

CHAPTER FOUR



Graphic Memories

Dialogues with Self and Other in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*

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Born a decade prior to the Islamic Revolution, Marjane Satrapi grew up in the midst of turmoil. Her critically acclaimed graphic memoir *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, which spans the years immediately before and after the Revolution, and its sequel, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, have found an abundant readership around the world. As Satrapi indicates in her introduction to the first volume, in creating this narrative of her life, she hoped to provide non-Iranians, particularly those in the West, with a more accurate perspective on Iran. Implicit in this aim is a distinction between the Iranian Self and the Western Other, with the latter constituting Satrapi's major implied audience. While the didactic aspects of the two *Persepolis* volumes cannot be denied, another, perhaps less appreciated, aspect of Satrapi's work resides in its critical dialogue with Iranian culture. Satrapi's assertion at the end of her introduction to *Persepolis*—"One can forgive but one should never forget"—applies as much to Iranians as to Western readers and reflects her attention to the Self as the other important implied

audience for the text. Indeed, as Amy Malek notes, many Iranian readers have praised Satrapi's work "for preserving the communal memory of a generation" (375). In narrating her own memories, Satrapi critically intervenes in the culture and politics of censorship and compulsory veiling under the post-revolutionary Islamic regime and touches upon the important psychological consequences of such tactics of repression.

By choosing to present her story through the medium of comics, Satrapi further establishes a dialogue with the Other, in the form of her engagement with the established Western attitudes and aesthetic values that surround the production and reception of comics. Satrapi's relative unfamiliarity with comics before producing the *Persepolis* volumes seems to have contributed to her eclectic approach to the medium. Her style shows influences from various sources, not only the cartooning style of her mentor, David B., but also the tradition of Persian miniature painting and probably the satiric political cartoons that at one point appeared in newspapers and magazines in her native country. Yet Satrapi has clearly forged a cohesive, and very distinctive, style of her own, one that successfully deploys the expressive visual language of the medium.

UNVEILING THE SELF: SATRAPI'S REVOLUTIONARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In 1936, the ruler of Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944), ordered women to abandon the veil; in 1980, a year after the revolution that brought the current regime to power, mandatory veiling was reinstituted. Ashraf Zahedi, in her essay "Concealing and Revealing Female Hair: Veiling Dynamics in Contemporary Iran," reminds us of the political meaning that attaches to these acts. Both have been used by Iranian women as political weapons for opposing the hegemonic discourses of the government, which have been obviously coercive during much of Iran's recent history. As Zahedi remarks, each regime has employed a combination of "encouragement, legal measures, and physical force to impose its political will on Iranian women" (250). In so doing, the Iranian government has consistently "deprived Iranian women of choice about their identity, self-presentation, and place in society"—violations that "have only intensified women's determination to challenge these regimes" (263). However, women in current Iranian society who are against mandatory veiling have essentially no recourse, because unveiling would undoubtedly result in physical reprisals.

Thus, it is no surprise that the most explicit oppositions to veiling and its politics during the past three decades have emerged not from inside the country but from outside, primarily from members of the Iranian diaspora or exilic community. Such a diasporic or exilic situation has provided Marjane Satrapi with an opportunity to challenge the issue of veiling, both in its literal and metaphoric sense, as a major hindrance to self-revelation. Compared to other memoirs and autobiographies written by diasporic and exiled Iranians, the *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* remain revolutionary in many respects. One revolutionary aspect is the very medium Satrapi has used: comics. This medium had never previously been used by any Iranian author, let alone an Iranian woman, perhaps partly because, as a mode of storytelling that relies on images as well as words, it might at times entail depicting women unveiled, which is taboo. Satrapi has repeatedly been asked why she chose to present her autobiography as a graphic work. Her answers usually refer either to the advantages of image-text over text or image alone or to matters of personal taste. (See, for example, Root 150, as well as her comments in Shaikh; Tully.) Yet, as far as the issue of self-revelation is concerned, her choice of comics as the medium for expressing her personal memories and life experiences has been of remarkable help to her in creating an innovative Iranian text, and particularly an Iranian autobiography.

In Iran, women's published autobiographies did not emerge until the mid-twentieth century (Milani 220). Furthermore, compared to the number of works in this genre in the West, few autobiographies have been published in Iran.¹ As Farzaneh Milani argues in detail, the major reason behind the long absence of such a genre in Iran—both for men and women—has been the deep-rooted concept of veiling, both in its literal and figurative meanings, and its surrounding cultural constructions in Iranian society (24, 131, 201–02). As for women's autobiography in particular, Milani points out, “In a sexually segregated society where access to a woman's world and words is limited, and the concept of honor is built around woman's virginity (the proof of her inaccessibility) women's autobiographies, with their assertive self-attention and self-display, cannot easily flourish, and they have not” (201).

As Bonnie Gunzenhauser observes, an autobiography is not simply a report of one's life story (77). One defining feature, she maintains, is that “autobiography has a psychological and philosophical dimension that requires its writer to balance the deeds of an active public self with the thoughts of a contemplative private one” (77). And yet, in the relatively few Iranian autobiographies written to

date, the private self of the autobiographer often blurs with the public self. “Most of these life-scripts,” Milani observes, “have a sense of self deeply rooted in the public domain, representing what Bakhtin calls rhetorical autobiography. They are devoted mainly to the defense of a political career, a religious cause, a notorious life” (221). Drawing on Helen Buss’s distinction between “memoir” and “autobiography”—that “memoir writers are more concerned with making their lives meaningful in terms of the lives of others and in terms of their communities rather than in terms of individual accomplishments” (595)—we can deem such writings as the ones referred to by Milani to be more like memoirs of public life than personal autobiographies. Thus, ironically, such so-called autobiographies are efforts to veil, rather than unveil, their authors’ selves.

In light of this argument, I believe that Satrapi’s text is, without exaggeration, a turning point in the history of Iranian autobiographical literature for at least two reasons. First, if we take a certain degree of self-revelation to be one defining feature of autobiography, then Satrapi’s self-revelation surpasses that of her Iranian predecessors. Other Iranian autobiographers have been reluctant to reveal some inner levels of their selves, resorting, for example, to metaphors, allusions, and symbols to camouflage their sexual activities and experiences, if they are mentioned at all (Milani 143–44, 223).² In contrast, “Marji”—Satrapi’s narrating “I” in both volumes—courageously confides in and shares with her audience the most intimate events of her and her extended family’s lives. Such revelations include her pre-marriage relationships and sexual experiences, intimate circumstances regarding her parents and grandmother, her searching for food in trashcans, and her attempts to urinate like a man based on Simone de Beauvoir’s advice. Furthermore, as mentioned above, Satrapi is the first Iranian author who has transcended the verbal medium of autobiography and chosen the “image-text” medium of comics for her narrative.

