

# In Search of Nowhere: Reading for Ruptures and Junctures in Marjane Satrapi's Selected Works

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## Abstract

The emergence of a transnational culture in the last century has resulted in the creation of a culturally fluid landscape with shifting identities. However, the psychological dilemma of stepping out of one's home/land and its consequent effects in the case of forced migration from conflict-torn areas need to be better addressed. The paper attempts to de-romanticize the process of migration by illuminating the attendant trauma and struggles of living with ever-shifting identities in the transnational landscape, haunted by the memories of home. The paper discusses the primary argument with regard to Marjane Satrapi's works entitled *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2000) and *Persepolis: The Story of a Return* (2004) by reading them as her journey of coming-of-age in a post-feminist world wherein she instates herself as an immigrant in a dialogue with the socio-political and religious conflicts in her homeland. She will be further seen as negotiating her dual identities and the formation of hybrid identities as a potential site of/ for possible resolutions. The paper further aims to ascertain whether migration in the age of transnationalism; along with access to technology, has created avenues for migrants from conflict zones in reconciling with the idea of home and homeland.

**Keywords :** Conflict; Hybrid Identities; Migration, Shifting Identities; Transnational culture; Trauma.

## Introduction

Migration has been the core of civilization, from being done for the purpose of finding fertile and livable land in olden times to its modern day version of moving to/from places for better opportunities. The past cen-

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tury, however, has witnessed a surge in this phenomenon in a manner unseen before- the decades after World War II underwent tremendous changes owing to modernization of industries and society on a massive scale and the emergence of regional conflicts among newly founded states and older powers. People began migrating to developed countries, especially in the West for a better future and to escape the strife caused by living in conflict zones.

This migration has opened up visible (physical) and invisible (social, cultural and emotional) borders, leading to the emergence of a global culture that is or appears to be more inclusive and accommodates multiple identities and ideas. However, experiences of people migrating from the East, especially those escaping political and regional conflicts voluntarily and involuntarily differ vastly from experiences of those migrating from relatively stable states. These experiences are further layered with gender, race and class; altering the way immigrants are received, treated and made to feel by the people driving conflict in their homelands as well as host countries. Migration from these conflict zones carries the weight of grief and, physical and emotional injuries.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran, a relatively modernized country caused such voluntary and involuntary wounded mass migration to the West and neighboring countries in Middle East when it fell into the gallows of political and religious turmoil. Beginning in the early 1950s, Iran's political landscape shifted towards communism and ended at theocracy after the Islamic Revolution that thwarted the Pahlavi Dynasty. Under the regime of the newly chosen Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the country witnessed economic, diplomatic and political crises, creating an unstable and unsafe environment for its own people. This period was a catalyst in the migration of Iranians to Europe and North America who despite leaving their homeland out of their own choice, continued to harbor a longing for it. The Iranian diaspora primarily comprised of middle and upper classes, known for their alliance with the Western thought process and lifestyle that lead to their seemingly smooth assimilation in the host countries. Even so, their journeys were laden with the trauma of witnessing and experiencing violence (both physical and emotional) and leaving their homes and loved ones behind. The ruptured memories of their homeland and their grief stricken journeys haunt the immigrants intimately to this day; reflected in their lifestyle, their creation and whole-hearted acceptance of their hyphenated identities as well as their art.

### **Satrapi's Ruptured Memories of Iran**

The works '*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*' and '*Persepolis: The Story of a Return*' are Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoirs of her childhood spent in Iran during the Islamic Revolution and her return from Europe to a completely changed and restrictive homeland. The first installment of the memoir is resplendent with images depicting the dramatically changing social and religious climate of Iran in 1979. The novel's protagonist Marji is a curious and opinionated twelve year old belonging to an educated and liberal upper-middle class family that looks upon her grandmother as the figure of authority. The novel documents Marji's journey through the many changes Iran went through during the Revolution such as drastic radicalization of the people; misogynistic practices such as restricted movement of women in public places, their slow but steady erasure from positions of power, indoctrination; and the introduction of compulsory veiling. Satrapi has also shown the economic and social repercussions of the Regime wherein people lost their jobs and faced inflation combined with a volatile environment. Marji is troubled by the radicalization she is witnessing in her school and among her classmates, most evident in the beginning of the memoir wherein Satrapi shows how young school children got divided into separate groups supporting the radical regime and a democratic and liberal government.

