A Reawakening of Memories in Comic Form: *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi

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Marjane Satrapi's award winning two-volume graphic memoir *Persepolis* aroused worldwide interest after its publication. The work, which has been translated into many languages, contributes to the body of memoirs written after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The Revolution, which transformed Iran from a constitutional monarchy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, had dramatic effects on the citizens of Iran, particularly on women. It was not only the Iranians in their homelands forced into a life they had never dreamt of who were affected by the revolution, but also those people like Satrapi who were forced to leave their homelands and live in exile. After the revolution, the Iranian diaspora has raised awareness of Iranian problems in the international arena (Keddie and Matthee 2002: 224). The Iranian intellectuals living in exile have created works in the countries in which they took refuge. Milani cites such projects as the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, publications including *Iran Nameh* and *Iranshenasi* in the United States, and the establishment of research and education centres such as The Foundation for Iranian Studies in Washington. Milani also provides examples from the numerous literary works and memoirs like *Persepolis*, published by these Iranians abroad (Milani 2004: 163-164). These memoirs have attracted worldwide attention to the experiences of the Iranians, and the number of memoirs increased in response to the amount of interest they received. Due to its popularity as a graphic novel, *Persepolis* was later adapted into film and achieved international release. The two volume memoir covers Satrapi's life from her childhood to the end of her university years. Satrapi was born in 1969 in Iran and experienced the Islamic revolution and the first years of the war between Iran and Iraq. The first volume of the book narrates her childhood years in Iran until the first years of the eight-year long Iraqi war. The second volume of the book is also under focus here. Firstly, it deals with her high school years in Europe where her parents send her for a better education. Secondly, it narrates her return to Iran and her university years under the Islamic Republic, providing the reader with a comparison of pre- and post-revolutionary years in Iran. This paper analyses volumes I and II of the graphic novel *Persepolis* within a broad framework of Iranian memoir writing focusing especially on its content and reception upon publication. This paper will firstly trace the possible reasons behind its publication, illustrating its importance within the Iranian memoir writing tradition and discuss the prominent themes in the book. Secondly, it will engage with the negative and positive receptions, interpretations and press comments about the graphic novel.

Memoir Writing among Iranian Women and Satrapi's *Persepolis*

Observing Iranian memoir broadly, the initial point to be raised is that Persian art is not very rich in terms of memoir writing prior to the revolution. The motivations that spurred Iranian

women to narrate their stories after the revolution are a source of considerable debate. According to many critics, the main reason for this delay in writing the personal narratives of Iranian women stems primarily from a culture "that creates, expects, and even values a sharply defined separation between the inner and the outer, the private and the public" (Milani 1990: 2). Milani states that the Iranian culture manifests "deindividualization" and protection of the self against the public. Even cultural proverbs such as "save face" and "protect appearances" uplift and glorify the maintaining of respect and self respect (ibid). The patriarchal organisation of Iranian society is another relevant point when considering women writers in Iran (Basmenji 2005: 11). These, among others, might be counted as some of the reasons of the scarcity of memoir-writing in Iran, especially by women. It can thus be asserted that it was not until these Iranian women living in exile had found a freer environment that they started to express their feelings and experiences in narrative form.

Hart's account of how autobiography writing thrived among women in France might provide further insight concerning the development of memoir writing among Iranian women. She argues that "implicitly masculine in the post-Rousseau romantic tradition the autobiography consigned women to the realm of silence and domesticity. But the revolution furthered the emergence of theories that permitted the women of this study to challenge the traditional conceptions of their social role and the autobiographical enterprise" (Hart 2004: 11-12). It can be inferred that the penetration of the revolution into their life and the changes it brought pushed women to disclose their experiences. It was also the revolution which led to a boom in the memoir writing by Iranians living in exile, although for different reasons than the French Revolution. In this case, oppression and discontent, rather than freedom, triggered autobiographical narrative writing among women. Whatever the reasons behind the emergence of these books may be, it is evident that the memoir boom evident in the Iranian community after the revolution has contributed a lot to this genre in Iranian literature. On the one hand, it breaks the silence of the Iranian women memoir writers and has created a new exile genre outside the country; and on the other hand, as stated before, it has raised the consciousness of foreigners towards the issues of women in Iran.

