

## Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* Series

### An Analysis of Identity and Purpose

Satrapi's *Persepolis* is an unconventional autobiography. Written in a comic book or "autographic" style, Satrapi's humour offers a comedic light relief juxtaposing the macabre imagery of revolution and war that punctuates her life in Iran (Smith and Watson, 2002, p. 239). Dealing with ideas of morality, religion and politics, Satrapi's childhood experiences are inextricably linked to the political and social transformations taking place in Iran during this period. Satrapi's adolescent years in Austria, led to what the author has termed a "lack of identity" (Satrapi, 2004) as she found herself perceived to be, "a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West" (Satrapi, 2008, p. 274). Which has led some to suggest the purpose of this autobiography is a simplistic exploration of Satrapi's own, confused, identity (Claudio, 2011). Whilst this essay does not seek to disabuse the importance of personal identity within *Persepolis*, it does refrain from citing it as the sole and central purpose within Satrapi's work. Satrapi's main grievance is the perception of Iran within the West (Goldin, 2004). Whether this is in regard to the portrayal of women or the notion that Iran is a nation of fundamentalism and terrorism, the narrative works eloquently to dispel the fallacies of western observers and display Iran's multi-faceted culture for the reader. Interestingly, *Persepolis'* purpose is heavily linked to identity. Satrapi employs the idea of identity, whether her own, her families or that of Iran or the West to aid her purpose of correcting the common misconceptions that all too often divide the cultures of East and West. Therefore, this essay aims to explore and analyse not solely the purpose(s) of *Persepolis* but also the way in which identity is used to aid the realisation of said purpose(s).

Autobiographies are not written in a vacuum. If we accept writer Jill Ker Conway's theories, an autobiography is inspired by a myriad of factors including cultural, historical, political and personal influences and issues (Conway, 2011). *Persepolis* is no exception. Cultural meanings of social identity,

religion and politics are explored within its pages. Yet self-writing is an intensely personal art and can therefore only be categorised to a certain extent. *Persepolis* is an Iranian autobiography and cultural barriers continue to persist within this sub-genre that hinders such works creation. Female Iranian writers have only recently begun to attempt and publish self-writing and autobiography, often perceived to be the reserve of Western males (Gusdorf, 1956, pp. 28-30), which remains a relatively taboo art within Iranian culture. As scholar Farideh Goldin has noted, for Iranian women “writing of self is frightening” due to the possible repercussions that can be brought upon the writer’s family within Iran (Goldin, 2004). Additionally, the “modesty and secrecy” inherent within Iranian culture has deterred the composition of female self-writing within the country until recently (Goldin, 2004). The multitude of female Iranian autobiography recently published, including *Persepolis*, is often cited to have been precipitated by the 1979 revolution (Goldin, 2004). Female Iranian writers, such as Satrapi, have tended to publish and create their work beyond Iran’s borders, free from the punitive fundamentalism of the Iranian regime, to enjoy the freedom of expression provided in the West. Written in Europe and originally in French, in many ways *Persepolis* is typical of this modern era of Iranian autobiography. The Western influence upon female Iranian autobiography has been perceived to have led such writers to “treasure seemingly mundane details of life” (Goldin, 2004) and this “bourgeois preoccupation” with domesticity is also apparent within *Persepolis* (Conway, 2011, p. 13).

In spite of this, *Persepolis* is unique in many aspects including the work’s purpose. In order to comprehensively appreciate Satrapi’s motivation and purpose for publicising her self-writing, an understanding of the context in which the autobiography was written is also required. Satrapi’s writing is in many ways socio-politically motivated. At *Persepolis*’ time of writing Iran’s foreign relations with western powers were extremely fragile, given the fundamentalist stance of the regime. In 2002, George W. Bush, then President of the United States, determined Iran to be part of an “axis of evil” (CNN, 2002). Such rhetoric has since been seen as a catalyst for stigmatising Iran as a nation of “fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism” (See Satrapi 2008; Satrapi 2004; Farouky

2003). Additionally, this construction of fallacious images of Iran within Western minds has led Satrapi to suggest that Iran's overwhelming image within Western media is of "women in chadors and guys with guns" (Goldin, 2004). To Satrapi, this obtrusive perception of Iran demonstrates a simplification even a disregard, of the complex and multi-faceted social and political situation within the country at this time, of which *Persepolis* is keenly aware.

