

Persepolis: A Story of a Westernized Culture

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The Western world. For those who live in what is considered the “West” might have different ideas of what the West is depending on where they are in that world. Some see it as a place of opportunity, wealth, and prosperity. Others see it as a place for freedom, and it can also be just another source of entertainment and influence. For other countries, however, the West is seen as a negative rather than a positive. For the country of Iran, the West caused, and continues to do so, nothing but turmoil and grief for the country. To describe this negativity, and positivity at times, toward the West, Marjane Satrapi illustrates Iran and her citizens’ struggles with the West and Westernization in her graphic memoir *Persepolis*.

Satrapi displays her life within these pages to make sure her audience knows who she is, where she came from, and what her country is like, correcting the misconceptions often made by the Western world. These corrections are illustrated throughout Satrapi’s story showing the lives of the citizens of Iran, the government, and their own ties with the West. Iran as a country has struggled with Western countries taking over the government with the ideal of post-colonialism. Feminism and gender roles are illustrated in the memoir and the negative influence from the West. Satrapi herself deconstructs those misunderstandings of the Western world throughout her narrative.

REASONS OF HOSTILITY TOWARD THE WEST

Europe and the United States are the main places that make up what is considered the West. Countries in Europe, specifically Great Britain, and the United States are held responsible

for many of the reasons why Iran is so against the West and Westernization. In the 1800s, Iran was confronted with one of the most dominate empires in Europe, the British. Toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, Britain, along with Russia, continued interfering with the country (Katouzian 154). Like Satrapi states, they manipulated and influenced Reza, a low-ranking soldier who wanted to create a republic, so he would become Shah, or emperor, of the country while the British would get all of the oil they wanted (22-23). They assured him that if they got their oil, they would take care of everything Reza was responsible for (Satrapi 21). Marji's grandfather, a prince of Persia before Reza Shah took his crown, states that the emperor was not Reza Shah, but the King of England (23).

Originally, the United States had good ties with the country of Iran. However, when the Persians wanted help from the Americans, their aid did not materialize because of the United States policy of isolationism. In 1937, their positive ties deteriorated when the Shah reacted sensitively to the criticism of him in the western press (Katouzian 227). Additionally, America was "held responsible for the absolute and arbitrary government in Iran" (Katouzian 304). In other words, the United States was one of the Western countries at fault for making the shah rule with monocratic and supreme authority.

Imperialism, a form of post-colonialism, is defined as "the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas" (Merriam-Webster). By influencing and manipulating Reza Shah, the British took control of Iran, leaving the once-independent country completely reliant on the British (Katouzian 154). In *Persepolis*, a panel illustrates the "2500 years of tyranny and submission" (11). The bottom illustration is that of modern imperialism. Looking at the drawing from left to right, the first group of men appears to

be executors, the second group is the army of the Shah holding the flag of the Shah's Iran, and the third is a man holding the British flag and a figure of what appears to be Uncle Sam. The leaders, the British man and Uncle Sam, are the reason for imperialism, and the Shah follows their lead.

During Marji's uncle Taher's stay in the hospital, the doctor describes a group of patients that were injured by chemical weapons that were made by the Germans and sold to Iran as well as Iraq. He states that those soldiers who are wounded are sent to Germany for treatment. The soldiers are treated like guinea pigs for the German's weapons. The Western countries are taking advantage of the Iranians and other Middle Eastern countries for their own benefit.

From the beginning conflicts with the West, Iran's perception of the Western world is on a low note. The Western world shaped their reputation as a greedy, imperialistic world from the time they manipulated Reza Shah.

PERSIANS AND THE WEST

The people of Iran who follow the ways of the West have certain characteristics. Whether they are youth or men or women, the traditionalist citizens of Iran have different perceptions of the more modern and progressive people.

