

**A HEAP OF BROKEN IMAGES: THE SEARCH FOR
IDENTITY IN PERSEPOLIS BY MARJANE SATRAPI**

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Abstract

Identity is the most important power that determines our actions and behavior. We will act according to our views of who we truly are- whether these views are accurate or not. It is a socially and historically constructed concept. We learn about our own identity and the identity of others through interactions with family, peers, organizations, institutions, media and other connections we make in our daily life. It is the concept we develop about our self that evolves over the course our life. Everything and everyone can influence a person's identity. While some influences can be major such as ones relationship with their family, other influences may be minor. Trying to live in a way that is inconsistent with our nature will create a life of frustration, stress, and disappointment. We must learn to embrace our deepest needs, desires, strengths, values and beliefs in order to create harmony with the surroundings around us. It is valid point to argue that everyone has struggled with their identity during a chapter of their life. Throughout our life as we encounter new experiences that will alter our thoughts, emotions and perspective on ourselves. In my research paper I intent to explain the quest for identity and the subsequent identity crisis faced by the protagonist in the novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi.

Keywords- Identity, individuality, identity crisis, helplessness

‘Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim.
Accept no one's definition of your life, but define yourself’

- Harvey Fierstein

Identity is the most important power that determines our action and behaviour. We will act according to our views of who we truly are -whether these views are accurate or not. It is a socially and historically constructed concept. We learn about our own identity and the identity of others through interactions with family, peers, organizations, institutions, media and other

connections we make in our everyday life. The gender, social class, age, nationality, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity play significant roles in determining how we understand and experience the world as well as shaping the types of opportunities and challenges we face. In our life we keep our identity all the time because it is the abstract thing that spots our own presence in this world. Actually it is the feeling of belonging to, as part of the self conception and self perception to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality etc. Everybody have their own identity in this world. Most of the time, it reveals through individuality.

Identity is the concept we develop about our self that evolves over the course of our life. This may include aspects of our life that we have no control over such as where we grew up or the colour of our skin as well as choices we make in our life such as what we uphold and believe. We demonstrate portions of our personal identity outwardly through what we wear and how we interact with other people. In this way our behaviour reflects our own individuality, personality, distinctiveness and uniqueness. It is the strongest force in human personality. We all have a deep and abiding need to remain consistent with how we define ourselves. Any transformation we make within our self will depend on our ability to expand this identity. By building a new, empowering set of beliefs, we can create a lasting transformation within our self and in our life.

Everything and everyone can influence a person's identity. While some influences can be major such as one's relationship with their family, other influences may be minor. For different people, the same experience may have affected them to a different extent. Although we all live in the same world where many of our experiences overlap, the reason why we are all unique is because we ultimately choose what does or does not impact us in a crucial or unimportant way. It is through the addition of the myriad parts of our lives that come together to create our identity. Our family is huge in determining who we are and what we are all about. They tell us what is good about us and what we can or cannot do. Our family in most cases dictates our political, economic beliefs, our religion and our social beliefs and frames our overall view of the world. They are obviously central to an individual's identity. They provide guidance, shape expectations and nurture talents.

Trying to live in a way that is inconsistent with our true nature will create a life of frustration, stress, and disappointment. We must learn to embrace our deepest needs, desires, strengths, values and beliefs in order to create harmony with the surroundings around us. It is a valid point to argue that everyone has struggled with their identity during a chapter of their life. There comes a time when our opinions and beliefs begin to differentiate from those around us. During this time, some people may discover where they belong whereas many others are not. It is not solely one stage of our lives when we are confronted with an identity crisis, but a continuous challenge. Throughout our lives as we encounter new experiences that will alter our thoughts, emotions and perspective on ourselves

This kind of struggle and search for identity and the subsequent identity crisis we see in this coming of age graphic novel *Persepolis*. Throughout this novel Marji, the protagonist of the story, constantly struggles with her identity and fights to find her true self. Marji's creator Satrapi describes how she spend most of her childhood in revolutionary Iran, and her high school years in Austria. These two settings of Satrapi's life carried radically different cultural views on politics, religion, gender and sexuality. As a result, Satrapi is constantly struggling with not only the mixed messages coming from her own country, but the contrasting messages from the ever powerful western world as well. This adds more depth and complication to Satrapi's story as she fights to find her true self.

