
Persepolis – An Enlightening new Project

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Graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi uses different kinds of narrative techniques to make her graphic novel, *Persepolis*, a narrative with a didactic purpose that challenges readers to rethink and reflect on their ideas about cultures, gender, religion, transculturalism and power. My interpretation of the novel is that the author intends to draw a global picture of human beings and cultures. The story, which focuses on the similarities between Iranian and Western cultures, reduces the emphasis on their differences.

THE PLOT

The novel, which takes place in Teheran from 1980 to 1983, jumps back and forth in time and tells about a family and its friends, whose often dramatic and sad destinies are determined by the changing regimes of violence. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator, a ten year old girl, lives with her parents in a posh area of

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Teheran. Her father is an engineer and her mother is the grandchild of the former emperor of Iran, who was replaced by Reza Shah after a military coup d'état. The girl was brought up listening to intense political discussions and reading difficult philosophical literature. The family is described as being very modern and avant-garde compared to the rest of Iranian society. The story of the girl is inextricably intertwined with the story of the nation, where she is caught between the religious and the secular world.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OR FICTION?

The novel is a blend of subjectivity and history. Although Satrapi claims that the novel is fiction, she gives the reader the impression that the story portrays the true version of what happened in Iran during her childhood. She manipulates the reader into thinking that the story is autobiographical, which makes the story stronger. In order to do this, she uses a variety of different techniques. First, the narrator is a little girl born in the same year as the author with the same name. The introduction of the book is also written as a kind of historical review that shows how the story of the great Persian Empire has been neglected since the religious military coup d'état. The introduction ends with Satrapi's signature. Next, the story uses drawings to increase the effect of authenticity, for example, directly following the introduction is the image of a little girl and the words, "This is me when I was ten years old". Through the eyes of the little girl, the story is supposed to make up for all the propaganda and lies that have been told about the country.

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY IN THE STORY

The drawings, which are used exceptionally well to tell the dramatic stories of war and manslaughter, are sketched very simply, often with a humorous undertone, which helps the reader to maintain a distance

from the story without becoming cynical. This technique is what Bertolt Brecht calls 'Verfremdungseffekte', where the reader is able to step back and watch the story, instead of reliving it, which would be too traumatic.

Satrapi explains,

I cannot take the idea of a man cut into pieces and just write it ... it would not be anything but cynical. That's why I drew it. People are not ready to read a book about all the misery of the third world, and I don't blame them (Davis 2005).

An example of how the emotional part of the story is played down, even in the drawings, is when a friend of the family tells about his experience with torture.

Even though the stories told are horrifying and the people involved are subject to manslaughter and torture, the sentimental aspects of the story are not stressed. The main characters are all spared, which means the reader only learns about the terrible events that occur through secondary characters. Again, this helps the reader to acknowledge what has happened without getting too close.

THE VIEW ON WOMEN

From the beginning, gender is an important topic in the story. As a little girl, the main character, Marji, wishes to become the new prophet of the world.

In the above image, Marji is standing in front of five earlier Prophets telling them that she is the last prophet. Their only response is a surprised, 'a woman?' This image sets the stage, where gender as a distinction is very important. These men might be waiting for a new prophet, but none of them thought it would be a woman. Through these two small drawings, Marjane Satrapi is commenting on the status of women. To suggest that a little

girl is the new Prophet is a great provocation, not only in the Middle East but all over the world. Allowing prophets from a variety of different religions to stand together also invites readers to reflect on gender in a transnational context.

THE VEIL

Both Marji and her mother are being threatened by the regime because of their clothes and unwillingness to wear a veil. In order to avoid being treated violently by the regime, the women in the story are forced to wear a veil. At no point in the story do religious women express a desire to wear the veil. In this way, the author has chosen not to speak up for the women in, for example, France who are forced to remove their veils in public. She has decided only to show how the regime forces women away from society, out of universities and jobs into a life behind a veil. The status of women is also stressed in a subplot about a girl named Nilufar, who before being executed by the regime, is forced to marry a soldier who then rapes her, because it is illegal to kill a virgin. This story not only shows the lack of respect for women, but also communicates ideas about the special role of the female body. The regime has committed two crimes, because they rape and then kill her. Whether a man has had his sexual debut before he dies is of no interest. But if he dies as a soldier, he is given a golden key that fits the door to heaven, behind which he will find eternal life with lots of virgins and wealth.

