

Towards an Identity and Liberation: A Feminist Reading of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and *Embroideries*

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Abstract

In this paper, I have engaged in a feminist critical analysis of two of the autobiographical graphic novels: *Persepolis* and *Embroideries* by the French-Iranian author Marjane Satrapi. What appeals to me the most is Satrapi's unique style of minimalistic literary text complementing the stark black and white illustrations narrated from a thoroughly feminist perspective. I have analysed one text at a time as they needed to be dealt differently. While in *Persepolis* the political undercurrent strongly flows throughout the text, it is missing entirely from *Embroideries*. In *Persepolis*, I have established how Satrapi has shown her protagonist as a politically conscious woman questioning the oppressive regime and especially its treatment towards women while in the other, I have established how Satrapi has made her unconventional women characters sexually liberated, turning the societal norms and expectations upside down. Thus, in the former the socio-cultural and political position had been focused upon while in the latter, the focus is on a woman's power relations with a man even during the most intimate encounters. My paper not only focuses upon two of Satrapi's most powerful feminist texts but also highlights the kind of feminist she grew up to be, raw and outspoken in her approach, keeping in mind her 'privileged' family background which definitely empowered her to a certain extent and also how that didn't make her indifferent to the sufferings of the lower classes in general and marginalised women in particular. I have also explored the aspects of sexual liberation of women which Satrapi strongly advocated in both of her books in explicitly bold language infused with wit and humour.

Keywords: *Autobiography, Graphic Novel, Feminist perspective, Power Relations, Political Consciousness.*

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1.1 Introduction

Alas! A woman that attempts the pen
Such an intruder on the rights of men,
Such a presumptuous Creature is esteem'd
The fault can by no vertue be redeem'd.

-Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea¹

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar rhetorically question: 'Is a pen a metaphorical penis? Gerard Manley Hopkins seems to have thought so.'² This is because in a letter to his friend R.W. Dixon in 1886 'he confided a crucial feature of his theory of poetry. The artist's "most essential quality", he declared, is "masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one's thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is."³ In addition, he noted that, 'The male gift is the creative gift.'⁴ Thus, Gilbert and Gubar lay bare before us 'the patriarchal notion that the writer "fathers" his text just as God fathered the world'⁵ and in the patriarchal society, 'the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch, whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis.'⁶ In this context, Edward Said's 'miniature meditation' on the word 'authority' is worth quoting:

Authority suggests to me a constellation of linked meanings:... "a power to enforce obedience," or "a derived or delegated power," or "a power to influence action," or "a power to inspire belief," or "a person whose opinion is accepted"; not only those, but a connection as well with *author*-that is, a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, beginner, father, or ancestor, a person also who sets forth written statements.⁷

Thus, we can see how 'authority' has always been under the male dominion since time immemorial, and thinking, reading or writing, or anything remotely connected to intellectual stuff, has always been deemed to be a male prerogative. Thinking, reading or writing empower a woman, enhance her critical faculties, make her question the patriarchal authority, challenge the established norms and demand her equal rights. This poses a huge threat to the pre-existing, well-established patriarchal structure of the society. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* writes: 'How could women

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ever have had genius when all possibility of accomplishing a work of genius- or just a work-was refused them?"⁸ Marjane Satrapi in her graphic narrative *Persepolis*, abhorring the oppressive Islamic Revolution in Iran writes: 'I wanted to be an educated, liberated woman. And if the pursuit of knowledge meant getting cancer, so be it.'⁹ She further exclaims: 'Misery! At the age that Marie Curie first went to France to study, I'll probably have ten children....'¹⁰

In this paper, I will be negotiating the politics of representation and multivalence of feminism in two of Marjane Satrapi's graphic novels, *Persepolis* and *Embroideries*. One may question the authenticity of my criticisms of two middle-Eastern feminist texts based on Western feminist models but I would choose to answer by quoting Virginia Woolf from *Three Guineas*: 'As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman any country is the whole world.'¹¹ Thus, Woolf's iconic statement lays the foundation of the kind of global feminism — Cosmo Feminism, that isolates gender oppression from other structures of power and posits a worldwide sisterhood of women sharing a common cause against male domination.

The intelligent and outspoken child of radical Marxists, and the great-granddaughter of Iran's last emperor, Satrapi bears witness to a childhood uniquely entwined with the history of her country. *Persepolis* paints an unforgettable portrait of daily life in Iran and of the bewildering contradictions between home life and public life.¹²

As she chronicles her journey from childhood to adulthood against the backdrop of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, she bears witness on behalf of herself and others to stories of oppression and rebellion, hope and revolution, fear and despair. Hillary Chute, a scholar, has claimed *Persepolis* to be a 'feminist graphic narrative'¹³ in her essay 'The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"', while another scholar, Nancy K. Miller suggests that '*Persepolis* offers a new perspective on familial legacies and feminist generations'¹⁴ in her article 'Out of the Family: Generations of Women in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*.'

