

# **Parsua Bashi's *Nylon Road*: Visual Witnessing and the Critique of Neoliberalism in Iranian Women's Graphic Memoir**

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## **Abstract:**

I offer the first critical reading in English of Parsua Bashi's graphic memoir *Nylon Road*, which traces a narrative of place and belonging by a diasporan Iranian woman after the cataclysmic changes of previous decades. The narrative is a dialogical autobiographical process in which Parsua, the narrating I, conducts a self-interrogation with eleven of her former selves. Together they weigh the competing belief systems of Iranian fundamentalism; Western secular humanism in Switzerland, where Bashi was a migrant (her preferred term) from 2004-09; and Soviet-style socialism, influential for many middle-class intellectuals in 1970s Iran. This visually charged clash of political and cultural positions serves as a lens for thinking about social relations and the role of women in public life. Bashi organizes *Nylon Road* dialogically as a site for airing visual and voiced evidence about conflicting representations of what it meant to live in, leave, and return to, Iran over a quarter century. *Nylon Road*'s story of coming of age in revolution-era Iran presents Bashi as a daughter who, unlike Marjane Satrapi, participated in the new regime's program for decades and critiqued those escaping into exile. When she finally does so, in her thirties, she is an uncomfortable migrant in Zürich, where her multiple past selves, drawn at different ages, confront her with versions of her childhood and adolescent experience that the present-time narrating I recalls quite differently in both visual and verbal terms. The differing political positions traced in these encounters with her multiple I's, distinct in her representations, form a complex set of perspectives for both reflecting on and critiquing the Islamic Revolution within feminist, global, and postcolonial contexts.

[A] political battle ... is taking place in part through the medium of the visual image. – Judith Butler (827)

Graphic narratives that bear witness to authors' own traumas and to those of others materially retrace inscriptional effacement; they reconstruct and repeat in order to counteract. – Hillary L. Chute (*Graphic* 173)

1 Many memoirs by diasporic women in the generations after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the founding of the Islamic Republic attracted international attention for their accounts of navigating the contradictions of Iran's strict fundamentalist regime. These transnational narratives of upheaval and its aftermath, usually narrated by subjects now living in the West, are often situated within a liberal-humanist framework. Such memoirs as Azar Nafisi's *Reading*

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*Lolita in Tehran* are read as “written for the West”, observes Madhi Tourage, because they are taken up by a global readership seeking validation of Enlightenment values. Notably, they were wielded, after the events of 9/11 in the United States, in a marketing campaign for Western intervention in the Middle East when Nafisi’s “ideas [found] a brand” and she became a kind of “commodity” (Whitlock 21-2).<sup>2</sup>

2 Responding to the global framing of diasporic memoirs, Nima Naghibi calls for a more nuanced reading practice with “a critical diasporic cultural politics [that] focuses on a creative tension between the home and the host country, interrogating the concept of the nation-state, and celebrating a border space that facilitates fluid cultural identities” (my emphasis). She urges rethinking the narration of the Islamic Revolution as a space of “both rupture and possibility, positioning diasporic Iranian women writers as key witnesses to testimonial narratives of loss and suffering” (154). Naghibi’s call raises interesting questions: What kinds of representational strategies might make life narratives more resistant to exploitation by campaigns announcing a message of ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation’? And, which autobiographical media can effectively link the personal and the political to promote telling stories of crisis and trauma, on the one hand, and innovative possibility, on the other, to map the ‘creative tensions’ that they set up?

3 As Naghibi and O’Malley observe, even Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* has often been read through a Western neoliberal filter focused on engaging personal details, such as teenaged Marji’s touching costume of jean jacket, Michael Jackson button, and hijab in *Persepolis I* (131), while ignoring its sharp critique of British and American oil-driven foreign policy and anti-Muslim propaganda. While its expressions of anguish about the revolution’s undermining of a distinguished Persian history and grief at the loss of family members and friends to the regime’s persecution make *Persepolis* a moving and important intervention, Satrapi has remade herself as a cosmopolitan diasporic subject, migrating to France in 1993, although she affirms her identity as Iranian.<sup>3</sup> That is, she is one of the “Iranians of the imagination” whom Naghibi distinguishes from “those who stayed behind and suffered through the war and the policies of the Islamic Republic”, some of whom now assert – invoking the rhetoric of authenticity – that they are “the ‘real’ Iranians” (152).

4 A differently situated graphic memoir tracking how the experience of the Revolution and

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<sup>2</sup> Touragi extends his critique to memoirs by writers remaining in Iran such as *Iran Awakening: One Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Life and Country* by 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi.

<sup>3</sup> Over a decade ago Satrapi insisted that her identity is as an Iranian woman. See the interview by the Asia Society <http://asiasociety.org/marjane-satrapi-i-will-always-be-iranian>.

the Islamic Republic affected both micro- and macro-Iranian histories is Parsua Bashi's *Nylon Road*, published in German in 2006, while she lived as a 'migrant' (her preferred term) in Zürich; it was translated into English a year later, then Spanish. *Nylon Road*'s innovative style of visual and verbal dialogue is a tough yet engaging antidote to narratives of nostalgia and victimage; and its dialogical style resists appropriation to a liberal humanist point of view. Like Satrapi, Bashi as a girl and young woman identified with various socialist-leftist ideological positions and criticized the excesses and abuses of the Revolution and its repressive aftermath. But because Bashi, born three years before Satrapi, did not leave Iran until 2004 (at age 37), her account in *Nylon Road* of life in Tehran for decades suggests how ideological shifts accompanying the upheaval of revolution and the fundamentalist regime texture the processes of memory as the flux of events plunges subjects into near-constant change and ever-shifting self-definition.

5 Bashi's graphic memoir is an open-ended, dialogical one. In *Nylon Road*'s plot the narrator engages serially, and non-chronologically, with eleven sharply contrasted younger 'ghost' selves that she shed with migration. As she discovers that she had "forgotten me" these ghosts gradually reawaken her to the diversity of her former beliefs and positions (Bashi 15).<sup>4</sup> Bashi's innovative use of these avatars places them on the scene of past events similarly to how eyewitnesses are positioned, although they are not genuine eyewitnesses but visual fictions created from memory. Of course, because migration is the necessary precondition for narrating a story of vulnerability and flight, a diasporic witness is not literally an 'eyewitness', although some diasporic memoirists serve as surrogate eyewitnesses to the experience of national upheaval and oppression. Bashi's ghost selves exert pressures that compel *Nylon Road*'s narrator to constantly negotiate with her memories as embodied subjects in creative tension with her migrant 'I', rather than consolidating them into a coherent post-migration identity. Her strategy of positioning encounters with these past selves in Zürich, rather than having her memories recalled by a child narrator, dramatizes how her past avatars responded quite differently over decades to the flux of experience. Bashi's rhetorical tactics and visual tropes for situating self-presentation thus provide a prismatically multi-sited account of her pre-migration past in Iran, giving *Nylon Road* an experiential authority closer to that of the eyewitness. Through this rhetorical strategy Bashi documents significant abuses that, as a young woman, she experienced during the

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<sup>4</sup> I call this process a dialogical one, drawing on Bakhtin's concept in *The Dialogic Imagination* for an ongoing process of exchange with no final resolution. Parsua's encounters with her former selves conduct a continuing dialogue as a chain of exchanges that remains unresolved at the comic's end (see Bakhtin, 292-4).

repressive early days of the Republic. Although she recounts a catalog of humiliations and losses – a severe whipping by the Islamic Court, loss of most of her family and friends through emigration, and loss of custody of her child in a divorce trial – such times are not presented as *all* that staying in Iran and working for change after the Revolution meant to her.

6 Bashi also extends her dialogical critique to the excesses of neoliberal capitalism, embodied in her experience in Zürich but visible globally in practices toward and media representations of women. Her argument has two effects: it undermines the West's claim to ethical superiority; and it underscores the tendency to represent Islamic women as abject others without distinguishing among the histories and practices of various nations and periods. *Nylon Road*'s sustained montage of past selves thus foregrounds the limits placed on women globally by conservative politics, be they in 'democratic', 'socialist', or 'religious-fundamentalist' nations. As a result, its exponential multiplication of figures of the drawn and narrated past self is a challenging dialogical 'read' that explicitly resists framing in neoliberal-humanist terms. Despite this achievement, *Nylon Road* is not well known in either Anglophone nations or Iran, where copies are prohibited from circulating officially. It merits attention, however, as a feminist diasporic graphic memoir navigating both national politics and global cultural relations with improvised and innovative visual and verbal strategies.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Search for Forgotten 'Me's' in *Nylon Road***

7 Parsua Bashi is well positioned to narrate her story. Born into a middle-class family with three children in 1966, over a decade before the Revolution, she refused her parents' urging that she migrate – unlike most of her family and friends – after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Instead, she studied art at the University of Tehran when it reopened in 1983 and became a successful, award-winning graphic designer. Yet, for 'fraternizing' with a man in public, she was sentenced to a severe whipping and thereafter, at 23, married to escape the pressures on unmarried women. Although she and her husband had a daughter, she soon found him oppressively dominating and sought a divorce. When the punitive divorce court assigned custody of her daughter to the father, she grieved although her career thrived. Eventually she was "struck by Cupid's arrow" in 2002 and left Iran in April 2004 for Zürich – in German-speaking

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<sup>5</sup> As Naghibi observes, "some narratives of the regime may languish in obscurity, unsuccessful in their attempts to claim willing witnesses" (155) if they fail to establish an "empathic engagement" (158) with readers.

