

## **Crossing Cultures/ Crossing Genres: The Re-invention of the Graphic Memoir in *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*.**

By Lopamudra Basu

### **Migrant Intellectuals, Academic Debates and the Graphic Memoir**

Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoirs *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* are compelling explorations of female Iranian national and diasporic identity. Satrapi uses the form of the graphic novel to creatively counter the overwhelming perception of Iranian women as oppressed subjects of Islamic religious orthodoxy. This essay is an attempt to read Satrapi's memoirs as a reworking of the traditional genre of autobiography, which has traditionally privileged a Universalist western subjectivity, usually male. Satrapi reinvents autobiography as a genre expressing the growth of non-western, female, Iranian subjectivity but also rescripts its terrain as encompassing the social sphere in relation to which individual subjectivity develops. Not only does Satrapi use the memoir to narrate her own growth into consciousness and artistic expression, this narrative is constantly juxtaposed against seminal events in contemporary Iranian history. Satrapi's reworking of autobiography as graphic memoir disrupts the categorization of Iranian female identity as one in direct opposition to modern western female identity, positing one as complete suppression by religious authority and the other as the apotheosis of freedom and individualism.

Satrapi's memoirs have been published at a time of increasing visibility of memoirs by Iranian women in the US. Perhaps the most famous example is Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. This work has sparked a furious controversy about the particular popularity of Iranian women's memoirs at a time of increasing US intolerance towards the current regime in Iran and the constant veiled and overt threat of American attack if the present Iranian government does not give up its nuclear energy program. Hamid Dabashi has drawn a connection between these seemingly disconnected literary and political phenomena by arguing that such literary presentations of women's suppression by religious or cultural institutions has been the traditional rationale for moral and cultural legitimation of imperial rule. Using Gayatri Spivak's analysis of the moral

rationale for British colonial rule in India to be the saving of brown women from the atrocities of brown men, Dabashi categorizes these contemporary memoirs to be providing the present day moral impetus to sanction American imperial adventures. Dabashi is quite unabashed in his categorization of Nafisi and others as comprador intellectuals who are servicing the American ideological machinery. In addition, Dabashi accuses Nafisi for reinvoking a restrictive notion of the western canon, through her depiction of a group of students reading the classics of modern western literature in the privacy of Nafisi's home, at a time of academic and literary censorship in Iran. The reading list of Nafisi's group, Dabashi argues, ignores a domestic Iranian literary tradition and the women in the group lack an empathy with the underprivileged sections of the Iranian population. While this paper is not the space to tease out the intricacies of this debate, I think it provides an interesting context to begin reading *Persepolis*.

It is important to keep in mind that the Nafisi controversy impinges on the question of gender. Dabashi's main source of discomfort with Nafisi's depiction of the severe restrictions of women's freedoms in contemporary Iran is that it becomes a rationale for imperial interventions. This is a familiar accusation that many feminists of color have faced. In representing gender oppressions in their societies truthfully, they invite criticism for being anti-nationalist or pro-western. The Nigerian born British novelist Buchi Emecheta is an example that comes to mind as someone who has attracted a great deal of negative attention because she has been an unequivocal critic of polygamy. Nigerian critics have attacked her for her negative portraits of Nigerian men. This ambivalence in Emecheta's presentation of Nigerian men has led to some critics like Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi to argue that Emecheta is preoccupied by the question of the black woman as a victim of black patriarchy, without being equally attentive to the question of racism. Ogunyemi identifies Emecheta as a feminist author and construes feminism to be a Euro-American movement. It seems that a feminist of color or a third world feminist has to shoulder the peculiar burden of speaking out against the oppressions of women in her society, while avoiding being labeled as a western feminist who privileges gender without being attentive to racial, ethnic, and class issues.

