

# Unconventional autobiographies: arabesques and persepolis



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In the novels *Arabesques* by Anton Shammas and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, autobiographical narrative is created through the use of unconventional styles of writing. Shammas's use of the novel as the platform in which his autobiography is told goes against all preconceptions of how an autobiography is normally written. As Rachel Brenner points out, Shammas's "arabesque-like quest for his double, epitomized in the metaphor of multiple self-reflections, comments ironically on the human tendency to shape one's worldview according to territorial, theological, and linguistic boundaries and zones" (Brenner 443). An interesting result of the use of this format is that several parallels develop within the plot, muddling the distinction between truth and farce for the reader. Conversely, Satrapi reveals her childhood in graphic novel form, a revolutionary means of autobiographical narration — especially in the Middle East, where it had never been used before as such, and especially not by a woman. In this format, illustrations function alongside the text to convey the impact of the situation. Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley affirm that "*Persepolis* manages to challenge the reader's expectations of the medium" (Naghibi & O'Malley 245). Whereas in *Arabesques* the stories of the past help form the narrator's self-identity, *Persepolis* employs a more direct, linear account of the people and events around her in order to create her sense of self. In the preface of his novel, Shammas quotes Australian author Clive James in stating that "most first novels are disguised autobiographies, [but] this autobiography is a disguised novel." In saying this, Shammas reveals that *Arabesques* is an autobiography above all else, but it nonetheless has novel-like elements to it in that parts of it may be fictionalized. Through the countless stories of the narrator's beloved Uncle Yusef and the history and adventures of the Shammas family, <https://assignbuster.com/unconventional-autobiographies-arabesques-and-persepolis/>

the personality of Shammās (the narrator) is discovered. Uncle Yusuf's stories are the most revered by Shammās, evident in the way he describes them as "flow[ing] around him in a swirling current of illusion that linked beginnings to endings... the reality to the tale" (Shammās 226). Every version of every story that Shammās tells is connected to the entire Shammās story, functioning to establish his own separate identity. Unlike the more abstract nature of *Arabesques*, *Persepolis* uses a form of narration that is much different but equally complex in that the undertones in the graphic images that accompany the text are quite deep and symbolic of more than what is initially seen on the surface. The text is centered on the key issues in Iran during the time immediately after the Shah's dethronement, but the graphic images paint an image into the reader's mind of exactly what the narrator thinks, making it easier to relate to her thinking. In this way, Westerners can enjoy reading this book and understand it quite well even though the issues are not what the typical American experiences because the way it is written is a relatively common means of writing in the West. Naghibi and O'Malley affirm this claim that, "while *Persepolis* provides a perspective on events unfamiliar to the Western reader, the comic book form it assumes is itself automatically familiar" (Naghibi & O'Malley 232). Marji's character and her struggle to form her identity become more relatable to the average American because they don't have to picture and imagine the people that she meets, the events she goes through, and the actions that she commits or others commit against her; they are all illustrated, so this difficulty in relating to the character virtually disappears, and her struggle to find her own political and religious standpoints is focused on instead (Satrapi 96). The definition of an arabesque is a circle of events that never progress

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from one initial point to a distinct final destination (Brenner 440). Due to the “ arabesque” nature of Shammas’s autobiography, which is evident in his elaborate yet disjointed stories, the ambiguity becomes very difficult for the reader to follow and accept everything as true, which is what an autobiography is in theory supposed to do. That quality thus changes the whole perception that is held of the autobiography, making it — as Shammas pointed out from the very beginning — a fictionalized autobiography. Perhaps the fact that the story is told in Hebrew adds to this fictionalization of the entire novel. “ Hebrew is central to the ‘ métissage,’ or ‘ crossbreeding,’ as the languages “ braids” or interconnects [Shammas’s] formative self and his evolving westering self” (Brenner 433). As a Palestinian Christian living in Israel, Shammas feels torn and divided as to whose “ side” he belongs on and where he lies in the midst of all of the tension. Through the use of the language of the “ enemy,” the Jew, Shammas is expressing the manner in which he searches for his identity. In contrast to the fictionalization of the autobiography in *Arabesques* , *Persepolis* ’s use of illustrations draws the readers to the narrator more closely because they have less difficulty in understanding the political and religious aspects of the plotline. It is not easy for most Westerners to imagine a country full of so many religious-based rules and so much political oppression, revolution, and violence. Professors Naghibi and O’Malley affirm that the “‘ cartooniness’ of [Satrapis’s] drawings encourages the reader to see herself in Marji, to see the self in the other, to erase all differences in a gesture of ‘ cultural understanding’” (Naghibi & O’Malley 238). Although there is a separation of church and state in this country because Marji is an innocent child still forming her own opinions while living in a country where

