

9-27-2017

The Use of the Autobiographical Graphic Novel by Iranian Authors as a Means of Forging Nationalist and Feminist Identity

Max M. Funk

Bowling Green State University, maxf@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/irj>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Funk, Max M. (2017) "The Use of the Autobiographical Graphic Novel by Iranian Authors as a Means of Forging Nationalist and Feminist Identity," *International ResearchScape Journal*: Vol. 4 , Article 9. Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/irj/vol4/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in International ResearchScape Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Introduction

Most Westerners associate graphic novels with action-packed tales of superheroes and the reinforcement of many traditionally American (U.S.) ideals that stem back to when comics first emerged in the mid-1930s. Over the years, however, graphic novels have deviated from comics in style, form, content, length, and much more; this gradual deviation has led to a more widespread success for graphic novels as a serious form of literature. While the success of graphic novels was largely confined to the United States for many years (much as comics originally were), this form of literature has now seen massive success worldwide. Starting in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, Middle Eastern, and more specifically, Iranian, writers have achieved success by writing graphic novels; works such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Amir Soltani's *Zahra's Paradise*, and Mana Neyestani's *An Iranian Metamorphosis* have sold millions of copies worldwide. This adoption of the literary form by Iranian writers has marked a drastic change in format; the most successful graphic novels tend to be autobiographical blends of mostly non-fiction and some fiction.

The goal of this research is to explain the role of both the autobiographical and graphic components in the global success of graphic novels written by Iranian authors. The use of graphic novels highlights the visual experiences of the readers. The research comes through the analysis of major works written by Iranian authors over the past two decades (2000- present), although the main focus will be primarily on Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The main theoretical focus of this research is how the form of the autobiographical graphic novel contributes to the subjectivity of stories contained within that form. This study explains how a subjective approach is effective when one attempts to reach an audience more familiar with Western conventions - especially with regard to

autobiographical graphic novels.

Finally, these graphic novels also serve to reshape discourse concerning women and the Iranian context, both within a local and a global context.

The motivation for this research is twofold and stems from the two disciplines that intersect in productive ways. The first field of study is International Studies where the main concern involves the means by which individuals (primarily women) use representation and image as a form of empowerment. As such, the overarching goal of the analysis is constructive in nature.

By discussing the medium of the autobiographical graphic novel, it will become clear how underrepresented by emerging voices, primarily women's, provide important societal commentary. By drawing on literary discourse, the techniques and transformations of the autobiographical graphic novels, authored by Iranian women, can be more clearly tracked.

Research Design

This research is qualitative in nature. In *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, John W. Creswell describes the main components of a qualitative study:

“exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups,” collecting data from those individuals or groups, focusing on the themes and trends to emerge from the data, an inductive style, and a complex rendering of the meaning to come from the research (4). The specific qualitative method used in this research is narrative; this approach is common in the humanities and consists of the researcher studying individuals' lives, generally by asking those individuals for personal stories. Information from these stories is then shaped into a narrative chronology that fits with other stories or data the researcher has collected (13-14). Due to the geographic location and celebrity of the individuals who are the focus of this study, personally

interviewing them would be impractical if not impossible. Instead, the stories collected from

these individuals come in the form of the autobiographical graphic novels they have written.

The data collection process is based on the critical literary analysis of the works. After collecting data in the form of making observations in and about these works, the various authors' narratives could be analyzed and compared while utilizing relevant critical theory.

The worldview within which the research was approached is constructivist. Creswell writes, "Social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (8). The examination of these subjective meanings expressed through the form of autobiography is the main focus of the research. While many could make the claim that autobiographies are generally inaccurate in an objective sense, especially when told in the graphic novel format for reasons such as entertainment value, the subjective nature of this form is actually desirable for this study. The overarching goal is to highlight the importance of these subjective and personal stories of Iranian authors.

The selection of the stories was accomplished using single-stage cluster sampling. Creswell provides this definition: " A single stage sampling procedure is one in which the researcher has access to names in the population and can sample the people (or other elements) directly" (158). This sampling type is the most useful because there was a pre-determined population. The population in this case is composed of Iranian graphic novel authors who have written works post-2000 (the focus of the study is on contemporary trends). Since the population size is so limited it was necessary to select works that had already achieved public success, either through global sales or literary awards. The global sales indicate the success of these individuals' stories with average citizens worldwide, while the awards given indicate success within the literary

and scholarly community. The acceptance and widespread consumption of these stories by the two communities is a crucial component proving the upward trend in graphic novels from Iranian authors.

