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Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis Series

In this essay, Iranian exile cultural production is examined via a cultural studies approach, applying Hamid Naficy’s work on the concept of liminality and its productive potential to analyze the Iranian women’s memoir phenomenon of the past eleven years. Focus is placed primarily upon Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel Persepolis, which is analyzed as part of this larger memoir phenomenon. I will argue that Persepolis is a prime example of exile cultural production—as a site for experimentation within various genres (here, that of the memoir and graphic novel), and also for identity negotiation, self-reflection, and cultural translation—thanks to the liminality and hybridity of an artist and author who feels she is “in-between.”

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Iranian diaspora community has grown immensely. This growth is not to be found in the numbers game, per se, for the majority of Iranians living outside Iran settled in their “homes in exile” over twenty years ago. But the growth of the community, as a community, and as a segment of the general population has been considerable during the past ten years. Community awareness within the Iranian diaspora community thus established and growing, the coming-of-age of the second generation has been heralded by the publication of numerous memoirs that have brought the Iranian diaspora experience to the realm of popular culture.

Despite this growth and unlike other more established diaspora communities, such as the Irish, South-Asian, or African diasporas, the Iranian diaspora has only recently developed Persian and/or Iranian Studies departments, created scholarships for Iranian diaspora students, and encouraged members

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1For example, at the University of California-Irvine and the University of Maryland-College Park.
of its community to engage in political and civic responsibility in the diaspora. While many studies of the Iranian diaspora have been conducted, sociological and anthropological scholarship have failed to produce quality quantitative information, particularly in the last five years.

While mass appeal media have begun to flourish, there is a marked lack of cultural analysis of the diaspora within Iranian Studies. Naficy’s book, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* remains, over ten years after its publication, one of the only serious cultural studies of the Iranian diaspora to date and certainly is the most groundbreaking theoretical work on the subject. This essay turns to a cultural studies approach in studying the Iranian diaspora and employs Naficy’s use of the concept of liminality to examine Iranian exile cultural production, most recently visible via memoir.

This qualitative approach seeks to examine the construction and negotiation of identity issues within the diaspora, including hybridity, liminality, and interrogations of the third space created in and by exile. Specifically, I will examine Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* as unique forms of exile cultural production, in that they blend the genres of memoir and graphic novel (alternately referred to as graphic memoir, graphic biography, graphic book, comic book, picture novella, etc.) to tell the story of a young girl growing up in a tumultuous (and often misunderstood) period of Iranian history. Satrapi’s illustrations perform a complementary function to her narrative: her words provide the captivating story, while her drawings provide resonance for Iranian and non-Iranian readers alike, the combination of which accomplishes Satrapi’s stated (and unstated) goals.

I will examine *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* as uniquely apt examples of exile cultural production, illustrating how Satrapi’s liminality allowed her to create a third space where issues of exile, return, and identity negotiations can be performed while bending and blending Western genres with Iranian history and culture. I will examine the reception to Satrapi’s work to argue that the truth, pedagogy, and humor of *Persepolis* necessarily combine, in much the same way as her illustrations and narrative, to create what has become an overwhelmingly successful Iranian exilic production.

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2For example, the creation of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), the Iranian-American Political Action Committee, and the campaigns for public office of Ross Mirkarimi and Goli Ameri in 2004.


**Theoretical Framework**

**Liminality and exile culture**

Hamid Naficy’s understanding of the exilic state is based on the condition of *inbetweenness*. Naficy examines this notion by applying Arnold van Gennep’s early twentieth century concept of *liminality* to the modern migration and exile culture that he investigates, referring to the traveler who “waivers between two worlds.”

As the backbone of his theoretical framework, Naficy creates a “paradigm of exile,” which explains his notion of exile liminality as an oscillation between two modes, arguing that, “to traverse these modes of exchange is to open up new spaces for becoming, spaces of liminality.” Naficy stresses that to be in a state of exile is to be in neither one place nor the other, but to be in-between, to be “traveling in the ‘slipzone’ of fusion and admixture.” It is this oscillating that Naficy argues allows for the potential of exiles (and people in diaspora in general) to “continually negotiate or ‘haggle’ for new positions,” and to create from these positions new modes of expression and cultural production.

Thus, Naficy describes the state of exile as “a process of perpetual becoming, involving separation from home, a period of liminality and in-betweenness that can be temporary or permanent, and incorporation into the dominant host society that can be partial or complete.” His insistence upon the liminality stage of exile serves his larger argument regarding exile culture, arguing that exiles become deterritorialized and are thus in a unique position to subvert

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5 From the outset, I would like to clarify my use of the terms *diaspora* and *exile*. Due to space constraints, I will not go into the numerous arguments regarding these terms. Rather, acknowledging the significant contributions of Safran, Cohen, Gilroy, Marienstras and others to the study of diasporas, and responding to the changes within diasporas and exile that require fluid definitions of both terms, this essay will assume the notion of *diaspora* as defined by Ted Swedenberg and Smadar Lavie, who argue that exiles can and often do live *within* diaspora: “Diaspora refers to the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places—their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with ‘back home.’” See Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* (Durham, 1996), 14. In addition, I would argue that the distinction between exile and diaspora is not a comparison between two equal but different notions, but that diaspora requires the existence of communities within which exiles may be (but are not always) included. It should be noted that not all exiles live in diaspora as defined here—indeed, Satrapi’s experience in Austria speaks to this community-less experience of exile in *Persepolis*. Finally, while taking the work of these scholars seriously, this essay insists that semantics not preclude subjects’ own understandings of who they are, with whom they hold primary relationships, and how they conceive of the community or communities around them. Therefore, when using Naficy’s term *exile cultural production* or the term *Iranian diaspora*, I do not intend to suggest that these are unrelated or conflicting concepts.


and/or question previous “authorities, authenticities, identities and cultural practices, but also to forge new ones in their place.” Exile is, therefore, not merely a state of dystopia and dysphoria, but is capable of productivity as well, and “of eradicating one set of codes and replacing them with different sets of syncretic inscriptions.”

From this process, exile culture is produced and becomes an important mode of negotiating these codes, inscriptions, and identities.

Pop culture, hybridity, and the third space

Numerous terms have been used recently to describe the fusion and in-betweenness of diaspora cultural production, including liminality, hybridity, syncretism, cyborgs, interculturation, transculturation, and intermixture. Such terms reflect the increased scholarly attention given to diasporic identity, and numerous scholars have noted this as a reflection of the recent tendency to turn “vibrant hybrid and syncretic practices into prescriptive models or to celebrate them as the only true forms of resistance and oppositionality.”

Indeed, as Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenberg have noted, “exile and its allied concepts have become popular enough to be in danger of overexposure.”

Using Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, Naficy argues that popular culture is a landscape upon which assorted groups, cultures, and ideologies interact, all working to attain “cultural, moral, and ideological leadership over allied and subordinate groups and over marginalized cultures and ideologies.” With the United States as his case study, Naficy claims that the mainstream culture dominates by selective incorporation of “expression of alternative viewpoints into the civil society” through various means, including education, media, consumer capitalism, and of course, exilic cultures. By appropriating “exilic world views and artifacts,” the dominant culture neutralizes the specificity of their content and thus mutes as mere difference or style any exilic opposition that may have been contained therein. These “differences” or “styles” then become part of the larger “ethnic diversity” trend; in so doing, Naficy argues, the exilic “threat” has successfully been defused, while the non-threatening elements are diffused.
economically to create ‘new and improved’ products with a difference, that is, products with a safe ethnic gloss.”

