



AN ANALYSIS OF PERSPECTIVE AND BELONGING IN THE MODERN

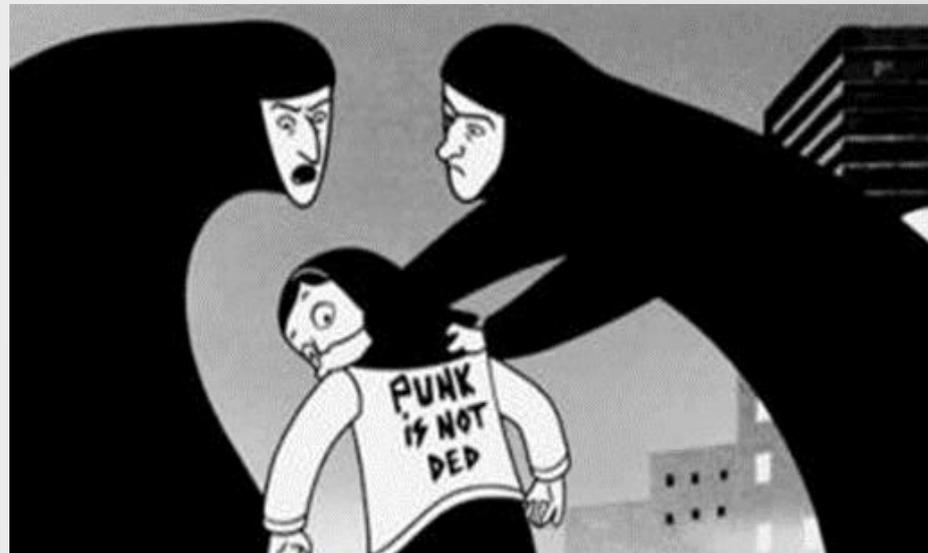
GRAPHIC NOVEL.

WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO

MARJANE SATRAPI'S 'PERSEPOLIS'

KEY IDEAS:

- The effects of 'Orientalism'
- How the graphic novel medium is utilised to challenge western perspectives of the East- Especially in a post 9/11 world
- Identity and belonging in a war-torn country and coming of age



Marjane Satrapi, created her debut autobiographical novel with the intention of subverting harmful stereotypes of the Middle East; **'this old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism...I know that this image is far from the truth'**. Throughout my essay I discuss the historical colonial divide of the East as other and separate to the West, known as 'Orientalism'. Along with an analysis on how cleverly Satrapi uses the graphic novel medium as well as the coming of age trope and a conflict of belonging, to immerse a western audience in her novel. In the hopes of creating empathy and understanding of the Iranian culture she is so proud of.

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# AN ANALYSIS OF PERSPECTIVE AND BELONGING IN THE MODERN GRAPHIC NOVEL

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WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE  
TO MARJANE SATRAPI'S '*THE  
COMPLETE PERSEPOLIS*'- A COMING  
OF AGE TALE IN REVOLUTIONARY  
IRAN. <sup>1</sup>

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In this article, I will discuss Satrapi's use of the graphic novel medium to create a unique perspective that is not only accessible but empathic to a western audience. Her use of the autobiographical 'I' and visual story telling gives a reader from any background a unique privileged insight into her childhood and ultimately her perspective. I will reference Satrapi's 'The complete Persepolis,' as both a post-colonial text and as a memoir.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*, First Edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.

<sup>3</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.

<sup>4</sup> Black Lives Matter, 'Black Lives Matter – About', *Black Lives Matter*, 2020  
<<https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>> [accessed 10 January 2021].

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**T**he work of Marjane Satrapi, specifically her 2007 work 'The complete Persepolis' (referred to from now just as Persepolis-), is renowned for its autobiographical portrayal of a liberal family in the middle east, which directly challenges stereotypes and preconceptions of Iranian people.<sup>3</sup> Her memoir-esque retelling of childhood in revolutionary Iran is relatable to a western audience through its coming of age themes and young Marjane's cross-continental search to belong. With current cultural movements such as Black Lives Matter, it is now more important than ever that we give a face to many victims of the lasting effects of post-colonial violence and interference.<sup>4</sup> Satrapi's discussion of identity and belonging during her teenage girlhood and the Shar reign, is arguably one of the most important modern literature texts that discusses the middle east.

Edward Said's book 'Orientalism' discusses the western ideological construction of a colonial divide, that separates the seemingly civilized west from the fanatic and one-dimensional portrayal of the middle east.<sup>5</sup> For Said, this otherness of the Middle East is created through a colonial 'system of knowledge about the Orient.'<sup>6</sup> 'In the case of 'Orientalism', these

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25<sup>th</sup> Edition (New York: Vintage Books). Nottingham Trent University, ProQuest eBook.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p.30.

procedures have been characterized by the distorted, stereotyped and decontextualized view of the East by the West.<sup>7</sup> Arguably, this construct of otherness and extremism is still very much present in modern depictions of the middle east, especially when considered in a post – 9/11 society. So much so that Iranian author, Marjane Satrapi, explains in the introduction to her auto-biographical graphic novel *Persepolis* (originally published in France in 2003): ‘this old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism... I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me.’<sup>8</sup>

The nuclear family within the novel challenges preconceptions of Iranian culture. Marjane comes from a family of communists with very liberal political views more typical of Western families. Traditional stereotypical notions of Persian people, especially Persian women, are erased very early within the text, on page 5 her Mother’s photo



gets taken at an anti-veil protest.<sup>9</sup> However, we are quickly reminded that this is an act against the Shah reign as her Mother changes her appearance in fear and feels watched by her

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p.39.

