

The Importance of Voice:
Feminism and Satrapi's *Persepolis* Series
by Karen Rustad

Marjane Satrapi is an Iranian graphic novelist living in France. Her most successful works thus far are the first two volumes of her *Persepolis* series of graphic novels, a memoir about Satrapi's childhood in Tehran and adolescent exile in Vienna. The *Persepolis* series has won three Alph-Arts (the most prestigious award in comics) and sold 15,000 copies in France alone (Vincent). Her work has garnered great critical acclaim and positive press, with interviews on NPR and in numerous newspapers discussing Satrapi's experiences living as a girl in Iran during and after the Islamic revolution.

In an October 2004 interview Satrapi commented, "You know, the feminists become very angry when I say I am not a feminist. I am a humanist. I believe in human beings" (qtd. in Sully). It may seem an extra challenge to argue that the work of an avowed non-feminist is actually feminist in nature. Yet I believe that, despite Satrapi's aversion to being identified as a member of any group, including the feminist movement, her graphic novels *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* contain feminist advocacy in both their content and their performance. I take my definition of feminism from Nancy Cott: opposition to sex hierarchy, the belief that women's condition is socially constructed, and an identification with other women as a social group.

I. Women and the Comic Book Industry

Comic books have long been considered the realm of Superman and scantily clad damsels in distress—hardly a likely environment for pro-woman work. However, from the very beginning women have been involved in the comics industry. Six years after the

first comic strip, *The Yellow Kid*, was first published in 1895, comic strips by women were appearing in American newspapers (*Century* 7-8). In 1909, Rose O'Neill created the Kewpies, a race of wildly popular cupid-like characters (8-9). As comic strips spawned the comic book industry in the late '30s and early '40s, women artists were involved almost immediately. June 1937's *The Monastery of the Blue God*, written by Cecilia Paddock Munson, was not only an early women-illustrated comic book story but also marked women's entrance into the action genre (62). Girls, not adolescent boys, were comic books' main audience up until the 1960s (*Girls* 7). Since the 1920s, many comics included cutout paper dolls with outfits suggested by readers (15). Comic books advertised "charm bracelets, handbags, belts, and even girdles," reflecting their female readership (12). Women and girls were both major creators and readers of comic books.

After World War II, women began to slowly be pushed out of the comics industry. As in other industries, women comic artists felt pressured to leave their jobs as male artists returned from the war. Many left their careers to marry and raise families. In the late 1950s, "a recession in the comics market" hit due in large part to charges of immorality in the comics industry (*Century* 121).

"Seduction of the Innocent, a book written by Dr. Fredric Wertham in that decade, claim[ed] that comics were responsible for juvenile delinquency. ...[The book] resulted in Senate hearings on comics and juvenile crime, the formation of a self-regulating Comics Code, and, eventually, the failure of most of the comic book publishing companies. As with any industry slump, many artists and writers were let go, and as with any industry, the first fired were women." (121)

The two surviving comics publishers, Marvel and DC, had already been "gearing themselves toward super heroes and the young boy market. Female-oriented comic books were slowly being phased out" (121-2). By 1974 there were only two female artists in the

mainstream comic book industry: Ramona Fradon and Marie Severin (*Century* 122, Vollmar). While women still drew comic books, they were relegated to underground channels (ie ‘zines).

Satrapi’s *Persepolis* series marks an effort to re-open the mainstream comics business to women. As comics gain prestige in their new incarnation—the “graphic novel”—the boundaries of the comic art form are being questioned. In the post-*Maus* comics world it has become apparent that comics are capable of expressing far more than heroic fantasies and cheap one-liners—they can handle serious personal and political topics. Within this moment of change, the existence and mainstream commendation of Satrapi’s *Persepolis* series secures a place for women’s voices in the new graphic novel genre. Since Satrapi has already established feminist issues as a relevant topic for the graphic novel, it is likely to be easier for future women artists and authors to stand on her shoulders and express themselves.

II. Female Voices In *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*

Persepolis’ protagonist, Marjane, maintains several key relationships with women while in Iran. She is very close to her grandma, who acts as the “moral center” of the book (Sully). Her grandma is also the first convert to young Marjane’s new “religion” (*Persepolis* 7). She also identifies strongly with her mother, one of the most “human” characters in the book; when Reza proposes marriage to Marjane, her first thought is to talk to her mother; she only settles for her father because her mother is traveling (158). While she does have important relationships with men such as her father and Uncle Anoosh, these men seem to function more as role models than close confidants. Anoosh only spends enough time with Marjane to tell her about her family’s history and express

his Marxist optimism before he is executed (60-2). He functions as a political hero for Marjane to look up to. Marjane's view of her father is more mixed—she dislikes his cynicism and at one point in the story questions his patriotism (83-4). Overall in the memoir he functions as a wise but somewhat distant teacher, as seen in his mature response to Marjane's doomed engagement to Reza (*Persepolis 2* 158-9). While Marjane's relationships with men are also important factors in her development, she shows the greatest connection to the other women in her family.