Lavie and Swedenberg agree with this assessment and argue that hybrids also “subversively appropriate and creolize master codes, centering, destabilizing, and carnivalizing dominant forms through ‘strategic inflections’ and ‘re-accentuations.’” Naficy notes this appropriation as well, noting that exiles often “employ the host’s popular culture and its mediating institutions” in creating symbolic communities so that cultural identity is preserved and exile culture is protected (at least temporarily) from the dominant culture’s appropriation. As he points out, “culture for exiles . . . is not just a trivial superstructure, it is life itself.”

Much like Naficy’s liminality, Homi Bhabha’s hybridity refers to “identity that occurs in the space between cultural borders.” The importance of hybridity, as described by Bhabha, is in its refusal of two moments that can be traced as originals from which a third emerges. Thus, for him, hybridity represents a “third space” that makes possible the emergence of any number of other positions: “This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.” Bhabha uses Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* as an example of the third space manifested as cultural production: the existence of a large population of Muslims in Britain (and indeed, Naficy might argue, Rushdie’s liminality in exile), along with the hybridity that emerges as a result, contributed both to the production of *Satanic Verses* (a third space itself), as well as the various conflicting reactions that followed.

The Iranian diaspora

No one knows exactly how many Iranians live in the diaspora today. Informal estimates have ranged from “over one million” in the United States to “four million or so” worldwide. Lack of comprehensive and reliable statistical research on the Iranian diaspora has been a perpetual problem in the study of

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19Christine Ogan, *Communication and Identity in the Diaspora: Turkish Migrants in Amsterdam and Their Use of Media* (Lanham, 2001), 6. Discussions surrounding hybridity and the third space are abundant; for the purposes of this paper, I will only briefly describe these concepts as they relate to my project.
21Lavie and Swedenberg have introduced the “third time-space” as an extension of Bhabha’s third space, adding a temporal feature. They argue that this concept “stakes out a terrain that calls for, yet paradoxically refuses, boundaries, a borderzone between identity-as-essence and identity-as-conjuncture.” (See Lavie and Swedenberg, *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, 9).
this population. While numerous quantitative surveys have been conducted, they often fail to assess the international reach of the diaspora, focusing instead on relatively small enclave-oriented samples, such as Los Angeles, France, or the United States individually. Additionally, surveys of any conclusive nature were all conducted more than ten years ago, and thus fail to account for new immigrants, new members of the growing second and third generations, and the newer phenomenon of return. Attempts to gauge the number of Iranians in diaspora via census figures, such as those gathered in the United States, have produced unreliable results due to the diversity of Iranians ethnically, the tendency of many Iranians and those of Iranian descent to choose (for a variety of reasons) not to classify themselves as anything other than white/Caucasian and the failure of census-makers to include appropriate alternative options for Iranians and/or Middle Easterners.

Despite this lack of quantitative information, qualitative analysis has revealed that many Iranian exiles/immigrants have, since their migration, become much less politicized and much more interested in culture. As noted earlier, when in exile, “culture is life” and the personal experiences of history and politics, particularly on political refugees, have had a shifting effect upon older members of the Iranian diaspora toward this more cultural direction. With an increased emphasis upon culture, the Iranian diaspora has been prolific in its cultural production in exile, particularly given its relatively short period of existence. As a result, Iranian diasporic culture includes a range of both high and low cultural productions, including films, art, music, television, and literature.

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24The largest Iranian diaspora community in the world is in the United States (particularly in Los Angeles, California—known as Tehrangeles—with large, active communities in Washington, D.C., New York, and Texas), but there are large communities in several countries within the European Union, with one estimate placing Iran as one of the top ten countries of origin of asylum seekers to the EU during 1990–2000. See Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, The Age of Migration (New York, 2003), 108.
26See, for example, Jonathan Friedlander and Ron Kelly, Irangeles: Iranians in Los Angeles (Berkeley, 1993.)
27Indeed, as one surveyor noted, the California census had Iranians “lumped under” the category of “Hispanics or Some Other.” See Bruce Bahmani, “Iranian American Survey Results,” The Iranian 9 (September 9 2004), http://www.iranian.com/BruceBahmani/2004/September/Survey/.
28The second-generation seems to be taking a more active approach to civic responsibility and politics in diaspora, though it remains to be seen how widespread or effective this surge will be.
29See for example, Hamid Naficy, An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking (Princeton, 2001). For films, see Maryam, by Ramin Serry, about an Iranian family living in New Jersey during the Revolution and hostage crisis of 1979, and films by Amir Naderi, such as Manhattan by Numbers and A,B,C...Manhattan. For art, see for example Negar Mottahedeh, “After
Shirin Neshat, filmmakers such as Amir Naderi, musicians such as Andy, and satellite television producers such as Zia Atabay, have all produced exilic culture that speaks to the liminality of their subject positions. An exhibition presented in Berlin in spring 2004 entitled *Far Near Distance: Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists* particularly encompassed this spirit, as its curator noted:

...on the one hand, [these artists] examine western concepts and interpretations of Iranian art and, on the other hand, try to mark out possible paths between Iran and the countries they have chosen as their new homes. The exhibition thus deals with their aesthetic positioning between homeland and exile, the past and the present.\(^\text{30}\)

This positioning of liminal subjects is precisely what Naficy has argued is the productive potential of exile, a potential that I will argue is fulfilled in *Persepolis*. Applying the aforementioned cultural studies contributions, I would argue that Iranian exiles’ state of liminality has enabled new hybrid cultural forms to emerge. In the case of *Persepolis*, we can see Satrapi’s use of Western genres of comics and memoir as an appropriation of dominant Western popular culture to express and preserve Iranian cultural and historical identity in the face of the mainstream diffusing and defusing that Naficy has described. Additionally, her liminality allows her to blend together traditionally Western genres with Iranian history, culture, and storytelling, producing a particularly constructive opportunity to create (1) a third space from which to question dominant notions in Western society regarding Iran and Iranian culture and history, and (2) an engaging forum from which to perform the important work of cultural translation for the Iranian diaspora.\(^\text{31}\)

### The Phenomenon of the Memoir Genre

A mix of the personal with the contextual, an autobiographical narrative intersecting with history, memoir gives its readers an author as guide, an

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\(^\text{31}\) Cultural translation was introduced as a concept by Homi Bhabha to suggest that “all forms of culture are in some way related to each other, because culture is a signifying or symbolic activity,” and that “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity.” See Rutherford, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” 209–211.
informant whose presence lends a unique perspective to the historical moment…

— Kate Adams, “The Way We Were”

Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* series appeared, significantly, at a time when memoirs have been experiencing a great surge of popularity. While the publishing industry surely has much to do with this autobiographical outpouring, scholars, authors, and journalists have tirelessly theorized as to the causes of what has been termed “what may be the most important narrative mode of our contemporary culture.” Scholars have hypothesized that the post-modern state of fiction has resulted in the death of desire for story, in a time where “the actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.” Others are of the opinion that the democratic nature of memoir, giving voice to the minority experience, has appealed to a culture obsessed with democracy, equality, and individual representation, while journalists in particular have become proponents of the more practical argument: “it’s the market.”

