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Orientalism, Gender, and Nation Defied by an Iranian Woman: Feminist Orientalism and National Identity in Satrapi's *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*

By Diego Maggi¹

Abstract

Marjane Satrapi's graphic novels *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004) —focused on her youth and early adulthood in Iran and Austria— reveal in many ways the conflicting coexistence between the West —Europe and North America— and the Middle East. This article explores feminist Orientalism and national identity in both Satrapi's works, with the purpose of demonstrating the manners that these comics complicate and challenge binary divisions commonly related to the tensions amid the Occident and the Orient, such as East-West, Self-Other, civilized-barbarian and feminism-antifeminism. In the first part of the analysis, feminist Orientalism —a concept based on the works of Edward Said and Roksana Bahramitash, which is defined in the paper as any form of domination from the West on the East, validated by women's rights and/or Western feminism— is applied on the two comics of Satrapi, in order to explain how they break some stereotypes linked to women from the East, like their passive and subjugated role in a patriarchal and religious society. Through the study of feminist Orientalism on both graphic novels, it can also be observed the various ways in which the protagonist disputes the notion of the West as the best place for women to live, unlike the “uncivilized” Orient. The second part of the analysis exposes the complex national identity of the main character. On the one hand, she opposes the nationalism that the Iranian fundamentalist regime wants to impose, and, on the other hand, she is attached to her family and Iranian culture. Moreover, the article delves into the ambivalent national identity of the protagonist during her experience as a migrant in Vienna, where she defies misunderstandings and Orientalized visions, but also suffers because of the tensions and differences between the Occident and the Orient.

Keywords: Orientalism, feminism, national identity, graphic novel, qualitative analysis, Iranian women, Iran.

Introduction

The graphic novel *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003)² by the Iranian artist Marjane Satrapi, born in 1969, narrates her childhood and adolescence in her native country, Iran, while the second volume, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004), recounts her early adulthood

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² *Persepolis* was first published in four volumes in France between 2000 and 2003. The versions translated into English were initially published by Pantheon Books (USA) and Jonathan Cape (UK) in two volumes: *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004). I use the two parts of the English version and I call them by the shortened names of *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*.

in Vienna and Tehran³. One of the topics that can be observed in Satrapi's autobiographical bildungsroman is the East-West dichotomy⁴. For many authors, *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* break oriental stereotypes and help to understand the reality of the Orient. Suriya Begum, for example, affirms that these graphic novels humanize people from the East to the West (90), and Daniel Grassian considers that they pursue to establish "a communicative bridge between Iran and the West, and leads to a better understanding of both cultures and both people" (44). On the contrary, some critics analyze these comics⁵ as works that strengthen Orientalist discourse and perpetuate anti-Islamic and anti-Iranian sentiments (Barzegar 24). Despite the opposing criticisms, in these graphic novels can be found different perspectives on many of the tensions between the East and the West.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Satrapi's *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* complicate and debate on two fields of study — feminist Orientalism and national identity— that are closely related to the conflicting Occident-Orient dichotomy. Through this analysis, I want to explore the ways in which these graphic novels blur binary and stereotyped divisions like the East and the West, the Self and the Other, civilized people and barbarians, feminism and anti-feminism; revealing a complex vision of the discordant coexistence between the two worlds.

Satrapi's Comics and Feminist Orientalism

The concept of Orientalism was widely known due to the postcolonial academic Edward Said⁶. For this author, Orientalism constitutes "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (*Orientalism* 3). This argument can be linked to Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, who considers that in all societies there are procedures which control, organize, select and redistribute discourses (52). In the case of Orientalism, these procedures have been characterized by the distorted, stereotyped and decontextualized view of the East by the West. Orientalist discourse also constitutes for Said a theoretical body and "a system of knowledge about the Orient" (6) formed, among other aspects, by canonical texts of diverse disciplines, institutions, ideologies and imaginaries, whose objective is to define the West from its difference with the Other (the East) and legitimize the dominance of Europe and North America over the Orient.

