Gestures in Remembrance: Mirroring, Narration, and Figural Placement in "Persepolis"

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In Marjane Satrapi’s memoir *Persepolis*, originally published as two separate texts (*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*), the author’s story of being raised during the Islamic Revolution and its impact is examined. Satrapi’s comic is a glimpse into the life of a young girl with hopes of becoming a prophet and of bettering the universe while the world around her was crumbling. The life and times of Marjane are documented as she struggles with gaining her voice, losing her identity, all the while struggling with the demise of her homeland both from first hand accounts and through the description of her parents as she is sent abroad for schooling. Throughout both comics, Marjane develops her sense of self, which is often impacted through mirroring the media and her parent’s influence. The narrative structure and reflexivity of Satrapi’s autobiographical comic adds yet another layer of thematic elements in the text. *Persepolis* incorporates a braid of figural gestures that call attention to Marjane’s statements, often breaking the fourth wall between the audience and the narrative, attempting to draw an individual’s attention to not only Marjane’s voice, but the element of narration, mirroring, and how gestures impact the main character’s opinions both within the text and outside through the spread of knowledge to a greater audience, for a greater good.

There are multiple instances of the figural gesture motif within *Persepolis*. Primarily, the figural gesture of Marjane with her index finger raised and pointed upward appears multiple
ways. Marjane is seen gesturing in this manner toward the reader, toward friends, and toward enemies as well. This gesture appears multiple other times and ways when other individuals in the comic gesture toward someone and mimic the call-to-attention Marjane has mirrored herself. When considering narration, the element of mirroring, and the development of Marji’s (Marjane Satrapi’s nickname) voice, multiple frames and panels can be discussed. Keeping the specific thematic elements in mind, three frames in total in both Persepolis and Persepolis 2, will be examined. For the sake of comparison, the general mention of others will be discussed, among the primary examples.

The first instance of a figural gesture in the form of the raised index finger that Marji ultimately adopts, appears as she breaks the fourth wall, in the first chapter of Persepolis. In the section titled “The Veil,” Satrapi depicts the initial demise of the Shah’s regime. In the opening panels, a member of the Islamic Revolution announced that “All bilingual schools must be closed down” because “They are symbols of capitalism” (Satrapi 4. 3-4). Along with all things the people of Tehran originally found pleasure in, the Islamic Revolution vowed to eliminate and veil the young women, segregate schools, and oppress the once atypical lifestyle of Muslims. Panel four depicts a spokesman of the Shah’s regime declaring the issue with the education system, especially those that are not religiously affiliated, to a crowd of people absorbing his statements in agreement. All the while, his index finger is raised, commanding attention as he communicates with the masses. Ultimately, this is the figural gesture Marjane adopts as she speaks out against the community of supporters of the Islamic Revolution.

When Marjane begins mirroring this gesture, she first raises her index finger and addresses an audience by her own accord (in this case, she addresses the readers as she breaks the fourth wall too). In the fourth and fifth panels of the page, Marjane’s father states that “God
did not choose the king” with his figural gesture is in place, and calling attention to his statement as well as his firm belief in what he is expressing to Marjane as she sits atop his lap (Satrapi 19.4). The reader’s eyes may be drawn to Marji’s center panel as she retorts with her own indicative figural gesture toward her audience while breaking the fourth wall of the graphic narrative: “He did so! It’s written on the first page of our schoolbook” (Satrapi 19.5). By informing the readers of her own naivety, Satrapi sets up the narrative for discussing her progress in not only discovering her ability to fight oppression, but also to formulate her own opinions. Though by mirroring her father’s figural gesture, she does not mirror his words—she repeats the words that were fed to her, but in the following panels, her father expresses the truth to her. Thus, ultimately giving Marji the confidence and tools to think for herself rather than what the masses and those of the Islamic Revolution have attempted to instill in Iran’s youth. Marjane models this action toward one of her classmates as she raises her index finger, drawing attention to her statement and squaring up, face-to-face, to educate her about the Islamic Revolution, but to no avail (Satrapi 52.3). The following panels depict Marji as a smaller version of herself in comparison to her friend, who has her right fist raised high, almost in an act of solidarity and opposition to Marjane’s sole raised finger (Satrapi 52.3-5). Despite this, as Marji mirrored those in power, she eventually became powerful in her own right despite her initial failed attempts.