In addition to enlightening the Western world to Iran's true identity, Satrapi's *Persepolis* is also perceived to seek a further audience within the West for an entirely different purpose. As scholar Amy Malek suggests "Iranian women have also served the Iranian diaspora by helping the second and third generations understand their cultural history and diasporic heritage" (Malek, 2006). Malek goes on to suggest that due to the often divergent accounts of western media and family/friends version of events within Iran during the 20<sup>th</sup> century diaspora memoirs, such as *Persepolis*, offer an invaluable platform from which later generations can relate to their own "experiences and negotiate their identities" (Malek, 2006). Interestingly Satrapi has asserted that *Persepolis* was in fact written for a Western and not Iranian audience (Satrapi, 2004). In spite of only having a single audience, *Persepolis'* purposes are manifold and the book can have multiple meanings depending on the reader. Malek summarises the view of an Iranian- American student, who suggests that he chose to read *Persepolis* as it allowed him to "identify not across cultures, but across generations" (Malek, 2006). Clearly here the purpose and meaning of *Persepolis* are different from how a Western observer of Western heritage would observe the book. In essence, however, the overall purpose remains the same; *Persepolis* seeks to educate the reader. What we can discern, however, from its lessons is that the book has differing meanings to each individual reader and to this end *Persepolis* can certainly be construed as having multiple purposes.

These aforementioned purposes revolve around the fulcrum of *Persepolis* which is, in effect, Satrapi's exploration of her identity. If we accept scholar Susan Stanford Friedman's analysis, female identity is constructed upon a basis of "identification, independence and community" (Smith and

Watson, 2002, p. 75). The first instalment of *Persepolis*, focused on her formative years, does not disabuse from this idea as Satrapi's identity is very much entwined within her relationship with others. Whether it is the "permissive" nature of her mother (Satrapi, 2008, p.131), the passionate politicking of her father (Satrapi, 2008, p.20) or the courage of Uncle Anoosh, Satrapi's early relationships have profound impacts upon the narrative in spite of the multiple identities which subsequently follow (Satrapi, 2008, p.68). This initial identity can be seen acting as a moral compass within *Persepolis 2* as Satrapi often refers back to the wisdom of her parents during her more rebellious periods (See Satrapi, 2008, p.228). Interestingly, here identity is used for a purpose as these relationships also juxtapose the Western image of Iran. This can be seen in her parent's favoured music: the Bee Gees and Pink Floyd (Satrapi, 2008, 37). Through their purchase of western clothes for Marjane such as a denim jacket and new Nikes, and is perhaps encapsulated by their radical Marxist views (Satrapi, 2008, 130). Another informative relationship within *Persepolis*, albeit one that declines in importance over time, is Satrapi's connection to religion and God; with whom she regularly converses at the beginning of the book. In many ways, Satrapi struggles to discern between religion, with god as a benevolent being, and the tyranny of the regime itself as she dismisses and banishes God from her presence after the arrest of Anoosh (Satrapi, 2008, 70). Only later, in *Persepolis 2*, does Satrapi once more begin to pray. As Satrapi later noted, this transformation was precipitated by the realisation that she was "against fundamentalism... not against any religion" (Satrapi, Confessions of Miss Mischief, 2008).

*Persepolis 2* is scattered with further such epiphanies and these represent a turning point within the narrative. From here identity becomes not solely the reserve of an individual, but something that can be prescribed to a nation, religion or government. Effectively, identity and purpose become entwined once more. As Satrapi attempts to differentiate between Iran's identity and the fundamentalism of the regime she highlights the contrast between the public and private spheres of the Iranian people. Documenting parties with alcohol (p.106), flirtatious looks (p.294), pre-marital sex (p.305) in comparison to the public life in which she had to refrain from hugging her boyfriend

for fear of persecution (Satrapi, 2008, p.284). Essentially, Satrapi is disabusing the idea that the world is made up of vastly differing lands, instead she beseechs us to realise that the same threats exist within every society and the observer must learn to separate the identities of nations from governments and religions from the extremists they foster. In this way Satrapi also contests the Western image of Iran, using her time within Europe to draw nuanced insights into the culture that so readily stereotypes her own heritage by drawing parallels between East and West. She notes, after an encounter with a particularly draconian Nun, that every religion fosters “the same extremists” (Satrapi, 2008, p.180), whilst proceeding to compare the similarities between European fascism and Iran’s fundamentalism (Satrapi, 2008, p.229). Satrapi effectively demonstrates how a nation or religion’s identity is always a multi-faceted entity which cannot be defined by one image or summarised by one word such as “evil”.

