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Reversing the Photograph in Persepolis: Metafiction, Marxism, and the Transcience of Tradition

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REVERSING THE PHOTOGRAPH IN *PERSEPOLIS*:
METAFICTION, MARXISM, AND THE TRANSCIENCE OF TRADITION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Lauren E. Rizzuto
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Accepted by:
Dr. Michelle Martin, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* together illustrate the growth of an Iranian girl before, during, and after the Islamic Revolution; unlike other historical memoirs, however, Satrapi's books are written entirely in comic strips. Because the author privileges the text-and-image delivery of comics, a genre usually targeted toward adolescents, rather than the ostensibly objective nature of the history book to convey both her family's and her nation's history, *Persepolis* does not only refute the authority of a Westernized historical record but also challenges the traditional ways in which we learn history. As an author and an artist, Satrapi bridges generational, cultural, and historical barriers to tell a story that secures the graphic novel's place as a genre worthy of literary scholarship, redefines history, and constructs the riveting coming-of-age of a Marxist, marginalized individual engaged with her own, internal revolution.

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CHAPTER 1

A History in Pictures: Getting Graphic with *Persepolis*

Marjane Satrapi's two-volume work *Persepolis* is the autobiography, written as a graphic novel, of an Iranian girl growing up against the backdrop of the Islamic Revolution. Graphic novels belong to the "comix," or comics, genre because they derive from comic strips, and authors of graphic novels will often refer to their works as comics. Critics and authors alike have applied the term "graphic novel" to these comic books for several very different reasons: their presentation usually resembles cartoons, or comics; they are longer in length than the typical comic book (both *Persepolis* books are over 100 pages); and they delve into supposedly more literarily credible subjects, such as history. These varied justifications become problematic, however, when we consider one significant question these qualifications raise: in regards to the graphic novel's place within literary scholarship, what is more important, content or form? For example, prior to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which is an autobiographical and biographical Holocaust narrative in graphic novel format, comics were not really considered a genre capable of serious literary work; even now, many readers would disregard the heavy subject matter of the *Persepolis* books and instead would argue that they lack historical authenticity because they are written in cartoons. Furthermore, in a Western society whose pop culture is incessantly becoming more visual, literary critics hesitate to defend graphic novels' scholarly substance because they, unlike other "serious" text-dependent literature, are largely visual constructions. Thus, even though *Persepolis* offers unprecedented insight into the lives of marginalized Iranians during the Islamic Revolution, both scholars and readers may snub Satrapi's work simply because it belongs to the comics genre.

And yet there is no doubt that both *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and its sequel *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* tell a serious story; the books examine a breadth of topics, including war, transcultural identity, Marxism, a selective tradition of history, and gender expectations. Thus, in addition to comics, critics tout Satrapi's novels as belonging to many genres, including YA fiction, autobiographical (and in some parts, biographical) memoir, *Bildungsroman*, and history book. Their various classifications complicate the very notion of "genre" itself; for example, two of these distinctions—memoir and history book—concern truth, or at least our perception of it, but the criteria for each differs considerably. Since we assume that the memoir relies upon the subjective recollection of the narrator, we have less difficulty privileging individual experience over acknowledged events. This is not the case with the history book, a document containing agreed-upon facts and dates; though we may admit that history is more often written by those in power, we still largely attribute the history book's credibility to its objectivity. Therefore, though readers may search for truth in both, blurring the lines may result in doubt about the work's credibility in either form; because the two-volume¹ *Persepolis* story is simultaneously memoir and history book, it risks being neither—an additional obstacle for Satrapi to confront since mainstream readers have not exactly embraced the graphic novel as a form of worthy literature.

In 1992, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* won a special Pulitzer Prize for its portrayal of the Holocaust in cat-and-mouse form, and ever since, the comics-inspired genre has experienced an ongoing transitional status from pop cultural product to serious literary work. I find a similar classification dilemma in the *Persepolis* books,

¹ Although *Persepolis* was published in two volumes when it was published in the United States, its original publication in France included four segments. Since I have used the United States publications in my study, however, my parenthetical citations will indicate either "*Persepolis*" or "*Return*."

which attempt to convey the antecedent and aftermath of a less-examined holocaust, the Islamic Revolution. Whereas the devastating effects of World War II and Nazism have long penetrated Children's and Adolescent Literature, Satrapi's book remains singular in its subject matter: very few books exist for youthful audiences that portray the contemporary Middle East, and the *Persepolis* books are the first to feature a female, feminist, Iranian protagonist in graphic novels. Thus, because Satrapi's work, like Spiegelman's, illuminates a most traumatic chunk of history in a genre that, according to many critics, retains the "shallow" feel of comic books, my thesis will essentially address why Satrapi chose to write her nation's story in a graphic novel, how her choice has impacted both comix and adolescent literature, and most significantly, the *Persepolis* books' ability to change the ways we traditionally understand history.

The overarching purpose of my study is not, then, merely to discern between fiction and truth in the *Persepolis* novels' account of Iranian history; rather, I am more specifically interested in the ways Satrapi chooses to write history. Because *Persepolis* and *Return* are written in comic strips, readers consequently receive historical information in a combination of text and pictures. Unlike other historical accounts, however, Satrapi's work does not seek to tell its story from an objective viewpoint; it is the autobiography of Marjane Satrapi, told through the eyes of Marji, her cartoon childhood self. More importantly, it is the story of a marginalized individual: Marji begins her story not only as a child but also a female child with radical political beliefs for the time *and* for her age. From the first few pages, readers understand that Marji is not exactly a traditional Iranian girl, and her Marxist family is "very modern and avant-garde" (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 6), which contrasts significantly with the common Western perception of Islamic fundamentalism. And if that were not enough to heap onto the pile

of building skepticism, Satrapi uses ironic humor throughout both books while describing the horrifying effects of the Islamic Revolution.

Like Satrapi herself, the *Persepolis* books emerge as hybrid, and arguably marginal, constructions. The set comes to the United States as a transcultural text—first written in French by an Iranian who publishes her work for a French audience, and then translated into English—in the unconventional, text-and-image format of the graphic novel. Additionally, its atypical protagonist gives rise to questions of narrator reliability and historical accuracy. Satrapi anticipates some objections to her work, as she writes in the introduction to the first volume:

[T]his old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists. (introduction, n.pag.)

From a critic's perspective, it seems that *Persepolis* and *Return* urge a post-colonial reading of our preconceptions regarding the Middle East: the texts resist a Western, and arguably imperial, viewpoint by interrogating our Western ideas of an "official," unbiased version of history; simply put, by writing her history in a graphic novel, Satrapi refutes the absolute authority of any historical record while simultaneously challenging the traditional ways (such as history books and photographs) we learn history. Still, one may question Satrapi's choice of using the graphic novel to portray her own history, especially considering its somewhat ephemeral status as a recently-taken-seriously product of pop culture. Scholars Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys, for instance, suggest

that authors using the term “graphic novel” are merely “attempt[ing] to rescue comics from their critical neglect,” a neglect largely stemming from comics’ hybrid, cross-cultural construction of both text and image (255). What Frey and Noys are implying, then, is that the genre is still considered a controversial format for works of literary and cultural importance, even by comics’ creators. For Satrapi, the value most obviously at stake is the preserved integrity of the Iranian people, but the use of a graphic novel may weaken her argument’s credibility.

Oddly enough, I think that it is precisely Satrapi’s utilization of the graphic novel, a literary format whose artistic construction is more blatantly subjective and interpretive than that of a nonfiction history book, which provides historical authenticity to her story. As graphic memoirs, *Persepolis* and *Return* invite readers to interact with the text and sympathize with its characters, which is a quality rarely present in historical nonfiction; in addition, Satrapi uses irony in her novels’ text-and-image delivery, thus asking readers to co-author the story as they make sense of the history they are learning. In his critical work *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children’s Pictures*, Perry Nodelman argues, “Irony occurs in literature when we know something more and something different from what we are being told. We are aware that the words we are reading are incomplete” (223). Thus, the ironic delivery bestows authority upon the reader as she or he decides what is real, and what is not; often, the drawings reveal striking dysfunction in their oppositional relationship to the text. Moreover, Satrapi’s choice to tell her story through the eyes of an individual child signifies the ignorance and innocence of accepting a single version of history as “truth,” and the distinctive illustrative style of the novels complement this concept. Satrapi creates her art in a simplistic, black-and-white style that is reminiscent of woodcuts to achieve what cartoonist and comics theorist Scott

McCloud has identified as “amplification through simplification” (30); though there are times when the illustrative style becomes slightly more realistic, such as when Satrapi emphasizes a particular tragic occurrence, it is clear that she is engaging the reader in an empathetic relationship with the text. Therefore, Satrapi’s *Persepolis* books evoke more questions than they answer through their subjective appeal, thus causing readers to question “objective” authority within history books and instead consider history from the emotional experience of an individual.

* * *

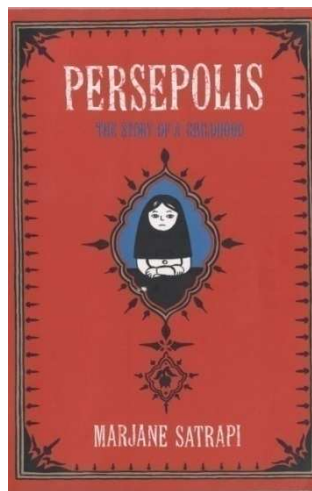


Fig. 1.1. Cover of *Persepolis*, first volume.

Like Satrapi herself, *Persepolis* and *Return* are a hybrid of merging cultures and associated values as well as a problematic *Bildungsroman* of an Iranian girl. In his article “A Graphic Self,” Rocio Davis considers Satrapi’s choice of title: “By giving her memoir Iran’s historical name, she posits the text as a doubled narrative of memory—that of a country and a childhood lost, as well as the intricate connection between the two” (272). Indeed, the first volume’s full title is *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, and the cover of the novel succeeds in capturing this juxtaposition: like any child, Marji does grow, but she does so by separating herself from what has become a detrimental

cultural identity (see Fig. 1.1). Beneath the subtitle, the cover features Satrapi’s younger, cartoon self, an illustration that will again appear in the first frame of the first page of the novel (Satrapi 3). Staring directly out at the implied viewer, Marji—as she is called in the novel—wears a stern expression; though she is supposedly ten years old, the girl exhibits no signs of innocence or lightheartedness. She has crossed her arms, and her mouth tilts slightly down in a look of definite disapproval. Most significantly, the child in the picture dons “the veil,” a symbol that Westerners synonymously identify with Islam and its usually negative stereotypes, and she looks out from an enclosed space, indicating an imprisoned state. Therefore, despite the title’s promise of “childhood,” the cover reveals a situation starkly different from our Euro-American notions of childhood; the girl on the cover most clearly expresses discontent, an emotion that is more often associated with adult disillusionment and less often with childhood innocence.



Fig. 1.2. The Veil.

