THE AXIS OF EVIL?
DECONSTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPES IN SATRAPI'S *PERSEPOLIS* AND AMIR AND KHALIL'S *ZAHRA'S PARADISE*

Carolina de Pinho Santoro Lopes é professora do Colégio Pedro II e mestranda em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa na Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro.
E-mail: carol.pslopes@gmail.com

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to examine how the dominant view of Iran in the Western world is deconstructed in *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi, and *Zahra's Paradise*, by Amir and Khalil. Both works counter the stereotypical view of the Iranians as extremists, fundamentalists and incapable of democratic self-government. While the Islamic Republic is heavily criticized, the Iranian people and culture are positively represented.

Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é examinar como a visão hegemônica do Irã no Ocidente é desconstruída em *Persépolis*, de Marjane Satrapi, e *O Paraíso de Zahra*, de Amir e Khalil. Ambas as obras contrariam a visão estereotipada dos iranianos como extremistas e fundamentalistas incapazes de se governar democraticamente. Embora a República Islâmica seja duramente criticada, o povo e a cultura do Irã são representados de forma positiva.

Iran's classification as a member of the "axis of evil" by George W. Bush in 2002 highlighted the fact that the country has been mostly associated in the West with terrorism, political radicalism and suspicions about the production of nuclear weapons. Although *Persepolis* (2003), by Marjane Satrapi, and *Zahra's Paradise* (2011), by Amir and Khalil, present a strong critique of the Iranian government, both graphic narratives write against common stereotypes about the country and its population, rejecting dichotomic and simplistic views. This essay will first present theoretical concepts and ideas about the representation of the Orient and then discuss how both books counter the hegemonic perspective.

In postmodern times, the notion of discourse has acquired great importance. Roland Barthes considers that texts are necessarily intertextual, constituting a response to previous texts and deriving meaning from this relation with other discourses (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 126, 128). Within this big dialogue, some discourses are privileged while others are excluded. Michel Foucault (1999, p. 10) claims that the control exerted over discourse shows its connection to power; more than a mere translation of systems of domination, discourse is the object of struggles and the power which we desire to hold. He also argues that the processes of formation and regulation of discourse are intertwined (FOUCAULT, 1999, p. 66). According to the author, the mechanisms of exclusion and delimitation may be external to discourse, relying on the support of institutions, or internal, one example being the organization of disciplines (FOUCAULT, 1999, p. 17, 29-30). There is a series of requirements, related to the concepts and techniques used, which must be fulfilled in order for a statement to be considered as belonging to a given discipline (FOUCAULT, 1999, p. 31-32).

These ideas are particularly enlightening when studies about the Orient are taken into consideration. Edward Said (1978, p. 12) considers that Orientalism encompasses a diversity of discourses about the Orient, including texts from fields such as history, sociology, philology, among others, all of them related in various ways to different kinds of power. According to him, "[Orientalism] *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will*

or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world" (SAID, 1978, p. 12, italics in the original). Thus, it is clear that, although knowledge is generally required to be politically neutral in the Occident, the author sees much of the academic studies about Eastern countries as deeply influenced by imperialist power (SAID, 1978, p. 9-11).

Foucault (1999, p. 53) claims that the world is not divided in prediscursive categories which we merely decode, but that discourse is a violence humans impose on the world. An instance of such categories which are constructions, though they may seem natural, is the divide between Orient and Occident (SAID, 1978, p. 5). Said (1978, p. 43) sees Orientalism as a way of coming to terms with reality that affirms the difference between the familiar West and the unfamiliar East, in a distinction between "us" and "them". This binary view reinforces the differences and the feeling of enmity, contributing to a broadening of this polarization (SAID, 1978, p. 45-46).

The relationship between Orient and Occident, far from being politically neutral, is charged with power, the Orientals being the dominated part (SAID, 1978, p. 5, 38). The East has been represented as weak and inferior in relation to the West; in fact, more than a simple portrayal, the Orient is to an extent created by these discourses about it and contained in hegemonic concepts (SAID, 1978, p. 40). Along with knowledge comes power, as the first makes it easier to dominate other people, especially when the Other is depicted as incapable of self-government (SAID, 1978, p. 32, 36). This way, discourses about the Orient were used to justify and legitimate its colonization.