In spite of its focus on dangers of representing gender oppression, Dabashi's tirade against Nafisi is oddly reminiscent of Aijaz Ahmad's polemical attack against Edward

Said in the early nineteen nineties. Predictably, Ahmad's leading charge against Said and other postcolonial migrant intellectuals was that they are separated from their native cultures and that Said's celebrated intellectual dissent and intervention from metropolitan locations is an ineffectual project because the institutional location of migrant intellectuals already co-opts them in the pervasive regime of global capital. In a similar manner, Dabashi argues that Nafisi's political affiliation with neoconservatives in the Bush regime undermines her credibility as a critic of Iranian social realities. In attempting to figure a way out of this theoretical impasse between the potential for migrant intellectual activism and the limitations imposed by metropolitan location, I think it is useful to bring into play the notion of the autonomy of the artistic form proposed by Adorno and others of the Frankfurt School. Walter Benjamin in "The Author as Producer," Herbert Marcuse in *The Aesthetic Dimension* and Theodor Adorno in "Commitment," have all in different ways privileged art which does not explicitly follow the dictates of any political purpose. These writers wanted to distance themselves from the excesses of art pressed to the service of repressive political systems. These theorists made an impassioned argument for an autonomous space for art, so that it could be the repository and expression of potentialities for social transformation, without explicitly furthering a political agenda. Instead of explicit correspondences between works of art and political realities, Adorno and others in the Frankfurt School are interested in highlighting the less formulaic, subtle inter-relationships between art and politics. First, in Adorno and Marcuse's conception, an artwork by virtue of its form is able to transform reality and give it an alternative space and a life of its own. It is no longer a part of the real world but vitally connected to it, following only the logic of its form. Marcuse defines aesthetic form as "the result of the transformation of a given content (actual or historical, personal or social fact) into a self-contained whole: a poem, play, novel etc. The work is thus 'taken out' of the constant process of reality and assumes a significance and truth of its own"(8). Marcuse goes on to argue that the critical function of art resides in the logic of its aesthetic form. Although the aesthetic form of a literary work distances it from the actuality of class struggle, it is able to offer a "counter-consciousness," which is ultimately liberatory. For Marcuse as well as other theorists of the Frankfurt School, the progressive character of a work of art is not dependent on the class origins of the artist or

the representation of the oppressed class in the artist's work. Marcuse argues that "the criteria for the progressive character of art are given only in the work itself as a whole: in what it says and how it says it (19).

Richard Byrne's discussion of this controversy in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* points to the misuses of Nafisi's memoir by the current US administration to build a consensus for a military campaign against Iran. It is important to acknowledge that artistic works can be manipulated and pressed into the service of ideological campaigns to manufacture consent for imperial projects. The *Persepolis* memoirs embody a form which is innately resistant to such ideological manipulation and co-optation. A graphic memoir is a hybrid form which combines autobiography with journalistic or historical reportage mediated by the cartoonist's gift of exaggeration. Scott McCloud in his unique study of the art of the graphic novel *Understanding Comics*, written in the form of a graphic novel, has argued that "the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled . . . when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face . . . you see it as the face of another . . . but when you enter the world of the cartoon . . . you see yourself" (36). The cartoon is thus an iconic figure which allows the reader to project her own reality into that of the comic character enabling a dialogue between two different realms of experience. McCloud also argues that by dabbling in two distinct styles, one of photographic realism and the other of abstraction, the graphic novelist is able to dwell simultaneously in abstract concepts as well as concrete specificity, depending on the style being used. The interplay of visual styles, the realistic to the iconic, along with the verbal dialogue makes this genre a hybrid and dialogic one, similar to M.M. Bakhtin's theorization of the traditional novel. The graphic novel in the present time retains its connection to the "heteroglossia" of popular culture in a manner more similar to the nineteenth century novel, when the novel was more of a form of popular entertainment.

*Persepolis*, created as a dialogic art form does not offer a romanticized vision of individual sensibility. Nor does it offer a monologic presentation of Iranian woman as victim of Iranian religious patriarchy. While recording the events of the Islamic Revolution accurately, and emphasizing the curtailment of women's rights, there is no luxury for lament or nostalgia. There is also a conscious attempt to include diversity of classes and religions in the presentation of Iranians. There is a sense of a broad canvass

sweep rather than a small circle of Iranian women who are readers of western fiction. In some unique ways therefore, the form of *Persepolis* enables it to be malleable enough to escape some of the controversial quagmires that more traditional autobiographies can fall into. Moreover because it embraces a popular cultural form, the graphic novel, it can mask the seriousness of its statement under the guise of comic laughter. Like the figure of the fool in Shakespearean tragedy, the graphic memoir form allows for serious and provocative commentary on contemporary society without getting labeled as the political statement of Iranian nationalism or feminism.

