

Loss, survival, and trauma: A multimodal representation of children in the Rwandan and Central African war graphic narratives

Okoro Harmony Ezinne¹

Department of French
Redeemer's university Ede,
Osun State Nigeria

Abstract

*This article approaches children's post-war representations in graphic narratives of war, loss, trauma and survival in Rwanda and the Central African Republic. While existing scholarship on these post-war contexts focuses on the history of the conflicts or humanitarian policy, there have been few studies of the uses of language and images in graphic novels to make sense of children and war. Through the lens of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, which draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar and trauma theory, the study investigates how Gaspard Talmasse's *Alice on the Run* and Marc Ellison and Didier Kassai's *A House Without Windows* use visual and linguistic choices such as gaze, framing, salience, perspective, modality and vectorial structures to represent children as victims, witnesses and survivors. This qualitative, multimodal analysis examines selected African war graphic novels at the panel and page levels. The goal is to highlight the impact of war on children, show how the graphics visually represent loss and trauma, and understand how the texts express resilience and survival through multiple modes. The results suggest that visual grammar is key in emphasising children's vulnerability through close-ups, muted colour palettes, and fragmented spatial layouts. Meanwhile, the graphics show survival through movement vectors, symbolic images, and deliberate silences.*

Key-words: Loss, Trauma, Survival, Visual grammar, and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis.

Introduction

Wars in Africa have been brutal, leaving many people dead and rendering the survivors displaced and traumatised. In these wars, children are the most affected. In the Rwandan war between April and July 1994, members of the Hutu ethnic group, which constituted approximately 85 per cent of the Rwandan population, assassinated President Juvenal Habyarimana.² This event initiated the systematic genocide of an estimated 800,000 Tutsis, the ethnic minority in Rwanda³. The hundred-day genocide resulted in extreme violence, often pitting neighbours against each other and, in some cases, compelling Hutu husbands to kill their Tutsi wives⁴. Rwandan identification cards listed ethnic

¹ okoroh@run.edu.ng 07068093163

² Laurence Binet. "Genocide of Rwandan Tutsi 1994" *Médecins Sans Frontières*, 2024.

³ van Beurden, M. G. "The Rwandan Genocide, 1994". In W. ten Have, & B. Boender (Eds.), *The Holocaust*

and Other Genocides. An Introduction (2012): 97-119. Amsterdam University Press.

⁴ Laurence Binet. "Genocide of Rwandan Tutsi 1994"



classifications, making it nearly impossible for Tutsis to escape persecution and mass murder. This war caused so much displacement and left the Rwandan citizens seeking refuge in other neighbouring countries.

Central African Republic (CAR), on the other hand, since achieving independence in 1960, has endured persistent violence and instability, including six coups. Despite multiple initiatives aimed at peace and disarmament, an insurgency led by Seleka forces, a coalition of armed groups primarily composed of Muslims, seized the capital city of Bangui and overthrew the government of François Bozizé in 2013⁵. In retaliation for the brutality perpetrated by Seleka forces, anti-balaka coalitions, consisting mainly of Christian fighters, launched violent attacks against Seleka members and Muslim civilians, thereby reigniting the conflict that has resulted in thousands of deaths and displacements⁶. Although the government and non-state armed groups have held seven peace agreements since 2012, both Seleka and anti-balaka militias have expanded their activities and influence nationwide, targeting civilians and competing for control over mineral resources and migration routes⁷. The humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, with approximately 70 per cent of the population living in extreme poverty and an estimated 3.4 million people requiring assistance.

These two wars have been historicised and fictionalised by many authors using different media and modes of communication. In historicising these two conflicts, Gaspard Talmasse presents *Alice on the Run*, and Marc Ellison and Didier Kassaï narrate and illustrate *A House Without Windows*. Both are graphic novels or comics which illustrate and narrate the excruciating pain and trauma of the Rwandan and Central African Republic wars, respectively. In *Alice on the Run*, Alice's Great Journey commenced in Gitarama, the southern province of Rwanda, in 1994. Five-year-old Alice enjoys a peaceful childhood with her parents and younger sisters. However, the eruption of the genocide against the Tutsis irrevocably alters her life, compelling her family to flee their village. She leaves with her family and a young Tutsi girl named Rose, embarking on the perilous journey through the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zaire. She flees before the advance of numerous armed groups and militias. It is in this atmosphere of utter uncertainty that she grows up.

A House Without Windows shows the effects of the Central African war on children. In the Central African Republic, children grow up in instability, poverty, and food insecurity. The 2013 war only exacerbated this situation. Citizens live in fear, crushed by uncertainty. Their childhoods have been made difficult and disrupted by the lack of education, hospitals, and children's rights. Even before the outbreak of the conflict, this former French colony was considered the worst country in the world for children. Through drawings and photographs, this graphic work invites us to witness the destitution of post-war

⁵Guilia Marcucci. "Central African Republic: Sectarian and Inter-communal violence continues" *The War Report 2018*, 2019. Université de Genève

⁶Harmony, E. Ibiam. *La narration et l'illustration de la violence et du traumatisme dans des récits graphiques centrafricains et rwandais*. Thèse, University of Uyo, 2023.

⁷Center for Prevention Action. "Conflict in the Central African Republic" Global Conflict Tracker, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-central-african-republic>

Central African Republic. This comic is the work of Central African artist Didier Kassaï and British photojournalist Marc Ellison, who travelled to Bangui to investigate childlabour in a diamond mine. They discover life in a refugee camp and meet the street children of Bangui.

However, scholarship on these conflicts has primarily focused on historical documentation and humanitarian discourse; there is limited attention to how graphic novels employ visual and verbal resources to construct meanings about war-affected childhoods. Thus, this study aims to show the effects of war and conflict on children, to examine how loss and trauma are visually encoded, and to explore how survival and resilience are multimodally articulated, using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. The study draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar, complemented by insights from Trauma studies, to analyse Gaspard Talmasse's *Alice on the Run* and Marc Ellison and Didier Kassaï's *A House Without Windows* using multimodal qualitative methods.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Trauma Studies

Multimodal studies have evolved through incorporating different approaches. These include multimodal interactional analysis,⁸ which emerged from mediated discourse analysis and draws on interactional sociolinguistics and intercultural communication. Multimodal analyses trace back to Charles Forceville's cognitive approach⁹ to multimodal metaphor, based on cognitive linguistics¹⁰. However, critical discourse approaches¹¹ emerged from social semiotics and other critical discourse analysis traditions¹². The approaches mentioned above show that many theoretical concepts and frameworks continue to develop within multimodal studies; the majority maintain some relationship to one or more of these paradigms.

