

# Comics and Cultures: Narrating the Self and Other in *Persepolis*

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This article performs a close reading of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The memoir portrays Marjane coming of age in Iran in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution (1978-79), her brief life in Europe, and her readjustment to Iran after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-89). However, having lived in two different cultures, the other characters she encounters define her as neither "Western" nor "Iranian," leaving Marjane to feel in an ambiguous "in between" cultural position that leaves her without an identity. This process of "othering" in the role of shaping Marjane's identity within a transcultural narrative will be examined. The narratological approach uses *focalization*, observing the narrative perspective of the first-person voice of Marjane. The purpose in analyzing the narrative perspective from this approach seeks to determine what Marjane defines for herself and her own sense of identity apart from what others define for her. It will be demonstrated that othering greatly impacts how Marjane perceives her identity, and will further speculate the productivity of defining people with transcultural experiences as having fragmented, "in-between" identities. While perspectives of transcultural identity may risk encouraging othering and marginalization, this analysis focused on the personal narrative perspective hopes to demonstrate a constructive approach to reading first-person narratives involving cultural pluralism.

## Key Words:

Focalization; graphic novels; memoirs; identity; othering; transculturalism; Iran

## INTRODUCTION

As a young person discovers his or her self-understanding, this process is equally affected through encounters with the Other: other people, cultures, ideas, and locations. One contemporary example of such interactions occurs within the narrative of *Persepolis*, an autobiographical novel by Marjane Satrapi. Satrapi tells her coming of age story living in both Iran and Europe in the aftermath of Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1978-79. Particularly, Marjane

encounters geographic and cultural notions of identity and belonging that impact her own identity formation. This occurs first upon moving to Austria at age 14 where she attends school away from the rocky political situation in Iran. Then 4 years later, she returns to a drastically different postwar Iran and Iranian society that ultimately challenge her readjustment. At these points of cultural contact, Marjane discovers how others define her in relation to themselves. A heavy downfall occurs after her return to Iran when Marjane finds herself in an identity crisis. With restricted access to both Austrian and Iranian society, she explains:

My calamity could be summarized into one sentence: I was nothing. I was a Westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West. I had no identity. I didn't even know anymore why I was living (Satrapi 2007: 272).

Her resolution to this crisis occurs as she develops a consistent sense of self, which is most notable in the process of developing her personal democracy, and then articulating this democracy to others. Furthermore, yet less obvious, is that her personal democracy consistently exists as a continuous base woven through the entire narrative, which exists in the form of her first-person perspective telling the story. For this reason, the narratological approach called *focalization* will be applied to analyze the different narrative tracks that work to bring forth this perspective. By focusing the analysis to what Satrapi's first-person perspective interprets of her identity, this article reveals how Satrapi's interpretations add a different layer to the preexisting and complex interpretations of migration and transcultural identities. It will also question the extent to which dominant views still hold fast to assume the "West" and the "East" are fixed, stable, and unmoving cultures of which migrants are cast to exist as fragmented or unidentified in between otherwise fixed cultures. An analysis focused on her consistent narrative voice, rather than on the continuously changing definitions of identity by others around her, will therefore demonstrate how, despite having transcultural experiences, her identity does not exist unstably between supposed stable and defined cultural spaces.

## NARRATOLOGY, FOCALIZATION, AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

In narratology, the method of focalization distinguishes between the story narration and the narration of a character's cognitive processes (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011: 330). Basic types of focalization include external focalization in contrast to internal focalization (Toolan 1988: 69). Whereas external focalization occurs outside of the story and dissociates from a character in the text, internal focalization refers to the events presented through the restricted cognition and perception of a specific focal character (Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 2005: 173). The perspective in *Persepolis* is thus internal focalization, and also specifically fixed internal focalization as the narration is fixed to the protagonist, Marjane (Jahn 2005: 174). Her position is able to report feelings, thoughts, and reactions of herself and several characters (Toolan 1988: 70-71). Furthermore, two perspectives come from Marjane at once. First is the focalizing subject, or, Marjane's younger persona who "sees" the events as they occur, and the second is the narrating subject telling the story, or, Marjane's adult persona who "speaks." In the structure of autobiographical narration, and for the sake of readability, the subject "who sees" will be referred to as the "experiencing-I" voice, while "who speaks" reminiscently about the events is called the "narrating-I" (Löschnigg in Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 2005: 34).