The medium of the graphic novel enables Satrapi to develop a satirical perspective to critique the dual standards of the Islamic regime and the double lives that Iranians are forced to live. She is also able to use humor and the child narrator's voice to point to contradictions between appearance and reality both in Iran and the West. The form of the graphic novel enables the representation of the autobiographical persona as a comic character, thus allowing for an ironic distance which removes elements of nostalgia, sentimentality, and solipsism which are dangers inherent in the form of the memoir.

### **Rewriting Memoir as Collective Memory**

Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith in the Introduction to *Decolonizing the Subject: the Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* have argued that in traditional western autobiography the subject of autobiography "the 'I' becomes 'Man,' putatively a marker of the universal human subject whose essence remains outside the vagaries of history" (xvii). They consider western autobiography to be an "exclusionary genre," which provides a "constraining template . . . against which the utterances of other subjects are measured and misread" (xviii). In *Persepolis*, Marji's childhood and growth into subjectivity happens against the historical events of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran Iraq War. Questions of Marji's autobiographical subjectivity are not isolated from the history of her country and the consequences of the Islamic Revolution on the lives of women. *Persepolis* distinguishes itself from traditional autobiography not only because of its hybrid literary identity as graphic memoir, which intermingles visual and literary text, but also because it does not concentrate exclusively on the subjectivity of the author.

The graphic form enables partial use of the first person “I” but it also depicts the autobiographical persona as a third person “Marji,” a nickname obviously derived from Satrapi’s first name but providing some distance from the traditional autobiographical subject position.

*Persepolis* draws attention to Satrapi’s primary social and intellectual formation as a liberal, upper class, western educated Iranian girl. The graphic memoir portrays Marji’s parents’ active involvement in the Iranian revolution primarily because of their left-wing, anti-imperialist politics. Marji becomes the witness and recorder of the dramatic events sweeping her country at the time of her childhood. Through her eyes, we witness the violent demonstrations during the revolution, Iran’s war with Iraq, and the American hostage crisis, among other events. There are several intertwined narrative strands in the memoir. The history of Marji’s relatives interweaves with events in Iran’s past and both of these influence the course of Marji’s life. In the memoirs, Marji’s voice is not the only one we hear. There are several storytellers in *Persepolis*. Two very important ones, because of their affective bonds with Marji, are her grandmother and her Uncle Anoosh, who fill her in on the British and Russian imperial rivalries over Iran, the attraction of left wing and Marxist ideology for the intelligentsia, and the corruption of the Shah’s regime. Although a graphic memoir, these characters represent modes of oral storytelling in informal situations. Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Storyteller” reflects:

Memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening from generation to generation . . . It starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown. In each of them there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop. (98)

Benjamin is lamenting the end of oral storytelling conventions and the rise of the novel in an era of print culture. The representation of oral forms of storytelling and particularly their role in creating the foundations of Marji’s identity points to a sense of self which is not at a radical disjuncture from family and community. Marji’s early sense of self does not coincide with any separation of public and private components of identity. Being born at a tumultuous time of Iranian history, even her private dreams and reveries as a child are imbued with a sense of political participation in the public sphere. Even when the revolution is quickly co-opted by Islamic religious hard liners, who impose very

authoritarian rules limiting access of women to public space, the private sphere of the family home remains a space of free speech, inquiry, and questioning of events outside. Marji's parents both participate in this inquiry and debate and Marji is quickly socialized as a political being, for whom the imaginary portraits of Marx and God are remarkably alike in their physical appearance.

Throughout both memoirs, there is an uncompromising critique of war and an expose of the hypocrisies and double standards of the Islamic regime. In both *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*, Satrapi records the enormity of suffering and devastation caused by war. Although the main target of Satrapi's satire is the Islamic regime's curtailment of women's rights, her deeper anger is reserved for its complicity in involving Iran in a long and disastrous war with Iraq. Although the presentation of the war begins with Marji's patriotic fervor and her father's enthusiasm in being able to bomb Saddam Hussein's Baghdad, the human costs begin to endow the text with a somber poignancy. The tragic consequences of war are revealed in the arrival of refugees in Tehran and the increasing lists of dead soldiers, who are promised an instant place in heaven. Even more devastating is the destruction of Jewish family of Baba Levy, which causes the death of Marji's friend Neda Levy. She is an innocent victim of war and her death along with the death of Marji's classmate, Pardisse's father remain moments of senseless suffering in a work in which satiric laughter seems to dominate.