<sup>8</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.2.

<sup>9</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.5.

more traditionalist neighbours – as shown in the panel below.<sup>10</sup>



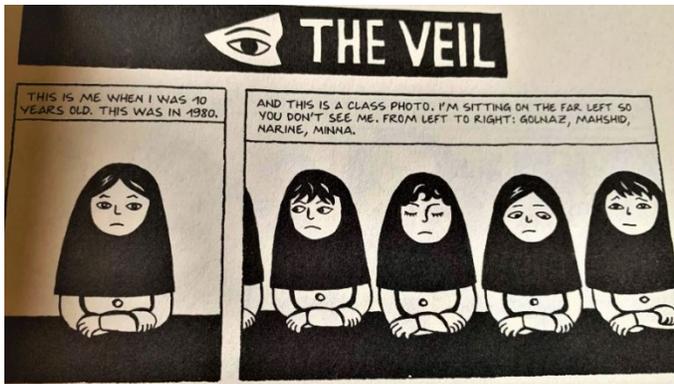
Young Marjane’s turmoil over the contradicting views expressed by her country vs her more radical family and her search for where she belongs in a fundamentalist society, are best embodied by an image on page 6.<sup>11</sup> With the logical views and personal freedom of the West, depicted on the left where she is unveiled and surrounded by mechanical cogs, is juxtaposed with an image of the East on the left, with traditional Arabic art and wearing of the veil. This tug of war between the liberal West and traditional East is a prevalent theme throughout the memoir.



<sup>10</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.5.

<sup>11</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.6.

The feminist beliefs and actions of Marjane's Mother are even more interesting when we consider the history of the graphic novel form. A medium still dominated by male readers and authorship, in which women are often drawn to appeal to the male fantasy and/or as helpless damsel in distress figures to be won and rescued by their male counterparts. This is expanded on by Derbel in her essay; 'Iranian Women in the Memoir: Comparing Reading *Lolita* in Tehran and Persepolis.' '[T]he comic dimension frames women's representation by subverting the common duality that posits the superior male gaze.'<sup>12</sup> Derbel also comments on Satrapi's unique use of the Iranian memoir, 'The memoir form offers accessibility to a prohibited space in Iranian culture. As a symbolic form of unveiling the self, the Iranian memoir offers its women writers the potential to transgress and transcend.'<sup>13</sup>



I would argue that the impact of Satrapi's *Persepolis* has been so impactful on a Western audience, because of her unique use

<sup>12</sup> Emira Derbel, *Iranian Women in the Memoir: comparing reading Lolita in Tehran and Persepolis (1) and (2)*, First Edition (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), page. Nottingham Trent University, ProQuest eBook. P.5.

<sup>13</sup> Emira Derbel, *Iranian Women in the Memoir*. p.2.

<sup>14</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.

of perspective that aligns the reader with our protagonist from the very beginning.<sup>14</sup> The opening chapter titled 'The Veil' immediately confronts the reader with a familiar portrayal of middle eastern women in hijabs.<sup>15</sup> A stark contrast to the image of Marjane's Mother at the protest on page 5.<sup>16</sup> However, as the novel begins 'This is me when I was 10 years old,' we are let into Iranian culture and Satrapi's autobiographical world from a childlike perspective.<sup>17</sup> Marjane is both present and erased from her own class photo 'you don't see me,' she is lost in a strip of veiled schoolgirls. Which is perhaps a comment on Western erasure of individuality, through the colonial impact of grouping together middle Eastern people as one collective other.<sup>18</sup> Known as orientalism or defying the orient, as described by Edward Said.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, for young Marjane, this image begins the start of her search for belonging – she is separated from the other schoolgirls, yet further down on the page the schoolgirls are the same in their youth play and confusion.

As a western reader, our understanding of Iran and/or life in the Middle East is likely to be akin to that of a child. We see the young schoolgirls' confusion over the law that it is mandatory to wear the veil in schools.<sup>20</sup> This is shown within the panel below, as the children play with the veil like toys, using them as skipping ropes and as a dog lead on each other.

<sup>15</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.3.

<sup>16</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.5.

<sup>17</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.3.

<sup>18</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.3.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>20</sup> Iranian Veil Law, 1985.

Although, this playful image is contrasted in the same panel as a child wearing the veil who strangles another and says - "Execution in the name of freedom."<sup>21</sup> Despite the innocence



of the girls, Satrapi's inclusion of this image suggests the unavoidable effect of a war-torn society on its children. She also hints at the future divide between the girls, created through more fundamentalist and fanatic religious types verses the more liberal and Westernised interpretation of Islam.

