The Violation of Human Rights in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*

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A critical analysis of the official Iranian accusations against *Persepolis* would not persuade the officials of their impasse. Rather, there would be a risk that such an analysis might relegate *Persepolis* to the condition of some memoirs published by Iranian exiles in the West: that of contributing to the propaganda in favour of imposing regime change on Iran by ever more destructive sanctions or the threat of military force.¹ I hope that in


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confronting those accusations with a discussion of the text of *Persepolis*, one might avoid that risk. An invasion would in fact fuel the nationalistic patriotism of many exiled Iranians and send them home to fight for their country. One might, however, argue to a Western readership in favour of a deeper grasp of the political and aesthetic complexities of Satrapi’s work. For that, a critique of the Iranian charges is a means to an end.

*Persepolis* is political not only because it critically represents actions of national and international powers and the realities of war, but also because one of its main issues is that of the question of rights. Human rights, which emerge on the world political scene with the late eighteenth-century Declarations, are not the property of a type of regime; they belong to the democratic sensibility present in all people in the modern world. They are the central motivation for the street demonstrations in Iran, which began in June 2009, when the results of the presidential elections were contested and violations of the peoples’ vote and their freedom of expression were alleged. As long as there are no lasting improvements in human rights in Iran, *Persepolis* can still be experienced by today’s public in the manner of a powerful negative dialectic; a conflict with no foreseeable resolution, brought to the surface of discourse and portrayed with the energetic immediacy of a modern artistic work.

administration to attack countries like Iran and Iraq. He writes: “Nafisi portrays Iran as a land where crazed (clergy) men are abusing virgin houris who are impatiently reading Lolita while waiting to be liberated by George W. Bush and his Christian Crusaders.” see Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 7.

On the question of democratic sensibility in *Persepolis*, see Nima Naghibi and Andrew O’Malley, “Estranging the Familiar: ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Satrapi’s *Persepolis* 1,” *English Studies in Canada*, 31:2-3 (2005), 223–48. What Naghibi and O’Malley do not mention in their essay is the Iranian origin of the democratic sensibility, the appeal for human rights, represented by the narrating character Marjane throughout *Persepolis*, and identified with the work’s powerful democratic critique of the totalitarian regime ruling Iran. They do not mention that the child Marjane’s precocious political awareness is a product of her parents’ and grandmother’s teaching, and, in short, that Iran has its own indigenous tradition of democratic thinking. Thus, they see the narrative as shaped from start to finish by a “contrapuntal relationship between East and West,” exaggerating the “Western” origin of all that is modern, secular (or not Muslim), and dissident, whereas Marjane’s family clearly represents that part of the population which espouses those qualities as Iranians, and as people who do not mind if modernisation, secularity, or dissidence can be furthered by an equally Iranian tradition of openness to the outside—including, when desirable, the “West.”
The perspective of Claude Lefort’s analysis of rights changes our viewpoint on the traditional scholarly question of the autobiographer’s truth claim. Our attention shifts from the democratic reader’s suspicion that the writer may be lying, to the writing subject’s right to tell his or her own story, a story hitherto suppressed. The right to freedom of speech, to self-expression in the public space, actually founds democracy as one of its basic principles. Autobiographical writing constitutes an important exercise of that democratic right, and the political representation of the self in *Persepolis* dramatically elicits the social and political differences between the Western and the Iranian regimes, through their divergent responses to this work.

As far as I have been able to establish, no reviewer in the West has cast suspicion on any of Satrapi’s statements, and from my own reading and personal experience, I would, like many Iranian clandestine readers of the work, endorse that general attitude of trust, which seems appropriate, given such a work’s quality of témoignage, written in exile for readers living in an open society, about life in a regime of severe censorship. Strictly speaking, it is not impossible that a writer in that situation might depart from factual accuracy, but the breaking of a silence probably incites Western readers to give the exiled writer the benefit of the doubt. Besides, the veracity in question here does not concern solely external facts. Satrapi reports in her *Cahier du Monde* interview, that by the time she composed the last volume of *Persepolis*, what mattered for her was to maintain her subjective viewpoint.

3 For an interesting discussion of truth claims within the narrative of *Persepolis*, see Mélanie Carrier (“*Persepolis* et les révolutions de Marjane Satrapi”), who, when analysing the status of the representing/represented subject in *Persepolis*, distinguishes the unreliable subjectivity of the child Marjane’s discourse when it is not authenticated by what adults have told her from occasions when what she tells other children is so authenticated. The irony is that the other children do not believe what she tells them in either case (*Belphégor: Littérature populaire et culture médiatique*, 4:1 (2004), 1–12. This is indeed important in its reverberations in the case of adult autobiography, whose truth claim is also customarily treated as unreliable. But Carrier’s point is problematic because she does not take account of the fact that every aspect of *Persepolis*, including the little girl’s stories, is controlled not by the “narratrice enfant” but by the adult narrator and behind the figure of the narrator, the writer Satrapi herself.