This study uses an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), specifically drawing on Kress and Van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar¹³ and Trauma Studies¹⁴. The combination

⁸ Norris, Sigrid. *Analyzing multimodal interaction: A methodological framework*. Routledge, 2004.; Norris, Sigrid, and Rodney H. Jones. "Introducing mediated action." In *Discourse in action*, pp. 17-19. Routledge, 2005; Scollon, Ron. *Mediated discourse: The nexus of practice*. Routledge, 2002.; Scollon, Suzie Wong. *Nexus analysis: Discourse and the emerging internet*. Routledge, 2004.

⁹Forceville, Charles J., and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi, eds. *Multimodal metaphor*. Vol. 11. Walter de Gruyter, 2009.

¹⁰ Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press, 2024.

¹¹ David Machin. *Introduction to multimodal analysis*. Hodder Arnold, 2007.; Van Leeuwen, Theo. *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹² Djonov, Emilia, and Sumin Zhao. *Critical Multimodal Studies of Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2013.

¹³Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge, 2020.

¹⁴ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. JHU Press, 2016.; Hartman, Geoffrey. "Trauma within the Limits of Literature." *European Journal of English Studies* 7, no. 3 (2003): 257-274.

of these frameworks provides a robust analytical lens for examining how graphic war narratives represent violence, loss, pain, suffering, and trauma, particularly in relation to children and other vulnerable subjects. Given the inherently multimodal nature of graphic narratives, this framework enables an examination of how meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual and verbal modes, while situating such representations within broader socio-historical and psychological contexts of war. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis extends traditional Critical Discourse Analysis by emphasising that meaning is produced not solely through language but through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources¹⁵, such as images, written text, colour, layout, typography, and spatial organisation. MCDA is particularly relevant to graphic war narratives, where images often carry the primary burden of meaning and where ideological positions are embedded visually as much as linguistically. This study adopts Kress and Van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar as the principal analytical tool within MCDA. Visual grammar conceptualises images as socially constructed texts governed by culturally shared conventions. It adapts Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics to the visual domain by proposing three meta-functions for studying visual meaning: representational, interactive, and compositional¹⁶.

The representational meta-function shows how images depict social actors, events, and processes. It distinguishes between narrative processes, which depict actions and reactions, and conceptual processes, which portray participants symbolically or in classificatory ways. In graphic war narratives, this metafunction enables an analysis of how the texts visually represent war, displacement, and violence, as well as how children are positioned either as passive victims, witnesses, or agents within conflict zones. The interactive metafunction examines the relationship established between the depicted participants and the viewer. It includes the analysis of gaze, social distance, perspective, and angle, all of which contribute to the construction of power relations and emotional engagement. In representations of war trauma, interactive meanings are crucial because they depict the reader's responsibility. Interactive meaning analyses invite readers to empathise with, observe, or distance themselves from traumatised subjects.

The compositional metafunction focuses on the arrangement of visual elements within the frame. Concepts such as information value, salience, and framing determine which aspects of the image are foregrounded or marginalised. In graphic war narratives, compositional choices often reflect fragmentation, instability, and disorder, mirroring the psychological and social disintegration that war produces.

¹⁵Kress, Gunther. *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge, 2009.; Ahmed, Reyam Shehab, and Hassan Shaban Ali Al-Thalab. "Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Moral Lessons in Selected Graphic Novels for Children." *Jumada Al-awwal* 1446 (2024): 159-184

¹⁶Wei, Qinhong. "Studies on multimodality and multimodal discourse in visual surroundings." (2009).; Bo, Xu. "Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Movie "Argo"." *English Language Teaching* 11, no. 4 (2018): 132-137.; Attah, Maryam Peter, Martina Chinyere Ugwu, and Asma'U. Sa'ad. "A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Commercial Advertisements in Selected Nigerian Newspapers." *LASU Postgraduate School Journal* 2, no.1 (2025): 245-261.

Trauma studies, on the other hand, provide the second pillar of this framework by offering insight into the psychological and cultural dimensions of war experiences. Trauma theorists argue that traumatic events, such as war and genocide, resist straightforward representation because they overwhelm cognitive and linguistic capacities. As a result, trauma is often expressed indirectly through fragmentation, repetition, silence, and non-linear narratives¹⁷. Within literary and visual narratives, trauma theory emphasises the significance of absence, gaps, and disruptions as meaningful representational strategies. It also foregrounds ethical concerns related to witnessing, testimony, and the representation of suffering, particularly when the subjects are children or other vulnerable populations. Trauma theory, therefore, enables this study to interpret visual and narrative ruptures as manifestations of traumatic memory and psychological dislocation¹⁸ rather than mere stylistic choices.

The integration of MCDA, Visual Grammar, and Trauma Theory allows for a multidimensional analysis of graphic war narratives. While Visual Grammar provides the tools for systematically identifying how meanings emerge across visual modes¹⁹, Trauma Theory offers an interpretive framework for understanding why such meanings occur in fragmented, symbolic, or indirect ways. Through this integrated approach, visual features such as disrupted panel sequences, broken frames²⁰, muted colour palettes²¹, and uneven spatial arrangements are analysed not only as semiotic resources but also as visual correlates of trauma. Similarly, the positioning of child figures at the margins of panels or their depiction through distant or obscured perspectives are both a discourse strategy and a reflection of trauma-induced vulnerability and loss of agency. Furthermore, the interactive dimension of Visual Grammar, particularly gaze and perspective, is read alongside Trauma Theory's emphasis on ethical witnessing. The framework helps readers understand how graphic war narratives shape their ethical and emotional responses to trauma.

Graphic war narratives are especially suited to this combined theoretical framework because they rely on multimodality, visual symbolism, and fragmented storytelling to convey experiences of violence and memory. The integration of MCDA and Trauma Theory enables this study to examine how graphic narratives do not merely depict war trauma but actively construct meanings about suffering, survival, loss, and memory. By foregrounding both semiotic structure and traumatic experience, this framework provides a comprehensive approach to analysing how war trauma, particularly that of children, is represented, mediated, and ethically communicated through graphic narratives.