Marjane Satrapi is an Iranian living in the diaspora after the Islamic revolution in Iran. She explains her reasons for writing her memoir at the beginning of her book: "one can forgive but one should never forget" (Satrapi 2003: introduction). In expressing this Satrapi supports the idea that one should remember the past rather than try to suppress it and she aims to remind people of those hard days they have been through. However, there is another important underlying theme in *Persepolis*, which is common in most memoirs. According to Milani, "[o]ne of the concerns that recur frequently in these [memoirs] . . . is the desire to destroy a 'false' image" (Milani1992: 13). In recent years, Iran has come to be viewed

> [A]s a terrorist state, a country of religious fanatics. Iranian Culture has seemingly rejected everything western and turned in a different direction . . . Yet there is another part of Iranian story that is unfortunately largely unknown in the Western world. [*Persepolis*] is the story of a country of great poetry and literature, of an enlightened society with important philosophers and learned scholars. Another part of the story not

> heard in the West is of an Iran that values family ties and views community obligations as critical to the well being of the society. (Farr, and Kerbo 1999: 1)

Persepolis is an important personal project for Satrapi to show the world, which has associated Iran with "fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism", that this image does not represent the real Iran. She opposes the idea that "an entire nation [should be] judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists" (Satrapi 2003: introduction). In accordance with this belief, she has included in her book various examples from Iran "behind the curtains". These examples will be dealt with below.

Satrapi originally chose to write her memoir in French, and it was later translated into many languages all around the world. In an interview, she states that she wrote her book "for the other ones, not for Iranians" (Tully 2004). This strengthens the aforementioned argument proposed by Milani that the concern of the Iranian women memoir writers is to try to change the negative image of the country in the international arena. When first published, many critics compared *Persepolis* to *Maus*, a graphic novel by Art Spiegelman. *Maus* was published in 1973 and tells, in fable form, the story of Spiegelman's father trying to survive the holocaust as a Polish Jew. Satrapi's graphic novel depicts real life stories and portrays a period that garnered worldwide attention, a clear parallel to the case of the Holocaust in *Maus*. Satrapi's work is different from most graphic novels in that it depicts memories and experiences that take place in a geographical location rarely mentioned in comics previously. According to the Bureau of International Information Programs (2006), Satrapi's have become "the most influential graphic novels in the past ten years". In addition to receiving critical acclaim internationally, it was later listed among the best comics of 2003 described by *Time Magazine* as "a comix-style memoir by a woman who grew up during the Iranian Revolution. Totally unique and utterly fascinating, Satrapi's simple style reveals the complexities of a veiled-off world" (Arnold 2003a). In another review, Andrew D. Arnold stated, this memoir "provides a unique glimpse into a nearly unknown and unreachable way of life. It has the strange quality of a note in a bottle written by a shipwrecked islander. That Satrapi chose to tell her remarkable story as a gorgeous comic book makes *Persepolis* totally unique and indispensable" (Arnold 2003b).

The graphic novel is not a significant medium in Iranian culture, making *Persepolis* all the more unique and important. There are some government supported comic strips like *Smart Eagle* which tells the story of a martyred pilot during an Iraqi attack on Iran. Mostly Iranian comic strips have political themes and published under the guidance of the regime.

Accordingly, as a result of the coercive and oppressive regimes reigning one after another, there remained no space for works of political criticism in the country. Ebrahim Nabavi a famous Iranian political satirist, states in one of his speeches before returning to Iran that; "he can't comment on some things any further 'because [he is] flying back to Iran in 10 days or so'" (Moallemian 2000). In *Journey from the Land of No*, Hakakian, writes that during the Shah period, *Tofigh Magazine*, which included poems, critical caricatures and political satire, was banned and closed by the SAVAK security forces (Hakakian 2004: 4-37). Therefore, living in foreign lands allows these Iranian cartoonists and satirists the freedom to criticise the regime. Likewise, her residence in France allowed Satrapi to choose her own way of presentation for her own memories.

