

Jasmine Diaz

Dr. Susan Morse

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Bridging the Gaps: The Function of *Persepolis* in the Iranian Diaspora

In the 1970's a great power struggle began in Iran, leading to a profusion of civil unrest and mass emigration. In 1941 Iranian monarch Reza Shah, was removed from power by the United States and replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who Westernized the highly conservative and religious nation. He continued implementing the Westernized laws set by his father, which were known to "discouraged democratic political expression in the public sphere" and condemned Islamic fundamentalism (Khosrokhavar 3). The largely conservative citizens of Iran protested the alterations in multiple movements in response to the westernization, financial failures, and perceived belief that the Shah was being controlled by Western powers for control over Iran's vast oil supply. January of 1979, the Shah went into exile in Egypt and the devoted Muslim leader Ayatollah Khomeini assumed power, reinstalling the strict, Islamic law; "The Constitution allows all laws to be revised [...] by an Assembly of Expert, which is dominated by conservative clergymen" (Khatami 122) . In 1980, Iraqi troops invaded Iran in hopes of capturing the oil- rich country amidst the Revolutionary turmoil, further contributing to Iranian emigration to European countries. The Iran Iraq War continued until 1988. The mass exodus resulted in the "forced dispersal, immigration, displacement and establishment of reconfigured transnational communities", now known as the Iranian diaspora (Agnew 19).Such abrupt uprooting of a citizen's identity and physical connection to their homeland leads to a

conflicting sense of identity and belonging in individuals who are involved in the sudden transition.

As a member of the Iranian diaspora, Marjane Satrapi endured many hardships in her efforts to transition from Middle Eastern culture to a more modernist Western culture. Her series of graphic novel memoirs, *Persepolis*, depict her childhood growing up in Iran during both the Islamic Revolution and the Iran- Iraq War, and moving to Austria as one of many emigrants of Iran at the time. Marjane Satrapi's memoir is just one example of an exile bearing the burden of memory to unify other members of the diaspora and to educate Westerners on the varying viewpoints regarding the government and ideologies within Iran. As Marjane is sent to Austria amidst the turmoil, she is given a great deal of freedom to express her political beliefs and associate with a variety of people that she otherwise may not have encountered in the conservative country of Iran. She was set as an outsider or an "other" in the foreign country due to her lack of exposure to Western culture; Marjane was again considered an "other" upon her return to her home country, four years later because she had been exposed to the luxuries of Europe rather than the tragedies of Iranian war. Throughout her lifestyle transitions, her identity is also greatly impacted; including her political beliefs, taste in music, and her social and political awareness. She often denies her Iranian heritage while in Austria and embraces the punk rock and communistic culture; however, by the end of the piece, she is able to identify with both Iran and her life abroad as she is able to accept the restrictive nature of Iran as a part of her identity upon departing for France. Satrapi thus expands her sense of identity by living outside of her place of origin while retaining her Iranian identity and value set, thereby encouraging other members of diasporas to do the same in order to bridge Western and Eastern cultures. By telling her story of exile in the form of a graphic novel, Satrapi is able to

visually mediate the war experience through the eyes of a young Iranian exile, depict stills of defining moments in Marjane's journey to adulthood, and allow audiences of all ages and cultural backgrounds to relate to some degree with the protagonist's situation as an exile.

Satrapi's identity was subject to change according to where she was living, given that she was given independence and left home at such a young age, she never felt like she truly belonged in Iran or Austria because she had experienced such different cultural norms. Babak Elahi mentions that "the link between ethno-national identity and language can be experienced symbolically, [...] as a reflection of identity[...] of ethnocultural uniqueness and existence" (Elahi). Marjane Satrapi depicts her life as an Iranian child growing up during the revolution, moving from Iran to Austria and how her ideologies change in response to the Islamic Revolution and the war. Along with many other Iranian women's memoirs regarding similar experiences in Iran, Satrapi reflects on the burden of using memory to represent experiences a large group of people lived through. She depicts the experience, common to all emigrants, young and old, of being seen as a foreigner in her new home country and in her home country once returning. For example, when Marjane alters her whole appearance in Austria and begins to deny her Iranian heritage, she overhears a few of her peers talking about her at the local cafe:

" ...she never talks about either her country or her parents'

'she lies when she says that she's known war. It's all to make herself seem interesting'" to which she replied "'I am Iranian and proud of it!'" (Satrapi 196-197). Her attempt to assimilate into the punk culture in Austria is received by rumors being spread by peers, leaving her as an outsider. Similarly, when she is conversing with her old friends in Iran about her multiple experiences with sex, her friend replies "'So what's the difference between you and a whore?'"

after that, Marjane said she felt "terribly alone" (Satrapi 270). Satrapi had been exposed to a modernist culture and returned to her old acquaintances who had lived in a traditionalist society, thus leaving a gap in understanding and expectations on both Marjane's part as well as her Iranian family and friends. In addition, when Marjane returns to Iran, she is deeply disturbed by the "radio broadcasts [that] reinforced the idea of holy sacrifice in war by urging listeners to 'wish death and welcome the afterlife'" and streets named after "martyrs" of the war (Johnson 120). She includes historical truths and context in order to justify her disagreement with the radical government as well as its efforts to recruit men for the war based on promises of peace in the afterlife. Satrapi's memoir serves to bridge such gaps of knowledge not only possessed by those related to people of exile but by Western cultures that do not understand the traditionalist culture and the struggle to transition between the starkly different cultures.

The large amount of memoirs produced soon after 9/11 were about the Iranian diaspora and how foreign the authors themselves felt toward their own culture, all proving that "an accented identity,[and] accented writing, can help us understand how Iranian-Americans might transform the trauma of a language lost into the celebration of a self regained or reconstructed, a translation of identity into a new language or [...] a dialectical relationship between two languages." (Elahi). Elahi and Satrapi both appeal to the common exile's resonance with "the other" who experiences a decay in morale like Firoozeh Dumas who expressed shame when moving to Iran: "we couldn't speak their language... we were stupid" (Dumas 6). The unique medium of Satrapi's memoir allows members of both the Iranian emigrant group and more privileged Westerners to relate to the characters and understand the changes not only the protagonist, but all Iranian emigrants underwent. Amy Malek analyzes Satrapi's demonstration of "the loneliness and feelings of frustration at feeling misunderstood everywhere while having a

home nowhere become themes of exile [...] wholly relatable to Iranian and non- Iranian, immigrant and non- immigrant readers alike-[...] made possible through the universality of her illustrations." (Malek). Thus, Satrapi's illustrations not only breath personality into the characters and situations she is found in but simplifies her message and makes it easier to comprehend by a diverse audience, conveying universal emotions through the comic drawings.

In telling her story Satrapi mediates her war experience through the eyes of a child, making it more understandable for Westerners and second and third generation exiles, it furthers the messages of oppression felt in Iran. In utilizing her childhood self as the protagonist the graphic novel itself appears less threatening to Western audiences; in turn allowing themselves to follow Marjane's evolution and mentally mature with her as she is acquires global consciousness. Marjane frequently refers to Marxism as a child in order to show how opinionated and educated she was about various political beliefs at such a young age. Thus she continued to disagree with Islamic beliefs and embrace the words of Karl Marx: ““religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions”” (Marshall 42). She limits the scope even further by “[choosing] not to draw something she witnessed and thereby expands the repertoire of traumas representation of omission, silence, and void” (Gilmore). For instance, when Marjane sees her neighbor's bracelet "attached to" something amongst the rubble of their bombed home, Satrapi illustrates her adolescent self covering her eyes in childish fear, followed by a blackened frame narrating, "No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger" (Satrapi 241). The illustration and the black frame portray her childhood self's mediation of the war experience. The comic shows a natural response any child would have to such an event, "I wanted people in other countries to read *Persepolis*, to see that I grew up just like other children" says Satrapi (Satrapi). The emotional pain and fear was so traumatizing that

the young Satrapi was unable to coherently process the event, causing her to withdraw into herself hoping to forget. However, Satrapi is seen bearing the burden of memory here in sharing the traumatic experience despite its lack of gruesome detail. She emphasizes that the concept of remembrance and memory is what needs to be preserved among exiles, not the explicit and detailed content it presents to its audiences.