4 The only negative criticism I have encountered in reviews is that of the Iranian exile writer Gelareh Asayesh; she writes that Satrapi shows “a certain narrowness of perspective, and occasional lapses into historical myopia.” See “Pictures from the Revolution,” *St. Petersburg Times* (29 June 2003). http://www.lexis.com (accessed 5 October 2006).
through the identity of the artist as the central character;\(^5\) that was a condition of her readers’ ability to identify with Iranians’ fear of invasion. It follows that while no one can confirm or refute Satrapi’s singular perspective on Iranian reality, we can uphold her right to represent her perspective in her own way in the public space—in this case, a transnational democratic space.\(^6\)

In contrast to that trusting acceptance of this work in the West, the Iranian regime’s official denunciation of *Persepolis* (the film and by extension, the book) starkly represents the totalitarian assumption that any subjective departure from the regime’s own discourse can only be dishonest, since that official discourse holds that the inner reality of every subject coincides perfectly with it. A conservative Iranian film critic, Hussein Moazzezinia, in a public debate after the screening of the movie, criticised the work, denouncing Satrapi’s subjectivity as inherently mendacious: “Satrapi was selective in presenting her narrative. She omitted certain facts, which at times makes her film unreliable and dishonest.”\(^7\)

The political subject’s claim to have rights, freedoms, which include dissidence in democratic societies, is exactly what the regime condemns, thereby defining itself as totalitarian. The above-mentioned descriptions,

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6. A recent innovation in research on autobiography is the substitute term *autofiction* which would in principle liberate researchers from the chore of verifying the writer’s facts. Gillian Whitlock, in *Soft Weapons*, commits her thoughtful study of life writing by writers from the Middle East to the notion of autofiction through her use of the term *avatar* (meaning the autobiographical narratee), in its “virtual reality” sense of an icon, which can be moved freely with no constraints of veracity. See Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). The term *autofiction* has the advantage of abolishing the often-antipathetic suspicion that the writer may have “lied.” Whitlock thus differs radically from the aesthetic of the anthropologist-autobiographer Michel Leiris, whose moral and political *engagement* as a writer entails a requirement “not to misuse language,” that is, to make his writing “always the truth,” the very “negation of a novel.” Then writing could be action, striving against oppression for “the emancipation of all humans,” without which the individual could not achieve emancipation for himself. See “De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie,” preface to the 2nd ed. of *L’Age d’homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 15–24. In this regard also, I refer to Felicity Baker’s critique of the scholarly tendency to devalue the truth claim, in “Autobiography as Non-Fiction,” 141–59.
derived from Claude Lefort’s formulation of totalitarianism and democracy, help me to frame the present article theoretically and analytically. Thus, this article on *Persepolis* attempts to approach the work as a whole from the perspective of the question of human rights, whose violation dominates all four volumes, by a consideration of critics’ responses to the book or the film, notably those of the Iranian critics, in whose comments we see a clear denial of the issue of rights. In what follows, I shall discuss aspects of *Persepolis*’s critical reception with reference either to the comic or to its cinematic adaptation, because, whereas I have no records of Iranian criticisms of the comic, they are not lacking for the film.8

The Iranian Charges (i): Class Prejudice

Satrapi’s remark in the *Cahier du Monde* interview that she was not interested in politics, but that politics was interested in her may refer to the impact of political events on her entire life, or to the Iranian government’s banning of *Persepolis* and condemnation of the 2007 film version of it, or both those things.9 Of course, there is no reason why commentaries on *Persepolis* should correspond to Satrapi’s own account of her creative process, but they have often diverged widely from it for manifestly political reasons, for example, in denial of the work’s political force. Mahmud Husseinizad, the program production director of the Iranian State-run Channel Three, even asserts that “the film is not political”: it just happens “to have been made at a politically sensitive juncture,” referring presumably to the aftermath of 11 September 2001.10 The experienced and perceptive London film critic, Derek Malcolm, also writes in *Evening Standard*: “But it is not so much a political film–even if it dares more in that direction than you might expect–as a wonderfully accurate-seeming portrait of growing up within the tide of history.”11 Malcolm makes an identical point to that of Husseinizad: the film


is not really political. The ways in which Husseinizad and Malcolm qualify their comments to the effect that *Persepolis* is not political suggest that they really think that the work is political in a certain way, but in a different sense from their own statements. Satrapi herself says that she is not a political commentator;\(^{12}\) in this she resembles many other artists, for instance Orhan Pamuk, who strongly object to the label of political writer. She is a political artist however, in Lefort’s sense of a subject who differs, who does not conform exactly to the official discourse of power politics. In the case in point, “political film” and “portrait in history” are not, as Malcolm seems to imply, two different and separable categories. *Persepolis* represents the artist’s life through the traumatic impact on her of political events.

