Blue Ava Ford Publications
International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)
An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487
Impact Factor:8.486(SJIF);www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-4;Oct,Nov & Dec(2026)

The Visual Politics of Trauma: Sexual Violence, Memory, and the Reconstruction of Female Identity in *Becoming Unbecoming*

Mehdya[1], Dr. Lakhvinder Singh Bedi[2]
1.Research Scholar, Department of English, Desh Bhagat University, Punjab, India
2.Professor, Department of English, Desh Bhagat University, Punjab, India

Article Received: 15-09-2026 **Article Accepted: 13-10-2026**
Published Online: 14-10-2026 **DOI.:10.53413/IJTELL.2026.7.4.35**

Abstract

This paper scrutinises how Una's *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015) represents sexual violence, traumatic memory, and the reconstruction of female identity through graphic storytelling. It explores how the interplay of images, fragmented narratives, visual metaphors, and silence communicates experiences that are difficult to express through language alone. It argues that trauma in the memoir extends beyond individual suffering and is reinforced by victim-blaming, social stigma, and cultural attitudes that silence survivors. By connecting personal experiences with the wider context of gender-based violence, the novelist challenges conventional representations of female victims and questions the social structures that shift responsibility from perpetrators to survivors. It further investigates how visual narration makes women's pain visible while creating space for resistance, self-expression, and the recovery of agency. Ultimately, the paper argues that this novel transforms the graphic memoir into a feminist intervention that challenges gendered violence and reconsiders female identity beyond shame and victimhood.

Keywords: Graphic Memoir, Sexual Violence, Trauma Una, Female Identity.

Introduction

Sexual violence is a serious violation, and it can manifest in a variety of forms, such as rape, molestation, harassment, and coersion, and thus involve acts of a sexual nature without the consent of the person. These acts are replete with physical, emotional and psychological repercussions that can cause profound and lasting damage to the victim, long

Blue Ava Ford Publications
International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)
An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487
Impact Factor:8.486(SJIF);www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-4;Oct,Nov & Dec(2026)

after the event. It can be defined as any sexual act that is committed without the consent of a person. It includes rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, harassment, exploitation and forced sexual practices. Such actions can be the use of physical force, coercion, threats, manipulation and power abuse. Sexual violence may take place in personal or open places as well as in any kind of relationships. It violates an individual's autonomy, dignity and basic human rights. The WHO defines sexual violence as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act or any unwelcome sexual act or comment in relation to a person's sexuality that is carried out by a person who is or is not a relative of the victim under coercion and without consent" (van Berlo and Ploem 4).

Historical theorization of sexual violence shows a slow transformation of the perception of it as a one-man moral wrongdoing, into perceiving it as a structural, systemic and political phenomenon. The sexual violence in pre-modern legal and cultural systems was not understood as a crime of the violation of bodily autonomy of the victim but that against the property or honor of the man. The bodies of women existed in the patriarchal relations of kinship and inheritance, in which rape was mainly regarded in the light of destruction of family or social order as opposed to being a personal trauma. This paradigm reduced the experience of survivors and made sexual coercion normal in society-hierarchies.

It is inextricably linked with issues of power, gender and social inequalities. Sexual violence has been used as a tool for oppression and control of women's bodies and is not only used as a tool for personal aggression, but as a tool throughout history. The women were viewed as the rights of fathers or husbands and sexual violence was seen as a crime against the man who owned the woman, rather than the woman herself. Women had little access to justice, little consideration for their dignity, and little interest in their dignity was shown by their legal and religious system, which took precedence over family honour.

Una and the Shape of the Book

English author and illustrator Una is known for her compelling work in the genre of visual novels, notably her debut work *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015). Una grew up in Yorkshire, England during the tumultuous sociocultural era of the times which was characterized by all the misogyny around and the terror caused by the Yorkshire Ripper. The late 70s were a terrible time that had a dramatic effect on the world and on Una's life and artistic approach. Her experience of systematic discrimination and cultural indifference plays a significant role in her writing and it is an important example of the long-term effects of trauma and courage in confronting it.

