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STRADDLING EAST AND WEST: THE ORIENTALIST GAZE REVERSED IN MARJANE SATRAPI'S *PERSEPOLIS*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the Orientalist gaze reversal in the autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis*, written by Marjane Satrapi. The story of *Persepolis,* divided in two parts, depicts Marji's life since she is 10 years old, in 1979, during the Islamic Revolution, until she is 24 years old. My study is concerned, more specifically, with how the identity construction of the main character in the text, which is Marji herself, works on the reversal of the Western gaze upon her. In each location Marji finds herself, be it in Austria or in Iran, she has to deal with different characteristics and specificities of her own identity in order to reverse the Orientalist gaze. The strategies used by Marji are different according to her location. In some situations, the reversion is constructed by using the Western discourse against the Western institutions or people themselves. In others, individualization and/or heterogeneity are responsible for this reversal. The use of generalizations also works on debunking the Orientalist gaze. Furthermore, some features of the graphic novel medium and the autobiographical genre also collaborate for the gaze reversal.

Key-words: *Persepolis;* Orientalism; identity; graphic novel.

RESUMO

Esta dissertação investiga a reversão do viés Orientalista na *graphic novel* autobiográfica *Persépolis*, de Marjane Satrapi. A história de *Persépolis,* dividida em duas partes, retrata a vida de Marji desde seus 10 anos de idade, em 1979, durante a Revolução Islâmica, até seus 24 anos. Esta pesquisa busca, mais especificamente, analisar como a construção identitária da personagem principal do texto, a própria Marji, reverte o olhar ocidental sobre ela. Em cada lugar em que ela se encontra, seja na Áustria ou no Irã, ela precisa lidar com diferentes características e especificidades de sua própria identidade a fim de reverter o olhar Orientalista. As estratégias utilizadas por Marji variam de acordo com sua localização. Em algumas situações, a reversão é construída se apropriando do discurso ocidental. Em outras, individualização e/ou heterogeneidade são as responsáveis por essa reversão. O uso de generalizações também funciona para descreditar o olhar Orientalista. Além disso, algumas características da *graphic novel* como mídia e do gênero autobiográfico também colaboram para tal reversão.

Palavras-chaves: *Persépolis;* Orientalismo; identidade; *graphic novel*.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The problem to be analyzed in the present investigation is the gaze of the West over the East, constructed as the other – the different, the exotic – in the autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis* (both volumes, *The Story of a Childhood*, 2002, and *The story of a Return*, 2003), written by Marjane Satrapi. The story of *Persepolis,* divided in two parts, depicts Marji's[1] life from the age of 10, in 1979, during the Islamic Revolution, until she is 24 years old and moves to France, where she wrote the book and is still living. In the first part of the book, the child Marji shows her life in Tehran through the eyes of a child. In the second part, the focus is on her life in Austria and on her return to Iran four years later. My study is concerned, more specifically, with the identity construction of the main character in the text, which is Marji herself, an Iranian woman who has lived in the West, and the use of this construction to reverse the Western gaze upon her.

The geographical division that arbitrarily puts the West in a privileged position in relation to the East is based on a historically constructed imperialistic view of the world. According to Edward W. Said, who writes specifically about the Middle East, this binary division[2] allows one group, considered superior, to control and explore an oppressed one. The image of the East created by the Western discourse becomes easy to describe and generalize (Said 3). Thus, when a Middle Eastern person enters the Western world this person suffers the consequence of being identified as the other, that which is constructed as the opposite of an European identity. Hence, by those means, while the West is considered to have the "real" values and morals, the Orient does not have either of these qualities (Said 49).

In the case of *Persepolis*, the use of the graphic novel and autobiography genres has an impact on the construction of the subversion of the imperialistic view upon the Middle Eastern people. The autobiography itself has become a tradition among women who are living in the West after having experienced the life under an oppressive regime (Naghibi and O'Malley 224). The graphic novel genre has been used by women to express their own traumatic experiences (Chute 2).

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[1] In order to avoid confusion, I use the nickname Marji when referring to the character of the graphic novel and Marjane Satrapi, or only Satrapi, in reference to the author.

[2] According to Jacques Derrida, dichotomies are never just oppositions but create a system in which one is always hierarchically superior to the other (Murfin 292).

Because the comic book is considered a minor form of art – the field started to gain importance in the academy in the 1970s but is still often considered irrelevant as a literary genre (Groensteen 4) – many artists use the graphic novel, a dominant genre within comics, in their search for recognition and legitimacy. Joining forces with autobiography, the graphic novel gains strength as a major art and, in the case of *Persepolis*, gains more respect within the potential readers to whom it is directed: the Western public (Elahi 313).

Taking the context of the imperialistic gaze and the graphic novel genre into consideration, this investigation is mainly concerned with the depiction of cultural identity in the East and the West represented in *Persepolis*. As defined by Stuart Hall, identity refers to the meeting point between discourse and discursive practice, and the articulation between both ("Who Needs Identity?" 2). Hence, identity is constituted at both the individual and collective sites. I analyze the identity construction of Marji based on how Satrapi articulates not only Marji's geographical shifts but also her displacement of the very discourses by which Marji is reduced under Orientalist representations of the East/West dichotomy. Angelika Bammer points out, in the introduction to her book *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, that displacement is a new form of cultural identity based on difference, and that it constitutes a characteristic of our time, that of late capitalism. Therefore, this is the sense in which I want to argue that Marji's identity construction can be read in terms of her displacement between the East and the West as a resistance to the gaze of Orientalism. Since identity is neither essential nor unified, rather, according to Hall, it is a constantly changing production ("Who Needs Identity?" 3), it is also modified by the cultural and geographical displacement.

My hypothesis is that, in *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi, by using specific characteristics of the graphic novel genre, shows Marji's perspective of the dichotomy East/West and reverse the Orientalist gaze. For Caren Kaplan, when in situations of displacement and marginalization, people become aware of the split between their overlapping layers of identity, and can travel from one layer to others (357). Kaplan, quoting Chela Sandoval, calls the ability of talking about different cultures from plural perspectives "oppositional consciousness". Hence, I intend to analyze to which extent, in *Persepolis,* "oppositional consciousness" is used strategically to reverse the Orientalist gaze and disturb the East/West dichotomy.

As I shall attempt to argue, Marji's identity is different and more complex than the Orientalist usually depicts any individual from the

Middle East, and, in this case, more specifically, from Iran. Jack G. Shaheen writes in his article "Arab Images in American Comic Books" that Arabs in comics are most often depicted as villains, alternating between "the repulsive terrorist, the sinister sheikh or the rapacious bandit" (123). By contrast, Satrapi reinforces a different perspective of the Arab image, focusing on her own, and her family's private life, showing the multiple perspectives from which an Iranian and the Iranian culture can be depicted. By this process, she constructs an irreducible character who cannot fit into one simple category, as Middle Easterner. This process is similar to the idea Hall proposed for reading Caribbean arts: "They are resources of resistance and identity with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed within the dominant regimes of cinematic and visual representation of the West" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 225).

Satrapi is the first Iranian woman to write a memoir telling the history of her people in a comic book format. Other women have told their history in order to show what it is like to be a woman in an Islamic regime. Indeed, according to Nesta Ramazani, many Iranian women writers have emerged to tell their own history of repression in Iran and in exile. Whereas Ramazani points out that "[i]t is not surprising, therefore, that autobiographical works by Iranian women are rare, that they are a recent phenomenon, and that most of such works have been published not in Iran, but in the West" (278), *Persepolis*, by contrast, develops a point of view that does not try to reinforce the idea of the West as a democratic, better place in comparison to the East (Naghibi and O'Malley 224-5).

1.1 **Historical Context**

As already mentioned, the first volume of *Persepolis* takes place in Iran, during the period of the Islamic Revolution and the takeover of the Islamic regime. Hence, to understand how the Iranian Revolution, which started in 1977, led to the Islamic Republic, it is important to have an overview of the historical moment of this revolution. First of all, the revolution did not start as an Islamic one. Many different groups were unhappy with Pahlavi's regime, the current Shah during the revolution, and wanted to overthrow him – leftists, Marxists, working class, students, and many others, some extremists, others not, they were all against the regime. Even though those groups disagreed in different levels, some wanted a democratic government, others the Islamic Republic, some were more violent, others more

peaceful, some religious, others not, they were all united in the desire of overthrow the Shah, and they made compromises in order to reach this goal.

The Iranian population had many reasons for their discontentment with the Shah. Some of those reasons were: his alignment with countries from the West; his opening of the economy to foreign agribusinesses, which jeopardized the rural works in the countryside; his attempt at controlling the religion; undermining Iranian national identity in favor of cultural imperialism; and "cultivating 'fascism' by propagating shah-worship, racism, Aryanism, and anti-Arabism" (Abrahamian 157). Moreover, Nikki Keddie also states that there were criticisms from some groups against "the failure of the Shah's reforms and particularly the disregard for human rights, enshrined in both the Iranian constitution and the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights" (233). An open letter sent to the Shah also "attacked shortages, inflation, and the squandering of oil, and called for fulfillment of the constitution, release of political prisoners, freedom of the press, and free elections" (Keddie 233).

The women also thickened the mass against the Shah and had an important role during the revolution. They were a relevant group in the demonstrations, and, in many moments, marched ahead of the crowds in order to put the police and the regime in a delicate situation. They also united themselves under the garments of the Islamic religion, even though they were not all religious: "there was a trend among some women students in the 1970s to return to the chador or to adopt a new costume, with large headscarf covering their hair and forehead, a knee length smock, and loose trousers, all in plain neutral colors" (Keddie 235). The intention was to show that they were against the Shah, whose regime was trying to forbid women to wear the chador, and to create an unity among the Iranian women, whose "participation during and after the revolution was multiclass and gave many women a new sense of pride at their ability to organize, take action in the public sphere, and sometimes risk their lives" (Keddie 247).

In the beginning, groups responsible for the manifestations and strikes all over Iran were not concerned about a regime headed by Ayatollah Khomaini. Firstly, because he was in exile, in Iraq and later in France. But, more than that, because in a meeting with Karim Sanjabi, representative of the National Front, one of the groups fighting to overthrow the Shah, Khomaini had agreed in having "Islam and democracy as basic principles" (Keddie 253). However, he did not keep his word. Once Khomaini was back in Iran, in the eve of the referendum

that would decide either or not the Islamic Republic would be installed, he declared:

> 'What the nation needs is an Islamic Republic – not a Democratic Republic nor a Democratic Islamic Republic. Don't use the Western term 'democratic.' Those who call for such a thing don't know anything about Islam.' He later added: 'Islam does not need adjectives such as democratic. Precisely because Islam is everything, it means everything. It is sad for us to add another word near the word Islam, which is perfect' (Abrahamian 163).

Hence, the Islamic Republic won the referendum, and, in 1979, the Islamic constitution was approved. In this, the Supreme Leader was implemented as the major power in the country. Of course this position was occupied by Ayatollah Khomaini, and it was a lifelong position. This moment in the Iranian history marked the beginning of the Islamic Republic.

The constitution, however, had the presence of some democratic clauses and "also incorporated many populist promises" (167). According to Abrahamian, the reason for it was that "the revolution had been carried out not only under the banner of Islam, but also in response to demands for 'liberty, equality, and social justice'. […] Secular groups – especially lawyers and human rights organizations – had played their part in the revolution". More than that, Abrahamian also states that the most important part is: "the revolution itself had been carried out through popular participation from below – through mass meetings, general strikes, and street protests" (167). One of the democratic clauses was the direct and secret election for president every four years, limited to two terms, for instance. In relation to the populist promises, they included "citizens' pensions, unemployment benefits, disability pay, decent housing, medical care, and free secondary as well as primary education". Nevertheless, each of the clauses, laws or promises of the new regime should be established under the agreement of the Islam; hence, the government could forbid or control anything using this argument.

Thus, the regime imposed by the Islamic Republic did not wither as many of the revolutionaries thought it would happen in the next few years after the revolution. One of the events that helped the consolidation of the regime was the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted eight years, from 1980 to 1988. In a first moment, prompted by the invasion

of Iran by the military forces of Saddam Hussein, the war took a turn when the Iranian government stated that they should fight until the end, which means conquering Baghdad. Of course, they did not accomplish that, and the results of the war, for Iran, were “160,000 killed in battle. Others add that another 30,000 died later from war-related wounds, that 16,000 civilians were killed in the bombing of cities, and that more than 39,000 suffered permanent injuries” (Abrahamian 174-5). Hence, as the country was becoming fragile due to the war, the regime had room to consolidate itself in power.

Two other points were crucial to consolidate the Islamic Republic. First, the life in the countryside and for the bazaars – Iranian merchants – had improved during this period. Still according to Abrahamian, expectancy of life increased from 56 years old during the regime of the Shah to 70 years old after the revolution (180). However, the second reason for the consolidation of the regime's power was not that positive for society and it is related to the destruction of the opponents of the regime. “In the twenty-eight months between February 1979 and June 1981, revolutionary courts had executed 497 political opponents. […] In the next four years from June 1981 until June 1985, revolutionary courts executed more than 8,000 opponents”. And finally, after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, in 1988, more than 2,800 prisoners were killed (181). In this sense, using Abrahamian words, “the Islamic Republic consolidated itself by using the stick as well as the carrot,” meaning that what kept the regime in power were the bloodshed, terror, and populist actions (181).

By 1997, a situation that Abrahamian classified as “an untypical miscalcultion” occurred (185). The Guardian Council, a group of ministers who has to approve any person who decides to run for president, accepted the candidacy of Sayyed Muhammad Khatemi, a more liberal (even though this word could not be used, once its connotation is related to the imperialist West for the conservatives, in Iran) candidate. As Khatemi became president, Iran started a timid reopening in terms of external politics and began to restructure some internal issues. For instance, he reestablished diplomatic relations with England, which were suspended since 1979, and visited many other countries in order to start negotiations. Internally, tortures and coercions were banned, and some rules in regards to women rights were softened, such as permitting them to study abroad or wear the headscarf instead of the chador, as well as allowing the use of colorful clothes (Abrahamian 185-90).

However, the speech of the United States President, George W.

Bush, undermined the progress acquired by Khatemi. When Bush, after 9/11 attacks, categorized Iran as part of “the axis of evil,” in January 2002, this speech was used by the most conservative parts of the Iranian government in order to return to the process of closing diplomatic relations with the West and stricting internal rules again. Bush accused Iran of being a threat to world peace, of being in the process of developing nuclear weapons, financing international terrorism, and depriving its people of their freedom (Abrahamian 192). The Iranian conservatives grabbed this chance and won a series of elections, including the presidential run, in 2005, in which Mahmud Ahmadinejad was elected with a discourse that looked back to the revolution and to the principles of Ayatollah Khomeini.

It is in this context that *Persepolis* was translated into English, in 2002, the first volume, and in 2003, the second. Exactly when the West, more specifically the United States and their allies, started a supposed war against terrorism, *Persepolis* became a worldwide known graphic novel by the depiction of the life of an Iranian girl who had seen the war, faced prejudices, and questions the binary divisions of East/West.

1.2 Criticism

In “Estranging the Familiar,” Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley argue that Satrapi juxtaposes oppositions, working with the familiar and the alien in a way that contests “East” and “West” positions. These critics contest the reading, in the West, of *Persepolis* as universal and familiar: “Despite the fact that Satrapi writes about a culture that historically, and recently quite intensively, has circulated as radically other in the West, most of the rave reviews of *Persepolis* stress the familiarity and universality, in other words, the normative or normalizing 'Western-ness' of the text” (226). For Naghibi and O'Malley, Satrapi creates strangeness in opposition to the familiar in order to disrupt this supposed universalization. Still according to them it is in this constant construction of the familiar and unfamiliar that the potential of *Persepolis* flourishes. Those oppositions, according to the authors, are also constructed on the level of form. Thus, they argue that the use of comics as a medium which is considered unimportant on dominant levels allows for contesting the structures of dominance, by camouflaging the subversive messages.

