

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2023

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 13.10.2023

Accepted: 05.12.2023

Published: 14.12.2023

Citation:

Hindu Sree, J. "Decoding Trauma: A Cultural Ecological Reading of the Graphic Memoir Persepolis." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 12, no. S1, 2023, pp. 152–56.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/rtdh.v12iS1-Dec.50>

Decoding Trauma: A Cultural Ecological Reading of the Graphic Memoir Persepolis

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Abstract

Trauma is an amalgamation of repercussions happened and the effects of socio-cultural conflicts. Graphical novels always combine images and text to decipher the narrative by appealing to all senses. Persepolis, a graphic memoir is also an autobiographical narrative written by Marjane Satrapi. This memoir covers the societal and cultural aspects through pictorial representation. It delineates Satrapi's childhood and her adult years in Iran and Austria during the Islamic Revolution. Satrapi resists to accept the new changes happening in the society. Eventually, she forgets her real self who migrates abroad in search of hope but ends up in trauma. This research article sets out to analyse Satrapi's existential crisis, identity trauma, self-discovery and how the ecology influenced her culture and life.

Keywords: Trauma, Graphic Novel, Bildungsroman, Dual Identity

Graphic memoirs are sequential art forms which convey an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical story. They are sub-genre of comics and graphic novels. *Persepolis*, an autobiographical series of graphic memoir written in French language deals with the life of the author Marjane Satrapi. It is published in 2000. The English translation got published in 2003 and 2004 in two volumes. It covers her childhood up to her adult years in Iran and Austria. It exposes the reality of Islamic revolution which happened in 1979 and its repercussions that changed the fate of people in Iran. *Persepolis*, a graphical memoir informs both text and history about the incidents through witty dialogues and pictorial representation.

Marjane Satrapi, a French- Iranian graphic novelist, was born in Iran and grew up in Tehran in an upper-middle class Iranian family. Her parents are active leftists and they inculcated courage in their daughter and they wanted their daughter to lead her life in a free, moral environment. Satrapi's biographical information becomes the moving plot in the graphic memoir which presents situations in a subtle and humorous manner. This memoir throws light upon trauma of the people who confronted wars after wars and ended up in a fate where they choose forced death or imposed migration as a result of leading a life in peace. Each part of this memoir has chapters with distinguishing titles which sum up the total essence of the memoir using graphics.

Persepolis 1: The Story of Childhood depicts Satrapi's experiences of growing up during the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This part begins by introducing the narrator Marjane, the ten-year-old protagonist. This part exposes the effects of war and religious extremism on Iranians especially women. Satrapi educates herself through reading of various books that inculcated western political thoughts which made her to question her way of living in her own country especially, the aspects of treating people based on class and the privileges experienced by few people. She even wishes to learn her family background and eventually she learns about it. All these experiences of learning about politics, she wanted to demonstrate again Shah's regime. She even incorporated these political effects in her games which she played with her friends in the garden. Satrapi believed that exile of Shah will change the future of the country. But the entire situation turned topsy-turvy when she noticed the rise of religious extremism, where women are forced to cover themselves and thereby restricting social freedom. She has gotten her communist revolutionary ideas through her uncle Anoosh who is later being accused and executed for his political beliefs which are against the government.

Satrapi learns about the government's declare on war against Iraq through her grandmother. Her home to Tehran was under the attack. The entire family started to hide themselves in the underground. Her family believed in Leftist ideology so that they had done all activities which are against the regime. In order to protect her daughter from this trauma, like other families, Satrapi's family decided to send her off to Austria for further study and safety. This first part ends by showing how Satrapi's mother fainted when she bids farewell to her daughter.

Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return takes place in Vienna where Marji started her new life immediately, she was denied of staying in her mom's friend's house. Initially, she finds hard to communicate in German and she overcomes it by assimilating into the culture. She often finds herself with verbal altercation and so she was expelled from houses because of the xenophobic atmosphere. She undergoes physical and psychological transformation to make her adapt to the culture of Vienna. But people are not ready to accept Marji as she is So she finds her comfort in drugs and other activities. Finally, she settles in Frau Dr. Heller's house after her small stay with her mother.

