a man she has never met. To calm her distress, her elderly aunt presents her with a family heirloom, a magical 'male skin' that has been passed down from generation to generation, from woman to woman. If Bianca wears this skin, she will appear as a man. Bianca then assumes the identity of Lorenzo and gains the opportunity to enter the male world and become acquainted with it. She also experiences for the first time in her life a society from which women are excluded. The narrative employs a simple literary device to offer insights into the cultural origins of gender norms, to unmask injustices and forms of direct and indirect violence, and to prompt readers to consider the implications of dressing in someone else's shoes. The essay examines the insights offered by the work from a gendered and pedagogical perspective, emphasizing its potential as an educational tool for self-reflection, debate, awareness, and the prevention of gender-based violence with an audience of adolescents, young adults, and adults.

#### KEYWORDS

Gender-based violence, comic, graphic novel, gender education, youth fiction.  
Violenza di genere, fumetto, romanzo grafico, educazione di genere, letteratura per ragazzi.

*Pelle d'uomo* (2020) di Hubert e Zanzim è un romanzo grafico pubblicato in Francia e tradotto in diverse lingue. L'opera è ambientata nell'Italia rinascimentale e racconta la storia di Bianca, una giovane donna forzosamente promessa in sposa ad un uomo che non ha mai visto. Per tranquillizzarla, l'anziana zia le regala un cimelio di famiglia, passato di generazione in generazione, di donna in donna: una 'pelle d'uomo' magica che, se indossata, permetterà a Bianca di apparire, fino a che la vestirà, come un uomo. Bianca diviene quindi Lorenzo e ha la possibilità di entrare nel mondo maschile e di conoscerlo da vicino, oltre che di sperimentare per la prima volta una società da cui le donne sono escluse. Attraverso un espediente letterario semplice, la storia propone numerosi spunti di riflessione sull'origine culturale di molte norme di genere, ritrae ingiustizie e forme di violenza diretta e indiretta e dà modo ai lettori di chiedersi come sarebbe la propria vita vestendo i panni altrui. Il saggio analizza gli spunti proposti dall'opera in ottica di genere e pedagogica e sottolinea come questo romanzo grafico possa diventare un interessante strumento educativo di autoriflessione, dibattito, sensibilizzazione e prevenzione della violenza di genere con un pubblico di adolescenti, giovani adulti e adulti.

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## 1. Literature and gender education

The role of literature in gender education is of significant importance. Stories, in all of their forms, serve as essential tools in the formation of identity, both at individual and collective level (Zipes, 2006; Lepri, 2016; Beseghi, 2017; Barsotti, Cantore, 2019; Trisciuzzi, 2020). Narratives can prompt a critical and countercultural reflection on gender stereotypes and prejudices. In some instances, stereotypes are validated by the stories we read, while in others, they are deconstructed and revised in accordance with new models (Biemmi, 2012; Caso, 2017; Forni, 2022). By employing evocative narratives and complex yet recognizable characters, literary works provide readers with opportunities to explore their own identities and the world around them. Furthermore, these works enable readers to question their own gendered experiences and the social expectations of the culture they live in. When qualitatively relevant, works should not merely reflect prevailing norms and habits; rather, they should challenge unquestioned constructs, proposing alternative models that lead to a reconsideration of power dynamics and interpersonal relationships.

Nowadays, many books for children, teenagers and young adults promote a more inclusive and diverse representation of human experiences, addressing often neglected issues and giving voice to historically marginalised subjects (Ulivieri, 2007, 2014; Lopez, 2017). The act of reading, particularly among younger audiences, can facilitate a transformation in readers' perspectives, enabling them to envision and construct a more equitable and egalitarian future. Fiction is not merely an imaginary model, rather, it can serve as a catalyst for tangible social changes, ultimately influencing the way we experience our everyday lives. The dissemination of gender education through literature provides a tool for educating future generations about diversity and for facilitating the construction of a society in which norms are redefined in accordance with models of equality and inclusion.