Satrapi's artistic choice setting apart her work from other autobiographical narratives is her use of drawings to visually symbolize her characters. Recently the term "graphic novel" emerged to describe works like *Persepolis*, where "dual narrative tracks of word-and-image combine to register temporality spatially" (Chute 2008: 452). In other words, symbolic representations of specific moments, events, and interactions in Marjane's memory are drawn into designated panel-spaces across the page. We can therefore understand *Persepolis* as a graphic novel. (footnot 1) Applying focalization to analyze the narrative tracks of graphic novels is still a relatively new approach in scholarship, but the aim is to find the most productive way to analyze the simultaneously occurring visual and verbal tracks (Horstkotte and Pedri 2011: 331). For the purpose of this article, approaches of focalization that consider the internal perspective of Marjane in both image and text are the most useful for this analysis. In the following three sections, select examples directly from the narrative will be described. Then, an analysis using focalization will follow to explain how these narrative points exemplify Marjane's identity crisis and what her narrative tracks reveal.

### "AN IRANIAN IN THE WEST"

Beginning in Vienna, Marjane feels the differences between Iranian and Western culture. Not only are her own assumptions of Western life challenged, but also are

the assumptions that Westerners predispose of Marjane. In one instance, Marjane is on a tram in Vienna when a stranger yells at her in German. Her narrating-I tells us: "It was an old man who said 'dirty foreigner, get out!' I had heard it another time in the street. But I tried to make light of it. I thought that it was just the reaction of a nasty old man" (Satrapi 2007: 177). Then, another memorable experience of which Marjane's narrating-I refers to as "the famous day" she receives a derogatory comment from the mother superior in the boarding home where she lived in Vienna. Here, Marjane's narrating-I explains she was so hungry that one plate of food wasn't enough, so she brings the entire pot of her dinner down to the TV room where she eats and watch TV. She adds that she loved this privilege to eat in front of the TV because it was strictly forbidden in her parent's home (176). When the mother superior sees her eating straight out of a pot, she admonishes Marjane by targeting her Iranian heritage: "...What kind of manners are these? It's true what they say about Iranians. They have no education." Not one to take an insult however, Marjane quickly retorts, "It's true what they say about you, too. You were all prostitutes before becoming nuns!" (177) The conclusion of this experience shows Marjane in the office of the mother superior's assistant to condemn her comment. Although she is expelled from the boarding home, the narrative tracks switch back to the narrating-I perspective to conclude to the reader: "In every religion, you find the same extremists" (178).

After being specifically targeted for her Iranian or "foreign" status, Marjane tries to deny her Iranian nationality altogether. This occurs when a young man asks Marjane her nationality and she tells him she is French. Unconvinced, the young man says she has a "funny accent for a French girl," and Marjane is portrayed walking away with a guilty look on her face for her actions. As if feeling the need to justify to the reader of her reasoning for denying her nationality, her narrating-I explains that she does this because: "...at the time, Iran was the epitome of evil and to be Iranian was a heavy burden to bear" (195).

### "A WESTERNER IN IRAN"

Marjane's exposure and interaction with European life has indeed impacted her awareness of herself with respect to her Iranian heritage, and has also made her aware of the role others have on her sense of belonging. Her Iranian heritage made it difficult for her to identify with Europeans, whereas in Iran, her European exposure is now a target for others as attempts to re-situate herself with Iranians. By this time in Iran in 1988, the war with Iraq has ceased, yet there still remain obvious divides among the ideologies of society. Marjane narrates that the Fundamentalist Iran, which exists in the public and political ideological sphere, reflects fundamental religious views and rules of conduct expected of society. This contrasts with an

“Occidentalized Iran,” or, Iranians who had employed aspects of Western culture as both relief from and rebellion against the oppressive regime (Leservot 2011: 123). These acts of Western culture exist more prominently in the private sphere of society, but when it is visible in public, they are considered acts of rebellion, such as intentionally wearing Nike sneakers or bright lipstick directed against the Islamic dress code.

