

Identity Search in Satrapi's *Persepolis*

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In Young Adult Literature circles, the coming of age story is nothing new. Some might even go so far as to argue that every book aimed at teenagers and young adults is a coming of age story, in which protagonists must deal with growing up and finding their true identity. This is a natural stage of growing up in real life, which makes it a very relatable story for a younger audience. This being the case, many authors take advantage of this template as a way of exploring the different issues surrounding a young person's growth to maturity, including not only identity but morality as well.

Marjane Satrapi's coming of age story, however, is a little different. In her graphic novel *Persepolis*, Satrapi describes how she spent most of her childhood in revolutionary Iran. Growing up in a war-torn country with many contrasting voices trying to make an influence can certainly be confusing to an impressionable child or preteen. Furthermore, Satrapi went on to spend most of her high school years living on her own in Austria. These two settings of Satrapi's life carried radically different cultural views on politics, religion, gender, and sexuality. As a result, Satrapi is constantly struggling with not only the mixed messages coming from her own country, but the contrasting messages from the ever-powerful Western world as well. This adds more depth and complication to Satrapi's story as she fights to find her true self. Throughout the graphic novel, Marji constantly struggles with her identity in a unique way that goes beyond the typical coming of age story. She explores not only what it means to be a young adult, but also an Iranian citizen, Austrian immigrant, and woman, at a time when

many young adults in the West only have to decide between the identity of a “jock” or a “nerd.”

It is a scientific fact that all teenagers will fight to find their true identity while struggling through adolescence. As their bodies change and their minds develop to the point where they can construct complex and abstract thoughts, adolescents are simultaneously trying to construct an identity. As stated by Nakkula and Toshalis, “Because so much is in flux in adolescence, the question ‘Who am I?’ is asked with great passion and urgency” (18). Between their expanding minds to their suddenly foreign bodies, everything in a teenager’s life is changing so rapidly, that they begin to question who they are and what kind of person they want to become. Nakkula and Toshalis go on to argue that creating one’s identity is the core of adolescent development, and that everything an adolescent does, from how they spend their time to who they choose to befriend is dependent on the person or identity they are trying to discover (18). It is within this struggle for personal identity that we see the heart of Satrapi’s own struggle. Her novel focuses on her own personal fight for identity, and the complications surrounding her struggle.

Satrapi’s journey to discovering her identity begins with her childhood in war-torn Iran, which is filled with mixed messages. During the transition between regimes, the country’s propaganda switches radically. While before the revolution’s success the King is said to have been chosen by God, as cited in Marji’s schoolbook (49), the teacher later tells the students to rip the picture out of their books (44). When Marji tries to address the change of opinion, no one tries to explain the change or even admit to it; she is simply punished. This action not only causes Marji to question what she believes, but

also the authority of a school that is so quick to change its beliefs according to the cultural opinion.

In another scene from the novel, Marji and readers discover that “former revolutionaries became the sworn enemies of the republic” as those captured and tortured during the revolution and then celebrated after the rebels’ victory, are then threatened and killed by the very government they fought to establish (67). Receiving these conflicting messages from her government causes Marji to not only lose any feeling of safety or security that she had after the revolution but also cause her to be confused about what kind of person or what kind of actions are acceptable in her country and culture. If those who are lauded and praised as heroes one day are then executed on the next, how does one know how to act and what to believe?

As if the mixed messages from her government were not enough, Marji also receives many conflicting messages from her own family. While her parents profess to be liberal and often disagree with the fundamentalist government, their actions sometimes prove otherwise. Early in the book, Marji is distraught when her father reveals the truth about Mehri’s true social status (being the maid) to the neighbor’s son with whom Mehri had fallen in love. When Marji’s father says that “their love was impossible” because of their different social classes, Marji becomes upset and confused, wondering why her self-proclaimed Marxist father would adhere to the rules of social classes (37). Later in the novel, Marji sees her parents criticizing some neighbors who suddenly adhere to the fundamentalist government while only a few weeks ago were dressing and behaving in a much more liberal way. When Marji tries to join in on her parents’ disapproving rant,

however, her mother tells her that like her phony neighbors, she must also lie about who she is when she is talking to others and say that she prays multiple times a day (75).

