

## **Developing Identity:**

### **Universal Tale of *Persepolis***

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*Persepolis* tells the tale of Marjane Satrapi, a young girl growing up in Iran during their revolution. She grows up during a very trying and difficult time in her country's history. She has to struggle between the oppressive ideals of her country and the more care-free views of her parents. With these conflicting ideals, once she is able to be on her own, she has a difficult time finding out who she really is and goes through the common developmental stages of child psychology. These phases continue to her adult life, until she comes into her own. The most striking aspect of her development is not what makes her different than those around her, but what makes her the same even in such extreme circumstances. She takes a culture that may seem foreign to many of her readers and makes her story universal, showing the world that at the core, humans are all the same.

To understand how difficult it was for a young Marjane to find her true identity, one must have some background on child psychology. The leading expert on the topic is Jean Piaget whose book, *The Psychology of the Child* discusses the different developmental stages. *Persepolis* begins when Satrapi is ten years old and, according to Piaget, she is in her pre-adolescent stage. This is a time “when the subject succeeds in freeing himself from the concrete and in locating reality within a group of possible transformations” (Piaget & Inhelder, 130). So, in other words, Satrapi is just starting to find herself and is very impressionable.

Unfortunately for her, her country is going through a religious revolution and becoming a totalitarian state while she is trying to create her identity. However, it is during this period that the seeds of her search for herself are planted.

The influence of her country's changes on her psyche, is best shown when she and her friends pretend to be Che Guevara, Fidel, and Trotsky demonstrating in her yard, chanting "Down with the King!" (Satrapi 14). In Piaget's stages, this is seen as *symbolic play* and reveals much about the child's unconscious desires, such as their developing fears and anxiety (Piaget 62). By pretending to be these communist figures, the children have, unconsciously, made themselves the leaders and therefore cannot be harmed by the affects of the war. They are in charge; they are not defenseless civilians like their parents. They have made themselves stronger. This plays greatly into what most literary critics have agreed on with the description of anxiety and core issues in psychoanalytical criticism (Tyson 15-16).

At her core, Marjane is a scared young girl which makes complete sense during the confusing and scary transformation her country is going through. She is given all these new rules about how she must dress and who she must love and hate. So, she decides to identify herself with the bigger fish in the sea. She is the one who instigates this because, according to "Anxiety and Anxiety Disorders in Girls", by Anne Marie Albano and Amy Krain, girls during this age are much more attentive of their surroundings than boys (80-81). Marjane is highly intelligent and because she is more perceptive than her male friends, in this stage, she unconsciously creates this game.

Furthermore, Marjane is more aware of the government's real motivations because of her very politically active parents. Parents are the most instrumental moral directors for children during their pre-adolescence (Kagan 122-123). Their actions and behaviors become a model for their children to follow. Their opinions become their children's. Being the leaders of her family and her highest authority, her parents teach her that what the government is doing is wrong. They know that people are dying for no reason and lies are being spread, which is why they go to political demonstrations. This puts Marjane in a very tough place because her parents are telling her that what the government is doing is wrong, and her government is demanding complete obedience. For instance, one night her mother's car breaks down and while she is waiting for Marji and her father to pick her up, she gets harassed by some men who believe she is trash because she is not wearing her veil. Her mother was trying to show Marji to go against the restrictions and received the consequences (Satrapi 74).

Despite this terrifying experience, it is not until Marji's beloved uncle is executed by the government that she sees her parents' side. Death is one of the most pivotal and shaping experiences humans can go through which is why there is such a great fear of it. Literary critics believe that it is "a principal organizer of our psychological experience," (Tyson 21). This is exactly what happens to Marjane after she says goodbye to her uncle and sees him plastered as a Russian spy on the newspaper (Satrapi 70). It forces her to see the horrible lies and deceit of the growing situation around her and brings her closer to her family. They have seen life and death together and their bond

grows deeper.

Oddly enough, however, Marji retains a certain devotion to her country, as she states in her October interview 2004 with Bookslut.com: "I always say that if I were a man I might say that Iran is my mother and France is my wife. My mother, whether she's crazy or not, I would die for her, no matter what she is my mother. She is me and I am her" (Tully 1). Iran's influence on Marji is very strong because it is her native country and holds great influence in her development. Even though the death of her uncle made her realize how cruel government was, she still remains dedicated to her country. She recognizes the faults, but like she says, it is like family and she still loves it. This love for her mother country and her actual family creates a great conflict for her when she goes to Austria.

