

## *Persepolis* and Human Rights: Unveiling Westernized Globalization Strategies in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

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### ABSTRACT

*Persepolis* is one of the significant memoirs published by Iranian émigré women in the tumultuous post-September 11 era. In the Euro-American context, critics embrace Satrapi's emphasis on universal human rights; however, they have neglected her Orientalist discourse which problematizes her representation of Iranian Muslim women. The present paper looks into Satrapi's Orientalist discourse in *Persepolis* mainly drawing upon Lacan's theory of the object's gaze. It concludes that Satrapi's Orientalist discourse has been disguised through her emphasis on the intercultural momentum toward human rights, which makes her role as a 'comprador intellectual' much more destructive than that of her counterparts. Her peculiar style and wise choice of narration have unquestionably rendered the book to a wide-ranging audience, as a result of which, *Persepolis* has played a critical role representing Iranian Muslim woman in the post-September 11 era.

**Key words:** *Persepolis*, Orientalist Discourse, Universalism, Veiling, The Iran-Iraq War, Child Narrator, Comprador Intellectual

### INTRODUCTION

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a highly acclaimed memoir published in the post-September 11 era, has been construed as a valuable resource on Iran's history, specifically the post-revolutionary era. One of the significant reasons for the unremitting popularity of *Persepolis* has been the sense of intercultural momentum toward human rights, which, perceivably, has been reinforced through its "hybrid form as a graphic *khaterat* [memoir]" [italicized in the original] (Dianat, 2013, p.14). Critics such as Manuela Costantino (2008), Lopamudra Basu (2007), Kathleen Kennedy (2008), Anjali Singh (2004), and Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley (2007) are some of the main scholars who believe that *Persepolis* has significantly released Iran from the confines of oddities attributed to the East. Nevertheless, in this article, we want to argue that Satrapi's peculiar style and her inconvertible emphasis on universal human rights have blinded the scholars to the embedded orientalist discourse in her work.

Arguably, Satrapi, through eliminating the cultural context in which the events have been depicted, has developed an absolutely Orientalist attitude toward her compatriots, specifically, Iranian Muslim women. In order to demonstrate her Orientalist stance, we will firstly examine her negative attitude toward the practice of veiling in Iran, drawing upon

Lacan's theory of the object's gaze, and then we will discuss her unrealistic description of the Iran-Iraq war and provide counterarguments by using testimonies in Iran's war literature. More importantly, we will explore the significance of Satrapi's graphic style and child narration in attracting a wide range of addressees.

*Persepolis* was originally published in French in four volumes between 2000 and 2003; however, its English translation was published in two volumes: *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*. Since its publication, Satrapi's memoir has achieved great fame, rendering it similar to world-known works such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*.

*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* revolves around the life story of Marjane, called Marji by her family members and friends, who belongs to an upper-middle class and left-wing family. Her childhood is tainted with the political ferment of Iran in the 1980s and the grievous losses of her friends and relatives. Rather than romping around and enjoying her inviolable childish amusements, Marji is exposed to repellent accounts of the appalling torture of political dissidents and the horrid tolls of the Iran-Iraq war. The first volume of *Persepolis* finishes by Marji's departure to Austria when she is just fourteen years old. Her parents believe living a happy, free life in Austria is a far cry from living a hopeless life in Iran close to her family.

*Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* covers Marji's life in Vienna and her return to her homeland. In Vienna, first, she stays at a boarding house run by nuns until she is kicked out because of objecting to a nun who insulted her over her nationality. Afterwards, she, temporarily, stays at Julia's apartment, a friend at whose house she gets a closer glimpse of the Western culture when she sees Julia's sexual relationships, and then at a communal apartment with eight homosexual men, where her mother meets her in Vienna. The last place she stays is Frou Doctor Heller's house, where she is unfairly accused of stealing Doctor Heller's brooch. Her life in Vienna is replete with untoward love affairs, betrayals, encounters with unsavory characters, and the problems she faces as a result of her addiction. When she becomes disenchanted with living a free life full of prosperity in Vienna, she decides to go back to Iran. In Iran, at a party she meets Reza and finally marries him. Her marriage with Reza does not turn up to be a successful one, and she gets divorce after getting her BA in Iran. After her divorce, at the age of twenty-four, she decides to head for France. Satrapi permanently stays in France and never returns to her homeland. She ends her memoir with her famous sentence, "Freedom has a price" (Satrapi, 2007, "The End" *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*).

## METHODOLOGY

Edward Said's theory of Orientalist discourse is the backbone of this study. Still, Lacan's theory of the object's gaze and William James's theory of cultural relativism will be applied to this study to problematize the arguably Eurocentric stance of *Persepolis*. What has made Satrapi's memoir especially significant and different from other memoirs published in the West are its distinctive features which are its graphic genre and child narrator. To clearly depict the overriding effects of its singular style and narration, we will employ Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994), and Gillian Whitlock's *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (2007). At the end, the researchers will delineate how, under the pretext of defending universal human rights, and through its special style, Satrapi has established Orientalist discourse rather than demonstrating "the universality of cultures" (Singh as quoted in Jones, 2004, par. 11).

