

# SEARCHING FOR A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN: RETHINKING THE IRANIAN DIASPORA IN "PERSEPOLIS", "SHAHS OF SUNSET" AND "A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT"

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*Abstract:* For diasporic communities created through violence or forcible resettlement, home transcends physical boundaries and becomes a blend of past experience and future imagination. Iranians displaced after the 1979 Revolution have imagined home through various cultural mediums, such as, television, film, and literature. Three cultural texts produced by Iranian women, (*Persepolis*, *Sahs of Sunset*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*), in particular, offer illuminating glimpses into the diaspora experience. I propose to engage in a close textual reading of the aforementioned works across methodological boundaries to show that despite their portrayal of varied diaspora life experiences, the diaspora paradigm reduces these experiences to a figurative return to the homeland. I argue that the diaspora paradigm, by offering a highly romanticized and homogenizing understanding of home and foreign land, flattens the diversity of identity and experience. Furthermore, the diaspora paradigm denies the role of intersection of class and gender on the lived experiences of the actual diaspora population. Through an alternative reading of these texts, I hope to challenge the prevalent paradigm through which Iranian diaspora identity is understood. I focus on autobiographical textual trends as a method of story-telling and self-formation, comparing this narrative structure to the theory of identity as 'infinitely postponed' in exile. I specifically highlight crucial interactions of local and global forces that shape diaspora experiences otherwise elided in the existing scholarship, complicating romantic understandings of both home and abroad.

*Keywords:* Iranian Diaspora, Selfhood, Media Texts, Female Authorship, Identity.

## INTRODUCTION

For diasporic communities, "home" has always transcended physical boundaries: home becomes an abstraction, a blend of past memories and future imagination. For Iranians displaced by the 1979 Revolution, cities and countries in the West have become new "homes" around the world<sup>1</sup>. Although these diasporic groups have built physical homes outside of Iran, the yearning for the spiritual "home" remains palpable. This material and spiritual dichotomy is frequently mediated<sup>2</sup> through the forms of cultural

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production as outlined in Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities and print capitalism<sup>3</sup>. Iranian exiles and immigrants living in Western countries have created cultural texts through modern means of print capitalism that seek to evoke Iran as a "home" while at the same time mediate an immigrant experience. Many of these exiled Iranian authors, specifically women, can be understood as searching for a "room of their own"<sup>4</sup> within society from which to write about their experience, in a similar vein as feminist essayist and author Virginia Woolf.

Reading culture as text, as is attempted in this essay, originated in the eclectic sphere of cultural and media studies<sup>5</sup>. Approaching cultural products as texts assists in enveloping an increasingly diverse set of media forms under one methodological umbrella. I have chosen the term "cultural text" to refer broadly to a range of media products and media "texts" because its terminological flexibility<sup>6</sup> lends it particularly well to discussing diasporic media. Cutting across the disciplinary boundaries separating various mediums<sup>7</sup>, print, film, television, comics, and digital media, and then uniting them all as cultural texts allows one to apply a cultural text's "generality, disposition to travel, and broad interpretability" to glean a new "insight into social life", specifically the condition of diasporic social life, in the context of an increasingly globalized world (Bachmann-Medick 2012: 102, 99). We discover that in the modern view of diasporic studies, Virginia Woolf's room is but one of many in a complex, fragmented house of the geographically dispossessed.

Relying on Arjun Appadurai's five "-scapes" theory, this paper is concerned primarily with the Iranian diasporic "mediascape"<sup>8</sup>. Mediascape refers to the proliferation and production of information in the form of various digital and print mediums (Appadurai 1990: 298-299) that creates a "community of sentiment" (Appadurai 1996: 7). Various forms and mediations of diasporic cultural texts ultimately unite to create a community of sentiment that evokes a nationally or ethnically specific experience of exile. In this paper, I seek to analyze how and why certain cultural texts produced by Iranian women have found themselves located within this particular diasporic mediascape.

Using Appadurai's mediascape framework, it is possible to bypass the various methodological constraints of a singular disciplinary approach to various medias, whether cinematic or literary,

and instead access the “fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes” (Rantanen 2004: 13) explored in diasporic media through close textual reading (Hartley et al. 2002: 145). Reading cultural products as texts places emphasis on the voice of the author or creator of such texts and reveals how through narrative imagination<sup>9</sup> authors make and re-make their experience in exile. I argue that the concepts of the home and the self presented by the female Iranians authors in three works frequently cast as emblematic of the diaspora paradigm, *Persepolis*, *Shahs of Sunset*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, are far more complex and cannot be subsumed under a rubric of the diasporic experience.

A closer and more critical reading of these texts, a comic book, a reality television show, and a film respectively, I maintain, allows us to move beyond a reductionist narrative of both the self and the home. The diaspora paradigm recognizes that the construction of home is predicated on “economic, social, cultural and psychological resources [...] as well as emotional, affective, and psychic processes”<sup>10</sup>, thereby acknowledging the material and emotional pre-conditions necessary for any type of creative imagination. However, this act of recreation is not exclusively tied to a diasporic condition. Rather, the construction of a new home is part of a postmodern journey towards finding a space to self-actualize in a world that is filled with in-between spaces<sup>11</sup>, not simply ethnic or national, but the complicated spaces of gender, age and class. By proposing that these texts are first and foremost individual attempts of these authors to find a cultural shelter for themselves, I analyze them as creative acts of liberation. I suggest we either abandon the concept of diaspora, or at least engage in a re-definition beyond essentialism that takes into account questions of privilege and self-definition.

The diasporic condition has increasingly been an experience that individuals have sought to express and understand as a feature of modern social life. The concept of a diaspora refers to the dispersion of a population beyond their traditional homeland<sup>12</sup>. The diaspora paradigm emphasizes the fraught nature of belonging for individuals who have left or been exiled from their natal communities. Culturally, the diaspora paradigm examines identity formation in exile as a visible dichotomy between home and host country. Despite what seems the relative “newness” of the discourse concerning diaspora and diasporic conditions, the diaspora

is not firmly attached to the postmodern condition but is derived from the “classical diasporas”, the Jewish, the Greek and the Armenian<sup>13</sup>. Today, the diaspora paradigm has expanded to “mediate, in a lived tension, the experience of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (Clifford 1994: 311).

In recent years, the diaspora paradigm has gained wider currency beyond academia and become part of the mainstream cultural milieu<sup>14</sup>. Iranian women in particular have produced some of the most sophisticated and popular narratives of their exile experiences<sup>15</sup>. Each work I discuss, *Persepolis*, *Shahs of Sunset*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, has been categorized as diasporic by critics and scholars despite their different mediums. Reading these diverse cultural texts comparatively<sup>16</sup> allows for the deconstruction of the term “diasporic” and facilitates the reconciliation of these various narratives across time, space, and medium to a universal feminist experience of emancipation through storytelling.