¹⁷ Crawley, Karen, and Honni Van Rijswijk. "Justice in the gutter: Representing everyday trauma in the graphic novels of Art Spiegelman." *Law Text Culture* 16 (2012): 93-118.

¹⁸ Felman, Shoshana. *The juridical unconscious: Trials and traumas in the twentieth century*. Harvard University Press, 2002.

¹⁹ Constantinou, Odysseas. "Multimodal discourse analysis: Media, modes and technologies." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 9, no. 4 (2005): 602-618.

²⁰ Van Vollenstee, Andre. "Graphic testimonies: voicing the unutterable in auto/biographics of war." PhD diss., Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2018.

²¹ Liu, Jing. "Visual images interpretive strategies in multimodal texts." *Journal of language teaching and research* 4, no. 6 (2013): 1259-1264.

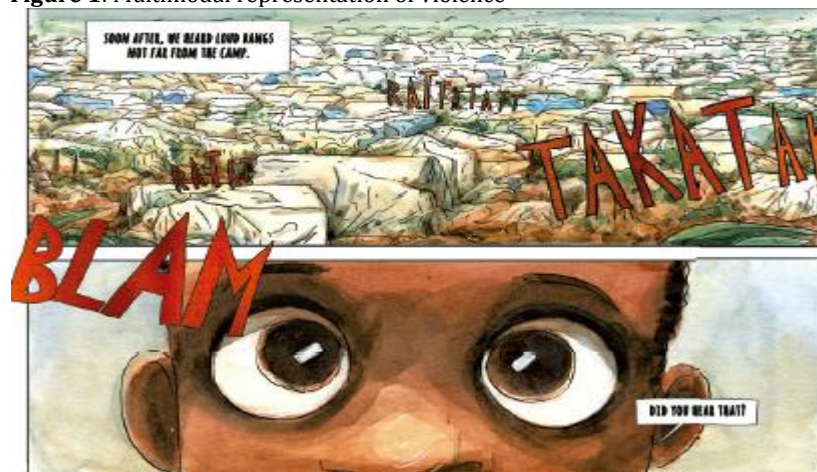
Multimodal Representation of Childhood Loss in the Selected Graphic Novels

Talmasse's *Alice on the Run*, and Ellison and Kassai's *A House without Windows* are graphic illustrations of war and its effects on Children. The two African war narratives foreground children's experiences of conflict, displacement, and trauma. In analysing these traumatic events affecting children, the study conducts a close, multimodal reading of selected scenes depicting separation, displacement, silence, and survival. The analysis focuses on representational, interactive, and compositional meanings to show how visual strategies such as muted colour palettes, fragmented framing, and absent or averted gaze encode trauma and vulnerability. Trauma theory is employed to interpret narrative silences, repetition, and visual disruption as signs of unassimilated loss.

Displacement and Loss in Gaspard Talmasse's *Alice on the Run*

When the war displaced Alice and her parents, they walked for miles through the rainforest and along the road. When they arrive in any camp, they do not last long because there are always attacks and gunshots from the armed groups who are fighting the barbaric war.

Figure 1: Multimodal representation of violence²²



Source: Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. Mark Waid (Translated by Nanette McGuinness) 2022. P.42

Figure 1 constructs childhood trauma through a strategic contrast between collective displacement and individual psychological rupture. The upper panel's long shot of a densely packed refugee camp operates as a conceptual representation that normalises mass displacement. The sounds of gunshot and bombs represent onomatopoeic gunfire ("RATATAT," "TAKATAK," "BLAM"), which transforms violence into an omnipresent environmental force rather

²²Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. Mark Waid (Translated by Nanette McGuinness) 2022. P.42

than a visible act of aggression. This abstraction mirrors the structural invisibility of power in conflict zones, where the victims can feel the violence more than they can see it. The lower panel's extreme close-up of a child's widened eyes constitutes a reactive process, producing a demand gaze that interpolates the reader as witness²³. The absence of the mouth and the hesitant question, "Did you hear that?", visually encode trauma's unspeakability and belated cognition, aligning with trauma theory's emphasis on fragmentation and deferred understanding²⁴. Alice, as portrayed here, is mouthless; she is not speaking, and the speech bubble expresses the voice in her head as her mind is in turmoil. In the African context, as a child, she does not have the right to speak in matters of the adult world, but in this situation, Alice is struggling to survive in a war caused by Adults. Thus, panels in *Alice on the Run* show that war is frequently signified through off-frame sounds, disrupted facial close-ups, and the silencing of child characters, foregrounding psychological impact over explicit spectacle. The child in this situation is a subaltern.

Figure 2: Visual metaphor of Displacement and Loss²⁵.



Source: Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. 2022. P.49

Figure 2 from *Alice on the Run* visually constructs childhood loss and displacement through a multimodal configuration that foregrounds trauma as both an immediate experience and an anticipated condition, drawing from the theoretical framework of our corpus. The image illustrates displacement not simply as physical movement but as emotional rupture and social abandonment. At the level of representational meaning, the image operates through a narrative structure in which children function as the primary social actors. The image depicts an abandoned child seated by the roadside in a static

²³Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge, 2020.

²⁴ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. JHU Press, 2016

²⁵Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. 2022. P.49

pose, visually contrasting with the directional movement of the adult figures; their bodies are absent, and the panel shows only their legs walking away from the child. This opposition constructs a powerful narrative vector of abandonment, which means mobility signifies survival for adults, while immobility signifies loss for the child. In this graphic work by Talmasse, the visual opposition echoes the broader theme of forced flight, in which children experience displacement as involuntary exposure rather than a purposeful escape. The roadside functions as a liminal space, symbolising the suspension of childhood between safety and danger.

As the eyewitness and observer, Alice's reaction is central to the narrative. Her fearful gaze toward the abandoned child establishes an emotional linkage between the two figures, transforming the abandoned child into a projection of a possible future self. Trauma theory illuminates this moment as anticipatory trauma²⁶, in which fear is generated not by direct harm but by witnessing another's suffering. The image thus visualises trauma as contagious, transmitted through recognition and identification rather than physical contact. In terms of interactive meaning, the figure employs close-up framing and oblique gaze to position the viewer as a witness rather than a rescuer. Neither Alice nor the abandoned child directly engages the viewer, reinforcing a sense of helpless observation. The image outlines the tears on the child's face visually, making it salient, drawing attention to trauma as an embodied, visible condition rather than an abstract psychological state.