Since the publication of Said's *Orientalism* (1978), not only there have been many studies that corroborate the arguments postulated in this book, but also criticisms and proposals that debate on his theory. As Jeffrey Cass says, "Orientalism continues to remain one the hottest fields of literary study" (27). In fact, even forty years after the appearance of Said's text, it was published the book *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (2018) by Wael B. Hallaq, who pursues an appropriate comprehending of Orientalist discourse because he considers that Said's proposal has been misunderstood (12). One of the criticisms of Hallaq to Said is that, in addition to Orientalist discourse, there are "several other 'texts' operating on various aspects of the

³ These works gave Satrapi international fame, because of the important awards that the comics won, like the Angoulême Coup de Coeur Award and TIME's recognition of one of the "Best Comics of 2003", and the film based on both volumes, *Persepolis* (2007), co-directed and co-written by Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, that won the Jury Prize in the Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for Best Animated Feature in the Oscars.

⁴ The term "West" in this text is related to Europe and North America, while "East" is focused on the Middle East.

⁵ In this paper, the terms "graphic novel" and "comic" are considered synonyms.

⁶ However, other scholars prior to Said, such as the Iranian historian Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1946), conducted similar proposals about the East's Orientalization for West's imperial purposes (Tavakoli-Targhi "Ahmad Kasravi's critiques" 234).

‘Orient’s’ reality” (17). Thus, following Hallaq’s argument, other discourses are intersected with Orientalism, which complicates the East-West tensions.

For many authors, one of those discourses is feminism, a field little deepened by Said. Joanna de Groot, for instance, asserts that Said’s *Orientalism* dismissed and marginalized the women’s studies (192), and Meyda Yegenoglu criticizes that the questions related to gender and sexuality are usually considered as a sub-area of Orientalism (10). In the case of Roksana Bahramitash, she establishes the existence of feminist Orientalism and Orientalist feminism. The first concept refers to “Orientalists who used women’s rights as an excuse to legitimate their colonial presence” (221), while Orientalist feminism is a “type of feminism that advocates and supports particular foreign policies toward the Middle East” (221). Bahramitash, like many feminists and scholars from the Middle East, sees Western feminism as a way of Orientalizing, deepening stereotypes — such as the veil, which I explain later — and justifying, consciously or unconsciously, the imperial power of the Occident.

However, considering that Bahramitash’s concepts are intimately related and can generate confusion, for the analysis of this paper they are going to be merged into a single term —feminist Orientalism— which I define as any form of domination or superiority, not only political and economic but also cultural, from the West on the East, justified by women’s rights and/or Western feminism.

One of the characteristics that could approximate these comics to feminist Orientalism is the protagonist’s inclination towards cultures and feminism of Europe and North America. From the beginning of the first volume, the protagonist shows affinity to West’s philosophies and ideologies. She believes, like her parents, in Marxism and ensures that her favorite book is a comic entitled “Dialectic Materialism”, in which Descartes and Marx —two of the most iconic Western philosophers— discuss about the material world (*Persepolis* 12). Furthermore, her devotion to Marx can be seen when she compares the faces of Marx and God (Figure 1). The image of God in *Persepolis* also resembles typical paintings of Christianity, such as the representations of God by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel.

In addition to the sympathy for Western ideologies and philosophers, the main character rejects symbols and customs of Islamic women, especially the veil, which complicates her female identity as an Iranian woman. Jennifer Heath affirms that “In the West today, the veil is rarely treated as a traditional or sacred custom but is perceived almost entirely politically” (6). This argument can be applied to the protagonist’s perception of the veil, because she sees it as a political



Figure 1 (*Persepolis* 13)

control of the dictatorial Islamic regime in her country, instead of a sacred garment. In *Persepolis* 2, she even makes fun of the use of the veil: "I have always thought that if women's hair posed so many problems God would certainly have made us bald" (130). Moreover, her veil's rejection constitutes such a primordial element in her work that, at the beginning of the first chapter of *Persepolis* —called precisely "The Veil"— she shows an image of the child protagonist dressed according to Islamic clothes for women and, in the next drawing, an image of four classmates, whose text says, "...I'm sitting on the far left so you don't see me..." (3) (Figure 2). Hence the author, from the start of her work, proposes that the oppressive regime wants to establish a general collective identity for all women and to erase their individual identity and freedom.