As Marjane eventually gained power in the form of confidence, her words had a greater impact as did her once-mirrored gestures. In Babak Elahi’s article “Frames and Mirrors in Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis,” he discusses the ideology behind mirrors and the act of mirroring an individual, even oneself. Marjane is often scene mirroring her parents, individuals in power, leaders of the Islamic Revolution, and almost anyone she is exposed to both vocally and physically. By allowing what influences her to determine her thoughts, though it’s nearly
impossible not to, she subconsciously mirrors opinions of those around her. It isn’t until Marji is older that she begins to create her own ideals and concepts that become worthy of mirroring for others. The development of her individuality stems from Elahi’s concept of ideological influence in *Persepolis*. In regard to this, Elahi states that, “The drama of the mirror stage moves the individual subject from a sense of insufficiency to that of anticipation. The sense of not being whole is replaced by a sense of completeness” (Elahi 319). He then goes on to write, “Satrapi’s uses of the mirror as a secondary frame within the comic panel that *Persepolis* narrates a problematic development of identity, one which is agonistic and remains largely unresolved for Marjane as autobiographical persona” (Elahi 320). Though this statement relates directly to mirrors and the act of reflecting, it also conveys the similar epidemic Marjane faces in the novel as she has a “problematic development of identity” and may still have one even after completing *Persepolis*. Ultimately, both as the main character of the comic, and as the narrator, “Marjane has gone through the looking glass while Satrapi, the author, has stepped out of the narrative frame to express to us her sense of guilt and self-recrimination” (Elahi 321). For Satrapi, writing *Persepolis* could have been an act of self-reflexivity, allowing her the opportunity to reflect on her growth, and possibly re-writing some of what influenced and heeded her development. As the narrator of this graphic memoir, Satrapi also, as Elahi states, “stepped out of the narrative frame to express to us her sense of guilt and self-recrimination” as she reflected on her path to adulthood.

By understanding the root of the figural gesture braid throughout *Persepolis*, we can better understand how it impacts thematic elements within the text. Once Marjane herself has fully adopted the gesture, it appears again later in the text in a more confident tone. The series of numerous spreads between the one in which Marji attempts to educate her friend and when
Marjane first begins to develop her own voice. The development between the pages of *Persepolis* contain multiple instances and variations of the upright index finger drawing attention to an individual as well as pointing at another individual spewing hatred or spreading information. In panels five through nine in the latter part of the comic, Satrapi depicts an argument between Marji and her mother in which mirroring takes place. The element of narration can be examined as well. As Marjane and her mother argue about why she skipped class, Marji’s mother raises her index finger into the sky, then thrusts it upright to further argue her point to her daughter as she catches her in the act of lying. Marjane’s mother continues lecturing her as she fades to a silhouetted background image in the following panel. Her mother states, “Now is the time for learning. You have your whole life to have fun! What are you going to be when you grow up?? In this country you have to know everything better than anyone else if you’re going to survive” (Satrapi 113.5-9). As Marji struggles with taking control of her own life, as a twelve-year-old girl, Satrapi takes narratorial justice as she mirrors her mother at the time. Thus, further reiterating the impact her mother had on her as a child. Satrapi as the narrator and main character of *Persepolis* responds to her mother’s rule when she argues, “Dictator! You are the guardian of the revolution of this house” (Satrapi 113.9). A question mark appears over her mother’s head as her daughter’s voice, intelligence, and ideals they have instilled upon her wash over her with striking realization. Satrapi as the narrator has the ability to remind readers of her tact in intervening in her own life story through text boxes and the comic form.

In terms of narration, Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri’s article “Focalization in Graphic Narrative” reiterates many of the narrative structures and ideals implemented in *Persepolis*. In association with these ideals, figural placement and the reoccurring appearance of it in the narrative adds yet another layer of inference to the narrative structure. Their article incorporates
levels of perspective, structure, and the visual aspect of the graphic novel. “Focalization, the filtering of a story through a consciousness prior to and/or embedded within its narratorial mediation, is a fundamental analytical concept in narrative theory” according to Hortskotte and Pedri (Hortskotte 330). The authors then go on to iterate how this act of focalization impacts reads, writers, and researchers. They believe “It allows researchers to differentiate between the narration of a story on the one hand and the mental processing of that story by a character—or by the narrator” (Hortskotte 330). In regard to the figural gesture motif in Persepolis, as readers we can interpret the meaning of Satrapi’s braid and how it interacts with the themes of the novel multiple ways. One interpretation pertains to the “Two distinct kinds of vantage points [that] can be embedded in narrative: a personal one associated with a character and an impersonal one associated with a narrator” (Hortskotte 335). Therefore, depending on how we as readers and researchers interpret Satrapi’s intentions within the pages of Persepolis, the association with the narrator Satrapi or the character Satrapi could alter our reading, as it may have altered her writing as well as her own growth as an individual during her reflective writing process.

