

## **The Only Way Out is In – Escapism versus Anti-escapism in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis***

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### **Abstract**

Iran, a land that has experienced relentless social turmoil, ranging from the Shah's being dethroned to the formation of the repressive Islamic Republic and the abrupt Iran-Iraq war, has rarely known of peace – a luxury far beyond reach. With executions on a daily basis, the country's blood ocean left no one untrembled with fear. Written in such a catastrophic historical background, *Persepolis* – the author's chronicle of endless days in tumult – manifests Satrapi's humane attempt to help her people find peace in themselves through the anti-escapism approach. Reviving the miserable plights that have fallen victim to escapism – a curtain that blinds their eyes from reality, Satrapi establishes peace in anti-escapism – the truth, eliciting all to love one another for their true selves. Highlighting how escapism and anti-escapism unfold in *Persepolis* and further upholding other fruitful rewards of anti-escapism in denunciation of escapism's disastrous consequences, the analysis, together with critical reviews of the text, ultimately, will prove ways in which the only way out – evading confrontations, is actually jumping in - solving hardships. Examining the book's comic version and its film adaptation from these two contrasting scopes, this research allows readers to re-approach the text with meaningful insights, the gist of which resides in a humanitarian value: a call to awaken human beings' willpower to drag difficulties from an unresolved realm into success by trampling on fears of escapism itself.

**Keywords:** *Persepolis*, anti-escapism, escapism

### **1. Introduction**

Facing adversity, what would you do? In the face of a fight-or-flight dilemma, many would secure themselves at a safe distance from the threat, evading conflicts such as politics, gender issues or internal oscillation as one strives to achieve an identity. Concerning the methods that characters employ to unravel their discord, *Persepolis* delivers a memoir from an Iranian woman whose childhood was tormented with endless days of social turmoil. Examining the comic version and its film adaptation from two contrasting angles: escapism versus anti-escapism, readers will re-approach the text with meaningful insights, in which consequences of escapism are denounced in advocacy of its opponent – anti-escapism. Drawing the pictures of two opposite mindsets, Satrapi manifests her underlying message: The only way *out* of hardship is getting *in* its core to find an ultimate resolution instead of pushing the challenge adrift in an unresolved realm.

### **2. Literary Critiques**

In order to understand the profound influence of anti-escapism, it would be beneficial to consider the escapism concept at first. Longeway, a researcher in "The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception" article, defined escapism as "the

attempt to avoid awareness of aversive beliefs” that not only eases people from their perceived “irrational patterns of belief formation,” instability and sufferings of the real world, but more significantly, maintains their existence, preventing despair and suicide, which, despite seeming exaggerated, is truly the case for the people living under repression for a long time (1). Indeed, such is the drastic distortion of life caused by suppression that many Iranians in *Persepolis* have no other choice but to deliberately blind themselves from the current political events, or, should conditions permit, seek shelter out of the nation’s boundary. Regardless of whether the victims remain beyond or within the country, these deeds represent escapism. “A defense against reality,” escapism is evident through three main ways in *Persepolis* (Longeway 2).

From the political angle, fleeing from a country during a dramatic period of civil upheaval demonstrates a form of escapism. In the dramatic sequence of governmental changes in just a few years, from the point of persistent demonstrations to overthrow the Shah to the people’s success in reclaiming their liberty, followed swiftly by the rise of the Islamic Republic to the abrupt Iran-Iraq war, a huge number of Iranians were arrested, not only those involved in demonstrative campaigns in Teheran 1978 but also the former opponents of the Shah’s regime during the war. Executing prisoners on a daily basis, the Islamic Republic’s repressive law left all trembled with fear, which makes the people shelter themselves in another country.

