



## *Never Forget Who You Are And Where You're From: Tracing Trauma and Postmemory in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis*

Ritika Gandhir

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## An independent research scholar.

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to inspect and establish a reading of the intricacies of trauma, memory, and violence in *Persepolis*, a bildungsroman graphic novel that charts the transition of Marji's childhood to adulthood. The textual self of Marjane Satrapi, a ten-year-old in 1980, a year post-Iranian Revolution, narrates her experience of growing up through a graphic novel in an attempt to highlight the shortcomings of written language. Marji is a very intriguing character to analyse Marianne Hirsch's coinage Postmemory - the tie that "generation after" has with the trauma experienced by those who came before - events that can only be recalled, "via stories, pictures, and actions in which they were raised" (Hirsch). Satrapi's choice to end the novel at the beginning of another journey demonstrates Marji's wish to keep searching for closure, or perhaps closure to accept that there is no closure for herself. Through the work of theorists like Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, Marianne Hirsch, Geoffrey Hartman, Jan and Aleida Assmann and more the paper seeks an exploration of a generational flux of traumatic memories and sensitizes the reader to the magnanimity of testimonial and confessional literature as an act of survival.

**Keywords:** Trauma, memory, Affective Postmemory, Graphic novel, childhood, testimony.

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## Discussion

The subtitle of *Persepolis* is "The Story of a Childhood", which immediately stretches and centres our focus on Marji. Since the 1990s, the emergence of child-centred autobiographical

narratives has taken hold of how we imagine and construct a childhood. These narratives since seen from the eyes of a child-persona of the past have been able to entice readers' interest in the socio-cultural circumstances of the narratives. Especially those which are situated within disruptive, war-torn, nations. The larger umbrella-like the world over the head of Marji manoeuvres and shapes her entire life and not just a violent part of her childhood. Satrapi admits through her narrative self that her life was of privilege and comfort. The panels depict her grandmother sitting comfortably crocheting on an armchair. Marji has her room, with a study table, books and toys, a hearty celebration of Navroj, A Cadillac, and whatnot. And yet, one sees, that despite material comforts and social standing, Marji finds it hard to comprehend the violence around herself and even assimilates it which I discuss later in this paper. Marji, the "cartoon self", is the author's fictional persona and is responsible for the emergence of realist effects in an autobiographical novel like *Persepolis*. This self-caricature is an absolute necessity so that a certain alienation and estrangement can be established. It allows the narrator to become the *other*, to feel heard and seen.

## Graphic Novel and Representation of Trauma

"Graphic Journalism" (Hatfield 111) or "cartoon journalism" (Rall 72) is employed in the novel to perform a commentary about the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Alongside it also hinges on the intimate tone of autobiographical recourse to assert the agonising circumstances of oppressed groups to a Western public. Misagh Parsa points out that social classes and other marginalized groups were the ones who started the collective operations against the monarchy. The overwhelming majority of participants in the protests and strikes called for political freedom, democracy, social equality, and economic fairness in

opposition to the oppressive nature of the current system. They also promised to stop foreign exploitation and denounced foreign dominance. However, the Revolution lacked rural class solidarity, unlike the Russian, Chinese, and Vietnamese revolutions and there was no incorporation of guerrilla warfare against the secret army. A lot of protests were also handled through the institution of mosques and therefore eventually Islamic Theocracy took charge of the ruling power after the Monarchical dissolution (Parsa 12).. As a graphic novel *Persepolis* serves to be a notable component of the canon since “trauma has become part of the Zeitgeist” (Fassin and Rechtman 212). It has the freedom and plasticity that comes with the genre to indulge in Narrative time or Chronotope (space-time). Bakhtin suggests that trauma in graphic literature can be represented as not just possessing power but also a collection of images and pictorial expressions which make it more approachable. Trauma is “the event which is not experienced as it occurs but is fully evident only in connection with another place in another time” asserts Anne Whitehead, and this is where Graphic novels can become a part of the contemporary “Trauma Culture”(Luck 28). The disruption of a strict, linear narrative leads to a “de-narrativization” which is synonymous with traumatic recall. The significance of such a “non-narrative” is dependent upon the context and temporality of the recall as observed in *Persepolis*. Therefore, the onus is on the reader to establish a lucid narrative and bypass the chronological ambiguities.

## **Shades of Postmemory in *Persepolis***

Marji is surrounded by multiple historical memories, Her Uncle Anoosh is one of the most seminal characters in the text. Anoosh’s narration of his past life to Marji, during a bedtime story, is full of escapades and torture and is pivotal as a necessity to pass “communicative memory”, to borrow Jan

Assmann's term, to the children in the family. This "communicative memory"<sup>1</sup>, of Marji's family, is located within a generation of contemporaries, witnessed by them as adults and its affective connection is passed to Marji through the trope of bedtime story which is an "act of transfer"<sup>2</sup>, as maintained by Paul Connerton. Anoosh's memories are not just memories but also emanations of traumatic and turbulent experiences. Anoosh presents a swan made of bread to Marji as a keepsake to remember him; this is an endeavour to preserve what Eva Hoffman calls a "living connection"<sup>3</sup> through tokens of conversations, and actions of everyday life to immortalise the familial memory.