The cover’s ostensible incongruence between text and illustration is no singular occurrence; the very first page of the novel supplies this discrepancy and more (see Fig. 1.2). While the first frame replicates the cover’s image, the second frame features four

girls, who appear to be the same age, in the same position as Marji. The text reads, “And this is a class photo. I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me. From left to right: Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, Minna” (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 3). Because the reader knows that the drawing cannot possibly be “a class photo” in the way we understand camera-taken photos, the text seems immediately to contradict the visuals. The book further confounds the reader by compounding the Islamic Revolution and humor in its discussion of the veil, a “fashion statement” that visually accentuates the synonymous relationship between government and religion. The bottom frame says, “We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to,” and the illustration demonstrates the children’s confusion about having to participate in a religious ritual beyond their understanding. In the picture’s background, one child (who is wearing the veil) strangles her friend (who is not wearing the veil) while saying “Execution in the name of freedom,” an expression that demonstrates the hypocrisy of terrorism while denoting the naïveté of children in the midst of war. Meanwhile, two more children in the lower right corner are using the veil as reins for a horse. Later on, Marji elaborates on her own inner confusion: “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” (6). Knowing that readers have likely approached this book with mixed anticipations, Satrapi has deliberately displayed Marji’s blurred sense of self in an effort to assure us that it’s okay to be confused—in both childhood and adulthood; thus, Satrapi has chosen her young narrator for the specific purpose of fostering a bond between the readers and an unfamiliar text. This is a point Amy Malek has likewise identified in her article “Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production”: “Using a child’s perspective, both visually and verbally, to speak about a time of Iranian history that was so entrenched in adult

situations—revolution, war, and cultural upheaval—provides a universal appeal that is undeniably captivating” (371). The voice of a child in an adolescent text allows us to understand Marji’s inexperience while simultaneously acknowledging our own.

And yet it is important to note that Marji’s voice is not really a child’s perspective but an adult’s retrospective look on a time past. Satrapi clearly demonstrates this noteworthy difference in a chapter entitled “The Key.” Mrs. Nasrine, the Satrapi family’s maid, is particularly distressed by a plastic, gold-painted key she has found in her fourteen-year-old son’s possession. When Marji’s mother asks the maid about its meaning, Mrs. Nasrine sobs, “They gave this to my son at school. They told the boys that if they went to war and were lucky enough to die, this key would get them into heaven” (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 99). Immediately following this episode, Marji’s mother asks a family member—who is serving in the military—what this key could possibly mean for the fates of children. He replies:

It’s awful. Every day I see buses full of kids arriving. They come from the poor areas, you can tell . . . First they convince them that the afterlife is even better than Disneyland, then they put them in a trance with all their songs . . . It’s nuts! They hypnotize them and just toss them into battle.

Absolute carnage. (101)

One would suppose that after such heavy material, the chapter would end on a particularly grave note, and it does, to some extent (see Fig. 1.3). The top half of the chapter’s final page, in a far more realistic image than readers would expect given the prior nature of Satrapi’s illustrations, shows dark, shadowy outlines of children being blown up on the minefields.

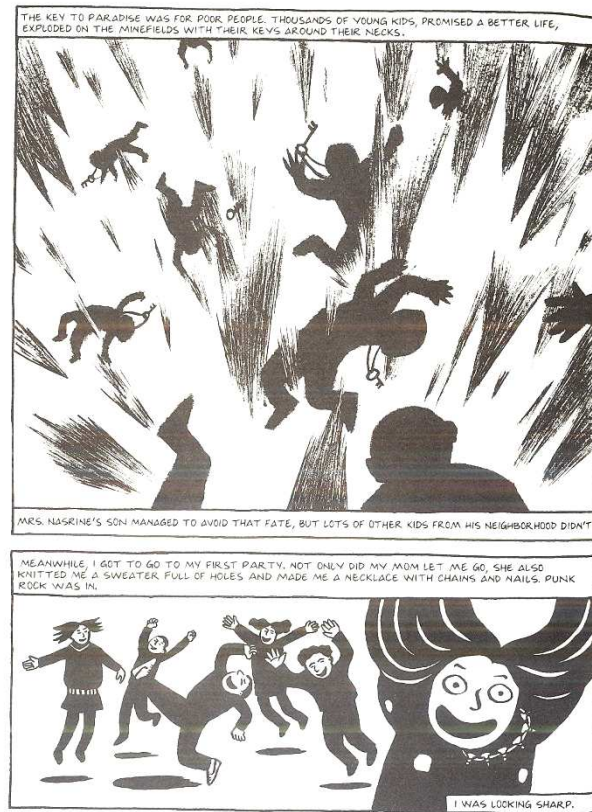


Fig. 1.3. The Key.

The keys around their necks are especially visible. Below this frame, however, are children at a party, laughing and dancing, with Marji in the foreground. The positions of the dancing children easily parallel the flimsy shapes destroyed by the mines, and Marji's necklace of "chains and nails" starkly contrasts with the dangling keys in the above picture (102). She says, "I was looking sharp," a possible pun on the nails' pointed ends while drawing attention to Marji's reproachable self-centeredness. Again, the adult Satrapi is seeking reader empathy, this time in the form of mutual self-disgust; she seems to be saying, "Don't pity me. Like you, I was once young and self-consumed—and completely dismissive of the world's horrors." Satrapi's text-and-visual narrative condemns ignorance while advocating change—a message only strengthened by the graphic novel's construction.

It is important to recognize that the ironic pairing of these two dramatically different images functions quite differently from the way a photograph would depict the same awful situation in a history book. Although the photographer, to some degree, manipulates the photo's content, we largely rely upon photography for its assertion of "real life." Satrapi, as the artist and author, exercises much more imaginative control in the graphic novel—a fact that has led to skepticism about the novel's credibility as an accurate historical narrative. Satrapi combats this objection through self-deprecation, a motif seen in other autobiographical graphic novels such as Spiegelman's *Maus*. Lawrence Langer notes this technique in his essay "Two Holocaust Voices," attributing Vladek's—Art Spiegelman's father's—repulsive racism and miserly personality to Spiegelman's need to write truth: "Because . . . Spiegelman's Vladek [is] innocent, victimized by atrocities not of [his] own making, we instinctively feel pity for [him], though [his creator is] careful to burden [him] with enough distasteful features to repel readers even as they are attracted. Heroes and heroines belong to romantic legend, not Holocaust reality" (224). As if to emphasize the reality of the devastating circumstances, Satrapi has given the illustration new dimension by drawing the explosions with shaded lines and points; readers recognize the people as people merely because of their shapes, for their outlines are fuzzy, and no facial features are visible. Also, the figures in the above frame seem to be thrown in midair, for there is neither ground nor shadows on the ground to indicate otherwise. It is truly an illustration of "absolute carnage" (Satrapi 101). The children on the bottom frame, in contrast, are jumping in positions that are very similar in terms of thrown-about limbs, but there is definite ground beneath them (as indicated by the oval-shaped shadows beneath their figures). Their faces express smiles and laughter for, unlike the unfortunate children above, their out-of-control

dynamic is well within their control. Furthermore, the images on the bottom revert to the previous style of drawing throughout the text: rounded lines, cartoonish figures, and sharp definition due to the black-and-white drawing (with no shading whatsoever).



Fig. 1.4. Burning theatre.

Given that the bottom illustration seems much more consistent with the style of the novel thus far than does the upper, readers may question why Satrapi chose to use a different style. As Nodelman points out, “Similar shapes in groups create patterns. . . . But they also create an overall effect of unified calm. On the other hand, conflicting sets of differing patterns . . . create tensions with each other that are active and disruptive” (73). This is an interesting point if we consider that the first time Satrapi deviates from the text’s pattern, the narrator is describing another act of “absolute carnage” (see Fig.1.4). Earlier in the novel, Marji’s father relays a story to his wife about the staged

deaths of 400 citizens trapped in a burning theatre (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 15). Also in this illustration, the rounded shapes and usual pattern of the novel are broken by an enlarged image of horror. Again, the people in the frame have no faces or expressions as they run to the locked exit door; their spirits soar into the air with skulls for faces, and every moving figure in the picture resembles the uncontrollable blaze of the fire. The only objects in the drawing that maintain the previous style are the chairs and the exit doors, which are notably the only inanimate objects in the illustration. Even though both the image of the fire and the image of the mine explosions are incredibly frightening because of their subject matter alone, their deviance from the norm adds a particular shock value to the scene.

The same is true of a frame, much later in the book, that illustrates the effects of a bombing on Marji's street, a bombing that kills the Satrapi family's neighbors, the Baba-Levys (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 142). Marji is fourteen now, and her reaction to tragedy differs considerably from before (see Fig. 1.5). Satrapi's drawings of the bombed house are similar to the earlier shaded drawing of the mine explosions, but Marji and her mother—who are walking past the house—appear in their typical forms, which indicates the constancy of the characters even if the circumstances are changing. In a manner quite unlike her childish, egocentric reaction to the mine explosions, Marji tells the readers what she sees as she walks past the rubble: “I saw a turquoise bracelet. It was Neda's. Her aunt had given it to her for her fourteenth birthday . . . The bracelet was still attached to . . . I don't know what . . . No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger” (142). The bracelet itself is clearly discernible in the illustration; Satrapi deliberately brings attention to it by drawing it in the same bold, smoothly rounded style of the characters' figures and by accentuating it with stress lines to

indicate its brightness. Because of these differences from the rest of the shadowed destruction, readers understand the relevance of this singular, tiny object: it is an inconsequential accessory on a human being, but after the bombing, it is the only evidence of human life—and death.

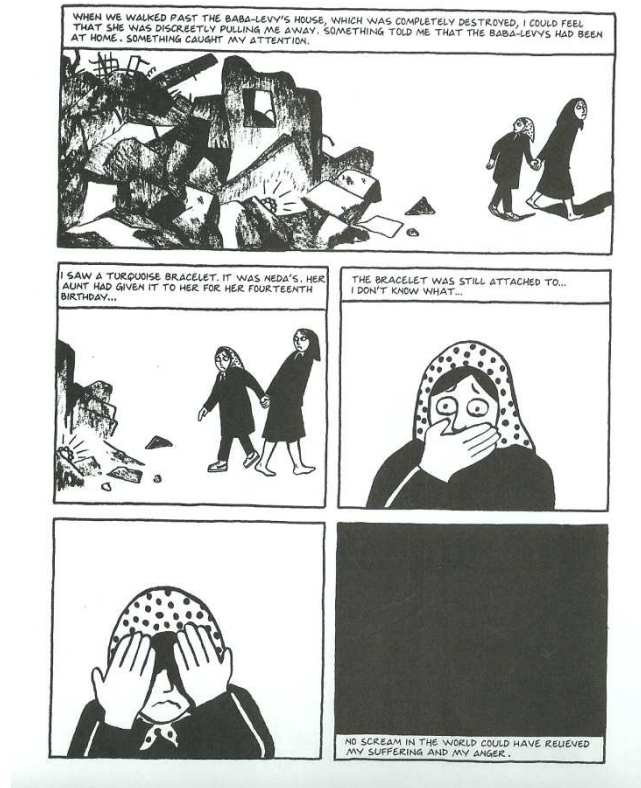


Fig. 1.5. The street bombing.