Once again, she was accused of stealing the brooch of Heller which is not the real incident. She remained outdoors and even ended up in streets catching bronchitis. She returns back to Iran. When she meets her parents, a lot of transformation could be seen. She is not ready to convey her life and trauma when her own parents suffered a lot in war. On her return, Marji meets Reza who is a painter and eventually they get married to each other. Their union was not successful as they expected. Several rituals of marriage have also been seen in the graphic memoir. Before going to Europe, Marji visits her grandfather's grave and the prison building where her uncle Anoosh has been buried. Towards the end, Marji goes to Paris for her future life once again. Marji reveals at the end of the narration about the death of her grandmother in 1996.

Cultural Ecology explores human adaptations to physical and social environment. It is the very ecology that changes the mindset of people and the institutions. Anthropologist Julian Steward has coined the term "Cultural Ecology" in 1955. Steward has proposed that cultural ecology perceives the environment as presenter of problems, opportunities and so on. It also deals with the ability to survive in an environment. As a theoretical approach, Cultural ecology attempts to define similarities and differences in culture pertaining to the environment. It is a study on human-environment relationships. The cultural landscape furnishes clues about cultural practises and life of the people both past and present. Existentialism delineates and emphasizes the existence of an individual as a free agent especially deciphering an individual's development through the act of the will and the central idea of existentialism throws light upon the pursuit of self-discovery and determining the meaning of life.

The pioneers of existentialism are Jean Paul Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers. Absurdity, Nihilism, Lack of meaning in life, Absence of faith in God form the themes of existential crisis. Jean Paul Sartre adds that everything has been figured out, except how to live sums up the most important aspect of existentialism. The psychological trauma arises out of loss of self which becomes part and parcel of existentialism. Ultimately, existential crisis leads to identity crisis and hybridity. She undergoes both physical and psychological trauma. According to Jean Paul Sartre, freedom is essential for all human beings because as a free being they are responsible of the following entities like consciousness and their actions. Existentialism is a very powerful word which explains what humanity is all about.

Graphic novels are written with illustrations that provide a detailed narration with precision. It is much longer than a comic book. Most of the graphic novels follow linear plot structure. Existential perspectives are captured through vivid illustrations that bring Persepolis, a meaningful narrative. Persepolis is the Greek named city called Parsa situated on the Iranian Plateau protected by the mountain of Mercy. The title of the memoir itself contradicts the incidents happening in the narrative. The memoir's narrative covers the life Satrapi from 1980 till 1996.

Persepolis 1: The Story of Childhood, deals with Marji Satrapi, an intelligent girl who lives with her parent in Tehran. Her family practised a life which is a kind of imitation of western culture. They did not force their women to use veil whenever or wherever they go. She even tries to find a rebel quality in her parents but she fails to notice that they are actually rebelling against government in all possible ways. Satrapi undergoes identity crisis within her own country when the autocratic Shah's government was replaced by oppressive religious extremist regime. During this regime, all rules were thrust upon women and forcing them to follow it. Satrapi finds herself as an alien in her own environment. Whenever she fails to follow the rules, she leads her life in a threatened environment. She becomes a rebel which is because of the imposed rules imposed on her by her country which becomes unacceptable for Satrapi. She even points out that forgiving should be followed yet not forgetting what the country has done to these people. This aspect imparts the significance of accepted culture rather imposing culture through restrictions and prohibitions. Families are shattered in the war which makes the situation worse where even the young people and children lead their life in isolation.

She wants to overcome her existential chaos by reading books which makes her feel home. Satrapi says,

“We found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends” (Satrapi 2)

All the pictorial representation of changes in culture creates a kind of introspection in the minds of readers to step into the situation of Satrapi and her people. The immediacy of war between Iran and Iraq worsened the situation. The very ecosystem makes the people to assimilate the culture that they are newly exposed which delineates the concept of cultural ecology. The question “Who am I?” leads Satrapi to a state of finding her grandfather's life and history. When she confronts the truth, she becomes a propagandist of her ideal. Yet, she becomes a failure of the adopted culture. She could not learn French because the environment allows her to a channelised education. Here, the concept of freedom turns out to be a question for which the narrator could not find answer. She seeks inspiration from her uncle Anoosh who comprehends the reality of Iran to Satrapi from the perspective of Communism for which he was executed. At this moment, Satrapi feels the absence of God in helping them which highlights her transformation in the beginning.

“And so I was lost, without any bearings... What could be worse than that?” (Satrapi 75)

She even wishes to participate in the demonstration thereby overcoming her identity crisis. When Tehran was bombed, Satrapi's parents got frightened to live in the changed environment which is not suitable for living. Most of the families started to migrate to European countries and USA.