While most of this essay focuses on the research conducted and the use of scholarly theories to aid in the analysis of similar narratives, it is important to indicate how the research was carried out. Critical analysis of graphic novels is still relatively unusual; therefore, it is first necessary to provide an explanation for how this process is accomplished; explanation of the key components and processes of critical analysis can be found in the section "*Graphic Novel Analysis*".

Finally, it is important to note potential biases and locate myself within the research I am conducting. With any constructive, qualitative research, the researcher faces the problem of being an outsider to the individuals who are being interviewed or researched. My case is no exception; I am a white male who was raised in an American (US), Catholic household (although I no longer consider myself Catholic). In contrast, the focus of my study is on primarily Muslim individuals with varying ethnic backgrounds who are from Iran, a country I have never lived in or visited. There are certain complexities about sex, religion, and culture that I am not and most likely could never be privy to. I attempt to limit this bias by not making my own generalizations about the region and its social or political issues; instead, I focus on what individuals are saying about their own societies. Additionally, the point is not to come to some definitive answer on social issues in these individuals' countries, especially because the few individuals whose works I am working with are not definitive experts of all things Iran nor are they representative of all Iranians. Rather, the goal is to highlight the importance and meaning in the stories of the individuals about their own lives within the country they inhabit and to examine the form in

which they do so.

Graphic Novel Analysis

Before discussing what is meant by the process of graphic novel analysis, it is first helpful to address what exactly is meant by the term “graphic novel.” To begin, they are stories told in any variety of ways like a novel, but the difference between the forms comes in the use of visuals to narrate the story. In *De la viñeta a la novela gráfica: Un modelo para la comprensión de la historieta*, Manuel Barrero provides a helpful understanding of how the images work to develop a story. Barrero describes graphic novels as being a mode of “*secuencialidad*,” or a narrative unit that relies on sequential elements to construct it both spatially and temporally (Barrero 45).

Panels of images and corresponding text are placed in some logical order that makes up the story being told; however, it is important to note that this order need not be chronologic. In *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form*, Hannah Miodrag explains the distinction. She clarifies, “‘comics’ segments are visible simultaneously and, as the split panel device shows, can enter into correspondence to the extent they act like units, interrupting and diverting a sequential reading” (Miodrag 143). Unlike other narrative forms, the comic structure of graphic novels can show multiple moments in time simultaneously; the result is a fragmented reading experience where the reader is given sequential visual and textual snapshots rather than a seamlessly flowing narrative.

Although graphic novels differ from traditional novels, short stories, and poems in their reliance on visuals to tell a story, many of the same tools of formal literary analysis used for novels, short stories, and poems apply to graphic novels as well (Miodrag 197); graphic novels still have

themes, moods, symbols, metaphors, and other literary components. However, due to the better-

known nature of these concepts and general accessibility of the body of knowledge related to more general literary analysis, this discussion of critical analysis is limited solely to the elements exclusive to graphic novels.

To this end, Barrero further discusses how graphic novel analysis differs from that of novels, short stories, or poems. He notes that graphic novel authors utilize drastically different art styles; as such, much of the critical analysis comes down to how these varying art forms are used to tell the story. In particular, critics focus on elements such as the stroke or line sizes, the shading, the color palette, framing (i.e. what or who is in or out of focus), the formatting of the panels (e.g. shape, size, location on the page), or the other specific tenets of the form like speech bubbles (Barrera 35). However, he continues, while these are important facets of graphic novels and comics, they are not the comprehensive guide to understanding the narrative; rather, they are tools critics can use to aid in that understanding. He claims that the more important analysis comes in the examination of the substance of expression's relation to the form itself. In other words, critics look for ways in which the elements discussed above combine to create meaning in the text; they also examine how the author intertwines these meanings with the text or overall narrative being told (Barrera 36-7) Miodrag further elaborates by explaining that the point of critical graphic novel analysis is not simply to describe the artworks; instead, the point is to "quantify the impact of these formal elements" in the larger context of the narrative (Miodrag 198). For example, the point would be to explain the effect of a black and white color palette on the mood or themes of the work being examined rather than just noticing the work was in black and white. Authors make certain artistic choices that advance certain themes, messages, and arguments in their texts.

