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Locating reality through visual narratives: Marjane Sartapi's surfacing in "Persepolis"

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Abstract. The innovative way of telling stories by using visuals with a motive of imparting a message to an audience has influenced several writings. The use of visual narratives turns out to be a profound technique of illustrating stories that has existed and continues to exist event today. From oral narratives to visual ones the art of storytelling has always been efficacious and more absorbing. Impressing upon what, how, where, and in what manner the event took place through graphics is fascinating. There is substantial writing that primarily deals with research on visual stories. One such is Marjane Sartapi's "Persepolis" told through the eyes of a young girl, and this unique perspective of graphic narration offers distinctive insight into the perseverance to retain one's identity in tumultuous times. Nations and homelands play an important part in one's identity formation. Associating oneself to national sentiments and signs, individuals feel themselves part of the nation. However, identity becomes problematic for those in diaspora. This research paper intends to look at Marjane Sartapi's "Persepolis" as an attempt of the author to surface through many of her inner-outer conflicts. The paper shall trace her journey of self-approval from Iran to Vienna and finally to France. The trauma and the identity crisis she faces during her childhood in Iran and later in Vienna is an experience which she decides to narrate using animated comic images. The use of visual narrative form has helped her convey the trauma and pain she long carried. Finding a homeland and an identity became challenging.

Keywords: visual narration, identity crisis, veil, diaspora

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Обнаружение реальности в повести М. Сартапи «Персеполис»

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Аннотация. В статье раскрывается новаторский способ рассказывания истории жизни с помощью визуальных эффектов с целью передачи сообщения читательской аудитории. Использование визуальных нарративов оказывается продуктивной техникой

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иллюстрирования историй, имевшей место как ранее, так и в наши дни. Запечатление с помощью графики того, что, как, где и каким образом произошло, завораживает читателя. Значительный объем литературы посвящен исследованию визуальных историй. Одним из интересных примеров применения графического нарратива является роман «Персеполис» Марджаны Сартапи, где история рассказана устами молодой девушки, а уникальная перспектива графического повествования предлагает особое понимание главной идеи – той настойчивости, с какою личность стремится сохранить свою идентичность в бурные исторические времена. Нация и Родина здесь играют важную роль в формировании личности человека. Ассоциируя себя с национальными чувствами и знаками, люди ощущают себя частью нации. Поиск идентичности становится еще более проблематичным для тех, кто находится в диаспоре. В рамках исследования роман «Персеполис» Марджане Сартапи рассматривается как попытка автора решить многие из внутренних и внешних конфликтов. В статье прослеживается путь самоутверждения героини от Ирана до Вены и, наконец, до Франции. Травма и кризис идентичности, с которыми она столкнулась в детстве в Иране, а затем в Вене, – это опыт, который она решает рассказать, используя анимированные комические образы.

Ключевые слова: визуальный нарратив, кризис идентичности, платок, диаспора

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Introduction

The innovative way of telling stories by using visuals with a motive of imparting a message to an audience has influenced several writings. The use of visual narratives turns out to be a profound technique of illustrating stories that has existed and continues to exist event today. From oral narratives to visual ones the art of storytelling has always been efficacious and more absorbing [1]. Impressing upon what, how, where, and in what manner the event took place through graphics is fascinating. There is substantial writing that primarily deals with research on visual stories. One such is Marjane Sartapi's "Persepolis" told through the eyes of a young girl, and this unique perspective of graphic narration offers distinctive insight into the perseverance to retain one's identity in tumultuous times. Nations and homelands play an important part in one's identity formation. Associating oneself to national sentiments and signs, individuals feel themselves part of the nation. However, identity becomes problematic for those in the diaspora. This research paper intends to look at Majane Sartapi's "Persepolis" as an attempt of the author to surface through many of her inner-outer conflicts. The paper shall trace her journey of self-approval from Iran to Vienna and finally to France. The trauma and the identity crisis she faces during her childhood in Iran and later in Vienna is an experience which she decides to narrate using animated comic images. The use of visual narrative form has helped her convey the trauma and pain she long carried. Finding a homeland and an identity became challenging. "Persepolis", is Marjane Satrapi's enthralling yet distressed search for self and home amidst Iran's troubled political and social past. "Persepolis", the autobiographical graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi is considered a modern classic [2].