Persepolis differs from other stories about the Islamic Revolution by being written in a comic book format and with a child as a narrator in the first half of the complete volume. Naghibi and O'Malley

point out that, unlike Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Teheran* (another Iranian autobiography that has been well received in the West), *Persepolis* does not accept the so-called Western vision over the East and challenges boundaries between high and low literature, breaking down binarisms that are so current in the Western culture, East/West being one of them. While *Lolita* is considered canonical in the West and depicts Iran as oppressive, *Persepolis* works at a more complex level creating both identification and disidentification throughout the text, and criticizing the dichotomy that splits the world in two. This complexity created by content and form makes it difficult to categorize the text: when classified as autobiography, Middle Eastern history or women's studies, the book becomes distant from the comics genre, considered minor literature. The classification also influences the reader, and when *Persepolis* is classified on a superior level than that of popular literature, this classification foregrounds a dominant reading influenced by the West as a liberal and humanist ideology (228). Yet still according to Naghibi and O'Malley, *Persepolis* gains cultural capital because it is an autobiography that discusses the "unveiling" of the mysterious women's life in Iran and it becomes marketable in the West by the curiosity about the exotic and the possibility of having access to it (241).

Satrapi text blurs the division between good and evil, also as an alternative to blur the division East/West. The article "Frames and Mirrors in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," by Babak Elahi, discusses the use of frame and mirrors, in a dialectical representation which contests both European and Iranian views of Iranian people, as a response to the depiction, by the West, of the people from the Middle East as terrorist and "the axis of evil". Elahi argues that, in order to show another perspective of Middle East, Satrapi depicts the subjectivity and complexity of identities and individual life based on the experience and narrative of her persona (313). By showing the life of ordinary people in Iran, she changes the focus of the Western public and redirects the gaze to a different point of view, blurring the received dichotomies.

The use of a graphic novel for such depiction gives more room for the subversion of current ideologies. According to Elahi, "[t]his is not to say that comic art is non-ideological. Rather, it is to suggest that the conscious use of pictorial panels can expose and thus deconstruct the ideological frame" (314). In a certain way, the pictorial framework can portray traces of identity, like gender and nationality, which can be responsible for carrying ideological elements. In *Persepolis*, Elahi argues, the use of frames creates a complex individual identity which helps to challenge certain ideologies. In this sense, constructing familiar

and unfamiliar frames is one of the strategies we can notice in *Persepolis*. Elahi points out how this is created in a way that allows Marji to "find traditions as rigid as those of Iran" (318) when she is in Europe.

The mirrors, also recurrent in Satrapi's graphic novel, can be understood as a way to depict a fragmented and complex identity. The mirror reappears when Marji experiences some discovery, which leads her to try to recognize herself – in other words, in moments of searching for self-refamiliarization. Elahi observes that in most of the images of Marji looking at a mirror she is frowning or crying. "[M]irrors function in *Persepolis* as sites of subjective fragmentation, instability, and uncertainty" (322). Then, Marji is constantly looking for this recognition of identity, in Europe and in Iran, questioning the constructions of her identity as it is created in both places. For Elahi, the dialectical dialogue questioning both representations – European and Iranian – of Iranian national identity "is precisely what makes Satrapi's work interesting" (324).

Looking at the frames in a different way, Ann Miller, in the article "Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis: Eluding the frames," has defined the three different spatial structures in relation to women artists: "the locations represented by the work [*Persepolis*], [. . .] the spatial order within the work itself, [. . .] and the space from which the representation is made"[3] (39). In these terms, Iran is considered home and Austria the space of exile. In the space of the graphic novel format, the gutter[4], Miller argues, is crucial for it allows the reader to create an interpretation in the gaps, interacting with the text and creating "sites of aporia" (41) in which the reader can construct the political and cultural issues displayed in the text. Moreover, for the space from which representation is made, Miller discusses the influence of Satrapi's family in the identity constructed in her textual self and her position as a female comic book artist – an area prominently male.

With the subtitles "Iran as gendered space – the veil," "public and private space," "border-crossings," and "Austria – becoming the other," Miller scrutinizes some locations explored in *Persepolis*. Under the first subtitle cited above, she discusses how the veil is used in both the so-called West and East in order to criticize one another. The first

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[3] These spatial structures were first discussed by Griselda Pollock, as Miller explains in her article.

[4] Gutter is the space between frames which separates one for the other in a comic book. McCloud considers one of the main characteristics of the format for leaving this space the reader is called for the construction of meaning and continuity in the text.

creates a discourse in which the other is the oppressor – being the veil a symbol of the oppression – and the West the liberator. In a different perspective of the veil, Muslims use it as a symbol of the disobjectification of women once the objectification has occurred through the development of the Western imperialism and has transformed women into a product (42). In discussing public and private space, Miller argues that in a society where woman is relegated to the private sphere, in which the city is masculinized (the streets receive male names of the martyrs of the war, for instance), women create two different selves: one that can be used in public and another used in private life. The latter is where the subversion against the Islamic regime is practiced. Even by doing it in secret, it becomes the only way of resisting the oppressive government. Furthermore, she argues that Iran is a "geographical and cultural space [subjected] to border-crossings of all kinds" (44). The Islamic regime may try to keep the nation "pure" and "without the Western influence"; however, Satrapi is depicted, when teenager, wearing symbols of the West culture, such as Nike shoes and Michael Jackson's badge. Hence, the hybridization occurs and cultural products enter in the social system, though in an underground and illegal way according to the laws of Iran showed in *Persepolis*. Yet, it is when Satrapi goes to Austria that she becomes conscious of her construction as the other, even in her own country, being criticized by her multiple identities in both places.

Persepolis is also considered a story about witnessing. In "Witnessing *Persepolis*: Comics, Trauma and Childhood testimony," Leigh Gilmore discusses how Satrapi manages the visible, the invisible and the vision of a child in witnessing the experience of trauma. By using drawings, a characteristic of comic books, Satrapi depicts the imagination of the child Marji in situations such as the description of the torture of political prisoners. "Marji was not the eyewitness, but the account of torture entered her consciousness and memory, and Satrapi's drawing testifies what she heard . . ." (160). However, when the experience of trauma is really hard to bear, Satrapi sometimes chooses not to show it by representing trauma through "omission, silence, and a depiction of the void" (161). Gilmore's focus is on the first book of *Persepolis*, *The Story of a Childhood*, for she studies the child witnessing (in the second book, *The Story of a Return*, Marji is already a teenager and later an adult). She emphasizes how the child witnessing in this graphic novel is not a time of limited capacity, and works on the "relationship between historical public events and personal experience" (159).

Gilmore also makes clear that the use of the graphic novel genre is a strategic way to get the affection of the reader and broaden the public who would have access to the story. For her, more than teach how to see the history of Iran in a different way from what it is depicted in the West, *Persepolis* also teaches how to feel in relation to the Middle East. "It does so through an autobiographical representation of childhood and trauma created by an adult working in the politically informed genre of comics" (157). She completes by saying that the format challenges the content (158), which can be understood as a challenge for the reader who faces a new form of showing traumas and violence, a form that started, in 1980s, within the comics genre with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (159).

1.3 Theoretical Framework

In the article "Who Needs Identity?," Stuart Hall argues that identity is an ongoing construction, never finished, and it is articulated between the person her/himself and another group or person. In this sense, identity operates through difference, in relation to the other, marking symbolic boundaries. "Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies". Hall continues by saying that the construction of identity is just possible by the exclusion of the other, the abjected. By this means, the homogeneity that identity claims, arguing that it has origin in "history, language and culture" (4), is not natural or essential, it is rather a construction which works in defining a hegemonic center and a marginalized group, allowing the play of power.

Thus, some practices are used in order to summon the individuals into their position of discursive structure, considering the Foucauldian notion of power as a normative and regulatory form of control. However, even though there are many forms of control to maintain the relations of power, the individual has agency and can, even if it is hard to get free of ideology, language and/or discourse, change, unsettle, or interact with this power and position in different ways (14). Thus, for Hall, identity refers to the meeting point between discourse and discursive practices, an unfixed and unstable point of articulation. In other words, identity is an intersection between psychic identity and the positions into which an individual is summoned in social fields, in accordance to certain groups, and how she/he performs these positions. Even though disciplinary power is a tendency within modern forms of

social control it has to be a corresponding production of response from the side of the individual.

According to Stuart Hall, representations in arts can show cultural identity from the angle of the oppressed, and by doing so can combat the hegemonic view over them. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" he writes about the specific situation of Caribbean artists; however, this notion can also be applied to other groups. In this article he discusses two ways of rethinking cultural identity. First as a collective identity, which is a position constructed through the historical experience and cultural codes shared by a specific group: "It continues to be a very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalised peoples" (223). Representations are made according to places from where a historically-constructed group is talking or writing. Hence, from a postcolonial perspective, the production of identity by re-telling the past is an imaginative rediscovery that tries to create a collective identity as a political strategy. Caribbean artists, for example, reconstruct black collectivity from the viewpoint of the diaspora caused by colonization and slavery that displaced the people throughout the world. Even if Africa has never been a unity itself, the cultivation of a collective memory creates a relationship among the people that lived the experience of diaspora. Hall calls it an imaginary reunification which imposes coherence on the experience of diaspora (224).

In a second, and more complex, view of cultural identity, Hall points out that identity is not fixed, and is "subjected to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). Difference and similarity construct cultural identity, and their complexity goes beyond binary structures of representation (past/present, East/West, them/us). "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture[5], which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*" (226, original emphasis). However, when in a position of displacement, the search for a common place creates an imaginative community, since the original place has also changed and it is not possible to go back. Hence, writing or producing visual arts are ways of returning, but using another route, since the "real" place does not exist anymore. In this sense, arts become

[5] "Lacan used the term *suture* to signify the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious which, in turn, he perceived as an uneasy conjunction between what he terms the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders . ." (Hayward 378). Thus, the individual is not a unified and centered subjected, but part of a social system constantly trying to (re)define her/his identity.

a way of constructing representations that create identifications differently from the problematic ones created by hegemonic groups.

Moving to a more specific concept about the Middle East, Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, is the construction of a discourse about the Orient made by the West which has become the Orient (40). The creation of this discourse can be traced to the Middle Ages and is deeply influenced by the conquests of the European colonizers. In order to control, dominate, and have authority over the East, Europe creates the discourse about the East. Said points out many academic studies and literary texts that work on this creation by describing the Orient as the opposition of the hegemonic West. From canonical literature he cites Flaubert, Dante Alighieri, Shakespeare, Byron, Pope, and others who, in a way, described the East created in the West as the real and the only possible image of the other, always in comparison with the West. In the field of Orientalism, the East cannot speak for itself; it is the West that is purported to know better about the subject, even if the Orientalist has never been in the Orient. Said continues explaining that the necessity of creating the other comes from the necessity of self-definition. Thus the West needs the East to be the stranger, the unfamiliar, the other, the inferior against which it can be the familiar, the superior: "On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things" (49).

Orientalism is an academic field and a way of thinking which arbitrarily implies and in the same breath naturalizes the West as the geographical position from which to describe a whole group of people. "[. . .] [A]ny account of Orientalism would have to consider not only the professional Orientalist and his work but also the very notion of a field of study based on a geographical, cultural, linguistic, ethnic unity called the Orient" (50). Geographical boundaries separate what is familiar from the other, unfamiliar, and barbarian rest. Said describes some conquests of Europe, more specifically France and England, in the Orient to show how they create the discourse about the East. The conquest of Egypt and the construction of the Suez Canal are some of the acts that Europe describes in official documents that show the importance of Europe controlling the East – because, according to Orientalists, they themselves would be unable to live in peace or to have a democratic government. Hence, it is the role of the colonizers, as the "good" people, to control them. The authority of those documents discussed by Said "can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to

describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse[6] [. . .]" (94). Thus, Orientalism is a concept that describes the Western approach to the Orient, from a dominant gaze that generalizes the other culture in order to make it easier to control.

In *Persepolis*, Marji's experience in the Western countries enforces her feeling of displacement. For instance, she makes friends with a group of outcasts, she is the exotic, she can "unveil" the mysterious Orient, and also suffers by the generalization of the assumptions of the Orientalist thought. As Angelika Bammer states, "it is not surprising that displacement has played such a prominent role in the operative theoretical paradigms with which we have attempted to understand and explain the human condition and conditions of knowledge in our time" (xii). Such necessity of theorizing about displacement, according to Bammer, is due to the fact that "the combination of colonial and imperialist practices carried out on an international scale, and state-sanctioned ethnic, religious, and racial discrimination practiced intra-nationally have made mass migration and mass expulsion of people a numbingly familiar features of twentieth-century domestic and foreign policy" (xi). Hence, the experience of displacement, as a characteristic of the twentieth-century, is foregrounded by the construction of the other, and, consequently, by the discrimination of this other. Nevertheless, it is intricately inserted in the cultural identity construction of any subject who undergoes this kind of experience. If "what is displaced […] is, significantly, still there: *Dis*placed but not *re*placed, it remains a source of trouble." (Bammer xiii, original emphasis). Displacement becomes a constitutive part of the subject, as part of an unfixed identity articulation. And, to sum up, as Bammer wisely concludes, "identities are always constructed and lived out on the historical terrain between necessity and choice, the place where oppression and resistance are simultaneously located" (xvii).

In the case of *Persepolis*, those concepts must be discussed along with the concept of graphic novel and its role as part of a major format: the comic book. To understand the graphic novel genre, Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* discusses the emerging of alternative comics and the role of the graphic novel in this

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[6] "For Foucault, a discourse is a strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known. The key feature of this is that the world is not simply 'there 'to be talked about, rather, it is through discourse itself that the world is brought into being" (Ashcroft 62). By this means, discourse is created in a way that keeps power and control.

scenario. In the chapter "Comix, Comic Shops, and the Rise of Alternative Comics, Post 1968" he offers the general idea of how the graphic novel has become a channel for the legitimation of comics. Indeed, according to Hatfield, the genre of the graphic novel is considered a way of acquiring recognition for the author and for the form as literature. The expression, graphic novel, coined by Will Eisner in the late 1970s, was meant to be designated to a serious and complex comic book geared for a general readership. In the 1980s the genre gained strength with the publication of *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman. With its origin in underground comics, the graphic novel inherited some characteristics of this movement born in the counterculture, in the 1960s, such as a field for self-expression, depth content, and adult material. Hence, the graphic novel reached the bookstores, being consumed not just by fans of comics, but also by a general reader.

Hillary Chute, in her introduction "Women, Comics, and the Risk of Representation," from the book *Graphic Women*, argues that graphic novels – which she prefers to call graphic narratives once this is not necessarily a novel, rather it is a format that accepts different forms of narratives – altogether with the growth of autobiographies written by women has increased and propagated as a form of telling their own traumatic stories. According to Chute, the graphic narrative (to use Chute's term) comes along with a nonfictional self-representation which depicts real events. The embodiment of the self and the chance of materializing history and traumas make the graphic narrative genre the way some women choose to express their stories (2). This is so because they use the image, part of this hybrid visual-verbal form, as a way of making the trauma present and visible. Moreover, those images appear in clippings just like a recollection of memory itself. "The art of crafting words and pictures together into a narrative punctuated by pause or absence, as in comics, also mimics the procedure of memory" (4).

The depiction of a child, as in the case of Satrapi in *Persepolis,* is juxtaposed with an adult narrator conscious about the different thoughts of the self as a child and as an adult. Therefore, a multiple representation of the self is layered in different temporalities by using the tensions between word and image typical of the genre (Chute 5). The hybridity of the genre allows the text to "challenge the structure of binary classification that opposes a set of terms, privileging one" (10). Those multiple representations are explored in a sense that make the use of the comics genre a part of the context rather than merely a medium, a vehicle wherein the story is constructed, but one that significantly interacts with it. Chute also reinforces the importance of characteristics

typical of the comics format such as the gutters and the frames. The former creates the space for the interplay of presence and absence while allowing the readers to construct their own interpretations of the sequence of frames. The frames themselves can be read as the time represented in space, as discussed by theorists like Hatfield and Scott McCloud. Chute calls the gutter "the rich empty space between the selected moments that directed our interpretation" (8).

Henceforth, this study will engage with concepts of identity construction and the ideology of Orientalism. Hence, I shall take into consideration the concept of identity developed by Stuart Hall for my analysis of the construction of the main character's identity in *Persepolis* and the concept of Orientalism developed by Edward Said for my analysis of the Western gaze in *Persepolis* and how it is reverted. For Stuart Hall,

> identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions [. . .] identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being ("Who Needs Identity?" 4).

