

History Is Made in the Dark 1: *Persepolis*, the City of Persians



Darius I founded Persepolis, “The City of Persians”, in 518 BC, signalling the triumph of human civilisation and launching an empire that would stretch from Macedonia and northeast Africa to the banks of the Indus River. Persepolis—which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, ranked with Stonehenge, the Acropolis, and the Historic Centre of Rome—was burned, however, in 330 B.C. by Alexander the Great. It is now a relic that might conjure up Shakespeare’s “Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.” The film *Persepolis* begins not with nostalgia for the Empire of Persia but rather with nostalgia for the City of Persians, a mythic sanctuary for individuals. The opening credits present a montage of ancient Iran springing to life as a land of celestial enchantment, where snowflakes double as floating jasmine and angels double as coursing birds, overseeing the hatchling Persia, where even the fish can fly. Freedom abounds. But this origin story ends with a crouching demon, sitar in hand, serenading a winged mermaid on the rocks, her flight arrested. Flames billow from an urn, a civilisation burning.

The story proper opens with Marjane, who has been sent to Paris by her mother after a bad marriage, and who now considers leaving the city of light and, donning the black hijab, returning to Iran. Can she survive without her family? She could not when she was earlier sent for schooling in Vienna. When the attendant asks for her passport, she is paralysed by memories. Uncle Taher, she recalls later in the film, died for lack of a passport *out* of Iran. Marji retreats from the gangway and sits back in the waiting area, stooped over like the flightless mermaid. The color fades, and the story of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 unfolds as a contest between private history, which pulls her back to her family, and public history, which has pushed her so far from them.

In flashback, the young Marji, as “prophet”, tells her grandmother that making old women suffer will be strictly forbidden in her Republic. But the reality of suffering under a “dictator”—the Shah—whom Marji, blinded by propaganda, naively admires, is explained by her father. The US installed the Shah’s father 50 years earlier as a puppet Hitler—“I’m the light of the Aryans”—who promised the old “splendour” of Persia but delivered cruelty, imprisoning Marji’s grandfather, himself a “Qadjar prince” who was then “ruined” by this foreign power. While Marji drifts to sleep in abruptly new admiration of her “royal” grandfather who was also a “Communist”, the fog of that contradiction turns into choking public memory as the Shah’s soldiers in gas masks sweep Tehran and tanks rumble through the streets.

Marji’s alternation between individual conscience and group consciousness, between private and public history, points, then, to the deeper culprit of civic ruin. It is not a person (Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors are never personally shown), but a way of thinking *about* the person: a way of historicising individuals. In this mindset, anyone can become the despot, even Marji (who later falsely accuses a man in order to save herself). Likewise, although not the demanding megaphone of the Islamic Republic, urging soldiers to “irrigate” society with their blood, Marji’s Communist father seems also at risk of sacrificing individuals to his version of public history.

Less militantly and didactically, yet still in that vein, Uncle Anoush affirms to Marji the public ideal of enforcing a “society of justice and freedom”. But only his personal history—a tale of conspiracy and death and escape, but also, as if the film is visually resurrecting the mythic promise of *The City of Persians*, a tale of Anoush’s journey back to the land of butterflies, floating snowflakes, flying fish, and birds presiding over the destiny of Persia—only this history actually matters to his young niece. Why? Because, as Anoush tells her, *she* herself matters to that history: “family memory must live on” through her. He gives her a miniature swan to seal her promise “never to forget” this intimate bond to individuals. And then comes a montage of other families’ private histories to affirm this lesson in civics.

When the maturing Marji can feel nothing but contempt for Iran’s new “repressive” government, she thinks that Western culture, amplifying the individual like an angry rock song, holds the secret. Once transported to Vienna, though, Marji discovers a city either of petty and dissolute adolescents, divorced from historical consciousness, or of racists fulminating in popular fashion against “Iranians”. So Marji pretends to be French. But, in breaking her promise to Uncle Anoush, by cutting herself off from personal history, she soon finds herself alone and dying in the land of vapid egos and collective public anger disguised as social consciousness.

Persepolis is a history of private voices surviving—or not—amidst the public ones. Marji’s family escapes a squad of thugs chiefly because the women appeal to the boys’ mothers, awakening personal history and, for a moment, rescuing the boys from their own anonymity. The film exposes the angry voices of group identity as an alter ego in every individual. A society of “justice and freedom” is a city of choices, one by one: “Everyone has a choice!” exclaims Marji’s grandmother. When the Islamic Revolution,

like the Shah's régime, erased multitudes of quirky, curious individuals, it sacrificed real memory—each a discrete history among the “millions”—to the overzealous, univocal memory of History, the story of Trends and Movements, Traditions and Ideals. In many ways, *Persepolis* dramatises Marjane Satrapi's effort to rescue the single, quirky memory—and the family of individuals woven from it—from the consolidating public History of Iran. The film is a swan song to the great City of Persians—the city of persons.

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