The Content and the Major Themes in *Persepolis*

The *Persepolis* series tells the story of Satrapi's childhood in Tehran, her teenage years in Europe and her college years after her return to Tehran. *Persepolis* can be described as a *bildungsroman*, since it relays the growing up of an Iranian girl and her coming to terms with her identity. Satrapi's naive graphic style enables her to depict serious political events and the daily life in Iran from a child's point of view. In her memoir, she portrays her parents as left-oriented intellectuals who are against the Shah's regime, and her uncle as a Marxist. Her parents, who have modern views concerning religion and politics, send her to Lyceé Français in Tehran and later to Vienna when she is 14 years old. She returns to Tehran after high school and goes to college to study fine arts. She later gets married, gets divorced and in the end moves to France after college. The numerous departures from and arrivals in Iran allow Satrapi to view the movement and changes in her country with the eyes of an outsider, yet she remains an Iranian national, thus her memoir shows a different face of the revolution than the history books; this gives an insider's point of view from a child's eye, allowing the reader to see the traces of the clashes between the pre- and post-revolutionary period which led many Iranian citizens to leave their country.

On closer observation of the content, one discovers several *leitmotifs* that emerge throughout the memoir. The process of revolution, illustrated by many detailed examples from pre- and post-revolutionary periods, stands out as a primary motif in *Persepolis.* There is a stark contrast here between the discontent of the people in regard to the new laws introduced by the revolution and their obvious dissatisfaction with their pre-revolutionary lives. In her memoir, Satrapi has devoted a considerable amount of space to reflect on the impact of strict regulations imposed during the Shah period, the dissatisfaction of the people and the ongoing protests. She describes how they fell into an undesirable lifestyle while they were fighting for a better life, trying to be free from the restrictions and the pressure the monarchy put on them.

Questioning of the New Regulations

Satrapi has also dedicated considerable space to the changes introduced into the daily lives of the people after the Islamic Revolution detailing the impact of the Revolutionary process on everyday life, family life and traditions, and the characteristics and ideas of Iranian people. According to Langness and Frank, the symbols and images that people use while telling their experiences give texture and evidence to the lives that they lived (Langness and Frank 1981: 88). In *Persepolis* Volume 1, we are given an account of how absurd the laws of Shari'a appear to the eyes of a child. Young Marjane questions the use of the veil and separation of the sexes in the public sphere. This provides a different experience of the revolution than that portrayed in history books. We are given an account of the changes and the experiences in the private sphere. We witness the changes and the relations within the family before and after the revolution. Due to the complexities of adjusting to a new life in the public sphere, the domestic sphere is also significantly affected by the revolution. Besides the social and political changes that the transformation period witnessed, the memoir presents the reader with the inner dynamics and the changes of the private realm. In the spirit of the Orwellian theme of constant surveillance, the new regime uses the devotion of adherents to infiltrate community life and thus maximise the

potential of catching religious dissidents (Satrapi 2003a: 105-110). In the name of the war the new regime pledges itself to exterminate the enemies within; the result is that opponents of the regime are easily arrested and punished. Satrapi gives accounts of the punishments inflicted for offences such as wearing western brand clothes, and not dressing according to the law (Satrapi 2003a: 133-134). Intermittently, we observe that the struggles are the same as those experienced in the Shah period: the lack of transparency in the political institutions remains unchanged.

Struggle for Rights and Freedom

Both before and after the Revolution the struggle for rights and freedom is a prominent element. During the revolutionary process, different groups coming from different backgrounds and belonging to different parties merged under the cause of democracy and freedom. Their purpose was to topple the dictatorial rule of the Shah. In terms of women's rights, there were many reforms made during the Shah period — for example the family laws on polygamy and divorce — however, they were very limited in content. Concerning the gender issues, the Shah was convinced that it was efficacious both in terms of economy and his modern image to bring women into the labour force. Independent women's organisations united under the name Iranian Women's Organization, which was given the patronage of Princess Ashraf. The foundation of this organisation triggered the Family Protection Law in 1967, which was later augmented in 1975. The law was not totally egalitarian or universally applied; however, it is seen as an important step toward changing the unequal treatment of the sexes. With the new law, female-initiated divorce became possible and after 1975 revisions, it also gave women a limited right to child custody (Keddie 2003: 167). On the other hand, the Shah's attitude towards women's rights was also criticized by many scholars. Najmabadi defines, "[a]ll women's initiatives, even of a charitable nature, had to be absorbed and controlled centrally by the state — the sole authority to decide the timing of initiative" (Najmabadi 1991: 60). Likewise, she also argues Ashraf Pahlavi's leading the Women's Organizations as an extension of this attitude. Thus, the reform programs made for women's emancipation and improvement of the social status were seen as an extension of the Pahlavi dynasty's window dressing procedure for the international arena and could not get the necessary support from the Iranian society.