Taking into account these aspects, I am going to answer the following three questions, in order to continue deepening in Satrapi's work and feminist Orientalism: 1) Does she reject the East in general or only those aspects that restrict her individuality and freedom? 2) Does she defend women rights, or the Western notion of women rights? 3) Can she be considered as a representation of feminist Orientalism?

About the first question, the negative view of Islamism and the idealization of Western women in Iran have a significant historical background. In *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (2001), Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi affirms that the European woman was the object of admiration and erotic fantasy of many Persians who traveled to Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (54). In fact, many Iranian modernists of that epoch "often established a casual relation between the education of women and the progress of Europe"

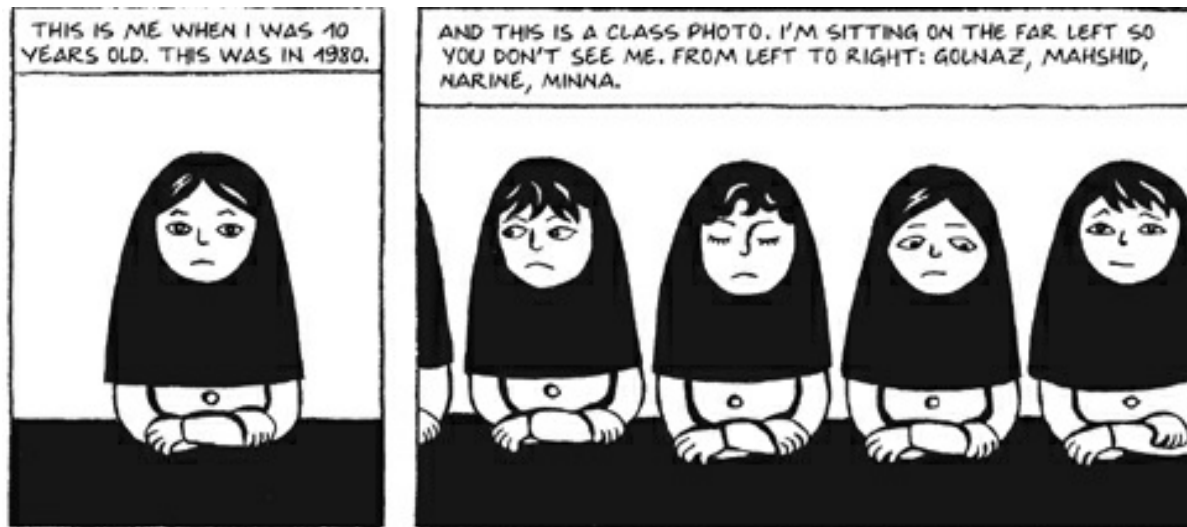


Figure 2 (*Persepolis* 3)

(62). Tavakoli-Targhi also states that the pre-Islamic past of Iran was distinguished as a glorious age by Iranian modernists, while the integration of the country into the Arab and Islamic world was considered as a regression (96). Furthermore, the word *vatan* (homeland) in Iran was related in many historical periods to a 6,000-year-old mother. This notion, as well as the strong British and North American influence propitiated by the dictator Mohammad Reza Shah before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, contributed to support women's education in Iran during the twentieth century. Bearing in mind this historical context and returning to the first question, Satrapi's character does not repudiate the East in general, but only those aspects of Islam that restrict the

rights already obtained by Iranian women due to, among other reasons, modernist thoughts in Iran, originated since the XVIII century.

Regarding the second question —does Satrapi defend women rights, or the Western notion of woman rights? — I am going to relate *Persepolis*' volumes to a Gayatri Spivak's argument of her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears [...] into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (306). Through the protagonist and other female characters in Satrapi's work, it is evident women's rebellion against the patriarchy of the Islamic regime to not disappear as subjects. In the first volume, for example, Satrapi's mother protests the imposition of the veil (5) (Figure 3), her friend Mehri complaints against Mohammad Reza Shah (38-39), and Satrapi's grandmother advises the protagonist, "Always keep your dignity and be true to yourself" (150). Then it can be seen how "Satrapi attempts to undo the generalizations and stereotypes of Iranian women as being powerless victims or Pariahs" (Grassian 23). In other words, various female characters in *Persepolis*, although they belong to the "third-world woman", are not passive agents that disappear under the patriarchal regime. Instead, they rebel against this government to impose their individuality.