Switzerland – although she did not know German, to marry Nathanael Su, a well-known jazz musician of Swiss and Cameroonian parents (6, top right). *Nylon Road* originated as a comic about a protagonist who, struggling to resume her artistic career abroad in her thirties, began work on a book of comic drawings.

8 Parsua Bashi wrote me that her idea of making the comic arose when she experienced “a Vacuum space between my past in Iran and my new life in Zürich” that spurred her to begin “a kind of daily sessions to write about my past, and draw some little pictures only to show to some friends” (Personal Correspondence, 28 Nov. 2015, hereafter referred to as PC). *Nylon Road* thus originated as a form of self-therapy in sketches that Bashi developed into a graphic memoir in collaboration with a translator and editor from Kein & Aber Publishing Company. It was awarded the “Cultural Worlds in Switzerland” prize by Pro Helvetica, the Arts Council of Switzerland. Bashi’s journey, however, was not a one-way trajectory as, three years after the memoir’s publication, she returned to Tehran, where she continues to live and work as a successful graphic designer, now reunited with her daughter. She has written other books in Farsi that were translated into German and published.<sup>6</sup> While her reintegration into Iran may seem surprising, given the sharp criticism by *Nylon Road*’s protagonist of post-Revolution life, her critique extends to the inequitable gender and racial politics of Western and Socialist nations as well.

9 *Nylon Road* conducts its coming-of-age story as a conversation among versions or avatars of Parsua at various ages that, she says, “came from a real emotional/psychological situation” (PC).<sup>7</sup> Its dialogical set-up enables her to interrogate notions of identity coherence for subjects caught in conflicting concepts of home, history, and memory amid the ideological positions of fundamentalist post-revolutionary Iran, the capitalist global north, and the Socialism of the former Soviet Union. Through this dialogism, *Nylon Road* forestalls resolution other than the creative tension that its narrating I, Parsua, confronts with her eleven narrated I’s. In its constant conversational shifts among ‘I’-s between comic boxes, Bashi develops, in Marianne Hirsch’s term, a “binocular vision” that is ambivalent about her location and position (1213). Thus *Nylon*

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<sup>6</sup> Bashi’s more recent books include: Parsua Bashi with Martin Walker: *Persische Kontraste* (Persian Contrasts), Zürich: Walkwerk, 2008; and Parsua Bashi: *Briefe aus Teheran* (Letters from Tehran), Kein & Aber Verlag, 2010, translated from Farsi by Suzanne Baghestani.

<sup>7</sup> Although the convention in life narrative is to use the first name of the author for the narrated I and the last name for the narrating ‘I’, in *Nylon Road* the complexity of having eleven former selves engage in dialogue with the narrator makes this impractical. I therefore use ‘Parsua’ to refer to the narrating ‘I’ and add, after the name of each former self, her age to make their differently situated positions and points of view clear. I also distinguish both the narrated I’s and the narrating ‘I’ from the flesh-and-blood author Bashi, who draws, writes, organizes, and edits the comic. She is revealed as the comic’s maker on its last page, with her drawn hand invoking the invisible hand that drew it.

*Road* serves simultaneously as both a dissident history of the Islamic Republic and a critique of Western consumerism and commodity capitalism as they define Swiss and, more generally, Western values. In treating individual trauma as part of a collective experience occasioned both by the Republic and by migration, *Nylon Road* belongs to the genre of life writing that Sidonie Smith terms ‘crisis comics.’<sup>8</sup> Unlike many such comics, however, *Nylon Road* does not appeal to readers to bear witness to her suffering or contribute to an agency aiding the artist. Rather, its tough yet funny interrogation of the complicity of the world’s nations – including Iran and the Middle East, Europe and the Americas, and the former Soviet socialist bloc – in perpetuating colonial values critiques how all conform their citizens to repressive ideologies and discourage independent thinking.

### **The Divergent International Reception of *Nylon Road***

10 Although *Nylon Road* has not gained traction in North America or the UK, in the German-speaking world, as in Spain, it has a substantial, appreciative readership.<sup>9</sup> Its varied fortunes are a consequence of both the contrasting publishing strategies of its Swiss and American publishers and its differential reception by critics in Europe and North America. The original German edition of the comic was marketed as a kind of double-edged sword – a memoir simultaneously critical of the Islamic Republic and Western neoliberalism that was welcomed in European reviews as a witty and probing intervention into cultural politics. In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Simon Poelchau characterized *Nylon Road* as a thoughtful dialogue among several different embodiments of Parsua about the excesses of both Iran and the West, noting her sharp quip that in Zürich she enjoys gourmet dining while Iranians are starving under Western-imposed sanctions.<sup>10</sup> In the online journal *Migrazine*, Olivera Stajić observed how many Western feminists ignored *Nylon Road*’s substantive interrogation of Islamic fundamentalism and critique

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<sup>8</sup> Smith describes the crisis comic as a mode of “witness to radical injury and harm” that addresses readers variously as “those with the need to know their rights”, “individual agents of rights activism” who can “rescue themselves,” and “privileged readers to be enlightened about conditions elsewhere” (62-4). Bashi’s audience includes both readers in the global north and those of the Iranian diaspora interested in the interplay of rescue and alienation in their own experience of migration.

<sup>9</sup> As of early 2016 Kein & Aber has sold about 3,000 copies of *Nylon Road*, and the Spanish translation has sold about 1,000. Information from Lisa Mühlemann, Head, Rights and Licenses, Kein & Aber AG, Zürich.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Poelchau, in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, aptly observes: “Despite her criticism of the fundamentalist regime of the mullahs, Bashi resists damning Islam as such. In her opinion those in power use religion as an ideological weapon to legitimate their authoritarian politics.” (My translation of: “Bei aller Kritik an dem fundamentalistischen Regime der Mullahs unterlässt Bashi es aber, den Islam als solches zu verdammen. Ihrer Meinung nach benutzen die Machthaber im Iran die Religion als ideologische Waffe, um ihre autoritäre Politik zu legitimieren.”)

of the limits of Western positions.<sup>11</sup> Overall, *Nylon Road* was heralded as a comic sharply aware of discrepancies between the ideology and economic and cultural practices of Western neoliberalism that contributed to debates about the place of post-Revolution Iran in global politics.<sup>12</sup>

11 In English-language journalism and scholarship, however, *Nylon Road* received little critical attention. An anonymous review in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, one of the few newspapers to cover it, criticized its “anger.”<sup>13</sup> Online, Jonathan Liu’s review in *Wired* ignored its political acuity, remarking: “What [*Nylon Road*] really reveals is how little the two cultures really know about each other, let alone being able to understand and sympathize with each other.” To date, my critical essay on *Nylon Road* is, to my knowledge, the only one in English.<sup>14</sup>

12 A comparison of the two versions of the cover of *Nylon Road* suggests a possible reason for its lack of impact in North America. The illustration originally used for the German and Spanish covers, which does not appear elsewhere in the comic, captures Bashi’s dilemma as a diasporic subject caught between conflicting national and political identities (Fig. 1). In it, Parsua, the narrating ‘I’, sits in a full-frontal, cross-legged position, gazing at the viewer as she draws on a sketchpad. Each of her stocking-clad legs is inscribed, one with Persian characters, the other with Roman-alphabet letters and numerals.<sup>15</sup> The nylon stockings signifying feminine fashion mark Bashi’s uneasy location between opposed cultural and linguistic worlds along the ‘nylon road’ of women’s contemporary transnational transmission of image, fashion, and

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<sup>11</sup> Stajić states, “In addition to the pure narrative [Bashi] also visually depicts some fundamental debates of modern society: How far should freedom of opinion go? Isn’t criticism of Islam at times counterproductive? And how fully do women in the West really lead independently empowered lives?” (My translation of: “Abseits des bloßen Narrativs bebildert sie auch einige Grundsatzdebatten der modernen Gesellschaft: Wie weit darf Meinungsfreiheit gehen? Ist Islamkritik manchmal nicht auch kontraproduktiv? Und inwieweit führen die Frauen im Westen tatsächlich ein selbstbestimmtes Leben?”).

<sup>12</sup> Parsua Bashi wrote the following to me about the reception of *Nylon Road* in media for Iranian audiences: “There were three Persian press reviews, a couple of interviews and some more reviews in some Iranian Blogs: BBC Persian website, Radio Zamenh website, Radio Farda (VOA Persian radio branch in Prague) and some others that I have not recall (*sic*) now, and yes they were definitely have been read (*sic*) by Iranians inside Iran. But as you might know all the mentioned websites are filtered (blocked) by Iranian Gov., so we could say they were read by Iranians unofficially” (PC). Ordering books published elsewhere through websites is also impossible because online money transfer outside the country is not allowed.

