

## **Persepolis: City of Persians, People of Iran**

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“Nobody outside of my country knows that there are normal people in Iran,” says Marjane Satrapi, as quoted by David Hajdu in his book *Heroes and Villains* (Hajdu 299). Satrapi shows, through this quote and through her graphic memoir *Persepolis*, that she desires to show the world the ways that Iranians are normal by revealing her own coming of age amidst the struggle of conflict in Iran. One of the central themes explored through Satrapi’s telling of her childhood is the tool of deconstruction she provides to her readers. Her *Persepolis* portrays a deconstructive view of Iranian culture based on Tyson’s explanation in her book *Critical Theory Today*: “To find that ideological framework and understand its limitations, a deconstructive critic looks for meanings in the text that conflict with its main theme, focusing on self-contradictions of which the text seems unaware” (260). Satrapi aptly lays out the ideological framework and limitations of the Iranian government in power, and intentionally reshape her readers’ misconstrued ideas of Iranian history. While they often watch their expectations of the lives children in modern day Iran shift, they often overlook the importance of the title in this critical process. Even before page one of her memoir, Satrapi deliberately combats misconceptions of Iranian culture by using the title of *Persepolis* to create the context of Iranian history and values that shape the Iranian people of today.

With a quick glance at history, it can be seen that Iran does not fit the stereotypes that the West commonly uses to classify it. As seen by Westerners, Iran represents a nation resisting any influence from the United States and supporting Islamic extremism (Axworthy 283). The implications of this extremism are taken to mean that men repress their women and terrorize their enemies. While Iranians were classified with Iraq and North Korea in President George W.

Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech, they were not threatening the United States; they were merely giving help to the coalition forces against the Taliban (Axworthy 284). These are the types of themes that Satrapi deconstructs in *Persepolis*. She desires to show her readers deeper identity of Iran that lies beyond current governmental affairs. The title *Persepolis* correctly implies that it will be a historic book; however, it is not the history of the city Persepolis, but a graphic memoir of Satrapi's childhood.

By using the unexpected title *Persepolis*, Satrapi begins calling her readers to deconstruct their views of Iranians and even Iranian history. Taking advantage of this apparently counterintuitive title, she takes common images of Iran and explains them; but instead of saying what the West expects her to say, she tells the story of the people who experience these realities much as Westerners would if faced with the same realities. According to Axworthy in his book *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, the Iranian people are intensely complex and paradoxical; they take pride in their tradition, and defy compliance to the restricting laws of whatever government they may be subjected to (xii). They did not begin as a Muslim Arab nation, but as the great Persian Empire. Beginning with the origins of Iran, *Persepolis* shifts the vantage from which Iran appears to most Westerners.

In the beginning of the history of Persia, the first dynasty came through the domination of Cyrus. Satrapi references these Persian-Iranian roots on page twenty-eight of *Persepolis* when she tells the history of how the Shah comes to power and made a show of restoring the glory of Iran. It is through Cyrus' reign, circa 500 BC, that romantic, intriguing Persia claims to hold the place of the world's first great empire (Forbis 10). From its birth as a nation, Iran held a place of honor. Though Cyrus was the first great emperor, the emperor Darius also holds an important part in history for Iranians for it was he who

built the great architectural wonders of the of Persepolis (Greek for “City of the Persians”) and made Persia an empire of the people. Darius re-founded the empire that couple of revolutionary monarchs had allowed to lose power, after Cyrus had benevolently dominated the surrounding nations to establish the greatness of the Persian Empire (Axworthy 17). The two great emperors, along with their successors, made Persia prestigious and famous throughout the world.

While Cyrus made Iran important in the grand scheme of history, it was Darius who cultivated a growth and emphasis on culture for Iranians. He established institutions and gained the support of his subjects, while still disciplining them to pay heavy taxes needed to support such a large empire (Forbis 17-8). Satrapi does not mention Darius directly in *Persepolis*, but since he promoted the majesty and legitimacy of his own reign through building an enormous palace at Persepolis, she does mention his handiwork. Through Darius’ work at Persepolis, he created “a mystique of magnificent kingship” that continued to permeate Persian history until the Iranian revolution of 1979 (Axworthy 20). Satrapi highlights the significance of this point in Iranian history as she sets the stage for where her memoir begins.

