The Family Idyll, Exclusion and Ideology in *Persepolis*

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Introduction

In 'giving voice' to marginalized or under-represented communities, autobiographical films about migration might be considered as challenging or, offering opposition to, anti-migrant discourse. Rarely is attention given to instances where such films (despite, perhaps, the stated intentions of their makers) do precisely the opposite – that is, when they contribute to anti-migrant perspectives by (re)producing exclusionary stereotypes or ideologies. Furthermore, while diasporic cinema has challenged the methodological nationalism of the 'national cinemas' paradigm (Higson, 2000; Ezra and Rowden, 2006), scholarship in this area has tended to ignore how mobility across borders can imaginatively or discursively reinforce (and not necessarily simply challenge) nationalist perspectives, except more broadly in the prelapsarian or nostalgic representations of an idealized homeland. Focusing on the widely celebrated French–Iranian diasporic autobiographical animation *Persepolis* (2007) by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud and adapted from the former's celebrated graphic novels, this chapter examines the film's construction of community identity and how precisely through its appeal for belonging and inclusion of one kind of migrant (namely, secular, middle-class Iranians), the film denies the belonging and inclusion of others.

Persepolis chronicles Satrapi's formative childhood years in Iran against the backdrop of the turmoil of the Iranian revolution and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88), her migration to Vienna for secondary education and her subsequent return to Iran during her teens, concluding with her eventual decision to move to France. The migration and resettlement of Iranians around the globe in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution (1979) and

the Iran–Iraq War was matched by a rise in Iranian films, filmmakers and audiences outside the territorial boundaries of Iran (Naficy, 2008, 2012). For Naficy, these media forms have 'spoken' for displaced Iranians and shaped their experiences, allowing them to navigate and make sense of their migration, reconstruct their past and form new cultural identities (Naficy, 2012, p 384).

Persepolis is arguably the most high profile and celebrated of Iranian diasporic autobiographical films. It won the Jury Prize at Cannes (2007) and was nominated for an Oscar for Best Animated Feature (2008). The film is adapted from the four-volume French graphic novels (Satrapi, 2000–03), published in two volumes in English (Satrapi, 2003–04), to widespread acclaim. It is one of the few films depicting the experience of secular Leftist Iranians in the diaspora. In 'speaking for' Iranian migration (as Naficy claims of Iranian diasporic films), *Persepolis* brings attention to Spivak's distinction (mentioned in the introduction of this book) between representation as *Vertretung* – that is, 'speaking for' or standing for – and *Darstellung* – a re-presentation or portrait.

Published in the context of the war on terror and hostile relations between Iran and the West, Satrapi's graphic novels belonged to a flurry of autobiographical memoirs emerging from Iranian women during this period. Their commercial success, Negar Mottahadeh (2004, p 2) notes, cannot be coincidental. As Whitlock argues, in surfacing 'a long history of fascination, mourning, obsession', Iranian life narratives 'occupy a specific subculture that is shaped by their origins in a turbulent period of Iranian history and culture and by the geopolitical grid of the war on terror that determines their production and reception as valued commodities' (2007, p 16).

Satrapi's decision to adapt the novels using animation over live action was partly motivated by a desire to humanize Iranians and Middle Easterners against negative representations shaped by this context, with Iran's designation by then US president George Bush as one of the countries on the 'axis of evil'. While live action 'would have turned into a story of people living in a distant land who don't look like us', Satrapi claims, the abstraction of animation allows for 'a universal story' (Satrapi, 2007, pp 5–6). This chapter is interested in the meaning of 'us' in the film and its implications for Satrapi's intentions of challenging misrepresentations.

Satrapi's novels have been the focus of energetic academic debate, with broad agreement on their status as a feminist text challenging rigid distinctions between West and East (Malek, 2006), resisting Brown girl rescue narratives (Gilmore and Marshall, 2010) and challenging simplistic representations of the veil (Naghibi and O'Malley, 2005). However, other authors have also questioned the novels' orientalism in relation to the war on terror (Ezzatikarami and Ameri, 2019). While some critics (for example, Hamid, 2007) note the lack of nuance and complexity in the animated

adaptation, the film has not received the level of critical attention afforded the novels.

This chapter seeks to contribute to our understanding of the racialized representations in the film, beyond the contexts of orientalism and the war on terror (albeit acknowledging the relevance of these framings), by focusing instead on two significant yet neglected aspects: the centrality of the family as a trope in the construction of identity and belonging; and the film's position as a French film about the Iranian revolution and its aftermath. As Whitlock argues, it is the work of criticism to 'decipher the imaginative weaving together of "here" and "there"' for there is a tendency in analysis of exilic memoir to efface 'the historically specific conditions of production, dissemination, and reception' (2007, p 162).