Satrapi's concentration on the bracelet, followed by her silent scream, signifies a difference in Marji's reaction to tragedy. Just previously, Marji draws attention to her maturity by lighting her first cigarette, explicitly stating, "With this first cigarette, I kissed childhood goodbye. Now I was a grown-up" (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 117). Thus, when her street is bombed, Marji does not openly yell her indignation or find release in a good time—here, her screams remain unheard and unseen, if she screams at all. There is no dialogue, only introspection, and Satrapi further emphasizes her speechlessness by first

drawing Marji with her hand covering her mouth and her eyes filled with tears, followed by Marji with her hands covering her face, and finally a completely black frame. Her reaction contrasts significantly with her earlier reactions to the fire incident in the theatre. After she overhears her parents talking about the fire, Marji forcefully tells her parents, “I want to come with you tomorrow! . . . To demonstrate on the street! I am sick and tired of doing it in the garden” (16-17). At the age of ten, she is unaware of the consequences of anarchy; she imitates the actions of revolutionaries in her family’s garden—which serves as a place of confinement for children—and so, with the invincible perspective of a child, equates it with the dangerous reality. Later, both Marji’s recollection of the mine explosion and her first party at the age of twelve again demonstrate a naïve sense of invincibility (102); they additionally indicate the feelings of self-centeredness that come with childhood and perseveres through adolescence. Her response to Neda Baba-Levy’s death is quite different, especially considering that she is not very emotionally invested prior: “[The Baba-Levys’] daughter Neda was a quiet girl who didn’t play much, but we would talk about romance from time to time” (137). Her response, “No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger,” communicates that she is now mature enough to understand the cost of revolution.

* * *

One likely result of Marji’s maturation along the text’s progression is that readers will mature with her. In the beginning of the work, readers understand that Marji is a child, and so she thinks in a fairly ignorant way; in her privileged, ten-year-old experience, torture and death are merely games, and being a prophet has little to do with the aspects of saving humanity from certain destruction—or even with religion—and more to do with assuaging her grandmother’s pain. In the earlier instance of the burning

theatre, the juxtaposition of death and a good time indicates her maturing awareness within uncontrollable circumstances: life goes on. It is important to note that Satrapi does not condemn Marji for her insensitivity, nor does she attempt to persuade her readers to feel indignant at Marji's egocentricity; rather, Satrapi intentionally creates Marji as a flawed character, giving a sense of honesty to the text. Malek explains why such candor is integral to the *Persepolis* novels' international appeal:

Though often in the background of her story, these details add to her expressive characters and charming narrative to allow readers to successfully allo-identify with Satrapi and her family. This ability to relate oneself across borders real or imaginary . . . is a key element of *Persepolis* that is absolutely key to its broad success. This method allows the reader to imagine visual representations of Iran and Iranians while also creating affinity towards Satrapi's family, empathy with her exilic depression [in *Return*], and frustration at her disappointments. (372)

Perhaps it is "these details" which have permitted Satrapi to do with a graphic memoir what a photograph cannot. Though the two mediums work to serve the same purpose--the preservation of memory--they differ considerably in their presentation of memory. A photograph is an immediate reflection of a moment, but more significantly the *reality* of that moment, in time. *Persepolis'* illustrations, on the other hand, are more refractions than reflections; Satrapi understands her readers' expectations and thus relays her information through ironic retrospection.

In an interview with Dave Weich, Satrapi explained why comics are an appropriate medium in which to tell her story:

Image is an international language. The first writing of the human being was drawing, not writing. That appeared much before the alphabet. And when you draw a situation—someone is scared or angry or happy—it means the same thing in all cultures. . . . There’s something direct about the image. Also, it is more accessible. People don’t take it so seriously.

It is strange that Satrapi has chosen a not-taken-seriously format in which to tell a serious story, but her choice forces us to reconsider the adequacy of the traditional historical record. In particular, Satrapi’s metafictional integration of text and image enables readers to understand that while this is a historical narrative, it is also the *Bildungsroman* of an individual and thus relies upon personal experience—as do all historical accounts, whether openly autobiographical or “objectively” biographical. Furthermore, through the dual chronicle of the devolution, so to speak, of Iran, and the evolution of an impulsive, imaginative girl into a reflective, politically-minded young woman, uninformed readers engage with *Persepolis* through the eyes of inexperience; at the novel’s end, readers feel as if they, too, have grown.

CHAPTER 2

“So you don’t see me”: Reversing the Photograph

The historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

-T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”

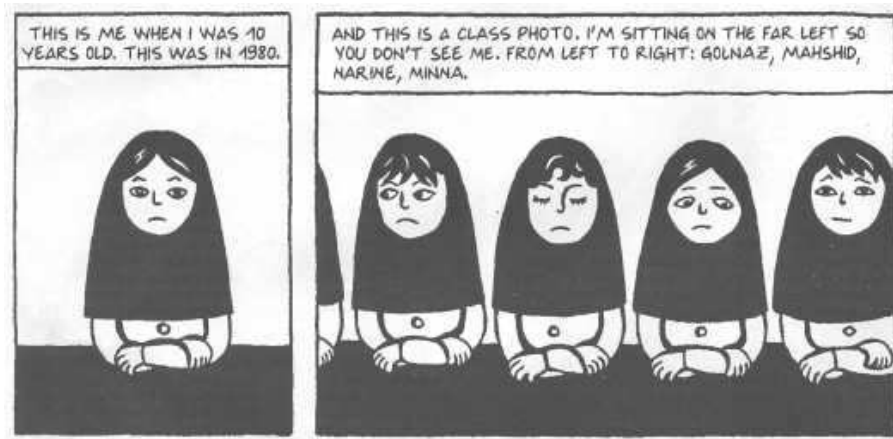


Fig. 2.1. Class photo.

In the first book, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Satrapi begins her story with a photograph, a visual symbol we use to document history; given that the book is a *graphic* novel, however, and that the photograph is drawn and not camera-taken, Satrapi’s authorial decision becomes problematic when we consider the book’s implications of historical accuracy. On the very first page, staring directly out at the implied viewer, Marji—the text’s narrator, protagonist, and Satrapi’s autobiographical cartoon self—crosses her arms while wearing a stern expression devoid of childhood innocence or lightheartedness (see Fig. 2.1). The text reads, “This is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980” (3). It is at this time that Marji directly experiences the effects of the Islamic Revolution, and indeed, the title of the initial chapter is “The Veil.” Furthermore, the child in the picture is wearing the veil, a wardrobe item that many

Westerners may stereotype as a primary artifact of the Islamic faith; though Satrapi has opened her novel with the intention of unveiling and then dispelling a Westernized version of Iranian history, she also recognizes Western society's need for intercultural familiarity. The narration continues, "And this is a class photo. I'm sitting on the far left so you don't see me" (3). Except for its comics strip presentation, the second frame reads very much like a class photo from an Euro-American school—the students are sitting in a row, their appearances are similar if not nearly identical, and Satrapi lists their names "from left to right," which implies some sort of organizational standard. These familiar symbols help to assert the historical authenticity of Satrapi's story, even if she alters their appearance by telling her story in comics. Her employment of the "photograph" especially emphasizes her novel's need to be understood as a documentation of history and, furthermore, reality.

And yet because readers understand that the simplistic woodcut-style drawing cannot possibly be "a class photo" in the same way that they traditionally perceive history outside of the comix domain, readers can likewise assume that Satrapi's agenda is not what it may appear to be. Satrapi's metaphorical photograph provocatively juxtaposes history with comics, thus exposing the fictional nature of historical "truth" by presenting history in an artistic format. In this way, the graphic novel is at once traditional (by its inclusion of the photographs within a self-proclaimed historical account) and non-traditional (by its comics design and alteration of traditional photographs); simply put, *Persepolis* seeks to defy tradition while still requiring some dependency upon it. This dependency often presents itself in metafiction, a term I use to mean an author's outside commentary on the fictional nature of the text from within the text itself; by writing her own history in a graphic novel (a metafictional device unto

itself), Satrapi is able to juxtapose the reality of historical events with unreal cartoon drawings, which in turn questions the very idea of history as an objective truth. Comics are metafictional simply because of their cartoon illustrational style, which largely consists of symbols or, more specifically, icons. The reason for this, in both the comix genre at large and in *Persepolis*, is that symbolic representation, much more than realistic illustration, invites the readers to identify and interact with the text; in this way, Satrapi asks her readers to question other versions of history, even as she risks undermining her own historical authority. In his critical study *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*—which he actually wrote entirely in comics—Scott McCloud attributes the power of the symbol to cartoons’ ability to be “a form of *amplification through simplification*” (30, author’s italics). *Persepolis*’ use of the photograph, for example, may at first glance appear to be a mere simplification of what readers understand a photograph to be, a technique consistent throughout the comics genre. Still, this motif is far from simple, for it actually intensifies readers’ notions of what the icon means. McCloud explains, “By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts. Through traditional realism, the comics artist can portray the world without—and through the cartoon, the world within” (40). Satrapi deliberately draws her photographs—and draws them in such a way that they cannot possibly be mistaken for camera-taken photographs instead—to emphasize the complex relationship between self-identity, photography, and the historical record. In sum, Satrapi does not necessarily draw her photographs with an expectation of the readers’ willing suspension of disbelief, but, rather, she is more focused on the idea behind the photograph: self-identification within history.

By explicitly employing metafiction, however, Satrapi is additionally commenting upon the Satrapi family's—and thus Iranian civilization's—lack of self-identification with a largely Western version of history. In the book, Marji's father Eby is a photographer; both he and Satrapi seek to record history as they observe it, albeit in different ways. Because he uses a camera, Eby is privileging traditional realism as well as recording history in the moment it happens. Satrapi, on the other hand, was not allowed to venture out and take photographs when she was a child; as the Islamic Revolution occurred over twenty-five years ago, she must artfully reconstruct the past in the present time. Additionally, she is documenting the past with cartoons rather than with a camera, therefore demonstrating that history, in the sense of traditional realism, is not conclusive whatsoever. As in Marji's case---and even Eby's case—the needs of the dominant culture often suppress the stories, and thus the histories, of marginalized individuals, indisputably resulting in a selective tradition of history at large. But by including snapshots in simplistic comics form, Satrapi achieves an agency that was once only held by her father; though it does not physically hold a camera to readers' eyes, *Persepolis* acts as a metaphorical, metafictional lens through which readers may learn a new way of seeing. With her insertion of photography, Satrapi admits her text's reliance on traditional realism by recognizing photography as a necessary component of the historical record, but because her photographs are cartoons, she voices disagreement with traditional realism's status as an objective, absolute authority. Thus, via metafiction, the graphic novel allows Satrapi to usurp a traditionally male role of historical authority while at once defying, upholding, and renewing traditional ways of recording history.

* * *

In his famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot asserted that a “historical sense”—what has come before, what came after, and the relationship between the two—is vitally important if a writer is to establish his or her place within an evolving literary tradition. With his essay and his art, Eliot revised the very notion of tradition from a stagnant institution of assumed greatness to an undulating process of historical renewal. One might argue that the graphic novel itself is evidence of evolution within tradition, as it is certainly a departure from the more accepted genres pervading the Western literary canon. As a result of its transitory status, however, many critics argue that graphic novels concerning history—and in particular, graphic memoirs bearing witness to the horrors of human destruction—suffer from a lack of historical credibility given their unconventional format. From Western culture’s standpoint of historical accuracy, the graphic memoir is simply not traditional enough.

For this reason, graphic memoirs like *Maus* and *Persepolis* seek to retain some of the more traditional ways readers receive and acknowledge historical information while simultaneously admitting their obvious deviation from tradition. Although Satrapi willingly employs an unconventional format to tell her story, she includes altered though recognizable historical techniques to assert her place within the larger literary tradition; the photograph, for instance, is probably the most familiar symbol of historicity, and it obligingly appears on the very first page of Satrapi’s novel. T.S. Eliot claimed that “the historical sense” of the traditional writer “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its [the past’s] presence” (4). In other words, the traditional writer must first understand that the past is neither dead nor immovable but instead lives on in the present; Satrapi’s use of the photograph supports this idea because a photo serves as visual proof of the past, but it survives in the present. By transforming this historical

motif (i.e. visual documentation) from its formerly camera-taken presentation to comics illustration, however, Satrapi additionally affirms Eliot's notion of a writer's dialectical existence: if a writer is to successfully establish a place within the existing literary tradition, he or she must embrace the dual position of historical literary figure and of contemporary artist. Satrapi upholds this claim both with her incorporation of historical motifs and historical subject matter within a pop cultural presentation, resulting in an alternate version of history.