Another function her illustrations play is framing and mirroring herself to convey how she perceives herself relative to the collective. For example, when Marjane is holding the picture given to her by her friend, Lucia's father, she is able to see herself with Lucia and her sisters all appearing as close siblings. Marjane's perspective of the photo functions as " [a] mirror... the frame around the photo, the panel ... shows Marji's hands holding the framed photograph, making us see the snapshot from her point of view. " (Elahi). As a result, the audience, of any background, is able to see Marjane's sense of self reflection and search for identity as she grasps a photo of herself fitting in with the family that she does not have in Austria, where she is seeking acceptance. Again, she includes the common motif of Iranian emigrants trying to reach for a culture or religion to retain as their own.

As someone living in the diaspora, Satrapi voices her opinion and lack of resonance with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its values by portraying rebellion both implicitly and explicitly. As the Islamic Revolution took its toll on citizens, "the veil [became]... an icon of essential identity of Iranian women", rendering women as identical beings with equal and limited rights (Karim). In opposition, Satrapi's graphic novel allows her to emphasize on the distinct features of each woman present in her story; "Satrapi makes visible and distinctive what the regime tries to render through group anonymity through its imposition of the hijab... she provides names and physical distinctions for each girl... Satrapi represents Iranian women as diverse." (Gilmore). The

Iranian author is able to voice her journey and beliefs unlike numerous citizens and authors who gathered to share their ideas but were silenced by SAVAK group of the government (Salehi 139). She embraces her newfound freedom to express her opinions after leaving her home and has found her sense of identity; being able to identify as an Iranian and an uncensored Western writer.

Besides maintaining the memory of struggles experienced by members of the diaspora, Satrapi educates audiences of Western descent or background through her illustrations. She breaks down stereotypes of Iranian emigrants as being "very traditional religious people who do not like to mix with the people around them, or [...] social but phony and superficial" or radical Islamists that are a danger to non-Islamists (Moslehi). In fact, her character, Marjane, displays quite the opposite behavior when she grows close to numerous friends in Austria and rejects the values and practices forced upon Iran by the Islamic Republic, leading to her new life in France at the end of the series. Despite the hatred the government of Iran cultivated amongst its citizens towards Western powers, calling the United States "the Great Satan" and Russia "Little Satan", Satrapi wishes to prove to foreign countries that not all Iranians share the same political beliefs as those of the collective country of Iran (Mottale 48). To allow Western audiences to understand and relate to Marjane, Satrapi "depicts surroundings that are simultaneously Iranian and yet largely familiar to Western audiences: her living room with couches, a TV," (Malek). The familiar furniture and settings that are quite different from the traditional Iranian living room which is usually furnished with lavish rugs and lack couches and traditional beds; these small visual elements allow Western audiences to feel a bit less removed from the protagonist's situation and feel a bit more comfortable with understanding the character's struggle for identity.

With lack of understanding for the life in the Middle East and the Iranian diaspora itself, there are several views concerning the scope of memoirs like that of Satrapi's. Given the vast difference in gender roles in Iran, some may view female memoirs as quite bias and limiting to the scope of life in Iran, in turn demonizing men. Such assumptions should be avoided because "it tends to ghettoize women's memoirs as 'lesser than' the non-fiction works of other authors, particularly by men... women's stories are necessary because they have yet to be told, [...] issues most often addressed in these memoirs, [include] sexuality, trauma, mental illness, shame, and addiction." (Malek 46). The *Persepolis* series serves as a story for all Iranian exiles to identify with. Given the limited freedom to publish works about her hardships and disagreement with the Islamic Republic, Satrapi utilizes her new Western freedoms to address the issues she encountered in Iran and the oppressive country of Iran. The assumption that women's memoirs attack men is an overstatement. Satrapi discusses the hardships men of both the diaspora and imprisonment encountered. For example, she describes the new life of a family friend, Houshang, after he had moved to Austria with his family; in Iran, he was a CEO, in Austria he was considered "nothing", which called for daily insults from his wife: "you can give me whatever you want the day you've earned some money. I've had enough!" (Satrapi 157). By presenting such a side story, she portrays the struggles of men in trying to support their families in a country which is void of consideration of previous positions and financial situation. Men are not demonized but rather seen frustrated by the "demeaning conditions; their jobs and pay are often at a lower level than their education achievements [...] and lose control over household money" (Moghissi 256). Similarly, she recalls the relationship she had with her uncle Anoosh and his experiences of imprisonment in Iran. Her uncle is depicted crying over an old photo of his wife and two daughters, then he's later seen telling young Marjane "you are the little girl I always