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everyone is both politically and religiously oppressed, the reader can nevertheless understand her and connect to her. It was pointed out earlier that by writing in the tongue of the enemy, Shammas is trying to find his own identity as a Palestinian living in Israel. However, in doing so, he is also breaching the divide between the two ethnicities, proving that the two can coexist peacefully as friends. By telling the Arab story in the tongue of its enemy, Shammas not only creates controversy, but also instills the notion that a connection between the two is possible. Brenner contends that “ the language starts to heal the conflict by mediating between the dominating majority and the dominated minority” (Brenner 435). In his view, Israelis (the “ dominating majority”) and Palestinians (the “ dominated minority”) can find a middle ground to end the tension between them, and this is via language. This idea of joint domain is key in narrowing the divide between them and bringing them closer together on a common basis. By using Hebrew, Shammas helps ameliorate the strain that has split Arabs and Israelis for two-thirds of a century. Nevertheless, by using the rival language, Shammas is shedding light on the peaceful nature of the Arabs, nullifying all Western viewpoints that Israel is the sole peaceful nation in the Middle East. Shammas’s sense of identity is created by reflecting on the peaceful nature in which the two ethnicities can coexist, just as he strives to find his place amongst a country that is governed by “ the other.” Through the use of language, the reader experiences the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict as Shammas does, and therefore gains a better understanding of the relationship between the two nations and the possibility of friendship between them. Unlike *Arabesques* , *Persepolis* feeds all of the information to the reader directly, and does not require the reader to analyze and interpret

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for his- or herself the significance of every event presented in the narration. Even though the graphic novel format of the autobiography seems like a very basic form of writing, it actually augments comprehension of the novel for the reader. It is much more complex than what meets the eye. For example, on the top of page 5, an image of veiled and non-veiled women is shown, representing those for and against the ensuing revolution of 1979. This panel is very powerful in the way that the women are illustrated. The veiled women have their heads upright and their eyes closed, hinting either that they are ignorant of what is happening to them or that they think they are better than the unveiled women. The unveiled women, on the other hand, look quite angry as they are chanting “ freedom,” a step in the push for women’s rights, which were virtually neglected after the Revolution. In a way, this image could be seen as an example of Marji’s search for her own religious identity that she tries to form throughout the course of the novel. Another example of a powerful image that Satrapi uses to develop her individuality is that of Karl Marx being compared to God on page 13. The image itself is actually quite comical, but it is a good representation of Marji’s search for her own political identity. Without the use of these images, the text alone would not have been able to suffice for the comparison between the two men; with the images, however, Marji’s struggle to find herself becomes more easily interpreted by the reader. By using images, *Persepolis* helps the reader see what the author sees and know what she knows. Thus, the format of the novel contains an element of universality that does not exclude anyone from understanding its meaning and the author’s experiences — making it, in other words, a true autobiography. Although the graphic novel format of *Persepolis* is unique and makes it easier for readers

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to comprehend many of the events and recurring themes of the novel, there are other factors that make it enticing for Western audiences. One example of this is that Westerners, especially Americans, love to hear firsthand accounts of political and religious plights from different parts of the world, particularly the Middle East. Naghibi and O'Malley agree that this is true; however, they also contend that Americans love especially to hear from individuals who are from countries belonging to the so-called "Axis of Evil," "especially in an autobiographical form that promises to disclose the intimate secrets of an exotic other" (Naghibi 225). Because Satrapi's story is an autobiography taking place in Iran during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, there is a greater interest in the topic itself, and the firsthand account that it supplies the Western reader of the political and religious conflicts occurring in the country is extraordinary and fulfilling. Another reason as to why the novel appeals to Westerners may be that although Marji does not pick sides in the debate on whose lifestyle is better (that of the West versus that of the East), she does share many Western ideologies and viewpoints on certain topics, the most predominant being pop culture: she enjoys listening to punk rock and Michael Jackson, and acts like a typical rebellious American preteen or teenager. As we see the development of Marji from a toddler to a 13-year-old, she goes through several changes in her personality, and her opinions and standpoints on certain topics constantly fluctuate as she sees and hears new things, ultimately causing her to learn from her experiences. The first time the reader witnesses Marji's confrontation between something Western and Eastern is right on the first page when she is trying to decide how she feels about the veil and veiled women. The Western reader is in the same place as the narrator because they are both clueless about the cultural ways

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of the East and would like to know more about them. Marji's innocence and naïveté make it very easy for the readers to relate to Marji, just as they could when she showed her appreciation for Western things as well. Both of the novels, *Arabesques* and *Persepolis*, use a unique means of writing to universalize the underlying implications of their stories. Shamma's use of abstract stories of his family and their past interlace to eventually form his own identity. By writing the novel in Hebrew instead of Arabic, Shamma establishes a peaceful aura around his autobiography in that he doesn't express his situation as simply a nasty brawl amongst Jews and Arabs. Instead, he implements a nonviolent method of integrating the two cultures that define him as a Palestinian living in Israel. Conversely, Satrapi's approach to depicting the political and religious conflict in Iran differs from Shamma's in that the format of the autobiography is a graphic novel written in comic book-style. Through this medium of writing, the reader, especially the Western reader, can more easily understand and relate to Satrapi's character and the obstacles that she goes through as a result of the Iranian Revolution. That makes *Persepolis* a little easier to comprehend and possibly even easier to identify with than *Arabesques*, but ultimately, both novels attain their goals of seeking their own identities. By overcoming multiple difficulties politically, socially, and religiously, they discover themselves.

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