

The Complete Persepolis:
The Story of a Dangerous, Strong Woman in a Colonial Society

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Toward the end of *The Complete Persepolis*, after Marji's bold speech about the hypocrisy she encounters in her college life, her grandmother tells her: "It's fear that makes us lose our conscience. It's also what transforms us into cowards. You had guts!" (Satrapi 298). Throughout *Persepolis*, this theme is common. Marji would pick a battle, fight it, and either be criticized or praised for her actions. That is generally the main "point" of *Persepolis*: standing up for a cause. Marjane Satrapi, in her graphic memoir, does just that: she stands up for a cause while simultaneously standing up for herself. In the process of standing up for herself and her political causes, she becomes labeled a "strong" woman, which is generally considered dangerous in most societies; in Iranian society, Marji's outspokenness leads to her being labeled as "dangerous"; she is dangerous because she defies typical misogynistic stereotypes, but she also defies them in a post-colonial society, a fact which makes her even more dangerous. Satrapi's memoir shows what life was for her in the midst of the "Iranian Revolution," and it shows how much harder—and dangerous—it was to be an intelligent woman during this period.

Iranian Leaders' Views of Women

Much of *Persepolis* is spent discussing the veiling of Iranian women and how asinine Marji and other characters think the policy is. At one point in the book, Marji's father looks at a school administrator and tells her: "If hair is as stimulating as you say, then you need to shave your mustache!" (98). What Marji's father is complaining about, of course, was the idea that women should be veiled because hair may "stimulate" a man sexually. Obviously, he never fully agrees with the policy, and Marji grows up questioning the policy as well.

However, there is more to this policy than can be seen from just this isolated encounter with school administration. Golnar Mehran, in her article “The Creation of the New Muslim Woman: Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” points to the “bigger picture” of Iran’s policy: smart women being devalued. She notes that, since 1979, the “Iranian educational system”—as can be seen in *Persepolis*—has made the effort to create the “ideal Islamic woman.” The ideal woman would be a mother and a wife—generally uneducated. Women are supposed to be modest and quiet, not unapologetic and outspoken—as Marji is.

What Mehran discovered, and what is considerably more concerning, is how Iranian leaders have viewed women since 1979. According to Mehran, the Iranian Minister of Education and Prime Minister until 1981—Mohammad Javad Bahonar—once noted that men are “on an average endowed with stronger nerves, physical structure, greater weight, height, and brain quantity” and that, therefore, men are “made for hard and difficult jobs.” In other words, men are generally stronger and of higher intelligence than women are. Javad Bahonar also said that, conversely, women are equipped with “special physical features” in which to properly bring up children and that “the part of the brain which is related to emotions is more in a female, whereas the portion of the brain dealing with thought and deliberation is greater in the male.” In other words, the former Prime Minister of Iran considers women to be the weaker sex because they are supposed to be mothers and not thinkers. Marji herself breaks that stereotype in *Persepolis* in a variety of ways—including the fact that she has never had children—most notable of which is her capacity to think.

Ayatollah Khomeini has yet another reason for the subjugation of women: they are powerful. The “ideal” Islamic woman is based off the image of Fatima—a fighter of “tyranny and injustice,” while also being a wife and mother (Mehran). Khomeini, because of this dual

role women are supposed to play, stated that “if women change, the society changes.”

Therefore, in order to completely dominate a society, the women must be dominated more than the men. Women, by this logic, are wives, and wives have tremendous power over their husbands; by this logic, dominated women would change the minds of their husbands. Marji’s character did her best to avoid being dominated. No matter what Marji did, she was considered dangerous because she thought and was intelligent—a bombastic combination. This combination could truly be considered the mark of a true feminist.

Feminism in *Persepolis*: The Danger of Intelligence

Even from the beginning of the book, *Persepolis* is filled with feministic elements. Marji’s mother is first introduced in the book as a protestor of the veil (Satrapi 5). Marji’s parents do everything possible to educate her, and she grows up reading such comic books as “Dialectic Materialism,” and she reads the ideologies of Marx and Descartes (12-3). She learns the *correct* history of Iran’s governance from her father (19-25), and she learns about the political “real world” from her beloved uncle, Anoosh (54-71). She is, from an early age, educated. She learns, from an early age, to think for herself—she may not always think *accurately* at this early age, but she still learns to think independently. She refuses, from an early age, to allow anyone she considers an improper authority to tell her what to think. In short, she is the strong, educated woman-in-training that generally strikes fear into many a man.

