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Mirrored Identities: Comparing the Lives and Works of Marjane Satrapi and Frida Kahlo

Iranian illustrator and filmmaker Marjane Satrapi met worldwide critical acclaim with the release of her autobiographical graphic novels *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* and *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*, published in English in 2003 and 2004 respectively. The novels, hereafter referred to simply as *Persepolis*, describe the unraveling of Satrapi's life after the 1979 takeover of the Iranian government by Islamic fundamentalists. Satrapi transformed her heartbreaking memories into a highly relatable coming-of-age story in classic comic strip style. Her drawings appear childlike in their simplicity, but against the epic backdrop of revolution, they pack a powerful punch that transcends the form. Over the next few pages I will find comparisons between Satrapi's life and work, primarily *Persepolis*, which remains her masterwork, and that of iconic artist Frida Kahlo. At the conclusion, I will also discuss several of Satrapi's drawings that illustrate recurring themes in her work.

Satrapi and Kahlo differ sharply, not only in their backgrounds, but also in their creative output. Satrapi's black-and-white ink drawings with transparent meaning contrast vividly with Kahlo's colorful and densely coded paintings. Yet in four distinct areas, one can draw strong parallels between them, which illustrate the role of gender in art during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Revolution

In 1910, three years after the birth of Frida Kahlo, the Mexican Revolution brought to an end the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, who had halted the republican reforms of the previous century. For the next ten years, different factions battled for the heart and soul of the country, and young Frida personally observed fighting in the streets of Mexico City. Her worldview developed at that time, as well as her dedication to the new Mexico and to Marxism (Dexter 14).

The years following the revolution led to rapid changes. The writer Carlos Fuentes said that despite its political shortcomings, the revolution "'revealed a nation to itself (Dexter 14).'" A wave of Mexican nationalism brought with it a new interest in the country's artistic roots. Mexican artists, instead of looking to Europe for inspiration, turned to indigenous and pre-Columbian art.

Despite having come from a comfortable middle-class family, Kahlo formed a strong affinity toward the poor during this period. Her art, indeed her style of dress, strongly reflects this interest. Most of her paintings contain elements taken directly from Mexican folk art, including *ex-votos*, small, simple religious paintings primarily from the 18th and 19th centuries, created to thank the deity (Dexter 15). Kahlo rejected painting with old-master techniques and strong realism, choosing instead to adopt a naïve style that supported her message. The tremendous optimism surrounding the revolution galvanized a generation of Mexican artists to produce art that reflected their culture, including Kahlo and members of the muralist movement, which included Kahlo's husband, Diego Rivera.

Throughout her active artistic period, indeed through her many illnesses, including the last, Kahlo maintained a high level of involvement in communist politics. Dying just before the scope of Stalinist brutality became an open secret, she devoted her final months to creating a bust of Josef Stalin himself.

Marjane Satrapi saw revolution every bit as closely as Kahlo did, but with markedly different results. When Satrapi was ten years old, popular rebellion overthrew the government of Shah Mohammad Rez Pahlavi (Satrapi 40). The Iranian Revolution and the Mexican Revolution had similar aims – to throw off a dictatorship engendered through European colonialism – but the results were quite different, at least immediately. Through *Persepolis,* Satrapi shows how the formation of an Islamic theocracy, which included the enforcement of the Islamic dress code known as *hijab*, suddenly and radically, circumscribed the lives of the Iranian people, particularly women. The subsequent Iraq-Iran war brought new horrors to the country and to the Satrapi household (Satrapi 79). Eventually, Marjane's parents sent her to attend school in Austria, hoping she could study in safety and freedom. Instead, her efforts to assimilate ended traumatically, leading to equally unsuccessful attempts at readaptation in Iran. At the end of *Persepolis,* Satrapi describes her decision to forge a new hybrid identity in France.

Kahlo produced her art from *within* the Mexican revolution and its aftermath. Although she eventually became disappointed with the direction of Mexican society, she lived through the years of the late 1920s and 1930s with Marxist optimism. On the other hand, Satrapi grew up in in a Marxist household, but recorded her experiences *well after* the Iranian Revolution. However, having experienced the death of friend and her uncle in addition to the general traumatization of war and exile, Satrapi seems to have developed an extremely flexible political philosophy, based primarily on personal fearlessness and pragmatism. During Terry Gross's interview of her June 2, 2003, Satrapi said, "When you see that your friend who is 13 years old, she can die, then you say I can die also. I accepted I was already dead. Then you're not scared anymore." In an interview for Powell's Books, she said, “The real war is not between the West and the East. The real war is between intelligent and stupid people. (Satrapi. Interview with Dave Weich).”