The novel details the life of Marjane Satrapi who spent her childhood in Tehran during the Iran and Iraq war, which is known as the Islamic, Shah or Iranian revolution. Marji is 10-years-old when the novel begins and describes her experiences of oppression. My paper mentions the young protagonist Marji interchangeably as Marjane to impress upon the autobiographical writing of the author Sartapi. By frequently interchanging the two identities of Marji, the girl protagonist and Marajne, the author I intend to understand her own experiences and the traumatic journey in search of identity.

“Persepolis” is the touching autobiography of a person with both an Iranian and Western identity yet still searching for an identity. The novel begins with the young Marji at ten years of age, fancying of becoming the last prophetess of the galaxy. The bright, inquisitive and bold child of two leftist politically active Tehran intellectuals, is beguiled by the astounding and electrifying atmosphere of revolutionary Iran. But as Iran becomes increasingly more oppressive, the parents send the young Marji to Vienna to study. There, Marji struggles to negotiate her Iranian identity in the Western world. After a breakdown in Vienna, the now twenty-year-old Marji returns back to Iran only to find that her home is no longer there. Entering Iran as an Iranian-European, Marjane realizes that she cannot be both traditional and modern at the same time in a country that only sees only two types of women, veiled and un-veiled. In Vienna Marjane’s identity had evolved and taken on a new form and she thought that Iran too was capable of the same modernity of late. Unable to embrace both traditionalism of Iran and the modernism of Austria, Marjane makes a third and final move to France, where she constructs a ‘third sphere’ for her identity. Probably this space would give here. Place of immense possibility wherein she could recount and narrate back the past with clarity.

In Marjane Satrapi's “Persepolis”, the protagonist, Marji, spends much of the story trying to establish her own personal identity, trying to figure out her real self. She does this by questioning various traditions of national identity (such as wearing a veil) in Iran before and after the 1980 revolution [3]. Graphic novel turned animated film, “Persepolis” reifies the alternative comic as an art form that brings in the narration of mature and, at times, disturbing subject matter. At one level the storyline of “Persepolis” seem to be rather common coming of age tale but its narration with a poignant and refreshing style makes it unique. The artistic sequences of young Marji’s perspective, mostly in black and white, are emotive and possess a poignant truth and innocence flawlessly carried in such a basic representation. We are all storytellers at one point or another in our lives. Whether we narrate for mere communicating or for achieving tonic effect, revealing past events or traumatic experiences to a friend, family member, or stranger is common practice. In a way, we revisit our past selves in order to get better understanding on our present identities.

The veil vs Marji: finding no ‘space’ for herself

In Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir “Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood”, Satrapi begins with the feeling she most experienced – oppression. Her childhood experiences were quite an ordeal for her. During the Iranian revolution, she underwent extreme psychological and inner struggle created through political and social disruptions in Iran. Marji’s inner struggle follows her from a very young

age through her adult life creating traumatic effects. This psychic struggle against the author's own self is a key component of this eminent memoir. We at the onset, begin to ponder as to why does she confront such an internal struggle, what are the real factors responsible for this?, and is she able to resolve her inner conflict by the end of book? Our questioning and looking for these answers, we better understand the predominant idea of Satrapi's memoir. This visual narrative also provide a profound perspective to trace the history of Iran and the impact of the revolution on the Iranian people, especially on Iranian women. Marji's yearning for freedom and her audacity in not complying with the authorities are ideals that are cultivated under the Westernized education that she receives from her parents. This makes her incompatible with the society constrained by Islamic traditions and thus lead to her dilemma and inner conflict. By introducing the idea of the 'veil' [4. P. 3] and how it physically covers her body and symbolically veils her identity, she tries conveying that after she was veiled and separated from her friends as a child, she could not understand the necessity of the veil as she is seen pondering: "We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we have to. It's too hot out" [4. P. 3].