Julia Kristeva, a psychoanalyst and feminist, generally agrees with this assertion. In an interview with Arwad Esber, Kristeva says that intelligent women are generally pushed to the back of society, into a “social ghetto,” because “being real, smart, and sensitive” means that women “need to be quiet or speak in a mystic language that has nothing to do with society” (“In

Quest of the Feminine: The Stranger within Us”). Marji is, in short, seldom quiet. She seldom speaks in that “mystic language” that has nothing to do with society. She defies this so-called “conventional” role of smart women.

For example, Marji cannot stay quiet when teachers try to influence her thinking. After she is expelled for hitting the principal, she gets herself in trouble when she tells her new teacher there *are* still political prisoners in the Islamic Regime. Inspired by her dear uncle’s imprisonment and subsequent execution, she tells her religion teacher: “You say we don’t have political prisoners anymore. But we’ve gone from 3,000 prisoners under the Shah to 300,000 under your regime” (144). Subsequently, her parents receive a phone call reprimanding her for her actions, and it is shortly after this incident that Marji is sent to live in Europe. It was because of this free thought—this dangerous quality—that she is sent to Vienna.

Perhaps it is this time in Vienna and various points of Europe that teaches her to be even more feministic—as is explained in the second half of *Persepolis*. She thinks freely and gets expelled from boarding school when she “tells off” the nuns (177), lets her friend Momo know the atrocities of war and imprisonment (191), insults her landlady in Persian (221), participates in political discussions and debates (227), and even reinvents herself as an aerobics instructor in Iran (275). Upon marrying Reza, she realizes she’s trapped, and, in a stereotypically feministic panel of the graphic memoir, she draws herself in prison, realizing she should never have been married (317). In short, she becomes even more feministic than she had been—is evidenced in the aforementioned events—and she still has the capacity to think for herself. She is still able to make her own, often educated, decisions. What is most impressive, though, is her ability to explain her own decisions and thought processes to other people.

No greater example of this concept can be seen than in Marji's passing of the Ideological Exam for her admittance to college. She tells the Mullah who interviews her that no, she did not wear a veil in Vienna because "if women's hair posed so many problems, God would certainly have made us bald," and she also tells him that she does not know how to pray in Arabic because God should be able to understand her prayers in Persian (284). Later, she learns that her honesty, more than anything, is what earns her a passing "grade" on this interview (284). Indeed, the interviewer had been impressed that she was able to be so honest *and* have such conviction behind her answers. In this isolated incident, Marji's feminism and free thought earn her credibility in ways that they generally did not.

While Marji becomes an even more educated person in Vienna—in a number of ways—she also does learn a certain level of restraint. In other words, she is able to keep *some* of her feministic ideas to herself even as she still expresses her views. Such an example is seen in the scene when she admits why she is on "the pill"—she is sleeping with her boyfriend (303). Everyone is appalled that she would admit such a thing in public, and she "tells them off" in her own way. She, essentially, tells them her body is her own and that what she does with her boyfriend is her business and her business alone (303). However, she admits that she did not tell them every single thing she had thought at that moment; she also wanted to say that, among other things, these women were acting like the state and that marrying a stranger for a dowry is a form of prostitution (303). She does eventually learn to "curb" her feminism, but she never fully abandons it; rather, she learns to censor herself. Censorship, in feministic terms, is a negative thing; however, this aspect of Marji's personality makes her slightly less dangerous because it means she can think *about what she says*. It means she is not as outspoken and dangerous as she could potentially be, but she is still an unsafe person in this culture.

Despite this distinction, Julia Kristeva would be fascinated by the character of Marji. She states that, even in a sexual relationship, one partner is generally the stronger one, but these roles can be switched; however, she admits that this is often “wishful thinking” in Islamic nations (“The Strange within Us”). Marji, however, fits this category of “strong” woman. Her relationship with Reza, after they marry, is generally a domineering one. She even specifically mentions the difference between the woman Reza married and the woman he gets in the process (318). Their relationship “goes downhill” after they marry, and Kristeva would probably say it is because they both try to be the dominant partner. They are both opinionated, and they both know how to think for themselves.

There may be another reason Reza and Marji are incapable of “getting along” after marriage: they are both educated. Charles Kurzman, in his article “A Feminist Generation in Iran?”, details a survey he conducted with educated Iranian women and their opinions on feminist issues. In his research, he found many college students who told him that “educated women who are independent financially are not acceptable to men” (299). Interestingly, when asked if marriage is an outdated institution, 21.1 percent of educated women agreed (308). Clearly, Marji would fit this category. Perhaps this is the problem with her marriage to Reza—she realizes, too late, that marriage is not the institution for her. This section is one of many in which Marji shows her feministic capabilities—and the brain that follows the feminism.

