

“The Struggle of Memory against Forgetting”: An Analysis of *Persepolis*

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Abstract: Graphic memoirs or autobiographic comics emerged in the 1960's in the American comic underground scene, with *Barefoot Gen* (1973 – 1975) by Keiji Nakazawa, and since then, the proliferation of graphic memoirs has been staggering, revealing the demand of such literature. As a sub-genre of the graphic novel, the graphic memoir has forged a place for itself in the landscape of comic book literature. The synthesis of both text and image is an effective combination that serves to enhance subjectivity and reflection. The retrieval and reconstruction of memories make graphic memoirs a site of subversion and transgression of the boundaries of traditional biography and autobiography. Thus, from biography and autobiography emerges graphic memoir, which is a subversive and discordant hybrid. Taking *Persopolis* by Marjane Satrapi, the paper will attempt to study the inherent desire to remember and inscribe one's life-story. Satrapi has utilized graphic memoir to capture her experience as a young woman in the aftermath of the Iranian Cultural Revolution of 1979. Every individual possesses the impulse to testify his life-story. Focussing on *Persopolis*, the paper will touch on aspects of memory, history, gender and ideology.

Keywords: graphic memoir, ideology, Marjane Satrapi, memory, *Persepolis*

I. Introduction

Milan Kundera says in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”^[1]. What Kundera states is a universal truth encapsulating the struggle and toil of the human condition. This is the inevitability of every individual life. Further, every individual possesses the impulse to testify one's experience of life because one desires to be remembered by others. In recent times, the genre of memoir has emerged as a way of testifying and witnessing. What makes memoir interesting is the merging of autobiography and biography in it. Ben Yagoda quotes Gore Vidal: “A memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts, double-checked”^[2]. Thus, memoir depends on memory as the launching pad to inscribe a life-story. In the twenty-first century, memoir has gained popularity over autobiography and biography both commercially and academically. This in turn, fuels the ongoing discourse of the dynamics of memory in life-narrative.

The sub-genre of graphic memoirs or autobiographic comics emerged in the 1960's in the American comic underground scene, with *Barefoot Gen* (1973 – 1975) by Keiji Nakazawa. Since then, the proliferation of graphic memoirs has been staggering, revealing the demand of such literature. As a sub-genre of the graphic novel, the graphic memoir has forged a place for itself in the landscape of comic book literature. The synthesis of both text and image is an effective combination that serves to enhance subjectivity and reflection. The retrieval and reconstruction of memories, along with the addition of description and image, make graphic memoirs a site of subversion and transgression of the boundaries of traditional biography and autobiography. Thus, from biography and autobiography emerges graphic memoir, which is subversive and discordant, brought about by the dance of image, text, reflection, subjectivity and perception. This is driven by the need to testify, confess and witness in life-narrative like graphic memoir. To write life-narrative, one starts with memory. But as established by psychological research “memory is by nature untrustworthy: contaminated not merely by gaps, but by distortions and fabrications that inevitably and blamelessly creep into it. It is itself a creative writer, cobbling together “actual” memories, beliefs about the world, cues from a variety of sources, and memories of previous memories to plausibly imagine what might have been, and then, in a master stroke, packaging this scenario to the mind as the real one”^[3]. Thus, one can conclude that memory is not infallible and is subject to an individual's perception and imagination.

Using the graphic memoir as a medium, Satrapi arms her memory not only with words but also with images to fight against forgetting. Her strategy is a double-edged one as she also fights against ideology and the abuse of power. The details captured in the pictures enhance the depth and quality of recollection. The time period that is covered in *Persepolis* is the time of Satrapi's childhood, the advent of the Islamic Cultural Revolution in 1979, the Iran-Iraq war and Satrapi's adolescence and adulthood. Thus, the graphic memoir becomes an interweaving of both the public and personal realms. The extravagance and policies of the Pahlavi dynasty had brought about the desire for revolution and demonstrations started since October 1977 and

continued till the climax in 1979. In the aftermath of the revolution, women in particular, became victims of the oppressive ideology of the Islamic Republic. The first chapter, “The Veil” echoes the oppression of women’s freedom when all the girls in Satrapi’s school are made to wear the veil. The imposition of the veil is met with a nonchalance holding no interest for the girls than a plaything. Satrapi says, “We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to”^[4]. This marks the beginning of a future of fear, indoctrination and intolerance.

Memory is reconstructed not only through words but also through images. One may say that the images are an extension of “iconic memory” which is “the ability to recall an image in one’s mind; the visual form of sensory memory”^[5]. Thus, with the help of iconic memory, Satrapi evokes images from her memory almost like a camera or video recorder. Further, they express the irony and truth of the situation. For instance, Satrapi captures the euphoria on the day the Shah leaves Iran saying “the country had the biggest celebration of its entire history”^[6]. The entire page is filled with faces wearing the broadest smiles with outstretched and clapping hands. How tragic it is that the Iranian people will never celebrate with joy in this way for a long time.