Embroideries, on the other hand, casts:

a gloriously entertaining and enlightening look at the sex lives of Iranian women. *Embroideries* gathers together Marjane's tough-talking

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grandmother, stoic mother, glamorous and eccentric aunt and their friends and neighbours for an afternoon of tea-drinking and talk. Naturally the subject turns to love, sex and the vagaries of men....¹⁵

Maureen Freely, in a review of the book by *The Guardian*, describes the book as:

A daring and brilliantly calculated illumination of a secret space... Though *Embroideries* is not a continuation of the *Persepolis* story, it sits at the heart of the same world - a brutally policed society where an extraordinarily rich and inventive culture still prevails, if only behind closed doors, where women are wildly subversive, funny, free-thinking and sexy.¹⁶

1.2 The Veil, Islam and Patriarchy

Hillary Chute, in her previously mentioned article, writes:

The issue of veiling opens the book. Satrapi begins *Persepolis* with a row of only two frames. In the first panel, the narrator offers exposition. In a box above a drawing of an unsmiling, veiled girl, sitting with her arms crossed in the centre of the frame, she situates the reader with the following information: "This is me when I was ten years old. This was in 1980" (*Persepolis*, 1). The following panel depicts a line of four similarly composed girls, unsmiling and with crossed arms, and a sliver of a fifth on the reader's left: we are only able to infer a hand, a bent elbow, and a chest-length veil. The narrator writes, "And this is a class photo. I'm sitting on the far left so you don't see me..." (*Persepolis*, 1). Here Satrapi uses spacing within the pictorial frame as the disruption of her own characterological presence. We do in fact, clearly, "see" her- just not all of her- but her self-presentation as fragmented, cut, disembodied, and divided between frames indicates the psychological condition suggested by the chapter's title, "The Veil"¹⁷.

Marjorie C. Allison¹⁸ writes how Satrapi engages 'readers in the process of looking and "seeing" more clearly'¹⁹ and how

Satrapi illustrates how crucial it is for readers to look beyond the veil and recognize individuals. A quick glance at cells one and two shows girls who look identical because of their veils. A closer look reveals that they are in fact not identical. Their bangs, eyes, and facial expressions are all different. Readers can, ... see a range of moods and, presumably, personalities.²⁰

It must be noted that women are also equally responsible for perpetrating

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patriarchy, for instance, there were demonstrations for and against the veil everywhere on the streets, implying many women were, in fact, supporting the veil, which according to the Guardians of the Revolution, the religious fundamentalists, whom Satrapi and her mother refer to as “The Bastards,”²¹ protects women ‘from all the potential rapists’²² since ‘women’s hair emanates rays that excite men’²³ and that is exactly why women should cover their hair. The women who were demonstrating for the veil were either fully aware of its implications that they were actually supporting their own oppressors or were probably thinking that they would appear ‘cultural’ or be deemed ‘religious’ if they wore one as preached by the fundamentalists. Satrapi, initially, was quite confused in her judgement about the implications of the veil, young as she was at that time. Satrapi as a child was quite thoughtful and also religious in her own way. She believed in God, and also believed him to be her friend, an innocent child that she was. She also used to talk to him every night about everything including her wish to become the last prophet and the first woman to be so. From that tender age, she had the critical faculties to ask questions like why religious prophets were always men?

She also wasn’t fully able to comprehend the relation between being “religious” as a Muslim woman and putting on a veil. Later as the narrative progresses, we see her questioning herself if religion really has anything to do with wearing a veil and if yes, why only the women would wear it? ‘I was born with religion’²⁴ but not with a veil. In her own subtle way, she started her protest — he always dressed up like the “modern”²⁵ woman, which was one out of the two kinds of women based on their way of dressing up, the other being the “fundamentalist”²⁶ woman. As a modern woman, ‘you showed your opposition to the regime by letting a few strands of your hair show.’²⁷

On another occasion, she wore a denim jacket with the Michael Jackson button and her Nike sneakers, and we can barely estimate the risk she undertook when she went out in that, alone on the streets, because anything Western or remotely punk was entirely forbidden as they were considered to be symbols of “decadence.”²⁸ It was a very bold and powerful move on adolescent Satrapi’s part as she tried to assert her independence under the oppressive Islamic regime. However, it is quite ironic that such a patriarchal oppressive regime has a women’s branch, reinforcing the fact

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that women uphold patriarchy no less than men: ‘Their job was to put us back on the straight and narrow by explaining the duties of Muslim women’²⁹ and being extremely dedicated to their job, they lowered Satrapi’s scarf to cover the few strands of hair that she always left uncovered as a mark of protest and called her a ‘little whore,’³⁰ meaning it as an invective, of course.