Describing *Persepolis* as a political work, I do not refer to partisan politics. In no way does Satrapi endorse Western policies (as some Iranian exiles do), which could favor an eventual invasion of Iran or other destructive interventions. The work represents Iranian reality as universally human, and Iranian social facts as inherently political—including that important dimension of reality, which is fantasy, individual, or collective. It makes a major political statement, portraying simultaneously an indestructible love of country and the pain of living under unliveable conditions; the egalitarian relationships and the democratic love of freedom of men and women enduring forms of hardship maintained by the governing regime. Satrapi’s work attempts to foster in a Western public a questioning attitude about their own notions of Iranian identity, and about the history and culture of a nation that has been scandalously misconstrued in the West. She undertakes to enlighten the West from a woman’s viewpoint, and to add her woman’s voice to the call for change in Iran.

Satrapi’s remarkable achievement, on a first level, resides in the destruction of the Western stereotype of Iranians as “terrorists and fanatics.”\(^{13}\) “People have stopped thinking of us as human beings,” she said in an interview; if *Persepolis*

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\(^{13}\) In his review of *Persepolis* the movie, Matt Bochenski writes that Satrapi shows us the unseen side of Iran: “Satrapi has taken a black-and-white issue and invested it with new colour. The Iran that we see everyday—the ‘axis of evil,’ the terrorist state—is not the Iran of Iranian people.” See “Persepolis Review,” *Little White Lies: Truth and Movies*, Matt Bochenski, issue 16, March/April 2008, 9.
has a political point, it is just that “a human being is a human being.”

That is indeed a political point; the reduction of some humans (“Iranians” in the minds of so many Westerners; “women,” or “homosexuals,” in the Islamist regime) to a position of inferiority or exclusion is bound to be analyzed in terms of political power. Breaking the spell of the stereotype to show the humanity of Iranians’ lives is no superficial success. In the perception of Western readers and spectators, the comic’s drawings of the little girl growing into womanhood transform Iranians from the status of objects of manipulative propaganda to that of active subjects engaged in the lifelong process of becoming human, which is what all humans are. Satrapi suggests that the very images of the comic assist that transnational achievement for human rights: “drawing is abstraction,” which makes identification possible, she says. Conversely, Western political propaganda, through the antipathetic reduction which creates the negative stereotype (“terrorist,” for example), had made it impossible. That breakthrough corresponds to the work’s cognitive function, which actually reaches the minds of readers by undoing their prejudiced perceptions. The almost Brechtian aesthetic of the comic-book form of *Persepolis* enables the artist to address us seemingly directly, maintaining a playful spirit even when representing appalling events.

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15 The partly Kenyan Barack Obama’s electoral victory was said to attest the humanity of Kenyans: The Kenyan newspaper, *Daily Nation*, referred to the political force of that recognition of black people’s humanity (*Le Monde*, 8 November 2008). There could be no more direct confirmation of the political significance of Satrapi’s comment that her only political point is that “a human being is a human being.” Applebaum, “Curtain Up,” 27.
17 Hamid Dabashi writes that the expression “Iranian terrorists” is almost entirely fictional: the action which could warrant creating that label was the hostage taking in the US embassy in 1979—in fact, a symbolic action by a group of militant students, members of the new postrevolutionary religious regime, to warn the United States against intervention. Dabashi writes “On November 4, 1979, a group of militant students took American diplomats hostage in their own embassy. Thus began 444 days of crisis—public humiliation for the United States, accompanied by a possible forceful retaliation by the Americans if diplomacy could not resolve the stalemate. [. . .] Khomeini probably did not know about the plan for or approve this takeover, but once it happened it was a godsend to him. The cunning revolutionary leader took full and immediate advantage of it. At a critical moment the students in the U.S. embassy called themselves ‘Students following the Line of the Imam,’ and Khomeini endorsed their actions. For days, weeks, and months, massive anti-American demonstrations were staged in front of the embassy. [...] President Carter was humiliated, day after excruciating day.” Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted*, 165–66.
The caricatural aspect of most comics, even found in Spiegelman’s *Maus*, leaves room for differences of degree and style, which can signify different affections or value judgments, provoking sympathy or antipathy.\(^{18}\) The nature of the drawings aids identification only in the case of the sympathetic characters (Marjane, her family and friends, and so on); when Satrapi draws the mullahs or the Guardians of the Revolution, whose task—that of overseeing the “moral purity” of the citizens—gives them the power of life and death, her caricatures are as savage as the Western propaganda which has labelled all Iranians terrorists. *Persepolis* demolishes the stereotype of ordinary Iranians, but retains that of certain officials of the regime. This latter differentiation probably helped to provoke official condemnation of the film in Iran, but in terms that misrepresent it. Mahmud Husseinizad describes the differentiation in the following way:

