

## **The Complicated Effects of Consumerism in *Persepolis***

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Marjane Satrapi's memoir *The Complete Persepolis* was published in the early 2000s in France. The autobiographical novel tells the story of a young Marjane (or Marji) growing up in Iran. In the story, Marji is raised as a communist; in fact, the ideals of Karl Marx are mentioned often throughout the book. At one point in the story, a very young Marjane remarks that "it was funny to see how much Marx and God looked like each other. Though Marx's hair was bit curlier" (13). Ironically, the reader can analyze the story using Marxist criticism in order to reveal how specific ideologies, particularly the ideology of consumerism, oppress the Satrapi family and the Iranian people. According to Marxist criticism, "If a theory does not foreground the economic realities of human culture, then it misunderstands human culture. For Marxism, getting and keeping economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities" (Tyson 53-54). The reader can see how the Iranian government employs certain ideologies, such as religion and patriotism, to control the lower classes of Iran. If one examines the Satrapi family in particular, he or she can come to the conclusion that the family is motivated by the process of getting and keeping economic power; specifically, the ideology of consumerism motivates and oppresses the Satrapi family. However, it is also important to consider how the family is liberated, as well as oppressed, by consumerism. Conclusively, though consumerism is undeniably oppressive to the Satrapis, the relationship between consumerism and the Iranian people is complicated.

### **Iranian Economics and the Satrapi Family's Social Class**

According to Marxist theory, consumerism is an ideology that makes individuals feel as if their self-worth is correlated to what he or she buys (Tyson 60). This ideology has two

purposes; it makes the lower classes feel empowered while making the rich richer. To examine how the Satrapi family is influenced by consumerism, it is important to determine the family's social standing in 1980s Iran. Though never explicitly stated in the memoir, the reader can come to the conclusion that the family is economically comfortable; even in the recessions that result from an oppressive regime, changing regimes, and war, the family has money to buy their daughter items and send her to Austria in order to receive a Western education.

In pre-revolutionary Iran (specifically 1960-1979), the country was experiencing economic development linked to the oil trade and Western powers' interests in the nation's resources (Poya 45). According to the statistics of class economics, the middle class enjoyed relative economic prosperity during this point in time (48). The Satrapi family, who seems to enjoy the effects of Iran's economic development in the 1970s, is likely placed into the middle class of Iranian citizens. Evidence for their wealth is present in *Persepolis*; for example, when Marji asks for money, her mother is able to provide it (Satrapi 138). The family also drives a nice car and employs a maid (6), and they can afford to go on vacation numerous times throughout the book as well as send their daughter to Austria. The family clearly is of a higher class than other Iranian citizens.

As Poya discusses, the difference between lower and middle class was large. She writes, "Iran's integration into the world system, although it had its own characteristics, shared those features of uneven economic development experienced by countries colonized by foreign powers" (29). In other words, Iran's globalization and economic development in pre-revolutionary Iran lead to a pseudo post-colonial relationship with foreign powers as well as a steep divide between the lower and middle classes. The memoir clearly outlines stark differences in life styles between middle class Iranian families such as the Satrapis and the countries lower

classes. For example, in the chapter “The Key,” impoverished boys of the nation are convinced to go to war while Marji and other higher class children of the same age are at a party (Satrapi 99-102). Marji, even at a young age, recognizes that she belongs to a higher class than those around her; she feels guilty “because our maid did not eat with us” and “because my father had a Cadillac” (6).

Examining the relationship between the Marxism and the different Iranian classes is crucial to come to an understanding of how consumerism affects the Satrapi family. Because the Satrapis are of a higher class, they are more apt to follow the ideals of Karl Marx because, as Marji’s Uncle Anoosh states, “In a country where half the population is illiterate you cannot unite the people around Marx” (Satrapi 62). In other words, the people who may be the most exposed to oppression—the lower class—may not have the skills necessary to study Marxist theory, which highlights the issues of class struggles and oppressive ideologies.

Hossein Godazgar highlights another ironic issue in the relationship between class and consumerism. In a study comparing Islam to consumerism, Godazgar discovered that “the higher the religiosity of the people, the lower their consumerism was and vice versa” (404). Thus, the revolutionaries of Iran who follow the Marxist doctrine, such as the Satrapis, may be less oppressed by the ideology of religion, but they are more apt to be oppressed by the ideology of consumerism. This ironic relationship naturally leads to hypocrisy.

In a review for the *New York Times* entitled “God Looked like Marx,” Fernanda Eberstadt refers to the Satrapi family as “fashionably radical” (Eberstadt 1). The readers can see how the family may not wholeheartedly practice the ideals of Marx. Eberstadt points out an example of the “hypocrisies of Iran’s bourgeois left” in the chapter “The Letter” (Eberstadt 1). In this chapter, Marjane recalls a time when her maid fell in love with the neighbor’s son; the

two exchanged love-letters until Marjane's father broke up the romance by telling the young boy of the maid's social position. The father tells Marjane, "in this country you must stay within your own social class" (Satrapi 37). Marjane later consoles her maid while remarking, "We were not in the same social class but at least we were in the same bed" (37). So, though Marjane's father follows Marxism, he does not take the ideals to heart enough to try and change the oppression of the lower classes around him.

