

2019

Retracing Traumatic Experience in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis – The Entanglements of Collective History and Personal Memory

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Citation of this paper:

Menzies, Sarah R., "Retracing Traumatic Experience in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis – The Entanglements of Collective History and Personal Memory" (2019). 2019 Undergraduate Awards.

Retracing Traumatic Experience in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* –
The Entanglements of Collective History and Personal Memory

The comics medium has frequently been used to articulate the otherwise unspeakable nature of traumatic experience. Through their combination of visual and verbal modes of representation, graphic novels materialize trauma in a way that transcends a solely textual form. In her *Persepolis* series, Marjane Satrapi details her experience of Iranian historical trauma through the positions of subjective and intergenerational memory. She frames her autobiography from the perspective of her childhood self – and her simplistic, minimalist drawing style, resembling that of a child, makes visible the atrocities of war in an unrealistic but easily digestible visual format. The universality of her child narrator, and the associated imagery of her narrative perspective, allow Satrapi to construct a counter-memory of Iranian historical experience specifically aimed at Western readers. She disrupts master-narratives of Iranian history on two levels: one as told by ideologically driven revisionists of the Iranian Revolution, and the second as created by the seemingly progressive liberalism of the West (Brock 226). While Satrapi offers recognizable signifiers of childhood to Western readers, she also adapts these signifiers into a framework of specifically Iranian experience. Her shifting significations reject the appropriation of her narrative into a Western frame of understanding, and through this rejection, she reconstructs the trauma of her Iranian experience by mapping out the intricacies of personal memory. Satrapi demonstrates that the process of retracing traumatic events, in her case, through comics, works against the larger cultural silence of Iranian people who are vilified in Western representations of Iran. *Persepolis* thus offers a graphic account of ongoing and always present Iranian history – as Satrapi illustrates the inextricability of history and memory in the process of bearing witness to traumatic events.

Throughout *Persepolis*, Satrapi simultaneously offers a critique of Western imperialism as well as the oppression of the Islamic regime in Iran. Her ability to uphold both critiques is demonstrably a product of her reshaping of Iranian history from the position of exile. Exile refers to “the state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons” (OED). Hamid Naficy argues that the feeling of ‘homelessness’ that results from the exilic condition positions the exiled individual in an ideal cultural mindset to engage in artistic productions that “doubt, analyse, and transcend” their own culture (qtd. in Klapcsik 77). Sandor Klapcsik further describes how exiles, through visual media and other forms of cultural production, “construct an imaginary nation both of the homeland and of their own presence” (76). The universality of *Persepolis* as a text exists not despite but because of the porous categories of identity and culture that are integral to Satrapi’s narrative structure; rather than eliding stereotypes of Iran and Iranian culture, she makes them easily accessible and visible to her readers.

By framing her narrative as a product of multiple points of cultural reference, Satrapi takes on the role of “cultural translator” for Western and Iranian audiences alike (Klapcsik 76). In particular, her handling of the veil throughout the text – as a commonly associated symbol of Iranian oppression post-revolution – is one of many ways that she contests an easy categorization of cultural experience. In the first panel of *Persepolis*, Satrapi illustrates Marji wearing the headscarf; however, as soon as the second panel, she pushes Marji outside of the panel frame with the suggestive caption: “I’m sitting on the far left so you don’t see me” (PI 1). Klapcsik describes that the equally enforced and frowned-upon veil has become “a symbol of Eastern otherness” for Western readers: it is a symbol that is characterized by the oppressive power of religious fundamentalism “and – if it is worn in a way that still exposes individuality and attractiveness – the possible rebellion of women against such a regime” (570). In this opening scene, Satrapi resists representing Marji – an embodiment of Iranian

girlhood – sitting alongside her identically veiled peers. Despite her absence from the panel, Marji asserts her presence in the narrative and avoids an easily determinable affiliation to a post-revolutionary Iranian identity.