1.3 Patriarchy, Women and Infidelity

While the war between Iran and Iraq was on, Satrapi heard other women in the supermarket saying that ‘...their women are prostituting themselves. No dignity at all!’³¹ In the wake of the war, there was a shortage of food in the country and another woman responded: ‘Soon, it won’t just be food. With all those sluts out there, we’re going to have to watch our husbands.’³² Another joined saying: ‘Anyway, as everyone knows: Southern women are all whores.’³³ This reflects upon the lack of sensitivity and sympathy of women for other women affected horribly by the war. The very fact that these women could only think along these lines amidst a full-fledged war is also a vivid sketch of the kind of ideas fed by the society into a woman’s brain such that her entire world, existence and identity revolve around a man, most preferably her husband. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* writes:

There is an art to ‘catching a husband’: ‘keeping’ him is a profession.... The wife quickly learns that her erotic attraction is the weakest of her weapons; it disappears with familiarity; and there are, alas, other desirable women in the world; so she still works at being seductive and pleasing: she is often torn between the pride that inclines her to frigidity and the notion that her sensual ardour will flatter and keep her husband. She also counts on the force of habit, on the charm he finds in a pleasant home, his taste for good food, his affection for his children; she tries to ‘make him proud’ by her way of entertaining, dressing and exercising authority over him with her advice and her influence; as much as she can, she will make herself indispensable....a whole tradition teaches wives the art of ‘how to catch a man’....One must not give a husband too much or too little freedom. If she is too indulgent, the wife finds her husband escaping her; the money and passion he spends on other women are her loss; she runs the risk of having a mistress get enough power over him to seek a divorce or at least take first place in his life. Yet, if she forbids him all adventure, if she overwhelms him by her close scrutiny, her scenes, her demands, she can seriously turn

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him against her. It is a question of knowing how to 'make concessions' advisedly; if the husband puts 'a few dents in the contract', she will close her eyes; but at other moments, she must open them wide. . . .³⁴

This reflects upon the depths to which patriarchy has seeped into the society — women are conditioned to believe that as wives it is their responsibility to prevent their husbands from going astray; Beauvoir compares this to a real job, a profession and interestingly, refers to marriage as a contract. It also implies that if their husbands actually develop an attraction for another woman, it would be the woman's fault and never the man's, irrespective of the fact that the other woman might be single. This is because the society has nurtured men into believing that they have the right to be led astray and that infidelity is in their very nature, that they are bound to be attracted by other women once they are bored of their wives. On the other hand, women have been gaslit into thinking fidelity, unflinching loyalty and undying devotion are something only to be rigorously expected of women. Beauvoir writes how patriarchy teaches women to have a fine grip on their husbands—tightening or loosening it just a little bit might result in losing her husband. In Satrapi's *Embroideries*, she has recalled stories of several women with similar experiences of infidelity in their marital relationships. We get to know Amineh's story and how Houshang betrayed her without an iota of guilt with several other women. She could say nothing to him.

And this is not only her story but a universal one. Most women across the globe in various cultures and societies are not particularly encouraged to leave their husbands – she is expected to adjust to everything with no fault of hers while a man gets the license from the society to do anything because he is a man and therefore, someone believed to be much superior. Divorce is also not a feasible option for women, especially in societies where they are not given the opportunity to become financially independent and therefore, they have to remain dependent on their husbands throughout their lives. Even if a woman is independent and decides to get a divorce in such cases, that is still not well-received by the society. Sometimes she is ostracised and shamed for leaving her husband, sometimes she is harassed and abused by other men as for them she is an unowned property now since she no longer has a husband and while to them, she was nothing more than a sexual object ever anyway and more so

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now since she is no longer a 'virgin', she will be ready to give them sexual favours. Such an instance of another woman was shared by a friend of Satrapi as she warned Satrapi against a divorce. But the picture is changing now as women are refusing to compromise and evidently, the divorce rates are steadily rising. We also come across stories of women like Shideh who divorced her husband because of incompatibility issues, which is often not regarded as a justified cause for a divorce. Again, we can analyse this issue of infidelity from the other woman's point of view, who is the lover of the man having the affair. Parvine, another woman at the samovar, who can be rightfully called as a spokesperson for the author, tells us from her personal experience that it is better to be a mistress to a married man than be his wife and she concisely summarizes the reasons for us and enlists them. Satrapi's grandma agrees with Parvine and enhances her statements with further reasons.

1.4 Prostitution and Patriarchy

It is also interesting to take note of the way words like 'slut' and 'whore' are used as invectives while prostitutes are just victims, nothing more than a "scapegoat"³⁵ as described by Beauvoir and it has always been so, since the patriarchal society never left any other option for a woman to earn money. It took advantage of her at every step by targeting her body, abused her, harassed her and made her a victim of rape to assert virility and masculine strength. While the men who visit these prostitutes must be condemned and shunned, it is always the women who end up getting shamed because the popular saying goes that: "men will be men." Beauvoir in the chapter 'Prostitutes and Hetaeras' quoted Marro: 'Between those who sell themselves through prostitution and those who sell themselves through marriage, the only difference resides in the price and length of the contract.'³⁶ Beauvoir goes on further to add: 'For both, the sexual act is a service; the latter is engaged for life by one man; the former has several clients who pay her per item.'³⁷ On another occasion, Beauvoir also exposes another uncomfortable but bitter truth that "the existence of a caste of "lost women" makes it possible to treat "the virtuous woman" with the most chivalric respect"³⁸ and needless to say that such a display of chivalry is extremely fake and only a pretence — a mere sham. Satrapi on one occasion called the Mother Superior and other nuns "prostitutes"³⁹ when she lived in a boarding house run by nuns. But was she simply calling out at