The Body: Coded and Decoded, Veiled and Unveiled

Early on Frida Kahlo used body, dress and hair to convey specific political messages, both on her physical person and in her art. Emma Dexter, curator at the Tate Modern, believes Kahlo chose the dress of the Tehuantepec area of Mexico because the women there were “reputedly economically and socially dominant.” (Dexter 13). She also wore a shawl typically worn by female fighters during the Revolution. Even when visiting foreign capitals, she wore Tuhantepecan dress not only in support of the Mexican poor and in honor of her country’s heritage, but also in a sort of dialog with the host country. For instance, by wearing traditional dress while visiting depression-era New York City, she was responding to American capitalism and industrialization which ran rough shod over the lives of the working class (Dexter 13).

Looking at Kahlo’s life and work, one sees how she often encoded messages through her costuming or the manipulation of body image on canvas. One clear example is the metaphor-laden *The Two Fridas*, in which two Fridas sit side by side in near mirror image. The Frida on the left wears a 19th century European gown, torn over the chest to expose one half of a heart. The other dark-skinned Frida wears traditional Mexican attire and has the other half of the heart. The two figures are joined by blood vessels that wrap around them like ribbon. The painting exposes the conflict Kahlo felt living in different worlds, in this case Mexico and Europe, by virtue of her father, who was German.

Kahlo’s depiction of her hair also carried encoded messages. Her hairstyles were usually elaborately styled with ribbons and flowers, but she had been known to slick it back to make herself look like a man. When she and Rivera divorced, she cut her hair off. In the painting *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair,* she depicts herself in a man’s suit. The shorn tresses surround her on the floor. A staff of musical notation floats at the top of the painting with the words from a popular song, “Look if I loved you, it was for your hair. Now that you are bald, I don’t love you anymore.” It seems to be not only a repudiation of her marriage to Rivera, but of her heterosexuality as well. The next year when she and Rivera remarried, she painted a picture of herself with a braid that clearly isn’t her own hair…yet another message to be decoded.

Other paintings show Kahlo as a vegetable (*Roots,* 1943) and a hunted and mortally wounded prey (*Little Dear,* 1946). Most impressive are her head and shoulder self-portraits, one after another, each looking only slightly different and each containing symbols from Kahlo’s very personal iconography. Often Kahlo appears to be sending more than one message at a time. She had no hesitation in mixing gender politics, Marxist philosophy and cultural explorations along with issues surrounding her broken body, famously injured in a 1925 bus accident (Dexter 200).

Interviews with Marjane Satrapi reveal her to be a plain spoken woman with an open agenda. She does not use iconography to encode her message like Kahlo, but in *Persepolis* she reveals a shared interest with Kahlo in body image and attire. Satrapi begins her book with a chapter called “The Veil,” which describes the difficulty young girls had adjusting to the veil in 1980, when it became a legal obligation in Iran after years of being illegal under the Shah. The theme of veiling one’s hair and unveiling, literally and metaphorically, runs throughout the book. In her essay, "Concealing and Revealing Female Hair: Veiling Dynamics in Iran," Sociologist Ashraf Zahedi writes,

> “Though there is nothing inherently sexual about female hair, most societies throughout history have assigned sexual symbolism to it…Men in power have sexualized, theologized and politicized female hair. They have written and drawn from theological and legal texts to justify its concealment. Central to this justification was the need to control sexual power and in turn, the male gaze (Zahedi 251-252).”

As we can see here, “the problematic of women out in public being vulnerable to a compromising gaze (Pollock 133)” did not confine itself to the world of the Parisian flaneur. However, the consequences for being on the receiving end of the male gaze were markedly different in Tehran during the 1980. The penalties for women who flouted the laws of hijab, the term used for a variety of head coverings used by Muslim women, resulted in arrest. The so-called Guardians of the Revolution added a women’s branch whose primarily mission was to enforce hijab. In a chilling chapter called “Kim Wilde,” Satrapi describes how she added some flair to her attire, including a Michael Jackson button and some sneakers, and was consequently detained by a band of women Guardians. Although she wore a headscarf, one of the women demands that she lower it, calling her a “little whore (Satrapi 133).” Shortly after this incident, her parents, sensing that Marjane’s risk in the new order due to her volatile temperament, sent her to go to school in Austria. There, over the course of four years, she tries on a variety of identities that disguise her authentic self as effectively as the veil. This phase, included in the chapter “The Vegetable,” coincided with a growth spurt that begins Satrapi’s long-term disorientation.

No longer hidden by the veil, she finds herself disconcerted by the gaze of onlookers. Feeling disloyal to her heritage, she was also plagued by guilt. She writes, “The more I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture and betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing by someone else’s rules (Satrapi 193).”