Satrapi's metaphorical, metafictional photograph provocatively juxtaposes history with comics, thus exposing the fictional nature of historical "truth" by presenting history in an artistic format. Due in part to its contemporary illustration of history, the graphic novel provides a mouthpiece in which to voice not only a contested history but also the difficulty of portraying history accurately. Before approaching a graphic memoir like *Maus* or *Persepolis*, most readers have not encountered history in a graphic novel format; they have learned to favor the history book's formal textual analysis, chronological presentation of facts, and photographic proof as verification of an "objective" history, presented as "permanent," unquestioned truth. The historical graphic novel, on the other hand, privileges innovation rather than a reliance on facts. It is as much a work of art—an acknowledged form of liberating expression—as it is a historical text, and more traditional readers are likely to snub the disjointed frame-by-frame presentation, limited textual dialogue and cartoonish visuals of the comic strip, all of which suggest an ephemeral existence instead of a concrete, fixed account.

Anticipating her audience's presumptions, Satrapi does not merely design her narrative with the intention of shedding light on history. The Islamic Revolution occurred nearly thirty years ago; hence, Satrapi's anticipated readers may encounter a

generational barrier as well as a cultural one in their search for historicity. If Satrapi were to present her subject matter in the traditional format of the history book, she would certainly fall short of reaching and educating a youthful Western audience. *Persepolis'* inventive inclusion of metafiction, however, transcends these barriers in a way that is audience-appropriate and still critical of historical objectivity. This consequently enables Satrapi to showcase a historical sense, assert her own contemporaneity, and, finally, take part in an existing and evolving literary canon. Through metafictional form, *Persepolis* illustrates the necessity, futility, and transience of tradition.

For the purposes of this study, it may be helpful to discuss the term “tradition” itself. In his illuminating work *Marxism and Literature*, the Marxist theorist Raymond Williams identifies the Western notion of tradition as a great source and display of contemporary power; although many understand it to be “a relatively inert, historicized segment of a social structure: tradition as the surviving past,” Williams emphasizes that it is much more complex:

Most versions of “tradition” can be quickly shown to be radically selective. . . . [T]his selection is presented and usually successfully passed off as ‘the tradition’, ‘*the significant past*’. What has then to be said about any tradition is that it is in this sense an act of *contemporary* social and cultural organization, in the interest of the dominance of a specific class. It is a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present. (116, author’s italics)

According to Williams, the upheld traditions of the past are purely reflective of the current needs of the dominant social class. In this way, Williams challenges the common

notion of tradition as something preserved from long ago; in actuality, today's culture decides what is significant enough to preserve and, thus, what is "traditional."

It is easy to see, then, how our concept of history—and what is historically important—changes over time, and, furthermore, how the graphic memoir has acquired a pivotal place in this change. For Satrapi, the present historical tradition never assumes a non-negotiable, permanent entity; rather, her literature demonstrates that our historical tradition is really what Williams calls "a *selective tradition*: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present" (Williams 115, italics mine). In other words, our concepts of the past—what events happened, and what we have learned from them—continue to shape our ideas about the present, thus preserving carefully selected historical residue in current cultural ideology. It is important that readers neither idolize nor trivialize traumatic events; just as history cannot be easily simplified into right versus wrong, readers should neither understand victims as "good guys" nor persecutors as "bad guys." When asked in an interview with Daniel Epstein why she decided to write her story, Satrapi answered, "There have been so many misjudgments because today's world is divided into two parts. In real life things aren't that easy. If it was that easy then part of the world would be bad and the other part would be good." Refusing to rely on an "objective" version of history to tell her story in a traditional manner, Satrapi writes her own story of success and failure in comic strips, completely dismissing the notion that there is only one story or that there is only one way to tell a story. The role of tradition in *Persepolis* is especially significant when examining the graphic memoir's subject matter, the devastating effects of the Islamic Revolution upon the Iranian people. With their utilization of a non-traditional literary format, graphic memoirs affirm that no retelling—in *any* form—can be entirely

conclusive; rather than trying to paint the big historical picture, *Persepolis* shows readers a different way of looking at it. Understanding the impossibility of realistically depicting death and cultural destruction in all their complexity, *Persepolis* shies away from detail and instead relies on simplified images to illustrate horrors that cannot be represented with realism. Here, the traditional ways in which readers receive history are inadequate.

It must be said that Satrapi does not limit the act of selective tradition to Western society alone. In one humorous sequence, Satrapi explicitly reveals this detrimental procedure at work within the Islamic Revolution: Marji's father Eby, who illegally takes pictures with his camera every day, has photographed an unusual occurrence and has returned home with the story. While he was at a demonstration in front of a hospital, he noticed a widow whose husband died from cancer but was falsely celebrated as a martyr for the revolution (Satrapi 31). As Eby watched, the protesters confiscated the late husband's body from a stretcher and conveniently assumed that he has died for the revolution. Upon witnessing this, the widow approached the mob, begged them to stop glorifying his death, and even went to the trouble of explaining her husband's unfortunate circumstances. Undiscouraged, one mob member responded with, "No problem. He's a hero" (32). Even more staggering than this ostensibly idiotic reply was the widow's reaction to it: she did not chastise the mob or even walk away from their foolishness; instead, she chose to demonstrate with them, unreasonably blaming the king for her husband's death. At the conclusion of Eby's story, the adults in the Satrapi family share a laugh at the irony of the situation, but Marji remains confused: "Something escaped me. *Cadaver, cancer, death, murderer—laughter?*" (32). Like the people who are objectified through Eby's camera lens, Marji is excluded from the joke.



Fig. 2.2. Eby the photographer.

It is significant that Eby has been photographing this entire scene from a distance (see Fig. 2.2). He assumes a sort of middleman position in this conflict, neither physically part of the action nor culturally apart from it. The accompanying illustration likewise emphasizes this: in the middle frame, his body appears off to the side in the middle ground, as he holds his camera to his eye, he records the mob lifting dead bodies in triumph. As Trites writes, the appearance of photography in the adolescent novel often implies an examination of mortality, or “what it means to die” (124). Although no living person can presume to know what death will be, exactly, it is clear from Satrapi’s text that Marji’s parents and grandmother have a much clearer understanding than does Marji herself. While the adults laugh at the apparent preposterousness of the situation, Marji becomes aware of her own ignorance (see Fig. 2.3). She remarks, “I realized then that I didn’t understand anything. I read all the books I could” (Satrapi 32). The dark humor baffles Marji, who understands death to be no laughing matter.

What Marji fails to realize is that the adults are not laughing at the death of a cancer victim, but rather they are laughing at the absurdity of appropriating death and martyrdom for the Revolution. Because the Satrapi family separates themselves from the Iranian fundamentalist mentality, they are able to see the humor of a bleak situation



Fig. 2.3. Dark humor.

while still identifying themselves with the Iranian culture. This sort of blurred identity is perhaps best evidenced with Satrapi's inclusion of photography in her novel. In her book *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Trites affirms, "Novels that employ photography create many opportunities for characters to explore metaphorically the relationship between subject and object, between acting and being acted upon" (123). *Persepolis* uses photography in relation to three central characters to examine their self-identities in relation to those imposed by their culture: first, Marji willingly erases herself from her class photo, exerting her individuality in refusing the conventional role—as evidenced by her veil—the fundamentalist Iranian government has prescribed (Satrapi 3). Second, though once eager to identify herself as an independent modern woman in direct opposition to Iranian fundamentalism, Marji's mother Taji later disguises herself so that government officials will not recognize her from a magazine photo and punish her for a public display of disobedience (5). Third, Eby's situation differs in that, although he is intentionally erasing himself from photos by being the photographer himself, he does not change his self-identity; he too faces repercussion, but he makes no effort either to disguise himself or to stop taking pictures (31). Interestingly, every one of these occurrences illustrates an

inner conflict that each of the characters must face in her or his search for self-identity, and photography acts as a catalyst for this self-exploration.

Furthermore, *Persepolis* explores the concept of the photograph in its examination of erasure and self-identification versus a selective tradition of history. Though Satrapi does resist the absolute authority of the historical record, it is nonetheless important that *Persepolis* itself does not completely disregard tradition's value; there must be some basis for comparison, even if it is significantly altered. Metafictionally, Satrapi revises readers' concept of the photograph to illustrate the human need to reclaim identity when facing historical erasure. Her decision to draw the photograph, instead of simply displaying camera-taken photos, questions our reliance on photographs for visual proof alongside a textual historical record; in other words, *Persepolis* asks how memories—and thus history and individual identities—might be altered or even exist if the photos were not there for verification. Satrapi begins her novel by linking Marji's, Taji's, and Eby's identities to photography; although each character's relationship to photography is different, all illustrate a distance from, rather than a celebration of, Iranian culture. The characters do not wish to be present in the photos, further emphasizing the existence of a selective tradition in the historical record.

In a traditional sense, readers understand a photograph to be something of a tangible memory, demonstrating through realism something that “really happened,” as opposed to a drawing, which relies on an individual's interpretation of an event or a concept. The class photo, for example, leads the audience to ask why Marji would call a very obvious drawing a photograph (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 3). Still more oddly, Marji insists that she has erased herself from the photo—she actually says, “so you don't see me”—which openly contradicts what readers already know: Marji did take part in a class photo,

and readers did indeed see her in the previous frame, metaphorically or not. In *Words About Pictures*, however, Perry Nodelman claims, “[O]ur faith in the accuracy of photography depends on our acceptance of its version of reality—not on how it reproduces the reality our eyes see but on how it tells our eyes what to see of that reality” (12-13). According to Nodelman, we use the photograph not merely to convince ourselves of an event’s occurrence but also to consider it visual proof of our preconceived reality. Marji’s statement, therefore, may not seem contradictory to the reader because *she* is telling the story, not the reader, and thus she is imposing reality; this parallels the inherent contradiction of Satrapi’s drawing being a photograph in the first place. Furthermore, though Satrapi’s text is hardly photographic in its delivery, its overall function as a historical memoir very closely plays the part of a photograph; like any photograph, *Persepolis* preserves a memory. Its use of comics, however, immediately tells the audience two things: one, this is not the only reality, and, two, this is the story of an individual as much as it is the story of the Iranian nation.

In the first chapter Taji, Marji’s mother and a feminist who openly opposes the veil, unwillingly gets her picture taken at a public protest:

Everywhere in the streets there were demonstrations for and against the veil. At one of the demonstrations, a German journalist took a photo of my mother. I was really proud of her. Her photo was published in all the European newspapers. And even in one magazine in Iran. My mother was really scared. . . . She dyed her hair, and wore dark glasses for a long time.
(Satrapi 5)

Perhaps bending to readers’ traditional expectations regarding photographs as “truth,” the illustrations this time provide literal interpretation of the text (see Fig. 2.4). The first frame shows



Fig. 2.4. Taji's protest.

