

Research paper on
persepolis: the story
of a childhood.
marjane satrapi. 2004

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In the two decades leading up to World War II, there was considerable criticism leveled against the genre of the comic book, because there was the fear that the multicolored magazines would lead to the erosion of conventional literacy, including such competencies as the ability to focus on plain text, read sequentially from left to right, as well as the misguided notion that conventional literature dealt with acceptable subject matter that steered clear of controversy, while comic books had edgier content (anyone who had read James Joyce, for example, knew that this last claim simply was not true). Once graphic novels began to emerge, this criticism extended to them as well; in addition, there were critics who believed that this genre led to incidence of juvenile delinquent behavior. However, there is also scholarship that shows that the hybrid form combining drawn images with textual narrative, speech and thought has created a new standard for this literature that combines aesthetics and textual significance. Such concepts as the rule of thirds, purposely focusing the placement of the eye, as well as the composition of a particular subject inside a frame, influence the ways in which the graphic elements in *Persepolis* have not only replaced but also enhanced the remaining textual information. Indeed, *Persepolis* takes what had been a primarily male-dominated form, the comic book/graphic novel, and gives it a feminist spin.

The graphic novel slowly began to grow in popularity, beginning in the late 1970s. One of the most influential graphic novels has been Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, which has received considerable acclaim for its portrayal of Satrapi's own experiences as an adolescent and a young adult in Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In the United States, this book was

published as a two-part memoir, the first of which focuses on Satrapi's childhood, while the second half focuses on Marjane's departure for Austria in 1983 (Henderson). This second half traces her life as she forms her adult identity in a context radically different from the place of her birth and then eventually returns to Iran, only to marry, divorce and leave the country again, ending up in France; the sociocultural practices of Iran were too strict for her liking. The juxtaposition of text and images in the book highlights the contradictions between the Western mores and those of the Islamic world. Another important element, in terms of feminism, is that Strapi abandons a patriarchal society – the paradigm of the Islamic Revolution – and embraces a more balanced society in which neither sex has such control over the other.

The reception of Persepolis has been positive, both on the popular and academic levels. In 2003, Time listed Persepolis as one of the 25 must-read graphic novels between 1978 and 2003 (Arnold). Juneau and Sacharov recommend Persepolis as an excellent means for analyzing the impact that sociopolitical events can have on individuals as opposed to larger societies, as well as for considering such concepts as “ identity, revolution and political Islam” (Juneau and Sacharov). Whitlock claims that Satrapi's avatar in the books (Marji) engages with the conventions of the comic genre, leading to the creation of a work of autobiography that is aware of its own medium and its very presentation (Whitlock). Chaney praises the novel for its powerful representation of someone having to straddle both Western and Iranian cultures (Chaney). There are several panels that are worth a more detailed description in order for us to convey how the graphic novel works.

Additionally, Satrapi breaks new ground in that her heroic characters are women. In many comic books or graphic novels, the purpose of the female characters has been to serve as a sexual foil or partner for the male characters. Here, the female characters are genuine and powerful – and independent of men. Satrapi does not draw them as being superior to men; instead, she just presents a more egalitarian society.

Elements of photographic art and symbolic meanings appear throughout the novel, but they make their first appearance on page four. In panels 2 and 7 on that page, the lighter background connotes the sense of youth and whimsy. The neutral color keeps the background from intruding into the subject matter of the panels themselves. In panels 3 and 4, in contrast, the backgrounds are significantly darker; possible meanings for this change include omens of power, disaster and seriousness. Panels 1, 5 and 6 have backgrounds that are more integrated, which means that their backgrounds “ directly relateto the subject or [form] part of it.” (Feininger). Panel 1's schoolyard looks lighter, again showing that youthful imagery, but panel 6 is closed and dark; the lack of detail indicates that the authority figure has no limits on his power to bring change with the Revolution. Panel 5 turns that figure's beard and hair into the very background. The character's face (and very message) are literally held in by a tone that suggests disaster and power are all possible.

