Marji in Marjane Satrapi*'s* Persepolis: An Un-childlike Child and the Interpretative Fictionalizing by the Child

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Abstract: A work of fiction by adults, which deals with a child, mainly portrays the child as a secondary subject. The writer always owns the primary subject as well as the agency on behalf of a child. These fictional worlds of children are created with a strategy of continuous memorizing and retrospective idealizing. As the adult world is full of adversities, contradictions, anxieties, and treachery, adult writers find the fantastically dreamy, pure, innocent, and relaxed world realizable, imaginatively, in children's portrayals. Children in such works are ideally placed. Even when they are supposed to face issues they come out or are made to come out successfully on the basis of their given virtues such as innocence, adventurism, and imagination. Certain qualities with which the children protagonists in such works are endowed with are ideal universals. As the child in such fiction is a tool to complete the adult fancy about past and future, we hardly find childhood questioning or confronting us. This idealistic fictionalization or interpretation of a child is however problematized at multiple levels in Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis*.

Instead of a child so objective, distant, and divested of any independent childhood ideology, Marji, the child protagonist, is not only active and imaginative but interpretative of the historical past and present andre-inscribes herself on those sites wherefrom she was forced to leave. Instead of preferring to portray her as a paternalised, super-prescripted, and manoeuvred child Satrapi portrays her to be experimental, skeptical, and oriented towards the undiscovered-self. Satrapi's portrayal of Marji is problematized by her inevitable autobiographical desire to re-inscribe her own body by creating the textual space replacing the Iranian space where she was removed from.

Keywords: children's fiction, Persepolis, manoeuvred portrayal, experimental portrayal

The manner of child's imagining, dreaming, fantasizing, fictionalizing and narrating is different from the adults. Alice in Alice in Wonderland best exemplifies child's desire for fiction and the process of fictionalizing the real. But both are problematized in Persepolis as she is positioned to fiction with the triple force of "witnessing" the violence and trauma, the burden of "not forgetting" her family history, and her "re-drawing" her own body as a child. *Persepolis* historicizes all— "witnessing," "not forgetting," and "re-drawing"— in child's narrative. Her fictionalizing takes place in her dreams of desiring to be a prophet; to shouting at God for his failure to protect her uncle Anoosh. The heard account of Ahmadi's torture makes her imagine and draw a neat and symmetrical image of Ahmadi's tortured and severed body into pieces

unlike a real horrible image. Her witnessing the bombing, listening the political horrors, wishing for cigarette is mingled together to create a past-present-personal-political spectrum of illustration.

Marji's narrative is deliberately fraught with the disjunctures created due to horror, trauma and terror to differ it from the normalized child-like fictionalizing. This paper proposes to examine some of these issues in the graphic novel Persepolis. (494 words)

The child in adults-written fiction for children appears to be the subject of these works, but only initially. Despite the attempts by the adult writer to give the child the space, agency, and language, the child is subsumed in the larger framework by and for adults, and the child protagonistis reduced to becoming a mere vehicle for carrying out the task of his/her composer. These nuanced patterns of child behaviour of the fictional children characters/protagonists are 'normalised' in the sense that they are tamed fictionally to fulfill their role which the writer wishes to assign them or carry through them. Un-contained, un-directional (not directionless), and un-oriented childhood often gets contained, directed and oriented in adult fictional narratives and this results in fictional closure of childhood, and this reduction is not truly mimetic of real life. The other major narrative strategy is alienating them from the adult "us". Jack Zipes, reviewing Elke Liebs's book says, "In other words, the child has become an *alien* figure and, as part of the unknown, children are threatening and must be controlled, cast away, or punished without guilt feelings on our part." (Zipes 502) In consonance with this are portrayals and images of children in nineteenth century English literature influenced by catechist literature for children. Wordsworth and Blake's opposition to such conception of childhood and their portrayals is well known. Allan Richardson comments on Wordsworth's protest —

> Wordsworth protests against the ideological construction of childhood by envisioning an ideology-proof, organic sensibility; a move which, while it attests to his profound dissatisfaction with contemporary educational methods (expressed at greater length in Book Five of The Prelude), tends to leave the child unsocialized and frozen in a state of eternal innocence (one reason why Wordsworthian children of nature like Lucy Gary or the Boy of Winander must die so early). (861)

Another difficulty we encounter is the stereotype - a "common childhood" with common traits. Heather Montgomery in her seminal work An Introduction to Childhood: Anthropological Perspectives on Children's Lives denies such uniform and blanket view that "child's progress to adulthood being a replication of the primitive savage's journey to becoming civilized." (Roberts 130)

