The Otherness in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*:
The Autobiography and the Graphic Novel as a Subversion of the Western Gaze

*Thayse Madella*

Based on the book *Orientalism* by Edward Said, that describes the process in which the people from the Middle East is constructed as all the same by the West, and on the debate about identity construction discussed by Stuart Hall, I shall discuss how the graphic novel format is used in *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi, for the construction of Marji's identity. *Persepolis* subverts the Western gaze that locates the Iranians in a position as the other and shows a more complex life in Iran through Marji’s identity construction. Her unfixed identity, constructed by the articulation of her own interests and the positionality society imposes over her, according to terms defined by Hall, has been influenced by the location Marji's persona finds herself, being in Iran or Austria, home or exile. Those life experiences, that, in a sense, are traumatic, become source for the autobiographic graphic novel *Persepolis*. According to Sidonie Smith, this “graphic memoir occasions an education in how to represent (for the artist) and how to interpret (for the reader) the taint of otherness attached to those who become objects against which routine violence is directed – by the West, by states, by society” (69). For Hillary Chute, the embodiment of the self and the chance of materializing history and traumas make the graphic novel format the best way some women could express their stories (2). By these means, Satrapi makes use of autobiography and graphic novel in order to subvert the Western gaze upon her showing to the Western reader a more complex perspective of herself and Iran in opposition to the homogeneous other constructed by the West about the Middle East.
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The coming of age graphic memoir *Persepolis* (written by Marjani Satrapi in two volumes, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*), an autobiographical depiction of the life of an Iranian girl during and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, brings to terms the process in which Marji, Satrapi’s Persona¹, becomes conscious of her construction as the other in relation to the Western culture. According to Edward Said, the discourse about the Middle East is an arbitrary dichotomy constructed by the West (3). In this discourse, the whole Middle East is constructed as the same and in opposition to the imperialist West. Satrapi, who is part of a group of diasporic women writers who decided to expose their own lives under the Iranian Islamic dictatorship after moving to the Occident, contests this binary construction. Instead of depicting the West as a savior, symbol of freedom, she uses her supposedly autobiographical story to question the geographical dichotomy responsible for creating the marginalized other. For the theorist Hillary Chute, *Persepolis* is able of “destabilizing tropes of East and West [. . .] rather than reinforcing them”(138). Chute asserts that the diasporic experience Satrapi has lived gives her authority to make such a critique.

Reviews frequently applaud *Persepolis*, especially through the winsome child at its center, for being a universal story – an approach to the book that uncomfortably subsumes the 'exotic' other into the 'us', erasing the ethnic, cultural, and class specificity of the book's narrative. [. . .] Satrapi herself has stated her desire to demonstrate the diversity of the Iranian people to non-iranians: we in the West may find the Satrapis and their

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¹ In order to avoid confusion, I am going to use the nickname Marji when referring to the character of the graphic memoir and Marjane Satrapi, or only Satrapi, in reference to the author.
experiences extraordinary, but her aim is in part to reveal that her family's experiences and their left-wing outlook are more common than the average Western reader would presume. (Chute 138).

Hence, for Chute, more than transforms “the 'exotic' other into the 'us'”, *Persepolis* is capable of showing the complexity and multiplicity of Iranian people for a reader who is not used to this perspective of this people. And one of the ways *Persepolis* is successful in doing so is by showing Marji as a multiple subject.

I shall argue that, in the graphic memoir, it is possible to notice three different stages in the process of Marji becoming conscious about otherness according to the geographical territory she is living at. The first would be Marji, a ten year old girl who defies the authoritative regime and grows up in an upper-class revolutionary family, before going to Austria. The second stage would be the process of becoming aware of her position in the world in relation to the West, as the other, already in Austria. And finally, the third and last stage would be when she returns to Iran, four years later, questioning both East and West positions in relation to her identity, and criticizing the vision one side of this geographical dichotomy that splits the world in two has about the other. In this process, she also needs to work on the feeling of unbelonging and displacement in both places home and exile – distinctions that also become blurred by her diasporic experience.

In *Persepolis*, the conscious of being constructed as the other gains strength when she moves to Europe for the first time. For the same reason, Said decided to theorize about the other, writing his book *Orientalism*, which was published in 1978, after moving to the United States. Marji, when living in Austria, realizes the image of people from the Middle East was distorted in privilege of the image Europe created about the Middle East. Said says, taking in consideration his experience as a Palestinian in North-America:
My own experiences of these matters are in part what made me write this book. The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. [. . .] The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny. (27).