<sup>13</sup> “There’s a lot of anger here, not only that of the mullahs and their minions, but that of Bashi, appalled at how more than 2,000 years of Persian history and culture had been lost in the dark backward abyss of religious fanaticism.”

<sup>14</sup> The only scholarly attention *Nylon Road* has received in English in North America that I am aware of is in two papers that I presented at international conferences and my original essay, a longer version of this article.

<sup>15</sup> Afsaneh Rezaei, a PhD Student in the Department of Comparative Studies at The Ohio State University, advised me that the lettering on the right stocking leg “is likely Persian” (though the words she discerned could mean something in either Persian or Arabic), noting “There are a couple of instances where I think I can see the letter گ, which is only in the Persian alphabet. And the date and location printed right under her elbow say Zurich ۱۳۸۵ زوری/خ ۱۳۸۵—the number referring to a year in the Persian calendar (1385, would be 2006/2007).”



sexuality. Thus, as an adult migrant to Switzerland, Parsua is literally at a crossroads of conflicting ideological, religious, and social views between the Iranian-Muslim and Western-secular worlds that she inhabits. With its binocular optic her 'fashion statement' cover embodies that tension.

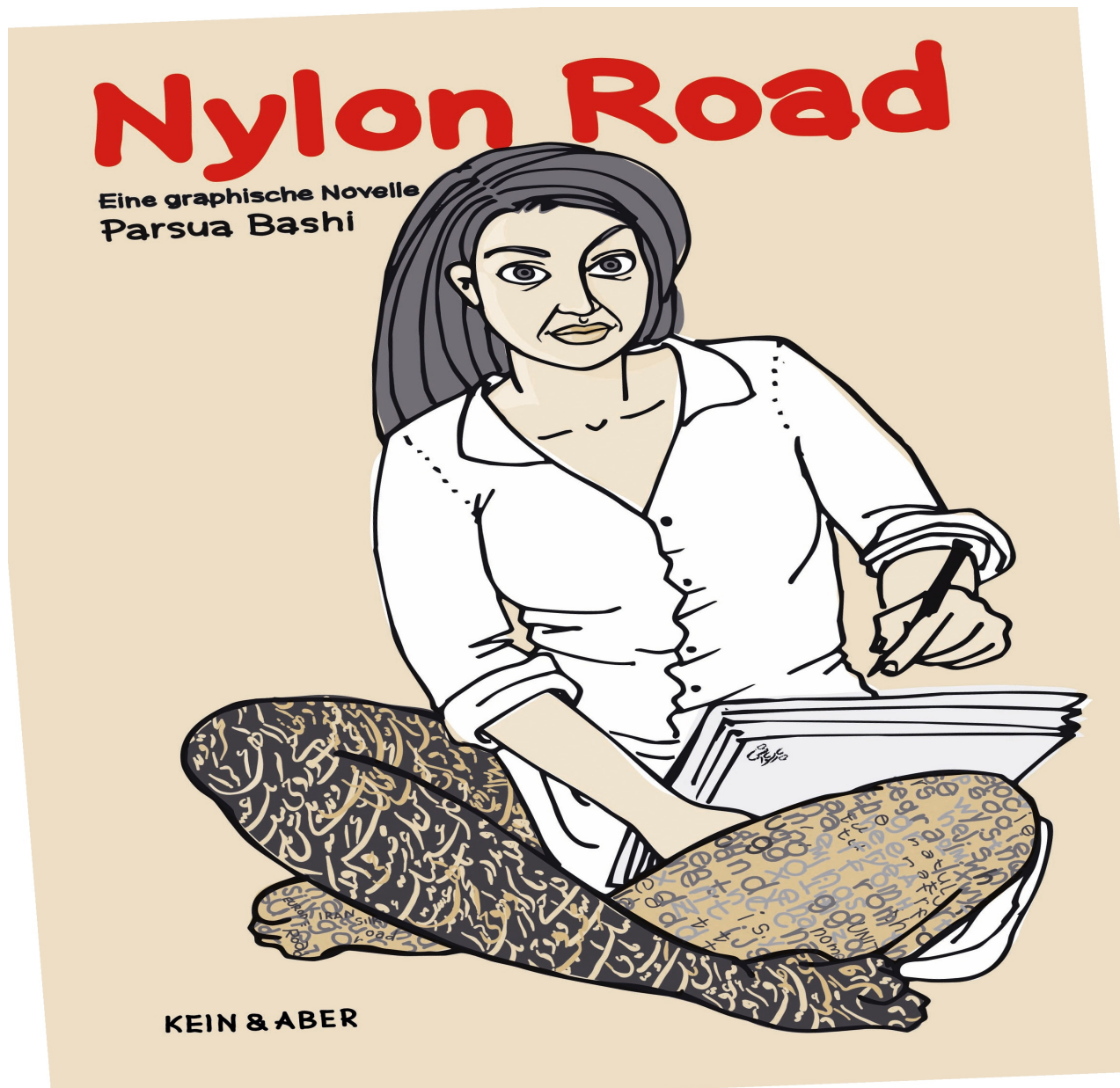


Fig. 1: Front cover, German edition. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.



13 By contrast, the cover of the English-language edition chosen by the comic's publisher, St. Martin's Press, reproduces a frame in the book depicting a child-woman emerging from a line of shadowy, veiled female figures who are submerged in dark shrouds (Fig. 2).

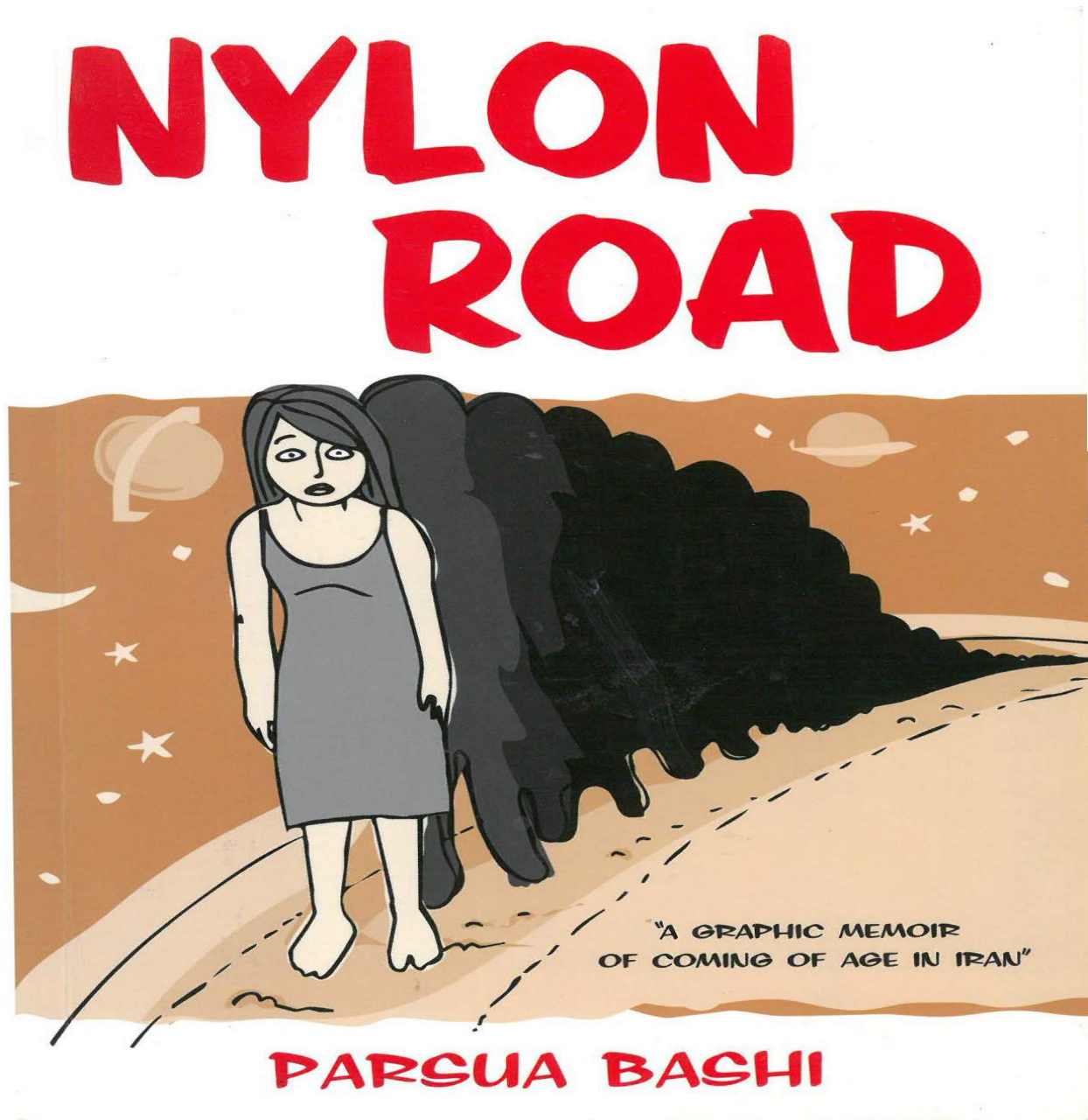


Fig. 2: Front cover, English edition. Reprinted by permission of St. Martin's Griffin, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