## 2. *A Man's Skin*

*A Man's Skin* (2020) is a French graphic novel, written by Hubert and illustrated by Zanzim. The book was published in different languages and countries. A graphic novel is defined as a narrative work that combines elements of writing and sequential visual art. In contrast to the conventional format of the comic book, which typically presents brief, episodic narratives, the graphic novel is characterized by a more intricate structure and a focus on complex themes that are explored over an extended number of pages. The combination of text and images in graphic novels allows for the engagement and appeal of a wide audience, thereby democratizing the access to rich and meaningful narratives (McCloud, 1997; Baetens, Frey, 2014; Barsotti, Cantore, 2019). In particular, *A Man's Skin*, is characterized by the use of relatively simple and two-dimensional illustrations. These images are particularly evocative and employ a bright palette of colours that effectively delineates well-defined characters, even when they exhibit a high degree of complexity.

Set in the context of Italian Renaissance, the graphic novel is presented as a fictional account that does not claim to be a historical narrative, but rather provides a prompt for reflection on contemporary issues starting from the past. *A Man's Skin* narrates the tale of Bianca, a young woman approaching the age of eighteen who is forced to enter into an arranged marriage with a man she has never met before. The girl does not know her future husband's personality, as she only met him briefly during the negotiation process in which she was 'sold' to her future husband by her father. In a context where marriage is a matter of business, not of love, her curiosity about the groom is not regarded as socially acceptable by her family. Bianca is also told by her female friends that she was lucky to have been matched with a man slightly older than herself, rather than a much older person, as was the case with many of them. Her friends then recommend her to refrain from complaining, emphasizing that such circumstances are a normal part of life and established rules should be followed. Her female friends also explain that even if their husbands were not initially motivated by romantic love, they are still laudable men who, in their opinion, contribute to their happiness (Zanzim, Hubert, 2020, p. 7). The narrative repeatedly illustrates the naiveté of their perspective since the betrayals and mistreatment of husbands towards their wives—regarded as mere contractual partners, not as individuals—are revealed. Moreover, Bianca is subjected to relentless criticism from her mother and family regarding her conduct and attitude, which they deem improper for a lady. Bianca talks to men, speaks without permission and dreams of changing her culture toward a more egalitarian society. She is an unconventional figure for the time, but her actions may be still considered revolutionary today, albeit in a more moderate way.

Before the wedding, Bianca shows signs of anxiety, and to calm her fears, her aunt gives her a family heirloom, a garment that has been passed down from woman to woman for generations. This item, known as a 'man's skin', has magical properties that, when worn, allow the wearer to assume the appearance of a man. In this manner, the future bride is given the opportunity to get to know her future husband in his 'natural habitat', the male world, a domain typically inaccessible to women. Bianca thus assumes the role of her alter ego, Lorenzo, enters the male world and experiences a society from which women are excluded, as her female relatives did before her through the use of the magic skin. Bianca, when disguised as Lorenzo, is forced to undergo a complete 'masculine' education:

in order to avoid being discovered, she must learn not only to emulate the physical characteristics of a man, but also to adopt the behavioural patterns associated with masculinity. Bianca must learn to walk in a manner that is perceived as masculine, to modulate her voice, and to move her hands less.

When Bianca 'wears' a male body, the initial experiment is to identify its physiological characteristics. Soon after that, Bianca also tests the social implication of having a masculine body and appearance. One of the initial places of social investigation is the inn, where women are typically not allowed. This space gives Bianca/Lorenzo the opportunity to interact with men without the constraints of 'female' social norms. Bianca's initial response to the environment of the inn is a total shock: the men she encounters are characterized by a lack of restraint, both in their behaviour and in their consumption of food and alcohol. The nights are marked by arguments, fights, and sexual encounters. Among these men Bianca finds Giovanni, her future husband. This situation is depicted in the comic with straightforward imagery, presented without any form of censorship. These dynamics have never been observed before by the girl's female eyes and Bianca describes the sexist environment as 'disgusting'.

The following morning, Bianca attends mass, where she listens to her brother, a priest, while having a sermon against the sinners of the city. Her brother is depicted as a bigoted and closed-minded individual who portrays women as instruments of temptation, heedless of the fact that all the men present at the mass are far more lustful and sinful figures than the women he is accusing, as Bianca noticed the night before at the inn. So, Bianca feels offended and unrepresented by this portrayal and will subsequently attempt to oppose it during the narrative.