In developing the concept of Orientalism, Said points out that the Western image created about the East is a stereotyped and standardized representation defined by Eurocentrism. Although this image does not correspond to the "real" East, it does have real effects in the construction of knowledge which not only describes, but also creates reality. The knowledge the West has about the Orient becomes the Orient – as Said puts it, "Orientalism overrode the orient" (31).

The main theorists of comics whom my analysis shall follow are Charles Hatfield and Scott McCloud. Hatfield argues that the tensions existing in comics are important points for the analysis of the form. These tensions can be: image versus word; single image versus images-in-series; sequence versus surface; and text as experience versus text as object (36). Each of these tensions can complement the other and work together, not necessarily in opposition. McCloud discusses some elements of comics, such as frames, gutters, closure, time, space, and motion. I shall combine these specific analytical elements of comics with other literary elements such as characterization, plot, setting, and

point of view, to elaborate on the intercultural meaning-making in *Persepolis*.

Two more theorists that I intend to follow in my analysis are David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, whose theories are directed related to cinema. However, in order to analyze the frames I use some concepts developed by the film theory, such as angle, level, and distance of framing. As these authors argue, “the frame implies not only space outside itself but also a position from which the material in the image is viewed” (190). Hence, even though, obviously, there is no camera on graphic novels, the format still has a perspective from where it is “shot,” a selected perspective, that can interfere , or not, in the meaning and, consequently, in the analysis.

This study is divided in three analytical chapters, according to the geographical location where Marji is living. The first chapter discusses the first identity divisions and struggles with which she has to face as a young girl aged ten who defies the authoritative regime and grows up in an upper-class revolutionary family, as well as the influences of her family, religion and history over her while living in her homeland, Iran. The comparisons between the different layers of cultures that are part of her constitutive self are constructed within herself. In this sense, the chapter analyses how the construction of a heterogeneous and irreducible subject can work on the reversal of the Orientalist gaze by debunking its monolithic construction.

The second chapter highlights the process whereby Marji becomes aware of her position in the world as the other in relation to the West; this is when she is already living in Austria, after moving there when she was 14 years old. Differently from the previous chapter, in this second one, Marji's identity construction takes in consideration the Western perspective of an Oriental. The arbitrariness of the Orientalist viewpoint is, thus, emerged. When Marji's generalizations and statements are put side by side with the assumptions constructed by European characters, the asymmetrical power of different groups appears. However, in *Persepolis,* this asymmetry is used in a way that reveals such arbitrariness.

Finally, the third and last analytical chapter discusses her position and displacement when she returns to Iran, four years later, questioning both Eastern and Western intercultural frameworks, and criticizing the perspectives that each side of this geographical division of the world constructs about the other. She has to deal with new layers of identity, and the problematic relations of those supposed oppositional layers that are all part of her constitutive self. Throughout this process,

Marji's characterization and point of view will somehow need to elaborate on feelings of unbelonging and displacement as she straddles between both places: at home and in exile.

The passages analyzed in this thesis were strategically chosen in order to discuss features that are part not only of those specific passages. Rather, they can demonstrate the dynamics of *Persepolis* in relation to the topic under discussion, which is the use of identity construction in order to reverse the Orientalist gaze. The same way Marji's identity is constant constructed as multiple, irreducible and unfixed, the Orientalist gaze reversal also takes place in many other moments of *Persepolis.* In this sense, even though this thesis is limited to the analysis of a few scenes when compared to the whole book, written in two volumes, they are relevant for the assertions I am posing here.

CHAPTER II
"DON'T EVER FORGET WHO YOU ARE": MARJI'S CHILDHOOD AND IDENTITY IN IRAN

This chapter focuses on Marji's identity construction and her relation with her family, country, history, and religion while she is still living in Iran, from the age of ten until she is 14 years old. Seen she is not yet, in this first moment, completely aware of her depiction as the other in relation to Western culture, the discussion in this chapter is more focused on her identity struggle within her own culture and country. I shall analyze how Marji is depicted as an irreducible subject, with a complex and fragmented identity. This focus on her heterogeneity is important for my discussion of the subversion of the Orientalist perspective. The viewpoint of the supposed specialist, the Orientalist, constructs the other – in this case, the Middle Easterners – as homogeneous in a way that would allow an easy categorization. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism,* and it is possible to notice in *Persepolis,* this reducionist construction does not have a real correspondence in reality; however, this construction does have a real impact. Hence, the depiction of a heterogeneous identity is already debunking, by itself, the Orientalist perspective that constructs the Orient as homogeneous, in such a dichotomic and reducible viewpoint.

Ross Murfin, when discussing Derrida's deconstruction, argues that dichotomies "are not simply oppositions; they are hierarchies in miniature. In other words, they contain one term that our culture views as being superior and one term viewed as negative or inferior" (292). Thus, to construct a dichotomy in which the European term would be considered superior, a construction an "Other" is also needed, for that would be the inferior term of this hierarchical dichotomy. As Said asserts, the Orient is "one of [Europe's] deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (1). In order to construct and categorize such dichotomy, features are oversimplified and distributed over the, also oversimplified, categories that would fit easily in each side of the dichotomy. Said also discusses the effect of categorization in the construction of the Oriental: "there is every where a similar penchant for dramatizing general features, for reducing vast numbers of objects to a smaller number of orderable and describable *types.* [. . .] Physiological and moral characteristics are distributed more or less equally" (119, original emphasis). It is because categorization constructs hierarchical dichotomies that Marji's construction as an irreducible subject becomes important in order to disrupt the cultural ideology that makes Middle

Easterners the inferior term. Accordingly, by breaking opposed categories, Marji also breaks the hierarchies inserted in them.

Moreover, the story of *Persepolis* is told by the filter of an autobiographical story. As with any autobiography, it is constructed as a look from the present to the past (Smith and Watson 16), and a depiction of, as Smith and Watson argue, "the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get 'outside of'" (6). In this sense, even though the character is a child, the critical overview within this perspective is coming from a self, the adult narrator, already conscious of her intercultural positionality. The autobiography becomes a new chance of revisiting the past and, at the same time, reconstructing it. Hence, even though in autobiographical narratives the memory is one of the main sources of evidence (Smith and Watson 7), the fact of having an omniscient narrator also brings a different perspective, reconstructing and rewriting the past. Thus, considering that *Persepolis* is an autobiography, I shall also argue in this chapter that this is constitutive in the construction of her identity and it is possible to notice how Satrapi rewrites her history in order to reinforce a perspective from the viewpoint of the Middle Easterner.

2.1 An irreducible identity

The supposedly contradictory identity of Marji is constructed since her childhood. At the age of 10, Marji is an eyewitness of the Islamic Revolution. She was born in a revolutionary and secular family – her parents participate actively in the revolution. However, she used to consider herself religious. At the age of six, she knew she wanted to be the last prophet. She was a religious child growing up, in her words, in a "very modern and avant-garde" family. Contrasts such as this one – of being part of a secular family while being religious – are part of her identity. Those characteristics seem to be oppositional, yet, by trying to coexist, give room for the complexities so common and necessary, by definition, to the construction of irreducible identities.

Figure 1, for instance, shows a page in which the supposedly oppositional and contradictory layers of identities are depicted. On this page, different frames show a recollection of various moments which, together, construct parts of her childhood memory. Each frame is a specific moment by itself, in a different time of Marji's child life. The first frame depicts Marji in the diegetic time of the narrative, at the age of 10; the second is a portrayal of herself as a baby; the third, fourth and fifth frames are imagined situations with Marji as the "last prophet," as we shall see on the pages that follow; and the last three frames on the

bottom of the page are different events from her life that illustrate the reason she should be the last prophet.

According to Hatfield, one of the main characteristics of comics is the representation of time using images in series, as a sequence, and he stresses that "the relationships between pictures are a matter of convention, not inherent connectedness" (41). In this case, the sequence of events is not essential or inherent, rather it is a selective recollection of memories (Marji as baby, as a ten-year-old, with her family), together with fantasies and desires (Marji as the last prophet). The narration is what keeps those frames together. As Chute argues, the form of comics has a particular relationship with memoirs and one of the reasons for this is its capacity of depicting memory in a fragmented way by its "pause or absence," that can be graphically visible in the form of comics by the use of gutters: "[C]omics and the movement, or act, of memory share formal similarities that suggest memory, specially the excavation of a childhood memory" (4). Therefore, the formal similarities between comics and the recollection of memory suggested by Chute are directly related to what is possible to see on this page: a reformulation of memory constructed throughout the junction of different clippings, in different moments of Marji's life, which also brings together different layers of identities.

It is important, at his point, to discuss the relation between fragmented identities and the subject's irreducibility. The impossibility of an easy categorization that does not allow only one perspective in order to categorize and/or classify someone constructs an irreducible subject. Therefore, fragmented identities, which are constantly being worked through attachment and articulation between different layers, do not allow the reductionism of the subject. The irreducible subject requires a much more complex approach, through different perspectives. Identities are fragmented, and, because of that, do not necessarily lead to a resolution or closure.

Fig. 1. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a childhood*. 2003, page 6.

Thus, the page, as a surface to be read in a non-linear way and as a whole, is also responsible for another meaning-making element in comics (Hatfield 48), and in this case the surface shows the fragmented identity Marji is trying to put together. In this case, considering that the frames are composed of a recollection of memories and pieces of identities, the gutter becomes the space in-between where political and social perspectives can be articulated in different ways. In the same page, for instance, it is possible to notice her representation as woman, as member of the Satrapi family, as religious, as upper-class, as Marxist, as revolutionary, and also as Middle Easterner. Each frame of this page represents different identity layers of herself as an irreducible subject. At the same time they are separated by the borders of the frame and by the gutters, they are also connected by the narration, the page, and the recollection of memory. Therefore, it is possible to say that the frames, as separated layers, and the page, as a set, put together a complex and irreducible subject constituted by overlapping layers of identity.

Those representations can be contradictory but, at the same time, they act together in the representation of Marji as a subject. For instance, in one frame she is worshipped as prophet and in the next she is questioned as to the possibility of being both, a prophet and a woman. By mixing categories once considered opposed ones she starts blurring dichotomies, which are arbitrary – and, precisely because they are arbitrary, they construct a relation of power and domination. In order to dismantle such hierarchical dichotomies, Marji's identity construction can be read through the concept developed by Hall, in which identities are an ongoing construction.

In the sense that "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, "Who Needs Identity" 4), Marji is, at this "point of temporary attachment" (6), a result of the historical and cultural, family, and religious Iranian background. The "points of temporary attachment" argued by Hall can be related to the importance of the gutter, discussed by Scott McCloud. For McCloud, it is "in the *limbo* of the gutter, *human imagination* takes two separate images and *transforms* them into a single idea" (66, original emphasis). Therefore, using Hall's perspective in order to discuss the importance of the gutter for comics, those gaps do not necessarily transform images into a "single idea," as claimed by McCloud. Instead, the gutters are, rather, "points of temporary attachment," which allow different readings and connections. In comics,

thus, the gaps, often used to potentialize new meanings, are visually framed and marked. It is in this framed and marked gap where the concept of identity developed by Hall can work along with the gutter for creating an irreducible and unfixed identity within the comics.

Hence, if the gutters can be read as articulations between frames, what is the effect of this form of reading in the text? According to Jennifer Daryl Slack, “articulation can be understood as a way of characterizing a social formation without falling into the twin traps of reductionism and essentialism” (113). Slack also argues that “[a]rticulation is, then, not just a thing (not just a connection) but a process of creating connections” (115). By quoting Hall, Slacks also makes clear that articulation can work through non-correspondence: it “'has the considerable advantage of enabling us to think of how specific practices articulated around contradictions which do not all arise in the same way, at the same point, in the same moment, can nevertheless be thought together'” (123). In this sense, by reading the gutters as articulations, the complexity and fluidity of the connections between different layers of identity are visible and present in these empty spaces.

As articulations, these connections are not fixed, allowing different forms of reading. By these means, the relations between the frames and the different depictions of Marji's identity can be constructed in different ways. For instance, her representation as a woman prophet can be read once in connection with her destiny, represented by her depiction as a baby – considering that destiny can also be connected with religion – but also with her concern with class issues, as represented by the maid eating in the kitchen – related to her Marxist background. Another reading can, at the same time, confront her gender role as a woman in a patriarchal society and the necessity of making changes in this society.

One of the readings, for instance, can be analyzed in relation to her desire of becoming a prophet. Her declared intention of becoming a prophet is directly related to class issues: “I wanted to be a prophet… because our maid did not eat with us. Because my father had a Cadillac” (fig. 1, frames 6 and 7). Considering that social class is based on hierarchical relations, breaking with these relations would demonstrate the possibility of breaking hierarchies. Both the Cadillac and the maid are representatives of class: the former shows that the Satrapi family is from a middle-class status and the latter adds to that while at the same time showing the hierarchical relation between the maid, who can be read as representative of a low-class status, and the family.

When Marji fantasizes about being the last prophet, she is

aware that if this would materialize into reality, it would cause a revolution not just in the structure of class but also in gender relations. In this context, she depicts, in her fantasy, the previous prophets questioning her about gender when she announces she is the last prophet: “I am the last prophet”; “a woman?” (fig. 1). Moreover, her prophet role play and her doubts about issues related to religion – she is not sure what to think about the veil – foreground supposed contradictions that influence her own identity. Accordingly, the negotiation of articulations for the veil and religion are tricky for a child who is religious and secular at the same time. Even though her desire of being a prophet is a fantasy, her questions about the veil and her dissatisfaction with class issues are real and this reality creates the projection of her fantasy.

In a struggle between her family and her own beliefs, both acting in her identity construction, Marji ends up imagining a confrontation between God and Marx. During the Iranian Revolution, in 1979, Marji starts questioning her own faith, and, then, it is in this moment that God and Marx come face to face. “My faith was not unshakable” (10). Once she has the revolution to worry about, God and her destiny as a prophet are not her main concerns anymore, although religion remains one force working on the comprehension of Marji's identity. The figure of God is important to her in the search for self-comprehension for he appears to comfort or to confront her: when God interrogates her about the comparison between him and Marx, asking whether she still wants to be a prophet or not, she feels threatened by this confrontation; then, she evades instead of answering it. She tries to change the subject, giving room for the ironic way god talks about the weather (fig. 2). This ironic answer is a form of showing that she cannot evade the discussion about herself. As much complex and problematic as identity can be, it is necessary for her to understand her position, thus those interrogations from God are actually interrogations from herself to herself – as if she is trying to avoid those complexities but, at the same time, that avoidance is impossible. Thus, Marji is aware of the importance of identity to herself and to her irreducible position as Iranian, as woman, as religious, as secular, as revolutionary, and as many other layers she can occupy.

Fig. 2. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 13.

By comparing God and Marx, Marji starts changing her faith in religion by a search for answers in theories and books. She starts to see similarities between what she expects from religion and what she is finding in theories. Marji transforms the similarities of content in image and depicts God and Marx quite similarly, with the comment that "Marx's hair was a bit curlier" (fig. 2). God and Marx are oppositional figures in many different levels, the former being a figure-head of a religion and the latter a thinker, who is also an atheist. The confrontation between them brings oppositional representations to the same level of the discussion Marji is having with herself – this inner discussion she is having is represented in the roles of God and Marx. The irony in representing God and Marx together in a discussion shows her own confusion and the confrontations of ideology she is facing. In this frame they are facing each other at the same level, depicted from the same angle and distance. When Marji takes Marx's place, in the subsequent

frame, she is depicted in symbiosis with the setting, which makes her as bold and big as God. In the discussion between Marx and God, Marji takes Marx's place. Once it is her faith that is under discussion, she needs to be in control of it.

In frame 1 (fig. 2), Marx and God are face to face in a medium close-up, looking at each other as if in a confrontation, while Marji compares them both. The expected antagonism is constructed, ironically, with the image of God and Marx as reflections of each other, as in a mirror. In the second frame, the confrontation is not anymore against Marx, rather it is against Marji. In the last frame of this figure we have God in a close-up with the depiction made from Marji's perspective within the frame. This antagonism and confrontation bring to term the troubles caused by the different layers of identities Marji has to deal and their struggles, negotiation and articulation in order to construct a subject in which all of them can coexist.

