

Candidate Number: [REDACTED]

IB English HL

Works in Translation Paper

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Reflective Statement

The Interactive Oral on Persepolis deepened my understanding of the impact of the Iran-Iraq War and Marjane Satrapi's memories in retelling her childhood experiences in a way that will have the most impact on readers. Starting with gaining factual information, I was able to gain a better understanding of how the history of Iran, starting out as a non-Arab, Persian entity became the modern Shia Islamic Republic it is now. The presentation's outline of the historical transformation built upon the way Satrapi describes the Iranian people—proud of their heritage spanning thousands of years. Iran was once a vast empire with a strong military, which appealed to the people in Persepolis who orchestrated the revolution to overthrow the Shah. They saw the “decadence” of Western civilization impacting the once strong empire of Persia, and decided to restore its former glory by constructing a government based on the people's roots: Islam and national identity. Amidst this backdrop, Satrapi writes her graphic memoir to give readers a more nuanced narrative about the contemporary Iranian people, ranging from the fundamentalists (supporting velayat-e faqih) to those who rebelled (like Satrapi's parents and family).

Of course, one needs to keep in mind that much of Satrapi's memoir is focused on her childhood during the Iran-Iraq War, and due to this exigent circumstance, her memories might have been less factually accurate. The interactive oral imparted the feeling of crisis Iran (especially the capital of Tehran) faced when the presenters assigned everyone in the class to one of three groups, representing families. Each group was, in turn, asked questions about how to

deal with pressing scenarios, such as starvation, sending children to Europe to be safer, etc; all situations arising from the Iran-Iraq War. Group-members openly discussed their decision-making process with the class and then made a decision. Ultimately, at least one group member would die, if not the whole group, showing how the war impacted Iran. In retrospect, the interactive oral deepened my understanding of the impact of the Iran-Iraq War on Marjane Satrapi's retelling of her childhood through the graphic memoir, *Persepolis*, by allowing me to critically evaluate the factual accuracy of her work, while appreciating the cultural elements that shaped modern Iran.

Marji's Coming-of-Age

In Yiddish it is said that small children ruin your sleep, big children your life. However, adults the world over also have contempt for the typical teenager's rebelliousness. For example, Marjane Satrapi's 2000 graphic novel bildungsroman, *Persepolis*, shows a fresh perspective on teenage rebelliousness in light of the extreme conditions teenagers may face, such as, war and poverty. Though written in Paris, France, the memoir reflects on Satrapi's childhood and adolescence during the Iranian Revolution. From this, readers receive a different perspective on a country often judged by the actions of a few extremists and learn of the sacrifices made by liberal Iranians in struggling for a Western-style democracy. To better understand the liberals' struggle against religious and political conservatives, one must first learn the historical background of Shia Islam and its development in the Iranian society. Satrapi chooses to depict Marji having an intimate relationship with God in her childhood, greatly contrasting with the rigorous, state-enforced doctrines of Islam to show Marji's rebellious streak. When Marji and her household join a larger resistance organized by private households against the State's enforcement of fundamentalist Islam, her rebellious personality is further developed. Given these factors, it can be argued that Marjane Satrapi characterizes her younger self in a way to show how her coming of age was shaped through the conflict between fundamentalist Islamic forces and private household resistances.

Before one can truly understand religion in *Persepolis*, it is necessary to study an overview of Shia Islam from its creation to the Iranian Revolution of the 1970s-1980s because of the role fundamentalist, State-enforced Shia Islam played in *Persepolis*. Most importantly, several beliefs and practices of the Shias were differentiated from the Sunnis, and the most prevalent ones in the novel are: *Madhi*—a person prophesied to bring peace and justice to Islam,

'*Adl*—the belief that God is just and rational, and *Nubuwwah*—the belief in people who could bring the message of God down to the masses for them to understand. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi uses dark shadows around uniforms around government employees to counter the claim that the Islamic government of Iran saw themselves as *Madhi*. This darkness surrounding the government is supported by the establishment of the “Guardians of the Revolution”, which served to solidify the regime’s power. The increasing control exhibited by the government manifests itself when it uses the belief of *Nubuwwah* to justify state-controlled media. In support, Satrapi chooses to use Marji’s father’s habit of checking the BBC for confirmation of news as a counterexample to the state-controlled media, both during the Shah’s reign and the new Islamic government. It can be argued that Satrapi’s choice results in Marji’s increased aversion to the Islamic regime’s information control as she grows. A background of the practices underlying Shia Islam allows readers to see how Satrapi sets context for the fundamentalist Islamic government in *Persepolis* and how it influences Marji’s character development.