Whatever the reason, memoir has grown to a massive literary genre, though not without its critics. Scholars have theorized and analyzed the memoir in relation to the autobiography and novel in attempts to tease these related genres apart. Each presents a shaped reality while relying on similar rhetorical strategies, such as foreshadowing and symbolic representation. Vivian Gornick acknowledges these similarities, but argues that it is the *truth* of memoir that is the real key to its worth, noting “a fictional ‘I’ can be, and often is, an unreliable narrator; the non-fictional ‘I’ can never be.” Thus, although memoir and novel writing share much of the same artistry and techniques, the element of convincing truth is memoir’s distinction, and its challenge is in convincing the reader of this truth while maintaining a powerful narrative. As Gornick puts it, while a story may be revealing, “it’s the writing that provides revelation; and revelation comes only with a story well told.”

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36Miller, “But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Memoir?” 430. (Many disagree with the premise that memoirs are only newly popular, and have noted the history of memoir far outstretches that of autobiography. See, for example, Parini, “The Memoir Versus the Novel in a Time of Transition”).


Carolyn G. Heilbrun has attributed the recent popularity of memoirs to their having been given a new mandate: “to reveal certain circumstances throughout a life that testify to the unusual claims the writer has made upon the world. And the writers of these memoirs are frequently, if not exclusively, women.” Whether or not we take Heilbrun’s point, Iranian women have certainly been a part of this phenomenon of women’s memoirs and have overwhelmingly heeded the call to testify to “unusual claims” upon the world. Memoirs by first- and second-generation Iranian women first appeared in the late 1980s, but did not find considerable media attention until the publication of Tara Bahrampour’s To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America. Since then, memoirs by Iranian women have flourished, with no less than twelve reaching publication since 1999. During this same period, only four books published by Iranian men were referred to as memoirs, though rather than focusing on personal revelations, self-reflection, positionality, and identity, as the women’s memoirs do, they tend to focus on the political events that shaped their lives (including, of course, persecution and exile they faced), which scholars like Helen M. Buss argue is more typical of autobiographies than memoirs. These facts beg the following questions: Why have Iranian women chosen to tell their stories now, why have they used the memoir format, and why have they come out in such high numbers?

The fact that there was an eager market for these memoirs is a point that should not be overlooked or underestimated. Amidst the popularity of memoirs in

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41Tara Bahrampour, To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America (New York, 1999).
43I have in mind Masoud Banisadr, Masoud: Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel (London, 2004), Manouche Farmanfarmaian, Blood & Oil: Memoir of Iran, from the Shah to the Ayatollah, (New York, 1997), re-released as Blood & Oil: A Prince’s Memoir of Iran from the Shah to the Ayatollah in 2005, Manouchehr Ganji, Defying the Iranian Revolution: From a Minister to the Shah to a Leader of Resistance (Westport, 2002), and Vartan Gregorian, The Road to Home: My Life and Times (New York, 2004). Abbas Milani, Tale of Two Cities (Washington, D.C., 1996) was published earlier, and although it could be argued that Afshin Mola'i, Persian Pilgrimages (New York, 2002) has elements of memoir, I would argue against its classification as such.
general, and women’s memoirs, in particular, the post-9/11 atmosphere has created a level of curiosity towards Iran that, though it may have originated in the 1980s, was never satiated or answered publicly by Iranians themselves until recently. As Americans and others around the world seek insight into a country and a people that have been deemed “evil” and an imminent threat to Western society, Iranian exiles—and their children—have also begun to re-examine and work through their identities and histories. Many have found a voice in the memoir genre, letting go of what Farideh Goldin has termed an “imported taboo” of “speaking and writing candidly from our Iranian past.”

With the vast commercial success of Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has also come a growing non-Iranian audience for Iranian women’s memoirs, which has been answered by a recent burst of five new memoirs appearing in a short eighteen-month span. A quick glance at titles will show the common themes of these books, with four of the total twelve having some notion of being between Iran and America explicitly stated after the colon of their titles. These women authors are all speaking from a liminal position and are attempting to produce literature out of their exilic positions. But the question remains: why memoir?

Writing in response to the onslaught of male literary critics who have come out against women’s memoirs as a genre unto itself, Heilbrun argues that women’s stories—unlike men’s—remain unfamiliar and need to be told; to her mind, whether they are as good as or better than men’s memoirs is beside the point. In response to one vitriolic critic in particular, Heilbrun states:

[Patrick] Smith detests the women’s memoirs he excoriates, but he refuses to see that entertaining or enlightening him is not the objective of the women writing memoirs today. There is one general purpose behind these female stories: to tell what has not been told before, or has not been told in the public sphere by women to women.

Without addressing Smith’s position there are two basic problems with Heilbrun’s argument: first, the assumption that women’s stories are only written for other women is problematic, as it tends to ghettoize women’s memoirs as “lesser than” the non-fiction works of other authors, particularly by men and thus, ostensibly “for men.” Second, were her argument true that women’s stories are necessary because they have yet to be told, scholars like Buss or Janet Mason Ellerby would not have been able to write entire books on “the contemporary women’s memoir,” with chapters divided into issues most often addressed in these memoirs, such as sexuality, trauma, mental

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illness, shame, and addiction. More important for this essay, if Heilbrun’s argument were correct, we would not find the extremely high frequency of memoirs by Iranian women, about being Iranian women (albeit, in various contexts), all being published in America in the last six years alone.

Indeed, Roya Hakakian, author of one of the aforementioned more recent Iranian memoirs, Journey from the Land of No, has made a similar argument to Heilbrun’s: “Look at the past twenty years, what Iranian women have been through...there has to be a way to avenge ourselves, and we do it on paper. It’s a vindictive way of looking back at my own history to say ‘We had a voice.’” Despite these claims, I would argue that this chorus of women’s voices, particularly in the Iranian case, has as much to do with the desire to tell one’s story as it does with the market-driven nature of the memoir genre in a post-9/11 atmosphere that has positioned Iran squarely in a misunderstood “Axis of Evil.” In such an environment, women writers who want to have careers as writers have turned to the ever-popular memoir genre. For Iranian women writers, this often means turning their backs on the genres that speak more closely to their expertise.

Taking Hakakian, a poet, as a demonstrative example, we find an articulate woman who says she “knew [she] wanted to be a writer,” and that she “wanted to question the past,” asking what happened to Iranian women and why, meanwhile examining her Jewish-Iranian background and paying homage “to the people I consider my intellectual ancestors,” that is, modern Iranian poets. She flatly denies any suggestions of pedagogy, that her memoir attempts to justify or explain herself (or her country and its history) to readers, or that she wrote her memoir to reclaim an Iranian pride, while introducing a “softer side” of Iranians to the world. In her words, Hakakian wrote her memoir solely for the “sheer act of writing itself.” One is left to wonder, then, why Hakakian, the poet attempting to pay homage to poets before her, chose the memoir as her medium of expression. Given that she knew she wanted to be a writer and to pay homage to Iranian poets, it would easily follow that, were her motivations merely to write for herself, she would have used her poetic talents to work through the issues she describes while remaining within the genre of poetry. By framing her story in a memoir, however, she points to a greater problem within the market-driven publishing world: the current inaccessibility of non-memoir genres to Iranian women.