Satrapi has skillfully interwoven facets of her own imagination in the film. Thus it can be observed that she has depicted people from her own social class as white and other social classes have been portrayed as being dark, of uniform social appearance, and unattractive.\(^{19}\)

Husseinizad radically displaces Satrapi’s differentiation of degrees of caricature, misrepresenting its effect; we cannot disagree about the skill with which the artist shows us how her imagination interacts with history. In *Persepolis*, the representation of class in Iranian society is very largely limited, inexorably, to the middle class, to which the first-person subject belongs. But a few members of Iran’s poor have a place in *Persepolis*; they are drawn no less sympathetically than its middle-class characters, and are certainly not “darker” or less attractive than these:

\(^{18}\)Ari Folman’s 2008 antiwar film *Waltz with Bashir* modifies that statement (graphics by David Polonsky, and published in February 2009 as a comic book). Folman has said (in audience discussion, London Film Festival, 24 October 2008) that the Israeli soldiers are drawn in a manner intended to make it impossible to imagine them as heroes. The figures are not caricatures, either; they represent very young men dominated by fear.

\(^{19}\)“*Persepolis* is more harmful than 300.”

\(^{20}\)For the present article I make use of the translation of the original four-volume comic book, which was published in Paris by L’Association from 2000 to 2004. The English translation appeared in two volumes; the first part was translated by Mattias Ripa in 2003 and the second part by Blake Ferris in 2004, both New York: Pantheon. Quotations in English adopt the translators’ versions. However, I bring these closer to the French when necessary.
for instance, Mehri, the illiterate teenaged housemaid, and Madame Nassrine, the cleaner.20

In the strip entitled “The letter” (Volume One) ten-year-old Marjane decides to undermine class inequality in the family home by fostering Mehri’s dream: she has fallen for a youth seen standing at a neighboring window. Marjane’s complicity in the secret exchange of letters (she writes Mehri’s for her) comes to light when the boy learns Mehri’s humble status. He retreats; to express her own anger against the class system and to rescue Mehri from her grief, Marjane resolves, against parental orders, that they both join the next day’s demonstration. This turns out to be Black Friday, when many are killed in another part of the city. Returning home after seeing violence at close hand, both girls are slapped equally hard by the anxious, furious mother.21

In the strip “The key,” (Volume One) Madame Nassrine shows Marjane and her mother a gold-colored plastic key and tells them it has been given to her twelve-year-old son to open the way to heaven and a better life if he is lucky enough to die in the war. The government’s crudely classist key campaign targeted only underprivileged, potentially gullible young boys.22 A young cousin of Marjane, whose military service has coincided with the outbreak of war, describes the daily coachloads of singing children arriving at the battlefields, intoxicated with false promises of eternal sexual bliss, who go straight to their death. Even Madame Nassrine, one of the religious poor, seems to have lost her faith as a result of the authoritarian regime’s

21 Referring to a rumour that Israeli soldiers perpetrated the butchery, Satrapi concludes: “But in fact it was really our own who had attacked us” above an image of the two socially unequal girls smarting from the dark sore patches on their cheeks.

22 On the strip’s final page, there are two contiguous rhyming images of entry to the sexual heaven, which explode the illusion of the key. In the larger frame, boys deluded by the hope of an erotic paradise are bombed to death. In the other one, luckier twelve-to fourteen-year-olds, Marjane among them, go wild at their first rave party. The gyrating, leaping bodies on the dance floor echo the flailing bodies of the dying boys on the field of battle. Marjane even apes the poor in a sweater full of holes (knitted by her mother for the occasion) with a chain of key-shaped nails around her neck. Patricia Storace describes these two frames, where real deaths seem to be mimed by the “aestheticized violence of punk fashion” as “one of her most effective juxtapositions of images.” Patricia Storace, “A Double Life in Black and White,” The New York Review of Books, 52: 6 (7 April 2005), 41.
misuse of religious and spiritual beliefs: “All my life, I’ve been faithful to religion. If it’s come to this . . . well, I can’t believe in anything anymore.” Marjane’s mother takes Madame Nassrine comfortingly in her arms and later convinces the boy that the promise of the key is make-believe. The class structure remains stable, but the aspect of antagonism has gone elsewhere.

