

## *Persepolis*

### Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. Wikipedia provides a general and apolitical history of the Revolution in Iran. According to Wikipedia, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, also known as the Islamic Revolution of Iran, involved the overthrow of the Shah (an absolute monarch of the Pahlavi Dynasty) and that dynasty's replacement by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini was a cleric who became the leader of the Revolution after the Shah was exiled. He was supported by various leftist and student groups as well as Islamic organizations.

The demonstrations against the Shah began in October of 1977, with resistance against him by citizens as well as religious factions. Iran voted in a national election to become an Islamic Republic after the Shah was exiled and the country approved a new theocratic-republican constitution that installed Khomeini as its leader. The revolution moved at a rapid rate to bring change. It resulted in the exile of many Iranians and replaced a pro-Western, absolute monarchy (the Shah Pahlavi Dynasty) with an anti-Western, authoritarian theocracy. Contributing to the social turmoil were the perceived threats of Marxist and Islamic Socialists, as well as secular opponents to Khomeini's rule.

Neighboring Iraq took advantage of the social and political chaos in Iran during the Revolution and in 1980 attacked Iran. Hostilities between the two countries continued until 1988 when a peace settlement was brokered. The war between Iraq and Iran resulted in profound loss of both military and civilian lives in both countries.

2. Students will readily recognize how natural and important it is for teenagers to develop and express their own voices, styles, and values--often separate from their parents. Enjoying their own music--rock, indie, rap, pop, folk--is as important as how they dress and socialize. Being able to experiment and make mistakes is critical for growth and development. Some students may have lived under oppressive regimes where people are not free to express their opinions without fear of reprisal for themselves and their families. They will understand how difficult it is to need to hide their feelings, opinions, and behaviors from others. Such repression can cause individuals to feel paranoid, isolated, frustrated, and often rebellious. It may also prompt unhealthy escapes through alcohol and drugs when the opportunity arises or may encourage an obsession with sex and anything forbidden.
3. Graphic novels are characteristically black and white drawings, cartoon-like, with ample text in the dialogue balloon above the characters' heads as well as printed text framing the cartoon strip. Some texts are longer, actually novel-length, and more richly complex than others. A challenge in bringing a cartoon drawing to life in a film would be to make the characters believable as human beings rather than cartoon characters yet retain the freshness and magic of the cartoon drawings. Handling difficult material—character nuances, political and military turmoil, resulting social changes in a country in revolution—would be the challenge of Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud. The commentary in “Behind the Scenes,” with Satrapi and Paronnaud, addresses some of these issues. *The Boston Globe* critic Vanessa E. Jones calls Satrapi's graphic novel “a grown-up version

of the comic book.” She quotes Jonah Weiland, a website writer for Comic Book Resources, who says the graphic novel readership is “a little older, late 20s” and more “female-friendly than the typical monthly comic book. Generally graphic novels have a broader appeal. Their stories aren’t crafted for 16-year-old boys.”

## Responses to Reflecting on the Film

1. From the beginning of the film, Marjane is depicted as a precocious single child, always loved by her parents and grandmother. She enjoys a peaceful life as a girl who loves French fries with ketchup, wears Addidas sneakers, and has Bruce Lee as a hero. She plays with friends and imitates Bruce Lee. She is obsessed with "being the last prophet of the galaxy" and speaks directly to God about her feelings. Marji's parents let her play out her fantasies. Marji's interpretation of the political turmoil in Iran is naïve and idealistic. For example, she composes a list of rules for the population that includes that the poor must all eat a roasted chicken every day and another that old women will never suffer: “It’ll be forbidden.” She compares horror and heroic stories with her friends whose families were among the Revolution’s victims.

Marji's family is well-educated and secular, enjoying parties with western music, dancing, and alcohol--all forbidden in Islam. Her Uncle Anoush is released from jail after incarceration for 9 years, and he tells her his story so that she will be entrusted to never forget the family history. When he is again arrested for execution, and is allowed one visitor, he requests Marji. While the Revolution continues, Iraq takes advantage of their vulnerability and every aspect of their lives changed, as did they.