She could rather only know how hot it feels wearing it! The veil divided her traditional sense of national-self from her modernist viewpoint that was instilled in her by her intellectual parents. At this juncture she finds herself torn between the personal and the national. Her devotion to her French education was defeated when the Islamic regime announces that it will close all bilingual schools because they are symbols of Westernization and capitalism. Now, Marji's construction of her personal identity becomes problematic in Iran. For Satrapi, the symbol of the veil was tied to notions of traditionalism; she is forced to veil in order to signify her ties to her national and cultural identity and her role as an Islamic woman [5; 6]. Wearing a veil for the first time in the new founded Iran of religious fanatics baffled her. Before the Iranian revolution, Marji's family lived a modernist lifestyle. While Marji studied in coeducation, she also fascinated Western style clothing. After the revolution, things changed unexpectedly. The images give a potent impression of the little girls' reaction to the veil imposed on them. They all looked unhappy. This piece of clothing, representative of national identity already clashes with Marji's sense of personal identity. Her crisis begins. The split self or this inner conflict is manifested in the beginning graphics itself. The author using the background rather than the caption to visualize Marji's ambivalence and confusion reflects the inner dilemma clearly. This is a valuable tool for indicating invisible idea and emotion, conveying the character's inner feelings, building a connection between the invisible and the visible world in comics. The opposition between the left side of the image representing the modern world, and the right side of her representing the religious world speaks of the split of Marji's real/ideal self. The nationalist accepting the veil opposed by the personal Marji rejecting the same veil [5; 6].

Unable to conform with the conservative dress code, Marji wear denim jacket and sneakers. She's into 'Punk' and this expression of her growing identity causes problems for Marji when she runs into one of the Guardians of the Revolution, questioning her, "Why are you wearing these punk shoes?" [4. P. 133]. Regretfully, Marji then has to lie, replying, "I wear these because I play basketball" [4. P. 133].

revolution was meant to bring positive changes by ending colonial rule; however, the young Marji and several other natives often felt that they were not connected to the world of change and revolution happening in the country. This new national identity was imposed on her body rupturing her personal identity completely. “Persepolis” examines how women become the bearers of culture and demonstrates how their bodies become tied to their femininity and national identity. With the symbol of veil, Marji’s (who is Marjane Satrapi’s herself) national identity and femininity are homogenized rather than individualized and are socially constructed for her through her existing environment(s). So to say, the nation-state and the identities of its respective individuals conditioned and constructed by moderating a person’s individuality. Homi Bhabha asserts in his essay “DessemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation” that national symbols are unstable constructions that can never produce the unity they promise. Bhabha’s essay shows that there is not one essential identity that can adequately represent all the people of a nation [7. Pp. 117–120]. For Marji, it is impossible to assume the role of an Islamic woman representing her nation state through veiling because her identity is constituted of multiple selves rather than a single, authentic self.

Trying to settle this dialectic between the personal and the national, Marjane at the age of 14, chooses a more eclectic formation for herself. Carving a space for herself she puts up a denim jacket and a headscarf.



Figure 3. In a denim jacket and a headscarf [4. P. 131]

This reaching put for self-approval was short-lived as her exposure and obsession with western culture and freedom was again a pricking and pestering her. When compelled to leave the war-torn Iran by her tensed family, Marji though

finding it difficult to leave her homeland and be in diaspora yet looks at the opportunity to unify and construct her identity in Austria which she desperately needed.

Escape towards a search for ‘space’ in Vienna

The trauma of the revolution, the imposition of the veil, the war situation bombarding her neighbour’s house killing her friend Neda, all force Marji to leave her homeland and abandon her friends, family, country, and childhood. By leaving her nation and crossing borders, Satrapi’s identity then becomes ‘diasporic’ [8; 9]. Relating this condition to postcolonial theory, we now understand that home is concept that shall become a difficult attainment. Unable to unveil the emotional trauma she experienced during the Iranian revolution, the tension she always underwent alongside the reduced status she experienced as a female in Iran, Marji, as a young adult attempts to search for her own ‘space’. However, the struggle with this search for identity again brought pain and trauma and was a failure in Vienna too. However, suppressing the past begins to pull her apart her. Being in diaspora she is still not ‘home’ and Marji feels isolated from those around her in Austria and Iran. Her guilt for lying to her parents about her drug use and being rejected by her friends in Austria, the protagonist uses her body to inflict self-punishment for the overpowering shame.

Unable to disconnect herself from the veil, Marji tries to make up for the loss of the veil by using make up and punk attire. She attempts to restore her body to wholeness by adapting to standards of femininity under Western ideals and ‘normalize’ her body. The complexities and ordeal of an Iranian identity manifest themselves in several ways for Satrapi. Rocking Nikes and a jean jacket, the Kim Wilde-obsessed Marji turns to Iran’s dangerous black market to purchase illegal Iron Maiden tapes. In Vienna, Marji struggles in different ways to assert an Iranian identity of which is both proud and yet free of. Complexities and confusions kept growing for her when she lied of being a French while drinking and dancing at a bar. Marji submerges into something unanticipated and gradually loses herself. Her Iranian identity is looked at as a heavy burden to bear and even tries to disguise it by pretending to be French in front of her peers. Sometimes she feels guilty about intentionally alienating herself from Iranian culture and her family, but she is constantly haunted by her inner enemy – the conflict. She is physically free in Austria but not spiritually free. Her inability to unburden trauma, the shame and guilt of the lies and suffering she had undergone in Austria, Marjane begins to self-destruct, both emotionally and physically. At this point, Satrapi is visited by a memory of her grandmother reminding her to never forget who she is and where she came from. Indeed, the tension of an Iranian and Western identity is Satrapi’s chief conflict. Throughout her experience in Vienna, Marji combatted much racism and prejudice.

Moving to a ‘third space’ in France

Marji’s evolving experiences narrates her effort to reconstruct her lost Iranian memories and identity. It is the first but significant step in her process of achieving self-approval and resolving the crisis. Returning to Iran, she initially suffers from severe depression due to sudden cultural changes. She feels unconnected with Iranian culture and the people around her both emotionally and culturally. Her unfor-

tunate experiences in Austria and desire for a place called homeland made her feel restless. Upon returning to Iran, Satrapi laments that she was a stranger in Austria and now a stranger at home. The realisation dawning on her that her home is neither in Austria nor in Iran makes her feel worse. Satrapi asks herself if Iran will ever be home once again. Her contemplation for freedom from oppressive circumstances probably led her to a serious identity crisis. The price of freedom, Marji recognizes is her national identity. At twenty years, the Iran she stands in, is fundamentally at odds with the person she wants to be.

Fortunately, Marji is enlightened and encouraged by her father and escapes from this dialectic by gradually overcoming her inner struggle and understanding what she wants to pursue. Marji's journey eventually develops towards self's overhaul. And thus, interestingly, Satrapi moves to her 'third space' – France [10]. Upon settling in France, Satrapi decides to re-visit her past in the form of a written narrative. Writing can be therapeutic because it helps us to understand the past and the traumas that have affected our identity formation. Through "Persepolis", Sartapi could reach a deeper understanding of the trauma of her life, the conflict she underwent and by unveiling her private narrative into a public one she seems to achieve cathartic effect purging out the pain she was shouldering from long. Her inner struggle starts fading away creating space for her real self now. She gains spiritual freedom and achieves a sense of wholeness at the very end.

