

FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

This insightful and well-developed argument served as Youqi Chen's final paper for the Multi-Source Academic Argument assignment, completed during Module 2 of the course. Whereas their first academic paper asked them to respond to an argument source and assert their well-reasoned position in a debate about the graphic memoir *Maus*, this second paper assignment asked them to apply a particular theory (from memoirist Mary Karr) as a lens through which to analyze Marji's evolving identity in the graphic memoir *Persepolis*. Therefore, the 3-part introduction presents both the exhibit source and the theory source before transitioning into a conceptual question, establishing the larger significance of the issue being explored, and asserting her own well-reasoned position about Marji's primary internal conflict.

In addition to using Karr as a theory source, students were required to acknowledge and respond to at least one argument source, engage with comics theorist Scott McCloud, and then select one other secondary source of their choice to help develop and support their argument. Youqi chose to engage with two argument sources, using templates from *They Say/I Say* to make concessions and distinguish her point of view in a sophisticated way. In this way, this paper could be a useful example of managing and responding to multiple sources in a meaningful way while effectively establishing connections back to the exhibit source under analysis (*Persepolis*) to support the paper's central claim.

Because visual literacy and the comics form were essential components of this course, students were required to use visual evidence from *Persepolis*—specific panels from the book which were inserted directly into the paper—to help illustrate and support their argumentative position based on the visual significance of the images. Throughout the drafting and revision process, Youqi improved upon the selection and analysis of her visual evidence, ultimately using three separate panels from different periods of Marji's life to signal her evolving journey of self-identification. Therefore, this paper could lead to some unique discussion regarding the selection, use, and documentation of visual evidence in an argument. It also serves as an effective example of a multimodal argument, particularly emphasizing the visual in addition to the linguistic. The spatial mode also comes into play regarding the insertion of the images into the student's paper, which necessitates consideration of appropriate layout and organization.

Lesley Yoder
WR 120: First-Year Writing Seminar

FROM THE WRITER

What is a comic? My way of interpreting it as a graphic novel with amusing effect is totally changed after I read Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis*, which perfectly communicates the potentials of comics to construct and present a rich inner world and a complete self. When self-recognition towards interiority and identity is distorted in the trend of the political and religious revolution, how should Iranian people balance the relationship between public life and individual life and build a strong internal defense in the midst of violent social upheavals? The journey of constructing the self of the protagonist, Marji, under such a complex historical background is vividly presented through this memoir.

YOUQI CHEN is a rising sophomore in Questrom School of Business who was born and raised in China. As a new member in Questrom who just transferred from School of Hospitality Administration, she doesn't have a clear career goal right now which would help her determine her major, but she would like to take on more academic challenges and explore more different courses before she steps on her path of starting her own business in the future. Youqi appreciates all the help offered by her WR 120 instructor Lesley Yoder who led her into the world of a new genre – comics, helped her effectively improve her overall writing skills, and inspired her further interest in reading and writing. Professor Yoder shows her enthusiasm for teaching all the objects related to writing, and she is devoted to building an open environment all the way along for students to express their thoughts.

PERSEPOLIS: THE PROCESS OF SELF-APPROVAL

The Complete Persepolis is a graphic memoir by Marjane Satrapi that describes the author's childhood experience in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and her early adulthood after she graduates high school in Austria and returns to Iran. As a result of the restrictions placed on Iranian women by the supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini, many Iranians demonstrated in the streets and rebelled against the Islamic Republic ("History of Iran"). Marji, the protagonist, has a distinct childhood experience in the time of revolution, experiencing extreme psychological struggle under the influence of the political and social upheavals in Iran. Marji's internal struggle follows her from a very young age through her adult life, which corresponds to memoirist Mary Karr's "inner enemy" theory explained in her book *The Art of Memoir*. Karr theorizes the inner enemy as "a psychic struggle against the author's own self that works like a thread or plot engine" as well as one of the key components of a great memoir (Karr 91). Based on Karr's theory, what is the role of Marji's inner enemy in *The Complete Persepolis*? Why does she confront such an internal struggle, and does she resolve her inner conflict by the end of book? By exploring these questions, we can better understand the central idea of Satrapi's memoir as well as Karr's theory and the mechanism behind a graphic memoir. It also provides readers with a distinct and profound perspective to trace the history of Iran and the impact of the revolution on the Iranian people, especially on Iranian women. Marji's desire for freedom and her courage against authority, which are cultivated under the Westernized education she receives from her parents, make her incompatible with the society constrained by Islamic traditions and consequently lead to her inner conflict. Even though the inner conflict acts as a significant obstacle in Marji's childhood, she successfully overcomes it and achieves self-approval before she leaves Iran for France as an independent adult, which indicates the final resolution of her inner conflict.