Homi Bhabha argues that, since this discourse denies the colonized subjects' capacity of being independent and governing themselves, they are considered "the cause and effect of the [colonial] system, imprisoned in the circle of interpretation" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 83). According to him, stereotypes make the relations within the colonies easier and construct an opposition through which colonial power is exerted (BHABHA, 1994, p. 78). Bhabha (1994, p. 66, 75) also affirms that stereotypes are a fixed and stable form of representing the Other, which makes them false, and at the same time a paradoxical portrayal. Said (1978, p. 32) considers that the object of Orientalist knowledge is seen as essentially stable, even if liable to changes, and that this knowledge distanced from immediacy brings authority to those who possess it.

Ambivalence is at the heart of stereotypes, in which projections and introjections play an important role, revealing some fantasies possessed by the colonizer (BHABHA, 1994, p. 81-82). The Other is associated with opposing, contradictory attributes, such as innocence and cunning, wildness and submission, among others (BHABHA, 1994, p. 82). This ambiguity guarantees that stereotypes can adapt to different and changing contexts, as well as creating the effect of truth since they account for opposing views of the colonial subject (BHABHA, 1994, p. 66). Said (1978, p. 63) also acknowledges that myths were part of many academic Orientalist texts. This fact justifies Said's claim that Orientalism "has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world", responding more to the Western culture than to the Eastern (SAID, 1978, p. 12, 22). The object of this discourse is to dominate the Orient by making it more familiar and less threatening to the Western audience (SAID, 1978, p. 60). Therefore, Orientalism does not seek

accuracy, but a representation which posits the East as the Other while incorporating it into Occidental conceptual frameworks (SAID, 1978, p. 71).

Orientalist discourse relies upon the idea that the Orientals cannot represent themselves or they would have already done it (SAID, 1978, p. 21). Consequently, it would become an Occidental mission to do so and speak for them. The Eastern people's alleged incapacity of expressing themselves could be seen as another way to confirm the Western superiority. However, it is essential to bear in mind that not everyone is allowed to speak and that it may be very difficult to gain access to some fields of discourse (FOUCAULT, 1999, p. 37). Hence, being able to speak for oneself is more a question of power than ability.

Though permeated by ambivalences and myths, Orientalist discourse has acquired the position of scientific truth, encompassing academic texts from a diversity of fields (SAID, 1978, p. 46). Repetition is paramount in the construction and reinforcement of stereotypes, "the *same old* stories […] [which] *must* be told (compulsively) again and afresh" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 77, italics in the original). Instead of aiming at questioning its audience's beliefs, Orientalism presents a repetition and confirmation of commonly held views of the East (SAID, 1978, p. 65). It establishes, then, the limits of thinking about the Orient, setting the patterns which every text about the East should follow (SAID, 1978, p. 42). In consonance with the previously mentioned Foucault's claim that the mechanisms of formation of discourse and constraint upon it are intertwined, Said (1978, p. 14) argues that the restrictions working on Orientalist discourse were also productive. Nevertheless, in the process of turning the elements of the world into "units of knowledge", the Orient is constructed in relation to the Occident, in an operation in which observable aspects of the East are not as valued as the stereotypes circulating in Western discourse (SAID, 1978, p. 67, 69).

Just like the Orient is created within discourse, history may also be seen as a construction. Linda Hutcheon (1988, p. 125) affirms that the only way to have access to the past is through its remaining texts. According to Hayden White, history is similar to fiction in that it is a form of discourse which employs literary techniques to organize events in a narrative structure (KORHONEN, 2006, p. 12-13). This notion has led to the recognition of the role of literature as a way to give room for marginalized groups to represent their own history (KORHONEN, 2006, p. 18-19). As the discourse of those off the center gains value in post-modern times (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 130), this strategy becomes particularly productive, giving origin to narratives which counter hegemonic discourse such as *Persepolis* and *Zahra's Paradise*.