Anoosh's death pulls the ground beneath her feet, and she feels "lost, without any bearings... What could be worse than that" (Satrapi 71), The three dots in this sentence are Marji's

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Assman uses the term "Kulturelles Gedachtnis" to refer to "Kultur", an institutionalised archival memory

In comparison or rather against the concept of American "Cultural Memory" which is a social subgroup. Cultural memory is shared by several people which leads to association by identity which is shared. Communicative memory is shared between contemporary generations in everyday life, actions and conversations and is not institutionalised either.

<sup>2</sup> Trauma can not be "transferred", neither can its memory be to another person, as Gary Weissman refers to in *How Societies Remember*. The indexical relationship between an event and its memory pertains to the importance of the context of an event which is not a belonging of children of survivors or the Postmemory generation. Hence to them is lost the memory never exists and can be only understood by its dependency on semiotics.

<sup>3</sup> Here it would be wise to discuss Edward Said's distinction between vertical filiation and horizontal affiliation, a structure that acknowledges the breaks in the authorial transmission that challenge authority and direct transfer. The transfer of memory between imminent generations under which "memory" as an umbrella term is referred to as "living connection" by Hoffman concerning Jan and Aleida Assman's work on Cultural and communicative memory. In Satrapi's *Persepolis*, the tales that Anoosh, grandmother and her parents recite to Marji, not necessarily in completion, are indicative of "living connection", as refrains which are broken and incomplete.

and perhaps even Satrapi's hopelessness about the ability of language to express what she felt. This gap doesn't only represent the ill capacity of semiotics but also the magnanimity of a child's grief. In the panel, Marji can be seen floating in the Space "without any bearings...". This Spatial and Temporal dissociation can be explained by Deleuze's concept of "stutter". The hesitance in articulating her emotions through language is symbolic of its heterogeneous and "assemblage" like nature.

Tales of violence and death are a stream of events in Marji's comparatively sheltered life. Her grandpa's father was once the Emperor of Iran and her grandpa, a prince who later joined the communist struggle against the Tyranny of the Shah was incarcerated for most of his life. Marji is told by her mother that he was locked for hours in a water-filled jail cell and suffered from Rheumatism as a result, which is itself an Alexithymic disorder<sup>4</sup>. Marji is the child witness to the recounting of traumatic events, as she is listening to her grandmother, not only the story is inscribed on her brain but also on her body. The only way for Marji to apprehend is to undergo a re-enactment of an analogous incident, she wishes to "mark" herself through this postmemory of her grandpa as Sethe's daughter asks in only way for Marji to apprehend is to undergo a re-enactment of an analogous incident, she wishes to "mark" herself through this postmemory of her grandpa as Sethe's daughter asks in Morrison's *Beloved*. Upon being inquired by her father if she'd like to play Monopoly, she

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Lifton elaborates on "absurd death" and deaths due to mass destruction impact survivor's ability to tackle discontinuity and disintegration which comes with grief. In this context, Marji's grandmother's unwillingness to talk more about her husband is symptomatic of a kind of "psychic closing off" which blocks or avoids any discussion associated with the traumatic event beyond the point of general conversation about it. Alexithymia as per Henry Krystal in *Psychiatric Traumatization* discusses muted or non-responsive behaviour towards one's own emotions, often traumatic. This can further exacerbate psychosomatic illnesses like Rheumatism, Asthma, Irritable Bowel Syndrome etc or Substance Abuse in the case of Marji's school years in Vienna.

replies with a straight face, “No, I want to take a really long bath... I wanted to know what it felt like to be in a cell filled with water. My hands were wrinkled when I came out, like Grandpa’s.” (Satrapi 25).

This wish to re-enact a fatal event that happened long ago, is what Geoffrey Hartman phrases as “witness by adoption”<sup>5</sup> to smoothen the tardiness of an event and correlate the present with the past. Grandpa’s family spent their days in poverty, as Marji’s grandmother explains, “Oh yes so poor that we only had bread to eat, I was so ashamed that I pretended to cook so that the neighbours wouldn’t notice anything” (Satrapi 26). She shows a photograph to Marji in which there is no Grandpa, and upon her inquiry about it, Grandmother tells her that he was in jail. The absence of grandpa in the photograph, as Barthes enunciates in *Camera Lucida*, “tells me death in future”<sup>6</sup>. The photograph predicts the death and absence of the Grandfather in Marji’s family, and it enhances and proves this gap in the memory of Marji and even her mother.

Through Marji the reader associates and finds a spot for empathetic federation with the trauma victim. Her Idiopathic<sup>7</sup> identification with the tale of her grandfather establishes and accelerates the reader’s Heteropathic identification with the traumatic recall of Marji’s Grandmother. This nonverbal and

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<sup>5</sup> Hartamn and Ross Chamber (with “foster writing”) wish to underscore the ridges in biological transmission of trauma as it is protected within a familial gaze. It also applies to the frustrating need to know a traumatic past and project it to understand its implications.

