Sexuality and Dual Identity in *Persepolis* and *Chemistry*

Immigration is one of the distinctive phenomena of the modern age. Every year millions of immigrants pour into Western countries in hopes of a better life. Buoyed by a wonder at the possibilities of their new country and a sense of ambition, these first-generation immigrants often are able to distinguish themselves from the native population. Yet despite owing their material success to their new host country, immigrants continue to refer to their home country for a cultural identity and inspiration. Perpetually regarded as outsiders and foreigners, they will make doubly sure to practice elements of the culture they left behind. This duality between the host culture and the ancestral culture has dramatic effects on the immigrants. They are stuck between two worlds, the country of the past and the country of the present. On the one hand, they are encouraged to assimilate into their new host country in order to forward their careers. On the other hand, they are asked to respect and maintain contact with the culture of their ancestral homeland. However, this balancing act is difficult for many to effectively accomplish. In practice, immigrants are foreigners in the West and Westerners in their homeland. Thus, these children form a dual identity, seeing themselves in both their host country and their mother country. Yet, not being able to firmly fit with either, immigrants are an island onto themselves isolated from both. This is most keenly observed through the development of sexual values among other social values. Split between the West and their homeland, immigrants have difficulty choosing between the sexual values and norms of their host country from those in their mother country. The interplay between sexuality and immigrant dual identity is explored in *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* by Marjane Satrapi and *Chemistry* by Weike Wang.

Clothing is one of the most important markers of sexuality. Traditionally, the clothing for males and females is sexually segregated. Moreover, a person’s clothing is indicatives of how openly they display their sexuality. This idea is explored with the symbol of the veil in *Persepolis 2.* The hijab, which is a veil worn by Muslim women, plays a large part in Marjane's adolescence and early adulthood. It is a symbol of religious piety and sexual modesty. Many devout Muslim women chose to wear the hijab prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in order to display their religious belief. As a result of the new Islamic regime coming into power in 1980, the hijab was instantly mandatory for every woman venturing into public. Satrapi notes that “I again put on my veil … and so much for individual and social liberties … I needed to so badly go home” (Satrapi 91). Here, we see that Satrapi resents the hijab and its broader implications. It is a constant reminder of the Islamic regime’s firm grip over her life in this case her sexuality. Thus, it symbolizes the sexual oppression she feels in her homeland of Iran. In addition, the chador combined with the hijab serve to stymy Satrapi’s sense of individuality. However, in this quote Satrapi resigns herself to wearing it because she needs to go home. Her humiliating time in Vienna reveals to her that she will not be fully appreciated and respected in the West. Thus, she feels the need to return home. Thus, the hijab is also a symbol for her homeland and her decision to start wearing it reflects her desire to reconnect with her home country. Thus, we see that Satrapi does not feel comfortable with either the West or Iran.

Clothing also plays a role in *Chemistry* by Weike Wang. *Chemistry* describes the story of a Chinese-American who struggles to reconcile the high expectations of her Chinese parents with her own personal life. In one incident, the narrator goes to by the qipao. A Qipao is a type of traditional Chinese dress. Wang notes that “The woman makes it clear that a qipao is not for anyone who is fat. She says, If you are fat, wear an A-line. But after putting the dress on, I realize the fit is not for me . . . Quickly I realize something. While beautiful, the qipao is hard to walk in, the legs bound together“(Wang 19). We can see here that the qipao is a symbol for the Chinese culture of her parents. Although very beautiful and dignified, he narrator finds Chinese culture to be too restrictive similar to how the qipao tightly binds her legs together. The narrator goes to the store hoping to connect with her parent’s culture, but she instead finds that the fit was not for her. More specifically, the qipao reflects the Chinese view of beauty, sexuality and femininity. The Chinese feminine ideal of being brilliant and beautiful is difficult for the narrator to uphold. The narrator feels a sense of inferiority when being told that fat people cannot wear the qipao. Moreover, the fact that her shoulders are too broad and not appropriately feminine only serves to further humiliate the narrator. The imagery of the qipao serves to illustrate for the sexual ideals of China distance the narrator from her heritage. The narrator’s balancing act between the West and China make it hard for her to fully identify with Chinese society.

Clothing as a symbol of sexuality is closely tied to a culture’s view of sexual promiscuity. Views on sexual promiscuity vary from country to country and from culture to culture. In particular, Iran especially during the Islamic regime has a much more conservative view of sexual intercourse and sexual relations than the West. Marjane Satrapi explores this dichotomy between her liberal views on sex and he conservative bent of her homeland. In one example, Satrapi is discussing her experiences in the West with her Iranian friends. Initially, her friends are very curious about her sexual experiences in the West. However, when they learn that she has had multiple sexual encounters with different men, they are quickly angered and label her a whore. Similar to the dual identity of immigrants, the duality between a public self and a private self rears its head here. Whereas most people in the Islamic republic pretend to be true believers while hiding their Western beliefs behind closed doors, Marjane’s friends are different. The pretense of a Western exterior they present to the outside world through styled hair, heavy makeup and talk about boys is belied by the fundamentally traditional values. They are simply not as truly rebellious as they envision themselves. Their rejection of premarital sex and sexual experimentation reveal their true orthodox leanings. Already mired in low self-esteem and depression, Marjane is further pushed away from the culture of her Iranian homeland. She eloquently notes that she is forever an Iranian in the West but a Westerner in Iran. As she moves back to Iran and starts to where mostly Western clothing, she decides to be Western on the outside but Iranian within. Thus, through her differing sexual values from traditional Iranians, we can see how her dual identity prevents her from fully identifying as one or the other.

The Chinese feminine ideal of beautiful and brilliant is explored later in the novel by Wang as well. In one incident, the narrator tells her parents that she is abandoning her PhD. “I’m not going to finish my PhD. I’m quitting. My mother says, Don’t call me again. Don’t even think about coming home. Who do think you are? You are nothing to me without that degree (Wang 62). In choosing to abandon pursing her PhD, the narrator is distancing herself from her parent’s culture completely. Her parent’s lack of acceptance of her decision symbolizes their dug in approach towards life itself. In her parent’s view, the only the search for knowledge itself will command respect. Only through academics can one find any sort of spiritual meaning. By breaking the PhD, the narrator is signaling that she can find meaning by herself. Moreover, the narrator chooses to break up with Eric. Similar to how abandoning her PhD establishes herself as and independent woman from her parents, break up with Eric establishes her as an independent force who is not beholden to anyone. The Chinese feminine ideal defined by her parents is to be both beautiful and brilliant. By abandoning her PhD she chooses to no longer care about being brilliant. By breaking her bonds with her boyfriend, she chooses to no longer consume herself with being beautiful. Moreover, breaking up with Eric destroys the happy romance that her Western friends had envisioned. Thus, her breakup selves to additionally symbolize her defining herself by Western standards as well. Thus, the narrator chooses to abandon both the Western and the Chinese sides of her identity. She chooses instead to define herself by her own decisions.

In both *Chemistry* and *Persepolis*, we see how immigrants deal with the concept of a dual identity. This is explored through the ideas of sexuality for women. For Satrapi, the hijab represents the oppressive Iranian regime, her parents sent her away from. Yet compared to the Western world where she and her family were ridiculed and humiliated, it is strangely comforting. Thus, Satrapi reluctantly decides to start wearing the hijab again. On the other hand, the qipao represents the idealized Chinese beauty that the narrator in *Chemistry* fears she lacks. Throughout the novel, this insecurity of being beautiful and brilliant eats away at the narrator. Eventually, she chooses to abandon being consumed by both goals by giving up her PhD and breaking up with Eric. Thus, the narrator chooses to forgo both a Chinese identity and a Western identity, instead trying to define herself by her own choices and decisions. On the other hand, when she arrives in Iran, Marjane’s liberalized sexual views clash with the traditionalist views of her friends. Eventually, Marjane realizes that she can only be happy by accepting both the Western and Iranian parts of herself. In both cases, we see that through motifs concerning sexuality, the characters confront the conflicts of their dual identity.