She is barefoot, slumped in dejection, and wears only a slip as she stands on the round surface of the globe against a vaguely Zoroastrian planetary background.<sup>16</sup> While this pose characterizes an initial moment of abjection after Parsua's migration to Zürich, her helpless appearance is untypical. The different affects of the two covers are striking: While the original Swiss cover suggests the ironic self-representation of an acknowledged transnational artist, the English-language one depicts a dislocated refugee as global victim, although Bashi left Iran voluntarily for a romantic interest. Similarly, while the original German subtitle is simply *eine graphische Novelle*, "A Graphic Novel", the English version is subtitled *A Graphic Memoir of Coming of Age in Iran*, which places Bashi's comic within the Bildungsroman tradition of education as accommodation to Western norms and values, stylizing the comic as a 'soft weapon', in Whitlock's phrase, in the American 'war on terror', which is at odds with the narrative that unfolds within it.<sup>17</sup> That is, Bashi's artistic agency was undermined in the English-language publisher's design and cover of the book. While these differences in cover choice may seem slight, they are linked to larger distinctions about the circulation of Bashi's graphic memoir and the receptivity of Western and diasporic audiences to its dialogical conversations.<sup>18</sup>

### **Narrative Structure in *Nylon Road***

14 In working out a graphic mode to represent her psychic and political struggles, Bashi uses a fluid line reminiscent of contemporary magazine illustration and visual techniques drawn from portraiture. Her style of presenting encounters between her narrating and embodied past 'I's is a visual dialogic that represents confrontations by shifting the positions of the 'I's within the frame to signal the opposed points of view. Bashi described her process of composing the comic as it moved from what Hillary L. Chute calls hand-drawn "marks" to final form, writing me: "First I draw quick pencil sketches on paper, then draw them again in a final form by ink on paper, scanned the outlined versions, and colored them in computer by a drawing software. The bubbles with the text was the last layer" (PC). That is, the 'I' who appears in each chapter as both narrator (in rectangular boxes above the frames) and speaker (in text bubbles of dialogue) is embodied in

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<sup>16</sup> The cover design is by Lisa Marie Pompilio under the St. Martin's Griffin imprint in New York.

<sup>17</sup> Bashi expressed to me her concern about the different covers used to market her graphic memoir, noting that "for the English version the publisher wanted to change the cover design with one of the panels of the book. Honestly talking, I do not like either their choice of the drawing or the layout." (PC). Other than cover image, subtitle, back cover, and paper size, the pagination and materials of the two versions are identical.

<sup>18</sup> *Nylon Road's* translation into colloquial English is, in my view, well done, faithful to the original German yet fresh and funny.

a kind of visual ‘language’ that organizes multiple, fragmented moments of remembered experience. While the outlined figures and a two-color scheme (terracotta, gray, black, and white) of *Nylon Road*’s graphics have a different, more cartoon-like ‘look’ than, say, the boldly beautiful images of *Persepolis*, they use visual self-representation to create a collage of witnessing to four decades of history.

15 *Nylon Road* shuttles contrapuntally between narrator Parsua’s life in Tehran from the early 1970s till 2004 and her life thereafter as a migrant in Zürich. Its twelve unnumbered chapters are separated by untitled pages, each with a small cartoon pulled from a detail in the text. Each chapter returns to the frame story, with Parsua in her narrative present of Zürich, engaging with a self from her past who serves as an eyewitness to that historical moment. As these past selves conduct increasingly contentious dialogues with the narrating ‘I’, they demand an account of who she has become in her present migrant life, while as readers we shift continually between the dramatically different contexts of past upheavals and the apparent serenity and stability of Switzerland. The eleven avatars whom Parsua confronts in various chapters are distinguished by their ages, clothing, and hairstyles, as well as the hijab or headscarf worn by the adult Parsuas in Iran – visible evidence of *Nylon Road*’s ‘binocular’ view of the Iranian Islamic Republic. And the narrator’s dialogue with her increasingly adversarial former I’s, who are presented associatively rather than in chronological sequence, brings competing truth claims into view that parallel their divergent appearances. Teenaged Parsua is ideologically invested in Marxism: her young adult self is stunned by changes that are introduced with the Khomeini regime; a later self becomes an active resister, first against the post-Revolutionary fundamentalist government and then, in Europe, against the excesses of neoliberalism and the ubiquity of racial prejudice. As both verbal and a visual dialogic, these conversations juxtapose various Parsuas’ earlier dissident views on the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent Islamic Republic to the narrating ‘I’’s perspective as a montage of historical flux. Although *Nylon Road* does not draw on intergenerational memory (unlike many others of the Iranian diaspora), in its assemblage of decades of remembered experience during and after the Revolution Parsua’s selves perform a kind of ‘eyewitnessing’ to events that occurred after many Iranians had emigrated. Bashi’s strategy of giving voice to her former embodied selves, rather than simply recalling memories, situates Bashi in the gap between her former positions and the narrator Parsua’s new migratory consciousness.

16 That is, the way that Bashi strategically places her contending ‘I’'s on the page confers an authority on her past selves because of the dominance of the image in graphic memoir. The effect of *Nylon Road* is unlike the linear thrust of written autobiography, with its privileging of the present-tense narrator because Parsua’s varied past selves are contrapuntal figures rather than the evolutionary self characteristic of the Bildungsroman, with its teleological view of life. Her narrating ‘I’ does not have a consolidated identity, but a fractured and provisional one. While she may be a mature and accomplished woman at home, she is an innocent abroad, unprepared for the cosmopolitan world of Zürich at the same time that she sees through its complacent materialism. Thus Bashi’s narrative undercuts the fantasy of integrating past and present selves through migration to the West. Her recollections are involuntary, summoned as embodied selves radically different from the present-time narrating ‘I’ at the same time that they ‘know’ her. And memory shifts from being a merely personal function to focusing on public events that foreground how the customs and values of the Islamic Republic differ from those of the secular West, represented as the Züricher. *Nylon Road* thus sets up an ideological debate through the power of its images and its presentation of contending political positions, even as it deconstructs the binary stereotype of ‘Islam versus the West’ as an inadequate framework for the complexity of women’s lives in the shifting gender relations of both post-Revolutionary Iran and Western Europe. I now turn to a discussion of *Nylon Road*’s chapters at length.

### **The Dialogics of *Nylon Road***

17 As a tale about the trials of an Iranian woman after the Revolution first to stay and struggle in her native land, then to accommodate to living as a migrant in Zürich where she is perceived as an ‘other’, *Nylon Road* ‘talks back’ to what the narrator perceives as Westerners’ smug superiority. Although Bashi’s later return to Iran is not part of this story, her ambivalence about adapting to her new land dominates it. As Parsua’s self-inquiry engages in non-chronological order with eleven avatars at different ages – 6, 13, 16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 29, 33, 35, and 36, the ideological combat with each past ‘I’ intensifies. (I signal this by using ‘Parsua’ to refer to the narrating ‘I’ and put the age of each former self after her name, to mark their different points of view.)

18 In the frame story that begins Chapter One Parsua the narrator is introduced in a half-page panel depicting her in a blouse and pants, with uncovered long hair and folded arms, gazing calmly at the viewer as a 37-year-old woman who left Tehran in April 2004 after falling in love

(a story she omits). She discloses her expectation that, after emigration, she would become not just another immigrant, but someone able to engage in “real life” in her “new society” (8). Subsequent frames detail her struggle to learn both German and Swiss-German dialect, find a job appropriate to her graphic-design skills, and develop a social circle. But the difficult process of cultural and linguistic assimilation leaves her feeling discouraged and displaced. Migrant Parsua sums up her dilemma: “I started to feel like a useless asshole” (Fig. 3).