Through the eyes of a Western audience, Satrapi’s act is not extraordinary, but in the context of Iranian taboos concerning women’s self-unveiling and in light of the fact that her work is addressed to Iranian audiences as well, her act gains remarkable significance. Thus, if autobiographies are in themselves a form of self-disclosure (Milani 201), *Persepolis* and its sequel take self-disclosure to a new level. Arguing that Satrapi’s “image-text” is not merely a documentation of her past but a “solo performance” achieved through “the mimetic acts of showing and telling her personal history,” Jennifer Worth calls attention to “the personal nature of the narrative” as well as to “the presence of the body and focus on embodiment” (144). As

she notes, despite the dominant presence of bodies of all kind in the *Persepolis* volumes, “it is Satrapi’s own figure that predominates” (146). Not only does Satrapi’s work expose the self through words, it visually depicts this multifaceted unveiling for the first time in the history of Iranian literature, despite the strong cultural, religious, and/or legal bans on any public or published self-disclosure and self-unveiling on the part of Iranian women. Therefore, only on a relative basis do I agree with Worth when she remarks,

Given the forthrightness of both word and image in Satrapi’s works, there is almost nothing that could be considered vulgar or offensive. Nudity, although rarely used, is implied through silhouette; coarse sexual language (terms stronger than “ass”) occurs only once or twice; and Marjane’s sexual encounters are visually elided and only textually alluded to in the vaguest of terms: “I’ve had a few experiences” is as explicit as she gets. This type of discretion indicates both Satrapi’s Persian modesty and her respect for the power of the body. (153)

Worth’s words may ring true for Western audiences, but from the perspective of Iranian culture, Satrapi has actually violated the boundaries of “modesty,” an ideal best understood, as Milani explains, through the complex concept of *sharm* and a network of related subconcepts (52–53). I utterly agree with Naghibi and O’Malley, who—having a better understanding of Iranian culture both inside and outside Iran, especially in reference to *Persepolis 2*—deem Satrapi’s unprecedented degree of self-disclosure to be “particularly shocking.” As they note, “As an adolescent in Vienna and a young woman in Iran, Marji discloses much of her private life, including her sexual experiences. This is particularly shocking in an Iranian cultural context; Satrapi ventures into territory that is still off limits to the growing field of diasporic Iranian women’s autobiographies, texts which tend to skirt the issue of sexuality” (241).

As if to provide a counterpoint to self-revelation, Satrapi begins her account with an episode titled “The Veil” (*Persepolis 3*), thereby establishing, from the outset, the theme of veiling—the troublesome concept that still complicates the disclosure of the self in Iranian society and culture (see figure 4.1). One could even argue, as Naghibi and O’Malley propose, that the veil is introduced from the very front cover of the first volume, which features an image of the young Marji wearing a veil (231). “The Veil” is, moreover, the only episode title that appears twice, once in each volume (see Worth 155). Both occurrences anticipate others related to Iran,

and both end similarly with Marji leaving Iran. Thus, in a sense, the veil becomes the cultural icon of Iranian society in the text.



Figure 4.1. Panel from p. 3 of *Persepolis*. The image, used to title the opening episode, is repeated in *Persepolis 2* (p. 79)—the only episode title that occurs twice.



Figure 4.2. Panels from p. 132 of *Persepolis*. Here, Marji purchases some illegal music tapes. By depicting both the dealer and Marji as looking furtively in two directions at once, Satrapi suggests how censorship imposed from the outside can be internalized as self-censorship.

Although Satrapi refers frequently to the physical limitations that the veil imposes on women, her complex treatment of the veil transcends this literal sense. For instance, she artfully shows that outer censorship can create an internalized form of censorship and may therefore lead to internal conflict. Milani argues that the cultural features of veiling and censorship will necessarily result in a culture of self-censorship, a deliberate dichotomy between the inside and the outside (210), and that a “certain role playing, a constant watchfulness are the inevitable outcome” (213). As a result, life becomes a complex calculation of when, where, and to what degree the self should or should not be revealed (see *Persepolis 2* 148, sixth panel) and of the possible personal and/or social consequences of a failure to judge a situation accurately. Critically intervening in her own culture, Satrapi repeatedly

calls attention to the existence of this dichotomy in contemporary Iranian society, especially after Marji's first return to Iran. In a scene in the first book, for example, Marji ventures out to buy some illegal music tapes (*Persepolis* 132). In two separate panels, Satrapi depicts both the dealer and Marji as necessarily on the alert, looking in two directions simultaneously in order to avoid being arrested (see figure 4.2).

However, much as Milani argues, Satrapi manages to suggest to her readers that in her society, external censorship will eventually lead to a sense of self-censorship, and thus a possible manifestation of internal conflict. This becomes more explicit when, after little Marji purchases the illegal tapes and is arrested by two female guardians of the Revolution, she manages to escape the predicament through a series of lies that build on one another. In the last panel of the incident, through a self-reflexive technique, Satrapi draws our attention to the role Marji has had to play in order to survive: the features of Marji's crying face are exaggeratedly deformed, making her face reminiscent of the tragedy mask of dramatic theatre (see figure 4.3).