The image's compositional meaning further intensifies the metaphor of loss. Adults are fragmented and partially excluded from the frame, represented only by their lower bodies. This visual fragmentation strips them of identity and agency, symbolically transferring the burden of displacement onto the child. The sparse background and muted colour palette create an atmosphere of emptiness, reinforcing the sense of social and emotional erasure. In *Alice on the Run*, such compositional choices reflect the breakdown of familial and communal structures. These communal and familial structures, which are an important aspect of African culture, are erased under conditions of war and forced migration, to render all citizens traumatised.

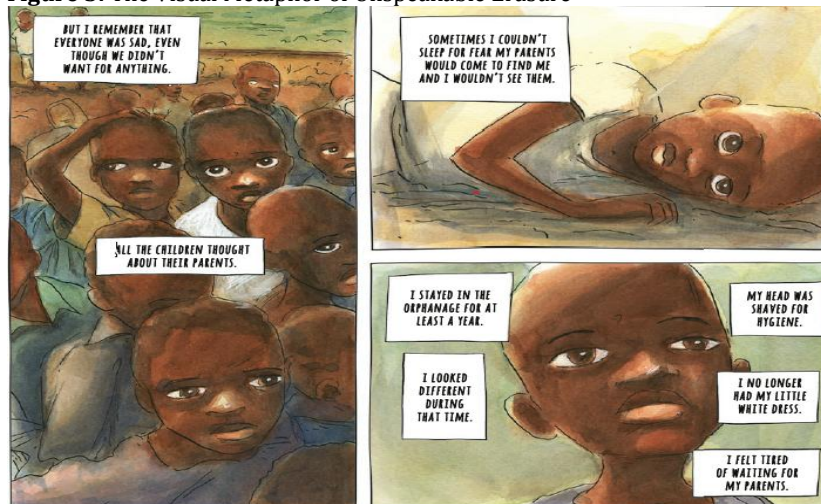
Together, these visual elements construct a metaphor of displacement as suspended childhood. The squatted posture of the abandoned child, combined with Alice's fearful recognition as eyewitness and observer, presents loss as both a present reality, as the curled up child is presently in a state of loss in the barbaric war, without any adult family member. To Alice, it is a looming threat because she is so scared of becoming like the abandoned child. Trauma, in this sense, is not resolved within the image; it remains open-ended, mirroring the ongoing uncertainty faced by displaced children in the narrative.

This uncertainty is what Alice grew up in, because in the IDP camp, she wondered if she would ever see her parents and siblings again. The trauma of this loss and displacement is what Talmasse tried to represent in his graphic

²⁶ Phipps, Ricardo. "Anticipatory Traumatic Reaction as a Framework for Understanding the Response of Children and Adolescents to the Russia-Ukraine Military Conflict." *Journal of Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2022): 8-12.

narrative. The representation of child displacement in graphic narratives requires a complex interplay between textual anchoring and visual semiotics to convey the unspeakable nature of trauma.

Figure 3: The Visual Metaphor of Unspeakable Erasure²⁷



Source: Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. Mark Waid (Translated by Nanette McGuinness) 2022. P.111

In Figure 3, Gaspard Talmasse employs a distinct visual grammar that moves the reader from the position of a passive observer to an implicated witness. Through the lens of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and trauma theory, three key mechanisms of this transition become evident: the demand gaze, the corporeal inscription of loss, and the modality of memory. First, the narrative disrupts the safety of the “long shot” through the manipulation of interactive metafunctions. While the opening panel establishes a social distance, depicting a mass of indistinguishable bodies that signifies the collective erasure of displacement, the subsequent panels collapse this distance. Talmasse utilises what Kress and van Leeuwen term the “demand image,” in which the subject’s gaze directly addresses the viewer²⁸. In the final panel, the protagonist’s direct eye contact acts as a visual interpellation, demanding acknowledgement of their altered state. This panel breaks the fourth wall of history, preventing the viewer from consuming the image as a mere historical artefact and forcing a confrontation with the individual human cost of the event²⁹. Second, the visual narrative delineates trauma not just as a psychological state, but as a somatic experience inscribed upon the body. The textual narrative laments the

²⁷Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. Mark Waid (Translated by Nanette McGuinness) 2022. P.111

²⁸Putland, Emma, Chris Chikodzore-Paterson, and Gavin Brookes. "Artificial Intelligence and Visual Discourse: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of AI-Generated Images of 'Dementia'." *Social Semiotics* 33(2023): 1–26.

²⁹Gill, Kyle A., and Henry Lennon. "Conformity Through Fear: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of COVID-19 Information Adverts." *CADAAD Journal* 14, no 1 (2022): 22–44.

loss of external identity markers, "I no longer had my little white dress", which was the identity of a girl child in a happy, peaceful environment. At the same time, the visual track manifests this loss through the "shaved head." This visual element serves as a high-salience symbol of depersonalisation. The removal of hair, which is a primary signifier of individuality and gender in children, visually echoes the institutional stripping of the self. The hyper-vigilance depicted in the second panel, characterised by the wide, fearful eyes of Alice, who could not sleep, visually translates the concept of "anxious anticipation" common in abandonment trauma. The child is in a state of perpetual waiting, a temporal disruption in which the fear of missing a reunion overrides the biological need for sleep³⁰.

Finally, the use of colour and medium functions as a metaphor for the instability of traumatic memory. The low-saturation palette, dominated by sepia and grey tones, lowers the image's naturalistic modality, signalling to the reader that this is a reconstruction of self, where identity is lost, as there is no more white dress in a colourful and lively environment. The fluidity of the watercolour medium allows boundaries to bleed, reinforcing the theme of displacement, in which the "self" risks dissolving into the "mass"³¹. The juxtaposition of these fluid, murky visuals with the sharp, white, rectangular text boxes creates a tension between the messy, emotional reality of lived experience and the rigid, retrospective narration³² of Alice, who has grown and survived in the war.