Creating children's world in fiction is another challenge for the adult writer. It will definitely be a memorized or retro-imaginedworld, often coloured by the prescriptive wish for the children in future. Memorizing is a continuousensemble and it is difficult to recover the memories which are unaffected by the present adult burden of memorizing. Adult memorizing has directions, intensities, recurrences, and functions. The unbroken continuity with the past and future complicates what is memorized.Adult writers have difficulty negotiating with this phenomenon. Another dimension that intervenes the portrayal is incorporation of adversities, hardships, risks, and dangers involved in adults' life and discourse. It is virtually impossible to find any serious discourse on human life without the pain and anxiety that marks a large part of adult life. Adults' concerns, discourses, and priorities are, and need to be, different from the children's concerns, their articulations, and the resolutions of their concerns. These concerns too vary and are in constant flux as they grow and are exposed to everything that is new to them. For

adults, things are settled, so to speak, and there is little to be learnt from the common stock of knowledge and beliefs. In being turned into a subject of the state, the adult has been fully shaped to function as a `normal` 'sane' human, and there is no scope for further learning.Herein lies the challenge for those writing children's fiction: Do they take one of the limbs of the established binaries, which appear easy and pregiven? Or do they challenge these binaries in an effort to move beyond them? A writer could put the child in a dream-like situation where he/she has dream-like fantastic qualities and perform fantastic things and win battles which the author did not win for himself/herself. By doing so the writer may satisfy his/her own sense of unexplored corner or domain of childhood as well as afford pleasure of that domain to the reader; he/she may be advising the child reader to explore the domain and fulfill the childhood in ways different from the author's own early life. This vicarious fulfilling of the unfulfilled desires is one of the shaping influences in children's writings. The second way would be to subject the child to such horrified, magnified, isolated and intensified adverse situations so as to build expectations of heroism from him/her. The child's battle would obviously bring up the necessary heroism quotient in the narrative. Such a portrayal of child would be fantastic feast for the readers both the adults as well as the children. This would be an ideal portrayal as it is an ideal predicament any individual would desire. The child protagonist deserves the accolade for being a child and facing the adult odds fiercely. But then it is forcing the adulthood onto the child by exorcising his or her childhood and changing the nature of childhood adventures. Even while portraying the individual children characters in terms of their behavioural aspects the description would lead to the inevitability of their being virtuous, innocent, and inadvertently adventurous as opposed to the unscrupulousness, unresponsiveness, and passivity of the adults. This binarism is convenient for affording some pleasure to the readers. If the two ways of fictionalizing children are taken for

granted then the tacit acceptance of the adult order by the child or objection to it is still designed and controlled by adults. We need to understand the impossibility of escaping the adult subjecthood, or the willingness to unlearn adult knowledge, in order to regain the child subjectivity. Even if it were to be achieved, it would still be a regained, secondary subject and not the unmediated state that is desired by the progressive author. The basic question, therefore, remains unanswered— how a child subject, a physio-psychological state that is independent of adult burden of subjectivity, could be achieved in fiction.

Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel Persepolis is an earnest attempt at recovering and maintaining the child and childhood. The child Marjane wants to imitate adults, a natural wish by any child. She puts this dream into effect on her own by smoking a cigarette, wearing a denim jacket, etc., as against the urge deployed in and through the fictionalized child to remain a child to maintain the blissful phase. Her protesting against her Principal is a reflection of her parents' legacy of protesting. Marji's idea of religion and the god is something to reflect upon. She admits that "Deep down I was very religious. But as a family we were very modern and avant-garde. I was born with a religion."(Satrapi 6-7) The five panels in which she limns her inclination towards religion needspecial mention. In the first panel she shows the split in her family at the background. In the second, her conditioning by birth. But after that, the successive panels show her child-like but individual, firm and reasoned desire to become a prophet. Her maintenance of a holy book and codification of laws for humanity is an imitation of the adult God's scripture and the practice of having disciples. It is less a spiritual submission than the child imitation of adults' actions, including religion. She imitates the curing power of the God. She wants to be a prophet because she wants her maid to eat at a table with others, she wants that no old person should suffer as well as to celebrate the "traditional zarathustrian holidays" (6-7). However, the

conditioning that god cannot be challenged, whatever the gravity of one's situation, is yet to dawn on her. She shouts at Him when she is convinced that he has failed to rescue her Anoosh Uncle from the fearful death. God's temporal inability is unbelievable and results in His shocking exit.Rather thanconvincing herselfthat God works in mysterious ways, she reacts angrily to His inability:

Marji: Everything will be alright …

God: Marji, what seems to be the problem?

