The Play of Contraries in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"

Navdeep Kahol, Government College Dera Bassi, India

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Abstract
Persepolis, a graphic memoir in two volumes by Iranian writer, filmmaker and graphic artist Marjane Satrapi, is the most subversive of contemporary memoirs that defy easy categorization. Unlike other Iranian memoirs riding the wave of popularity following the Islamic Revolution, it stands out as a unique mix of the contraries. The proposed paper examines the ways in which the graphic novel reconciles the seemingly opposite ideas of the popular and the literary, the comic and the serious, the East and the West. Comic, presumably a naive form of literature meant for the amusement of children has been yoked to the serious purpose of asserting the identity of Persian people. In addition, it exposes and mocks the dominant religious narrative of the theocratic Islamic regime aptly represented by its black-and-white graphic images. *Persepolis I* makes use of a child narrator to recount the events following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. It allows the reader a fresh perspective and brings out the absurdity of the regime's decrees. For example, it undermines the veiling ordinance of 1980 by showing young schoolgirls using their headscarves in other ways that are contrary to their supposed purpose to guard female modesty. *Persepolis II* deals with Satrapi's stay in Austria and her return to Iran. Again, her experience in Austria belies the notion of a "liberal progressive" West. *Persepolis* is rich and multi-layered and draws its strength from its play of contraries. Its slippages speak volumes about the complex political situation of post-revolutionary Iran.

Keywords: Graphic, Memoir, Persian, Women, Islamic Revolution

Introduction

The Iranian memoir is the most popular form of literature exposed to a wide readership and critical acclaim in the first decade of the 21st century. Life narratives are being written more often, with greater confidence by Iranian diasporic writers with the Western reader in mind. These have stimulated a lot of critical responses as well. Like reality TV, they are experiencing a new high since the Iranian revolution of 1979, observes journalist Nahid Mozaffari. The new wave of autobiographical writing by diasporic Iranian women has witnessed the publication of such works as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi, *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* by Tara Bahrampor, *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* by Gelareh Assayesh, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* by Firoozeh Dumas, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* by Roya Hakakian, *Lipstick Jihad* by Azadeh Moaveni and *Persepolis* and *Embroideries* by Marjane Satrapi.

Most of the Iranian memoirs are rooted in a turbulent period of Iranian history and culture, that is Islamic Revolution of 1979, with the US "war on terror" looming large on the horizon. Invariably, all of them address the issue of the institutionalization of patriarchy following the revolution and its implications for women. However, *Persepolis* beats most of them in popularity except Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* which panders to the Western hegemony and upholds the superiority of the Western canonical texts, notes Nima Naghibi. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines comic books as a bound collection of comic strips, usually in chronological sequence, typically telling a single story or a series of different stories. "The comic book art form consists of sequential juxtaposed panels that represent individual scenes. Panels are often accompanied by text and dialogue in the way of text bubbles which is emblematic of the comics art form" (Comics, Graphic Novels, 2023).

Persepolis is unique as it employs a child narrator to recount the events of Iranian history in a comic form. "Probably due to a strict continuous censorship policy, Iran has not produced much in modern forms of comics and graphic narratives since 1979. The few "Iranian" graphic narratives were published by exiled Iranians and Iranian-Americans. The world success of Satrapi's *Persepolis* deeply irritated the Iranian government and was immediately censored in Iran" (Reyns-Chikuma, Ben Lazreg, 2017, p.764). Satrapi is a filmmaker, graphic artist and writer of Iranian origin who chose to stay back in Paris in view of the curtailment of the civic and artistic liberties in Iran following the Revolution. Her memoir recounts the trauma of exile and alienation within her homeland. Satrapi, an adolescent at the time of the revolution, left for Europe as she realized the precariousness of life for women in Iran. Marjane Satrapi can be rightly called the daughter of the revolution as she attempts to make sense of a regime ruled by clerics and fundamentalists, and its implications for Iranian women. The memoir reacts to the retrogressive moves of the totalitarian government regarding the observation of gender segregation and veiling. The paper undertakes an examination of the form and content of *Persepolis I* and *II* (2003 and 2004) with an aim to unveil the play of many contrasts that form the basic structure of the memoir.