Scholars and media critics have read the gendered experiences of the female Iranian protagonists in these works and universalized their diasporic experiences. *Persepolis* is described as a representative text of diasporic cultural production. In the journal “Iranian Studies” Amy Malek calls *Persepolis* a “case study” in diasporic culture (Malek 2006: 353-380) and Nima Naghibi and Andrew O’Malley describe the author of *Persepolis* Marjane Satrapi as a “diasporic” woman (Naghibi and O’Malley 2005). The media attention surrounding *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* contextualizes the film as an “Iranian diaspora romantic vampire drama set in the western United States” (Seal 2016), or assigns the film’s authenticity as “related to its roots in the diaspora” (Verfürth 2016). *Shahs of Sunset* for all its glitz and glamour is described as capturing the sense of a “young diaspora” (Khakpour 2016).

Iranian women writers reflect very critically upon their journeys in finding a room of their own. Much like Virginia Woolf, albeit under a different historical and cultural landscape, the women authors of *Persepolis*, *Shahs of Sunset* and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* are also searching for their room of their own within different forms of homes and varying narrative journeys. These women writers create stories that explore and chal-

lunge the veracity and capability of the diaspora paradigm to fully recognize the diversity, fragmentation, and contradiction of their experiences as presented in their texts.

These texts reveal a profound dissatisfaction and even a rejection of the diaspora paradigm. This set of Iranian women authors pursues a far more fluid and non-nationalistic presentation of their intimate individual realities, pieced together from a mosaic of experiences and identities as exemplified by their creative and individualistic approaches to each form of narration. In *Persopolis*, *Shahs of Sunset* and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, the question of home remains unfixed and elusive for these women. The search for the self as a woman, as an Iranian, and as a person remains in turmoil as well. To document this I will begin by first summarizing and contextualizing the current trends of the diasporic paradigm of analysis and the current cultural space these women occupy before beginning a close reading of the texts. I end by highlighting the overall deficiency of the diaspora paradigm in analyzing these texts. These texts, I argue, are united by individualist strains in each narrative that affirms the agency and power of each female author to tell her own story and thereby to construct her own home as a testament to her liberation from constraints of both local community and nation.

## TRENDS OF DIASPORIC CULTURAL TEXTS AND FEMALE IRANIAN AUTHORSHIP

The diaspora paradigm of cultural analysis has evolved in recent years, with the very nature of the diaspora paradigm lending itself to a certain flexibility and indeterminacy of meaning. Leading scholars in the discipline generally agree that the diaspora experience is defined by a “collective trauma” or a “banishment” (Cohen 1997: IX) from the homeland with dispersed peoples maintaining a “real or imagined relationship to a “homeland”, mediated through the dynamics of collective memory and the politics of “return” (Edwards 2001: 52). Dispersion refers to the scattering of individuals from their homeland in new geographical locations whereby they maintain a symbolic connection to their homeland despite the maintenance of physical distance. The diaspora paradigm has produced three overarching qualities that define the

diasporic experience: dispersion in space, orientation towards the homeland, and boundary maintenance (Brubaker 2005: 5-6).

As such, the diaspora paradigm retains a troubling degree of descriptive flexibility to apply to any movements of individuals and their real or even imaged yearning towards a home. This contention is supported by scholars such as Rogers Brubaker who laments that the diaspora label has shifted to “every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed in space” (Brubaker 2005: 3). Scholars of diaspora studies emphasize the diaspora’s power of manifesting “itself in relations of difference” (Tölölyan 2007: 650) as an alternative to the models of nations and national interaction (Brazier and Mannur 2003: 7). At its most powerful, the diaspora offers us “a means to theorize both culture and politics at a transnational level” (Edwards 2001: 55). The diaspora paradigm has the potential to analyze and contextualize individual narratives outside and in opposition to national models, provided such narratives still attach themselves to the grounding of a collective diasporic experience. Despite these new conceptual and analytical possibilities, the diaspora paradigm has in many ways over-extended itself and essentialized diasporic identity by the way in which it has sought to challenge concepts of homogeneous, essentialized nationalism. As Brubaker argues, “Diaspora can be seen as an *alternative* to the essentialization of belonging; but it can also represent a non-territorial *form* of essentialized belonging”<sup>17</sup>. Yet, Brubaker neglects the emancipatory act and meaning of “diasporic” cultural production for the involved individual. He fails to propose a way out of this essentialized dichotomy. In this dichotomy the individual is lost, supplanted by communities on either side of the host country or homeland dialect.

It is fair to argue that the diaspora paradigm’s inclusivity of any and all experiences of physical and emotional exile has diluted the meaning of diaspora, universalizing the status of diasporic membership to such an extent that almost all individuals can lay claim to some form of physical, emotional or cultural exile. Because of this flexibility, we find these three cultural texts, *Persepolis*, *Shabs of Sunset*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, sharing the same cultural space. The cultural texts produced by Satriapi, Amirpour and the women in *Shabs of Sunset*, MJ, GG and Asa, in many ways can be read as diasporic: each individual is dispersed in space, and the autobiographical method of narrative

construction orients the self towards an elusive “home” in Iran. However, these women construct themselves as both outside their ancestral cultural framework and yet also differentiated from their host country. Satrapi, Amirpour, MJ, GG and Asa exist in a constant state of flux that is not explicitly tied to their exile, but rather tethered to the global experience of modernity and a unique female condition. This state of flux and the cultural and social implications of their stories serve as acts of individual liberation.

Ultimately, these three texts chronicle a search for unity of the self outside of Iran or any host country and illuminate the creation of a room of one’s own that is free from claims of nation or community, a space to be one’s self<sup>18</sup>. While a consensus exists that the condition of exile itself inspires creativity and production (Malek 2006: 356) of new identities and new spaces, *Persepolis*, *Shahs of Sunset*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* push back against this claim. They show that it is the creative act by one’s self that is the liberation, not a liberation predicated on an experience of exile or attached exclusively to the diaspora paradigm. Liberation of the self is a de-territorialist act.

#### “PERSEPOLIS”: A CURIOUS ADVENTURE

In *Persepolis* author Marjane Satrapi depicts her experiences growing up during two formative events in Iranian history, the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Most widely known for her graphic novels *Persepolis* and *Persepolis II*, Satrapi has published children’s books and contributed to various magazines and publications (New York Times 2005). Born in Northern Iran, Satrapi spent most of her childhood and adolescence in Tehran before finally fleeing to Paris in 1994. It is her graphic novel *Persepolis*, however, that has resonated with a wide public audience. At one point topping the New York Times Paperback list at No. 1 (Gustines 2013), *Persepolis* has won the 2001 Alph’Art Coup de Coeur Prize in Angouleme and the Prix du Lion in Belgium (Grassian 2012: 243), among other honors. Readers and critics have been drawn to the work across national lines. Using a black and white comic illustration that takes inspiration from Western and Iranian styles<sup>19</sup>, the text follows Satrapi through her childhood and adolescence in Iran, living abroad in Vienna and her

departure from Tehran to Paris. *Persepolis* represents both a textual and narrative hybridity that is often referred to as characteristic of diasporic cultural texts<sup>20</sup>. *Persepolis* as a cultural text occupies a distinctive place of its own, Satrapi's own room. Satrapi's portrayal of the common constraints experienced in teenage girlhood coupled with the more sinister dangers of the rigid social rules of the Islamic regime reveal a story that seems to subvert, if not reject, its critical reception as diasporic.