The dread, in fact, did not stop in its mental realm, but drastically changed people’s daily routines. With the fear of the Iraqi’s unexpected bomb attacks, the basement was redesigned to better fit as a temporary shelter. Besides the dread of external threats, another obsession concurrently haunted innocent people, which turned out to be more influential than the war itself: the so-called “neighbors” (Satrapi 105). Explaining to little Marji why she had to replace flower curtains with black ones, Tadj – Marji’s mother – elaborated: “The masking tape is to protect against flying glass during a bombing and the black curtains are to protect us from our neighbors ... [– those] across the street, [who are] totally devoted to the new regime” (Satrapi 105). With a “socialist-liberal attitude before and after the Islamic revolution of 1979” (Klapcsik 70), Tadj had every reason to worry that their glimpse into her house would be enough for a denouncement (Satrapi 105). Resisting the government’s ideology and other oppressive forces, many Iranians sought refuge elsewhere. Indeed, such were high demands that printing fake passports even became a big business. However, these fake stamps and papers did not act as mere tools, but weapons that attacked the warfare and governmental suffocation, for it was this inhibition and unsafety that drove parents to send their children away at all costs, as represented by uncle Taher’s case. A father separating from his thirteen-year-old son, uncle Taher was struck by a fatal heart attack not because of cigarettes or grenades, but the wish to see his son one more time. Such was this sorrow that the old man’s fragile heart was incessantly tortured. Apparently, even though fugitive plans are successful, escapism still cannot fully resolve the toll of a bad regime. Compensating for the lack of words to describe Iranians’ tragic losses during this historical period, Satrapi has revived true accounts of miserable plights due to escapism, illuminating its first cause: political turmoil.

Concerning the gender and national perspective, the repetitive image of the veil in *Persepolis* also implies escapism. First, the veil is a tool for women to evade men’s sexual harassment. Zahedi’s research on the “Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Iranian Regimes” specifies that with an “erotic nature,” female hair symbolizes “a woman’s appeal and her power over men” (76). Therefore, men of high social and religious authority believe that women must put on veils so as not to excite men “out of the normal state” and protect themselves from the male’s gaze (Tabari and Yeganeh qtd. in Zahedi 89). However, this shield of females from male counterparts actually suppresses the “female sexual power” in her hair. Again, escapism evidences oppression, which yields a negative repercussion. Second, for “a rejection of Western norms,” the veil affirms authenticity and returns to “the roots” of Iranian identity (Jackson 32). To combat the “corrupting influence of Western fashion,” the Iranian parliament designed the national Islamic costume against “symbols of decadence” such as a denim jacket with Michael Jackson buttons and a pair of Nike sneakers (Zahedi 94). Wearing these outfits on the street, therefore, caused Marjane great trouble, for not only was she insulted as “you little whore,” but the guardians of the Revolution nearly took her to the committee for further punishment (Satrapi 133). Overall, the veil attests escapism, building a wall separating women from men and Iranians from the Western culture.

When it comes to Marjane’s maturation, the protagonist herself illustrates escapism through the whole process of acculturation. First through the assimilation stage, the protagonist’s claim of French origin, verbally denying her identity and deliberately acting on opposing assumptions of the European world denoted her open intention to shed the heritage she once embraced in order to become fully absorbed into the dominant culture (Klapcsik 74). This assimilation stage, however, did not last long, for Marjane soon entered the “crises phase,” which witnessed her abandoning the West to return home due to a shock in relationship (Klapcsik 72). After discovering the truth behind her boyfriend’s affairs, Marjane isolated herself from parents and friends, spending days on the streets and Viennese trams until bankruptcy banned her from getting on public transportation. Eating leftovers in trash bins with no proper shelter during winter, Marjane almost died from bronchitis. Leaving her utterly disappointed with the non-native

culture and desiring for a real home from the place she used to fear so hard, these downturns, therefore, catalyzed another escape. Coming of age, Marjane represented escapism through assimilation while later departing from her ideal European identity.

With the background knowledge of how escapism works out in *Persepolis*, it raises the need to examine its dire consequences in further details. Opening the book with “The Veil” chapter, Marjane explicitly portrays the first repercussion of escapism: a whole range of misuse and its associated bewilderment. In 1980, when the veil first became an obligatory female uniform in Teheran schools, Marjane recalled: “We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to” (Satrapi 3). In particular, while some girl removed it due to hotness, others turned the veil into part of their game, whether pretending to be “the monster of darkness” or stringing veils together to make a jump rope or a horse bridle (Satrapi 3). Many other scenarios happened, but in whatever case, the girls could not instantly acquaint themselves with this drastic intervention in their lives. Apparently, escapism disorients people with its inconvenience.

