

## Writing Resistance, Building Identities: *Persepolis* and *Embroideries*

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Marjane Satrapi's graphic novels have traced her journey as an Iranian immigrant in the backdrop of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Her first novel, *Persepolis* (2008), documents the socio-economic and political upheavals amidst the Revolution and her way of dealing with the death, separation and loss that comes with a civil war. In *Embroideries* (2008), Satrapi presents the inner world of her family. As an Iranian immigrant in France, these novels become what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls "memory objects", a way of materialising internal images and preserving her identity through reiteration and recollection (331). With the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991), the notion of graphic novels being exclusively a young male's domain changed. This format has shaped the representation and depiction of spatial politics beyond impersonal op-eds of newspapers. While Joe Sacco and his war comics journalism depicts an outsider's perspective on war-torn marginal countries, Malik Sajad and Hamid Sulaiman's take on the crisis in Kashmir and Syria, respectively, show a more personal involvement and depiction of marginalised history. Gillian Whitlock observes that life-writing with autobiographical figures such as those created by the likes of Art Spiegelman and Satrapi creates a space for dialogue, dissent and resistance (5, 11-13). Marjane Satrapi fits in this niche of the postcolonial graphic novel that presents war history and trauma as a social fact, much removed from the fantastical science fiction drama that is usually the content of American comics and graphic novels.

### ***Persepolis*: The story of a childhood and return**

The medium of the graphic novel attains documentary value because of its manipulation of frames that allows for a simultaneous fluid and static narration, allowing space for feminist modes of subjective aesthetic reproduction. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi depicts herself in the novel as a young girl and coupled with the minimalist style, successfully erases the boundaries between an "other" Iranian girl and the reader. The novel opens with the chapter titled "The Veil" and there's a feeling of peering into Marjane's life. The first two panels of the first chapter establish her individuality amidst the row of similar looking veiled girls (fig.1), and one has to take this figure as the commanding voice. The change from a liberal Iranian society to one controlled by a regressive dictum is expressed using a montage-like sequence of images that depict the lives of the narrator and the people around her. Satrapi goes against the dominant non-

fiction narrative styles of violent rhetoric and political blame games. Instead, she depicts how any country can become Iran, how many Marjis can't afford to escape.



Fig. 1. The first page of *Persepolis* shows the enforcement of the veil in schools; Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Vintage, 2008, p. 1.

Her criticism of the State is through the young Marji, which gives it a subtle tone and shows how in times of war, intersectional identities are the most vulnerable. Being in a politically active family infused her with strong ideas about international politics from a very young age. Readers see young Marji shouting slogans like "Death to the Shah!" (8), only to be disappointed and disillusioned with the newly formed Ayatollah Khomeini regime. Her stand becomes that of a cosmopolitan feminist who recognizes that in times of war, marginalised intersectional identities are the most vulnerable and her call for solidarity cuts across binaries of gender. Her reminiscences in the novel depict her as a patriot and non-patriot, someone born of the war and yet not part of it.

With the new regime came a wave of crackdown on public morality and all things perceived as Western, right from jeans and glossy magazines to regulation of male and female relationships. Women's bodies are always the first to be targeted by the patriarchy. While the veil was being paraded as a safety measure for both men and women, abuse and oppression were inflicted on women by those same men. Nivedita Menon observes how the Right wing is always united when it comes to marking women's bodies and in homogenising

the Other. In the Indian context, she refers to the militant Muslim Lashkar-e-Jabbar and the Hindu Right wing groups such as Bajrang Dal's attempts at enforcing hijab for Muslim women and traditional dress for Hindu women, in an attempt at protecting culture (207). Iran's moral policing was fuelled by an anti-America approach because of America's interference in Iran's oil reserves, to the extent of supporting a coup. While Iranians, including Satrapi's family, rallied against the Pahlavi regime for its excess support to the West, Khomeini was opposed as soon as he began enforcing the Sharia law and a crackdown on the revolutionaries. Niamh Reilly proposes a framework for cosmopolitan feminism that involves five thrust areas— critical engagement with public law, utilisation of global forums for cosmopolitan solidarity, recognition of intersectionalities and the commitment to cross-border dialogue, the development of collaborative advocacy and a global feminist consciousness that challenges the structures of patriarchal, racial and capitalist power relations (190). Satrapi's depiction of her change from wanting to kill the earlier Shah of Iran to a more pacifist approach to conflict resolution is testament to a cosmopolitan feminism that is born of war and seeks to scrutinise intensely the role of the state in perpetuating violence on its citizens. Her radicalism manifests itself in her private and public choices. Satrapi shows equal concern for the men during war, when she depicts young boys being led off to fight in the Revolution with the promise of attaining heaven. The black and white format of her artwork makes this phenomenon of indoctrination and loss of innocent lives even more morbid.