Persepolis was one of the first graphic memoirs to portray a woman’s life under the Islamic Republic of Iran. In a sense, *Persepolis* is representative of gendered graphic memoir because it gives importance to women’s issues. In particular, one gets a close look at Satrapi’s adolescence and young adulthood; times in which she was beginning to understand the ramifications of the revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. “A distinctive feature of the Iranian revolution was the participation of large groups of women. Western audiences were particularly impressed by the sight of so many black-veiled women involved in the “referendum of the streets,” but subsequently they have been somewhat baffled by the loss of freedom experienced by the very women who helped bring the Islamic Republic to power”^[7]. Satrapi shows the effects of ideology and war on women in particular, especially herself. Ideology in general is associated with the prevalence of a system of ideas or principles, which is ultimately, an exercise of power and control over an individual. Throughout time, women have always come under the reach of ideology. As graphic memoir is hybrid and subversive, it provides Satrapi with a means to counter ideology, which has usually been phallogocentric. Thus, as female gendered writing, graphic memoir fights against a prevailing system which oppresses women. The ideology as depicted by Satrapi is supported by men as well as women. The fusing of Marxist ideology and Islamic ideology was ominous because later on, many Marxists were accused of being against Islam and were imprisoned and executed. As Satrapi’s father says “It’s incredible. The revolution is a leftist revolution and the Republic wants to be called Islamic”^[8]. As history unfolds, the contradiction in these words is corrected giving rise to a fundamentally rigid Islamic government.

The division of the graphic memoir into chapters mirrors the nature of episodic memories, which is the remembrance of actual episodes from life. Satrapi has reconstructed these episodes from her daily life and conversations with her grandmother, father, mother, uncle and friends. The dialogue in Satrapi’s conversations with Uncle Anoosh, who was a Marxist, for example, has been reconstructed. This involves crafting a weave of imagination, subjectivity and perception. Satrapi has been able to channel these memories into vivid images as if they were recorded in her mind. The narrative voice itself shifts from first person thought and reference to third person reference frequently. Thus, the medium of the graphic memoir becomes a palimpsest of the memories of Satrapi’s family rejuvenating them with life in fluid imagery. The complex nuances and subtleties of family dynamics are projected onto the reader to reveal layer upon layer of stories and recollections which are imprinted on Satrapi’s mind, finally amalgamating in satirical text and image. This makes graphic memoir multifaceted, revealing the hardship of living in Iran at the time.

People fighting against power and memory fighting against forgetting is a perennial struggle. This rises to deeper significance when discussing the plight of women against power because women wrestling against power bear life-altering memories. In *Persepolis*, one sees the long term effects of forced ideology and war on the growth of Satrapi as a young girl. She becomes rebellious, experiments with drugs and sex, suffers from depression, attempts suicide and suffers from a lack of purpose and identity. But in the midst of all that happens to her, Satrapi fights back through her art and through the medium of the graphic memoir. She strives to remember the pain, atrocity and fear which is blended with a dose of humour. In the chapter entitled “The Socks” Satrapi says: “We confronted the regime as best we could. In 1990, the era of grand revolutionary ideas and demonstrations was over. Between 1980 and 1983, the government had imprisoned and executed so many high-school and college students that we no longer dared to talk politics. Our struggle was more discreet. It hinged on the little details. To our leaders, the smallest thing could be a subject of subversion. Showing you wrist. A loud laugh. Having a walkman... It’s only natural! When we’re afraid, we lose all sense of analysis and reflection. Our fear paralyzes us. Besides, fear has always been the driving force behind all dictators’ repression”^[9].

Fear controls the lives of Iranians but this fear brings about a hypocritical double life that becomes inherent in the youth in particular. For example, Satrapi and her friends live double lives, enjoying parties and a Western lifestyle away from prying eyes. “The more time passed, the more I became conscious of the contrast

between the official representation of my country and the real life of the people, the one that went on behind the walls”^[10]. Thus, it may be said that the version of history that Satrapi exposes is uncensored. An instance is found in the chapter called “The Exam”. Satrapi had to undergo a drawing test to get into the college of art. She was sure there would be a subject on the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war so she practiced by copying a photo of Michelangelo’s “La Pieta”: “I reproduced it by putting a black chador on Mary’s head, an army uniform on Jesus, and then I added two tulips, symbols of the martyrs, on either side...”^[11]. In this image one sees history glorified, disillusioned and idealistic. It attains a universality embodying the despair and helplessness after the revolution in Iran. How ironic it is that the revolution that was to bring change has plunged the country into a deepening abyss.

Satrapi has endeavoured to construct a narrative that is a mosaic of memory, history, ideology and gender. This mosaic speaks of truth that is exclusive only to Satrapi. The interweaving of history, religion, politics and family life enriches and widens the reach of the narrative. The graphic memoir has a significant role to play in documenting the development of life-narrative that has been reinvented as a vehicle and weapon by women. Because graphic memoir draws from biography, autobiography and comics, the possibilities it offers to women as a genre of literature are myriad.

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