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Cinema of Exile

*Persepolis: Held Within the Grip of Both Now and Then*

Within the monochromatic frames of *Persepolis* exists an artfully woven story of a life riddled with instability. An autobiographical piece from co-director Marjane Satrapi, the film focuses on the tumultuous reality of coming of age amid the political and social turmoil surrounding the Iranian revolution. The film begins in Marjane's childhood in Tehran, where she witnesses her country grow into an increasingly hostile and oppressive regime. Eventually, her parents grow fearful for her safety and send her away to live in Vienna. But as the film follows her into this foreign country, consciousness of Marjane's home in Tehran rarely leaves her mind, or that of the film. Because of this consciousness, Marjane experiences what Naficy describes as "an ambivalent relationship with [one's] previous and current place and culture" (12). One of the defining characteristics of a person in exile is a relationship with their homeland that follows them as they cross borders into another land (Naficy 14). With this consciousness of what existed before exile comes a feeling of always being caught in between. Whether between the homeland and the new land or the past and the present, the exile is constantly pulled in two directions. *Persepolis* communicates Marjane's keenly felt experience of this through the animated spaces it constructs and the often paradoxical reality it represents.

Marjane's relationship with Vienna is complicated before she ever sets foot in the country. She stands in the airport in Tehran, unsure if or when she will see her parents again. As they say their goodbyes to each other, the general atmosphere in the airport is heavy. People pass

by in the background with downturned expressions and deep-set frowns. The effect of these devastating farewells can be felt all around Marjane and her parents, everything weighing down on them.

The camera contributes to this heavy feeling. Positioned above Marjane, it looks down on her face as tears fall from her eyes, bearing down on her. This camera angle makes her feel small and isolated, and it reminds us of just how young she truly is. She is a child who is losing her parents, her home country, and any sense of familiarity. This farewell is certainly not easy on her parents, either. Despite the poise and reassurance they try to express, the score communicates a pervasive sadness that undermines their strength, looming over them until tears finally fall from their eyes. It is time to leave.

After breaking from their hug, Marjane crosses over to the other side of a windowed wall to have her bag investigated. The camera is positioned behind the airport worker who sifts through her small collection of belongings. This placement causes this open suitcase to obscure Marjane's visual presence, and we cannot see her until the case is shut. Within this suitcase is a physical representation of what she is allowed to bring with her



from her life in Tehran, a childhood fragmented by force. It is a reminder of her relationship with Iran that she will carry with her wherever she goes, what Naficy calls the exile's "primary relationship" (12). These memories will influence every experience she has in Vienna.

Once she has the case back in her hands, she turns and waves to her parents on the other side of the glass before finally heading to her gate. The camera doesn't follow Marjane in this moment, instead lingering on her parents. Now physically separated from their daughter, the weight of it all becomes too much and her mother collapses. Marjane turns around one last time, perhaps to give her parents some reassurance or to find some for herself, but what she finds is the darkened silhouette of her father carrying her unconscious mother away. The space around them dissipates into void as they walk away until they become one with the empty black screen. This is Marjane's last image of her home before parting.

This scene, as a precursor for Marjane's life in Vienna, complicates things. Everyone involved knows that leaving Iran is ultimately for her safety, but the process of leaving her entire life behind is undeniably difficult. This forward motion toward safety doesn't come with ease; it is shown to be all the more difficult through this last exchange. Motion forward is complicated by her turn back, because no matter how badly she may want to return to her parents' side, she has already crossed the threshold. There is now a barrier blocking her access to them, and there is no turning back. This painful departure sets the tone for Marjane's life in Vienna: an arduous attempt to move forward, plagued by the pain of looking back.

Once she arrives in Vienna, Marjane notes in voiceover that Europe did not wait for her in the way she expected. Things seem to go as planned at first and she stays with her mother's friend, but this stay is so short-lived that the film never even shows it. Already, there is a feeling

of rejection. She is instead lodged at a Catholic girls' dorm. The looming presence of the nuns that evoke the images of the oppressive women in Tehran marks her entrance, and the first interaction we see is with her roommate, who doesn't understand a thing Marjane says. The film further emphasizes this feeling of rejection by or alienation from her surroundings, and we quickly get a sense of the instability that comes with this.

After a phone call with her parents, Marjane becomes increasingly disconnected from her environment. The painted backgrounds become smoky and hazy, obscured by heavy clouds of black, shadowy ink, and the sound track becomes sparse, leaving nothing but the sound of dripping water and the faint howling of wind. This world we are shown is not rooted in reality, but instead in Marjane's listless mental state. She misses her parents and wishes to be with them, and these stylized environments come to represent her mind being so caught up in thoughts of Tehran.



This listlessness manifests itself in behavior that eventually gets her kicked out of the dorm, and she begins hopping from one house to another—literally hopping. This montage brings in a noticeable change in the animation style, leaning fully into a storybook-like aesthetic. The music becomes airy and whimsical, Marjane's movements become stiff, and buildings pan across the screen as if each sits upon their own little orb of a planet. This childlike art style again brings to mind Marjane's youth, but it also betrays what it depicts. We see her in this transient state, never landing in one spot long enough to find stability. Thinking about the scene in this way makes her stiff movements worrisome instead of quirky and jovial. And the separated movements of the buildings reinforce a feeling of exile, as if each building is built upon a completely different world. It feels like Marjane is hopping from one realm of exile to another, at once feeling both acceptance and rejection; there is no chance of truly fitting in. The motion also creates the feeling that the earth itself is rolling beneath her feet, that everything is unstable.

The space of the film takes on Marjane's inner turmoil in this sequence. Perhaps the storybook qualities are her attempt at looking on the bright side of the situation, but the pain that underlies it still shines through. This pain and the apparent lightness of the visuals come together in this paradoxical representation of Marjane's transient living arrangements. The image and the subject never feel fully congruent, as if the image itself is pulling at the seams. This is especially concerning when thinking about this constructed space as a reflection of Marjane's mental state. This paradoxical scene comes to embody the equally paradoxical experience of exile. Naficy describes a person in exile as "both and neither," a contradictory existence (13). Marjane is at once accepted and rejected, safe and in pain, an Iranian in Vienna, she is an embodiment of this confusing duality. And because of the scenes that preceded this montage, we know what has

caused this feeling of intense instability: her distance from Iran. Her motion to turn and look back from the scene in the airport is repeated again and again through her turn back toward her memories in Tehran. She is caught between her desire to be with her family and her current geographical placement, and because of the pull from these two locations, her life feels fragmented (Naficy 12).

Marjane's reality as an exile is not simple and it is not painless. *Persepolis* uses the medium of animation to create spaces where these complicated feelings can be explored, whether through the anguish of being separated from her family or the catastrophic effects of having a body in Vienna but a mind in Iran.

Works Cited

Hamid, Naficy. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton University Press, PRINCETON; OXFORD, 2001.