Marji's inner enemy debuts in the first chapter and serves as a subtle but crucial thread through the whole memoir. It leads readers to Marji's inner world, to understand her internal struggle and its reflection of Iranian society and religious repression at that time. In line with what Karr theorizes in her book, "the split self or inner conflict must manifest on the first pages and form the book's thrust or through line" (Karr 92), Satrapi shows her own "split" in the first chapter by depicting herself in the middle of two contradictory backgrounds (see Figure 1). The panel's emphasis on using the background rather than the caption to visualize Marji's ambivalence reflects comic theorist Scott McCloud's theory of communicating the invisible from his book *Understanding Comics*: "the background is a valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas... Particularly the world of emotions" (McCloud 132:1). In his text, McCloud highlights the potential of



Figure 1 (Satrapi 6:1)

backgrounds to convey the character's inner feelings, building a connection between the invisible and the visible world in comics. This panel exemplifies McCloud's theory, as the opposition between the left side (representing the modern world) and the right side (representing the religious world) embodies the separation of Marji's real self (the girl with the veil), and her ideal self (without the veil).

Furthermore, Marji is deeply influenced by her parents' Westernized education, which prompts her to develop inner conflict. Her parents represent a segment of Iranian people at that time who accepted Western culture and held modern educational ideas. Marji's mother had been one of the active protesters against the veil during the Islamic Revolution. Affected by her mother, young Marji is also eager to be part of the protests and fight for justice for her maid, Mehri, who is treated unfairly in her choice of marriage because of her "inferior" social class (Satrapi 37–38). Marji's courage against authority also manifests in her direct opposition to her religion teacher in school. Marji smartly uses the experience of her Uncle Anoosh, who was a revolutionary, as an example to refute her teacher's claim that "Iran no longer has political prisoners" because her uncle was unfortunately executed by Islamic regime at that time (Satrapi 144:1). Although Marji's opposition to her teacher in the class was viewed as a reckless offense by the principal, Marji's father was happy with her of telling the truth instead of blaming her under the pressure of school authority. Her father's appropriate permissiveness preserves Marji's passion for justice and her courage of telling the truth.

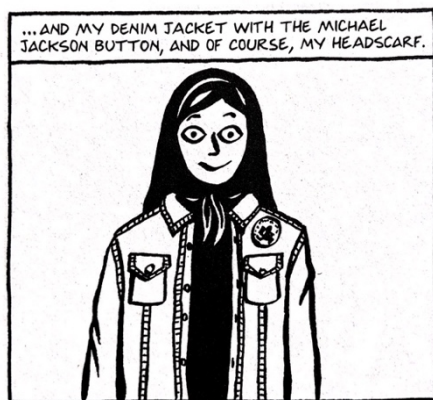


Figure 2 (Satrapi 131:4)

Marji's early exposure to and obsession with Western culture further deepens her inner conflict. Marji gets in touch with Western music culture and fashion culture from a young age. She had asked her parents to bring her two posters of Western pop singers and a denim jacket from Istanbul, which were strictly forbidden in Iran during the revolution. Figure 2 shows how delighted and confident Marji is with the denim jacket. She even went outside with this jacket and got arrested by the Guardians of the Revolution (Satrapi 133). On one hand, Marji's behavior violates the implemented dress code. On the other hand, it highlights her desire for the freedom of dressing and her courage against authority. Scholar Rocío Davis also addresses this panel in her article "A Graphic Self: Comics as Autobiography in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," which discusses in detail the juxtaposition of sequential

images in *Persepolis*. Davis argues that "the portrait Satrapi draws of herself at the age of 14 continues to privilege her liminality, but this time in a more eclectic formulation...she literally wears the symbols of the position she has chosen for herself. At this point, Marji is no longer a child caught between two world-views: she has carved a place for herself" (273–274). I agree with Davis's claim that Marji has "carved a place for herself" because this panel shows Marji's attempt to adapt herself to the cultural conflict and cope with her inner struggle. Marji is satisfied with her current status instead of being perplexed by the cultural dilemma when she was ten years old, as Figure 1 shows. Nevertheless, Davis' article only addresses the first volume of *Persepolis* and, therefore, lacks a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Marji's inner conflict in the second volume of the graphic memoir.

Volume two of *Persepolis* describes Marji's experience in high school in Austria, along with her later return to Iran. It is a period of time when Marji is involved in more intense inner struggle.