My interest lies not in rehearsing existing debates on the film or novels, but rather in a closer reading on hitherto overlooked aspects of the film relevant to the representation of migrants. Focusing on several scenes narrating the revolution and post-revolutionary society, I show how *Persepolis* reproduces French neo-republican views on legitimate statehood or 'good' citizenship within an Iranian domestic setting. Satrapi's family are constructed as French citizens-in-waiting, sharing a commonality to a racialized idea of French national identity defined in contradistinction to an essentialized Muslim or Arab identity, in turn coded as alien or threatening to this 'community of value' (Anderson, 2013). The film's depiction of domestic family scenes in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran, I argue, are equally, if not more, relevant to *Persepolis*' status as a film about migration than the scenes charting her relocation from Iran to Europe. The chapter considers then how the 'I' in the autobiographical *Persepolis*, pluralized to a collective 'us' or 'we', is reliant on the exclusion of a 'them'.

An accented family

One of the pioneering contributions to the study of migrant cinemas is Hamid Naficy's (2001) theory of 'accented cinemas', where the linguistic analogy of the accent is applied to frame stylistic commonalities between exilic and diasporic filmmakers.[1] As Naficy argues, an accent in film functions as both an accent and dialect in linguistics by penetrating at a deep structural level. Exilic and diasporic accented films inflect the components of a classical or dominant cinema language by their displaced cultural origins and traditions. Society's dominant form of cinema, Hollywood, is *the* standardized 'accent'. Much like the official accent of newsreaders on television news, Hollywood's accent is considered 'standard, neutral and value-free' (Naficy, 2001, p 23). What distinguishes the accents in exilic or diasporic films is their displacement and deterritorialization due to their position within the 'interstices' of social formations and cinematic practices. Naficy (2001,

p 4) identifies a range of components that are typical of the accented style, including open and closed forms; epistolary form; nostalgic structures of feeling; interstitial and collective modes of production; and self-inscription of the filmmakers dis/location. Through a linguistic frame of reference, Naficy demonstrates 'the sense of a different cultural *voice* contained in a permanent dialogic relationship with the dominant host culture' (Philips, 2003, p 344).

We can see how *Persepolis* might be 'accented' by its interstitiality between Western, French and Iranian cultural influences. Its hand-drawn black-and-white two-dimensional animation, developed from the original graphic novel illustrations, has clear influences of German expressionism and Italian neo-realism in its rendering of revolution and war, as Satrapi herself has stated (see Satrapi, 2008). Floating jasmine flowers and minarets in the opening credits recall formal aesthetics of both Persian miniature art and the French–Belgian *bande dessinée* (comic strip) tradition to which the graphic novels belong. While motion does not allow for the concentration afforded by the graphic comic panel, the movement, sound, voice-over and temporality enabled in animated film allow for a speed and fluidity in the representation of life events – these features have their limitations (Hamid, 2007, p 62) and, I would add, potential. Satrapi chose animation over live action partly to maintain 'cohesion and consistency' (Satrapi, 2007, p 6) between reality and dream/fantasy and partly to work at a level of abstraction when it came to the setting and location. The playful fluidity between dream and reality aligns with the coming-of-age story structure and the perspective of the child central protagonist, while rendering traumatic events experienced, such as repression and violence during the Iran–Iraq War, accessible (Warren, 2010).

This formal hybridity, however, does not extend more literally and audibly to the film's spoken voices, despite accented cinemas being mostly characterized as 'bilingual, multilingual or multi-accented' (Naficy, 2001, p 24). Unlike the graphic novel, animated film allows for an original language and its accents (their tonality, cadence, inflections and so on) to be *heard* while they are simultaneously translated into another language via subtitles. *Persepolis*, however, adopts the language of the host country (French), with characters voiced by famous French actors, including generations of illustrious French female stars as lead women: Chiara Mastroianni as Marjane; Catherine Deneuve[2] as her mother; and Danielle Darrieux – whose eight-decade career embodies quintessential French female stardom – as Marjane's grandmother. In the English-language version, Mastroianni and Deneuve retain their roles but speak in French-accented English.

Cristina Johnston claims the recounting of an exile story through iconic French women is a deliberately subversive strategy for 'giving voice to a generation of Iranian women' (2015, p 111). But it is difficult not to regard it as an erasure, or domestication of, cultural difference through a liberal humanist universality – an example of 'they are like us' rather than 'we are

like them' (Naghibi and O'Malley, 2005, p 226). Satrapi's background is relevant here. Coming from a middle-class family of political dissidents, she was educated in Le Lycee Razi, a French-language school in Tehran, attended a French Catholic boarding school during her time in Vienna and completed her master's degree in Iran before attending university at Haute école des arts du Rhin in Strasbourg.

From the outset, the melancholic exile story places France as the 'primary point of reference' with Marjane's perspective as a French citizen (Hamid, 2007, p 62). An adult Marjane, reluctantly wearing a hijab (preparing for travel to Iran), sits despondently in Paris' Orly airport unable to bring herself to board the flight. The scene is rendered in colour to represent the present day, yet as Marjane sits smoking, a monochrome energetic younger 'Marji'[3] appears before her, signalling our entry into childhood memories. We track[4] with Marji as she runs to embrace her cousin Nioucha (not wearing the hijab), who is returning to Tehran from a trip to Paris in 1978 – Marji bombards her with questions about her trip, forging an imaginative connection with France as a desirable destination. The film mostly takes place in the monochrome flashback but returns to the present-day airport briefly a further three times, reiterating Marjane's ambivalence to her homeland and ending with her decision not to return.