From such chaos, rebellion – the second consequence of escapism – arises. Indeed, there were demonstrations for and against the veil everywhere through both violent and non-violent strategies (Satrapi 5). Not just targeting the veil abrogation, these rallies were staged against its meaning when demonstrators actually wore the garment themselves. Indisputably, combining “punks” with a veil, Marjane protested the intrinsic value of this cover, for the Islamic Revolution completely clashed with the Western world. The superficiality of the veil, surprisingly, was shared by many other Iranian women. With the interview question of their attitude towards this cloth, many respondents argued that the hijab did not represent anything, serving neither religious nor modesty purposes “except the imposition of a prison on women from a society that sees her hair as an awrah” (Jackson 37). In short, as many as one-fifth of Iranian women found no use in the veil (Jackson 45). Without striking the heart, it rendered only a void implementation of escapism that disgruntled the crowd into riots and disputes. Wearing the veil – a testimony of escapism – bore no meaning in itself.

In contention against rebellions, more suppressing systems emerge, accentuating people’s hatred, one salient example of which can be seen in the “guardians of the Revolution, the women’s branch, [which] has been added in 1982 to arrest [those] improperly veiled” (Satrapi 132). The oppression continued even until 2004, resulting in two hundred women arrested in Tehran and 1,250 others receiving verbal warnings for not “covering up properly,” according to the Tehran police chief (Zahedi 94). However, despite all the risks, they continued to resist hijab imposition and employed the garment to challenge the regime itself (Zahedi 94). In short, manifested through the veil, escapism has revealed its vast calamities. Not only confusion and misuse, implementing the veil to escape from male’s sexual harassment provokes further civil unrest and worse, leads to more suppressing systems whose extreme deeds smother thousands of innocent lives.

Besides leaving behind a mind obsessed with repressive politics, escapism also creates traumatic crises on the protagonist’s path of adaptation to her bicultural identity (Stola 270). Similar to the veil situation, the protagonist stumbled on disorientation, tantalized by the notion of freedom as she first arrived in Europe. Leaving her country for the first time, the protagonist felt confused and perplexed by the new culture. Despite rigorous attempts to fit in gangs through drugs, parties and metamorphosis, Marjane could not fully integrate herself into the surroundings, for deep inside her soul, there lay a bitter feeling of “playing a game by somebody else’s rules,” as she recollects: “The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins” (Satrapi 193). Trying to solve the identity crisis, Marjane gathered courage to uncover her roots. However, all she had to gain is another rejection: an ironic culture shock on her homeland. Parting from Vienna after a series of misery, the character escaped her reality one more time by regressing to Iran, yet to find herself a stranger as well. Indeed, how “unbearable” it would be to walk through new “cemetery” streets, whose names’ complete change to martyrs’ engulfed Marjane in utmost distress (Satrapi 251). True, “the road to readjustment seem[s] very long,” for the protagonist had to familiarize herself not only with the altered physical settings, but also with her self-perception (Satrapi 250). “A Westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West,” Marjane got lost in defining her identity (Klapcsik 75). Although Marjane later resolved her crisis under the label of a “third-worlder,” she became stuck in her own world. Failing to share her tragic past with either family or friends, the uneasy character squelched her own sufferings – “little anecdotes of no importance” (Satrapi 267). Therefore, despite the accompaniment of many people, Marjane could not feel any happiness, which trapped herself in the wish to be alone. In shattered disillusionment, Marjane suffered from “homexilation” with growing feelings of home loss and misplacement in a reverse culture shock (Klapcsik 73): “I thought that by coming back to Iran, everything would be fine, that I would forget the old days. But my past caught up with me. My secrets weighed me down. I became depressed” (Satrapi 268). Treading deeper into the “paralyzing crisis” to the point where neither doctors’ pills nor others’ jokes helped, the protagonist attempted suicide by swallowing all of her anti-depressants. Had she not evaded both realities, Marjane would not have rejected

or felt excluded from “both the original culture and the new dominant group” (Klapcsik 74). Escapism, after all, offers the protagonist nothing but miserable marginalisation.