As the new wave of religious fundamentalism engulfed the nation, Marji's parents decided to send her to Vienna to complete her education. Until the moment Marji leaves, the speech bubbles between her and her parents become lesser. Her grandmother comes to visit them, completes the family picture and weaves the three generations together for that final night before Marji leaves. At the airport, her father imparts a final advice: "You've got to go now. Don't forget who you are and where you come from" (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 152). It echoes the sentiment of every immigrant, looking for steady ground in foreign lands. This is a reminder of their past, the history and the memories which have no existence for the outer world. Their identities are determined by their nationality, their religion and their overall status of being an outsider in the spaces they relocate to. In the social circles of Vienna, Marji feels out of place and is viewed as a vulnerable and exotic woman from the Middle East, who needs protection and solidarity. Four years of education in a foreign city convinced her that Tehran, her home, was where she wanted to be, no matter what kind of political climate prevailed there. Her complex feelings and realisation of the futility of being completely rootless in Vienna is expressed in these sentences:

I think that I preferred to put myself in serious danger rather than confront my shame. My shame at not having become someone, the shame of not having made my parents proud after all the sacrifices they had made for me. The shame of having become a mediocre nihilist. (246)

The heavy baggage of shame that Marji felt, of not having become someone is one carried by all those who have suffered adversely at the hands of the capitalist class. In the case of immigrants like Satrapi, who were lucky enough to escape, part of the burden involves attempting to forge a new identity from a perpetual feeling of being a hyphenated identity. Marji was often introduced as “She’s Marjane. She’s from Iran. She’s known war” (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 168). She was often made to feel “welcome” with statements like “It’s good to have international friends” (174). These two kinds of responses epitomise how cosmopolitanism, in a very general sense, appears to a lot of people across the world. It’s about identifying hyphenated identities and trying to accept it as part of our own society. But Satrapi’s experience of being an Iranian-French woman has been far from being smooth. Her homesickness in Vienna was aggravated by the alienation of being in a foreign land with no strong support. Instead of forcing her way to become someone, she chose to go back. While her criticism of the fascist Right is more direct, even the Left with its ideals doesn’t escape her commentary. Her criticism of the Left is embodied in Momo, the senior from her school in Vienna. Momo was a self-proclaimed anarchist who always talked about Marx, Bakunin and how Christmas is a capitalist construct meant to profit businessmen from people’s sentiments. Satrapi’s criticism against the Left is displayed when Momo remarks: “...Thanks to the Left, there are holidays in Europe. We are not forced to work all the time. If at the beginning of the century, the anarchists had triumphed. We wouldn’t work at all. Man isn’t made to work at all” (175).

The second part of the novel is about Marji’s coming to terms with the changes Iran has undergone, a marriage not meant to be and a final decision to leave Iran for good. On one of her walks through the old streets, she sadly observes:

There were also the streets. Many had changed names. They were now called martyr what’s-his-name avenue or martyr something-or-the-other street. It was very unsettling. I felt as though I were walking in a cemetery... surrounded by the victims of a war I had fled. (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 253)

Feelings of alienation resurface along with the guilt that she was feeling. Having been abroad for four years made her feel like a stranger in her own country

now. When she decides to leave Iran for France, her father says:

You weren't made to live here. We Iranians, we're crushed not only by the government, but by the weight of our traditions! Our Revolution set us back by fifty years. It will take generations for all this to evolve. You only have one life. It's your duty to live it well. And now that you are twenty-four, it's not like when you went to Austria. You don't need us anymore. (341)