When the revolution debunks the Shah's government and the religious government takes place – rebranding the movement as an Islamic Revolution – the hunt for the political prisoners is reinforced. Marji's uncle is one of the victims of the state: he was a prisoner during the Shah's government, was released after the revolution, but ended up being killed by the Islamic Republic. People who had fought in the revolution were now considered enemies by the religious government. After many atrocities, including the death of her uncle, Marji considered herself abandoned by God. Therefore, she expelled God from her life. In a frame that occupies a whole page, after fighting with God, she is depicted floating alone in outer space. At this point the narrator says: "And so I was lost, without any bearings… What could be worse than that?" (*The Story of a Childhood* 71). What brings her back to reality is a signal that marks the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, in 1980.

Even though, in a personal way, religion stops interfering with Marji's identity, it starts to interfere by imposition from the authoritarian regime. According to Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf,

> Khomeini's revolution brought an Islamic government which provoked a brand of Islamic culture and Islamized the policies of the country which had been secular for centuries. Iran underwent a drastic transformation which brought a significant impact on the individual and collective identities.

> Amongst various policies put in place by the new government was the reformation of women's issues. Iranian women had, for centuries, struggled for equality and freedom and for a long time had enjoyed greater rights of freedom. (547)

As we can notice according to this excerpt, it is not the people themselves, or their culture, who are extremists, rather it is the State, in its authoritarian way of governing, that imposes strict rules based on religion. This different, heterogeneous construction of Middle Easterners, focusing on the diversity within the culture and the people, is reinforced, in *Persepolis,* by working on the construction of Marji's identity.

Persepolis goes beyond the representation of a collective identity, in the terms defined by Hall, in which it would bring "one, shared culture" (223). Rather, Marji's identity construction focuses on Hall's second view of cultural identity:

> Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. [. . .] Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. [. . .] identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past." ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 225)

Keeping in mind the perspective of the gutters as an articulation and the frames as layers of identities that are never fixed, the reading of this graphic novel allows the continuous "becoming" claimed by Hall. This is so because any reading of it is going to provide new forms of connecting frames and filling gutters. If "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves," the action of reading in different ways is an act of positioning as much as the act of revisiting the past through autobiography.

Persepolis offers so many layers of identities through its frames, such as the ones analyzed in this chapter, that it gives many possibilities of readings. Then, by doing so, the possibility of different readings diminishes generalizations and categorizations, and, by

consequence, undermines dichotomies. By undermining dichotomies, showing other layers of identities, the heterogeneous characterization constructed in *Persepolis* disrupts the Western perspective that is often responsible for reducing the narratives of the East. Once the subject is heterogeneous, any easy categorization becomes difficult. Therefore, the problematic categorizations that “reduce vast numbers of objects to a smaller number of orderable and describable *types*” (Said 119, original emphasis) are also disrupted. The plurality of readings opened up in *Persepolis* denaturalizes the stereotypical construction of the Orient by the West and demystifies its Orientalist perspective.

2.2 The airport and its Bordelands

The last frame of this first book, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood,* is set in the Tehran airport, a space of transience (fig. 3). As Nima Naghibi argues, the airport can be understood as a transitional space, representing mobility, unbelonging, and loss (*A Story Told in Flashbacks* 170). At this space, Marji is leaving behind her nation and family to live in another country, Austria. In this sense, her future and her past are influencing the construction of this scene. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson say that “remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present. The process is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering” (*Reading Autobiography* 16). Hence, because the narrator is conscious about the future this sad departure comes as foreboding of the time Marji is going to spend in Austria (which I will discuss in the next chapter) and also as a depiction of her intentions in keeping her past acting in her subjectivity and individuality.

The reinterpretation of this memory is constructed from the viewpoint of the narrator, who is omniscient. Marji finds herself lost, alone, in a space in-between, both apart from her family and her country and not belonging to the foreign space either. This separation from her parents and homeland is represented in this frame under discussion by the glass of the departure gate in this physical place, the airport. On the one hand, leaving Iran seems to be a way of escaping the authoritarian regime in her country; on the other hand, leaving the country is an act that can be seen as the abandonment of Marji's own family and history. In this sense, the glass wall is keeping Marji apart of this history, but, at the same time, because it is transparent, it makes possible for her to look at her history and family, keeping a connection with them. Therefore, when she looks back, she is using this chance of upholding this

connection; rather than abandoning her past, she reinterprets it from the perspective of her position as the narrator. The glass wall corroborates with this space of transience and in-between and allows such reinterpretation.

Fig 3. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 153.

The glass wall works as a borderline separating those who are going to leave the country and those who are going to stay in Iran. At the same time, the airport works as a borderland, a location that goes beyond geographical and physical space, affecting also the psychological state. Gloria Anzaldúa, who first proposed the term borderland to refer to the multiple cultures and traditions working within the construction of Chicanas, affirms that "having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages" (100). These borderlands have also been called contact zones, a term defined by Mary Louise Pratt: "to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and

grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34). Hence, even though the glass results in separation, it does not keep the contact between cultures from opposite sides. This borderland can juxtapose contradictory cultural codes and systems that impose negotiation and articulation. "The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision" (Anzaldúa 100). In this sense, Marji is already negotiating cultures and traditions that are going to affect her identity when in Austria along with the ones she brings with herself from being a woman in Iran.

The borderland of the airport can be interpreted along with the tensions of the form of comics. For Hatfield, "comics art is composed of several kinds of *tension"* (original emphasis), that he defines as "heterogeneous in form involving the co-presence and interaction of various codes" (36). That is the reason this scene at the airport can reflect the many negotiations Marji has to deal with when discussing the construction of her identity. Hence, while the airport brings her in-between two countries, different cultures, and clashes of time and space, this space also reflects the tensions that can be found in the graphic novel. Some tensions in this frame show time represented in space (past and future are working together here as she is already dealing with some of the problems she will face in the future, in Austria), words and image negotiate meaning, and the depiction of a child along with the narration of an adult. The many tensions, from the form and from the content, can coexist but, rather than an easy coexistence, theirs is a process of constant negotiation, articulation, and transition to one another. The constant straddle of different cultures and their value systems are, for Anzaldúa, "an inner war" (100). In this sense, all the tensions reflected by the frame represent, to a certain extent, Marji's inner self in the process of articulating the cultures and traditions that surround her and her own reaction to such straddling.

Iran is, supposedly, home and a place of unbelonging at the same time, represented in this frame by the airport, a space of transience, where she is in-between different cultures, countries, traditions, and history. Although Marji feels displaced in her nation, Iran, where she was born and raised, her next destination, Austria, cannot be described as home, either: it is also responsible for her feelings of displacement and her construction as the other (see chapter 3). It is this context, of continuous unbelonging, that requires the construction of otherness and displacement at home and in exile, past and future. For Hashim and Manaf, "traditionally a home is

conceptualised as a stable, physical centre of a person's private space, a place where one feels belonged and loved" (550). According to this traditional concept, it is possible to assert that Iran is no longer this fixed context of home for Marji was experiencing the feelings of unbelonging, emotional instability and loss, though this home is still important in her construction as a subject, reinforcing the articulated coexistence of various differences that compete within her identity.

Inside the departure gate, which separates Marji from her family and country, she is the only one who is not depicted in shadows, her expression is clear, with mouth and eyes wide open, showing how she is scared. Through the clear depiction of her expression, which shows that she is uncomfortable with the situation, it is possible to make a parallel with Anzaldúa's description of the process by which she increases her awareness about herself – what she calls *Coatlicue state*: "At first I feel exposed and opened to the depth of my dissatisfaction [. . .] 'Knowing' is painful because after 'it' happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable" (70). Because Marji is the only one under the light, she is exposed, and when she looks back to her family she is in search of awareness, she is trying to keep a connection with the many cultures she is inserted in. However, this "increment of consciousness" scares her, as Anzaldúa states, "the soul frightened out of the body" (70). Marji is becoming aware of all the tensions around her; therefore, she is in evidence in relation to the others inside the departure gate. Even though she is looking back, she is actually moving forward.

It is important to emphasize that, in the airport, the reader is watching the scene from the Iranian perspective, from inside the country. In the forefront of this frame, Marji's parents are depicted from an angle she could not see from inside the departure gate. This perspective is related to how Marji is seeing herself within the context of going to a Western country – she is describing a different perspective from the one she had in the moment of the departure, that would be seeing her family from behind. Therefore, the expression of the parents is a reinterpretation of a scene that was not visible from where she was originally standing. By adopting such a perspective, she is making her and her parents' grief present and visible. Because it situates the narrative point of view on the Iranian side of the gate, bringing the implied reader into this perspective, the visual text disrupts the expected normality of the implied reader's Western gaze. It can be understood, therefore, to construct a reversal of the Orientalist gaze.

The shadow on the father's face, and the act of carrying her mother after she has fainted, reinforces the grief of this moment. The

parents are depicted in a straight-on angle, from a medium shot, while Marji is behind them depicted in a long shot. The focus is also on the parents. From this angle, the parents seem to be walking away from where Marji is standing still, thus to be getting away from her. By doing so, it becomes increasingly harder for her to see her family clearly. However, because the depiction shows the parents in the forefront, focusing on them instead of on her, this re-writing of the past highlights the connection with her history. The difficulty of this connection is brought to the frame by the lack of focus in Marji. Even though she is the only one with the expressions clearly depicted on the other side of the glass wall, she is reconstructing her own story. In this process she is changing the attention from herself as individual to her past as part of the collective Iranian history. The focus on the importance of Iranian collective identity is highlighted by the Iranian people under the light on the Iranian side of the airport, calling the reader's attention to this group of people.

Even though she states that “it would have been better to just go” (fig. 3), when she looks back to her family, in the airport, she is trying to keep the connection with her historical background. This look back in the airport scene can also be interpreted as a metalanguage once the autobiographical text is, by itself, a narration of the past seen from the present, as mentioned above. When she looks at her parents for the last time, she is looking at her personal and cultural history in her country. By doing so, she avoids forgetting her history and is still having to play with historical contexts related to her Iranian background within her identity construction, even though she is going to live in Austria. Or, indeed, it is precisely because she is going to live in Austria that it becomes even more important for her to deal with her identity in relation to her national background. In any case, this contact with her past demands effort, which can be traumatic, to a certain extent, both for herself and for her parents. However, the depiction of a goodbye, a separation, reinforces exactly the opposite, which means that this goodbye, instead of remarking her separation from her country, actually reinforces her necessity and effort to keep the connection with the history of Iran, despite its difficulty and complexity.

According to Hillary Chute, this characteristic of materializing trauma and history in the graphic novel “asserts the value of presence,” and texts such as *Persepolis* “offer the work of retracing – materially reimagining trauma” (2). In this sense, her connection with her history is constituted by this act of materializing and re-telling trauma, making it present. As Marji states, it could have been better to just go without

looking back; however, she needs to deal with such trauma in order to be capable of articulating the pieces of her identities, the ones already constructed and others that will be acquired through exile. When she reinterprets and materializes the history of Iran, in *Persepolis,* she reinforces the importance of this "act of looking back", as Adrienne Rich would say – so much so that it is possible to say that *Persepolis* by itself is a reinterpretation and materialization that is epitomized in this frame. Rich calls it "Re-vision": "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18).

The airport setting also sets the stage for Marji's negotiation between a collective identity and an individual one. Her national identity, as her cultural background in Iran, becomes a concern when facing her departure to Europe. Indeed, when Marji's family decided to send her to Austria, members of the family immediately emphasized the importance of remembering her roots and how she cannot forget her past and her identity as Iranian: "Don't ever forget who you are," her father states (148); "I will always be true to myself" (151), says Marji, looking at herself in a mirror; "Don't forget who you are and where you come from," her father reminds her at the airport (152). That reinforcement of remembering her own identity is also a reflection of a self that is conscious about the future and the problems she will face when moving to Austria.

CHAPTER III

"IT'S TRUE WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT IRANIANS": DISPLACEMENT AND OTHERNESS IN AUSTRIA

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Marji constructed herself as an irreducible subject who cannot be homogenized to fit one simple categorization, as would happen under the Orientalist perspective. In this chapter, I shall analyze how she constructs herself through the influence of an Eurocentric discourse when living in Austria. I intend to focus on her identity construction as a heterogeneous subject in comparison to European characters and culture. Based on that, I aim at seeing whether and, if so, to what extent she assimilates the Western gaze to revert such perspective upon her. Moreover, I also shall analyze how each of these possibilities are in fact depicted in the graphic novel and on her identity construction.

During the period of Marji's exile in Austria, she depicts many situations in which she suffered prejudice for being Iranian. For instance, a nun says to her that "[t]hey [Iranians] have no education" (Satrapi, *The Story of a Return* 23), a landlord accuses her of stealing (79) and of being a prostitute (67), her boyfriend's mother expels her from their house (66); to cite just a few scenes where prejudice is depicted. In Said's *Orientalism,* he theorizes about otherness after having his own experience as a Palestinian living in the United States. He states that the lives of Middle Easterners who are trying to live in the West are "disheartening":

> My own experiences of these matters are in part what made me write this book. The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. [. . .] The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny. (27)

In *Persepolis,* moving to Europe reinforces the construction of Marji's identity as the other. Marji, when living in Austria, realizes that the image of people from the Middle East is distorted in privilege of the image Europe created *about* the Middle East.

Said states that the East is the contrast image that also constructs the West: “The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture” (2, original emphasis). Therefore, if Marji works in blurring and reversing the differences naturalized by the Orientalist in relation to the construction of the Middle Easterners, it is possible to argue that she also blurs the dichotomy between the East and the West. Accordingly, her experience as a Middle Easterner living in Europe allows her to construct such subversion once the marginalization she has experienced resulted in the “oppositional consciousness” discussed by Caren Kaplan (see the intrduction of this thesis), which is responsible for the critical overview she constructs about the different cultures she is inserted.

3.1 Discussing Differences

Living in Austria, Marji is part of a group formed by the outcasts of the school she is studying. In the beginning, she is facing problems in making friends – even when people start giving her some attention they were actually interested in her skills in math and drawings, and also in making jokes about some of the language problems she was facing (*The Story of a Return* 11). Only when Julie, an eighteen year old French girl, who was still in a “class where the average age was fourteen”, showed some interest in Marji that she got to know some of the people who would later become her friends (12). The group of outcasts in which Marji is integrated is formed by the punk Momo, the orphan siblings, Thierry and Olivier, Julie and Marji.

Marji introduces them together to the reader in a frame resembling a family picture, which occupies the whole page (fig. 4). Because she was alone before meeting them, they become as important as a family to her. The narration explains the picture: “an eccentric, a punk, two orphans and a third-worlder, we made quite a group of friends. They were really interested in my story. Especially Momo! He was fascinated by death”. Hence, the main characteristic of this group is to be formed by people who could not fit in other groups at the school; in other words, they formed a group of outcasts. This is one of the reasons Marji can feel part of this group.

Fig. 4. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 13.

Moving on to the specificities of this frame (fig. 4), the narration creates a contrast with the image. The narrator's description of the characters cannot be easily related to each of the friends in the picture. The differences between them are not directly embodied in the frame. Because they do not have materialized and embodied differences in the drawing, and the five members of the group are depicted with similar features, the reader needs to stop in this image and spend some time making the relation between each of the depicted characters with the description above, trying to connect who is the eccentric, the orphans, and the third-worlder – only the punk can be considered easier to recognize by the hairstyle. The differences, nevertheless, are not self-evident. The relation that is expected from the reader would be Marji being the third-worlder (all the other characters are European), in the center of the frame; Julie, the eccentric, to the left of Marji; Momo, the punk, above Julie; and Thierry and Olivier, the two orphans, at Momo's right. In this image/word tension, typical of the comics format (Hatfield 36), while the narrator brings up pieces of identities with characteristics that could be considered "self-evident" and can be embodied, the image does not corroborates this assumption. For instance, it is difficult to be sure of who is the one characterized as eccentric, once they are all outcast and there is no eccentricity clearly depicted in Julie's characterization. Any of them could be considered eccentric by the reader in a first moment (one question worthy to raise here is: why is Julie the one characterized as eccentric and not Marji herself? This is going to be further discussed below, in this chapter). The embodied stereotypes are not materialized – Europeans and Middle Easterners have the same trace and similar characteristics that make it hard for the reader to distinguish one another.