From these dire consequences of escapism, Satrapi proceeds to advocate for anti-escapism in *Persepolis*. Placing an emphasis on “accurate representation of external reality as observed through the senses (as opposed to a subjective or moralistic filter),” the author includes several moments in the book when she upholds direct confrontation to adversity (Clary 1). A few days after feigning French nationality at the party, Marjane overheard some fellows gossiping about her lie. However, this situation she did not escape, but rose with utmost national pride, shouting to concede her lie: “You are going to shut up or I am going to make you! I am Iranian and proud of it!” (Satrapi 197). Without a resolute attitude, Marjane would still be stuck in her identity crisis. Stepping out of oscillation, the used-to-be liar upheld her worth by speaking the truth. Therefore, when witnessing her Iranian friends treading into her past trail, using “fashionable make-up” and Western ways to cover their real ideology of being “real traditionalists,” Satrapi could not tolerate hypocrisy (Satrapi 270). Instead, the author invites people to live their true selves, discarding ideal perception masks. Indeed, she campaigns for anti-escapism.

The support for a confrontational approach further unfolds through the ending scene of the film adaptation. When asked about her nationality by the driver on the way coming home from the airport, Marjane proudly replied: “[I am from] Iran” (“Persepolis” 01:32:09-12). After the tremendously long journey of war endurance, humiliation, fear, alienation and marginalization to rebellion, courage and pride, Marjane’s acceptance of her real identity has healed all the past sufferings (Stola 275). Indeed, she has found the conscience’s voice. With a childhood to back up a presence anchored in national heritage, Marjane’s future is no longer devoid of goals. Evidently, anti-escapism aims people towards a clear future. In the dark, it gives them strength to combat difficulties for a true victory rather than running away from hardship. Though adversity may taste bitter, its conquerors will find the rewards sweet, should they not bury themselves under escapism and its disastrous results. This also underlies Satrapi’s message, which is why she intentionally places the quote to conclude the film. In all circumstances, one should never deny reality.

Many people may wonder: “If the author is an anti-escapist, why did she leave Iran in the end?” In fact, this does not indicate escapism, but actually a standing proof for anti-escapism itself. Before embarking for a settlement in France, Satrapi made a big decision: divorcing her husband. Getting married simply because it was difficult to be together with her boyfriend outside of marriage, Marjane soon recognized that their clashing personalities prevented them from matching as a true couple. Despite former affection, Marjane’s love gradually drained. With opposite mindsets, they “went from weekly fights to daily insults in the space of two months” (Satrapi 319). Staying together out of habit but with no shared interest, the couple even had separate beds (Satrapi 319). Choosing divorce, therefore, liberated Marjane from a huge burden. In the face of social prejudice, Marjane dared to confront and tackle her situation. Despite all the crises in Vienna, the protagonist did not deny her past or hesitate to go on a new journey. Accepting reality, this anti-escapism deed proves how mature Marjane has grown as an adult who shows willingness to step out of negative restraints to fully anticipate and embrace the future. By tackling life challenges, an individual gathers vigor to enhance chances of success later on. Anti-escapism bears good fruits indeed.

It would limit the scope of escapism, therefore, to narrow this approach into a physical realm. Mentally, anti-escapism builds the courage to confront and solve a conflict, which, in *Persepolis*, surrounds identity. To retrieve her very selfhood, Marjane first identifies her outspoken and uninhibited personality that makes “Iran of today not for [her]” (Satrapi 341). Then, aware that there lacks any land for freedom in Iran to permit her to live as her true self, the character leaves the country behind a successful trail of anti-escapism. No longer a political victim of exile, Marjane finally attained a better life. The price of freedom, though paid with endless agony and untold sacrifices, finally earns its worth: Since the night of September 9, 1994, Marjane has been free.