Marjane Satrapi was born in Rasht, Iran, in 1969, and grew up in Tehran. At age fourteen, she moved to Vienna, where she spent four years due to fear of political persecutions. Satrapi studied arts in Tehran and Strasbourg, having gotten her second degree after moving definitively from Iran to Europe. She currently lives in Paris. The author has published graphic narratives such as *Persepolis*, *Chicken with Plums* and *Embroideries*, among other books. Many of her works, including the three already mentioned, contain autobiographical elements or are inspired by the lives of some members of her family.

In *Persepolis*: The Story of a Childhood, the first of a two-volume series, Satrapi

draws on her experience of growing up in Tehran during the Islamic Revolution (1979) and part of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Behind this memoir lies the will to remember, to prevent the stories of many Iranians from fading away. Hillary Chute (2010, p. 138) affirms that "Satrapi herself has stated her desire to demonstrate the diversity of the Iranian people to the non-Iranians". The book presents an alternative writing of the history of Iran, in which Western imperialism is criticized. Thus, this narrative does not function as a "soft weapon", in other words, as a way to reaffirm the stereotypical view of Iran and Islamic countries as backward and therefore inferior (SMITH; WATSON, 2010, p. 131-132). On the contrary, *Persepolis* seeks to bring to light the story of several Iranians who resisted the authoritarian regime as well as show the negative impact of imperialism on the country.

In "The Bicycle", one of the first chapters of the graphic narrative, the revolution is described as a response to "2500 years of tyranny and submission" (SATRAPI, 2003, p. 11)[1]. The oppressors are identified as both internal to the country, in the case of the emperors, and foreign, as the Arabs, the Mongolians and, more recently, the British and the Americans. In the bottom of the panel, imperialism is represented by Uncle Sam and a man carrying the British flag marching ahead of military men carrying the Iranian flag, followed by hooded executioners. This way, even if not characterized as a territorial invasion, modern Western political domination is clearly depicted and related to violent repression.

The volatile character of American political alliances, based mainly on economical principles, is criticized in *Persepolis*. The reason behind the American interest in Iran is evident in the passage after the revolution succeeds in forcing the Shah to leave the country. After the news reporter announces that Jimmy Carter refused to give refuge to the Shah, Marji's father affirms that Carter's interest in Iran seemed to be restricted to oil (*P.*, p. 43). Hence, alliances only last as long as they are profitable to the more powerful part, permitting the economical exploitation of the other.

The graphic narrative makes it clear that the government's policies do not necessarily represent the will of the people. Resistance is depicted not only by the demonstrations which led to the deposition of the Shah, but especially represented by the figures of uncle Anoosh and two of Marji's parents' friends, Siamak Jari and Mohsen Shakiba. Whereas the Shah submitted to the American power, these men fought against his regime guided by communist ideals and were imprisoned and tortured because of that. Anoosh is a key figure in the narrative due to his close relationship with Marji and to his being responsible for passing on an important part of the family memory to her. He is one of the characters who urge Marji not to forget the family history (*P.*, p. 60).

Even though the Shah's departure was enthusiastically celebrated (*P.*, p. 42), the situation in the country did not drastically improve after that. In fact, *Persepolis* shows that torture, political persecutions and executions continued to happen after the Islamic Revolution. If Anoosh was imprisoned during the Shah's reign, it is only after the revolution that he is executed (*P.*, p. 70). Marji's mother, after demonstrating against the Shah (*P.*, p. 18), protests against the Islamic Republic's policy of making it mandatory to

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[1]   Further references will be indicated by *P.*, followed by the page number.

wear the veil (*P.*, p. 5). It is clear that the revolution for which Marji's parents' fought did not bring the results they expected. The hope for a more egalitarian society and a less oppressive regime was frustrated.