For Bianca, experiencing the world in a man's shoes is a concrete loss of innocence, a break with the past, a revelation. Seeing her shocked and upset, her aunt heartens the young protagonist by explaining how men, like women, are forced to wear a constant mask, to perform a cultural role: "we show ourselves more delicate than we are, they show themselves stronger... even at the cost of pretending. [Giovanni] was playing at being a man" (Zanzim, Hubert, 2020, p. 54). Slowly, Bianca not only becomes accustomed to these excessive performances of masculinity, but also becomes an active participant: her contribution, as Lorenzo, in the masculine socialisation takes place symbolically when Lorenzo throws a punch at a troublemaker in the inn and, according to the bystanders, finally becomes a man, one of them.

When she visits the city as Lorenzo, Bianca experiences a freedom she had never felt before. She feels a sense of autonomy, of belonging to a community, and of liberation from the constraints and norms that previously defined her identity. She also learns to embrace her body without shame and to love it. As she notices: "It is not a dishonor to have a body. A body is neither inherently good nor bad; it has no moral value" (Zanzim, Hubert, 2020, p. 124). Performing her life as a man, Bianca reaches self-awareness for the first time.

Additionally, Bianca's worldview is challenged by her relationship with Giovanni. The girl's disgust toward the man transforms into interest and, later, into love as she gains deeper insight into his personality. Giovanni actually performs a socially constructed masculinity that hides his frailties. Giovanni falls in love too, but with Lorenzo, never discovering Bianca and Lorenzo are the same person. Giovanni and Lorenzo clandestinely engage in nocturnal meetings, and their love encounters frequently serve as a narrative vehicle for exploring themes such as gender discrimination, body, pleasure, and love. Lorenzo/Bianca, who brings with him/her both a 'male' and 'female' perspectives, suggests reflections that challenge the binary and encourage Giovanni to view the world from a new perspective.

After realizing that Giovanni and Lorenzo have developed romantic feelings for each other, Bianca experiences a sense of marginalization and a loss of identity and questions her role in the evolving dynamics of their relationship. Moreover, upon marriage with Giovanni, Bianca becomes acquainted with a markedly different aspect of Giovanni's personality: with her, the man is emotionally detached, lacking in passion and kindness. Bianca lives in complex emotional state, with both positive and negative feelings: since she loves him, she is gratified to be Giovanni's wife; however, she also feels envy towards Lorenzo, who is the real focus of Giovanni's attentions and feelings. The protagonist's distress over this unequal treatment prompts introspection on the intricate interrelationship between the body, identity, sexual orientation and social norms.

Rejected as a wife, except for bureaucratic reasons, Bianca then becomes friends with Giovanni and in the meantime carries on a revolt against her brother and his sexist and homophobic teachings, which go so far as to oppress the female gender more and more. When Bianca's mother notices these changes in her daughter, she tells her that she no longer recognises her, and symbolically Bianca explains that she has simply started to think by herself, to reflect following her ideals. The confrontation with her brother and the encounter with Giovanni through Lorenzo's body become highly formative and transformative experiences, which increases Bianca's empowerment and awareness.

### 3. Discussion

The narrative employs a simple literary technique to explore the cultural foundations of prevailing gender norms, to expose injustices, and to illustrate forms of direct and indirect violence. Initially, Bianca is depicted as a young

woman who is vulnerable to external forces and social constraints. However, her awareness, which is evident in both her resilience and vulnerability, has the potential to serve as a constructive and realistic model for emancipation. The narrative of gender roles is elucidated and exemplified through the actions and experiences of Bianca/Lorenzo, emphasizing the multiplicity of contradictions within these roles and the potential dangers posed by some harmful standards that have become so internalized as to constitute an unquestioned norm. Bianca's formative and transformative experience provides an opportunity to reflect on several issues, including gender identity – the binarism of which is represented here but strongly deconstructed – sexual orientation, relationships among peers and with family members (Leonelli, Biemmi, 2020).