The third-worlder, Marji, is at the center of the frame and all the other characters are around her. Contrasting with traditional geographical Western depictions, which put Europe at the center and the rest of the world positioned in relation to Europe – for instance, Middle East is "East" and "Middle" in relation to its position and distance from Europe – in this frame such position is reverted. The character representing the third-world and the Middle East is at the center while all the characters representing Europe are at the margin. This inversion of positions, removing Europe from the center and allocating Middle East to this position, also reinforces the subversion, constructed in *Persepolis,* of the Orientalist perspective. While the Orientalist, who is a Westerner, would have the Orient as the object of analysis from a Western perspective, in which the Europe is the group control, and any

statement would be constructed in comparison to this group, here the perspective is from an Iranian girl. She puts herself at the center and the others are positioned in relation to her – Julie is characterized as eccentric from Marji's perspective. Thus, Marji, the Iranian, the Middle Easterner, the Third-Worlder, is the group control, and the Europeans are characterized in relation to her.

Furthermore, still considering the depiction of the frame as a family picture, this characteristic also increases the relevance of her position at the center of the portrait. By being at the center, she gives herself more importance than she gives the others. Like in a family picture, the center is occupied by the members who keep the family together – the elderly, the grandparents, for instance. Here Marji puts herself in this position; she is the central character.

There is another feature, in *Persepolis,* that also collaborates in reverting the European perspective about the other: the cartoon drawings. At first, this feature can be seen as a search for universalization, a strategy to make an Iranian story familiar to an European public:

> Despite accusations by some critics of a lack of sophistication as a graphic artist, Satrapi's style is deliberate and has definite effects. It is part of her effort to make familiar, to universalize, but at the same time to other. The 'cartooniness' of her drawings encourages the reader to see herself in Marji, to see the self in the other, to erase all differences in a gesture of 'cultural understanding'. (Naghibi and O'Malley 229)

As these authors have discussed, the familiarization generated by the cartoon allows the reader to see oneself in the other, creating a familiarization in what was once unfamiliar. However, for them, the focus of the cartoon style in *Persepolis* is not, necessarily, universalization; it is, rather, the constant play of familiar and unfamiliar. Furthermore, the cartoon drawings have one additional role in *Persepolis*: the construction of the characters without an emphasis in stereotypical characteristics, which can be considered a problematic issue in comics (Smith 62).

Sidonie Smith argues that some critiques against comics are that they can “reproduce colonialist, racist, anti-Semitic tropes of difference through crude visual stereotypes” (Smith 62). On the other hand, artists

like Spiegelman and theorists like Chute claim that one of the great characteristics in comics is precisely its capacity of "both play[ing] with and against visual stereotypes" (Chute 12). In the previously cited frame, depicting Marji and her outcast friends, the individual and personal features do not construct easy references, or stereotypes, for the characteristics described by the narrator. This is the reason for which the frame requires more attention from the reader in order to make the correlation and differentiation between image and words.

In contrast with McCloud's argument that cartoon searches for "amplification through simplification" and is used as a form of universalization, in *Persepolis,* the use of the cartoon drawings works as an strategy that underscores the complexity of individuals and their identities (McCloud 30-31). Even though, as McCloud argues, "when you enter in the world of a cartoon you see yourself", the graphic novel explores the critical potential of the comics format when dealing with complex subjects, traumas, and stereotypes without accepting commonplace and predetermined conceptions, such as universalization (36). The word/image tension constructed in this frame keeps assumptions and stereotypes at bay. In this sense, when the reader expects to find some trace that can easily show who is whom in this image and this expectation is not fulfilled, it is possible to affirm that the stereotype is still part of the debate. However, instead of being a reinforcement of these stereotypes, this tension, rather, forces the reader to construct new references in order to establish the relation between text and image. By this means, this subversion of hegemonic universalization is used to unsettle binarisms such as West/East once it is not possible to recognize easy categorizations to classify the members of the group, even though the narrator explains the differences of the people depicted in the frame.

In the previous pages of *The Story of a Return*, Marji explains that what called the attention of this group to her was the fact that she was different from the other children at the school. The fact that she is Iranian and has lived through war is positive to her in order to be part of this group. So much so that, when Julie introduces Marji to Momo, she emphasizes that "she's Iranian. She's known war" (12). In this sense, she is introduced to this group of friends because she is exotic, different, mysterious, and knowledgeable. As Said affirms in the beginning of *Orientalism,* the Orient "had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1). Thus, it is in order to try to understand these mysterious other, the "exotic beings," getting to know the "haunting

memories" and the "remarkable experiences" of a girl who "has known the war," that the Occident has this curiosity about the Orient, that this group is curious about Marji. According to Naghibi and O'Malley, one of the appeals of *Persepolis,* as a graphic novel well received in the West about an Iranian girl, is the promise to "'unveil' the mysteries of the life of a woman from the East". They also continue explaining one of the reasons why this "ethnic autobiography" has become extremely marketable: "Because of the West's perpetual desire to look beyond or beneath the veil in order to glimpse into the life of the exotic or sinister East" (240).

Hence, why is Julie the one characterized as eccentric and not Marji herself? If this depiction was constructed from the perspective of her friends, Marji would be the eccentric, instead of Julie, once she is the exotic other – being Iranian and having known war are worthy of being part of the presentation, for instance. However, this is not the perspective of her friends, but her own perspective, instead. Thus, taking in consideration that for the West she would be the eccentric and the exotic, Marji characterizes an European girl as the eccentric, and, by doing so, she is reverting the Orientalist perspective – she is taking the central position to herself. In other words, Julie is the eccentric because Marji said she is. Marji is the one in power to characterize her friends.

3.2 Displacement

In Vienna, Marji starts to realize that, from the eurocentric perspective, she was not seen as an equal. When she is expelled from the boarding house run by nuns, for instance, she clearly depicts the difference of treatment given to an European and to a Middle Easterner. She experiences the construction of a generalization which puts the whole population of the Middle East under the same category, which results in a population constructed as a monolithic group. When she argues with the nun, for example, the nun states: "It's true what they say about Iranians. They have no education" (fig. 5). When the nun says that, she is precisely reinforcing a general discourse about this group of people. In Said's words, the nun, as any European, "could speak [...] of an Oriental personality, an Oriental atmosphere, an Oriental tale, Oriental despotism, or Oriental mode of production, and be understood" (32).

Fig. 5. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 23.

Moreover, Marji must be constructed, by the West, as uneducated because she, then, is the oppositional other that constructs Europe as the educated group: “On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical capable of holding real values; the latter are none of these things” (Said 49). Hence, for the West to be capable of “holding real values,” the other, in this case Marji, must not be capable of having such values; thus, Marji is considered uneducated for the nuns to be considered the educated ones.

It is worthy to note that, before this scene (fig. 5), Marji had just explained that eating while watching television “was strictly forbidden” in her parents’ house (22). Eat in front of the television was something new to her once she was still learning about another culture. And, the sequence also makes clear that she usually follows the rules of the house she is living – in her parents' it is forbidden to eat in front of the television, so she refraining from doing that. Differently from her home, in the boarding house this custom was allowed, so she felt she could do it. In the first three frames of the page in figure 5, Marji is depicted trying to watch television while the nun is blocking her view. She takes time to understand she was doing something wrong – this time is marked by the use of more than one frame to show the scene; by spending three frames until the nun makes the statement, the reader understands that the act of the nun, stopping in front of Marji, was not understandable right away. When the nun disrupts Marji while she was trying to watch television, this first verbal contact is made by yelling at her – represented by the spiked balloons – the nun screamed at Marji that she needed “a little restraint” (fig. 5). The nun continues to talk to Marji in a position of authority – while Marji is sitting down, the nun is standing up and pointing a finger at her – with a serious expression signaling her disapproval.

The reaction of the nun because Marji was eating straight from the pot was not the reaction of someone who explains the rules of a new culture to someone who does not know such rules. Rather, by her reaction, it is possible to say that she takes for granted that education would be the same in any place of the world. In other words, the rules of the Western culture are taken by the nun as the correct ones to everybody in any place, and people who do not know those specific rules are dismissed as uneducated. Then, by Marji's attitude, she concludes that the whole of Iranians are not educated – the attitude of one single person is enough to create a generalization that encapsulates all Iranians. Moreover, beyond the generalization of all Iranians, the nun

also constructs a binarism that separates the educated people, who follow the European ideal of education, and uneducated, the rest.

What follows in the two bottom frames of this page is Marji trying to react at the same level as the nun's reaction. At first, she is pointing her finger at the nun, even though she is still sitting down. Secondly, she makes a statement as general as the one made by the nun: “It's true what they say about you, too. You were all prostitutes before becoming nuns” (fig. 5). The impact of this statement in the group of nuns was surprise, incredulity, and revolt – noticed by the big “ôôô” they say – even the character in the television has his mouth open, like the nuns, in disapproval. This character has taken the nun’s side, the television is positioned behind the nun, who occupies a leadership position with her followers in the back, while Marji is sitting alone, isolated. As Said argues, any European could speak of any Oriental and be understood. In this sense, the character in the television can be a representation of any Westerner, who would be able to understand the generalization made by the nun.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Marji constructs herself as a heterogeneous and complex subject in order to disrupt the construction of the Middle Easterners as homogeneous. In this scene, Marji is showing one of the occasions in which the Oriental, from the Western perspective, is homogenized. It is against this kind of construction that Marji works on her own identity. This is why she reacts against the nun’s generalization. However, here, when Marji does that, she goes beyond the depiction of the Orientalist as the one who constructs the homogenized East and shows that the construction of the other is not accepted equally in both directions. In this sense, when she tries to homogenize one European group, this is a scandalous.

Specifically, Marji appeals to the same logic of the nun's authority, and both verbalize an assumption spread by a group denominated only “they,” even though such “they” is not necessarily the same for the nun and it is for Marji. None of the parts in the discussion explain who “they” is and why “they” has the authority to be the source of a generalization. The difference between both “they” is on the authority of the Orientalist, of the West. Said describes authority as:

> formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status; it establishes canons of taste and values; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true and from traditions, perceptions, an judgments it forms transmits,

> reproduces. […] All these attributes of authority apply to Orientalism. (19-20)

Because Marji's “they” is not supported by the authority of a religion as is the nun's “they,” Marji cannot come up with a generalization, like the nun, so she ends up expelled from the boarding house. When called to talk to the assistant of the Mother Superior, Marji questions why what she said was unacceptable and what the nun said was acceptable – the yelling nun, here, is not even a subject of discussion from the perspective of the Mother Superior's assistant. Marji is expelled without any explanation about this inequality.

The reversal on the Orientalist perspective happens when, because of an inequality of treatment, Marji equates both extremist groups from the dichotomy East/West. In the last frame of page 24 (fig. 6), Marji recognizes that “in every religion, you find the same extremists”. The veil wore by the nuns is similar to the one wore by the Iranian women. In this sense, the oppression from both extremist groups, the Orientalist nuns and the Islamic regime, is comparable. Therefore, by saying both groups have similar behavior she expresses her feeling of oppression in Europe and compares this feeling with the oppression caused by the Iranian extremist government, which made her move from Iran to Austria. *Persepolis*, then, shows how treatments can be different – she is expelled while the nun is not even questioned – even though they had the same attitude towards one another – the construction of a generalization based on what “they” say.

In this sequence (fig. 6), Marji makes another attempt in order to be treated as an equal by the nuns, and again she is insulted. Her first attempt was asking if what the nun had told her was acceptable. In the second, she argues that the nun should also be ashamed. By no means Marji had tried to defend herself from the accusation of saying what she had said; she is simply arguing for the same treatment as the nun. She is aware that such generalization is a construction that does not necessarily correspond to the real signified. However, if she should be ashamed because of a constructed generalization, the nun, who had done the same, should also be ashamed. In this sense, because she is the other in the Western perspective, she is the one who is not allowed to say anything about the Western culture; differently, this rule is not applied to the Orientalist, who is a Westerner, and, by having authority over the Orient, is capable of constructing characteristics that would be applied to the homogeneous other.

Fig. 6. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 24.

After being humiliated and insulted by the nun, Marji's last answer to the mother superior's assistant is in Farsi, her mother tongue. According to Angelika Bammer, "language functions equally as an identity-grounding home under conditions of displacement and a means of intervention into identity-fixing cultural agendas" (xvi). Hence, the use of Farsi calls her history and cultural background as Iranian to the top of her identity – she foregrounds her Iranian identity in a situation in which her inferiority and displacement would be assumed, otherwise. Thus, the use of her native language is a way of avoiding being inferiorized by the hierarchy that creates the East as inferior to the dominant West. The nun has authority once she is European supported by the Orientalist discourse, while Marji is from the Middle East, so, according to the nun, she is uneducated and does not have authority to answer equally to an offense. Therefore, the use of Farsi is this intervention Bammer claims, applied against the asymmetrical regime of the nuns. The Farsi is also the identity-grounding in relation to her Iranian identity. After a sequence being depicted under a shadow, it is just when Marji answers in Farsi that she comes out of the shadow and the reader can see clearly her expression. When she forces her language in the sequence and against the nun, who does not understand Farsi, she returns the focus of the debate to herself, leaving the nun in the background without emphasis. The reinforcement of her Iranian identity through language is, then, a way of avoiding that generalization and difference in her treatment would turn her invisible, under the shadow of the stigmatization made by the nuns, a representation of the Orientalist way of thought.

In the end of this scene, Marji establishes a similarity between the extremists of any religion: "in every religion you find the same extremists". This is clearly a reference to the construction, by the West, of Muslims as extremists and terrorists, and, by consequence, the responsible for "the axis of evil" (Abrahamian 192) while Christians are simply constructed as members of a religion. By equating all religions she is, in fact, constructing heterogeneity in any religion once it does not allow easy categorization. In this sense, what she considers negative is not the religion itself, but, rather, the extremism that can be found anywhere. Accordingly, it is arbitrary to categorize Muslims as extremists. In the West, this is the common logic, Muslims, as their main characteristic, are extremists and terrorists. She disrupts with this Orientalist ideology that the Middle Easterners' religion is the evil one. By doing so, she changes the perspective, moving to specific members of any religion as the extremists, instead of creating a generalization that

would encompass all members of any specific group or faith.

Marji is aware that there are many cultural differences between the place she used to live, her nation, Iran, and the place she is now living, Austria. Therefore, in order to try to fit in and find her place – once she is still displaced – in this new society she is inserted, she decides to get to know the Western culture better by spending her vacation reading classic Western books. One of the books she reads is *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir (fig. 7). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir discusses the construction of woman as the other, the marked gender in opposition to the universal male: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch" (267). By the same means, Marji realizes she is constructed as the other in opposition to the supposed universal West. Said says that "the Orient is not an inert fact of nature" (4). Accordingly, the division East/West, that constructs the Orient as the other, is not natural, rather it is a production, as much as the woman, which is also constructed as the other, according to Beauvoir's theorization.

Therefore, it is possible to use the other in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a parallel along with Said's other in *Orientalism*. In figure 7, her failure to pee while standing in order to change the perception of life, when following her interpretation of Beauvoir's text, can be related to her failure to fit into Western culture. At the same time, although *The Second Sex* is a Western text, Beauvoir functions also as a connection with her family as her mother's favorite writer, and, consequently, with her nation, Iran. And these two tensions, the connection with her family and the necessity of fitting into Western culture, are also depicted in the frames that show Marji, as a child, asking her mom about Beauvoir's book alongside her attempt to pee standing up.

It is important to underline that Marji is not trying to assimilate the Western culture; it is not her goal to become, as much as she could, similar to a Westerner. Quite the opposite, her intentions concerning understanding and fitting into this culture are intended to serve as ways of not being assimilated without her permission, accepting the Western ways of life and thought. This is why her mother is by her side, evoking her Iranian nation, family, and culture, while she is trying to experience the possibility of understanding Western culture. In this sequence, a connection with her Iranian culture is expressed, again, through her mother tongue, Farsi, in this case, uttered by her mother. In *The Second Sex,* Beauvoir argues that even when a girl has some interest in the male

penis, it "does not mean that she experiences jealously of it in a really sexual way, still less that she feels deeply affected by the absence of that organ" (273). Following the same line of reasoning, Marji's interest in Western culture is not an interest in becoming a Westerner. Neither does her failure in keeping a connection with her nation signals an abandonment of her history and background as Iranian. Instead, it rather highlights the construction of otherness that leads to Marji's feeling of displacement.

Fig. 7. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 21.