The curriculum of schools was altered to cater to the regime's agendas and thus, created a rift between the young generation, leading to a rupture in their ideology and their memory of a happy school life and sowing the seed of more instability. Marji is also bothered about the way her parents and grandmother, who always spoke their mind, reel in the fear of being silenced in more reckless ways. The last blow that hits Marji and therefore, Satrapi is the bombing in their neighborhood which strips the consequences of war from their 'otherness' and touches home. The blow is magnified during her last days in Iran when she is at constant loggerheads with the unabashed radicalization, representing the voice of so many Iranians who held their Persia and its values close to their heart. She is eventually sent off to Austria- where she goes reluctantly and finishes her education while coming to terms with her ideas, her personality and her sexuality; all the while missing her home, her family, and the warmth and familiarity that she associated with Iran.

The second novel, '*Persepolis: The Story of a Return*' begins from Marji's arrival in Austria. She's a young girl who feels passionately about her homeland and naturally, wonders at the audacity of her aunt's young daughter for her ignorance with respect to the situation back in Iran. Briefly, Marji

does feel glad to be in Europe as she finally goes to a fully stocked store for groceries after a prolonged period of turmoil. However, she is unable to find anything familiar to eat and eventually, sets herself with pasta which becomes her staple food in exile, reminding her of home with every bland spoonful she ate. The subsequent years in Europe lead Marji to discover herself and grow into an informed woman via trial and error. Her mingling with the western thought process helped her adopt a more open and liberated view of the world while also reinstated her Iranian-ness by way of making her recognize the boundaries she needed to draw. This came with the price of a harrowing health scare and a suicide attempt, after which, Marji is called back to Iran that she would later find out was not so much of a home anymore. Her return to Iran as a young adult is marked by the shock upon seeing a completely transformed homeland; an Iran that no longer held the warmth, a feeling that she knew was Home and also shows the reader how in times of conflict, even neutral spaces such as Airports become a symbols of change as Satrapi states herself: "After four years living in Vienna, here I am back in Tehran. From the moment I arrived at the Mehrabad Airport and caught sight of the first customs officer, I immediately felt the repressive air of my country." (248 *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*)

This memoir documents how deeply Iran was hit by the political conflict. Marji, who spent her teenage years in voluntary exile, reminiscing her memories of home returns to a reality that hits her with the realization that her Iran no longer exists, so much so that she refrained from turning on her bedroom's lights to avoid seeing any other 'change' and simply feel being 'home'. In the second installment of the memoir, we meet a Marji who has been shredded off her insecurities and has accepted her individuality and sexuality but finds it difficult to express herself in her own land where she longed to come and where she spoke the language of the locals as well as looked the part. She felt out of place in her own land; yet, stayed put. We see as she completes higher studies, marry a man of her choice and is assertive and vocal about her opinions. We walk along with her as she breaks one stereotype after the other by seeking divorce and taking control of her life in a place that had erased women, their individuality and autonomy; and finally leaves Iran for good, but not without visiting her favorite places in her homeland and keeping a piece of them to carry along with her into the future; and without being able to see her grandmother after her departure as she died soon after that: "After all, freedom had a price." (343 *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*)

The memoirs also throw light on how silently conflict can take center stage

in people's lives who then battle it out in their newly devised ways- such as organizing confidential parties and congregations under a strict watch, navigating through the visible and invisible boundaries of the religious regime and how women suffer twice more at the hands of political and social oppressors, made invisible, and ripped off their individuality and voice via literal and metaphorical veiling.

Rupture is defined as an instance of a breach, a disturbance or a sudden break in a harmonious feeling or situation. Satrapi's first-hand experiences of living and witnessing turmoil leave her memory of her Home and Homeland in phases or pieces of pleasant times broken by the Revolution, and which she attempts to hold together by reliving her childhood through the writing of her memoir. Right from the start, the reader is presented with the changing face of Iran including the decisions from compulsory veiling to gender-segregated schools and heavily-censored syllabus introduced to a young generation which finds them absurd, unnecessary and misaligned with their idea of Iran or Persia. Furthermore, the unabashed execution of these laws and the harsh punishments practiced by the Regime's moral police are shown to be in direct conflict with that of the Persians. Satrapi shows Marji questioning this changed atmosphere and her struggles to accept those as they threatened and eventually succeeded in destabilizing her sense of Iranian-ness and attachment with her country and culture. The author's time in Europe continued to add to her already ruptured and uncertain idea of herself and affected her life choices over there. The reader travels through Marji in her quest to blend with either the Europeans or to assert her ethnic identity; witnessing how a sudden loss of one's identity paves way for severe emotional and mental distress; traumatizing the victims and leaving permanent emotional scars.