Marji: Shut up, You! Get out of my life!!! I never want to see you again! Get out! (70)

Panels showing the uneasy talk between her and the prophet trace the abrupt end of their friendship and the beginning of her isolation.

Her reaction to the forced war, "[T]he second invasion in 1400 years! My blood was boiling. I was ready to defend my country against these Arabs who kept attacking us. I wanted to fight," is not a nationalistic heroic sentiment but resentment against a forced war (79). For children the discourse of martyrdom is incomprehensible. Later at school,when their teacher asks them to write a report on war, her friend Paradise too reveals this lack of comprehension clearly rather than being consumed by the heroic rhetoric about war. Paradise articulates her inability to cope with the loss of her father to the war, "I wish he were alive and in jail rather than dead and a hero" (86).

Marji's initiation into adulthood is fraught with difficulties. She resists being groomed into a "duty-bound" good citizen or an "obedient child" who should be lightening the burden of her parents in difficult times. Her defiance of her mother's authority, her smoking episodes, are a parallel, if private, rebellion. Her stubbornness, which would trouble not only her but her parents, is "essential" for her in future. Her mother's misgivings about her character — "sometimes it

scares me how blunt she is," is seen as a sign of hope: "It'll help her later on. You'll see"(119). Marji rejects the clichéd parental views in favour of her own voice and stance.

The section "Kim Wilde" reverses the child-parent equation. As soon as the borders of Iran are reopened her parents rush for the passport to grab an opportunity to travel abroad at least to Turkey to spend some time together away from Iran. This visit to Turkey, instead of Europe, is ridiculed by Marji, much as the way an adult would ridicule a child's rushing for whatever is available. Her demand list includes "denim jacket, chocolates, two posters— of Kim Wilde and Irom Maiden"; the last of it is ridiculed by her mother but supported by her father. While in Turkey her parents buy the posters, but they find it difficult to see the posters through the customs in Iran. Her mother conceives a childish plan. She tears his overcoat open from inside and hides the two posters. They successfully manage to dupe the customs. The child in the parents and the daughter is quite alive and reciprocal. When Marji wears the denim jacket with a Michael Jackson button and goes outside to buy tapes of Kim Wilde and Camel, she is spotted by the two guardians of revolution. Their job is "to arrest women who were improperly veiled" and "to put them back on the straight and narrow by explaining the duties of Muslim women." Marji is really in trouble. However, her cleverly managed feigned ignorance rescues her from the clutches of the guardians. The 'kidding' of Marji and her parents is a comic interlude in an otherwise grim reality of everyday. The child in *Persepolis* is a grim necessity for survival, not something that operates naturally. The instances of their kiddish behavior are tragic and ironic responses to the authoritative control of the personal domains of life. While the child in Marji's parents help them dupe the vigilant customs, the child in Marji helps her claim innocence, distinguished from the adults', in the eyes of the guardians. This kiddishness is further heightened through her rebelliousness.There are two instances: her slapping the Principal of her

school, and her counter-narratives on the existence and the fate of political prisoners at the new school. The two instances evokea mixed response from her parents. The two instances are woven into a strand to show a natural pattern of growing.

Marji's spirit remains unperturbed in a society that is coercive and totalitarian. She enjoys the unperturbed childhood agency from the beginning, in an ivory-tower world of her own making. She lives up her childhood, dreaming, imitating, imagining, reacting, rationalizing, or philosophizing. The adult Marjane's (the author's) perspective is carefully prevented from intruding upon the child Marji's voice or point of view. She gives her parents' teachings due consideration, without, however becoming a model submissive child, one who allows the difficult circumstances to curb her autonomy. The writer relieves little Marji of the burden of choice: carrying the legacy of her parents forward or submitting to the Islamic law of the State. The freedom which is allowed to her helps her discover the life as she best as she can. It helps the child Marji in two ways— she is free from familial, cultural, and political external agencies of control; she is also free from any futuristic burden. By not making Marji an ideal child hero, the child Marji is also divested off the author's burden.