The narrative and the accompanying illustrations emphasize the distance between Marji as narrated subject and Satrapi as reflexive author, both of which are products of distinct cultural positions – the Iranian girl, and the exiled adult. This gap becomes apparent several times in the text – particularly when Satrapi details moments of her childhood trauma. The images, which describe events the way a child understands and imagines them, are combined with detached explanations of historical events given by Satrapi's narrating voice in the captions (Chute 102). In these instances, Satrapi's physical distance from the events she describes, in addition to the temporal distance from her childhood perspective, sharpens her representation of historical memory. At the end of *Persepolis*, we see Marji walking away from her parents and leaving for Austria. In the second volume of the text, Marji, having struggled to settle in Austria, returns home to Iran. However, the climate of Iran post-revolution is one that she is unable to adapt to, and she ultimately leaves for France in 1994. Given this framework, Marji's first exile from Iran, although painful and traumatic, is never represented as the end of her story. She is illustrated turning back to look at her parents, rather than walking away from them, and the image of her fainted mother fills the space of the page. In comparison, Marji's second and final exile from Iran is not presented as a mournful end to the narrative. She is depicted as smiling and waving to her parents, who share the joy of their daughter's departure because, as Satrapi narrates, they now possess the knowledge that she will not return. Her mother tells her: "This time, you're leaving for good. You are a free woman. The Iran of today is not for you, I forbid you to come back!" and Marji replies with a simple "Yes mom" (PII 187). Satrapi's exigent circumstances force her to reiterate certain images time and time again in the space of the text, but from the varying

cultural positions that inform her narrative voice (Brock 233). In these final moments of *Persepolis II*, the narrating voice of Marji and the experienced voice of Satrapi are unified, as their positions of exile, which were formerly separated by age, become one and the same.

From her position of exile, Satrapi positions Marji as an “autobiographical avatar” onto whom she can project the traumatic nature of her childhood experiences (Whitlock 977). By creating a protagonist to narrate the events of her childhood, Satrapi is able to discuss said events at a safe distance from the trauma. This distance positions her experiences as both traceable and readable issues to be encountered: “Verbally and visually inscribing multiple autobiographical ‘I’s’ Satrapi’s older, recollective voice is most often registered in the overarching narrative text, and her younger, directly experiencing voice is most often registered in dialogue, and in the discursive presentation of pictorial space – the ‘visual voice’ of the book” (Chute 97). Despite Marji’s narrating position, the voice of the adult exile permeates the text in instances where Marji navigates the feelings of alienation that are associated with her exile.

At the beginning of *Persepolis II*, Marji’s attempts to assimilate into the West encourage her feelings of cultural betrayal: “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” (PII 39). At the same time, Marji is detached from other Iranian exiles who have forgotten their experiences in Iran in their attempts to cultivate a purely Western cultural identity. When Marji meets Shirin upon arriving in Austria, she is immediately critical of Shirin’s focus on “trivial things” and refers to her as a traitor (PII 2). Satrapi represents the trauma of war as an integral aspect of her childhood, and Shirin’s amnesia about those events results in Marji’s feelings of anger and distance. Marji’s experiences in Austria thereby demonstrate her inability to distance herself from the trauma of her childhood – and these constant remembrances result in her deeply

fractured sense of self: “I wanted to forget everything, to make my past disappear” (PII 40). When Marji returns to Iran, with the temporary cultural aphasia of having been away, her experiences become entirely unspeakable (Segall 46). As a result, Marji begins to immerse herself in the war stories of her father and her war-wounded friend Kia Abadi. For Marji, these testimonials, although causing significant distress, provide an intergenerational link that allows her to piece together her trauma from multiple points of cultural reference: “I felt as though I were walking through a cemetery... Surrounded by the victims of a war I had fled. It was unbearable. I hurried home” (PII 97). Satrapi’s unification of her subjective memories of childhood and the collective memories of those around her allows her to reproduce traumatic experience in a way that enmeshes history with personal memory.

In the introduction to *Persepolis*, Satrapi presents her narrative as working towards a nostalgic recovery project of “not forgetting” (PI Introduction). In its amalgamation of visual and verbal practices, the comic functions as a vehicle to document subjective experiences of trauma while also serving as a means of collectivizing historical memory. Satrapi contests dominant narratives of historical memory with an intimate, personal account. As Jeff Adams observes, “the late twentieth century rise of the documentary graphic novel has brought with it a pedagogical impulse, a desire to document traumatic incidents from the past for a contemporary audience” (qtd. in Brock 224). In the comics form, trauma is articulated through the continuous practice of making visible that which cannot be narrativized. *Persepolis* offers a witness account of Satrapi’s trauma, but also testifies to the historical, political, and cultural silences of other Iranian people who are vilified in Western representations of Iran: “I also don’t want those Iranians who lost their lives in prisons defending freedom, who died in the war against Iraq, who suffered under various repressive regimes, or who were forced to leave their families and flee their homeland to be forgotten” (PI Introduction). The comics form offers numerous opportunities for images to fill the gaps

where words are insufficient in this testimony – and it does this through the process of tracing historical memory. The gutters of the comic are empty spaces where Satrapi calls into play dominant stereotypes of Iranian experience, and the panels themselves work to resolve the cultural aphasia of said stereotypes (Naghibi and O'Malley 246). Through her representation of the past, and her focus on making visible the speechlessness of trauma, Satrapi retraces the larger collective experiences of Iranian people.