Marji gets into trouble at school, mocking the political platform that honors martyrs, questioning why women must shelter themselves from men’s eyes. Air Raids punctuate what Marji sees as the meaningless drivel delivered in the classroom. She develops an interest in boys, punk dress, and music, listening to “Iron Maiden” tapes which she buys on the Black Market. As she becomes increasingly vocal at school, contesting the teachers’ defense of the new regime, the principal calls her parents. Fearing for Marji’s safety, they send her abroad, to a French school in Vienna where she can stay with her mother’s friend.

2. During the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Marji and her family are frightened by the angry protests as they fear for their safety. Before the Shah was overthrown, Marji's parents are detained for hours by the soldiers, and her father has his film taken from his camera. After the revolution, Marji's Uncle Anoush is released from prison, having been incarcerated for nine years. He believes, "We'll have a society of justice and freedom at last." However, the revolutionary government arrests him, too, and he is executed while in jail. Some of their family friends flee the country; others are arrested and tortured: "Executions took place daily and everyone was afraid. The new government adopted even more repressive laws."

In two years their lives change completely. All females have to be completely veiled, and Marji is often warned that her veil needs to cover more. She is told, "The veil stands for freedom. A decent woman shelters herself from men's eyes. A woman who

shows herself will burn in hell." Male guards show disdain toward Marji and the women in her family. The guardians see Marji and her boyfriend in her car with his hand lightly touching her hand, and for a punishment, Marji's parents have to pay a fine or have her whipped. Stern revolutionaries shout orders and propaganda over megaphones: "To die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society." Young boys are pressured to join the military and give their lives for their country. Marji's mother was able to convince her friend's son not to join the military, and she saves his life.

However, other family friends are arrested for playing cards and having alcohol, and Marji's family even has a close call when the guards threaten to raid their house. Marji and her grandmother dump all their wine, but the father has meanwhile managed to bribe the guards so they never enter their home. Often the revolutionary guards are ruthless. As Marji tells her principal, "My uncle was imprisoned by the Shah, but the new regime had him shot. . . . We've gone from 3000 prisoners to 300,000 under the new regime." Because Marji is aware of the absurdities under the new regime and is so outspoken, her parents fear for her life and send her out of the country, just to protect her.

3. Marji experiences a number of problems while she is living in Vienna, both personal and as a result of her being a foreigner in Vienna. Her mother's friend decides, shortly after Marji moves in with her daughter, that their apartment is too small to include Marji. They arrange for her to live in a convent where the nuns' stance about behavior for young women is not unlike that of the Guardians in Iran. Personal problems for Marji include the fact that she does not speak German, Austria's primary language, and she feels estranged from the German-speaking residents of the convent and their friends. Further, she is haunted by guilt; she sees herself as living a frivolous life while her family and friends in Iran suffer from the Revolution and the war with Iraq.

In addition, her teen-age body starts to develop into a woman's form. She grows taller, and curves form on her previously straight frame. She fears that she is ugly as a birthmark develops on her recently-enlarged nose. Her first boyfriend, Fernando, does not consummate their relationship because he discovers that he is homosexual. Her second boyfriend, Markus, at first seems care-free and absolutely in love with her, but she discovers him in bed with another woman. She decides that she is "an idiot" for missing all of Markus' flaws.

As a foreigner in Vienna, Marji has many problems. Although she speaks both Farsi and French, she does not speak German, so she is outside the social system in the country where she is living. Her roommate speaks only German, so they do not have an easy relationship. In fact, her perception of her roommate is skewed by the fact that this young woman wakes her in the early morning with her noisy hair dryer. Marji's perception of her roommate also includes the fact that this woman has very hairy underarms, unlike Middle Eastern women.