Nevertheless, going back to the second question and Spivak's quote, the insurgence of Iranian women in Satrapi's work can be seen as a Western imperialist notion that creates the illusion of female freedom in Eastern women, in order to make them defenders of the Occidental



Figure 3 (*Persepolis* 5)

culture. The preference of the protagonist for clothes and music from the United States and England (Figure 4), in addition to the sympathy for Occidental philosophers, could be perceived as the imperial domination of Western culture on Iranian women. Perhaps the Westernization in



Figure 4 (*Persepolis* 131)

Satrapi's work could also be observed as an unconscious contribution to imperialist missions such as, according to Perin Gurel, the rhetoric of the U.S. President George W. Bush on the violation of the rights of Middle East's women "in the service of neoliberalism when mobilizing Americans for war against Afghanistan and Iraq" (67). Therefore, despite rebelling against the male-controlled regime in Iran, Satrapi could be categorized as a defender, conscious or unconscious, of imperialism in her country and the Westernization of Iranian women.

There are also similarities between the protagonist's actions in favor of Iranian women rights and the first movement—or wave—of feminism in the Western world. According to Monique Wittig, this movement "started to fight for themselves as a group and rightly considered that they shared common features as a result of oppression. But for them these features were natural and biological rather than social" (14). So, the first wave of feminism considered that all women had biological characteristics that distinguished them from men, but these differences did not justify political inequalities or human rights violations. *Persepolis 2* displays some similarities with this movement, for instance, when the protagonist, while she studies at a university of Tehran, challenges a lecturer who criticizes the dress of women in his country because they do not entirely follow the dress codes of Islam. One of the arguments of Satrapi's character is "You don't hesitate to comment on us, but our brothers present here have all shapes and sizes of haircuts and clothes. Sometimes they wear clothes so tight that we can see everything" (147). She defends with humor the rights of women to dress in the same way as men, like women of the first feminist wave fought to achieve men rights, without questioning the female gender as a cultural construction, an argument that would be debated by the writers of the second wave of feminism like Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous.

Nonetheless, there can also be found some similarities between Satrapi's comics and Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), despite that *Persepolis*' author do not explicitly discuss on the differences between gender and sex. Cixous motivates women to write about themselves, because only then "woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display" (880). For this feminist, besides, the personal history of a woman has the power to join with the history of all women and contribute to their liberation (882). In *Persepolis*' volumes, Satrapi draws and writes on herself, revealing to the reader her intimate and even sexual life, like the scene where she narrates her overwhelming frustration, because her boyfriend did not want to have sexual relations with her (59) (Figure 5). Taking into account that discourses are cultural constructions and one of their most important features, according to Foucault, is "the prohibition" —everything that is not allowed to be said (53)— could be considered Satrapi's sexual intimacy as a discourse usually prohibited in Eastern and Western societies. From the perspective of *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Satrapi would be breaking a cultural construction —the prohibited in the discourses— which contribute to define and control the "gender", so this rebellion allows her to approach to her body (biological sex).

In addition to the resemblance to the first and second waves of Western feminism, *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* can also be related to Spivak's image about "the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (306). The main character of both graphic novels represents a modern Iranian woman who, despite liking Western pop music, Marxist ideology, democracy and women's freedom; does not separate from her cultural roots. Her family and ancestors, for instance, are transcendental in her life. This can be observed in Satrapi's happiness



Figure 5 (*Persepolis 2* 59)



Figure 6 (*Persepolis* 152)

when she knows that her grandfather was a prince who was later overthrown, confiscated and imprisoned (22-24); and in her family sadness when she leaves her home to study in Vienna (152) (Figure 6). In fact, her father tells her, “Don’t forget who you are and where you come from” (152). The protagonist fits then in Spivak’s argument because she is between her family—which represents her country and native culture—and the West cultures, values and feminism.