## DISCUSSION

*Persepolis* has been praised for its universal themes such as the distasteful aspects of war and the consequences of imposing an ideology on little children and youth. In this paper, we will argue that Satrapi's memoir has played a more hazardous role than those of other world famous émigré Iranian memoirists like Azar Nafisi because of establishing a seemingly Universalist attitude and breaching cultural boundaries. Her focus on human rights has made critics ignorant of her Orientalist attitude toward Iranians, specifically Iranian Muslim women. In order to depict Satrapi's negative stance on Iran's history and culture, we will trace her Orientalist viewpoint in her representation of the practice of veiling, and women's involvement in the Iran-Iraq war.

## *Persepolis* and the Issue of Veiling

Primarily, veiling plays a significant role in *Persepolis* and is depicted as an entirely obstructive practice for Iranian women, which renders them absolutely gloomy and encumbers their social activities. In Satrapi's memoir, there are two chapters entitled "The Veil", the first chapter of *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, that clearly shows her degrading attitude toward veiling and depicts compulsory hijab as an unforgivable infringement of human rights, specifically, the rights of immature girls, and a chapter in *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, which is about Marji's decision to go back to her family in Iran after her failed affair with Markus. This chapter ends with a picture of Marji wearing a headscarf as she prepares to go back to her motherland. This panel explicitly portrays veiling as a violation of a woman's "individual and social liberties" (Satrapi, 2007, "The Veil" *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*). Entitling two chapters "The Veil" shows Satrapi's attempts at drawing the attention of her readers to this aspect of Iranian women's lives. Conceivably, Satrapi does not portray veiling as a sign of Muslim women's submissiveness and wretchedness, as Nafisi pictures it in *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*; nevertheless, she highlights the role of mandatory hijab as an encroachment on human rights. Presumably, due to the claims Satrapi has made regarding her disapproval of the law banning the veil in French public schools (Costantino, 2008, p.434), she agrees with Ashraf Zahedi that "[f]emale hair, revealed or concealed, has always been an intriguing aspect of women's image and identity, worldwide" (2008, p. 250). However, her depiction of hijab during 1980s and 1990s in Iran, without providing the Western audience with a sketch of the historical and social context obscures her notion of hijab and reinforces the Westerners' debasing viewpoint regarding Muslim women's veiling as the epitome of their oppression. By drawing on Katayoun Zarei Toosi's demonstration of the visual power of the veil, we will delineate how Satrapi has developed a negative perspective toward veiling and has ignored the role of mandatory hijab and single-sex schools in causing a drastic increase in female Students' attendance at school and also in bringing Iranian Muslim women to the social stage.

Zarei Toosi, in her thesis, *Dislodging (New) Orientalist Frames of Reference: Muslim Women in Diasporic and Immigrant Muslim Anglophone Narratives* (2012), demonstrates the visual power of the veil through drawing on Peter Schwenger's study of the gaze of the object in "Red Cannas, Sardine Canas, and the Gaze of the Object". Schwenger, in this study, "foregrounds his approach on the 'optics' of the object via Lacan's theory of the gaze" (Zarei Toosi, 2012, p.143). As Schwenger has maintained, in Lacan's theory, "objects are not the passive recipients of looking. Rather, in a reversal of the common view of vision, it is objects that look at us" (as quoted in Zarei Toosi, 2012, p.143). According to Lacan, "the onlooker does not play an active role in the picture formation process, nor is the picture a mirrored reflection of the light on an object. It is an impression, "the shimmering of a surface that is not, in advance, situated for me in its distance..." (Lacan, as quoted in Zarei Toosi, 2012, p.143). In other words,

[t]he correlative of the picture, to be situated in the same place as it, that is to say, outside, is the point of gaze, while that which forms the mediation from the one to the other, that which is between the two, is something of another nature than geometrical, optical space, something that plays an exactly reverse role, which operates, not because it is opaque—I mean the screen. (Lacan, as quoted in Zarei Toosi, 2012, p.144)

This screen, in Lacan's explanation, operates like "a blind spot" which prevents us from seeing "the object's gaze" (as quoted in Zarei Toosi, 2012, p.144). Schwenger maintains that this blind spot is a creation of our cultural conditioning that controls our way of seeing and conditions us to develop some sort of "selective blindness" (as quoted in Zarei Toosi, 2012, p.144). Based on Schwenger and Lacan's survey of the subject-object relationship, Zarei Toosi concludes that,

If Schwenger is right and our "cultural conditioning" controls our way of seeing, and if the Muslim veil not only exemplifies the power of the gaze of the object, but also literally functions as a screen that blocks seeing, then it is important and necessary to study the social, political and historical forces that form and inform our visual memory of the veil. (Lacan, as quoted in Zarei Toosi, 2012, p.144)