Her time in Vienna is her second extensive stage in her search for identity. Marjane states in the interview with Bookslut.com that the second half of *Persepolis* deals greatly with her struggle for identity in the foreign culture of Austria. "The feeling that I am 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. But it's the moment you look at everything that it's this lack of identity," (Tully 1). This lack of identity is exactly what happens to Marjane when she reaches Austria. Her parents want her to have a safe and free education when they send her off at age fourteen. Reaching puberty, this is a time when girls care much more about others' opinions and feelings about them which leads them to conform rather than

express their true selves. This psychological occurrence is known as a “loss of voice” (Bell, Foster, & Mash 12). Being thrown into a new country, while being in a stage when she cares about others’ opinion more than her own, is an awful combination for Marji’s search for identity. Marjane finds a group of death obsessed outcasts who appear to find her interesting because of her traumatic experiences. This is the only group of kids that will interact with her, but they mostly talk about themselves (Satrapi 166-168). Even though she has friends to be around, she feels very lonely and very much an outsider. To fit in, she cuts her hair and completely changes herself, sometimes even lying about her nationality, all because she wants to fit in. She has a brief moment of clarity, but because of the stage she is at and the environment around her, she conforms once more and ignores her own feelings, becoming very depressed (190-195).

Her depression leads to substance abuse which is common for girls her age. In fact, because girls tend to mature faster during these years they often find friends that are older than them who accept drug abuse and encourage it. This leads to a more frequent use of the drug and dependency or excess. (Andrews 191-192). Marjane fits this example perfectly. Her friends are older than her and often smoke marijuana. From being around them so much, she gets a second hand smoke high and later starts using (Satrapi 191-192). But even after she dissolves out of the punk group and finds different friends, she continues using and even sells drugs. This brings her grades down considerably and gives her a very apathetic attitude, ( Satrapi 218, 222, 226). According common psychoanalytical theory, she fits the model of “insecure or unstable sense of

self" because she does not know who she really is and lets the others around her decide for her (Tyson 16). By giving them that job, she has no idea who she is. She cannot even develop her likes or dislikes; she has found something else to control how she thinks when she was supposed to be getting freedom. It could be suggested that because she is used to being controlled by her oppressive government that she needs to find that again, in any way, shape or form. But it is much more likely that she is at a very impressionable and highly sensitive age and found the wrong group of kids to influence her. They affected her so much that even when she reaches other groups, she just gets worse and worse. Her depression gets to a point where she wastes all her money on train rides, gets very ill, and is found in the hospital (Satrapi 238-240). Her only solution is to return to Iran and to her family. One could see this as her devotion and patriotism cropping up once more. Also, she is idolizing her home country because she is so miserable, which is common for depression. She is projecting her wishes and fantasies to another place, even though they may not be real.

Sadly, once she gets home, she finds herself even more conflicted. She resigns her liberties and puts her veil back on. The second she enters the country, she can literally feel the repression in the air as she goes through the airport. The man barks at her to fix her veil and goes through a list of all the goods she is not allowed to bring back with her (Satrapi 246). When she was in Austria, she did not watch the news about Iran because it made her feel bad about wasting her time in Europe. When she returns, she finds out from her father about how many people died for unjust causes, the children that were

made orphans and how the government has become even more strict (Satrapi 257). She was not there to experience any of it, so she again feels like an outsider. Before, she had bonded with her family in their fear and they could all support each other. They had grown closer through their trials, but because she was gone for all of it, she has no idea how they feel. She will never be able to go back and see what it was like to be them. She cannot empathize with their struggles, so she feels out of place.

She feels lost, and it only gets worse. Marjane decides to go on a ski trip with some of her friends to elevate her depression. However, instead of relaxation, she finds judgement. At first, her friends seem interested in her travels and ask her about sex. When she admits that she has had a few lovers, they call her a slut (Satrapi 270). She feels utterly crushed. These old friends of hers, who she should be able to rely on, are so blinded by their country's restrictions they cannot look past their judgements. By being rejected, she is only hiding more of herself and after many shrinks and various prescriptions, it is no surprise that she becomes suicidal. She feels like an outsider everywhere she goes, with everyone she meets, so she does not see the point in living. She is so miserable that she just wants it all to be over (271-272). After failed attempts, she breaks out of it and starts moving forward by physically transforming herself with new clothes, hairstyle, and exercise(274-275). Marji feels if she changes herself outwardly, maybe it will be a step in the right direction to her true identity. She does not seem to realize that these changes are all superficial and will not help her in the long run.

