The Satrapi Family’s Cultural Resistance in *Persepolis*

Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* is difficult to categorize; although it is mostly Marji’s life story from birth until early adulthood, it takes place mostly in socially tumultuous Iran, making it a story of war and revolution as well. This combination allows Satrapi to offer an interesting look at how a young girl learns to find herself in a country that is also struggling for an identity. Although she is the main character in the novel, there are examples of her mother - Taji--, her father – Ebi-- and Marji herself all finding different ways to cope with and fight against the culture opposing them.

Marji’s mother gives one of the first examples of resistance in the novel when she is photographed at a demonstration (5). Marji remembers, “I was really proud of her. Her photo was published in all the European newspapers.” But Taji is scared by this publicity and responds by dying her hair and hiding her face in public. Though this is a brief occurrence in the novel, its effect on her becomes obvious throughout the novel, evident in the way she responds to certain events. On page 74, two men assault her and threaten to rape her if she does not wear the veil. “That incident made [her] mother sick for several days,” illustrated in the bottom left corner of the page, where Marji’s mom lies motionless and unresponsive, her eyes looking empty. Her history of resistance and demonstration has been replaced by a woman who is afraid to even be noticed by the fundamentalist opposition. Taji teaches her daughter to react in the same way on the following page, when she tells Marji, “If anyone ever asks you what you do during the day, say you pray, you understand?” (75). In this way, the energy that was once devoted to opposing the regime is now focused on protecting herself and her family by hiding their true personalities.

As Iran’s society becomes more oppressive and fundamentalist, Taji becomes more disillusioned and pessimistic in her conversations with her daughter. One of the most poignant
examples of this appears on page 94, when Marji asks her mother whether all the dead soldiers affect her. Taji’s face becomes very stern, she frowns and lowers her eyebrows, as she responds, “Of course they mean something to me! But we are still living!” (94). Once seen internationally as a symbol of resistance, Taji has become resigned to the fate of her country. This creates tension between Taji and Marji since it occurs at a point in Marji’s life when she is becoming more involved in revolutionary thinking. The bottom three panels on page 113 illustrate this, as Taji becomes a black shadow in the first and last panels, representing her opinion becoming less important to Marji. In the final panel, Marji calls her mother “the guardian of the revolution of this house,” meaning Marji is the revolutionary and Taji is the force that must be opposed. But Taji’s response, a small question mark inside a speech bubble, shows that this is the opposite of her intentions – Taji was only trying to protect her daughter from the real Guardians of the Revolution and instead is being compared to them.

In the second half of the novel, almost all of Taji’s formerly revolutionary spirit is gone, replaced by pessimism and scare tactics. On page 145, Marji’s principal calls the house to complain that Marji told off one of the teachers. The earlier Taji would have laughed and even been proud of her daughter, but the new version of this mother instead tells her daughter of all the terrible things that happen to young girls in Iranian prison. At the end of her lecture, she grabs Marji and cries, “If someone so much as touches a hair on your head, I’ll kill him!” Even Marji realizes the change that has occurred in her mother after she spends time away from the family for a while. On page 252 she remarks, “I would never have thought that I would one day hear my mother sound so disillusioned.” At this point, Taji has given up hope and settled into the idea that war in her country is never-ending.
Marji’s father, however, retains much of his optimism throughout the novel. Like Taji, Ebi enters the story as a participant in demonstrations. Rather than being the subject of pictures, he chooses to take them. The graphic on the bottom of page 29 is a beautiful representation of his photography and shows many of the horrors he had to witness in order to get his photographs. Also, the juxtaposition of his hunched profile next to the blown up photographs shows how important this activity is in his life, as the pictures are almost twice the height of Ebi.

One reason why Ebi remains somewhat levelheaded throughout the conflict is because he focuses heavily on facts. On pages 72 and 73, he is shown both reading the newspaper and watching the news on television while relaying this information to his family. When Iraq begins their bombing of Tehran, the first thing Ebi does is turn on the radio (80). Since he is so educated in what is really going on in his country, not just the propaganda, he is better able to decide which events he should get upset about and which he should overlook. He is even called out on his reliance on facts by Taji on page 135. Taji and Ebi are discussing current events with another couple when Ebi corrects a gentleman on something he says. The friend responds that he is only repeating the rumors, and Taji teases Ebi by saying he has the opposite symptom of gossip. “Even when you see something with your own eyes, you need confirmation from the BBC,” she tells him.

Though he puts great importance on gathering facts, Ebi’s main priority, like his wife’s, is the protection of his family. When Marji asks to come along to a demonstration, he refuses, telling her, “It’s too dangerous” (76). Marji is later allowed to go, but at the first sign of danger, Ebi picks her on top of his shoulders, grabs Taji by the hand, and runs to safety. Ebi reacts similarly when Tehran is being bombed; once he learns via radio what is really happening, he rushes home to make sure his wife is safe.
Yet Ebi refuses to use his original fighting spirit during the events of the story. When a group of frustrated parents is called in to talk to a teacher on page 98, Ebi is shown in the forefront arguing against the school’s rules. As a goodbye to the teacher, he suggests she shave her mustache – a petty remark, yet one that shows his opposition to the fundamentalist regime. Ebi again shows his frustration with authority figures on page 108 in his confrontation with officers who pull him over and accuse him of being a “piece of westernized trash.” In one of the few times Ebi loses his temper in the novel, he replies, “I won’t take that from you. For twenty years I’ve worked for this country and you dare to talk to me like that?” This is a poignant scene for Ebi because it shows that all the work he has done against the dominant powers in Iran is fueled by his love for his country. He is willing to put himself in danger to prove his loyalty to his ideal Iran. Although this is not as extreme as his previous acts of demonstration, it is still an example of opposition and more than some others are doing.