Loss and Abandonment in Marc Ellisson and Didier Kassai's *A House Without Windows*

A House Without Windows narrates and illustrates the aftermath of the Central African Republic War on Children. How Children are no longer protected but left in the streets to perish. The children become street urchins, displaced and lost. Most of the children are labourers, some become prostitutes, some are accused of witchcraft, and are either thrown out, lynched to death by adults or buried alive by the Anti-Balaka³³ (anti-bullets) group. Children in the Central African Republic have gone through the most inhumane violence both during and after the war, which the author and the illustrator of this graphic book tried to show.

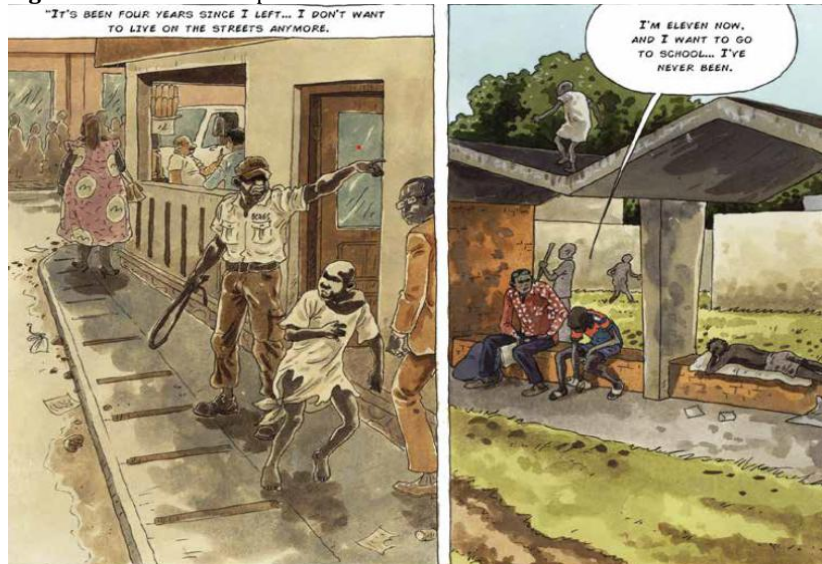
³⁰Croswell, Kimberly. "Survivor Tales: Feminist Graphics Bridging Consciousness Raising into Reality." *International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity* 12, no 1 (2024): 43-61.

³¹Ulanowicz, Anastasia. "Traumatic Peregrinations: Intergenerational Memory and Migration in Nina Bunjevac's Fatherland." *European Journal of American Studies* 18, no 2, 2023

³²Belda-Medina, Jose. "Inclusive Education through Digital Comic Creation in Higher Learning Environments." *Social Sciences* 13, no 5 (2024): 272

³³Marc Ellison and Didier Kassai. *A House Without Windows*. (Translated by Nanette McGuinness), Humanoids, 2020

Figure 4: Multimodal representation of Violence and Loss³⁴



Source: Marc Ellison and Didier Kassai. *A House Without Windows*. 2020, p. 21

Figure 4 presents a split-panel composition that visually and narratively stages violence as a structural condition producing displacement, particularly for children. Through its orchestration of representational, interactive, and compositional meanings, the image functions as a multimodal testimony of traumatic uprooting³⁵. The left panel portrays violence through a narrative process dominated by vectors of force. The armed authority figure extends his baton and arm diagonally, forming a strong vector that directs the viewer's gaze toward the fleeing child. This scene creates a classic actor-goal structure, in which institutional power (the man with the weapon) acts upon a vulnerable body. The child's posture is bent, off-balance, and mid-motion, which signals panic and coercion, visually encoding displacement as an act of expulsion rather than voluntary movement.

The right panel shifts from overt violence to its aftermath, presenting conceptual processes of survival and abandonment. The shelter-like structure functions as a temporary, liminal space, populated by displaced bodies sitting, hiding, or lying prone. The presence of a child perched precariously on the roof visually metaphorizes instability and social marginality. Violence here is no longer kinetic but embedded in conditions of neglect, homelessness, and interrupted childhood. The image in Figure 4 employs a long social distance, positioning the viewer as an observer rather than participant. This detachment mirrors trauma theory's emphasis on witnessing; the viewer is in the position

³⁴ Marc Ellison and Didier Kassai. *A House Without Windows*. 2020, p. 21

³⁵ Ibrahim, Baher. "Uprooting, trauma, and confinement: psychiatry in refugee camps, 1945-1993." PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2021.

of a secondary or vicarious trauma³⁶. The panel, through MCDA, invites the reader to see without intervening, echoing the social indifference that often accompanies displacement.

The authority figure avoids direct gaze, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations. In contrast, the children's downward gazes and averted faces suggest shame, fear, and psychic withdrawal, which are key symptoms of traumatic experience³⁷. According to trauma studies, such visual withdrawal reflects the subject's loss of agency and fractured sense of self under violent disruption—the vertical division between panels functions as a temporal and causal frame. The left panel represents the moment of violent rupture, while the right depicts prolonged displacement. Saliency is achieved through the contrast between uniforms and weapons versus bare feet, slumped bodies, and improvised shelter. This contrast visually encodes the transition from regulated civic space to precarious survival zones.

The muted colour palette, which is dusty browns, greys, and faded greens, further reinforces trauma's affective atmosphere, aligning with what trauma theorists describe as the numbing and desaturation of lived experience after violence. Collectively, the image in Figure 4 constructs displacement as a visual metaphor of falling out of social order. The child forced off the street and later positioned on the roof signifies a movement from ground-level citizenship to an elevated but unstable existence. Because in the African culture, adults protect children, but the scene in the panels above shows that the children are thrown out and forced to grow up in the streets. When a child does not go through the proper processes of growing up, he will miss his way and, as such, become unwise. The shelter's open sides suggest exposure and impermanence, underscoring displacement as an ongoing condition rather than a singular event.

Figure 5: Visual Metaphor of Rupture, Loss and Abandonment³⁸



³⁶Kaplan, E. Ann. "Global trauma and public feelings: Viewing images of catastrophe." *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 11, no. 1 (2008): 3-24.

³⁷ Santoro, Gianluca, Lucia Sideli, Alessandro Musetti, and Adriano Schimmenti. "The relationship between childhood trauma and shame: The mediating role of dissociation." *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education* 15, no. 8 (2025): 151.