Blue Ava Ford Publications
International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)
An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487
Impact Factor:8.486(SJIF);www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-4;Oct,Nov & Dec(2026)

Two histories are woven together in the novel: the bigger one is the one of the British police and its flawed investigation into the Yorkshire Ripper murders, and Una's own story as a 12-year-old girl who has to deal with the stigma and isolation that comes after sexual violence. The graphic novel reveals the mechanisms of victim-blaming, and points out the weaknesses of institutions and the role of the public. Through fluid imagery and dynamic narratives, Una tells her own story and uncovers a cutting commentary on cultural misogyny, offering an unabashed examination of the intersection of gender, power, and justice.

Trauma theory begins with a simple idea. A painful event does not always become a clear memory. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is often not fully understood when it happens, and that it returns later in the form of repeated, unwanted images. Judith Herman makes a related point. She explains that traumatic memories are often stored as pieces, with strong images and feelings but little clear order. If this is true, then a book about trauma cannot always follow a straight line.

Becoming Unbecoming does not follow a straight line. Catherine Appleton and Kerry Mallan, who have written a careful study of the book, note that it has very few ordinary sequences of panels that move step by step through time. They compare it to "a scrapbook of information" that the reader must put together (48). This is a useful image. A scrapbook holds loose items, such as photographs, notes, and clippings. It does not tell the reader how they connect. The reader must decide. In the same way, Una gives us pieces of memory, pieces of history, and pieces of argument, and she leaves us to join them.

The book also moves between different kinds of writing. A review in Prism describes how the story slides from Una's taste in music, to family life, to the Ripper murders, to sections of psychology, statistics, and short essays on the justice system, often with no clear signal that a change is coming. Another reviewer calls the art "an ever shifting artistic landscape," because the style changes from page to page. This constant change is not careless. It copies the way a traumatised mind jumps from one thing to another. It also stops the reader from settling into one comfortable way of reading. The reader, like Una, never feels completely safe.

The Politics of Symbols: Insect, Sack, and Tree

Una often replaces direct description with symbols. These symbols turn private pain into images that anyone can read. The first is the insect. A review in The A.V. Club explains that when Una writes about the changes of her body in adolescence, she draws a detailed insect-like woman to show how strange and foreign her new body feels. Another reviewer

Blue Ava Ford Publications
International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)
An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487
Impact Factor:8.486(SJIF);www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-4;Oct,Nov & Dec(2026)

connects this to a "Kafka-esque metamorphosis" near the start of the book (Broken Frontier). The image has a clear meaning. A girl's body changes, and at the same moment, men begin to look at it as an object. The body no longer feels like her own. It feels like something that is being watched and judged. The insect is a picture of that feeling.

The story is developed in two parallel directions. The former follows the trail of the murders carried out in the West Yorkshire, England by a serial killer who was loose over decades before being arrested. The second revolves around the personal experience of sexual assault by Una and the long-term psychological and emotional trauma that she carries without any conversation with anyone. These pathways follow on different, yet overlapping, lines: the chronological flow of the social events, and, on the other, the subjective perception and interior processing of the violence which Una sees and experiences. The memoir goes further to discuss the neglect and unstable family life of Una, specifically the alcoholism of her mother and her abuse, which is once again another way that violence against women appears in a variety of interlocking ways.

The major issue of the novel is the omnipresent sense of guilt of girls and women victims of sexual abuse, which is brought up and strengthened by families, law, and society in general. Such unfair accuser of blame is a guiding line running through the graphic memoir and is closely related to the feminist scholarship on the lives of women in modern world. It is on this feminist point of view that the current discussion is framed. In this scenario, clothing becomes a highly significant narrative tool as the dominant social discourses often put the blame of sexual violence on the way women look and therefore, some forms of their dressing may cause or invite abuse. In conjunction with this, the use of verbal abuse, slurs, and judgments based on morals against women who do not fit into socially approved norms of femininity are exposed in the story repeatedly.

