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### "You Think I Look Marx?": Tracing Hybridity Through the Imagination of God in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis

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J. N. Andrews Honors Program  
Andrews University

HONS 497  
Honors Thesis

“You think I look like Marx?”: Tracing Hybridity through the Imagination of God in  
Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis

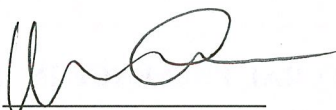
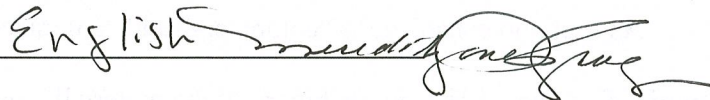
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28 March 2016

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## INTRODUCTION

Set during the turbulent 1980's in Iran, Marjane Satrapi's postcolonial graphic autobiography *Persepolis* (2003)<sup>1</sup> explores how the clash of ideologies within a country manifest in a childhood. Spanning Satrapi's life from ages 5 to 21, but focusing on her "tween" and teenage years, the novel demonstrates how a culture in crisis thrusts the already fragile adolescent identity into more trauma and uncertainty. As liberal progressives clash with Islamist revolutionaries, the definition of what it means to be Iranian becomes less clear. Reactions to the imposition of wearing the veil most prominently signify this struggle. Women in the streets of Iran stage "demonstrations for and against the veil,"—those who wear it proudly proclaim the article of clothing as a symbol of their religious devotion. And those without, Marji's mother among them,<sup>2</sup> declare "Freedom!" conversely stigmatizing the veil as a sign of theocratic oppression (5). The women's responses to the symbolic veil in Iran signify the cultural war at the heart of *Persepolis*. One group sees "being" Iranian as centering on strict adherence to the religion; the other, as centering on freedom and progress. The question of Iranian culture and identity persists throughout *Persepolis* as Islamists and liberal progressives fight to be the dominant voice of Iranian nationalism.

## WESTERN CULTURAL PRESENCE IN IRAN

As such, no conspicuous "colonizers" and "colonized" in the traditional sense exist in Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The simple binary of the materially oppressive West versus the oppressed

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<sup>1</sup> Though written in French, I use the English translation of the text as the primary source material for my essay. Marjane Satrapi authorized the translation of her own work, and most scholarly work done on *Persepolis* base their analysis on the English translation.

<sup>2</sup> In order to differentiate between Marjane Satrapi, the author and Marjane Satrapi the character, I will be referring to the former as "Satrapi" and the latter as "Marji" throughout the rest of this paper.

East simply does not apply in this case. Instead, without any explicit political markers of its influence, the West subsists as a cultural imperialist agent in the text.<sup>3</sup> Though it does not physically oppress the Iranian people, the West has a hand in the Iranian liberals' views on progress. Educated progressives such as Marji's parents, for example, espouse the philosophies of Western thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Marx, and Simone de Beauvoir. Robert Gluck discusses the desire for elite intellectual and cultural cultivation in Iran under Reza Shah: "the central goal of Pahlavi rule throughout the 20th century was modernization and industrialization, while still maintaining independence from other nations, particularly Great Britain and the Soviet Union" (21).<sup>4</sup> *Persepolis* broaches this Pahlavian aspiration through Marji's parents, who are a part of the Iranian generation during that time period. They try to "enlighten" her by buying her books "about the revolutionaries of [her] country" as well as "Marx and Descartes" (12). That Marji's mother and father try to educate her about individuals like F. Rezai as well as Karl Marx demonstrates the aforementioned Iranian desire for intellectual and cultural cultivation and the creation of an independent Iranian national identity while retaining the influence of Western progressive thought.<sup>5</sup>

*Persepolis* exemplifies the concept of Western ideals fueling the conflict between progressive and fundamentalist notions by presenting a panel in which both sides share Marji's

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Said defines imperialism as "thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others" (7). Though he uses the term in the material sense, I believe the definition can also be extended to apply to the Western *ideological* occupation of cultures.

<sup>4</sup> Gluck's article delineates the history of the Shiraz Arts Festival, as well as a fascinating perspective on the intersection between Iranian nationalism and Western influence. He writes of the events surrounding the Festival: "Iran in the 1970s presents a fascinating case study of how an authoritarian government can remain officially open to forward-looking Western ideas, while still strictly limiting its citizens' free political speech. This unstable model could not survive for long, especially in the face of declining popular support" (27).

<sup>5</sup> In this way, Marji's parents themselves exhibit a form of ideological and cultural hybridity, which could potentially be an area for further research.

face. The left half contains various scientific instruments—gears, a hammer, and a ruler—in the background, calling to mind Ania Loomba's theory on how the West exports its value of industrialization to colonized cultures (6). Regarding this image, Manuela Constantino reads Marji's halved face as a resistance against the Western tendency to simplify Iranian women as victims of the veil.<sup>6</sup> While I believe the text gives room for such an interpretation, I argue that the metaphor of split-faced Marji also signifies the hybridity she experiences from a young age. At home, Marji is her parents' daughter—politically and culturally liberal, progressive, with a deep interest in Western philosophy; hence the image of rational, modernist tools sharing the uncovered half of her face. At school, she is a student in an Islamic system—politically and culturally conservative, traditionalist, with reverence for religion; hence the tangled vines behind a veiled Marji, evoking connotations of Eastern mysticism. Thus, Marji's identity struggles between two ways of being Iranian: on the one hand, she is the Western(ish), Dialectic Materialism-reading child of her parents. On the other, she is the devout traditionalist, bent on becoming a Muslim prophet. The image of Marji and her split face implies a neat separation of the two—Marji performs whatever role her environment requires—and demonstrates the beginnings of understanding her hybridity.

