

Postcolonial feminism in marjane satrapi's persepolis 1 and 2



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At the end of the 20th century postcolonial literature began to mold and take a slightly different route and took a more feministic stance. Throughout this essay I will be discussing Marjane Satrapi's highly acclaimed novel *Persepolis 1: Story of a Childhood* and its sequel, *Persepolis 2: Story of a Return* which tackles many postcolonial feminist issues. It is a hybrid text, a novel that is part autobiographical and part fiction. *Persepolis* takes us through both the traumatic and grim experience of a young girl growing up in the after math of the Islamic Revolution in Iran with the use of comic strip like pictures. *Persepolis* takes place in a country that is considered inferior and 'Third World' through a westerner's eyes. *Persepolis* gives the reader an insight into the Iranian world and allows a female Iranian to voice her story, where in the west she is considered to the 'other'.

Drawing on the works of Leigh Gilmore in *Witnessing Persepolis* and Liz Stanley in 'Self Made Women' to 'Women's Made Selves', I will be using their theoretical frameworks to explore many major issues within feminist postcolonial studies that both *Persepolis* novels deal with. The concepts of the 'experience of witnessing a traumatic experience' and 'the audit self' are significant to both *Persepolis* novels as they are both texts that can be read in the view of postcolonial feminist literature.

In *Persepolis*, Marjane is constantly going through some form of trauma as we follow her through both novels and her experience in the Iran-Iraq war, something that no child should ever go through. Drawing upon Leigh Gilmore's notion of traumatic narrativity and witnessing, we can relate this back to Satrapi and her own personal experiences. Gilmore says the aim within *Persepolis* is "to not only teach these readers how to think about the

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Middle East...but also how to *feel*. ” (Gilmore 157) She continues saying that *Persepolis* play a huge part in how the West constructs political effect, and how through her autobiographical writing Marjane revisits her past to relay her story not only to the reader but also for herself. She uses these comic-like strips to understand her trauma and to draw what can be seen and what cannot be seen in order to do this. According to Gilmore, “ For those whose lives and stories are ruptured by violence, narrating traumatic experience is both an unavoidable burden and a necessary risk.” (Gilmore 158)

“ Satrapi uses a narrative of her own girlhood to urge Western readers to recognize her and her family’s political difference from what they think they know, and what they feel, about the Arab world after 9/11.” (Gilmore 157)

Satrapi uses a childlike narrative and illustrated images to understand and come to terms with her trauma. Capturing her story visually engages the trauma in a way that gives it visibility without constricting it to evidentiary authority. These pictures almost appear as another language to capture something and to understand it. The fluidity of a child’s perspective brings the reader to a different place of the Iranian woman and it allows us access to an effective realm of understanding that perhaps an adult perspective could not give. She is trying to make sense of this war-torn country she lives in, trying to figure out what is wrong and what is right. A prime example of Satrapi trying to make sense of the war is her depiction of God that she creates within *Persepolis* .

When something traumatic happens in her life that she doesn’t understand, she turns to God and asks for his advice and comfort. The depiction of God

seems to soothe and calm a young Satrapi and she even refers to him as her friend. “ The only place I felt safe was in the arms of my friend.” (Satrapi 53) It is quite clear to the reader that a young Satrapi never actually spoke to God, but it is her way of trying to understand the traumatic events that are happening around her. As mentioned above, the child like narrative also gives the reader a better understanding to what Satrapi was feeling at the time.

A direct experience of witnessing for Satrapi occurs when she sees the dismembered body of her neighbor Neda under rubble in *Persepolis 1: Story of a Childhood*. Satrapi’s drawings show the reader the intense impact this has on our child witness. Satrapi draws upon the child witness, who is herself, to register the event that can see and does see but is too traumatic to bear. Gilmore states that, “ Persepolis never attempts to persuade readers that Satrapi or anyone has full access to trauma through the image. But Persepolis insists that trauma contains within it the possibility of bearing witness, even if that means bearing witness to what was not shared or shareable.” (Gilmore 161) We see the illustration of a young Satrapi wide eyed with her hands to her face in shock. “ No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger.” (Satrapi 142) The final frame is completely black with no words to emphasize this. Trauma here is represented as a black and ominous void.

An indirect experience of witnessing for Satrapi is when she over hears an account of torture from political prisoners who were friends of her family and visiting her house. They relay what has happened to them while imprisoned, describing in detail the torture they experienced. “ They whipped me with

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thick electric cables so much that this looks like anything but a foot.”

