



Persepolis

Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel offers an intimate look at her childhood in Iran during and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Marjane Satrapi



Birth and Education

Born in Rasht, Iran, Satrapi studied in French-language schools in Tehran.



Migration to Europe

In 1984, her parents sent her to Vienna. She later returned to Iran and studied in Tehran.



Artistic Activities

Satrapi worked as an illustrator before publishing Persepolis in 2000.

Historical Background

The events that Maryam depicts in *Persepolis* trace a linear path from the Iranian Revolution of 1979, to the political and social upheaval that followed with the rise of the Islamic Republic, to the Iran-Iraq War. The 1979 Revolution, which was accompanied by widespread protests and political disobedience, led to the flight and overthrow of the American-backed despotic Shah.

The Shah was particularly known for his efforts to modernize the country, his land reform policies, and his reliance on a ruthless secret police to achieve his goals. In 1980, Iraq invaded Iran, leading to an eight-year war that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians and soldiers.

Story Summary

Islamic Revolution and Social Changes

The story of Persepolis begins right after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Marjane describes how she used to attend a co-ed, non-religious French school, but these schools were shut down and hijab became mandatory. Marjane's family was modern and secular, and while they supported the revolution against the Shah, they were concerned about the fundamentalist turn of the Islamic Republic.



The Iran-Iraq War

The Iran-Iraq war begins. This is a moment of nationalism for Marjane, but she gradually comes to understand the cost of the war, heroism, and martyrdom. Young boys join the army and are given golden plastic keys as a symbol of easy entry into paradise after death for the country.



Familiarity with Iranian History and Uncle Anouche

Marjane becomes familiar with Iranian history and its various invaders and rulers. Her grandfather was an Iranian prince who was often imprisoned and tortured under the Shah. She meets her uncle Anouche, who had fled to the Soviet Union to avoid arrest. Anouche is later arrested and executed, and at this point Marjane renounces God.



Leaving Iran

The government's repression becomes more severe. Marjane, who has always been rebellious, becomes bolder and slaps her school principal, leading to her expulsion. Marjane's family decides it would be better and safer for her to continue her education in a country with more freedom. With tears in her eyes, Marjane leaves her family and embarks on a new life in Vienna, Austria.



Main Characters



Marjane Satrapi

The main character with a strong will who struggles to maintain her dignity, independence and individuality amidst the restrictive world of post-revolution Iran. Her growth is threatened by the new regime's impositions, especially the mandatory hijab.



Marjane's Parents

Educated, politically active and accepting of Western culture, they protest against the Shah but become disillusioned when the new regime proves more repressive. They ultimately send Marjane to Vienna to continue her studies.



God

In childhood, Marjane finds solace in God as both friend and support. As the world grows uglier under strict religious leaders, she distances herself and eventually removes God from her life after witnessing Anouche's imprisonment.



Anoosh

Marjane's beloved communist revolutionary uncle who returns from exile in the Soviet Union, only to be arrested and executed as a spy. His death causes Marjane to lose faith in God and develop a deeper understanding of political injustice.



Taher

A family friend with heart problems requiring surgery abroad. The government's refusal to grant him a passport illustrates the regime's cruelty and how political restrictions directly impact people's lives and health.



Niloufar

A young woman executed by the regime for her political views. Her tragic fate represents the brutal treatment of women and political dissidents under the Islamic Republic, deepening Marjane's understanding of oppression.

Key Themes



Religion, Repression, and Modernity

Persepolis explores the intersection of religion and modernity, and the impact of religious repression on the personal faith and practices of those who must endure it. Marjane initially considers herself "deeply religious," but gradually loses her personal faith after the government imposes strict religious laws.



Nationalism, Heroism, and Martyrdom

Like her family, Marjane is initially excited by the revolution, believing it will allow the Iranian people to determine their own destiny. She loves her country and believes it should be free, but gradually comes to understand how nationalism can be used both to overthrow a dictator and to support one.



Violence, Forgiveness, and Justice

By the end of Persepolis, the historical toll is immense. Marjane expresses her grief that "we could have prevented all of this" and shows how much of the harm done to the Iranian people was a result of the regime's own actions.



Children, War, and Growing Up

These memories follow Marjane from childhood to young adulthood, showing the impacts of war and politics on her psyche and development. War both slows and accelerates her growth, bringing out both the crying, sensitive child and the strong, determined adult in her.

Symbols and Motifs



Veil

The veil represents oppression for Marjane, not because of religious conviction but because it's forced upon her. It becomes the primary symbol of state control, particularly over women in Iran.



