

Persepolis: marjane satrapis childhood in revolutionary iran book review sample

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Marjane Satrapi's book *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, published by Pantheon Books of New York, NY in 2003, tells the author and artist's own story of her childhood in Iran during the 1970s and 1980s during revolutionary times in her home country. Told in graphic novel or comic book form, Satrapi's book illustrates what it was like to be a young girl growing up in Iran as regimes and social standards underwent monumental change. Presented from a young girl's point of view, she navigates not only the typical hazards of growing up, but also encounters the violence and horror of the Islamic revolution. Mixed with history, this installment of Satrapi's story ends when she is 14 years old and her parents decide to send her to Austria because they believe she will no longer be safe in Iran. Satrapi wrote the book because she believes too often her home nation is "discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism," that she feels this image is "far from the truth," and that what happened during the time of the revolution should never be forgotten (2003, p. ii). This reason ties in directly to Satrapi's desire to show that being Iranian is complex and some of the reasons why this complexity exists, although that may not be evident in the typical news reports seen around the world (Tully 2004). It is easy to imagine that Iranians who experienced the revolution as well as people of other nations will be emotionally and intellectually affected by reading this book because of its point of view, subject, and presentation. The book is difficult to categorize because it encompasses more than one type of autobiographical writing; it could be considered a coming-of-age memoir, reflection, or an autobiographic short story, and should therefore be thought of as a hybrid of the three. Because the form is not simply text, but a lengthy

comic-strip style with 19 chapters, interviewer Robert Root suggests the “more accurate term would be ‘graphic memoir’” (2007, p. 150) rather than simply memoir or graphic novel. Persepolis is deceptive in that it is a quick read yet it explores depths of experience and emotion that are surprising when thought of as part of a young girl’s experiences in life. The book offers an important and multifaceted view of a part of the world that is, at least to Westerners, one that often dismissed.

Although not strictly chronological, Persepolis follows the life of young Marji from the point of view of her older self. The 19 chapters each present a short episode depicting a realization or event experienced or learned about by Marji. Personal, political, ideological, and emotional experiences are inextricable from one another as the regime of Iran’s Rezim Shah is torn down by a revolution; this leftist revolution ironically paved the way for the Islamic revolution a few years later and the tyranny of the far right. Marji is the child of leftist, well-off parents who are able to make sure she is well educated and able to get some of the things that kids want while they are growing up, such as Nike sneakers and band posters. In some ways, she is a very typical young girl who just wants to have the cool, new stuff coming out and to have fun with her friends.

However, having a normal childhood in the revolutionary Iran of the late 70s and 80s was impossible, no matter how well off or educated a family was.

After the ousting of the Shah, the Islamic regime pushes its way into the government, leading to new rules for Iranian citizens. As children, Marji and her friends do not always understand the reason for some of the new rules, such as the requirement to wear a veil to school. In the beginning, it seems

like a silly game to them, but as they grow older, as the violence escalates, and as it moves closer to home, they realize that the political changes are not a game. Having learned more about the personal and political horrors of war, her life is punctuated with acts of rebellion by those she knows and eventually by herself. Fourteen-year-old Marji's rebellious acts in school show that she now uses humor like a weapon. The secular education that she received at the beginning of Persepolis is replaced with one approved of by the Islamic regime. In one sense, it is a personal saving grace that she lived at a time and was of an age to see both sides of the revolution. On the other hand, possessing this view and her resulting rebellion made it dangerous for her to remain in Iran, which is why the book closes with her parents sending her away to live in Austria when she is only 14 years old.