Regarding the explanation given on the visual power of the veil, we want to argue that Satrapi's "cultural conditioning" has functioned as a blind spot and has led her to establish a totally negative attitude toward veiling. Through ignoring the cultural milieu of Iran during the 1979 Revolution, she has reasserted Westerners' cynical presumptions regarding this code of Islam, which has historically been common among Iranian women. As one of the descendants of the Qajar dynasty, Satrapi belonged to an upper class family, who arguably, did not have the same concerns as the majority of their compatriots. In other words, from a cultural point of view, they were detached from most of their fellow-country women and men. As a typical native informant, as Dabashi (2011, p.73) has expatiated on the features of "native informants", Satrapi was born and raised in Iran, and had the chance of moving to Austria and France for higher education, because of coming from an opulent background. More importantly, like Nafisi or other native informants, she had always felt alienated in her native land, meaning that she had rarely become culturally integrated enough in her society to see the problems of other people living with tighter financial resources and having to come to terms with harsher patriarchal codes. In order to show how such a blind spot has made Satrapi reaffirm the already negative preconceptions regarding hijab and ignore its significance in Iran, after elaborating on the relevant scenes, by relying on Nina Ansari's *Jewels of Allah: The Untold Story of Women in Iran* (2015), we will depict how the mandatory veiling opened up new opportunities for Iranian women in 1980s.

In the very first chapter of her memoir, Satrapi starts disparaging veiling by depicting how in 1980 she and her classmates, at the age of ten, had to wear scarves at their single-sex school while they could not comprehend the meaning of compulsory hijab: "We didn't really like to wear the

veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to" (Satrapi, 2007, "The Veil" *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*). *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* begins with a description of how Marji and her friends feel bewildered in their single-sex school, having to wear scarves. In the very second photo of the first chapter of *Persepolis*, readers are presented with a class photo in which there are four similar-looking girls introduced to readers as Marji's classmates: Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, and Minna. Marji is dropped out of the photo, "I am sitting on the far left so you don't see me" (Satrapi, 2007, "The Veil" *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*). Interestingly, all veiled students in this photo look alike and seem dejected. We should also emphasize that Marji is absent in the photo, and she describes her position in the picture to help readers imagine her sitting beside her classmates. Satrapi, through this description is portraying hijab as a fatal remover of individuality.

Another important panel in this regard shows how the rebellious little girls, offered a veil by an officious authority of their school, show their disapproval by starting to play with it. Three Students' reactions are of great significance. One covers her face with her scarf and calls herself "the monster of darkness". The other plays with her scarf as a rope and the third whose reaction is unquestionably the most important one is the student who puts a scarf around another girl's neck and takes it as a bridle (Satrapi, 2007, "The Veil" *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*). These Students' reactions toward veiling show Satrapi's totally negative attitude toward hijab. Since the mandatory hijab is depicted as a certain violation of human rights, specifically the rights of little children who have no understanding of it, obviously, Satrapi has blindly supported the dominant Western feminist notion of hijab.

Some Western feminists, by adopting "such universal concepts as human rights", have rendered a "cross-cultural" conception of women's freedom ambiguous, "an ambiguity that is particularly evident with regard to veiling, to which (white) Western feminism is often at least tacitly, and at times even overtly, hostile" (Hirschman, 2003, p.173). As Nancy Hirschmann has maintained, such hostility is self-deprecating, since "understanding veiling as a complex practice within which women's freedom functions in correspondingly complex ways is important for feminists seeking to develop theories of concepts like "freedom" that have the potential for broad-based application" (2003, p.174). In other words, "precisely because veiling is "other" to most westerners, it may be able to reveal aspects of the West to which Westerners are often blind, such as assumptions about individuality, agency, and difference" (Hirschman, 2003, p.174). Thus, Satrapi, similar to Western feminists, oblivious to the complexity of the practice of hijab, has established a restrictive approach toward veiling in Iran and has likened it to a bridle which fetters Iranian women's freedom. By developing a universal discourse on human rights, she has ignored how the mandatory veiling in 1980s provided Iranian women and young female students with wider latitude.

As a matter of fact, compulsory hijab and single-sex schools, as Ansari has indicated in her book, *Jewels of Allah: The Untold Story of Women in Iran* (2015), were "initially a

welcome alternative for the majority of traditional families”, since “wearing the veil was what their families had been accustomed to for centuries, and same-sex education meant that girls could comfortably attend classes and thus gain an education” (Ansari, 2015, chapter 1). In other words, “owing to rules that many Western women and men may consider archaic and sexist, girls in Iran became educated and liberated” (Ansari, 2015, chapter 1).