“fundamentalist” women—as Satrapi refers to them on page 75—shouting, “the veil!” while “modern” women yell, “freedom!” in return (5). Interestingly, the fundamentalist women close their eyes in their chanting, as mob members will also do in later frames of the novel, whereas in contrast the modern women’s eyes are open; perhaps Satrapi wishes to emphasize the close-minded mentality of the fundamentalist regime. The second frame refocuses on the modern women’s argument, as it ostensibly features the photograph taken of Taji, her fist punching the air in defiance. The frames on the last row, however, reveal the seriousness underlying the issue, as Marji’s mother appears

visibly worried, dyes her black hair to a much lighter color, and then partially hides her already-disguised identity by turning up the collar of her coat. The final frame is particularly disturbing, as Taji, now infamous, walks head down amid looming faces of fundamentalist men against a dark background.

It is interesting that while both Marji and Taji disappear from their photographs, their reasons for removing themselves differ. In Marji's case, the alleged class photo is not a traditional photograph but a calculated illustration; as the text affirms, she has willingly erased herself from the class photo: "I'm sitting on the far left *so you don't see me*" (Satrapi 3, italics mine). From the very first page, Satrapi emphasizes the rebellious spirit of her protagonist in Marji's quest for historical authority, a spirit that will eventually result in the writing of her history in autobiographical comics. Marji's—and Satrapi's—defiant attitude assuredly stems from her liberal upbringing, but she is careful not to undermine the penalties of such behavior. Taji, for example, anticipates severe punishment when photographed; though she essentially erases herself by disguising her physical appearance, the book's sequential illustrations still stress the dangerous consequences of being photographed unwillingly, as the once-independent Taji first stands next to her husband for support, then appears from the shoulders up while looking into a diagonally-placed mirror, and finally slinks along in as small a manner as possible to avoid the overpoweringly large faces surrounding her. The text further mentions that even if a photo in "all the European newspapers" is a grand accomplishment, a photo in "one magazine in Iran" can have terrible consequences (5). According to the fundamentalist government, a photograph of an Iranian woman is acceptable only in certain government-sanctioned images. Satrapi's determined inclusion of the photographs, however, in effect reverses Marji and Taji's willed

invisibility by revealing their previously marginalized existence. Still, because Marji and Taji are indeed removing themselves from the photographs in the book, readers understand that a photograph is not merely a reaffirmation of the characters' place in history; rather, it is a cautious reminder that their presence was unwanted in the past, and it still largely remains veiled, if not invisible, in the present.

Not so surprisingly because of his male status, Eby differs from his female family members in that he is the photographer himself. Though Marji and Taji are under erasure in their photographs, Eby certainly exhibits more power because he is behind the camera. Marji again alerts the reader to the danger of the situation: "He took photos every day. It was strictly forbidden. He had even been arrested once but escaped at the last minute" (Satrapi 29). Interestingly, though the government has forbidden Marji and Taji even to show themselves in public without wearing the veil, which essentially confines any exhibition of individuality to the home, Eby is more safely able to rebel outside domestic walls; whereas a woman without a veil is an immediate eyesore on the fundamentalist Iranian landscape, a man with a camera blends in much more easily. Such a difference effectively depicts the gender limitations of the situation. Though Eby, like Marji and Taji, is actively removing himself from the photos as he stands behind a camera, his reasons for doing so have less to do with his unwanted presence in history and more to do with his role as male historiographer, an empowered position in the historical tradition.

The camera, certainly, is the source of Eby's power, as it is for many of YA literature's protagonists. Trites remarks, "The metaphor of the camera bestowing upon the photographer a sense of empowerment based on the communicated abilities of photographs occurs often in literature. . . . [T]he protagonist employ[s] photography as a

metaphorical representation of achieving agency” (124). For Eby, the camera is the necessary tool to assert power over his surroundings: he disagrees with much of what he sees, and so he uses the camera to separate himself from his culture and reinforce his self-identity. Interestingly, however, the camera is unable to separate Eby physically from his culture—his Iranian heritage is, and will always be, an inextricable part of him, a fact that Marji (and Satrapi) captures with her own camera of recollection. The camera, then, is strictly metaphorical, just as the photographs in *Persepolis* are strictly metaphorical. Readers understand that the drawn photograph does not possess the same properties as does a camera-taken photograph, and yet the photograph continues to exert some sort of meaning as a result of readers’ traditional preconceptions.

* * *

In sum, *Persepolis* encourages readers to understand that our concept of history—and what is historically important—changes over time, and furthermore, how the graphic novel has acquired a pivotal place in this change. Satrapi writes in the book’s introduction:

[T]his old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* is so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists.

Although Satrapi insists that a largely Westernized understanding of Iranian history is incredibly biased as well as vastly incomplete, she simultaneously acknowledges her text’s reliance on this viewpoint for comparison. With its utilization of a non-traditional

literary format, the graphic novel *Persepolis* affirms that no retelling—in *any* form—can be entirely conclusive; rather than trying to paint the big historical picture, Satrapi's novel simply shows readers a different way of looking at it. By writing her own family's history, the stories of individuals still facing historical erasure, she emphasizes the fact that much of history remains untold. But by writing her story in contemporary comic strip form, Satrapi asserts that the past is neither dead nor immovable but instead lives on and even re-invents itself in the present. Thus, because she is able to bridge generational, cultural, and historical barriers, Satrapi virtually reverses the photograph: while photography is a way to record the past, *Persepolis'* metaphorical, metafictional photograph *changes* the past to construct the here-and-now.

CHAPTER 3

Commie Comics: Marxism and the *Anti-Bildungsroman*

Like many other female *Bildungsromane*, or the coming-of-age stories of women, conflict is at the heart of *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and its sequel *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*. The difference here is that Satrapi's novels autobiographically chronicle the development of an Iranian girl growing up in a Western culture, a transcultural situation that inspires a series of conflicts in addition to those usually found in female coming-of-age stories; in contrast to other *Bildungsroman* protagonists, Marji never becomes acclimated to her traditional gender role within her native culture. At the end of the second volume, she emigrates from Iran to France so that she may achieve self-fulfillment as an independent woman. Thus, the Euro-American female *Bildungsroman* model—as prescribed, for example, by Annis Pratt in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*—seems inadequate when we try to classify these graphic novels, largely because several of the texts' main conflicts signify a departure from other female *Bildungsromane*'s treatment of gender expectations and limitations: first of all, Marji's growth does not take place solely within one culture but in two conflicting cultures, Eastern and Western. As a child, Marji lives in Iran, but at the age of fourteen she moves to Austria. Upon her return to Iran as an adult, she experiences reverse culture shock, realizes that she will never be able to live “freely” as an Iranian woman in Iran, and moves to France. Secondly, *Return* does not end in marriage, as do many female *Bildungsromane*, but in divorce; just as Marji must divorce her native country, she must also divorce her husband to free herself of gender constraints to her individuality. Thus, whereas typical female *Bildungsromane* trace their protagonists' eventual acceptance of society and their place within it, *Persepolis* and *Return*

conversely advocate an escape from society's chains, a fact emphasized by the books' revolutionary approach to gender restraints.

Throughout both books, however, one of the rare constants among the conflicts is Marji's insistence that "one must educate oneself," a motto that privileges intellectual reasoning and self-initiative over conforming to cultural ideology (Satrapi, *Return* 173). This particular value hardly resolves any conflicts for Marji, but it does allow her to behave in ways that, while culturally unacceptable, exhibit her individuality, which is greatly enhanced by Marji's Marxist values. While communist revolutionaries are facing execution by the Iranian government, Marji educates herself largely in Marxist tradition: her parents and uncle are Marxists, her favorite book at the age of ten is a comic book titled *Dialectic Materialism*, and she and her friends pretend to be revolutionaries in their childhood games. Marxist references abound throughout both *Persepolis* and *Return*; as a child, Marji even devotes her writing to Marxist subjects, such as the elimination of class differences. Furthermore, though class and gender are not interchangeable concepts, Marji's childhood disregard for class hierarchy mirrors her adult disgust for her culture's gender hierarchy, a classification system that views women's rights to be far less important than men's. Therefore, Marji's growth from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood is marked by her Marxist values; when she encounters conflict, she chooses to stay true to herself rather than adhere to cultural expectations. And while *Persepolis* and *Return* may often intensify conflict rather than offer resolution, Satrapi's choice to utilize Marxist values in her own life identifies conflict as an opportunity for growth instead of a problem better left alone.

However, it is significant that neither *Persepolis* nor *Return* end happily, or even contentedly, and most of the novels' conflicts remain unresolved. Satrapi's books further

diverge from the female *Bildungsroman* norm in that their coming-of-age narrative never fully comes of age, at least not in a traditional sense. They do not end in marriage, and they do not end with Marji finally finding a “home” or even a culture that fully accepts her. In an interview with Annie Tully, Satrapi confessed that she still finds herself ungrounded today: “But nowhere is my home anymore. I will never have any home any more. . . . It’s a big difference when someone has to leave their country.” Clearly, Satrapi’s works escape categorization not only because of their many textual complications but also because they are new material in the realm of YA literature. There are few precursors to Satrapi’s autobiographical story told in comic strips of a marginalized individual, who leaves her native land on the cusp of adolescence, grows up in a foreign culture, and only returns to find herself practically a foreigner in her own country. While Pratt’s study has been generally helpful in understanding female growth within Euro-American society, apparently the *Bildungsroman* model contains no prototype for hybrid texts featuring hybrid protagonists. As scholars we should ask what new comment such literature is making on the transition from childhood to adulthood and on the gender limitations of such a transition.

Pratt asserts, “In the [female] *Bildungsroman* proper, with its expectation that the hero is learning to be an adult, there is the hidden agenda of gender norms, where ‘adult’ means learning to be dependent, submissive, or ‘nonadult’” (16). The first *Persepolis* volume introduces Marji as a ten-year-old child living in Iran, only beginning to understand her Iranian culture and its gender norms as she grows into adolescence, but *Return* more fully explores adolescence and its associated needs for cultural inclusion and acceptance; because Marji is a teenager growing up in Austria, however, the inner conflicts she would experience like other adolescents in their native country are

heightened by her acculturation: “The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else’s rules” (Satrapi, *Return* 39). Eventually Marji realizes that she will never be able to identify fully with either her native culture or Austrian culture. After four years in Europe, Marji returns to Iran to experience reverse culture shock: “I was nothing. I was a Westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West. I had no identity. I didn’t even know anymore why I was living” (Satrapi, *Return* 118). The illustration here emphasizes Marji’s nothingness; she has become merely a white cutout on a black background, a colorless shadow of a person in what appears to be a hopelessly dark situation (see Fig. 3.1). She is unable to connect with anyone, and even her cousins

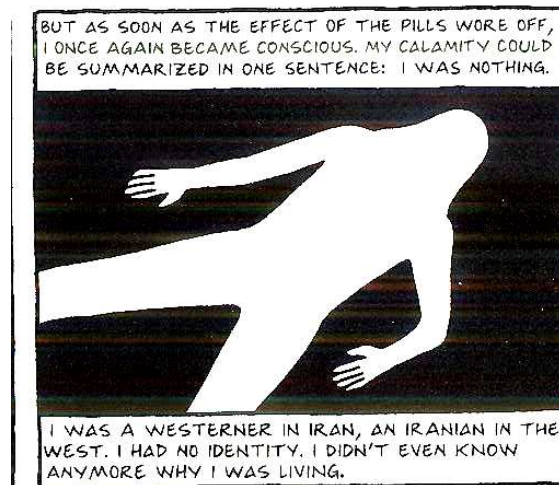


Fig. 3.1. No identity.