In contrast with the very rigorous doctrines of Shia Islam, Satrapi depicts Marji as having an intimate relationship with God during her childhood. This relationship is perhaps best captured by Marji’s statement, “at the age of six I was already sure I was the last prophet. This was a few years before the revolution” (Satrapi 6). Satrapi chooses to have Marji mention the timing of this quote to subtly foreshadow that the idea of a woman prophet would not last. However, Marji feels comforted by her grandmother, who encourages her to continue her religious journey. Of course, readers can see that this stems from Marji’s innocent declaration, “...‘it will simply be forbidden [for old people to suffer]’” when she sees her grandmother’s aching knees (7). Satrapi uses this portrayal of little Marji’s naivety to show how this will not last as Marji becomes older. Even though Marji may have been “born with religion,” the

revolutionary atmosphere of Iran coupled with her family's Communist leanings led Marji to set aside her "prophetic destiny...for a while" (6, 10). This abruptly impacts her intimate relationship with God, as was encouraged by her grandmother, but Satrapi chooses this moment to start showing Marji's tendency towards rebelliousness by emphasizing a conflict between Marji's family teachings and the revolutionary calling. Satrapi chooses to characterize Marji as an innocent girl who had a family-supported intimate relationship with God during her early childhood, but was then abruptly thrust towards revolutionary activities, introducing a trend of increased rebelliousness.

Despite the strict enforcement of fundamentalist Islam by the State, private households still organized resistances, to which Marji was privy, further stoking her rebelliousness. A major source of Marji's strength in opposing the regime is through cultural means, which is encouraged by her family. For example, Marji and her mother do not wear the hijab or chador indoors. Clearly, this is protesting the regime's claim that the revolution was a cultural one. In fact, Marji mockingly says, "this is called a 'cultural revolution'" (4). Because this sentence structure with the quotes to show sarcasm was Satrapi's choice, it supports the stance that Satrapi herself does not think the Iranian State's policies are based on preserving culture. Therefore, to fight against a cultural imposition, Marji and her family go to parties, drink alcohol, and undertake other activities that are forbidden due to them resembling Western, capitalist decadence (4, 106). This further highlights Marji's increasing rebelliousness and her family's role, i.e. if she looks to her family for guidance and sees them rebelling against the regime, then she will too. Of course, there was a prevailing fear of getting caught by the Revolutionary Guards. Marji's family is caught coming back from a party and her father is found to have been drinking. Her father remarks, "their faith has nothing to do with ideology! A few bills were all he needed to forget

the whole thing!” (110). This clearly shows his disdain for the regime, one that does not even adhere to its own principles. This attitude culminates in Marji looking for tapes on the black market so that she could still listen to Western music (132). Marji’s maturity is highlighted by this event, as her persistence to secure the tapes shows independence and self-initiative instead of depending on her parents to get them. However, she is clearly conflicting with the Islamic government. They arrest Marji through the women’s division of the Revolutionary Guards (132-134). Satrapi’s juxtaposition of mentioning the women’s division of the Revolutionary Guards while the Islamic regime commits atrocities against women serves to show another act of hypocrisy by the regime. Ultimately, Marji becomes completely rebellious following the death of her friend, Neda Baba-Levy. She strongly states, “in 1984, I was fourteen and a rebel. Nothing scared me anymore,” showing her bildungsroman from an innocent child to a teenager perhaps nearing the cusp of adulthood, at least mentally (143). This change was facilitated by the conflict between fundamentalist Islamic forces and Marji’s rebellious family, without which Marji’s coming of age would have been much slower.

In retrospect, Marjane Satrapi’s choice to consistently portray the growing rebelliousness of Marji is supported by the surrounding conflict between fundamentalist Islamic forces and private household resistances. The context for the Islamic government of Iran is set by Satrapi by drawing on the historical background of Shia Islam. Marji’s childhood intimate relationship with God greatly contrasts with the doctrines of Shia Islam. To further provoke Marji’s rebelliousness, private household resistances were organized by Marji’s family and friends, directly conflicting with the fundamentalist Islamic government of Iran. By showcasing the resistances to the Iranian State, Marjane Satrapi fulfills her purpose to give readers a fresh perspective on Iran, one that differs from the typical fundamentalist view. Of course, a key part

to this new perspective has been young people like Marji. Through her characterization of her younger self, Satrapi raises the essential question: what role do situational factors have in influencing a person's development from their childhood to adolescence to adulthood? Perhaps while revisiting adults' contempt for the typical rebellious streak of teenagers, one should keep in mind that even though many teenagers naturally overcome the rebelliousness and develop into conforming, law-abiding citizens, extreme conditions of war and poverty can compound the innate dash of rebelliousness to nurture a teenager into a violent revolutionary undertaking in chaotic actions like modern terrorism.

Works Cited

Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Pantheon Books, 2003.