Cases Examined

The two primary autobiographical graphic novels examined for this research are *Persepolis* and *Persepolis II* by Marjane Satrapi. These two works (often analyzed together by critics due to the text *The Complete Persepolis*, which contains both) are the most successful works in the genre to come from an Iranian author. This success coupled with the plethora of related scholarly works makes them prime choices for this research. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi details the events of her childhood; growing up, she experiences the Islamic Revolution in Iran as well as the war with Iraq. During this time, the fundamentalist state enacts many cultural changes, especially for women. Satrapi begins to feel marginalized in her own country and culture as a result of laws such as the mandatory donning of the veil. The novel makes a strong case for women's rights, but also addresses Islam and modernity, tensions between the East and West, as well as what it means to be Iranian. The same basic themes are further expanded upon in *Persepolis II*. This graphic novel serves as a continuation of the first; Satrapi returns to Iran after having sought exile in Austria. Many of the problems she started to have growing up are only exacerbated by the more fundamentalist government and the changing status of the cultural mores. Together, *Persepolis* and *Persepolis II* are a commentary on women's changing roles in Iran by a woman whose voice would not be readily accepted by many, including the fundamentalist government, in her own country.

The third autobiographical graphic novel examined is *An Iranian Metamorphosis* by Mana Neyestani. The story details the aftermath of a children's cartoon he wrote that was misinterpreted as being racist by Azeris, a Turkish/Azerbaijanis minority living in Northern Iran.

The Azeris used the cartoon as an excuse to protest the Iranian government to which they were

already strongly opposed. Neyestani went from being a relatively successful cartoonist to being jailed for his “crimes” without having undergone a fair trial. The story then follows his time living in jail and his eventual escape from Iran. Finally, the story covers his exile and troubles as a refugee. Neyestani’s autobiographic graphic novel serves as the voice of someone (a critic of the government from the political left) whose commentary was certainly not allowed in his own country.

The final graphic novel analyzed is *Zahra’s Paradise* by Amir Soltani. The plot of the story follows a mother, Zahra, as she searches for her missing son in the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian election. Some of the main characters are bloggers and activists; so, many of the themes deal with the attempt to expose certain problems in society, mainly because of government action and the government itself. While this narrative is not a strict autobiographical graphic novel, in contrast to the other works, the categories that define genres are not always so clear.

Autobiographical graphic novels are neither entirely true nor entirely fictitious. *Zahra’s Paradise* is a work with highly emphasized fictional components; however, the events of the novel refer to events lived by the authors and the life of the activist son is one much like the life of Soltani himself. Additionally, many of the characters in the novel mirror real people, albeit, some of whom the author likely did not know. The novel is included in context with the others because of its international success and its use of many of the same techniques as the “truer” autobiographical graphic novels. Additionally, one major theme that is relevant is the attempt to find a voice in a society where that would be difficult for the author otherwise.

Feminism and Autobiography

Autobiography is a genre that is particularly suitable for displaying women's voices. In "The Female Self Engendered: Autobiographical Writing and Theories of Selfhood," Shari Benstock writes that autobiography as a purposeful narrative allows women to recapture their "self." Benstock continues on to describe what she calls a difference between one's "self" (if there is a definable "self") and one's "reflection of self"; how one sees one's "self" can never coincide with some true "self" (Benstock 8). In other words, autobiography as a genre is inherently dishonest. People have faulty memories and perspectival views of all life events that are impacted by the time in history and much more. Regardless, Benstock argues that women autobiographers have less of an issue with this inherent dishonesty; women are forced every day to recognize their outsider's position in a male-oriented world. As such, they are more self-aware of their "self" in the greater context of society because they have to be (Benstock 9). The form is better suited for women because it actually matches their experiences within the social context.