The memoirs do not provide a political analysis of the Iran Iraq war, but there are allusions to the culpability of European powers in their irresponsible sale of weapons to both countries. The Iranian hostage crisis is referred to parenthetically as is the use of chemical weapons by the Iraqi army. Mahmood Mamdani has pointed out "The Iraqi war against Iran saw the first post-Vietnam use of chemical weapons in war, and America was the source of both the weapons and the training needed to use them"(122). These memoirs hint at the responsibility of global super powers and arms trade in propelling the war, but these threads are not explored sufficiently.

Although the geographic movement traced in the protagonist's journey is from post revolutionary Iran to Austria, followed by a return to Iran and a final departure for France, the choice of a European country is determined by the pragmatics of obtaining a visa rather than any particular emotional or cultural identification with Europe. It

becomes virtually impossible to obtain a US visa after the hostage crisis mentioned in *Persepolis*. In both memoirs, the US is presented as a powerful entity in the imagination of the characters, as a space of freedom and pleasure with a faint acknowledgement of it as a geo-political entity that is implicated in the political ferment of modern Iranian history.

The yearning for Anglo-American culture is evident in Marji's obsession with punk rock, her defiance in seeking out contraband cassettes, and her parents' smuggling posters of Iron Maiden and Kim Wilde into Iran from their trip to Turkey at considerable risk to themselves. Are these acts of rebellion limited only to the western educated upper class Iranians? In a very revealing moment in the memoir, Marji's cousin Shabad reports the recruitment of village boys for the war effort. Shabad claims "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 into a trance with all their songs" (*Persepolis* 101). This seems to suggest that Disneyland is an attractive place for young boys of the poorer strata of Iranian society. Thus the Islamic regime is selective in its rejection of capitalist modernity and will invoke it for its own purposes. Even if this is Shabad's own rhetorical retelling of the drafting techniques, there seems to be an implicit acknowledgement of the pervasive appeal of American popular culture.

### **Inverting the Colonial Gaze: Iranian Woman's Eyes on Europe**

Satrapi's project in the graphic memoirs is to provide a counter-narrative about the status of Iranian women, a narrative which deconstructs mainstream media and even tendencies in western feminism that cast Iranian women and other groups of third world women as unmitigated victims. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has explored the binary between the west and the non-west in feminist scholarship in her essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." Mohanty analyzes the discursive production of the third world woman as "a singular and monolithic subject" (196) in feminist texts. Third world women are portrayed as a homogeneous category and posited as victims of particular institutions and systems. Mohanty argues that individual practices like veiling cannot be reduced to a pervasive sign of female oppression in Islamic



societies; local contexts must be examined closely when evaluating any practice. Mohanty's critique is directed at hegemonic western feminism which seeks to "represent" the oppressions of third world women and thus unconsciously replicates its own privileged and normative position in a manner similar to hegemonic status of western humanism. Satrapi's unique contribution through her graphic memoir is to deconstruct the binaristic model by which the world is increasingly codified, the modern West and the backward East, particularly as these spaces structure and impact the lives of women. In mainstream media and popular perception, the US is seen as a space guaranteeing the rights of women and post revolutionary Iran a space where women's freedoms are severely restricted. Satrapi's memoir refuses to be "under western eyes," it refuses the familiar mode of being read as a text about Iranian women's travails under the dreadful Islamic regime. One of the ways in which it enacts this refusal is by subverting the practice of the gaze which has been directed by western feminists towards third world women, proceeding instead to direct this gaze at the hegemonic west and the liberated western feminist as well.

John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* discusses the gaze with reference to Renaissance paintings and argues that a woman's gaze like her self is often split into two. She is schooled in the art of surveying herself and policing her own actions. Contrasting the male gaze with that of the female Berger writes, "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at . . . The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight"(47). Juxtaposing images of women from Renaissance paintings and girlie magazines, Berger traces a similarity in facial expression and reads both images as woman responding to an imagined male onlooker, "offering up her femininity as the surveyed" (55).