Even though Marji is not trying to assimilate the Western culture, she must negotiate these cultures and traditions. By being an Iranian in Austria, Marji lives the experience of displacement. Nevertheless, as Bammer argues, the experience of displacement is a constitutive part of the cultural identity construction. In other words, the situation that causes the feeling of displacement leads her to self-construction, for being displaced is constitutive of the self. In this sense,

"what is displaced […] is, significantly, still there: *Dis*placed but not *re*placed, it remains a source of trouble" (Bammer xiii, original emphasis). In other words, the many cultures and traditions Marji needs to deal with are constantly displacing one another, but they are still constantly there, being part of her identity construction. This sequence that Marji brings together a Westerner theorist to explain her situation as Middle Easterner shows her negotiation process as in-between the cultures and her feeling of displacement. Because she encompasses all those depictions coming from East and West, she seems to play with this assertion made by Bammer, instead of "replacing" one culture, one place, for another, the cultures and traditions "displace" each other, constructing a different articulation of identity, that must be negotiated, constantly juggled.

Therefore, otherness and displacement are characteristics of an identity under a constant construction that must be negotiated. In this sense, *Persepolis* works with those two characteristics in a way that allows Marji to criticize and try to subvert the Orientalist perspective. She appropriates the Western discourse from different perspectives in order to show that the image of the Middle Easterner is an arbitrary construction. This is so that even though she is the exotic from the perspective of her friends from Vienna, she declares that the eccentric of the group is Julie. *Persepolis* shows that this construction of the Orient is based on generalizations and homogenization, like the "they" uttered by the nun who said the supposed truth about the Iranians.

Marji works on constructing and disrupting comparisons between the East and the West, reinforcing that such divisions are arbitrary, though constructing real prejudices. For instance, as we have seen, the West has the authority to generalize a whole group and say "It's true what they say about Iranians," but the opposite is not allowed; the Iranians, from the Orientalist perspective, cannot construct generalizations in order to refer to the Western people, and, even though they do, it is not recognized in the Western discourse. However, Marji deals with her construction as the other and her feelings of displacement in a way that she is supported by her Iranian culture, depicted by the use of the Farsi language, in order to not be inferiorized. Moreover, when *Persepolis* depicts Easterners and Westerners without self-evident and predetermined stereotypes it is also a way of reinforcing differences from a plural perspective. Hence, Marji does appropriate the Orientalist discourse to show another perspective from and of Middle Eastern people. She does so by depicting otherness as part of her identity and telling how it has real effects on her and on her social relationships.

CHAPTER IV

"BETWEEN ONE'S FANATICISM AND THE OTHER'S DISDAIN, IT'S HARD TO KNOW WHICH SIDE TO CHOOSE": THE RELATIONS OF A "WESTERNIZED" IRANIAN

When in contact with another culture, one cannot ignore the effects of this contact in the process of identity construction. In this sense, when Marji returns to her homeland, Iran, she suffers the consequences of being considered "Westernized". She also struggles to find her own space in this place she used to call home. The modifications in both, herself and the country, make her adaptation more difficult when she goes back, after living in Austria. Considering this context, I shall analyze, in this chapter, how Marji balances the changes in her identity after living in Austria with her Iranian national identity; in other words, how she manages finding her own position while constructed between different cultures and traditions. Moreover, my major aim in this chapter is to analyze how she manages to disturb the Orientalist perspective, even though she, at the same time, does not agree with the current situation of the Iranian government and the more traditional aspects of that society.

Marji becomes conscious of her displacement in both places East and West, at home and in exile. For Bammer, "our sense of identity is ineluctably, it seems, marked by the peculiarly postmodern geography of identity: both here *and* there and neither here *nor* there at one and the same time" (xii, original emphasis). According to Gillian Whitlock, this life story is

> translated into [memoir] that negotiate[s] the cross-cultural relations between Iran and the West in a self-reflexive way. The intensity of this loss of the self and its place in the world engenders a resurrection through memoir as a Western metropolitan intellectual and a diasporic subject with a troubled and ambivalent relation to a lost homeland and to contemporary Iranian culture and society (972).

Hence, the "here *and* there" claimed by Bammer, in relation to whom lives the displacement of the geography of identity, is reaffirmed by Whitlock, specifically in the case of *Persepolis.* The "cross-cultural

relations between Iran and the West" are constructed through this presence, at the same time, of here and there.

When Marji is back to Tehran, not just the city has changed – for instance, the names of the streets are different, as they had been changed for the names of martyrs of the war (97) – but she herself has also changed. Home does not feel like home anymore. According to Hashim and Manaf, Khomeini's revolution altered significantly "the individual and collective identities" (547) in the country: women were now inferior to men by law, the country, once secular, was now religious, people were either accepting it or fighting in silence. When the sense of home is altered and the exile is not an option of a supposedly home either, this position creates a need to construct one's own relationship with the places that constitute part of one's identity background. Accordingly, Marji needs new relationships not only with exile but also with home once she is "back" (one is never back, since one is changed). This disturbance can occur when binarisms are challenged and a new perspective, different from the Orientalist one, is needed to understand the complexities of Marji's identities. If the Orientalist is known by the arbitrary construction of the division between the East and the West, when this construction is disturbed, the main idea of this discourse is also disturbed. Thus, when home, exile, West and East are categories that cannot be easily used to classify Marji, this complexity reverses the Orientalist gaze.

As I have already discussed in chapter II, according to Hashim and Manaf, "home is conceptualised as a stable, physical centre of a person's private space, a place where one feels belonged and loved" (550), thus Iran cannot be considered this stable and belonging place for Marji anymore. However, this dislocation of home does not mean that Iran is no longer part of Marji's national identity. It does mean that this new configuration is much more complex. Even though she cannot recognize her house or her city as hers anymore, Iran is still influencing Marji's identity, Iran being part of what makes her feel displaced (as defined by Bammer). Besides, as I will attempt to demonstrate in this chapter, even if she does not feel that she belongs in Iran, she is also trying to recognize this place she is living now as home, after her experience in the West. Hence, Marji's feeling of displacement has an important role in disturbing the binarism under discussion here.

One author that deals with this complexity of being part of different cultures that displace each other is Gloria Anzaldúa, the Chicana author discusses her own issues caused by living in the borderlands, and the consequent need of having to negotiate and juggle

with different cultures that are all responsible for constructing her as a irreducible subject, even though they oppose each other. Anzaldúa describes the problematic relation between the individual and her home as "[f]ear of going home. And of not being taken in" (20). This "fear of going home" is felt by the so-called deviant, who has appropriated the term to transgress and ressignify it as constitutive of an irreducible identity. The description of deviance, according to Anzaldúa, "is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants" (18). Anzaldúa describes herself as deviant because she is what she calls "half and half" – in the case of Anzaldúa's discussion, what makes her "half and half" is the fact of being male and female, both in the same body. By moving this discussion to *Persepolis*, being Iranian and Westernized can be considered "half and half": "neither one nor the other but a strange doubling, a deviation of nature that horrified, a work of nature inverted" (19). Here, what Anzaldúa considers problematic in the situation of a deviant is not the deviant *per se*, but, rather, the duality in which the person can only be one or the other, giving only two possible options. Differently, the deviant defies the arbitrary social rules, the deviant is "the coming together of opposite qualities within" (19).

Instead of this "strange doubling," deviance is, actually, according to Anzaldúa, a quality, exactly because the deviant questions and defies the imposed social rules. Hence, connecting Anzaldúa's discussion with my aim here, that is to analyze how, in *Persepolis,* the Orientalist gaze is reverted, it is possible to argue that, as a deviant, Marji questions and defies the impositions made by reductionist categorizations, whether in Austria or in Iran.

Like the Chicana woman, the supposed Westernized Middle Easterner is: "Alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture" (20). In this sense, the person who needs to deal with different cultures, that, many times, oppose each other, feels, often, like being in a crossroads during a journey. Anzaldúa, to a certain extent, summarizes this constant crossroads by asserting that: "Not me sold out my people but they me. So yes, though 'home' permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home. Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-*mexicanos, conosco el malestar de mi cultura*. I abhor some of my culture's ways [...]" (21). Hence, even though her culture "sold her out," alienated her, she is still attached to this culture, she knows her own culture, she is part of it, even if the community condemned her for being a deviant; she is still defending this community against other groups who do not know her

culture as she does. This is the constant crossroads, juggling with different cultures, being critical of her own culture, not meaning that she is denying such culture. By this means, Marji, as much as Anzaldúa, needs to juggle with different cultures, that, more than just oppose one another, exclude and do not accept one another. Because of the crossroads, that is an intrinsic part of the borderlands, Anzaldúa claims the position of "making a new culture – *una cultura mestiza* – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture" (22). This is the same sense in which, though writing from a very different context, Marji does not need to choose between cultures – in other words, between the one or other "half" of herself; living in a borderland space analogous to Anzaldúa's, her need is to construct a new culture in which so many oppositions can live together.

Anzaldúa's discussion is important to expose the situation in which Marji is going through when she returns to Iran. As my analysis shall demonstrate and will be further discussed later on, in this chapter, she is considered the deviant in relation to Iranian traditions, so much so that she is called a whore by her friends when she talks about her own experiences – "so, what's the difference between you and a whore?" (*The Story of a Return* 116). However, as Anzaldúa states, she also defends her people, for instance, by showing the honest Mullah – in opposition to the dishonest nun, analyzed in chapter III, it also works as a subversion of the Orientalist perspective (130) – and by criticizing both the Iranian and European media when Marji and her parents are discussing the news broadcasted by the Iranian television about the Europeans' fear of the war (168). Like Anzaldúa, Marji is in-between cultures that oppose each other. She is critical in relation to many of Iranian traditions; however, she, when living in Austria, became aware that Europeans are responsible for the "reputation [of her own people] as fundamentalists and terrorists" (168), so she also defends her people against these kind of generalizations.

4.1 The deviant

Marji's identity, obviously, suffered the influence of living in Austria for four years. Hall's theorization on identity construction considers fluidity a constitutive characteristic of identity: "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture" ("Who Needs Identity" 226). Considering this, Marji's identity is also fluid, and, then, constituted by these influences of the other country she has lived. These influences are one of the reasons for the feeling of displacement she has to deal with in Iran. One

scene that clearly shows the difficulties Marji has to face in order to construct her position in Iran after being subjected to different cultures is when she goes skiing with some friends. Her mother's and her friends' intention when convincing her to go to this activity is helping Marji "to lift [her] out of [her] depression" (115). However, the differences between Marji and her friends become more and more evident to a point when they cannot coexist peacefully.

The first difference Marji exposes between her friends and herself lies in the significance of being on the mountain. While her friends are there for skiing, she is looking for some peace. The difference is evident through the page, in figure 8. In the first frame, when the group is arriving at the ski resort, Marji is depicted separately from the rest of the group. The three other girls are walking in front of her, holding the equipment while she is walking a few steps behind them with her hands in her pockets, showing that she has no interest in skiing – or that she is not familiar with this sport. The long shot in this frame does not allow a clear recognition of the characters, them being under a black shadow that keeps the setting in evidence. The reader can only confirm that the one separated from the group is Marji because the next two frames unfold the situation: Marji is not going to join her friends in the activity. In the following frames, the reader understands the importance of the setting in this first one: Marji is going to stay lying down, enjoying the nature around her while her friends are skiing.

The setting, exposed in evidence here, can be related to one scene of the period she lived in Austria, and, consequently, to her displacement in both places Marji has lived. In Austria, she had a great experience when she went to the mountains to visit the family of one of her friends from the boarding house. When Marji goes with Lucia to the Southwest of Austria to spend the Christmas vacation, she felt at home, in a family. In comparison, when she goes to the mountains in Iran, she is searching for this coziness. However, by desiring and seeking to be alone, she does not create this family bond with her friends. Terms like East, West, home, and exile at this point are disturbed by their contrast. This is so because, when in exile, she finds a family bonding in the mountains of the country that constructs her as the other, but, when in Iran, where she could expect to feel at home, she actually constructs a distance even bigger from her friends.

In this sense, as much as the geographical division, definitions such as home and exile are also arbitrary. When Marji is looking at the mirror, back in Austria, preparing herself to a return to Iran, she claims: "... I needed so badly to go home" (91). The definition of home brought

by Hashim and Manaf – "a place where one feels belonged and loved" (550) – could be better applied to this specific experience in the mountains of Austria than to the experience in the mountains of Iran. What I am arguing is not that Austria can be, in any level, considered home; rather, that this comparison points to the difficulty of conceptualizing such terms, and, because of this difficulty, terms like "home" can also be arbitrary. Therefore, once home and exile are also disturbed concepts, displacement becomes part of Marji's identity when she is in Iran.

The next two frames on this page (fig. 8) reinforce even more how distant Marji has become from her friends, in Iran. In frame 2, Marji's friends are depicted as trying to convince Marji to join them. In the background, people are skiing. The only part of Marji's body that is depicted in this frame is her feet, accompanied by her voice, represented by a balloon that comes from the space outside the frame. The background shows how her friends are integrated with what is happening around them: just like the people in the background, her friends have their skiing equipment with them. Marji, on the other hand, does not have the equipment and is not interested in it. Marji is still an outsider in a certain way, comparable to when she was in Austria, but now she differs from the community she was supposed to be originally a member of; she is a deviant.

In the third frame, Marji is depicted laid down, alone from a high angle in a medium shot. She is much more connected with nature, the setting from the first frame, where nobody else is depicted but her group, than with her friends, who are characterized by Marji as "real traditionalists" (*The Story of a Return* 116). It is important to keep in mind that the Islamic tradition is an imposition by the regime, as argued by Hashim and Manaf; thus, Marji does not consider traditionalism as an essential part of the Iran she calls home, and to where she is trying to return. Hence, her happiness consists in not being forced to fit in the group; she states in the second frame, "I am very happy like this" (fig. 8). Thus, she is happy in this position because what she is trying to do is to connect herself with an Iran that does not exist anymore, the Iran that she used to know before going to Austria. In this sense, the nature would represent this necessity of connection with a country that does not exist anymore. In this first moment, she is facing problems in accepting she needs to construct this new relationship with this now new homeland. Even though in this first moment she feels great in trying to connect herself with this Iran from the past (she feels on the top of the world), later on I will discuss the consequences she faces because she has

difficult in understanding the new conjecture of the country.

Fig. 8. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 115.

Hatfield says that, in reading comics, the set of the page is also important for the understanding of this medium: “the 'page' […] functions both as sequence and as object, to be seen and read in both linear and nonlinear, holistic fashion. […] the single image functions as both a point on an imagined timeline […] and an element of global page design” (48). Hence, the set of these three frames put together in this single page (fig. 8) depicts the relation Marji is having with these friends that are supposed to be part of the community of Iran in which she is trying to insert herself. Throughout this page, the connection between Marji and her homeland, Iran, is constructed in opposition to the connection between Marji and the traditionalist imposition; in other words, she is trying to connect herself with her country, here represented by nature (first frame), without connecting with the traditions she does not agree with, represented by her friends (second frame). In this sense, this page functions to show Marji's displacement in relation to her supposed home. The displacement appears in the first frame, when she is isolated from the group, in the second frame, when only her foot appears in opposition to her friends, who are integrated to the setting, and also in the third frame, where she is depicted alone, even though she is in this resort with her friends.

After spending the day outdoors, during the evening Marji and her friends get together inside the resort. On the page in figure 8, the resort is present; however it is part of the setting without interfering in the current action. Differently, on the page in figure 9, the resort is the main setting once the girls are indoors. Those two pages (figures 8 and 9) are oppositions of each other. While figure 8 shows a page mainly white, with parts in black, figure 9 shows a page mainly black with details in white. In the same way, the last frame in figure 8 changes and becomes mainly black while in figure 9 the last frame also changes and becomes mainly white. The settings are also constructed in opposition: the former is outdoors, in snowy weather, while the latter is indoors with a fireplace in the background. The opposition is also visible in Marji and her friends’ attitudes towards each other: in figure 8, Marji stays by herself, interacting with nature, while her friends are trying to interact with her; in figure 9, Marji is trying to interact with her friends. Moreover, the first frame of figure 8 is similar to the last frame of figure 9, the difference is that in the former the environment is highlighted while the girls are not on the focus while in the last one the girls are highlighted and the environment is the background – this opposition is clearly depicted by the size of the house, bigger and in the forefront by

the first frame of figure 8, and smaller and in the background in the last frame of figure 9.

Fig. 9. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 116.

The borderlines of the page and the frames allow for the construction of a borderland where different oppositions can coexist. One fixed delimitation, such as the frame, the page, or the border of a country, does not limit changes of cultures and traditions, the juggling of opposite dualities, the contact between indoors and outdoors, the contrast between fire and snow. All the experiences are part of the same construction, the same self, as the “half and half” discussed by Anzaldúa. Hence, the oppositions depicted throughout those two pages are representative of the oppositions that construct Marji's identity. The same way that the borderlines of the frames do not limit the construction of different meanings on the pages, geographical borderlines do not limit different constructions of identity. Quite the contrary, when working as borderlands, the contacts of oppositions construct a new and different identity.

While Marji is still connected, or in the process of connecting, to Iran, she is, at the same time, experiencing what Hashim and Manaf said about the Khomeini’s revolution, which altered significantly the collective identity of the country. Hence, on one page she states: “Actually I felt on top of the world. The mountain, the blue sky, the sun,... All of it suited me. Little by little my head and my spirit took on some color” (fig. 8). However, Marji's state of peace is broken when she is questioned about her sexual experiences in Austria. Even though her friends are interested in Marji's experiences in the West, they do not accept that those experiences go against the new order of the, now, traditionalist Iran. After confessing that she has had sex with more than one person, Marji is compared to a whore: “so, what's the difference between you and a whore?” (fig. 9). Marji realizes, at this point, that her friends themselves are in a contradictory opposition, looking like modern women and being traditionalists in the same breath: “underneath their outward appearance of being modern women, my friends were real traditionalists (fig. 9).

This kind of comparison – Marji and a whore – happens, here, in *Persepolis,* for the second time, and both situations can be related. In Austria, Marji's landlord accuses her of being a prostitute: “You think I don't know anything about your 'secret prostitution'?” (Satrapi, *The story of a return* 67). The oppression, that homogenizes her and constructs her as the other in the West, is the reason why the landlord puts herself in the position of saying that she knows what Marji does, even though she does not know. However, in this scene, back in Iran, she feels the same oppression coming from inside her community, from her own people. It happens because, here, she is a deviant, she is “Westernized”: “To them,

I had become a decadent Western woman" (fig. 9). In this sense, it is possible to notice that the characterization of Marji as a prostitute is arbitrary. In a first moment she is characterized as a prostitute by her landlord who, as the Orientalist, puts herself in the position of the person who knows the other, and can judge Marji, because she is Iranian. In the second moment, Marji's friends are the ones doing this judgment, calling her a whore – they are Iranians and consider Marji "Westernized". The arbitrariness of this stereotype ends up disrupting binarisms, once, on one hand, she is considered a prostitute for coming from Iran, and, on the other hand, she is a whore for being "Westernized".

Both her friends and Marji are, then, more complex than the other expected. Marji, first, thought that her friends were modern, that is, for her, people who do not follow the traditions imposed by the regime. Once they did not fit the category of "modern women," for Marji, they are, then, categorized as "traditionalists". On the other hand, Marji does not fit the expectations of her friends either, and, because of that, she is categorized as "whore". All those categories cannot encompass any of them once categories "reduce vast numbers of objects to a smaller number of orderable and describable *types*" (Said 119, original emphasis). In this sense, their complexity works to destabilize the previous thought they had of each other, which constructs a necessity of reorganizing categories in an attempt to make them fit.

In the last frame of this page (fig. 9), right after being called a whore, Marji is depicted at the margin, alone, separated from the group, almost out of the frame. Otherness is constructed, then, from different perspectives, and those perspectives are responsible for Marji's feeling of displacement. On the one hand, for instance, the Orientalist, who homogenized and inferiorized Marji for being Iranian through the voice of the Austrian landlord, forces a connection between Marji and her homeland, Iran. This enforced connection happens when she is considered a prostitute because she is Iranian. On the other hand, the perspective that puts Marji in the margin of this frame comes from her community, in Iran, and works on problematizing the relation between home and Iran. However, the fact that this relation between home and Iran is problematic does not mean that it does not exist. As Anzaldúa states, "though 'home' permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home" (21). For home is complex and cannot fit easy definitions, Marji feels herself displaced once again. Hence, through the voice of this group of friends, Marji becomes a deviant in her community.

4.2 The religious man

Even though Marji criticizes the traditionalism of this new Iranian identity, as in the scene with her friends, she also shows a perspective that would be considered new for the Western reader, and even for herself. A traditionalist, religious, and Muslim man is depicted as a "true religious man" (fig. 10). To get into university, Marji needs to pass the national exam and the ideological test. She passes the exam; however, the ideological test is a problem, as she needs to know "to pray in Arabic, the names of all the Imams, their histories, the philosophy of shiism, etc, etc, ..." (129). Even though Marji tries to study and learn "everything by heart," she cannot learn all the information she needs to know in time for the ideological test. In this context, she prefers to be honest with the mullah instead of trying to fool him. As a positive result, she is admitted to graphic arts, the field to which she had applied. The mullah who interviewed Marji "had really appreciated [her] honesty. […] [She] was the only one who didn't lie" (fig. 10).

In the sequence in which the mullah interviews her, the focus is on Marji, whose expressions are shown clearly, in opposition to the mullah, who is shown during the whole interview in a shadow. The medium shot in the second frame of this page, foregrounding the mullah, evolves to a medium close-up, framing them both at almost the same level, with Marji a little bit in the background. In the third frame, the close-up focuses on both at exactly the same level. From this perspective, the man who is supposed to be the oppressor is going, in each frame, to be put side by side with the person who is supposed to be the oppressed. When Marji decides that she is not going to occupy a powerless position that is expected of her as the interviewee and decides to be honest, she performs an action that puts her at the same level as the mullah. Likewise, when the mullah sees her honesty as a quality instead of a showing off of a girl against the Islamic revolution he also demonstrates that, as Marji states, there is a "true religious man" even under the Islamic dictatorship.

When oppressor and oppressed are on the same level, the hierarchy is contested and the system of power is questioned, even in an interview that is going to decide ones future. Marji defies the system that would not approve her admittance to the university and she is admitted to graphic arts. Beyond that, when Marji depicts the "true religious man," she is disrupting more than the Orientalist perspective, she is also disrupting a homogenization that is adopted among Iranians. The importance of the mullah in this passage is reinforced when he is constantly present, even in the shadow, and is put side by side with

Marji. He is not diminished or left out of the picture, he is still there, visible. His presence constructs heterogeneity within a group that has been constructed as homogeneous throughout *Persepolis* – that is the religious Islamic group. Throughout *Persepolis,* the Islamists, who are part of the Islamic regime, are shown as oppressors, a group that conducted the secular Iran to a traditionalist country. Therefore, this passage disrupts even the discourse of Marji herself, as representative of the heterogeneous Iran depicted in *Persepolis*. At this point, any trace of homogeneity is broken; the irreducibility of the individual expands to any individual, the member of any group.

This scene can be compared with one scene analyzed in chapter III in which Marji has a discussion with the nuns at the boarding house. By this comparison, it is possible to notice another way in which *Persepolis* subverts the Orientalist perspective. At the core of this subversion is the depiction of a nun and of a mullah, both representatives of different religions. The former is depicted, in this graphic novel, as an extremist and a symbol of the Western religion. Differently, the latter, a symbol of the Islamic religion, appears in the text as a "true religious man". In the scene with the nun, Marji constructs a similarity between the extremists of any religion and the Catholic nun. This construction is a reversal of the one made by the West of Muslims as extremists and terrorists, the ones responsible for "the axis of evil" (Abrahamian 192). The Orientalist, a Western scholar, sees Christianity, a Western religion, as the rule, the base, the religion that is central (our calendar is one of the many examples of the importance of Christianity for the West). In that moment, Marji shows that it is possible to find extremists in any religion, including Western religions, exemplified by the nuns. Then, from another perspective, she brings to the discussion the "true religious man" of the Islamic religion, emphasizing that it is possible to find open-minded figures in the Islamic regime. Differently from the conversation with the nun, here Marji is the one highlighted while the mullah is under the shadow. The straight on angle from the back of the mullah, depicting Marji from the front, constructs an opposition with the scene analyzed in chapter 3, working on the reversion of the Orientalist gaze.

Fig.10. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 130.

The critique against the Islamic dictatorship is also present on this page, even though Marji is working on the construction of the mullah as a “true religious man”. In the first and the third frames of the first column, the oppression of the regime against Iranian citizens is depicted in the tension Marji and the other candidates suffer because they are afraid of the system. This fear of the system is related to the fact that she is a deviant. Because they cannot accomplish a demand of the regime, they become afraid of it. Once Iran is under a regime that scares some of its citizens, it is possible to argue that in those two frames Marji is depicting her feeling of the “fear of going home,” as described by Anzaldúa, in relation to what is feeling by the deviant.

These two frames (first and third of the first column) construct a contrast in relation to the interview with the mullah. In the first frame, the four candidates, Marji included, are worried and anxious about the test, they are restless. Moving to the other frame, Marji regrets being so honest and believes she lost her chance to get into university – she does not know yet that the Mullah liked her, so she doubts the possibility of being admitted. In this sense, *Persepolis* is not naive in relation to the fear caused by the regime to its own community; however, this graphic novel dismantles the common idea constructed by the Orientalist by depicting the “true religious man”. Marji, herself, doubted the existence of the true religious man within the Islamic regime, which made her doubt the possibility of being admitted, so much so that she states, after the test, “it's all over...” (fig. 10)

4.3 The media

Marji's consciousness of the arbitrary authority that constructs a hierarchy of a group over another becomes explicit in certain scenes of *Persepolis.* One example of it is the conversation she has with her parents about the media in both places, Iran and Europe (fig. 11). In this conversation, she states that as much as the media in Iran is anti-Western, the media in Europe is also anti-Middle Eastern: “The Western media also fights against us. That's where our reputation as fundamentalists and terrorists comes from!”. When she emphasizes that their reputation is constructed by the media, she is, at the same time, emphasizing that this construction is not, necessarily, in accordance with their reality, reaffirming the arbitrariness and cruelty of it. In the same path of Edward Said, Marji experienced the “web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim […]” (Said 27) as discussed in chapter III. Therefore, she affirms that the discourse constructed in the West is the

responsible for the problematic reputation of the people from Middle East. Because she has lived in the West, and suffered such experience, she has the authority to speak of this topic. In the third frame, she is depicted in a position that expresses such authority, by the position of her hand and finger, and by her expression.

In this sense, in the same way the Orientalist speaks in general terms about the Orient, Marji is speaking about the manipulative media of the West. Following the same path, Marji puts herself in the position of an authority about the West and generalizes about the whole of Europe. She had lived only in Austria until this point of the story; however, this is not an impediment for her to generalize and talk about Europe and the Europeans as a whole. She reverse the roles, she becomes the authority, she becomes the one who is allowed to construct generalizations.

The war they are discussing in this scene is the Gulf war, which was triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, in August 1990. After this invasion, an army formed by the United States and Great-Britain attacked, by air, the Iraqi army in Kuwaiti territory, in January 1991. "For the first time in modern history Arab states fought with western armies against another Arab state" (Halliday 143). Even though, as Marji's mother claims, the allies (the Western countries that interfered throughout this war) argue they were in this war for humanitarian reasons, the oil was in fact an issue, probably the main one, in this war. Halliday listed the reasons argued by Iraq to invade Kuwaiti:

> Iraqis made a number of complaints against Kuwait: that it had lowered the general market price of oil by overproduction and had thus lessened Iraq's income; that it had stolen oil from a field, Rumaila, that lay along their joint frontier; that the frontier was drawn in such a way as to harm Iraq's maritime interests and security; that Kuwait was acting as an 'agent' of imperialism. (Halliday 144)

Hence, as it is possible to notice in this excerpt, oil and imperialism are the main reasons for war. Once again the West was intervening in the functioning of this region. Borrowing Said's words, the allies' thought is this: "[Orientals] are a subjected race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves" (35). In this context, by using humanitarian reasons, the West has, actually, created an excuse to invade, control and dominate

the region.

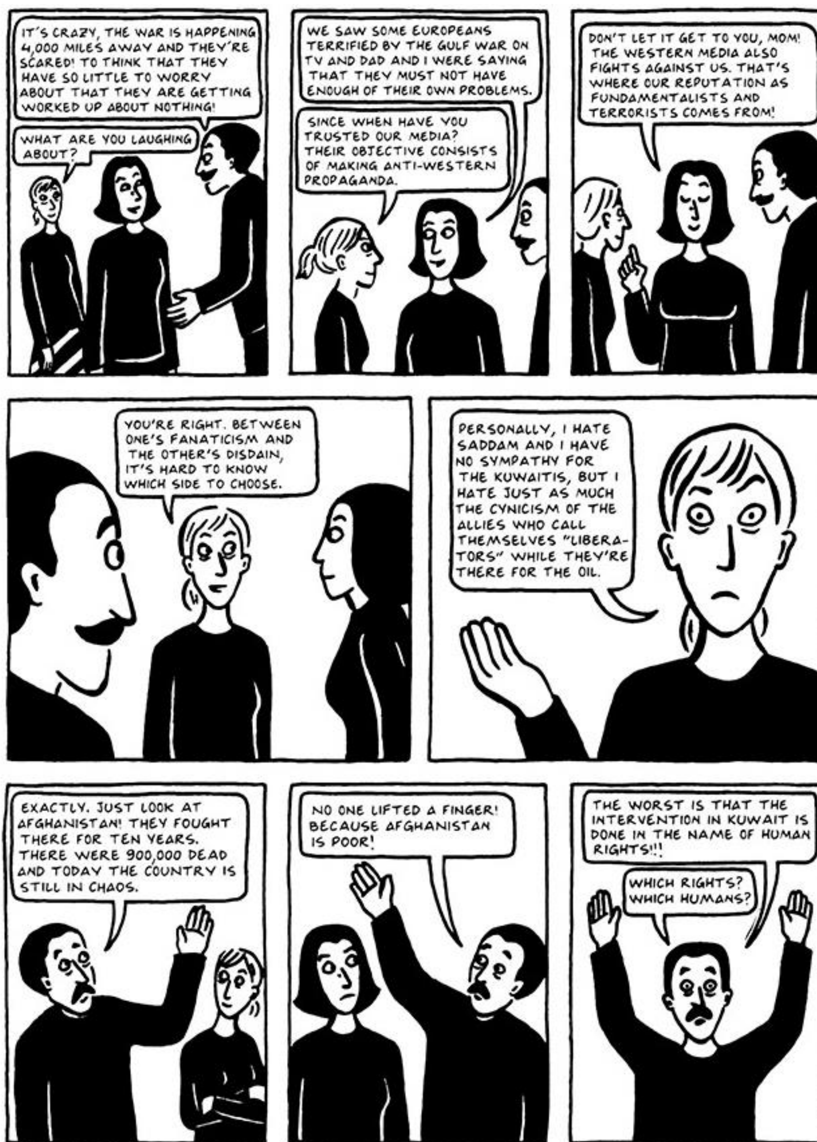

Fig.11. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 168.

In order to understand better why Marji's mother has "no sympathy for the Kuwaitis," it is important to know that Iranians nourish anger towards Kuwait for supporting Iraq in the war against Iran. That is why Marji's mother states that "[she hates] Saddam and [she has] no sympathy for the Kuwaitis" (fig. 11). For the same reason, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was unpredictable: "In the course of [the] war [against Iran, Iraq] had received substantial assistance from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, estimated at $40–50 billion, or four times its average annual peacetime oil revenue" (144). Hence, by understanding a bit more about the alliances between all the sides in these two wars in the Middle East, it becomes clear that the wars are a matter of economic interests, rather than humanist ones.

During this conversation (fig. 11), they balance the difficulties of supporting any of the groups involved in this war: the invaded Kuwait, the invader Iraq, and the allies from Western countries. Marji's mother is lecturing about her point of view not only to her family, but mainly to the reader. In the fifth frame of the page in figure 11, by depicting her in a medium close-up, her interlocutor becomes also the reader, as she is looking at whom is outside the graphic novel while she is explaining why she cannot support either of them. While Marji is the authority about how the West constructs Middle Easterners reputation, her parents are the authorities in relation to the conflicts in the area. For this reason, they are the ones explaining the situation for both, Marji and the reader. In the next pages of *Persepolis* it is noted that this kind of analysis was not common for Iranians, who, for the most part, were "happy that Iraq got itself attacked and delighted that it wasn't happening in [Iran]" (*The Story of a Return* 169). Hence, here, the specialists in each area are explaining to the reader how the situation in the Middle East is much more complex than a generalization created by the West.

Moreover, the Western people are, here, mocked by Iranian media and by Satrapi's family (fig. 11). Both show how Europeans have no idea about the conflicts and situations in the area and how they only use their power to interfere in what is interesting for their own business. The lack of knowledge about what is really happening in the Middle East and the interest of the Western countries in controlling this region are evident in this scene. More than that, it is evident, by the necessity of creating the humanistic excuse, how the manipulative West needs this lack of knowledge to be able to control the region. By constructing the Middle Easterners as fundamentalists and terrorists they construct also a reason to interfere, through war, in the Middle East.

The experience Marji has in both East and West allows her to construct a critical perspective of both stereotypical constructions of herself and of the other. Being alienated by her own culture and an alien in the West, being a deviant, as Anzaldúa states, is what makes her aware of the problematic relations between the arbitrary division that criticizes her in any place: in the West for being Iranian and in Iran for being Westernized. In this sense, being half and half as a way of possessing "oppositional conciousness," is, quoting Anzaldúa, "the coming together of opposite qualities within" (19). What, in the beginning of returning home, Iran, is a burden – being a "Westernized" Iranian – for Marji becomes what enables her, as the poetic persona representing Satrapi, to write her autobiographical graphic novel.

Fig.12. Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. 2003, page 187.

By the end of *Persepolis,* Marji leaves Iran for the second time, and this time to live in France (fig. 12), where she is still living until today. However, the process of separating herself from her homeland

geographically does not necessarily separate her from her home. Anzaldúa claims: “Yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back” (21). Writing, then, becomes a way of returning to this imaginary home. The graphic novel *Persepolis* is a way for Satrapi to revisit, in a critical way, her own story and her homeland. The last frame in this second book is similar to the last frame of the first book: it is set in the same airport, a transitional space, but, as Naghibi argues, in a “positive and forward-looking note” (“A Story Told in Flashbacks” 169), with a glance of hope in it. The second volume of *Persepolis* ends with Marji saying: “The good-byes were much less painful than ten years before when I embarked for Austria: there was no longer a war, I was no longer a child, my mother didn’t faint and my grandma was there, happily...Happily, because since the night of September 9, 1994, I only saw her again once, during the Iranian new year in march 1995. She died January 4, 1996... Freedom had a price” (fig. 12). Marji, her mother, and her father are smiling, in a scene that seems to look forward to a better future – like in the end of the first book, the narrator is conscious about the future – only Marji’s grandmother cries.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

As seen in the previous chapter, in each location Marji finds herself she has to deal with different characteristics and specificities of her own identity in order to reverse the Orientalist gaze. As claimed by Said, the geographical division that constructs an East and a West, as opposition of each other, is arbitrary, based on an imperialistic view held by the West. This division has real implications on the lives of people in the East and in the West. In this sense, the strategies used by Marji to reverse the Orientalist gaze upon her have to be different according to her location, even though those divisions are arbitrary. In some situations, the reversion is constructed by using the Western discourse against the Western institutions or people themselves. In others, the constructions of individualization and/or heterogeneity are responsible for this reversal. The use of generalizations also works on debunking the Orientalist gaze. Furthermore, concerning the graphic novel medium and the autobiographical genre, some of their features also collaborate for the gaze reversal.

Marji has to deal with different layers of identity in different places, and, by doing that, she ends up constructing new relations with those places according to the necessities of her new layers of identity. The relations between places, people, and cultures construct a heterogeneous and irreducible subject. This is a constant construction, never finished and always modifying itself in order to articulate different characteristics, thus constructing identity as defined by Hall. This ongoing construction is the characteristic of identity that allows the depiction of the heterogeneous character of Marji, debunking the Orientalist discourse by which, as we have seen, she is normatively reduced to a monolithic construct. In this sense, the construction of Marji's identity as multilayered and dynamic is what disturbs and reverses the Orientalist gaze.

It is possible to affirm that Marji is in the borderlands, term coined by Gloria Anzaldúa to describe her own situation of being in-between different cultures and geographies. This geographical and psychological location is constructed throughout the interaction between the different layers of identity. Those layers are constantly trying to coexist; however, as already discussed, this coexistence is not peaceful. They can be oppositional and contradictory while still trying to occupy the same space. The construction of a heterogeneous character, through

antagonisms, confrontations, and contradictions is not an easy one. The coexistence of all those layers of identity results in troubles and struggles, as the layers are constantly destabilizing and undermining one another. The negotiation and articulation between these layers, thus, is uninterrupted, always an ongoing process. This process is, in turn, responsible for constructing a heterogeneous individual. Therefore, with(in) the borderlands, the construction of Marji's heterogeneity ends up disturbing the Orientalist gaze, and criticizing both sides of the dichotomy East/West.

In the genre of comics, the borderlands can be graphically foregrounded through the use of the gutters, the frames, and the page. The articulation between these characteristics of comics adds the visual depiction of connections, imperative for the construction of an irreducible identity in the terms defined by Hall. Anzaldúa claims that "the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision" (Anzaldúa 100). The "frames of reference" argued by Anzaldúa can be made visible in comics, graphically framed; incompatibilities are set at the same page, separated by the gutters, united in the space of the page. Thus, the page becomes the space where the cultural collision can happen, and, then, the gutter works as the articulation between the many "incompatible frames of reference".

These articulations, in the form of gutters, differently from what McCloud has theorized, are not there in order to bring unity to the story. Instead, they work on problematizing the process of identity construction. Accordingly, the gutter, as an articulation, does not seek a resolution, but conveys an irreducible complexity. This plurality and irreducibility allows for the formation of a non-unified, unfixed, and multiple identities, one that can be said to exist with(in) the borderlands. The concept of articulation – defined by the Cultural Studies perspective (Hall and Slack, for instance) – as an unstable point of connection, can be used to read the gutters, bringing to this feature of comics the fragmentations and connections that allow the construction of a multilayered identity of the borderlands. Thus, the ongoing crossing of cultures can be, in a way, represented by the gutters of comics.

Therefore, the use of the frames is a resource with which it is possible to build the strategy of gaze reversal towards a critique of Orientalism. In this sense, the frames are used in a way that depict different layers of identity, which are put together, as a set, and connected, throughout the page, using the articulations made possible by the gutters. Different from what the Orientalist theorizes, this form of

construction, in *Persepolis*, works on a depiction of a multilayered image of the East. The East, then, cannot be easily defined through the use of fixed categories, as it would happen when seen through the Western gaze and its dichotomous discourse. In the depiction of those different layers and the connections between them unveils the heterogeneous and irreducible subject that can ultimately disturb the Orientalist gaze.

Marji has experienced otherness, marginalization, and displacement, both in Iran and in Austria. Even though otherness and displacement are part of her identity construction, the impacts and the ways she deals with these characteristics are different according to where she is living. Thus, the asymmetrical construction of Marji as subject is directly influenced by her location. For instance, although she is called a whore in both places – by her friends in Iran and by her landlord in Austria – the impact on her and the reasons why she was offended were completely different. Her landlord offends her because she is Iranian while her friends offend her by calling her "Westernized". Another example is a comparison between the nun and the mullah; even though their construction can be comparable, it is not possible to affirm that they have the same impact on Marji's identity or that Marji deals with the relation between herself and the nun or the mullah in the same way. In this sense, while the nun's scene is more focused on showing that "in every religion you find the same extremists," the mullah depicts a "true religious man," this assertion being a compliment in opposition to the discourse that Muslims are extremists. In other words, while the nun's scene works on generalizing religions, the mullah's works on individualizing any person, member of any group. In the case of the mullah, Marji considered a "true religious man" someone who does not follow the Islamic regime rules strictly, balancing religion rules and what he sees as important, which, in this case, is Marji's honesty.

In a sense, those different constructions of herself, in relation to where she is and with whom she is interacting, are possible because Marji, by living in the East and in the West, and suffering with marginalization, otherness, and displacement, has what Kaplan calls "oppositional consciousness". Because she has different experiences in both places working on constructing her own identity, she can discuss the differences and similarities of those places in relation to herself. The "oppositional consciousness" appears, for instance, in *Persepolis,* when Marji, even though she is against the regime that puts Iran under the Islamic rules, is also conscious of the problematic construction of the Middle East made by the West. She can compare, for example, what the

media are talking about the other in Iran and in Europe. She thus raises the debate about the manipulative media of the West, which constructs the Eastern "reputation as fundamentalists and terrorists," and the, also manipulative, media of Iran, which are "making an anti-Western Propaganda" (*The Story of a Return* 168). It is the awareness of all those cultural constructed perspectives that allows her to formulate her own critique of both places. Such awareness becomes possible by the "oppositional consciousness" that allows her to move from one cultural perspective to the other.

When Marji moves to Austria, new strategies appear to be necessary to deal with the construction of the irreducible character. New layers of identity emerge; in Austria she has to deal with the fact that she is the other, she is seen as homogeneous, the exotic. In order to reverse the Western gaze upon her, one of the strategies that emerge from *Persepolis* is the construction of one of Marji's friends as eccentric, instead of herself, even though she is aware that, according to the Western perspective about Iranians, she would be constructed as such. The act of putting herself in the center, in relation to all of her European friends, states her position of struggling in order not to be marginalized. Moreover, when Marji is telling the story from her viewpoint, she is the one deciding who is going to be represented from a specific characteristic, and she chooses Julie to be the eccentric.

When Marji categorizes each of her friends, she ends up constructing the reducible categorizations that Said considers the problem of the Orientalist perspective. However, when she does that, *Persepolis* destabilizes the hierarchical relation between the East and the West. Marji reduces each of her friends to one single characteristic; which is one of the strategies, as Said argues, that is used by the West in order to have power and control over the East. In this act, she puts the Orientalist in the position of the Oriental and herself, as the Oriental, in a central position; in other words, she reverses the Orientalist gaze in a way that also denaturalizes supposed fixed categories. A reversal that changes the relation between oppressor and oppressed is not a simple changing in positions, it is, rather, a political act, the act of constructing a criticism of such relations. In this sense, *Persepolis* is, to a certain extent, destabilizing the arbitrariness of the Orientalist discourse.

Another of Satrapi's strategies of gaze reversal that appears in *Persepolis* is the use of the autobiographical genre to reinterpret, reconstruct, and revisit the past. Real experience, or, at least, the credibility of such, reinforces her authority on the critical perspective of the cultures she is involved. This is possible to notice when she lectures

about the Western and Iranian media, in the analysis of chapter IV of this thesis. In this passage, the authority of the experience is also reinforced by the mother's lecture. While Marji can argue about the European media, it is her mother who does the same about the Iranian one in a sense that grants each of the characters the authority to criticize the location where they lived their experiences. The perception Marji acquires by living these cultures and the awareness of the contrasts between them is the background that vouches for her criticism. In a certain way, she can reverse the Orientalist gaze because she suffered it upon her and this experience can be the source for this reversal. The gaze reversal, thus, is a consequence of this continuing work of revisiting, reinterpreting, and reconstructing the past.

In the sense that Marji reverses the Orientalist gaze upon her, she, consequently, blurs the naturalized binarism of East/West. Generalizations and individualizations unbalance the Orientalist gaze and work on denaturalizing the Orientalist ideology. Generalizations, such as the ones analyzed in this thesis –"you were all prostitutes before becoming nuns" (Satrapi, *The Story of a Return* 23), "in every religion you find the same extremists" (24) – destabilize both the authority responsible for constructing the generalization and the generalized group. We have seen that, according to Said, one strategy that allowed the Orientalist to have authority over the East was through the construction of generalizations, which turned a population into one monolithic group which in turn were easier to control. However, the one constructing these generalizations, here, in *Persepolis*, is Marji and the group which the generalizations are directed in the examples above is a Western religion. In *Persepolis,* the one who has control over the discourse is Marji, as the narrator and main character, and Satrapi, as the writer. She – Marji/Satrapi – appropriates the Western discourse, subverts it, and applies it back to a Western group.

The use of individualizations also works on the subversion of the Orientalist ideology. It is possible to highlight here "the true religious man," a mullah of the Islamic religion and member of the regime who is depicted as a good figure; and the use of Farsi as a reference to the connection between Marji and the Iranian culture. Throughout *Persepolis,* the mullahs are usually depicted as oppressors and responsible for driving the secular Iran into an oppressive religious regime. The depiction of the "true religious man" goes in the opposite direction, disturbing even the mullahs' portrayal. Although *Persepolis* criticizes both the authoritarian regime, in Iran, and the oppressive Western discourse, this mullah's representation works on the

construction of individualization within a group of oppressors.

The use of Farsi is considered an individualization as well once it is a device used only when Marji is in Austria. In the two scenes analyzed in this thesis, in which Marji appeals to her mother tongue, the language is depicted in frames that are put side by side with some icon of the Western culture. First, she calls upon her native language when she is trying to argue with the nun, a representation of a Western religion. Later, her language appears again, now uttered by her mother, together with the discussion about Western writer Simone de Beauvoir. In both passages, the language is a connection to Iran used in a situation where Marji is experiencing feelings of displacement and unbelonging because she is Iranian. Those situations dismantle the binary division of the world in terms East and West when the articulations between the frames create connections that bring so many representations of these two sides in a way that is not possible to separate them or establish limitations between them.

The depiction of Marji's experiences, in *Persepolis,* constructs an identity of a Westernized Iranian woman who lives in Europe and is capable of criticizing both cultures she is involved with. Even though I have just categorized Marji, again, my point is to say that she also disrupts with those categories that seems to fit her. For instance, she is considered Westernized but uses her native language to connect with the culture of her country, she reads a French writer to remember her mother, who is Iranian, she criticizes the media in both places she had lived, she was religious and a reader of Marx at the same time, she was considered a whore for being Iranian and also for being Westernized. Many other articulations can be done with the layers of Marji's identity. All of them can work in the construction of an individual subject.

Moreover, the criticism against the oppositional geography is also disturbed by the construction of home and exile, which are problematized accordingly as they appear in the text. Throughout *Persepolis*, "home" is a term to describe Iran. However, in some scenes, the description of Iran cannot be supported by the term "home" – as it is the case of the relation between Marji and her friends, when she returns from Austria to Iran. On the other hand, even though she relates to the family of a friend, in Austria, as hers, it is not possible to say that, by any chance, Austria can be a home to Marji. In this sense, Marji is constantly feeling displaced. Hence, dichotomies like home and exile, East and West, are blurred and problematized, in a way that none of those established concepts can be clearly defined and applied again.

The act of returning to one's own native place does not necessarily mean a return to home. Changes in both the place and the person alter the relations that are necessary for the feeling of being at home. What once was considered home does not exist anymore. Thus, writing becomes a way of returning to what is considered home. Through the graphic novel *Persepolis* Marji can revisit and reconstruct in a critical way her story and the story of her homeland. Revisiting and reconstructing the past through an autobiography comes along with the consciousness acquired by her diasporic experience and the feeling of unbelonging in the East and in the West. The graphic novel *Persepolis*, by constructing Marji's identity as a result of cross-cultural experiences, blurs the East/West dichotomy. The text shows the problematic construction of one's image in both places. The binary division of the world cannot be sufficient to define any group of people. Marji realizes she is seen as the other by the West and she is also criticized as a cross-cultural subject in her supposed homeland. Because of that she questions such a division. *Persepolis* shows a critical overview of life in both places, in the East and in the West, without making one the savior and the other the devil. One way she does so is by telling her own story.

Thus, in conclusion, this heterogeneous, irreducible character, constructed through different layers of identity reverses the oppressive Orientalist gaze. As argued throughout this thesis, the depiction of a group, usually constructed as homogeneous by the Western discourse, when constructed as heterogeneous is already in the process of disturbing such reductionist discourse. More than that, the arbitrary construction of the universal West and the East as the other becomes evident when the categorization, reductionism and generalization are constructed from the perspective of a member of the group that is usually characterized as homogeneous. It exposes that this Western construction of the other – the Orientalist perspective – is naturalized through the Western discourse, rather than an innate characteristic. In this sense, because of the strategy of gaze reversal, the Orientalist discourses are exposed and debunked in this graphic novel.

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