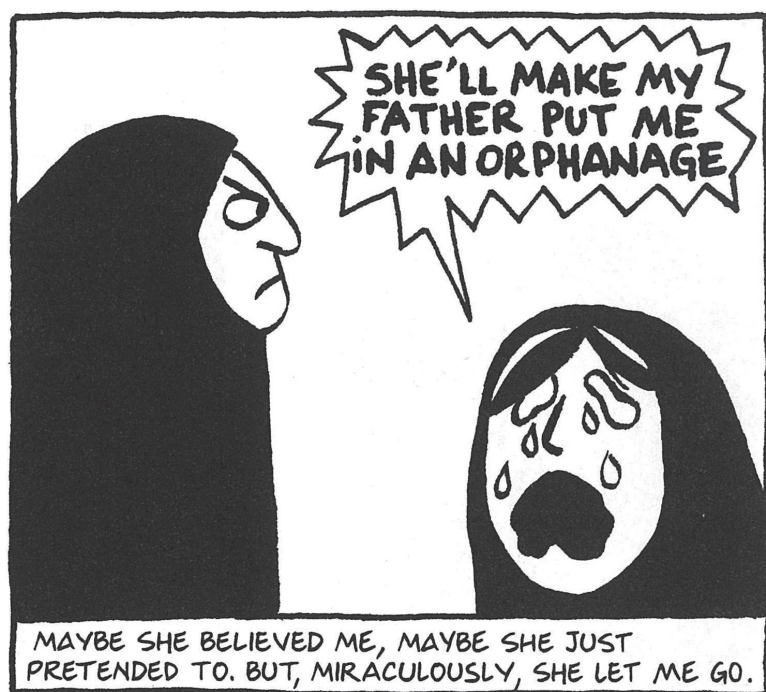


Figure 4.3. Panel from p. 134 of *Persepolis*. Caught in the act of her illegal purchase, Marji lies her way out of arrest by a dramatic display of anguish and remorse.



Figure 4.4. Panels from p. 151 of *Persepolis 2*. The juxtaposed images suggest the way in which compulsory veiling extinguishes women's identity in public space. By allowing women to become individuals only in domestic settings, veiling produces a psychological split between the private and the public self.

With the compulsory hijab (veiling) in post-revolutionary Iran as one of her main themes, Satrapi explores the possible psychological implications of such an issue for women. As evidenced throughout her text, different situations in the lives of women living in contemporary Iran require different degrees of self-revelation. At home, a woman possesses the freedom to unveil, as shown by a host of domestic images throughout the text.³ In public, however, a woman may dare to leave only a few tufts of hair unveiled. Yet, if a woman is about to be interviewed for a job or for admission to university, or to discuss her project with the “mayor’s deputy,” she must be as veiled as possible to increase her chances of success (see the interview panels in *Persepolis 2* 130, 177). The juxtaposition of two contrasting images in *Persepolis 2* successfully captures such an inside/outside dichotomy (see figure 4.4). The caption, split between the two panels, reads: “Our behavior in public and our behavior in private were polar opposites. This disparity made us schizophrenic” (151).

In fact, one major reason for Marji’s second, “much less painful” exit from Iran (*Persepolis 2* 187) is arguably this intolerable cultural schizophrenia (to borrow the title of Dariush Shayegan’s book). In other words, the text can be interpreted as Satrapi literally and figuratively choosing “freedom” (187) and unveiling over censorship and veiling. Upon her very arrival in Iran, Marji says, “After four years living in Vienna, here I am back in Tehran. From the moment I arrived at Mehrabad Airport, and caught sight of the first customs agent, I immediately felt the repressive air of my country” (*Persepolis 2* 92). Significantly, Marji’s desire to leave Iran for the second time is both provoked and intensified by a series of events that illustrate what she calls “the repressive air of my country,” generated mainly by the state’s heavy implementation of veiling and censorship and sometimes by her fellow citizens as well. For example, when Marji is about to leave the house for the first time after her return from abroad, out of habit, she neglects to cover her head, at which point her mother warns her, “Don’t forget your veil!” In response, Marji says, “Oh shit! I’ll have to put it back on!” (96). Marji’s hair, which she had the freedom to ignore in her social relations while she was abroad, becomes such a conscious part of her body as a woman in Iran that the cotton head scarf her grandmother gives her is regarded as a very precious gift. “This way,” Marji’s grandmother says to her, “your head can breathe. Otherwise you’ll be bald in no time” (140).

Marji notices signs of the above-mentioned cultural schizophrenia early on, in the attitudes of her Iranian girlfriends. While Marji is spending time with her friends to escape her temporary state of depression (*Persepolis 2* 114–16), they urge

her to tell them about her sexual experiences abroad. Accordingly, she informs them of her “few experiences,” only to be shocked when one of them retorts: “So, what’s the difference between you and a whore?” As Marji thinks to herself in retrospect, “Underneath their outward appearances of being modern women, my friends were real traditionalists” (116). The very incident causes Marji to go back home “even more depressed,” after which she has to visit a psychiatrist (117). Later, at university, while Marji is encountering friends with similar attitudes, Satrapi significantly points out a resemblance between those friends’ and the Islamic regime’s repressive strategies (149).

The regime imposes sexual segregation on the society, including educational environments (*Persepolis* 2 127, 138, 145). The guardians of the Revolution control the relationship between couples of the same and different sex (134–35), as well as people’s clothing on the street (147). Yet the people themselves also monitor each other’s sexual relationships through self-censorship (141, 149). The atmosphere, Marji complains, is so oppressive that she and her fiancé often do not leave home: “The outside being dangerous, we often found ourselves inside, at his house or at my house. This situation was suffocating me” (136). Even at university, an Islamic style of dress is directly promoted, and women, especially, are advised to abide by that dress code (141–42). When “courageous” Marji objects to the prohibitive situation at her own university (143), not only does she not receive any convincing reply, but she is later summoned to be advised by a cleric that “wearing the veil is synonymous with emancipation” (144). Also, given the strict limitations concerning women’s unveiling in institutional settings, Marji and her friends have to repeat their anatomy classes in the privacy of their own homes (150), since their drawing model at the university can only be either a veiled woman (145) or a man (146). Upon increasingly noticing the double lives of Iranian people, Marji remarks, “The more time passed, the more I became conscious of the contrast between the official representation of my country and the real life of the people, the one that went on behind the walls” (150; see also the episode titled “The Socks” 145–57).

The last and perhaps most crushing incident in this series of events, and the one that significantly prompts Marji to leave Iran—appropriately titled “The End”—is the failure of Marji and her fiancé to implement the design project they have worked on for seven months as their shared dissertation project (*Persepolis* 2 176). The project “involves creating a theme park using [Iranian] mythological heroes” (174), and Marji and Reza hope that it will eventually lead to the creation of “the equivalent of Disneyland in Tehran” (175). They earn the highest grade for

the project and are advised by their supervisor to propose the project to the mayor of Tehran (176). Both before and during the meeting with the mayor's deputy, however, the issues of veiling and censorship resurface. Twice, Marji is denied the opportunity to meet with the deputy because of her indecent veiling and makeup. When she does finally manage to meet with him, she is disappointed when the long days and nights of serious effort on her and Reza's part are simply ignored and the project rejected because of its images of female mythological characters unveiled (see figure 4.5).



