

## ***Persepolis* and the Psychological Affects of War on Civilians**

Abby Bialeschki

In writing, *The Complete Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi uses her experiences as a civilian through the Iranian/ Iraqi war to get people to understand how mentally exhausting living through a war can be. Many people will go a lifetime without having to endure the constant fear of being attacked or affected by war. For some like Satrapi, everyday witnessing the terror is a constant battle of living in fear and anguish. Fear for their lives or the lives of loved ones, fear of losing their home to bombs or gun fire, or even fear of being captured and killed by the opponent, all of these issues are horrifying problems that civilians who live around the war are constantly plagued with. With these issues or fears the civilians have, one can only imagine what war could do to those civilians' mental states. Satrapi gives an accurate description of living through the Iraqi/Iranian war and how it affected her and her family.

In *The Complete Persepolis*, Satrapi takes a different approach when telling her childhood story. By using images and words much like those from a comic book, Satrapi helps the readers get both a mental picture and physical image of what life was like throughout the war. In the book, the reader views graphic images of people shot and killed in the streets, children sent to war and slaughtered on the front lines, and the image of people beaten, whipped, and tortured. These kinds of images can only help the reader better understand what life was like for those civilians living within the battle zone.

For many readers, war occurs on the news. People understand that war occurs in many different places throughout the world, but never really understand the full effects on those civilians living day by day in fear. For instance, Satrapi recalls her first time seeing a fighter jet fly across the sky and how fear and excitement rushed over her and her community (80). The reader sees just how scared and fearful Satrapi and her father were when that first bomb dropped on their town. In this part of the book, the images are allowed to speak for themselves. The pictures show how concerned Satrapi and her father was when they had heard about the fighter planes bombing close to their home. The reader also sees how patriotic and courageous young Satrapi is when asking her father if he was going to fight against the Iraqi's and how upset she was when she found out her father would not be participating (81). For Satrapi and her family, this would be the start of many bombings and destruction to their community.

The emotionally draining bombings and destruction that occur throughout the book raises questions as to what it would feel like to be a civilian living through a war. How would it play out psychologically for the reader? Constant pressure would disturb a person mentally and physically. These kinds of experiences are damaging to a person; for instance, as soon as Satrapi had reconnected with a loved one, he or she was quickly taken away because of the war. In the article, "War takes its toll on Civilian Health"; Elie Karam states that:

Those exposed to conflict were six times as likely to have anxiety disorder, three times as likely to have a mood disorder, and thirteen more

times likely to have an impulse-control disorder as to those who did not experience such conflict.(1)

This statement shows that civilians who are affected by the war not only have damaging effects on them physically, but also mentally. Karam states in her article that those civilians who were affected by some sort of mental disorder did seek treatment, but it took up to six years for some to fully recover from the damaging affects the war had on them (1).

Both Satrapi and many of the people whom she spoke about in her book were under pressure to keep safe. They were constantly afraid and would have to hide in basements or even refrained from going outside because of the concern of being attacked. In the book, it is clear just how alarmed the people were. In the section titled “The Wine” the reader sees the pictures of men and women hiding in their basements to be safe and protected from bombs (104). The reader also gets a vivid picture of how, after every bombing, they would pick up the phone and call around to the others to make sure they were alive (104). The reader sees the exhaustion in the faces of those civilians who constantly had to run from bombs and gunfire (104). After doing this for so long, one can imagine how mentally exhausting this would be. Not only would the people fear for their lives, but also for the lives of their friends and family.

The physical and mental state for those men and women who were raising children during this horrific time may also come into affect when understanding the psychological issues the civilians go through. Many mothers and fathers would often send off their children to another country to get them away from the

war and to avoid conscription. For instance, Satrapi writes about Taher, an older man who sent his two sons to Holland to be far away from the war (118). The reader understands in this section that Taher is having difficulty dealing with both the war and the absence of his sons. The image of Taher is of an older man confused and upset because of how his life ended up. There is a clear understanding throughout this section that Taher is stressed and depressed with both the war, and losing his sons. These circumstances led Taher to chain smoking and having heart attacks as well as shame for his country (118). The war played a part in Taher's psychological state. The constant worry of bombs and gun fire, as well as the absence of his sons, mentally and physically affected Taher. War impacts human life mentally, even though we tend to focus on the physical affects.

For many people, losing a loved one is something that can be horrific to a person, especially to a young child. Satrapi wrote about her experience with her long lost uncle who returned home after spending years in prison. She speaks about the excitement she has when she finds out that he, unlike her father, was a hero (57-59). The reader gets to experience a strong bond occurring with Satrapi and Uncle Anoosh. However, her bond with Anoosh was short lived because of the war. Anoosh, shortly after his return home, was executed. As a child, Satrapi was confused and upset at the fact that her uncle, whom she loved dearly, was executed and killed because of his involvement with the war.

These kinds of experiences can be damaging to a person, for instance, as soon as Satrapi had reconnected with a loved one, he was quickly taken away

because of the war. In the book, losing someone like Anoosh was devastating to Satrapi. She becomes angry at God and even wants him out of her life (70).

Whereas before she turned to God to help guide her life. This article may suggest that Satrapi could have had some form of emotional distress because of the war and how it affected her.

Contributing to her emotional distress, Satrapi also lost many close friends and family due to the war as a young child before she left for Austria. Not only does emotional distress inhibit a person from believing in a world of pleasure and solitude, but it also creates an image that it is normal to live like this. In the article, "The Psychosocial Aspects of Children Exposed to War: Practice and Policy Initiatives" Barenbaum, Ruchkin, and Stone state:

It is generally accepted now that children represent a highly vulnerable population, for whom levels of symptoms may often be higher than for adults. Recent literature also suggests that childhood trauma can have a lasting impact on child cognitive, moral, and personality development, interpersonal relationships, and coping abilities. (1)

This is evident in the book, Satrapi talks about losing a friend because his family decides to move to the United States for a better opportunity and to remove themselves from the war (63). In a completely different spectrum, the reader sees how damaging it was for Satrapi when her friend was killed by a bomb. The reader sees the image of the home ruined by a war bomb and a small hand sticking out from the rubble (142). The reader understands the anger and

confusion on the face of young Satrapi and can only imagine how this could mentally affect a person's development and how they view society.

When people think of war, people think of the soldiers who fight on the battlefield. However, war not only affects the soldiers who fight, but also the civilians who call the warfront their home. *Persepolis* shows the reader what it is like for those civilians by the images in the book it shows just how damaging it can be on a person. As Jessica Hamblen and Paula Schnurr states in their article, "Mental Health Aspects of Prolonged Combat Stress in Civilians":

Civilians who are not directly involved in the war effort are also frequently confronted with war related stressors. Some typical civilian stressors include life threat; being bombed, shot at, threatened, or displaced; being confined to one's home; losing a loved one or family member; suffering from financial hardships; and having restricted access to resources such as food, water, and other supplies. Particularly horrific stressors experienced by some civilians during war include torture, beatings, rape, forced labor, witnessing sexual abuse of or violence toward a family member, and mock execution. (1)

The reader is constantly reminded in the book how war stressors take a toll on the civilian lives. Satrapi makes it clear throughout the book that because of the war, the hardships for civilians are high. Civilians had restrictions on food at the grocery store because the supply was low (87). Most civilians during this time would have to go without many luxury items that they might have had before the

war as well as necessities such as gasoline for their cars (88). Everything was rationed.

Since Iran was no place to keep a young child, Satrapi's family moved her to Austria to get away from the war that was occurring and to have a better life with greater experiences. At such a young age, Satrapi was taken from everything and everyone she had known, and forced to become an adult in a different country. Most readers cannot imagine what it must have been like for Satrapi to be so young, away from her family and her friends, and have to adapt to a completely different culture. Because she was so young, some people may come to the conclusion that being away from her family and not having the stability that most teenagers need, caused Satrapi to act out the way she did. Instead of having her mother and father there to make sure she was keeping out of trouble, they were completely clueless as to what she was doing in Austria. If Satrapi would have stayed in Iran with her family, maybe she would not have experimented with cigarettes, marijuana, and men. Yet, Satrapi and her rebellious way were not just because of her transition into adulthood, but also an effect of a much greater issue.

William Steele and Caroline H. Sheppard state in the article: Trauma and Loss: Research and Interventions that:

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in children can also be triggered by a traumatic move. When families must move because of a traumatic situation, the adults often are ill equipped to respond to the child's emotional needs. Oftentimes, parents underestimate their children's

feelings. If children see their parents crying, arguing, or simply stressing over the basic inconveniences associated with moving, they may interpret their parent's behavior as being their fault. (2)

This article may help conclude that this could be why Satrapi acted out all of those years while away from her parents by experimenting with drugs, cigarettes, and men. Maybe Satrapi herself could not understand the full meaning as to why her parents sent her away from her culture. Since war played a huge part in her move to Austria, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder could have also played a part as to why she rebelled all of those years. She could have also rebelled for all of those years because she was moving away from her home without her family which may be worse than moving with family to a new surrounding.

Steele and Sheppard support this by saying, "Anyone who has worked with children has seen the effects of such a move. Teachers, in particular, have children come through their doors everyday, who are negatively affected by a move, socially, emotionally or academically. Research supports that moving has negative consequences on learning" (2). This could account for why Satrapi often lashed out at her teachers leading to her expulsion from school in Iran, as well as her restriction against authority in Austria.

At only fourteen, Satrapi moved away from the war and her family to seek a new life. However, having to grow up and experience what she did could have lasting affects on one's psyche, and the novel shows some such effects on Satrapi. Since she was away from her family, Satrapi was kick out, expelled, and left homeless on the street at such a young age. Because Satrapi was on her



own when she was a teenager, this may have had lasting effects on why she is the way she is. She also lashed out at other people for making fun of her heritage. Even though she was rebelling against her culture and her identity, Satrapi manages to show how she is still a part of her culture by proudly standing up for it when being mocked (196-197). She also manages to lash out at Doctor Heller, calling her obscene names which eventually left her homeless (234-235). Many teenagers worry about where they are going to go on a Friday night or who are they going to ask to the dance. But, Satrapi not only faced being alone but also a fear of homelessness. She was left alone to fend for herself. Having to do this at such a young age can damage one's mental health.

It is evident that it was difficult for Satrapi to adapt to such different cultures and at such a young age because of the war that was occurring in her country. A reader can see throughout the novel that Satrapi herself could have been suffering from some sort of emotional distress due to the effects of the war. Not only is she a vocal and destructive person while growing up in Austria, but also vulnerable because she wanted to fit in. This could be because she was trying to find her own identity as a young Iranian girl in a much different culture. She still struggles with her culture and her identity because in the end, Satrapi leaves Iran once again to live in France, away from her home and family. The reader sees just how Satrapi no longer wants to be a part of her culture. She would rather live in exile because of her witness to the war and the impression it left on her and her view of Iran (339).

In *Persepolis*, war plays a huge part on how civilians in Iran live. Satrapi makes sure the reader gets a clear image of how damaging the war is to both the community and the civilians. In America, people only see war through a television or in a magazine. Since the civil war, no other war has been fought on American soil. Americans come from and believe in the “Home of the Free.” For Americans, we have no way of knowing what it is like to live in constant fear of the outside world. This is why Satrapi helps give a more distinct and clear image by using her graphic images to help American reader’s understand what war is like for those communities who are experiencing it first hand. She shows just how damaging it is to a person’s mind. She uses the comic book images to show the scared faces, the dead bodies, and the explosions that occurred while she was growing up as a child. Not only does this book reveal just how damaging war can be on the civilians who live through it, but also gives readers who have not been through such devastation a better psychological connection and much more personal view on war.

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