On page 70, there is another page of interest to analysts. The square panels (2 and 3) focus the reader's attention on the center as a result of their biaxial symmetry. Panel 4 has a horizontality to its shape that emphasizes motion from left to right, which makes Marji's pointing finger stand out even more. It

is her finger that tells God that it is time to leave. In panel 5, the shape is sharply vertical; her focus is rising and falling slowly, moving with her open mouth, pointing hand and angled eyebrows. Because panel 1 has no boundaries, it is alone in communicating a sense of moving outside time. This combination of permanence and instability summarizes how Marji feels about her uncle Anoosh (Henderson).

Page 153 contains two primary subjects for the panel; however, they split it evenly, showing that Marji's parents have equal significance in the panel, even though Marji's new style involves having her in the foreground with her parents behind her, making the viewer look at her first. In panel 2, Marji feels alone; because nothing is in there telling us about her parents, and because her head is bowed, it seems reasonable that this would lend greater insight as to Marji's feelings on entering a personal exile. Panel 3 focuses on Marji's parents. The fact that Marji's mother appears closer and larger to the reader here makes both her and her husband appear as bright characters. Panels 1 and 2 are static, for the most part, and so those scenes do not appear to move well. Panel 3 is much more dynamic; part of this has to do with the fact that people perceive darker tones as being " heavier" than lighter ones. Because Marji is clearly " lighter" and smaller than her parents, there is a lack of balance in the panel; this lack of balance leads to the concept of tension - a long-standing concept in narration.

Page 235 contains three fairly similar panels; the eye naturally moves from left to right on all three of them. The reader is " propelled to the person or object that that is being pointed out" (Clements and Rosenfeld).

Interestingly, though, the viewer's eyes move in serpentine fashion, going

back from right to left across panel 2, because the crowds are facing in opposite directions in the first two panels. At that point the reader notices that Marji has sat in the same position all day; she is the central element, even though she is off to the left, because she does not change, even in the third panel, when the sky goes from white to black. The presence of the moon indicates the length of time that Marji has sat there.

These pages indicate the ways in which graphic novels and their included aesthetic elements make it possible for comic texts to manifest an enhanced degree of meaning and information. Both the text and the pictorial elements communicate symbolic meanings to the readers, meaning that there is the possibility of substitution from one system to the other. Using graphic elements to replace textual information is akin to using synonyms to reword a sentence, just like using modifiers in the language to make meaning more specific can make text more significant. Even though comic texts still face a particular degree of bias because of their early phases, literacy today requires more than the use of simple text. In everyday life, graphic symbols and signs have specific meanings, just as the combinations of letters have been endowed with arbitrary meaning. To argue that comic texts do not provide a meaningful form of communication, just as able of communicating ideas that are complex, is to deny the plain fact that society is capable of using different visual communication forms. It takes just a few examples from the social media and advertising to show that visual literacy goes far beyond the simple text, and that the graphic novel can artfully combine simple text with visual literacy to communicate literary notions.

Indeed, there are methods available to the author of the graphic novel that

are simply not in the arsenal of the author of plain text. In many graphic novels, the use of color brings connotations to text that are not available in simple text. In a graphic novel like *Persepolis*, which is only black and white, the connotations of color are not available; however, the use of a monochromatic graphic format helps readers who come from a wide range of ethnicities and races to relate to a more mixed world.

There is also significant research pointing to the contributions that comic texts make in removing biases from the perspective of both author and reader. McCloud's theory of "amplification through simplification" explains this. By drawing a version of an object that is more simple than real, the writer focuses on the meaning at work behind that image. With *Persepolis*, Satrapi focuses on the simple notion that Marji is just a girl who went from childhood to adulthood, like millions of young women around the world. The difference in her case is that she went through the experience of the Islamic Revolution during her most formative years. The removal of color from the situation makes the situation more relatable to more readers using a concept called "universality" (Henderson). The fact that the book is in black and white suggests that this experience could happen to anyone. What makes *Persepolis* an effective feminist work is that it does not force the female characters into positions of power that do not suit their personality or the realities of the situation. Instead, the female characters are autonomous and powerful in their own right.

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