The image of the scientific instruments associated with Western rationalism sharing half of Marji's face makes it clear Western thought influences her cultural upbringing. In fact, the West impresses upon the nationalistic ideals of both the progressive Iranians and their Islamic fundamentalist counterparts. *Persepolis* exhibits the people's disappointment with the Shah's

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<sup>6</sup> She writes, "Satrapi's usually sparse images contrast with this elaborate depiction of Marji's dual identity that emphasizes the multi-dimensional identity hidden behind the veil and the cultural baggage that comes with it." (439).

weakness to the words of the “influential British” (20-21)<sup>7</sup> and his failure to impose democracy after attempts to follow a Western model of government (40-41)<sup>8</sup>. In response, many Iranians fight for a return to the model of a purely theocratic government that Islamism idealizes<sup>9</sup>—which *Persepolis* depicts primarily through the changes made to the education system by closing down universities and calling for reform in the schools (72). For Iranian Muslim fundamentalists, in particular, a “return” to a theocratic government would allow the overturn of Western secularist influence on governments and legal systems (Sedgwick 192).<sup>10</sup> Thus, Western education and ideals fuel and shape progressive desires in the “anti-veil” side, leading them to fight for an Iran that looks similar to the Western model of democracy and secularism. At the same time, it also sparks a vehement anti-Western nationalism in the fundamentalists.

### MARJI AND THE HYBRIDIZATION OF GOD

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<sup>7</sup> In comparing the Islamic revolution with other national revolutions, Said Amir Arjomand identifies Reza Shah’s Western connections as a major influence on his downfall in popularity. He writes, “the Shah was seriously compromised by his close and subservient association with the United States, and the American military and economic presence and the presence of a large European work force acted as a major stimulus to mass mobilization. The antiforeign motive in challenging the legitimacy of the societal structure of domination finds parallels in the English, the French, the Russian, the Chinese, and the Cuban revolutions, and in East European fascism” (388).

<sup>8</sup> Disappointment in Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi on the Iranians’ behalf likely stemmed from their high hopes for a strong head of government who would lead the country to a new age of union and the realization of an Iranian nation independent of Western influence. Of Pahlavi’s wild popularity M. Reza Ghods observes, “Iranian nationalists of all major political parties came to believe that only a strong military leader could give Iran the unity, strength, and modernity that the Constitutionals had sought. By the time of his coronation, Reza Shah had become the receptacle of the nationalists’ hopes” (43).

<sup>9</sup> Arjomand sees the extreme zealotry of the Islamic fundamentalists as a reaction to the disarray of the preceding period: “The intense and repressive moralism of the Islamic revolutionaries in reaction to the moral laxity and disorder of Pahlavi Iran finds a strict parallel in Puritan moralism in reaction to the moral laxity and sensuality of the Renaissance culture, and in Nazi moralism in reaction to the decadence of the Weimar period” (403).

<sup>10</sup> Mark Sedgwick writes that Islamists desire a return to what they see as the “original” form of Islamic governments. “Islamists often suppose that all Muslim states were once Islamic states, and claim to be attempting only to return to the original system” (192-193).

The complicated adulteration of Western culture and two forms of “being” Iranian manifest in Marji’s imagination of God throughout *Persepolis*. The graphic novel presents a visually Anglicized God who at times seems to espouse eastern ideals. In so doing, the work rejects the idea of a clear binary of positive and negative between West and East. Instead, the philosophical and religious modes of thought converge in the mind of a child vulnerable to the various influences at play. Ultimately, *Persepolis* reveals that no “pure” Iranian nationalism or Western ideological imperialism exists in the relationship between Iran and the West. Instead, the strands tangle together on both sides of the revolutionary divide, leading to confusion in children like Marji, who are susceptible to influence from both forces. My project provides a nuanced interpretation of *Persepolis*’ presentation of Iranian/Western cultural hybridity as neither completely fatal nor vital to the construction of the self. Instead, I address the implications and effects of the confusing mixture of Eastern and Western cultural identities as it manifests in Marji’s religious and philosophical imagination. I therefore make the claim that Marji’s hybridized identity produces self-conscious anxieties as well as self-awareness and the potential for a new cultural identity.

*Persepolis* depicts the difficult process of coming to terms with hybridity. As the novel deconstructs, and depicts the appropriation of various cultural values, Marji experiences doubt over and disillusionment with both Western and Eastern ideals. Her imagination of God manifests the difficulty she has with processing her hybridity. Of the concept, Loomba writes: “Colonial identities—on both sides of the divide—are unstable, agonized, and in constant flux. This undercuts both colonialist and nationalist claims to a unified self” (149). *Persepolis* demonstrates such “constant flux” through Marji’s difficult relationship with her hybridized God as she oscillates between dependence on him for personal comfort and a rejection of him for his



failings with regards to external events. Here, I trace Marji's imagined interactions with God in order to claim that *Persepolis* uses God to demonstrate the complicated, difficult process of cultural hybridization.<sup>11</sup> However, according to *Persepolis*, hybridity is not completely painful—the text presents the Iranian/Western cultural hybridity as both anxiety-inducing in its production of self-consciousness, but also as hopeful in the creation of a new, self-aware identity.

### EXAMINING *PERSEPOLIS* THROUGH THE LENS OF POSTCOLONIALISM

As a graphic novel, *Persepolis* uses visual images in tandem with its text to create meaning. Hilary Chute outlines in her article “Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative”: “Graphic narrative suggests that historical accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention; the problematics of what we consider fact and fiction are made apparent by the role of drawing. Comics is a structurally layered and doubled medium that can proliferate historical moments on the page” (459). *Persepolis* fully demonstrates the potential of graphic novels—still a nascent area of academic study—to forge implications and spark important questions. My research focuses on the self-consciousness and self-awareness of Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and how personal and public history blur in both visuals and text. Satrapi's technique layers symbolic imagery on top of its deceptively simple black and white lines, and I closely analyze this style to support my postcolonial reading of the graphic novel.<sup>12</sup> However, the dialogue is inseparable

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<sup>11</sup> In so doing, I follow Loomba's urge that “We cannot appreciate the specific nature of diverse hybridities if we do not attend to the nuances of each of the cultures that come together or clash during the colonial encounter” (151).