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their meaningless religious norms of maintaining lifelong chastity? There was a sense of scorn with which she used the word 'prostitute'— probably meant it as a slang like it is usually used, with all its problematic connotations in a patriarchal society; and in this sense she did succumb to the convoluted and labyrinthine power structures of patriarchy. Even in today's age where feminism as a movement has gained momentum more than ever, those women, who often call themselves 'feminists', end up shaming other women for a choice of profession they have made or for something which they have taken up out of compulsion. Even after many years of sexual revolution, we shame women and view them with contempt because they have either decided or been forced to take up a profession where they get paid, most often poorly, for providing sexual favours to 'customers' whereas the men who are their 'customers' (physically and sexually assault these women who are financially powerless and legally helpless) are very often married and never shamed. Surprisingly, this double-standard in judgement of men and women is never questioned. Satrapi believed in sexual liberty. When one of her classmates who heard her saying that she had slept with her boyfriend, questioned her character, she said, 'My body is my own! I give it to whomever I want! It's nobody else's business.'⁴⁰ Satrapi, after this, wrote that she wanted to tell that girl that marrying somebody without love, for his money would be prostitution. She used the word prostitution with all the negative connotations forgetting that prostitutes also have the right to "give" their bodies to someone for love or for money. Obviously her attitude to prostitutes was a product of the negative conditioning by the society.

When she returned from Vienna and her friends were disgusted to find out that she had had sex with more than one man and called her a "whore"⁴¹ in the demeaning sense of the term, she called them "real traditionalists"⁴² with the fake 'outward appearance of modern women'⁴³ but we, the readers, know that in this context she is quite a hypocrite herself.

1.5 Worth of a woman in Satrapi's Iran

Under the religious autocratic regime, the situation was so terrible for women that once when Satrapi's mother went out without the veil, very liberal, modern and empowered as she was, she was "insulted"⁴⁴ by the "bastards"⁴⁵ as they threatened her by saying

...that women like me should be pushed up against a wall and fucked. And

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then thrown in the garbage... and that if I [she] didn't want that to happen, I [she] should wear the veil...⁴⁶

Satrapi happened to know a girl named Niloufar who was just eighteen and a communist and therefore the Guardians of the Revolution were trying to track her down in order to kill her. Just a couple of days later after meeting her, she got the news that Niloufar was spotted and executed. She was later informed by Niloufar's parents that since in their religion, it is a sin to kill a virgin, Niloufar was first married off to a Guardian of the Revolution who took her virginity and then executed her. Niloufar's father further added: 'After she was executed, to make sure her awful fate was understood, they sent 500 tumans to her parents.'⁴⁷ This brings out so many gravely problematic issues before us. Along with little Marji, we, the readers, are set into thinking — can we really put a price tag on the life of a human being? Satrapi informs us that 500 Tumans were equal to 5 dollars back then. Another important question that emerges is how degrading a woman's position could have been that mere 5 dollars was the price they deemed fit to give her parents after raping and killing her? Another blatant example of gender discrimination is brought to notice very subtly when we get to know that 'virginity' holds true and good only for women and not men and only in case of female prisoners, their 'virginity' is needed to be taken and not in the case of the male prisoners.

1.6 Satrapi versus The Regime

Satrapi was fearless and she knew to speak up against anything that is not right. She refused to bow down before the oppressive theocratic regime and by the mere age of fourteen, she was an outright rebel. She deliberately refused to abide by the rules and was a thorough non-conformist. There are too many exemplary instances of her courage, at such a tender age, to be enlisted. From hitting her principal who tried to snatch her bracelet at school as jewellery was forbidden to standing up and asking the authorities who had organised a lecture in her college on "Moral and Religious Conduct" that 'Why is it that I, as a woman, am expected to feel nothing when watching these men with their clothes sculpted on but they, as men, can get excited by two inches less of my head-scarf?'⁴⁸ Her blatantly outspoken nature was never shushed under any oppressive authority as she went on to expose the disparity in the dressing codes of men and women as prescribed by the oppressive patriarchal regime (see fig. 7). And to her

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readers, she tells: 'I had learned that you should always shout louder than your aggressor.'⁴⁹

The following are the illustrations of some of the best instances of Satrapi standing up against the brutally harsh regime and fighting for her rights.