The second symbol is the sack. A review in Aster(ix) Journal observes that Una carries a sack that grows larger every time she meets gendered inequality or violence. The sack shows that trauma is not one event that ends. It adds up. Each insult, each act of disbelief, and each warning that girls must be careful becomes another weight. The image also makes a political point. The weight is not a private problem of one girl. It is handed to her by the world around her.

The third symbol is the tree. A study in The Comics Grid by A. A. Remm reads the book through ecofeminism, and finds that Una uses trees, human-tree hybrids, hills, and other natural scenes again and again to show her inner life (Remm 7). A tree has roots that hold it down, but it can also grow new branches after damage. So, the tree can show both

Blue Ava Ford Publications
International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)
An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487
Impact Factor:8.486(SJIF);www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-4;Oct,Nov & Dec(2026)

the weight of trauma and the hope of growth. The link between a woman's body and nature has a long history of use against women, because women have often been treated as things to be owned and controlled, in the same way as land. In Una's drawings the link is not an insult. She takes it and uses it as her own language.

Conclusion

At the end, it can be highlighted that Una's *Becoming Unbecoming* uses visual form as a political act. Its broken, scrapbook-like structure copies the way trauma breaks memory. Its blank panels and wordless sequences let the reader feel what happened without turning assault into a spectacle. Its symbols, the insect, the sack, and the tree, give shape to feelings that are hard to say, and they show that these feelings come from a social world and not only from a private mind. Finally, the novel works as an act of identity building. By drawing her own story and placing it inside a wider history of misogyny, Una moves from silence to authorship. She turns the way a culture looked at her into a way of looking back. The book shows that images can do more than illustrate a story of trauma. They can also change who has the power to tell it.

Works Cited

Appleton, Catherine, and Kerry Mallan. "Filling the Silence: Giving Voice to Gender Violence in Una's Graphic Novel Becoming Unbecoming." International Research in Children's Literature, vol. 11, no. 1, 2018, pp. 47-64.

Arsenal Pulp Press. "Becoming Unbecoming." Arsenal Pulp Press, arsenalpulp.com/Books/B/Becoming-Unbecoming. Accessed 11 Oct. 2026.

Aster(ix) Journal. "Review: Una's Becoming Unbecoming Is a Must Read." Aster(ix) Journal, asterixjournal.com/review-unas-becoming-unbecoming-is-a-must-read/. Accessed 11 Oct. 2026.

The A.V. Club. "The Essential Becoming Unbecoming Is a Harrowing Journey Through Misogyny." The A.V. Club, www.avclub.com/the-essential-becoming-unbecoming-is-a-harrowing-journe-1798254291. Accessed 11 Oct. 2026.

Broken Frontier. "Becoming Unbecoming: Una's Graphic Memoir Is a Compelling and Powerful Exploration of Gender Violence, Misogyny and Social Responsibility." Broken Frontier, www.brokenfrontier.com/becoming-unbecoming-una-myriad-editions/. Accessed 11 Oct. 2026.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Chute, Hillary. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. Columbia UP, 2010.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1992.

Kirkus Reviews. "Becoming Unbecoming." Kirkus Reviews, www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/una/becoming-unbecoming/. Accessed 11 Oct. 2026.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. HarperPerennial, 1994.

Prism Magazine. "Hindsight Is a Marvellous Thing: A Review of 'Becoming Unbecoming.'" Prism International, 26 Jan. 2017, prismmagazine.ca/2017/01/26/hindsight-is-a-marvellous-thing-a-review-of-becoming-unbecoming/.

Remm, A. A. "Ecofeminism, Trauma, and Visual Metamorphosis in Una's Becoming Unbecoming." The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship, vol. 15, no. 1, 2025, doi.org/10.16995/cg.18270.

Una. *Becoming Unbecoming*. Myriad Editions, 2015.

Wikipedia contributors. "Becoming Unbecoming." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Becoming_Unbecoming. Accessed 11 Oct. 2026.