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46 Janet Mason Ellerby, Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Women’s Memoir (Syracuse, 2001).
47 Heilbrun, “Contemporary Memoirs, Or, Who Cares Who Did What to Whom?” 36–37. It should be noted that Heilbrun herself later confesses, “…pushed against a wall with a gun to my head, I would have to admit that I wish the flood [of women’s memoirs] would abate.” She is quick to rationalize this “flood,” however, by saying, “Women, so long silenced, now seemingly speak in chorus; but what else is to be expected?”
49 Hakakian, “Expressing our Immigrant Experiences: Writing Ourselves into History.”
50 Hakakian, “Expressing our Immigrant Experiences: Writing Ourselves into History.”
Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran, by journalist Azadeh Moaveni is another example of this obstruction. As she has stated publicly, Moaveni’s book project involved a short period of living in Iran during which she attempted to understand and analyze the large youth population of modern Iran. Her project speaks to the necessity of understanding the largest demographic of today’s Iranian population and would have made a fine journalistic narrative, or even political analysis, in a similar vein as journalist Elaine Sciolino’s Persian Mirrors. Moaveni’s project, however, somehow became a memoir:

I wanted to write a book from the first month I moved [to Iran] . . . but I didn’t want it to be told through me. I thought that I could tell it through young Iranians and their lives. But the reality of the publishing industry of America—and how culturally isolated Americans are, it made sense to have a narrator with an American voice which would then appeal to a larger number of people.

Moaveni makes clear that her intended project veered at some point, and the result was yet another memoir by an Iranian woman with a photograph of a veiled woman on the cover.

Among the more than ten Iranian women writers noted earlier, we find journalists, poets, novelists, artists, and professors. The fact that these women have gained more commercial success for their memoirs than for their poetic anthologies, novels, or academic articles, points, I would argue, to the implicit reason behind their writing in the memoir genre: the command of the market economy and the commercial inaccessibility of non-memoir genres to Iranian women. It appears that, while Iranian women’s voices may appeal to readers in this particular moment for a variety of reasons, they are still confined and pigeonholed within the memoir genre by an industry unable—or unwilling—to recognize them beyond their perceived status as “formerly oppressed third-world women,” and rather for their real intellectual, literary, and artistic talents. This only perpetuates several frustrations in Iranian exile culture within the larger Western culture: memoir and film have become the only two creative vehicles through which mainstream Western consumers can view Iran and Iranians outside of the one-dimensional view provided by commercial news outlets. These two outlets have become further embedded in the Othering of the Iranian experience by giving a voice to Iranian artists and writers, while keeping them within these limited genres, thus further Othering them, though this time using their own supposed non-fictive voices.

52 Elaine Sciolino, Persian Mirrors: the Elusive Face of Iran (New York, 2000).
54 Indicative of this, perhaps, is the inclusion on Random House’s Persepolis “Reader’s Guide” webpage of a Suggested Reading section, including Reading Lolita in Tehran, also published by Random House, and a Further Viewing section, including Iranian art films, http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=037571457X&view=rg/.
Luckily for us, however, there are exceptions to every trend. Azar Nafisi and Marjane Satrapi chose to write their memoirs in unique formats, adapting the conventions of memoir in ways that only added to their appeal. While one benefit of these memoirs may have been to understand and preserve history, as Naficy and Goldin have both argued, it appears that, rather than writing their memoirs simply to preserve the past, Satrapi and Nafisi were also developing and redefining a genre. Had they only wanted to “imagine what it was like in Iran,” it does not seem likely that they would have chosen to publish a memoir in the first place, let alone to create memoirs so unique to the field.

Instead, Nafisi and Satrapi have managed to effectively incorporate their professions into their memoir-writing in provocative new ways. Indeed, Germaine Bree suggests that this is to be expected:

If a sense of self is in fact closely linked to cultural phenomena, we can envisage the possibility that our male-female polarization cannot even now furnish the proper frame of reference for “understanding the relation of self to the world” as Merleau-Ponty put it. ... As we have seen, new forms of autobiography, women’s predominantly among them, may be pointing to new, viable, less theoretical forms of the autobiographical narrative.

Nafisi, a professor of English literature now living in the United States and working at Johns Hopkins University, manages to combine her passion for English literature and the genre of literary criticism with her memoir Reading Lolita in Tehran. Her book has been a mainstay of the New York Times’ Bestseller List, remaining in the top two positions on the paperback non-fiction list for over sixty-nine weeks, and has been embraced by a wide array of readers in staggering numbers. Nafisi’s success surely has much to do with her quality of writing and the public’s curiosity. It also has to do with the political culture that has supported it, as well as the book club phenomenon of recent years and its popularity among such clubs.
Meanwhile, Marjane Satrapi, an illustrator now living in Paris, has also bent the memoir genre, using her artistic talents to create a memoir told in comics of her experiences of Iranian history and exile. Indeed, graphic novels themselves have been seen as a hybrid form in its site of comic art and storytelling, making Satrapi’s use of this form all the more fitting. Satrapi, too, has earned international acclaim and success, winning numerous awards and selling over half a million copies of *Persepolis* worldwide. She not only bends the memoir genre, but contributes to the growth of the comics world as well. Her creative approach has been remarked upon by literary and art figures alike, and panels of her strips have been featured in art exhibitions, highlighting their significance as art as well as valuable cultural artifacts in their own right.

What the overwhelming success of these two memoir genre-bending exceptions illustrate, I would argue, is the public’s enthusiasm and readiness for Iranian women to produce works of fiction, art, and scholarship on a wider spectrum. Although Heilbrun has argued that the quality of women’s memoirs is not as important as the fact that they exist, I would disagree with this notion. While it is important to emphasize the importance of women’s memoirs and women’s roles in literature in general, many in the recent crop of Iranian women’s memoirs do not seem to lend themselves to the memoir genre as naturally as others. Rather, as noted earlier, it appears that some of these works are like square blocks that have been forced into the circular hole of the memoir genre. It is up to both the literary field and Iranian writers themselves to use this particularly auspicious moment to their advantage and open the field to non-memoir works.

**Reading Iranian diaspora memoirs across borders**

For Marcia Austin-Zacharias, a sense of place and the relationship between author and reader are key to the successful twenty-first-century memoir. Indeed, Nancy Miller has argued that memoir writers and readers engage in a relational act that “creates identifications . . . conscious or unconscious, across a broad spectrum of so-called personal experience.” She adds that while “some degree of identification is typically present in reading prose narrative—fiction or non-fiction—memoir reading can’t do without it.”

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60 *Persepolis* was the winner of the 2004 ALA Alex Award and was included as a YALSA Best Book for Young Adults, Booklist Editor’s Choice for Young Adults, the New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age, and the School Library Journal Adult Books for Young Adults. These awards reflect both the broad appeal of *Persepolis* as a graphic novel, but also the continued limitation and false classification of the genre as one intended only for young adults and children.
63 Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 423.
I would argue that it is this exchange that has been so successfully accomplished in *Persepolis*. Satrapi has stated on numerous occasions her intention to insert into the discourse on Iran the “humanity” that Austin-Zacharias has described, and reviewers and readers in general have pointed to this universality and identification as one of the most successful aspects of *Persepolis*. Memoirs, then, have not only allowed writers to record their histories, work through memories, and negotiate their identities in diaspora, they also can provide a pedagogical forum in which identifications form across cultures, as well as between subjects, in the diaspora space. This identification, Miller argues, “can also mean the desire to ‘allo-identify,’ to read yourself across the body or under the skin of other selves.”64

Miller’s notion that memoir reading is as participatory as memoir writing in collective memorialization is similar to Avtar Brah’s notion of *diaspora space*—a space inhabited not only by migrants and their descendants, but equally “by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous.”65 In this way, while *diaspora* refers only to the former, *diaspora space* adds the equally important component of the “entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put.’”66 Those referred to as “staying put,” are the very readers Satrapi is hoping to engage and perform her cultural translation for, but as I will argue, the diaspora itself also gains from this mutually beneficial production and allows internal identifications to occur as well.