1.7 Satrapi and Politics, Patriotism and War

Feminism stands for equality in all aspects — equal rights and opportunities for a woman as an individual with socio-political and economic rights. But it's generally considered that a woman has no business getting involved in politics or politics is not a woman's forte and rather she should confine herself within the four walls of her house. Satrapi defied all such norms from her very childhood. She had read everything about her country's history, about different political ideologies, especially Marxism and the the-then political situation in Iran. From her very childhood, she wanted to fight for her country in times of crisis: '...My blood was boiling. I was ready to defend my country against these Arabs who kept attacking us. I wanted to fight'⁵⁰ was what she said during the Arab invasion. Even the terms "patriot" and "patriotism" are rooted in patriarchy — only a man is expected to fight for the country out of his love for his country. It is not expected of a woman to protect her country. Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* argues that the appeal to patriotism rests on the State's promise that the "brothers"⁵¹ will protect the "sisters"⁵² from threats outside the nation — namely, war — and threats within the nation such as rape, dishonour and so on. Woolf imagines a brother seeking to "rouse"⁵³ his sister's "patriotic emotion"⁵⁴: 'I am fighting to protect our country,'⁵⁵ to which 'he adds that he is fighting to protect her body.'⁵⁶ His sister in turn wonders 'What does 'our country' mean to me an outsider?'⁵⁷ This continues the chain of thought which I have quoted earlier that a woman fails to acknowledge that she has a country because "her" country has never treated her as an equal to a fellow male, never expected of her to protect it. Often it can be seen that a country is treated as a woman, usually a nurturing mother figure and "her sons" and never "her daughters" are expected to protect her honour during any external threat. Another problematic concept that can be inferred from this is that women are projected as fragile and delicate creatures, incapable of protecting

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themselves, let alone their country and therefore dependent on males to do so. In *Persepolis* too, Satrapi brings out the stark disparity between what a country expects of men and women as she says: ‘Girls had to make winter hoods for the soldiers, but boys had to prepare to become soldiers.’⁵⁸ However, Satrapi outrightly rejects these notions and turns them topsy-turvy in her own way. Fully acknowledging her privilege of being born into a family which was extremely liberal, she always saw both her parents going for protest demonstrations and inculcated that: ‘The year of the Revolution I had to take action.’⁵⁹ She, along with some of her friends ‘...demonstrated in the garden of our house’⁶⁰ with some toy guns in their hands. Apparently, it might seem to be child’s play but we are prevented from being dismissive of her depth of understanding of the gravity of the issue, given her age and the sense of playfulness attached to the entire act, when we come across the line where Satrapi is seen telling her friends wisely: ‘The Revolution is like a bicycle. When the wheels don’t turn, it falls.’⁶¹ As readers, we seem to echo her friends’ praise for her as one of them exclaims ‘Well spoken!’⁶²

On another occasion we see little Satrapi eavesdropping on her parents outside their room discussing the the-then political scenario and then she barges in the room saying: ‘I want to come with you tomorrow!’⁶³ On being asked ‘Where?’⁶⁴ she replies: ‘To demonstrate on the street! I am sick and tired of doing it in the garden.’⁶⁵ When they warn her saying: ‘It is very dangerous. They shoot people!’⁶⁶ she sharply retorts, ‘For a Revolution to succeed, the entire population must support it.’⁶⁷ Her passion at such a tender age was unbridled and unabashed. She revelled at the fact that:

There are lots of heroes in my family. My grandpa was in prison, my uncle Anoosh too: for nine years! He was even in the USSR. My great uncle Fereydoon proclaimed a democratic state and he was....⁶⁸

She had also expected her father to join the military and fight the war against the Arabs and when he said: ‘...Of course I am not going to fight, why should I fight?!’⁶⁹, she reaches to the conclusion: ‘My dad is a defeatist. He’s no patriot....’⁷⁰ However, she is proved wrong when she sees her father dancing with joy as news came floating that the Iranians have counter-attacked and bombed Baghdad: ‘I was all wrong about dad.

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He loved his country as much as I did.⁷¹ Through the course of the novel, we witness the growth in her character when she gradually understands the futility of war as she is able to comprehend the grave loss of human lives as a consequence of the unnecessary violence involved in a war which is often glorified: 'When I think we could have avoided it all...it just makes me sick. A million people would still be alive.'⁷² Another heart-wrenching line comes from Satrapi's classmate, whose father was in the air force and died in the Iraq-Iran War, when Satrapi had tried to console her by saying: 'Your father acted like a genuine hero, you should be proud of him!'⁷³ and she responded: 'I wish he were alive and in jail rather than dead and a hero.'⁷⁴

Golnar Nabizadeh⁷⁵ comments:

The text is rendered in stark black-and-white images. Satrapi has explained that she grappled with how to depict violence in *Persepolis*, given that representations of violent events have become "so normal, so banal," despite their depiction of occurrences which in themselves are "not normal" at all. Satrapi suggests that for readers who can readily access images that portray violence in hyperreal detail to come across more of the same in the novel might only contribute to the banality that haunts modern images of violence. Satrapi thus chooses to depict the horror of violence through a different visual mode. Instead of vivid color, she uses black and white to paint her images of bloodshed, stating, "Black and white makes [violence] more abstract and more interesting."⁷⁶

1.8 Satrapi as the Emancipated Woman

Satrapi was sent to Vienna, Austria when she was merely fourteen because her liberal parents always wanted her to grow up as an independent woman with the best of education which would not have been possible back in Iran. But she never forgot her roots, as advised by her father: 'Don't ever forget who you are!'⁷⁷ and she promised him she won't. She took a jar filled with Iranian soil when she left the country. In Europe, however, we see Satrapi growing up on her own and maturing gracefully into an independent woman. At the beginning, she felt left out but gradually she made friends and she tried her best to assimilate into European culture. During the vacation when all of her friends went to different places and she was left all alone, she started extensive reading about everything her friends talk about which she does not know. Such was the maturity of fourteen-year-old Satrapi that she also wanted to know herself, "Marji, the woman."⁷⁸ She