Such hard-hitting changes in understanding how one's identity often ends up creating 'ruptures' in memory of oneself in the larger context of one's family, home, homeland and its culture. These ruptures take centre-stage in conversations and art by way of 'pre' and 'post' images or memories. And, in Satrapi's case, we see this pattern in her or Marji's family's conversations reminiscing the 'good old times'; and more importantly, in her careful bifurcation of her memoir into two parts as also her brutal and real depiction of her characters' emotional trauma vis-à-vis her graphic art. Satrapi's memory of her home and parents is also stained by the economic and social instability as a result of mass radicalization of the people and thwarting of human rights in the name of faith. She bravely tackles the sensitive issues of religion, gender bias and female sexuality; and authority in Iran. Through her protagonist Marji's journey from pre-teenage to

adulthood, as well as the support which she receives from other female figures in her life (her mother and grandmother), we witness the coming of age of a girl who braces the ruptures of an unprecedented and deeply-layered oppression in a conflict torn state; and manages to stay afloat during the turmoil, risking her life for her rights, beliefs and individuality. It is safe to say that this solid show of resistance held up by Satrapi in sharing her story not only exposes the reader to the ways conflicts and clashing ideologies affect survivors' memories and histories of their personal narratives by creating permanent fractures in them but also acts as a medium through which they can regain control by being provided with a channel to bridge those gaps.

### **Migration from Conflict Zones**

Political, social and religious conflicts seep themselves and thrive at the cost of people's lives, exposing them to physical and mental trauma. The blows endured by people in conflict zones are reflected in their mannerisms, body language and the ruptured memory of their home that they carry throughout their lives. This is evident in the way they tend to remember the violence caused by the conflict and in their mental health conditions, which is often fraught with anxiety, and depression accompanied by a constant nostalgia for their home and the realization of its vagueness. Conflicts more often than not, sustain themselves by diminishing the authority of people on their own lives, faith and rights; a situation faced by the protagonist Marji. As a result, she is half-heartedly sent off to Austria. This step is taken by her parents as they sense the threat being caused against their value system and rights. The conflict in Iran took a more serious turn when it went to war with Iraq, leading to instability in the country.

The constant threat to life and the need to keep one's well-being is the primary driving force of migration from conflict zones, often done without the consent of the migrants and at a stage where they have been directly or indirectly affected by the violence, leaving them traumatized for a long time. Marji's first step out of her homeland is taken out of helplessness after a violent missile attack on her street that killed her young friend and left her shaken to the core with the loss and its consequent grief, causing a severe rupture in her memory of home. It is this point that acts as the first important 'juncture' from where Marji – and, therefore, Satrapi – witnesses the permanency of the gaps between her idea of Iran and the reality instead. This first encounter with the changed reality of her homeland forms the onset of her inner battle of shifting identities, creating a semblance of

Home in Europe and dealing with the confusion caused by a fractured identity.

The protagonist's second departure from Iran is voluntary, one that she takes after the realization that her individuality and freedom will be compromised for a land that bears almost no resemblance to the homeland she loved and remembers. This departure can be fairly considered as the second and path-breaking juncture for Satrapi and her protagonist as they finally accept the duality of their identities and the reality of Home. However, as opposed to being comparatively easier, voluntary migration is just as traumatic as forced migration as it shows the migrants a final reflection of the changed state of affairs in their homeland and how they only have memories and fragments of what they called home; which they then carry with them in search of nowhere, an act that Satrapi shows through Marji's last trip around Iran with her grandmother. By showing this simple act of Marji taking a decision for herself to leave her home to build another, Satrapi gives Marji the agency to decide for herself - choosing the parts and memories of Iran that she identifies and associates herself with, thereby, indirectly challenging the authority that had become the Regime's main weapon to destabilize its people, especially the women.