By interpreting the braid of the figural gesture as an element of sequencing and a necessary component to the narrative, the braid adopts a new level of value. Since the braid weaves its way into the sequel to Persepolis, the gesture links the stories and creates a basis for comparison between the development of Marji as a child and her development into womanhood. In Persepolis 2, Marjane has moved abroad, dealt heavily with the development of her as an individual, a few bad haircuts, and the never-ending struggle with authority figures. The primary figural gesture discussed occurs at a moment of heightened tension for Marji as she stands up to her then boyfriend Markus. Marji is on her way to a protest and asks Markus if he will be joining her, his denial warrants a fight. Marjane’s index finger is raised and her mouth is wide open as
she yells at Markus about something she has always been passionate about: protesting. She claims, “Yeah, the intellectuals are too precious to waste their time shouting” (Satrapi 75.5-6). Marjane storms away, back towards the reader, with Markus still in the foreground working on his typewriter. In her fury, index finger still raised with her final words she states, “The cowardice of people…who give dictators the chance to install themselves” (Satrapi 75.6). These two frames are indicative of Marji’s development, as well as her acceptance of who she is, who she should not surround herself with, and a reminder of where she wants to go. Satrapi also narrates the final panel of this spread as she gives insight into this moment of her own depiction of her life. Though young Marji may not have known this at the time, Satrapi describes this argument as “the beginning of the end of our story,” in reference to Markus and Marji’s relationship (Satrapi 75.6). Though, looking back, and including a text box that draws attention to herself as the narrator, Satrapi simultaneously rewrites and reflects upon her past.

When discussing the narratorial mediator and her involvement in the text, it is important to point out that many of the panels in Persepolis that don figural gestures do not contain a text box. Most of those that call attention to the character doing the speaking with the upright index finger, also call attention to the audience and act as a simultaneous narration from the current Marjane Satrapi as well as the younger Marji, and those who have also adopted the figural gesture, within the text. The narration in Satrapi’s graphic memoir is discussed in Hillary Chute’s text Graphic Women, specifically in the chapter “Graphic Narrative as Witness: Marjane Satrapi and the Texture of Retracing.” Hillary Chute discusses the feminist aspect of Persepolis and how that is portrayed in the text, especially in its form and “in the complex visual dimension of its author’s narrating herself on the page as a multiple subject” (Chute 134). In describing Satrapi’s multiple subject form of narration, she states: “Persepolis is about the ethical visual and verbal
practice of ‘not forgetting’ and about the political confluence of the everyday and the historical: through its visual and verbal witnessing, it contests dominant images and narratives of history” (Chute 135). Hillary Chute continues on to discuss Satrapi’s impact on the public, and emphasis through figural gesture, as Satrapi “shifts the narrative attention to a broad public sphere” rather than only telling her story and only for the purpose of sharing her trauma (Chute 137). She aims to educate the masses through her consistent “injunctions to ‘never forget’” as the “defining project of the text” (Chute 141). For Satrapi, by remembering her nation’s past and her own personal past, she redefines her voice through narratorial mediation, and eternalizes her story and gives insight into a sometimes foggy history.

The final explicit instance of figural placement for Marjane, though other characters in Persepolis have also adopted this indicator, appears in one of the final chapters of Persepolis 2 titled “The Satellite.” Marjane is seen as a mature, graceful woman as she shares with her parents her thoughts on the current state of the Islamic Revolution, and, ultimately, her ability to formulate her own thoughts. This panel shows Marji with her index finger raised, flanked by her mother and father as she faces her would-be audience. Marjane’s newfound understanding of how Westerners view Muslims, her people, and her home fuel her to say, “The Western media also fights against us. That’s where our reputation as fundamentalists and terrorists comes from” (Satrapi 168.3). Within this discussion, Marjane calls attention to what she is saying by her figural gesture. Her parents focus their eyes on her as she states her opinion. One in which her mother and father agree with in the following panel. Throughout both novels, Marjane has occasionally mirrored perspectives, repeated statements, or announced statements that lacked complete fulfillment. Satrapi implements this figural gesture and her knowledge of things she once was unaware of throughout both Persepolis and Persepolis 2, thus drawing attention to the
progress she as an individual has made in learning about her culture and the Islamic Revolution. All the while, as the narrator of her own life, Satrapi notifies the audience of what statements may bear importance over others with the indication of an upright index finger. This is a moment of recognition and familial respect for Marjane as well as the last indicator of her growth, her development as a woman, and Satrapi’s attempt at speaking to a broader audience. By acknowledging the issue with how Westerners view Iranians, Satrapi attempts to educate her audience. And, to gain our attention, she has her index finger thrust into the air reminding readers of the necessity to absorb her statement not only in this panel but in the others containing the figural gesture motif.

Marjane Satrapi’s incorporation of a physical gesture, in association with an audible statement implies just how important her words, especially in attributing panels were. In Satrapi’s retelling of her story, she educated readers of an occasionally blurry topic, showed firsthand how it affected her and the population of Iran, and eloquently, and visually, notified readers of moments of heightened importance through the ever-present figural gesture of the raised index finger of the speaking subject. Satrapi’s ability to fluidly tie in a motif of grand importance with a series of mirrored moments, all the while narrating her graphic memoir adds to her development not only as an individual but as an artist in her process of reflection, remembrance, and the written (graphic) word.
Works Cited