Furthermore, the comfortably-off people in Vienna, for whom Marjane shows no respect, are drawn as of fair complexion and often unattractive (Volume Two). So Husseinizad’s idea of a light-dark, positive-negative classist opposition in Persepolis is not borne out by observation of the text and drawings. He abuses class ascription in order to elide what Satrapi clearly shows: that the Islamic regime effectively reverses the cross-class power relations on certain levels; the Guardians of the Revolution, who throughout Persepolis patrol the streets and sporadically raid people’s homes, spreading terror by fanatical application of religious rules, exercise great power with little or no training, unchecked by legal controls and impervious to people’s rights. Husseinizad’s reference to class misrepresents Satrapi’s depiction of class. His incrimination by class ascription of Satrapi’s viewpoint in Persepolis takes the official charges into a pseudo-Marxist discourse characteristic of the regime since 1979. Satrapi does represent class difference—the radical realism of the comic genre would be completely sacrificed if she did not. Her penetrating analysis of social complexities is exemplified by the strip “The wine” (Volume One). The festive title carries a heavy burden of irony. The mere smell of alcohol on Ebi’s breath is enough to put him in danger. Near the end of this strip, Ebi’s car, with Marjane and her family inside, is stopped by Revolutionary Guards on their way back from a party. Ebi is asked to breathe out and because his breath smells of wine, the Guardians follow his car in their patrol car. Upon reaching home, the women manage by lying to go upstairs ahead of Ebi and the Guardians. They hastily throw all their stored wine down the lavatory. Satrapi dedicates three pages to this ordeal, ending it with Ebi arriving upstairs, after having bribed the young man, and exclaiming: “Their faith has nothing to do with ideology! A few bills were all he needed to forget the whole thing!!” The strip simultaneously shows, on the one hand, the manipulativeness of the middle-class characters, their exploitation of their superior skills when confronted by two ignorant youths, and on the other, the immediate awakening of pity in the
two youths as soon as the grandmother appeals to them as a diabetic needing her medication. When two very young Guardians are arresting Marjane’s family, the grandmother’s cunning initially plays on the youths’ feelings by claiming she has diabetes so that she can run upstairs and dispose of all their alcohol, leaving the father to cope with the Guardians’ determination to raid the house. The mitigating factor which lessens the guilt of Marjane’s family in this case is that the essentially kind-hearted, ignorant youths hold at that moment the power of life and death over the middle-class characters, while at the same time Satrapi’s representation of the poor and uneducated shows their humanity; it cannot, even here, be called negative or even unattractive.

Another strip “The passport” (Volume One) dramatizes a more radical reversal of a power relationship. Marjane’s aunt, the wife of her uncle Taher who urgently needs to travel to undergo a life-saving operation, has to place his life in the hands of their former window cleaner, now the hospital director, an unqualified man now possessing the authority to certify the need for a passport or not (the borders were closed between 1980 and 1983 and only very sick people were allowed to leave the country).\(^2\) He tells the distraught wife that the issue is in God’s hands. Permission is granted, but too late. In this strip, we might call the representation of class tensions “unattractive,” both in Husseinizad’s sense (that the wife doubtless finds it wrong that her husband’s life is in the hands of their former window cleaner), and also in a further analysis, that a certain reversal of the power hierarchy, true as it may be to revolutionary theory, certainly does not reduce the injustice of traditional class structures. That irony, tragic for the grieving family, perhaps finds its farcical equivalent in the irony of the aforementioned story of the family’s destruction of all its alcohol just when they most needed a drink. Such truthful anecdotes give *Persepolis* an educational function for all the classes, which may explain the official critics’ silence about its portrayal of Iran’s ruling caste of mullahs.

In the strip “The makeup” (Volume Two) Marjane is exploiting her superior position to escape arrest. The mitigating factor of danger to her own life

\(^2\) Accentuated social divisions and loss of contact across different social groups stress the discontinuity created by the new regime. Ordinary people start to change religious-political colour with the change of regime; for example, the very “Westernised” neighbours of Marjane’s family transform themselves into fundamentalists, as this is the way—the only way—to achieve advancement within the restricted social framework.
makes Marjane cruelly outwit her class “inferior” without exonerating herself. The focus on the middle class and the intelligentsia in *Persepolis* does not imply superiority as Husseinizad suggests. This story exposes the budding intellectual’s own moral fallibility. As the novelist J. M. Coetzee has observed, an absolutist regime which imposes a dehumanising social system makes everybody crude, somehow less than human; even artists.\(^{24}\) In interviews, when asked why she included the story in question, she replies that she had a reason; and although she considers herself a very nice person, she wanted to show that in a situation of fear, no one is exempt from evil.\(^{25}\)

This story faces the reader with the spectacle of Marjane gravely compromising her integrity. On a summer day in Tehran, Marjane and her boyfriend Reza have a rendezvous in front of a shopping center. To surprise Reza, who has complained about her inelegance and unadorned face, she arrives heavily made-up. While waiting she sees a car full of Revolutionary Guards arriving, followed by a van; a raid is imminent. As her flashy lipstick makes arrest inevitable, an instant decision is needed for survival. Spotting a man on the steps of the shopping center, she decides to report him to the Guardians before they notice her makeup. At this moment of decision, Satrapi depicts a devilish Marjane, projecting blame and tracking her prey. Accusing the man of saying something indecent to her, Marjane has him arrested.\(^{26}\) She appeals successfully to the Guardians’ Islamist dogma of “protecting the woman,” to the point where they forget their misogyny, their class resentment, their duty of morality control—her false charge against the man even blinds them to her makeup.\(^{27}\) There is no classism here, but a critical realism. In the frames depicting the man’s arrest, which occupy a full page, Marjane shows herself


\(^{26}\)Iran’s citizens’ lives are at the mercy of the lawless “Guardians of the Revolution,” who arrest Marjane’s scapegoat without so much as asking her to sign a written statement of her accusation, or even to give them her name.

