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Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood. **Marjane Satrapi**.

First published in French in 2000 by L'Association.

Published in English by Pantheon Books, 2003. 160 pages.

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The graphic novel *Persepolis* smudges boundaries of genres like fiction, autobiography, or the testimonial. Though written over two decades ago by the French-Iranian author Marjane Satrapi (1969-), the title continues to gain resonant afterlives across geographies, especially in the context of the women-centric protest movements that raged across Iran in 2022 and galvanised different socio-economic and ethno-religious cross-sections of society to the cry of “Zan. Zindagi. Azadi. [Women. Life. Freedom.]”. Narrated from the location of an unhomed young girl who learns to witness and question the quotidian and spectacular around her, *Persepolis* could be read today aligned with the decades long Iranian women’s liberation movements that was dyed rage in 2022, seeking to untether the body from state control, or with liberation movements elsewhere, across other sections of society.

In a world where graphic narratives and especially comic books have been stigmatised as sites of levity and totems of superhero-obsessed nerdish cults of masculinity since the mid-1930s, the comic book fandom being normatively perceived as a subculture comprising an exclusively male readership, Marjane Satrapi has curved over the years a new niche for adult readers of graphic narratives. Her graphic novels include women as protagonists and curators of stories, visibilises them, gathers their stories, and explores new possibilities of the tangle between the verbal and the visual in serious comics. In an attempt to inscribe personal memories into the collective experience of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Satrapi employed her unconventional storytelling technique to create an avant-garde graphic memoir that not only represents the unspeakable precarity of her formative years through deceptively simple illustrations, but also limns the disorienting nature of collective trauma in minimalist frames. Her work is trans-tending, in terms of inclusion, influences and experiments with the form. She was heavily inspired by the French cartoonists in the L'Association comics publishing collective. The texts that kindled her graphic memoir include David Beauchard’s autobiographical masterpiece *Epileptic* (1996), and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986). In this book review I intend to explore the politico-historical context inspiring Satrapi’s composition of *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, written in French in 2000 and translated into English in 2003. I would also like to interpret her drawing style which complements the bildungsroman of her younger self growing up in war-worn Iran. Finally, I would like to analyse how she has fictionalised her autobiography to render the imperfections and limitations of memory, while retaining its “truth” as a testimonial.

In *Persepolis*, Satrapi has meticulously etched an account of her tumultuous childhood by making “the snaking lines of history forcefully legible” (Chute 93). From her memories of the Shah’s reign when she saw her progressive parents protesting against the tyrannical ruler to witnessing the wrath of the Iran-Iraq war through the 1980s, she has used the medium of comics to narrate her journey of self-exploration in a tense and space of extreme political churning and upheavals, through “its flexible page architecture...and its structural threading of absence and presence” (Chute 94). Hence her illustrations, which recount her clumsy attempt at navigating her childhood days in revolutionary Iran, lack technical finesse and are instead presented in

monochromatic grids “to reach a certain degree of abstraction and universality” (Razavi 2). Her illustrated human and non-human characters are drawn in uncomplicated line strokes that exhibit the glaring contrast between the complex content of her narrative and the allegedly simplified artistic rendering. That Marji the child protagonist of the novel imagines God to resemble Marx, the only difference being Marx’s “curlier” hair (13), speaks volumes about her childlike attempt at figuring out who God and Marx are by focusing on their culturally received appearances. Her innocent tête-à-têtes with God, despite being visually narrated in simple frames, address multiple complex social issues such as the legitimised class divisions and poverty as received by a child-witness, her younger version in the book, well almost: “I wanted to be a prophet because our maid did not eat with us” (6).

Before delving deeper into the historical context and structure of her narrative, it is pertinent that we understand Satrapi’s fever for writing *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. She wrote it from someplace else, as a reluctant refugee, hoping to disseminate beyond Iran her shored images and memories of that country caught in the crucible of rapid socio-political transformations caused by widespread protest movements against the Shah’s regime and then, the 1979 Revolution. Despite being composed primarily as a graphic memoir premised on the personal, her narrative accesses the trans-dimension of literature. Her story “applies as much to Iranians as to Western readers”, contends Abedinifard (83). In an exclusive interview with *movieweb*, Satrapi looks back at her composition of the graphic memoir in order to highlight the reality of the Iranian people. She observes, “I didn’t have to be angry anymore, I didn’t have to have any violence in me anymore...you cannot answer to the violence by violence”. In a censorship-driven culture, her memoir questions the hegemonised tropes of invisibilisation.