However, as Tabari states, with the revolution "many of these women had, in fact, participated in the movement to overthrow the Shah's regime with the expectation that new arenas of women's rights and women's participation in social, political, and economic life would be opened. To their horror, from the outset they faced reversals not advances" (Tabari 1986: 350). Satrapi shows that both before and after the revolution there were protests "for and against the veil" (Satrapi 2003a: 5). In these protests, people were looking for a freer culture for their personal choices. Later, after the foundation of the Islamic republic in *Persepolis 2*, we see the struggles of the people who are fighting for more freedom in the public space (Satrapi 2003b: 148). In both periods we are given accounts of the dissatisfaction of the people with the status quo and their ongoing struggles for more rights.

Ideological Questioning and the Changes in the Public Space

These elements later cause an ideological restlessness among the Iranians who rise up against the Shah regime and this emerges as another theme in the graphic novel. People who have merged under the cause to overthrow the Shah regime start questioning the new regime as it turns into an Islamic Republic. Satrapi's memoir provides us with a window through which to gain a glimpse of the ongoing discussions about the protests and the new regime via the nightly discussions in Satrapi's household. The intellectuals question the union of the Islamists and the Marxists and speculate on the outcome (Satrapi 2003a: 62). The theme of growing ideological uncertainty is a common element in the portrayal of the post-revolutionary process in Iran in memoirs depicting the same period (see Dabashi 1993 and Paköz 2007).

The reshaping of the public space after the revolution is highlighted as a significant theme in *Persepolis*. During the political power struggle and ensuing state reform of the revolution Iran experienced a "reshaping of the public space". According to Farhi, this can also be called the closure of the public space, and was based on three principles: "clerical guardianship, representations of female modesty, and the cult of martyrdom" (Farhi 2001: 61). Clerical guardianship was among the most important innovations of the Islamic Republic, it was based on the clerics' claim to direct rule. Under this principle, the guardian council was given the right to veto anything that was against the Islamic codes. Through this facility, diversity of opinion and action is eliminated. Women, under the clerical guardianship, are shown as the bearers of culture, which must be protected by the watchful eyes of the state. The women are depicted as the primary element of cultural preservation and the new state ideology as the leaders are in search of "authenticity and cultural revival" (Farhi 2001: 66). These new rules are touched upon in Satrapi's memoir. With farcical tone Satrapi questions the eligibility of the codes brought into the lives of the Iranians. She is of the same opinion as Farhi (2001: 66) who argues that "[b]ehaviour, appearance, and range of activities, as well as public speech about women, came to be defined and regulated by the political and cultural objectives of various political movements, the state and the leadership." The veil became a license to enter into the public space. Satrapi points out on the first day of university the administration organise a lecture with the theme of "moral and religious conduct" which points out the young ladies should not behave "loosely", and that they should watch their behaviours and clothes. The long headscarf and hiding all women's hair is regarded as one of the important elements of these rules (Satrapi 2003b: 142). Therefore, women should behave and dress according to the new codes in order to "be" in the public space. Hence, women are transformed into someone else from their own selves while they are in the public space.

Women Becoming Invisible

As an extension of the reshaping of the public space, women under the veil have become invisible. As Satrapi states in her graphic memoir, even little children were subject to separation: "In 1979, we were in a religious school/ Where boys and girls were together. / And suddenly in 1980/ … / We found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends" (Satrapi 2003a: 4). Moreover, at the very beginning of her memoir Satrapi draws a picture of herself and her classmates indistinguishable from each other within the confines of the veil. She draws herself to the far left, only half visible, as if to emphasise the invisibility and

the marginality of women in her country (Satrapi 2003a: 3). Women's invisibility is crystallized by their loss of freedom to be truly themselves in the public space. They must behave as an "embodiment of correct values" which requires them to cover their bodies and act within the expected patterns thus causing their real selves to become invisible. The public areas are separated for men and women in everywhere: in restaurants, buses, and schools.