Throughout *Persepolis*, Satrapi presents remembered images of experience and historical memories as mutually reinforcing accounts. The text processes lived experience in a way that exceeds simple chronological understandings, and necessitates that historical knowledge is a means of bridging the gaps in subjective memory. The process of framing historical memory, therefore, resists a strict linearity that is typical of historical documentation. Satrapi privileges her dual positions as narrator and the subject of narration – both historiographer and biographer. From these varying standpoints, Satrapi's subjective memory evokes cultural and historical significances that are articulated in her process of documentation (Brock 231). In the opening panels of *Persepolis*, Satrapi roots memories of the past revolution firmly in the present space of the comic. Furthermore, Marji positions herself as a single voice in the first panel, only to make the jump between her personal circumstances and the realities of other girls her age in the second panel. In the following panel, Satrapi switches into a moment of revolutionary demonstration that further elucidates the circumstances of the first two images. Moving the sequence from memory to history, Satrapi jumps temporally between various historical moments – and emphasizes the immediacy of images in her renderings of memory and history. The comics form allows Satrapi to represent each panel within its own timeframe, but also to leap across periods of time when necessary. As a result, she is able to shift easily between “the ostensibly prosaic to the explicitly political” (Chute 98). Historical documentation will often privilege the

authentic experience of survivors and the subsequent narration of their lived experience; consequently, “chronology tangles with chronography” in historical representations constructed from memory (Brock 231). In *Persepolis*, the memory of the exile quickly becomes the narrative of historical experience in Iran.

Marianne Hirsch introduces the idea of “postmemory” to address how memories can be transmitted, through individualized accounts, to those who were not present during an event (106). Specifically, Hirsch comments on how the intergenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge allows a character like Marji to contextualize her own understandings of personal trauma with familial narratives – thus filling the gaps of speechlessness and lost history. The process of representing the past through postmemory is dependent on inherited memories that illuminate how traumatic events continue to form a collective consciousness. Postmemory is thus a way of understanding how traumatic events of the past have continued effects in the present. For Satrapi, her childhood account of her experience post-Islamic revolution is one that exceeds comprehension. The child protagonist Marji is acutely aware of how members of her family are often unable to verbalize their experiences of trauma. For example, when Marji asks her grandmother about her grandfather, her grandmother entirely avoids the conversation: “She won’t tell me about grandpa” (PI 28). Satrapi’s retelling of personal memory is often grounded in the intertexts of generational history and experience – specifically, those of her family members. Through Satrapi’s representations of personal memory, readers also become distant, adoptive witnesses to the larger historical circumstances of Marji’s experience.

Hirsch cites Maurice Halbwachs’ notion of “collective memory” to emphasize how memory is transmitted between individual and collective remembrance: “The break in transmission resulting from traumatic historical events necessitates forms of remembrance that reconnect and reembody an intergenerational memorial fabric that has been severed by

catastrophe” (Hirsch 109-110). *Persepolis* shows how stories of violence pass between Marji and her family in a way that forms a collective sense of trauma entirely distinct from the grief of a personal traumatic experience. When Uncle Anoosh tells Marji about the violence leading up to his imprisonment, he says: “I tell you all this because it’s important that you know. Our family memory must not be lost. Even if it’s not easy for you, even if you don’t understand it all,” and she firmly replies, “Don’t worry, i’ll never forget” (PI 60). Satrapi’s documentation of this moment points towards the necessity of familial memory in navigating her autobiography. Stories of violence become an intrinsic part of Marji’s social fabric, and, just as familial memory allows Marji to somewhat comprehend her traumatic losses, Satrapi’s memoir also serves as a metaphor for the collective loss of all Iranian people. Her injunction to “never forget” emphasizes the necessity of reading personal accounts of experience as entrenched in the fabric of a larger historical moment. The exiled author is also implicated in the process of transmitting memory intergenerationally, as Satrapi writes about her childhood from the position of the exiled adult. She acknowledges that even beyond the biological transmission of postmemory, her text allows us as readers to become witnesses by adoption. Through this remembrance, Satrapi also frames her own experience, both pre- and post-exile, as one that should never be forgotten.