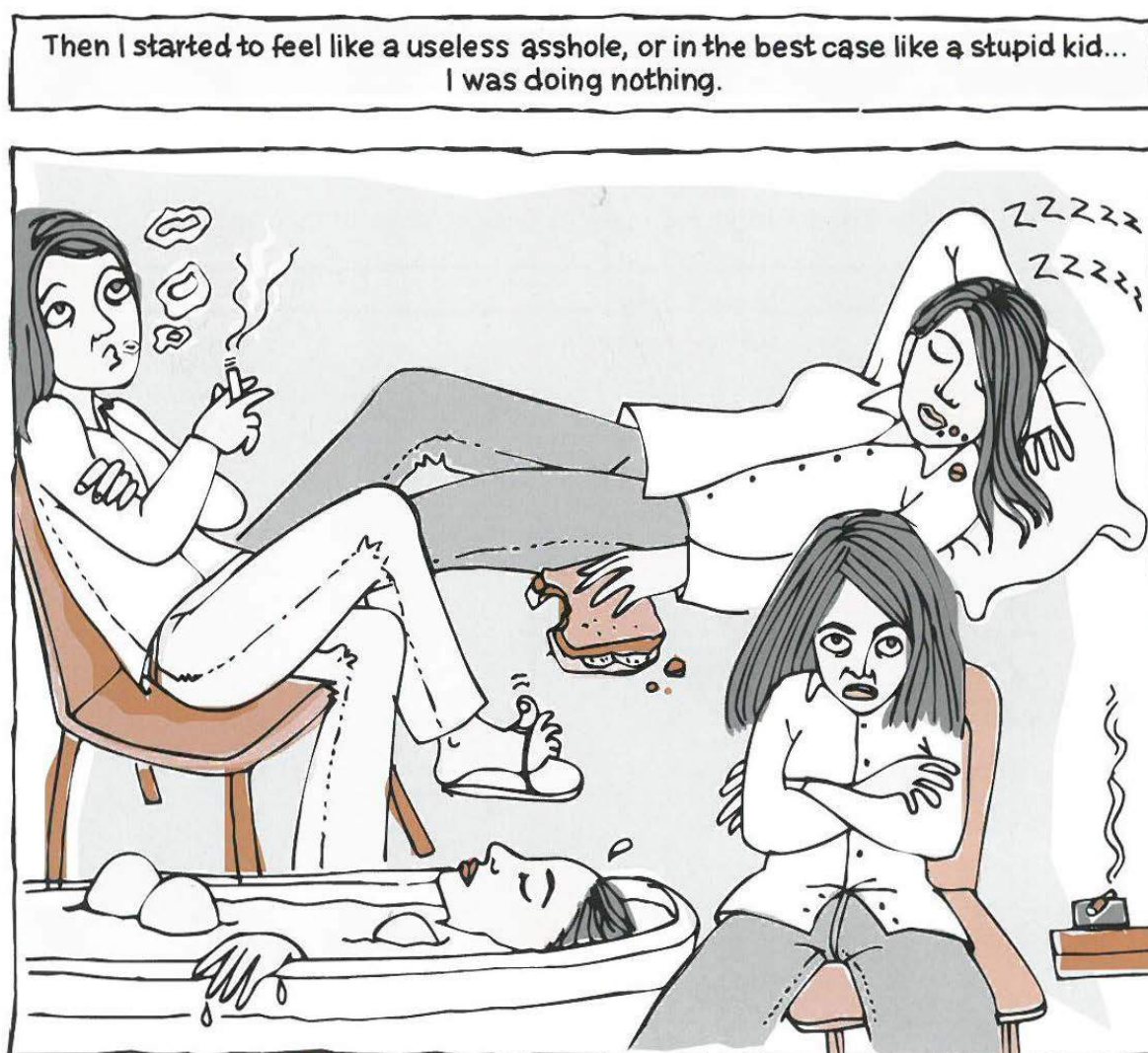


Fig. 3: *From Nylon Road (p. 12) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.*

In the panel four images depicting her as idle and disgruntled occupy a single visual plane, a style Bashi will develop further in subsequent chapters. And this moment of self-recognition in frustration spurs further reflection.

19 While the narrator stands brushing her teeth, “a happy-go-lucky little girl” of 6 appears in shorts and sandals, holding flowers and toys. Recognizing this grinning apparition by her birthmark, the narrator, stunned, asks, “How could I have forgotten me?” (15). Parsua-6 responds, “The only reason I’m here is because you called.” She proceeds to say that Parsua is out of touch with herself – “I was the one who had lost contact” – and informs her that there are “more of us waiting to see you”, establishing the narrative convention of visits by past selves that anchors *Nylon Road*’s plot. What might seem a Western cliché of getting in touch with ‘the child within’, is here used to inaugurate an autobiographical quest (18, bottom half. See Figure 2 illustration.). Disclosing her unhappiness as a dislocated migrant, Parsua identifies the moment as a turning point and awakening: “I was alone, hopeless, desperate, and apparently unable to deal with the situation. ... They were here to remind me that what I am now is the result of their lives” (18).

20 Unlike the search for unequivocal rescue from the Islamic Republic that many Iranian diasporic memoirs recount, as Chapter One goes on, Parsua begins to regard her migration to Zürich as producing a traumatic gap in her life. The revelation – “I saw my entire life in a flash” – is drawn as “MY LIFE!”, a jagged-topped building of concrete blocks that have broken apart the edifice of a formerly coherent self (19, top left). But in a close-up portrait, the next frame reveals the other side of that moment, a simultaneous “ENLIGHTENMENT” or “Aha!” awareness, with literal light bulbs in Parsua’s eyes. She is awakened to a double consciousness that stirs a desire to examine her past – and inaugurate her story (19, top right).

21 Bashi wrote me about this moment: “The Idea of having conversation with myself came from a real emotional/psychological situation that I was in at the time of writing this book” in the “Vacuum space” that she experienced between her Iranian past and new Swiss life (PC). The felt space, depicted as a gap between parts of the building, is echoed in the gutter between the two frames that juxtapose “The interruption” and “ENLIGHTENMENT,” as Parsua feels that her life became “absurd and meaningless” (19 top left).<sup>19</sup> This unresolved traumatic space marking the narrator’s awakening to autobiographical consciousness is thus a difference that produces rupture, rather than the consolidation of an edifice of the self.

22 In this crisis of self-reflection, as Parsua listens to the radio, the second avatar to appear is her 16-year-old self from 1982, situated during the Iran-Iraq war and in the wake of the Cultural

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<sup>19</sup> Chute observes that “the gutter [is] ... the figuration of a psychic order outside of the realm of symbolization, a space that refuses to resolve the interplay of elements of absence and presence” (*Disaster*, 35).



Revolutionary Council's installation of a rigidly fundamentalist Islamic system. Parsua-16 voices a critique of the "relaxed" European view of the world reflected in feel-good broadcasts, while in Iran "other people are dealing with shit" such as mandatory prayer in school and the conscription of all 18-year-old men for the war (24). In Bashi's depiction this moment is a collision of two versions of herself, differently embodied in Parsua's long hair and blouse and the veiled garment of the patriotic teenager sternly admonishing her. The hippie Western woman they glimpse while strolling, who has appropriated a prayer shawl to wear as a skirt, appalls Parsua-16 because of her ignorance that the shawl is a traditional head-covering for many Middle Easterners, from Palestinians to militant fundamentalists (25). In the ensuing argument between Parsua's two selves, each makes points about the perception of Islam, dramatized on the page by their shifting body language, gestures, and dominant or subordinate placement in the visual dialogic.

23 During Parsua's reflection in Chapter Three on whether she is "homesick" for her "hometown" or has just forgotten the violence of Iran's past in nostalgia, her 18-year-old self of 1984, the fourth year of the Iran-Iraq war, appears in pants and a ponytail to narrate the painful personal losses of those years: the brother she felt close to was smuggled to Turkey to avoid the army; and many of her family and friends left for Europe or North America, trips that turned into a kind of permanent emigration that was "seriously tearing families apart, some forever" (30). Eventually "none of our family or friends were left", except her parents, yet Parsua-18 seeks to remain true to her ideal of what the nation, which once was Persia, could again be (33). As narrator, Parsua sums up her conflicted feelings: Was it worse to abandon her native land – "I was young [but] strictly against emigration" (32, middle) and leave it to "a bunch of mediocre midgets" (32, bottom)? Or to feel "abandoned" in not leaving a place that, in the view of many, had betrayed its Persian history (33, top right)? Despite the urging of her parents, Parsua-18 remains staunch in her determination to study fine arts at the University of Tehran. Responding to Parsua-18's question about the most difficult part of migration, Parsua acknowledges that she felt more in exile at home – "most homesick in my own hometown" (35). At the same time in her adopted new land she is virtually speechless without her mother tongue, as she confronts the difficulty of integrating into Swiss-German society (34, bottom). While the experience of crisis in Iran has "vaccinated [her] against" homesickness, she is left without a "home" anywhere (35, bottom), a familiar theme of migrant life writing.

24 The narrator's belief in her self-sufficiency is next challenged by her 23-year-old self (in 1989) who calls on her to recall a moment when the revolutionary guards were busily rounding

up what she calls “THE USUAL SUSPECTS” – political activists, boys and girls together, journalists and artists, writers and intellectuals, monarchists, dealers of music cassettes and alcohol, “bad hejabs” – for alleged crimes in appearance, ideas, or expression (Fig. 4).