This objectification of women as a source of visual pleasure and power for the male onlooker is made even more complex in the context of western imperial conquest in the Islamic world. Two visual texts which embody Islamic women becoming available for the visual consumption of a western male gaze are the famous 1834 painting of Delacroix "Women of Algiers in Their Apartment," which becomes the title of Assia Djebar's collection of stories about Algerian women and the cover image of her book.

The other example is *The Colonial Harem*, which is Malek Alloula's collection of postcards of Algerian women in various states of native dress and nudity, sent back to France by French colonialists in Algeria. Like the autobiographies of Islamic women, these visual texts form the cultural context for the writing and reception of the visual images of *Persepolis*, particularly images of the female body.<sup>1</sup>

The question of the visual representation of Islamic women is intimately linked with the institution of veiling. Feminist scholars of Islam like Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi have pointed out that there was no rigid prescription of the veil during the early history of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad's wives often led very active public lives and accompanied him as advisors on the battlefield. The veil, Mernissi points out, was instituted as a mechanism to separate the public and the private at a time when the wedding guests of the Prophet had overstayed their hospitality. But during the lifetime of the prophet it was never a rigid imposition. The practice of veiling became rigid and codified during subsequent periods of Islamic history. During the period of European colonization, the veil got fixed as a sign of Islamic oppression of women. The colonial conquest of territory became allegorically conflated with gaining access to the covered bodies and concealed lives of Islamic women. The veil got conflated as a sign of cultural backwardness of the Islamic and other eastern worlds. In the era of nationalist decolonization, secular nationalists in the Islamic world demanded the abandonment of the veil as a symbolic passage to modernity. The banning of the veil was particularly harsh in its enforcement in Iran, where in 1936 Reza Shah Pahlavi enforced a ban on the veil which was very traumatic for many Islamic women who had relied on it as a modicum of safety and comfort in their lives. Predictably the banning did not completely succeed and many Islamic women continued to wear some form of the veil. Farzaneh Milani in *Veils and Words: Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* notes the dramatic passage of legislation banning the veil in 1936 and the equally controversial re-imposition of the veil in 1983 after the Islamic Revolution. In both instances, women's protests against legislation affecting their bodies, identities, and relationships with public and private spaces were largely ignored. Mialni points to the arguments in favor and against veiling but ultimately gestures at its unstable status. She gestures at the problems inherent in the veil:

There is a paradox at the center of all these arguments: does the veil protect or entice? On the one hand, man is represented as a creature with gargantuan sexual appetites, unable to control himself, a potential threat to any woman who through displaying her body might provoke or arouse him . . . Yet it is the veil that entices one to imagine what it hides. It teases and torments some men and protects others from what they cannot see.” (39)

The titillating effect of the veil almost luring the voyeuristic gaze of the male viewer is particularly noticeable in the visual representations of Islamic women in the colonial era. It is no coincidence that Delacroix’s painting coincides with the date of the French conquest of Algeria. Assia Djebar has pointed out that the representation of Algerian women in the harem in a state of leisure and dressed in opulent finery, smoking a hookah, casts the western male viewer as voyeur, violating the taboo of the veil and getting intimate access to sensuality and visual pleasure in the private sphere. The same dynamic of voyeurism is intensified in the postcards collected in *The Colonial Harem*, which includes images of Algerian women in semi nude poses, used to present and circulate an exoticized image of Algeria.

Inderpal Grewal in *Home and Harem* argues that the harem in Islamic societies and the *antahpur* in Hindu society functioned as a community of women, a space often of friendship and autonomy. However in the colonialist imagination all these forms of seclusion were constructed as a problem or as evil. According to Grewal “harem women in orientalist texts were seen as promiscuous, duplicitous, and often as lesbians, those in the Indian zenana were seen as passive and exploited as well as duplicitous” (51). Grewal interprets these discourses as ultimately restricting the relative autonomy of the harem, and the infiltration of colonial power into domestic spaces.