(Satrapi 51) They also explain how a friend of theirs was tortured and eventually executed. “ He suffered the worst torture... They burned him with an iron.” (Satrapi 51) Though Satrapi herself was not present to view the torture for herself, the act of listening to others relaying their stories and presenting them herself is an act of witnessing. She eyes the iron in her own house with a set of new-found eyes. She cannot believe that this every day appliance could be used for torture, saying, “ I did not know you could use that appliance for torture.” (Satrapi 51) As Leigh Gilmore says in her essay, “ She draws both the unrepresentable violence and the challenge of witnessing.” (Gilmore 160)

“ In the end he was cut into pieces.” (Satrapi 52) To demonstrate this, Satrapi illustrates the picture of a man who has been decapitated with his waist, knees and torso also severed. This body has no organs or blood and may not have been exactly what happened to him. but this is how she imagines and witnesses the situation in order to understand it. The man who was tortured can never give witness so instead she gives witness through her child like narrative. This is also a way to navigate through her trauma, by drawing what can be seen and what cannot be seen.

At a very young age Satrapi has been forced to learn about violence and about death when her beloved Uncle Anoosh is executed in *Persepolis 1: Story of a Childhood* . This traumatic event completely shifts her belief in religion and God, who she has considered her companion up until this moment. Gone is the girl who relies on her religion and depiction of God for comfort. Satrapi appears more mature and adult like after sending God
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away, because she now must deal with the traumatic events that are happening to her on her own. However, this way of dealing with her trauma is what leads to her feeling of being isolated and alienated which eventually catches up to her in the sequel.

Satrapi's experiences and traumas are not solely related to war, but also with exile and isolation. We watch her grow into a woman in *Persepolis 2: Story of a Return*. A surge in her personal traumas and bad experiences and feelings start to occur a lot when she is living in Vienna. Satrapi deals with trauma a lot differently as an adult. There is no depiction of God, and instead turns to drugs and alcohol as a way of coping. On one page we see her getting high to escape her troubles with her friend Ingrid. "I didn't always like it, but I by far preferred boring myself with her to having to confront my solitude and my disappointments." (Satrapi 64) Satrapi feels isolated so intensely that she feels the need to turn to drugs. Self-defeating behavior is symptom of trauma.

We watch as Satrapi hits rock bottom as she becomes homeless and only reaches out for help when she begins to cough up blood and ends up in hospital. She eventually decides to call her parents and her only request is that they "promise to never ask [her] anything about the last three months." (Satrapi 89) This section of the novel holds few illustrations of her struggles in Vienna, and when asking her parents to never ask her what happened there is only words with no pictures. According to Gilmore, "Trauma complicates the burden of memory and narration inherited by anyone who could write and draw their lives." (Gilmore 158) She cannot incorporate the trauma into her being or identity due to being so traumatic, <https://assignbuster.com/postcolonial-feminism-in-marjane-satrapis-persepolis-1-and-2/>

it feels separate from her body. All of these traumatic events seem to stem from her being sent into exile when she was younger.

We can also draw on the work of Liz Stanley in *From 'self-made women' to 'women's made self'* to identify with Satrapi's story. According to Stanley, the interior self is regulated and produced through exteriorities formulated and enacted at different levels within different social structures. Calling the combined self as an "audit self", Stanley suggests that "audit selves are composite figures, typically heavily gendered ones, which are artefacts of information collection, retrieval and analysis systems." (Stanley 50) We constantly ask people to define themselves.

Satrapi wants to escape the confines of Islam and womanhood and its association with 9/11 post world. All countries have different traditions and cultures that help it to develop their own sense of national identity. Satrapi struggles with accepting certain traditions that are associated with Iran's national identity. Satrapi wants to define herself and doesn't want to be defined by the veil.

Much like when we see a woman in a hijab or a veil we project on to her a stereotype of who she already is and what her audit self has a possibility of being, Satrapi also struggles with the label of a 'married woman' being placed upon her in *Persepolis 2: Story of a Return*. "I had suddenly become a married woman." (Satrapi 163) We see Satrapi illustrate herself behind iron bars in this image, as if she is trapped within the stereotype of a married woman, fear of having an identity placed onto her without her permission. She felt that the stereotype has been placed upon her and now there is

nothing that she can do about it, as if she is conforming to society and losing her own personal identity. Satrapi feels pressure to become what Reza, her husband believes is the ideal woman. “ I love girls in suits.” She replies with, “ That’s just my style!” (Satrapi 164) Much like the veil, people are projecting onto her a stereotype of who she already is.

Throughout this essay we have discussed and analyzed theories and issues of postcolonial feminist literature within both novels of *Persepolis* .

Works Cited

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