Another point that could be discussed regarding Satrapi's attitude toward the veil is her considering hijab an anti-modern practice which has nothing to do with religion. As a little girl who believes she is the last prophet, she states, “I really don't know what to think about the veil. Deep down I was very religious but as a family we were very modern and avant-garde” (Satrapi, 2007, “The Veil” *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*). In the panel that such a feeling is expressed, readers see the anguished, nervous face of Marji, thinking about the veil as a concept standing in opposition to modernity. We should stress the fact that, through such a claim, Satrapi offers such an unworldly perspective on veiling that she totally dismisses the complicated concept of hijab to which is attributed a wide range of meanings in different cultures. On the complexity of veiling, Zarei Toosi has explicitly expatiated,

The multiplicity of positive and negative meanings associated with the veil also display a complex and, at times, contradictory range of meanings. It is positively associated with modesty, protection from unwanted male attention and desire, and liberation from the demands of consumerist capitalist economies and their investment in women's bodies. It signifies security and agency, and functions as a means of mobility in the public sphere. It also negatively stands for Islam's resistance to modernity, the challenges it sets against secular democracy, women's oppression in a misogynist system that protects men and society from women's presumed destructive sexual attraction, lack of mobility and agency, domesticity, an extremist and militant religious ideology. (Zarei Toosi, 2012, pp.173-174)

Arguably, Satrapi has adopted an extremely negative attitude toward the veil through depicting it as only a sign of lack of mobility and agency. In this memoir, all women who wear chadors and believe in hijab are depicted as gloom-stricken, passive, and pretentious citizens who, rather than believing in veiling, just try to stick to a governmental mandate. Such a depiction shows how Satrapi has been so blindfolded by the propaganda against veiling that she has forgotten how “the restoration of the veil” was “embraced by a large segment of women from traditional backgrounds”, as it gave them the opportunity to leave the “confines of their homes” and enter into the public domain (Ansari, 2015, Chapter 4). Ansari has straightforwardly expressed how compulsory hijab brought women to the social stage, and opened up new opportunities for them (2015, Chapter 4).

### Iran-Iraq War

In addition to veiling, another aspect of Satrapi's negative attitude toward Iranians is her bleak prospect of the

Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). The present researchers believe she perpetrates two major faults in her depiction of this particular war: firstly, she portrays all the youth that participated in the war as naïve, feeble-minded people who had no understanding of a military battle; and secondly, she never makes any references to the unquestionably important role of women in the war.

### *Satrapi's misrepresentation of the young soldiers and the promised women in paradise*

Satrapi in *Persepolis* offers her audience a totally unrealistic limited representation of the youth who participated in the war. She depicts them as gullible beings belonging to poor families, who are deceived by the authorities into believing that they will go to paradise replete with every sort of blessings, if they get killed in the battlefield. What Shahab, one of Marji's cousins who has been sent to the front since the beginning of his military service says clearly shows Satrapi's tough stance against the motivation of the teenagers who volunteered to participate in the war: “They come from poor areas, you can tell.... First they convince them that the afterlife is even better than Disneyland, then they put them in a trance with all their songs.... It's nuts! They hypnotize them and just toss them into battle, absolute carnage” (Satrapi, 2007, “The Key” *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*).

The worst part of Satrapi's depiction of young soldiers is to render them too vacuous to be beguiled into accepting death in the minefields by a little plastic key and the promise of women in paradise. Nasrine's son is a significant character, through whom Satrapi represents most of the youth that were determined to defend their country for the thrilling promises they had been given. Nasrine is Satrapi's maid, who one day complains about her son's decision to participate in the war. Nasrine, after showing “a plastic key painted gold” to Marji and her mother, explains how her son has been duped into going to the war: “They gave this to my son at school. They told the boys that if they went to war and were lucky enough to die, this key would get them into heaven” (Satrapi, 2007, “The Key” *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*). She continues, “They told him that in paradise there will be plenty of food, women and houses made of gold and diamonds” (Satrapi, 2007, “The Key” *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*). When she sees Marji and her mother's faces evincing shock and surprise over hearing the promise of women in paradise, she furthers, “Well, he's fourteen years old. That's exciting” (Satrapi, 2007, “The Key” *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*). Satrapi actually pictures the young teenagers who were determined to go to the war as boys with insatiable quest for sex, who were deceived just by the promise of sleeping with women in paradise. Arguably, the climax of showing young soldiers as ignorant teenagers fooled by golden keys is the panel which shows an inordinate number of soldiers getting blown up in the minefields with their golden plastic keys around their necks, while Marji is having a joyful time at the very first party she has attended (Satrapi, 2007, “The Key” *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*).

### *Iran's war literature: Some life stories*

Marji's depiction of the gullibility of the teenagers and the youth who volunteered to participate in the war can be rejected by two significant points; firstly, she ignores the will power of Iranian soldiers and shows all of them tricked into going to the battle; secondly, she dismisses the fact that although "a large proportion of Iranian forces were religious zealots" (Pelletiere, 1992, xiii), the main reason for their participation in the war was not religion, but defending their country, and protecting their fellow country men and women. Although religion provided the Iranian youth with a great motivation to go to the war, their patriotism should by no means be disregarded as an inconsequential impetus. In order to delineate that most of the young forces willingly participated in the war to defend their country, not for a plastic golden key or a promise for women, we will draw upon the war literature of Iran, specifically the collected oral memories of martyrs and veterans of the war. To achieve this goal, we have chosen three works containing the life stories of two martyrs and a former prisoner of the Iraqi army: *Mah dar Meh* (Moon in the fog) (2013), *Salam bar Ebrahim* (Salute to Ebrahim) (2009), and *Yek Vajab va Chahar Angosht* (A Room of the Size of a Hand and Four Fingers) (2011), which are the collected memories of Iraj Rostami, Ebrahim Hadi, and Azim Haggi, respectively.