³⁸ Marc Ellison & Didier Kassai, *A House Without Windows*. p. 31



Source: Marc Ellison & Didier Kassai, *A House Without Windows*. p. 31

The left panel of Figure 5 constructs loss and abandonment through a sparse yet symbolically charged visual composition that foregrounds children's vulnerability within a context of social rupture. At the representational level, the image employs conceptual rather than narrative processes. The panel represent the children in static, collapsed postures; sitting, slumped, or lying on the ground. This absence of forward movement signifies stagnation and hopelessness, aligning with trauma theory's understanding of loss as temporal arrest. Their physical poses (hands clasped behind heads, legs stretched out, bodies tilted backwards) visually encode distress, surrender, and emotional overload.

The shadowy figure in the background introduces a symbolic narrative vector. The shadow's lack of corporeal detail reinforces its metaphorical status as loss rather than a literal character. The image establishes a long social distance, positioning the viewer as a witness rather than a participant. None of the children returns the viewer's gaze; instead, their eyes are cast downward or obscured by posture. This refusal of eye contact reflects traumatic withdrawal and emotional numbing³⁹, typical responses to profound loss. The absence of adults within the frame intensifies the sense of abandonment.

Compositionally, the image paints a vast, monochromatic background. The barren, ochre-toned space overwhelms the small, fragile bodies of the children, visually reinforcing their insignificance within a hostile social landscape. The lack of environmental detail eliminates any sense of place or protection, transforming space itself into a metaphor for abandonment. The panel conveys salience through bodily exposure, which includes thin limbs, torn clothing, and contact with bare ground. The ground becomes a recurring motif of dispossession, symbolising the loss of home, family, and social belonging. The

³⁹ Kerig, Patricia K., Diana C. Bennett, Mamie Thompson, and Stephen P. Becker. "“Nothing really matters”: Emotional numbing as a link between trauma exposure and callousness in delinquent youth." *Journal of traumatic stress* 25, no. 3 (2012): 272-279.

text, which reads “Most of them have lost both parents and have no other family willing to take them in during these hard times”, anchors a discourse of collective orphanhood which represents collective trauma where loss exceeds individual experience and becomes socially normalised, rendering children’s suffering invisible and routine. Rather than naming individual loss, the phrase “most of them” universalises abandonment, transforming personal grief into a structural condition produced by crisis.

The right panel of Figure 5 depicts a narrative governed by a unidirectional vector of divergence⁴⁰. The composition is between two primary participants: the mother (Actor) and the child (Goal). The narrative process is defined by the mother’s motion away from the foreground, creating a vector of flight that signifies the finality of the separation. The child, conversely, is static, anchored to the bottom-left of the frame. This lack of agency contrasts sharply with the mother’s active departure, visually encoding the powerlessness inherent in abandonment. The representational structure thus does not merely depict a family separation; it visualises the precise moment of rupture, where external exigencies sever the protective maternal bond.

The spatial layout of the image reinforces the socio-economic context of the trauma through the Information Value principle⁴¹. The text, positioned in the upper Ideal zone⁴², offers a generalised, logical explanation for the event: “Others were abandoned by their mothers when the father-essentially the breadwinner-was- was killed.” This information intellectualises the tragedy, attributing it to the loss of the father and economic collapse, because in African culture, the father is always the provider. In contrast, the child occupies the lower Real zone⁴³, grounded in the material reality of the scene. By placing the child on a heap of refuse, the composition visually equates the subject with the setting. Leaving the child on a heap of refuse creates a powerful metaphor of abjection⁴⁴ in which the child becomes a disposable matter, cast aside alongside the village’s waste. The visual grammar thus bridges the gap between the “Ideal” sociological cause (war/poverty) and the “Real” human consequence (the discarded child).

The image, however, functions as an “Offer” in MCDA terms⁴⁵, as the child does not engage with the viewer but cries out into the diegetic space. The medium-long shot establishes a sense of social distance, positioning the viewer as a helpless witness rather than an active participant. This framing replicates the

⁴⁰ Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2020.

⁴¹ Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. 2020.

⁴² Galtung, Johan. “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91.

⁴³ Galtung, Johan. “Violence, Peace and Peace Research.” 1969

⁴⁴ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982

⁴⁵ Salo, Ahti, and Raimo P. Hämäläinen. “Multicriteria decision analysis in group decision processes.” In *Handbook of group decision and negotiation*, pp. 269-283. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2010

trauma of structural violence,⁴⁶ whereby the viewer sees the event clearly but remains powerless to intervene. Furthermore, the mother turning her back serves as a visual metaphor for the refusal of recognition, because she is ashamed of the act. In Africa, mothers are the last resort for a troubled child, so a mother abandoning her child is un-African. Levinas argues that the face is the locus of ethical responsibility⁴⁷, so by obscuring the mother's face and having her turn away, the image signifies the complete collapse of ethical and familial obligation under the weight of survival. Ultimately, the image utilises depth of field to manifest the psychological void created by the father's death. The physical distance expanding between the fleeing mother and the crying child represents the disintegration of the family unit, which is pertinent in the African culture.

Childhood Struggle and Survival in *Alice on the Run* and *A House Without Windows*

In the face of threat, fear, loss, abandonment, and displacement, these children in these graphic narratives struggle for survival. In *Alice on the Run*, after she and her sister lost contact with their mother, she kept going, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 6: Multimodal representation of Struggle and Survival⁴⁸



Source: Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. Mark Waid (Translated by Nanette McGuinness) 2022. P. 74

The sequence in Figure 6 uses high-velocity motion to articulate the trauma of active warfare. Kress and van Leeuwen's narrative processes are here defined by strong diagonal and horizontal vectors⁴⁹ that propel the participants (the children) across the frame. Survival is depicted not as a state of being, but as a kinetic action. The typography acts as a co-participant in this narrative: the

⁴⁶ Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.

⁴⁷ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne University Press, 1969.

⁴⁸ Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. Mark Waid (Translated by Nanette McGuinness) 2022. P. 74

⁴⁹ Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. 2020

onomatopoeic "TAKATAKATAK" is rendered in jagged, capitalised red font that visibly intrudes into the diegetic space. By breaking the frame and overlaying the image, the text takes on the agency of the attacker, visually replicating the intrusive nature of traumatic sound that violates the victim's safety.