These images of the exoticized sensuality of women of the Islamic world perpetuated in the colonial era two contrasting ideas about women in the Islamic world. On the one hand, the veil represented theological oppression, denial of human rights of self-expression. On the other hand, images of unveiled women in the harem seemed to represent sensual excess and moral depravity which could be read as civilizational backwardness to justify the imposition and continuance of colonial rule.

It is against this background of the visual representation of Islamic women that Marjane Satrapi embarks on her quest to represent through the visual form of comics,

women and men who have had a role in shaping her life. It is not surprising that there is no attempt in her drawings to highlight the feminine charms of her women. She refuses visual pleasure to an implied male reader/viewer by refusing a sexual or exotic presentation of women's bodies. This choice is also apparent in the stark black and white drawings of the memoir and the refusal of providing visual stimulation through the use of color.

*Persepolis 2* is a more dramatic representation of an inter-cultural gaze. This memoir begins with Marji's arrival in Austria where her parents have sent her to escape the constricting life, loss of individual freedom, and the devastation of Iran's war with Iraq. Satrapi continually deconstructs the facile generalizations about western democracies being the most fertile grounds for the flowering of female subjectivity. Marji's experience in Austria is the very opposite of the model immigrant success narrative. Instead of being able to pursue her educational, artistic, and personal goals, Marji's life goes into a downward spiral once she is separated from the nurturing influences of her natal family. She experiences Austria as a place of profound alienation and personal failure. It is only by returning to Iran and reconnecting with her family that she is able to find her identity as an artist. In the realm of romantic relationships too, Satrapi undermines popular perceptions of greater equality among the sexes in intimate relationships in the western world. Satrapi's parents share a very equitable relationship through both the memoirs. In contrast, Markus, Marji's Austrian boyfriend is shown to be quite exploitative. Even though Marji's marriage to Reza, on her return to Iran, does not last, there is greater balance of power between them.

However at the convent where she resides at the beginning of her life in Austria, Marji encounters virulent racism and cultural stereotyping. She goes to watch television in the common lobby carrying her pot of spaghetti to eat while watching television. The nun in charge accuses her of a lack of manners and then goes on to generalize that "It is true what they say about Iranians. They have no education" (*Persepolis 2* 23). Unlike the male gaze of Delacroix's painting or the postcards of the *The Colonial Harem*, we see Marji being subjected to the gaze of the educated western woman. We can witness in this encounter the construction of what Chandra Mohanty had referred to as the monolithic third world woman. Marji's response defies any stereotype that her interlocutor might

have been harboring about the docility and subservience of Iranian women to authority. Marji's retaliation is swift and brutal when she mimics the rhetoric of her attacker and says "It's true what they say about you too. You were all prostitutes before becoming nuns" (*Persepolis 2 23*). If the nun can casually devalue Marji's cultural heritage, she has no compunction in casting an insult on the principle of chastity that is one of the foundational values of a nun's life. If Mother Superior's gaze attempts to cast Marji as the unsophisticated, culturally backward other, Marji's reversal of that gaze is able to caricature the celibate nun as a former prostitute.

Although Satrapi refuses an erotic presentation of female bodies in her graphic memoirs, this attitude however is not concomitant with any kind of internally imposed censorship on the representation of the sexual aspects of Marji's identity. In fact, both the memoirs are imbued with an attitude of frankness and an acceptance of the sexuality of men and women. This sensibility is very much in contrast to the attitude of sexual titillation that has characterized the discourse of the harem.

Marji gets cast as the inadvertent voyeur of liberated western sexuality, when at a party at her friend's Julie's house she witnesses Julie and her lover being intimate on a couch on the living room where she had escaped to. We enter into this scenario through Marji's gaze. Instead of the colonizer's gaze at the hidden sensuality of the Eastern woman, the reader is gazing at the liberated sexuality of a young Austrian woman. The acceptance of late twentieth century pre-marital sex in western democracies is suddenly rendered unfamiliar and disturbing from the perspective of a young Iranian girl for whom pre-marital chastity is a standard expectation. Julie's uninhibited sexuality and promiscuity only creates a sense of amazement in Marji. After the first shock of seeing a man's genitalia, Satrapi creates a panel which is a flashback to a childhood conversation between Marji and her father on the subject of testicles. Marji remembers her father's embarrassment and comparison of testicles to ping pong balls. In the next panel Julie discovers Marji laughing aloud on the couch and concludes erroneously that she is under the influence of marijuana. Marji's spontaneous laughter upon recalling the conversation with her father and Julie's laughter at the mistaken reading of Marji's laughter emphasize their mutual agencies and avoid fixing either of them into a relationship of object and voyeur.