Furthermore, by way of the second 'juncture' in Marji's life, the author attempts to show how women residing in conflict zones and migrating from them as a result experience trauma at more intimate and invasive levels. They face oppression in both public and private spaces wherein not only is their physical movement restricted, but they are regarded as secondary citizens meant to be kept concealed and used as a ploy in discouraging any attempt of rebellion from the men of the society. A common tactic employed by oppressors during the Regime was the introduction of compulsory veiling, which according to the author herself, is nothing more than a tool to restrict women's movement in public spaces, therefore, slowly confining them to the four walls of their homes.

The veil is also an attempt to thwart individuality, for their gradual disappearance from public life, restricting and affecting them psychologically as well. Women in conflict zones often deal with the deeply rooted trauma of unwelcome invasive and intimate checks in the name of security- sexual violence, harassment and a constant threat of it all happening again anytime. We see how the novels' protagonist Marji is saved from this threat by being sent off in exile. Even then, she becomes a walking embodiment of the memory of her lost homeland plunging her into severe depression and drug abuse. She attempts suicide twice, creating an invisible but per-

manent injury in her existence and becoming an embodied memory of her broken homeland. However, it is her return to her homeland with a more evolved understanding of herself as a woman that helps her identify the systemic effacing removal of her gender from the mainstream that reaffirms her decision to own her story and her life; a teaching that her grandmother imparted in her as a proud Iranian woman. The readers do not simply see a young divorced Marji leave her home; they see a confident, assertive and brave woman who is proud of her ethnicity, its culture and the battles she has fought to sustain it, carrying their scars as a stained yet beautiful memory. We meet her as the author of her story on the last page where she has truly come of age - making peace with her hyphenated identity - hence, bridging the gap between her duality and the ruptured memories of a conflict-torn homeland that resulted in its birth.

Additionally, people's experience of migration from Iran and other conflict zones is also influenced by their class as it makes the journey of privileged people fairly easier and they are able to settle into white collar jobs, given their education and polished appearance. It is the less privileged who have to struggle in physically exhausting journeys and finding means to support their families with no resources. They resort to menial labor and suffer far more than they deserve, and find it harder to form new alternative or hybrid identities. In the case of Satrapi and her protagonist, their upper-middle class upbringing and, privileged financial and educational circumstances gave them the advantage of being able to not only identify the shifting geopolitical realities of the country but to also think critically about their future in its context, and subsequently move to a different country. The author shows in the primary texts, as well as credits her exposure to the Western media, pop culture-trend and the Westernized atmosphere of her urban and educated Persian home, for making the transition fairly easy.

### **Shifting Identities and Dialogue with Oneself**

When Marji (therefore, Satrapi) moves to Vienna, she is struck by the feeling of loneliness in a land whose language she cannot speak. Often times, language is the first barrier that migrants face when they reach their host countries, a problem faced by the protagonist who has a German speaking roommate. This is followed by the difference in color and cultural differences in terms of food, attire and religious/traditional practices. Immigrants often create a discourse that documents the transformation of identities as a result of constant reminiscence of their past, and negotiation between different cultures in order to come to terms with their reality



while holding onto the shreds of their memories. Through Satrapi's lens, we witness how Marji transcends on the same path, gradually accepting her reality and intertwining it with her innate 'Iranian-ness' that surfaced in a new land, leading her to feel both proud and depressed; and homesick for a home that only existed in her memory.

These very obstacles eventually pave way for dialogues between different identities, creating a space for negotiation and where immigrants can navigate through them (identities) safely. Satrapi's journey through her protagonist takes the final leap when she realizes that there is no place for her Western education in post-Revolution Iran and decides to move to Paris for good. She accepts her traditional values while also adopting the good that the West has to offer. This is the result of the author's constant dialogue with her Self vis-à-vis the Other; in an alternative, transnational space, that makes her realize that leaving The Islamic Republic of Iran is the price she has to pay to sustain whatever is left of her Iranian-ness that values freedom, individuality and goodwill. As a result of her comparatively privileged upbringing and global exposure, Satrapi is able to assert her individual identity as an aware and vocal woman while keeping pieces of home alive through her works.