From the beginning of the flashback, Marjane's immediate family – parents, uncle and aunt, and grandmother – are centralized, pictured as a unit in one frame like a family portrait, as they greet Nioucha. Families feature prominently in diasporic cinema through narratives of separation and reunion or as a site where cultural identities and generational conflicts can be explored (Berghahn, 2013, p 40). A powerful concept in 'domestic genealogies' of race and nationhood (Gilroy, 1993; McClintock, 1995), the family as nation (for example, 'motherland') offers a neat rhetorical device in cinema, a universal reach that can speak to the macro politics of inclusion and exclusion within an intimate frame. However, its cultural heterogeneity means the diasporic family is sometimes perceived as undermining the singular identity imposed by nationalism (Berghahn, 2013, p 44) by resisting its containment into the 'imagined community' of nationhood (Anderson, 1983). To the contrary, *Persepolis*' hybridity, I would suggest, fuses ideas of imagined nationhood in two different countries (France and Iran) that reinforce, rather than challenge, dominant nationalist discourses in each.

To illustrate this point, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept 'chronotope' is useful. For Bakhtin, the chronotope (literally time-space) is a 'unit of analysis' for identifying the interconnectedness of space and time in literature, where 'time thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible' and 'space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history' (1981, p 84). The inextricability of space and time renders the chronotope relevant to cinema and diaspora 'by the temporal component of memory and the

spatial component of dislocation', which are 'constitutive of diaspora consciousness', but also the 'dialectical tensions between two places, the "here" and "there", coalesce with the tensions between the present and the past' (Berghahn, 2013, p 64).[5]

The family is one historical permutation of the *idyll* chronotope, defined by Bakhtin as a folkloric experience of time and space, 'an organic fastening–down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory' (1981, p 225). Life and events are 'inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and one's children and their children will live' (Bakhtin, 1981, p 225). As a limited 'little world', the idyll is 'sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with other places, with the rest of the world', but where 'a sequence of generations is localized that is potentially without limit' (Bakhtin, 1981, p 225). Emerging in the provisional and classic family novel, against the backdrop of capitalist modernity, the idyll was 'radically reworked' on the 'soil of the bourgeois family' (Bakhtin, 1981, p 231).

One of the defining characteristics of the family idyll relevant to *Persepolis* is the temporary mobility of its characters into the confusing and hostile 'cold, hard alien world' outside, before returning to the 'warm little corners of human feeling' (Bakhtin, 1981, p 233) and stability of the family home. Repeatedly, Marjane's experiences outside the family home are mired in danger, fear, failure, rejection and disappointment, and she continually returns for security, continuity, stability, education and understanding, most evident in Marjane's isolated experience as a migrant adolescent in Vienna, which ultimately ends in disappointment and return home. For Berghahn, the circularity and the cyclicity of the family idyll is threatened by the unpredictability of migration, or the linearity of the 'road chronotope', which is 'characterised by progress, random encounters with strangers and unexpected occurrences' and the reason why families rarely feature in the road movie genre (2013, p 65). My interest lies in how the family idyll (and threat of its destruction) structures Marji's experience of revolution and its aftermath, the viewer's access to knowledge and understanding of these events, and how this comes to define the Satrapi family's identity against others.

Early in the film, Marji's blissful childhood is disrupted by the revolutionary turmoil under the Shah's dictatorship, which permeates her family home through Marji's encounters with family or friends. Marji processes challenging and traumatic events in the adult world through a combination of rebellion, curiosity and childhood play. The witnessing of everyday violence is an important theme here, carried successfully from the novels, with a 'radical disjuncture' between the minimalist animation and the 'complicated traumatic events they depict: harassment, torture, execution, bombings, mass murder' (Chute, 2008, p 99). After hearing the account of a family

friend, Siamak, who experienced torture in prison, Marji and her friends seek vengeance against a classmate, believing his father worked for the Shah's secret police. While represented comically, the fervour of the pursuit points to how 'impressionable young minds … can easily be converted to the belief systems of the adults around them' (Warren, 2010, p 122). In an earlier scene, a cosy domestic encounter between Marji and her grandmother (as Marji's mother cooks) is interrupted by shouts of 'Down with the Shah', leading the three of them to witness the protests through the window. Marji's father runs up the stairs to report enthusiastically that the Shah has fallen. Domestic spaces (living room, kitchen, bedroom), thresholds (windows, doors, stairs) and activities (watching television, cooking) become transitional conduits to Marji's witnessing and understanding political developments outside her childhood world. For Palmer (2011), the significance of the relationship between Marjane and her mother and grandmother and the reproductive space in particularizing history challenges the silencing of women and connects motherhood politically to a cultural and national narrative.