On the whole, the strength of Marjane's bonds of sisterhood serves as a barometer of her overall quality of life. When Marjane leaves for Austria, she attempts to develop friendships with other girls. She goes to Tyrol with her roommate Lucia, discovers a group of friends through her classmate Julie, then turns to Ingrid for companionship (12, 16, 64). Lost in a new culture obsessed with sex and drugs, none of these friendships are truly fulfilling for Marjane; however, they are better than nothing. When she abandons these sisterhood relationships to focus on her boyfriend Markus, her life in Austria is doomed. To impress Markus, Marjane does copious amounts of drugs, destroying her health and eventually "profoundly annoying him" (72). Their eventual breakup destroys Marjane's "one emotional support, the only person who cared for [her], and to whom [she] was wholly attached" (79). There are none of the women in her life to "stroke her hair" and comfort her; because her "complete existence had been planned around Markus" she finds herself with no place to go and ends up sleeping on the street (85). Eventually she has no choice but to return to her family in Iran. *Persepolis* demonstrates the importance of women having a strong female support network, echoing Adrienne Rich's prioritization of relationships on the "lesbian continuum."

Persepolis examines the self-policing nature of patriarchy. Living under the Islamist regime in Iran, Marjane observes:

The regime had understood that one person leaving her house while asking herself: “Are my trousers long enough?” “Is my veil in place?” “Can my makeup be seen?” “Are they going to whip me?” no longer asks herself: “Where is my freedom of thought?” “Where is my freedom of speech?” “My life, is it livable?” “What’s going on in the political prisons?” ... When we’re afraid, we lose all sense of analysis and reflection. Our fear paralyzes us. (148)

Obsession with personal appearance and adherence to superficial social norms works to distract women from more important issues. The element of fear--fear of being thought “fat” (in America) or “amoral” (in Iran)—prevents women from examining the ideals of “thin” or “pious”: the sources of their oppression. The goal of patriarchal norms is making women “called beautiful because [they] threaten...no one except [themselves]” (Chernik 108). By using fear to make women police their own physical appearance, patriarchal systems minimize the most important threat to their regime: a free female mind.

Persepolis also points out the double standard of Iranian norms for men and women. While Marjane is studying at university, the entire student body attends a lecture on “Moral and Religious Conduct” (142). The speaker denounces women for wearing makeup, short headscarves, wide trousers (the fashion at the time), and other indecencies. During the time for questions, Marjane points out the lack of reciprocal modesty among male students and asks, “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?” (143) As Iranian feminist scholar Haleh Afshar notes, Islamic law calls for modesty on the part of both men and women:

men too ha[ve] an obligation to fulfill their Islamic duty of being modestly attired. In addition...men ha[ve] an obligation to control their gaze and their lust. Even if unveiled women were being un-Islamic, it was the duty of Muslim men to avert their gaze. They should bear in mind that it is the observer, the gaze, which is sinful and not the object of the gaze. (Afshar 206)

Most nations' implementation of the Shari'a (religious law) has, however, overlooked most Koranic prescriptions for men. Instead, fearing women's sexuality, male Islamists have placed all blame for male arousal and sexual immorality on women. Satrapi humorously repudiates this doctrine of female guilt in *Persepolis* as two guardians of the revolution stop Marjane while she is running late for a dentist appointment:

“Madam, why were you running?”
“I'm very late! I was running to catch my bus.”
“Yes...but...when you run, your behind makes movements that are...how do you say...obscene!”
“WELL THEN DON'T LOOK AT MY ASS!” (147)

Unwilling to capitulate to an unequal moral system, Marjane refuses to feel guilty about her body and sexuality. Marjane cannot completely rebel against Islamic clothing standards; as her mother finds out in the early days of the Islamist regime, public *badhijabi* results in severe harassment or worse:

“Two fundamentalist bastards... They insulted me. They said that women like me should be pushed up against a wall and fucked, and then thrown in the garbage...and that if I didn't want that to happen, I should wear the veil...” (*Persepolis* 74)

However, Marjane does indulge in small rebellions through wearing lipstick, showing a few strands of hair, and being outspoken. Satrapi speaks out through *Persepolis* itself to protest Islamic patriarchal double standards and point out the absurdity of burdening women with all sexual guilt.

Most importantly, *Persepolis* provides a path for female self-determination by complicating the question of “what women want.” Contemporary fundamentalist Islam assumes that women are naturally inclined toward a certain social role: that of modest, *chador*-wearing, homebound wives and mothers. Through the practice of *amreh beh maruf va nahi as monker* (“leading Muslims to the correct path and preventing them from going astray”), guardians of the revolution and fundamentalist vigilantes enforce Iran’s morality codes as something that women themselves ought to want (Afshar 197). Even Satrapi’s “good” mullah assumes that “wearing the veil is synonymous with emancipation” (*Persepolis* 2 144). Yet while many Western feminists see wearing the veil as synonymous with repression, some Iranian feminists do see the veil as potentially pro-woman. They believe that

the veil protects women from becoming commodified sex objects and enables them to move freely and act independently in the public sphere. Once women have freed themselves from the shackles of femininity and its demands for sexuality, they become human beings; they can gain the gaze and cease to be the object of attention. (Afshar 15)

Persepolis captures this conflict clearly. There are male and female guardians of the revolution; there are male and female liberal Iranians. One panel shows two groups of protestors, both wholly female, with one shouting “The veil! The veil!” and the other shouting “Freedom! Freedom!” (*Persepolis* 5) With women coming down on both sides of the issue, who is to say that women definitively do or do not want Iran’s moral codes?