Certainly, the cases examined for this research project expand upon feminist themes through the focus on the "self." For example, a scene in *Persepolis* shows a conversation that Satrapi's mother and father have after learning that universities will temporarily be shut down by the government so as to not educate people who would have sympathies with the US. Satrapi's first reaction is sadness because she could no longer have the future of one of her heroes, Marie Curie (*Persepolis I 73/3-5*).⁽¹⁾ Here, Satrapi's desire to be a successful chemist reflects a broader feminist desire for equality when it comes to work, opportunity, and success. Similarly, these

themes are expounded upon in *Zahra's Paradise*. In one scene, Zahra travels to a government office to obtain information regarding the whereabouts of her son. The man behind the desk then sighs, "Listen, woman: you're not the only mother in Iran" (Soltani 106/8). She responds, "It's my right to search for my son!" (Soltani 106/9). Zahra clings to her motherhood as something that gives her certain rights within society, especially as they relate to her own family. Despite showing very different types of female advancement, both works push for the right of women to advance in society.

Then, it is important to note the significance of the positive representations of the characters in the various works. In *Girls and Their Comics: Finding a Female Voice in Comic Book Narrative*, Jacqueline Danziger-Russell argues when discussing *Persepolis*, "The fact that it is an *autobiographical* work written by a female and told through the eyes of her child-self imbues this graphic novel with an undeniable reality that the young reader can relate to" (186). By depicting herself as a young female heroine, regardless of what she was "in reality," Satrapi gives young women a model for empowered behavior. This relation can also be observed with the women in the other works. Collectively, the cases examined provide a means by which women, whether Iranian or not, young or old, religious or secular, a mother or not, can relate to positive and empowering representations of women.

Now, considering the cases used in this research were written by two male authors and only one female author, it is important to note that Benstock's arguments about autobiography being suited to women actually extends much further. Benstock writes that those who are in "the position of

Other, by those who occupy positions of internal exclusion within society — by women, blacks, Jews, homosexuals, and others who exist at the ever-widening margins of society” (10), are better capable of bridging the gap between the “self” and “reflection of self”. Individuals on the margins of society are constantly made aware of their marginality in day to day interactions, and as such, are better suited to detail the realities of their life. Benstock's position can be made clearer by examining “Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate” by Sandra Harding. Harding argues that because knowledge is always socially situated, those on the outside of the dominant society can produce distinctive kinds of knowledge. Further, that experiential knowledge can provide specific, critical insights about the inner-workings and problems of the dominant society (Harding 7). Harding's clarification certainly applies to the feminist issues brought up by the various autobiographical graphic novels examined; through experience, women's issues are easier to expand upon. The authors, however, share a different common bond: Iranian identity. Furthermore, the author's share a particular Iranian identity that has seen them marginalized for various reasons. As such, these works have a strong subjective authority when commenting on the issues that most affect them as a result of their shared marginalized status.

Feminist Nationalism

Given that the common bond between the authors examined is Iranian identity, it is not surprising that most of the feminist issues being discussed emerge in tandem with issues of nationalism. For sake of clarification, the definition of nationalism being used comes from Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*. He defines nationalism as “an imagined political

community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (5-6). Anderson further elaborates on what is meant by “imagined” when he writes, “It is *imagined* because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). The nation then is created out of the shared consciousness of a particular group. This group, Anderson writes, is finite; there are elastic boundaries of culture and territory as well as the existence of other nations. Additionally, Anderson argues that an important part of the concept of the nation is sovereignty; there is a certain self-control that is necessary for the existence and function of a nation (7). This imaginary trait of national community has nonetheless very real consequences. Anderson mentions that citizens are not only prepared to kill for their nation, they are also prepared to die for it. The most important aspect of Anderson’s definition is that he is primarily an anthropologist. As such, his definition of nationalism is inextricably rooted in culture. Given that this research is concerned with how culture is both advanced and preserved through literature, his definition is particularly useful.