Undeniably, along with teaching Westerners about Iran and attempting the much-needed work of cultural translation and allo-identification across cultures, memoirs by Iranian women have also served the Iranian diaspora by helping the second and third generations understand their cultural history and diasporic heritage. During an informal discussion at the most recent International Conference on the Iranian Diaspora in Washington, D.C., a self-selected group who identified themselves as second and third generation Iranian-Americans offered interesting responses to the recent Iranian memoir boom that speaks to this generational significance.

The view of the Revolution and Iran-Iraq war for many members of the second-generation diaspora (who are often too young to remember these events first-hand) has generally been influenced by only two sources: their family/friends’ version of what happened, told in bits and pieces throughout their childhood, and the Western media’s version of what happened and happens, usually in thirty-second sound bytes from a non-Iranian perspective. Often these two images do not converge, and media images tend to only offer one perspective of a multi-dimensional cultural, social, and political history. Many in the second, and now third, generations have turned to these memoirs, particularly those dealing with growing up in diaspora, to hear different

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64 Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 403.
66 Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 181.
perspectives (Jewish, Muslim, younger, older, etc.) and find stories with which they can relate their experiences and negotiate their identities.

The second generation has a vested interest in reading these memoirs that perhaps the older generations do not—a major series of events shaped their lives in immeasurable ways, including bringing them out of Iran and into exile, and yet they know very little about this history and the experiences of the generation before them. As one Iranian-American student noted, he was drawn to Satrapi’s work because of its ability to engage him and allow him to identify not across cultures, but across generations: “I obviously did not grow up during the revolution and therefore I could not directly relate with [Satrapi’s] character, but I felt as if I was there with her when I was reading her book.”

Indeed, it seems it is this experience of revolution that many young Iranian-Americans are looking to examine. When asked whether or not they would recommend any of the twelve memoirs to other Iranian-Americans, one respondent felt specifically those of the second-generation would benefit most from these memoirs: “Growing up in the U.S., most of us have seen images of the revolution that the U.S. media showcases and thus limits not only our understanding, but the images we associate with the revolution becomes limited.” Another agreed, adding that these books instilled a surprising sense of pride within young Iranian-American readers that they found comforting in today’s socio-political climate: “I would probably recommend [these books] to other Iranians, especially the younger generation. There is comfort in knowing more about one’s cultural background . . .”

Thus, the Iranian women’s memoirs of the past six years, despite their arguable limitations, have provided non-Iranians an outlet for their curiosity and for the second-generation Iranian diaspora a medium through which they can relate to Iran and Iranians and thus understand more complicated aspects of their own identities. One can only hope that these memoirs will both inspire an opening of literary genres to Iranian and Iranian-descendant authors, as well as provide a catalyst for further creative productions of culture by the second and third generations.

Persepolis and Persepolis 2: Performing Cultural Translation via Graphic Memoir

I consider myself a lightly educated middle class individual . . . Nonetheless, after reading roughly five pages of “Persepolis” I discovered, to my chagrin, that I know jack squat about Iran. Were you aware that Iranians are not, in fact, Arabs?

—E. Bird, Amazon.com reviewer of “Persepolis”

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Using graceful drawings composed of “strong lines, heavy blacked-in figures . . ., inky shadows” and a witty, incisive, and intelligent narrative, Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel *Persepolis* presents one girl’s experience of revolution, war, exile, and return.\(^70\) Originally written in four separate volumes in French,\(^71\) the *Persepolis* series has been translated into twelve languages as two larger volumes: *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* chronicle Satrapi’s life from the ages of ten to twenty-four, during which readers are made witness to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the ensuing eight-year war with Iraq, Marjane’s experience of exile in Austria, her high expectations as she returns to Iran, and her final disillusioned return to Europe in 1994.\(^72\)

Written specifically for a non-Iranian audience, *Persepolis* has achieved widespread international success. According to one source, as of 2004, almost half a million copies have been sold worldwide, both volumes spent numerous weeks on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller lists, and over 160 colleges and high schools in the United States use *Persepolis* for gender/political science classes.\(^73\) Additionally, Satrapi’s comics and illustrations have been featured in publications across the globe, including *Libération, El Pais, Internazionale, Flair, The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker*. Satrapi has been commissioned to do numerous illustration projects, including a mural project in Barcelona, and her art has appeared in galleries in Europe. Her graphic novel *Broderies*, published in French in 2003, has already appeared in multiple languages and her 2004 *Poulet aux prunes* is also slated for publication in several languages.

In light of her success, I will examine Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* as both manifestations of exile cultural production and as graphic memoirs, using the context in which this series was produced and the reactions to its production from both intended and non-intended audiences to frame the analysis. I will argue that *Persepolis* is an exemplary model of both memoir and Iranian exile culture in that it pushes the boundaries of both and that Satrapi’s position of liminality allows her to use a third space position from which to complete her cultural translation, in which she addresses issues of identity, exile and return.

**Persepolis as exile cultural production**

*Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* are particularly useful examples of exile cultural production as a creative way to negotiate memory, history, and identity, both


\(^72\)For the duration of this paper, I refer to the English versions of this work as the graphic novels *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*.

personally and on a transnational level. We are witnesses as Marjane experiences the isolation of having no familial connections or real friends with whom she can relate and to whom she can turn while experiencing the effects of racism, bigotry, and discrimination by Austrians fearful of increased immigration and “multiculturalism.” This loneliness is coupled with feelings of guilt for escaping the war, as well as shame and betrayal for abandoning her culture and becoming more Western. Upon her return to Iran, we witness Marjane’s troubled attempts at readjustment, largely a result of having to “readjust” to an Islamic society she had never fully adjusted to in the first place, as well as her ensuing depression due to her feelings of disappointment and guilt, intensified by the weight of her “secret” life in Vienna. Throughout both of these experiences, the loneliness, recurring identity crises, and feelings of frustration at feeling misunderstood everywhere while having a home nowhere become themes of exile and return that are wholly relatable, to Iranian and non-Iranian, immigrant and non-immigrant readers alike—a success made possible through the universality of her illustrations.

The context in which *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* were published speaks a great deal to the success of this exilic cultural production. Satrapi resides in Paris, where she has lived and worked since 1994. It is significant that she created her graphic novel in France, where *bandes-dessinées* (B.D.) as a genre has flourished and been widely embraced. This popularity has encouraged the expansion of sequential art from an adolescent-oriented *Tintin* and *Superman* genre to a sophisticated one that deals with the more adult themes of David B.’s *Epileptic* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, both inspirations to Satrapi’s work.75

The success of these forebears readied a readership for *Persepolis*, whose embrace led to its translated publication throughout Europe, the United States, and Canada, where it has enjoyed enormous popular and critical success. Through this international dissemination and dispersal of her graphic novel, Satrapi is thus doing important work for both the genre to which she contributes as well as to the global Iranian diaspora. By teaching others about Iranians and translating their cultural experiences, she is helping those in the widespread Iranian diaspora be better understood by their host communities and helping to complicate the media-driven negative images of Iran in the West by providing universal (though, importantly, not universalizing) images of humanity.

