

## His/story Through the Eyes of a Girl: Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

■ Reviewed by Aglaia Viviani

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"Distance" is undoubtedly one of the keywords with which to interpret *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (the human rights activist of Arabic origin, born in Iran in 1969, currently living in France):<sup>1</sup> first, because it is written using an almost filmic technique, which reminds one of many famous Iranian movies; second, because it is written from the distance of a different time and place (more than twenty years later, France), in relation to the events it narrates. Last, but not least, this interesting book about sexual and cultural difference is written in a language, French, which is not the writer's mother tongue, thus enabling Satrapi both to distance herself from the text and to make it immediately available to a wide public.

The desire to give testimony to the women of her family and to her fellow countrywomen seems in fact to be what triggers this amazing childhood autobiography.<sup>2</sup> In the preface, clearly aware of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the author states how, writing *Persepolis*, she meant to deconstruct most Western clichés about Iran and about the condition of women living there. To achieve her goal, Satrapi chooses to use a narrative form in which the "showing" is given the same importance as the "telling", i.e. the comic-strip story.

This literary genre, usually associated with children's literature and thought to belong to a kind of subculture, is not a random choice. As the writer recalls in her autobiography, in the late seventies her favorite book was just a comic-strip story on Marxian theories, so Satrapi is conscious of the importance of comics in the development of a child's personality. It is worth noticing, however, that the protagonist of *Persepolis* is a young girl, while only relatively few comics have a female protagonist.

As Peter Hunt affirms, "children's books do not fit easily into the patriarchal world of cultural values... children's books are invisible in the literary world, in much the same way as women... have been, and still are."<sup>3</sup> The concept of visibility, and particularly women's visibility, is another crucial issue for Satrapi. To deal with the concept of women's visibility means necessarily to deal with the subject of the veil, a particularly delicate matter in contemporary France. Satrapi's position on this issue seems to be that the veil should be allowed everywhere, but only worn through personal choice; yet, the veil is not the only problem connected with visibility that Satrapi discusses.

Pictures often convey a sense of realism much more than words do, because they make people actually see an

event. And to make a story visible, so that it can be more easily believed, is exactly the aim of one who wishes to bear testimony: it is Satrapi's case, but also Joe Sacco's with his comic-strip story, Palestine, which depicts the lives of the Palestinian people, perpetually at risk. (It is perhaps worth mentioning that the child Marjane begins questioning God's existence right after learning about the situation of Palestinian children.)

In *Persepolis*, His/story is both shown and told from the point of view of a young girl. Being a child, she cannot fully understand what is going on around her; Marjane overhears only bits and pieces of adult "not-for-children" conversations, so she tries to put together, as in a jigsaw, her scattered fragments of experience, and to give them meaning according to her necessarily limited parameters.

So, for example, when the veil is declared compulsory, Satrapi shows how she and her female friends (suddenly separated from their male schoolmates) invent many games in which their veils become toys; and, learning that the Shah has flown to Egypt ("Both the Shah and Sadat have betrayed their countries, signing a pact with Israel," she is told by her father), Marjane wonders if this has something to do with the Shah's first wife.

The inequality of social classes under the Shah's regime is shown through the love story of the writer's nanny: Mehri, ten years older than Marjane, falls in love with a rich, westernized neighbor (he sports a Bee Gees t-shirt, and a John Travolta-like haircut). He thinks that Mehri is Marji's older sister. When the young man discovers that she is not, he dumps her, leaving the nanny heart-broken and the child very angry for the injustice witnessed.

At night, she goes into her nanny's bed to comfort and soothe her; the didascaly says: "We did not belong to the same social class, but at least we shared the same bed". From then on, Marjane joins her family in their anti-Shah activities.

However, some members of Satrapi's family are persecuted and tortured under the Shah's regime, but later killed by the new government. The most important among them is the author's uncle, Anush, a communist who tells his niece wonderful, sad stories. This deeply affects the girl, and particularly her relationship to God.

Until Anush's release from prison (because the Shah has flown), Marjane's attitude toward God was a graphic illustration of the meaning of "Islam": she was depicted as happily abandoned in His arms; "the arms of my friend were the only safe place," she writes. Afterwards, Anush's ideas place some distance between the girl and God. When he is again imprisoned and shot, the child

reacts exactly as the poet Sylvia Plath did when she was eight and her father died prematurely: she sends God away, finding herself alone and frightened in an immense, cold and dark universe (the child Marji is depicted as floating in space, among the planets).

The desperation of this scene clearly reminds the reader (and particularly the feminist and/or French-speaking reader) of a similar passage in *Mémoires d'une Jeune Fille Rangée*, the first volume of Simone De Beauvoir's autobiography.