Perhaps it is this brain usage, this manifestation of feministic capabilities, that makes her so dangerous to the Regime. People who think are more difficult to control; women who think are doubly dangerous. In a colonial society, these ideas are embraced—and Marji does not fit into this ideology.

Post-Colonialism in *Persepolis*: The Danger of Thinking

Post-colonial theory is an interesting one in that it looks at the way people are subjugated within a society. Generally, thinking is not considered a good thing, according to the post-colonial theorists, because thinking allows people to avoid colonization and psychological enslavement. In short, thinking causes a colonizing force to lose its power.

Lois Tyson, in her book *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, spends an entire chapter on post-colonial theory and its application to literature. Among others, she defines two main terms: “othering” and the concept of being “unhomed.” Othering, essentially, is a culture choosing sides as in a cultural football game. In order to “other” someone, a colonizing power must establish itself as “us”—the civilized group—and the country or society it is colonizing as “them”—the “demonic other” (420). A colonizing force must establish itself as the “good guys” while the “different” society is considered “the bad guys.” The concept of being “unhomed” is slightly different. In order for a group or an individual to feel unhomed, the group must be made to feel like a “psychological refugee” by being in a “cultural identity crisis”—as Tyson defines it, a group of unhomed people are not at home in themselves and are therefore unhomed and terrorized at a psychological level (421). Having made this clarification, there are many ways in which *Persepolis* is a post-colonial text.

Philip Carl Salzman, author of “Arab Culture and Postcolonial Theory,” suggests that every culture establishes “norms” about people, rights, and property—and that this arrangement is called “balanced opposition.” Balanced opposition is what gives a colonizing power a sense of normalcy. He also states that balanced opposition is “an ingenious way to organize security” (838). In *Persepolis*, the balanced opposition, or the norms, are established by the Regime—and

root themselves primarily in Iranian schools. Note the previously mentioned scene when Marji tells her teacher that there are more political prisoners under the Regime than there had been under the Shah. The norms set up by the Regime—the colonizers, in this case—said that teachers should only teach that the Regime is good and has helped Iranian society more than it has harmed it. Marji disagrees. She thinks, a fact which makes her dangerous to the Regime. This incident demonstrates the power of free thought: in a world in which “the truth” is subject to government mandates and religious ideologies, free thought can be dangerous; when said free thought comes from a young woman, it means the Regime-established educational system has failed.

In a world where women are ideally supposed to be quiet and modest, Marji’s thinking is particularly frightening because it means one person does not believe the Regime’s propaganda. In colonial societies, one person thinking outside “the norm” is dangerous because one person can talk to another person, and two people can talk to more people, and, as the chain continues, a rebellion erupts. From a colonial perspective, a rebellion means loss of total domination.

Aside from this incident, there are many others in the text that epitomize the concept of othering and colonial ideology. Most notable is the scene when Marji’s mother is attacked. Before this point, she is shown in various protests, and she is rarely seen wearing a veil. However, that seems to change after she is attacked. While in town, she is, of course, without her veil, and fundamentalist men come and, essentially, call her garbage and say all women “like her” should be raped to be taught a lesson (74). It is soon after this point that Marji’s mother is almost *always* seen in public with her veil covering her head. Not only do the “fundamentalist” men other Marji’s mother by pointing out how truly evil she is without the veil, but they also

win. They force her mother to conform to their standards because of the othering they have enforced.

Mehran adds to this thought. While her article, “The Creation of the New Muslim Woman,” is mainly an informative piece showing the changes that have been made to make the “ideal” woman, it also shows women as “other.” As was previously mentioned, Khomeini said that the easiest way to change a culture is to change the women of that culture. If women are truly evil, or at least savage, it is more important to subjugate and humiliate them than it is to do the same to the men—for women are also the weaker sex. Mehran also mentions something interesting about women’s standing in this post-1979 society: women are the mothers of potential martyrs. If women, whose main job is to bear and raise children, bear and raise martyrs, they are valuable contributors to society; otherwise, they are assumed to be evil—or at least ineffective members of society. In this way, women are seen become “other.”

A more noticeable element of post-colonial theory in *Persepolis*, however, comes in the form of Marji being “unhomed.” An obvious instance of Marji being unhomed is when she arrives in Vienna and has a difficult time assimilating within the culture. After being expelled from the boarding school, she has to move in with Julie, and she realizes on the trip there that she needs to do more than “read up on” Western philosophers to fit in with her friends (Satrapi 179). When she is with her friends, who enjoy smoking marijuana, she refuses to smoke for fear of becoming a metaphorical vegetable, but she pretends to “get high” with them to so she can be viewed as “one of the group” (192). Later, when she dates Markus, Marji becomes a drug buyer—and eventually dealer—to impress her boyfriend (222). Markus, as she realizes later, really just takes advantage of her unhomed state; he knows how desperately she wants to fit in, and he gives her a way to achieve it—if only for a little while. She mimics the society in which

she lives; from a feministic perspective, this mimicking is dangerous because she is abandoning her identity—her “self”—to find a sense of belonging. In this temporary identity crisis, she attempts the very thing she runs from in Iran—a sense of conformity.