As a comic or graphic novel, Satrapi's *Persepolis* has been described as a "transcultural narrative" (Honray 2013: 51) that employs the traditionally Western aesthetic form of a comic<sup>21</sup>. Since the advent of the mobile printing press (Mehta and Mukherji 2015: 2) comics have been utilized to disseminate messages and narratives through the union of image and text to reach a mass-audience. Comics as a cultural text have more recently shifted in critical perception from a "mass to a 'popular' cultural product" (Mehta and Mukherji 2015: 2) worthy of study<sup>22</sup>. Comics have been recognized as a significant medium utilized by authors to express transnational or diasporic narratives that physically illustrate "new public modernities" or "different (post)national imaginaries" (Mehta and Mukherji 2015: 3-4). Satrapi's *Persepolis* is distinctively representative of a comic's ability to engage in (post)national imagination that surpasses not simply traditional boundaries of nation, but through visual framing of specific comic panels, critiques of the boundaries of community and gender.

*Persepolis* chronicles Satrapi's coming of age during the period of increasing repression in the Islamic Republic Regime. In the comic, Satrapi attempts to come to terms with a series of shifting identities that are instantly at tension from her earliest childhood. Satrapi challenges the notion that she must belong to a religious or secular, fundamentalist or modern identity from an early age. She recognizes her own experience and her own identity as more complex and nuanced. She sees both herself, and her family, as feeling at home within both a religious and secular designation (fig. 1).

The Islamization of Iran's political, social and cultural life exacerbates the division that Satrapi rebels against. Here, in this panel Satrapi displays such a dichotomy visually with her body cut in half. The composite parts of her Islamic faith and her avant-garde nature make up the composite of her whole self. This type of



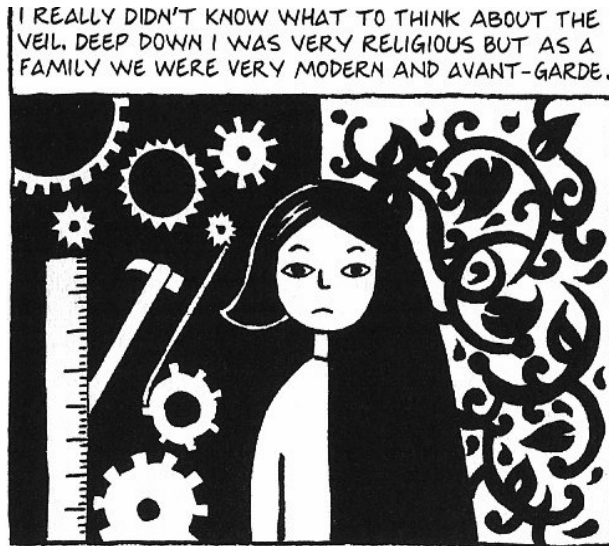


FIG. 1. *Satrapi 2007: 1 The Story of a Childhood, Section 1: The Veil*

symbolic dialectical framing of religion and modernity challenges the simplified premise of exile orientation towards the homeland as presented in the diaspora model. Satrapi rejects any simplification of her own identity, with the split down the middle of the panel indicating her feelings of compartmentalization. She is alternatively religious and modern, but this classification occurs outside any communalist definition of those terms. This split panel highlights Satrapi's "ambiguous 'in between' cultural position", (Honray 2013: 51) but its depiction during her childhood before there is any significant experience of physical or emotional exile suggests that such feelings of isolation or of being "in-between" are not tied to a diasporic condition but are part of the journey of growing-up as a young girl. The various claims of identity that make up Satrapi's whole self become more complex and at times contradictory as she grows older.

Satrapi's dissatisfaction with communal forms of identity becomes most evident as she transitions into adolescence. As a teenager Satrapi begins listening to punk and heavy metal, she has

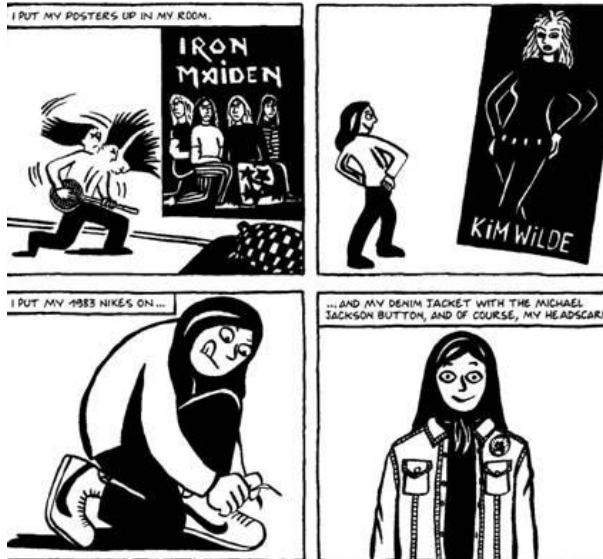


FIG. 2. Satrapi 2007: 1 *The Story of a Childhood*, Section 17: Kim Wilde

poster of British musician Kim Wilde in her room. In this private space Satrapi asserts her own cultural independence: she rocks out in her room and buys illicit tapes on the black market. Her room is her own (fig. 2).

This series of panels shows Satrapi's emotional multiplicity that challenges the concept of cultural purity and state imposed regulations. Satrapi's teenage years in Tehran are defined by Iron Maiden and Michael Jackson despite her wearing the veil in public. Satrapi's cultural preferences are influenced by a mixture of British and American artists; she has already become hybridized before any experience of physical exile from Iran. Satrapi's annexation of various cultural signifiers, her punk-style jacket complete with patches and her traditional veil, represent her creative journey towards becoming herself. Her switching between Iranian and Western cultural norms suggest, according to the diaspora paradigm, an experience of "cultural schizophrenia"<sup>23</sup>.

Such descriptions of Satrapi's experience deny her imaginative agency and her ability to exist untethered to any group. Reading

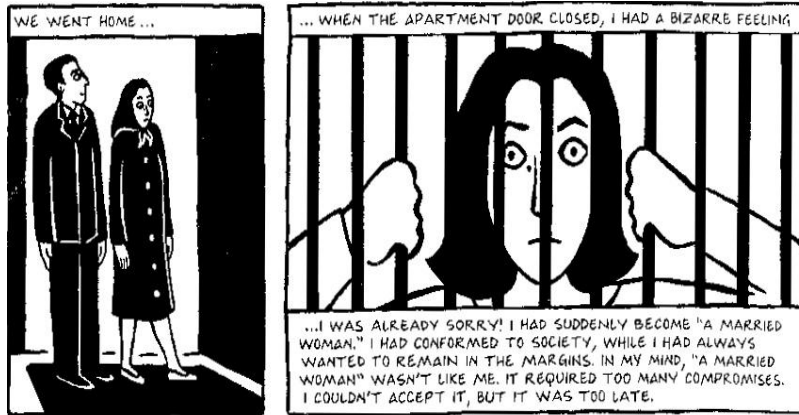


FIG. 3. Satrapi 2007: 2 *The Story of a Return*, Section 17: *The Wedding*

Satrapi as floating between alternative cultural territories, Western or Iranian, or even diasporic, does not recognize her own personal space as a legitimate claim.