In addition to the perpetuation of violent political persecutions, the government's control of the official version of history did not diminish after the revolution. In the book, the two main institutions involved in this control are the schools and the press. During the reign of the Shah, Marji is told at school that the king was chosen by God (*P.*, p. 19). After the revolution, a teacher tells Marji's class that there are not political prisoners anymore in Iran, a statement denied by an older and less naïve Marji in front of her classmates (*P.*, p. 144). The fact that the press could not be trusted is evident in several passages from the graphic narrative: television news report a fraudulent result of the elections which established the Islamic republic (*P.*, p. 62), the headlines accuse Anoosh of being a Russian spy (*P.*, p. 70), and Marji's father always resorts to the BBC to check whether the news reports are true (*P.*, p. 83). Hence, the institutional control over discourse is clearly shown in the narrative.

While the Shah's regime is portrayed as the product of British and American interference and subject to these powers, the book shows that the government after the Revolution took an extremist position to free the country from all Western influence. Some totalitarian policies were taken, such as closing the universities for two years (*P.*, p. 73) and banning alcohol and tapes of foreign musicians (*P.*, p. 106, 132). Both the subjection to Western countries and the anti-Occident position are criticized and seen as oppressive in the graphic narrative. Marji and her parents consider the government's measures backward and resist them by continuing to give parties and buy banned products, in a rejection of fundamentalism (*P.*, p. 73, 110, 131-132).

In the process of not forgetting, Satrapi does not leave out traumatic events. Besides displaying pictures of torture and violence during the demonstrations, the author deals with the theme of the Iran-Iraq War. Chute (2008, p. 99) argues that Satrapi's choice to draw in black and white and to narrate the story from the viewpoint of a child contributed to a more effective representation of trauma since the stylized drawings prevent violence from looking banal. By representing violence less realistically, Satrapi reinforces the horror of a child's witnessing such terrible events, making the reader more emotionally involved. The horrors of the war include the fear of death during the air raids (*P.*, p. 103-104, 136), the death of young boys convinced to enlist by the promises of a better life in paradise (*P.*, p. 100-102), and the loss of lives after the bombings, as the Baba-Levy's family (*P.*, p. 142). Other negative consequences of the war were the shortage of products such as food and gasoline (*P.*, p. 87-89), and the exile into which many Iranians were forced, especially young boys, who were not allowed to leave the country after turning thirteen (*P.*, p. 118, 151).

Persepolis goes against the view that history should only deal with great historical figures and major political events like wars. As Chute (2010, p. 156) puts it, the graphic narrative does not simply denounce "the virulent machinations of 'official histories'", but shows that history is deeply connected to everyday life. As demonstrated by the depiction of the consequences of the war, the book concerns mainly how historical events and political decisions affect the lives of the entire population.

Considering all the difficulties faced by the population due to the war, the government's decision of not accepting Iraq's offer of a peace treaty (*P.*, p. 114-116) is another instance of a situation in which the country's policies were in disagreement with the wishes of the population. Even if the government's actions could be considered extreme and fanatical, these characteristics could not be extended to the whole of the Iranian population. Marji voices her discontentment with this policy and denounces the hardening of the repression of those who were against the regime (*P.*, p. 116-117), making it clear that the stereotypical view of the Iranians as fanatical extremists is not fair.

The graphic narrative includes some elements of Iranian culture in a play between permanence and change. Some of the references are millennial cultural elements which still persist or at least left important and lasting marks in Iran. Chute (2010, p. 144-145) claims that Satrapi's style is influenced by ancient Persian art, characterized by simple and flat drawings. This feature is especially clear in the passage showing the Shah's visit to Cyrus the Great's tomb, in which the emperor is depicted (*P.*, p. 28). Another reference to the Persian Empire is the title of the graphic narrative. Persepolis used to be the capital city of the empire. These elements refer to a prominent moment of the Iranian history, a time before the invasions. The relevance attributed to this age is revealed by the inclusion of these references in the narrative, as well as by the very fact that the Shah deemed it important to visit Cyrus's grave. In the narrative, the Shah also mentions the Aryans, who gave origin to the Medes and the Persians according to Satrapi's introduction to the book (*P.*, p. 27). In this passage, the Shah promises that the Iranian people "will regain their splendor", making it clear that the reference to the ancient world is a way of pointing to what can be considered a golden age (*P.*, p. 27).