This tug between the West and East, is continued throughout the memoir.<sup>22</sup> As a teenager Marjane experiments with punk



<sup>21</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.3.

<sup>22</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.

<sup>23</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.160.

<sup>24</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.6.

identity – 'I put on my 1993 Nikes and my denim jacket with the Michael Jackson button, and of course, my headscarf.'<sup>23</sup>

The memoir depicts a young middle Eastern girl who associates freedom with Westernisation, as shown in the image on page 6.<sup>24</sup> Her search to belong as a teenager by finding and listening to rock music resonates globally; Marjane's coming of age is relatable to anyone anywhere. This chapter is called 'Kim Wilde.'<sup>25</sup> When considered in relation to the first chapter named 'The Veil', it is a particularly interesting progression from stereotypical depictions of the East to familiar Western rock and roll icons.<sup>26</sup> The tension between the familiar and unfamiliar perfectly personified in the image above, with the edition of 'and of course my headscarf.'<sup>27</sup> East and West have found a comfortable middle. However, as Marjane enters her teenage years her rebellious streak becomes too much for the state to ignore. Marjane's family displays constant resistance to her schoolteachers' attempted indoctrination, 'as for me I love the king he was chosen by God...It says so on the first page of my textbook.'<sup>28</sup> Her parents dispute the information presented by her schoolteachers, isolating her from the rest of her class.

After repeated incidents of young Marjane being punished at school, her parents decide to send her to a French speaking school in Austria to protect their daughter from the war and give her the social liberties and freedom of western Europe. This marks an important shift in perspective for the western reader, who now can see their world through a Middle Eastern

<sup>25</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.160.

<sup>26</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.3.

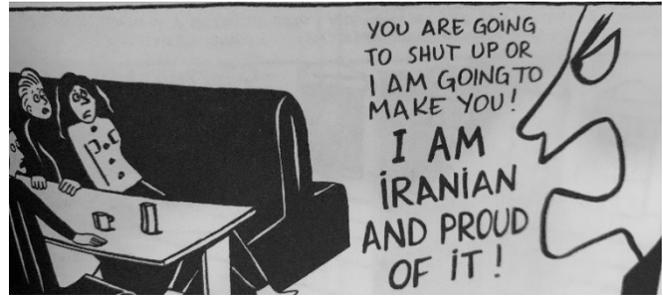
<sup>27</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.160.

<sup>28</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.19.

lens. After the reader has begun to have an insight into Iranian society, it becomes Satrapi's turn to be a naïve visitor in a culture more familiar to our own. With this shift we continue to identify with our protagonist's experience of teenage angst and coming of age style narrative. She leaves for Vienna alone at the age of fourteen.

This section of the novel truly explores our journal's central theme of longing to belong as well as Marjane's personal identity. Our protagonist feels like a westerner in the east and vice versa. Marjane struggles to keep the values of her family and her identity while being a young person hundreds of miles from home. Even the friends she makes during this time see her as a tainted and war-torn figure – shown explicitly when her school friends only value her opinions in discussions relating to war and death; 'For Momo, death was the only subject where my knowledge exceed his.'<sup>29</sup>

These experiences alienate young Marjane, to the point where she temporarily betrays her own background and identity. When a young man at a party asks her where she is from, she says she is "French." 'I should say that at the time Iran was the epitome of evil and to be Iranian was a heavy burden to bear.'<sup>30</sup> Our protagonist quickly redeems herself in her own eyes after over hearing gossip about the event from girls at a café, (pictured- ).<sup>31</sup>



Despite her opposition to the Iranian fundamentalist regime, her loyalty to her family and heritage is ultimately where she belongs and longs to be, which is why she returns home after four years in Vienna.

Marjane's experiences as an Eastern outsider in Vienna are significantly impacted by the colonial system of knowledge about the Middle East and its subsequent stereotypes. This is described in an essay titled 'Estranging the Familiar: "East" and "West" in Satrapi's Persepolis.'<sup>32</sup> '[S]he defies misunderstandings and Orientalized visions, but also suffers because of the tensions and differences between the Occident and the Orient.'<sup>33</sup> Or East and West, Marjane's search for belonging is a cross – continental search and after numerous years and a marriage in Iran, she moves back to the West and lives in Paris. Perhaps, Satrapi implies that the search for belonging is as life long as it is universal.

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<sup>29</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.175.

<sup>30</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.195.

<sup>31</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The complete*.p.197.

<sup>32</sup> Naghibi, Nima and Andrew O'Malley. "Estranging the Familiar: "East" and "West" in Satrapi's

*Persepolis*." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 31 no. 2, 2005, p. 223-247. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/esc.2007.0026](https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2007.0026).

<sup>33</sup> Naghibi, Nima and Andrew O'Malley. "Estranging the Familiar: "East" and "West" in Satrapi's *Persepolis*." [doi:10.1353/esc.2007.0026](https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2007.0026).

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