Although rebellion is main issue in the book, the true overarching theme is of remembrance. To the author and the people she has known, remembering everything is important. Readers first understand this reason from Satrapi's introduction in which she says, " One can forgive but one must never forget" (2003, p. ii). Marji first encounters this when she hears the story of her beloved Uncle Anoosh's life when he tells her the reason for him telling her all about his life is because " our family memory must not be lost," and Marji promises, " I'll never forget" (2003, p. 60). This theme is reiterated a final time when Marji is at the airport with her family and her father tells her, " Don't ever forget who you are" (2003, p. 148). To remember at a national, familial, and personal level are of the utmost importance to Marji and the people she knows and loves. Without this theme, there would be little reason to write the book. For example, many people who have had a terrible and

traumatic childhood believe that the best thing to do is to forget about it. Satrapi does not subscribe to that idea; perhaps this is because the things she experienced as a child are inseparable from the experiences of her family and her nation. Other scholars examining Satrapi's work describe Persepolis as being also an ethical practice of "not forgetting" (Chute 2008, p. 94). The ethical part of "not forgetting" or remembrance is because it provides a challenge to the dominant history narratives, discrediting those that are false or fail to tell the complete story (Chute 2008).

The unexpected and devastating results of revolution are another theme in Persepolis. For instance, her leftist parents, family, friends, and acquaintances appear to be in denial about what will happen after the ousting of the Shah. Whether it was naiveté, ignorance, or outright denial, or a combination of these things, the revolutionaries that Marji knew believed so much in their own superiority that it did not occur to them they would not be the ones to say what happened next after the Shah was exiled. Her Uncle Anoosh even claimed that the Islamic uprising would lead to nothing because "the religious leaders don't know how to lead" (Satrapi 2003, p. 62). Time would show that Anoosh was wrong. The chapter "The Sheep" shows the literal and figurative ways that people dealt with the revolution together. Sheep can be as much a flock that works together as it can be a blind crowd of followers. For example, one of Marji's family friends literally escapes Iran by crawling out with a flock of sheep. Figuratively, the leftist revolutionaries are being sheep because they were blind to the idea that there were worse things than the Shah and his regime waiting to take the Shah's place as soon as he was exiled. Another figurative example of being sheep is part of the

nation's blind subscription to or cooperation with the new Islamic regime. It is a part of growing up to learn that grown-ups can be wrong and that things are not always as they appear to be; Marji's education in that type of expectation comes at an accelerated pace (Schayegh 2004). Though she may not have realized it during the many events making up her childhood, her older self puts the memories together to show the failures, the unexpected results, and the historical effects of the revolution and wars in Iran.

Another element of the writer's life shaping the story was her growing awareness of the social constructions concerning the differences among people. In *Persepolis*, class and gender are two of the big dividers. Marji learns a frank lesson about class after helping her family's illiterate maid send love letters to a neighbor boy and her father finds out about it. "Their love was impossible," he tells Marji, "In this country you must stay within your own social class" (Satrapi 2003, p. 37). Marji learns the lesson of how the new Islamic regime affects women gradually. At first, it seems ridiculous when she is only 10 years old and the veil becomes mandatory to wear at school. It makes her angry when her mother is accosted by some men in the street who threaten to rape her because she is not wearing the veil. It becomes terrifying when members of the women's league threaten to take her away from her family because she was wearing western clothing that was a "symbol of decadence" (Satrapi 2003, p. 173). Despite that the vast differences in treatment of people in Iran were social constructions based on elements people cannot help such as their gender or class, the hard lesson Marji learns is that these differences can cause problems.

Satrapis voice throughout Persepolis is that of a woman looking back at her childhood; there are a lot of memories that she has put together that may not have meant so much to her when they happened, but now that she is older she can better understand what they mean. Satrapi comes across as a straightforward, outgoing, curious, and stubborn individual. Not unlike many children, at the beginning of the book she shows herself as ready to go along with the status quo. For example, she believes what she hears on the television and she subscribes to the religion she grew up with. However, it is not long before her rebellious streak shows. Even when she is following the status quo of believing in the religion of her upbringing without question, she wants to be a prophet and it does not occur to her that females cannot be prophets. Later, after she has experienced and learned a lot more about life and the revolution, she finds it much easier to challenge the status quo, arguing with teachers in school. She is not apologetic for herself as a person. Even when she does terrible things such as get her friends to chase a young neighborhood boy and threaten to beat him around because of things his father has done, she does not shy away from showing the truth about what she did, why she did it, and what she learned from the experience. This unapologetic voice makes the story refreshing.