The diaspora paradigm and the diasporic designation of *Persepolis*, which territorializes a sense of belonging, fails to address isolation and exclusion *within* a society experienced by an individual. This search for a space that Satrapi begins to undertake during her adolescence becomes a constant theme throughout the book whether she is in Iran or abroad in Vienna and Paris. Satrapi's narrative transcends both nation-state boundaries and any iteration of an in-between or "third space"<sup>24</sup>. She constructs her own identity that is staunchly individualist at what proves to be a very high social cost.

Eventually, Satrapi leaves Vienna to return home to Tehran. At this stage in the comic she is a young woman. Yet her reunification with her homeland and family is still fraught with cultural and personal tension. At the height of Satrapi's isolation, she marries one of her fellow university classmates, Reza, but in doing so, she feels herself begin to disappear into the fabric of suppressed Iranian society and the fabric of the veil. She is what might be termed a diasporic character in her homeland (fig. 3).

Satrapı says she had “always wanted to remain on the margins”, even in her home country of Iran, suggesting that these liminal spaces described by the diaspora paradigm are not limited to “borderlands” between nations, but occur within nations mediated by divisions of religion, class and gender. The visual effect of the jail bars cutting through Satrapı’s body underscores the danger of essentialized identity at home or in the diaspora. She is literally cut into pieces; her own self can find no unification inside or outside of Iran. This panel also proves contradictory to the prevailing discourse of diasporic Iranian female autobiographies as narrative “unveilings” of women’s experiences in Iran<sup>25</sup>. The marginalization Satrapı experiences because of her forced veiling and her marriage is certainly connected to the laws and customs of the Islamic State, however, Satrapı’s depiction of her internal jailing suggests that she feels marginalized not simply socially or politically, but psychically. Ultimately, Satrapı does not find total liberation once she has left the constraints of her homeland.

Satrapı’s ultimate rejection of any imposed home comes when she decides to divorce Reza and leave for Paris, a clear act of independence. In the cinematic adaptation of *Persepolis*, Satrapı’s drawing style is still preserved but she appears in color, while Iran is depicted in black and gray. This cross-over from comic to animated film further highlights the diversity and similarity of what have been termed diasporic media. This shift of Satrapı’s narrative from a comic to a cinematic medium still falls within mediascape’s “image-centered, narrative-based [...] reality” (Appadurai 1990: 299) and as such, can be read in a similar fashion as Satrapı’s original comic as a cultural text.

This panel or film still shows Satrapı, even in her homesickness, at her most vibrant and most alive. To suggest along the lines of the diaspora paradigm that Satrapı orients herself towards her homeland is mostly correct, but her orientation is defined by a sense of intense criticism, even rejection towards the country that she loves. To live her life and find a room of her own, Satrapı had to escape to the margins, legitimizing above all her own space, even if in the process she still carries with her the feeling of being adrift. This fraught rejection of Iran complicates *Persepolis*’ categorization as an unveiling autobiography, Satrapı hardly seems ready, or able, to reveal her “true” self once she escapes Iran because she still exists in a state of individual flux (fig. 4).



FIG. 4. *Satrapı and Paronnaud 2007*

Satrapı fundamentally rejects the repressive and totalitarian home Iran has come to represent. Satrapı has exiled herself in a sense to achieve her own freedom. A diasporic reading of Satrapı's rejection of her homeland reveals the paradigm's inability to reconcile itself with a sense of emancipatory individualism. Satrapı's isolation, depression, and discomfiture with her status in Iran as well as abroad in Vienna are supposedly representative of her inability to affix herself to a collective identity: "[Satrapı] could not turn the in-between space into a redefinition of her identity because it was not acknowledged by others" (Honray 2013: 59). The diaspora paradigm is unable to recognize the "in-between" or the margins as a space of imaginative recreation of the self unless those spaces are given context and legitimacy by a community of others. In an interview, Satrapı firmly rejects any sense of self that requires communal context: "I am against the idea of communities. I hate communities [...] It's very similar to my thinking on identity" (Watson 2016). In *Persepolis* Satrapı crafts a narrative that complicates the notion of diasporic identity, or cultural identity in general, as requiring community grounding. *Persepolis* is revealing, emancipatory and liberating, but the liberation Satrapı experiences is not so simple. It is fraught with memories of the past and the expectations of society. Only in the mar-

gins can Satrapi have the freedom to move beyond her past towards any future of her own.

### RISING FROM THE “GHETTO OF BEVERLY HILLS”

In *Shahs of Sunset*, the memories of the past figure quietly into the background of the loud and glittery reality television show featuring a cast of Iranian-Americans. Via Bravo's reality television network, life as an Iranian-American woman is celebrated and exaggerated. If diasporic identity is a claim, as Brubaker suggests, then the women in *Shahs of Sunset* certainly seem ready to claim their Iranian heritage. This appropriation, however, is not necessarily a claim to the collective membership of the Iranian diaspora in a traditional sense. Utilizing the format of reality television, the three women featured in the show, Asa, GG and MJ, remake their own narratives on screen in real time.

The medium of reality television, like that of comics or graphic novels, has frequently been disparaged by the public and scholars as a “low-taste” (Skeggs 2010: 68) form of popular-culture, especially because of its unclear categorization as a media that switches between genres of documentary, melodrama, and television-diary. *Shahs of Sunset*, however, is located within a broader mediascape where 78% of cable television (Skeggs 2010: 68) can be classified as reality TV. Because of this incredible proliferation and popularization of reality television as a new media, *Shahs of Sunset*, self-reflexively American and Iranian, is a particularly useful cultural text to read in reference to the diaspora paradigm that emphasizes diasporic cultural production as serious, high-minded, and above all a communal process in which “[diasporic] cultural and political reproduction is organized, institutionalized, funded, and also carried out by the works of artists, performers, political entrepreneurs, clerics, and other elites”<sup>26</sup>. While the women and men showcased in *Shahs of Sunset* are certainly representative of a monied Californian elite, they have at times been cast in opposition to the Iranian community who they purport to represent<sup>27</sup>, making *Shahs of Sunset* all the more revealing of the tensions of cultural authority and authenticity present within the diaspora paradigm.

The show is identical in format to other American reality television shows featuring personal camera interviews and the filming of mundane wealth and social pettiness. As a medium, reality television, despite its low-brow connotations, represents a fundamentally hybrid form<sup>28</sup> of media, one that allows for the cast of such a show to engage in a constant “reconstruction’ and negotiation” (Holmes and Jermyn 2004: 11) of reality through their own commentary and action. Reality television, read as a cultural text<sup>29</sup>, is understood as “a social laboratory where various versions of modernity are elaborated and contested” (Kraidy 2010: 18). As such, *Shabs of Sunset* represents a cultural text that, because of its medium, is able to highlight how in its current form, diasporic identity is not merely contestable in certain social contexts, but incredibly contradictory, when read through the intersection of other claims to social class and gender.