Considering then the intersections between sex, sexual orientation, race, and religion mentioned by Benstock as being integral to writing against a dominant ideology, Anderson’s concept of nationalism allows us to understand how the various aspects intersect that make up a group’s culture. So, when one is making a particularly feminist argument through means of autobiography, it is helpful to look at that argument in context of the nation. In “Estranging the Familiar: ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Satrapi’s *Persepolis*,” Nima Naghibi and Andrew O’Malley discuss the importance of autobiographic graphic novels as a form that now highlights the issues related to both women and Iranians as separate but interconnected categories. They write, “Iranian women writers have recently been using the genre to challenge the stereotype of the

self-effacing, modest Iranian woman and to write themselves back into the history of the nation” (224). As Naghibi and O’Malley point out, the motivation is twofold: challenging stereotypes of women and rewriting women’s positions within Iran. As such, the ways in which nationalism and feminism are presented in the texts cannot be separated

Certainly, a multidimensional motivation is present throughout the various works; women are depicted as being disadvantaged through various frameworks on account of being both Iranian and a woman. For example, the interrelated nature of the categories of ethnicity and gender are displayed in *Persepolis* in a panel where Satrapi depicts two Iranian women side-by-side. One woman wears a jet-black hijab and is labeled “The fundamentalist woman” while the other wears a similar hijab, but with pants, shoes, and tufts of hair clearly showing (*Persepolis I 75/1*).

These two pictures are presented as being the only options available for women; a similar picture is also provided for men. While Satrapi clearly favors what she calls “the modern woman,” both women are distinctly Iranian. Whatever the type of woman, this nationalist sentiment posits women as being inextricably part of Iran. To this end, it is important to note that both women have large frowns (*Persepolis I 75/1*). The women are unhappy in the sense that with either choice, they still hold a similarly unfavorable position in society. They are still resigned to existing in a way where even their simple clothing choice must have a bearing on their opposition to or support for the government.

Similarly, *Zahra’s Paradise* frequently displays the two-pronged oppression faced by Iranian women. For example, after the 2009 election in Iran, there were countless disappearances of

younger individuals (generally protesters or individuals involved in media). After continuously being denied answers, a large number of Iranian mothers would gather in a park with pictures of their missing children as a form of protest. Much of the strength of the protest came from their positions as mothers, an accepted role for them within the social framework of the nation.

However, using this position to speak against the government resulted in swift government reaction. As police come to shut down the protests, one woman screams, “It’s not enough that you arrest our brothers and sisters, now you want to arrest our mothers? Have you no shame?” (Soltani 138/6). In response, one of the policemen yells, “Shut up you whores!” (Soltani 138/7) as he begins to swing his baton at the first woman in the crowd. Here, the policemen are harming individuals participating in a peaceful and mournful protest simply because they are defying both their expected gender roles and roles within the nation; they are deemed whores and poor mothers as a result of their protest, action in a public space, and use of religion to defend their rights.

As with *Persepolis*, there is a call for both Iranian advancement as well the advancement of all women within Iran. The scene with the mothers serves to underscore the need for the advancement of women and through that advocacy, the need for more options for all Iranians.

Form and Writing Subjectively

In their crafting of varying types of nationalist and feminist arguments, Satrapi, Soltani, and Neyestani chose the format of the autobiographical graphic novel. While this choice could be in large part due to something as simple as a love for drawing, it is nonetheless important to examine the impact that the form has had on the success of their works. Here, I argue that the works foster a particularly subjective narrative in ways that serve to create a more relatable story

for readers. This relatability adds weight to the arguments made by the authors about varying issues and broader societal concerns.

The importance of this relationship between author and reader is taken up by Michael Chaney in “Terrors of the Mirror and the Mise en Abyme of Graphic Novel Autobiography.” He writes that “autobiographers establish authority according to subjective, rather than verifiable, truths” (Chaney 22). Presenting “truths” in a way that points to the positionality of the authors makes readers more empathetic to the authors’ points. Focusing on the narrative structure and medium that is the autobiographical graphic novel, Chaney mentions that all autobiographies, especially the more artistic and fantastical autobiographical graphic novels, walk a thin line between fiction and nonfiction (Chaney 22). Similarly, in *En la era de la intimidación: seguido de, el espacio autobiográfico*, Nora Catelli discusses how the tension between fiction and nonfiction stems from the author’s “doble identidad” as both a living author and the narrator of a crafted story. Due to these dueling positions which the author inhabits, there is a struggle between telling a story that is their actual history and one that is a story with fictional components (Catelli 9).