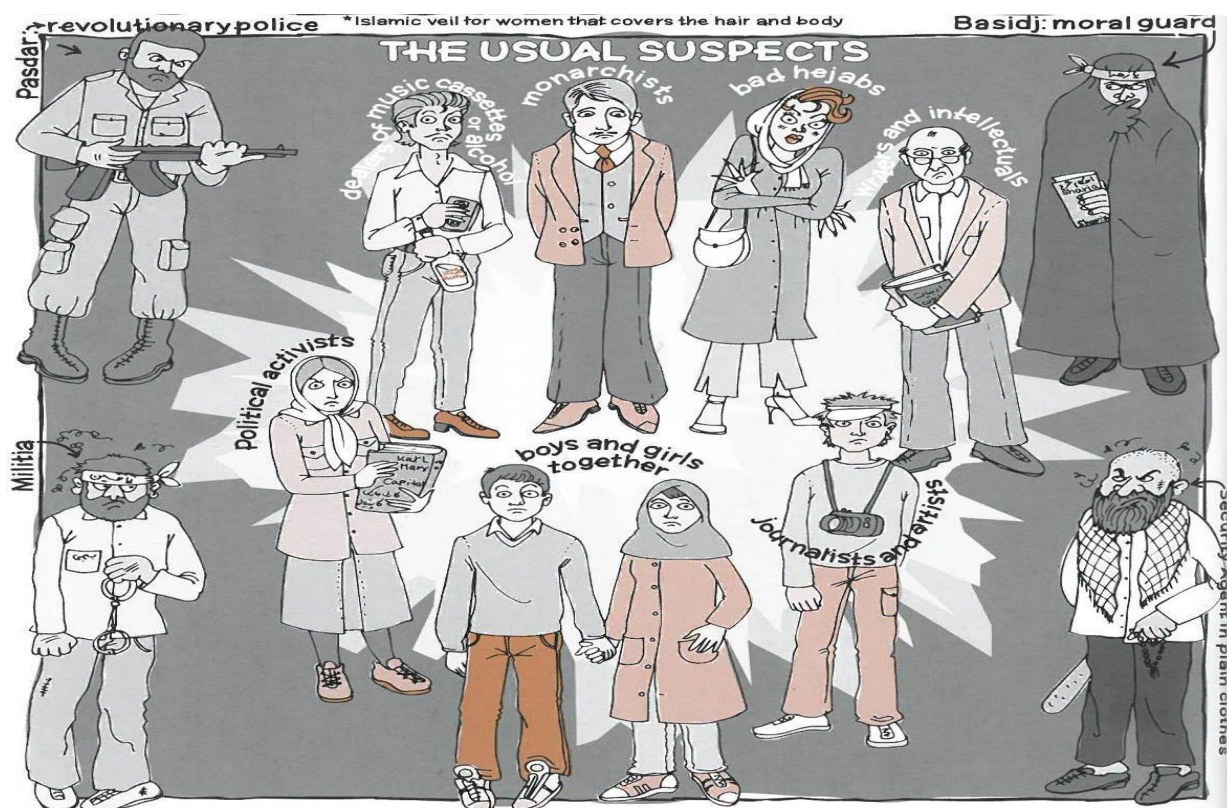


Fig. 4: From *Nylon Road* (p. 42) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

In Tehran, Parsua-23, lonely without her friends, develops an inexplicable crush on a male artist colleague, drawn as portly and dominating, who envelops her in a sea of words (45, panel, second row). When she is caught walking on the street with a male classmate by a Pasdar (member of the Revolutionary Guard) who accosts them for associating in public, she defiantly responds that Sharia law does not prohibit such acts. For this retort she is sent to the Islamic Court and sentenced to seventy lashes (44). Summing up her response to this painful moment, the narrating ‘I’ recognizes that her sense of citizenship was violated in Iran: “I felt enormously ashamed to be part of such a society” (44).

25 Depressed and humiliated, she turns to her boyfriend, despite their differences. When he asserts that he will “protect her” – “I’ll make a PERFECT woman out of you” – she agrees to be married and, three months later, discovers she is pregnant (45). Although Parsua now regrets her

“stupid decision” to wed this tyrant and the impact it had on the daughter to whom she gave birth, she consoles her younger self for the bitter experience. The narrator goes on to observe how the limiting laws of religious fundamentalism lead young people into bad marriages in Iran; conversely, in Europe, people can get to know each other before marriage (47). Finally, both Parsuas resolve their quarrel by admitting that young people can make mistakes anywhere because both Middle Eastern and Western European nations exert forms of domination over their citizens.

26 This critique of personal life is extended, in Chapter Five, to a critique of political conservatism in both the Middle East and Euro-American nations. In Zürich Parsua has an encounter with a passionately pro-Persian Iranian-migrant woman expatriate. When this other woman speaks as “we PERSIANS” and denounces Arabs as “CAMEL RIDERS”, the four-page spread juxtaposes icons of Persian culture, displaying the splendors of the empire before the Arabs arrived that she enumerates, with an ever-closer focus on her screaming mouth. But Parsua’s response, as a cosmopolitan subject, is pained: “I was so embarrassed” (54), she confesses, denouncing the woman as “a chauvinist racist” (55), expressing unease with the pro-Persia woman’s nostalgia, reminiscent of the ‘Iranians of the imagination.’

27 In response, “one of my most patriotic selves” appears, the 35-year-old woman of 2001, a few years before Bashi migrated. Initially the two Parsuas argue about their justifications of the Islamic Republic and the ‘West’, their upper and lower positions within the frame alternating as each makes her argument. ‘Patriotic’ Parsua-35, committed to the relative freedom of pre-Revolutionary Iran, denounces Islamic fundamentalism and proclaims, in angry profiles, the excesses of Muslim leaders as “terrorists” who subject their own citizens to cruelty. In response Parsua challenges her former self’s view as “poisoned by rage” for claiming that the Islamic Republic’s imposition of religion is at fault for all Iran’s woes, not least because Islam has been merged with Iranian culture for 1,400 years (56-7). Their dispute, captured in a montage of close-up profiles of the two women sparring, induces Parsua to regard fundamentalisms as “simply for political purposes”, “propaganda . . . based on those false clichés” that use avowals of a “sacred mission” to hide their “dictatorial regime” (58). When her avatar charges that the fundamentalist Islamic Republic makes laws mandating the veiling of women and prohibiting alcohol, the narrating ‘I’ retorts that the West deports Middle Easterners as terrorists and, in France, condemns head-scarf-wearing as a religious symbol at the same time that it condones right-wing Aryan-nation protests and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The so-called ‘holy war’ of

fundamentalism thus links right-wing conservatives in East and West like ‘a double-sided blade’ in which they use mutual hatred to impose undemocratic limitations on their citizens’ rights. Her two selves, despite their different dress and locations, ultimately share a moment of insight in the last frame (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: *From Nylon Road (p. 61) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.*

The chapter, then, does not suggest that Parsua ‘reconverts’ from her Westernized tastes to Iran-nostalgia; rather it shows her recognition of repressive practices that underlie the ideologies of both the Islamic Republic and Western neoliberalism. As the final frame concludes, conservative propaganda in Iran, by shoring up the theocentric regime’s claim of a “holy war”, masks real issues of poverty, hunger, unemployment, and censorship of speech, enabling the dictatorship to mystify its power as religion (57). In parallel fashion, the West resists acknowledging how its own media reports can fuel attacks by immigration police and right-wing groups directed at Muslims (59-61). Thus the narrator’s dialogue with ‘patriotic’ Parsua-35 structurally links Islamic fundamentalism with its seeming opposite, the West’s avowed liberatory humanism.

28 Chapter Six takes up Parsua-the-narrator’s encounter with her divorced 29-year-old “mother-self” who lost custody of her daughter because she asked for a divorce from her jealous and possessive husband (65). Yet when weeping Parsua-29 recounts her sad story, Parsua rebukes her for refusing to recognize that she had a need to survive, despite her pain about the personal loss of her child and communal loss of her homeland, recognizing that these fueled not only her

grief, but her critique of Iranian custody laws favoring the husband as a “religious” policy (66). And she draws a political conclusion that her younger self couldn’t see, namely how ‘religion’ masks the Islamic Republic’s underlying ‘political purposes’, in frames of the prejudicial court process that caricature the judge and lawyer. When the judge assigns the child to her father, saying “True Muslim women live their lives with husbands even if they get beaten every day”, the scales of Justice are depicted as toppling (69).

29 Parsua-29 summarizes the social and professional rejection she experienced in a “JUST DIVORCED” composite drawing that represents her pariah status in Iran, including the many men who offer help privately in exchange for sex. Parsua urges her former self to let go of her victimage as “a poisonous habit of begging for sympathy”, drawn as the coat of pain and sorrow that she can only flush down the toilet at the chapter’s end and reminds her 29-year-old self of the leap she took to become independent (72). Their conversation becomes an occasion for feminist critique, as Parsua notes that, on the one hand, Iranian women had the vote earlier (1963) than their Swiss counterparts (1972); yet, on the other, in Iran women earn 30% less for the same jobs (72). Ultimately, “women all over the world are struggling for their rights. Some more, some less” (72). Thus the narrating ‘I’'s encounter with Parsua-29’s beliefs and position becomes an act of consciousness-raising that exposes socio-political contradictions globally and, personally, enables her to move beyond loss, though the memory of losing her child is drawn as a knife that still stabs Parsua to the heart (74). In this passionate dialogue one self’s point of view does not negate the other’s but, in dialogical fashion, leads to self-forgiveness and insight, if not the end of personal pain (74).