\(^{27}\)A recently-formed committee of the United Nations eliminates all reference to the claim that Sharia law serves “to protect women.” Malka Marcovich comments on this in “Quand l’ONU déraille” in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (22 March–1 April 2009), 35.
coldly indifferent to the pleas of the innocent man, even insisting she is in the right, asking him how he dares to look her in the eye and lie to her. The penultimate frame of this strip depicts a Guardian pushing the protesting man into the van as he calls upon his mother and the Qur’an to attest his innocence; here Marjane turns her face away, momentarily ashamed of what she has done. But Satrapi does not excuse Marjane’s action. She shows her in the last frame, in profile, breathing in relief, without remorse. The rest of the strip shows a momentary remorse when she tells Reza what she has done and he says that the wronged man might even be put to death if the Guardians are in an ugly mood, but she cheers up, later laughingly telling her story to her grandmother, who shocks her with an outright condemnation for her despicable behavior and for deserting her family’s honorable history and her own integrity. Reminding Marjane that the blood of her grandfather and uncle flows in her veins, she leaves her alone to reflect. The strip concludes on an image of Marjane without makeup, looking at herself in a mirror, absorbing the condemnation by a grandmother who has never disapproved of her before. That reduction of the self by shame for endangering another can perhaps strike the reader as discrediting Husseinizad’s accusation that the film (and by extension, the comic book) is classist.

Husseinizad’s denunciation of Persepolis for the alleged crime of classism seems to serve the purpose of masking the work’s far more serious denunciation of the mullahs’ regime for its distortion of the individual’s moral life.

While we join Satrapi in condemning Marjane’s terrible action as such, which is not obliterated by her later remorse, we observe that the ambient violence has not left her intact. She has partially internalized it and, in a desperate moment, which may be a life-or-death alternative, she decides to save her own life at the cost of someone else’s. As long as she is still living in the consciousness of the danger she is in, she does not care about the other’s life.28 One cannot fail to observe the symmetry created across Persepolis by this story of 1989 and a moment of the childhood story of

1979 in Volume One, “The party”; the milieu of political evil conditions every moment of both stories. The child Marjane, sharing the general jubilation at the abdication of the Shah, sets out with some friends on a project of violent retribution against another child whose father had killed “millions of people.” Her mother intercepts the three small bullies, her daughter and two others bent on punishing the small boy; she explains that he is not responsible for his father’s crime, and prompts Marjane to question her own moral assumptions, suggesting the possibility of forgiving the boy when he echoes his father’s assertion that he did not kill people, only communists. The episode illustrates the circulation of guilt and accusation through a society that has suffered too much evil. We also see how political violence slips into the sadistic possibility of even a decently raised child, one who already lives by moral principles, but whose immaturity exposes her dangerously to the temptations of her own sense of triumphant power. These two episodes speak to each other across the volumes of *Persepolis*, partially framing the work. Satrapi allows readers to glimpse for themselves their universal vulnerability to authoritarianism. *Persepolis* focuses repeatedly on the inescapable mix of political and emotional experience, for people whose personal lives are, from birth, invaded by politics. That doubtless explains why some artists who enact the political in the public space—whether in their works, in public statements, or in long-term militancy—must refute the opinion that their work belongs to politics.29 Everything about *Persepolis*, from its narrative line to the boldness of the images, indicates the child’s and the artist’s love of truth, justice, and equality under the law. It represents democratic sensibility.

**The Iranian Charges (ii): Islamophobia**

Hostility to Muslims, or “Islamophobia,” has become quite common in Western democracies, at least partly an effect of the political propaganda of those in power to “justify” the “war on terror.” Certainly, *Persepolis* protests

29While preparing this article I have noticed a number of such assertions, for instance, that of Folman saying *Waltz with Bashir* “is not a political film,” and that of Miriam Makeba insisting she knew nothing about politics (interview rebroadcast on BBC Radio Three, in a programme celebrating her life; “World Routes” [13 Dec 2008]). See, in particular, Claude Lefort, “Humanisme et anti-humanisme: Hommage à Salman Rushdie,” *Ecrire: A l’épreuve du politique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1992), 45.
against injustices perpetrated in the name of Islam, in the episodes where it functions as a weapon of political repression, but neither Marjane nor her autobiography can be called Islamophobic. The Muslim religion that we see represented in Persepolis is Marjane’s personal relationship with God. Some individuals in exile from Middle Eastern countries, and even some still at home, may turn away from the religion of their birthplace (even while many Westerners espouse Islam), but Persepolis enacts no such turning away.