To illustrate the conflict Chaney and Catelli discuss how, in *An Iranian Metamorphosis* there is one scene where Neyestani describes being in jail as similar to “being shipwrecked on a tiny island in the middle of a never-ending ocean” (Neyestani 74/5). The accompanying picture with the caption depicts Neyestani and his friend on a small island surrounded by water. Here, the visual depiction of such a fantastical metaphor calls attention to the feeling of isolation felt by

the author rather than to the objective facts associated with their confinement. Moments of “visual fiction” in context with the nonfictional narrative point to the autobiography as a crafted, subjective work. Chaney states that the authority of the author is far from destroyed as a result. By virtue of writing an autobiography, and calling attention to that fact in the text itself, the author speaks with a certain subjective authority (Chaney 22). While the author can never be one hundred percent accurate (due to biased memories, changing of some details for persuasive purposes, or even the art style itself), the author is still able to maintain a subjective authority.

So, the conflict presented by Catelli is less of a conflict and more of a double reality that readers can recognize and internalize as part of the autobiographical graphic novel experience. Readers accept the subjective authority and the limitations that come with it in a way that allows the author to better convey their message and real-life experiences.

The main way in which this subjective authority is fostered in the autobiographical graphic novels examined here is through framing. More specifically, the authors of these works rely on close-up and medium shots in a way that positions readers as part of the story rather than merely as outside observers. For example, *Zahra's Paradise* opens with establishing shots of Evin, a rural area to the north of Tehran. Typically, establishing shots of the environment use wide shots to show the expanse and majesty of said environment. Certainly, the first panel depicts a broad mountain range in a wide shot. However, as the panels continue depicting the natural setting in which the story will continue, the framing of the shots becomes increasingly narrow. The wide mountain range shrinks into a shot of one mountain, which shrinks into a shot of the river running off the mountain, which shrinks into a small pond area created by this river, which

shrinks into the shot of a man isolated in a small pocket of this natural environment (Soltani 7/1-7). The framing of this introduction indicates the broader scenery of the location in which the story takes place and then shrinks in scope in a way that points to this one man's position within the larger setting around him.

A similar framing technique is used frequently by Satrapi. One example comes during a scene from *Persepolis II* where Satrapi stays late at school one day to draw her art class's model. In this scene, Satrapi sits drawing the model and a school supervisor storms in to stop her from breaking the school's moral code. The shot is a close-up of the group; the three people are crammed into each panel (*Persepolis II* 146/2-5). In this scene, the reader is positioned as though they are in this small space with Satrapi. It is then important to note that in the panel preceding this scene the room shown to be a large space (*Persepolis II* 146/1). However, the framing shrinks in scale in a way that focuses on the position occupied by Satrapi within this larger environment. Clearly, the framing could have been much different; the panels could show Satrapi in a large room in a way that takes the focus from her specifically. However, by continuously utilizing close-ups and medium shots, Satrapi keeps the focus on the position she inhabits in the subjective narrative she crafts.

The use of close-up and medium shots is also utilized frequently by Neyestani for the same effects. For example, at the beginning of *An Iranian Metamorphosis*, Neyestani sits in an immigration office recounting the reasons he is seeking asylum in Turkey. The room that Neyestani and a detective occupy fades to black, crosshatched shadow; in focus is Neyestani, the

detective, and the papers on which Neyestani writes (7/2-3). Despite there being more to the room (even if just a door and white walls), the reader only sees close-ups of the individuals' faces or the papers on which they focus. This type of focus continues, especially while Neyestani is in prison. One example comes as Neyestani is led to his prison cell. Even in a wide hallway that expands about 15 feet wide and stretches for 60 feet, the focus is squarely on Neyestani and his fellow cellmate in a way that obscures the detail of anything beyond 10 feet away (Neyestani 97/5). Again, the framing is used to square Neyestani as the central figure of the narrative and the reader as a close follower of this story. At every turn, the reader is positioned as though they were another immigration officer in the interrogation room or another prisoner in Evin (the jail). This positioning serves to make the reader relate more to the story being told because they are actually seeing what the author saw (or at least a stylized version).