Islamic Revolution

Persepolis laments the loss of a bright, dynamic and progressive culture to the Islamic Republic that acted as a catalyst for the memoir. Iran is a country of paradoxes. Its politically charged climate continuously stimulates cultural and intellectual churning. International brands and turbaned clerics vie with each other for attention on the streets of Tehran. The

history of Iran is narrated as a fall into colonialism followed by anticolonialism and women seem to stand on the fulcrum of this see-saw. Before the 1930s, women's status was seen as the symbol of the modernity of a new nation whereas, in the second period, which is after the 1970s, it symbolized the modernity of the monarch and his progressive benevolence towards women. The mass unveiling order by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1936 was the culmination of Shah's attempts to westernize Iranian society. The act was aimed at subordinating the mosque. Literacy and job opportunities for women increased. They were allowed to vote in 1963. It brought women into the open from behind "walls and veils." Pahlavi's mindless mimicry of Western modernity called *Westoxification* (Gharbzadegi) derogatorily, was criticised by one and all. The unveiling came to be equated as a sign of imperialism and a threat to Iranian identity. According to Milani, she (the Westernized Iranian woman) was accused of "national and sexual infidelity". Shah's ideas of reform imposed from above enraged those marginalized by modernization and eventually precipitated into the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Shah of Iran "a puppet of England" was dethroned and exiled. It was a watershed moment for women in the history of Iran. The regime sent out contradictory messages to women. They were encouraged to participate in the rebuilding of Iran and Islamist movements after the revolution but their legal rights were severely curtailed, their movement restricted and their freedom clipped. They were expected to be content with their family life. Mandatory veiling was projected as the republic's attempt to protect the faith and dignity of women.

Within a month of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini exhorted women to wear an Islamic form of modest dress. This led to demonstrations, but the regime assured women that the government was not willing to impose veiling and that Khomeini only believed in guiding women. These justifications notwithstanding, veiling was re-institutionalized slowly and diplomatically and by 1980, it was made mandatory in all public offices. This step could only evoke disorganized resistance and ultimately the regime went on to make veiling compulsory for all women in 1983. Under Iran's supreme religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership, a Sharia-based law was implemented according to which western-wear, alcohol, partying and intermingling of sexes were prohibited. Veiling and gender segregation in public were made mandatory. The transgressors were persecuted, jailed, flogged and humiliated. They were treated like criminals for wearing makeup in public or violating the obligatory dress code. Their criminalization was turned into a spectacle to instil fear in those women who did not conform to the Islamic Republic's gendered disciplinary apparatus and stepped out of its firmly guarded boundaries. Thus, women have been the symbols of colonialism and anti-colonialism, modernity and tradition, revolution and counter-revolution in the recent history of Iran. Iran was converted into a virtual Islamic theme park following the revolution, quips expatriate Iranian Azadeh Moaveni in her exilic memoir *Lipstic Jihad* (2005).

Transgressing boundaries

Persepolis transgresses many boundaries of genre and defies easy categorization. It is a disruptive text on many levels. Though narrated from a child's perspective, its intent is serious which is the assertion of the Iranian identity. It forms part of the resistance literature produced by Iranian women in reaction to the socio-political upheavals in their native country. They re-narrativize the past and present to the world images of the "self" contrary to the constructed identities of the Persian women. They also propose to purge the image of Iran in the West as a terror land. *Persepolis* particularly destabilizes the distinction between the East and the West, the literary and the popular, the highbrow and lowbrow, the comic and the

serious. Nima Naghibi remarks, “This unique combination produces a text that regularly juxtaposes the familiar with the alien” (2005, p. 224).