who are close to her in age consider her a “decadent Western woman” because she has unashamedly had sex with more than one man (116). She actually attempts suicide, but when this attempt is astonishingly unsuccessful—she swallows enough anti-depressants to “finish off an elephant”—she decides to reinvent herself physically and mentally as “a

sophisticated woman . . . strong and invincible” (119-121). Marji’s new personality again demonstrates her cross-cultural identity because she preserves many of her “decadent Western woman” traits while attempting to reconnect with her Iranian culture (116). This is initially a satisfying compromise for Marji, as she makes friends, attends art school, and becomes involved in a serious romantic relationship; as time passes, however, Marji feels that Iran requires her to sacrifice too much of her individuality to be truly happy, and she leaves her country for good by the novel’s close (187). Thus, Marji’s development occurs in direct opposition to her dismissal of the cultural expectations surrounding her. Because it calls for revolution rather than conformity for growth, one might say that Marji’s coming-of-age ironically depicts a sort of *anti-Bildungsroman*: instead of growing into her culture, Marji grows out of it.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine every reference to Marxism within *Persepolis* and *Return*, my study will largely concentrate on the relationship between Marji’s coming of age and her Marxist education. Because she is unable to identify completely with either her native Iranian culture or her adopted Western culture, Marji’s growth into adulthood is punctuated by gender conflicts between liberal and fundamentalist ideology. In large part because of her Marxist education, however, Marji overcomes these potentially stifling occurrences and grows through revolution rather than cultural conformity; when she recognizes injustice, she rebels against it. Unlike her *Bildungsromane* predecessors, Marji does not need to adapt her personality to prescribed gender roles but instead retains her individuality by resisting social constraints, embracing her sexuality, and finally emigrating from Iran. Thus, Satrapi’s novels depict a sort of *anti-Bildungsroman*, or a novel in which the

protagonist's greatest growth occurs when she rebels against her traditional gender role in her native culture.

* * *

In *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Marji exhibits both her inclination for conflict and her political bent early on, as she and her friends play pretend war games. "Today my name is Che Guevara," she says, while holding a gun and sporting crisscrossed bullet belts, military fatigues, and a starred bandana (Satrapi 10). The narration reads, "The year of the revolution I had to take action. . . . We demonstrated in the garden of our house" (10). Apparently the Islamic Revolution has infiltrated the lives of Iranian children as well as its adults, so much that Marji's childhood games allow her to parrot communist activity. Her Marxist parents also buy her books to educate her, and she learns "about the young Vietnamese killed by the Americans" (12); this offhand description unflinchingly exposes the United States' efforts to end communism in the "Vietnam Conflict" as nothing more than the murder of innocents. Marji's interpretation of this and other controversial events indicates both her Marxist cultural upbringing and her identity as an inquisitive, opinionated female.

This early instance of Marji using her intellect while considering current events is no singular occurrence. As she grows, Marji does not separate her intellectual interests from the surrounding social circumstances but uses her intelligence to challenge existing social structures. When Marji's father Eby tells her that marriage between their maid Mehri and their neighbor's son is "impossible," Marji's response is anything but accommodating:

"You must understand that their love was impossible." [said Eby to
Marji.]

“Why is that?”

“Because in this country you must stay within your own social class.”

“But is it her fault that she was born where she was born??? *Dad, are you for or against social classes?*”

When I went back to her room [Mehri] was crying. We were not in the same social class but at least we were in the same bed. (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 37, author’s emphasis)

Marji’s youthful dismissal of social class barriers effectively demonstrates the influence Marxist ideology has had on her values; even her father’s (uncharacteristic) conservatism does not faze her. In this example, Satrapi is probably referencing Marji’s earlier announcement, “my favorite [book] was a comic book entitled *Dialectic Materialism*” (12). According to the Marxist theory of dialectical materialism, society is constantly undergoing a class struggle between the ruling class—the *bourgeoisie*—and the working class—the *proletariat*; eventually, this struggle comes to fruition in the form of revolution, and the proletariat overthrows the bourgeoisie, resulting in a communist state of equal opportunity. Because she is able to recognize unjust social systems in her own life, Marji confidently applies her reasoning to her own life and to the lives of those

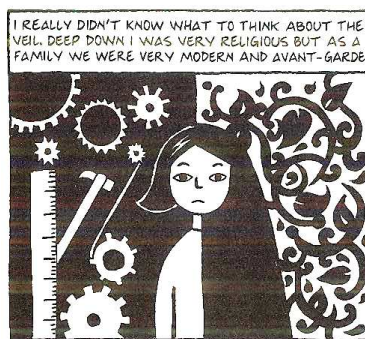


Fig. 3.2. Marji divided.

she loves. Furthermore, she uses her education to separate herself from discriminatory social structures when conflict presents itself.

Of course, to identify *Persepolis* as a Marxist text only further complicates its analysis, but this complication seems appropriate given the constant attention given to conflict in the narrative: Marji plays at revolution and war, distances herself from her culture's discriminatory attitudes, and educates herself in Marxist ideology as communists are tortured around her. Another conflict surfaces when Marji tells the reader of her secret religious convictions, which obviously contrast with her family's liberal attitude: "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" (Satrapi 6). The accompanying illustration depicts a Marji divided (see Fig. 3.2). On the left side, she wears a nondescript shirt and no veil; the background is dark with scattered sprockets, a hammer and a ruler, all which indicate the influence of scientific advancement and progressive society. On the right side, she is clothed in the full chador against a light background with traditional Persian arabesque to emphasize her clandestine religious inclinations. Two frames later, Marji informs the reader that she envisions herself as the last prophet of the revolution, an idea that strikes the reader as humorous given Marji's seemingly irrelevant reasoning: "I wanted to be a prophet . . . because our maid did not eat with us. Because my father had a Cadillac. And, above all, because my grandmother's knees always ached" (6). While Marji's claims appear comically trivial, they demonstrate a child's initial awareness of injustice. They also imply the need for revolution in chauvinistic religious ideology, as Marji smilingly tells five male prophets who have come before her, "I am the last prophet," to which they can only scoff in reply, "A woman?" (6).

Interestingly, Marji's religious convictions again illustrate another conflict: the presence of political ideals at work in her religious values. Two of her three reasons for becoming a prophet point to Marji's growing concern with negotiating class differences: she feels guilty because her maid eats in a room separate from her family, and she is embarrassed to ride in her father's Cadillac, an obvious display of wealth and privilege. Later she writes, "The reason for my shame and for the revolution is the same: the differences between social classes," ostensibly equating her religious agenda with her political convictions (33). At one point Marji puts God and Marx on equal footing; in one particular frame, Satrapi draws them both, equally sized, in profile, looking directly into each other's eyes. The text reads, "It was funny to see how much Marx and God looked like each other. Though Marx's hair was a bit curlier" (13). By illustrating Marx and God's physical similarities, Satrapi acknowledges the dual existence of both secular and religious ideology in her life. Again, readers are reminded of conflict, this time in the incredible, perhaps even impassable, difference of opinion between God and Marx as well as their respective followers; for Marji, however, the apparent incongruence unexpectedly strengthens the relationship between traditional and radical thought, and between God and Marx, by illuminating their interdependency for growth. After all, what started as a Marxist political revolution ironically resulted in a "religious" fundamentalist government.

At times it may seem as if Satrapi's work is a jumble of paradoxes, but the presence of such oppositions actually enhances the Marxist revolution in the work. In her article "A Graphic Self," Rocio Davis writes, "From the very beginning, Marji's story is one of contradictions, of a child finding herself between the cultural, political, religious, linguistic and social demands and impositions. To understand this text, we

must understand the manner in which the narrator-protagonist negotiates the crucial binaries of palimpsestic history, and how the author re-presents those often impossible contradictions” (273). Davis is emphasizing the *Persepolis* texts’ ability to revise, or revolutionize, history with its incessant inclusion of conflicts. And what a historical period to revise: the historical setting of the book is the Islamic Revolution. In 1980, Marjane Satrapi experienced first-hand the effects of governmental upheaval in Iran as her country’s intellectual revolutionaries, including her parents and family friends, took part in a revival of Marxist theory; for Iran, however, the revolution provoked cultural destruction, which in turn continues to fuel the negative stereotypes that plague our Western understanding today. This turbulent period provided the material for Satrapi’s riveting story, twenty-three years later, in graphic novel form, and her work is largely an attempt to dispel these harmful generalizations. For example, one Western stereotype of Iranians is that they are a country of religious fanatics (a stereotype Satrapi mentions specifically in her first book’s introduction), but Satrapi debunks this claim by dually recognizing Marji’s inner religious nature and her interest in Marxism. Although Marji does tell God to “get out of [her] life” after her uncle is executed, her childhood certainly includes many visits and talks with God in addition to her earlier-mentioned aspirations of prophethood (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 70). The inclusion of religious ideology beside Marxism and historical events identifies Satrapi’s work for what it is: a historical memoir of an impressionable child. Again, the novels’ collage of contradictions challenges readers’ expectations of a historical-based text, which invites them to understand how both history and personal growth can occur simultaneously from a series of conflicts. Through Marji, readers also experience revolution from the answers, or the questions, they recover from renewed historical evaluation.

In many ways, YA literature itself—and the female *Bildungsroman* in particular—is a product of revolution, a word that signifies “renewal,” and both *Persepolis* and *Return* mark their place as revolutionary novels in the history of YA fiction. Though the adolescent novel has been around since the late nineteenth century (most argue), its construction continues to “come of age,” renewing itself with the cultural demands of the times. A novel like *Persepolis*, for instance, speaks gutturally to a female generation that is rapidly acquiring voice in a global political sphere stained with terrorism; such a book would have been considered incredibly inappropriate in a more conservative period, particularly one that encouraged womanly silence. Previous Euro-American protagonists in female *Bildungsromane*—such as Jo of *Little Women*, Anne of *Anne of Green Gables*, and Julie of *Up a Road Slowly*—have exhibited development that is somewhat unappealing to today’s feminist, post-modern appetite. For these girls-turned-women, the centerpiece of their development is an acclimation to their society’s expectations and an eventual fulfillment of their assigned roles of domesticity; Jo and other female protagonists learn to deny their individuality in favor of conforming to a traditional standard, and in doing so, re-define themselves as wives, and possibly mothers, or at least members of significant interpersonal relationships. As Pratt explains, “[W]e find a genre that pursues the opposite of its generic intent—it provides models for ‘growing down’ rather than for ‘growing up’” (14). The feminist *Persepolis* and *Return*, in contrast, showcase a protagonist who is unable to retreat from conflict and initiates change; as Marji develops, she cites significant moments when, instead of conforming to a standard, she embraces her individuality to the point where she eventually revolts against the dominant fundamentalist regime and its conservative standards.