The layout utilises a triptych structure to mirror the fragmentation of traumatic memory. Trauma theorists often note that traumatic events are encoded not as linear narratives but as sensory fragments, auditory, visceral, and emotional⁵⁰. The panel arrangement replicates this cognitive shattering, which shows that the top panel isolates the auditory threat (the sound of bullets), the bottom-left panel isolates the emotional distress (facial affect), and the bottom-right panel isolates the kinesthetic experience (the physical act of running). The colour modality, dominated by earth tones and dust, grounds the struggle in the material reality of the environment, while speed lines and background blurring visually encode the physiological state of hyper-arousal⁵¹, in which the environment dissolves into pure motion.

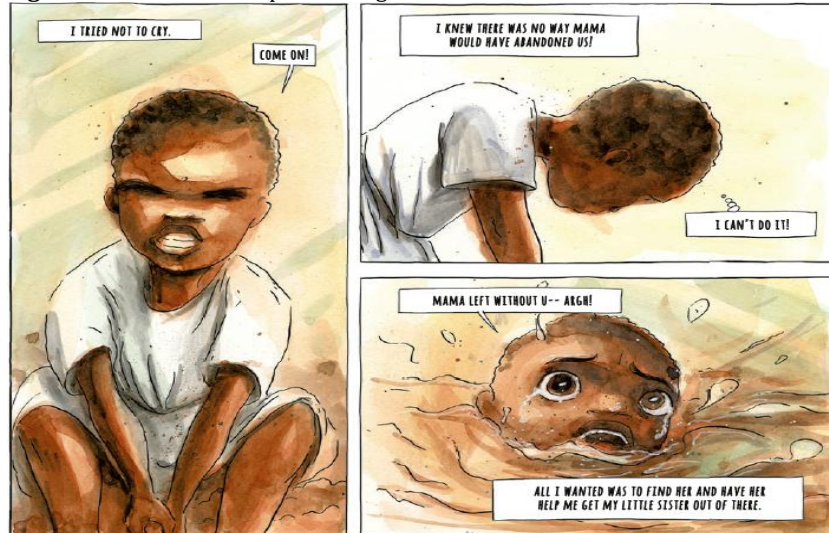
The visual narrative manipulates social distance to modulate the viewer's engagement. The sequence begins and ends with long shots, creating a public distance that allows the viewer to observe the trajectory of survival objectively. However, the bottom-left panel ruptures this distance with a sudden close-up of the children's faces. This shift forces the viewer into intimate proximity, confronting them with the raw effect of fear, as shown through widened eyes and open mouths. This moment functions as a "Demand" image. However, the gaze does not involve the viewer; the emotional intensity demands an ethical acknowledgement of their terror, transforming the viewer from a passive observer of war into a witness of human fragility. The vectors here are parallel (children running together). The dialogue "Wait for me!" and "I will, don't worry!" establishes a verbal pact that reinforces the visual pairing. In the context of trauma, this connection serves as a dyadic safety container⁵². The children's survival strategy is not merely flight from danger, but the preservation of their social bond. They resist the atomising force of violence by maintaining their connection, suggesting that in the landscape of structural violence, solidarity becomes the primary tool of resistance. This social bond between the sisters echoes the African mentality that blood is thicker than water; in this context, they cannot abandon each other. That was the reason why Alice's younger sister was on the verge of drowning; she struggled to save her.

⁵⁰Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

⁵¹Van der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking, 2014

⁵² Baumann, Mathilde, Marie-Ève Daspe, Claude Bélanger, and Natacha Godbout. "A safe haven through attachment: A dyadic perspective on the association between cumulative childhood trauma and relationship satisfaction." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 40, no. 9-10 (2025): 2093-2114.

Figure 7: The Visual Metaphor of Engulfment and Survival⁵³



Source: Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. Mark Waid (Translated by Nanette McGuinness) 2022. P. 81

The representation of survival in graphic trauma narratives often necessitates a shift from static “witnessing” to active “struggle,” employing a visual grammar that emphasises kinetic energy and physical exhaustion. In Figure 7 above, the artist utilises specific multimodal resources, which are vectors, colour modulation, and balloon morphology, to depict the collapse of the protagonist’s agency against an overwhelming environment. In the initial panel, the “Demand” of Exertion, the visual grammar is governed by high-tension vectors. Following Kress and van Leeuwen’s framework, the diagonal lines of the child’s arms and the clenched fists create “vectors of action”, signalling an active narrative process rather than a passive conceptual one. The child’s direct gaze functions as a “Demand” image⁵⁴, but rather than soliciting pity, the furrowed brow and gritted teeth recruit the viewer into the physical strain of the moment.

The textual anchor “Come on!” is bolded and capitalised, visually encoding the prosodic feature of loudness, which reinforces the desperate expenditure of energy required to combat drowning and the threat of death. The colour palette serves as a semiotic mode for environmental engulfment. The dominant hues are low-saturation ochres, mud-browns, and slate greys. In trauma narratives, such monochromatic palettes⁵⁵ with the children’s closed eyes often signify stripping of vitality. However, in the final panel, the colour functions more

⁵³Gaspard Talmasse. *Alice on the Run*. Mark Waid (Translated by Nanette McGuinness) 2022. P. 81

⁵⁴Putland, Emma, Chris Chikodzore-Paterson, and Gavin Brookes. "Artificial Intelligence and Visual Discourse: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of AI-Generated Images of 'Dementia'." *Social Semiotics* 33 (2023): 1–26

⁵⁵Sari, Yulia, and Arif Basnawi. "Redrawing the Past: The Value of Colours in a Graphic Narrative." *International Journal of Art & Design* 7, no. 1 (2025): 45-58

aggressively, as the muddy water rises to the child's neck, visually dissolving the boundary between the subject and the setting. This metaphor of the background bleeding into the foreground represents the erasure of the self, as the mud completely obscures the child, signalling threat and death⁵⁶. The only surviving high-contrast element is the sclera of the eyes, which remains stark white, creating a focal point of terror amidst the chromatic sludge.