For the youth of Iran, conforming to the Western World and following Western ways are their symbols for rebellion. By doing little things, such as girls showing their wrists, boys getting non-traditional haircuts, and laughing loudly, they express how they feel about the restrictions and laws of their country. According to Katouzian, teenagers in Iran were also influenced by the 1960s Cultural Revolution, the French student revolt, and the rebellion of the American youth in

the late 1960s and into the 1970s, encouraging them to “seek and support revolutionary ideas and actions” (304). A major example of teen rebellion is when Satrapi describes the incidents that happened between 1980 and 1983 (302). She states that there were so many high school and college students demonstrating and having revolutionary ideas during those years. However, this rebellious behavior can lead to severe consequences for the Iranian youth. Christopher Theokas, a writer for *USA Today*, is quoted in Naghibi and O’Malley’s article and wants to make sure readers know that a big difference between a rebellious American teenager and a rebellious Iranian teenager is that in Iran the “rebellious behavior we take for granted could lead to jail time—if not worse” (235-6). Though teenagers and young adults know the consequences, of their actions to rebel against the government, they still find their own way to do it. They are influenced by Western revolts, and they exhibit Western behavior to show their opposition to the government.

Women in Iran are already not treated with the same respect and do not have the same rights as men, and those who follow Western ways are treated worse. If a woman showed more of her hair under her veil or headscarf and did not wear a ‘chador’ like the fundamentalist women, one could tell she was more progressive and modern. Women with Western views are often referred to as sluts and whores throughout Satrapi’s memoir. Marji, her mother, and other women are given these names in a number of instances in the story. One scene is when Marji confesses she has had sexual relations with more than one man. Her friends ask what the difference is between her and a whore (270).

One can tell when a man is more progressive and modern by the tie he wears, lack of facial hair, and tucked-in shirt. While the tie is a symbol of the dreaded West, Islam and the traditionalist men are against shaving. Because Ebi, Marji’s father, wears a tie, he is called

“Westernized trash,” a term that is given to people who follow Western ways, and is accused of having been drinking the forbidden alcohol (108).

The impression readers of *Persepolis* understand is that the women who live in the West are seen as less feminine and more masculine, as we see with Taji’s friend Zozo. Before her and her family moved from Iran to Austria, Zozo was a secretary, a job that is usually associated with women no matter where you are in the world. She worked under her husband, Houshang, the CEO of the company. Now living in Austria, she is the sole provider for her family, usually associated with the male role. Houshang is unemployed in Austria. He has to rely on his wife’s salary in Austria, when in Iran he was responsible for the main source of income, the usual role of the husband. Houshang would be considered less of a man in Iran due to the fact that he assumes a more feminine role in the West. Gender roles in Iran are set, the male of the family is the provider and the female either has a supporting role or none at all, whereas in the West, it is socially acceptable for women to bring home the main source of income. Satrapi gives these instances to explain to her audience how the people of Iran react to the Iranian government and society and their negative views of the West.

These different groups of Iranian people have different reasons for following the Western ways as well as face various consequences by doing so. The youth of Iran do it to be rebellious, but have the risk of being thrown in jail. Men and women do it because they want to be more progressive and modern and therefore run the risk of being called whores, sluts, or “Westernized trash.”

PERCEPTIONS BETWEEN WORLDS

Throughout *Persepolis*, there are many different perceptions the characters have of the West and Westernization. There are both positive and negative views of the West that the characters portray, including Marji. On one page, she thinks Europe and the United States are great, and on the next, she calls Americans “dummies” (72). There are also perceptions the Western world has of Iran. However, these perceptions tend to be more on the negative side.

On the positive side, some Persians see the West, in the form of Europe or America, as a means of escape from unappealing circumstances: Naghibi and O’Malley state “the West always provides the way out, the way to freedom” (238). For example, Marji’s friend Kaveh is leaving their country and going to the United States because his parents believe that it is impossible to live under an Islamic Regime, the form of government of the country after the Shah was removed (63). Some members of Marji’s family leave the country for the United States, as well, and her parents even think of leaving. When things become worse in Iran during the war, Marji and her family escape to Italy and Spain for three weeks, and Marji thinks “it was wonderful” (77). Finally, Marji’s parents send her to Austria for her education because they want her to leave the country, so she can prosper without the pressure of the country’s laws and restrictions.