These social divides become apparent to Marjane when she reunites with her childhood friends. A large panel image depicts this moment by focusing in on the faces of three girls, and a slightly offset Marjane. Her friends are shown obviously made-up, with lipstick, eyeliner, sculpted eyebrows, and colored, trendy hairstyles. Little stars have been drawn around the girls to exaggerate their primed appearances. In contrast, Marjane has no makeup or stars around her head. She is drawn slightly distanced from her friends, and she has a gaping look of surprise. At the bottom of this panel, Marjane narrates to the reader: “... They all looked like the heroines of American TV series, ready to get married at the drop of a hat, if the opportunity presented itself” (Satrapi 2007: 259). One of her friends asks Marjane: “Why do you look like a nun? No one would ever guess that you’d lived in Europe” (259). Relying only on her outward appearance, Marjane’s friends do not associate her with the images they assume about what is “Western.” And furthermore, Marjane likens her Iranian friends to American TV stars. Ironically, while Marjane does not outwardly dress as a Western woman and in fact looks closer to a “nun,” another scene pulls her identity in the opposite direction of this image. This is when her friends ask Marjane if she had lost her virginity, and Marjane responds honestly: “Of course! I’m nineteen!” Her friends press on, “So, do tell, how was it?” Marjane responds, “It depends with who. It’s not always pleasurable.” At the realization that Marjane had relations with more than one man, one girl asks her angrily, “So what’s the difference between you and a whore???” Again, Marjane’s narrating-I comes in to conclude to the reader: “Underneath their outward appearance of being modern women, my friends were real traditionalists... To them, I had become a decadent Western woman” (270).

### “I WAS NOTHING”

It makes sense, then, that Marjane comes to a point of utter confusion: “My calamity could be summarized in one sentence: I was nothing. I was a Westerner in Iran, and Iranian in the West. I had no identity. I didn’t even know anymore why I was living” (272). In this scene, the image of Marjane that corresponds to her narrative is drawn as an empty, white and faceless silhouette of her body outlined by a black background. While the visual image of her experiencing-I is faceless and voiceless, the narrating-I perspective still exists to tell the reader the point of crisis she had reached.

### ANALYSIS

Marjane’s experiences first demonstrate her interaction with the Other, and the role of others in the extent to which she can claim identity with Western or Iranian culture. Beginning with the notion of the “Other,” the concept is rather familiar within literary criticism, and can simply refer to how individuals and groups who have their own familiar ideology also form an “image” of another people with which to compare and contrast. This image refers to the “more or less vague complex of ideas existing among the member of one people about the qualities, the customs, the outward appearance, the culture of others” (Hollander 1948: 217). Other literary critics have expanded upon this in their various fields, and Edward Said’s groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1979) concerns the Other in terms of the direct or indirect control from European colonization of other cultures (Said 2003 [1979]: 5). Said’s work emphasizes how processes of “othering,” in which the justification of domination and perceived superiority of the West, results in unequal and divisive “us” versus “them” attitudes that have had devastating results in colonial history. Examples of dehumanizing types of othering can include idealizing another culture or individual as “exotic” or “sexualized,” or, as “savage,” “demonic,” or “uncivilized.”

Such dehumanizing forms of “othering” are present in *Persepolis*, as when Marjane is called a “dirty foreigner,” or when the mother superior assumes she is “uneducated” because she is Iranian. Finally, Marjane anticipates a reaction from a young man asking where she is from, and to avoid any perceived prejudice, she tells him she is French. Then back in Iran, Marjane surprisingly experiences forms of othering that stem from the Iranian perception of a “Westerner” in contrast to what is a perceived Iranian. In this case, Marjane’s outward appearance deems her a “nun” to her friends, while her sexual experiences label her a “whore.” Particularly important to note is the gendered form of othering she experiences of being labeled between only two choices for women to belong: either “chaste” or “whore.”

The role of others and the process of “othering” are clear in preventing Marjane from belonging to Iran or the West. This lack of belonging brings up a central theme in narratives of migration from one culture to another, that is, of feeling relegated to a space “in between” by others from both the home and host culture. James Clifford points out that this sense is commonly reported for those within the “diaspora” (Clifford 1994: 306). Broadly defined, the diaspora has become “loose in the world” due to the effects of “decolonization, increased immigration, global communications, and transport – a whole range of phenomena that encourage multi-locale attachments, dwelling, and travelling within and across nations” (Clifford 1994: 306). The diaspora is thus “generally” the movement and relocation

of groups of different kinds of peoples throughout the world (McLeod, 2010 [2000]: 236). The notion of the diaspora expands to include the multi-directional coming and going of peoples, of border crossing, of multi-cultural contact, and is understood as in flux rather than in stasis. From this sense, the diaspora is not limited to a specific region, type or culture of people, but applies in a broader sense to the movement of people.