It is within *Persepolis 2* that Satrapi’s multiple identities begin to emerge. Here, the study must distinguish between what Smith and Watson have termed the present identity of the narrating “I” and the historical figure of the narrated “I” (Smith and Watson, 2002, p. 238). In Europe, Satrapi’s narrated “I” struggles in her attempt to conform to Western ideals whilst also staying within the moral parameters of her own culture, as set out by the narrating “I”. Europe offered opportunities to become a “liberated and emancipated woman” and whilst her engagement with political spheres such as anarchism and the work of Bakunin afforded her a niche within society it was through such freedoms that Satrapi’s identity becomes confused (Satrapi, 2008, p.177). The adolescent Satrapi’s naïve belief that sex and drugs aided her integration into a Western youth’s lifestyle are quickly derided by the narrating “I” for “betraying... her origins” (Satrapi, 2008, p.195) and yet she later talks of her lifestyle incorporating “more and more drugs” (Satrapi, 2008, p.228). Such contradictions between the narrating “I” and the actions of the narrated “I” provide an invaluable insight into Satrapi’s progression from her past self, documented within the story, to the writer’s own perception of her history. Whilst Satrapi remains highly critical of her drug abuse she has still written in detail about it within her autobiography. Demonstrating that she has not solely divulged

information that she as a writer “feels comfortable talking about”, as many memoirs do, but rather has provided an invaluable insight into her sense of self (Conway, 2011, p. 4). By revealing even the “darkest moments of her life” including her attempted suicide within *Persepolis 2*, Satrapi has revealed crucial clues to her perception of her own identity (Satrapi, *Confessions of Miss Mischief*, 2008). It could be argued that her time in Europe represents a conflict between her narrated self and the narrating “I” alluding to the idea that Satrapi’s sense of self is very much still situated within Iranian morals in spite of her being in diaspora. This is demonstrated by way of a contrast between Satrapi’s “dominant”- Iranian- and “alternative”-European- culture. Whereby the former underpins the narrative and is used as a template for comparison against the latter (Smith and Watson, 2002, p. 246). In this instance the “dominant” culture is, as aforesaid, acting as a moral guide within the story and is always present within the narrative in spite of the multiple identities at work (ibid).

Satrapi remains aware of such conflicts within her identity noting herself that she remains a foreigner “anywhere” (Satrapi, 2004). In spite of this, Satrapi remains easy for the reader to relate to. Perhaps this is due to her effectively baring her soul to the reader. In affording us glimpses at her highs and lows she has created a close proximity to us, making us feel like a confidant or friend of hers. Whilst it is difficult to define her as belonging to a single culture, Satrapi’s personality shines through the narrative allowing us to gauge her “self” and in turn endears us towards her.

Additionally, Satrapi’s political awareness further enlightens us to the type of person she is. Upon her return to Iran, and in spite of the danger, Satrapi remains outspoken condemning the patriarchal nature of Iranian society in which females are subjugated by law, whilst males remained free from such restraints as the veil or wide trousers (Satrapi, 2008, p.298). Even so it is difficult to categorise Satrapi’s political convictions. Her opposition to the repression of women for example should not be misinterpreted as feminism. On the contrary Satrapi has herself dismissed feminism as an ideal, suggesting that it propagates females as the superior race. Rather, given her egalitarian stance, Satrapi can be deemed more of a humanist than anything else; as Satrapi notes “it’s not a question

of East and West, and American and Iranian, and women and men” but rather of individual agency (Satrapi, 2004).

In conclusion, *Persepolis* works to dispel Western fallacies concerning the Iranian people. If we also accept Malek’s persuasively argued theory, Satrapi’s work plays an important role in providing Iranian diaspora, who may have never been to Iran, with an idea of their own identity and culture free from the obtrusive perceptions of a biased Western media. Identity is the fulcrum of *Persepolis*. The story works not only to clear the misconceptions surrounding Iranian identity, but the mistaken belief of condemning religion due to a minority’s extremism. Identity and purpose are therefore inextricably linked within *Persepolis*. Satrapi’s exploration of her own identity, for example, works to give a view of the Iranian people untainted by Western media or political rhetoric therefore aiding the purpose of *Persepolis*. From her parents Westernised outlooks to their creation of a strong moral centre within Satrapi. The multiple identities at work within *Persepolis* constantly aid the stories purpose by juxtaposing Western perceptions of Iran as a nation of fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism. Satrapi articulately works to show her own perception of Iran and display the idea that people should refrain from defining the identity of a multi-dimensional entity such as a nation by a single institution such as a government. *Persepolis* educates and endears its Western audience to the books Iranian author Marjane Satrapi and the continuing plight of the Iranian people.

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