Significantly, Marji's revolution is highly dependent on the traditional standards in place. As I explained in my second chapter, Satrapi clearly targets the notion of *tradition* within her work; to reveal the Marxist ideals within Satrapi's work, however, I will discuss tradition specifically in conjunction with Marxist lines of thinking. According to Williams, two other aspects accompany tradition in any cultural process: institutions and formations (Williams 115). According to Williams, "institutions" are particular practices that the dominant culture has chosen to emphasize, such as a governmentally imposed religion, whereas "formations" are "those effective movements and tendencies, in intellectual and artistic life, which have significant and sometimes decisive influence on the active development of a culture," such as art, philosophy, science, and literature (117). Marxist theory maintains that culture is constantly undergoing revolution, and this cultural renewal results from a power struggle between classes. Tradition is selective, not conclusive, and its continued existence certainly depends upon the upholding of institutions. Oddly enough, cultural renewal absolutely relies on the oppressive presence of tradition and institutions for its emergence—if all members of a society feel satisfied with their situations, they have no cause to pursue liberation, and thus no need for revolution. Marji, who is socially inferior on the basis of her gender, feels far from satisfied, and therefore she rebels against her society by first causing trouble within it, then removing herself from it, and finally writing her story in a graphic novel. Cultural evolution depends upon the emergence of formations like the *Persepolis* novels; it is through these formations that the individuals of society begin to recognize their society's insufficiencies and desire something more fulfilling (119). By their very literary construction, *Persepolis* and *Return* defy tradition and call for revolution.

The books' status as cultural formations parallels their controversial placement as a female *Bildungsroman*; just as the novel signifies a departure from tradition by its liberal content and unconventional comics format, it likewise radically differs from classic Euro-American *Bildungsromane* of children's and YA literature. In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Jo (not "Josephine") is the self-proclaimed tomboy who first stubbornly rejects the traditional female role assigned to her but later, after she has pursued her ambitions as a professional writer, finds happiness as a wife to the intellectual Frederick Bhaer. In a similar instance, Anne Shirley, the heroine of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series, learns to suppress her willful imagination in exchange for reaping the fruits of domestic life; Anne does manage to avoid marriage for several novels, but she eventually fulfills her readers' expectations (which they have had since the very first novel) and accepts Gilbert Blythe's marriage proposal. In yet another *Bildungsroman*, Irene Hunt's *Up A Road Slowly*, the headstrong protagonist Julie learns to embrace her role as a domestic, albeit intelligent, young woman and finally becomes engaged to childhood sweetheart Danny Trevort. In these coming-of-age stories—and many, many others—the female protagonist first observes her prescribed gender role, rebels against it, and then, while groping her way through the trials of adolescence, learns to repress her individuality and finally reconciles herself to her traditional place in society (which usually means she gets married).

At first glance, the growth of Jo, Anne, and Julie may seem a bit out-of-date when compared to that of Marji: Jo lives during the Civil War era, Anne grows up as a Canadian orphan of the early 1900s, and Julie lives during the mid-twentieth century. However, because these novels do serve as examples of classic Euro-American children's literature, Western readers who are familiar with any of these characters—either through

the books or the subsequent film reproductions—will surely compare Marji to this particular perpetrated standard. As noted, Marji may surprise readers with her liberal attitude toward a traditional female role in Iranian society and, in particular, female sexuality—a characteristic that never appears in Jo’s, Anne’s, or Julie’s narratives. Many readers may argue that this sort of deviant protagonist behavior is merely representative of late twentieth and twenty-first century adolescent fiction, but this argument seems patchy if we consider that females embracing their sexuality runs counter to twenty-first century Iranian adolescent culture, as Marji herself points out: “In my country, even when you had sex before marriage, you hid it” (Satrapi, *Return* 28). Significantly, this cross-cultural paradox is integral to the book’s agenda as a cultural formation; though both *Persepolis* and *Return* were published decades after any of the classic female *Bildungsromane* identified, Satrapi’s novels retain elements of conservatism while expressing a contemporary coming-of-age story. The difference is that whereas Jo, Anne, and Julie sacrifice themselves, in a sense, so that historical gender constraints may persevere, Marji renounces tradition in pursuit of a cultural revolution, a decision her Marxist ideology undoubtedly has influenced.

Marji’s character, of course, is a dramatic departure from those of Jo, Anne, and Julie, but the contrast is not so much a difference in personality as it is a historical difference in social conditions. To say that past heroines of female *Bildungsromane* have not asserted some sort of private revolution in their own stories is inaccurate; conversely, in the earlier texts’ conclusions, the female protagonists ultimately remain victims of the social roles against which they initially rebelled. In girlhood, these young women may very well exhibit inquisitive or opinionated behavior, but with its constant suppression of female individuality, society deems these qualities signs of weakness instead of strength.

Pratt (with co-author Barbara White) identifies this pattern of growth as “the growing-up-grotesque archetype”:

The novel of development portrays a world in which the young woman hero is destined for disappointment. The vitality and hopefulness characterizing the adolescent hero’s attitude toward her future here meet and conflict with the expectations and dictates of the surrounding society. Every element of her desired world—freedom to come and go, allegiance to nature, meaningful work, exercise of the intellect, and use of her own erotic capabilities—inevitably clashes with patriarchal norms. Attempts to develop independence are met with limitation and immurement, training in menial and frustrating tasks, restrictions of the intellect (lest she perceive her status too clearly), and limitation of erotic activity. (29)

Young women heroes must learn to suppress their undesirable characteristics, their grotesqueness, if they are to function in society. Jo, for example, understands that her “manly,” tomboyish nature is unfavorable in a domestic life, and she even declares that she wishes she were born a boy; faced with no alternative, she assuages her disappointment merely by taking on “boyish” mannerisms like whistling, swearing, and walking with her hands in her pockets—characteristics that further illustrate Jo’s character to be adventurous, imaginative, and deeply passionate (30). She stifles any erotic inclination she has toward Teddy by refusing his marriage proposal, which he makes after Jo spontaneously—and supposedly unintentionally—“electrifie[s] him by throwing her arms round his neck,” an act that demonstrates a sexual initiative usually reserved for men in the late nineteenth century (Alcott 271). Still, spinsterhood is hardly typical in the female *Bildungsroman*; for Jo, growing up means leaving her wild and

boyish ways behind in preparation for marriage; as Trites recognizes, “the marriage plot often signals an ending of the heroine’s independent ways,” and Jo’s story is no exception (*Waking Sleeping Beauty* 14). By the end of *Little Women*, Jo is about to marry Professor Bhaer; she has accepted what she once fiercely struggled against, “the irony that growing up . . . means growing down—an atrophy of the personality, a premature senility” (Pratt 30). She finally understands that if she is to remain a part of her mother and sisters’ domestically driven lives, she will have to let her internal revolution rest.

It is interesting to note that, like Marji, Jo, Anne, and Julie are highly intellectual protagonists. In contrast to the other protagonists, however, Marji’s intellect is not confined within the walls of her native culture; instead, her values are influenced by her Austrian cultural experience, which offers a decidedly more liberal sexual education than the conservative values taught in Iran. Her transcultural education pushes her to rebel angrily against the suffocating gender system upheld by Iran’s fundamentalist government, and before long, Marji understands her country’s conservative gender policy as sexually inhibitive in contrast to Austria’s. Sexuality has become a dominant theme in more contemporary *Bildungsromane* in which gender struggle is prevalent, and *Persepolis* is no exception. The coming-of-age genre in particular forces readers to understand sexuality as a negotiation of power and gender roles. According to Trites:

Sexual potency is a common metaphor for empowerment in adolescent literature, so the genre is replete with sex. Teenage characters in YA novels agonize about almost every aspect of human sexuality: decisions about whether to have sex, issues of sexual orientation, issues of birth control and responsibility . . . and prostitution. The occasional teenage

protagonist even quits agonizing about sexuality long enough to enjoy sex, but such characters seem more the exception than the rule. But for many characters in YA novels, experiencing sexuality marks a rite of passage that helps them define themselves as having left childhood behind.

(Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 84)

Understandably, sexuality is a dominant motif in the *Persepolis* novels because its adolescent protagonist is consistently exploring and negotiating the boundaries between genders as well as between childhood and adulthood. In the first book, Marji comprehends sexuality from an inexperienced perspective, largely because the act itself is forbidden outside of marriage by law, and talk of it remains taboo. *Return*, on the other hand, illustrates Marji's growing sexual awareness as she develops her own political opinions and regards her world with a Marxist eye. The most marked discrepancy, of course, between Marji's development and Jo, Anne, and Julie's is that Marji discusses and even embraces her sexual identity. In these earlier *Bildungsromane*, the protagonists' sexuality was unmentionable because it would obviously expose them as amoral characters and thus unwelcome role models for young women. In contrast, though Marji understands the gender expectations of feminine "purity" in Iran, she requires conflict for growth and is thus comfortable with expressing her sexuality.

Indeed one of Marji's first encounters with sexuality demonstrates the presence of a deeply troubling, even devastating, conflict in Iranian culture. Marji and her father Eby are driving to pick up Marji's mother when Taji runs, sobbing, to the car. When Eby asks her what has happened, Taji gasps, "Two guys . . . two bearded guys! . . . Two fundamentalist bastards . . . the bastards . . . the bastards. . . . They . . . they insulted me. They said that women like me should be pushed up against a wall and fucked. And then

thrown in the garbage” (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 34, ellipses in original). The accompanying illustration shows Taji unable to stand upright and Eby holding her so that she does not collapse. Marji’s ironic narration reads, “And so to protect women from all the potential rapists, [the government] decreed that wearing the veil was obligatory” (34). At this time in Iran, a woman’s sexuality is a shameful thing that must be controlled—by men, of course—at all costs. Eventually, Marji realizes that these fundamentalist men’s taunts were not empty threats. In a later instance, Taji becomes frustrated with Marji’s reckless behavior at school, takes her daughter by the shoulders and warns her of the potential consequences of such outspokenness: “You know what they do to the young girls they arrest? . . . You know that it’s against the law to kill a virgin . . . so a Guardian of the Revolution marries her . . . and takes her virginity before executing her. Do you understand what that means???” (145, ellipses present in original). Here, Satrapi’s illustrations use a moment-to-moment, panel-to-panel transition to demonstrate the intense distress Taji feels for her daughter; the progressive close-ups of Taji and Marji act much like a camera in film, focusing in on its subjects. This illustrative technique first entraps and then closes in on Marji and Taji, emphasizing their powerlessness. For these female victims, sexuality is not merely repressed, but their virginity (and sexual purity) is stolen from them when they are most vulnerable in an act of violence. This conflict is common in female *Bildungsromane*. As Pratt states, “When women heroes do seek erotic freedom, which we define simply as the right to make love when and with whom they wish, they meet all the opposition of the patriarchy. Not only is the feminine Eros discouraged, but its opposite, rape, is proffered as a substitute” (24). We can clearly see the relationship between power and sex in Taji’s warning; a virgin holds a significant amount of power because she is “pure,” a power emphasized by the law’s forbiddance to

kill a virgin (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 145). Unlike many children, Marji understands this, and later in bed, she ironically relates her newfound knowledge to what has become the catchphrase of her country's revolution: "To die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society" (146). To Marji, who is able to apply her Marxist education to the gruesomely contradictory religious propaganda, such a death seems a waste. She understands that if a governmental decree needlessly harms its less powerful citizens, it is essentially professing class inequality, not egalitarianism.

Moments of sexual awareness mark transitions in Marji's progression from girl to adult, a process that is fueled by Marji's rebellious personality. It is largely due to her Marxist upbringing that she can thrive under such constrictive circumstances and even make sense of the conflicting ideology her transcultural experience brings to her. As a child, Marji realizes that Iranian men control women's sexuality, but as a result of her Marxist revolutionary parenting, however, Marji understands that the dominant, fundamentalist view is not the only perspective available. Thus, she has known conflict since childhood and learned to make her own decisions, and Marji continues to grow from other conflicts, such as the contradictory opinions of female sexuality practiced by Eastern and Western cultures. It is no wonder, then, that in order to achieve growth, Marji rebels against a fundamentalist government by educating herself and then additionally rebels against the fundamentalist standards for female sexuality.

