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Decoding Graphic Narratives in 'Persepolis'

Aditi M. Mankar

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Shankarlal Khandelwal Arts, Science and Commerce College, Godbole Plots,
Akola - 444002, Maharashtra.

Affiliated by Sant Gadge Baba Amravati University, Amravati, Maharashtra.

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Abstract: *Humankind has long told stories via paintings and images in ancient civilizations. The art of telling a compelling story through graphics teleports the reader into the realm of characters, emotions, and story. One such exceptional example of this graphic narratives is Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir 'Persepolis'. This widely acclaimed graphic memoir demonstrates the horrors of Islamic Revolution and life in Iran through the character of Marji. Readers not only read the memoir but also get an insight of the horrors suffered by the women in Iran through images. Satrapi's depiction of her childhood in Iran is not only poignant but it is also an accessible way for many people of all ages to read her story and visualize the narrative through the graphic depiction.*

Keywords: *Graphic narrative, graphic depiction, Iran, Islamic Revolution, Images.*

According to the Merriam Webster's dictionary, a graphic novel can be a "fictional story that is presented in a comic strip format and published in a book". In the 1960's, a comic book reviewer Richard Kyle coined the term "Graphic Novel". Will Eisner's 'A Contract with God and other Tenement Stories' (1978) is considered as an early example of the graphic format novels. In the late 1980s, graphic novels gained recognition when Art Spiegelman won a Pulitzer prize for his revolutionary graphic novel 'Maus' published in 1986. It can be classified as a memoir, biography, and other mix of genres. A heart wrenching tale and experiences of a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor illustrated through sequential art and images will certainly give goosebumps to the readers. It has employed postmodern techniques and represented the Jews as mice, while the German and Poles as cats and pigs.

'Persepolis' is a series of autobiographical novels of Marjane Satrapi, depicting the horrors of Islamic Revolution of 1979 and Iran-Iraq war. Originally published in French in 2003 and 2004, its English translation came out in 2007. 'Persepolis' reminds us of Art Spiegelman's 'Maus', which applies the similar black and white graphics and serious tone with heavy underlying political influence which makes it distinct from Comics. Satrapi uses the graphic novel format to tell her personal experiences, memories, history, and coming of age themes.

The memoir is illustrated in black and white strips which is completely opposite of its cover page. The lack of color in the memoir functions to convey the subliminal and serious tone to the memoir. Although, throughout the memoir, the reader is

reminded of Marji's innocence. Satrapi does not refrain herself from depicting images of brutal violence and torture women had to suffer at the hands of Iranian government and morality police during the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which resulted in the book getting banned in several countries.



(Persepolis, Pg-18, 19)

In an interview, Satrapi was asked why she chose graphics over traditional narratives, Satrapi states that,

“words are never enough” as graphic narratives provide a

“literary and cultural map”.

The use of illustrations in memoirs like 'Persepolis', provides another dimension to the story. Through the graphics and the images, a visual component is provided to the readers which allows the messages to be conveyed without words more effectively. The non-linear narrative of the story jumps back and forth in time, mirroring Satrapi's memories and emotions. This adds depth and complexity to the narrative.

From the beginning of the memoir, the reader is aware that the narrator is telling us a story from an unknown position. We know that she is telling us about her childhood, about her past hence all the images panels are to be viewed as simplified flashbacks. Her character is also being portrayed in such a way that she remembers them and she as a child perceived them. Satrapi makes sure to remind us of the contrast between reality and childlike understanding as exemplified, where we are given both the dialogue of the scene, as well as Marji's childish thoughts. Along with the visuals, Satrapi's simplified language used in her story without sacrificing its impact and discussion of more complex topics and concepts.

The panel layout creates a sense of rhythm and pacing, guiding the reader throughout the narratives, while the recurring visual motifs like Marji's face, Iranian flag, creates a sense of continuity and cohesion.

Another technique that Satrapi utilizes is that of narrative framing. Narrative framing is a way of speaking for characters while also allowing them to speak up for themselves. The presence of multiple, contradictory voices within one text. For example, in the chapter "The Sheep", Marji overhears her family and friends discussing moving out of the country and what to expect from the future. Here, she notices all the different points of view they have. Her extended family and friends fearing the worst and moving on, her uncle believing that everything will be okay.



(Persepolis, Pg-64)

The use of black and white images serves many different purposes, not just for aesthetics reasons. From playing with light and dark, providing additional information to a scene, to acting like a filter; Satrapi effectively employs this technique to communicate her experiences in Iran with her readers. However, in another sense, it's ironic how Persepolis is a black and white narrative yet the story is not always black and white. There is a substantial amount of grey area, which can be other's perspective. It is important to remember that it is the story of one individual and is not exactly representative of everyone's story. The dark and light contrast are helpful in expressing the emotions of Marji. Instead of using the contrast to portray good

and evil, Satrapi primarily places a half light and half dark images or faces of characters to display their emotions like regret, pain, pessimism, and loss of innocence.

Satrapi's intricate depiction of her experiences and horrors she faced via images is the central technique she used in her memoir. The graphic narratives not only convey the seriousness of the subject but also depicts the emotions of the author more effectively.

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