Besides, the Zarathustrian religion is another element from the time of the Persian Empire mentioned in the graphic narrative. Marji introduces Zarathustra as the first prophet in Iran, who lived before the Arab invasion, and says that his rules would be the first in her holy book (*P.*, p. 7). The character also says that she would include the Persian New Year and the fire ceremony in her religion (*P.*, p. 7). These are celebrations of Zarasthustrian origin, having been passed on from generation to generation since pre-islamic times. All of these elements, then, constitute part of the Iranian national identity.

Historian Fernand Braudel's discussion of the combination of permanence and change in society may be related to the role of these ancient traditions nowadays. This author argues that there are coexisting layers of more recent and more remote history in every civilization (BRAUDEL, 1992, p. 351-352). Some underlying structures, undergoing slow and imperceptible changes, resist for a long time, representing continuity within a society (BRAUDEL, 1992, p. 356). In *Persepolis*, the references to aspects of the Persian Empire make it evident that, even if the Arab invasion erased some element of its culture, a part of it has endured up to the present day. These remnants are mostly unknown in the Western world; therefore, the graphic narrative presents a view of Iran which goes against the common idea that this country is Arab and belongs to a homogeneous Arab culture.

Although *Persepolis* deals with continuity, some of the cultural aspects in the

book are linked to change. The replacement of the national anthem by a Islamic one after the revolution is mentioned in a scene during the war (*P.*, p. 83). As the anthem is one of the main symbols of a country, its substitution represents a strong attempt to change a part of the national identity by promoting the erasure of the past. The military pilots' decision to only attack Iraq on condition that the original anthem is broadcast demonstrates their fierce opposition to the Islamic regime. This way, the narrative shows the heterogeneity within the country, rejecting generalizations.

Persepolis also shows the influence of Western culture in Iran and in Satrapi's work. First, her style, though inspired by Persian art, also draws upon Occidental art. Chute (2010, p. 145) affirms that the choice to draw in black and white was inspired by avant-garde, especially expressionistic, cinema and woodcut images by French artist Félix Vallotton. In addition, Gillian Whitlock (2006, p. 975) explores the similarity between the panel showing Marji's mother fainting when her daughter leaves Iran (*P.*, p. 153) and the pietà, a classic of Christian imagery depicting Virgin Mary holding Christ after his crucifixion.

Pictures 1 and 2: References to Cyrus the Great (*P.*, p. 28) and to the Pietà (*P.*, p. 153) demonstrate how *Persepolis* straddles two cultures, in a rejection of binaries.

The graphic narrative shows that Western influence is also felt in Iranian culture. Not only are Marji's parents political views informed by Marx's theory, but their leisure activities also involve Occidental elements, such as card games and alcoholic beverages, all condemned by the Islamic regime (*P.*, p. 12-13, 105-106). Among the young, Western musicians and clothes are considered stylish. Young Marji loves Iron Maiden and Kim Wilde and goes with her friends to a restaurant which sells hamburgers and hot dog (*P.*, p. 111-112, 131-132). She also considers that "only uncool people go to Turkey" and that her parents should go to Europe or the United States instead (*P.*, p. 126). This demonstrates the hegemonic influence of Occidental, especially American, culture worldwide. However, whereas the references to Iranian culture show that Satrapi values it, she rejects the Islamic government policy of banning everything which has to do with Western culture.

Amir, the writer of *Zahra's Paradise*, was born in Iran and moved to the United States at age twelve, shortly after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. He is a journalist, documentary filmmaker and human rights activist and has attempted to raise international awareness of the crimes happening in Evin Prison, in Iran, and to close it. Khalil, the illustrator, is an Arab artist. *Zahra's Paradise* was their first graphic narrative. At first, it was published online and translated to several languages. With its growing popularity, many publishing houses around the world decided to print it. The authors' last names are not revealed in the editions of the book for fear of persecution.

Zahra's Paradise started being serialized online in the beginning of 2010, only a short time after the real events which inspired it. In 2009, the suspicions and accusations of fraud in the Iranian presidential elections were followed by a wave of protests, which were strongly repressed. According to an appendix of the book, the Iranian criminal justice system announced that around four thousand people were arrested in the two months after the elections (AMIR; KHALIL, 2011a, p. 246)[2]. The Amnesty International reported that 115 prisoners were executed during the 50 days following the elections (*ZP.*, p. 246).