Shattering Stereotypes

The subject in *Persepolis* transgresses many boundaries – spatial, cultural, and personal. Satrapi’s conduct is in sharp contrast with the popular image of a Persian woman who is perceived as shy and docile. In general, Muslim women are portrayed as veiled, vulnerable, and victimized by Muslim men. Nahid Mozaffari in her review of Satrapi’s memoir observes that the model of a shy, pure and acquiescent Persian girl did not stand up to the test of real life and real women that populate Iran and these memoirs (2006, p. 527). Her women are always trespassing in the designated spaces. Satrapi herself neither conforms to the cultural expectations of society nor the Islamic regime’s orders. *Persepolis* challenges the stereotype of a veiled Muslim woman happy in her domestic domain. To represent the two contrasting stereotypes of women, she creates black and white/ Eastern and Western sides of the same person. Satrapi grows up in a liberal atmosphere, feeds on popular culture and rebels just like any other teenager in the West. Satrapi heightens the contrast by using extreme colours for the Eastern and Western stereotypes of women. She does not fit into the Western notion of a pious veiled Muslim woman either. She states in the foreword to the memoir that her aim was to correct the overwhelming image of “women in chadors and guys with guns” in Iran as she claims this image of Iran is far from the truth.

Satrapi rebels against the diktats of the Islamic Republic and directly clashes with the authorities. Such behaviour was conveniently termed as Westernized and met with disapproval and punitive measures by the authorities. “Westernized was a convenient label for any female behaviour that defied oppressive tradition,” observes Moaveni (2005, p. 200). Satrapi belongs to the generation of Iranian intellectual women who faced the loss of freedom and imposition of a rigid Islamic code on their being at a critical point in their lives but manages to laugh at the hypocrisy of the regime, and the schizophrenic way of life in Iran. “Her books are enjoyable, although that is certainly a strange word to use to describe books that tell about murders, torture, and the repression of an entire population, particularly women. But Satrapi has such a sly sense of humour that she makes her points with bitter laughter in the background. That's the only way to bear oppression, she says in some of her graphic stories” (Anne Douglas 2005, p. 63).

As the veil has been inextricably associated with women’s empowerment and disempowerment, it receives a special mention in the graphic memoir as a separate chapter. It has always been the bone of contention between modern Muslim women and authorities and also fields modern Muslim women against traditional Muslim women. This obsession with veiling has been justifiably represented in the text. For Satrapi, mandatory veiling was not a return to Islamic identity as the Republic would have them believe. “I really didn’t know what to think about the veil. Deep down I was very religious but as a family, we were very modern and avant-garde (2008, p. 6).” The Republic reinforced the image of a vulnerable and bashful woman by glorifying the veil. Its slogan – a woman modestly covered is like a pearl within a shell – was a strong reminder of this image.

Satrapi begins her memoir by mocking the sudden imposition of the veil by the regime in the very first chapter “The Veil”. She undermines the veiling ordinance of 1980 by showing young schoolgirls using their headscarves as skipping ropes, as a harness, as a monster mask and in other ways that are contrary to their supposed purpose to guard female modesty (Fig

1). As a student at the art college, she, like other Iranians, learns to decipher the female shape even with their veils on. In the chapter “The Convocation”, she says, “With practice, even though they were covered from head to foot, you got to the point where you could guess their shape, the way they wore their hair and even their political opinions. Obviously the more a woman showed, the more progressive and modern she was (2008, p. 296).” This use of bathos and ironic tone has been maintained throughout the comic.

Figure 1: The Veil

East and West

Persepolis constantly undermines the over-determined categories of the East and the West. The tension between the Eastern and the Western ethos, culture and literary forms is maintained throughout the text. Satrapi shows that the concept of a pure Persian identity and a pure Islamic identity are equally problematic and illusory. Women like Satrapi who inhabit cultural borderlands do not perceive the “Western influence” as a threat to their identity. Their narratives trace the appropriation of the feminist and nationalist identity in Iran. Satrapi claims to have a multicultural identity and refuses to accept the East-West dichotomy. Her graphics reveal how East and West merge in her persona. “*Persepolis* brings East and West together, often in ways that underscore the tensions and contradictions such unions inevitably entail,” remarks Naghibi (2005, 240). She professes her love for her country without feeling threatened by the Western influence. Satrapi is not sorry for her “Western behaviour and appearance.” Her parents are seen wearing Western clothes in *Persepolis*. They are crazy about Pink Floyd – an English rock band and Bee Gees – a pop music group.