wanted to have [...] star of my life" before he was executed (Satrapi 69). Satrapi not only portrays the physical pain men in prison experience but the effects it had on their lives after prison. His grief of being unable to return to his family in Russia represents a male's perspective of the displacement and inability to care for his family as a result of imprisonment; later on, Anoosh realizes that he was actually able to experience the fatherhood he was deprived of by bonding with Marjane. She was able to incorporate those affected by the Islamic Republic's cruelty as well; Anoosh was one of many victims of such treacheries and " people [...] did not have time to look back to see him trying to find his way through these convoluted labyrinths of social transformation" (Talebi 165). In essence, she captured Iranians with a variety of experiences in both genders, furthering her credibility regarding the effects of the war and revolution on the Iranian people.

Many see children of the diaspora (second generation and on) as less cultured and feel that they should not be considered Iranian do to their immense lack of knowledge on the traditions, history, and language of Iran. In accordance with such ideas, Satrapi's novel is believed to be biased and pro- Western due to her adolescent development in a western country. Young exiles, like Marjane, "must move in and out of diverse roles and create identities [...]" their minds have become the terrain for adult battles" (Safizadeh 255). The purpose of graphic novel series is to contribute to the remembrance of the Iranian diaspora along with the struggles to create an identity, not to characterize the entire Iranian community. Authors and exiles like Satrapi that resonate more with western values are portrayed by the Islamic government as " "Westoxicated Iranians, members of the oppositions, and cowardly individuals who fled to escape defending their country", giving exiles all the more reason to not return to their homeland of Iran and further embrace Western settlement (Raji 193). Emigrants are also afraid of being

persecuted by the government because of their personal beliefs, the Revolutionary Guards... search for western influences in every piece of luggage they bring into the country”, making mere possessions of the west a danger to the exiles’ safety (Shavarini 8). The variety of ideologies Marjane takes on throughout the memoir are not being promoted but instead function as devices to further the bildungsroman genre and the open minded nature she possessed throughout her entire life.

The reoccurrence of open- minded characters and exposition of various ideologies is essential to Satrapi’s support for the development of mixed identities that result from the diaspora. Marjane Satrapi attributes her open- mindedness to her Iranian parents: “They gave me the most important thing -- the freedom of thinking and deciding for myself. The best present anyone can receive is not being formatted because the world or a religion wants you to be.” (Satrapi). The Iranian culture must be maintained in some way and passed down to younger generations to maintain a sense of diversity, belonging and resonance with the culture. Thus, Satrapi’s efforts to maintain memory and unite Iranian exiles while encouraging ideals other than those proposed by the Iranian culture prove to be vital. Babak Elai speaks from personal experience when he writes of his experience as an emigrant of Iran: "Two more moves have complicated my relationship with Persian and with Iran even further, almost erasing that [...] I have become an American ethnic.” (Elahi). Second and third generation diasporas like myself are able to learn about the history that their parents endured and be able to engage in conversations regarding culture with my Iranian grandparents, who are also Iranian emigrants, as well as my American colleagues knowing that I may retain my connection to both cultures as part of my heritage and identity. *Persepolis* and memoirs similar to it serve as an educating tool and a connection to a culture that seemed all too distant to relate to and understand.

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