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started with her mother's favourite author, Simone de Beauvoir. It's however interesting to note that Satrapi differs in some of her opinions with Beauvoir and very justifiably so. She writes how Beauvoir explained in her book, *The Second Sex*, 'that if women peed standing up, their perception of life would change.'⁷⁹ Adding her uniquely humorous touch to the most serious of situations, she writes: 'So I tried. It ran lightly down my left leg. It was a little disgusting. Seated, it was much simpler. And, as an Iranian woman, before learning to urinate like a man, I needed to learn to become a liberated and emancipated woman.'⁸⁰

1.9 Patriarchy, Marriage and Virginity

She then started living with Julie, her classmate, in her house along with her mother Armelle. She was quite stunned seeing Julie's ways of behaving with her mother, her bold nature regarding her relationships, her sex life and sexual preferences while she mentally compared it to the prevalent ways of Iran. Armelle considered Satrapi as a 'pure, timid and innocent virgin'⁸¹ and therefore, a 'good influence'⁸² on her daughter who had a very active sex life. This is in tune with the widely popular notion of virginity which is a construct of the patriarchal society and it was traditionally meant only for women. While in the correct sense of the term, 'virgins' must refer to both men and women who do not have any experience of sexual intercourse and must not have anything to do with purity and innocence; in the traditional and most prevalent sense of the term, losing one's virginity is breaking of the hymen at the opening of the vagina during a woman's first experience of a sexual intercourse. A virgin woman is considered to be 'pure' and 'innocent' as a 'flower' and the first sexual intercourse is deemed to be an act of 'deflowering'. Such is the importance attributed to a woman's virginity that it is made to be more valuable than even her life. The patriarchal society wants a pure virgin to be 'delivered' unto a man in a wedding and bleeding from the vagina is taken to be the sign of her virginity. If she does not bleed, the man feels betrayed and is outraged. Simone de Beauvoir writes in the 'Sexual Initiation' chapter of *The Second Sex*:

Virginity is valued so highly in many circles that to lose it outside marriage seems a veritable disaster. The girl who surrenders by coercion or by surprise thinks she dishonours herself.⁸³

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Beauvoir describes further how the society teaches a boy as he grows up to be a man who takes extreme pride in his penis and his masculine responsibility to conduct the defloration. His virginity, the concept of which according to the patriarchal society does not exist, is never put into question naturally. Society teaches a girl to maintain this 'innocence' and hide her physical beauty from men because only her future husband has the right to see her naked body, caress and fondle it, if at all he wants to and ultimately 'take' her virginity. Any kind of sexual pleasure is forbidden to her before marriage and even after marriage. She is not particularly supposed to be enjoying the sexual act, let alone be in charge of it. She is only expected to be timid and extremely shy as she is reduced to a sexual object by the society to be enjoyed by a man and if she starts enjoying the sex, she is tagged as 'shameless', especially when it happens at the first wedding night where the man can even go to the extent of thinking that she must have had previous sexual experience and therefore, feel cheated by his wife's family since they are the ones who supposedly betrayed him by marrying off their daughter to him who is not a virgin and thus, kind of an 'used' or 'damaged' product. Satrapi's grandma narrates the story of her childhood friend Nahid, who loved a man and lost her virginity to him but was forcibly engaged to another man by her parents at the mere age of 18. When she met Nahid, Nahid begged of her to help her out of this situation which would come down to Nahid's father killing her if he and her would-be husband finds out that she is not a virgin. Satrapi's grandma comes up with the idea of a razor blade with which during the sexual intercourse, Nahid can cut herself a little and show the few drops of blood as a symbol of her virginity.

The women share a good laugh at the expense of patriarchy as it is revealed that Nahid ends up slicing her husband's testicle out of nervousness and fear and that made her husband's head hang in shame as he finds himself with a 'bloody testicle' since 'men's pride is situated in their scrotums.'⁸⁴ The concept of marriage has also been dealt with very unconventionally. It has not been treated with the sacredness and sanctity which is generally attributed to the institution of marriage. In a society where girls are married off at an early age and where her choice of a partner or her say in it or her decisions in general do not matter, marriage is nothing more than yet another weapon of patriarchy to oppress women. Beauvoir

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writes in the chapter 'The Married Woman': 'The destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage'⁸⁵ and traditionally-

...marriage was her only means of survival and the only justification of her existence...she must give children to the community...and she also has the function of satisfying the male's sexual needs and caring for the home.⁸⁶

But, 'the economic evolution of woman's condition is in the process of upsetting the institution of marriage'⁸⁷ as it is now 'becoming a union freely entered into by two autonomous individuals; the commitments of the two parties are personal and reciprocal.'⁸⁸ Either of the parties can obtain a divorce in case of any breach in the contract, be it adultery or irreconcilable differences (like Satrapi does) or something else. 'Woman is no longer limited to the reproductive function: it has lost, in large part, its character of natural servitude and has come to be regarded as a freely assumed responsibility.'⁸⁹