More significantly, Marji realizes that she is the center of a group of outsiders only because her nationality and personal history fascinates them: she has experienced revolution, war, and death. Being the center of a group of outsiders does not guarantee friendships, she discovers, and the rock and punk music group does not adopt her any more than she welcomes them into her life. She realizes that she isn't accepted by this group or any other group. She remains bewildered by aspects of the Austrian culture that remain odd and foreign—like Tyrolean dress, yodeling, and beer-drinking. In an attempt to connect with the foreign culture, she embraces European literature and immerses

herself in reading the work of European intellectuals, but she remains without friends. Friendless and an expatriate, Marji has no place to go for the school's Christmas break. In her loneliness at the convent, she responds to the nuns' hostility by lashing out inappropriately against their attack on her native culture and she is expelled. She becomes homeless, a foreigner in the land to which she has escaped because of her native land's foreignness.

4. When Marji returns to Tehran from Vienna, she discovers that her parents are bitter about the war that has not improved their lives. Her father calls it a "cynical game" that they "stupidly played." There is no longer optimism about changes in the regime improving their lives. When Marji walks in the city, she feels like she is walking through a cemetery.

Marji's old friends come to visit and ask foolish or very personal questions, give pointless advice, and she becomes increasingly withdrawn, staying indoors and watching television day after day. She realizes that she was a stranger in Vienna, but now she is a stranger in her own land. A psychiatrist diagnoses "depression" and prescribes pills that make her even more depressed. During an attempted suicide, she goes to God who tells her that she's not yet dead, her time has not come, and she is sent back to do what she must do.

Hyperactivity motivated by anger characterizes the next phase of her life. She returns to café life, school, and exercise classes. She is aroused by the University and political ideas, going to parties and dancing. Here she finds a boyfriend and when the Guardians see her driving with him and lightly holding hands with him, the couple concludes that marriage is their only solution to escaping scrutiny and punishment.

However, the marriage collapses within a year. "It's easy to be in love for three hours a week," Marji tells a friend, but for everyday life, they have nothing in common. She is at a party without him when one of their friends dies escaping the Guardians who break into the mixed-sex party in search of illegal behavior. When she returns home, Marji tells her husband that she is leaving him. She goes on a vacation to the Caspian Sea with her grandmother and then leaves for France, a permanent exile for she determines that she can never live in Iran. She departs with her family's blessing, but her grandmother dies shortly after Marji departs for her new life.

5. The film exposes social and political contradictions and absurdities that result from radical interpretations of Islamic codes:
  - Marji's Uncle Anoush, a revolutionary, survives 9 years in prison under the Shah, yet he is arrested and executed by the revolutionary regime he trusts and defends.
  - Revolutionary guards claim that women need to be veiled and protected from men's eyes, but they treat women with disdain. When Marji's mother asks a guard to show some respect, he responds, "Show some respect to *you*? I screw women like you and then dump them in the trash."
  - Many young boys were recruited into the military by being given a plastic key and told it would get them into heaven-- "full of food, women, gold houses, and diamonds"--all temptations designed to seduce young males. A friend's mother reveals how she suffered so much to raise her 5 children "and now they want to swap my oldest for this plastic key."

- Another family friend's husband needs a heart operation or he will die. Ironically, the woman must now rely on the head of the hospital--a man who has no qualifications for this position and, in fact, used to be the woman's window washer. All he tells the wife is, "If God wills it, your husband will get better," but he is unwilling to approve the surgery that her husband desperately needs.
- People are drinking more because it is forbidden, and they are willing to risk arrests and fines for attending "very boozy parties" that make their lives "bearable."
- Even though the new regime claims to be religious, the guards can be bribed and everyone lies in order to avoid arrest and to survive.
- An art appreciation class features Botticelli's beautiful *Birth of Venus*, but all the nudity is scribbled out in an ugly way.
- In a life drawing class, the model in a chador looks the same from every angle, hardly the subject for a life drawing class.
- As an art student, Marji complains that her mobility is hindered by long scarves and pants that are too wide. She objects that men may wear tight clothes even if women can see their underwear.

6. Almost all of the film is presented in graphically clean black and white, like the graphic novel which has inspired the film. Much could be written about the striking images throughout the film, especially of the fighting, the graphic image of bodies being removed from the streets, and the bombing of Tehran which forces the citizens to descend into underground shelters—all drawn in dramatic black and white images that suggest famous drawings of war like those of Picasso in *Guernica*.