The importance of the familiarity induced by the visual format of the autobiographic graphic novel is elaborated on by Joseph Darda in "Graphic Ethics: Theorizing the Face in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*." He argues that the relatability of the form blurs the lines between reader and author/narrator; more specifically, the historical and geographic differences as well as issues of class, gender, race, and nation are bridged by the reader in the process of understanding the narrative (Darda 34). He continues, "The form of the autographic puts an unfamiliar demand on the reader to take part in the construction of the narrative and thus to comprehend it from the inside rather than as a detached outsider" (Darda 34). The reader is not just invited to take part in the narrative, but instead is obligated to associate with the narrative. In the case of *Persepolis II* discussed above, the reader is positioned in such a way that they are in the room with Satrapi

rather than watching the scene unfold like a studio audience. By positioning the reader in this way, the authors strengthen the emotional effect of their position by placing the reader in that same position.

In addition to the use of framing, the art style used by the various authors aids in enhancing the relatable pull of the narratives. In “Autographics: The Seeing ‘I’ of Comics,” Gillian Whitlock posits that autobiographic graphic novels have the unique ability to evoke readers’ nostalgia (Whitlock 967); although most people probably did not read comics as a child, the form is generally seen as juvenile. Thus, graphic novels’ use of the comic style and format incites a feeling of innocence and familiarity by virtue of appearing “childish.” Whitlock continues, “iconic drawings of the human face are particularly powerful in promoting identification between reader/viewer and image, and the more cartoonish (iconic) a face is, the more it promotes association between the viewer and image” (Whitlock 977). The cartoonish faces (from any scale of realist to absurdist art), especially those of children, become “ciphers” for a mirroring of reality (Whitlock 977). The net effect of this author/reader interaction is the creation of a type of literature that allows a more personal relation to the main character, again, because the emotion can be seen and felt rather than just told.

Audience and Rewriting an Orientalist history

Given that there is a subjective argument being made by Soltani, Satrapi, and Neyestani in a way that better draws in the reader to that argument, it is important to consider the audience for whom these works are being written. While the issues of nationalism and feminism discussed in these

texts are both applicable to and written for the effected constituency; that is, the Iranian people, these texts are also written with a Western audience in mind. By using the graphic novel, a format dominated by the US and more recently Japan, a Western readership is automatically being considered. Additionally, the texts are riddled with references to Western culture. For example, *An Iranian Metamorphosis* draws heavily from Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and even contains references to General Custer's horrendous treatment of the Sioux (Neyestani 57/1). *Zahra's Paradise* contains multiple pages at the end defining terms that English readers are unlikely to know and then continues into an explanation of Iran for outsiders' understanding. For example, Soltani discussed the importance of the phrase "Allahu Akbar." He states that in Western media, the phrase tends to mean "religious fanaticism, intolerance, and hate"; however, the phrase actually means "God is the greatest" and represents "humility, sadness, pride, joy, wonder, among other powerful emotions" (Soltani 246). These clarifications indicate a purposeful addressing of a Western audience. Then, aside from overt references, the form itself, and even the number of languages these works have been translated into, Satrapi herself stated that she intended *Persepolis* to be for a Western audience. By showing an innocent young girl (herself) going through intense trauma as a result of the new Iranian regime, Satrapi's goal was to have readers not simply connect with Satrapi but also take an ethical stance on the current social and political climate of Iran (Darda 37). Essentially, Satrapi is saying that she was attempting to get Western readers to think or feel a certain way about Iran.

By appealing (although not entirely, of course) to a more Western audience, Satrapi, Soltani, and Neyestani are attempting to revise the common perceptions about Iran and the Middle East held

by that Western audience. This common perception is what Edward Said refers to as Orientalism in his book *Orientalism*. He explains, Orientalism is “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (Said 68). In this discourse, the world is divided into the Occident (the West) and the Orient (the East). Said describes Orientalism as a discourse that is a “corporate framework” for dealing with the Orient; as such, the divide between the Orient and Occident is reinforced through the means of literature, scholarship, economists, politicians, and any medium that can promote a certain cultural understanding (Said 69). In “Medievalismo Y Orientalismo: ‘El pasado es un país extranjero,’” María Eugenia Góngora Díaz further elaborates that this division of the world is one that is purposefully constructed (both in the past and present). Furthermore, this discourse is constructed in such a way that builds on the simultaneous rejection of and fascination with the ethnic and religious diversity associated with the Orient (Góngora Díaz 225-6). In other words, Orientalism promotes a vision of the Orient as something particularly exotic and exciting while simultaneously depicting the Orient as lesser than the Occident.