<sup>12</sup> I am aware of the potential tensions of the term “graphic novel,” as it may draw elitist distinctions between the “high” art of graphic novels and the “low” art of comics, even as the two share the same form—the union of visuals and text. Katherine Roeder, in her work discussing the neglect of comics in art scholarship, writes: “The term ‘graphic novel’ is used most often as a means of distinguishing the work from comic books and their mass-cultural associations. This unfortunately fosters a high-low dynamic within a field that is already marginalized and fighting for aesthetic approval” (4). She also argues that most works classified

from the images that accompany it in graphic narrative. As such, closely examining the text and its complementary visuals is vital for my interpretation. To this end, I analyze specific details of the images in *Persepolis*, taking into account proportions, facial features, and positioning while also scrutinizing specific word choice, recurring language, and implications in the dialogue.

Though, as I have mentioned before, the West does not have any explicit physical markers of its influence in *Persepolis*, I argue that it is still a postcolonial text, especially in its use of a hybridized God. As such, the precepts of postcolonial theory provide a helpful framework for my analysis. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes that postcolonial criticism investigates hybridity, as it “propose[s] forms of contestatory subjectives that are empowered in the act of erasing the politics of binary opposition . . . The contingent and the liminal become the times and the spaces for the historical representation of the subjects of cultural difference” (256).<sup>13</sup> This aspect of Bhabha’s theory best suits my interpretation of *Persepolis* as I examine Marji’s imagined God, who exists within the liminal spaces of her hybridized mind. My project makes the case that *Persepolis* neither invokes the West as an insidious presence on both sides of the Iranian divide nor as a corrective to Iranian national identity. Instead, it mixes with Eastern ideologies to form a self-conscious, and eventually, self-aware hybridity and a new cultural

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under the term do not fit the definition, and includes *Persepolis* among them, as it is a memoir and not a fiction novel. However, I refer to *Persepolis* repeatedly as a “graphic novel” throughout, as that is its current generic classification.

<sup>13</sup> The issue of hybridity remains a controversial one in postcolonial study. Some critics, such as Homi Bhabha, see hybrid identities as largely positive, as they “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2). And though he never uses the term “hybridity” directly, Frantz Fanon sums up his attitude towards the subject thus: “White civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro” (6). Such a statement encompasses the opposing postcolonial view of hybridity as destructive to the individual identity and therefore negative. As Fanon is speaking here of black men educated in white ideals, his comparison is useful towards my arguments about Marji, who is a “brown” girl/woman with “white”-educated parents.

identity in Marji. In addition, I also demonstrate how Marji eventually becomes empowered in her hybridity and the creation of a new identity that goes beyond the opposing forms of being Iranian and the tension between East and West.

### SCHOLARLY VOICES ON *PERSEPOLIS*

Previous scholarship on *Persepolis* has generally explored Satrapi's use of the autobiographical graphic narrative form. Although graphic novels such as *Persepolis*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) are increasingly becoming perceived as "worthy" of academic study. The question remains—should graphic narratives like Satrapi's text (traditionally considered "low art") to become part of the literary canon?<sup>14</sup> As such, many scholars focus on the generic classification of the text to make an argument for the inclusion of comics into academic study and canonical literature. To this end, much scholarship on *Persepolis* focuses on how the images demonstrate the traumas of a war-torn childhood. In one such approach, Ester Szep compares *Persepolis* to other graphic narratives, noting that Satrapi's spare drawing style repeatedly draws attention to the normalization of violence in Marji's childhood (28).<sup>15</sup> Thus, many scholars hone in on the intentional techniques of Satrapi's nuanced visual style in attempts to "prove" the complexity of the work and to equate it with other, traditional "high art" texts.

Another major strain of criticism focuses on the feminist aspect of Satrapi's autobiography. Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall discuss *Persepolis* as a feminist text that deconstructs

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<sup>14</sup> According to scholars such as Chute and Amanda Gluibizzi, the answer is "Yes." Gluibizzi writes, "Contrary to some common misconceptions, graphic novels and comics work within and exploit art historical precedent just as traditional art forms do" (28). On a similar note, Chute describes modern comics as "serious, imaginative works that explored social and political realities by stretching the boundaries of a historically mass medium" (456).

<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Amy Malek notes: "[Satrapi's] words provide the captivating story, while her drawings provide resonance for Iranian and non-Iranian readers alike" (353).

both the circumstances that oppress Middle Eastern women and the Western perspective that limits their ability to act as agents.<sup>16</sup> Many perceive this gendered identity as hybrid, arguing that Marji represents an Eastern woman educated in Western ideals. Most scholars, such as Manuela Constantino, however, discuss the issue in light of the novel's popular success with audiences. Often they interpret the myriad references to Western popular culture in the text (as well as its use of a largely Westernized generic form) as a way of familiarizing Western audiences with Iranian culture.<sup>17</sup> Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley's work on the dialectical relationship between East and West opposes the position Constantino and other scholars present.<sup>18</sup> Such articles demonstrate that a discussion on the hybridity of Eastern and Western culture in *Persepolis* exists, but scholars generally focus on its Western pop culture references, employment of a Western generic form, and popularity.

Despite critical attention to Satrapi's visual style, close analysis of the relationship between the images and language of the text are often brief or altogether absent.<sup>19</sup> In my work I seek to treat the text as a text. Scholarship on *Persepolis* has carved out a space for the work in the literary canon and in academic study, which provides room, I believe, for a return to the treatment of Satrapi's graphic novel as literature to be examined in the methods of close textual and visual analysis.

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<sup>16</sup> They write, "Representing Iranian women as diverse, she emphasizes the link between gender and state violence, and she captures the complexity of how controlling women is part of the Cultural Revolution and that some women support it" (683).

<sup>17</sup> Constantino reads the Western aspects of *Persepolis* as "the artist's determination to familiarize her Western readers with the aspects of her culture and history with which they might not be familiar" (441).

<sup>18</sup> They argue that the Western references serve as "part of [Satrapi's] effort to make familiar, to universalize, but at the same time to other" (228)

<sup>19</sup> Of course, readings of Satrapi's work in light of its success with Western audiences are necessary. Its impact as a cross-section between art, autobiography, feminism, and postcolonialism has been phenomenal, and its influence in each of these areas cannot be ignored.

