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MEMOIR

## Life is a comic book

In the larger context, Persepolis 2 is a look at how women live in the Islamic Republic of Iran...



As a teenager, Iranian writer Marjane Satrapi's questions were the same as most of her peers: Who am I and where do I belong?

Satrapi searches for answers to those questions in **Persepolis 2: A Return**, a unique memoir done entirely in comic book form (both the illustrations and the text are her own). She looks for identity and belonging, first in Vienna, Austria, where her liberal-minded parents send her in the hope of encouraging her to become the free thinker they believe she ought to be. There, she hangs out with a range of people, including a group of teenage punks, a gang of anarchists, a playwright and eight gay men with whom she shares a house.

## Stranger in a strange land

But those nuggets of belonging are not enough to outweigh the burden of being a stranger in a strange land — whether that be in the form of xenophobic comments from racist Austrians, finances that only allow for a diet of spaghetti, or through the nuances of western lifestyle, so starkly different from what she is used to. Despite cutting off her long, black hair, sticking a safety pin through her ears, reading Simone de Beauvoir and sampling a vast array of drugs, Satrapi finds herself unable to fit in in the West. She therefore heads back to Iran and the safety of her home, hoping the presence of her parents and her beloved grandmother will provide a greater anchor to her life.

But after the liberal existence she has led in the West, the rigidity of Teheran proves tough to handle for the outspoken Satrapi. It takes her a while to settle down to what's required of women in the Islamic Republic, and she keeps getting into skirmishes with authority. After numerous experiences (including both falling in and out of love), Satrapi decides to return to the West — but only after figuring out that belonging is something complex, made up of bits and pieces of everywhere and everything, and it takes age and maturity to develop both identity and self-confidence.

## Women in Iran

In the larger context, **Persepolis 2** — published a year after **Persepolis**, Satrapi's account of her Iranian childhood — is a look at how women live in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the way in which a fundamentalist regime can constrict freedom of action, expression and thought to such an extent that upon leaving home, women are more likely to ask themselves whether their veils are in place, or whether they can get by with wearing lipstick, than to wonder what happened to their freedom of speech.

The book comes on the heels of another commentary on the status of women in Islamic Iran, Azar Nafisi's **Reading Lolita in Teheran**, a memoir of the clandestine English literature classes the author held in her home during the darkest days of the Islamic Republic. Nafisi recounts the experiences of seven women as they discover themselves through the works of such writers as Vladimir Nabokov, Henry James and Jane Austen, and is an ode to the transformative and liberating power of fiction.

Nafisi's work has been highly acclaimed, yet Satrapi's memoir is an easier read and far more light-hearted. It is also noteworthy because it is as much a critique of the freedom and the limitless choices of lifestyles afforded by Western nations, as it is an expose of repression in Iran. The more ridiculous aspects of both Iran and the West are even more apparent because they're illustrated through cartoons. Actually seeing policemen on the streets of Teheran chiding Satrapi for running after a bus because her shaking rear end is "tempting" men can only make one laugh, as do drawings of teenage Austrian "anarchists" in underground hideouts. In the same manner, Satrapi also illustrates the more positive facets of both Western and traditional lifestyles, and those cartoons leave one feeling warm because they illustrate the love she receives from people in both worlds.

## Tragic years

Overall, Satrapi's memoir shows that no matter where one might be, the teenage years are among the most difficult stages of life. Barring the more serious political and social commentaries of her work, she shows those years to be both tragic and amusing, and makes us realise that in retrospect, life, like a comic book, need not always be taken too seriously.

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Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return, *Marjane Satrapi, Pantheon, 2004, p.192, hardback, Pounds 17.95.*

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