The show features three women, Asa, GG and MJ. The women were all very young when they left Iran, and they categorize their flight from Iran after the Islamic Revolution as a traumatic escape for freedom. They speak of “losing everything” (Gharachedaghi et al. 2012) in their home country to come to “Tehrangeles”. *Shabs of Sunset* represents an extreme form of cultural self-examination in the format of a reality television show, which is itself a subversive cultural text where the self is both magnified and condensed. As a reality television show, *Shabs of Sunset* “is located within the longer process of modernity whereby personhood is opened out through the display of intimacy” (Skeggs 2010: 73). The process of developing a personhood is represented through the first-person video confessional where Asa, GG, and MJ present themselves as occupying a space as both first and second generation Iranian-Americans, living in a menagerie of excess and luxury. The women discuss shopping and MJ carts around her two hand-bag dogs à la Paris Hilton, but GG and the other characters constantly chime in to describe their lifestyle, “Hello, we’re Persian” (Gharachedaghi et al. 2012). During the first-person confessionals, GG and MJ frequently reference the traditionalism of their mothers and grandmothers who expect them to marry respectable Persian boys.

The self that Asa, GG, and MJ present is specially curated in the reality television format. The lighting, background of artfully decorated rooms and outfits are precisely chosen yet conversely

indicative of their everyday “real” lives<sup>30</sup>, leaving the line between Los Angeles and Iran blurred, and the viewer rendered uncertain what is reality and what is artifice. One could see MJ, GG and Asa as living in a liminal space as exiles, but as the show progresses this claim of exile becomes increasingly tenacious and fraught by the problem of wealth. The women presented in *Shahs of Sunset* push viewers to consider their identity as distinct and individualized, an amalgamation of their wealth, their nationality and their gender, a selfhood constructed in their own space.

*Shahs of Sunset* features a constant construction of the self as the episodes happen in real time and the characters deal with issues of tension connected to their estranged families and their religious heritage. MJ, a high-powered real estate agent is criticized by her mother who says she is dressed like, “an Iranian peasant girl in a village behind Qom” (Gharachedaghi et al. 2012) and discusses the pressures of the familial expectations of marriage. *Shahs of Sunset* mixes the distinction between Iranian and American, and as a form of modern media captures the tension between pretension, authenticity and the shifting nature of identity. What is “real” and what is not is a constant question in the reality television format. The show reveals the impossibility of assigning authenticity much less uniformity in diasporic membership. Asa, a singer and artist, discusses her complex identity as an Iranian, “Iran is not my home, I’m emotionally homeless, that’s the refugee experience” (Gharachedaghi et al. 2012). Asa may consider herself a refugee and reject her Iran as her home, but she continues to identify and connect to Iran through her music career, singing in Persian. Asa rejects the nation of Iran but continues to forge a connectivity with Iranian culture to create art that is her own.

*Shahs of Sunset* gives this set of Iranian-American women a platform to assert themselves in a real way as subjects in charge of their self-representation. Stuart Hall describes diasporic identities, for example, as “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall in Cohen 1997: 138). In the reality television format, individuals constantly engage in this type of reproduction to craft increasingly marketable and entertaining personas of themselves. In assigning a constant fluctuation to identity, according to Hall’s work it seems as though in a format such as reality television, it can be impossible to locate a formative identity such as “Iranian” within



the context of *Shabs of Sunset*. Hall indicates in his work that the power of the diaspora is to bring “hidden histories” to light, but the women of *Shabs of Sunset* are able to reveal their own histories without necessarily claiming diasporic membership.

Asa, called the “Persian Pop Princess,” is one such cast member that showcases this fluctuation. Asa has released a series of music videos, “Tehrangeles,” “Gold,” and “U Think Ur Sheik,” that play on elements of Iranian culture combining them with decidedly American synthetic beats. Asa sings in “U Think Ur Sheik” to an unnamed man that while he thinks of himself as a “fly” sheik, she’s most certainly “the Shah” (Rahmati 2011). Asa selects specific parts of Iranian culture to create playful and opulent global music that stands outside a categorization of Persian or American, but does so in a way that highlights the centrality of luxury to her identity. For example in “Gold” she sings, “Whatcha know about gold? Grandma told me gold is how I gotta be” (Rahmati 2012). Asa claims her Iranian heritage in a way that is constantly underscored by a sense of wealth. Her freedom to remake herself is contingent and inspired by luxury and seemingly divorced from a sense of physical longing for her natal land. Asa focuses on material cultural production to claim her identity (Gillespie 2002: 2), and yet, this claim is purely individual because of her incredible access to financial resources.

*Shabs of Sunset* highlights the conditions necessary for transformation and hybridity in the diaspora paradigm. To claim one’s diasporic membership, an individual must have the resources, safety and freedom to do so. Implicit in the diaspora paradigm of analysis is an assumption of its members constantly “reinscribing space” (Cohen 1997: 137) to define themselves along a non-nationalist model. In *Shabs of Sunset* GG, MJ and Asa do reinscribe their space to articulate their own experience, but they are only able to do so because of their socio-economic position. To create a home, one does need a multitude of resources. *Shabs of Sunset* highlights that one of the most important resources is financial, a realization Virginia Woolf wrote of roughly a century ago. Those members with access to cultural production are those in a position of power. GG, MJ and Asa complicate the ability of the diaspora paradigm to honor the creation of selfhood as both blurred in the modern world but also as often inaccessible to most individuals.

## THE GIRL IN THE CHADOR: THE TWILIGHT ZONE AS SCENE FOR HISTORICAL REIMAGINATION

Released in 2014, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* tells the story of Ana-Lily Amirpour's darkly charming Iranian vampire in an imagined city. Amirpour's film represents the most sophisticated challenge to the diasporic paradigm. Female Iranian writers and creators have frequently been recognized for their use of memoir and autobiography to tell diasporic narratives<sup>31</sup>. Amirpour departs from this trend with her fictive narrative structure. Successful diasporic cultural texts "reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state" (Clifford 1994: 326), and through her film Amirpour produces a powerful and self-reflexive criticism of the diaspora paradigm that reaches not only outside the normative territory and temporality of the West or Iran, but rather upends both these spaces and crafts a new and nightmarish reality that she controls.

Amirpour, a British-Iranian, both wrote and directed the film *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* exhibiting a totality of creative control over her product. Amirpour is described as a "Iranian-blooded, British-born, Miami-and-Bakersfield-raised" filmmaker who is "cross-culturally influenced" (Nicholson 2014). She released her first feature length film *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* to great critical acclaim winning several international awards including a Citizen Kane Award for Best Directorial Revelation and the Bingham Ray Breakthrough Director Award<sup>32</sup>. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* is not only critically acclaimed, but ground-breaking in terms of style, genre, and language, the first Iranian vampire movie filmed in Farsi (Nicholson 2014).

Films, unlike relatively new media technologies such as social media or reality television, have long been recognized by first postcolonial and later diaspora scholars as a medium that is particularity adept at portraying a transnational or exilic experience. Within the diaspora paradigm, shared memories are at the foundation of crafting a collective identity, and the medium of film is especially suited to presenting a shared memory both visually and narratively. Films across all genres provide viewers with the "content and form of a memory"<sup>33</sup>. From this point of departure, it is possible to read *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* as a cinematic form of a fictionalized memoir written by director Amirpour.