In view of these arguments, the second question could be answered by saying that, although “Satrapi’s sentiments lie more with the West” (Grassian 35), she does not fight for women rights as an excuse to support Western imperialism. Instead, she defends the right of women to decide how to dress, what to believe and how to behave. Satrapi’s character wants that women have willpower to be able to choose. She does not care if they are from the East, the West or any other region. Even though the protagonist adopts many aspects of European and North American cultures, she does not hate friends and family members who believe in Islam, and she advocates a peaceful and fair coexistence. As Susan Stanford says, *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* reveal “a feminist cosmopolitanism ‘from the side,’ born of war, hoping for peace, and seeing with particular intensity the hypocrisy of the state which justifies its violence against women by claiming to protect them” (27). Therefore, Satrapi’s work defends women human rights in general that, despite the similarities with the first feminist movement in the West, transcends territorial and cultural borders and blurs the limits of the binary division of the Self and the Other among women.

With respect to the third question — can Satrapi’s character be considered as a representation of feminist Orientalism? — I am going to contemplate the three main characteristics that Roksana Bahramitash mentions about feminist Orientalism. The first trait is that the Occident is the best place for women to live, while the Middle East is uncivilized and retrograde, then it constitutes the worst region for women to inhabit (222). The second characteristic states that Oriental women are only victims and not active agents of social transformation, so they cannot resist and empower themselves as women in the East (222). The last feature states that “feminist Orientalism assumes that all societies in the Orient are the same and all Muslim women live there under the same conditions” (222).

It can be noticed how Satrapi contradicts these characteristics. In the case of the first one, in spite of her attraction toward the West, when Satrapi studies in Austria at the beginning of *Persepolis*, she cannot adapt to that culture. In fact, she decides to return to Iran after living for a time in Vienna. During that experience as a migrant, Satrapi rebels against Orientalist discourse in

Austria and suffers serious consequences for it. This can be clearly observed in the chapter called “Pasta” of *Persepolis 2*. In this episode, she lives in a residence of Christian nuns and watches television in the living room, while eats from a pot full of pasta. Then, the superior nun reproaches her saying: “What kind of manners are these... It’s true what they say about Iranians. They have no education” (23) (Figure 7). It can be seen how the nun uses the binary division of civilization-barbarism to establish that Austrians (and, thus, Westerners) are civilized people,



Figure 7 (*Persepolis 2*, 23)

while Iranians (Easterners) are savages. The main character, however, defends herself from Orientalist discourse using a stereotype against Christians, and she replies: “It’s true what they say about you, too. You were all prostitutes before becoming nuns!” (23). After the discussion, the protagonist is expelled from her residence and she claims that in all religions there are the same extremists. The comic displays the West and the East as regions with similar problems related to intolerance and stereotyping, where women have problems to adapt to both worlds. Satrapi, thus, contradicts the argument on the West as the best place for women to live and the East as the worst.

Regarding the second characteristic of feminist Orientalism that Bahramitash describes — in addition to the fact that the protagonist and some female secondary characters demonstrate resistance, sometimes active, against the Iranian regime, in favor of women human rights — the use of humor in *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* also represents a weapon of female defiance that contradicts the second characteristic of feminist Orientalism about women of the Middle East as passive victims. According to Laetita Nanquette, humor in Satrapi and other women writers from Iran “is a strategy in the education of the reader; it makes the reader feel close to Iranians” (89). So, *Persepolis*’ author not only shows characters actively rebelling for women rights in Iran but also diffuses the East-West dichotomy and empower female characters through humor.

The third characteristic of feminist Orientalism, which establishes that all Eastern societies are the same and Islamic women suffer similar harmful conditions, is contradicted by Satrapi's work. Both *Persepolis* are framed in the intimate and private life of the author, whose family belongs to the Iranian upper middle class, and she has no intention of depicting her life as a prototype of any woman's life in the East. From an individual perspective, she wants to refute stereotypes, generalizations and Orientalized visions. This can be observed in the introduction of *Persepolis*:

...this old and great 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. I also don't want those Iranians who lost their lives in prisons defending freedom, who died in the war against Iraq, who suffered under various repressive regimes, or who were forced to leave their families and flee their homeland to be forgotten. (II)

It is clear that she wants to expose a more human face of the Iranian society that moves away from images, assumptions and preconceptions from the West to the East—including those linked to feminist Orientalism. Additionally, when Satrapi says in the introduction that “an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists”, she is debating on the complex topic of national identity, and this is also evident into the content of her graphic novels.

