

## Researched Analysis

Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis* describes her life as a girl in Iran beginning at age 10. Throughout the novel, Satrapi is confronted with the Islamic Revolution, isolation, war, depression, class disparities, and sexism. Satrapi presents a feminist narrative that is specific to Iran and rejects all notions of the Western narrative of the "girl in crisis in need of saving." Through visual rhetoric and textual rhetoric, Satrapi creates a uniquely feminist piece that establishes empowerment, diversity, and self-discovery.

Satrapi begins *Persepolis* with an image of five school girls all cloaked in veils. While their general attire and stance echo one another, Satrapi diversifies the Iranian girls by listing their names and providing distinguishing facial expressions: "This is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980. And this is a class photo. I'm sitting on the far left so you don't see me. From left to right: Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, Minna" (Satrapi 3). This depiction and description of the girls rejects the Western idea of the veiled Iranian girl in need of saving. As evidenced by Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall in *Girls in Crisis: Rescue and Traditional Feminist Autobiographical Resistance*, the "girl-in-crisis" narrative stems from the Western perception that the veiled Iranian woman is oppressed, unable to defend herself, and requires Western intervention to be saved. In her journal article *Saving Brown Women*, Miriam Cooke describes how this weak, oppressed, and helpless image of the veiled brown woman came into Western narrative after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Cooke describes the call to action on November 17, 2001 by then First Lady Laura Bush to start a campaign to stop the violence against women and children by al-Qaida. Cooke recounts the United States government effort to present the veiled woman as in need of saving in order to intervene in the name of humanity, despite the fact that the Afghan Women's Network had already met after the attacks to discuss an approach to non-violence. Cooke explains, "Politics in the era of U.S. empire disappears behind the veil of women's victimization. . . . In the Islamic context, the negative stereotyping of the religion as inherently misogynist provides ammunition for the attack on the uncivilized brown men" (Cooke 486). *Gilmore* and *Marshall* explain Satrapi, in her representation of the veiled school girls, rejects this Western notion and creates a dialogue that either allows the Iranian woman to support or reject the veil, however she sees fit:

*Satrapi begins with the evocative image of the veiled girl ubiquitous in Western rescue projects and provides names and physical distinctions for each girl. Representing Iranian women as diverse, she emphasizes the link between gender and state violence, and she captures the complexity of how controlling women in part of the Cultural Revolution and that some women support it. (Gilmore and Marshall 683)*

*Gilmore* and *Marshall* present an important example and explanation for how Satrapi, as a 10-year-old, empowers herself as a woman to either reject or not reject the veil without Western intervention and input. Satrapi shows the diversity of the Iranian women, her classmates, who are all represented the same visually, through rhetoric of listing off their names and presenting them all as different and meaningful.

Later in *Persepolis*, Satrapi displays this notion of self-empowerment of the Iranian woman in the chapter The Convocation. The chapter outlines the unfair and unequal enforcement of dress-code within an Iranian school environment. The students, both male and female, are called together for a lecture on "moral and religious conduct." The female students, however, are the only group addressed and are mandated to "wear less-wide trousers and longer head-scarves" (Satrapi 296). The women are told to cover their hair well and to not wear makeup. It is at this point that Satrapi stands up for herself and the other women of the school: "Why is it that I, as a woman, am expected to feel nothing when watching these men with their clothes sculpted on but they, as men, can get excited by two inches less of my head-scarf?" (Satrapi 297). In this chapter, Satrapi depicts herself as empowered and strong. Satrapi, however, has had Western influences brought upon her by her four year stay in Austria. The argument presented by *Gilmore* and *Marshall* of the Western narrative of the girl-in-crisis is discounted in the later chapters of *Persepolis* because Satrapi has experienced Western ideals and influences. Satrapi's interaction with Austrian and generically Western rhetoric through her participation in marches and rallies while abroad introduced the young woman to Western influences. While *Gilmore* and *Marshall's* entire argument may not be valid, the notion that Satrapi presents a unique feminist narrative still remains true. Although there has been Western influence, Satrapi still presents a narrative that empowers Iranian women through Iranian women without the need of intervention. It is perhaps because of this Western influence that Satrapi creates her narrative in such a way.