The young Marji is not very aware of herself and her rights in the beginning of the book. Although the Marji character learns much, it is only in retrospect and through the frame of her older self's narrative that she really becomes aware of the effect of all she has witnessed. Satrapi herself claims that she is not a feminist. In a 2004 interview with Annie Tully, Satrapi says, " the feminists become very angry when I say I am not a feminist. I am a

humanist. I believe in human beings. After what I have seen in the world, I don't think women are better than men" (para. 11). Evidently, Satrapi believes that feminism defines women as being better than men. However, this claim that she is not a feminist seems more like one of Satrapi's rebellious statement and a symptom of her distaste for being pigeonholed than one that is necessarily the truth. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines feminism as " the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes" (n. d.). It says nothing about one gender being better than the other. Satrapi's voice is feminist because one of its goals in Persepolis is to show the negative effect the revolution in Iran had on women.

The most appealing aspect of this book was the way Satrapi was able to use her words and sketches to show the depth of her characters and to give emotion to the experiences of Marji and the people around her. Another positive aspect of the book is, as reviewer Carol Anne Douglas writes, Satrapi's " sly sense of humor . . . she makes her points with bitter laughter in the background. That's the only way to bear oppression, she says" (2005, para. 2). The sense of humor is not only what allows Marji and her family to go on throughout tragedies, but is also what pulls the reader on in spite of the horrific scenes and events described throughout Persepolis. One aspect of the book that is difficult to digest is the way some events and tragedies are presented so simply. However, it must be kept in mind that these events are portrayed through the eyes of a child who may not realize the effect or reason of the events.

The book leaves out almost entirely the points of view of people from

different social classes or religious conviction. For example, when Marji learns that her maid and her neighbor's love is "impossible" (Satrapi 2003, p. 37), the majority of the trauma shown regarding the situation is on Marji's part, not the maid's. It is a tough lesson for Marji to learn because she has received mixed messages about social class from her parents. Presumably, the reason the point of view of the maid and others is often left out of the story is because Satrapi as an author feels she cannot presume to speak for them. In an interview with Robert Root, Satrapi describes the idea that she can only present her point of view because that is the only truth she knows. She says, "Of course I believe I always give myself the freedom of speaking and saying what I say, but my freedom also stops where the freedom of others start," (2007, p. 154) which would include trying to speak for them or say what their experiences were.

Satrapi touches upon many sensitive issues in her life, including her love and devotion to friends and family, her penchant for exaggeration, and the passionate emotion she feels about everything in her life from politics and prophets to Nike sneakers and heroes. This is where her unapologetic voice allows her storytelling to be at its most strong. Her passion, her unapologetic voice, and her willingness to share sensitive things make *Persepolis* to be a book that surpasses the expectation most readers have of a "comic book." This book satisfies many curiosities about what it would be like to have been present in the middle east during a revolutionary time, how different each of these nations are from one another, and how different the citizens within each one can be.

Satrapi's book is successful and perhaps even more important today than

when it was originally published because much of the western world has a homogenized view of what countries in the Middle East and their citizens are like. Satrapi's book defies the notion that every Middle Easterner is a terrorist, a belief which some people in America seem to take inexplicable comfort in holding on to. When people say things like, " We should just nuke the whole Middle East," it seems they do not understand the complexity of people that Satrapi so succinctly depicts. This book was touching because it showed a point of view and some very poignant experiences so different from my daily life; having a broader understanding of people is the only way that the world can come home to improve circumstances for all. On the other hand, another aspect of the book appears to show that some people have absolutely no desire to understand or accept others, and that the important thing is to find a way to " be yourself" and not forget who you are and to remain true to your own self-concept. However, if more people would read this book and take the time to imagine themselves in Marjane's place, it would be a step in the right direction to understanding and preserving history while becoming educated on new points of view.

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