On the other hand, there are plenty of negative views about the Western world. One reason why Iran acts negatively towards the West and Westernization is the fear of losing the Persian culture in the influences and contribution of the West. ‘Western cultural onslaught’ is the phrase that best describes this fear. Homa Katouzian defines this as a “phrase adopted by those circles who feared the loss of Islamist cultural austerity and the beginnings of a more cultural sphere” (265). The people of Iran, or at least the government and those who believe in more traditional ways, want to keep their Persian culture secure in their country and not have it ripped away from them by the West and its influence. A couple of minor examples of negative views in

the book include when Marji calls Americans dummies and when Momo, Marji's friend at her Austrian school, believes Americans do not care about anything but capital and business, as he declares when he describes Christmas as an American invention that it is "good for business" (168). To address a bigger instance, Marji's views of the West change after her experience living on the street while in Austria. She states, "In the West, you can collapse in the street and no one will give you a hand" (280). Before living in Austria, Marji comes across as pro-West. After her three months on the street, her perception changes. She believes that all Westerners do not care about others or maybe just foreigners like her.

The Iranian government also has negative views of the West, from changing names of the streets of Tehran to closing the schools to make sure they are not educating future imperialists in the fashion of Westerners. Bilingual schools were seen as a form of decadence and capitalism, which are symbols of the dreaded West. After the Revolution, the streets of the country's capital were changed from those of Western figures and places to names of martyrs or others that represented their own country. Kennedy Street was changed to Unity, Boulevard Elizabeth II was renamed Keshavarz-Farmers Street, and Goethe was changed to Shaheed Ahmadi. There were also avenues named Los Angeles, France, and Italy that were subsequently renamed (Elliot 15). The government banned and forbade everything that was seen as decadent and associated with the West like alcohol, music tapes, and games.

Besides closing the schools to prevent imperialism and capitalism, the government also establishes "moral codes." This means preventing men and women from displaying their affection in public, prosecuting those who host parties, and prohibiting any contact with the opposite sex before marriage, all behaviors which are appropriate in the West. For instance, after Marji is accepted into the school of art at the university, she is found alone after hours drawing

with a man as her model. The supervisor that finds her reprimands her saying she is not allowed to look at him because “it’s against the moral code” (300). Marji then retaliates by asking if she should just look at the door while drawing him, which the supervisor thinks is more appropriate. Further, Marji and her boyfriend Reza are not allowed to get an apartment together without being married because of the moral code. Another way the government prevents Westernization is by issuing what Marji calls “Guardians of the Revolution.” This group of men and women arrest people who violate the moral code or who wear or display things that signify the West. People are arrested for wearing Western clothing, wearing make-up, engaging in inappropriate acts in public, and throwing parties. Those arrested are whipped, beaten, and given a hefty fine.

Westerners have many perceptions of the Eastern World, mostly negative do to current events and influence from prominent people. Iran is considered part of what George Bush coined the “axis of evil.” Because Iran is located in the Middle East and neighbors Iraq, Westerners’ first assumption is that they are all terrorists, when in reality, the Persians dislike Iraq, as well.

As people of the West, Satrapi deconstructs our stereotypes and misconceptions of Iran. Satrapi “wrote her book in response to one-dimensional representations of Iran as a terrorist nation” and the term Bush gave the country (Elahi 312). I will admit that before reading this memoir, I thought every Middle Eastern country was all the same due to the fact that I was not educated in depth about it. By stepping into her world as an Iranian living in a country that is not much different than ours, we become more educated about Iran. Instead of everyone living in huts with dirt floors, having only one economic class, and all women are oppressed, as many common misconceptions hold, Satrapi helps us understand what her country is really like. Some of us in the West think all of the countries in the Middle East are third-world when, in reality, there are poor neighborhoods and wealthy neighborhoods, an obvious social class system, and

some women are more independent and take advantage of opportunities than others. Even the nuns at her first boarding house in Austria give in to a stereotype of how Iranians are not educated, even though one of the main reasons Marji is in Austria is to continue her education.