My own work deals specifically with the ways that Marji's imagination of a seemingly (but not quite) Westernized, Christian God demonstrates how politics, religious ideologies, and upbringing converge and clash on the site of a child's mind with effects that last into the young adult years. Though many scholars note the presence of God in Marji's imagination, most do so only in passing to mention his likeness to the philosopher Karl Marx, pointing to his representation of how the political has seeped into the personal.<sup>20</sup> Unlike other scholars, I focus solely on God—his presence and absence—in my project, tracing his relationship with Marji from her childhood to young adulthood. I analyze his character as a direct manifestation of the hybrid cultural identities pushing and pulling for power over the minds of youth like Marji in the 1980s. To this end, I demonstrate how Marji starts with an uncomplicated acceptance of hybridity as a young child, which develops into an anxiety-filled and self-conscious rejection of it in her adolescent years, and eventually grows into a hopeful acceptance of her hybridity as a young woman. I believe reading the visuals and dialogue of Marji's relationship with God and the anxieties and hopes it produces helps further a more nuanced postcolonial reading of hybridized identities in *Persepolis*.

### **MARJI AND HER HYBRIDIZED GOD IN EARLY CHILDHOOD**

Marji, as a young girl educated by a system contingent upon political realities, is vulnerable to the regressive influence of the Islamists who controlled the government and therefore her education after the deposition of the Shah. As a child, Marji's dream is to be a prophet—the ultimate embodiment of Islamic religious beliefs. This childhood idealism converges with the

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<sup>20</sup> Lopamudra Basu notes that God and Marx's resemblance demonstrates how "Marji is quickly socialized as a political being" (7). Similarly, Julia Emberly notes that it foregrounds the tension in Marji's life at home and at school: "The education Marji receives at home begins to show signs of differing from her official education" (148).

fundamentalism of the Islamic revolutionaries: “I wanted to be justice, love, and the wrath of God all in one” (9). The last phrase—“the wrath of God”—demonstrates how Marji has imbibed the violently anti-secularist (and anti-Western) ideals of the Islamist government in power. Yet she still desires to be an expression of God’s justice and love as well; thus, Marji’s hybridized value system becomes apparent here. She has absorbed the Islamic ideologies as a student of a politicized educational system, yet these do not fully possess her mind. Of these particular lines, Naghibi and O’Malley observe the underlying childhood trauma behind Marji’s statement of her desire: “A six year old is usually not supposed to have an awareness of these sorts of political realities, because the dominant ideology of childhood as a state of innocence renders it an apolitical category” (244). The “state of innocence” in childhood Naghibi and O’Malley speak of appear in Marji’s tender, idealistic desire to be the justice and love of God. Yet such a phrase remains in tension with what she clearly delineates as “the wrath of God.” I would venture to say that Marji’s hybridized ideological fabric only heightens the tension made apparent in the expression of her desires. That Marji says she wanted to be these things “all in one” demonstrates an understanding of the tension between these ideologies, and her hybridity. She cannot fully embrace the fundamentalist ideals espoused at school, yet neither can she let go of those values for the sake of her parents’ beliefs.

Such confusion between her own religious principles and the impositions of the state manifest in Satrapi’s visualizations of Marji’s imaginary visits with God. In her encounters with him, he appears to be Anglicized. Marji’s observation that “It was funny to see how much Marx and God looked like each other” supports this idea (13). Indeed, the two—God and Marx—do share some resemblance; they both have long hair (though she notes Marx’s is curly), sharp noses, and heavily lidded eyes. She also refers to her friend as “God” and not “Allah,” causing

further confusion with regards to her cultural perception of God in calling him by a Western epithet and not a Muslim one<sup>21</sup>. However, *Persepolis*' black and white drawings do not allow for differentiation between different skin tones—moreover, Iranians are ethnically paler than other Middle Easterners—complicating the instinct to label God as wholly Westernized in appearance and name. Even so, He appears somewhat Anglicized, an example of how Western beliefs have quietly seeped into the personal, religious realm of a child, and not just the public, cultural sphere of Iran.

Though his appearance and name are Westernized, Marji's God is not an explicitly Christian one—*Persepolis* refuses to let the character be a purely Islamic or Western deity. Instead, religious beliefs from the two merge into a God who looks like Marx but calls Marji “My celestial light” and bolsters her decision to become the last Muslim prophet (8). And just as the novel takes advantage of its spare coloring and drawing style to prevent its audience from fully being able to point to God as purely Anglicized in appearance, it also uses vaguely Eastern language to restrict our ability to categorize Marji's God as the promoter of Islamic values. The phrases he uses when talking to Marji, like “You are my celestial light, you are my choice, my last and my best choice,” call to mind the spiritual language that is often associated with stereotypes of Middle Eastern mysticism and religion, without actually being explicitly Islamic (8). Yet for all his vague, magical phrases, God's words never directly quote the Quran, and he never expresses any support for the Islamist movement. Furthermore, though it is probable that Marji wants to be a Muslim prophet, she never explicitly refers to her religion as “Islam.” This fact, as well as the ambiguity of the language that God uses in their conversations, points to the

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<sup>21</sup> The word “Dieu” is used in the French translation, as it is the general term both Christians and Muslims use to refer to their gods. Interestingly, the English version translates the term as “God” and not “Allah.”

hybridity of Marji's imagination of her friend, as the text refuses to categorize him as either purely Western in appearance or purely Eastern in speech. Instead, the two aspects of God blend and blur into a deity that defies any label.