*Mah dar Meh* (Moon in the Fog) is the life story of Iraj Rostami, written by Mahboube Merajipour through her interviews with Iraj's wife and comrades. Iraj Rostami was the father of two little daughters, the elder of whom was just ten years old, when he was asked to exploit his talents in the Iran-Iraq conflict. Despite severe injuries to one of his knees, and his wife's insistence on his not leaving his family, he decides to go to the war to defend his country. He cooperates with Mustafa Chamran in managing guerilla wars, and amazingly, his unwavering faith in God makes him see lack of munitions as no barrier to leaving the battle. Interestingly, he does not care about titles or promotions and calls himself simply "basiji [a voluntary defender]" rather than using the military titles bestowed on him. Most of the time, he donates his food to the war-stricken people and loses about forty kilos until he gets martyred. In *Mah dar Meh*, also there are several accounts of young soldiers who sacrificed their lives to defend the borders of their country, and their high endurance originated from their faith in God and Islamic codes. Thus, certainly, men like Rostami, who had a tender-hearted wife and two little daughters, could by no means sacrifice their families for the promises given about paradise and women. He and all the young comrades accompanying him endeavored to defend their country and repel the enemy with all the limited facilities they were provided with, at the cost of their lives and their families.

*Salam bar Ebrahim* (Salute to Ebrahim), published by Ebrahim Hadi's Cultural Group, is about an unmarried young man belonging to a poor family, whose story could represent one of those young people that Satrapi tries to depict. The book consists of several stories that the family members and friends of Ebrahim Hadi have recounted regarding his lifestyle and his memories in the battlefield. Ebrahim was

born in a lower-class family and lost his father in his teens. Surmounting too many hardships, he managed to become a formidable athlete while continuing his studies. Though a professional in wrestling, volleyball, football, and ping pong, no title or medal appealed to him. His faith in God and Islamic codes is praised by anyone who knows him, as is reflected in all his altruistic intentions and actions. When he was not in the battlefields, he worked as a teacher and spent his puny income on buying foods and clothes for his students. His sense of morality was so profound that he did not shoot an unarmed Iraqi man, and wrestled with him in order to take him as a captive. Ebrahim gets killed in the battlefield at the age of twenty-six and his body has never been found. His affection, kind-heartedness, unfaltering patience, and his entirely praiseworthy sense of morality, which were all the result of his unwavering faith in God, provided the required motivation for him to accept an agonizing death in order to safeguard the borders of his country. It is important to note that because of his virile body, he appealed to young women and could easily marry a woman of his choice and live a happy married life thronged with earthly pleasures; nevertheless, he chose to use his capabilities and gifts to defend his homeland. Iran's history contains too many men like Ebrahim, who consciously chose to defend their nation and nationality. They were wise enough not to be tricked into confronting death just for a promise of sleeping with women in paradise, a possibility that they certainly had on the planet Earth.

*Yek Vajab va Chahar Angosht* (A Room of the Size of a Hand and Four Fingers), is another memoir representing the immature children who decided to go to the war and are forever doomed in Satrapi's idea as nonunderstanding teenagers fooled into going to heaven through getting killed in the battle. *Yek Vajab va Chahar Angosht* covers the life story of Azim Haggi, compiled and edited by Mohammad Pourhalm. Azim was born in a poor family in one of the small northern cities of Iran. His childhood and schooldays are vividly described in the book to make the readership understand that he was a child sharing the very same interests of all other children. However, when the war starts, Azim decides to participate in the war in spite of his parents' disapproval. His faith helps him bear all the difficulties of the battle, and all the revolting torments he was afflicted in captivity. The lucid description of sufferings and pains that he endured during his captivity makes any reader ponder over the Iranian forces' strong faith and resolution. Obviously, no human being can bear all those dreadful pains for a promise of a far-fetched heaven. As portrayed in the book, most of the teenagers and adults who willingly participated in the war were cognizant of the severe consequences they would face, but chose to defend their country and overcame their hesitations by their belief in Islamic concepts such as martyrdom and jihad, not a fake promise of a paradise full of women.

Since in *Persepolis*, the harrowing aspects of the war are experienced by a seemingly unblemished, forthright child, affiliated with no political association, the audience can be easily deluded into believing that Iranian youth were vapid people who participated in the war to gratify their

sexual needs in the paradise, as promised by the authorities. Undoubtedly, through such reductive representations, Satrapi is re-establishing some main pillars of Orientalism. First and foremost, by depicting all the Iranian young soldiers as immature, imbecile beings, she is “inventing collective identities for large members of individuals who are actually quite diverse” (Said, 2003, p. xxii), as is demonstrated by the memoirs we talked about above. Also, by highlighting Iranian forces’ constant obsession with amorous advances, Satrapi is strengthening another presumption of Orientalist discourse that there is “an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex” (Said, 2003, p.188).