30 The next former self to confront Parsua is her most recent, the 36-year-old who owned a graphic design studio in Tehran. Although Swiss Parsua introduces her as an embarrassing, “almost arrogant” and “loud” feminist (76), Parsua-36 provocatively extends the critique of the West, pointing out how even the figures of accomplished Western writers and artists are used as a “consumer product” in advertising campaigns, “selling the female body in public” (Fig. 6-1 and 6-2). Parsua-36’s sweeping condemnation observes that, at the same time in Iran, brave women defending human rights were imprisoned and even killed, events that Western media sensationalized by representing them as victims in burqa (which are not worn in Iran) – among the many ways in which the Western artists display ignorance of Middle Eastern cultures. Yet the narrator’s encounter with “loud” feminist Parsua-36 also points up a didactic lesson: how



ignorant citizens of both the global north and south are about each other's cultures. "I learned that not knowing is not a sin. Not knowing and yet being prejudiced is where the problem starts" (79).

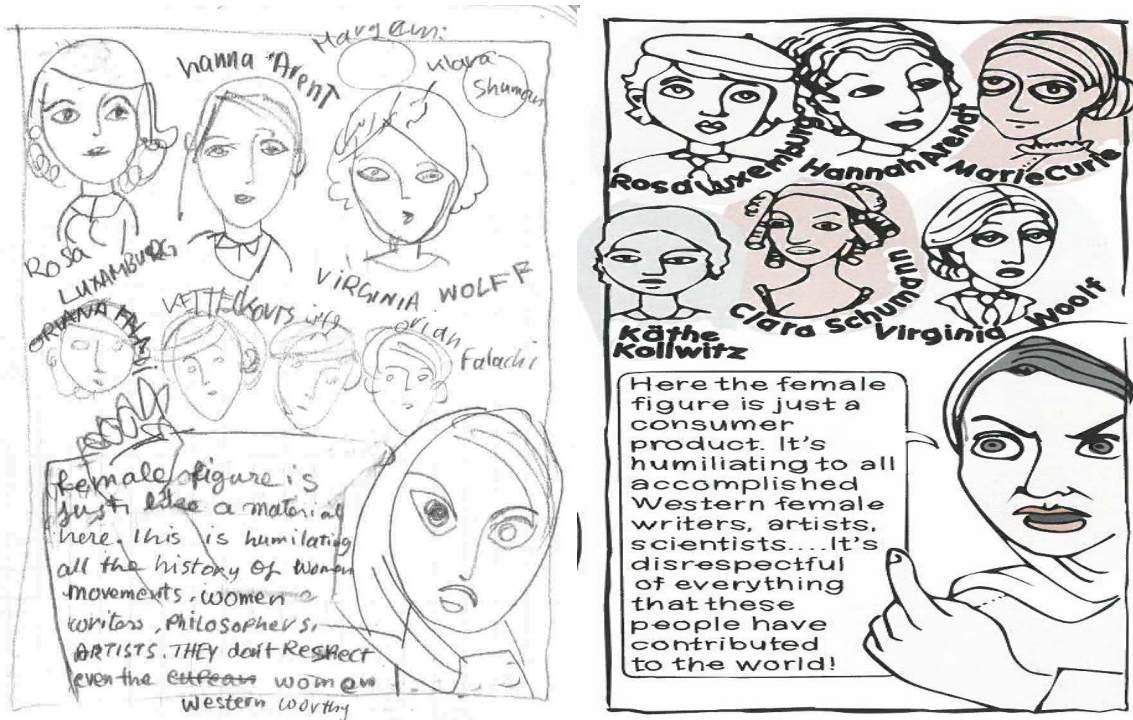


Fig. 6-1: Parsua Bashi, Sketch for Nylon Road, published by permission of the artist.

Fig. 6-2: From Nylon Road (p. 77) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

31 Parsua's younger avatars can be harshly critical of the narrator's seemingly 'free' and comfortable status in Zürich, particularly 21-year-old Parsua in 1987 in Chapter Eight, who appears on the scene to narrate her years of privation during the Iraq-Iran war. The urgent voice of this younger self compels the narrating 'I' to reflect on the greedy myopia of the Swiss gourmet dinners she now enjoys and her new friends' preoccupation with vacations and consumer luxuries—like the truffle oil that she tries for the first time in Zürich (84, 88). Parsua reflects on the limits of her past self's memory, which could not know that in the nineties some things got better in Iran under its fifth president, Khatami (1997-2005)—although repression and human rights abuses intensified thereafter. But a lack of perspective, she suggests, may be shared by emigrants and Westerners (Fig. 7).





Fig. 7: *From Nylon Road (p. 85) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.*

Parsua-21 also recalls contradictory aspects of wartime life in Iran. On the one hand, food was rationed and oil poured into plastic bags, while in Europe even chocolate is elaborately packaged; there were ration coupons and long waiting lines in markets; and the lack of cosmetics made hygiene a struggle. On the other hand, there was solidarity in Iranian family life for middle-class families like hers who sewed their own clothes modeled on pre-revolutionary catalogs; took photos to document both war and propaganda; held “exhibitions” of their paintings and photos, watched banned movies, and made live music inside the walls of their homes; and had endless private conversations about harsh realities that generated an everyday intimacy that Parsua finds rare in the commodity-obsessed Swiss world (86-92). To Parsua-21, Europeans are “sissies” (92), unlike the leftists who stayed in Iran and “dealt with the hardship” of everyday life (93). There are of course exceptions in both settings, people who crawl out of what Bashi depicts as European cocoon pods to help others struggling in the developing world (93). As the ongoing dialogue with her former selves makes clear, the claim to superiority of either the Islamic Republic or Western nations can be challenged by countervailing evidence. By the chapter’s end Swiss Parsua recognizes that her survival in her new social world, as in the old, depends on acts of forgetting and normalizing the burden of accumulated memories.

32 Reminded repeatedly by her former selves of repressive realities that marked post-revolutionary life in Iran, Parsua remains aware that nostalgia for the past is a form of false consciousness – in what is perhaps a textual barb directed at earlier emigrants. This is also borne

out in Chapter Nine, which charts how young Parsua-19's study of graphic design at the University of Tehran in 1985, after its reopening, was hindered by "conditions where nothing was allowed to be seen or heard" in the aftermath of the revolution's "explosion of light" depicted on a propaganda poster to ironic effect next to a sign proclaiming "OUR UNIVERSITIES ARE MAN-MAKING FACTORIES", both of which evoke scorn in Parsua-19 (98). She goes on to narrate the widespread censorship that fine-arts librarians exercised on viewing the work of Western artists – such as Egon Schiele's provocative naked bodies – in art books and Western design journals. Fraternizing with male students or bringing in materials from other countries were rule violations that could occasion severe punishments. But as Parsua-19 narrates this tale of the universities' repressive stifling as the 'new normal', she details the innovative kinds of resistance that it spurred. The chapter's drawings of posters, books, magazines, and videos, as well as the caricature of the library's monstrously "fat, spinsterly, old virgin" (97) and malevolent director, reveal that its narrated memories are both vivid and tough, driven by the students' shared determination to learn about a wider world of arts and culture.

33 As *Nylon Road* expands its critique to broader political and ideological targets, the narrating 'I's harshest critic emerges in the pigtailed teenaged self of Chapter Ten. Parsua-13 speaks from the position of the heady moment in 1979, just after the Iranian Revolution began, when she chose, among the available versions of leftist theory, to identify as a Marxist-Leninist and immersed herself in its prescribed reading of Marxist classics (103-05). Parsua, as narrator, ironically mocks the teenager's study of party tenets, texts, and mandated practices of group "self-criticizing" (106) and body-building as "A teenage fashion just like any other", comparable to the fad – and pain – of getting a tattoo (109). From Parsua-13's perspective, however, Europeans are superficial. They can be split into the complacent bourgeoisie and the proletariat without agency, and their personal styles reflect gendered and classed forms of oppression. As a rejoinder Bashi's full-page drawing suggests that the teenager's study of "dialectical materialism" was useful in getting her own way in the family – in the name of "rights" (108). But while Parsua-13 rejects seeing the martyred youth of Iran in 1981 as following a 'fad', Parsua the narrator defends her view in a startling way: she compares the fate of the youth of Iran to the ways that capitalism conforms young women to styles of dress and behavior that repress individual expression, a form of what Marcuse termed "repressive tolerance."<sup>20</sup> In the narrator's

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<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, Bashi articulated and published her comic at a moment in Zürich when she was free to air her discontent with both the intolerance of the Iranian regime and the consumerism of Switzerland, without threat to

view political positions are inevitably compromised because they are embedded in the ideologies of specific regimes and political moments.

34 Parsua-13 also offers a novel defense of her point of view in this debate, visualizing a fantasy of young women costumed in different garb to display capitalist, religious-fundamentalist, and socialist modes of conforming girls to three kinds of ideological “cults” (Fig. 8).