With the Iranian revolution of 1979, the “magnificent kingship” ended. A revival of Islamic extremism brought the Shah to power. This event correlates to the history of Persepolis at the time that it was overthrown. Though Persepolis was never the permanent capital of Persia, it held extreme significance in the eyes of the Persians. When Alexander the Great swept through Persia and demolished Persepolis by burning it to the ground in 330 BC, it was a deliberate political act that signified Alexander’s “succession” to the

Persian throne (Axworthy 29). He was conquering a nation by taking away the iconic place that had united them.

As Satrapi points out in her chapter “Persepolis,” the Iranian identity of today is more complex than a simple identification with their roots. In this chapter, she explains the Shah’s ascension to power and his desire to show the people that he was looking after Cyrus’ empire. For most Iranians today, they do not think first of their Persian history; think of their Islamic history because it is the foundation of their current government. To find the significance of Persepolis and the history of their Persian Empire, they have to dig deeper in their history (Axworthy 251). Not only do the Iranians place less immediate significance on Persepolis, most Westerners probably do not associate the city Persepolis with modern day Iran. Satrapi takes full advantage of this by using the title *Persepolis*. She draws her reader in without the negative connotations that they typically associate with Iran, brought about by the strained foreign relations between Western nations and Iran. This title *Persepolis* draws readers to pick up the book before fully realizing what they will be reading. They allow their barriers to come down because they are introduced to a mystical story through the class picture of young Marji at the age of ten (Satrapi 1). With her charming ways and clever words, she captures the hearts and attention of her readers.

On the other hand, if Satrapi had chosen to title her work “Tehran,” the typical Westerner would make more direct associations with modern Iran and would be less inclined to pick the book up off the shelf. With a title like *Persepolis*, even if readers are not familiar with the ancient city, there is more mystery and grandeur associated with the name. Not only is this title more enticing for Westerners, but it is also a title that enhances their image of the people of Iran. Through this title, Satrapi refers back to a time of Iranian

glory – a time in their history of which she and other Iranians can be proud. She desires to show her readers that Iranians are real people: they live ordinary lives and have as rich of a history as other nations. Though Satrapi has shown her readers that her people do not readily identify with their glorious history in conscious ways, she still shows that they, as a people, resemble their glorious past more than they resemble the repressive government they are subjected to.

No doubt, Satrapi's intent in titling her memoir *Persepolis* has much to do with the idea that to understand the Iranians, one must go beyond the religious history they identify with today. The title *Persepolis* draws attention to the fact that Iranian history holds more than a succession of Muslim rulers; it was a great nation even before the influence of Islam. It is necessary to return to the roots of Persia and to the city of Persepolis. Interestingly enough, Satrapi points her readers to this history not in the chapter "Persepolis," but in "The Bicycle." She addresses the "2500 years of tyranny and submission" that she remembers her father explaining to her (Satrapi 11). By drawing a succession of Iranians bowing to an emperor, the invasion of the Arabs, the Mongolian invasion, and groups that brought modern imperialism, she gives an extremely simple picture of the history of Iran. In her chapter "Persepolis," she addresses the relationship between this history and the situation of her people in the 1979 Revolution. Through Satrapi's artwork, readers see that the Shah made a show of going back to the roots of the country, in order to assure the people that he would restore their former greatness. Instead of restoring that greatness, however, he threw celebrations of the 2500-year dynasty to impress the heads of state. While his intent had been to reassure the people, he ended up estranging them from their history.

Understanding this pre-Islamic history includes coming to the realization that the construction of Persepolis occurred during the great Persian Empire and its destruction demonstrated the beginning of Greek supremacy, and the blend of Persian and Greek cultures within Iran. This identity struggle still affects Iran, as demonstrated in Satrapi's own life, especially *Persepolis II: The Story of a Return*.

There are specific instances where Satrapi shows that the West has influence on the Iranian people, but at the core they have stayed true to the traditions of their culture. One such instance is upon Satrapi's return from Austria when she talks with her Iranian friends: "Underneath their outward appearance of being modern women, my friends were real traditionalists. They were overrun by hormones and frustration, which explained their aggressiveness toward me. To them, I had become a decadent western woman" (Satrapi 270). After Satrapi has returned from Austria and is talking to her friends who appear to be modern women, she is confronted with the reality that there is more than one way to be westernized. Since she had experienced Western culture first-hand, she realized that her friends were not as modern as they tried to appear. They had blended Western clothing with their Muslim beliefs, but she was on the other side of the blend. She had retained Western thinking, while looking back even farther in her cultures history to hold on to its ideals of noncompliance.