Satrapi, through *Persepolis*, makes the hidden Iranian woman visible and empowers them without the aid of the Western savior. In the same chapter of *Persepolis*, The Convocation, Satrapi makes visible the hidden side of Iranian women and Iranian culture that is often not displayed. "The more time passed, the more I became conscious of the contrast between the official representation of my country and the real life of the people, the one that went on behind the walls" (Satrapi 304). Satrapi juxtaposes this public and private life through two images, one image of Iranian women, all cloaked in veils with almost no distinguishable characteristics, and another image directly below the first of the same women with distinct style difference that depict diversity in Iranian women. *Lisa Botshon* and *Melinda Plastas* in *Homeland In/security: A Discussion and Workshop on Teaching Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis* describe the same Western idea as described by *Gilmore* and *Marshall* and explain the reactions of college students from Bates University and The University of Maine at Augusta as they examined and analyzed *Persepolis*.

*American women's studies students are often primed to see 'Third World' women exclusively as victims who require liberation through Western feminist ideology. That Maine students from various class backgrounds, ages, and experiences uniformly find Marji an attractive paradigm of independence and resistance is a striking reverse parallel to a text like Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran, in which Iranian women discover a new sense of selfhood through their reading of banned Western texts. (Botshon and Plastas 6)*

*Botshon* and *Plastas* describe the same "girl-in-crisis" narrative that is so present in Western media and contrast Satrapi's depiction of herself and her other Iranian classmates as empowered Iranian women who are able to stand up for themselves without that assistance.

Satrapi also makes the hidden visible by using rhetorical strategies that might seem troubling or ethically questionable. The chapter of *Persepolis*, The Makeup, challenges ethical standards and makes the struggles of women visible. Satrapi depicts herself wearing makeup outside, which would have resulted in the Guardians of the Revolution taking her away. Instead of allowing the government to punish her, Satrapi blames an innocent man on the street for saying something indecent to her, which inevitably gets him in trouble with the law. Satrapi explains, "The only way to get away was to play the 'poor woman who needs protection'" (Satrapi 287). The reader is confronted with an ethically troubling situation and is left to question Satrapi's actions, but also the circumstances and government rules that prompted her to act in that way. This rhetorical strategy makes the feminist narrative visible by presenting it in a way that questions all aspects of the situation. *Hillary Chute* in *The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's 'Persepolis'* describes the rhetorical strategy behind Satrapi's feminist memoir.

*Making the hidden visible is a powerful if familiar feminist trope. Yet for Satrapi, as with other authors of feminist graphic narrative, making the hidden visible is not simply rhetorical; Persepolis offers not simply a 'visibility politics,' but an ethical and troubling visual aesthetics, presenting the censored and the censured through the urgent 'process of re-representation and re-symbolization.'" (Chute 106)*

*Chute* explains the necessity of Satrapi's ethically troubling and traumatic images as a means of rhetoric and the ability to shape these to fit her feminist agenda. The ethically questionable scenarios that Satrapi describes encapsulate the reality of the patriarchal society in which she lives and brings to light the feminist efforts put forth by herself and other Iranian women against the matter.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* defies the Western idea of the Iranian women in need of saving by utilizing a variety of different visual and textual rhetorical strategies that all contain feminist narrative. Satrapi rejects the Western narrative of the veiled, Iranian girl in need of saving by Western aid through her unique visual depiction and textual description of a diverse group of Iranian women. By giving names and individualized visual representations of the Iranian women behind the veils, Satrapi shows these women are fully capable of defending herself, or even choosing to support the veil. Through *Persepolis*, Satrapi also depicts her own feminist efforts to try to reform a sexist society. Satrapi's provides ethically troubling scenarios that allow the reader to question the situations and calls into view the clearly unjust nature of her society. Although Satrapi has experienced Western influences and feminist ideas, it is because of this interaction with Western rhetoric and clear rejection of it that she is able to form such unique feminist ideas that elevate and promote the Iranian woman. Satrapi creates a feminist piece that presents Iranian women as empowered and diverse through a dismissal of the typical Western narrative.

### Works Cited

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