Satrapi's Comics and National Identity

Defining national identity is a very complicated task because there have been many theories on this subject since the creation of national states in Europe and North America in the late eighteenth century. For this reason, I will not discuss about the concept but build a definition based on three important theorists—Anthony D. Smith, Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha. The first author considers national identity as a collective identity in which people share a “Historic territory, legal-political community, legal-political equality of members, and common civic culture and ideology” (11). With respect to Anderson, he thinks the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). The nation, for Anderson, would be imagined because none of its members can know all its territory or meet all its inhabitants, but people imagine themselves as belonging to it (6). Finally, Bhabha proposes that each nation is constructed through many contingent, arbitrary and indeterminate forms of identification (228).

Considering these concepts, I will understand national identity in this paper as a type of collective identity, in which its members imagine that they belong to a nation where they share a territory, a culture, a language, historical memories, among other characteristics. Moreover, as Bhabha says, this type of collective identity is not uniform and homogeneous but, on the contrary, is composed by diversities forms of identifications. In fact, it could be asserted that each person imagines her or him nation in a particular way.

In *Persepolis*' comics, national identity is defied and complicated by the protagonist. The first volume, for example, discusses on the tendency of Iranian society to be governed by authoritarian regimes as an essential condition of its national identity. This is evidenced when

Satrapi's father tells her that Iranian people have lived "2500 years of tyranny and submission" (11) and she explains in images the different absolutisms throughout the history of Iran until arriving to the "modern imperialism"⁷ (*Persepolis* 11) (Figure 8). Although the father's quote shows the tendency to dictatorships as a feature of the Iranian national identity, throughout the content of both comics it can be seen how the Iranian society challenges the absolutist power in everyday life. For instance, in *Persepolis* the girls in the school do not respect the veil and they use it as a toy (Figure 9), people make midnight parties with alcoholic drinks, even though they were prohibited (*Persepolis* 106), and the protagonist's grandmother deceives an officer who wanted to arrest Satrapi's father on the street, making him believe that she had to go home urgently



Figure 8 (*Persepolis* 11)

⁷ This comic's episode occurs before the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran.



Figure 9 (*Persepolis 3*)

because she was diabetic (*Persepolis* 108-110). Satrapi, thus, reveals diverse identities and forms of conceiving Iran, where many people are not submissive or aligned to the imagined nation imposed by the regime. Instead, they reject Iranian Government and look for different ways to cheat, repel and evade it, contradicting the Orientalized stereotype about the submission and passivity to dictators and religious extremists in the Middle East.

A concept closely linked to national identity is nationalism, which is strongly criticized in the two graphic novels. Nationalism⁸, according to Umut Özkirimli, is a discourse of power that divides the world in two groups —those that belong to the nation (“we”) and those that do not belong to it (“they”) — and find its justification in the nation’s historical past to obtain political control on people (208-209). Many of Satrapi’s provoking images are those in which she severely criticizes regime’s nationalism. For example, in a fantasy image that she sees in the basement — the place where her family and neighbors hid during the bombings—the harshness of the Iran-Iraq War, the protagonist says, “They [the governors] eventually admitted that the survival of the regime depended on the war [...] When I think we could avoided it all [...] It just makes me sick. A million people would still be alive” (116) (Figure 10). Satrapi shows the nationalist discourse as a lie, an absurd concept that serves to manipulate the population, so that the Iranian Government justifies its totalitarian and cruel power. Another shocking image with a fierce criticism to nationalism reveals Iranian children exploited by mines (Figure 11)⁹ — after the main character explained that Iranian boys at schools received a key because, if they died in the war, they would be able to open heaven’s door (*Persepolis* 99). Satrapi portrays then a brutal regime that uses its media power to manipulate the imagination of Iranian people —including children— on how they must conceive the nation and patriotism to get them to die defending the dictatorship.

⁸ One of the most important theorists of nationalism is Eric Hobsbawm, who defines this concept as a political program which “holds that groups defined as ‘nations’ have the right to, and therefore ought to, form territorial states of the kind that have become standard since the French Revolution” (4). Nevertheless, I choose the concept of Özkirimli because I consider that fits better to the paper’s objectives.