As a teenager in *Return*, Marji attempts to lose her virginity at an anarchist party, a coincidence that again indicates the relationship between her sexuality and her Marxist political beliefs. As she and her boyfriend Enrique retire, Marji admits:

Until that night, my relationship with Enrique was strictly platonic. I had grown up in a country where the sex act was never consummated until

after marriage. . . . But this night was different. I felt ready to lose my innocence. *And too bad if no Iranian ever marries me. I live in Europe and I'll marry a European!* [I thought.] I didn't want to be a timid virgin any longer. (Satrapi, *Return* 58)

Although Marji's anticipation that the party will be largely associated with Bakunin, a person who, according to Marji's friends, was "*the anarchist*" and "*against Marx*" (19), she still somewhat associates the party with her previous Marxist ideology (see Fig. 3.3).



Fig. 3.3. A revolutionary anarchists' party.

She says, "A revolutionary anarchists' party!' It reminded me of the commitment and the battles of my childhood in Iran. Even better, it would perhaps allow me to better understand Bakunin" (55). The word "revolutionary" as well as the phrase "the commitment and the battles of my childhood" echo Marji's earlier Che Guevara escapades. The text appears at the top of a full-page illustration: Marji is at the bottom of the page, "counting the hours" until the party, her expectations expanding from her head like a dream bubble. Apparently, Marji's idea of an anarchist party includes mob chants

of “Down with the bourgeoisie[!]” and the burning of capitalist symbols (like the pictured American flag on fire), which are both activities Marxism would condone. To Marji’s intense disappointment, none of this happens—the “anarchists” are playing hide-and-seek, among other non-political activities. Perhaps because she needs an outlet for her repressed rebelliousness, Marji channels her political energy into sexual desire (unfortunately for Marji, however, Enrique rejects her advances and finally admits his homosexuality).

Satrapi further strengthens the relationship between Marji’s education and her sexuality because, just as Marji educated herself through reading books, readers come to understand Marji’s experiences in a book. Moreover, like many YA novels and formations, Satrapi’s work not only seeks to educate its readers but also provides a forum in which to discuss issues, like teenage sexuality, that remain somewhat taboo in Iran *and* in Western culture. Trites notes Foucault’s definition of sexuality in her own discussion of sex in the YA novel: “In contrast to ‘sex,’ which is a purely biological act, Foucault defines ‘sexuality’ as a discursive construct. . . . That is, sexuality is influenced by, even created by language” (86). Furthermore, a certain power comes from the very act of discussing sex, in real life and in books, and this power more often presents itself in *who* gets to talk rather than in *what* they talk about. In *Return*, women who openly discuss their sex lives achieve power through language, a power the dominant (and usually patriarchal) culture often denies them.

As an adult, Marji understands this concept while many of her peers do not; she has grown up in a Western culture that encourages discussion about sexuality, and to an extent she has grown out of her native culture while her female peers have remained naïve from their governmentally-imposed taboos. As a result, she becomes outspoken

about her sexual habits during her university studies, an act that again links Marji's sexuality to education and revolt. In class one day, she drops her pencil case, and its contents, including her birth control pills, scatter upon the floor. When her friend Dorna asks if she irregularly menstruates, Marji replies, "No, not at all. I take it because I sleep with my boyfriend!" (149). This declaration provokes one of Marji's female classmates to chastise her openly:

"A little decency, please!" [says a classmate to Marji.]

"Can you explain to me what's indecent about making love with your boyfriend?"

"Shut up!"

"Shut up yourself! My body is my own! I give it to whomever I want! It's nobody else's business!"

I didn't say everything that I could have: that she was frustrated because she was still a virgin at twenty-seven! That she was forbidding me what was forbidden to her! That to marry someone that you don't know, for his money, is prostitution. That despite her locks of hair [peeping from beneath her veil] and her lipstick, she was acting like the state. . . . (149)

Clearly, an Iranian woman's sexual expression is taboo in Iran, and like all taboos, its linguistic power resides in maintaining silence or, at the very least, controlling discourse about it. The patriarchy that insists upon this silence essentially steals the power a woman *would* possess in being able to discuss her sexuality freely; indeed, Marji's classmate realizes that Marji is toying with a power that does not ordinarily belong to her, and so she tells her to "shut up," or silence herself (149). Thus, although Marji

refrains from fully verbalizing her indignation, her initial declaration of sexual activity exhibits her self-empowerment, her ability to make decision independent of a dominant culture's ideology, and her reliance upon conflict for personal growth.

However, Marji's power remains limited as long as a traditionalist patriarchy keeps control, and like Jo, Anne, and Julie, Marji gets married. In her second year at the university, Marji is in a steady relationship with a man named Reza, and due to cultural constraints, they are finding it increasingly difficult to be unmarried and share a living space. When Reza asks her to marry him, Marji feels confused. She thinks to herself, "I'm only twenty-one! I haven't seen anything yet! But I love him! How can I know if he's the man of my life without having lived with him?" (Satrapi, *Return* 158). Marji knows that she is probably unready for marriage, but her culture demands that she not live with a man unrelated to her until she is married. Her later talk with her father further reveals her hesitation:

"Dad! Reza asked me to marry him. I don't know what to do," [says Marji to Eby.]

"You're the only one who can know. At the same time, if you want to know him, you must live with him, and for that, you must marry."

"Worst case, we divorce."

"Well, yes." (158)

Even before she weds Reza, Marji apparently views the marriage cynically, and after the ceremony, she realizes her mistake. As her new, shared apartment door closes, Marji has "a bizarre feeling": "I was already sorry! I had suddenly become 'a married woman.' I had conformed to society, while I had always wanted to remain in the margins. In my mind, 'a married woman' wasn't like me. It required too many compromises. I couldn't accept

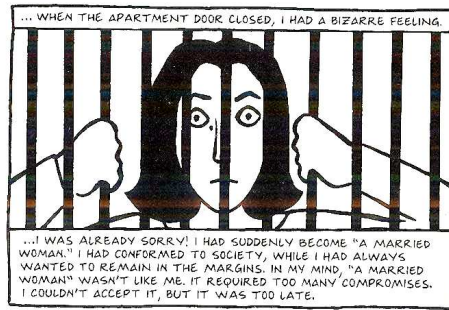


Fig. 3.4. Marji behind bars.

it, but it was too late” (163). The illustration to the text depicts Marji behind bars, trapped in a situation prescribed by her society (see Fig. 3.4). Marji’s initial reactions foreshadow her divorce from Reza, and she admits to the reader that she “continually lied to him” in ways that compromised her identity; for example, when Reza tells her that he likes light eyes, she buys herself blue contacts (164). In short, her marriage does not work because it is an action of conformity and an attempt to become someone she is not, both which inhibit Marji’s growth as an individual.

For *Persepolis* to achieve success as a feminist *Bildungsroman*, Marji must separate herself from her culture’s restraints; this is the only way that Marji will complete her development as a rebellious, opinionated woman. However, the only way to achieve such a separation is for her to emigrate from her native country; whether Marji divorces Reza or not, she will still behave according to a fundamentalist patriarchy as long as she lives in Iran. Hence, her marital divorce must be paired with a cultural divorce if she is to retain her identity as an educated revolutionary. Just before she speaks to Reza, Marji vents her frustration concerning her society’s gender limitations:

Ah, Iranian men! . . . [A]ll the laws are on their side! If a guy kills ten women in the presence of fifteen others, no one can condemn him because in a murder case, we women, we can’t even testify! He’s also the

one who has the right to divorce and even if he gives it to you, he nonetheless has custody of the children! I heard a religious man justify this law by saying that the man was the grain and woman, the earth in which the grain grew, therefore the child naturally belonged to his father! DO YOU REALIZE?? I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE. I WANT TO LEAVE THIS COUNTRY! (Satrapi, *Return* 183)

An adult protagonist's anger toward her culture, while understandable, is rare in the female *Bildungsroman*. As mentioned before, Jo and other female protagonists reach adulthood when they conform to societal gender expectations—namely marriage; in Marji's case, she is already an adult, she is already married, and yet she continues to desire growth. In typical *Bildungsromane*, marriage and cultural conformity are inseparable—a fact Marji must confront in *Return's* conclusion. In contrast to earlier *Bildungsromane*, Marji decides that cultural acceptance failed to satisfy her in childhood, and it will never satisfy her as an adult. When she divorces both her husband and her country, Marji's revolution succeeds.

* * *

The conclusion of Satrapi's novels shows the consequences of a revolution's success as well as a definitive departure from the female *Bildungsroman* genre. Unlike other female *Bildungsroman* protagonists, Marji comes of age as an independent woman because she is able to escape the confines of gender expectations. Her escape, however, results from an emigration from her native culture, which again does not appear in other coming-of-age narratives in YA literature. Instead of offering counsel to its female readers who may be in the process of acclimating to their traditional gender roles, *Return* reiterates the importance of self-fulfillment, as Marji's father—a revolutionary,

but a man nonetheless—tells her: “You weren’t made to live here. We Iranians, we’re crushed not only by the government but by the weight of our traditions! Our revolution set us back fifty years. It will take generations for all this to evolve. You only have one life. It’s your duty to live it well” (Satrapi 185). Unlike earlier protagonists of female *Bildungsromane* who matured by adhering to a repressive tradition of assigned gender roles, Marji comes of age when she asserts her individuality and renounces traditional conformity.

Marji’s decision is not without negative consequences, however. It is significant that both *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* do not end in resolution but in conflict. At the end of the first book, Marji is leaving her family and the life she knows; she narrates, “Nothing’s worse than saying goodbye. It’s a little like dying” (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 153). The second volume again mentions death, this time Marji’s grandmother’s. At this point, Marji is leaving her family and Iran once more in search of freedom, but as Marji quite plainly states, “Freedom had a price . . .” (Satrapi, *Return* 187, author’s ellipses). The presence of conflict in the conclusion of these novels implies the continuance of a story rather than an ending, which the ellipses at the end of *Return* further emphasize. As a result of her transcultural experiences, Marji will never be able to identify completely with either her native Iranian culture or her adopted Western life. She may be able to live as a “free” Iranian woman in full possession of her sexuality, but she will never be able to live freely in Iran, and it is questionable if she will be able to live freely at all. Though the Islamic Revolution is past, it is clear that Marji will engage with internal conflict throughout her adult life.

Together *Persepolis* and *Return* deliver the transcultural story of a transcultural individual that appeals to a transcultural audience, thus offering a radical commentary

on the gender restrictions in place not only in Iran but in Western cultures as well. While Satrapi's books do indeed illustrate the triumph of an individual who can evaluate her circumstances and act in a way that best benefits her, they still echo a traditional and contradictory viewpoint: a woman cannot be herself in her native culture. Though Marji's Marxist education has undoubtedly aided her in her comprehension of her society, Marji's intellect ultimately leaves her dissatisfied with a system she cannot change. Like the Marxist revolution that ironically secured the power of a fundamentalist regime, Marji's revolution falls short. At the novels' close, it is the readers' decision to initiate change; perhaps, like Marji, they will understand that "one must educate oneself" if one desires revolution (Satrapi, *Return* 173).

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