But occasionally the film moves into surprisingly color. The beginning of the film is actually its ending, with Marji in a bright red coat, unveiled and smoking, waiting at the airport terminal for her flight from Vienna to Tehran to be called. In the ladies' room she looks into the mirror and the woman next to her, with vivid hair color and make up, looks at Marji with disdain. The passengers waiting in line for their flight also have colorful garments. After Marji returns to Tehran, she frequents a cafe in town and this is also depicted in color.

At the end of the film, when Marji departs from Iran for the second and final time, this time for France, the scene is also in color. Satrapi and Paronnaud may wish to suggest that departures for a new life and that social life in cafés mandate a colorful optimism that black and white graphics can't capture. Whatever the intention, the scenes that are in color are infrequent but noticeable and their significance remains open to the interpretations of the viewer.

7. Marjane's grandmother is spirited, outspoken, and wise. She seems politically astute and would like to see her husband "avenged at last" because he was "jailed for being a communist" and he was discarded even though he had royal blood. Marji's grandma is refreshingly frank; she isn't reluctant to reveal when something is "bullshit." Grandma is especially close to Marji and offers inspired advice when Marji leaves for Vienna: "You'll meet a lot of jerks in life. If they hurt you, it's because they're stupid. Don't react to their cruelty. There's nothing worse than bitterness and revenge. Keep your dignity and be true to yourself."

Later, when Marji is in Vienna and has just denied her heritage by telling

someone that she is French, we see her grandma's spirit following her and questioning, "So you're French now?" Marji explains that when she tells people that she is Iranian, "they treat me like a savage. They think we're all violent, bloodthirsty fanatics." Her Grandma asks, "Is that any reason to deny your roots? You remember what I told you? *Be true to yourself.*"

When Marji returns to Tehran, her grandma is concerned that Marji is depressed and languishing. She cautions her, "You're wasting the best years of your life." Her words may have prompted Marji to seek therapy and eventually to return to college, full of energy and direction.

But Grandma doesn't hesitate to confront Marji when she is in the wrong. When Marji tells her grandmother that she deflected the guards' attention away from her make-up by falsely accusing an innocent man of insulting her, Marji's grandma is appalled that Marji finds it amusing that the man was arrested and punished. "You're a selfish bitch, that's what I think." When Marji claims that she had no choice, Grandma says, "You had a choice! Everyone always has a choice! Your grandfather spent years in jail for defending the innocent. And your Uncle Anoush. Have you forgotten why he died? What have I taught you? *Integrity!* Does that word mean anything to you? Shame on you!"

However, Grandma also later praises her granddaughter when Marji speaks up for women and criticizes the male leaders at a political meeting: "Good girl. That's like chopping their tiny dicks off." Grandma's rebellious spirit is underscored when she urges Marji to remove her hood when she is home because it makes the grandmother feel "claustrophobic." When Marji admits that she often forgets that she's wearing it, Grandma insists, "Never forget that. Fear lulls our minds asleep. It turns us into cowards as well. You showed guts. I'm proud of you."

Later, Grandma shows her individuality when Marji comes to her in tears after only a year of marriage and admits that she doesn't love her husband any more. Grandma puffs on a pipe and says, "All these tears over a divorce. I did it 55 years ago" when few divorced. "I knew I'd be happier alone than with some jerk. The first marriage is practice for the second. You'll be happier next time around." Such a candid response characterizes Marji's grandma. She also reveals her astute awareness of Marji's personality when she tells Marji, "You're crying because you were wrong. It's hard admitting your mistakes, hmmm?"

Throughout the film, Marji's grandma is a voice of reason and wisdom during all the personal and political upheaval of that revolutionary era. Grandma often functions as a conscience for Marji, when she most needs it, and as a broader perspective when Marji suffers from tunnel vision. Most of all, Marji seems to have inherited her non-conformist spirit from her grandmother who reminds us that women in that culture and era were assertive, informed, and principled--and that they didn't deserve the disrespect and abuse that many suffered under the revolutionary regime.