Cultural studies scholar Hamid Naficy has outlined a genre of diasporic or “accented” films, with Amirpour’s film most readily falling within the subcategory of “liminal cinema” that includes films that are “physically and mentally located within the host country [with narratives] centered on the life and clash of cultures in exile” (Naficy 2001: 78). Filmed in California, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* takes place in the imaginary “Bad City” in Iran and constantly straddles the line between East and West, reality and fantasy. The violence, poverty, and isolation of working-class residents of Bad City showcases the grim reality of existence in the city, but Amirpour locates the film neither fully in a host-country or her homeland of Iran. Naficy states that liminal cinema represents “an integration of the particular (Iranian) and the general (universal)” (Naficy 2001: 80). Through her cinematography, her choices of costuming and narrative structure, Amirpour presents a film that challenges not simply the center or the fixed concept of the Western nation-state, but also the margins or the constant fluctuating borderlands<sup>34</sup> of the diaspora paradigm by creating a private world outside these dichotomous communally defined spaces.

*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* is presented in black and white, lending the film a ghostly quality. Choosing to film void of color strands the film outside of any clear temporality or geography, and further emphasizes the relative similarity between day and night, destabilizing viewers’ ability to place the film within a spatial or national context. Bad City is representative of a liminal land to such an extent that it departs from our terrestrial world all together. Amirpour’s film follows a young woman in a chador, a specific type of Persian veil, who happens to be a vampire. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* takes place in a twilight zone that is both familiar and disturbing. This “twilight zone” serves as a visual setting of the “third space,” but Bad City proves that spaces of liminality are as constricting as any home or host country. The film unfolds as the girl in the chador meets Arash, a young working-class man trying to support his heroin-addicted father. The two begin a tentative friendship set against a backdrop of poverty and violence in Bad City.

Amirpour plays with multiple realities in the film, highlighting distortion. Arash’s father Hussein exists in a heroin-induced stupor to numb the grief of his wife’s death, but his addiction has

warped his memory and sense of reality. In another scene, Arash goes out to a club and is seduced by a woman, Shaydah, into taking ecstasy. Disoriented, he leaves the club and roams the streets lost until he meets the girl in the chador as she glides about on a skateboard under the fluorescent suburban streetlights (Amirpour 2014). Amirpour uses these scenes of drug use to force the viewers to question any sense of objectivity. In *Bad City*, reality melds with fantasy and distortion. Amirpour's characters challenge the conception of the self as whole or even a legitimate form of actualization. This is underscored by Arash's outfit in the club. He is dressed up as a classic Dracula with fake pointy teeth when he meets the very real vampire, the girl in the chador. Self-presentation and objective experience are constantly in tension in *Bad City*. The film presents the impossibility of having a sense of fixed, unified meaning, not because of an experience of exile, but because of the experience of industrial modernity and the suffocation of poverty. Diasporic films in their function challenge a fixed sense of the national (Higbee and Lim 2010: 9-10). However, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* goes beyond a criticism of national cultural homogeneity and questions whether in a postmodern world it is possible to attain any sort of fixed meaning in society because of the ever shifting and punishing socio-economic pressures. The poverty experienced by Arash, the drug addiction gripping Hussein, and the simple loneliness of the girl in the chador each touch upon larger forces of modernity, both emotional and material, that have rendered a sense of unity impossible in any context. *Bad City* proves that the monikers of a diasporic experience—solation, indeterminacy, and oppression—are rather equitably shared by individuals who are exiled within society because of positions of class and gender.

As a vampire, and an allegorical outcast in society, the girl in the chador represents Amirpour's conception and criticism of identity. She is the ultimate social exile. To reject society's norms, accordingly, one can only exist in the shadows, in the margins. The climax of the film occurs after Hussein in a drug-induced state visits a prostitute, Atti, and forces her to take heroin with him. The girl in the chador appears and kills Hussein. Despite Arash's ultimate realization that the girl in the chador is involved in the death, they flee *Bad City* together in his car<sup>35</sup>. The girl in the

chador and Arash express a sense of hesitation despite their triumphant act of escape.

Before this escape, the girl in the chador exists in a state of simultaneous postponement and finality, a phenomenon a similar in the diaspora paradigm's description of exile. Yet it is her rejection of Bad City, driving off into the shadows with Arash, that signals her vivacity and her strength to pursue another home even if it is on the fringes in the darkness. The girl in the chador created by Amirpour is a personification of the vampiric nature of diasporic identity. She is both dead and immortal, like the timeless yet shifting connection diaspora communities parse out between home and host country. Diasporic membership confers the benefit of belonging even in exile, but this membership proves to be a barrier to new forms of self-actualization. It is the search that is immortal. What can be called a space for reinvention and deterritorialization can also be a space of nightmarish stasis, experienced by the poor and the girl in chador. This "third space" proves not a space for reinvention and creative regeneration, but rather just another bounded prison. From the creatively liberating position as director, Amirpour crafts a narrative that brings to life this endless search.

## FINDING A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN: IRANIAN WOMEN WRITING THEIR OWN STORIES

The search for one's own space is a constant theme in these three cultural texts, a search that crosses boundaries between nations, genres, and mediums. *Persepolis*, *Shahs of Sunset* and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* detail the search for space in a charming and at times provoking artistic and narrative fashion. For these women, a home is where you can truly be yourself. Satriapi, GG, MJ, Asa and Amirpour complicate, criticize and even reject the notion and nature of exile and diaspora as presented according to the prevailing paradigm of diaspora and showcase how modern media technologies have been utilized by women writers and creators to liberate themselves from elitist forms of cultural production to tell their own stories in the form and method of their choosing.

The search of Satrapi, GG, Mj, Asa, and Amirpour is the same as Woolf's search for "a room of one's own," whether that is in Los Angeles, Tehran, or Bad City, as separate from the limiting distinction of home, host and borderlands. These cultural texts show us that the continual search for space is elusive and antithetical to a communalist understanding of the self. These women use labels not to claim membership to a group, but to serve as a lexicon that describes an intensely individualized life experience. It is ungenerous to essentialize these stories as diasporic, muting their sophisticated criticism of identity and ignoring the elitist preconditions necessary to engage in self-definition through the artistic narrative. The most significant similarity that unites these three diverse cultural texts is not their location within the diasporic mediascape but their vibrancy and enthusiasm for a journey towards self-understanding. These texts must be read through a more general lens as stories chronicling the search for a woman's voice in a postmodern world.

Perhaps the greatest deficiency of the diaspora paradigm is not its essentialization of identity and its territorialization of culture, but its disengagement with questions of self-definition and privilege. Satrapi, GG, MJ, Asa, and Amirpour have found rooms of their own to tell their stories, but have mediated their own stories because of their economic stations. The "diaspora aesthetic" (Johnson 2013) utilized by members of diasporic communities suggests that the diaspora experience is often mediated through elitist conceptions of home and identity, a foundational flaw for a paradigm that seeks to challenge the oppressive and perceived homogeneous form and function of nation states, or for that matter religious states, to give voice to those in the margins. The diaspora paradigm of analysis that allows for the unification of a comic, a reality television show, and a film as representative of Iranian female autobiographies in fact limits the possibility of connecting these three stories to a more universal thematic narrative of feminist "becoming" in the modern world.