Marji's childhood innocence relies on her family members' explanations of these events and their history. It is useful to distinguish here between Marjane Satrapi as the underlying narrator of narrative events[6] and the textual presence of Marjane in the film as the two character narrators – an adult reflecting on her past (mostly in voice-over) and a child/teenager whose experiences are being narrated and depicted in graphic form. The viewer's encounter with historical events is shaped through this hierarchy of knowledge: the child's view – how Marji sees, experiences, interprets and responds to revolution and war – and the adult Marjane, addressing us directly, lending explanation to unfolding events from a reflective distance. As adults who explain historical events to Marji (but who are not always aware precisely how they will unfold), Marjane's family members adopt a pedagogical authority, both with Marji and with an audience presumed to be unfamiliar with the political history.

When, for example, Marji expresses the view of the Shah's divine right to rule ('He was chosen by God'), her father explains 'what really happened' by offering her a quick and humorous history of Mohammad Reza Shah's father, Reza Shah, his overthrow of the Qajar dynasty and the establishment of a dictatorship with the help of the British. This account is represented as a marionette-style puppet show, drawing on French and Persian traditions of puppetry and oral storytelling. Visually, the hand-drawn animation constructs a fluidity between childhood fantasy and historical reality, as Marji takes pride in learning of her grandfather, a Qajar prince turned communist, and his imprisonment by Reza Shah. One of Marji's closest connections is with her revolutionary Uncle Anouche, who recalls, in the form of a bedtime story, his Uncle Fereydoun's involvement in declaring independence of Azerbaijan province, his subsequent execution and Anouche's own persecution and

exile to Russia before returning to Iran. Anouche's later imprisonment and execution under the Islamic republic has a profound impact on Marji's emotional and intellectual development.

While the idyll is determined by an intrinsic *disconnection* from the outside world, in placing generations of Satrapi family members 'who had lived in the same place, under the same conditions, and who had seen the same things' (Bakhtin, 1981, p 225) at the centre of unfolding political events in a histography of Iran, external events are accommodated into the idyll's structuring logic. The Satrapis are defined as a secular family with a set of democratic ideals and dissident tradition at the centre of Iranian history. However, this fusion of the familial with the historical is highly selective through its idyllic structure. There is little indication of the class antagonism driving the Iranian revolution, particularly the pivotal role of oil workers' strikes and the *shohras* (workers councils), which for a Leftist or communist dissident family would be of significant interest. *Persepolis* draws on the family idyll's 'concealed logic of abandonment' and 'self-justifying narrowing of the human community', which, as Dave (2006, p 51) argues,[7] makes it a serviceable form in capitalist societies as it denies class while simultaneously making claims on universal human experience.

Persepolis and dislocative nationalism

Persepolis takes its title from the name of the ceremonial capital of the Persian Empire, a key referent in Aryanist discourses within Iranian nationalism. In her study of Satrapi's graphic novels, Hamidi (2022) shows how Satrapi approaches the Aryanist myth critically. For example, her father's explanation of Reza Shah Pahlavi's rise challenges Marji's uncritical adoption of the Pahlavis' myth-making – also present in the film and mentioned earlier. However, Satrapi still adopts a version of the Aryanist perspective, albeit a liberal human rights counter-narrative (Hamidi, 2022, p 243). The graphic novels' introduction is particularly revealing, celebrating the purity of Persian culture, its Aryan roots and how it 'withstood' invasions from the outside and changed the invaders who were assimilated by its, presumably irresistible, allure.[8]

Zia-Ebrahimi (2016) identifies a dominant ideological current in Iranian nationalism that he has coined 'dislocative nationalism'. This views Iran as an Aryan nation adrift from the 'rest of its fellow Aryans (read: Europeans)' and characterized by a longing for a pre-Islamic grandeur and glory, inspired by pre-Islamic forms and symbols (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p 5). Through an imaginative operation, Iran is dislodged 'from its empirical reality as a majority-Muslim society situated—broadly—in the "East"' (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p 5). Dislocative nationalism has a set of core ideas: it views Iran as 'a primordial nation that has been in uninterrupted existence for 2,500 years'

and considers its 'essence and glory is to be found in its pre-Islamic golden age' (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, pp 2–3). As a body of thought and set of discursive practices, it is a modern ideology, a popular form of nationalism, rooted in Iran's troubled encounter with Europe and characterized by the view that Iran's history after the arrival of Islam was one of 'a long process of degeneration' and 'ethnicized into an "Arab invasion"' (Zia-Ebrahami, 2016, pp 1–2).