Satrapi's *Embroideries* talks about the right to sexual pleasure of a woman and the very word "embroidery" refers to the procedure of hymenoplasty or hymen repair surgery which involves 'sewing' up or repairing of the torn hymen. Here, the women, barring a few, believed this to be a weapon to tackle patriarchy by falsely projecting one's "intact virginity" by bleeding during the next sexual intercourse. There were some, being products and perpetrators of patriarchy, who thought it was immoral for women to have sex before marriage and this practise to be a fraud one. But Satrapi voices her opinions from the other side as one of them comes up, as Satrapi's spokesperson, with this obvious question which we, the readers, must have wondered as well: 'And why is it the women who have to be virgins? Why suffer torment to satisfy an asshole? Because the man who demands "virginity" from a woman is nothing but an asshole?'⁹⁰ She does not support this surgery simply because women do not need to do this; they were compelled to do this in traditional, orthodox societies in order to conform to the norms. "Embroideries" almost emerge as a symbol of circumventing the patriarchy but only to subscribe to it in the end. However, it cannot be denied that women are becoming more vocal with time about their right to sexual pleasure, which is much talked about in *Embroideries*. That sex is a basic human need and that both men and women have the right to equally participate

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and enjoy the act is stressed upon. One of the women shares details about her sex life that in spite of having four kids, she has never seen the “male organ”. She describes how her husband comes and turns off the light of the bedroom and then “Bam! Bam! Bam!”⁹¹ This paints for us the unfortunate larger picture and this woman becomes the mouthpiece of the uncountable number of women across different countries and cultures where marital rape has not been criminalised and who never really get the right to give her consent before having sex and rather feel compelled to offer herself to be enjoyed by her husband as per the society’s teachings that it is her duty to do so, without an iota of pleasure attached to the act as it should be.

1.10 Feminism as an Intersectional, Inclusive Movement

Although feminism started as a movement advocating equal rights for women, it has become all-inclusive now, advocating equal rights for everyone, irrespective of sex or gender, including LGBTQ+ rights. Although Satrapi grew up in a country where being gay was a criminal offence amounting to capital punishment, she, unlike many others, was never homophobic. In Vienna, she once lived with eight homosexual men in a house and quite happily so. She never viewed them any differently from herself or any heterosexual person for that matter because that is exactly what it is supposed to be. Considering homosexuality to be unnatural is unnatural and considering homosexual people as ‘sick’ or ‘mad’ as evident from one anecdote shared by Satrapi’s mother is actually the proof of a sick mentality and homophobia nurtured by the society. The philosophy of feminism has developed a lot over the years and changed for the better and today it is way more nuanced than ever before and its application is intersectional so as to incorporate every section of the society and identify the power relations accordingly for every specific context.

1.11 Conclusion

Marjorie C. Allison⁹² argues how Marjane Satrapi, among other female graphic novelists,

use[s] the genre to push in from the (literal and metaphorical) margins to challenge literary, sexual, and nationalist norms through both their storylines and their illustrations.⁹³

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Allison further quotes Theresa Tensuan to support her view:

Theresa Tensuan argues in her essay “Comic Visions and Revisions in the Work of Lynda Barry and Marjane Satrapi” that such women are “in the vanguard of artists who are exploring the forms and conventions associated with comics as a means of revisiting and revising the conventional narratives that inscribe one’s political, social, and gendered roles.”⁹⁴

All of this has been said to firmly oppose Charles McGrath’s claim which he asserted in the *New York Times* in July 2004 that ‘the graphic novel is a man’s world, by and large’⁹⁵ while casually mentioning that there are several important women graphic novelists and naming them within parentheses, after setting an undertone of condescension towards comic books, including the popular Japanese manga, throughout his article. Though he praises Satrapi’s *Persepolis* as:

Marjane Satrapi’s charming, poignant story, drawn in small black-and-white panels that evoke Persian miniatures, about a young girl growing up in Iran and her family’s suffering following the 1979 Islamic Revolution⁹⁶

but it is difficult to pinpoint his stance on the very form of the newly emerging graphic novel because on the one hand, he beautifully describes a graphic novel as ‘an integrated whole, of words and images both, where the pictures don’t just depict the story; they’re part of the telling’⁹⁷ while on the other, he comes close to comparing graphic novels with pornography, giving a twist to the word ‘graphic’. Marjorie Allison further goes on to say: ‘Many critics and reviewers such as McGrath seem to concentrate on the men of the graphic text world, a pattern noted by Liorah Golomb in her essay “Beyond *Persepolis*: A Bibliographic Essay on Graphic Novels and Comics by Women.”’⁹⁸ Hillary Chute, too, dismisses McGrath’s problematic claims in her essay ‘The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi’s “*Persepolis*.”’ Therefore, we can infer that not only is Satrapi’s work in itself revolutionary but also the chosen format and style of her work — a graphic novel. Thus, not only is the content of her novel from a feminist perspective but also her very choice to write it in the graphic novel form feminist in nature as she takes this man’s world by storm.