Both of these instances definitely cause confusion for Marji, who cannot even truly rely on her parents to be consistent with their beliefs. Their words may say one thing, but some of their actions say something different. Marji's parents obviously have a huge influence on her, as all parents do with their children. Consequently, the conflicting messages from them do the most damage. Marji is visibly upset and crying when her father ends Mehri's relationship (37). After the scene with the phony neighbors, Marji seems to go too far in her mother's ruse about praying by trying to one-up her friends and saying that she prays up to twelve times a day, compared to her friend's suddenly meager ten times a day (75). These two reactions show how little Marji understands her parents' conflicting messages and the motives behind their actions. While to her parents their behavior may seem reasonable in the context of keeping their family safe, Marji does not understand that sometimes, in order to protect oneself and one's family, one's actions do not always correlate with one's true beliefs.

As we can see, Marji's life is full of conflicting messages from the beginning. Her government and even her own parents send mixed messages to her about how to act and what to believe, and Marji struggles to figure out what it all means for her and for the person she is to become. With all these mixed messages, how does she know who is right and who is wrong? How does she choose how to act and what to believe in when it seems like her own government and her own parents can even figure it out? Thus, Marji has no model to follow when it comes to constructing her identity.

This identity is firmly established in Marji's childhood, making her eventual relocation to Europe even more stressful. When Marji moves to Austria in the second half of the novel, she does so to escape the horrors of war in her home country. However, she still has a fight coming in terms of establishing her own identity. In order to be accepted into her new environment, Marji has to learn a whole new set of cultural rules that contrast significantly from the cultural rules of her home country, building on her confusion and making it that much harder to construct an identity for herself. Most of these differences revolve around the role of sexuality and the position of women in society. Obviously, moving to a different country is bound to result in a little culture shock. However, because of the vast differences between her native culture and that of the generalized "West," Marji is confronted with a vast gap between the cultural values, and must choose which of the ideals presented to her will become part of her own ideology.

From the very beginning of her stay in Austria, Marji has to learn to adapt to her new surroundings. Upon meeting her roommate at the school, Marji is immediately confronted with a huge barrier: language. Her roommate speaks German, and Marji can only speak Persian and French. The roommates can only stare at each other with a nervous smile as they contemplate how they will be able to live together if they cannot communicate (161). This scene is just an introduction to the difficulty Marji will have adjusting to this new country and culture in this section of the novel. This small language barrier stands as a literal expression of the culture barrier that Marji feels while adjusting to life in Austria. Just as she has to literally learn a new language in order to

communicate with her roommate, so will she have to learn a new cultural language and way of thinking if she is to adapt to her new surroundings.

Marji's first lesson of this new culture begins when she meets an eccentric group of people that will later become her friends at the French school. When she meets the punk-y Momo, she learns that he greets people "in his own way," by kissing them on the mouth (166). Thus, Marji receives her first kiss ever from a boy who was just saying 'hello'. Momo's greeting, while simple and meaningless to him, was a huge moment for Marji, and in fact begins her lesson on the differences between Iran and the Western world's view on sexuality and public physical contact. This lesson is continued at Marji's friend Julie's party. In describing the party, Marji is instantly confused by the difference between parties in Iran and parties in Vienna. She says that while parties in Iran were full of people eating and dancing, parties in Vienna mostly comprised of people smoking, kissing, or simply lying around (185). Later, she is physically and mentally shocked when she discovers her friend having intercourse with her boyfriend and later when she sees both of them walk into the living room half-naked. Satrapi writes that this moment was when she finally understood "the meaning of 'the sexual revolution'" and that it was her "first big step toward assimilating into Western culture" (188).

Thus begins Marji's acceptance and integration into the Western culture. In the next two pages of the novel, we see how Marji's inner conversion is reflected by her outer transformation. Not only is her body changing in ways that she cannot control (189), but she is also deliberately changing her appearance to coincide with her new Westernized belief system. She cuts her hair and actually uses safety pins as jewelry in an effort to look more "punk" (190). Her friends love her new look, but Marji feels as if she

is betraying her parents, her country, and her roots (193). However, the need to assimilate is so strong that Marji even goes so far as to deny her nationality. During a party at her school, Marji lies to a boy and says she is French rather than admit that she is from Iran, which at this point in time is seen by Western society as “the epitome of evil” (195).