<sup>6</sup> Barthes in *Camera Lucida* uses the two-dimensional photograph as a medium of postmemory which eliminates distance between the present and the past and facilitates affiliation. Therefore family pictures can be pervasive as artistic media in the backwash of trauma. In the context of my argument, the photograph that grandmother shows to Marji, is an image of a “before” that signals an intense loss of safety in the world for her grandmother.

<sup>7</sup> Also see Hirsch's 1998 theory of non-appropriative identification draws on Kaja Silverman's (1996) difference between idiopathic and heteropathic identification.

precognitive act in the familial space compounds to a familial postmemory or perhaps even an Affiliative Postmemory as the photograph depicts a “loosened familial structure occasioned by war and persecution”. (Hirsch 36)

## Psychosomatics of Trauma

Mohsin and Siamak, two family friends of Marji's dad, narrativise their detention sufficed with torture to her parents which Marji overhears, once more the only way for her is to enact those tales through games, as she says, “My father was not a hero, my mother wanted to kill people ... so I went to play in the street.” (Satrapi 52) This implementation gives her a “diabolical power trip” (Satrapi 53) which doesn't last longer and she bursts into tears. Marji cannot express what all these tales of traumatic happenings do to her as a listener. Dori Laub conveys that these incidents become a part of the “political and cultural memory” (Assman and Assman), “These are not inter but transgenerational, ... no longer mediated through embodied practice but solely through symbolic systems.”<sup>8</sup> (Hirsch 6).

Even in Vienna, her break up with her boyfriend Mario leads her to a near-death experience, she lives on the streets for two months, later being evicted by her landlady in sheer cold only to wake up in a hospital and realise she has Tuberculosis. This streak of masochism and revenge against one's self is to justify her existence in the memories of all the people she has lost to war and persecution as she says, “I had known a revolution that had made me lose part of my family... and It's a banal story of love that almost carried me away” (Satrapi 243). A

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<sup>8</sup> In *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* Aleida Assmann insists upon the “Inter-subjective symbolic system” of affiliative transmission of memory. It can be moulded into any shape appropriate to the experience of the listeners once it is verbalized. Therefore the family is an institution which best transmits the “social memory” to the next generation and, is hence intergenerational.



sudden dispersal of her source of the object of emotional dependence, and the constant lack of gratification as Stern asserts, induces a “catatonoid reaction”<sup>9</sup> in her after returning to Iran. She feels immobilised, and numb, as all “affective and pain responses” are blocked, which Eugene Minkowski and Robert Lifton call, “affective anaesthesia” and “psychic closing off” respectively.

## Summation

Even when Marji pursues psychotherapy to alleviate her depression, perhaps to pass on the crisis which “fails to produce gratification, and only leads to contempt against the self”, argues Cathy Carruth, her addiction to prescribed pills is again sponsored by what Dori Laub explains as a lack of healing reunion with those who went missing and are lost forever with “no resumption of an abruptly interrupted innocent childhood” (Caruth). After seeing all her life “absurd deaths due to mass destruction” (Felman and Laub), eventually Marji tries to kill herself with an overdose, but to her fortune, she wakes up with just a terrible headache. Upon being told by the doctor that her survival is nothing short of a miracle Marji finds herself rejuvenated. She grooms herself, becomes an aerobic dance teacher, applies for the National Test, and marries Reza and yet, the closure doesn't arrive. The quality of “otherness”, “a salience, a timelessness” (Laub and Felman) which is associated with her disruptive life never quite goes away.

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<sup>9</sup> M.M Stern in “Anxiety, Trauma, and Shock.” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, discusses “catatonoid reaction” as a paralysis of initiative consisting of different kinds of immobilization which lead to an eventual automatic obedience. People who undergo extremities of catastrophic trauma are also unable to assert themselves in rage and anger, often have anxiety dreams, are hypervigilant whereas infantile trauma leaves no marks of recollection or a history of traumatic years and therefore no traceable pattern of behaviour can be spotted.

The exact moment of realisation, about her dignity and gratification, comes from an interview with the Director of her College, where it felt “as if I were going to meet my executioner” (Satrapi 300) which Caruth explains as a “successful completion of mourning” (Caruth 95) so that one’s life could be successfully integrated to the position where one need not justify their existence through internalised trauma. *Persepolis* ends with the definitive action of Marji taking another journey to France. The action predicts the salience of Trauma, which is a kind of journey that never ends but needs to be confronted, not in hopes of closure but of an understanding and investigation and memorialisation, so that it can be shared, exchanged, corroborated, disputed, and written down.

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## **Ritika Gandhir**

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Ritika is a literature Major from Miranda House College, University of Delhi. She developed an appetite for Graphic Novels during COVID Lockdowns. Her passion for Visual media manifests itself in her love for Cinema as well. Recently upon reading Trauma and Memory Studies as a Credit Course, she has begun to look at Graphic Novels within the framework of an interdisciplinary research area. "Curiosity is the purest form of insubordination", she strives to be imaginative, and inquisitive of the world around her, and of possibilities. This is a motto which she stands by in her academic pursuits. Eventually, she hopes to actively research in the above-mentioned field and more and to teach at a University, albeit a vanilla Dream but enough for her life to be vibrant.

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