Satrapı's parents bid emotional farewell but they did not predict how Satrapı's new environment is ready to treat her equally without xenophobic atmosphere. Here, the hope of living in home land becomes a question whereas foreign land becomes home for the people who became the refugees.

Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return deals with Satrapı's life in Vienna where she believed she could lead a life of her own and on her own. It did not turn out as expected for Satrapı. She could not lead a proper life and the sense of belonging to nation is completely lost. She lives in a foreign land where people have prejudiced notions against her mother country. People in Vienna are thrilled to hear about war and most of them did not share the emotions behind the struggle. Because of this partition of 'who she is' and 'who she was, made Satrapı a total stranger to herself. She has undergone language crisis when she is unable to speak German. Her heart is longing for home. She leads a traumatic life by failing in her education as well as her moral life. She believes in people but they played a temporary role. Though migration has begun sweet days of few people's life, it was not the same for Satrapı. Years have gone and gone. But she never led a good life which her parents expected her to be. In order to fit into the culture of Vienna, she has shown transitions in her hairstyle as well as behaviour. She is no more a rebel. She becomes the victim of war which makes her to feel alienation from the world of her own. She becomes hopeless and ended up in streets. This depicts the reality of most of the migrated people. All the caricatures inside the graphic memoir capture the narrative with powerful depiction of emotions through style. When she returns back to Iran, she recollects only past failing to adapt to the present.

Throughout the graphic memoir *Persepolis*, the significance of education is emphasized. Education is essential for a person to experience freedom. Only through proper education, one can enjoy full freedom. *Persepolis* also describes the intersection of modernity and religion, specifically facing religious repression. The characters in the memoir often goes for compromises in order to live their life in their home country. As a young girl, Satrapı took everything in a shallow manner. When she migrates out of her country, she realises that she has gotten through lots of afflictions and many more trauma also awaits her arrival. This graphic memoir also elucidates on gender perspectives especially speaking for the rights of women. As Margaret Atwood points out in her essay titled, "Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature", surviving is not an easy task. The ecosystem plays a vital role in deciding the personality of people. If the ecosystem is disturbed, it affects the society and its orders. At the outset, it is the cultural trauma that people have to confront. If both ecosystem and culture fail to do so, people become the victims of changed order. Post Colonial perspective also puts forth how the migrants try to mimic and end up a total failure. Migration within and outside will have different repercussions. There should be a proper balance between culture and ecology only then the society can be a civilized society.

Satrapı not only brings out existential aspects but also humour which makes memoir interesting. During Marji's school times, the satirical portions are often aimed at the oppressive tactics used by the religious regime. It appears in "The Water Cell," where she uses irony to mock the absurdity of revolutionary forces. The irony lies in the game's inherent teachings of capitalism, the polar opposite of any and all Marxist ideals. This textual example of how Satrapı uses subtle ironic humour to expose a stage in the protagonist's development.

Humour is also highlighted when Marji and her fellow classmates choose toilet paper as decorations to honour the anniversary of the revolution. Marji opines

"Every situation offered an opportunity for laughs...when we had to decorate the classroom for the anniversary of the revolution." (Satrapı, 92).

Her teacher asks,

"What are these garlands? Toilet paper?" (Satrapı, 92).

It is to make the reader to understand the political changes in her country and her support for one side, by using wit to express her beliefs.

Once again, the readers can use cultural ecology theory to identify the mindset of people who have undergone multiple transitions in their entire life span. Towards the end, once again Satrapi chooses migration to Paris because she feels like unwanted and unaccepted in her own land. She sets on a journey with hope that she will become herself on a day when the entire world lives in peace. This journey which she has begun should bring epiphany into her life. She has undergone jeopardy throughout her life. Satrapi's mother has advised her saying that,

“This time you are leaving for good. You are a free woman. The Iran of Today is not for you. I forbid you to come back.” (Satrapi 344)

As a woman, she was marginalised. As a foreigner, she was suppressed. As a migrant, she faced oppression. Satrapi finds isolation as her medicine.

“..... Freedom has a price” (Satrapi 344)

This is how ecology intersects with culture which in turn created a society for chosen people excluding the needy and their needs. The entire world moves towards freedom without knowing the price of achieving it completely or partially. Freedom has become an illusion in the present era. Persepolis decodes the reality of the contemporary world as the voice of the voiceless people who wants the world to be free and act on one's own will.

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