That her imagined God does not clearly align with any of the forces influencing Marji's ideologies does not seem to bother her at first. As a young girl, Marji accepts this as natural. Undoubtedly due to her age, Marji instead takes the hybridity of her friend for granted. Her imagination of God is the site where the conflicting influences of her liberal parents and the fundamentalist school system come together in order to cope with the struggle that is taking place in Marji's consciousness. Yet in the mind of a child, the influences on Marji's ideology blend together in seamless, untroubled coexistence. That she does not see the slippage in her desire to be "justice, love, and the wrath of God all in one" indicates that young Marji holds the hybridity of her cultural influences in unexamined harmony (9). The image accompanying this quote shows her in flower-print pajamas, posing three different ways: with a scale for justice, her hand up in a Schwurhand for love, and with a sword and shield for the wrath of God (9). That Marji appropriates a central-European hand gesture (the Schwurhand is used to swear oaths in court) for the concept of love in this image implies she associates peace and beneficence with the Westernized culture of her parents. In opposition, Marji's "wrath of God" pose holds a curved sword and a round, studded shield, parts of traditional Persian armor; this demonstrates her awareness of the militant fundamentalism of the Islamist system from which she receives her education. Yet the fact that these two poses stand in equal height and size alongside the justice posture—which holds a balanced scale, further emphasizing the equal influence both these entities exert on her mind—indicates that Marji upholds both these ideologies in forming her



own worldview. The image implies that for young Marji, no conflict exists between the two; they coincide in the naïve unity of a child's mind.

However, what seems natural and acceptable to a child becomes a source of strife for a growing young woman in the midst of adolescence. *Persepolis* exposes and challenges the seamless childhood hybridization of two different ideals through the growing disconnect between Marji and her friend. Increasing doubts and suspicions replace previous feelings of comfort and childlike ideals of harmony. As Marji immerses more of herself in the secularist Western reading material her parents provide, her interests in her young religious dreams wane. And as the symbol of the conflicting influences on her mind, God draws attention to the dissonance between Marji's desire to be a holy figure in Islam and her imagination of him as Anglicized. He asks, "So you don't want to be a prophet anymore?" and "You think I look like Marx?" (13). Marji's responses to both these questions—"Let's talk about something else" and "I told you to talk about something else"—demonstrate exasperation with her beliefs being questioned, in addition to an increasing consciousness that her seamless hybridization of polarized ideologies is actually implausible (13). Her frustration at God's gentle questions marks the dawn of understanding hybridity in her beliefs as well as the confusion such an amalgamation will induce in her own worldview.

### **FACING HYBRIDITY AMIDST CULTURAL CONFLICT**

Notably, God's questions—and Marji's irritations—begin when she starts to read about Eastern revolutionaries and Western philosophers, further driving the point that her God is a hybrid who belongs to neither East nor West. "To enlighten me, they bought books," Satrapi writes of her parents (12). Such ideological "enlightenment" becomes increasingly at odds with Marji's spiritual relationship with God; the likes of Eastern revolutionaries like Dr. Fatemi mix

with Western philosophers like Descartes into a mass of thinkers—without differentiation between the two—that troubles Marji’s spirituality (12). And yet, the hybridized figment of her religious and cultural imagination does not completely disappear. “Despite everything,” Satrapi writes, “God came to see me from time to time” (13). The use of the word “despite” here demonstrates that, in Marji’s mind, God cannot coincide with either Eastern or Western revolutionaries and philosophers, as he does not endorse any of their ideas. Instead, they have all blended into a part of Marji’s life where God simply does not fit; he, as an Anglicized God who speaks vaguely of Islam, exists outside all enlightened Eastern and Western thought. In not expressing any particular ideology, Marji’s hybridized God becomes obsolete in the face of “real” people and ideas.

In the process of increasing awareness of and interest in the political and cultural change taking place around her, Marji’s frustration with her hybridized God only escalates as she begins to realize that he is both incompatible with her intellectual enlightenment and has no interest in or relevance to current events. In an echo of God’s “You think I look like Marx?” Marji asks God, “Don’t you think I look like Che Guevara?” as she dons a military cap and prepares to join a demonstration (16). While she admires herself and adjusts her revolutionary headgear, God silently walks out her bedroom door, his expression blank. Later on, after fighting with her parents about attending the event, Marji cries in her bed, “God, where are you?” and Satrapi writes, “That night, he didn’t come” (17). Such a moment depicts Marji’s growing realization that her hybridized God fits well with childhood fantasies of becoming a prophet, but not with the realities of the nation; as an expression of ideological hybridity, he sides with neither the fundamental Islamists nor the liberal progressives. Because of this, he does not belong anywhere.

As she grows older and sees more of the harsh effects of a culture at war, Marji displays more awareness of the fact that her hybridized God cannot help her cope with the realities of a nation clashing with itself. In the chapter entitled “Persepolis,” Marji, her mother, and her grandmother wait fretfully at home for the return of Marji’s father, who has gone out to take photos of the demonstration. While she waits, Satrapi writes that she had, “thought my father was dead, that they [the Islamists] had shot him” (30). Interestingly, the panel depicts a despondent Marji with her head in her arms, with the faces of her father as well as her friend floating above her. In drawing a parallel between her father and God, the image evokes the Western side of her hybridized deity—Muslims never refer to Allah as their father, but Christians do. In comparing her parent to her imaginary companion and writing that she had thought “her father” was dead, Marji demonstrates the tension between East and West. The two, *Persepolis* seems to say, coincide together in a volatile state, and one may very well “shoot” the other dead for dominance in the mind of an individual. Her fears of the death of her father and God invoke Bhabha’s argument that “the very idea of a pure, ‘ethnically cleansed’ national identity can only be achieved through the death, both literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood” (7, emphasis added). Bhabha’s claims about the dangers of zealous nationalism are particularly germane to Marji’s anxieties here. She displays an emerging understanding that hybridity is inevitable, and to be rid of it involves the literal death of real individuals, such as her father, and the more difficult figurative death of cultural contingency—her God.