This 'third space' that she attains perhaps, as Homi Bhabha too points out – provides multiple positions to be constructed. Evading and crossing borders initially created damaging conflict between Marjane's modernism and traditionalism; however, later the author discovers, that "the border is the place where conventional patterns of thought are disturbed and can be disrupted by the possibility of crossing. At the border, past and present, inside and outside no longer remain separated as binary oppositions but instead commingle and conflict" [9. P. 217].

When she leaves for France, she does not see any conflicts and dialectic in her identity but rather sees the new 'space' providing her immense possibility. The 'third sphere' also allows for Satrapi her own private and public spaces in which she can remove the veil and begin to reconstruct her identity. Marjane's hybridity allows her to recreate a space in France where she can embrace her Iranian-European identity [11]. Excluded in Austria because she was not modern enough and marginalized in Iran because she was too modern, Marjane leaves for France in order to reconstruct her identity.

Conclusion

Marjane Sartapi's autobiography focuses on the reconstruction of the self through the interplay between cultural environment and individual agency, an interplay that is often complex and poorly understood. Enacting autobiographical writing requires and elicits a sense of understanding and coherence about how past events shape our present selves. For example, after a certain trauma, we repeat and rehearse the event in our minds in order to understand how this event has affected us and altered our identity. We ask question our identities after a trauma, in an effort to discover how events can revisit and change the self. The inner conflict that grows from a child's confusion to a woman's integrated sense of self

makes the story moving. It plays a pivotal role in showing the author's indescribable pain of her childhood keeping the audience engaged and anxious to see how he protagonist finds herself. The autobiographical writing of "Persepolis" makes it more than a memoir that describes the author's private experiences and her own sentiment. Here it exemplifies itself as an epitome of Iranian society as well encompassing several social aspects including gender, social class, education, religion, and political issues. Marji's diaspora and her hybrid assimilation of Iranian – Western culture is a small replication of the country's assimilation with its past civilization and the ongoing revolution. Marji's experience becomes illustrative and synonymous with the lives of many Islamic women who are deeply affected by the Islamic revolution. The changes in their lives exhibits the external social phenomenon, while their psychological reactions of nervousness, turmoil, and anxiety triggered by the social disruptions reflect the influence of the revolution on people's integrity and interiority, their inner lives and identities. Individuals however change, grow and evolve with the progression of the social environment. The novel "Persepolis" highlights one such kind where the protagonist tries assimilating her public – private sense. Our reading of "Persepolis" is not restricted to author's journey alone rather can be related well in larger contexts of trauma and the binaries that split individuals. It is composed of various selves, narrators, and voices. Her writing of her journey of self-location and enlightenment from her 'third space' renders a healing effect to herself and the ones unable to unveil their sufferings. Her writing remove the layers of false identity and reconstruct it through a graphic narration. The images and pictures drawn convey her world. Satrapi uses simple, basic drawn out characters in her memoir and adds minimal text to describe each scene. Satrapi has a clever way of drawing facial expressions and body language for her characters. For instance, when she was upset over her uncle Anoosh's death, the picture of Marjane floating in space with a look of desperation and hopelessness on her face allows the readers to have a better understanding of her pain. Even though Satrapi uses flatly drawn characters and unadorned language, her message is gripping and compelling, and the graphic form allows for more understanding and intimacy between Satrapi and her audience. Although the memoir would have been just as convincing if she had simply used words, the use of both language and pictures adds a touch of both humour and realism to her story. In a world dominated by the prose novel and memoir, graphic texts are not typical reading material. However, Satrapi creates a portrait of daily life in Iran that reveals more about her country and society than perhaps any history book shows. It is through these child-like illustrations that Satrapi gives a human voice to a dark point in Iranian history. Even though readers are accustomed to written memoirs, Satrapi proves that images can represent life just as well or even better than prose alone does.

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