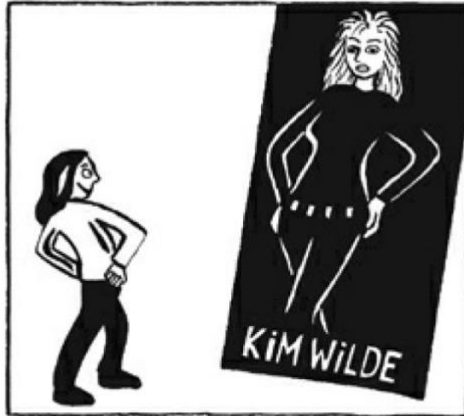

Figure 2: Kim Wilde

Satrapi's consumption of the American punk culture and emulation of its pop star Kim Wilde contrasts sharply with the state agenda of reinstating Iran as an Islamic country. The polar opposite ways of looking at the East and the West are visually complemented through black-and-white graphics. Marji copies Kim Wilde's pose but the two images have a marked difference (Fig 2). Marji has black hair and Kim Wilde is blonde. The image of a veiled woman in the beginning of chapter "The Veil" and that of a blonde in the chapter "Kim Wilde" also betray the parallel-contrast effect.

In the chapter "The Veil", there are two sides to Marjane's self. One half of her is veiled against an Oriental pattern and the other half of her is wearing a Western outfit against the backdrop of symbols of science and technology representing the West. The contrasting images of Eastern Marji and Western Marji recur in many frames throughout the text (Fig 3).

Figure 3: East and West

The "veiled figure of radical otherness" is positioned alongside a "familiar image of the Western underground hip", points out Naghibi. The fact that Satrapi has used the Western autobiographical and popular form of literature to articulate the concerns of an Eastern country is unprecedented and unique. There is no tradition of women's autobiographical

writing in Iran, claims Iranian American critic Farzaneh Milani in her book *Veils and Words*. Women are not supposed to unveil their minds and bodies in Iran. Satrapi on the other hand is bold, articulate, outspoken and well-versed in the art of writing comix. “Underground comix, spelt with an “x” as a sign of their illicit content, were closely tied to the youth counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Singsen). “Co-mix” forms part of the North American counterculture of the 1960s that led to the “alternative comix” movement in the 1980s.

Comic with a Serious Purpose

Persepolis is a comic with a difference due to its engagement with the contemporary politics of Iran. Its main concern is the authentic projection of Iran within the West whether it is regarding the portrayal of Iranian women or the notion of Iran as the terror land encouraging fundamentalism. Iran’s image suffered another setback after 9/11 with the then US President George W. Bush declaring the country as a spoke in the “axis of evil.” The narrative attempts to dispel the fallacies of the Western observers and introduces the reader to the bright, progressive and liberated Iranian people. Satrapi successfully removes the common misconceptions regarding her own identity, and those of her family, nation and even the West. Satrapi also exposes the claims of a liberal West citing her encounters with the “fanatics of the West.” She initially tries to assimilate in the Western culture during her stay in Austria but asserts her Iranian identity when treated as “the other.”

She successfully employs Western comic form, considered to be juvenile, to create a counter-discourse to both the Islamic Republic and Western hegemonic discourses. “The comic book has traditionally been seen as an immature and thus incomplete form, just as childhood is generally perceived as an incomplete state (Naghibi, 2005, p. 227).” Also referred to as “subliterature” by Nyberg, comics are relegated to low, disposable status. Satrapi resorts to trivialization as a strategy to use an unthreatening form/ genre to represent repression and violence. After the revolution, Iran immediately went to war with Iraq which continued for nearly eight years. At the end of the chapter “The Key,” she uses two frames showing Iranian soldiers being blown to pieces on the top and the panel below it shows her drinking and partying with her Iranian friends (Fig 4).

