

Family ties: the identity construction of Marjane's grandmother in the graphic novel Embroideries

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Abstract

The language of comics as a narrative and graphic expression has become an important part of culture today. In female production, with its diversity, beauty, depth, and social criticism, we highlight the graphic novel *Embroideries*, by Iranian author Marjane Satrapi. In her work, the author recalls the gatherings that brought together the women of her family and friends in a private and cozy space to discuss women's issues such as sexuality, marriage and divorce. The analysis will focus on the unveiling of the identity construction of Marjane's grandmother. In the presence of her grandmother, Marji's admiration and the discourse of equality and transgression are materialized. The qualitative-interpretative study will primarily use the theoretical contributions of Acevedo (1990), Cagnin (2014), Ramos (2010) and Vergueiro (2011) for the analysis of comic language. For the construction of identities, we will draw on the cultural studies of Hall (1987, 2006). Meanwhile, the dialogic episodes will be analyzed from a Bakhtinian perspective. In *Embroideries*, we find that these gatherings generate self-affirmation of identity, a sense of social belonging, increased self-esteem, and well-being among women. In the representation of the matriarchal family, we note that the grandmother carries within her the remnants of freer and more autonomous voices that manifest in her words and actions.

Keywords: autobiography in comics; identity construction; *embroideries*.

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INTRODUCTION

The artistic propositions of some women constitute forms of resistance in which personal stories and biographies are presented as narratives. Marjane Satrapi stands out among contemporary comic artists who have emerged from obscurity to cultural prominence.

Raised by an educated family, a great-granddaughter of an emperor of the country, she received an education that combined the tradition of Persian culture with Western and leftist values. *Embroideries* is a significant 21st-century work in the graphic novel genre that exposes feminist experiences and perceptions of resistance in Iran through collective voices. The title of the work has multiple meanings. Werneck, on the back cover of *Embroideries*, considers that:

“Embroidery” is the Iranian equivalent of the Brazilian “knitting.” But, beyond gossip, the expression also has a very particular meaning: hymen reconstruction surgery, a procedure adopted by women who need to negotiate between their own desires and the moralism that prevails in the country of the ayatollahs. Deluded or self-deluded, naive or mature, the women who participate in these embroideries share their experiences with men of all kinds: scammers, closeted homosexuals, players, perverts. Everyone knows that the cultural differences between Iran and the West are many. However, what Marjane Satrapi reveals to us is that the desires and anxieties of Iranian women are often more familiar than one might have supposed (Satrapi, 2010).

Thus, the author, by recounting a specific phase of her life, highlights the various ways in which women resisted patriarchal structures, often stepping beyond the bounds of moralism in Iranian culture.

A narrative only exists as a representation of events when someone gives it meaning, organizes it, and establishes relationships between these events. The work then emerges as a result of the subject/artist's implications in the social, political, cultural context, etc. The text under analysis is an autobiographical Comic Book that can be considered a “spin-off” of *Persepolis*. Set around the 1990s, the story is an intimate portrayal of Iranian women in a conversation circle at Marji's grandmother's house. *Embroideries* can be classified as a Graphic Novel, an Anglo-Saxon term for a narrative produced in a sequential art format with a more adult, long and non-serialized theme.

In *Embroideries*, the cozy and defined space for women is the setting where the intertwining of narratives unfolds, free from the limits of the comic strips and free from male judgments. The story is a kind of patchwork quilt, composed of the many female voices of various generations of the Satrapi family discussing taboo subjects related to sexuality, hidden feelings, and macho impositions. As linguistic forms present themselves to speakers in the context of precise enunciations, this context, for Bakhtin, will always be ideological. According to him:

¹ Translated by: Marcelo Silveira.

[...] we never say or hear *words*, we say and hear what is true or false, good or bad, important or unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. *Words are always filled with content and meaning drawn from behavior or ideology*. That's the way we understand words, and we can respond only to words that engage us behaviorally or ideologically (Bakhtin; Volóshinov, 1973, p. 70).