Satrapi's father doesn't express hatred for the country; rather it's an acute awareness of the problems that are plaguing it. Just like him, Satrapi's cosmopolitanism doesn't involve a complete erasure of the nation-state. It means constantly engaging with and critiquing it, while accepting the intersectionalities. This is how cosmopolitan patriotism or rooted cosmopolitanism operates, as explained by Kwame Appiah, which means one can be cosmopolitan and at the same time be rooted or loyal to a culture that one calls home. It's the same awareness that Satrapi exhibits in her novels. While she is critical of how the state system of Iran has turned out to be, she doesn't wish for another bloody war. Her approach is one of a cosmopolitan pacifism. In tracing this pacifist liberalism, Appiah writes:

It is the historical evidence of the dangers of intolerance— religious intolerance in Europe in the seventeenth century, for example, for Locke; racial intolerance in the colonial context for Gandhi (or for my father) — that often lies behind the skepticism about the state's interventions in the lives of individuals that itself underlies much liberal sentiment . . . The political tradition of liberalism is rooted in these experiences of illiberal government. (636)

Appiah and Reilly both approach the question of cosmopolitanism from the standpoint of empathy. Their framework of cosmopolitan patriotism and feminist cosmopolitanism rests on going beyond binaries, recognising intersectional identities and engage with the contested spaces of human rights and individual liberties. The path towards Third World feminist cosmopolitanism involves having a collective voice without homogenising the identities. In leaving Iran for France, Satrapi chooses to engage with what her hyphenated identity entails.

### **Stitching lives and loves: *Embroideries***

*Embroideries*, unlike other novels of Satrapi, lack consistent panel details or even speech bubbles. The content of this novel—erotic lives of Iranian women under the shackles of patriarchy that foment a culture of controlling women's bodies and lives—fits in perfectly with the underground subculture from which the genre of comics, and later on graphic novels emerged, and goes well with

the hidden and rebellious private lives of many Iranian women, like the ones talked about in this novel.

The absence of panel details opens up the text to the possibility of juxtaposing the past and present, leading to a rupture in the way time is constricted in the space of a few panels (fig. 2). There is a flow of conversation and unrestricted access to private lives of women, and this creates a space of relief and freedom for them, each of who have suffered some degree of oppression such as forced marriages and marital rape. Porosity of these boundaries makes this novel a memoir with its voices rooted in a multitude, a collective.



Fig. 2: Satrapi's grandmother surrounded by her friends; Satrapi, Marjane. *Embroideries*. Vintage, 2008, p. 13.

“Cosmopolitan feminism is ultimately an account of emancipatory feminist practice—it only becomes coherent in the context of struggles linked to concrete issues and events,” asserts Niamh Reilly (190). In this context, *Embroideries* is about how women across age gaps negotiate their oppressive conditions to be in solidarity with each other. The tales of their erotic lives capture the myriad ways in which repressed women create safe spaces for themselves in times of war. In the backdrop of a crackdown on protesters and free-thinkers, these women create their own non-violent resistance.

Unlike the darker images of Phoebe Gloeckner in her works like *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002) that have a consistent backdrop of coming to terms with trauma, *Embroideries* talks about sexuality and sexual trauma in an intimate and friendly space consisting of women of different ages, sharing their

own set of experiences in a very light hearted manner. Satrapi sets the stage for these women by painting the scene with the piping hot fumes from the samovar and the opium of her grandmother, both necessary for engaging in enlightening conversation. While Marjane's grandmother was married thrice, one of her friends indulged in trickery to avoid being detected of having a past sexual relationship. When the women share their stories and discuss about other women and their ordeals, one gets a sense of the prevailing double standards of morality and how they are enforced as a means to only control and manipulate bodies.

The feminist aspect of this novel lies in how much the narrative discloses meaning without being explicit and the control it exerts on how bodies are viewed in the public discourse. While uncensored discussions take place among the women, one can't help but notice the striking absence of any explicit imagery, except in one page where a cheating husband is shown engaging sexually with Marjane's grandmother's friend, but there's no nudity involved. Instead of fulfilling a very mainstream cultural expectation of displaying an objectified male phallus in *Embroideries*, the author chooses to only suggest it.