While Marji’s mother focuses on sheltering Marji from the violence that comes with resistance, her father takes a different route. He encourages Marji to do small acts of rebellion against the regime and applauds her when she does so. A good example of this appears on page 145, the same page on which Taji takes up most of the panels with her emotional rant. Ebi, however, appears in just the first three panels, looking pleased and embracing his daughter. He compliments her on yelling at the school principal, saying, “She gets that from her uncle.” Ebi’s proud smile is so wide in the second panel that even his mustache is thrust upward.

Though both her parents have their own ways of resisting the dominant culture, Marji’s journey has the most depth. Since the novel follows Marji from childhood to early adulthood, the way she expresses her rebellion changes as she grows and experiences different ideas. When the novel opens on page 3, Marji is a ten-year-old girl who has just begun to be forced to wear a veil.
On the bottom of this page is a panel filled with children refusing to wear their veils, instead using them to play horse or jump rope. “We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to” Satrapi writes (3). Although this is perhaps not a conscious act of rebellion, it gives a sense of foreshadowing to the story. Children are often very logical, so the fact that they do not see a reason to wear veils shows that there must be something illogical about forcing them to cover their heads, therefore they clash with their elders over the issue.

Marji continues her childhood resistance by emulating the ideas of rebellion she has heard about, often recruiting her friends as well. The first instance of this is on page 10, when Marji decides that in “the year of the revolution [she] had to take action.” She and her friends dress as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Leon Trotsky and march around the garden shouting, “Down with the king!” Backyard demonstrations are not the most influential, but in their outfits, Marji and her friends look exactly like rebels, if only miniature versions of them. Typical ten-year-old children are not so socially involved that they would understand what they were doing, but Marji and her friends at least have some understanding of what they are protesting.

Marji again tries to discover what it is like to be part of the resistance when she hears the story of her grandfather in prison (25). Learning about the torture that her grandfather went through effects her emotionally, shown in her expression in the top right panel of page 25. She sits completely still, her eyes so wide that their outlines cannot close. In the middle panel of the second row, Marji is shown in a close-up with half her face in a shadow. This is almost exactly like the graphic of her mother in the panel directly above, when Taji is filled with grief when remembering what her father went through, so Marji having the same look shows how stricken she is with the thoughts of torture. To deal with the pain, Marji decides to try to experience what her grandfather experienced. “That night I stayed a very long time in the bath. I wanted to know
what it felt like to be in a cell filled with water. My hands were wrinkled when I came out, like grandpa’s,” Satrapi writes (25). Marji’s expression in the bathtub is the same look of terror she carries throughout the scene as she discovers that rebellion is not simply a backyard dress-up game.

Despite this revelation, Marji still has not grown up enough at that point to understand that torture for any reason is still torture. This is evident in the situation involving her classmate Ramin, whose father was in the secret police (44). Marji and her friends decide to avenge the one million people that Ramin’s father allegedly killed by plotting to attack him with fists full of nails. In the first panel of page 45, Marji’s stance and expression, one upraised arm and a furrowed brow, look similar to a dictator setting his followers against an enemy of the state. In fact, the speaker on page 4 is holding the same stance as he denounces capitalism in front of an eager crowd. Like well-behaved followers, her friends agree to her plan and take up arms to fight Ramin. Luckily, Taji interrupts their search and threatens Marji with what she knows will be effective – physical torture. The last panel in the chapter shows Marji talking to herself in the mirror. This represents her decision to resist the regime in her own way instead of using the same tactics the regime itself uses.

Marji’s idea of rebellion is often defined as simply pointing out flaws in how the dominant culture operates. One of the best examples of this is on page 97, which has a montage of shenanigans the students terrorized the teacher with. One of these is the daily mourning sessions for martyrs. “After a little while, no one took the torture sessions seriously anymore. As for me, I immediately started making fun of them,” Satrapi writes. Even just the expressions on the other students’ faces as they watch Marji’s antics are humorous on their own. Marji’s ability to embrace the ridiculousness of certain situations is a major part of the reason she is able to
make it through school in Iran. However, she does not completely survive, as a few years later her humor has turned to anger, and she is expelled for hitting the principal (143). After succeeding in the difficult search for another school, she again gets in trouble for telling off a teacher in front of the class, which causes her parents to realize that Marji is too stubborn and outspoken for the schools in Iran.

When she returns home from her time abroad, much of Marji’s rebellious spirit is missing. An important and surprising example of this is on page 285, when she rats out a nearby man rather than risk getting caught wearing makeup in public. The childhood version of Marji would have run after this new, adult version with fists full of nails for the way she acted, but the adult Marji does not even feel guilty about it until her grandmother yells at her. Whether her years abroad distanced her from caring about the culture or too much domination made her numb to any plight but her own, she has lost the rebellious spirit that once defined her. But when Marji returns to school, she once again feels the social pressures and her resistance comes back in full force, evident on pages 300-301, where she argues with both teachers and police officers.

Throughout her life, Marji learns her own way of resisting the culture that constantly tries to suffocate her. Though she takes bits and pieces from her parents, Taji and Ebi have their own distinct ways of coping as well. Whether releasing their feelings through emotional rants or petty jokes, each family member finds a way to remain an individual under the pressures of fundamentalist Iran.

Works Cited