The Iranian diaspora (especially, the upper-middle class) has benefitted well from its acquaintance with the Western thought process in terms of their relatively smoother assimilation into western society. *Persepolis* is one such reflection of this assimilation that has its foundations in the initial stages of transnationalism. Iranians have settled into their host countries; comfortable and proud of their hyphenated and hybrid identities, and managed to create a third space where they navigate their dual identities safely and confidently. This safekeeping of their Persian memories is reflected in the way they decorate their homes with Persian Carpets, their continued practice of having a Persian diet and celebrating Persian festivals such as *Nowruz* which are a reminder of their glorious, liberal and beautiful Persian past. According to the author, this expansive cultural remembrance and celebration cannot be met with justice without images that truly reflect the sincerity of the emotions that the Iranian diaspora feels towards their homeland. However, here, she states that the very upper-middle class upbringing that enabled her acceptance of her dual identity also restrained her from venturing into cinema to tell her story.

Satrapi has time and again expressed her pride in *Persepolis* as a graphic novel for she believes that it enabled her to fully explore her talent as well as present to the reader a first-hand pictorial depiction of life in pre and

post-Revolution Iran. Her art not only made her story reach far and wide but also proved to be a means by which she could resist and affirm her stance against conservative practices that made her leave her home. The very act of showing women from a conservative culture with and without their headscarves, unveiled, having a voice as well as confidently claiming their rightful space, is seen in direct conflict with the Regime that practices extreme measures to curb free speech and choice even to this day.

Satrapi's primary motive behind her choice to tell her story in the graphic form was a way to uphold her family's liberal teachings of progress and self-growth. However, one cannot let the fact go unnoticed that it unconsciously brings back the Persian woman back into the public space where she successfully holds/controls the reins of her narrative. More importantly, it probes the reader to rethink and take the graphic novel as a distinct, serious medium of art that helps depict serious issues pertaining to Iranian nationals and their traumas without making them look obnoxious or turning them into deplorable caricatures.

## **Conclusion**

The last few decades have completely transformed the state of affairs all over the globe and led to the emergence of a new, more fluid landscape. The immigrant today is well aware of the changes taking place in his/her homeland and is able to find avenues to make his/her voice heard in the host land as well. The rapid development in technology and the growth in the reach of media have made it possible for not only the migrants' voices to be heard, but have also given a voice to the people still residing in conflict zones. The year 2022 only proved the importance of technology and its much necessary access to one and all, for it witnessed a massive revolution amongst Iranians wherein they revolted against the Islamic Regime's unregulated and extreme take on veiling. The movement spread like wildfire, gaining global attention that eventually led to the Regime's authoritarian declaration of the moral police as being illegal. Despite being a surface-level decision to keep the charged global community at bay, one cannot dismiss the subtle quakes in the power-holdings of the Ayatollah Khomeini-regime in present-day circumstances.

In addition to this, the diverse cultural idiosyncrasies are also often documented and seen by millions of people, acquainting them and making them comfortable with each other via the increased access to technology and media. With the quick and easy access to technology and a culture of voluntary migration that started in the 1960s, physical borders between

states have become easier to cross. The effect of this easement has become visible in the breaking down of emotional/psychological borders as well. People have become more accommodating to diverse cultures and ideas while also paving way for women and giving their voices a safe platform to be heard. The creation of this abstract and fluid space has made it possible for migrants, especially women, to create their own identities and make peace with their roots, reinstating that in a conflict zone, every space is politicized.

The protagonist Marji and the author are shown to make peace with their reality and new identity in the end. Beginning their journey as curious girls who are inspired from other strong females in their homes- politically aware and unafraid to take a stand, they both travel through multiple geographical and emotional landscapes, carrying on with their fractured identities and memories, and values; holding strong to their opinions, individuality and finally completing their transformation into women who are comfortable with dual identities. Just like the author, women can and women have managed to assert their identities in their host-lands and the new tech-friendly, transnational landscape. By making people aware and more comfortable with the idea of migration, it can definitely be ascertained that this new landscape has the potential to and already has become a site where they (immigrants) are in a continuous peaceful dialogue with their roots, creating new homes; and have found ways to remember and reconcile with their homeland in a bid to reclaim their rightful place and space.

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