The morphology of the speech balloons evolves to mirror Adeline's psychological disintegration. In the first panel, the balloon is smooth and round, containing Alice's coherent, imperative language ("Come on!"). By the final panel, the tail of the balloon becomes jagged and erratic, showing Adeline's distress, fear and trauma. In the semiotics of comics, jagged balloon tails typically denote screaming, electronic distortion, or intense physical pain⁵⁷. Here, the jagged tail visually interrupts the linguistic message, turning the word "Us" into a guttural cry ("ARGH!"). This rupture in the speech balloon signifies the fracturing of attachment⁵⁸, the moment the physical reality of abandonment severs the child's belief in parental rescue (the attachment bond). Through these multimodal interactions, the page deconstructs the myth of the heroic survivor. The transition from the active "Demand" gaze of Alice in Panel 1 to the passive gaze and engulfed state of Adeline in Panel 3 illustrates that in the context of displacement, survival is not always a triumph of will, but often a traumatic negotiation with physical limits.

This struggle for survival among children in a war-torn zone is what the author and illustrator of *A House Without Windows* also try to portray. After the war, the country was still in hostility and constantly attacked by armed men, which was really harsh and unsafe for Children. These children, most of them became orphans, remained in the street, some with their relations still alive, and were maltreated, exploited, beaten, accused of witchcraft, and thrown out to the streets, as seen in the next figure.

⁵⁶ Mansoor, Zeenat, Iram Amjad, Saira Khan, and Ume Furqan. "Social Semiotics of Trauma, Betrayal, and Displacement in the Screenplay *Jo Bichar Gaye*: A Multimodal Analysis." *Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends* 6, no. 2 (2025): 69–93.

⁵⁷ Forceville, Charles. *Visual and multimodal communication: Applying the relevance principle*. Oxford University Press, 2020.; Belda-Medina, Jose. "Inclusive Education through Digital Comic Creation in Higher Learning Environments." *Social Sciences* 13, no. 5 (2024): 272

⁵⁸ Diedrich, Lisa, and Briana Martino, eds. *Keywords/Keyimages in Graphic Medicine*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023.

Figure 8: Multimodal representation of Rupture and Struggle for Survival⁵⁹



Source: Marc Ellison & Didier Kassai, *A House Without Windows*. p. 42

The image in Figure 8 constructs survival not as resilience alone but as a coerced, traumatic negotiation with violence and displacement. The two-panel composition stages survival as a transition from collective persecution to isolated flight, foregrounding the bodily and psychological costs of staying alive. At the representational level, the left panel depicts a narrative process of collective violence. The central figure is seated and physically restrained, surrounded by participants who convey vectors of aggression through their looming postures and directed bodily orientation. This asymmetrical configuration encodes an imbalance of power, positioning the victim as passive and socially stripped of agency. The accompanying verbal text “I confessed, but I knew I was not a witch” reveals survival as a coerced performative act rather than a moral or juridical resolution. Within trauma studies, such forced confession functions as a survival strategy under duress, reflecting the collapse of ethical choice in contexts of extreme violence. The right panel shifts to a material process of movement, foregrounding a lone child walking away from the settlement. This visual transition reframes survival as displacement, and the absence of other social actors, along with the barren spatial background, signals a rupture from communal belonging. Survival is thus redefined as separation rather than reintegration, echoing forced migration narratives in which the victim’s continual stay within the community becomes incompatible with continued life.

The left panel’s medium shot reduces social distance, implicating the viewer in the scene of violence and intensifying its affective force. The victim’s lack of eye contact underscores social annihilation, a condition trauma scholars identify as central to experiences of persecution. In contrast, the right panel employs greater social distance; the child’s averted gaze and hand-to-head gesture visually index fear, confusion, and hypervigilance⁶⁰, which are symptoms commonly associated with traumatic stress. The viewer is positioned as a distant witness, mirroring the child’s isolation.

⁵⁹Marc Ellison & Didier Kassai, *A House Without Windows*. p. 42

⁶⁰Herman, Judith L. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

The compositional meaning communicates through a left–proper sequencing that follows the given new structure. The left panel normalises communal punishment as an established social practice, while the right panel presents displacement as its inevitable outcome. Muted earth tones and rough textures unify both panels, visually sustaining an atmosphere of precarity. Notably, the spatial emptiness in the second panel signifies what trauma theory describes as the loss of relational safety⁶¹. In this loss, survival is achieved only by abandoning home, identity, and social protection. Figure 8 portrays survival as endurance exposed, a deeply traumatic condition shaped by power, exclusion, and fear. Through its multimodal configuration, the figure articulates a critical discourse in which survival necessitates rupture, marking displacement as both a physical act and a psychological consequence of communal violence.

Conclusion

This study has examined the multimodal representation of loss, survival, and trauma in *Alice on the Run* and *A House Without Windows* through the combined framework of Visual Grammar in Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and Trauma Studies. Focusing on child protagonists, the analysis demonstrates how these graphic narratives construct childhood in war as a condition of vulnerability shaped by violence, displacement, and social rupture rather than resilience or heroic endurance. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, the study shows that both texts rely on narrative processes of flight, persecution, and abandonment to frame survival as a coerced response to threat. In *Alice on the Run*, the text visualises survival through constant movement and concealment, emphasising instability and fear. In *A House Without Windows*, survival emerges from communal exclusion, where remaining alive necessitates separation from home and social belonging. Interactive meanings are realised through averted gaze, oblique angles, and increased social distance, which limit affective reciprocity and position the child as socially invisible, aligning with trauma theory's emphasis on disrupted relational safety.

At the compositional level, fragmented layouts, muted colour palettes, and left–proper sequencing naturalise loss as an inherited reality of war while presenting survival as fragile and temporary. These visual strategies mirror the temporal dislocation and emotional numbness associated with traumatic experience. In applying Trauma Studies, both narratives depict trauma as an ongoing condition rather than a singular event, where children can only survive through silence, flight, and emotional withdrawal. In conclusion, *Alice on the Run* and *A House Without Windows* function as multimodal testimonies that challenge reductive representations of African children in conflict. By integrating MCDA and Trauma Studies, this study highlights how graphic narratives render survival as inseparable from loss and trauma, while affirming their ethical role as sites of memory, witnessing, and resistance to the normalisation of violence against children. The study contributes to multimodal discourse studies and African war literature by demonstrating how graphic

⁶¹Freeman, James. "Trauma and relational care: Integrating an awareness of trauma into the characteristics of relational child and youth care." *Journal of child and youth Care Work* 25 (2015): 120-132.

narratives function as critical sites for reimagining childhood, memory, and trauma in conflict contexts.