It is a scientific fact that all teenagers will fight to find their true identity while struggling through adolescence. As their bodies change and minds develop to the point where they can construct complex and abstract thoughts, adolescents are simultaneously trying to construct an identity. Between their expanding minds to their suddenly foreign bodies, everything in a teenager's life is changing so rapidly, that they begin to question who they are and what kind of person they want to become. It is within this struggle for personal identity that we see the heart of Satrapi's own struggle. Her novel focuses on her own personal fight for identity and the complications surrounding her struggle.

Satrapi's journey to discovering her identity begins with her childhood in war- torn Iran, which is filled with mixed messages. In the section *Veil*, Marji, the central character observes:

"This was in 1980. In 1979 a Revolution took place. It was later called 'The Islamic Revolution'. Then came 1980: the year it became obligatory to wear the veil at school.

Wear this!

We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to.

It's too hot out!

Ooh! I'm the monster of darkness.

And also because the year before, in 1979, we were in a French non-religious school, where boys and girls were together. And then suddenly in 1980...'

All bilingual schools must be closed down! They are symbols of capitalism and of decadence.

We found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends"

During the transition between regimes, the country's propaganda switches radically. While before the revolution's success the king is said to have been chosen by God, as cited in Marji's schoolbook, the teacher later tells the students to rip the picture out of their books. When Marji tries to address the change of opinion, no one tries to explain the change or even admit to it, she is simply punished. This action not only causes Marji to question what she believes, but also the authority of a school that is so quick to change its beliefs according to the cultural opinion

In another scene from the novel, Marji and readers discover that "former revolutionaries became the sworn enemies of the republic" as those captured and tortured during the revolution and then celebrated after the rebel's victory are then threatened and killed by the government they fought to establish.

It's Mohsen, he's been found dead, drowned.

Where?

In his bath tub!

Murderers....!

'my mother was right to believe it was murder...when they found his body, only his head was underwater. After Mohsen, it was Siamak's turn.

Is this Siamak Jari's house?

Yes!!

We are the deliverers of divine justice

His sister was executed in his place. Siamak and his family crossed the border hidden among a flock of sheep. And that is how all the former revolutionaries became the sworn enemies of the republic Receiving these conflicting messages

from her government causes Marji to not only lose any feeling of security that she had after the revolution but also cause her to be confused about what kind of person or what kind of actions are acceptable in her country and culture. If those who are lauded and praised as heroes one day are then executed on the next, how does one know how to act and what to believe in these circumstances?

As if the mixed messages from her country were not enough, Marji also receives many conflicting messages from her own family. While her parents profess to be liberal and often disagree with the fundamentalist government, their action sometimes proves otherwise. Early in the book, Marji is distraught when her father reveals the truth about Mehri's true social status (being the maid) to the neighbour's son with whom Mehri had fallen in love.

"Marji...you must understand that their love was impossible.

Why is that?

Because in this country you must stay within your own social class.

But is it her fault that she was born where she was born??? Dad, are you for or against social classes?"

When Marji's father says that "their love was impossible" because of their social classes, Marji becomes upset and confused, wondering why her proclaimed Marxist father would adhere to the rules of social classes. Later in the novel, Marji sees her parents criticizing some neighbours who suddenly adhere to the fundamentalist government while only a few weeks ago were dressing and behaving in a much more liberal way. When Marji tries to join in on her parents disapproving rant, however her mother tells her that like her phony neighbours, she must also lie about who she is and say that she prays multiple times a day

"Marji...if anyone ever asks you what you do during the day say you pray, you understand?? Ok....

Both of these instances definitely cause confusion for Marji, who cannot even truly rely on her parents to be consistent with their beliefs. Their words may say one thing, but some of their actions say something different. Marji's parents obviously have a huge influence on her, as all parents do with their children. Consequently the conflicting messages from them do the most damage. After that she says her friends she prays ten or eleven times a day. This reaction shows how little Marji understands her parents, conflicting messages and the motives behind their action.

Marji's life is full of conflicting messages from the beginning. Her government and even her own parents send mixed messages to her about how to act and what to believe and Marji struggles to figure out what it all means for her and for the person she is to become. With all these mixed messages how does she know who is right and who is wrong? Thus Marji has no model to follow when it comes to constructing her identity.