*Persepolis*, *Shahs of Sunset* and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* challenge the diaspora paradigm as a tool of analysis and reaffirm that home can be where one has a room of one's own, where one has a voice. Home is a space freed from alienation, where one experiences total belonging and inclusion. While the stories *Persepolis*, *Shahs of Sunset* and *A Girl Walks Home Alone*

*at Night* reveal the difficulty in mediating home, they show that it is possible to find spaces to belong. The stories told by Satrapi, Amirpour and the women in *Shahs of Sunset*, MJ, GG and Asa, prove that in the modern world we can make and unmake our “homes” beholden only to ourselves.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Los Angeles has one of the largest diasporas of Iranians outside Iran. Recent estimates state that the Iranian population of Southern California is between 300,000 and 500,000 with the majority of individuals residing in Los Angeles. Forty-percent of students registered at Beverly Hills High School are of Iranian heritage and twenty-two percent of the Beverly Hills district population are of Iranian descent. (Amirani 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Here, I use the term mediated to refer to the process of “mediation,” or creation of a media product that articulates a narrative or experience. Myria Georgious and Roger Silverstone describe the production of diasporic cultural texts as a fundamentally “political process [that provides] frameworks for identity and community [...] available as components of the collective imaginary and as resources for collective agency”. This modern process of mediation that utilizes new technological and digital mediation can be understood as a new expression of Benedict Anderson’s theory of print capitalism and imagined communities (Georgious and Silverstone 2006: 31).

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson in his seminal work *Imagined Communities* argues that through shared language and the medium of print capitalism, and by extension other forms of cultural mass production, physically dispersed communities of individuals can cultivate an imagined, but deep, shared psychic and emotional connection with one another. Anderson’s work primarily focuses on the shared connectivity of citizens in a nation state, but his theory has been implicitly used by scholars within the diaspora paradigm who posit that these same mediums of print capitalism are used to cultivate a cultural affinity and connection to the homeland in spite of their physical dispersion (Anderson 2006: 3 *The Origins of National Consciousness*).

<sup>4</sup> Published by feminist writer Virginia Woolf in 1929, the essay *A Room of One’s Own* precipitates the creative search these Iranian women engage in as writers and actors, Woolf says in her essay “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 1929: 4).

<sup>5</sup> The Birmingham group of scholars, including cultural theorist Stuart Hall, popularized and “developed a variety of critical perspectives for the analysis, interpretation, and criticism of cultural artifacts, combining sociological theory and contextualization with literary analysis of cultural texts”. Reading culture as a text seeks to both place a primacy on the creator’s or “author’s” voice in order to reveal “of meanings, values, and messages”. This paper takes inspiration from such close textual reading (Durham and Kellner 2009: XXIII and XXII).

<sup>6</sup> In approaching various cultural mediums as “texts” it is possible to complicate and even transform our understanding of various social practices and social experiences. Approaching diasporic medias as cultural texts I hope to complicate and perhaps transform our understanding of the very nature of “diasporic” (Bachmann-Medick 2012: 99).

<sup>7</sup> Media texts, and more specifically diasporic media texts, encompass a diverse range of mediums. Georgious and Silverstone define diasporic media texts as “the exchange of letters, videos and mobile phone texts and images, to the printed process, domestic and satellite television, and the Internet”. Whereas Durham and Kellner define medias as “tele-

vision, film, popular music, magazines, and advertising” Arjun Appadurai offers a more flexible definition of media products: “Electronic media [including forms of] oral, visual, and auditory mediation”. I have chosen to utilize Appadurai’s designation of media as it allows for a more inclusive discussion of different narrative media forms (Georgiou and Silverstone 2006: 32; Durham and Kellner 2009: X; Appadurai 1996: 3).

<sup>8</sup> Appadurai’s five scapes theory outlines separate spheres: ethnoscares, ideoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and mediascapes with which to categorize and comprehend the global flow of activity and material and intellectual production in the modern world (Appadurai: 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Appadurai argues that “diasporas bring the force of the imagination”. While I have utilized Appadurai’s “-scape” framework in some respects, I argue that creative imagination is not necessarily tied to a diasporic experience or necessarily evokes a collective diaspora experience. Instead, I suggest, these three cultural texts prove that creative imagination is tied to an intellectual feminist awakening that allows female authors to reimagine themselves as individuals (Appadurai 1996: 5).

<sup>10</sup> Avtar Brah discusses the conditions necessary for exiled individuals to create both physical and emotional homes during her interview with Somdatta Mandal. During the interview Brah expands on her work in light of new mass migrations (Mandal 2017: 162, 166).

<sup>11</sup> Shereen Honary in discussing the comic *Persepolis* frames this “in-between” space within the same lexicon of the diaspora paradigm “in-between” position is an opportunity, or, to allow for elaborating singular or communal strategies of selfhood to initiate new signs of identity. From this perspective, the in-between can act as a privileged position, as one is at an advantage to know and exist within a plurality of ideologies and cultures”. This notion of increased creation within an “in-between” space of exile is articulated in Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*. I argue that this notion of an “in-between” space is too exclusive and confining, and rather all spaces are potentially liminal (Honary 2013: 54).

<sup>12</sup> Outside of a strict dictionary definition of diaspora, the word has shifted and evolved substantially in its application (Oxford University Press Accessed October 15, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Cultural anthropologist James Clifford is a leading voice within the diaspora paradigm and cites the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian diasporas as the “nonnormative starting points for a discourse that is traveling and hybridizing in new global conditions”. From these points the next major evolution in the discipline of diaspora studies came with Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, published in 1993, that essentially inaugurated widespread discussion of diaspora as a collective social condition (Clifford 1994: 306).

<sup>14</sup> Brubaker’s suggests that the term diaspora has suffered a “dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space” (Brubaker 2005: 1).

<sup>15</sup> Many of the most popular books concerning the Iranian diaspora are written by female authors including Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tebran*, Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad*, and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*.

<sup>16</sup> Using comparative textual analysis, I read *Persepolis*, *Shahs of Sunset*, and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* against one another thus establishing a dialogue across these mediations that showcases their unity as narratives of female emancipation, as well as their shared implicit criticism and rejection of the diaspora paradigm. I take the position of Ruth Wodak and Brigitta Busch that “Media texts depend on intertextual relations with many other genres” (Wodak and Busch 2004: 106).

<sup>17</sup> Brubaker recognizes the fundamental danger of essentialization that is assumed within the diaspora paradigm, however fluid and flexible it strives to be: “Talk of the de-territorialization of identity is all well and good; but it still presupposes that there is ‘an identity’ that is reconfigured, stretched in space to cross state boundaries, but on some level fundamentally the same” (Brubaker 2005: 12).