Marji's parents send her to study in Austria for her safety and for the Western education which they think is more suitable for their daughter. It gives Marji an opportunity to get closer to Western culture. Marji is eager to assimilate herself into the new cultural environment when she first arrives in Austria. After making friends with people from completely different cultural backgrounds and entering into several frustrating relationships, Marji dives into an unexpected path and gradually loses herself. She views her Iranian identity as "a heavy burden to bear" and even tries to disguise it by pretending to be French in front of her peers (Satrapi 195:4). Sometimes she feels guilty about intentionally alienating herself from Iranian culture and her family, but she is constantly haunted by her inner enemy. She is physically free in Austria but not spiritually free. However, Marji's grandmother's previously-uttered words telling Marji to "always keep your dignity and be true to yourself" somewhat release her from the stress of her internal struggle. Marji doesn't truly accept her Iranian identity until she expresses her grievances to those who judge her for denying her own identity by exclaiming that "I am Iranian and proud of it!" (Satrapi 150:6, 197:1). As Karr suggests in her book, the motivation for a memoirist to tell a first-person narrative is usually to "go back and recover some lost aspect of the past so it can be integrated into current identity" (Karr 92). Marji's evolving inner struggle shows her effort to reconstruct her lost Iranian memories and identity. It is the first but significant step in her process of achieving self-approval.

After returning to Iran, Marji initially suffers from severe depression because of the sudden change of cultural environment. She feels unconnected with Iranian culture and the people around her because no one can truly understand her mental struggle and her unfortunate experience in Austria. "I am a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the west. I have no identity", Marji admits (Satrapi 272:2). Lacking a sense of belonging consequently results in her suicide attempt. Fortunately, Marji is enlightened and encouraged by her father and escapes from the shadow. Under the push of her father, she develops herself into a knowledgeable woman and gradually comes to know herself and the life she wants to pursue. She successfully finds her own direction in life and ends up with an outstanding final project in college before she starts a new life in France. Marji's journey eventually develops towards "self's overhaul" (Karr 92). "The goodbyes are much less painful than ten years before when I embarked for Austria", Marji acknowledges when she is about to leave Iran (Satrapi 341:4). Now Marji is completely different from the little girl she was ten years ago. She is no longer haunted by her inner struggle. Even though she leaves the support of her family after she goes to France, she gains spiritual freedom and achieves a sense of wholeness at the very end.

Here, scholar Babak Elahi would likely object with the view that Marji's inner enemy gets resolved at the end of the book and argue that Marji doesn't achieve a complete sense of self. He claims that Marji "presents her life as a gradual and incomplete struggle to create a self" in his article "Frames and Mirrors in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*" (Elahi 325). Though I concede that *The Complete Persepolis* centers on Marji's construction of her self-identification, I still insist that she achieves a unified sense of self at the end. Elahi uses his analysis of the mirrors the author depicts in the memoir as evidence to support his own point of view. He believes that all the mirrors display Marji's "subjective fragmentation, instability, and uncertainty" (Elahi 322). However, I would argue that the use of mirrors tends to be an effective way for the author to show her reflection on herself and her true feelings without wearing a mask, which is easier to convey through this special perspective rather than through texts. When the whole panel only has simple lines depicting Marji and her mirror image, readers tend to pay more



Figure 3 (Satrapi 245:4)

attention to her inner world (see Figure 3). Every image of Marji at the front of mirror looking at herself embodies the process of her mental maturity and self-identification after many times of self-doubt. Therefore, the mirror structure is not effective proof of Marji's unresolved inner conflict.

Marji's inner conflict evolves from a child's confusion to a woman's unified sense of self and plays a pivotal role in showing the author's indescribable pain of her childhood and keeping the plot moving forward, just as Karr's theory of the inner enemy suggests. *The Complete Persepolis* is more than a memoir that describes the author's personal story and her own sentiment; it is also an epitome of Iranian society that involves different social aspects including gender, social class, education, religion, and political issues. Marji's assimilation with Iranian culture and Western culture is a small reflection of the country's integration with its past civilization and the ongoing revolution. Her experience is a representative example of the lives of a group of Islamic women who are deeply affected by the Islamic Revolution. The changes in their lives represent the external social phenomenon, while their psychological reactions of tension, unrest, and anxiety triggered by the social upheavals reflect the influence of the revolution on people's interiority—their inner lives and identities. People's perceptions usually change with the evolution of the social environment. *The Complete Persepolis* presents such an integration of public life (nation) and personal life (individual).

WORKS CITED

Davis, Rocío. "A Graphic Self: Comics as Autobiography in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*." *Prose Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, December 2005, pp. 264–279.

Elahi, Babak. "Frames and Mirrors in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*." *symploke*, Vol. 15, No. 1/2, 2007, pp. 312–325.

"History of Iran: Islamic Revolution of 1979." *Iran Chamber Society*, http://www.iranchamber.com/history/islamic_revolution/islamic_revolution.php. Accessed 23 March 2019.

Karr, Mary. *The Art of Memoir*. New York, HarperCollins, 2015.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, Harper Perennial, 1994.

Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York, Pantheon, 2007.