

The Outsider and the Mediator: Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* as a Diasporic Memoir

Tony Sebastian

Department of Comparative Literature and India Studies, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad

ABSTRACT: *Persepolis* is a graphic memoir which details the life and experiences of Marjane Satrapi, a young girl who grew up in the midst of the Iranian revolution and war. Satrapi is a diasporic writer who looks into her past, to regenerate the civil and social strife, violence and fanaticism that interpolate her childhood memories. Her graphic novel is one of the many Iranian diasporic memoirs which reveals a struggle for a reconnaissance and assimilation of the identity of the Iranian individual. Marji, the narrator persona, engages the reader by recounting her first hand experiences through the memoir. Satrapi narrates the story, and often stands in place of Marji, to discuss the social and political realities of her time. She imagines a reader who is an outsider to the politico-social and economic conditions of Iran. Her identity as an expatriate, however, impedes her from assuming the identity of the ordinary Iranian woman. She thus is relegated to the role of a mediator.

Keywords: *Diaspora, graphic novel, memoir.*

I. Introduction

Marjane Satrapi introduces *Persepolis* as 'the story of a childhood.' Her identity and experiences as an Iranian woman lie at the core of the narrative. She narrates her childhood experiences through a series of episodes which reveals her political and social convictions. *Persepolis* is not merely 'the story of a childhood.' The political looms larger than the personal in the narrative. The totemic titular objects around which each episode revolves, the highly stylized frames, the deliberate use of dark humor support her political motive. Marji, the narrator of the story is a constructed identity that aids Satrapi to vocalize her moral, political and personal views and opinions. Satrapi uses the identity of the narrator as a child of ten, to demonstrate, mediate, and deliberate upon the political issues that were current in Iran during the revolution and the war that followed. For Satrapi, the reader is not Iranian, but an outsider. Satrapi belongs to the diaspora of Iran. She was a part of the affluent class of Iran that enjoyed better education and standards of living. Satrapi attempts to validate her 'Iranianness' throughout the narrative. Being an expatriate, she enjoys the privilege of a liminal space between the West and East, and can only act as a mediator of the East in the West.

II. Stylization

Her style is modelled on the lines of traditional Persian art that eschews perspective and resorts to simple figures. Traditional Persian art focusses on stylization and abstains from excessive mimetic accuracy. Fernanda Eberstadt observes that the depiction of the schoolyard brawl is "straight from the Persian miniatures" [1]. The conscious stylization in the traditional Persian manner is in compliance with Satrapi's larger, declared project of depicting the Iranians as normal people with their own distinctive culture. She says: "They are individuals with life, love, hopes. Their life is worth the life of anybody else in the whole world" [2]. I believe that employing Persian motifs and patterns is a conscious act to accentuate and assert the Iranianness of the text itself.

Satrapi uses austere black and white panels to narrate the 'story of a childhood.' Panels which involve a large number of people are highly stylized and the use of perspective is consciously avoided. Chute argues that narration through the child's perspective is a tactic employed by Satrapi, as a 'discursive scaffolding' to manage the tension that is inherent in depicting a narrative of trauma in pictorial form [3]. Further, she argues that "the minimalist play of black and white is part of Satrapi's stated aim, as with avant-garde tradition, to present events with a pointed degree of abstraction in order to call attention to the horror of history, by re-representing endemic images, either imagined or reproduced, of violence [3]. Satrapi's own take on the use of black and white panels in the comics is as follows:

I write a lot about the Middle East, so I write about violence. Violence today has become something so normal, so banal—that is to say everybody thinks it's normal. But it's not normal. To draw it and put it in color—the color of flesh and the red of the blood—and so forth reduces it by making it realistic [4].

In an interview with David Hajdu, Satrapi says that adding color, no matter how naïve a drawing maybe, brings it closer to reality [4]. Her drawings are always her interpretations of the event. Satrapi generates a disconcerting tension in the narrative by toning down the gruesome violence using minimalist practices of depiction. The traumatic events that are 'heard' or 'imagined' by Marjane portrayed with a large degree of stylization.

Persepolis depicts both imagined and perceived violence in a manner that aids the augmentation of the reader's understanding of the event. By employing stylistic practices that are distinctly Iranian, and by using an austere black and white color pattern, she manages to pin these events of violence within Iran's social and political history. Further, the black and white color pattern used in *Persepolis* alerts the reader that the medium is but an iconic depiction of the violence, and permits her the singular shudder in imagining the actual violence. It also hints at a disturbing banality that violence had come to acquire. In "The Cigarette," Satrapi says: "The war had been going on for two years. We were used to it" [5]. The austerity of the portrayal of complex traumatic events, in a highly stylized, yet simple manner, generates a stark contrast between the actual violence and its depiction in the text. For Davis, the color scheme and the simplicity of the figures portrayed are a means to such an end. "Satrapi uses black and white to effectively illustrate clothes and backgrounds in shifting ways that create dramatic contrasts. Her flexible geometric style eloquently conveys both childhood innocence and indescribable pain" [6].