Some of the feminist reforms during the Shah Dynasty include obligatory unveiling of women, making way for women to take up higher positions in their jobs, female suffrage and reforms in the family laws that fixed equal accountability for divorce, marriage, custody of children and so on. But all of this was undone when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power. This rupture in the status of women and human rights in Iran caused a change in the country's image. As Khomeini stood his ground against both Israel and the West, it fuelled anti-American sentiments on one hand, and large-scale migrations to America on the other. But even with large migrations to other countries, Satrapi writes, many Iranian immigrants looked for native brides with conservative values, which led to forced marriages and abuse when the brides didn't match up to the expectations of the men. Such a scenario creates barriers in the progress towards an inclusive Third World feminism that involves breaking down ideological structures of oppression.

The title of the novel is derived from a surgery that many women undergo to avoid being detected of their loss of virginity. The colloquial term for that surgery being used as the title of the novel shows how Satrapi has brought out the intensely private and even profane to the public discourse and redefined how it is viewed. This is her way of engaging in a conversation about the private and the public. One of the key challenges of a cosmopolitan feminist is to distinguish between the private and the public. In times of war and oppression, the private domain becomes the bastion of policing to ensure control in the public sphere.

An embroidery as a piece of heirloom acts as material memory. It bears testimony to craftsmanship and makes it an artefact bearing the history of lived experiences. The woven thread and other intricate details set apart different kinds of embroideries and are often handed down as part of a tradition. In light of this role played by a piece of embroidery, Satrapi's novel puts together myriad hues of these women's lives and presents readers with an object of memory that attests to its intention of redefining the connotations of sexuality and solidarity. Her art of resistance lies in forging new identities and representing this cosmopolitanism to a global audience.

Jasmin Darznik, Iranian-American poet and novelist, has observed that this profusion of Iranian narratives in the form of memoirs available in mass markets has sparked debates in America regarding who has the right to represent what exactly happened in the run up to the coup, the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1). She observes that in the race for the right to represent, a crucial aspect of these memoirs is being overlooked– the Iranian women's control over how she is represented and in what capacity. The strain of rebellion that runs through all of Satrapi's novels speaks volumes about the act of resistance that informs such autobiographical life-writing. The mode of the graphic novel with its intensely personal form that consists of hand-drawn caricatures and text offers a more intimate encounter with the author who is actually in the process of drawing multiple fragmented selves, as observed by Sam Knowles (84).

While the whole novel is peopled with faces and flashbacks spread across pages, the other figures slowly recede into the background near the end as Marji's grandfather pops out of an inner room and is promptly shoved out of the scene by his wife. As he walks past the shadows of the other women in the room and reaches the end of the pages, he's alone and remarks: "When the snake gets old, the frog gets him by the balls" (Satrapi, *Embroideries* 130). This remark from Marji's grandfather seems to suggest gender roles and authority, and in all probability, he associates himself with the old snake as he has submitted to his wife. His lone comment at the end, with no other figures on the page is the first and last time that a male has been given space in the novel. Being a novel dependent on the visual, the difference of space occupied by men and women is sharply visible. The men have always been shown in the company of women, strange and immoral with double standards, while only Marji's grandfather is shown in a dignified light at the end, standing tall and with a wry smile, the whole page to himself.

As a movement of resistance and defiance, the mode of autobiography does well to express marginalised identities. The graphic novel has an evolving legacy that attests to the developing forms of feminist modes of production.

Even though this format of the novel is widely seen as a mass market and capitalist product meant for a class specific readership that can afford to buy graphic novels, this postmodern form of the book with its combination of images and text has scope in influencing emergent readership about the various modes of self-expression that arise out of spaces of conflict. Such alternative modes of writing history are important to provide a space of dissent and debate. This genre revels in its complexity to depict multiple complex themes wrapped in its ambiguity. The interaction between image, word and text creates a meta-narrative that fuses the personal with the political and creates a new aesthetic of resistance and protest.

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