However, Marji’s father has not passed, and neither has her God. Eventually, the revolution that God possesses no interest in or influence on passes, and Marji finds comfort in the arms of her childhood friend once more after crying to her mother for those tortured by the

revolutionaries (53). Unfortunately, the solace Marji finds in her dear friend's arms does not last long. Once again, she discovers that her hybridized God cannot help her deal with the reality of cultural violence. After the execution of her Uncle Anoosh, God approaches Marji as she cries in her bed, asking her what's wrong (70). The fact that he does not know what troubles her reveals God's powerlessness, and uselessness, especially in a divinity with supposedly omniscient powers. Marji realizes this, and she tells God, "Shut up, you! Get out of my life!!! I never want to see you again!"—the crossbreed God of her childhood unfit to help her deal with the personal effects of a divided nation (70). Marji's God may be good, but merely bumbling in his goodness. Unable to be either fully Western or Eastern, he has no power over the real repercussions of a divided culture. Realizing this, Marji banishes him from her life, and he does not visit again until near the end of the novel. Her fears of her complex identity push her to try and reject its manifestation altogether. In the intermittent time, God's absence demonstrates Marji's increasing anxiety regarding her hybridity.

### **FACING HYBRIDITY IN THE ABSENCE OF GOD**

The anxiety of encountering—and rejecting—her hybridity through her banishment of God manifests throughout the intermittent period in which God is not present. This becomes apparent especially during Marji's years of schooling in Austria. God's absence during these years indicates Marji's fear of her own hybridity and the years Marji spends in Austria show her attempting to confront her anxieties, often with mixed results. Homesick, alone, and noticeably different from the others, Marji experiences several layers of isolation as an Iranian expatriate going through adolescence. The years Marji spends in Austria, then, demonstrate a desire for an identity—and as a teenager, this often manifests in a need to belong. That her experience and nationality separate her from her peers at this time only enhances this desire—often leading to

attempts at rejecting her hybridity in order to align with a certain group. In a Western country, the different forms of being Iranian Marji had practiced before converge into one. Thus, teenage Marji struggles to make sense of her hybridity in a place that only recognizes one form of the Iranian national identity.

However, despite her unique circumstances, Marji's prospects at belonging seem promising at first. Her differences from the other students are precisely what cause Julie, an older French girl, to notice her. Julie then introduces Marji to her circle of friends, who also take interest in her for being different, in that she is Iranian, has known war, and has "seen lots of dead people" (166). Marji's experience with death, for this group, defines Marji's Iranian-ness. They do not consider the difficulty navigating fundamentalist and progressive postures—for how would they know? Instead, Julie and the others simply base Marji's national identity on her experience with war, a difference they can appreciate. This group of friends finds community in being outsiders; their separation from other people makes them similar. "An eccentric, a punk, two orphans, and a third-worlder, we made quite a group of friends," Marji says (167). It seems that she has found a place to belong; a community where differences unite the students. The visual image that accompanies Marji's description of her group of friends emphasizes this fact. All of the teenagers wear black, marking the union they share in separating themselves from the other students. Marji and Julie have similar features in this panel as well, implying sense of belonging and sameness due to difference Marji has found—the two share similarly almond-shaped eyes, pointed noses, and wide mouths in the same proportions (167). Though unique, in this group, Marji stands as one of the same. Her circle allows her to be an Iranian expat in a group where differences are the norm. Assimilation into this group appears to offer, then, a space

that allows Marji her hybridity as a Western-educated Iranian expat along with the enticing promise of belonging.

However, it eventually becomes clear that even as her companions pride themselves on their differences from the other, “normal” students, Marji remains the odd one out due to her nationality and circumstances. As her friends discuss their plans for Christmas break, the fact emerges that Marji’s friends really are not so different from the rest after all. The other students talk about travelling to Nice, Barcelona, Honduras. In comparison, Marji’s friends discuss plans to see France, Salzburg and the Alps, revealing that even as they revel in their separation, they too are upper class Westerners with the means to travel (168). Though Momo, perhaps the most vocal proponent of the circle’s isolation, declares that “Christmas is an American invention” and disregards the banality of celebrating such a holiday, he still falls in line with the actions of the other students by planning to visit his grandmother in Salzburg (168). Marji, having not the means to travel (nor people to visit or go with), attempts to close the gap between herself and the others by focusing on what the group has claimed as their identity: difference. “You know, in Iran we don’t celebrate Christmas . . .” she begins, attempting to rouse their interest by using what caused the group to assimilate her in the first place (168). The others, however, take no notice, choosing instead to chatter excitedly about their holiday plans. Marji tries again: “Our New Year is March 21, the . . .” but her comment goes unheard. The image accompanying this dialogue clearly demarcates the divide between Marji and her friends: Marji’s comment is printed in a different font from the others, symbolizing her friends’ inability to understand her thoughts and hear her need for affirmation. Julie’s head partially obscures Marji’s face, raising a metaphorical wall between her and the others. Marji frowns, while the others smile or assume neutral expressions, demonstrating her sense of disturbance amidst the others’ complacency

(168). What has allowed her to become part of the group—her uniqueness as an Iranian expatriate who has known war—this time separates Marji from the rest. And the text reveals her friends to be what they truly are: normal Western students, with the only unique feature being their affected disinterestedness in the mundane. The pack of outcasts that seemed to promise belonging to Marji implicitly rejects her hybridity by alienating the part of herself that separates her: her Iranian-ness.

Marji's response to the emergence of her difference from the others in the group is to embrace a Westernized mindset, thus shunning that which obscured her ability to relate to them—her Iranian identity. As the others discuss Bakunin and Marx, Marji thinks to herself: "I needed to fit in, and for that I needed to educate myself"— meaning she must study the Western philosophers her friends read (173). Rejecting the true source of her dissimilarity from others— her complex Iranian national identity—Marji seeks a "difference" that is more similar to what her other friends share. Her endeavors call to mind Bhabha's words on what happens to identity in times of crisis: it "is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at gaining centre" (254). Marji, as a teenager on the fringes of her friend group, exists in the "position of marginality" Bhabha speaks of; therefore, as she reads Bakunin and Marx, she attempts to "gain centre" and claim her identity by becoming more like her friends.