In an interview, Khalil affirms that *Zahra's Paradise* "is a sort of collage made up of real-life events strung together to make sense of what can sometimes seem too absurd to be true" (AMIR; KHALIL, 2011b). The authors' first idea was to write the story of a real Iranian woman's fight to find her son who went missing after a demonstration against the government. However, they decided to write a fictional story to avoid any violent punishment to that woman (AMIR; KHALIL, 2011b). In an appendix to the graphic novel, Amir and Khalil state that their intention in writing the story was to raise awareness of the situation in Iran and encourage their readers to research more about it (*ZP.*, p. 242-243). Consequently, this book is aimed at an international audience, which is still clearer if its first publication online is taken into account.

Zahra's Paradise tells the story of a mother and a brother's quest to find a young man who disappeared after a protest against frauds in the Iranian elections. This way, it

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[2]   Further references will be indicated by *ZP.*, followed by the page number.

is a narrative about the resistance against oppression and totalitarianism. Memory plays a fundamental role since the story draws upon the testimony of several people. Amir reaffirms the importance of memory in an interview, in which he also states that "stories convey life" (AMIR, 2012). Besides, the idea of not forgetting is highlighted by the inclusion of the names of thousands of people executed by the Iranian government on the last pages of the book.

The graphic narrative heavily criticizes the Iranian government, depicting it as oppressive and authoritarian. If the book shows that Ayatollah Zahir was imprisoned during the Shah's reign (*ZP.*, p. 119), it makes it clear that the regime which followed it has been using the same strategy of arresting its opponents. The violent repression of the demonstrations is denounced in *Zahra's Paradise* (*ZP.*, p. 69), including a scene of wounded protesters being taken by force from hospitals by the Revolutionary Guard (*ZP.*, p. 30-31). Violence also occurs inside the prisons, where prisoners are beaten and cannot drink anything (*ZP.*, p. 129-130), being physically and psychologically tortured and even sexually abused (*ZP.*, 132-135). Besides, cranes are used to perform public hangings, and the authors represent these cranes as closely related to the power of the Ayatollahs by affirming that once the first falls, the latter will fall as well (*ZP.*, p. 89, 94).

In addition, the Islamic regime is portrayed as dishonest, being responsible for a collection of lies. First, more than one character mentions ironically the result of the 2009 presidential elections, which sparked the protests due to the accusations of fraud (*ZP.*, p. 83, 107). Secondly, the government blames the Westerns and the Zionists for both the demonstrations (*ZP.*, p. 58) and the death of protesters, including Mehdi, the young man sought by the main characters (*ZP.*, p. 213-214). Finally, there is criticism on both bureaucracy and the criminal justice system, represented by a labyrinthic factory, in which false confessions obtained through torture seem to be commonplace (*ZP.*, p. 103, 172-173). For the most part, the situation portrayed in *Zahra's Paradise* is not very different from that represented in *Persepolis*, being characterized by violence, distorted news and an authoritarian regime, echoing the events of the latter book, which took place more than twenty years before.

Even though the Iranian government is depicted in a very negative light, the Iranian people are positively presented. Their resistance and the fight against oppression are highlighted, being especially embodied in the figures of Zahra Kazemi, Neda Agha-Soltan and Mehdi Alavi. While the last is a fictional character, the young man who is missing, the other two were real women who fought against the regime. Zahra Kazemi was an Iranian, naturalized Canadian, photojournalist, tortured and killed in a visit to Iran in 2003 (*ZP.*, p. 48-50). A video showing Neda Agha-Soltan's murder during the wave of demonstrations in 2009 was disseminated online, calling the attention of people around the world to the situation in Iran. The international repercussion of this episode is mentioned in the graphic narrative (*ZP.*, p. 166). Thus, the Iranians are portrayed as courageous people who do not surrender to the repression of a dictatorship.