The Changes in the Neighbourhoods

The feelings, thoughts and behaviour of people are inevitably affected by this atmosphere. In *Persepolis*, after the revolution, we see a great change in structure of behaviours and in family neighbourhoods. The pressure imposed on and by society is emphasised; the community forces supporters of the Marxist reforms to become strict adherents of the Islamic regime or at least to behave as if they are supporting the new regime (Satrapi 2003a: 75). Women who once wore mini-skirts might turn into informers for the new regime under the Islamic hejab. The masses were expected to become supporters of a completely different regime in a relatively short period of time. Satrapi uses this to question the forgetfulness of the people. She seems to be criticising the psychology of the masses and the unpredictable consequences that the collective psychology might bring to bear on the lives of the whole nation.

Usage of Public Myths and Symbols

As mentioned in Chelkowski and Dabashi's work (1999: 6), there is "the massive orchestration of the public myths" and the usage of "collective symbols" involved in the making of the Islamic Revolution and the period following it, and Satrapi utilises such themes in her memoir. The use of these myths and symbols, which strengthened the discourses of the new republican regime, also helped it to reshape the public space. In this process the 'cult of martyrdom' is a prominent symbol. In *Persepolis 2*, while narrating the story of her application to the faculty of graphic arts during the Islamic Republic, Satrapi describes the details of the picture she has drawn. She states:

> copying a photo of Michelangelo's 'la pieta' about twenty times, on that day, [during examination] I reproduced it by putting a black chador on Mary's head, an army uniform on Jesus, and then I added two tulips, symbols of the martyrs, on either side so there would be no confusion. (Satrapi 2003b: 127)

Having penetrated every mechanism of the state, the cult of martyrdom can be counted among the discourses used to consolidate the power of the revolutionaries. Using the martyrdom myth made it easier for the revolutionaries to attract the attention of the masses. At one point in her memoir, Satrapi describes a group of people carrying a dead body shouting "here is another martyr" as they chant revolutionary slogans, but it is later revealed that the person had died of cancer. Likewise, many people killed by the Shah are counted and celebrated as martyrs of the revolution. The revolutionaries continued using the same rhetoric after the revolution and during the Iraqi war to secure their followers and to accelerate the implementation of the new rules. Çalışlar and Çalışlar believe that the war and the martyr ideology agitated the use of the veil. According to them, this ideology made it easier for the regime to push the black dress and the use of hejab for women, which are

not actually in the Islamic code. “In order not to behave against the martyrs” so, the regime could go on with its strict rules easily (Çalışlar & Çalışlar 2004: 49).

Censorship

Censorship stands out as another significant issue in this graphic novel. Its presence is seen both before and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and is shown as applying in every facet of life. Satrapi gives an illustrative account of the tortures and imprisonments during the Shah period. She then presents examples of the people’s liberation movements, which has a left-leaning political view, a short while before the Islamic Republic is declared (Satrapi 2003a, p. 47). Here, she gives examples from the stories of her father’s friends who were arrested under the Shah Regime because of their leftist political views. One of them states: “They whipped me with thick electric cables so much that this looks like anything but a foot/ Not to mention putting out their cigarettes on our backs and thighs” (Satrapi 2003a: 51).

Censorship as a theme emerges again after the Islamic Republic is founded; Satrapi argues that, in general, anything that could be taken as a symbol of the west was forbidden under the Islamic Republic’s codes. She states she could no longer purchase foreign music albums, and if caught in possession of such items, the Islamic guards were sanctioned to arrest her on the charge of acting in an anti-revolutionary way (Satrapi 2003a: 133). The ways in which the citizens attempt to transgress the rules or at the very least not give up trying are also acknowledged in the graphic novel. Both before and after the revolution, people demonstrate their efforts to escape from the restrictions imposed on their daily lives. As Jane Howard also points out, “social life in Iran has always been centred on family parties — birthdays, weddings, funerals, New Year’s holidays and religious feast days. However, there is still an urge to get out and about, to meet new people, to go out at night” (Howard 2002: 179) After the revolution obvious changes are made with regard to prohibitions on the cultural activities in the public sphere; in the private sphere, however, families attempt to continue their social activities despite the restrictions. Regardless of the many restrictions put on the entertainment arena, it is recounted that most people continue with their way of living, but that this is done secretly behind the walls. Marjane, as a young girl, engages in illicit behaviour merely to purchase the music CD that she desires (Satrapi 2003a: 132). *Persepolis* gives a positive account of life going on regardless of the restrictions. Satrapi states:

> in spite of all the dangers, the parties went on. ‘Without them it wouldn’t be psychologically bearable,’ some said. ‘Without parties we might as well just bury ourselves now.’ added the others. My uncle invited us to his house to celebrate the birth of my cousin. Everyone was there. Even grandma was dancing (Satrapi 2003a: 106)

Satrapi manages to blend serious historical elements within the course of the story without betraying her humorous tone. She refers to the liberalisation efforts of the Shah and his last attempts at staying in power. By the mid-1970s, it became impossible for the Shah to continue the rule of his dynasty in the same restrictive way, and so a liberalisation of his regime was implemented. Chehabi points out that a large-scale campaign commenced, stating the determination of the Shah’s regime to introduce this liberalisation policy. His

officials gave speeches promoting efforts for democratisation and the improvement on human rights and justice. As a consequence, during the period between 1976 and 1977 the regime released many political prisoners and criminals. Then in early 1977, the Shah started a program for further political liberalisation. He exchanged the Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveida for the technocrat Jamshid Amuzegar, and in one of his public speeches he declared: "We will have as much political freedom as the European democracies" (Chehabi 1990: 226). However, as Chehabi states (1990: 223-225), the Shah also increased the monopoly of the Rastakhiz party and prevented the creation of new parties. It can reasonably be stated that the liberalisation movement was not successful in opening up the political system. It can even be argued that it ended up making the Shah the sole ruler of the country and was an attempt to wipe away opposition to the regime and diversity in political thinking.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Disappointments and Alienation of the People

Revolution is undeniably the main theme of this book, but Satrapi has ambivalent feelings about the revolution. At the beginning of her memoir, she details the oppressive attitudes of the Shah regime. She devoted a large portion of *Persepolis* to describing the tortures and the pressures imposed on the people. With the revolution, everyone in the country is fighting for a better life and has laid their hopes on its success. However, after the declaration of the revolution, the punishments, killings and oppression continue in its wake, this time perpetuated by the new Islamic regime. Overall, the revolution is portrayed by Satrapi as a transient period with the movement, changing its ideologies, using agitations, symbols and morals, and religion to stabilise the new regime. She sees the revolution as a lost opportunity to change the unsatisfactory situation of the Shah's regime, one which ended in disappointment for most of the citizens.

Part of this disappointment is seen in the alienation of women from their society after the revolution. The new *sharia* rules placed men in centre at the social and political positions, and women as subjects of men. While at university, Satrapi comments on the clothing restrictions. She points to her male friends at the university and observes that they are wearing whatever they want, and then asks; "why is it that I, as a woman, am expected to feel nothing when watching these men with their clothes sculpted on but they, as men can get excited by two inches less of my head- scarf?" (Satrapi 2003: 143). She asserts that women are locked into expected patterns of behaviour which are defined by the patriarchy. It is as though women, while struggling to overthrow the monarchy, have entered into a new form of oppression. There has only been change in the expression of the codes.

Notkin approaches the same topic in a different way. In her commentary on Satrapi's memoir, she states that the writer also depicts her marginality in the book. She grows up as a "progressive during a fundamentalist takeover, as a woman in a man's world, as a rebellious teen in an environment where rebellion can be literally deathly" (Notkin 2003: 8). Within a highly conservative society, Satrapi feels like an outsider. However, she also feels like an outsider in Europe when she travelled there to get a better education and to be away from the war that has came out between Iran and Iraq in 1980. A similar feeling of alienation pervades her whole being when she returns to Tehran after finishing high school in Vienna. In Europe she has been forced between two extremes; after living in a very conservative

society she was introduced into marginal groups in Europe; her close friends were hippies and punks. But when she returns to the culture to which Satrapi had became acclimatized to her feelings this time clashes with the norms of the new republic, leaving her an outsider in her own native culture.