Both Chute and Said argue the importance of the experience in the construction of the subject in order to show a viewpoint different from the Western one. Chute states that “[t]he form of comics in this way lends itself to the autobiographical genre in which we see so many authors – and so many women authors in particular – materializing their lives and histories” (10). The autobiographical genre inserted in the format of comics became a way in which authors and format find legitimacy (Beaty 230). In this sense, Satrapi’s autobiography materializes and embodies the traumas in order to subvert the Western gaze.

_Persepolis_ shows the process of constructing an identity, which is unfixed and a result of different articulations, as defined by Stuart Hall, and her awareness of being the other. By this mean, “identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a sub-sumption” (Hall, Who Needs Identity 3). While Marji negotiates her identity in both Iran and Austria, she tries to determine her position as a self and as the other. Hence, _Persepolis_ develops over Marji’s own process of identity construction in the terms defined by Hall in order to make an effective critique of both Eastern and Western collective identity construction.

At the age of six, Marji knew she wanted to be the last prophet, even though her family background was secular. She was a religious child growing up, in her words, in a “very modern and avant-garde” family. In one frame, she is depicted half wearing the veil, a symbol of the Muslim religion, and half with symbols of
science and technology, such as hammer, rulers, and gears. This is the first time she shows her confusion about the different identities she has to struggle. As it is possible to see in the image of page 6 (image 1, page 5), each frame represents one layer of her multiple identity, and, at the same time they are separated by the frames, they are also connected by the narration, by the page, and by the recollection of memory. The frames, as separated layers, and the page, as a set, put together a complex and multiple subject.

In the sense that “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall, Who Needs Identity 4), she is, at the “point of temporary attachment” (Hall, Who Needs Identity 6), a result of the historical and cultural, family, and religious Iranian background, which are all interconnected. In this page, “the point[s] of temporary attachment” can be related to the gutters, which allow the closure, as McCloud argues (62-63), giving the reader the space and time to work on the meaning of the frames, but, at the same time it is also an articulation between the frames, connecting them. This connection, as an articulation should be, are not fixed, allowing different forms of reading it – a characteristic both of comics (according to McCloud) and identity construction (according to Hall). By this means, the relations between the frames and the different depictions of Marji's identities can be also constructed in different ways. For instance, her representation as a woman prophet can be read once in connection with her destiny, represented by her depiction as a babe – being destiny also connected with religion – but also can be connected with her preoccupation with class issues, represented by the maid eating in the kitchen – related to her Marxist background. Another reading, can, at the same time, confront her gender role as a woman in a patriarchal society and the necessity of making changes in this society.

The last frame of this first book, Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood, is set on the Tehran airport, a space of transience (image 2, page 6). As Nima Naghibi argues, airport can be understood as a transitional space, representing mobility, unbelonging, and loss (A Story Told in Flashbacks 170). At this space, Marji is leaving behind her nation and family. As the narrator is conscious about the future once the book is a memoir – Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson reinforce the idea that autobiographies involve “a reinterpretation of the past in the present” (16) – this sad departure comes as
foreknowledge about her future in Austria. Once the narrator knows how this story is going to continue the departure from Iran to Austria becomes harder. Marji finds herself lost, alone, in a space in-between, separated from her family and her country by the glass of the departure gate in this physical place, the airport (153). The look back on the airport scene can also be interpreted as a metalanguage once the autobiographical text is, by itself, a narration of the past looked from the present. When she looks for the last time to her parents she is looking to her personal and cultural history in her country, leaving those things behind to live in a Western country.

In *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*, her experience in Vienna flourishes her feeling of displacement. As Angelika Bammer states, “it is not surprising that displacement has played such a prominent role in the operative theoretical paradigms with which we have attempted to understand and explain the human condition and conditions of knowledge in our time” (xii). Such necessity of theorizing about displacement, according Bammer, is due to the fact that “the combination of colonial and imperialist practices carried out on an international scale, and state-sanctioned ethnic, religious, and racial discrimination practiced intra-nationally have made mass migration and mass expulsion of people a numbingly familiar feature of twentieth-century domestic and foreign policy” (xi). Hence, the experience of displacement, even though a characteristic of the twentieth-century, is foregrounded by the construction of the other, and, consequently, by the discrimination of this other. By being an Iranian in Austria, Marji lives this experience of displacement. Nevertheless, the experience of displacement is intricately inserted in her cultural identity construction. If “what is displaced […] is, significantly, still there: Displaced but not replaced [author's emphasis], it remains a source of trouble.” (Bammer xiii), then displacement becomes a constitutive part of her as a subject, as an unfixed identity articulation.
Hence, in order to try to fit in and also find her place in this new society she is inserted, she decides to get to know better the Western culture spending her vacation reading Western classic books. One of the books she reads is *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir (image 3, page 9). In this book, Beauvoir discusses the construction of woman as the other, the marked gender in opposition to the universal male (Moi 856). By the same means, Marji realizes she is constructed as the other in opposition to the supposed universal West. Therefore, it is possible to use the other in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a parallel along with Said's other in *Orientalism*. Her failure of peeing upstanding, as suggested by Beauvoir in order to change the perception of life, can be related to her failure of fitting into the Western culture. However, at the same time Beauvoir is a Western reading, and it is in search of understanding this culture she
is inserted in that she reads the book, *The Second Sex* is also a connection with her family and, consequently, with her nation, Iran, once Beauvoir is her mother's favorite writer. And these two forces, the connection with her family and the necessity of fitting in the Western culture, is also depicted in the frames when the depiction of Marji as a child asking her mom about Beauvoir's book is positioned side by side with her tentative of peeing upstanding. Hence, her failure, which is foregrounded by the size of the frames, is both in relation to her tentative of understanding the Western culture and her connection to her nation.