According to associate professor Yvonne Mørck from the Department of Society and Globalisation at the University of Roskilde, women have a special role in society as cultural markers, which demands certain ways of managing gender and culture. The position and status of women are at stake in different ways than those of men, especially in the juncture between the modern society and a more traditional society (Mørck

1998).

The novel shows how women are forced to use a veil and how the regime tries to control the population by controlling their sex appeal, which is said to shine through one's hair! In the case of Nilufar and presumably others, the fact that the female body is overpowered during captivity stresses the juxtaposition of female innocence against an evil masculine regime.

THE SEMIOTIC 'NOWHERE' BECOMES THE CULTURAL 'EVERYWHERE'

Satrapi's story shows that good and bad people exist everywhere. In Iran, it is obvious that the enemy is the violent regime and the people who support the regime. As a teenager, the main character is sent to Austria to live and attend school, and through the eyes of the girl, Satrapi shows us her meeting with the Western world. In Iran, the girl is an outsider because of her intellectual, Westernised family, and in Austria, she is an outsider because she looks different; her local semiotic 'nowhere' becomes her cultural identity everywhere.¹ No matter where she is, she is an outsider and makes friends with other outsiders. In Austria, where she is met with distrust, the matron in the dormitory where she lives accuses her of theft and prostitution, explaining that her boyfriend's mom 'knows what kind of girl she is'. This leads to a discussion of power. In face of the regime, people are shown as powerless and without much freedom to act.

I argue that the feelings of powerlessness towards the regime are equivalent to the feeling of powerlessness the girl has when confronted with the prejudices of the Austrian people. Transnationality, however, is not only an emotional problem; it also involves other very specific issues. The discussion on whether the family should leave Iran is a good example of this.

In the following image, Marji's mother proposes that the family should leave and

go to Europe like many of their friends have done already. The father, who works as an engineer in Teheran, replies, “so that I can become a taxi driver and you a cleaning lady”?

The image of the dad behind the steering wheel and the sad look on their faces makes the reader associate the scene with foreign taxi drivers in the West. In this way, the author uses the image to create a certain feeling and connection to the people in the story. Readers are aware that the father is a very clever and skilled person who supports his family by working as an engineer. By letting him utter that his future in a Western country would be that of a taxi driver, gives readers the opportunity to reflect on their view of all the people living as refugees and working in jobs below their level of education. Through the three drawings above, readers get an impression of the unhappy situation refugees are in, and how they are caught between a life with war and fear in their homelands, and a life in exile at the bottom of society. The readers’ own understanding of differences between others and us is negotiated.

CONCLUSION

Persepolis stimulates readers to reflect and disestablishes the outlook on natural life and culture. I would therefore argue that the novel should be read as a new, enlightening project that shows a hyper complex and polycentric society. The paradox is that in her desire to make a more varied picture of the Iranian people, Satrapi also reconstructs the definition of the West as being good and the religious Iran as bad. Al-

though she shows us that people in Iran are not all alike, her story follows the same discourse of the Western view of Third World people that she is trying to change. The Iranian people in the novel are not all religious fanatics, but most of them are and they are destroying the lives of many people. I await the release of the animated movie with great anxiety to see whether there will be any difference compared to how the message is expressed in the book. A sound track and dialogue will be added to the story and the animation will give the different characters more personality. Will Marji be even more child-like and will the grandmother have the soft and sweet voice that I imagine? These questions remain to be answered. Regardless, the movie will give the story an even broader audience, which hopefully will be moved by the story about the little girl not only emotionally, but also in how they distinguish between themselves and the ‘others’.

NOTE

1. For further discussion on the transcultural aspect, see ‘A graphic self’ by Rocío G. Davis in *Prose Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3 Dec 2005.

REFERENCES

- Davis, Rocío G. (2005): “A graphic self”, in *Prose Studies* 2005/3.
- Mørck, Yvonne (1998): *Bindestregsdanskere*. Forlaget Sociologi, København.

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