After discussing the ideological nature of the sign according to Bakhtinian theory, it is also worth highlighting Stuart Hall and his reflections in *Modernity and its futures* (Hall, 1992) on the postmodern subject with a fragmented identity. According to the author, identity becomes a “moveable feast”: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. It is historically, not biologically, defined.” (Hall, 1992, p. 277). Marji's grandmother develops a close relationship with her. This article will explore the relationship between the grandmother and the granddaughter, between the elder and the young, and the relationship between tradition and modernity.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

SATRAPI AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL *EMBROIDERIES*

Women's participation in comic book production is possible, and, although its expansion within the publishing market is recent, currently encompassing a representative heterogeneity of comic artists from different nationalities and ethnicities, the scene of female-authored productions strengthens with each passing day. The artists work in a kind of personal and social resistance, contrary to conditioning conventionalisms. In the group of autobiographical comics, we have the figure of the graphic writer Marjane Satrapi.

Marjane Satrapi is the pen name of Marjane Ebihamis. Born in Rasht, Iran, in 1969, Satrapi is a symbol of struggle on various levels of oppression. Marjane's upbringing in an environment where she had access to discussions forged the personality of a rebellious teenager, which contributed to the formation of a broader consciousness regarding issues such as politics and women's rights. Her family was involved with socialist and communist movements in Iran before the Islamic Revolution, including an uncle who was killed for participating in an attempt to create a communist republic in the Iranian province of Azerbaijan.

The Islamic Revolution occurred in 1979, and from then on, strict laws were implemented in the country based on a more radical line of Islamic religion. In 1980, Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, invaded Iran. It was then that she saw her friends being called to the front lines and neighbors dying in constant bombings.

Marjane was sent by her parents to Vienna in 1984. There, she lived with friends, in dormitories, and even on the streets. She contracted severe pneumonia, which made her return to Iran at the age of 18. She struggled greatly with the differences in customs, such as the way of dressing and other rules imposed by the Islamic regime. She married at 21 in an attempt to integrate into Iranian culture, but the union did not last long, as the condition of being married in Iran demanded a role that Marji was not willing to play. At 24, she decided to return to Europe and currently lives in Paris, where she writes, illustrates children's books, and directs films.

Satrapi's work also falls within the artistic expression of Francophone literature, which includes writers who choose to write their works in French, even those who do not have it as their mother tongue. The author's condition, as studied by us, is closely linked to the concept of the postmodern subject presented by Stuart Hall (1987), which explains that the postmodern subject does not have a fixed, essential or permanent identity.

Satrapi is the author of *Persepolis*, published in 1999 in France and translated into various languages and countries, including Brazil. In 2007, the work was adapted into an animated feature film, which was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. With the autobiography *Persepolis*, the author inscribes the name of a female comic artist in the cultural production of comics and also raises historical and cultural questions about what it is like to be a woman in Islamic culture in recent decades.

Recently, Iguana Publishing released the collective work *Woman, Life, Freedom*, coordinated by Marjane Satrapi. The book was originally published by the Parisian publisher L'Iconoclaste, on September 14, 2023, two days before the one-year anniversary of the death of teenager Mahsa Amini in Iran, who was killed for improperly wearing the hijab. In the collection, Satrapi gathered 3 experts and 17 illustrators to tell the world the stories behind the protests that shook the country in 2022. According to Satrapi (*apud* Caetano, 2023), "This regime will fall. The next revolt will be fatal. There are things that cannot be stopped, like an avalanche."

In summary, Marjane Satrapi continues boldly in her daily struggle as one of the most persistent voices for Iranian women. Bakhtin argues that "Just as the body is initially formed in the womb of the mother (in her body), so human consciousness awakens surrounded by the consciousness of others" (Bakhtin, 1979, p. 373-374).

We know that comics reached a new status from the late 20th century onward, as they increasingly targeted an adult audience, with a growing publication of titles with increasingly complex fictional plots (*A Contract with God, Watchmen, V for Vendetta, Maus*, among others).