Her lack of identity is only amplified by her country's oppressive nature. During the day, she and her friends have to wear the veil and be pure, modest Muslim women. Once night falls, they rip off their veils and throw on dresses and make up for parties (Satrapi 305-306). Psychologically, this makes Marjane, two people again, just like she was in Austria. She has to conform to someone else's standards for how she should look and feel. However, the penalty this time is not being left out of a social group, but imprisonment and death. Desperate for any kind of freedom, she and her friends continue to party even though the consequences are severe. It is at one of these parties that she meets Reza, a potential love interest. He is funny, charming, and a bit of a womanizer, but she dates him anyway because he gives her some sense of direction. This is a relationship that begins with two people ignoring their true desires and only seeing the ones they really want. Marji is projecting her wants and needs for her true identity onto Reza. She thinks she may be able to find herself in him and is not willing to see who he really is. In turn, because Marji is conforming to what she thinks he likes, he does not know the real her (279). Their relationship only gets worse when they get married.

Their reasoning behind their marriage is a faulty one. The government will not let them live together unless they are married. They can barely go out in public together, so they figure they should. Soon, they realize they were not marrying what they expected. The ruse that they have kept up while they were dating falls apart during the marriage. They are complete strangers. Instead of finding someone to lead



her and help her find herself, Marji ends up with more stress. She constantly fights with Reza because she does not know him. She feels angry because she is not getting what she wanted and they end up sleeping in separate beds (Satrapi 317-318). Her dad later informs her that he knew they were going to get divorced, but wanted her to experience that for herself. He finally gives her a taste of freedom and responsibility which leads her to finally wake up. Her father wants her to think for herself and do what she wants. With her marriage falling apart and her school work piling up, Marji focuses on her graphic design major. She works on a theme park design idea with Reza that was supposed to be an Iranian Disney World. She is very passionate about her project and pours all of her effort into it. They include all sorts of interesting mythology and have all areas of the park covered from rides to hotels. Alas, her ideas are brought down by the mayor's deputy who really just wants her to make a theme park with religious symbols (328-331). This is quite sad because she put seven months of effort into her project and came back with nothing. Her time and devotion to it show that art is a driving interest in her life. It gives her the direction she so desperately was seeking through Reza, friends, and drugs. She has finally found her calling, but has to conform to her government's ideals. When she sees one of her coworkers get a black eye for one of his drawings, she decides enough is enough (335). Marji decides she has to leave her country, divorces Reza, and has a bittersweet goodbye with her parents, but she finally knows who she is: an artist.

Marjane had to go through all those experiences to find out who she was. By

keeping her desires inside for so many years, it was rather explosive once it came out. But it is her fierceness and bold attitude that makes her stand out and makes her graphic novel so interesting. She has finally embraced who she is, what her country is and what that means to her. She still very much loves her country, but she now sees its faults. As she states in her interview with *Bookslut.com*: she is able to show the world her opinion about her country and feels that it gives her more of an identity. She no longer has to explain herself, she can just show people the novel and that gives her freedom. By doing this and living outside of Iran, she has become more Iranian and can accept it more (Tully 1).

By going through so many struggles and coming out a stronger person, Marjane presents the world with a very universal story. The setting may be different and the readers may not know the culture, but at the core, it is one girl's search to find herself. Many readers may not have grown up in Iran, but they can identify with the feeling of being lost or not belonging. Teenage girls can relate with having no idea who they are and conforming to destructive behavior, like drugs or weight obsession. Teenagers and young adults who feel the need to change themselves to the likes of that special boy or girl can see how Marji made that mistake and learned it does not work. The world is a complicated one with many different stories, but in the end they are all humans. At their core, people have the same wants and needs, to be loved, to excel, and to find their place in the world. Marjane Satrapi is a perfect example of someone who struggled to find her identity and came out strong and confident. Her story is worth telling because

it is real, someone who is lost can see it and have hope and that can make all the difference.

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