74Literally “drawn strips,” *bandes-dessinées* refers to comics and comic books in the Franco-Belgian tradition, and is often translated to *graphic novels* in English, though not without its controversy. Its established place in Francophone scholarship and criticism has led to its distinction as *le neuvième art* (the ninth art).

Standing out from the pack: universality in self-reflection

Satrapi is also doing important work for graphic novelists and the graphic novel genre. While there have been numerous autobiographical graphic novels in the past, several of which were written by personal mentors to Satrapi, they have nearly all been written by men (with Lynda Barry, Debbie Drexler, and Julie Doucet as notable exceptions) and certainly all non-Iranian men, at that. Meanwhile, as described earlier, while there have been several memoirs published that deal with Iranian women’s experiences, the *Persepolis* series is the first to appear in graphic novel form and the first to appeal to such a wide readership, both inter-generational and international. Indeed, graphic novels have been described as a genre that “transcend[s] national identity,” forming “a gestalt based on universal values.” This wide readership and international appeal has contributed significantly to the acceptance of comics and the graphic novel as an art form and legitimate form of adult literature, moving it from novelty shops to best seller lists and mainstream bookstores.

It can be argued that all twelve of the Iranian women’s memoirs published in the last six years deal with different issues and appeal differently to Iranian and non-Iranian audiences, but I would argue that among them, the *Persepolis* series stands out for a number of reasons. Using a child’s perspective, both visually and verbally, to speak about a time of Iranian history that was so entrenched in adult situations—revolution, war, and cultural upheaval—provides a universal appeal that is undeniably captivating. Her images appear as though they come directly from the eyes of a child, and Satrapi has stated that the most important part of her work is in her memory of childhood: “I make an important work of memory, I write a lot and I leave out all that is not essential. Inkings afterwards do not take me much time. If I need a year for a book, it is because of this work of memory.”

Part of the universality of this youthful perspective, particularly effective for Western readers, is achieved via the detail with which Satrapi tells her story and draws her illustrations. Satrapi tells her story in simple, black and white drawings, but depicts surroundings that are simultaneously Iranian and yet largely familiar to Western audiences: her living room with couches, a TV, and

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76 While it is true that *Reading Lolita in Tebran* has also met with great critical acclaim and commercial success, I would argue that *Persepolis* appeals to an audience of a wider age range, including younger readers and particularly young Iranian-Americans, who can appreciate her work in a way they can not yet with *Reading Lolita*, which is thick with literary criticism of English literature. In addition, *Persepolis* provides a different service to the Iranian-American community in that it both adds to the cultural production of hybrid literary genres, but also provides a cultural memory that *Reading Lolita* does not, by describing life both in Iran and in exile and dealing with the issues related to each of these locations.

77 Dominique Le Duc, “XX1st Century Graphic Novels,” Belphegor, 5, no. 1 (December 2005), http://etc.dal.ca/belphegor/vol5_no1/articles/05_01_Leduc_graphnov_fr.html.

Monopoly rather than traditional Iranian pillows, rugs, and perhaps a game of backgammon; the allure of large supermarkets (though understocked due to the Iran-Iraq war) rather than the clichéd image of the bustling bazaar; and herself as an Iranian girl obsessed with American pop culture of the 1980s via Michael Jackson tapes, Nike shoes, and posters of punk rock legends. Presented as non-fiction, these images provide non-Iranian readers with a glimpse at both the level of Westernization achieved in the Pahlavi era but also elements that were likely a part of their own childhood. Though often in the background of her story, these details add to her expressive characters and charming narrative to allow readers to successfully allo-identify with Satrapi and her family. This ability to relate oneself across borders real or imaginary (since, as noted earlier, these borders can also be generational, and internal to the Iranian diaspora community) is a key element of *Persepolis* that is absolutely key to its broad success. This method allows the reader to imagine visual representations of Iran and Iranians while also creating affinity towards Satrapi’s family, empathy with her exile depression, and frustration at her disappointments. As one critic noted, “In a word, [Satrapi] makes it easy for us to understand the terror and heartbreak she lived through in a cool, straightforward masterful style.”

Satrapi’s images thus also provide a unique forum for discussion of otherwise unpleasant, even taboo, issues. By imparting the reality of torture, war, and exile while insisting on making them palatable, Satrapi conveys another universal sense of humanity. As Patricia Storace eloquently described it, “Satrapi uses this style, which offers a benevolent, trustworthy world, like a fresco in a nursery, and matter-of-factly breaks our hearts with it, creating a confrontation between what is drawn as adorable with a world that does not requite its claims to protection, hope, or love.” These otherwise delicate topics are thus filtered first through her choice of young narrative voice and second, through her illustrations that evoke scenes of childhood naivété, often shattered by the realities of geo-politics. By using her simple, clean, wood-cut-like images to depict otherwise disturbing scenes of torture, war, or suicide, she ensures that the reader feels sympathy, pain, and anger, but does not experience the gruesomeness that may otherwise turn them off from the book: their imaginations are kept active, their hearts are strained, but their stomachs remain settled.

In another key element to this success, Satrapi skillfully uses irony and humor to soothe those hearts strained by her story: just as young Satrapi decided that humor was a way of dealing with pain in her life, she also uses humor to see readers through the most trying parts of her story. Realizing the power of humor after visiting her childhood friend who was paralyzed by a war injury,

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Satrapi reflects, “We can only feel sorry for ourselves when our misfortunes are still supportable... once this limit is crossed, the only way to bear the unbearable is to laugh at it.”81 As several critics have noted, it is this keen use of laughter and eye for irony that, when coupled with her illustrations, helps readers remain engaged and that makes palatable the tragedies of her story.

Additionally, Persepolis steps apart from the pack by taking the European diaspora experience as its point of reference; not only because it was originally written in French and published in France, but also because, unlike the other internationally available Iranian women’s memoirs, Satrapi’s first experience of exile takes place in Austria.82 Related to this point is the significance of Satrapi’s solitude in exile. Unlike the narrators of other Iranian memoirs, Marjane is without the continued support structure provided by parents, grandparents, or family members of any kind during her four years in Austria, and Satrapi has emphasized that this familial isolation was key to her depression and failure in Europe, a theme that bears much weight in her work.

Finally, Persepolis is, most importantly, a self-reflective yet unpretentious narrative. Despite the fact that Satrapi comes from a well-off family and is a distant relative of a former Qajar prince, and even after her revelation of these facts, the book remains unpretentious both in its delivery and in its message. Indeed, by being forthright and upfront about her positionality, as Austin-Zacharias has suggested memoir-writers must do, Satrapi has offered a specific viewpoint with regard to class, gender, and social status while enlightening readers via her inquisitive and precocious childhood questioning of each of these cultural markers. Her use of textual self-reflection as narrator of her illustrated past greatly contributes to the value of her memoir.83

Reception and reaction: intended v. non-intended audiences

Satrapi has noted numerous times in interviews that her intended audience when writing Persepolis was decidedly non-Iranian, with hopes of dispelling the Western stereotypes and misperceptions of the Middle East she faced when she arrived in Europe:

I wanted people to read this book and say, “Oh, it could have been me.”... In today’s world it is necessary that people read something like this, so they understand that this other that is so scary, this other that belongs to the “axis of evil,” these people have a normal life.84