In "The Letter," Marjane realizes that, as Marxist theory states, "differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than others" (Tyson 54). Marjane's sensitivity to the pains that strict social classes create is especially prevalent when she is a child living in economic wealth; the child feels guilty because she experiences economic comfort and relative freedom compared to the people from lower classes. Her opinions change, however, as her family loses their economic comfort and Marjane is more influenced by the ideology of consumerism.

Upon her return to Iran after her years in Austria, Marjane remarks that, "My father didn't have his Cadillac anymore, but drove a Renault 5 instead. The same Cadillac in which I was ashamed to sit because it was so difficult to accept being more comfortable than others...I would even have preferred that he came get me with a better car, as a way to remind me of a more glorious time" (Satrapi 247). In the preceding quotation, we can see that Marjane associates wealth and having more luxurious items with happiness. Since her childhood quandary of feeling guilty about her father's nice car, Marjane has had more time to be influenced by the ideology of consumerism in her world. This change in attitude may have resulted from her time abroad, in which she was immersed in a more consumerism based Western culture and spent a large amount of time in poverty.

## **Liberation through Consumerism**

Though Marxist criticism states that ideologies, such as consumerism, can be oppressive (Tyson 56-57), the characters in *Persepolis* seem to find liberation through consumerism. Using the chapter “Kim Wilde” as an example, the reader can see how consumerism may affect the Satrapis positively. In this chapter, Marji’s parents visit Turkey for a few days and return with presents for their daughter. During that point in time, imports from the west were illegal in Iran (Satrapi 126). Marji’s parents go to great lengths in order to secure their daughter such western items as a pair of Nike sneakers, a Michael Jackson button, a denim jacket, a Kim Wilde poster, and an Iron Maiden poster (130). Satrapi’s father hides the posters in the lining of his coat in order to smuggle the items past customs and into Iran.

Going to these lengths to bring two posters into Iran may seem excessive, but perhaps the ends justified the means for the Satrapi family. Through the act of buying goods that are outlawed in their country, the Satrapis are rebelling against their government. Though this rebellion seems insignificant compared to the dangerous protests that the family had participated in earlier in the book, the family must feel some level of gratification through this act of consumerism. In “Islam Versus Consumerism and Postmodern in the Context of Iran,” Godazgar states that “excess, waste, and consumerism were considered as part of an alien culture and a service to enemies of Islam” (391). In other words, by indulging in unnecessary goods through consumerism, particularly Western goods, the Satrapis were serving the enemies of the Islamic regime under which they suffered and thus rebelling against the regime.

The Satrapi family also rebels against the Islamic regime’s belief in the necessity of uniformity. Godazgar states that “modern consumerism’s characteristics of individualism, dynamism, hedonism and romanticism are opposed to the religious fundamentalism’s call for

communal identity, static economic ethics, everlasting concerns, and traditionalism” (394). The regulations of women’s dress, in particular, create a sense of uniformity in appearance. For example, the four young girls wearing veils in the opening chapter of the story (Satrapi 3) are nearly indistinguishable from each other. By wearing Nike’s and a denim jacket, Marjane separates herself from the other women in the country even though she still wears the required veil.

“Kim Wilde” also demonstrates how this act of consumerism provides the Satrapi family with a sense of normalcy. Marji’s parents likely want to provide their daughter with as normal an upbringing as possible in the circumstances; as Marji’s father laments, “It’s so hard for kids in Iran. The poor things” (Satrapi 127). Living in a country with strong Western influence, Marji naturally craves owning “hip stuff” (126) from the West, though it is forbidden. By owning these goods, Marji may feel like a “normal” young girl, even though she lives under abnormally harsh political circumstances. As Godazgar points out, the spirit of consumerism is associated with a “fantasy world” that acts as a sort of escapism from the world in which they live (396). So while listening to “Kids in America” and wearing her Western apparel (131), Marjane can escape from the expectations and limitations of the government outside of her home.

### **Oppression by Consumerism**

Though the Satrapis may find consumerism psychologically liberating, one must also examine ways in which they are oppressed by the ideology. As aforementioned, the Satrapi family may feel liberated by consumerism because of a sense of rebellion, normalcy, individuality, and escape. However, the Iranian government may not mind these calming psychological effects of their citizens’ illegal activities. Perhaps the government consciously turns the other eye to these illegal acts of consumerism because it keeps the citizens satisfied; in

other words, if the citizens can listen to the latest music and watch satellite TV, then they may be less likely to rebel and protest against their government. This idea is evident in the chapter “The Satellite” in which Iranians begin to procure satellite TVs; one image features the satellite by day and by night (324). Because satellite television is illegal, the owners cover their antennas with a sheet by day. Obviously, the police force would recognize that the citizens were hiding something if they noticed numerous blanketed objects on the top of roofs. So, their lack of enforcement on the issue in *Persepolis* may show that they did not want to remove the satellites. This chapter also shows the effects of television on the citizens, because Marji uses the television as a sense of escapism. She “spent whole days and nights at [her parent’s] house watching TV” (Satrapi 325). In this particular case, Marji was using the television as a source of escapism in order to not think about her marital problems; however, the logic can extend to include political issues.