Figure 4.5. Panels from p. 177 of *Persepolis 2*. Marji's meeting with a deputy of the mayor of Tehran marks an epiphanic moment in her life, the end of a series of events that culminate in her decision to leave Iran.

Marji's closing "... I understand ..." is uttered in an obviously depressed state at the end of her short exchange with the mayor's deputy, and the situation proves to be epiphanic and highly ironic in light of her departure from Iran for "freedom" shortly thereafter (187). It also gives richer meaning to the volume's subtitle, "The Story of a Return." Satrapi's desired freedom has now become manifest not only in her physically unveiled appearance abroad but also in her candidly and freely written, illustrated, and published narrative, which, because of the harsh censorship existing in Iran, could not have been published had Marji not left her homeland.

Yet, in addition to Satrapi's critical intervention in the Self through her content, she simultaneously engages with the Other through aspects of her text's form. While Satrapi emphasizes the educational aspect of her work with regard to Western audiences, I focus on somewhat different dimensions of her text. Specifically, I look at how aspects of her style challenge and contribute to the

appreciation of the expressive language of comics as a medium still practiced and enjoyed mainly by Western authors and readers.

CHALLENGING THE OTHER: SATRAPI'S DRAWING STYLE AS ARTISTIC DEVICE

In the popular imagination, comics are often assumed to constitute a genre, a misconception that probably reflects the early association of comics with stories about "superheroes" (Wolk 11). In Scott McCloud's definition, however, comics consist of the juxtaposition of "pictorial and other images" (that is, words) so as "to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). In other words, the comic format is a medium, not a genre. In *Reading Comics*, Douglas Wolk argues that media are "forms of expression that have few or no rules regarding their content" (11). Accordingly, a definition of comics should never predict or presume anything about the narrative content of comic works (see, for example, Chute, "Comics" 452; Eisner, *Comics* 5; McCloud 6, 9).

Understanding comics as a *form* of expression is, by implication, to underscore the crucial importance of *style*, which Wolk defines as "all the elements that go into a comic's 'look and feel'"—"the things that affect the reading experience irrespective of the story's content." Style is, as Wolk notes, partly a product of non-visual elements, including characteristic uses of language, pacing, and narrative structure, "but the biggest element of it is the idiomatic way a comic is drawn" (24). Style is thus associated above all with the manner of *drawing* itself, which Wolk describes as "the most immediate aspect of comics" (125). Style is thus associated above all with the manner of *drawing* itself, which Wolk describes as "the most immediate aspect of comics" (125).

As W. J. T. Mitchell reminds us, comics demand a "double literacy" (89). For this competence to be actualized on the reader's part, words must be intelligible, but visual images must likewise pass what Wolk calls the "legibility test." As Wolk points out, "In a cartoon, every object's form is subject to interpretive distortion—even when what's being distorted isn't a real image but a distant cousin of something real" (123). This distortion, he argues, "has only one hard limit. It has to be legible—the reader has to be able to recognize everything and everyone in the image very quickly" (124). In Wolk's view, the legibility of images is part of what distinguishes a good cartoonist from a bad one: "Every great cartoonist has a specific, intensely personal style, and so do most decent-to-middling cartoonists. Mediocre cartoonists' work blurs together; bad cartoonists generally either don't

have enough control to work up a style of their own or fail the legibility test” (124). Although assessing whether Satrapi is a “great” or merely a “decent-to-middling” artist is beyond the scope of this chapter, the sheer popularity of the two *Persepolis* volumes suggests that Satrapi’s style holds appeal for readers.

Hillary Chute remarks that Satrapi’s cartooning has been “a subject of debate” to the point that some critics, while praising the content of *Persepolis*, have “devalued its aesthetics” (“Texture” 108n10). Other critics, including Naghibi and O’Malley as well as Chute herself, have tried to justify Satrapi’s style. Chute emphasizes that “style as a narrative choice—and not simply a default expression—is fundamental to understanding graphic narrative” (99); she argues that Satrapi’s “pared-down techniques of line and perspective” in her “devastatingly truthful and yet stylized” *Persepolis* is “a sophisticated, and historically cognizant, means of doing the work of seeing” (99). Likewise, Naghibi and O’Malley note the usual criticisms of Satrapi’s “very ‘cartoony’” style and maintain that “Satrapi’s style is deliberate and has definite effects. It is part of her effort to make familiar, to universalize, but at the same time to other” (228).⁴ While building upon this conversation, I attempt to advance it by suggesting that through successful eclecticism, Satrapi employs a perceptibly personal and creative style in the service of her artistic expression. In fact, as revealed through examples from the two volumes, Satrapi’s graphic text fulfills Duncan and Smith’s expectation of successful comic book writing, which they describe as “a creative act done with both words and pictures wherein ‘the images are employed as a language’” (147, quoting Eisner, *Graphic Storytelling*).⁵

In an interview, Satrapi was asked whether she deploys techniques such as “breaking the frame,” as Art Spiegelman does in parts of *Maus*, which serve to remind readers of the authorial presence.⁶ She answered:

No. Because I didn’t come from a culture of comics. People like Art, they were kids that read comics, so they have lots of knowledge about the comics. They’re aware of what they’re doing. I didn’t know anything about comics. . . . Now, with the work, I have some ideas about comics, but at the moment I started doing it . . . I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t have the experience and the background and all the theory. I didn’t think about the comic; I was just doing it, and that was it. (qtd. in Root 157)

Satrapi’s self-professed relative unfamiliarity with the medium of comics might have caused her to opt for eclecticism in developing her own style. As Wolk notes, Satrapi’s cartooning method and her special use of intense contrasts of black and

white suggests the influence of her mentor, David B. (the pen name of Pierre-François Beauchard), as a glance at his most famous work, *Epileptic*, reveals.⁷ Another major influence on Satrapi's drawing style, as she herself acknowledges, is the dominant style of drawing in Persian classic miniature. In response to an interviewer's question, "Is there nonetheless something in your style that is unique to your Persian cultural background?" Satrapi said, "Certainly. The characteristic of including little perspective, and that of characters becoming taller or smaller based on their importance. These devices very much evoke Persian miniatures" (Hill 20). The only significant difference—which could be due to the influence of David B.—is that most Persian miniatures feature extensive use of various colours, whereas Satrapi's images are drawn in a sharply contrasting black and white. Richard Ettinghausen's description of the Iranian miniature is strongly reminiscent of Satrapi's drawing style. One special feature, he writes,

which must strike anybody who views an exhibition of Persian art especially after having first visited the other sections of a museum containing Western art . . . is that the human figure is usually *highly stylized* or rendered in such a way that its features have aspects of caricatures, while in still other cases painted figures are given in a *disembodied, flat manner, which makes them appear to be without corporeal substance*. (qtd. in Milani 205–06; my emphasis)