In fact, anti-escapism has its own price, not only seen in Marjane’s *Persepolis* but also the famous case of Malala Yousafzai, an author who makes a difference to the world with her confrontational tackle against terrorism in Pakistan. A fifteen-year-old girl, Malala felt discontented when the Taliban imposed a ban of education on females, for they thought girls above ten must stay at home and do the chores instead of acquiring knowledge – potential weapons to defy men. Disagreeing with such inhumane dictatorship, Malala ignored repetitive threats from the Taliban to openly campaign for girls’ education. A prominent activist, she was shot by a Taliban gunman in 2012 when he attempted to murder her. However, no matter how many times the terrorists try to suppress her voice, their efforts turn out to be counter-effective, in that they catalyze the girl’s fame to the larger world. With such brutal incidence, Malala earned unexpectedly tremendous recognition beyond her Pakistani boundary. Worldwide, people flocked to give support for her actions, both against terrorism and the education injustice imposed by the Taliban. Therefore, even if a voice is suppressed, as long as people continue to fight for justice, many other will spring up to demand what is right, as Malala herself declared in her United Nations speech:

On the ninth of October 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends, too. They thought that the bullets would silence us. But they failed. And then, out of that silence came thousands of voices. The terrorists thought that they would change our aims and stop our ambitions, but nothing changed in my life except this: Weakness, fear, and hopelessness died. Strength, power, and courage was born. I am the same Malala. My ambitions are the same. My hopes are the same. My dreams are the same. One child, one teacher, one pen, and one book can change the world. (Yousafzai 278)

Apparently, the strength of human beings lies not in age or physical power, but in the strength of the mind itself. In fact, oppression never ceases, but prevails until this very day, two salient instances of which can be witnessed as “ten people have been killed overnight in anti-government protests sweeping Iran,” according to the BBC News on January 1, 2018 or “thousands march in Hong Kong to show dissent for Chinese rule” as The Guardian published on 1 July 2017 (“Iran unrest” and Phillips). Given that injustice spreads without a stop, anti-escapism becomes more urgent than ever before, requiring double and relentless efforts. Undeniably, anti-escapism can be deeply hurt, causing not only physical fatalities but also mental injuries. However, it is still a goal worth dreaming of, for escapism can never offer ultimate peace.

So far, anti-escapism has opened up a promising future for individuals and can even grant them freedom. Going back to *Persepolis*, the book, through this approach, further manifests Satrapi’s humane attempt to help her people survive in a catastrophic historical period by rooting peace in themselves. In her interview with Emma Watson, the author shares:

Forgiveness is a good thing because you cannot go on living your life being angry, because then you become like the people you hate. And that is exactly what is happening in the world that we live in. Our response to violence is violence. If we start playing the same game as the people whom we accuse, that is very dangerous. (“Emma Watson”)

Clearly, anti-escapism does not equal violence. Instead, establishing peace in the truth as emphasized by Satrapi, anti-escapism highlights the importance of love and forgiveness, from which it keeps its motivation. Together with the message that “One can forgive but one should never forget,” the autobiography elicits all to love one another for their true selves without fear of societal rejection so that nonconformity to norms no longer concerns the mind. Moreover, as adversity tests strong men, it hails the humanitarian value of anti-escapism: a call to awaken human beings’ willpower to drag difficulties from an unresolved realm into success by trampling on fears of escape. By strengthening willpower, Satrapi enhances people’s confidence in their ability to control and manage their lives, which greatly reduces dependence on external forces. Acknowledging their intrinsic worth, the victims will take a different stance. Now that they can implement anti-escapism strategies to solve downturns, they will indeed find peace, for nothing can scare the people any more.

### 3. Conclusion

After all, the only way out is in, for if people let their fear sway them from reality, they become cowards who dare not directly look into the issue. Solutions they avoid, these individuals assure themselves that they have managed to get out, but in fact, the matter never disappears. Worse, should it come back, the toll can accrue in immensity. Thereupon, the only way *out* – getting rid of the obstacle, is actually jumping *in* - solving hardships, stimulated by a burning wish to enact love and justice. Knowing how to utilize anti-escapism strategies, then, helps one triumph over difficulties, from which he or she finds liberty and peace, all serving the quest into happiness – the ultimate goal of life.

### 4. Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to send my sincere thanks to Dr. Wayne Stein – my instructor in the *World Literature II* class – for his kind instructions and tireless efforts in helping me improve my final paper. Second of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the librarians of the University of Central Oklahoma who were always dedicated to guiding me find the most fruitful sources and providing me with perfect citation guidelines.

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