Through Marjane and the graphic novel medium itself, *Persepolis* resolves this conflict not by choosing a side but rather advocating more space for women’s self-determination and individual voices. Throughout the two novels, Marjane communicates with God on her own rather than through the fundamentalist mullahs. Symbolically she

says that she does not pray in Arabic because “if praying is talking to God, I prefer to do it in a language that I know” (130). Marjane chooses to talk to God in her own language and with her own voice, and thus is able to hold her own opinions about morality and religious law. Here Satrapi echoes Irshad Manji’s conception of *ijtihad* (interpretation). In many Muslim countries and communities, Manji argues, “[T]he gates of *ijtihad*—our minds—remain, for the most part, closed. Why should this be? ... The only thing this imperial strategy has achieved is to spawn the most dogged oppression of Muslims by Muslims: the incarceration of interpretation” (Manji 59). Women’s voices and the power to independently interpret religious practice is a sorely neglected part of Islam.

Zin al-Din...argued that Islam is based on freedom of thought, will, speech, and action, and no Muslim has authority over another in such matters. ... This means that women, like men, have the right to choose their own path and if necessary commit their own sins and repent or negotiate with the Almighty without intervention by men, be they learned religious figures or fathers, husbands, or brothers. (Afshar 7)

Independent, critical thought in both religious and secular matters is Marjane’s key to liberation. Satrapi’s choice of medium echoes her point. The graphic novel (especially in the form of a memoir) is not amicable to extended, formal argumentation. The combinations of images, dialogue, and captions can only suggest meanings and provoke emotions; *Persepolis* is neither a religious treatise nor a policy brief. Thus, Satrapi leaves many things for the reader to interpret for herself (Walker). As de Beauvoir observes, “There is no possibility of measuring the happiness of others, and it is always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place them” (de Beauvoir xxxiii). Thus, the goal of feminism cannot be the promulgation of any particular lifestyle, but rather the freedom for women to choose their own beliefs and customs.

III. Satrapi Speaks

Satrapi recognizes the need for pluralism, but she also has strong feminist opinions of her own. Press attention after the publication of the first two *Persepolis* volumes has allowed Satrapi to speak her mind publicly. Satrapi says she does not wear the veil outside of Iran; she states, “I hate the veil and what it means, I would never put that thing on my head” (Sully). However, she vehemently opposes the new French law banning the veil in schools.

[I]nstead of understanding why the girls were putting the veil on their heads, they just made a law. And if by just making a law you could stop things, it would be so easy. Forbid persecution, and it doesn't exist anymore? Of course it will exist, it will just become hidden. ... Then [without the veil] they cannot go to school to get an education, and the one way they have to become emancipated is then lost. ... It's a question of these girls' identity. Their mothers never wore the veil, and so they want to. Why? ... For French they are not French, and for Arabs they are not Arabs. So the height of irony is that the veil has become a symbol of rebellion. (qtd. in Sully)

Satrapi believes in the fundamental equality of the sexes and sees the ideology of sexual difference as the root cause of women's oppression in Iran.

[T]he basic problem of a country like mine, apart from the regime, apart from the government, is the patriarchal culture that is leading my country. That is the worst. That is why the government is still there. Whatever it touches, it gives its interpretation... When it touches psychology it says that the woman is more sensitive than the man. When it touches the medicine it says that our brain is a little less weight than the man's. (qtd. in Sully)

Men's monopolization of discourse in Iran has entrenched set gender roles and has interpreted sexual differences in favor of men. Satrapi is critical of Western patriarchy, too, saying that Western women's obsession with staying young and thin is the “veil of the West” (Independent). In both cases, Satrapi emphasizes her belief in the fundamental equality of all people; ideologies to the contrary arise only when power differences shape discourse by giving voice to some over others.

Satrapi is critical of feminist thinkers who emphasize women's difference from men:

I believe that we say too much "We the women" and "We the men," but should say "We the human beings." There are really two types of human being -- the ones who care about environment, who want a more just society; and the other ones who care about greed and war. (qtd. in Sully)

It is because of this school of feminism that she refuses to self-identify as a feminist.

However, Satrapi's words echo other skeptics of gender difference: Laurie Shrage, some of the early American suffragettes, and especially Simone de Beauvoir. By arguing for women's equality and reinserting feminist topics into the mainstream comics scene, Satrapi's *Persepolis* series and subsequent statements both advocate and demonstrate the importance of women's voices to securing women's freedom. Women must be free to interpret the norms of their society (Islamic or otherwise) in their own way if they are to question them and remove their patriarchal bias.

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