In this age of the internet where any information or data can be accessed by just one click on our electronic gadgets, where social media has become the favourite pastime of people of every age group, pseudo-

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feminism is on the rise. Pseudo-feminists try to distort the definition of 'feminism', taking away from it its true essence which advocates equality and trying to establish women as not equal beings but as man-haters by spreading hatred for men in general and posting anti-men stuff on the internet. But it is to be remembered that feminism, in its truest sense as a movement, is not the fight between men and women but between those who believe in equality for all and those who do not. In an interview with the very popular actress and feminist Emma Watson, Satrapi said that we need to teach our next generations that they are

first and foremost human beings. Your gender matters only when you are in love and when you are with your lover.... You can be a woman or a man, whatever you want to be. The rest of the time, just behave like a human being.⁹⁹

Quoting Beauvoir, she said 'You are not born a woman; you become a woman',¹⁰⁰ and then she applies the same logic for a man as well: 'And so you are not born a man either- you become a man, as society teaches you how to behave.'¹⁰¹ Talking about pseudo-feminism, she says:

The feminist movement for a long time has been there to cut the guy's penis off. And this is not a good thing. We cannot make the same mistake as men did.... We have to be more intelligent and say, We will make life together with you, we will collaborate, and let's be together.... I need a new kind of feminism where we are brighter than the stupid men of a century ago and we teach them the lessons.... Let's construct this world together. Let's behave toward each other in a nice way, in a humanistic way, and maybe we can do something better.¹⁰²

Endnotes:

¹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 3.

² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.3.

³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.3.

⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.3.

⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.4.

⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.6.

⁷ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.4

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2011), p.767.

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- ⁹ Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*, Trans. Anjali Singh (London: Vintage, 2008), p.73.
- ¹⁰ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.73.
- ¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, ed. Jane Marcus (New York: Harcourt, 2006), p.129.
- ¹² Satrapi, *Persepolis*, blurb.
- ¹³ Hillary Chute, 'The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.1/2 (2008): 92-110, p.106.
- ¹⁴ Nancy Miller, 'Out of the Family: Generations of Women in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*', *Life Writing* 4.1 (2007): 13-29, p.13.
- ¹⁵ Satrapi, *Embroideries*, blurb.
- ¹⁶ Maureen Freely, 'Tea and adversity', *The Guardian*, 24 Jun, 2005. <https://amp.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/25/comics>. Accessed: 13 January, 2023.
- ¹⁷ Hillary Chute, 'The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.1/2 (2008): 92-110, pp.94, 95.
- ¹⁸ Marjorie Allison, '(Not) Lost in the Margins: Gender and Identity in Graphic Texts', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 47.4 (2014): 73-97.
- ¹⁹ Allison, '(Not) Lost in the Margins', p.83
- ²⁰ Allison, '(Not) Lost in the Margins', p.83
- ²¹ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.74.
- ²² Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.74.
- ²³ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.74.
- ²⁴ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.6.
- ²⁵ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.75.
- ²⁶ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.75.
- ²⁷ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.75.
- ²⁸ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.133.
- ²⁹ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.133.
- ³⁰ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.133.
- ³¹ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.93.
- ³² Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.93.
- ³³ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.93.
- ³⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pp.517-18.
- ³⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.613.
- ³⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pp.613-614.
- ³⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.614.
- ³⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.613.
- ³⁹ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.179.
- ⁴⁰ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.305.

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42 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.272.
43 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.272.
44 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.74.
45 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.74.
46 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.74.
47 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.146.
48 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.299.
49 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.143.
50 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.79.
51 Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p.127.
52 Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p.127.
53 Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p.127.
54 Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p.127.
55 Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p.127.
56 Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p.127.
57 Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p.127.
58 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.99.
59 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.10.
60 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.10.
61 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.10.
62 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.10.
63 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.16.
64 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.17.
65 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.17.
66 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.17.
67 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.17.
68 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.61.
69 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.81.
70 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.83.
71 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.84.
72 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.116.
73 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p. 86.
74 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.86.
75 Golnar Nabizadeh, "Vision and Precarity in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"",
Women's Studies Quarterly 44.1/2 (2016): 152-167.
76 Nabizadeh, "Vision and Precarity in Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis"", p.157.
77 Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.148.

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- ⁷⁸ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.177.
- ⁷⁹ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.177.
- ⁸⁰ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.177.
- ⁸¹ Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.184.
- ⁸² Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p.184.
- ⁸³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.402.
- ⁸⁴ Satrapi, *Embroideries*, no page.
- ⁸⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.451.
- ⁸⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.452.
- ⁸⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.451.
- ⁸⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.451.
- ⁸⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.451.
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- ⁹⁶ McGrath, ‘Not Funnies’.
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- ⁹⁸ Allison, ‘(Not) Lost in the Margins’, p. 74.
- ⁹⁹ Marjane Satrapi, “Emma Watson Interviews *Persepolis* Author Marjane Satrapi”, *Vogue*, 1 August, 2016. <https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi>. Accessed: 13 January, 2023.
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