I agree with Chute's observation that Satrapi depicts highly stylized images as products of the child's imagination about violence and suffering. She argues that the stylization "stresses the gap between our knowledge (or our own imagination) of what brute suffering looks like and that possessed by a child" [3]. Chute scaffolds this argument with the depiction of the massacre of four hundred people in Rex cinema. The highly stylized panel, is almost full-page; the victims depicted as scorched screaming ghost like figures with hollow skulls rising from their seats as if by a process of vapourisation. Further, Chute suggests that the panels which depict the torture and murder of Ahmadi is a "potent moment which suggests the political point of Satrapi's expressionism" [3]. The portrayal of the dismembered individual as a dismembered doll indicates how young Marji imagines the incident of violence. Chute observes that the "frame depicts a man in seven neat pieces, laid out horizontally as a dismembered doll on an operating table would appear (indeed, he appears hollow). His head is separated cleanly from the torso, precisely severed at the waist, shoulders, and above the knees" [3]. Satrapi tries to depict the image as is registered in the imagination of young Marji. However, the author-persona of Satrapi is distanced temporally from the young Marji. She directs her energies towards developing a text that is centered on the reader, rather than depicting a historically accurate and objective one. Satrapi reconstructs the memories of her younger days in Iran to this end. This process of reconstruction is of particular interest to me as it is the process by which Satrapi generates the images for the reader. Here, the mnemonic text is reconstructed by the author to narrate from the child's perspective.

As a child, Marji is protected from the images of physical violence that was common in Iran during the period of unrest. She 'hears' about the instances of violence and suffering and can only imagine them. As a young girl of ten, Marji cannot yet realistically imagine morbid images of violence and suffering. For Chute, stylization is a tool which Satrapi uses to depict how young Marjane imagines the incident of violence and suffering. Such a stylization also presents Satrapi with a freedom to eschew mimetic depictions of the incident and thus "reducing it by making it realistic" [4]. I concur with Chute in that Satrapi employs stylization to depict the images generated by Marji's imagination. However, Chute overlooks the incidents of violence that Marji witnesses by herself. Although Satrapi uses stylization to generally indicate the presence of a large number of people, even in perceived instances (such as the stylized image of protesters in "The Letter" [5]) she refuses to impose stylization on violence that is perceived by Marji. While maintaining the general theme and style of the text Satrapi consciously avoids excessive stylization and resorts to a more realistic imagery to depict violence that Marji witnesses. Satrapi uses such a device to depict the destruction of the Baba-Levy's house in "The Shabbat." Davis observes that "the drawing of the rubble is highly sophisticated, worked in shadows and intersecting lines" [6]. The realistic portrayal is demanded by the very presence of Marji and because of the profound psychological impact it had on her. It is one of the most dramatic instances in young Marji's life as she finds suffering and violence at such a close proximity. She finds her friend's turquoise bracelet, still attached to her body in the rubble. She depicts the rubble and the scene in a realistic manner. Satrapi focusses on the impression that violence had on Marji, rather turning the reader's gaze to the aftermath of violence itself. The rubble portrayed realistically is relegated to the margins of the panel even when it is the focus of narration. In the three panels that follow the depiction, we find Marji's reaction to the violence that she witnessed before her. The panel which depicts Marji's horrified expression is followed by Marji covering her face. The last panel is black. Satrapi says: "No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger" [5]. I concur with Chute's argument that the representation of a traumatic event does not have to be visually traumatic.

III. The Expatriate

Satrapi belongs to the diasporic community that fled Iran owing to the war and the fundamentalist regime that followed. She belongs to the affluent class of the society of Iran that enjoyed a better education and standard of living. In her adolescence, she was sent to Austria owing to her rebellious nature and her inability to conform to the norms dictated by the Islamist regime. In projecting the image of her ten year old self wearing the veil in the very first frame itself, she demonstrates her political standpoint with respect to the Iranian social and political

scenario. She freely uses the terms 'fundamentalist,' 'conservative' and so on to describe the Islamist regime that governs Iran. She is deeply critical of the reforms made by the Islamist regime under the banner of 'cultural revolution'. In *Persepolis 2*, we find her parents voicing their views about the contemporary socio-political scenario of Iran. Her mother says: "Our revolution set us back fifty years. It will take generations for all this to evolve" [7]. Her father's voice is directed at the Western reader for whom the Iranian socio-political scenario is a puzzle. He says: "We Iranians, we're crushed not only by the government, but also by the weight of our own traditions" [7]. The deeply critical nature of her views arises from the complex milieu of experiences she gained through her life in Iran.

