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## ENG 101 Final Portfolio

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#### Challenging the Western Stereotypes of Eastern Society and Culture in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is a memoir detailing her own experiences in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. This memoir is significant in a variety of ways, but mostly because it serves to educate Western audiences about the Islamic Revolution and to correct false views of Islam and Middle Eastern culture. Satrapi accomplishes this through a variety of rhetorical strategies, such as her narration style and the graphic-novel structure of the book, which allow her to challenge some Western stereotypes about the society and culture she grew up with, such as the notion that Islam culture is oppressive and misogynistic. Through these rhetorical strategies and more, Satrapi strives to correct the false Western views of an oppressed Islamic society.

A common misconception of Middle Eastern women, especially Muslim women, is that they are victims of constant violence, dehumanization, and oppression by their religion. Satrapi, however, argues against this idea by detailing the ways Iranian and Muslim women are free and self-determining individuals. One way she does this is through the graphic novel-style of her book. Not only does this unconventional way of writing allow Satrapi to connect with her readers, but it also allows for the reader to form intimate connections with Satrapi and her own experiences. This writing style is also unique in that it combines images and words, and it allows readers to visualize the events and experiences Satrapi writes about. For example, this specific

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structure allows Satrapi to address her reader directly, as seen in the first panel of the novel on page 3, where she explicitly talks and points herself out to the readers. Additionally, the combination of images and words allow Satrapi to highlight the individuality of the girls in the next panel, by listing their names atop a picture of four girls who look very alike. The graphic novel structure of *Persepolis* creates a unique reading experience, one that, as Marta Madrid Manrique argues, “has to do with the complex encounter of two lives... it is a multiple voice conversation where the graphic narration creates uncertain meanings related to the reader’s experiences, cultural, historical, and political background; sensitivity; and vital search for meaning” (106). The intimate connections the readers make with Satrapi allow them to realize that her experiences as a woman are not different, if not similar, to their own experiences, and her memoir provides a detailed account of her own autonomy and independence.

Satrapi provides many examples of her own and other women’s independence and freedom throughout the novel. For instance, she writes about participating in opposition demonstrations during the Revolution with her parents, and her mother argues that “[Satrapi] should start learning to defend her rights as a woman right now” (76). Another rhetorical choice Satrapi makes is the use of a young girl narrator in the book, and this kind of narration has a great impact on the way readers view Middle Eastern women. Normally, Western societies and cultures view Muslim and Middle Eastern women as victims and those in need of rescuing, especially young girls. Leigh Gilmore, however, argues that this view is harmful as “the figure of the vulnerable girl is tied to the absent figuration of women as fully human and as political agents. As such, this representation recalls colonial and orientalist histories and the representational politics of racialization” (667). I agree with this argument, as it is thinking backwards to view women of certain cultures as in need of saving simply because they do not

partake in Western culture. Satrapi challenges this view by narrating her story through the point of view of a young girl and demonstrates to her readers that she, nor any of the women she describes, are “girls in crisis” (Gilmore). As stated before, Western stereotypes view Middle Eastern girls as those most in need of rescuing from their oppressive society, but making the narrator a young girl and describing herself as a relatively autonomous and independent individual, she challenges such a stereotype about women. Satrapi describes her family, school, and lifestyle in great detail to show that even as a young girl, she was and is not a victim of the fundamentalist violence Western societies normally equate with the Middle East. Narrating her story from the perspective of her younger self makes her experiences even more relatable with her audience; she shatters many of the misconceptions her readers may have about young Muslim women by describing her liberal, privileged family, her many freedoms as a child, and the uniqueness of her childhood friends. Gilmore also argues that Satrapi uses the young girl narrator in a unique way by “[dislodging] the girl from her static role and [using] the young Muslim girl to tell her own story. Satrapi turns the West’s zeal to educate Third World girls and women back on itself as she positions white Western readers as those in need of schooling” (682). Satrapi’s younger self is intelligent, capable, highly independent, and rebellious, and narrating the text through the perspective of a young girl challenges any stereotypes Western readers may have of such girls. Not only does she challenge these misconceptions about women, but she does so with an entirely opposite image of what her Western audiences might have imagined about Middle Eastern and Muslim women. Because of how honest and personal Satrapi’s account is, it would be impossible to challenge her argument about the autonomy and independence of women in her society, and she uses this as a way to point out the flaws of such Western stereotypes. An example of her independence and rebellion is Satrapi’s first time

smoking a cigarette, detailed on page 117. The cigarette was a conscious act of rebellion against her “mother’s dictatorship” but it can also be viewed as a challenge of societal standards, both Western and Iranian, of women. The entire text, in fact, challenges the Western view of Iranian women by demonstrating their capability, independence, and rebellion against the oppressive parts of their society.

Satrapi not only uses these rhetorical strategies to educate her Western audience about the experiences of Muslim and Middle Eastern women, but also Middle Eastern culture as a whole. The common perception of Middle Eastern culture is that it is highly fundamentalist, violent, and oppressive, but Satrapi strives to correct this view and show how similar her culture and society are to her Western counterparts. The use of the autobiographical genre, young girl narrator, and graphic novel structure of the book allows Satrapi to connect with and relate to her readers’ own experiences. The autobiographical nature of the book allows her to describe mundane parts of her life to show how similar her life is to her readers’ despite living in different countries. For example, on page 3, she draws herself and her classmates at the school playground, playing like kids would in Western societies. Furthermore, the graphic novel structure, as Nima Naghibi argues, is a typically Western form of writing; by using this structure to describe her life in a non-Western society, Satrapi “produces a text that regularly juxtaposes the familiar with the alien... Her text plays the increasingly mobilized stereotypes of the Islamic Republic as oppressive and backward against the Western conviction over its own progressive liberalism in ways that contest both of these scripts” (224). I agree that Satrapi’s rhetorical choices create such an effect and subtly point out the problems of Western thinking about the Islamic Republic and its culture. Satrapi also makes it a point to describe the normalcy of her lifestyle and experiences, which conflicts with the Western belief that Middle Eastern lives are stricken with violence and

oppression. There is an explicit contrast between the images these Western stereotypes offer about Middle Eastern and Islamic society and the images that Satrapi offers about her own life and experiences in such societies. In fact, her lifestyle is heavily influenced by Western society; Satrapi details her interest in American music icons, such as Iron Maiden, Kim Wilde, and Michael Jackson, and American fashion, with her 1983 Nikes and denim jacket (131). This shows to her Western readers that her youth was not completely different from theirs and also demonstrates that Iran is not the backwards, oppressive, and fundamentalist society some may believe it to be. The rhetorical choices she makes about her narration and writing style allow her both to contend and correct the misconceptions her Western readers may have about Middle Eastern society and culture by explicitly contrasting her own personal experiences with stereotypical ones.

If one looks closely at the rhetorical choices Marjane Satrapi utilizes throughout her book, *Persepolis*, they will realize that the text is more than a memoir about her experiences during and after the Iranian Revolution. Instead, Satrapi uses the book as a way to challenge the misconceptions her Western readers may have about non-Western culture and society in several ways. The autobiographical nature, graphic novel structure, and young girl narrator of *Persepolis* not only point out the problems in Western thinking about the society the text describes, but Satrapi also uses these rhetorical choices to correct such a view and help her readers realize the similarities between her society and culture and theirs. *Persepolis* is a poignant memoir about one woman's unique experiences throughout her life, but it also makes an impactful political statement about the flaws in the Western view about such experiences.

## Bibliography

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