The Iranian Government’s charges against the film as “Islamophobic” and “anti-Iranian” are explicitly political. But Persepolis defies that charge by demonstrating the nationalistic patriotism of the protagonist, as both child and adult. The work goes further than that, denouncing America’s role as supplier to both Iran and Iraq of the weapons with which the two nations could destroy each other in the 1980–1988 war. And even further: we read Marjane’s father’s story of the hypocrisy of the British, who, in 1921, installed the first Pahlavi Shah in their own interests, as a kind of negative founding myth of modern Iranian nationalism, whose earliest origins go back to a much more distant past. Persepolis belongs in fact to a small minority of works by exiled Iranians in that it is an anti-Western, pro-Iranian work addressed to the Western public.

Ascribing the label “Islamophobic” to the work disregards the fact that Marjane begins her life deeply religious; she is born a Muslim, she prays, and has a vividly portrayed relationship to God. Although her relationships with God and her faith are turbulent at times, she maintains them. She questions and at times defies the regime’s political Islamism and its interpretation of her religion. Persepolis represents the subjective value of religion; it also reduces Marjane’s own originary faith in Zoroastrian wisdom to one image encompassing the values of social justice, and weighs it against the entire violent action resulting from a state where the religious hierarchy controls political power. Her religious milieu is given as virtually preceding her birth: “I had been born with religion” (Volume One, “The veil”). However, the subjective reference itself always consists in events that provoke in the

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30This condemnation appeared after the screening of the film. However, the same official condemnation can be assumed to apply to the book, which is banned in Iran. See “Rare Iran Screening for Controversial Film Persepolis.”
child a new and precociously critical consciousness of the political-religious milieu; the changes in that milieu dramatize the moments of constitution of the subject. At the same time, her parents’ modern morality permeates the child’s religious sensibility. Religious and political (revolutionary) fervor are one and the same for her. The imposition of the veil is one of the early signs that the people’s real revolutionary hopes have been dashed. The fundamentalists have taken over the pluralist inclusive revolution and replaced the objectives of the “legitimate heirs of the Revolution” (words she attributes to her father) with their own monolithic religious domination. “Islamophobia” is a false accusation that evades the political critique of a regime that does not separate politics and religion, but fills the space of power with religious rules that restrict the freedom of the people.

Marjane’s childhood religion is not democratic, it is predemocratic. Applying Lefort’s terms, her childhood religion might be said to evoke the period before 1789 and the birth of democracy, when the political and the religious are one and when the political ruler rules in the name of the divinity. The political regime which rules Iran from 1980, is also predemocratic. However, its leaders do not resemble the “enlightened despots” of prerevolutionary Europe, as they use theocratic power not to emancipate but to oppress. Marjane’s childhood religion perseveres, in effect, in her adult relationship to her country and to God: both seem to be metaphors for what becomes, in Persepolis, a political commitment to human rights which cannot be negotiated; first and foremost, freedom of thought and speech. Marjane is already on the level of the universal when she writes her sacred book as a child; her religious embrace takes in all humans equally. On the other hand, in her adult life, she puts herself in danger at a university assembly by questioning the political use of religious rules.

Satrapi’s work, far from “anti-Iranian,” is consistently patriotic, with copious reference to Iran’s distinguished and beloved history. The very fact that Satrapi’s motivations for creating Persepolis included fostering sympathy for Iran in French readers’ hearts and then in the West generally, freeing the country from closure in outsiders’ dangerously negative preconceptions, in itself constitutes a powerfully patriotic act, and as such in my understanding a political act. She takes her own and her compatriots’ democratic aspirations
seriously. If we accept Lefort’s assertion that the advocacy and defence of human rights is a fundamental principle of modern democracy, not just a defining quality of a type of regime, but a democratic sensibility, present in all peoples, then in that sense also, although *Persepolis* may be considered critical of the government, it certainly cannot be perceived as anti-Iranian. The desire for a democratic space in Iran clearly undermines the anti-Iranian claim, by expressing a desire for social improvement in her country of origin. The two official charges against *Persepolis*, that the work is Islamophobic and anti-Iranian, serve to deny the manifestly political character of its critique, displacing it on to fictitious objects. The regime holding political power thus seeks to defuse legitimate democratic criticism of certain of its practices—sexual discrimination, abuses of persistent class inequalities, and the permanence of the highest levels of the ruling hierarchy—a situation complicated by the practice of periodic election of the president, a practice democratic insofar as it appears to admit the necessity of disagreement and criticism which are defining features of democracy. *Persepolis* shows that the contradiction on the level of power goes right down through people’s lives: “This disparity made us schizophrenic” (Volume Two, “The socks”).