Satrapi has always been an outsider to the Iranian society. We find that, as children, Satrapi and her friends rebelled with the education system that valorized the martyrs, promoted patriotism and endorsed Islamist religious virtues. Satrapi attributes the rebellious nature to their "education in secular schools" [5]. After her return from Vienna, the alienation that she felt became more conspicuous. She says: "I was a Westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West. I had no identity" [7]. This is typically the psychological composition of the outsider—the diasporic writer. Amy Malek observes that Satrapi's liminality allowed her to create a third space where issues of exile, return, and identity negotiations can be performed while bending and blending Western genres with Iranian history and culture [8]. She is a witness to, but do not share the Iranian psychological trauma. We rarely find violence and suffering from a first-hand point of view in the narrative. Satrapi is the absentee victim of the violence in Iran. I believe that Satrapi depicts perceived violence more realistically than imagined histories and stories of violence. She is shielded from the immediacy of violence and suffering by the social class to which she belongs. Her parents are rich and fashionably "modern and avant-garde" [5]. They belonged to the network of the country's affluent intelligentsia which called for a Marxist revolution and the rule of the proletariat. Her uncle Anoosh declares that Marxism cannot unite the people of Iran as half of them are illiterate. He declares that only nationalism and religion can unite the people. Satrapi does not inhibit herself from portraying the members of the working classes of pre-revolution Iran as religious. She depicts Mehri's mother as a woman wearing a headscarf. She portrays them handing over Mehri to the Satrapi's in a single panel in which her father says that he has "too many children, 14 or 15, including her" to which her mother adds, "she will eat well at your house" [5]. In fact, Mehri's episode reveals how Marji discovers that inequality is in fact a visible reality.

Upon reading further, one finds that the Revolution did bring about a massive change among the social classes. The regime imposed religious law upon all classes of the society. Women had to wear a chador or a scarf and men had to wear full sleeve shirts. The rich and poor were equally subjected to this law. I believe that such an act of covering up has a bio-political connotation in the post-revolutionary situation of Iran. One may contend that such a literal covering up of the individual's body does not serve to dilute the economic divide in the society. Nevertheless, the working class individual who abides by such religious laws and practices, perceived this as an act which equates her with the higher classes. They imagined that it brings about a parity of sorts in their social standing.

Further, Satrapi herself provides an incredible instance of change that was brought about by the revolution. In "The Passport," Satrapi says that her aunt was taken aback by the fact that her former window washer was the director of the hospital in which her husband was admitted. Neither the author-persona of Satrapi nor her aunt seemed very happy with such a change. Her aunt says: "All that creepy window washer had to do to become the director of the hospital was grow a beard and put on a suit! The fate of my husband depends on a window washer! Now he's so religious that he won't look a woman in the eye, the pathetic fool!" [7]. It is hard to avoid the elitist attitude of the aunt and the harsh cynicism of the author persona of Satrapi. She depicts the entire family united with their eyes wide open in worry and shock. At the core of this horror are two factors—the appointment a former window washer as the director of the hospital and a more generic fear about the rampant changes in the social classes. Although Satrapi tries here to project the absurdity of the Islamist regime, it also exposes the deep-seated class consciousness that the professedly Marxist family of Satrapi possesses.

IV. Conclusion

We find Satrapi and her parents fleeing from their last demonstration against wearing scarves as violence escalated. Satrapi recounts that it was the first instance where she witnessed physical violence. The act of fleeing and the philosophy of resignation are central to the narrative. They reappear throughout the narrative as a means to validate the tacit approval of the rampant violence which Satrapi witnesses and records in *Persepolis*. In "The Key", Satrapi recounts her mother saying "Our country has always known war and martyrs. So like my father said: When a big wave comes, lower your head and let it pass" [5]. Satrapi adds that "this philosophy of resignation is very Persian" [5]. It is interesting to note that her mother says this while she is styling her hair. I believe that this scene is poignant as it points to the luxury of Satrapi's family to tide over difficult times and protect their own interests—even in the wake of war or revolution.

Satrapi is the absentee victim of the violence in Iran. I believe that Satrapi depicts perceived violence more realistically than imagined histories and stories of violence. She is shielded from the immediacy of violence and suffering by the social class to which she belongs. Being an outsider, Satrapi tries to validate her 'Iranianness' using and throughout the narrative. She requires this validation as it bestows her voice with a legitimacy which allows her to talk about the Iranian politico-social scenario with conviction and authenticity. *Persepolis*, an attempt to grant herself such a validation, however, demonstrates that she can only be a mediator.

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