LA Honors 10

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Excerpts from a 2004 interview with Marjane Satrapi

**Q: The first Persepolis is told from the viewpoint of a young girl taking in a difficult world around her, whereas this second book, facing young adulthood, you make an obvious decision to focus inward more. Instead of the story of a young girl trying to make sense of her country, it’s more about a young woman trying to make sense of herself. Was it more difficult to write the second one?**

A: In the first book I had the advantage of being cute, because I am just a small girl, it’s not me who makes any decisions, it’s not me who does anything. So the world around me changed, I am a witness of this big change around me. The war starts, and after a while it becomes completely normal, the situation of the war. That is the capacity of the human being, that everything suddenly becomes absolutely normal. The feeling that I am evoking in the second book is more a problem of when you are going to a new culture and you absolutely want to adapt yourself, and you absolutely want to be integrated. You have to forget about your own culture first. You know, because culture takes all of the space inside you. If you want to have another culture come into you, it’s like you have to take out the first one, and then choose what you want from the two and swallow them again. But it’s the moment you look at everything that it’s this lack of identity. You don’t know anymore who you are. You want so badly to be integrated, but at the same time you have a whole thing that is inside you. It’s the problem that when you leave and then come back, you are a foreigner anywhere. I am a foreigner in Iran. I don’t take the risk to go back to my country anymore, but at the same time, it’s a good feeling not to belong to any place anymore, at the same time it’s a hard feeling. So if I wrote a book and said I was worrying about the situation in Iran the whole time, that would be so untrue. Any of us who have moved from Iran -- and there were many of us who left like this without parents -- all of us have gone through this desire to be part of a new society, that we had to abandon everything. And the funny thing is, all the Iranian friends I have now, who left the country alone at 12, 13, 14, we have become extremely Iranian after all these years.

**How so?**

Because when you are young you mix the fanaticism of the government of Iran with the culture of your country, and it’s all one thing. When you are also very young, it’s so difficult all the time justifying yourself because of your nationality. A simple question that for everyone is a one-word answer to “Where do you come from?” -- “I am French.” For an Iranian, it’s a one-hour explanation: “I am Iranian but, I am Iranian but…”

**How do you answer that question now, as opposed to when you were young?**

When you are young you hate to answer that question. Well, today I just say “I am Iranian,” and they say “You are Iranian?” and I say “Yes, it is a fact, I am Iranian. I was born there, I have black hair. Yes, I am an Iranian person, what can I do?” Since writing the book, nobody can tell me “Give me some explanation.” I think now my explanation is just “Read the book and you’ll see.” This book has permitted me not to talk so much anymore. People have read the book so they see what my situation is.

(over)

**So you’ve been in France for a long time now. Do you feel you can call it home in any way?**

I can live fifty years in France and my affection will always be with Iran. I always say that if I were a man I might say that Iran is my mother and France is my wife. My mother, whether she’s crazy or not, I would die for her, no matter what she is my mother. She is me and I am her. My wife I can cheat on with another woman, I can leave her, I can also love her and make her children, I can do all of that but it’s not like with my mother. But nowhere is my home any more. I will never have any home any more. Having lived what I have lived, I can never see the future. It’s a big difference when someone has to leave their country.

**Since the kidnapping of the two French journalists, with the demand of the kidnappers being that the ban on headscarves in schools is lifted, we’ve been reading a lot here that there’s a solidarity in the French Muslim community against this. Have you witnessed that?**

Absolutely. It is the truth. When they banned the veil in schools, I was against that. It became complete nonsense, because instead of understanding why the girls were putting the veil on their heads, they just made a law. And if by just making a law you could stop things, it would be so easy. Forbid persecution, and it doesn’t exist anymore? Of course it will exist, it will just become hidden. Just get rid of the veil and it will come out in another way. So the law is not a good idea for me. Then they cannot go to school to get an education, and the one way they have to become emancipated is then lost. At the same time, when the two journalists were taken in the name of Islam, no religion in the whole world allows this kind of thing. So of course there was very quickly solidarity. Even those for the veil, even the more fanatic ones, they just said “No.” Which is a very great thing. We cannot agree on some stuff, but the life of a human being, everybody agrees. All my life I have been against the veil, and now I am the one defending the veil. I hate the veil and what it means, I would never put that thing on my head, but I put myself in their place. It’s a question of these girls’ identity. Their mothers never wore the veil, and so they want to. Why? They have come to France, 30-40 years. For French they are not French, and for Arabs they are not Arabs. So the height of irony is that the veil has become a symbol of rebellion. When you are fourteen and they tell you not to do something, of course you want to do it.