As exemplified through Marjane's experience, the feeling of living "in-between" cultures and the sense of being "out of place" occurs when she encounters others who identify with the host culture. In Homi K. Bhabha's "The Location of Culture" (1994), the "in-between" position is an opportunity, or, to allow for elaborating singular or communal strategies of selfhood to initiate new signs of identity. From this perspective, the in-between can act as a privileged position, as one is at an advantage to know and exist within a plurality of ideologies and cultures. From perspectives on authenticating the space in between cultures, it is thus a positive opportunity to embrace movement rather than fixity, thus extending to include the human experience and identities as fluid. Such a position might therefore provide a newer model to prepare us for the type of changes occurring in our increasingly inter- and trans- cultural world. Further, such a model can challenge former tendencies to hold onto ideas of peoples and cultures that tend to divide into "us" versus "them" attitudes, and which can encourage processes of othering.

Nevertheless, if we consider that embracing the in-between culture space has the advantage to deconstruct fixed constructions of "West" and "East," is it possible for *all* people to embrace a fluid model of cultural pluralism? Or does this simply create a third, yet fixed space to relegate people of a diaspora? In Marjane's case, she was cast to an indefinite space where she lost her identity and hence her authority, and as such, suggests that the problem is that the others she encountered did not recognize this space as one that is in mutual existence with themselves. For example, the word choices her narrating-I uses is revealing of how spaces of "West" and "East" are still perceived by the other as fixed: "I was a Westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West." As it is clear, Marjane feels as if she is neither here nor there, thus highlighting one problem when the "West" and an "East" are defined in opposition to one another. Marjane's situation thus appears only to relegate her to yet another space, and one without definition, for which others can continue marginalize and identify *against*.

Leslie A. Adelson questions this tension in her analysis of Turkish migrants in Germany where recent literature written by people of migration are bracketed as "migrant literature" (Adelson 2005: 3). Even the very word "migrant" conjures an image of movement, which can easily become a label for only specific people

(3). Again, the problem is when a group of people are perceived as unstably in flux in contrast to a perceived stable community of the host country. In agreement with Adelson is Jane Hiddleston's work on the idea of community. Hiddleston points out that a much realistic description of our intercultural encounters exist as fluid interactions, where perceived oppositional confrontations (i.e., of "West" versus "East") occur instead in a series of relations (Hiddleston 2005: 33). In other words, a more realistic model of our current cultural interactions already displays fluidity, not fixity and opposition. However, this must first be acknowledged before attempting to dislodge notions of fixed spaces in our cultural encounters. As Persepolis demonstrates, the "in between" placement is not a position of power for her so long as spaces continue to exist in opposition to one another and so long as these spaces are unchanging. It is for these factors that Marjane defines this space in between as where she has no identity, rather than authenticating this where she can embrace a new, plural identity. Marjane's position instead is only further marginalized apart from others, and demonstrates the role of others in defining her identity. Thus, the in-between location is only problematic when it creates a new albeit marginalized space of otherness to which she is relegated.

#### SELF-RECOVERY: THE FIRST-PERSON VOICE

Despite the setbacks Marjane narrates, she does manage to overcome the challenges to her identity and self-image. Interestingly, it is Marjane herself, through expressing her personal voice, that she makes her individual persona visible within her social setting around her. Whereas the in between space was unfavorable for Marjane to authenticate her identity, an analysis of Marjane's narrative voices can offer a less ambiguous and more tangible identification of her identity than the space "in between" can offer. Her narrating voices, whether the experiencing-I voice or the narrating-I voice, exist consistently throughout the narrative as active, perceivable evidence of her identity. Her experiencing-I portrays her experiences while her narrating-I is at the advantage of looking back retrospectively to analyze the situation with her personal viewpoint, to critique her experience, and to say what she could not or did not say to the "other" when she experienced forms of othering. In this sense, her personal democracy, or personal viewpoints, are consistently "speaking." For example, at the conclusion of her infamous nun experience, her narrating-I serves to make a critique about religious extremism when she concludes that in every religion we can find extremists. That is, by removing the association of the term "religious extremism" from the religion of Islam, and then blurring this term to include all religions as capable of extremism, she both reveals her own viewpoints in such a way that compels the reader to see this connection. Or, when her friend assumes she is a "whore," Marjane's narrating-I track takes the

reader aside to point out the contrasting ideologies in Iranian society. Finally, although her experiencing persona loses her identity, Marjane still exists on the narrating-I track to narrate this loss to the reader. Her narrative statement is active to explain when she was cast outside the West or Iran and further reveals her critique of the very relevant concerns regarding identity upon intercultural contact. Thus, the narrative statement compels the reader to question to what extent we may hold onto fixed notions of cultures, locations, and societies. Furthermore, we might question how these notions shape our interactions with others, or, to what degree we allow unchanging ideas to contribute to destructive processes of othering, rather than constructive processes of understanding.