The difference in social class is apparent when Ebi breaks off the relationship between Mehri, their maid, and the neighbor boy. Their love would never be possible in a society like theirs because they must stay within their own social class (37). Evidence of the economic class difference is shown through the event of war. It is common in Iran for the men in lower economic classes to be drafted into war and potentially die for their country, while the men in the higher economic class is not required to fight in the war. When Marji learns about the “keys of paradise” that the boys are receiving in school, she calls her cousin to ask if he had received a key (100). Marji’s cousin is a part of the upper economic class and did not get a key, however the son of the Satrapi’s cleaning woman, who is of a lower class, was given one, promising “plenty of food, women and houses made of gold and diamonds” if he died while serving his country (100).

Racism towards Marji and her country comes up quite a bit throughout the text, mostly while she is in Austria. During the time she is dating an Austrian named Markus, Marji is called a witch, a dirty foreigner, and a prostitute. The owner of her boarding house, Frau Dr. Heller, believes that true Austrian men should not date women like her; in other words, Iranian. Heller also accuses her of stealing a brooch. At one point, rather than have herself associated with Iran, so she would not feel as much negativity towards her, Marji even denies her nationality stating that it was “better to lie than to assume that burden” (195). We see another example of racism when Taji talks about the past when the Iranians could go anywhere in the West by just carrying an Iranian passport without the hostility from the Westerners, but as she goes on, “Now as soon

as they learn our nationality, they go through everything, as though we were all terrorists. They treat us as though we have the plague” (203).

It is apparent that the East and West have different views regarding one another. Westerners might give into the stereotypes and misconceptions because they might not be as educated about Iran, but that is Satrapi’s purpose for writing her memoir. She wants to deconstruct our thoughts of the country and show us the reality. Hopefully, by reading Satrapi’s memoir and learning a little bit more about the country, Westerners will change their views and maybe correct their misconceptions.

INFLUENCES FROM THE WEST

The Western world has influenced many countries with its pop culture, clothing, food, and art; even forms of violence found in the West have spread to other countries including Iran. This Western influence is shown throughout *Persepolis* with parties, references to bands like Iron Maiden and the Bee Gees, as well as Marji’s choice of dress.

In Satrapi’s memoir, one of the most important influences from the Western countries is their popular culture that includes music, books, movies and television, and games. Throughout the whole story, Marji is influenced by things that are not originally from Iran. She listens to Iron Maiden and Kim Wilde and reads comic books. Marji also expresses the influence the West has on her by dressing in denim jackets, Nikes, and tight pants. Marji is influenced by these things because she is a young girl who is susceptible to being impressed by everything around her. The reference to the comic book also relates to the reason why Satrapi chose to explain her life story with pictures. According to Nima Naghibi and Andrew O’Malley, in their article “Estranging to

Familiar: 'East' and 'West' in Satrapi's *Persepolis*," because the memoir "provides a perspective on events unfamiliar to the Western reader, the comic book form it assumes is itself automatically familiar" (233). In other words, Satrapi's illustrations of her life experiences are unfamiliar to the West, her main audience, so she wanted to help her readers understand by giving them something they have encountered before. Satrapi's graphic memoir makes it easier for her to extinguish the false conceptions the West pins on her country.

Most of the characters mentioned in the book are influenced by the West in some way. For Marji's father, Ebi, the situation regarding the fundamentalist students holding some Americans hostage is like a scene from a James Bond movie; he thinks he looks like Frankenstein when he smuggles posters, products of the West, into Iran; and he relies on the British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, for all of his news. Also, the sons of Taji's friend Mali have "all the Star Wars stuff" (91). American food is also mentioned during the story when Marji and her friends skip class to go to a diner and eat hamburgers and hot dogs. The influence from the West is so great that people incorporate it into their daily lives, intended or not, whether it is the media, food, or toys.