When Marji moves to Austria in the second half of the novel, she does so to escape the horrors of war in her home country. However she still has a fight coming in terms of establishing her own identity. In order to be accepted into her new environment, Marji has to learn a whole new set of cultural rules that contrast significantly from the cultural rules of her home country, building on her confusion and making it that much harder to construct an identity for herself. Most of these differences revolve around the role of sexuality and the position of women in society. Obviously moving to a different country is bound to result in a little culture shock. However because of the vast differences between her native culture and that of the generalized "west", Marji is confronted with a vast gap between the cultural values, and must choose which of the ideals presented to her will become part of her own ideology

From the very beginning of her stay in Austria, Marji has to learn to adapt to her new surroundings. Upon meeting her roommate at the school, Marji is immediately confronted with a huge barrier: language. Her roommate speaks German, and Marji can only speak Persian and French. The roommates can only stare at each other with a nervous smile as they contemplate how they will be able to live together if they cannot communicate. This scene is just an introduction to the difficulty Marji will have adjusting to this new country and culture in this section of this novel. This small language barrier stands as a literal expression of the cultural barrier that Marji feels while adjusting to life in Austria.

Marji's first lesson of this new culture begins when she meets an eccentric group of people that will later become her friends at the French school. When she meets the punky Momo, she learns that he greets people "in his own way" by kissing them on the mouth. Momo's greeting while simple and meaningless to him, was a huge moment for Marji and in fact begins her lesson on the differences between Iran and Western world's view on sexuality and public physical contact. This lesson is continued at Marji's friend Julie's party. In describing the party, Marji is instantly confused by the differences between parties in Iran and parties in Vienna. She says that while parties in Iran were full of people eating and dancing, parties in Vienna mostly comprised of people smocking, kissing and simply lying around. Later she physically and mentally shocked when she discovers her friend having intercourse with her boyfriend and later when she sees both of them walk into the living room half naked. Satrapi writes that this moment was when she finally understood "the meaning of the sexual revolution" and that it was her "first big step toward assimilating into Western culture"

Thus begins Marji's acceptance and integration into the Western culture. As Marji gets involved in western life and society, her inner conversation is reflected by her outer transformation. Not only is her body changing in ways that she cannot control, but she is also deliberately changing her appearance to coincide with her new Westernized belief system. She cuts her hair and actually uses safety pins as jewelry in an effort to look more "punk". Her friends love her new look, But Marji feels as if she is betraying her parents, her country, and her roots. A feeling of identity crisis she experienced at this moment.

"I felt so guilty that whenever there was news about Iran, I changed the channel. It was too unbearable.' I wanted to forget everything, to make my past disappear, but my unconscious caught up with me. I even managed to deny my nationality.'

Marji's assimilation into Western culture and the guilt that follows it sheds insight into the identity conflict with which she is still struggling. During these days, She constantly remember her grandmother's words : "Always keep your dignity and be true to yourself" .Now she not only has to deal with the mixed messages of her parents and country, but also must consider the influence of the Western society and what kind of ideals that world supports. As her stay in Austria continues, she consciously adapts the western way of life, cutting herself off from her home country and their values. She takes on the identity of a Western woman who is both empowered and sexually liberated. This culminates at the anarchist's party where despite her early anxiety; Marji eventually believes herself to be ready to "lose her innocence" and willingly goes to bed with her current boyfriend. It is at this point that Marjane truly separates herself from her former culture.

When she then returns to Iran, Marji's Western identity is rejected by both her government and community. Her liberal beliefs about women are condemned by her conservative government at multiple times and even her friends denounce her western ideas about sexuality.

Compared to the ideals of Western society, Marji's friends are still conservative when it comes to sexual behavior, despite their opposition to the regime. These women may be Westernized on the outside, but inside they still hold the traditionalist views more common to their country.

From this point on, Marji is not only in a constant struggle with her government because of what she believes and how she wants to live her life. Many times she is rebuked or even arrested simply because she ignored the rules or spoke her mind. While she is dating with Reza, she is taken to the committee because she was out in public with a man she was not related to. Later, after speaking her mind at school about women's rights, she is summoned by the Islamic Commission with an unknown fate. Along with her fight with the government for freedom, Marji also has to struggle for acceptance from the people around her. Even though most people she comes in contact with are not fundamentalists, they are whole-hearted believers in the regime. Despite the women's shared opposition to the regime, some still carried traditionalist views that clashed with the ideals Marji had gained from her stay in Austria. However, it is those Western ideals that Marji has finally chosen to believe and defend. It is perhaps these instances that eventually drive Marji to move back to France where her Western ideals are more at home.

Marji's story, while different than the typical coming of age story, is nonetheless a familiar story of identity search. Despite all the conflicting influences that plague her during her adolescence, she is still at her core searching for the person she wants to be. Every teenager in the world has to go through this journey of self-discovery, and Marji is no exception. She wades through the mixed messages of her government and parents, adjusts to the culture shock of moving to a different country, and then adjusts once again to the culture of her home country, all the while deciding which values and ideals will become her own.

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