The negative effects of consumerism can also be examined by looking at consumerism on a smaller level within the Satrapi family. By examining how Satrapi’s upper-middle class family handles consumerism in the novel, one can see that the family is oppressed by the ideology that their self worth is correlated to the things that they own. For example, Marjane’s desire to own posters and nice clothing reflects her desire for Western items to make her feel good about herself. Some forms of consumerism, such as the smuggling of Western goods, are highly dangerous during this time because of the illegality and the harsh forms of punishment.

Marjane’s parents’ dangerous act of smuggling posters into Iran may have liberated them psychologically, but it did not literally liberate them in any way. The book never explicitly states the punishment for smuggling Western goods into Iran, but it alludes to a dangerous sentence. The customs officer at the airport warns Marjane’s parents, “You realize that if I find anything

illegal, I'll..." (129). Though the officer never states what he would do if he found any contraband, the ominous ellipses suggest that it would not be a pleasant punishment. Thus, the Satrapis are oppressed by consumerism because they go to great lengths to procure items that they do not need. In this way, consumerism becomes dangerous.

At the hands of government exploitation, consumerism can be even become deadly. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx comments on how the government uses societal ideologies to their advantage when exploiting the proletariat. He writes:

"The bourgeoisie...has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.' It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value...In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation." (57-58)

The chapter "The Key" illustrates a way in which the government, who could be considered the bourgeoisie, use ideologies such as consumerism to exploit citizens for the government's own means. In this chapter, Satrapi explains how young boys from the lower class were sent to war under the pretense that they would be rewarded with material objects in heaven. The mother of one of the young boys reveals to the Satrapis that her son was given a plastic key painted gold, a symbol of wealth, as a way to reach paradise should he die in the war (Satrapi 99). The mother also states that "They [government] told him that in paradise there will be plenty of food, women and houses made of gold and diamonds" (100). The lower boys of this class are so economically oppressed, that they would go to war in order to reach an afterlife that is "even better than



Disney Land” (101). “Veiled by religious and political allusions” (Marx 57) of martyrdom, the young lower class boys’ lives mean little more than exchange value to the government.

### **The Complicated Relationship between Oppression and Liberation**

The relationship between consumerism and the Satrapi family is definitely complicated. As this paper has explored, consumerism proves to be both oppressive and liberating for the Iranian family. It is impossible to say that consumerism is either oppressive or liberating, either beneficial or harmful, because its effects are more intricate. As Lois Tyson discusses, the middle class is probably best described as both economically oppressed and economically privileged (55). Like other themes in the book, the role of consumerism is not black and white.

The issue becomes even more convoluted when looking outside of the memoir to Satrapi and the book itself. The act of writing and publishing *Persepolis* must have been liberating for Satrapi. As an Iranian woman living in France, Satrapi could publish her memoir without fear of prosecution. As Nima Naghibi and Andrew O’Malley point out in their article “Estranging the Familiar: ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Satrapi’s *Persepolis*,” the act of making the novel may be perceived by Iran as “a form of metaphorical unveiling as indecorous as physical unveiling” (224). This process of unveiling has also garnered Satrapi wealth, especially with the animated film released in 2007.

So, it is through the Western medium of a comic book that Satrapi sells her story to a largely Western audience. Satrapi intellectually liberates her readers by deconstructing their common opinions of the Iranian nation while also economically liberating herself through the success of her memoir. However, her book and its success have also caused problems in Satrapi’s life. According to a newspaper article covering a convocation speech given by Satrapi, she cannot return to Iran because of *Persepolis*, and there is no Persian translation of the book.

However, Satrapi did state that “In Iran there are no copyright laws, so there might be an Iranian translation” (qtd. in Tempesta n.p.). As in her memoir, consumerism’s impact of Satrapi’s life is difficult to regard as either oppressive or liberating.

### **Conclusion**

The impact of consumerism in *Persepolis* is crucial yet complicated. The family often finds the act of consumerism to be liberating, because it offers feelings of rebellion, escapism, individuality and normality. However, the novel also shows that the ideology of consumerism oppresses the family, especially when the government can use consumerism and laws against consumerism to control its civilians. In fact, the memoir and its commercial success has arguably been both beneficial and restricting to Satrapi. Though *Persepolis* is drawn in a stark black and white mode, the role of consumerism is anything but black and white. This was likely intentional on Satrapi’s part, because our world cannot be separating into two mutually exclusive categories; in writing a memoir, Satrapi was telling the story of her life. The book paints a realistic picture about the intricate relationship our world has with consumerism.

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