Audiovisual - Film, TV & Radio Spotlight International Featured Stories Inclusion

Marjane Satrapi, the woman who helped the world understand Iran

CREATIVESUNITE

Co-funded by the European Union

Iranian-French artist Marjane Satrapi, who died at 56, transformed global understanding of Iran through her graphic novel "Persepolis," humanizing a nation often reduced to geopolitics and repression.

Firouzeh Nahavandi, Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)

The news of Iranian-French artist Marjane Satrapi's death, on June 4, 2026, at the age of just 56, has stirred emotions that extend far beyond the world of comics and the film industry. Tributes have been paid to an outspoken, strong-willed, freedom-loving artist and a tireless critic of the Islamic Republic of Iran. None of this is inaccurate. Yet the significance of her work is not limited to this.

Marjane Satrapi achieved something rare: she made Iran understandable. More than that, she captured its human essence. Her humour, her penchant for self-deprecation, and the importance she attached to family stories and personal contradictions all point to aspects deeply rooted in Iranian culture, where tragedy and comedy often coexist within the same narrative.

Making Iran understandable to non-Iranians

For decades, Iran had often been viewed through a lens focusing primarily on strategy and security. For the Western world, the country was inextricably linked to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the American hostage crisis, the Mullahs and theocracy, regional tensions and international sanctions. The Iranians themselves were often overshadowed by their regime. It is this perspective that Satrapi helped to transform.

When Persepolis came out between 2000 and 2003, her

autobiographical account of life in Iran was far from a conventional political analysis. The graphic novel recounted a childhood, a family, and an adolescence marked by revolution and war. It was this approach that gave it its power. By telling the story of Iran from the perspective of a child and a young woman, Marjane Satrapi enabled a wide audience to grasp a reality that was foreign to them. The country no longer appeared as an abstract entity, but as a society inhabited by individuals faced with choices, contradictions, hopes and disillusionment.

Its adaptation into an animated film in 2007 further expanded its international audience and helped introduce millions of viewers to this different side of Iran.
A poster for Persepolis the movie in a Warsaw bus shelter (Poland), February 2008. Ivonna Nowicka/Wikimedia, CC BY-SA

Persepolis, an 'eye-opener' on Iran

For many Westerners, Persepolis was also an unexpected revelation: behind the slogans, diplomatic crises and revolutionary crowds lay families, teenagers, arguments, dreams and worries with which they could identify. In this way, it revealed what major events often leave in the shadows. Iran ceased to be an international problem and became a human society again. This ability to connect undoubtedly explains why her work continues to resonate with new generations.

Twenty-six years after the publication of the first volume, Persepolis remains for many a first encounter with Iranian society.

Few works have played a comparable role in the discovery of contemporary Iran.

But the role of a "bridge builder" between two cultures does not fully capture who Marjane Satrapi was. Her work does not simplify Iran; it captures its diversity and tensions. She depicts parents who are progressive yet attached to certain traditions, individuals who bend the rules without necessarily rejecting their society, exiles who are critical of Iran but sometimes disillusioned with the West, and characters who retain their ability to laugh in the face of repression.

One of the great strengths of Persepolis is that it depicts multiple layers of experience simultaneously. Political repression coexists with humour. Social constraints never overshadow individual strategies. Tradition does not preclude the desire for modernity. Conformism exists, but so does

dissent. The Iran that emerges from the pages of the graphic novel is neither a static country nor a uniform society.

These many facets of Iranian society stand in contrast to the often simplistic images via which Iran is perceived abroad. This focus on individuals rather than abstractions also runs through other comics Satrapi authored, such as Embroideries or Chicken with Plums, in which she explores family relationships, social norms, and the desires and frustrations of an Iranian society rarely depicted in all its complexity.

Making exile understandable to the Iranian diaspora

However, the significance of Persepolis is not limited to the view of Iran from the outside. The work has also struck a particular chord with many Iranians living in Europe, North America or elsewhere, in that it recounts an experience that is often difficult to put into words: that of exile. Not the heroic or tragic exile of grand national narratives, but that of everyday life. That of misunderstandings, cultural clashes and miscommunications. That of those trying to find their place in a new society without entirely abandoning their original roots. Persepolis very accurately captured how expectations collide with reality.

Footage from an interview on French TV with Marjane Satrapi from the INA archives (don't forget to activate English subtitles).

The West, as imagined, from Tehran is not always what Iranians discover on arrival. Social norms, human relationships, friendships and romantic experiences do not necessarily match the picture they had in mind. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why so many Iranians from immigrant backgrounds have identified with his story.

Looking beyond the Iranian context, Satrapi puts into words a more universal experience: that of being caught between two worlds. Living amidst multiple languages, cultures and memories, without fully belonging to any of them. Her work has thus offered many Iranians in the diaspora a mirror in which they recognise their own existential questions.

This aspect may be less visible than her political commitment to political causes. Yet it is essential. For whilst Satrapi has enabled Westerners to better understand Iran, she has also offered many exiles the tools to reflect on their own journeys. In her own way, she has built a bridge in both directions. This mediating role undoubtedly explains the special place her work

occupies. She never glosses over Iran's contradictions. Nor does she portray the West as an ideal horizon or a source of systematic disillusionment. On the contrary, she highlights the complexity of multiple identities.

Today, as Iran remains at the heart of international tensions, the protests, repression and human tragedies unfolding across the country sometimes struggle to find their place amidst geopolitical analyses.

> Marjane Satrapi's work, however, reminds us of an often-forgotten truth: no country can be reduced to its political regime.

More than twenty-five years after the comic book was printed, Persepolis remains one of the few works capable of making Iran decipherable without excusing it, critical without caricaturing it, and human without idealising it. This is undoubtedly what explains its enduring appeal.

The official trailer of Persepolis, Marjane Satrapi's eye-opening animated film masterpiece on everyday life in Iran.

Firouzeh Nahavandi, Professeure émérite, Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)
Image: Georges Bird, Wikimedia, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license