Before moving on, we should highlight the undeniable fact that there is always some truth value in every memoir. This is the reason that we drew on some Persian memoirs of Iran’s war literature to provide counterarguments against Satrapi’s reductive portrayal of the Iranian young soldiers who voluntarily participated in the war to defend their country against Saddam’s attacks. Undoubtedly, characters like Iraj Rostami, Ebrahim Hadi, and Azim Haggi could exist in the real world at any corner of the world.

#### ***Iran-Iraq war and the role of Iranian women in the war***

The other significant point that Satrapi has ignored to talk about regarding the Iran-Iraq war is her not making any reference to the indispensable role of Iranian women in the war, whereas as a native informant, she has been expected to enlarge on the strives of her fellow country women to defend their homeland and improve their society. Not only has Satrapi not discussed Iranian women’s role in the Iran-Iraq battle but also she has shown them as passive nonchalant people unconcerned about each other’s problems. Marji’s mother, for instance, is shown as a politically active citizen; yet when asked by Marji whether she cares about the killed youth or not, she blithely answers, “Our country has always known war and martyrs. So, like my father said: “when a big wave comes, lower your head and let it pass” (Satrapi, 2007, “The Key” *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*). Nasrine, like Marji’s mother, just thinks about how to prevent her son from going to the war, and never does she think about the youth getting villainously killed by the fiendish weapons in the battlefield. Also, Satrapi, of all reactions of Iranian women to the war, chooses to focus on the unwelcome attitude of some Tehrani women to war refugees from southern provinces of Iran, calling their women sluts and trouble makers (Satrapi, 2007, “The Jewel” *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*).

Satrapi’s negligence of the active role of women in the Iran-Iraq war is a noteworthy blunder. What is of paramount significance is how Satrapi has shown Iranian women insulting one another rather than assisting each other to deal with the problems caused by the war. Her representation of Iranian women in 1980s is one of the most unrealistic pictures she is offering to her Western audience. In order to provide plain examples as counterarguments, we will first expand on women’s role in the war, and then briefly refer to *Da* (2008) (means mother in Kurdish), the memoir of Seyyedeh Zahra Hosseini, who, in her teens, experienced the devastating dimensions of the Iran-Iraq war in Khorramshahr.

As demonstrated by Mateo Mohammad Farzaneh “[Iranian] women participated in the war to either defend their nation, Islam, or both. On the same token, they operated in the war officially and voluntarily” (2015, p.1). It should be emphasized that Iranian women living on the frontlines played a much more critical role since they had to participate “in several capacities and their actions included but were not limited to reporting for the state media, preparing war propaganda, providing paramilitary or paramedic training to other women, performing paramedic duties and operating as intelligence and counter intelligence officers” (Farzaneh, 2015, p. 2). We should also stress that save for women who participated in the war either officially or voluntarily, “[t]here were sizeable number of women that did not sign up for the war since they were dragged into it involuntarily” (Farzaneh, 2015, p. 2). Farzaneh has offered a brisk summary of the role of Iranian women in the Iran-Iraq battle,

Iranian women participated in the conflict against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). They struggled in several ways and were a major supporter of the troops on the frontlines and provided key logistical support. As part of their struggle, they carried guns, went on surveillance missions, cared for the injured, guarded ammunition depots, organized food drives, voluntarily denoted their material possessions, and most dramatically, encouraged the men in their lives (fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons) to fight to the bitter end. (Farzaneh, 2015, p. 2)

We should highlight that the most important role that Iranian women played during the Iran-Iraq war, as Farzaneh has also maintained, was setting aside their feelings and emotions toward the closest members of their families and asking them to participate in the war, especially due to their faith and religious beliefs (Farzaneh, 2015, p. 1). Not only has this vital aspect of the Iran-Iraq war not been mentioned in *Persepolis*, but also a surprisingly fallacious image of women has been offered.

In order to provide more credible evidence to show the constructive role of Iranian women in the Iran-Iraq war, we will draw on *Da* (da means mother in Kurdish), one of the most popular works of the war literature of Iran, which saw its one hundred fifty seventh reprint in 2017, and also was translated into English by Paul Sprachman. *Da*, Seyyedeh Zahra Hosseini’s memoir, collected and written by Seyyedeh Azam Hosseini (No relation), incorporates the hardships that women confronted during the Iran-Iraq war. Zahra, a seventeen-year-old girl, and her younger sister, Leila, work in the cemetery, and help wash the corpses and put them in graves. Hosseini’s description of the horrendous conditions of the corpses is indicative of the horrifying experiences of people living in Khorramshahr. Zahra, besides working in the cemetery, learns premedical skills and helps the injured. She loses her father and her brother, Ali, in the first year of the war, and buries them with her own hands. In spite of her own severe sufferings, she consoles herself and every member of her family by saying that they voluntarily chose to defend their country, and martyrdom was their ultimate goal. Though injured in the war, she continues to help the Iranian forces and the war-stricken people of Khorramshahr. Forced

to leave for Tehran with her family as the war escalates, she marries Habib, and bears four children. Even in her conjugal life, she never asks her husband to stay at home rather than fighting at the borders. Oddly, she enjoys seeing her husband defend their country and never hinders him, though she had to overcome many hardships living alone with her little children. In addition to Zahra's own miseries, the sufferings of "Da", Shahpasand Hossini, Zahra's mother, are vividly described. What is of paramount importance in this book is the portrayal of women's stamina and strength during the war. As the name of the memoir implies, Hosseini's aim for writing a book of about seven hundred fifty pages has been elucidating the role of women during the war. Since the role of women in the Iran-Iraq conflict has been historically ignored, the success of the publication of her memoir "reflects with some delay, the feminization of Iranian literature through its writers" (Nanquette, 2013, 949), which, we believe, has been one of the most significant achievements of women to make their voice heard not only to their compatriots but also to the world. *Da*, perceivably, is the best counterpoint for Satrapi's misrepresentation of Iranian women as passive, egocentric citizens.