Hybrids

Frida Kahlo was the product of at least two cultures. A devout Catholic, her mother boasted Mexican, Spanish and native Central American ancestry (Dexter 13). Her father, who had been born in Austria, emigrated from Germany. Other opposing forces that influenced Kahlo included her middle-class upbringing and her strong feeling for the poor, her allegiance to Mexico and distain for the United States, her bisexuality, etc. Her art strongly reveals the dual nature of her upbringing and affinities (the aforementioned *Two Fridas,* for instance*)*. Art historian Tanya Barson notes, “Doubles, binary oppositions and pairings occur frequently in Kahlo’s work and underpin the symmetrical formal structure of a number of her paintings (Barson 64).”

The child of Iranian intellectuals, Marjane Satrapi’s came from a more homogeneous background than Kahlo. However, her exile to Austria at an impressionable age changed her forever. She became a “person out of place…disgusted by the restrictions of the fundamentalist regime AND the excesses of shallow Westernism (Satrapi. Interview by Mike Russell).” Returning to Iran, after four years in Austria, she desperately tried to adapt, going so far as to marry. But because the Iran of her youth was gone forever, adaptation proved impossible. At the end of *Persepolis,* we see how Satrapi left Iran to create an entirely new identity in Paris. As an Iranian expatriate living in Paris and creating in a medium associated with America, Satrapi became a unique cultural hybrid.

Marginalization

Frida Kahlo never felt obliged to participate in the Mexican muralist movement, in which her husband, Diego Rivera, was active. Muralists wanted to end the commercialization of art in favor of public works on a grand scale. Accordingly, they no longer favored easel painting. However, painting served Kahlo's purposes, and she seldom used other media. Because her paintings were small and autobiographical, despite their political overlay, they were not considered – in her lifetime -- to be on the same scale of artistic achievement as Rivera's, a familiar theme for women artists (Dexter 15).

Happily, Marjane Satrapi lives in an era where comics form have become increasingly accepted as a legitimate art form. She had the good luck to fall in with a group of French illustrators who were also comics artists or enthusiasts. At first she was skeptical about the form, considering it vulgar, but soon understood its storytelling potential (Hajdu 301). The acclaim and success of *Persepolis* and subsequent books, including *Embroideries* and *Chicken with Plums,* prove that her work does not sit on the margins. However, that hardly matters to Satrapi, who says, "The fact of not being taken for serious, for me, gives me freedom (Hadju 304)."

The Drawings

Satrapi creates her comics in a straightforward style with unequivocal meaning. In the same way that jokes do not lend themselves to lengthy dissection, Satrapi drawings may lose their punch if described in detail. However, *Persepolis* carries certain themes that run through women’s art as a whole, including body image, sexuality, and creating art within the constraints of a male patriarchy.

To create her drawings, Satrapi ignores the lessons she learned at the Strasbourg School of Decorative Arts and uses only a black marker and the cheapest paper she can find. She reasons that the marker forces her to draw with greater care, but the inexpensive paper relieves her of the obligation to “create a masterpiece.” She prefers working in black and white, particularly when depicting violence, believing her images would be “reduced” by making them realistic. She thinks, “Black and white makes [depictions of violence] abstract and more meaningful (Hajdu 302).”

The familiar story of women students being barred from life drawing class reaches a modern extreme in Satrapi’s *Persepolis.* Satrapi takes us through the absurdity of learning anatomy on voluminously clothed female models (Satrapi 299). In addition, the moral code also prohibited women from observing a fully dressed man at all (Satrapi 300).

Even under the best of circumstances, women struggle to come to terms with their changing bodies. In her illustrations for the chapter “The Vegetable, Satrapi depicts the special challenge of an adolescent getting used to her changing features while adjusting to a vastly different culture. She may have gained the freedom to choose her own clothing, but she found herself tyrannized by an unforgiving standard of feminine beauty (Satrapi 189-197). This theme repeats itself throughout the book. We see examples of how women struggled to adapt to the *hijab* dress code and stringent sexual mores represents the untenability of Satrapi’s position in Iran (Satrapi 305). Life there required that she dissemble, conceal and demur. Her temperament absolutely bars her from doing so.

Marjane Satrapi’s freedom, as a woman and as an artist, holds paramount importance to her. About being a comic artist, she said, “The fact of not being taken seriously, for me, gives me freedom. That’s the only thing that I care about—being free, acting free, thinking free (Hadju 304).” One can easily imagine Frida Kahlo uttering the very same words. Style and circumstance, as well as decades, separate Satrapi and Kahlo. Yet, ultimately, they are bound by a tenacious sense of individuality -- forged under historical extremes -- and the need to create art exactly on their own terms.

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