Satrapi's cartooning style, with its simplified and sometimes highly stylized features as well as its intense black and white contrast, is also very much reminiscent of the comic strips published in Persian satirical newspapers and journals approximately three decades ago, when Marji was a child (see *Persepolis* 12).⁸ This possible source of influence is compatible with Satrapi's sometimes humorous or satirical attitude toward her traumatic memories and the vices and absurdities of her native society. In one example, returning from her war-injured friend's home, Marji remembers: "That day, I learned something essential: we can only feel sorry for ourselves when our misfortunes are still supportable. Once this limit is crossed, the only way to bear the unbearable is to laugh at it" (*Persepolis* 2 112). This tactic—transforming cruel or upsetting realities into the subject of irony or humour—is visible in both volumes.

In *Persepolis*, Satrapi's highly simplified style serves to produce what Hillary Chute calls a "child's-eye rendition of trauma," in which the often horrific political events of Marji's childhood are rendered in a highly simplified manner, as if they had been sifted through the mind of a small child ("Texture" 98). The contrast

between the style of depiction—images that suggest “a child’s too-tidy conceptualization” of violence and death (100)—and the underlying reality has a defamiliarizing effect, at once distancing us from the trauma and forcing us to remember and acknowledge it.

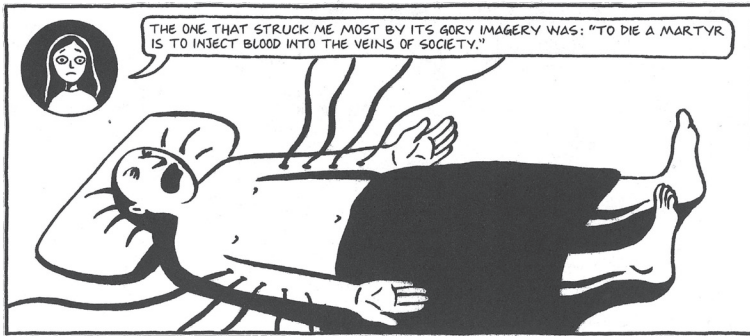


Figure 4.6. Panel from p. 115 of *Persepolis*. Marji’s “child’s-eye” perspective on trauma has a defamiliarizing effect, in this case inviting readers to reinterpret post-revolutionary propaganda about the glory of martyrdom.

One example occurs as Marji grapples with ideas about war and martyrdom after the Iranian government refuses to accept Iraq’s proposal for settlement and openly declares its intention to continue the war. Her imaginative reaction to government rhetoric is illustrated in a panel depicting a martyr’s corpse (see figure 4.6). Post-revolutionary Iranian propaganda habitually sanctified images of martyrs, but the rather horrifying depiction of the corpse from the point of view of an innocent child invites readers to re-evaluate the seductive discourse of the Islamic Republic’s mottos such as the one quoted in the panel’s caption: “To die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society.” Marji’s reaction to the glorification of bloodshed is also revealed in her manipulation of Michelangelo’s *La Pietà* in a drawing done to pass her qualifying exam (see figure 4.7). As Gillian Whitlock argues, through this manipulation, Marji the student acts politically by “subverting the political correctness” expected of her by the examiners (975–76). Later, Marji reaches the same conclusion when pondering the execution of Nilufar (the communist girl arrested in Khosrow’s house). Marji remarks: “All night long I thought of that phrase: ‘To die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society.’ Nilufar was a real martyr and her blood certainly did not feed our society’s veins” (*Persepolis* 146).

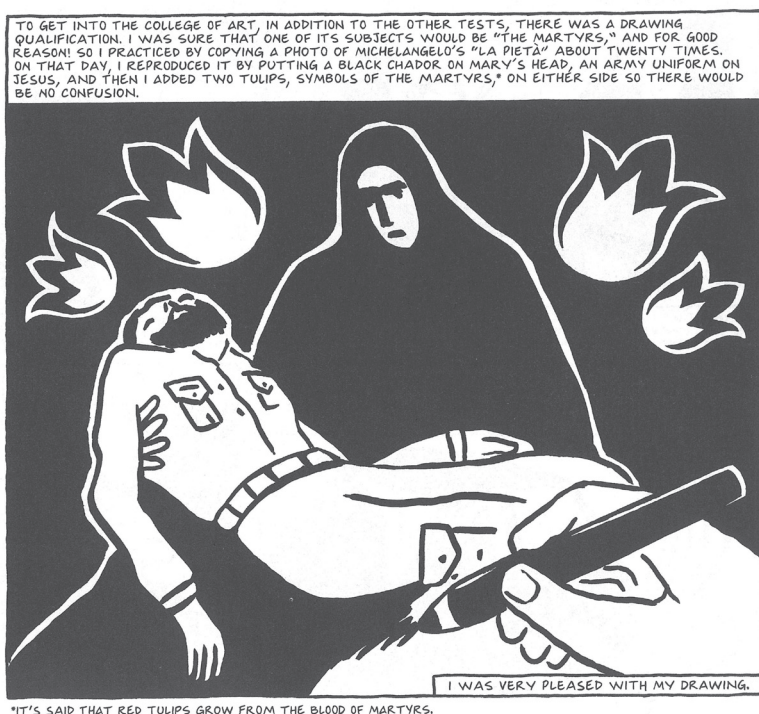


Figure 4.7. Panel from p. 127 of *Persepolis 2*. The panel illustrates Marji's subversive transformation of Michelangelo's *La Pietà* in the context of early post-revolutionary Iran, in a drawing done to pass a qualifying exam.