A final example powerfully demonstrates how Marjane recovers her individuality at the University of Tehran, when she and her classmates are called to a lecture entitled "Moral and Religious Conduct." The lecture asks students to conduct themselves decently, and specifically addresses the women to wear longer veils, to stop wearing makeup and wide-leg trousers that were in vogue at the time. Marjane confronts the committee, saying that a longer veil would hinder her from moving freely when she draws in the art studio. She also questions why the religious authorities were opposed to the wide-leg trousers, arguing that the shape of the trousers hide women's curves effectively. She ends her monologue asking if religion is merely opposed to fashion rather than preserving women's physical integrity (Satrapi 2007: 297).

For challenging the committee, the Islamic commission summons Marjane, and to her surprise, the authority praises her for "always saying what you think" (298). Rather than expelling Marjane, he asks her to design the uniform that she envisages would suit the needs of the art students. Marjane's narrating-I track ends this panel saying, "And this is how I recovered my self-esteem and dignity. For the first time in a long time, I was happy with myself" (298). This is a noticeable turn from the point of Marjane's perceived lack of identity and attempted suicide. Analyzing this narrative on the experiencing-I track clearly reveals how the personal narration of her views ties into her recovery of her identity. From a narrative perspective, this is visible when she uses personal pronouns such as "I," "my," and "as a woman," emphasizing her individual self to her audience (297). In this case, the experiencing-I communicates her critique while the narrating-I is silent. Again, this is a noticeable difference when she had lost her identity, as her experiencing-I voice was completely absent while her narrating-I voice was the only narration available to speak during her downfall. Satrapi also artistically emphasizes this recovery on the visual track by drawing her comic persona in such a way to individualize both her physical self and her voice. For example, her character is drawn as the only person standing while her classmates are seated (297).

Visually, it appears that her character is speaking to her readers, as if she were addressing us directly because the image of her persona faces the reader. Images of the classmates around her are drawn with their gazes directed respectfully toward Marjane as she speaks, further commanding the reader's attention on her character. She is also the only one speaking at the time, and her voice is captioned within the speech bubbles to emphasize a clear authority over her voice to which she claims authority. By individuating her character and her voice, and the visual effect commanding the audience's attention, Marjane's experiencing-I track acts in the way her narrating-I track had done previously to compel the readers to reconsider previously held notions. For instance, the visual and narrative picture Satrapi creates of herself is that of a woman speaking openly in a country often assumed to have silenced women. This therefore challenges a common assumption that, when left unchallenged, can fixate this conception as a truth, of which practices of othering women in Iran might continue. On describing the narrative structure in conjunction with the images, Rocio Davis explains that reading visual narratives require an increased interpretive effort on the part of the reader. That is to say, the reader must work to interpret both image and text. Davis suggests that, in putting forth more interpretive effort, this gives room for the audience to reconsider previously imagined concepts about Iran, transcultural interaction, and strategies of self-representation or identity formation (Davis 2005: 271). So, while working to interpret the multiple narrative tracks, we also participate alongside Marjane-as-narrator through her process of self-understanding. The drawn images furthermore allow for a spark of recognition in memory with which both reader and narrator identify. By incorporating the reader and narrator in a mutual process, this demonstrates how encounters with the Other exist in a relational, rather than oppositional, process of interaction.

Thus, her conclusion that this experience helped her redeem her self-esteem and dignity is clear in the way her character's identity is visually and verbally perceivable, rather than being lost in between an indefinite space. As she speaks to the "other" represented both in the audience within the narrative as well as the "other" represented in the audience of her readers, we can see this relational interaction with the other through this narrative conversation.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Marjane experiences forms of othering in both the "West" and in Iran, and from the perspectives of othering, her position of neither here nor there leaves her without an identity. In this sense, she could not turn the in-between space into a redefinition of her identity because it was not acknowledged by others. If it makes more sense to view her experience and those experiences of cultural encounters as relational, rather

than fixed, we can see this in the relational presence of her narrative voice with other characters and with the others in her audience. Finally, the critiques she makes translate her culturally plural experiences. That is, the structure of her narrative tracks exemplifies how such relational encounters occur. A sort of cultural synapse, if you will, occurs in drawing connections

between notions previously placed in opposition to one another. In this sense, there leaves no room to fall perilously and silently “in between” but rather to exist as an active participant on a mutual and even level and creating common grounds for those gaps and cracks that still lie ahead in our journey towards cultural understanding.

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