Besides, positive qualities, such as being compassionate and showing solidarity, are stressed in the characterization of the Iranians in the book. Both the owner of the store which provides photocopy services and the taxi driver who takes Mehdi's family to

the morgue are sympathetic and support Zahra, the mother who is searching for her son. The taxi driver offers watermelon juice to Zahra, in an attempt to comfort her (*ZP.*, p. 84). Taymour, the owner of the store of printing services, makes one thousand posters with Mehdi's photograph without charging his family for this *(ZP.*, p. 76). In addition, he is also forgiving, saving a wounded member of the Basij, a paramilitary militia, who was repressing the demonstrations (*ZP.*, p. 70-72). Taymour affirms that the members of the Basij are the same young men who fought in the Iran-Iraq War and that it would be cowardly to let the protesters kill him (*ZP.*, p. 71-72). Showing that even the members of repressive forces of the government are capable of good deeds, the Basij saved by him repays the favor by saving Taymour's life and preventing other Basij from setting fire to his store (*ZP.*, p. 185-186). These compassionate acts show that, as Amir (2012) affirms in an interview, there is "no absolute evil", and even the guards can be touched and moved.

Whereas the country is negatively represented, the Iranians are valued. Everything in Iran seems stuck, from the traffic (*ZP.*, p. 85) to the photocopy machine (*ZP.*, p. 75), symbolizing the country's paralysis. A character also mentions ironically the suspicions about the Iranian nuclear program, saying that Iran cannot even produce a good screwdriver, much less nuclear weapons (*ZP.*, p. 75). The population, on the contrary, provides a glimpse of hope for the future due to their positive features, such as their persistence in fighting against repression.

Another instance of contrast between a corrupted institution and the people who fight against it is the relation between mainstream media and blogs. While mainstream media ignores the demonstrations, Hassan, Mehdi's brother, keeps a blog so that his brother's memory will not vanish (*ZP.*, p. 63). Hassan also affirms that his posts are all which remains from the young people arrested in front of him at the hospital, establishing once again a relationship between the act of writing and that of remembering (*ZP.*, p. 31). The government's attempts to erase the past are reflected on the prohibition of public funerals, press statements and even obituaries about those who were killed in the protests (*ZP.*, p. 204, 209). Yet the graphic narrative ends in a hopeful tone, with Hassan stating that resistance will continue even in his exile in Turkey as long as he has access to the internet (*ZP.*, p. 229). Thus, the Iranians are not represented as extremists who support the regime, but as people who are willing to run risks and make sacrifices in their fight against it.

Diverse references to the Iranian culture contribute to the deconstruction of stereotypical views of the Iranians as radicals and violent terrorists. The works of classical poets such as Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), Hafez (around 1320-1388), Rumi (1207-1273), and Ferdowsi (935-1020) are mentioned or quoted in *Zahra's Paradise*, usually countering the practices of the Islamic regime. The verses of Hafez and Khayyam are associated to ideas of friendship and the love of God, Khayyam being described as the most dangerous enemy of the Islamic Republic, whose poetry is the true Constitution of Iran (*ZP.*, p. 148, 171). The homophobic practices of the Iranian government are criticized by the taxi driver, who affirms that Rumi and Shams Tabriz, a close friend who inspired his works, would be condemned to death if they lived in Iran nowadays (*ZP.*, p. 89). Amir affirms in an interview that these poets express the Persian

spirit which is "all about connecting and relating across boundaries" (AMIR; KHALIL, 2011b). This way, stereotypes about the Iranian people are rejected through these references.


Picture 3: After seeing the execution of two homosexual young men, the taxi driver affirms that the poet Rumi would be hanged by the Iranian regime and quotes Hafez, suggesting that the men in power go against Islamic precepts.

Besides, the representation of Western countries makes it clear both that Occidental powers contribute to maintaining the political situation in Iran unchanged and that the problems which affect this country are not exclusive of Iran or the Orient. Western companies are accused of working with the Iranian government and even helping it to keep its citizens under surveillance (*ZP.*, p. 51, 175). Western powers, more particularly the United Kingdom, are related to a downfall of Iranian economy and of the country's Prime-Minister in 1953 (*ZP.*, p. 87). In addition, the public executions with the use of cranes are compared to the Ku Klux Klan, which shows that similar terrors also happen in the Western world (*ZP.*, p. 89).

