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Book Review

**Reviewed by
Emma Tarlo**

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*: A Sartorial Review

***Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (Jonathan Cape, 2003); *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, (Jonathan Cape, 2004)**

No memoir better conveys both the play of dress upon the body and human ingenuity, resilience, and creativity through dress than Marjane Satrapi's extraordinary two-volume autobiographical comic strip about growing up in Iran before, during, and after the Islamic revolution and seeking temporary refuge in Austria. Through humorous and emotive sequences of striking black-and-white drawings and simple dialogs, she documents the complex interweaving of the personal and the political,

the individual and the social, demonstrating how dress stands on the border of these domains, making their separation impossible, for it is quite literally the substance through which issues of freedom, control, aesthetics, and politics are negotiated and enacted.

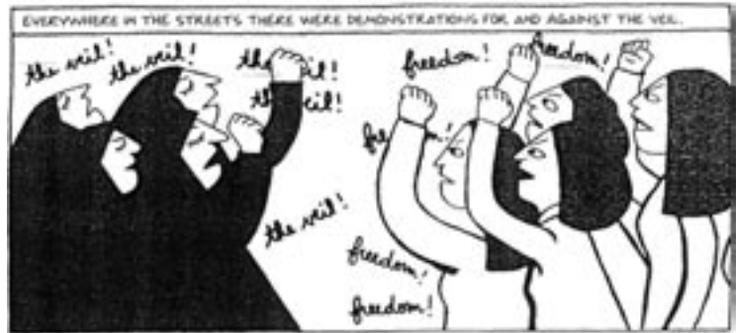


Persepolis begins with images of Marjane Satrapi and her friends at school. It is 1980, just one year after the “Islamic revolution,” when these ten-year-old girls suddenly find themselves expected to cover their heads and segregated from male classmates. A chaotic playground scene reveals just how alien the veil was to children from modern educated backgrounds in Tehran whilst at the same time conveying the regime’s incapacity to keep young imaginations in check.



The turbulence of the period is conveyed through the frequent street protests she witnessed as a child, as people’s identities became split into stark and simplistic choices to which she could not relate. In her drawings she contrasts the expressive wide-eyed vigilance of uncovered modernist protestors with the closed-eyed sanctimoniousness of Islamist

women who advocate full covering and whose bodies no longer reveal either female or human form. Islamist men receive a similar treatment from Satrapi's pen as she reduces the lower half of their faces to uncompromising beards which engulf their mouths and, by implication, their capacities for freedom of expression.



Satrapi beautifully illustrates her ambivalence to these choices through an image of herself half-covered, half-uncovered—each half evoking associations with which she identifies but which, under the new regime, seem to have become contradictory.



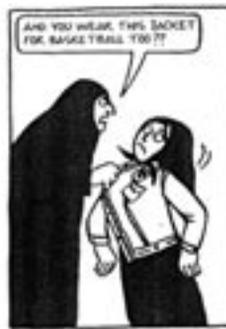
Although Satrapi's parents participate in public protests against the forced covering of women, they end up having to conform to the demands of the regime. The distinction in the streets is no longer between those who cover and those who don't, but between different styles of covering for women and degrees of facial hair and other more subtle factors for men.



Against this background of fundamentalism, the Iran-Iraq war, and the cult of martyrdom that developed around it, Satrapi embarked on adolescence. Her response to the culture of repression and uniformity she was experiencing in daily life was to look to the West for inspiration.



When her parents go abroad they dutifully return with the latest model of Nike shoes, a denim jacket, a Michael Jackson badge and a Kim Wilde poster which her mother stitches into the lining of her father's coat in order to escape the scrutiny of customs officials. But looking cool, American-style, does not go down well with the female wing of the Guardians of the Revolution who, since 1982, had been parading the streets in search of improperly veiled girls in need of re-education. Despite their timeless and hawk-like forms, these female guardians are not as ignorant of contemporary trends as Satrapi hopes and she is unable to convince them that her badge portrays Malcolm X rather than Michael Jackson!