Within this universe, the publication of autobiographical comics gained momentum at the turn of the 21st century. Regarding the importance of the materiality chosen by the author to reveal her perception and visualization of her own life journey, we highlight, according to Vergueiro, that:

[...] graphic novels have made it possible to break the barrier between industrialized and alternative comics. They created conditions for a differentiated market, where artistic quality, psychological depth, design boldness, and thematic complexity have come to be better valued. Through them, comics have established themselves as the 9th Art or as Sequential Art" (Vergueiro, 2011, p. 9).

In *Embroideries*, Satrapi recovers memories and shares moments of family socialization in which a group of women discusses their dilemmas regarding body, marriage, divorce and family. In crafting the work, the author opts for a style that blends the cartoonish with the woodcut-like, starting from the cover. Adam (1999) emphasizes that all representation and, consequently, all narration involves an interpretation. Past life stories give meaning to the present. Thus, retelling consists of a return to a past that does not repeat the lived experience but re-signifies it. Therefore, the personal experience revealed to another occurs through a tacit agreement between the 'self' authorized by the enunciator subject, "the narrator – who revisits their memories, their past, their life, and makes it into a discourse in which the reader participates and is an accomplice" (Lacerda, 2000, p. 87).

Regarding graphic novels, it is worth considering that, according to García (2012, p. 218), "autobiographical comics present an additional difficulty compared to autobiographical prose, as they establish a visual representation of the narrator in the third person, which appears 'objective' when it is already an artistic invention."

Moreover, autobiographical comics combine text and image in the narrative plot. The author, in the present, makes a series of choices that must be taken by the artist for the story to be well-told. For the artist to succeed in their creation, they must:

[...] choose the moment, decide which moments to include in a comic and which to leave out; choose the frame, choose the distance and angle to view these moments and where to cut them; choose the images, represent the characters, objects, and environments clearly in these frames; choose the words, select words that add valuable information and match well

with the surrounding images; choose the flow, guide readers through and between panels on a page or screen (McCloud, 2005, p. 10).

This relationship of choices between text and image also serves as a way for authors to gain more legitimacy and serves as the foundation for the product to achieve its goal. Thus, the narrative takes shape based on the author's selection of moments they want to highlight or omit and the other elements chosen to compose the narrative's construction.

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative-interpretative analysis, we will consider the identity construction of Marji's grandmother as a central character in these conversational circles. We selected six episodes from the graphic novel to be analyzed, considering the relevance of the events discussed and the interaction between grandmother and granddaughter.

To understand the theme in question, we will use Hall's (1987, 2006) studies on identity construction as a reference. In the realm of cultural studies, Hall discusses the processes of identity by examining the dissolution of the idea of a universal subject, present in the Enlightenment project, and understands that identity is neither universal nor fixed but a process of historical transformations marked by continuities and discontinuities.

Moreover, to explore the resources of comic book language, the works of Acevedo (1990), Cagnin (2014) and Ramos (2010) will be instrumental. The dialogic episodes will be analyzed from a Bakhtinian perspective. According to Bakhtin, language can only be understood from its social nature, as "Countless ideological threads running through all areas of social intercourse register effect in the word" (Bakhtin; Volóshinov, 1973, p. 19). Let us proceed to the analysis itself.

ANALYSIS

MARJI'S GRANDMOTHER: TRADITION AND SUBVERSION

The layout of the book deviates from the standards typically adopted in comics. It spans only 136 black-and-white pages, the drawings are not organized in panels, and the work is not paginated. Instead, events are situated in relation to the plot, suggesting a single line of reasoning that depicts the gathering of a group of women at Marji's grandmother's house.

In the first image (Figure 1), we see that Satrapi begins the narrative by introducing her grandmother in the prologue of the work. The caption reads: "My grandmother called my grandfather Satrapi, never by his first name. She said one must respect one's husband" (Satrapi, 2005).

Figure 1 - Marj introduces her grandmother



Source: Satrapi (2005).

For Acevedo (1990), Cagnin (2014) and Ramos (2010), the caption, footnote, and reminder are resources that allow us to identify the narrator's positioning as omniscient and/or as a character.