The theme of separation and exile has a prominent place in *Persepolis*. At the beginning of the novel, Satrapi tells the story of her family, particularly of her uncle running away from the current administration, as his Marxist tendencies are a threat to the Shah regime. Afterwards, we see the family's friends fleeing the coercion of the new regime. Likewise, Satrapi herself, aiming for a better future away from these restrictions, becomes an exile at the end of each of the books. In this context, *Persepolis* describes various forms and experiences of exile, elucidating the feelings of separation and of being alienated that are experienced by the writer and her acquaintances.

Reactions to *Persepolis*

Satrapi wrote and illustrated *Persepolis*. The visual aesthetic and language are minimalist, her figures are basic; however, she has adopted an effective style which imbues those simple figures with elaborate detail. As Theokas says, "[t]he fact that she is able to portray such a vast range of emotions with a few simple strokes of pen is impressive". The memoir offers a faithful picture of post-revolutionary Iran viewed with a humorous perspective. Notkin says "Satrapi's humour pervades it just as it might pervade a prose work on a similar subject. None of the humour is without its pointed commentary which often only makes it funnier" (Notkin 2003: 8). Satrapi depicts the sorrowful stories of her people in a satirical and ironic fashion — arguably a defence mechanism. In an interview with Daniel R. Epstein, Satrapi refers to her humorous tone throughout the books stating that life became so absurd for them at that time that it was impossible to live without laughing at it.

Critical reception of *Persepolis* was overall positive; the work is regarded as having "the intimacy of a memoir, the irresistibility of a comic book, and the political depth of a conflict between fundamentalism and democracy" (Steinem: nd). Satrapi has been praised for avoiding "black and white" simplicity when relating her arguments. She emphasises that the world is a complex place and Iran as a whole cannot be regarded as an axis of evil. In relating her experience of a *mullah* who treats her well, she highlights the mistake of trying to explain the conflicts in binary opposites; us and them, East and West, good and evil. She argues for a greater complexity: there are many grey areas (Epstein: nd). She reveals the inner dynamics of the issues and the experiences of the people to support her belief.

Some critics, however, argue that she does not give enough importance to momentous events of the period, citing as examples the U.S. embassy hostage crisis and the Rex Cinema Fire. However, narrating the course of the historical events is not her main intention. Otherwise, the reader who is given an account of history would be taken away from the impression of the private thoughts and feelings of the writer and the graphic novel would be more like a graphic documentary sheering away from the main intentions of the writer.

Hamid Dabashi (2006) levels his own indirect criticism of Satrapi in a broad comment on memoirs depicting the oppression of women stemming from the revolutionary and post-

revolutionary periods. He argues that these women were highly westernised with their education and their lifestyle in foreign countries, and lacked empathy with the underprivileged sections of their country. He labels these memoir writers as "comprador intellectuals" who legitimise America's imperial adventures. However, as Lopamudra (2007: 2) also indicates in her essay, "feminists of colour or the third world feminists have to shoulder the peculiar burden of speaking out against the oppressions of women in her society, while avoiding being labelled as a western feminist who privileges gender without being attentive to racial, ethnic and class issues". Although most of the memoirs do not seem to have feminist agenda, the issues they are dealing with are both familiar to feminists and clearly open new discussions for them.

Notwithstanding the political views of the Iranian memoir writers, the memoir booms after the revolution have drawn much attention to the Iranian Revolution and the experiences of Iranian women living abroad. Satrapi's book can be called both open to criticism and criticism-proof due to the expression of the narrative in graphic novel form. She takes advantage of the comic art using exaggerations and satirical perspective to discuss the political events and serious ideas. Moreover, unlike other memoirs in this period, this humorous element alleviates the harshness of her criticisms. As Lopamudra (2007: 5) explains; "[l]ike the figure of the fool in the Shakespearean tragedy, the graphic memoir form allows for serious and provocative commentary on contemporary society, without getting labelled as the political statement of the Iranian nationalism or feminism".

It can be argued that the medium of the graphic novel facilitated a greater freedom of expression for Satrapi. It also provided a vehicle through which Satrapi could show the "other" Iran, and the variety of people and diversity of thought in her country. This, in turn, contributes to the efforts that aim to overcome the stereotypical way of thinking about Iran in other countries, particularly in the West. *Persepolis*is in many ways a successful account of the revolution and the writer's experience of it, executed with a plain, unembellished drawing style that delivers an effective message. It raises awareness in its audiences of an important period of time in history and voices the similar experiences of many Iranians living in exile.

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