The significance of this emerges in the film's depiction of the post-revolutionary government's arrival. Over black, a radio voice announces the election of an Islamic republic in a referendum by popular vote. Fading in and out, each family member appears as an individual vignette against black, reflecting on the turn of events. The vignettes visually imply the spotlight of being under interrogation, while indicating the fragmentation of the formerly cohesive family unit or the destruction of the idyll. Uncle Anouche demonstrates naive hope ('Every revolution goes through a period of transition'), while others speak of friends leaving or fears of political repression. Attempting to reflect the arrival of a new oppressive government and the difficult choices many Iranians were confronting, the scene might be defined in narrational terms as a 'surprise-shock' (Buckland, 2021, p 45), where information that may help explain a narrative event is withheld from the viewer. Unlike the historical background given for the Pahlavi dynasty, the imperial powers and Satrapi's radical heritage, there are no explanations, historical or otherwise, for the emergence of the Islamic republic. Put simply, it arrives from nowhere. Unlike the widely available documentaries and news footage on the Iranian revolution, the revolutionary scenes give little indication of the mass participation of Muslims or the presence of Islam as a political force in the revolutionary upheaval. A repressive Islamic authoritarianism materializes unexpectedly from without, threatening the unity and temporal continuity of the family's world, which until now has accommodated political and historical events into its cyclical and circular logic. Like the arrival of Islam in Iran in dislocative nationalist discourse, the Islamic republic appears as an imposition from the outside, not one emerging from the political dynamics of the revolution or the complexities of Iran as a Muslim and Middle Eastern country.

Dislocative nationalism's views of Iranians' similitude with European subjects and their country's geographical dislocation by historical accident become particularly significant to the film's representations of the aftermath of the revolution and the early post-revolutionary period. The scenes chart the Satrapi family's experience of early 1980s Iran following the consolidation of the Islamic revolution and Khomeini's grip on power.[9] Rebellion against the new Islamic government and the family's desire for freedom is explored, not through any explicit political activity but through their attempts to maintain a secular cultural identity through everyday activities, either putting

them into direct conflict with new repressive state restrictions or leading them to avoid punishment by performing these activities secretly. Most evident is the imposition of the mandatory hijab and restrictions on women, and Marjane's and her mother's experiences in navigating, challenging or being subjugated by these.

Marjane's opposition to restrictions on her freedom is fused with her adolescence and growing rebelliousness. She openly ridicules, with her schoolfriends, state propaganda or the ideology of martyrdom during the Iran–Iraq War. Much like the graphic novels, the monochromatic aesthetic underlines a critique of the rigidity and control of the post-revolutionary society – the stark black and white intensifying the cultural uniformity of young women wearing the chador. But as has been frequently noted, Marjane's rebellion develops through her embracing of Western pop culture forms. In one well-known scene, she is confronted by two Islamic women officials wearing chador, who take issue with her trainers ('punk shoes') and her jacket with a Michael Jackson badge ('that symbol of Western decadence'). Arguably, Marjane's adoption of Western culture is, as Typhaine Leservot argues, a strategy 'for resisting the dominant paradigm of Islamic rule', a counter-discourse to the restrictions placed on Iranians by their government (2011, p 127). However, unlike the graphic novels, where Satrapi is shown to engage with Marx and Descartes, Satrapi's occidentalism in the film is less nuanced. Importantly, for an Iranian Leftist secular family, there are no instances displaying Marjane's or her family's appreciation of Iranian cultural traditions, such as the poetry, cuisine or music, other than the subtle influence of elements in visual form of the animation, musical motifs or the film's title. Nor can we discount the influence on identity of the characters' French voices, mentioned earlier. Presumably this is all part of the intention to make the family appear 'like us', whoever that might be, but inevitably it leaves an impression 'that Marjane is already a French citizen merely awaiting her final reunion with her true Western self and mother country' (Hamid, 2007, p 62).

A reading of the Satrapi family as a temporally and spatially dislocated French family sheds some light on the film's racialized politics. Modern states represent themselves as a 'community of value', defined as a group of people brought together who share 'common ideals and (exemplary) patterns of behaviour expressed through ethnicity, religion, culture, or language' (Anderson, 2013, p 2) – that is, sharing values rather than simply sharing the same legal status. The idea of a community 'facilitates a seamless switch between scales, between the imagined national community and the imagined local community' (Anderson, 2013, p 3), and this localism underlines the significance of everyday practices to the patriotic notion of a national identity. Watching cricket or drinking pints of beer in a pub might be considered distinctive virtues of being English, for example. A community

of value is populated by hard-working, law-abiding 'good citizens', and a key component of this construction of belonging is the importance of protecting core values against outsiders, which translates on a national level to foreigners (or immigrants, migrants), whose outsider-ness is defined by not sharing these 'right' values.

In *Persepolis*, the Satrapi family is depicted as upholding certain values which need protecting from those who do not uphold them or threaten them. The need to maintain them is underlined by the structuring logic of the family idyll and the racial and cultural differences associated with French national identity. For example, about a third of the way into the film, Madame Nasrine, the family's domestic worker, sits unveiled at the kitchen table, with Marji and her mother, with a key in hand, explaining how her son received it at school with the promise it would unlock 'food, women, and they'd live in houses of gold and diamonds' in paradise. The scene follows a horrifying depiction of the martyrdom of young men in the battlefield. Madame Nasrine, worried about her son, questions her religious faith despite having 'worn the veil and obeyed' her whole life. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Marji's father sharing news of neighbours arrested for alcohol consumption. The film then cuts to a cowered Madame Nasrine, who has swiftly donned a hijab. Asked why by Marjane's mother, Madame Nasrine points to Marjane's father: 'That's how I was brought up'. The scene ends with the family around the kitchen table dissolving into a night-time scene with Marji's mother and father patiently talking to Madame Nasrine's son and Madame Nasrine (veiled) looking concerned. In voice-over, Marjane explains: 'Thanks to my parents, Mrs Nasrine's son never went to the front'.

Madame Nasrine's son appears easily convinced by the lure of a sexual encounter with women, and Madame Nasrine clearly lacks knowledge and agency for parenting her son and convincing him otherwise. Her religious conviction is a potential source of her inability to find a solution. Marjane's family, conversely, as rational subjects, not only convince Madame Nasrine's son of his errors but probe Madame Nasrine's devotion to her religious practice and expose its irrationality. Whereas Marjane's family's hierarchy of knowledge has been a key narrational device in the film, here it functions to produce superiority over characters on the margins of the family circle, bringing them into their community but with a clear distinction in status. Through the secure locale of the family idyll, the Satrapi family have a set of secular, liberal values and virtues that resist the irrational and violent character of religious extremism of the outside world. Yet while this may position them as repressed or dissident political subjects in the Islamic republic, it produces them as 'good citizens' of the French republic.

In recent decades, debates about French citizenship have shifted towards questioning the 'authenticity' of Muslims' and migrants' French identity,

resulting in a narrow, nationalist political field (Wolfreys, 2018, p 3). While Islamophobia is a global phenomenon, in France this has dovetailed with a persistent narrative, with roots in France's colonial history that predates 9/11 and the war on terror, focusing on the integration of migrants and their descendants (Wolfreys, 2018, p 2). The paradise key story aligns with the moral panics during the period of *Persepolis'* production about impressionable young Muslim men in danger of religious radicalization and terrorism and the denigration of North African migrants and their decedents who bear a 'licentiousness and misogyny that has traditionally characterized depictions of the savage "other" in the colonial imagination' (Wolfreys, 2018, p 4).

Persepolis was produced in 2007, between the legislation and implementation of hijab bans in 2004 and 2010 in France – that is, at the same point when an intolerant form of nationalist secularism began to be deployed to restrict the practices of Muslims. From the late 1980s, the 'transformative narrative' of French republicanism, associated with the Left, increasingly shifted Right with demands for allegiance to republican values and a distorted version of *laïcité*, a previously open form of secularism, which was weaponized by the political elite as a tool to scrutinize Muslims and migrants (Chabal, 2015). The questioning (or perhaps policing) of Madame Nasrine's veiling in the intimacy of Satrapi's secular idyll and the veiling mandated by a repressive government outside the home becomes highly charged, a direct inversion of the public restrictions and private practices of secularism and veiling taking place in contemporary France.

This inversion is reinforced in scenes which depict a clandestine family party. Marjane's Uncle Taher appears in a basement surrounded with wine-producing equipment and wearing a white laboratory coat and taste-testing his product.

We cut to a close-up of feet stamping on grapes before a wide shot reveals Madame Nasrine wearing her hijab, skirt raised, in a bathtub, stomping the fruit and repeating 'God forgive me. God forgive me', as Marjane explains in voice-over how 'her uncle's cleaning lady' helped crush the grapes. Madame Nasrine is the target of humour, the 'joke' being that despite her religious conviction she is a key part of the labour process in producing wine for family parties. Her activity is both physically demanding and humiliating, whereas Marjane's uncle's labour underscores his cultural 'taste' and scientific expertise. In the privacy of the bathroom, Madame Nasrine would be away from unrelated men and not needing to wear a headscarf, so the purpose is to underline the joke of a Muslim woman sinfully helping to produce wine. Moreover, the crushing of wine is a pastoral image which, for Bakhtin (1981), represents the bond between human beings, life events and the natural world. It is part of the agricultural cycle in rural idyllic life where people consume the products of their labour, including food and drink (Bakhtin, 1981, p 227). Wine cultivation and consumption are central to French

provincial life and symbolic constructions of national identity – a valued part of what it means to be 'French'. Madame Nasrine, of course, is not taking part in the partying and is only responsible for the labour required for the Satrapis to conduct those secret activities. She is thus positioned as socially and culturally inferior, a domestic worker who is the subject of ridicule. If we read the Satrapis as a middle-class French family, Madame Nasrine might represent the low-income Muslim, Arab or 'migrant' (regardless of immigration status) population of domestic workers. Notably, discussions of the film's feminist politics rarely take into account the representation of Madame Nasrine or other Muslim women in the film and the implications these have for the film's resistance to dominant narratives of gender and power. Social class was an important factor in experiences of the Iranian revolution. The mandatory veil restricted freedoms for many women, but it facilitated the participation of religious women from working-class or low-income backgrounds in work, education and public spaces (Poya, 1999; Dad Mohammadi, 2016). *Persepolis* elides these complexities.

If there was any doubt about the film's position on these matters, it is re-emphasized in the next scene, which portrays Marjane's Uncle Taher on a ventilator and in need of heart surgery, making a visual link to the wine equipment in the previous scene. Exasperated by the refusal of the hospital director to send him to England for an urgent operation, Marjane's aunt proclaims: 'That incompetent window-cleaner grew a beard and put a suit on. And now he's the director! My husband's fate now lies in the hands of a window-cleaner!' There seems to be no awareness that the 'great unwashed who mistreat [Marjane Satrapi] and her family' might be as 'motivated by class antagonism as they are by Islamic revolutionary ideology' (Golsorkhi, 2008). The Muslim characters' class status becomes instead a partial explanation for their susceptibility to backward ideas or uncritical adherence to government propaganda. Satrapi and her family are depicted as a victimized secular minority, controlled by people depicted as less educated and, ostensibly, lower in social hierarchy under the previous regime. Therefore, a certain class superiority underlies the family's despair with their predicament. Differences in accent reflect 'social and class origin, religious affiliation, educational level, and political grouping' as well as regional, national or cultural characteristics (Naficy, 2001, p 23). *Persepolis*' accent, in other words, is also determined by Satrapi's middle-class status.

While these scenes may seek to show the plight of a secular family against the cruelty of a new repressive government, they also define Satrapi's family's values through their *contradistinction* to the values of Muslim, poor or working-class characters. Through black-and-white animation, Satrapi claimed to avoid ethnic divisions, but despite these claims to universality, there are clear cultural and racial markers of difference. Marjane and her family are distinguished by their cultural similitude to Western and French

subjects through secular beliefs, cultural consumption, knowledge and tastes. While the monochrome avoids variations in skin tone, Muslim subjects are physically coded and identified as non-White by beards or strictly observed veils or chadors, thereby coding the Satrapis as 'White'. These markers are interlinked with the Muslim characters' intellectual simplicity, religious zealotry, aggressive and oppressive attitudes and irrational worldviews, thereby ensuring 'ideological and religious difference is visually coded as a racial, almost organic division' (Hamid, 2007, p 62). Analogous to its monochromatic aesthetics, *Persepolis* draws equally stark black-and-white dichotomies between good and evil, veiled and unveiled, secular and Muslim, progressive and backward, modern and traditional.

Persepolis has also been noted for its representations of racism during Marjane's time in Europe. In an early Vienna scene, Marjane experiences racism at a boarding house when a nun describes Iranians as 'lacking manners', in reference to Marjane eating out of a pot. Later, when Marjane pretends to pass as French when meeting a guy at a bar, she is exposed as a fraud and mocked by his sister and friends. Marjane is described as backward and uncultured or racialized as non-White through these encounters. While the response ends in her challenging the racists and reclaiming her identity, these scenes need to be seen in the context of the depictions of Muslim characters discussed earlier. Neda Maghbouleh (2020) has shown how Iranian American migrants' racialization is continually shifting between categories of White and non-White, which is relevant to secular Iranian identity formation elsewhere. In navigating contradictory identities and the experience of discrimination and racism, the Aryan myth, romanticization of the Persian Empire and exclusion of Islam from Iranian history and identity has remained an influential narrative of racial superiority over religious and ethnic groups. Despite the success in 'calling out xenophobic attitudes toward her and other Iranians in Europe', *Persepolis* problematically reproduces some of this 'rhetoric of whiteness against non-Persians/Iranians' (Hamidi, 2022, p 254). These racialized representations are not only shaped by and feed into a dislocative nationalism that views Muslims and Arabs as inferior or alien to Persian racial purity, but also, I would argue, engaging in an Islamophobic, anti-migrant discourse driven by narrow constructions of a secularist French national identity.

Satrapi's representation of her experience of racial stigma is therefore, in this context, better defined as a reflection of *misracialization*. Marjane is advised by her grandmother to be proud of her country, but there is little understanding of what this 'highly abstracted ideal' might mean (Hamid, 2007, p 63). In fact, the corrective to the racist narrative of Iranians being uncivilized, as we have seen, is the Satrapis' progressive, modern and cultural (read: French/European) values, which continue to be defined against the uncivilized values of Islam. We can see further evidence of this in the opening

scenes at Orly airport where Marjane fixes her hijab in the mirror (to be able to board the flight to Iran) and the woman beside in the bathroom looks at her with disdain. The suggestion is that Marjane being perceived as Muslim is what puts her into the purview of a racist. Marjane's experience of racism is therefore due to her misassociation with an identity and set of values that the film shows ultimately belong to Muslim or non-White characters. In short, *Persepolis* makes an appeal for the Satrapis' inclusion into France's imagined community as good citizens who are mischaracterized as Muslim or non-White through their country's unfortunate, accidental and incorrect association with Islam. 'We are like you', the film seems to say, 'despite our association with them'.

Conclusion

Alongside the themes of childhood, the representational strategies of animated abstraction, geographical non-specificity and childhood subjectivity, the family operates as a key structuring principle in *Persepolis*' so-called universality. This chapter has sought to problematize its universal claims by considering how the family produces a narrow universal appeal that, combined with ideological constructions of national belonging, is exclusionary. Like the idea that Whiteness is 'beyond ethnicity', the Satrapi family is defined as 'normal' or 'ordinary'. The film supposedly shows, to repeat Satrapi's quote, how Iranians are 'like us', and this, we are told, humanizes Iranians or Middle Easterns. Yet this humanization is predicated on a set of presumptions about what constitutes 'us'. It requires neutralizing the Satrapis' upper-/middle-class status and seeing their Frenchness or Western cultural tastes as value-free or 'unaccented'. A large part of *Persepolis* is concerned with the threat of outside forces to Satrapi's idyll, with the idea of Muslims or the poor wielding power being the most dangerous. Nowhere in *Persepolis* is Islam or a Muslim character represented in positive or nuanced terms, nor is the complexity of religiosity and secularity in contemporary Iran touched on.

Liberal, feminist autobiographical texts have been criticized by scholars for generalizing the experiences of Western, middle-class elites and, through their connections to their co-nationals, constructing 'Islam and Muslims – whether traditionalist or revivalist – by employing recycled Orientalist tropes cast in the insider's voice' (Nash, 2012, p 26). In *Persepolis* these racialized constructions are produced not only from the Western country in which it was produced but by the ideological current of racial purity in Iran.

Persepolis has been described as a film about a liminal subject with an identity crisis who cannot find a home. But the search for belonging is constructed by an idea of cultural similitude to a narrowly defined French or Western community of value, to which Muslims or those 'like them'

do not belong. The idyllic family structure is crucial here, as it operates as a terrain for nationalist ideological perspectives that dislodge Iran from its geographical or historical specificity, its deep and rich Islamic roots, and cast it onto the landscape of French neo-republican secularism, which views Muslim and Arab identities as alien to the national body.

Filmmakers from minority or marginalized backgrounds must constantly negotiate the 'burden of representation', with self-representations or autobiographical work often laden with the responsibility of representing a group identity or taken to be allegorical for the community at large. *Persepolis* reminds us that while the family in migrant cinema may not be contained by the imagined community of nationhood, it can still reinforce hegemonic ideas of nationhood, ones that may overlap between 'host' and 'home' countries and operate in excluding those who are defined as outsiders regardless of their status as migrant or citizen.

As a lauded film for charting the Iranian experience of revolution, war and migration to Europe, *Persepolis* stands as an important example of the problems of self-representation in migrant cinema. Calls for 'giving voice', 'speaking for oneself' or celebrating self-representation dominate contemporary discussions on the representation of migrants and refugees. This relies on an uncritical form of standpoint epistemology, where 'envoicement' of migrants or refugees (and/or their self-representations) is regarded as a necessary and an essential end in itself, superseding the political character of what may or may not be said, the positionality from which such voices may speak, the implications of what is expressed on marginalized others and, most importantly, the need to question the terms by which such voices will be listened to or heard.

Notes

[1] Originally, Naficy (2001) distinguished three modalities of accented filmmakers: exilic, diasporic and postcolonial/ethnic. More recently, and specifically in relation to Iranian accented filmmakers, he locates five types: exilic, diasporic, émigré, ethnic and cosmopolitan – each correspond to a different relationship to displacement, placement and production (Naficy, 2012, p 393).

[2] Mastroianni's biological mother.

[3] Marji is the name used in the film to refer to Marjane's child character.

[4] Although *Persepolis* is a hand-drawn animation and therefore does not use camera movements, it draws on these conventions as part of its signification of cinematic realism. I therefore draw on filmic terminology (for example, 'track', 'close-up', 'cut to', 'wide shot') for clarity of description where necessary.

[5] Naficy (2001) proposes 'closed chronotopes', expressing the claustrophobia of exile, 'open chronotopes' (derived from Bakhtin's 'idyll'), reflecting the nostalgia for homeland and characterized by boundlessness and timelessness, and 'thirdspace chronotopes', articulating the journeying and in-betweenness of the diasporic condition.

[6] Marjane Satrapi is not only the writer and director but also the graphic artist responsible for the hand-drawn depictions and whose autobiographical experiences are being drawn on (literally) and fictionalized. Satrapi even performed the movements of the

characters for the animation construction, so her body is, in some ways, also present in the work.

7   Dave is writing with reference to the middle-class idyll constructed in the film *Notting Hill* (1999).

8   'In the second millennium B.C., while the Elam nation was developing a civilization alongside Babylon, Indo-European invaders gave their name to the immense Iranian plateau where they settled. The word "Iran" was derived from "Ayryana Vaejo," which means "the origin of the Aryans." [. ...] Iran was rich. Because of its wealth and its geographic location, it invited attacks: From Alexander the Great, from its Arab neighbors to the west, from Turkish and Mongolian conquerors, Iran was often subject to foreign domination. Yet the Persian language and culture withstood these invasions. The invaders assimilated into this strong culture, and in some ways they became Iranians themselves' (Satrapi, 2008, Introduction).

9   Neither Khomeini nor any other political figures are depicted or made reference to, unlike the depiction of the Shah and the Pahlavi dynasty in pre-revolutionary scenes.

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