Children have a desire to fiction and display varied patterns in fictionalizing. This desire however is problematized by his/her socio-cultural, political or historical positioning. Alice's desire to fictionalize the real characters in her dream is narrativised byLewis Carroll. They are comic deviations of people, personalities, and their eccentricities according to the approvals or disapprovals they met with a child. However, her deviations are so subtle and complex and reflect adult writer's finesse that makes those descriptions distanced from the real child's accounts. It has two distinct levels — one that evokes pleasure that comes from the experience of a fantasy world, meant for the child reader, and a critical layer meant for the adult reader. The

child Alice, while fictionalizing, can neither cross the cultural or political boundaries, nor disown or leave the adult institutions or beliefs. Alice's fictionalizing is given a dream trope to make her return to the mainstream possible, natural, and unavoidable. The differences between Alice's and Marji's fictionalizing are quite evident.Carroll is a male Victorian writer, imagining a Victorian girl-child, keeping the Victorian reader in mind. Children's fiction is often characterized by this dual stance.

A careful examination of Marji's fictionalizing would reveal an interesting pattern. Marji fictionalizes God and his role according to her belief that she would get all the answers for her doubts and questions from him. Her obsessive engagements result in her dreaming herself as the next prophet. Her dream is shattered when she realizes his inability to protect her Uncle, Anoosh. She shouts mercilessly at the god and asks him to get lost from her mind, which she has allowed him to occupy. His role of a "giver" of higher values is literally interpreted as a giver of desirable things and people.

Her dreaming is always overshadowed and penetrated by recurring accounts of mass violence, bombings, secret killings, political executions, physical tortures, forced migrations, etc. Constant exposures to violent acts end her child-like dreaming unnaturally and abruptly. She dreams of prophets but not of fairies, imagines the children blown to smithereens, and fictionalizes the severed body of Ahmadi. Even her short trip to Europe (77), preceded and succeeded by lethal attack, violence and invasion, is too small to divert her to enjoy the joy of Italy and Spain. Just the three words, "… it was wonderful" at the end of the panel describe her inability to be charmed by the exotic joy of Italy and Spain.

Her fictionalizing is influenced by her reading. A panel on page twelvevirtually shows the taller columns of books piled surrounding her (Satrapi 12). They are taller than her

perceptions. They are about Fidel Castro, children of Palestine, young Vietnamese, and about the revolutionaries in her country. She mentions her favorite comic book on "DialecticalMaterialism". She caricatures thedialogue between Marx and Descartes and ends up with Marx hitting Descartes with a stone, and the speechless staring of Marx and God (Satrapi 13). She sees herself as a future Che Guevara or Fidel Castro. The revolutionary discourse at her home and in the books she reads penetrates her fictionalizing unconsciously, unknowingly. Her fictional belief that the king is chosen by God is complicated by herfather's detailed account of the historical reality of the king. Her unwillingness results in framing those accounts in strictly serious panels rounded by her hope that, "Maybe, God helped themnevertheless." After Shah's departure the struggle for the adults is over temporarily, however the stories of struggle linger with the children. They playmock demonstrations, and executions. On Marji's initiation they play one Ramin's execution. Heridea is "to put nails between their fingers likeAmerican brass knuckles andto attack Ramin," who in their opinion was responsible for "a million" murders. (45)

In Chute's view:

> Persepolis is about the ethical verbal and visual 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, debunking those that are incomplete and those that do the work of elision. (Chute 94)

Charmed by the revelation that her grandfather was a prince, she proudly dreams him as a prince riding an elephant under the sun (Satrapi 22)**.**Her imaginative fictionalization however is superseded by the fact that it is right time for her to know her maternal lineage. Her fantasizing of the grandpa prince is however bordered by the accounts given by her parents about him,

hiseducation, his political orientations and his political fate. After Shah's departure almost 3,000 political prisoners are released. Two of them were Siamak Jari and Mohsen Shakiba. When they are released, Marji's family gets an opportunity to see and know them from very close quarters. They give an account of the systematic torture under Shah's regime. The detailed account of horrific torture and pain inflicted on human bodies is visualized by Marji in "a panel, large and unbordered— its unboundedness evoking both the uncontainability of trauma…" (Chute 101).She fictionalizes Ahmadi's body that was flogged, nailed, and burned with hot iron(Satrapi 51). She wonders the torturous use an iron can be put to. The image of systematically cut body of Ahmadi into symmetrical pieces makes the difference between the real brutal horror in seeing a disfigured body and one imagined by a childlike Marji (Chute 101).

Marji's two meetings with her uncle Anoosh are quite significant in this section. In her first meeting she is concerned about the childhood worry to boast against Laly's stories about her father Siamak and the accounts of his torture. She wants a better story against Laly's. All the stories told by Anoosh are eagerly consumed by her so that she could tell them to her friends. When Anoosh says, "They put me in prison for nine years," she exclaims, "Nine years!" but says to herself, "Better than Laly's father." Anoosh wants her to retain the family memory, "I tell you all this because it's important that you know. Our family memory must not be lost. Even if it's not easy for you, even if you don't understand it all." (60) She exclaims again, "What, the story is finished?" She does not understand the family memory with all its implications. However, he succeeds in making her remember and narrate everything in the form of stories to her friends. Later on, the same stories later on would be converted by her into family history, memory, and legacy. As they are narrated by a child, they are boastful, "There are lots of heroes in my family. My grandpa was in prison, my uncle Anoosh too: for nine years! He was even in the U.S.S.R.

My great uncle Fereydoon proclaimed a democratic state and he was…" Her friend too realizes that it is "too much" (64). The role of "not forgetting" is widened. Both the content and the process are deeply embedded in her. As Chute explains, "Persepolis not only does not forget, but also, more significant, shows us the process of "never forgetting" through the layers of verbal and visual narration: it presents the procedure, in addition to the object, of memory."(Chute 97) Marji's fictionalization is affected by the stories of terror, violence, and brutalities she has heard. Her visualizations about such incidents are evident. Marji visualizes her mother's narration about her father going for taking photographs of the demonstration. She frames him outside the panels of pictures of demonstrations and cruel suppression of it. Although he stands outside the panels he is feared to be arrested or killed during such protests. She visualizes him as being killed but portrays him flowing to heaven with the God (Satrapi 30). Her fictionalization of the successive horrifying massacres in the section "The Party" takes the form of an abacus. She is in fact trying to count the countless victims and systematically perceive the chaotic genocide (40). The unseen horror portrayed in an orderly image is contrasted by the chaotic, exuberant and full-page image of jubilant celebrations after Shah's exit as she has been part of those moments. The differently designed dresses, unveiled women, uncontrolled laughter, and victory signs— all percolate in her visuals as exactly they appear.

Shahab's account of young children being recruited for war just ends with the tossing up of their bodies in an explosion. They are shown with keys hung around their neck. It explains what Shahab narrates,

> They come from the poor areas, you can tell… first they convince them that the afterlife is even better than Disneyland, then they put them in a trance with all their songs… It's nuts! They hypnotize them and just toss them into battle. Absolute carnage. (101)

The keys would be guns in reality, which were handed to them by the military authorities. In contrast to the nameless faceless children who have been turned into weaponized bodies, tossed up in the explosions,is the joyful faces of children tossed up enjoying the party. The two panels as well as their descriptors are in sharp contrast. One is— "The key to paradise was for poor people. Thousands of young kids, promised a better life, exploded on the minefields with their keys around theirnecks," and the other starts with, "meanwhile, I got to go to my first party. Not only did my mom let me go, she also knitted me a sweater full of holes and made me a necklace with chains and nails. Punk rock was in." "Sweater full of holes," and "necklace with chains" link the two scenes in two different ways (102). Chute comments in her essay that, "Persepolis is about imagining and witnessing violence; more than half its chapters— which each commence with a black bar framing a white title drawn in block letters and preceded by a single, shifting icon— contain images of dead bodies and serious, mostly fatal, violence." (Chute 99)However grim and shocking the account of the children soldiers is, she cannot sustain the grim mood for long. She soon forgets it to go for her first party.Adult writer's natural tilting towards maintaining the supremacy of the grimness and horror in the narrative, however, is bracketed by the inability of a child in maintaining grimness for long.

Satrapi's life as child Marji, Marji's fictionalizing to be memorable as a child Marji, and Satrapi as an adult writer redrawing the child Marji according to child Marji's wish are three different things. As Marji tries to re-draw, re-read, and re-construct everything around her— heard, seen, or witnessed, Satrapi too reconstructs Marji in her narrative by interpreting her. Marji's fictionalizations are actually interpretations provided by the child Marji, which were absent in the lived experiences. Chute wonders, "what does it mean for an author to literally appear— in the form of a legible, drawn body on the page— at the site of her inscriptional

effacement?"(93) However these interpretations are by no means intended for ordering or stereotyping the child in an adult fashion. By redrawing Marji she is interpreting the lived and the experiential with the intention to preserve. Adult writer's authorial temptation to assume the role of fictionalization on behalf of a child is carefully resisted by the writer here. In many senses Marji does not "belong" to the authorially conceived image of a child. Even in her fictionalization she is an interpretative imitator, a true mimetic artist, and not just an unidentified reproducer.

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