Even teachers can be a perplexing matter, for a child. After the Shah's departure, Marjane's female teacher tells her class to rip out the Shah's photo from their textbooks: "Didn't you tell us that the Shah was God-sent?", asks the child. Under the new republic, vice-versa, during the war against Iraq, the same teacher gives her (now only female) pupils lots of patriotic homework. Moreover, twice a day the girls have to beat their chests while listening to macabre music, as a sign of mourning for the dead soldiers. Young Marji's reaction is to play the fool: the daring, fed up child exaggerates her grief to parody it and to make her friends laugh.

Laughter is an incredibly powerful act of resistance, Satrapi affirms. When anything that stands for the West becomes forbidden, young people become used to buying smuggled American pop music and paraphernalia like posters and pins. This, however, can be very risky: even the child's bedroom, this entirely personal space with its cherished objects, is under scrutiny. When teenage Marjane is found by some female "wardens of the revolution" with a Michael Jackson pin, she tells them that he is Malcolm X. The didascaly says: "Michael Jackson was then still black".

With cleverness and an ever-present, subtle irony, the author also states that history is a force which crushes the common people, and only seldom those who Antoine De Saint-Exupéry, in his *Le Petit Prince*, calls "les grandes personnes". Those who are mercilessly crushed are often women. In *Persepolis* one can find a particularly touching strip called "The Key". It tells the story of a thirteen-year old boy who is sent to the front carrying a golden plastic key, to open the gates of Heaven after his death. His

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mother, until then a very religious widow, is totally shattered.

At the same time, in *Persepolis* there are lots of positive female figures. Marjane's grandmother, who manages to raise her three children alone and in extreme poverty because her husband is in prison, is one of them. Yet, the most powerful model for the author is perhaps her brave mother, an educated woman and an active feminist. At the beginning of the story, the child Marji looks like a miniaturized replica of her mother: they have the same haircut, the same eyes and profile, almost the same clothes. As the protagonist of *Persepolis* grows up, however, she acquires peculiar features and a strong personality.

Marjane's growth into a rebellious teenager is in fact marked by a growing awareness: a feminist awareness (there is most of Zaynab Fawwaz Al-'Amili, and the whole *Deuxième Sexe* by De Beauvoir, in the single vignette in which, during a police raid, a perplexed Marjane is left with her newborn cousin by a runaway aunt: "Since then

I've had serious doubts about the so-called 'maternal instinct,'" says the didascal), a self-awareness, and also awareness about political events

Marjane's first cigarette is smoked as an act of resistance against "my mother's domestic despotism," at the same time in which Marjane (who is now fourteen) and her family are actively opposing the

government. She is expelled from two different schools for insubordinacy; therefore her parents decide to send her away from Iran, where she seems to be doomed to prison.

In this context, the "I" who narrates her/story is defined by a complex of relationships fixing the boundaries between "self" and "other": "I" is therefore inextricably linked to a wider "we", so that in the end the reader is actually shown not a *solo* portrait but an entire group portrait, a whole fresco.

Satrapi, who from the very first pages of her autobiography underlines her deep religious faith from early childhood ("Although my family was very modern, and quite progressive, I was a true believer," "I was born full of reli-

gion," "As a child, I wanted to be a prophet when I grew up")<sup>4</sup>, also connects herself to the Islamic tradition of narrating stories from the Koran to children in an almost fairy tale-like form.

Yet, children's literature is only one among the many possible passwords to approach *Persepolis*. Feminism surely is another one, considering how much space is allowed to gender in this feminine *Bildungsroman* which also appears as a quest-book. The reader of Satrapi's autobiography is often reminded of a strong homo-social essay such as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: the young girl who tells her story in *Persepolis* draws the (woman) reader into the magic circle of her narration, creating empathy and a kind of complicity which excludes the male gaze.

The body of the young protagonist (a child's body, which according to David Sibley "experiences things acutely in a physical sense: place, events, relationships with others")<sup>5</sup> who grows up under the reader's eye, becomes the text/place where writer and reader can meet.

*Persepolis* therefore becomes a sort of door/book enabling readers to transform the story they are reading, and to be at the same time transformed by it, as it happens in another recent outstanding novel concerned with the same issues as *Persepolis*: Professor Azar Nasafi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.<sup>6</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. I am quoting from the Italian edition: Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*, Milano: Sperling & Kupfer, 2003. All the translations into English are mine.
2. For the most widely accepted definition of autobiography, see Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris: Seuil, 1975: "Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité" (p. 14). For a discussion of childhood autobiography as a literary genre, see "Le récit d'enfance en question," *Cahiers de Sémiotique Textuelle*, 12, 1988: 5-155.
3. Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature*, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1994, pp. 6-7.
4. Satrapi, p. 6.
5. For the female quest-book, see Maureen Murdock, *The Heroine's Journey*, Boston & London: Shambala, 1990. David Sibley, "Families and Domestic Routines. Constructing the Boundaries of Childhood", in Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (Eds.), *Mapping the Subject. Geography and Cultural Transformation*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 123-137.
6. Azar Nasafi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, London: Random House, 2003.

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