What the Iranian critics call unreliable and dishonest is, in fact, the work’s subjectivity—fantasy, imagination—that is, the internal enemy, which threatens any regime calling itself a theocracy. It is the extension of subjectivity beyond the self to the larger realm, the society as a whole, which grounds the universal value of *Persepolis* and also makes the Iranian critics find Satrapi’s subjectivity inadmissible.  

The truth of autobiography is always subjective. To query her subjective truth or call her work autofiction may seem an unfitting response to such candid writing. The subjective dimension of Satrapi’s imagination and fantasy questions the theocratic regime and as such could be construed as Islamophobic by the regime; these consciously creative images of Satrapi’s subjective fantasy include, to name a few, Satrapi’s depiction of herself as the last prophet (Volume One, “The veil”), her blasphemous depiction of God and his strong resemblance to Marx (Volume One, “The bicycle”), her preference for Zoroastrian rituals (Volume One, “The veil”), or her depiction of the two gigantic and monstrously terrifying female Guardians of the Revolution as representatives of the Islamic Republic (Volume Two, “Kim Wilde”). However, Marjane is a believing Muslim in her own subjective way, and all those examples are cases where Islam has become corrupted by totalitarian power politics.
The charge of unreliability and dishonesty is the most complex of the official Iranian attacks on the author of *Persepolis*, a much more personal attack than the above imputations of Western ideological bias. This charge actually anathematizes subjectivity as such, since the first-person subject cannot truthfully communicate her perception of real events without showing how her perception is permeated by her fantasy life, or without showing the impact of events on her hopes and dreams. To negate the interpenetration of subjectivity and objectivity is to deny human reality. That anathema has a patently political purpose, since the denial of the right to self-expression belongs to political oppression and inequality, while the subject’s decision to express her protest reaffirms the founding principles of democracy.

But we cannot voice that critique of the Iranian charge of dishonesty without observing that a similar critique can be addressed to the Western neologism *autofiction*, differently rejecting subjective truth. That term, *autofiction*, too, may be regarded as political, insofar as it repeats the subtle erosion of rights that has characterized the Western democracies in recent years, disseminating it through the literary dimension of the culture.

On a different level, the effortless recourse to the concept of *autofiction* could also facilitate Western readers’ abdication from a disciplined suspicion about truth claims. That relaxing of the suspicion which is usually seen as the democratic citizen’s duty, while it may in some cases result from a just awareness of the authentic complexity of the task of a work such as *Persepolis*, must in other cases reflect a facile readiness to adhere to Western stereotypes about Iran and to dub the artist-narrator “like us,” or “Westernized,” echoing the Iranian accusations. So for the sake of justice, as well as in the interest of Westerners’ self-critical vigilance, we need to resist the trend toward the newly minted term *autofiction*. That term could undervalue the truth claim of Satrapi’s affirmation that Iranians are human too, and are therefore not reducible to the Western stereotypes of them as either fanatics or oppressed females. The representation of their humanity shows the susceptibility of all of us to ideological control and false consciousness. The term *autofiction* could prevent critical engagement with the representation of Iranian reality and its significance for the West, as a reminder of the danger of totalitarian
thinking and of the urgent need of a democratic space that allows for freedom of expression and critical reflection on society.

**Conclusion**

*Persepolis* represents the impossibility of Iranians’ lives with the simultaneously comic and tragic force of the comic book. In line with my opening suggestion of a negative dialectic of *Persepolis*, we might suggest that this is one of the works which, through an “aesthetics of perceptual revolution,” transcend the phase of the “lipstick jihad” and renew the political rebellion of 1979 which the world also saw spreading across Iran from June 2009.32 The official Iranian critics react to the impact of *Persepolis* on the perception of all its readers, but concerned only about their local public, they direct almost comically false charges against the work as if anxious to stem an unstoppable flood of protest of which *Persepolis* itself must have been just one of the recent signs. Since 2009 we know that their fears were real.

All the charges made by Iranian critics serve the purpose of evading the real public issues foregrounded by *Persepolis*: religious freedom and human rights, especially the right to free self-expression in the democratic space. If rights are jettisoned by political power, is it not precisely because they are fundamentally political? Thus the impossibility Marjane has to face again and again is shared by the citizens and ultimately by the regime itself, since its need to suppress dissent never ends. The revolt of the people in 2009 against this impossibility has spread awareness. They now know that they are the source of the state’s power, and that their refusal to be obedient can erode that power. As events unfolded in Iran and the people enacted their disobedience in nonviolent protests, the state lost any appearance of legitimacy and its ability to rule except by brute force. *Persepolis* already represents that knowledge in a nascent, or rather in an earlier renascent stage. Such a work is itself nonviolent action.

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