The setting is the dining room. After enjoying the meal, Marji's grandfather insists on praising his wife's culinary skills. It's worth noting that Marji's grandmother is the only one facing directly towards the reader, a posture that underscores her importance in the family system, as the matriarch.

The narrative takes place in Tehran, after lunch at Marji's grandmother's house, while the men took a nap and the women washed the dishes. Following this, nine Iranian women – Marji's mother, grandmother, aunt, her friends, and the author herself – gathered to chat around tea (brewed, not boiled), using a traditional *samovar*. The tea preparation is a ritual, as it needs to brew for 45 minutes in the traditional *samovar* pot. Satrapi (2005) explains the *samovar* ritual as a moment of family socialization, highlighting the grandmother's positions that earn Marji's admiration.

Next, we observe the moment when the table is cleared and the *samovar* preparation begins. There's use of off-screen dialogue, where the speech bubble appendix addresses the speaking subject (Marji), who isn't visible in the focused image but participates in the narrated scene. Additionally, an interesting effect is the sense of withdrawal, a movement created by the characters' positioning, all seen in profile. The grandmother, as the matriarch, leads ahead of the others, while Marji, the granddaughter and youngest woman, is implied to be at the end of the line. This arrangement visually represents Marji's lineage.

Figure 2 - The *samovar* ritual



Source: Satrapi (2005).

The tea moment in *Embroideries* thus represents equity among women and mutual support for survival and resistance against the control that institutions seek to exert over their lives. The *samovar* can be defined as the heart of *Embroideries*, as it is during its preparation and enjoyment that women in a confessional tone dialogue about love, sex, virginity, marriage, and betrayal. Thus, the predominantly singular enunciative voice fragments, echoing or being echoed by others, as women plural reclaim the retelling of their life stories, revealing that certain desires and issues characterize women, rather than an opposition between Western and Eastern women. According to Bakhtinian concepts, we consider that:

The word is implicated in literally each and every act or contact between people – in collaboration on the job, in ideological exchanges, in the chance contacts of ordinary life, in political relationships, and so on. Countless ideological threads running through all areas of social intercourse register effect in the word. It stands to reason, then, that the word is the most sensitive *index of social changes*, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularized and fully defined ideological systems (Bakhtin; Volóshinov, 1973, p. 19).

Let's move on to the analysis of the next scenes. In the sequence of images, placed side by side, we have the representation of the grandmother at different stages of life:

Figure 3 - Marji's Grandmother in Youth and Old Age



Source: Satrapi (2005).

In Figure 3, we have the representation of Marjane's grandmother in her youth, highlighted in light tones, with her face slightly tilted towards the reader. Without any background scenery, we can see the grandmother's three husbands. The grandfather, her third and final husband, is depicted differently from the others; he is shown in profile, wearing glasses, and slightly leaning towards the grandmother. In her youth, she is portrayed as a wise and seductive woman who married three times. It can be inferred that during Marjane's divorce (Satrapi, 2007), the fact that her grandmother had gone through this experience and accepted Marji's separation naturally reaffirms the grandmother's influence as an emancipated woman.

Directing our gaze to the image on the right, we see the grandmother already elderly, approximately 80 years old. We observe a light background that contrasts with the adjacent image. We know that visual planes are comic language resources that relate to the position of characters in a panel, a cutout of a scene. In this case, the character's position (panoramic view) in relation to an interior space of the house, the living room, is necessary to show certain stances of the women that cannot be publicly revealed. A cutout of the room and the armchair were enough to construct the setting. A speech balloon is presented with the following statement: "To speak behind one's backs is the ventilator of the heart...". The utterance by the grandmother allows us to assert that:

The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychophysiological act of its implementation, but by the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance of utterances. Thus, verbal interaction is the basic reality of language (Bakhtin; Volóshinov, 1973, p. 94).

Continuing the analysis, we reaffirm that one of the functions of the speech balloon is to depict the dialogues between characters (Acevedo, 1990; Cagnin, 2014; Ramos, 2010). The use of this balloon shows that it is not a thought kept to the character alone, as the family matriarch verbalizes the emotions and feelings of the other women in the group, including Marjane. The grandmother is a central figure in the

narrative as she unites, interlaces and initiates interactions among the subjects for others to follow. This interaction between subjects also implies another relationship: the relationship of subjects with society.

[...] any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist – or, on the contrary, by the “light” of alien words that have already been spoken about it. [...] The living utterance, having taking meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276).

The grandmother embodies irreverence, boldness, and liveliness, serving as an example of both tradition and modernity. For instance, she uses opium even at an advanced age. “The doctor prescribed it to relieve the pain” (Satrapi, 2005), Marji’s grandmother would justify. The images below highlight a before and after that points to the fragmentation in the grandmother’s identity construction.

Figure 4 - Marji’s Grandmother and the Opium



Source: Satrapi (2005).

Marji’s grandmother, married three times and divorced twice, uses tea that symbolically shows us her fragmented identity and likely that of many others in similar situations:

- a) Indignant about her position as a wife (without opium), she uses linguistic expressions like “crap,” “shit,” and coarse phrases like “I’m fed up with this life.” The non-linguistic onomatopoeia “PFFF” reinforces feelings of disdain, disinterest and fatigue with the situation. “Words alone have been telling stories for millennia. And they did well without images... But in comics, the two things must work together seamlessly, so readers hardly notice when they are switching from one to the other” (McCloud, 2008, p. 31);
- b) A model woman under the macho perspective of society, being gentle, polite, and obedient to religious and cultural customs (after using opium).

The temporal marker, established in the comics between before and after, contributes to the visibility of the shift between liberal and conservative positions, essential in constructing Iranian female identities. To confirm this assertion, we exemplify with the final scenes of the work, when Marji's grandfather leaves the room and tries to join the conversation, but the grandmother restricts the male presence, expelling him from the room to preserve the intimacy of those present. Chute (2010) reinforces the private sphere's limitation in *Embroideries*, as its narrative reveals dialogues that occur within Marji's grandmother's living room.

Figure 5 - The Male Intrusion



Source: Satrapi (2005).

The verbal text, combined with the panoramic view, is essential to show the male intrusion that occurs in both the physical and discursive space. Marji's grandfather, from a very limited male perspective, finds the use of the word "horse" in a conversation among women strange. This sense of strangeness arises from socially crystallized beliefs that associate the word "horse" and activities like "horseback riding" exclusively with men. According to Orlandi (2015, p. 24): "There is no hidden truth behind the text. There are messages of interpretation that constitute it and that the analyst, with their device, must be able to understand."

Figure 6 - Marji's Grandmother Defines the Female Space



Source: Satrapi (2005)

The space defined by the walls serves as a clandestine private area for the exchange of experiences, resistances and lessons that transcend the impositions of the veil. This space, which extends beyond the physical, is fertile ground for these women to assert themselves as active subjects of their own stories. The work begins and ends with the speeches and actions of the grandmother, portrayed as a confident woman who navigates between the traditional and the contemporary.

CONCLUSION

The presence of women as professionals within comic book publishing is a recent phenomenon that has been steadily gaining ground. Female artists are claiming spaces in environments that structurally privilege men and, through the creation of their own characters, they seek to freely address their own identities.

In her work *Embroideries*, Satrapi employed irony and sarcasm to discuss serious matters. Thus, in these humorous pages, the cartoonist recounts personal episodes that touch on themes such as marriage and divorce. The gathering of female friends, mother, aunt and grandmother facilitates the exchange and addition of knowledge. Often, the men depicted are scammers and unfaithful, but their tragicomic stories hold value precisely because they are told from a feminine perspective. In *Embroideries*, there is no diversity of settings: the grandmother's living room is the stage for the conversations "to vent the heart." The matriarch, with the experience of three marriages and two divorces, is also a counselor and a point of reference for Marjane and the other women in the group.

We briefly analyze the identity construction of Marji's grandmother, who navigates between the traditional and the subversive. The analyzed episodes allow reflection on the social influences and positions that, when shared, tend to influence and advance the current generation.

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