### Narrative Techniques and the Appeals of *Persepolis*

So far, we have examined Satrapi's Orientalist discourse in her memoir through showing her unrealistically gloomy depiction of veiling and Iran-Iraq war. As we have been arguing in this paper, although Satrapi's Orientalist discourse was by no means a new phenomenon, *Persepolis* has played a more critical role in misrepresenting Iranians in the Post-September 11 era. Satrapi's Orientalist stance has not been highlighted not only because of her emphasis on universal human rights but also because of the features that have distinguished her life narrative from other memoirs of Iranian women, which are its graphic genre and the child narrator. These two properties have arguably rendered *Persepolis* a universal story fathomable by anyone living at any corner of the world, as a result of which, surveying the significance of these two features is an imperative for this project.

### *Persepolis* and the medium of comics

Recounting her life story through pictures has undeniably made Satrapi's memoir accessible to a wide range of audience. Choosing such a medium for a memoir was certainly an excessively wise choice to emphasize the hardships that Iranians encountered after the Islamic Revolution and to highlight the effects of such traumas on little Marji and other children her age. Although theorists have distinguished comic books from graphic novels, regarding *Persepolis*, we will use both words interchangeably, as our purpose here is to convey how images have provided Satrapi with the grounds she needs to make her voice heard to a larger readership.

One of the most significant works written on the advantages of the comic medium has been Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994). McCloud,

in this book, elaborates on how comics provides authors with a better medium to convey their message. He defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, 1994, p. 91). In this work, he, after giving a diligent survey of the history of comics, expands on the important role of comics in the world of art, which he believes "lies deep within the human condition" (McCloud, 1994, p. 193). He argues that we human beings "live in a state of profound isolation" for our incapability to express our inner feelings and thoughts, as a result of which "all media of communication are a by-product of our sad inability to communicate directly from mind to mind" (McCloud, 1994, p. 194). McCloud explicitly elaborates on how nowadays "comics is one of the very few forms of mass communication in which individual voices still have a chance to be heard" (1994, p. 198). He also describes comics as the medium that has all the potentials of painting and film plus the intimacy of the written word (1994, p. 212).

In addition to all these, cartoons afford comic works some other features which render them critically significant. Such features have made this medium for a life narrative a controversial one: firstly, unlike realistic art, cartooning provides the artist with the opportunity to focus on "specific details"; therefore, cartooning could be deemed "a form of amplification through simplification" (McCloud, 1994, p. 30); secondly, the "universality of cartoon imagery" makes it of a vital significance, for instance, "the more cartoony a face is", "the more people it could be said to describe" (McCloud, 1994, p. 31); and lastly, "the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled, an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm" (McCloud, 1994, p. 31). The last feature is exactly what has led to *Persepolis*' unending popularity in the West. The Westerners have found in Satrapi's memoir a great means to travel to a Middle-Eastern Islamic society like Iran and see the miseries that since 2001 have been attributed to Iranian Muslim women and men.

Critics such as Notkin, McGrath, and Basu have also emphasized the vital role of pictures in Satrapi's memoir. Notkin, for instance, maintains that Satrapi has used "the quintessentially Western format of the graphic novel to tell an *inconvertibly middle-eastern* (sic) story" [emphasis mine] (2003, par.3). She asserts that the medium Satrapi has chosen to write her memoir has made "her work accessible to a wide contemporary audience, perhaps including people of the age of her younger-self protagonist" (Notkin, 2003, par.2). Besides, the format has aided her to "provide invaluable wordless commentary on some of her core points" (Notkin, 2003, par.2). McGrath also considers *Persepolis* a comic book and believes "[c]omic books are what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal—and if the highbrows are right, they are a form perfectly suited to our dumbed-down culture and collective attention deficit" (2014, par. 2). In short, *Persepolis*' medium of a comic book has intensified its appeal as a novel with a universal theme, causing more international readers to identify with the Iranian protagonist of the novel.

### **Persepolis and Child Narration**

Another important technique that Satrapi has developed in *Persepolis* in order to depict her life narrative as a universal story is establishing a child narrator whose statements are all imbued with a manipulating innocence. Using a child narrator provides the author with two peculiar advantages: firstly, through narrating her life story from the perspective of naïve Marji, who is still untainted with the delinquency and impurity of the grownups, she has created a universal persona, with whom any reader from any nationality can easily identify; and secondly, depicting the events through the eyes of a little child has enabled the author to make implicit connections with the social changes that were taking place in Iran in 1980s, as we will argue further in the following paragraphs.