81Satrapi, Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return, 112.
82Indeed, 1/3 of these Iranian memoirs of the last six years not only speak of the Iranian-American experience at some length, but, interestingly, all four include some mention of this growing up and/or living between Iran and America in the post-colon portion of their titles.
83For more on the combination of self-reflective text in Satrapi’s graphic novel, see Mélanie Carrier, “Persepolis et les révolutions de Marjane Satrapi,” Belphegor, 4, no. 1 (November 2005).
Her success in conveying this message is apparent in her overwhelming book sales and continued appearance in a wide range of international periodicals, but also in the over seventy glowing critical reviews published internationally and in the over eighty positive reviews her work has prompted in what has been referred to in recent times as a democratic sphere of open review space: Amazon.com.85

Critical reviews of _Persepolis_ and _Persepolis 2_ have been overwhelmingly positive, with only a handful expressing negative remarks. Sentiments from countless U.S. critics were echoed in Italian, French, German, British, and Indian reviews and interviews. From the mainstream _New York Times_ to obscure graphic novel web forums, critics have applauded Satrapi’s use of the graphic novel genre to relate her story of Iran. As reviewer Luc Sante asserted, “Satrapi’s story is compelling and extremely complex... It would have made a stirring document no matter how it was told, but the graphic form... endows it with a combination of dynamism and intimacy...”86 Additionally, _Time_’s resident graphic novel expert, Andrew Arnold, expressed his appreciation of her use of the genre to teach her audience about Iran: “_Persepolis_ provides a unique glimpse into a nearly unknown and unreachable way of life. That Satrapi chose to tell her remarkable story as a gorgeous comicbook makes _Persepolis_ totally unique and indispensable.”87 Indeed, it is Satrapi’s combination of a strong, stirring, and engaging narrative with the deceptively simple beauty of her illustrations that has captivated critics on the most extensive level, as Storace eloquently comments:

In the cartoon world that she creates, pictures function less as illustration than as records of action, a kind of visual journalism. On the other hand, dialogue and description, changing unpredictably in visual style and placement on the page within its balloons, advance frame by frame like the verbal equivalent of a movie. Either element would be quite useless without the other; like a pair of dancing partners, Satrapi’s text and images comment on each other, enhance each other, challenge, question, and reveal each other.88

Reviews on Amazon.com are both indicative of public reaction to the books reviewed as well as an indication of the breadth of readership the books

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85Reviews posted on Amazon.com under both books were considered; _Persepolis_ received an average 5 out of 5 stars with eighty-five percent of reviews giving this score, while _Persepolis 2_ received an average of 4.5 out of 5 stars, with eighty-one percent of reviews giving it a 5 out of 5 score. It should be noted that even lower rated reviews noted the value of Satrapi’s work, with one low-rating reviewer of _Persepolis 2_ remarking, “It’s a must read, but less charming than the first _Persepolis_.”


User reviews of *Persepolis* on Amazon.com have originated largely from the United States, but also include Italian, Australian, British, Canadian, Israeli, Swiss, French, and even Ecuadorian readers. These readers often note whether or not they are of Iranian ancestry and remark upon the ways in which their positionality affected their reading of the memoir. Much like Arnold’s review in *Time*, non-Iranian readers from the United States tend to respond eagerly to a side of Iran unavailable to them through media representations, alongside a concise history of Iran. As one reader put it, “Satrapi’s remembrances … offer the reader … a history lesson missing in my American generation.” An Italian reader also appreciated the pedagogy of *Persepolis*, adding, “Sometimes humourous, sometimes very intense and touching, *Persepolis* helps open … our eyes on a world many of us have only heard about from media.” Even those who felt they were knowledgeable about Iranian history found that the use of illustrations in *Persepolis* created a new layer of depth to their understanding:

I have an above-average awareness of the historical goings on of that period. However, told in this unorthodox style, with pictures, through the creative and emotional eyes of a child, the “facts” gained a vibrance and color for me like never before. The human side of history had so much more meaning, and seemed to imprint a deeper and easier understanding in my mind than most accounts.

Several Iranian-Americans and one French-Iranian reader also reviewed *Persepolis* on Amazon.com. Their reviews overwhelmingly respond to the way they identified with Satrapi’s story and recalled each of the events portrayed in *Persepolis*. Many praised her work for preserving the communal memory of a generation:

It refreshed my memories of revolution and war, memories that I thought were gone. I have come to realize that every life is a novel, but not many people can read it, and even fewer people can write their own. Marjane has done this for a whole generation.

Indeed, reviewers of Iranian descent appreciated the sense of nostalgia invoked by Satrapi’s work and noted that they had recommended it to their Iranian friends and family. They also used the public forum to appeal to Western audiences to read her work in order to “understand your Iranian neighbors better.”

As noted earlier, *Persepolis* (and the other memoirs by Iranian women, in general) has served the Iranian diaspora both in expressing this “story of a generation,” but also by aiding the second and third generations in understanding...
their cultural history and their diasporic heritage. Satrapi’s book, in particular, speaks to this younger generation by using a broadly appealing mix of genres with which to tell her story, making for a concise treatment of a history that other books have spent pages describing, analyzing, and critiquing, while remaining “a fun read.”

Much like other readers, several reviewers from the Iranian diaspora mentioned that their favor for *Persepolis* had much to do with Satrapi’s honesty. But younger members of the diaspora noted particularly her willingness to speak frankly about issues that remain taboo in the Iranian diaspora community:

> It is not part of the Iranian culture to openly illustrate drug usage, sexual encounters, and being homeless. To me this is very important because it allows Iranians to see that it is ok and normal to openly discuss problems we face (especially young adults) and that we don’t have to hide from others because of *Taarof*.

In any culture, the public presentation of such truths is courageous and in the Iranian diaspora culture it is also somewhat unprecedented. Like most diaspora communities, most members of the Iranian diaspora are insistent upon the positive public portrayals of Iran, Iranians, and the Iranian diaspora community, particularly when presented by “one of their own” to Western audiences. Negative portrayals are often met with bitter responses, counter arguments, or outright denials. While she does not come across in her books, interviews, or appearances as one to dodge bullets, so to speak, Satrapi avoids potential backlash from this community by presenting her past without resorting to victimization narratives. She presents her homelessness as a result of “a banal story of love;” she presents the Revolution from a child’s perspective, free from the slander and bickering of differing political factions (though, necessarily and importantly not free from politics); she presents the war through the eyes of her family members, friends, and veterans; and she presents the effects of exile, including depression, marital problems, and drug use in an individualized, personal experience, impossible to translate as an authoritative representation of the entire community. (This is in significant contrast to other experiences, such as her narrow escapes from *basiji* interrogations, or her fear and grief during war, which one can—and perhaps should—take as representative of that time and place.)