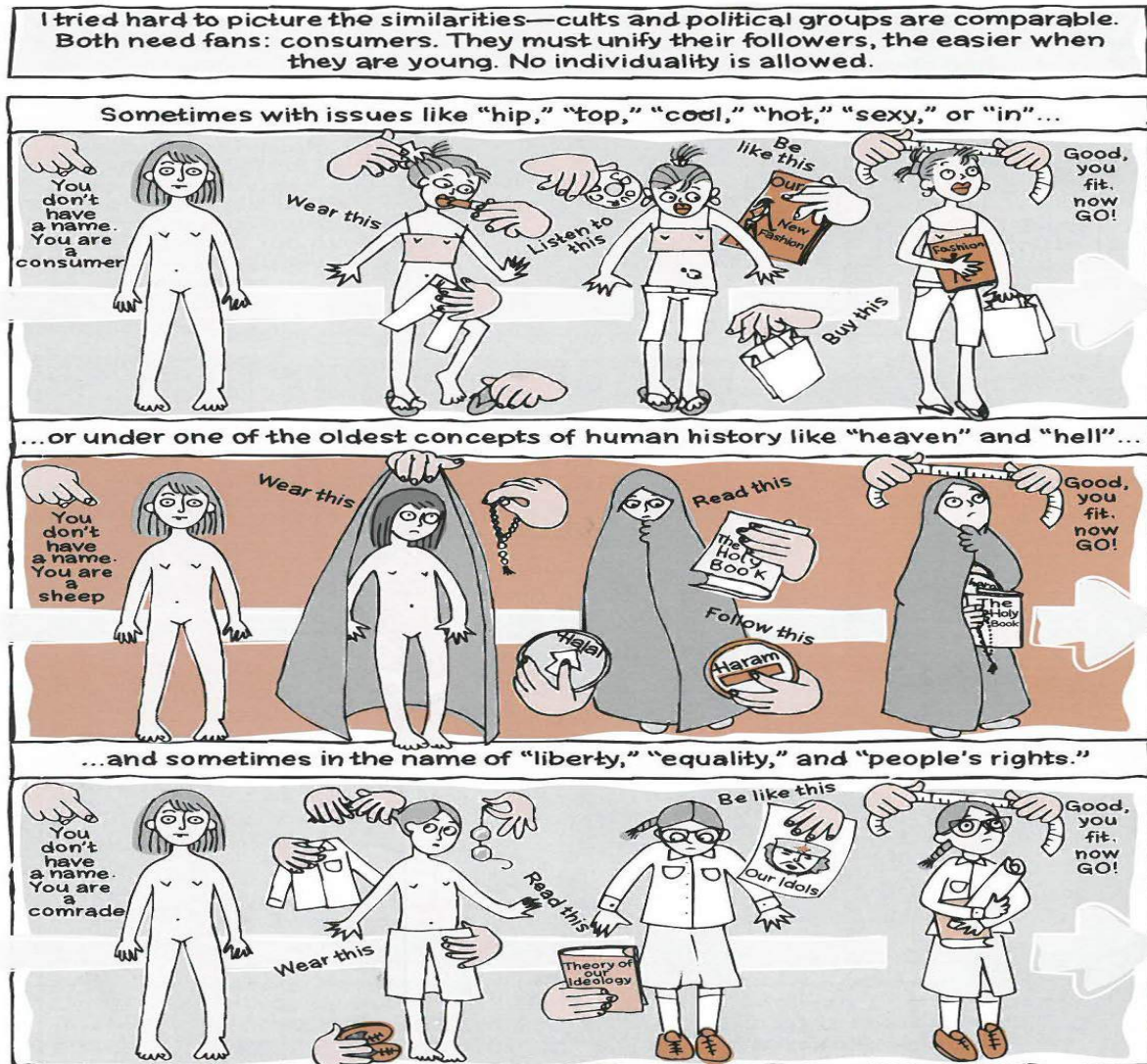


Fig. 8: From *Nylon Road* (p. 110) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

herself. But a careful reading of the comic’s critique of ‘repressive tolerance’ à la Marcuse, undercuts any easy binary in which the West emerges as a ‘freer’ or more liberated location for integrating Parsua and remaking her migrant self as a Western citizen. Marcuse asserts, “Tolerance is extended to policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which should not be tolerated because they are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery. ... Tolerance is turned from an active into a passive state, from practice to non-practice” (95).

Each kind of costuming produces consumers who suffer the disciplinary effects of their interpellation in unquestioning adherence to their governments. Parsua sums up this critique of ‘the power of wealth’ to shape political belief in her contrast of three kinds of regimes, embodied in their leaders: ‘fashionista’ capitalism crowns designer Karl Lagerfeld; the Islamic Republic honors the Ayatollah; and Soviet-style socialism heralds Stalin – all with wads of money in their hands (112). While an offer of ice cream cannot reconcile Parsua-13’s Marxist self to the narrator’s critique, Parsua concludes the chapter with a powerful insight: despite her selves’ bickering about positions, a “lost childhood” was the price of her early fervor during the Revolution (112). Yet Chapter Ten suggests how deeply Bashi, as a teenager, was steeped in dialectical materialism, which likely contributed to *Nylon Road*’s dialogical structuring and use of visual counterpoint.

35 The most provocative avatar of all steps up in Chapter Eleven: Parsua’s 33-year-old self, now a graphic designer who has been awarded her first prize (117). She is interested in Western fashion but becomes angry when the narrating ‘I’ shows her a spread in *Vogue* entitled “Colonial Girl”, featuring “Calcutta Cat” and “Delhi Doll”, derived from women’s garb in colonial India (116). While Swiss Parsua defends free expression, tolerance, and the celebration of difference as practices enshrined in the West, Parsua-33, a tough and self-assured urbanite, searingly critiques the cynicism of the global fashion industry as sustained by colonial and racist practices that emerged with the Enlightenment and the modern nation-state. Fashion magazines, Parsua-33 alleges, “make a profit from their own crimes of history by pretending that colonialism was just an aesthetic phenomenon” (116). Disgusted at the fascination the narrating ‘I’ exhibits for Western consumerist fashion, however, this younger self alleges that the narrating ‘I’ is blind to how cynically the West commodifies history as fashion statements. When the narrating “I” contrasts the freedom of artists to criticize politicians in Europe with the fundamentalism that constrains artists in Iran, Parsua-33 taunts her about the manipulative tactics of Western advertising. À la layouts in the fashion pages of *Vogue* or *Elle*, this younger self visualizes a fantasy: fashion lines of “Sweet Slaves”, complete with manacles and chains (121); “Hot 9/11” with models wearing Twin-Towers-explosion T-shirts; and models with shaved heads and Holocaust-camp shirts. As the two Parsuas’ heated debate about the conundrum of ‘free’ speech continues, Parsua-33 argues that the Eurocentric West ignores taboos on trivializing genocidal acts that are Indian-, African-, or Asian-related even as it valorizes Eurocentric events (123).

36 Their debate, located at what Art Spiegelman called the “intersection of personal and world-historical events”, focuses the narrator on the blind spots of belief systems, all of which construct an “other” and set limits to the critique of their own histories (Spiegelman, unpagged). But at the end of their dialogue Parsua remains stymied, like the narrating ‘I’ at the crossroads depicted on *Nylon Road*’s original cover, between the clashing systems of different cultures and traditions. Finally, reconciliation with her former self is impossible. When Parsua as narrator poses the irresolvable conundrum of freedom and censorship that – for her – constrains the exercise of democracy in societies, Parsua-33 responds, “Why bother writing a book? Why not just shut up? ... your theories are BULLSHIT!” (124). In the witty graphic metalepsis that follows, Bashi captures the chapter’s lack of closure as the narrating ‘I’ jumps out of the comics page on which she is drawn jumping out of the page, chided by finger-pointing Parsua-33 (124). Confronting the spectrum of attitudes of her former selves, Parsua is shown at an impasse – and yet, her narrative succeeds in displaying the challenges presented by both post-revolutionary Iran and the ‘civilized’ West.

37 *Nylon Road*’s final Chapter Twelve is brief, two facing pages that juxtapose alternate views of Parsua the narrator. On the left side, in nine close-up portraits, Parsua is visualized full-face, smoking and pondering how to conclude her story in a way that is funny but not “paranoid”, “two-faced”, or “simply crazy” (126). The rejoinder on the right page is a self-portrait in which seven of her collective younger selves, led by the six-year-old, orchestrate an end to her process of self-reflection by holding aloft a banner reading “The End.” This picture within the picture of the little figures surrounds a self-portrait of Parsua the narrator that is clipped onto the bookshelf in her study. Below it her drawing hand appears in profile, at rest and holding the pencil for Bashi’s comics drawings (Fig. 9). The artist’s hand is a metaleptic gesture familiar in autographics and other forms of self-portraiture, from Dürer and Parmigianino through Van Gogh and Kollwitz, that emphasizes the recursive nature of graphic storytelling and signals the performative artist-maker. In this binocular structure, Parsua, the narrating ‘I’ of the comic is revealed as a projection of Bashi, the agent whose invisible hand has drawn, written, organized, and edited her memoir. Thus, Parsua is as much an effect of her former selves as a speaking subject—and still a migratory subject in transit. In dialogical fashion this visual and narrative self-examination cannot be resolved into a portrait of the Bildungsroman’s consolidated public citizen. Rather *Nylon Road* presents an ