

Trevor Nichols

Alexandra Magearu and Cadence Dangerfield

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The Problem of Identity in *Persepolis* and *The Best We Could Do*

In both Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*, their change in identity throughout their stories is a key theme that is strongly influenced by multiple factors within their lives. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi has a long internal battle on who she is, mainly due her parent's politically outstanding ideas and a multicultural upbringing in both Iran and Austria, leading her to question who she is and to seek things to define herself by. Thi Bui, on the other hand, struggles to grapple with her past as her own understanding, her parents' understandings, and the history commonly taught in American schools all clash with each other, just like her own multicultural identity — all of which are highly traumatic to her and her family. Both of these authors undergo a similar alienating experience of trying to understand what they truly are. Misunderstandings of deep rooted, conflicting multicultural backgrounds induce the need for a better self understanding and a stronger resolution on self identity, as demonstrated by these two authors.

Both Satrapi and Bui begin their novels with conflicts in their own identities stemming from adversity of their multiple cultural ideologies. One of the main points of confusion in Marji's identity in Satrapi's *Persepolis* stems from the difference in ideologies between the "East" — most often characterized as more of a group identity — and the "West" — more often characterized as an individualistic ideology. Marji, from *Persepolis*, begins early in her life already with an "Eastern" mentality — forced to assimilate and fit in with society in religion and

governmental policy. Marji self-narrates this in the very beginning: "I was both with religion. At the age of six I was already sure I was the last prophet. This was a few years before the revolution. Before me there had been a few others" (Ch. 1, Satrapi). Her narration reveals that she was both born in an Eastern world and took up Eastern ideas like religion. But this immediately prefaces her description of her ideal religious policies: "I wanted to be a prophet... Because our maid did not eat with us. Because my father had a Cadillac. And, above all, because my grandmother's knees always ached" (Ch. 1, Satrapi). Although she grew up in a highly religious society, her reasons for being religious appear to be significantly more individualistic and consumerist as seen in her rationale: wanting a nicer car, wanting to heal people close to her, and wanting a more balanced social structure — all of which could be attributed to similar "Western" ideologies, which highlights her deviance from the standard ideology of her society. Later in the memoir, before she leaves for Austria, there are multiple instances of her standing out in Iranian culture at the time. When her parents come back from Istanbul, they snuck in Western nonconformist materials like pop-idol posters, a denim jacket, and Nike sneakers, of which Marji happily wore out (Ch. 18, Satrapi). Marji promptly gets caught and questioned by the morality police for her deviant actions from which out of self interest, she lies in order to escape punishment. Not soon after, Satrapi again defies the local standards by continuing to wear jewelry and speak out against the information taught in school, prompting her quick escape to a more Western country (Ch. 20, Satrapi). Her comparatively Western worldview makes it hard for Satrapi to find an identity in Iran's deeply Eastern ideology.

Once Satrapi arrives in Austria, her highly Western mind fails to immediately fit in and her troubles finding her own identity fail to end. One of her first interactions with a person over there leads her to immediately think "What a traitor! While people were dying in our country, she

was talking to me about trivial things. ...I lived with them for ten days," hinting at her immediate inability to fit in in this highly Western world. Later, at a party, Satrapi also cites her difficulty fitting in as she "was turned off by all these public displays of affection. What do you expect, I came from a traditionalist country," showing that even in a Western country, she is too Eastern to fit in (Ch. 24, Satrapi). She soon after attempts to change her appearance in hopes that her identity would follow. Satrapi says, "The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else's rules ... I even managed to deny my nationality." Because she had failed to fit in, her journey to a Western world had ultimately been a failure, leading her to promptly leave and go back home to Iran. Yuan, in an analysis on the novel summarizes the key idea here: "Marjane is experiencing the identity decision between Iranian and foreign cultures, trying to find the place of self and subject in history" (57). Due to the challenges Satrapi faces in her own identity, she is forced to realize that she knows she isn't truly Western, but never truly was Iranian by culture either. Satrapi now knows that her identity is not solely dependent on one thing, but still has not formed anything for herself.

Thi Bui's own conflict in identity may serve as a parallel, but remains completely distinct from Satrapi's own journey. Although she was born in Vietnam, she had the majority of her upbringing in America, leading her to wonder who she is and where she is from. Thi Bui decides to investigate her own familial history in order to gain a deeper understanding. Very early on in her novel, the differences could already be seen in her comparison between her own experience and her sister's:

"Once upon a time, I was young and moving to New York to be an artist and live with my artist boyfriend and my mother didn't disown me. Are you going to live together? Um

yes? I see. For an immigrant kid, that's living the dream. Whew! A few years earlier, when my oldest sister, LAN, left for medical school and moved in with her boyfriend (and later husband) Mas went through a period of denial" (Bui, 24-25).