So, by reacting to an Orientalist discourse, the graphic novel authors examined are painting a more Westernized picture of Iran. Naghibi and O’Malley reference Gayatri Spivak when they write, “the project of imperialism has historically been to transform the radically other into the domesticated other in a way that consolidates the (Western) self” (Naghibi and O’Malley 226). Naghibi and O’Malley argue that by using the more subjective format allowed by the autobiographical graphic novel, there is a greater ability for a Western audience to connect to someone who seems “normal” (Naghibi and O’Malley 226). So, the familiarity of the texts

comes from the fact that Iranian women are mapping themselves according to certain stereotypes that Western nations hold of themselves; there is an argument being made that most Iranians are “modern.” While modern and Western do not necessarily mean the same thing, there are overlaps in the novels that suggest Iran is more Western than the particularly non-Western view Western media often associates with the nation. While novels like *Persepolis I & II*, *An Iranian Metamorphosis*, and *Zahra’s Paradise* certainly challenge many of these assumptions in their creation of a particularly Iranian experience, their voices are accepted internationally due to a reaffirming of and speaking to certain Western narratives and assumptions about how people should behave.

Conclusion

Overall, the autobiographical graphic novel allows the Iranian authors to make a more subjective and personal story; this subjectivity is especially important considering the goal is to relate to an audience that may otherwise hold misconceptions about Iran. Clearly, when looking at international sales, this tactic has worked in drawing in Western audiences to the arguments made in the texts. Often, countries such as Iran are shown as horrendous places to live and women there are depicted as passive and abused. While Iran and surrounding countries certainly have their issues, by showing up-close and personal stories about feminism in Iran and linking modernization and Islam, the authors look to posit Iran as filled with “modern” individuals, as a place where women are much more than passive victims of society, and as a country that is wrought with political issues more complex than Western media currently shows.

Simultaneously, these texts rewrite Iran’s representation in global discourse and women’s

representation in both Iranian and global discourse in a way that doesn't seek to solely glorify Iran; rather, they posit it as a country with its positive and negative aspects, reinforcing its similarity with other countries.

Note

1. When citing graphic novels, the number on the left of the dash indicates the page number in the text that the information is being pulled from. The number(s) on the right indicate the panels on that page to which are being referred. On the page, the panels are numbered in order from left to right and top to bottom.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1991.

Benstock, Shari. "The Female Self Engendered: Autobiographical Writing and Theories of Selfhood." *Women's Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1991, pp. 5-15.

Berrera, Manuel. "De la viñeta a la novela gráfica. Un modelo para la comprensión de la historieta." *Narrativa gráfica: los entresijos de la historieta*, edited by Ana María Peppino Barale, México DF: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2012, pp. 29-60.

Catelli, Nora. *En la era de la intimidad: seguido de, el espacio autobiográfico*. Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2006.

Chaney, Michael A. "Terrors of the Mirror and the Mise en Abyme of Graphic Novel Autobiography." *College Literature*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2011, pp. 21-44.

Creswell, John W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Sage Publications, 2013.

Danziger-Russell, Jacqueline. *Girls and Their Comics: Finding a Female Voice in Comic Book Narrative*. Scarecrow Press, 2012.

Darda, Joseph. "Graphic Ethics: Theorizing the Face in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*." *College Literature*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2013, pp. 31-51.

Góngora Díaz, María Eugenia. "Medievalismo Y Orientalismo: 'El pasado es un país extranjero.'" *Revista Chilena De Literatura*, no. 92, 2016, pp. 223–232.

Harding, Sandra. "Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate." *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies*. Routledge, 2004.

Miodrag, Hannah. *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form*. Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2013.

Naghibi, Nima, and Andrew O'Malley. "Estranging the Familiar: 'East' and 'West' in Satrapi's *Persepolis*." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2005, pp. 223-247.

Neyestani, Mana. *An Iranian Metamorphosis*. Uncivilized, 2014.

Said, Edward. "Orientalism." *The Edward Said Reader*, edited by Mustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, Vintage Books, 2000.

Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Random House, 2008.

—. *Persepolis II*. Random House, 2008.

Soltani, Amir. *Zahra's Paradise*. First Second, 2011.

Whitlock, Gillian. "Autographics: The seeing 'I' of the comics." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2006, pp. 965-979.