Even though Marji has problems in fit in the Western culture, when she goes back to Tehran she also faces problems adapting herself into the space she used to call home. She becomes conscious of her displacement in both places East and West, home and exile. For Bammer, “our sense of identity is ineluctably, it seems, marked by the peculiarly postmodern geography of identity: both here and there and neither here nor there at one and the same time” (xii). According to Gillian Whitlock, this life story is

translated into [memoir] that negotiate the cross-cultural relations between Iran and the West in a self-reflexive way. The intensity of this loss of the self and its place in the world engenders a resurrection through memoir as a Western metropolitan intellectual and a diasporic subject with a troubled and ambivalent relation to a lost homeland and to contemporary Iranian culture and society (972).

When she is back, not just the city is changed – for instance, the names of the streets are different, they change for the names of the martyrs of the war (97) – she has also changed. Home does not feel like home anymore. According to Hashim and Manaf, Khomeini’s revolution altered significantly “the individual and collective identities” in the country (547), women were inferior to men by law, the country, once secular, was now religious, people were accepting
it or fighting in silence – the simplest gesture such as wear colorful socks or show the wrists could be considered a subversion (Satrapi, *The Story of a Return* 148). “Traditionally a home is conceptualised as a stable, physical centre of a person’s private space, a place where one feels belonged and loved” (Hashim and Manaf 550). According to this meaning of home it is possible to assert that Iran is no longer home for Marji once she was experiencing the feelings of unbelonging, emotional instability and loss. She cannot recognize her house or her city as hers anymore; she cannot feel as part of this new collective identity. The place she used to call home, before moving to Vienna, does not exist anymore.

Because home does not exist anymore, writing becomes a way of returning to this imaginary home. The graphic memoir *Persepolis* is a way Marji can revisit, in a critical way, her own story and her homeland. *Persepolis: The Story of a Return* finishes when
Marji decides to leave Iran for the second time and goes to France, where she is still living until today. This second book has the last frame similar to the last frame of the first book, in the same airport, a transitional space, but, as Naghibi argues, in a “positive and forward-looking note” (A Story Told in Flashbacks 169) ending, with a glance of hope in it. Marji, her mother, and her father are smiling, in a scene that seems to look forward a better future – like in the end of the first book, the narrator is conscious about the future – only Marji’s grandmother cries. The second volume of *Persepolis* ends with Marji saying: “The good-byes were much less painful than ten years before when I embarked for Austria: there was no longer a war, I was no longer a child, my mother didn’t faint and my grandma was there, happily…Happily, because since the night of September 9, 1994, I only saw her again once, during the Iranian new year in march 1995. She died January 4, 1996… Freedom had a price” (The Story of a Return 187).

When in a position of displacement, the search for a common place creates an imaginative community since the original place has also changed and it is not possible to go back. Hence, writing or producing visual arts are ways of returning, but using another route once the “real” place does not exist anymore. In this sense, arts become a way of constructing representations that creates identifications differently from the problematic ones created by hegemonic groups (Hall, Cultural Identity and Diaspora 232). In this case, this revisiting comes along with the conscious of having the experience of diaspora and the feeling of unbelonging in the East and the West. The graphic memoir *Persepolis*, by the construction of Marji’s identity as a result of cross-cultural experiences, blurs the dichotomy East/West, once shows the problematic construction of one’s image in both places. The binary division of the world, like East/West, cannot be sufficient to define a group of people. As Said argues, “this universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’
which is ‘theirs’ is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary” (54). By this means, once Marji realizes she is seen as the abnormal by the Western and, as a cross-cultural subject, she is also criticized in her supposed homeland, she starts to question such division. *Persepolis* shows a critical view of the life in both places the East and the West, without making one being the savior while the other the devil, and one way she does so is by telling her own story, and as a diasporic subject she also questions spaces like home and exile.

**Works Cited**