Satrapi writes of her people, who are the people of Iran – the people of Persia. Her writings are about her city and the city of her people, and her people are the Persians. The Greek word *persepolis*, meaning "city of the Persians" (Axworthy 20) holds extreme significance to Satrapi's memoir. Surely Satrapi intended the title not only as a reference to the ancient city, but also to the meaning of the name. Satrapi sees her writings as a way to

teach the rest of the world that her people are human and have to deal with life just as the rest of the world does. In David Hajdu's essay on Marjane Satrapi, found in his book *Heroes and Villains*, he quotes Satrapi as saying, "The point of the book is to show what a person is really like who comes from my country, because nobody outside of my country knows that there are normal people in Iran. I shit and fart, and I laugh and I make love... I don't really care what people think of me, but I care what they think of my people" (299). Satrapi's statement here clearly demonstrates that the purpose of her book is to explain to the world what life is truly like in Iran. Her first step in doing so was to create a title that drew from the history and the culture of her people, which set the tone for her entire book.

Satrapi's choosing of the title had more significance than just the literal meaning. Perhaps Satrapi chose the title *Persepolis* not because of the name itself, but because it leads to the name that the people of Persia have given to the city of Persepolis. Forbis gives more insight into this reason:

Only in the West is this ancient city known by its Greek nickname. The proud people of Persia have perennially referred to the site as Takht-e Jamshid or Throne of Jamshid, an allusion to the beginning of Iranian myth... Poets then and poets now recite the heroic deeds and tragic failings of the fifty kings who traditionally inhabited the Iranian Empire until the Moslems arrived. It is still recited in a purely Persian language, untainted with any of the Arabic words adopted after the Moslem conquest. In the process Jamshid, most outstanding of the early mythical kings, melded with the Zoroastrian temple of Persepolis in the creative consciousness of the Persian people. (Forbis 22)

Especially at the beginning of *Persepolis*, references to this meaning of the title come into play. On page seven, as Satrapi explains her early desire to become a prophet, she tells her readers that in her holy book “the first three rules came from Zarathustra. He was the first prophet in my country before the Arab invasion.” From there, she continues to show her readers what those rules were and what some of the holidays associated with the Zoroastrian teachings were. Even at this early point in her life, she has heard about the beginnings of her country. As a representation of children in Iran, she is saying that Iranians are aware of their roots; however, even in those same panels, she states that her family did not celebrate the ceremonies and holidays that were associated with that religion. The way that she relates these events clearly shows her readers that Iranians do have a rich cultural history, but most of them choose to identify with the Muslim identity that came after the Arab invasion.

To even further enrich the implications of this reasoning for the title, the book may be viewed through the lens by the realization that Satrapi’s journey into adulthood is similar to Persia when Persepolis was renamed and destroyed by the Greeks. As Satrapi goes to Austria and becomes westernized, so Alexander swept through Persia and conquered the Iranian people. Alexander’s reign had an influence over the entire empire of Persia and the culture that had already been established there. Satrapi’s journey to Austria gives her exposure to a new culture that starts to shape her even though her cultural identity was originally very different. Both Persia and Satrapi were redefined by Western culture, but at the same time held on to their Persian roots. Their origins remained the same, perhaps gaining more significance than they previously had. The significance of Satrapi’s origins became real to her as she overheard her friends talking behind her back



about how she never talked about her country or parents. This prompts her to stand up and say “I AM IRANIAN AND PROUD OF IT!” (Satrapi 197). She had been in Austria for one year and had been allowing Western culture to influence her more and more until she claimed to be French. It was not until her friends began talking about her that she realized how important her roots were to her, and how much they still shaped who she was.

As Satrapi explains her life to her readers through her graphic memoir *Persepolis*, she highlights the humanity of her Iranian culture and people. She uses her title to catch readers off guard by attracting them to a book they might not otherwise be inclined to pick up. When she has drawn them in, she presents them with images they are more familiar with identifying in Iranian culture; however, she does not leave them with the same ideas that they previously had about those images. She integrates the Persian past of Iran with its cultural identity today and shows her readers that the Iranian people are as complex as any Western culture.

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