This “child’s-eye rendition” allows Satrapi to present Marji’s appalling childhood experiences in a way that enhances their visual power. As McCloud maintains, drawing styles in comics can range from the “extremely cartoony” to the highly realistic or even “near-photographic” (44; see also his second chapter), with each style having its own aesthetic functions. Therefore, adopting a realistic style in itself does not necessarily add to the aesthetic value of a work. As McCloud himself puts it, in reference to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, “a simple style does not necessitate a simple story” (45). Nor does choosing a simplified mode of drawing signify an artistic flaw. Rather, the artist, according to the content of her work, chooses to develop a certain style. If we accept McCloud’s theory that “[i]f an artist wants to portray the beauty and complexity of the *physical world*, realism of *some sort* is going to play a part” (41), then Satrapi’s simplified cartooning could be taken to

represent Marji's inability to recall clearly (or perhaps even to find at all) the complexity and beauty in her past life. Indeed, parts of Marji's past life are too unpleasant for a realistic style of drawing. Instead, Satrapi draws in a way that engages readers while simultaneously protecting them from trauma that would turn them away. As Amy Malek remarks,

By using her simple, clean, wood-cut-like images to depict otherwise disturbing scenes of torture, war, or suicide, she ensures that the reader feels sympathy, pain, and anger, but does not experience the gruesomeness that may otherwise turn them off from the book: their imaginations are kept active, their hearts are strained, but their stomachs remain settled. (372)

Similarly, describing Satrapi's drawing style as "expressionistic" and "minimalist," Chute comments, "The stylization of *Persepolis* suggests that the historically traumatic does not have to be visually traumatic" ("Graphic Narrative" 135). Thus, as far as the harsh violence in the text is concerned, Satrapi's drawing style is intended to create some aesthetic distance.

McCloud's theory of cartooning as a form of "amplification through simplification" (30) can also assist us in appreciating aspects of Satrapi's visual idiom. What McCloud means is that by creating more abstract images in comics, the artist's intention is not to eliminate details but to foreground specific details. "By stripping down an image to essential 'meaning,'" explains McCloud, "an artist can amplify that meaning" (30). In many of the panels, Satrapi's characters—who are simplified to the point of "legibility"—"focus our attention on an idea" (31; see also Worth 154) by having been reduced to their most noticeable features or expressions. For example, in the first two panels on page 3 of *Persepolis*, we see Marji and four of her friends one year after the Revolution, when girls are segregated from boys and made to wear veils at school (see figure 4.8). The most noticeable expression conveyed to the audience, mostly through the simple shapes of lips, eyes, and eyebrows, is a sense of distraction and unhappiness, which is expressed by sacrificing all the complexities of the countenances. By contrast, the second panel on the following page shows an integrated class of boys and unveiled girls, and the expressions on faces (again conveyed through the shapes of lips, eyes, and eyebrows) are more varied. However, none of the pictures represent any expected childish enthusiasm, since even the picture of the integrated class belongs to the extremely chaotic year of 1979, when most streets in Iran were sites of demonstrations against the Shah.

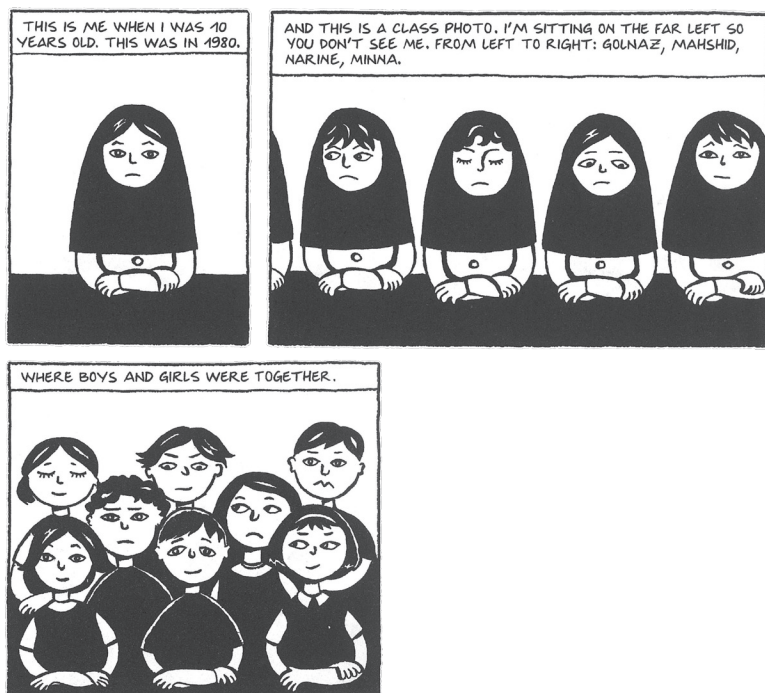


Figure 4.8. The first two panels from p. 3 and the second panel from p. 4 of *Persepolis*. Using the technique of “amplification through simplification,” Satrapi concentrates our attention on the contrast in facial expressions.

Satrapi’s “simplification” sometimes takes a deliberately metonymic form, which, as I explain below, may be related to problems of memory and representation. One early example of this occurs in the episode titled “The Bicycle” in *Persepolis*, when the issue of the causes of the famous Cinema Rex fire is raised. This event, which occurred on 18 August 1978 and in which nearly 410 people were burned to death (Hiro 74), was one of the most painful, and still unresolved, events in the recent history of Iran: “The government blamed religious fanatics; the public accused Savak” (Hiro 74). In “The Bicycle,” Marji’s parents are in bed late at night, talking, as Marji eavesdrops (*Persepolis* 14, third panel). Marji’s father is explaining to her mother the *real* reason behind the fire, that is, the reason alleged by the public rather than the one proposed by the government. Interestingly, after this panel, which introduces the source of the conversation, the voice of Marji’s father merges into Satrapi’s autobiographical narrator’s voice. Satrapi’s drawings

illustrate her narrator's words, serving to supplement them, until we reach the final large panel on page 15 (see figure 4.9), in which the visual parts with the verbal, the image referring not to the words but assuming the task of narration. The drawing depicts the victims of the fire in the interior auditorium of Cinema Rex—not in any familiar human-like shape but in the shape of flame-like, ghostly bodied, open-mouthed, screaming skulls burning up—with most figures being reminiscent of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Using metonymy to powerful effect, Satrapit distills the scene down to its most essential and significant elements: flames and death skulls.



Figure 4.9. Panel from p. 15 of *Persepolis*. The panel demonstrates Satrapit's use of metonymic drawing in the service of narration.