In accordance with the growing number of strong and complex female literary protagonists, Bianca reclaims a voice that has often been marginalized (Ulivieri, 2007). At the same time, she highlights the nuances of diversity and challenges the fragility of conventional gender categories. In addition to individual empowerment, as exemplified by Bianca, the graphic novel underscores the significance of collaboration within a group, emphasizing the ability of collective action to challenge prejudices and foster novel social dynamics, ultimately leading towards a shared objective. The social group is depicted in the graphic novel not only as a potential threat but also as a means of achieving a solution. The meeting between Bianca and Giovanni, who are not only married but also, by the end of the book, friends and partners, demonstrates an alliance that transcends gender. This alliance is necessary to overcome discrimination and prejudice that affect individuals in different ways. If Bianca is the main 'victim' of the story, Giovanni and his obsession with perpetuating toxic masculinity also exemplify the victims of harmful gender standards (Burgio, 2022; Di Grigoli, 2020). It is only through confrontation, collaboration, and each individual's contribution to the larger group dynamic, as demonstrated by Bianca and Giovanni, that these norms can be dismantled or at least weakened. The book offers a rather positive conclusion through an alliance that transcends traditional gender barriers and suggests hope for future social change.

In works such as *A Man's Skin*, the narrative's aim is not to give information or provide didactic instruction, but rather to engage the audience through an exciting story. Before conveying lessons, the work aims to inspire and provoke reflection and discussion about gender. This indirect yet effective educational approach is achieved through the creation of a compelling narrative that directly involves readers of different ages (Forni, 2022). This graphic novel presents an intriguing exercise in empathy, prompting readers to consider the experiences of others both within the context of the narrative and in their own lives. *A Man's Skin* prompts readers to consider how their own lives might be transformed by assuming the roles of others. Through its reflective and thought-provoking approach, this graphic novel has the potential to serve as an effective educational tool for adolescents, young adults, and adults alike, facilitating introspection, discourse, sensitization, and the prevention of gender-based violence (Dello Preite, 2019; Ulivieri, 2014, 2007).

#### 4. Conclusions

The immediacy and broad appeal of comics make them an effective medium for addressing critical issues such as femicide, domestic violence, sexual assault, and gender discrimination. A significant number of collectives and networks have effectively utilized this medium to draw attention to urgent gender-related themes within the mainstream media. For instance, many have utilized the informative and educational potential of comics to raise awareness about gender-based violence and discrimination (Mandolini, 2021). In addition to works specifically focused on these themes for political and social reasons, graphic novels like *A Man's Skin* tackle similar themes in a more nuanced manner. By employing fictional narratives, they stimulate meaningful discourse even among audiences who may not initially engage with these topics. Fictional narratives can transcend specific social issues, reaching a diverse audience and serving as effective tools for education. They can spark thoughtful reflections and engagement about gender issues from an early age, fostering greater awareness and empowerment among new generations.

*A Man's Skin* is a notable addition to a growing body of comics and graphic novels that confront violence and gender discrimination—issues that are increasingly prevalent in stories worldwide. The choice to convey clear messages or present reflective content through fiction demonstrates the pervasive nature of gender-based discussions in Western culture. This trend also illustrates the gradual construction of a new gender imaginary through literature that is widely read.

In the Italian context, notable works include *Per Sempre* (2020) by Assia Petricelli and Sergio Riccardi; *Le Maldicenze* (2021) by Flavia Biondi; *Le Mantidi* (2023) by Sara Dealbera; and all the works by FumettiBrutti. These graphic novels explore a range of issues related to gender discrimination, from historical perspectives to analyses of toxic masculinity, teen dating violence, and representations of non-binary and transgender identities. Many also adopt an intersectional approach (Edwards, Esposito, 2019), enriching the discussions on gender-related topics, which further enhances and deepens the representations and discussions on gender-related topics stimulated by the works.



In conclusion, several contemporary graphic novels illustrate the interconnections between different identities, placing individual and collective experiences at the narrative's core. These works advocate for equality and challenge the persistence of rigid gender norms and toxic masculinity (Burgio, 2020; Di Grigoli, 2020). By providing insights into diverse social and cultural contexts, these works facilitate readers' engagement with new identities and social models that transcend long-standing stereotypes and oppressive structures (Ulivieri, 2014). Following bell hooks (2014), we can assert that high-quality graphic novels are valuable tools for teaching transgression, overcoming preconceived notions, and envisioning new social and relational dynamics. Ultimately, they cultivate a well-made mind (Morin, 2020), emancipating thought and equipping new generations with effective social tools to overcome gender prejudices and violence.

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