She also makes the comparison with her other sister directly after: "How could a daughter of mine LIE and do such DIRTY THINGS?! Don't you love me? I'm SORRY! Promise me you'll never see him again! It went on like this until Bich ran away from home. ... You don't have a sister named Bich anymore. She is DEAD to us" (Bui, 26-27). In this scenario, Bui notices that her parent's actions have slowly changed over time, from with her oldest sister being disowned, to her other older sister being scolded, and finally to her being accepted the longer they assimilate into American culture, understandably leaving Bui scared and confused as to what her parents believe and how her parents would act, showing the process of her parents' culture change over time. Earlier in her life, Bui explains the experience of trying to fit in in America. In one circumstance she even states: "Don't be such a REFUGEE! Eat it in a bowl with some MILK! I don't LIKE milk! And who DOESN'T eat cereal out of the box?", which captures the pressures felt to forget their brief life in Vietnam and change to assimilate in the US (Bui, 285). This pressure for Bui to adopt the American culture was the initial spark that caused Bui to slowly drift away from her stern Vietnamese way of life. The initial departure from her original identity is what leads Bui down the path of confusion in her current identity.

Satrapi, on the other hand, begins to realize her identity earlier in her memoir. Before leaving Austria to come back to Iran, when faced with people shaming her for not owning up to who she is, she realizes that she really is an Iranian on the inside despite how Western she appeared in Iran. Towards the end of her stay in Austria, Satrapi exclaims, "I AM IRANIAN AND PROUD OF IT! ... I had just redeemed myself. For the first time in a year, I felt proud. I

finally understood what my grandmother meant. If I wasn't comfortable with myself, I would never be comfortable" (Ch. 25, Satrapi). Satrapi explains that for the first time since being in Austria, she felt proud of who she was: being Iranian. Although later in the book, she has a difficult time fitting back in Iran, she ultimately decides that even though she disagrees with the current governmental policy, it doesn't detract from her identity as an Iranian. Right before returning home, she says, "I packed my bag, I again put on my veil, and so much for my individual and social liberties, I needed so badly to go home" (Satrapi, Ch. 29), which shows that although she values her liberties and freedom as an individual, she still wanted to return home — to Iran. Throughout Satrapi's story she is confused on who she believes she is: "I was a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the west. I had no identity. I didn't even know anymore why I was living" (Ch. 32, Satrapi). After she has this realization of not fitting in, she owns up to it, where she begins to stabilize in her own life. Satrapi ultimately finds her identity not solely in being Iranian or in having a Western mindset, but something that is her own: "Marjane makes a breakthrough in her life by rejecting, accepting and transcending the Iranian identity" (59, Yuan). She does continue on to resist against the higher powers in the land, but she knows that she is still unmistakably Iranian, but not only so.

At the very end of Bui's memoir, she finally realizes that identity isn't plainly inherited, but is formed and chosen. She chooses to compare her previous confusion with her newfound resolution:

"How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined? ... That being my father's child, I, too, was a product of war and being my mother's child, could never measure up to her. But maybe being their child simply means that I will always feel the weight of their past. ... At least I no longer feel the need to

reclaim a HOMELAND. I understand enough of Vietnam's history now to know that the ground beneath my parents' feet had always been shifting so that by the time I was born, Vietnam was not my country at all" (Bui, 324-326).

Much like Satrapi, Bui explains that she does not need to come from one definitive place, but can be a mix and match of multiple factors in her development, partially Vietnamese, but never from Vietnam. In the beginning of the quote, Bui questions how much of her is uncontrollably "stamped into [her] blood and bone" and does not have a definitive answer, yet she knows that she is not only definitively Vietnamese. She continues on to elaborate that she no longer sees the effects of the War in her own family and her child, furthering her point that identity isn't inherited by blood, but in the circumstance you form in. Just like Yuan's words for Satrapi, her own identity was formed by rejection, acceptance, and transcendence of the multiple cultures surrounding her (59).

Both Satrapi and Bui undergo their own journey to find their own identities. Both of their uncertainties happen to stem from their multicultural developments, Iran and the west for Satrapi, and Vietnam and America for Bui. In the end they both resolve that they must not definitively be from a particular place or culture, but can be a mix of their own developments. As Bui puts it, she "no longer feel[s] the need to reclaim a HOMELAND" as her identity is much more than just that (Bui, 326). Although Satrapi does not agree with the ideologies of Iran as a whole, she still would exclaim, "I AM IRANIAN AND PROUD OF IT!" yet know her identity is much more than just that (Satrapi, Ch. 25). Throughout both of these graphic memoirs, Satrapi and Bui show that even though a highly conflicting multicultural upbringing is highly influential, their confusing identities need not be explained away by a simple discrete location or culture, but is instead formed intentionally and personally.

Works Cited

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