Marji does become subjected to the relentless scrutiny of adolescents in her high school for whom she is all too marked by difference. Sitting behind a group of her schoolmates in the cafeteria, she overhears them talking about her. The form of the graphic novel that Scott McCloud describes as “sequential art” is particularly effective in this scene. We see a scowling faced Marji facing the reader while the speech balloon captures voices she is overhearing from the next table, voices which cruelly compare her face to that of a cow’s. Like in the encounter with the nun, even in a moment of profound anxiety about herself, Marji does not tolerate insults. In the next panel we see an iconic representation of her face, just an outline of her profile with a exaggerated mouth proclaiming in bold and extremely large letters “I am Iranian and proud of it” (43).

Marji’s whirlwind romance with Markus brings into an interesting intersection some of the cultural preconceptions and attitudes that are the historic legacy of the colonial encounters. By the time she meets Markus, Marji is beginning to feel extremely isolated in the social world of Austria, where she has lost the direct and intimate support of her parents and extended family. Moreover, she has already been subjected to vicious racist comments which have severely undermined her confidence in herself. She is also confronting adolescence with its dramatic physical changes in an atmosphere of no social and familial support. These conditions make Marji quite anxious about her femininity and desirability as there is no longer a comforting sense of acceptance and nurturing that her family had provided for her. Her adolescent interest in the opposite sex seeks a reciprocity of attraction and acceptance. However, her first encounters with Austrian boys are disappointing, one seeks out her company for possible help with his problems in mathematics and the other acknowledges himself to be a homosexual after his inability to feel aroused by Marji. When Marji encounters Markus she is delighted to find that he has a “normal” heterosexual interest in her, which at last alleviates her own uncertainties about her desirability. However, this relationship is fraught with difficulty not just because Marji’s difficult social situation of living in exile and being completely without friends or familial support but also because the relationship has to encounter racially hostile attitudes directed towards it, due to the fact that the homogenous white Austrian society cannot easily accept the idea of inter-racial romance. Marji is subjected to the gaze of older Austrian women, Markus’ mother and Frau Doctor Heller, her landlord,

who are angry and discomfited by the idea of inter-racial dating. The final violent blow to the relationship is struck by Markus' unfaithfulness and Marji's discovery of it. This spirals into a period of profound depression, self-hatred, and alienation for Marji. In some of the most moving and dark scenes of the memoir, Marji becomes a homeless vagrant, riding in the labyrinth of the city tramway or foraging for food in garbage cans, till she ends up in the hospital after coughing blood and passing out on the street.

This episode strips Marji of all the layers of social privilege that she had taken for granted and reduces the social and economic gap that separates her from illegal immigrants or refugees who struggle to survive in urban centers of Europe and North America. The experience also gives Marji clarity and insight about a relationship she had grown comfortable with. She realizes that Markus is initially attracted to her racial and ethnic difference, her "rebellious side" and her "natural nonchalance" (*Persepolis 2 65*). He encourages her to start visiting disreputable clubs to buy drugs for both of them. But Marji realizes in retrospect "This decadent side, which had so pleased him at first, ended up profoundly annoying him" (*Persepolis 2 72*). Markus is attracted by Marji's exotic difference but ultimately expects her to conform to expectations of feminine docility and subservience which transcend boundaries of the east and the west. Gender inequality is still a reality in the post feminist west and this is revealed in the multiple ways that Markus exploits Marji, particularly his unscrupulous demands on the remittances sent by her parents. He does not have any moral qualms in being unfaithful and expects Marji to accept it quietly. The relationship reaches an unbridgeable impasse when Marji vociferously expresses her legitimate anger at his unfaithfulness.