Satrapi’s testimony of her childhood trauma from the alleged viewpoint of her younger self exhibits a massive influence of French comic artist David Beauchard’s storytelling technique as used in his emotionally resonant autobiographical narrative *Epileptic* (1996) in which he recounts the experience of growing up with an epileptic brother with the aid of “many metaphorical elements in his work” (Kriebel 3). Satrapi’s memoir also bears close resemblance to Spiegelman’s style of narration in *Maus* (1986), used to render a terrifying account of the Jewish holocaust from the point of view of his ageing father. Despite seeking inspiration from such brilliant comic artists’ interpretation of horror-as-humour, Satrapi’s storytelling prowess and her unconventional illustrations make her stark among contemporaries.

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood (2003) dispels the unidimensional stereotypes created and circulated about Iran and Iranians in other parts of the world, especially the metropolitan West, from the apparently uncomplicated narratorial perspective of a child. This visual chronicle of a childhood during a momentous socio-political-economic cusp in Iran documents “the political confluence of the everyday and the historical: through its visual and verbal witnessing, it contests dominant images and narratives of history, debunking those that are incomplete and those that do the work of elision.” (Chute 94). Marji explores Iran’s history through the prism of various incidents of national importance which her family members have either witnessed or helped shape. She learns that she is a descendant of Nasser al-Din Shah and that her family members had majorly contributed to the political movements against the authoritarian pre-Revolution government of Iran: “There are lots of heroes in my family. My grandpa was in prison, my uncle Anoosh too: for

nine years! He was even in the U.S.S.R. My great uncle Fereydoon proclaimed democratic state” (61).

Satrapi’s graphic narrative thus comprises “a text of witness” (Chute 96). It is a two-volume series that concludes in 1994 when Marjane leaves Iran for the last time. Before imagining new beginnings outside Iran, her visual testimony to the years spent in Iran performs a rite of passage from home, while rendering the “complexities of growing up in a time of war.” (Dallacqua 1). Marjane recollects through her lucid illustrations, how in 1980, i.e., the year after the Islamic Revolution “mandatory veiling was reinstated” (Abedinifard 84). Though quite young, she knew the political implications of this measure taken by the Iranian government. She learnt from her family members and her parents’ friends that the Iranian government had consistently deprived Iranian women of opportunities to claim the rights promised or explore their identity, a praxis which continued after the fall of the Shah’s regime in the name of making hijabi women the ideological locators of the experiment with the Revolution. Despite being a keen observer of her surroundings, Marji, who walks the reader through a memory-collage of the violent episodes of Marjane’s childhood, is too green to perceive how the issue of veiling serves “as a major hindrance to self-revelation.” (Abedinifard 84). In one of her frames Satrapi portrays Marji and her classmates as not being able to understand the obligation to wear the veil, which they then improvise as a plaything: “We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to” (3). Marji reasserts how futile she finds the whole idea of wearing the veil as she remembers the year before the Revolution, when she was in a French non-religious school and was allowed to sit with boys in the same class. Throughout the first volume of *Persepolis*, a chronicle of Marji’s growing years, the reader may observe how she fails to perceive the grave consequences of wearing tight jeans or sneakers that are identified as “punk shoes” (133). Like any other teenager she too remains obsessed with Kim Wilde, Iron Maiden, denim jackets and 1983 Nike shoes, but is consistently reminded by guardians of the Revolution that she lives in a country where an Iranian girl does not have the right to wear what she wants or claim freedom from bodily conscription to a predetermined Cause.

Persepolis has gained a cult audience over the decades as generations across geographies, many of whom espouse the democratic rights of the socially invisibilised, read in it the book of mirrors. The eruption of the slogan of “Zan, Zindagi, Azadi” speaks to instances of gender apartheid that Satrapi recounts in her novel decades back. *Persepolis*, thus, is not just a visual autobiography of a young girl who grew up in Iran. It transgresses into a testimonial, partly fictive, for generations of women who have chosen to question and defy their axiomatic marginalisation, objectification and the absurd patriarchal laws obsessed with controlling their bodies and movements as legitimised social norms. The book has inspired a few Indian graphic novelists to choose routes in radical departure from the formulae of framing comic books and/or graphic novels. Malik Sajad’s *Munnu – Boy from Kashmir* (2015), the graphic rendering of a young boy’s childhood in the conflicted land of Kashmir, is regarded as having been heavily inspired by Satrapi’s style of storytelling in *Persepolis*, it translates the testimonial-from-the-invisibilised format to another context. As is Amruta Patil’s *Kari* (2008), a graphic novel that renders a young Indian woman’s mermaid-life in the exilic space of a big city where she discovers her calling, and learns to live ever after with the hauntings of absences, of lives and beloveds left behind.

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