Bread Rolls

Uncle Anush gives Marjane bread rolls, symbolizing his preserved humanity despite imprisonment. These represent how art and creativity can sustain the spirit under oppression.



Golden Plastic Key

Given to students as a symbol of martyrdom, this key promises paradise to those who die in the Iran-Iraq war. It represents the regime's hollow promises—beautiful on the outside but ultimately deceptive.



Cigarette

Marjane's adolescent smoking symbolizes rebellion against authority. This seemingly minor act becomes both a coping mechanism during wartime and a gesture of resistance against multiple forms of oppression.

Chapter Analysis: Hijab

The opening chapter of Persepolis describes the implementation of the hijab policy in Iran. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, in which the Westernized Shah is overthrown, the new government becomes increasingly religious and repressive, making the wearing of hijab, which covers most of women and girls' faces, mandatory.

The girls at Marjane's school, including her friends, dislike the hijab, especially because they don't understand why they have to wear it. At the same time at school, they play as if they are revolutionaries: "Execution in the name of freedom!" In the first drawing that opens the book, a group of girls with their hijabs sit in a row and look unhappy; Marjane is seated with them, but she is somewhat cut off by the frame.

Before 1979, these girls were all part of a mixed, non-religious French school that was shut down after the revolution, especially because bilingual schools were seen as symbols of capitalism and corruption. After that, "we found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends," Marjane describes.

Cycle Season Analysis



Discovering History

Marjan turns to Iranian history as her father has explained to her. Her father describes Iranian history as "2,500 years of despotism and submission". The abuse of power, he explains, has often been both from within and from outside.



Rex Cinema Fire

One night, Marjan hears her parents talking about the Rex Cinema fire, a famous and popular cinema in Tehran, during the revolution against the Shah. The doors were locked from the outside before the fire was set; four hundred people were killed while the police guarded and beat those who tried to rescue the victims.



Revolutionary Play

Marjan stands in front of the mirror in her room, dressing up in Che Guevara's clothes and then Fidel Castro's, but God, who she has momentarily ignored to listen more to her parents, has left the room by the time she returns to ask their opinion on her outfit.

Chapter Analysis: Cigarette



Teenage Rebellion

One day, two years after the start of the war, Marjan goes to a store called Kansas, where hamburgers are sold, with some of her older friends. Although it is strictly prohibited, money can still buy Western luxuries for those who have it.



Confronting the Mother

When Marjan comes home, her mother yells at her for skipping school to buy a hamburger. She tells Marjan, "Now is the time to learn. You're wasting your whole life on entertainment... In this country, you have to know everything better than anyone else if you want to survive!!"



War Slogans

The people of Iran constantly hear conflicting reports about the progress of the war. As a result, no one believes many of the reports. Despite this doubt, the report that Iraq is offering peace to Iran is true. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is offering money to help with reconstruction, but Iran rejects the deal.

Key Quotes

"We found ourselves veiled and separate from our friends."

Marjane Satrapi

"I wanted justice, God's love and wrath, all in one."

Marjane Satrapi

"Revolution is like a bicycle. When the wheels don't turn, it falls."

Marjane Satrapi

"As long as there is oil in the Middle East, we will never have peace."

Marjane's father

"I wish he were alive and in prison, rather than dead and a martyr."

Paradise

"Our family memory must not be erased. Even if it's not easy for you, even if everyone doesn't understand it."

Anouche

"I wanted to be an educated, free woman...and so another dream went up in smoke."

Marjane Satrapi

"It wasn't just the government that changed. Ordinary people changed too."

Marjane Satrapi

Connection to the Contemporary World



Personal Narrative of History

Persepolis shows how personal narratives can provide deeper insights into historical events



Women's Rights and Identity

Marjane's struggles with the veil and gender restrictions resonate with the ongoing global fights for women's freedom and equality



Power of Visual Storytelling

The success of Persepolis as a graphic novel paved the way for more visual narratives of personal experiences in political realms



Cultural Bridges

This work helped Western readers gain deeper understanding of Iran and its people beyond media stereotypes



Migration and Identity

Marjane's experience of leaving her homeland and struggling to maintain her identity reflects the challenges faced by millions of refugees and migrants worldwide

Persepolis, by providing a personal narrative of historical events, helps readers look beyond headlines to the real lives impacted by these events. The work also continues to resonate with contemporary issues such as freedom of expression, women's rights, cultural identity, and the impact of war on civilians.