*Persepolis 2* invites a comparison between Marji's first romance with Markus and her later relationship and marriage with Reza, upon her return to Iran. Contrary to notions of restricted individual choice in the sphere of romantic relationships, Marji's romance with Reza begins and progresses on her own volition and faces very little mediation from her parents. When they first meet at a party they fascinate each other because each represents a sphere of experience that the other has not had access to. Reza has intimate knowledge of the war and Marji has the experience of living in a western democracy, an experience of escape and freedom that Reza longs for. While there is a definite element of affectation in their presentation of their personalities to each other, revealed in Marji's

reveries after their marriage, captured in panels representing two differing versions of herself. In one, she is wearing a dress, sporting a feminine hair style, rouged cheeks, donning a submissive smile. In the next panel depicting the woman Reza finds himself with, Satrapi draws herself in angular lines. She is wearing a shirt and pants and her hair style is shorter and cut straight in a page boy style. Her legs are no longer discreetly crossed but her knee covered by the trouser leg juts out. The sharp lines of her nose, the projecting knee, and the sullen expression make her look quite different from the girl in the previous panel. This visual contrast reinforces the notion of the limitations of the romantic perspective and how any perception is ultimately partial. Thus Marji and Reza begin their relationship with romanticized perceptions about each other. However, as their relationship evolves, we see them as companions, preparing for examinations and studying art at the university. Their relationship seems to be based on a principle of equality. During marriage negotiations, Marji's father inserts her right to divorce in the marriage contract, anticipating their future incompatibility. Even when the marriage disintegrates they are able to collaborate on their final art project. Finally it is Marji's grandmother who inspires her to seek a divorce when their mutual incompatibility is irreconcilable and Marji is unable to decide on a course of action.

The trajectory of Marji's relationship with Reza dispels any facile notions of oppression that stereotypic perceptions of Iran may have generated. While it is true that the exceptionally progressive and tolerant atmosphere of Marji's family cannot be taken as a given for all private homes in Iran, the fact that there exist female relatives of an earlier generation like the grandmother who value individual happiness over social expectations, gesture at indigenous resources and potentialities for the empowerment of women.

While Satrapi is committed to critiquing the excesses of Islamic religious orthodoxy in Iran, she is equally interested in revealing the limitations to their power and the constant challenges to their authority offered by ordinary Iranians. She is careful in *Persepolis* to reveal the protests of women like her mother to the rigid imposition of the veil. Marji's mother is active in demonstrations and resists wearing the veil till she is personally attacked and threatened to be raped. Even when the veil becomes an inescapable requirement of public dress, there are a myriad ways in which women defy



the authority of the regime. The most common form of rebellion is the sly subversion of the veil itself. On the first page of *Persepolis* we see female children playing in Marji's school. Reducing the veil to a play object, some children jump rope with it, some use it as a piece of cloth that can be used as a headdress of a monster. In Marji's adolescence, subversion of the veil includes wearing the headscarf along with a denim jacket decorated by a Michael Jackson button (*Persepolis* 131). More serious and direct forms of confrontation with the regime include Marji's various encounters with figures of religious authority. On her return to Iran from Austria, she is not afraid to speak out and demand greater freedom for women. Her protest against the university dress code for women actually earns her a conference with the university's Islamic commission who eventually agree to let her design a uniform more comfortable for female art students. While Satrapi's memoirs draw attention to "the contrast between the official representation of my country and the real life of the people, the one that went on behind the walls" (*Persepolis* 2 150), the schizoid split of the private and the public reiterates the desire for change and the continuing demands for reform which Iranian women seek to negotiate with the Islamic regime. We are not given a picture of a static society but one in which women are active agents of political and social reform. Mahmood Mamdani has interpreted the rise of the Iranian feminist movement resulting in more liberal legislation for marriage and divorce, in recent years as the "emergence of an Islamic modernity, arising from processes within Islamic societies" (174) rather than being externally imposed. Satrapi's literary and artistic achievement lies in creatively challenging some familiar western stereotypes about Iran and mapping indigenous potentialities for change for women in Iran.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Hamid Dabashi refers to this collection of postcards and compares these images to the image of veiled girls reading on the cover of Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. He accuses the publishers of cropping the image and for removing the original context of the photograph which depicted young women reading a reformist paper during the 2000 election.

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