Violence found in the West, particularly the United States, has also influenced Iran and her citizens. One example is when Marji and her friends want to attack another boy, Ramin, with nails in between their fingers like "American brass-knuckles" because his father killed over one million people (45). Also, when family friends, Mohsen and Siamak, state that their torturers in prison were trained by the C.I.A. These scenes illustrate that America is known for violent things. Of the few times that the United States is specifically mentioned in the book, the instances described above take the majority, and they illustrate negative things of the United States.

Influence from Western countries interferes with the culture of Iran which in turn causes turmoil within the country and outside of it. These influences could be classified as positive or negative depending on the person or government. Satrapi illustrates these influences throughout her memoir, and she shows both the good and bad sides.

MARJI AND THE WEST

Throughout the memoir, Marji battles with the West, her country, and herself. She's torn between her Islamic culture and the West, and it also influences her in significant ways. When she is living in Austria, she constantly compares the Western social customs to her country. She describes the different treatments of parents, public affection, and even the parties.

The West's influence on Marji is apparent throughout the whole story. The music she listens to, her clothing, and popular culture references we see her use reflect those of the Western world. She even makes a stereotypical assumption of her roommate in Austria and thinks she is going to be just like Heidi (155). Her art also reflects that of the West. When Marji is applying to the university in Tehran, she is required to draw for the school of art. Out of all paintings, she chooses one by a Western artist, Michelangelo's "La Pieta." Instead of the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus after his crucifixion, Marji sketches a grieving Iranian mother, veiled of course, holding her martyred son.

Marji is often seen being torn between her country and the Western world. In a 2004 interview with Bookslut.com, Satrapi explains that "if you want to have another culture come into you, it's like you have to take out the first one, and then choose what you want from the two and swallow them again." From the very beginning of *Persepolis*, we see a panel that is split in

half along with two sides of Marji. The left represents the West with Marji in Western-looking clothes and gears and hammers in the background. The right represents the East with Marji wearing the veil and Persian artwork in the background (6). While Naghibi and O'Malley state that this split image reflects the use of "Western autobiography and comic books to depict a very Iranian experience," it can also describe Marji's split culture of East and West (232-3). After Marji is given her poster of Kim Wilde, there is a panel of Marji imitating Kim Wilde on the poster. Marji mirrors Wilde's stance, which reflects her fantasy of the West (Elahi 318). By singing Wilde's song, "We're the Kids in America," after she almost gets carted off to jail for wearing punk clothing, she "demonstrates that she is certainly *not* a kid in America" but wants to be there, getting away from her oppression (Naghibi 235).

While in Austria, all Marji wants to do is make friends and be a part of a group. Throughout this part of the memoir, Marji distances herself further and further away from her culture and assimilates to the Western World. After denying her nationality and feeling like she has betrayed her parents, she finally stands up for her herself and her culture when some girls at a diner make fun of her. Yet, after returning to Iran from her four years in Europe, she feels alone in her own country. Even though she is not Westernized enough for Austria, she is too Westernized for Iran and therefore reprimanded by her friends and the government at times. Satrapi states in her interview that when you leave a country for an extended amount of time and then go back, "you are a foreigner anywhere."

Compared to her country's different perspectives of the West, Marji has her own ideas. Though she might have had an unfortunate experience, living on the street in Austria, she still finds the West beneficial for her. At the end of her memoir, Marji decides to leave Iran to live

the rest of her life in France. She ends up finding out who she really is in Iran, but the “real” Marji is viewed as unacceptable in her country, so she must find her true home in Paris.

CONCLUSION

The West can be a frightening place. It is full of stereotypical people, large cities, and racism. It is the breeding ground for new beginnings, a place for escape, and major influence. From the views of the people of Iran, the West is considered both positive and negative. The West, with its imperialism and postcolonial tactics, is the reason why the country had an arbitrary government for a while. However, the West could be viewed as a means of escaping the restrictions and laws of Iran.

Satrapi’s purpose of her memoir is to deconstruct her audience’s perceptions of her country. She wants to them see that the stereotypes are wrong, and there is much more to Iran. Her memoir is, in a way, an educational book. Her audience learns, alongside Marji, about Iran as well as Marji as a person.

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