However, it becomes clear that trying to "understand herself" by reading Western philosophers falls short of Marji's expectations. Upon reading Bakunin, she finds that she "didn't understand much of his philosophy" and of her friends' favorite author, Sartre, she finds him a "little annoying" (174). She also reads de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which leads to disaster: "Simone explained that if women peed standing up, their perception of life would change. So I tried. It ran lightly down my left leg. It was a little disgusting. Seated, it was much simpler"

(175). The reason for these disappointments, I propose, is in the fact that Marji is trying to use Western philosophers to understand her identity. She reads Bakunin and Sartre in the hopes of relating better to her friends, forgetting that the largest difference between herself and the others remains: she is still Iranian. And the general “for all women” philosophy of *The Second Sex* does not apply to Marji, which her debacle with standing urination reveals: “[A]s an Iranian woman, before learning to urinate like a man, I needed to learn to become a liberated and emancipated woman” (175). De Beauvoir’s Western feminism, *Persepolis* seems to say, does not apply to Marji’s complicated Iranian-Western hybridity. Her endeavors to discover herself solely as a woman will not work, for she is not the Western female audience envisioned in *The Second Sex*. To try and apply the ideals of a Western text onto an identity that is partially Iranian proves disastrous: Marji stands, disappointed, with urine running down her leg. Her attempts to understand her identity through Western philosophy contain one glaring oversight: she is not a Western student like the others. She has come from Iran.

Even after such disappointments, however, Marji still finds that she cannot embrace her Iranian-ness in the midst of a Western culture. She undergoes a physical transformation in order to look more like her group of friends—she cuts her hair, spikes it up, pierces her ears, and wears thick eyeliner. Notably, after these changes, Marji appears most similar to the spike-haired, pierced Momo, the de facto ringleader of the friend group—but she does not seem happy (191). Again, her interaction with her friends only emphasizes the differences between their individual experiences. As Marji tries to talk to her friends about her uncle after arguing with Momo about the nature of existence, the others begin to talk about smoking as she says, “Noble combat, blah blah blah . . .” each “blah”, of course, denoting the fact that Marji’s words go unheard (191). The picture accompanying this image also demonstrates her separation from the others. The panel



depicts Marji's friends in profile, their faces directed towards one another. Marji singularly faces forward, demonstrating that her friends cannot understand her. The differences in expression exemplify the separation between Marji and her friends as well; they all wear neutral expressions, while Marji uniquely has an angry one. These visuals demonstrate the fact that Marji's experiences and Iranian heritage isolate her. Her angry expression shows that she cares too much; the faces of her friends, that they do not care at all.

The distance between Marji and her friends manifests again as she attempts to fit in with the others by smoking joints. She feels uncomfortable with her friends' smoking lifestyle, remembering how her parents had compared a smoking cousin to a "vegetable" (192). However, Marji does not see refusal as an option. Her solution, then, is to pretend to take part in the activity, but to never actually smoke. "As soon as my friends' backs were turned, I stuck my fingers in my eyes to make them good and red. Then, I imitated their laughter," she says (192). The panel of the friends laughing together under the influence emphasizes the dissonance between Marji's actions. The others wear natural, open-mouthed smiles with no teeth showing, whereas Marji's mouth contorts itself into a sort of grimace, her teeth bared. This visual demonstrates the unnaturalness—and, perhaps, horror (hence the grimace and the teeth)—of Marji's attempts to fit her identity into a Western framework. Proving aware of this, Marji says, "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, that I was playing a game by somebody else's rules" (193). To try and fit herself into the mold of her friends, Marji must reject more and more aspects of her national identity forced, unnatural, and grotesque behaviors, as they force her against her hybridity.

Marji's experiences in Austria demonstrate the anxiety she feels after gaining full consciousness of her confusing hybridity. Her banishment of God exemplifies these emotions, and his absence then exhibits her desire to find an unconfused identity. Unfortunately, Marji's endeavors to reject the complicated Iranian parts of herself backfire. Eventually, the pressure of trying to Westernize herself by rejecting the Iranian-ness of her identity builds up, and Marji explodes. As she overhears some girls gossiping about her at a café, Marji slumps down in her seat (135). However, once they mention that her parents must not care about her, Marji "[sees] red," smoke coming out of her nostrils. She then shouts at the girls, "You are going to shut up or I am going to make you! I am Iranian and proud of it!" (135-36). At last, she feels that she has come to terms with her identity. No matter that the girls think she's crazy due to her outburst; Marji has accepted her nationality.

#### **THE RE-EMERGENCE OF GOD AND THE FORMATION OF A NEW IDENTITY**

As a result, Marji becomes more comfortable with being herself than ever before. In the chapter entitled "The Horse," she moves out of Julie's home and begins living in a room "full of light" (199). She also leaves behind her "punk look," no longer feeling the pressure to change and marginalize herself to fit in with her friends (198). She even finds companionship in her eight gay housemates, which the novel makes apparent in the way they welcome the news that her mother is visiting. Unlike Julie, Momo, and the others, who, as mentioned before, always seemed to brush aside Marji's comments, her new housemates are attentive and warm. Marji rushes to tell them that her mother is visiting, and they give engaging responses: "What about your mother?," "That's great!," "When?" (199) The image shows Marji being embraced and kissed by one of her housemates, with two others turned toward her with smiles on their faces. Even Marji's mother notices the change: one night, as the two sit together, she says, "I'm happy

to see you so well-settled here” (203). The positioning of this chapter right after Marji re-claims her Iranian heritage suggests that acceptance of her Iranian-ness has catalyzed this new phase in Marji’s emotional wellbeing.

Interestingly, God quietly reappears at this period in Marji’s life when she prepares to take the French baccalaureate. He comes to Marji in her dreams, telling her exactly what the subject of her test will be, a stark difference from the vague words of comfort he used to provide in her childhood. She even asks her mother to pray, and “each time that I asked my mother to pray for me, my wish was granted.” The image of God then appears with a fountain pen in hand, writing “Montesquieu,” whereas his hands had either been invisible or merely holding Marji before (223). Sure enough, Marji’s oral exam tests her on Montesquieu the next day. The image of God’s hands engaging actively by holding the pen indicates that God has become a tangible, useful presence in Marji’s life. Before, God’s hands emphasized the fact that though he was emotionally necessary to her; he was superfluous in actually affecting the reality of her life. Yet now, as she accepts that she is Iranian, God’s existence actually effects change in Marji’s reality, symbolized by his newly dynamic hands and his revelations to Marji coming true.