Aside from members of the Iranian diaspora, another unintended audience of *Persepolis* that has commented on Satrapi’s work includes Iranians currently residing within Iran. Although *Persepolis* has been translated into numerous

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languages, Persian is not yet one of them. While *Persepolis* is not sold in official bookstores, thanks to the extensive black market and networks between Iran and the rest of the world *Persepolis* has gained a readership within Iran, as indicated by its mention on a number of Iranian weblogs. 92 One blogger in particular, known only as “A Window” (*Yek Panjiri [sic]*), noted his appreciation of the *Persepolis* series and Satrapi’s following two graphic novels for their artistry in particular, noting the unfortunate lack of a comics tradition in Iran, let alone graphic novels of the caliber of *Persepolis*. Additionally, much like the Iranians in diaspora who posted reviews on Amazon.com, her work provided a sense of nostalgia for him and several of his commenting weblog readers that they found invaluable.93

*Memoirs, “Truth,” and Pedagogy*

Satrapi explains in her introduction to the English translation that she is particularly concerned with preserving the memory of a key moment in Iranian history, and particularly with showing Iran as she experienced it, to an audience whose only previous images of Iran may have been limited to ayatollahs, clenched fists, veils, and hostage-takers:

...this old and great [Iranian] civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists.94

Such an educational motive, while admirable, begs the question: can memoirs be pedagogical without compromising their all-important “truth”? The inherent truth claim of memoir, one of its only distinguishing characteristics from the novel, is called into question when motives of writing stray too far from “telling my story” or “preserving my past.” I would argue that memoir in its very nature is pedagogical, even if the author did not explicitly intend it to be: in telling about a life, it will be invariably different from the lives of

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92Weblogs have become a key mode of communication for techno-savvy Iranians, evident by their sheer number. Indeed, according to the ISG at MIT, after English, Persian language weblogs outnumber any other language on the Internet. For more information, see Alireza Doostdar, “‘The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging:’ On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogestan,” *American Anthropologist* 106 (December 2004). Also see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Blogs for the growing importance of weblogs in Iran. See http://blogsbyiransans.com/ for a list of Iranian weblogs in English.


others, and this is all the more so if the author is an immigrant, writing in a foreign place and tongue. But if the author makes clear an intention to teach about a people, place, history, and culture, then the story becomes framed differently than a traditional autobiography. As noted earlier, Satrapi has stated in her introduction, as well as in many interviews, that her intention was to give a different image of Iran than the one that the media presented previously:

From the time I came to France in 1994, I was always telling stories about life in Iran to my friends. We’d see pieces about Iran on television, but they didn’t represent my experience at all. I had to keep saying, “No, it’s not like that there.” I’ve been justifying why it isn’t negative to be Iranian for almost twenty years.95

In order to write a memoir about her own life as well as the experience of her country, Satrapi had to frame her narrative in a way in which she could emphasize both important moments of truth and self-reflection in her life, as well as important moments of national self-reflection in the history of Iran.

In a 2004 interview, Satrapi had this to say about the truth in her work: “Basically, the things that I said are all true.... But it’s not a documentary. You always have to arrange things to tell a story. I’m not going to point exactly to where I have changed things. That’s my secret.”96 While we certainly do not need every detail—indeed, memoirs that do provide such tend to be exceedingly boring, and of course, real lives are rarely perfect in their self-reflection—there are key issues that remain unexamined in Satrapi’s narrative. If reader reactions are any judge, however, these omissions do not seem to have impacted their appreciation of—and belief in—the truth of her story.

The issue of pedagogy becomes more overt in Persepolis 2. One of the major successes of Persepolis, as one reviewer put it, is that it “teaches by stealth:” a reader unfamiliar with Iran at the outset can find themselves totally engrossed in the story of Persepolis and find that they have learned a wealth of information about Iran in the meantime.97 Persepolis 2, however, particularly in its last half, feels much more pedagogical and much more verbal in its telling, as entire pages are devoted to conversations in which each panel shows nothing more than the characters involved, viewed from the same vantage point frame after frame, carrying out the discussion that takes place in the conversation bubbles all around them. While this style can be an effective way of bringing the reader

into the conversation and away from potentially diversionary background images, the repeated use of this style in several conversations\textsuperscript{98} tend to be the parts of \textit{Persepolis} 2 where the narrative takes over and the teaching becomes overt. As a result, \textit{Persepolis} 2 manages to teach its readers as much, if not more, than \textit{Persepolis}, but the “stealth” seems to have worn off and, consequently, part of its charm.

I would argue that, despite exclusions and modifications of “truth” in her memoir, it is in fact Satrapi’s honesty and forthrightness regarding her own positionality as well as her pedagogic intentions that preserve the honesty of her memoir and allows the reader to be “taught by stealth” with such ease. In choosing to write her graphic novel as a memoir and her memoir as a graphic novel, Satrapi consciously created a didactic window through which to explore her self-reflection of her childhood as well as a national self-reflection of a pivotal point in Iranian history.

\textit{Liminality and third space constructions}

Satrapi has thus accomplished what Naficy has suggested those in liminal positions have a special potential to do: she has questioned previous authorities and identities, such as the negative images of Iran that have often been incorporated into second-generation diaspora collective consciousness, while creating via exile culture new spaces and creative frontiers from which to examine the exilic condition. Other artists have created autobiographical graphic novels and other writers have created Iranian memoirs, but it is the successful mixture of the two that is most significant.

Furthermore, Satrapi’s liminality allowed her to fuse Western genres of memoir and comics with Iranian history, culture, and her own mixed sensibilities to create a “third space” environment from which to speak and tell her hybrid tale. Several times in \textit{Persepolis} 2 she confesses her inner duality/hybridity/liminality, which she equates to being nothing: “I was nothing. I was a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the west. I had no identity.”\textsuperscript{99} Indeed, in an interview with a French magazine, Satrapi admitted that France was also “her country,” where she has built her life and where most of her friends are, but she quickly added, “I am Iranian. Perhaps one day I would have dual nationality. But there are things which one does not change; my color of skin will not change, I will remain very brown. And there are things in Iran which I will never have in France. I am really between the two.”\textsuperscript{100} It is this very inbetweenness that allowed Satrapi to reach so many people in such an intimate way and thus to successfully create \textit{Persepolis}.

\textsuperscript{98}For example, pages that contain almost exclusively conversations with repeated images are pp. 48–49 (war, exile, discrimination), 98–99 (Middle Eastern wars, the Iran-Iraq war, and martyrs in Iran), 124 (chemical weapons in the war), 159–160 (marriage), 168 (Gulf War 1990), 184 and 185 (divorce and moving back to Europe).

\textsuperscript{99}Satrapi, \textit{Persepolis: Story of a Return}, 118.

\textsuperscript{100}Vincent, “Interview M. Satrapi, \textit{Persepolis}, une enfance perse.” My translation, from French.
Conclusion

The *Persepolis* series is a prime example of exile cultural production created by an author whose liminality has allowed her to create a third space from which to bend and blend Western genres of comics and memoir with Iranian cultural, historical, and social narratives to create a hybridized genre, fulfilling the potential Naficy argued was inherent in the liminal position. Satrapi’s honesty and truth, identified by scholars as the difference between memoir and novel, is key to her success as a memoir author. Just as her narrative and her illustrations cannot be teased apart, the humor and honesty that combine within Satrapi’s narrative itself are integral to the success of *Persepolis*. It is this admixture (to use Naficy’s term) of captivating and charming illustrations and a sharp, enchanting narrative that produces the depth and effectiveness of *Persepolis*.

As she has often noted, Satrapi’s graphic memoir is an attempt at cultural translation of the Iranian people and its history to non-Iranian communities. What she has also done, perhaps inadvertently, is to create a work that speaks to Iranians in diaspora as well: to their experiences, memories, and feelings of exile and home, as well as to the desire of the second and third generations to understand those experiences and memories. Her work thus not only creates a bridge between the diaspora and host communities, but works within the Iranian diaspora community as well, as she negotiates her own identity in exile, deals with the complications and desires of return, and creates, via culture and literature, a third space for her own identity as Iranian in exile.