Satrapi, from the very beginning, depicts Marji as a little girl who has no understanding of cultural, social, economic, or religious boundaries. Marji is a little pure, kind-hearted, innocent character who knows herself as an upcoming prophet. She has adopted her confidential relationship with God, believes she is the last prophet, and tries to write her holy book. As a prophet, she is determined to eradicate any sort of social stratification so that maids would be able to eat with the family they work for. The manipulating innocence of Marji reaches its climax when she tells her grandmother that she will cure her pains by simply forbidding old people from suffering (Satrapi, 2007, "The Veil" *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*).

Marji's reactions toward the harrowing tortures of political dissidents highlight the efforts of a little child who is trying hard to fathom the chaotic world in which she is trying to create unity and to keep justice, as a prophet. As she wants to be "justice, love, and the wrath of God in one" (Satrapi, 2007, "The Veil" *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*), she tries to feel the political prisoners' pains, punish the torturers, and also show forgiveness, whenever possible. For instance, in order to understand how her grandfather was tormented in a cell filled with water, Marji takes a very long shower until her hands become wrinkled. In order to exact revenge on the torturers, Marji, decides to unite her friends in the neighborhood against Ramin, whose father has supposedly killed "a million people" (Satrapi, 2007, "The Party" *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*) as a Savak agent. Her childish suggestion for Ramin's punishment unquestionably seems appealing to all readers as it shows the significance of children's exposure to violence and their reactions, along with their endeavors to exert balance and harmony in the world. Marji's desperate efforts to exert balance and harmony by wreaking vengeance on Ramin as a representative of persecutors end with her admirable forgiveness, which obviously indicates how children act prophet-like and how their small pure world is tainted with the corruption of their society. Undoubtedly, "[t]his childish fantasy reinforces universal assumptions about the quaintly naïve understanding the young child has of her place in the universe" (Naghibi & O'Malley, 2007, p.244). Thus, Marji's manipulating innocence bestows a supreme authenticity and immediacy to Satrapi's memoir, which consequently leads to the universality of her persona, and causes more forceful sense of identification in the audience.

We should underline that one of the important dimensions that has led to the popularity of memoirs and their dubious role is the narrating 'I' of the memoirist. Whitlock contends that although several critics have emphasized that "'I' of autobiography and memoir has never been anything but virtual", "the 'I' of autobiography can pack a punch in the material world, and life narratives have a distinctive role to play in the struggle to shape dialogues across cultures" (Whitlock, 2007, pp.1-2). Hence, arguably, the role of the autobiographical 'I' excessively increases when the 'I' is a little innocent child trying hard to understand the complexity of life during political ferments and wartime. As Costantino has argued, "*Persepolis*, because it recreates the past through the eyes of a child, lends a human face to history and therefore offers readers a "user-friendly" point of entry into difficult, complicated, and confusing historical events and cultural intricacies" (2008, p.432). Naghibi and O'Malley also have referred to a shared observation of critics regarding the universality of the persona of little Marji (Naghibi & O'Malley, 2007, pp. 242-243).

### **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, Satrapi's Orientalist discourse in *Persepolis* has not been meticulously explored, since her singular techniques in employing pictures, choosing a little child to narrate the history of a nation and her Universalist attitude have blinded the critics to her adopting of this discourse. Her strategies have hidden how she, as a native informant, has justified "the imperial designs" of the West, through "feign[ing] authority, authenticity, and native knowledge" by apprising her Western audience of "the atrocities taking place in the region of their birth" (Dabashi, 2011, p.72). Satrapi, through "denigrat[ing] the relevance of context" has regarded the culture of her own country with "derisive contempt", and has "celebrate[d] American or Western exceptionalism (Said, 2003, p.xix).

Satrapi, in *Persepolis*, similar to a "comprador intellectual" (Dabashi, 2011, p.72), whether consciously or unconsciously, has reinforced the Westerners' negative stance against the East, and unlike her claim to exonerate Iran from accusations of fundamentalism and barbarism, has buttressed the domination of the "McWorld"(Barber, 1995, p.), under the pretext of defending human rights. Culture-blind discourses of human rights, as Whitlock has also emphasized, lead to dismissing cultural differences and historical contexts, and offer a "seemingly uncontested ethics of cross-cultural relations,... which is part of the doxa of globalization" (Whitlock, 2007, p. 13). Satrapi, in order to establish a seemingly Universalist attitude, has actually blinded herself to the cultural context, and other people's feelings and beliefs and practices, which, according to William James is "the consequence of humans' 'practical' engulfment in their own lives, such that the lives of others appear empty and beneath due respect or appreciation" (as quoted in Skillen, 1996, pp.33-34). Her peculiar style and wise choice of a child narrator have unquestionably rendered the book approachable to a wide-ranging audience impressed by the human rights appeal of the text, as a result of which, Satrapi's *Persepolis* has played a much more critical role in



perpetuating the orientalist discourse about Iran than the works of her counterparts.

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