Another equally thought-provoking example of Satrapit's use of metonymy in *Persepolis* occurs in the panel depicting the days during the Iraq-Iran war when

many people in western and southern Iran were retreating to the safer parts of the country (89; see figure 4.10). The caption over the panel reads: “After Abadan, every border town was targeted by bombers. Most of the people living in those areas had to flee northward, far from the Iraqi missiles.” In the image accompanying these words, Satrapi reduces the whole situation to an extremely simple, yet powerful, metonymy: cars being drawn upward by rising flames. The cars represent the people living in the border towns, fleeing north at full speed, while the flames pressing on the cars from three sides and funnelling them upward suggest the rapidly spreading annihilation of war.

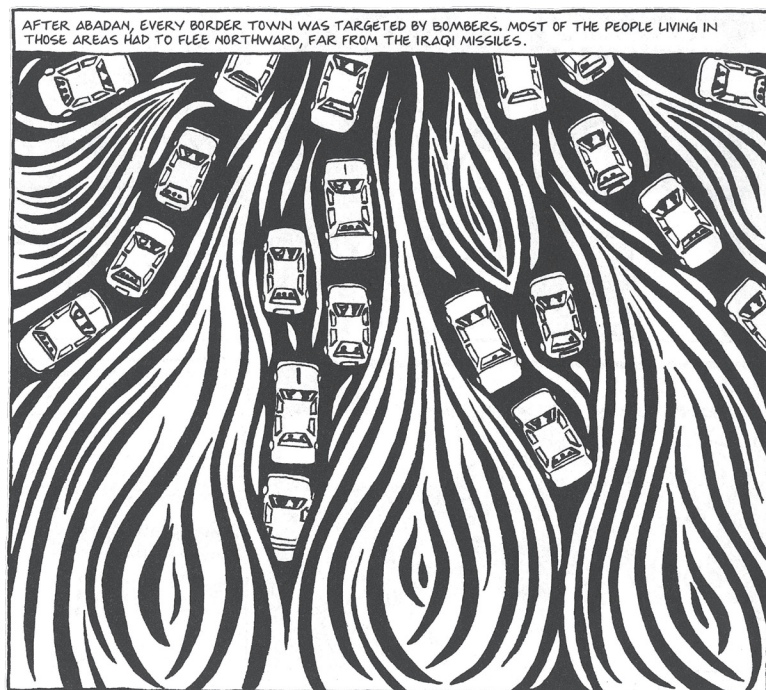


Figure 4.10. Panel from p. 89 of *Persepolis*. In another noteworthy example of Satrapi’s use of metonymic pictorial representation, cars squeezed by flames illustrate the flight of Iranians from Iraqi missiles.

In both examples, by preferring highly simplified, metonymic images to literal depictions of traumatic events, Satrapi seems to have been dealing with the problems of collective memory and the difficulties of historical representation. While such images illustrate Chute’s “child’s-eye rendition” of trauma, they may also be

interpreted as attesting to a failure of memory on Satrapi's own part, which leaves her unable to reconstruct and/or represent such traumatic events literally. They might even be understood as Satrapi's subjective interpretation of her narrator's "postmemories,"—her depiction, long after the fact, of events that were originally related to Marji by others. In Marianne Hirsch's definition, the term *postmemory*

describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. ("The Generation" 106–07)

However, even "memories in their own right," that is, personal memories, are narrations—subjective reconstructions, rather than objective descriptions, of past events. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson warn of the problem of "assuming a transparent or 'mirror' relationship between the life and the visual and/or verbal text" (11). They point out that

narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered. As psychologist Daniel Schachter has suggested, "Memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves." He goes on to explore how "we construct our autobiographies from fragments of experience that change over time." That is, we inevitably organize or form fragments of memory into complex constructions that become the stories of our life. (9)

Rather than actual representations of what the young Marji experienced (either herself or through postmemory), the above examples can thus be considered personal readings of these collective traumas as they are later remembered.

At the same time, such scenes are also descriptions of events reconstructed through the memory processes of the adult Satrapi, the artist, who has obviously manipulated and altered such visual memories using her repertoire of artistic skills. This distortion is, in effect, proclaimed by the cartoon medium itself, which is, in its very nature, "cartoony." As Wolk argues, in contrast to drawing, cartooning generally demands that the audience view the characters depicted as fictional ones, even if they are based on real historical persons. Using Joe Sacco's *Palestine* as an example, Wolk observes that "his drawing relies on careful observation, but its

style indicates that his stories are subjective interpretations of those observations” (121). The same can be said of Satrapi’s work, especially with regard to her rendering of historical events. While clearly referencing well-documented events, they are nonetheless imaginative revisions—stories about history.

In this respect, Satrapi’s use of the word *story* in the subtitles of both *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* is noteworthy. When asked in an interview about the degree of truthfulness in her work, Satrapi answered: “As soon as you write your story, it is a story; this is not a documentary. Of course you have to make fiction, you have to cheat, you have to make some angle around there, because the story has to turn, so that is the reconstruction of what we do” (Root 150). Satrapi’s declaration that any retelling of one’s past results in a fictional account may be an indirect admission that memory is not capable of fully and objectively reconstructing the past. While listening to her Uncle Anoosh vehemently relating his memories, little Marji, who is concerned that she has no family heroes to boast about, thinks to herself: “What a story!” (*Persepolis* 56). Like Satrapi herself, Marji suggests here that any lived experience, once recounted, becomes a story, told from a specific viewpoint. Even the most “photographic” memory is inevitably a subjective reworking. Yet Satrapi’s awareness of the limits of memory is revealed, perhaps more than anything else, by the episodic nature of the *Persepolis*, in which specific events in Satrapi’s past provide the starting point for separate stories in her text. As Michael Sheringham points out, it is often assumed that “the office of memory is to gather, preserve, and unify.” In this view, “Memory is redemptive: its miracle is to remedy apparent disparateness and loss by restoring a living continuity” (597). The episodic structure of the *Persepolis* volumes suggests instead what Sheringham describes as “the problematic, troublesome aspect of memory” (597)—its discontinuous nature, its blank spaces, its apparently arbitrary privileging of one event over another. Like the metonymic nature of some of her image-texts, Satrapi’s episode titles seem to have served as personal mnemonic codes, as triggers for memory, through which she has tried her best not to forget.