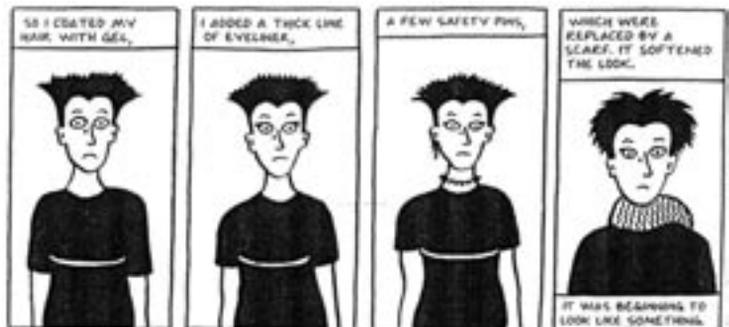


These vignettes from Marjane Satrapi's teenage years lend insight into the power of dress as a form of everyday resistance but her feisty and intelligent questioning of the prevailing ideology gets her into frequent trouble, and contributes to her parents' decision to send her away to the comparative safety of Austria. She is 14 years old and alone.

Volume 2 opens with the problems of adjustment to life in a Christian convent, surrounded by nuns and contemporaries with whom she shares neither language, culture, nor experience. The veil provides a subtle visual affinity between the nuns and the fundamentalist women she has left behind in Iran, and Satrapi implies that the affinity is more than simply visual when she comments, "in every religion you find the same extremists." She is soon kicked out of the convent but not before finding a bunch of friends whose distinguishing feature is their marginality, marked out in their choice of punk over mainstream fashion.



In Vienna, Satrapi is rapidly exposed to sex, drugs and parties. Her struggle to fit in whilst standing out is marked by her new punk haircut and her efforts to “pass” as French.



But these acts of assimilation take their toll as she faces racial prejudice and finds herself haunted by memories of her family and unable to forget or abandon her roots. However, if she feels out of tune with those around in Austria, she experiences a similar sense of disorientation some four years later on returning to Iran, where she can identify neither with the oppressive strictures of the regime nor with the fantasies of her childhood friends. The “West” she has experienced bears little resemblance to the West of their imaginations and serves only to reinforce her sense of isolation.



Throughout the volume, Satrapi keeps her distance from the potential superficiality of fashion whilst at the same time exploring its emancipatory and transgressive potential. For example, after a period of severe depression and attempted suicide, she uses her body quite literally as a canvas for personal transformation. Through the everyday technologies of removing unwanted body hair, renewing her wardrobe, perming her hair, applying make up and doing aerobics, she literally creates a new persona which enables her to function in society whilst still conforming to the subtle rules of distinction that had become part of Iranian public life. She portrays her own physical transformation both as an act of conformity and a subtle act of resistance that hinged, as she put it, “on small details”, such as laughing loudly, and wearing lipstick or red socks!



At university, where she studies art, she conforms to regulations about covering but remains outspoken. When the university administration organized a public lecture on “moral and religious conduct,” she confronted a panel of bearded men about the issue of gender inequality and the question of whether the “religion” they were advocating was really concerned about moral integrity or simply opposed to fashion.



Her public intervention resulted in her being called before the Islamic Commission where, to her surprise, instead of being expelled, she was asked to redesign a realistic uniform adapted to the needs of students—a task she set about with a certain relish.



Satrapi's modernist version of covered dress, designed to offer increased flexibility and flair for female students who have no choice but to cover, is a classic example of how the processes of creativity and differentiation work against totalitarian clothing regimes. Similar processes have been observed in relation to the strict and apparently uniform clothing prescribed by Chairman Mao in communist China and by Mahatma Gandhi in nationalist India. Under conditions of sartorial censorship, small differences of stitch, design, and fabric take on semantic proportions which are often lost on outsiders, but which act as subtle but important markers of distinction and individuality in specific local contexts.

I have concentrated on the sartorial dimension of Satrapi's work—her exploration of the restrictions and possibilities offered by dress under the rigid regulations of the Islamic Republic. But there is of course much more to this extraordinary memoir, in which the history and politics of Iran are effortlessly interwoven with the minutiae of everyday life experiences and perceptions. Satrapi does not fall shy of portraying the violence and brutality against which her family and those around them conducted their lives, whilst at the same time bringing out the sense of humanity and humor that they struggled to preserve. Her skill is not just that of a narrator but of a talented artist capable of conveying a wide range of emotions and insights through a few apparently naive brushstrokes. The end result is a compelling work which both dispels myths and confirms anxieties about how an oppressive state regime inscribes itself on the body of the individual and nation.