<sup>18</sup> While the diaspora paradigm finds currency in its anti-nationalist foundation; “The nation-state is the primary conceptual model ‘other’ against which diaspora is defined” (Brubaker 2005: 10). However, in contrast to Brubaker, I argue that the diaspora reproduces many of the same communalist features as nationalist culture, albeit in a different



context and as an individual. In “exile”, we witness individual cultural production of that imaginary statehood.

<sup>19</sup> Satrapi is the first female Iranian author to utilize the style of a graphic novel or comic book to craft a narrative. However, her use of black and white and the simple yet highly stylized features echo the tradition of Persian miniatures or comics published in Persian journal or newspapers (Abedinifard 2015: 96).

<sup>20</sup> Vijay Agnew argues that “Diaspora, as a mode of production, refers to the reproduction of cultural phenomena through creolization and hybridization”. Satrapi’s play on the Western style comic seems to fit into this hybridized style of diasporic cultural text (Agnew 2005: 5).

<sup>21</sup> Mostafa Abedinifard discusses the significance of Satrapi choosing the comic as the medium for her semi-autobiographical narrative: “By choosing to present her story through the medium of comics, Satrapi further establishes a dialogue with the Other, in the form of her engagement with the established Western attitudes and aesthetic values that surround the production and reception of comics” (Abedinifard 2015: 84).

<sup>22</sup> Derek Parker Royal discusses how only recently in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did “traditionally marginalized writers and illustrators”, here in the Jewish context, begin to utilize the comic medium to express their own social and cultural experiences, rescuing the comic from its perception as a “trash” medium (Royal 2011: 3, 4).

<sup>23</sup> Abedinifard defines *Persepolis* as within a canon of “diasporic Iranian women’s autobiographies”. His assessment that Satrapi feels or evokes a “cultural schizophrenia” through her narrative subtly connects to the histories of women writers, specifically Virginia Woolf, who suffered from mental illnesses in some ways exacerbated by patriarchal social constraints of the period. Satrapi’s own experience with depression and attempted suicide in the comic place her within the ranks of female authors such as Woolf, who, while experiencing mental anguish also found strength and inspiration in such suffering to engage in the liberating and healing act of writing (Abedinifard 2015: 87, 91).

<sup>24</sup> Homi Bhabha discusses his theory of Third Space as an interventive space between two subjects where new meanings are created, suggesting that both culture and identity is a process constantly in flux and not dominated by a nation-state structure: “though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew”. I argue against a concrete location of “Third Space” and suggest that this space of creative reimagination is potentially accessible everywhere and even by sole individuals, such as a woman’s “room of her own” (Bhabha 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Abedinifard frames Satrapi’s narrative as liberating as it represents as “compulsory unveiling” and suggests that her “desired freedom [becomes] manifest [...] in her physically unveiled appearance”. This assessment suggests Satrapi experiences a simple dichotomy between repression in Iran and freedom in the West mediated through her “unveiling”. Such a reading marginalizes the nuances of her experience feeling lost and isolated in a variety of national and cultural contexts. (Abedinifard 2015: 84, 93).

<sup>26</sup> A leading voice in diaspora studies, Khachig Tölölyan argues for an exact framework in which diasporic cultural production occurs. *Sbabs of Sunset* complicates this production model as it features individuals that the Iranian exile community rejects as their representatives, and further, disseminates a form of Iranian identity that in many ways seems grossly Americanized, yet contends to express an authentic Iranian heritage. The role of cultural “gatekeepers” within diaspora communities represents another limiting boundary within the diaspora paradigm (Tölölyan 2003: 650).

<sup>27</sup> Many Iranians-Americans, especially more traditionally respected community leaders, including Jimmy Delshad, former mayor of Beverly Hills, author and columnist Firoozeh Dumas, and religious studies scholar and political commentator Reza Aslan expressed concern and derision about the vapid and shallow nature of the reality television show that had more in common with American shows such as *Jersey Shore* or the *Real*

*Housewives* franchises than any resemblance to the real Iranian community in America (Groves 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn discuss reality television as a “fundamentally hybrid” medium that “has shifted over time with the emergence of further permutations in ‘reality-based’ texts”. The women of *Shabs of Sunset* utilize this medium as cast members to take control of their own stories to re-make their own narratives through their exacting portrayal of their homes and their physical selves. The ability of reality television to play with aesthetics and dramatic structures can seem antithetical to the form’s supposed portrayal of “reality” but in fact shows the power of reality television to highlight how our own realities are not “set” but can be made and re-made (Holmes and Jermyn 2004: 2).

<sup>29</sup> Television criticism, especially that of a feminist variety, notes that television can be read as a “textual format” where one engages in a “close reading of programmes for their narrative structure, iconography, symbolic codes, themes, and their solicitation of pleasure, identification, and subjectivity”. I have chosen to employ this same close-reading of *Shabs of Sunset* looking critically at both dialogue and the visual imagery of the show (Brunsdon and Spiegel 2008: 7, 8).

<sup>30</sup> Skeggs notes that when using textual analysis to examine how “reality” and “authenticity” are created within a reality television show one examines “character casting, editing, use of music, narrative structures, repeated tropes, time-control, the use of melodrama, the organisation of conflict, the presence of voice-overs”. In *Shabs of Sunset* the narrative structures and the style of camera confessionals is key to Asa, GG, and MJ’s presentation of their individual stories (Skeggs 2010: 72).

<sup>31</sup> Autobiographies and memoirs are part of a specific form of diasporic cultural production called “Iranian exilic memoirs” or “Iranian diasporic memoirs”. Amirpour departs from this trend in her film that features a fictive narrative structure that is almost fantastical with its vampiric main character (Derbel 2017: 108).

<sup>32</sup> The film won seven awards out of its twenty-three nominations (IMDb *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* Awards Accessed July 17, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Russell J.A. Kilbourn discusses film as narrativizing and visualizing memory. As stated earlier, the production and manufacturing of shared memories is viewed within the diaspora paradigm as a key factor in creating a shared sense of communal identity. While the diaspora paradigm recognizes that diasporic cultural texts often highlight difference as a point to emphasize their unique diasporic identities, Amirpour’s film upends the rules of memory as she produces a film that not only revels in its difference but in its sense of foreboding unfamiliarity (Kilbourn 2010: 6).

<sup>34</sup> Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim frame diasporic films as a constant struggle between the national and the marginal: “diasporic or postcolonial film-makers working within the West and are keenly aware of power relations between centre/margin, insider/outsider, as well as the continual negotiation between the global and local that often extends beyond the host/home binary in transnational or diasporic cinema. The films they study are also seen to be characterized by issues of migration, loss and displacement that lead to identities in flux, which, again, challenge the stable and fixed (hegemonic) concept of the national” (Higbee and Lim 2010: 9-10).

<sup>35</sup> This dramatic ending scene is reminiscent of the ending of the classic 1967 American film, *The Graduate*, as Dustin Hoffman and Katherine Ross run away together on a bus, staring ahead at first euphoric and the uncertain of their future. Arash and the girl in the chador express this same joy and uncertainty during their escape for freedom (Amirpour 2014: *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*).

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