CONCLUSION

Considered in the context of Iranian literature in general and Iranian autobiography in particular, Satrapi’s two *Persepolis* volumes have successfully opened previously unexplored paths to self-revelation. As Farzaneh Milani argues in *Veils and Words*, the fact that autobiography has been slow to emerge in Iran has roots in

the serious issue of self-disclosure in Iranian culture. As she notes, “This reluctance to talk publicly and freely about the self, however, is not confined to women. Iranian men have also shunned self-representation. Even in the few published autobiographies available, authors often suppress their uninhibited, unformulaic public self-disclosure” (201). In *Persepolis* and again in *Persepolis 2*, Marjane Satrapi breaks with this tradition, exhibiting a degree of self-disclosure that, as Naghibi and O’Malley remind us, is “particularly shocking in an Iranian cultural context” (241). Efforts to ban her work notwithstanding, her achievement in overcoming her “internal ancestral censor” (Milani 47) must be cherished. She engages in self-revelation in the face of strong cultural taboos concerning self-unveiling that exist not only inside but outside Iran. As is rightly noted by Naghibi and O’Malley, Satrapi risks travelling into a territory that is still out of bounds even to the diasporic Iranian female autobiographer (241).

As my analysis of the concept of “veil” in the *Persepolis* volumes suggests, Satrapi’s innovative autobiographical self-revelation is further supported by her critical attitude toward that concept, not only as a physical impediment to self-revelation but also as a cause of possible psychological and cultural disorders. In considering this issue, Satrapi shows awareness of the intricacies of the concept, including not only the problem of external censorship as manifested in the mandating of women’s veiling but also the problem of self-censorship as one of its major psychological implications. Evidently, Satrapi’s self-unveiling has already served to inspire others. In 2012, Mana Neyestani—an Iranian cartoonist and illustrator now based in France—became the first Iranian male author to recount his life story using the medium of comics. His *Une métamorphose iranienne* was soon translated into several languages, including English. Neyestani’s drawing style is very different from Satrapi’s; however, particularly in depicting aspects of his relationship to his wife, he shares her willingness to shatter Iranian cultural taboos surrounding self-revelation.

While challenging and contributing to Iranian culture and literature via aspects of its content, Satrapi’s text, through the specific drawing style she adopts, also intervenes in, and helps advance, the medium of comics as a form still mostly practiced and enjoyed by Western artists and readers. Whereas Satrapi has often expressed her hope that her books will help to educate Western readers about Iran, I would instead emphasize how certain formal and stylistic aspects of her work engage with, and contribute to, the aesthetics of comics in the West. As I have argued, different degrees of realism in drawing, far from necessarily signifying the

artist's skill or lack thereof, may be adopted by artists for different expressive needs and purposes. Thus, Satrapi's "cartoony" drawing should be regarded as a deliberate stylistic attempt to create special aesthetic effects. As I have demonstrated through analyzing a number of examples, Satrapi's simplified style is effectively employed to deal with important themes and to convey to readers the general feel of particular events despite problems of memory and historical representation. Among other things, Satrapi's "stylized" approach to drawing allows her to mitigate the effects of scenes of graphic violence, to amplify meaning through (metonymic) simplification, to focus on the fictionality of her narrative, and to disclose the imperfections of memory. In this respect, Satrapi's unfamiliarity with the medium of comics may thus have worked to her advantage. Integrating eclectic sources of influence, she has created a visually dramatic style entirely her own, through which she constructs dialogues of Self and Other that unveil both herself and her country.

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NOTES

- 1 The first known Iranian autobiography by a woman is Taj al-Saltana's memoir, which was written in 1924. It was, however, not published until 1982 (Milani 220), with an English translation, *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess from the Harem to Modernity*, appearing in 1993. In Jolly's two-volume *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, the only material on Iran and the Persian language is a short passage under the entry "Islam and Life Writing" (2:475).
- 2 The only apparent exception in this regard is Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *A Stone on a Grave* (written in 1963 but published only in 1981), a memoir of infertility, in which Al-e Ahmad reveals some of the most private aspects of his and his wife's relationship and of his extended family. Yet even Al-e Ahmad is bound by the concept of "veil," referring his wife, a respected and well-known writer, by her name only once in the entire book (see Milani 47).
- 3 According to mainstream Islamic jurisprudence, even in their own homes Muslim women cannot appear unveiled if any *na-mahram* people (those outside the circle of their close kin, or *maharem*) are present. This rule is not observed in Satrapi's family (for instance, see *Persepolis* 49–50) because they are not religious.

- 4 For other attempts to explain possible special effects of Satrapi's style, see Davis; Malek (372); and Whitlock (974, 976–77).
- 5 Employment of images as language is also quite discernible in many of the examples I mention in the first part of the essay. See figures 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4.
- 6 The term *breaking the frame* refers to the visual device of moving the action of a comic beyond the edges of the frame, so that images transgress the established boundaries. In posing his question to Satrapi, Root states that, by breaking the frame, Spiegelman is “coming out of the book and saying, this is a comic book, in case we didn’t know.” Here, Root appears to be using the example of breaking the frame to refer more broadly to what theorists of postmodernist fiction call self-reflexivity. Patricia Waugh considers self-reflexivity to be the pivotal element in “metafiction,” which she defines as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2; see also Lodge 220–45). Despite Satrapi's denial of using such metafictional techniques, she does, in effect, “break the frame” at least a few times in *Persepolis* (4, last panel; 114, panels 4–7; 115, panels 2 and 4; 116; 117) and once in *Persepolis 2* (32), collapsing the boundary between Satrapi the narrator and Marji the character by blurring their narrative voices. In fact, Gillian Whitlock refers to both Satrapi and Spiegelman as “self-reflexive practitioners in their use of cartoon drawing” (971). My thanks to Brad Bucknell for alerting me to the self-reflexive aspects of Satrapi's work.
- 7 Satrapi recognizes the influential role of David B. as a former instructor who “helped me for the first two, three chapters of *Persepolis*. He taught me a lot of things” (Chute, “Graphic Narrative” 242–43n4). As Wolk remarks, Satrapi's success in attracting an audience has overshadowed that of her mentor to the point that people sometimes confuse the direction of influence: “When I show people *Epileptic*,” he comments, “they often note that it takes after *Persepolis* a bit” (145).
- 8 For examples of strips from different journals that, to different degrees, evoke Satrapi's drawing style, see Javadi (174, 285, 297, 298, 302, 303).

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