Nevertheless, the West is not demonized since it is the place where the horrors happening in Iran can be denounced (*ZP.*, p. 213). Besides, similarly to *Persepolis*, *Zahra's Paradise* shows the influence of Western culture in Iran, especially of the musicians and soccer players admired by Mehdi, and in the authors' style, with references to Escher and Michelangelo (*ZP.*, p. 94, 98, 99, 108). Both references are used to criticize the Iranian regime, comparing the bureaucracy to Escher's drawings of impossible constructions and the men in power to the figures of God and Adam in

Michelangelo's painting "The Creation of Adam", suggesting that they consider themselves omnipotent. This way, the book avoids binaries in which the Occident is equated to evil and the Orient to good or vice versa.
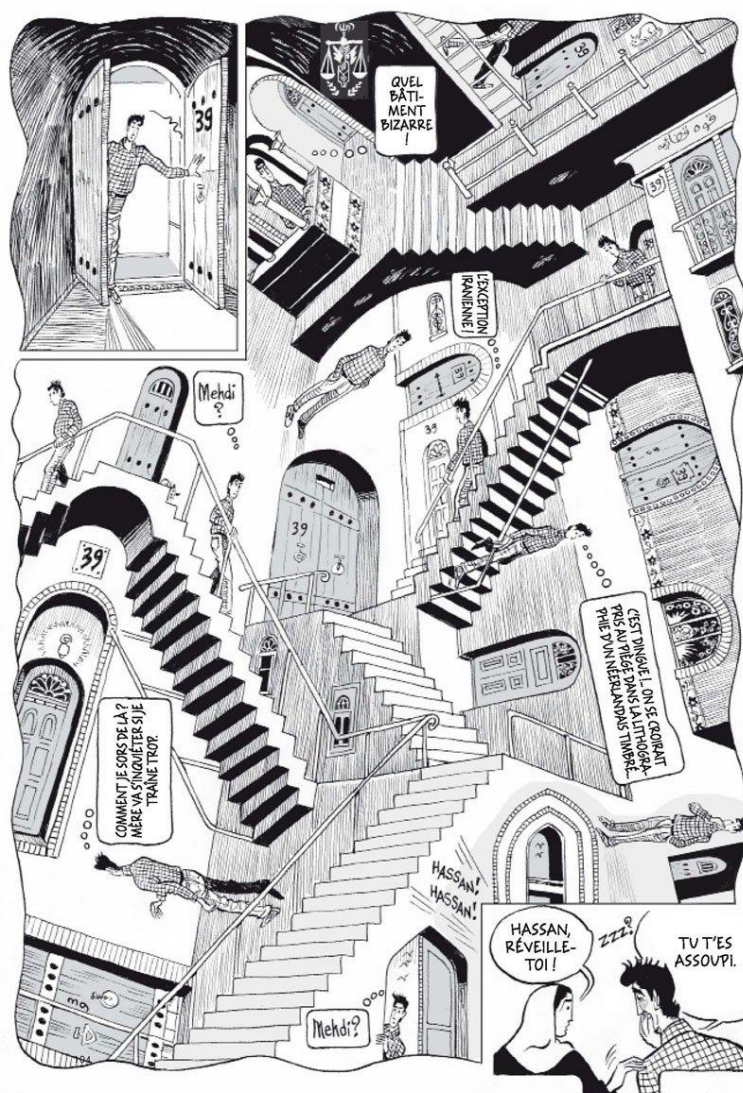
Picture 4: The analogy between Escher's impossible constructions and Iranian bureaucracy.

In conclusion, *Persepolis* and *Zahra's Paradise* criticize the Iranian regime while rejecting a stereotypical perspective on the country and its people. Both works deny the association of the Iranians to fanaticism, terrorism and the inability to rule themselves in a democratic way, without representing the Occident as absolute evil. Therefore, these graphic narratives present a more balanced view of the Orient — in a negation of the stereotypes discussed by Said and Bhabha —, as well as an alternative to bridge the gaps between East and West.

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