

The gray area
dialogue: an analysis
of western
perspective in
satrapi's persepoli...



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The late Ed Koch once said that “ stereotypes lose their power when the world is found to be more complex than the stereotype would suggest. When we learn that individuals do not fit the group stereotype, then it begins to fall apart.” In Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, Satrapi recounts her childhood experiences from Iran through words and pictures as she searches for her true identity in the midst of the chaos surrounding her. Yet, beyond this journey of self-discovery, Satrapi exposes a critical dialogue between Iran and the West that she attempts to resolve through her own struggles. Through Satrapi’s stylistic decisions, *Persepolis* develops a personal connection between the author and the reader and clarifies our misconceptions of the Middle East, providing Western readers with a greater understanding of the Iranian conflict.

Persepolis would not be nearly as impactful without Satrapi’s development of an individual connection with her readers, which she creates through her graphic depiction of violence in the Middle East. Throughout the novel, Satrapi juxtaposes illustrations of torture with panels of her family to highlight the close proximity of violence. For instance, she places a panel of teenage boys setting off landmines with keys around their necks right next to a panel that shows her going to her first party, demonstrating that violence is always close by as a looming threat on her family’s safety — and creating a sense of unease that Western readers may fail to grasp when considering the conflict. Ultimately, the threat manifests itself completely at the novel’s climax, when Satrapi is confronted by the women’s branch of the Guardians of the Revolution for wearing her “ decadent” American items and is threatened to be detained “ at the Committee... [where] anything could

happen to me” (Satrapi 134). Through her increasingly desperate pleas for mercy that are underscored by the change in her speech balloons and emotive expressions, Satrapi suggests that freedom of expression is dangerous in a country where violence arises because of the perception of cultural dissent. Such dissent is a right taken for granted in the West, and as such readers gain a clearer picture of the detachment between modern and fundamentalist perspectives that characterizes Satrapi’s lifestyle.

In the midst of this brutal setting is Marjane, whose internal struggle with all aspects of her life leads to a cognitive dissonance that reflects the time period’s overall confusion. At the very core of the story, Satrapi’s family is modern, from the material items they consume and enjoy (like jean jackets) to their social beliefs (such as gender equality). Still, as she acknowledges herself, “ deep down I was very religious” (6), presenting an interesting dichotomy of beliefs that is depicted through a split illustration; half of her is surrounded by symbols of technology and industry, while the other half presents her surrounded shrouded in the veil and surrounded in calligraphy. This visual presents a readily-comprehensible depiction of her deeply personal connection to her religion, and as a result, readers empathize in her struggle to find a moderate balance between her secular and spiritual beliefs.

Satrapi even struggles in her political views, since she is shaped by the people she is around. As Satrapi mentions herself, she wants to be as peaceful as the philosophers of Zarathustra are, yet she also attempts to justify the Iran-Iraq War and other questionable altercations with the superficial knowledge that she carries at her age. However, when she is <https://assignbuster.com/the-gray-area-dialogue-an-analysis-of-western-perspective-in-satrapis-persepolis/>

confronted and corrected by her father, whose speech balloon dominates almost half of one panel above Marjane in a menacing manner, she cries aloud that “ it’s not my fault! It’s the TV!” (62). Like Marjane, children are often shaped by the political views of their parents and the media, so readers immediately connect with her confusion while further recognizing the manipulation and unrest present within Iran. It is because of this very confusion that Satrapi decides to convey her story in a graphic novel style, helping readers to understand a thoroughly complex topic.

Social problems also provide a struggle for Marjane, as she tries to articulate her beliefs despite a class hierarchy present in Iran that places people in lower classes at a severe disadvantage. Satrapi’s portrayal of her family maid Mehri and her love for Hossein, for example, demonstrate the strict barring of movement between social classes that is at odds with her liberal upbringing. Readers empathize with her heartbreak after Satrapi effectively encapsulates Mehri as a sororal figure in a few humorous panels, so that when Marjane realizes the outcome, even she cannot contain her anger and sadness. In fact, in response to her father’s exasperations, Marjane asks, “ Is it her fault that she was born where she was born?” (37). Western society takes social mobility for granted, and as a result Satrapi gives readers a glimpse into the struggle people like Mehri face in Iran, even beyond the violence. Satrapi suggests that people want to believe in what is right; however, society at times may dictate the opposite of righteousness simply because the injustice is so deeply rooted within society itself. As a result, tensions break out into a fight for lasting change.

Beyond the personal connection between Satrapi and the reader, *Persepolis* serves as a mediator of two different sociopolitical climates, providing a way to deconstruct Western readers' misconceptions of Iran. Reflecting the work's audience, the West in general has been hostile by portraying political upheaval as characteristic in Iran; situated in the Middle East, some Iranians are seen as misogynistic and fanatical, while others are given little agency in revolution. However, Satrapi shows that many men are neither fanatical nor misogynistic and are instead loving and compassionate. Marjane's dad in particular is shown to be a beacon of compassion, demonstrating courageous selflessness as he documents the revolution through his photography while placing himself in dangerous situations. Depicted in a borderless panel, Marjane's father and his photos take up over half the page as a visual emphasis on the small but important role he plays in documenting the revolution. In the West, there also exists a stereotype of loafing Iranian citizens who lack political agency and abide by the rules of an oppressive regime. However, in reality, there have been many who fought against the fundamentalist Islamic government for what they believe is right, and Satrapi uses this opportunity to showcase the real fight for justice and empowerment that pervades the novel. Politically, Marjane encounters many individuals who have risked their lives for their belief in an empowered society; for example, Marjane depicts the numerous tortures Siamak's friend Ahmadi suffered in political prison in painful detail, even as he is severed into pieces as a result of his unfailing commitment to his comrades. Female empowerment is also demonstrated through Marjane's mother, who risked her life for the right to choose to wear the veil and goes on to encourage Marjane to "defend her rights as a woman now" (76).

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Still, Satrapi also acknowledges Iran-based stereotypes about America, both good and bad, in an effort to provide the whole story. Throughout the novel, America is alluded to as an escape from the reality of the troubles found at home; Marjane's crush Kaveh, for example, leaves with his relatives for America because they believe "nobody realizes the danger" (63), and in many respects they are correct. The Kansas burger joint, for example, demonstrates the power of American culture and how people ignore the problems that surround them; the small excursion Marjane takes to Kansas seems almost trivial until the sirens go off, at which point a boy hits the dirt in panic for fear of a bombing. Yet, the grave seriousness of the situation is immediately juxtaposed with Marjane's laughter in the next panel, because "in spite of everything, kids were trying to look hip" (112). At the same time, there is a pervading fear in Iranian society of cultural erasure, as is the case concerning the bilingual schools which were shut down as "symbols of capitalism" (4), as described by a bearded man whose gaze down to the adoring audience reflects the domineering, oppressive nature of the conservative rhetoric. Through the examination of stereotypes that persist in both in the Middle East and abroad, Satrapi clarifies their misguided justifications and attempts to resolve the disconnecting views between them.

In the end, the point of *Persepolis* is to humanize cultural conflict. Instead of painting the other side as terrorists, Satrapi helps readers realize the ever-present danger for families like Marjane's in standing up for human rights and, as a result, Western readers develop empathy while gaining insight into the many sufferings that Iranians face. Ultimately, war is not black and white; rather, there are many shades of gray that make conflict difficult to

comprehend. Therefore, humanity should make every effort to understand a conflict before attempting to solve it. In this way, society may hope to find resolution in seemingly divisive circumstances.