Marji’s assimilation into Western culture and the guilt that follows it gives us more insight into the identity conflict with which she is still struggling. Now she not only has to deal with the mixed messages of her parents and country, but also must consider the influence of the Western society and what kind of ideals that world supports. As liberal as her parents were, Marji is still shocked by some of the behavior of her peers, which is obviously radically different from how her peers back in Iran acted. However, because she is a teenager and wants to be accepted by others, she adapts the Western way of life, cutting herself off from her home country and their values. Instead, she takes on the identity of a Western woman, who is both empowered and sexually liberated. As Satrapi states in an interview with Annie Tully, “The feeling that [she is] evoking in the second book is more a problem of when you are going to a new culture and you absolutely want to adapt yourself, and you absolutely want to be integrated. You have to forget about your own culture first.” This culminates at the anarchists’ party where, despite her early anxiety, Marji eventually believes herself to be ready to “lose her innocence” and willingly goes to bed with her current boyfriend (212). It is at this point that Marjane truly separates herself from her former culture. After growing up in a culture where “kissing in public was considered a sexual act” (212), she throws off the restraints of Iran’s society and becomes willing to have sex with a man before marriage.

She is officially a member of the Western society, professing its ideals and behaving like a native.

When she then returns to Iran, Marji's Western identity is rejected by both her government and community. Her liberal beliefs about women are condemned by her conservative government at multiple times, and even her former friends denounce her Western ideas about sexuality. When Marji returns to Iran, she is visited by friends and family many times, all of them wishing to welcome her back to her home. This includes some of her childhood girlfriends, all of whom are made up to look like American actresses, which Marji learns is their way of resisting the oppressive regime (259). Marji later decides to tag along with these old friends to a skiing resort. While there, the friends ask her about her sexual history. Because she has spent the whole of her teenage years in Austria where sex was not restricted to marriage, Marji replies that she has had a few experiences. The other girls are then physically upset and call her a "whore" (270). Compared to the ideals of Western society, Marji's friends are still conservative when it comes to sexual behavior, despite their opposition to the oppressive regime. These women may seem Westernized on the outside, but inside they still hold the traditionalist views more common to their country.

From this point on, Marji is not only in a constant struggle with her government because of what she believes and how she wants to live her life. Many times she is rebuked or even arrested simply because she ignored the rules or spoke her mind. While she is dating Reza, she is taken to the Committee because she was out in public with a man she was not related to (288). Later, after speaking her mind at school about

women's rights, she is summoned by the Islamic Commission with an unknown fate (although it is soon revealed that she is not punished severely).

Along with her fight with the Iranian government for freedom, Marji also has to struggle for acceptance from the people around her. Even though most people she comes in contact with are not fundamentalist who are whole-hearted believers in the regime, most people still hold conservative views, especially concerning the topic of sexuality. When Marji admits to her female schoolmates that she plans on sleeping with her boyfriend, the other women are shocked and offended (303). Despite the women's shared opposition to the regime, some still carried traditionalist views that clashed with the ideals Marji gained from her stay in Austria. However, it is those Western ideals that Marji has finally chosen to believe and defend. She has at last decided what she will believe in and how that will affect how she behaves. It is perhaps these instances that eventually drive Marji to move back to France where her Western ideals are more at home.

Marji's story, while different than the typical coming of age story, is nonetheless a familiar story of identity search. Despite all the conflicting influences that plague her during her adolescence, she is still at her core searching for the person she wants to be. Every teenager in the world has to go through this journey of self-discovery, and Marji is no exception. She wades through the mixed messages of her government and parents, adjusts to the culture shock of moving to a different country, and then adjusts once again to the culture of her home country, all the while deciding which values and ideals will become her own. Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel is still a coming-of-age story in which a girl struggles to find her true identity. While those of us growing up in the West may

not have to deal with the stress of living under an Islamic regime or immigrating to a foreign country, we are still influenced by many different viewpoints during our adolescence and must decide who we are to become. We still have to wade through the conflicting messages and decide for ourselves who and what to believe. Every adolescent has to deal with the struggle that Marji goes through, and thus her story, while seems utterly foreign at first, is actually quite relatable to Western audiences. Searching for one's identity is a universal theme, which is why most Young Adult literature authors use that template. Satrapi herself admits that her book explores worldwide themes; in her interview with Mike Russell, Satrapi talks about her book as a way of breaking down the walls between cultures and having people see each other not as evil animals, but as complex human beings by highlighting the universal struggle in the book by saying, "You are a human being. Suddenly, there are changes around you, and suddenly you're suppressed and pushed down as an individual. How do you grow up? How do you make your life? These are common subjects." It is in this way that Satrapi juxtaposes the ideas of Iranian people and Western people, and shows us that the two are not so different. By using a familiar story set in an unfamiliar setting, Satrapi appeals to our global consciousness and makes us see that even a rebellious teenage girl from Iran can become an American reader's new hero.

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