⁹ The use of children and adolescents to die in defense of nationalisms by orders of totalitarian regimes can be observed not only in the Middle East but also in the West like, for instance, Nazism, Fascism, Argentine nationalism during the Malvinas War, among others.



Figure 10 (*Persepolis* 116)



Figure 11 (*Persepolis* 102)

It might appear that both comics refuse the Iranian national identity because they disapprove regime's nationalism. However, as Navdeep Kahol explains in her text "Redefining Nationalism: Contemporary Memoirs by Expatriate Iranian Women", Satrapi's work "urges the reader to dissociate the identity of a nation from its government and religion and from the extremists they foster" (18) and it is against the Islamic nationalism that "was offered as an antidote to westernization denounced as West-toxication" (19). In spite of severely criticizing the Islamic nationalist regime, the protagonist also disapproves Mohammad Reza Shah, which encouraged country's Westernization, because her family considered him authoritarian and unfair. In fact, when the dictator leaves the country due to the Islamic Revolution, Satrapi says that there was the biggest celebration in the history of the nation (*Persepolis* 41). As the plot progresses, the reader can perceive how the substitute government is more pernicious than the predecessor.

More than her rejection of the nationalist regime, perhaps where Satrapi's national identity can be displayed more clearly is in her nostalgia as a migrant in Vienna when she imagines and remembers her home, a sentiment that is common both in the East and in the West and, therefore, breaks the barriers between the two halves of our world. In his essay "Reflections on Exile", Edward Said affirms that exile "is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (173). This condition is clearly seen in *Persepolis* 2 after the protagonist breaks abruptly with her

boyfriend after seeing him in bed with another girl. In her bedroom, she cries and remembers her family in Iran: “Where was my mother to stroke my hair? Where was my grandmother to tell me that lovers I would have them by the dozen? Where was my father to punish this boy who dared hurt his daughter? Where?” (79). The rift that separates Satrapi from her imagined home grows when she is evicted from her apartment and lives three months on the street, marginalized by Austrian society. After the traumatic period, she affirms, “... and so much for my individual and social liberties [...] I needed badly to go home” (91). The suffering of Satrapi as a migrant — feeling in some scenes as the Other and desiring to return to her imagined Iranian community— not only reveal her Iranian national identity despite her Westernization, but it also goes beyond the categories of the East and the West, because the nostalgia of migrants transcends cultures, nations, genders and ages.

Conclusion

Through the different elements of *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* that I presented, it can be observed that these graphic novels defy, complicate, and debate the topics of feminist Orientalism and national identity. They display an Iranian society that coexists in conflicting and varied ways with Orientalist discourse, feminism, and the idea of nation that remove the divisions of binaries and stereotyped categories like East-West, Self-Other, feminist-antifeminist, civilized-uncivilized, among others. Satrapi, although she is an Iranian woman, shares many Occident’s perceptions and beliefs, including characteristics of the first and second wave of Western feminism. In spite of her Westernization, she feels like a marginalized Other in some episodes during her life in Vienna, and suffers the migrant’s nostalgia for returning home, for going back with her family and culture. Nevertheless, when Satrapi returns to Iran, she does not fit in this society whose totalitarian government, justified in an extremist nationalism, wants to erase the individual and complex identity of women and their willingness to decide what and how to dress, behave, think, say and be. The protagonist represents, on the one hand, the Spivak’s argument of “the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (306) but, on the other hand, she does not disappear under the “patriarchy and imperialism” (306) that Spivak denounces, because Satrapi’s individuality achieves to break the different walls that the Middle East and the Western Vienna impose on her.

Even though the first publication of *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* occurred almost two decades ago, they still constitute important objects of study for scholars and attractive comics for current readers. Moreover, her “simplified [aesthetic] style is effectively employed to deal with important themes and to convey to readers the general feel of particular events despite problems of memory and historical representation” (Abedinifard 106). In fact, Marjane Satrapi’s work has the rare virtue to seduce a large number of readers and to explore complicated and profound topics like the East-West dichotomy. For all these reasons, there are many motives to continue navigating in these comics across the dangerous bridges and rifts located between the two seemingly irreconcilable worlds.

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