The perspective of childhood that Satrapi adopts in the text allows her to effectively camouflage the complexity of memory and historical experience under the guise of universal simplicity. The inadequacy of the child Marji to fully comprehend her painful and violent encounters allows Satrapi to formulate a representation of traumatic memory that is universally accessible. Satrapi’s approach to representing scenes of violence is centred on the inability of the witnessing child to comprehend this violence. *Persepolis* thereby constructs multiple parallels of the child witness, and the book itself “becomes an integrated, repeated act of symbolizing the lost innocence of children” (Segall 40). For example, when Siamak

recounts the tortures that his guerrilla friend suffered through in prison, his description, drawn in a large, unbordered panel, represents both the “uncontainability of trauma and the fleeting, uncategorizable images running through Marji’s imagination” (Chute 101). Satrapi reconstructs the image of a man cut up in seven neat pieces, laid out like a hollow, dismembered doll in order to match Siamak’s description of his friend “cut into pieces” (PI 52). The text moves from an unbearable narrative of torture to detached caricatures of torture, and finally, to Marji’s present traumatic reaction (Chute 101). The visual disjuncture of the child’s perception of violence is contrasted against Marji’s attempt, and failure, to understand violence and death through the process of visualization. Satrapi utilizes the child’s “too-tidy” conceptualization of death and violence in order to represent the mass horrors of the Iranian landscape she grew up in (Chute 100). By drawing the image from a child’s unrealistic perspective, she shows us how a simplistic mode of representation depicts historical trauma more effectively than realism – primarily because she is able to inscribe an otherwise unrepresentable trauma visually onto the page.

In the first volume of *Persepolis*, Satrapi offers a relatable account of childhood growing pains and teenage rebellion. Readers are witness to the ways in which Marji begins to develop her own unique style, coloured by Western music, Kim Wilde posters, a denim jacket and Nike sneakers, and a loosely fitted hijab (PI 131). In the second volume of the text, Marji responds to her friends’ adoption of Western fashion trends, saying: “When something is forbidden, it takes on a disproportionate importance. Much later I learned that making themselves up and wanting to follow the western ways was an act of resistance on their part” (PII 105). This is another instance where the exiled Satrapi looks back retrospectively and draws conclusions from beyond what is immediately present in the narrative. However, this insight is something that readers lack in the first volume, and our familiarity with Marji’s teenage rebellion is framed against the horrors of war in Iran. The reader is made constantly

aware of the consequences of Marji's actions – as evident in Satrapi's juxtaposition of images of the young boys fighting in the Iran-Iraq war and Marji's first party. The sketch of Marji and her friends mid-air on the dance floor takes on additional meaning alongside the mirror image of other Iranian teenagers mid-air on the battlefield (PI 112). As Joseph Darda explains, "Satrapi's drawing of Marji seeks to represent her past self but fails, and points to this failure, by highlighting the national backdrop to what, at first glance, appears to be a simple moment of carefree teenage fun" (43). By placing the two panels alongside each other, and graphically matching them against one another, Satrapi reminds the reader of the social and political realities of Marji's adolescence. The gulf between these two groups of young people – "one of which is playing at violence and the other of which is victim to it" – is represented as entirely incomprehensible (Darda 43). Later in the text, when Marji realizes that her own home has been bombed, and that her friend has been killed in the bombing, her reaction elicits a similar sense of speechlessness: "No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering or my anger" (PI 142). The figure of the young Iranian girl is thus positioned at the forefront of historical trauma – and it is from this position that Satrapi creates a forum for voices that have otherwise been silenced in historical representations of Iran.

At the beginning of *Persepolis*, we are presented with Marji's desire to be a prophet unlike any of those before her (PI 6). This is an idea that permeates the text, even though this childhood desire slowly fades. Prophets bring a message, and Marji, and by extension Satrapi, has a clear message. In the introduction to the text, Satrapi calls on Western preconceptions of Iran as a nation of "fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism": "As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is untrue. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me" (PI Introduction). This clear statement of authorial intent illustrates Satrapi's ongoing process of grasping history – and how this

process allows for a reframing of her own traumatic experience. While Satrapi outlines that trauma is an inescapable reality of her history, she also demonstrates that the visual and verbal practices of “not forgetting” allow for an intervention against the larger cultural silences associated with Western representations of Iran. Through her positioning of multiple selves – the exiled author, the experiencing child, and the adoptive witness – Satrapi reframes her experience in a way that displaces the hegemonic images of Iranian historical representation. In doing so, she confronts the universal hardships of war and trauma to show the inextricable connections between history and memory in exploring the nature of her traumatic experience.

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