However, though Marji accepts her Iranian-ness and finds a new dimension of effectiveness to God, her troubles are far from over. Even as Marji does not fit in in Austria due to the Iranian component of her identity, she returns home and realizes just how distant she is from the others due to the “Westernization” she has undergone abroad. As she discusses her romantic life with her friends, she finds that they are shocked at her sexual experience—one questioning the difference between Marji and a whore (270). The novel further highlights Marji’s status as an outsider in the group through the visuals in this panel: she has plain black hair, and her cheeks are shaded to indicate her embarrassment. Her friends, however, are drawn with light-

colored, styled hair,<sup>22</sup> demonstrating her isolation from the Iranian group, just as she was isolated back in Vienna (270).<sup>23</sup> Marji's Iranian-ness prevented her from fitting in with her friends in Austria; now, her Western-ness obstructs her assimilation with her friends in Iran.

Yet, as Marji struggles with the limitations of Iranian law and culture, her relationship with her Iranian boyfriend, and a general sense of isolation and languor, she also begins to accept her her liminal position. For the college of art entry qualification, Marji creates her own, Iranian-influenced rendition of Michelangelo's "La Pieta." She redraws the Virgin Mary with a black chador, holding Jesus, who wears a war uniform. She also "added two tulips, symbols of the martyrs, on either side so there would be no confusion" as to whom she is representing in her artwork (281). Here, Marji appropriates a canonical Western artwork into an Iranian cultural context, indicating a certain coming-to-terms with her hybridity; she has been educated in the Western tradition, yet she remains culturally Iranian. That she chooses to appropriate a religious Western artwork to provide commentary on the plight of martyrs (considered faithful to Allah for their sacrifice) is particularly telling—for Marji's faith and philosophy form the site where the different natures of her hybridity collide. This demonstrates an acceptance of hybridity, for Marji willingly brings together Western art and Iranian culture in her production.

Notably, God re-emerges as Marji creates art that blends the different cultures that form her identity. After Marji produces her creation, she learns that she must take an ideological test for entrance into the graphic arts program. Her parents then tell her that she must learn to present herself as a "faithful" Muslim: "You must learn to pray in Arabic, the names of all the imams,

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<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the one friend who also has black hair is not shown in this panel.

<sup>23</sup> Malek, in her essay on Iranian cultural production in *Persepolis*, aptly summarizes Marji's struggle with isolation due to her hybridity: "Upon her return to Iran, we witness Marjane's troubled attempts at readjustment, largely a result of having to 'readjust' to an Islamic society she had never fully adjusted to in the first place" (370).

their histories, the philosophy of Shiism, etc., etc.” (283). Determined to receive entry, Marji attempts to learn all of these things by heart yet discovers that she cannot retain the necessary information. Finally, she becomes “convinced that the only way to get over this last hurdle was to pray” (283). And her prayers work—on the day of the exam, the mullah conducting the interview is impressed with Marji’s honesty about her religious convictions. For the second time, Marji’s God proves potent in affecting her real-life circumstances. Incidentally, such a moment comes right after the creation of her hybridized “La Pieta” artwork. Marji’s acceptance of her hybridity has led to the efficacy of God’s presence. Interestingly, the panel accompanying Marji’s prayer contains no image of God. Instead, we only see Marji, hands folded, with mystical white lines swirling around her. This time, God has no face; no Karl Marx-like figure appears. God’s lack of visible presence in juxtaposition with his effective actions demonstrates that Marji has come to terms with her hybridity. This, along with God, emerges now more potent than ever. She puts no face to her God, and thus she puts no face to her faith and her philosophy. Instead, he is simply God, the product of Marji’s hybridized consciousness; and thus, he becomes relevant like never before. For in her mind, Marji has created a new space for God—and herself—that is outside the constraints of cultural and religious limitations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout her childhood in *Persepolis*, Marji becomes increasingly disillusioned with the hybridity of Western and Iranian culture and values, which manifest in her relationship with God. Marji grows increasingly aware and anxious of her hybridity as she discovers her God’s ineptitude. The strands of Eastern and Western values and ideals inextricably link together in Marji and God, causing only confusion in the nation and the individual. Attempts to separate the

strands and to try and identify with only one side result in isolation and even more displacement. Hybridity, *Persepolis* seems to say, is an anxiety-inducing process in the self-consciousness it produces in the individual.

Yet it is not a completely hopeless process. While God appeared merely incidental in the comfort he provides Marji in her early life, he re-emerges as a force to be reckoned with, one that can catalyze actual change. His effectiveness, however, comes at the price of Marji's self-awareness and self-consciousness concerning her hybrid identity. Though the process is long and causes anxiety, *Persepolis* makes it clear that the pain of rejecting one's hybridity and attempting to fit oneself in the framework of just one culture weighs greater than the pain of accepting and facing the ambiguous nature of that hybridity. The presence and absence of Marji's God—as a manifestation of her hybridity—demonstrates this fact: in the end, it is better when he is there than when he is not. He reflects Marji's growth in her relationship with her hybridity, from the uncomplicated, yet naïve acceptance of it as a child, to the anxiety and rejection of it as a youth, and, finally, to the self-aware creation of a new identity beyond the constraints of cultural expectations, conflicts, and personal upbringing as an adult. And just as Marji prays to a faceless, yet active God in the end, her hybridity emerges as an active creator of an identity beyond cultural limitations.

As such, *Persepolis* refuses to take a singular stance on the issue of hybridity. Voices in postcolonial theory propose that hybridity must induce either anxiety or hope in an individual. However, Satrapi's work demonstrates that hybridity is a process, in which one begins unaware, develops anxiety, and eventually accepts hybridization with optimism. *Persepolis* rejects the unequally weighted binaries of anxiety/hope, good/bad, East/West. Instead, through Marji and her imaginary God, it demonstrates that coming to terms with the various influences at play upon

the mind is a necessity; the individual must learn to confront his or her hybridizations in order to participate in the construction of a new identity that stretches beyond cultural and ideological limitations.

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