Figure 4: The Key

"The broken bodies of the child soldiers are mirrored by the exuberant postures of the partygoers; the keys on their necklaces are mirrored by Marji's 'punk' chain necklace; the holes in their shrapnel-ridden bodies are mirrored by the holes in Marji's sweater, knitted for her by her mother in imitation of the then trendy punk style" (Naghibi, 2005, p. 240). A clever graphic device to show both the violence and apathy of the public during the war with Iraq. Boys as young as sixteen were brainwashed into joining the crusade against Iraq and were given "keys to paradise" making it seem like a religious mission. They were told that if they went to war and were lucky enough to die, this key would get them into heaven. The memoir indirectly criticizes the warmongering of the religious regime in the name of nationalism and the apathy of the public including herself in the same breath as well as on the same page. Satrapi laughs at the hypocrisy of the government as the latter tried to cover the absurdity of war. "They lined us up twice a day to mourn the war dead. They put on funeral

marches and we had to beat our breasts (Satrapi, 2008, p. 96).” Every street in Iran was named after a martyr to appease the families of the victims. Satrapi in *Persepolis* refuses to be dictated to in matters of faith. She often gets into ideological clashes with the religious authorities. While appearing for an interview for admission to an arts college in Iran, she is asked whether she had been wearing a veil while studying in Austria, she replies, “No, I have always thought that if women’s hair posed so many problems, God would have certainly made us bald” (2008, p. 286). Again, an instance of trivialization of the hot-button issue of veiling.

Gaps and Silences

Persepolis speaks through its visual images but also its gaps and its “slippages.” The moment the reader seems to have pinned down its meaning, the meaning slips from his/ her grasp. In the context of the Islamic Revolution, child Marji’s innocent acts and questions take on the quality of political subversion. Putting herself at the centre of narration as a child who is trying to make sense of the happenings around her during the Islamic Revolution adds to the complexity of the text. The childlike simplicity of young Marji’s questions, direct and simple language, comic book style and cartoony drawings using basic colours are just camouflage for the rich and multilayered text that is difficult to decipher for the readers. The advantage of using a child narrator is that its mind is like a clean slate, and it is yet to be schooled in social norms and mores. The child Marji is upset that her domestic help is poor and is forced to serve her family. She finds it difficult to accept socially ingrained practices prevalent in Iran since times immemorial. “The bold-lined, black-and-white, and almost rudimentary artwork simply belies the ambiguities and grey areas the text explores. If anything, the assumptions of innocence, naivete, and universality that this combination of a child protagonist and a childlike illustrative style seem to produce are belied by the kinds of slippages in potential meaning they generate,” says Naghibi (2005, p. 242). The child Marji’s simple and adorable desire to become a prophet seems preposterous amid the new-found rigid Islamic apparatus of the state. It belies the harsh reality of the status of women in Iran where only the male clergy are allowed to interpret the religious text. The ironic tone maintained throughout the narrative skillfully drives home the unstated while making it a hilarious read. “These slippages take on a potent political charge in the context of a long-standing and fraught history of Middle Eastern (particularly Iranian) and Western (particularly American) relations” (Naghibi, 2005, p. 224).

Conclusion

Persepolis is a highly disruptive and subversive text in both content and form. What makes it endearing and enticing is its endless play of contraries. It compels us to read between the lines and see between its panels. Its comic book style camouflages its rich complexity. It effectively destabilizes the dialectic between the East and the West, comic and serious, highbrow and low brow, liberated West and savage East, suppressed veiled Persian woman and liberated Western woman. The black-and-white images created by Satrapi represent polarization in world politics and mindsets. By highlighting the contrast between its opposing concepts and images, *Persepolis* beckons to the grey areas that have the potential for dialogue and negotiation. Paradoxically, *Persepolis* deflates and reconciles the opposites through its black and white graphics, as different as day and night and surprisingly leads the reader to the grey in-between zone of the truth.

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