One of the many problems Marji faces throughout the second half of *Persepolis* is the idea of assimilation. Whether she is in Vienna or Iran, she never seems to fit in with the society. At one point, she even says, “The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else’s rules” (193). She says this as she is in Vienna and spending time with her friends.

Upon returning home, she finds the same difficulty but with a different set of circumstances: after being *literally* unhomed for three-month period, she comes home and suffers from depression because of what she has experienced. As she notes, her family and friends “had to endure the war, but they had each other close by. They had never known the confusion of being a third-worlder, they had always had a home!” (267). Her family, in her mind, had always had each other to “pull them through” the difficulties of war; however, she had had to work through her own problems. In many ways, her problems come as a result of being that strong, dangerous, thinking woman, and that rationale drives Marji to a sense of depression. In her mind, her problems were bigger in their own ways than her parents’ problems had been because of not having family nearby to offer comfort.

Perhaps one of the most obvious moments in which Marji exhibits unhomed traits is when she decides she must go back to Iran. In one particularly poignant panel, she is shown donning the veil she had for so long neglected wearing (245). In the picture, she looks defeated

and tired—she does not want to return to oppression, but she so badly needs to be with her family. When she finally returns, she walks down the streets that are named after martyrs, that are lined with buildings and murals depicting and glamorizing martyrs, and would have been the death places of many of these martyrs. She tells her audience that she felt as though she “were walking through a cemetery” (250-1). She walks down the streets that used to be familiar—but after four years away from her home, so much has changed that even the streets are unrecognizable. This difficulty to re-assimilate to Iranian culture follows her throughout the rest of the book, and it is ultimately what drives her to go to France. She thinks that, since she was never able to “build anything” in Iran, she should go to France and get a “fresh start” there (339). Ultimately, then, her struggle to assimilate is never fully reconciled—and she is constantly in an unhomed state.

Interestingly, however, there is one area in which Marji refuses to assimilate—therefore making her dangerous to the Regime. Once again, the issue of the veil, and modesty in general, is the subject of debate. In art school, Marji gives perhaps her most memorable and empowering speeches of the entire book. When told in a group lecture that women in the college were being too “loose” with their clothing, she stands up and asks why they are so hypocritical. She objects to the veil being lengthened, as it would hinder her art; she asks if religion is defending her “physical integrity or just opposed to fashion”; she then asks why she must be covered up completely when the men at the school are able to wear skin-tight clothing, and she also wants to know how she is supposed to ignore the men while simultaneously not being a distraction (297). In other words, she asks the speaker for clarification on seemingly pointless rules as posed by the Regime. While there really is no answer given, she does precisely what the Regime does not want her to do: think and question.

An interesting thing of note is Marji's reasons for leaving Iran, leaving Vienna, and leaving Iran once again. She never seems to "fit" into any culture she tries to inhabit. In Iran, she thinks and questions colonial ideology with those she learns on her own. In Vienna, she leaves because her feministic ideas—and her relationship with Markus, in a truly un-feministic moment in her life—cause her to literally become homeless. Once in Iran, she still thinks and questions, and she demonstrates feministic traits in her questioning of "proper" attire for women. She is dangerous in a colonial culture because she questions the balanced opposition put before her, and she is dangerous in a contemporary culture because she tries not to forget her heritage. She becomes unhomed by being a feminist, and by being a feminist in a colonial society, she is dangerous.

Conclusion

Life was not easy during the Iranian Revolution. Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *The Complete Persepolis* demonstrates that fact perfectly. Marji grows up the daughter of protestors and is therefore taught to think for herself. In turn, she becomes a dangerous person within the Islamic Regime's rule: thinking feminists threaten to topple colonial societies. Throughout the entire book, Marji defies misogynistic stereotypes—a fact which is dangerous enough in and of itself. However, in Iran it labels her a "strong," and therefore "dangerous," woman; to add to the travesty that is this fact, she is also outspoken and capable of thinking: a dangerous combination for the Regime and other colonizing bodies. As Marji's grandmother tells her toward the end of the book, she has "guts," and that is what makes her such a threat to the Regime. In colonial societies, "gutsy" women are doubly threatening: they threaten to tear apart the authority of these societies.

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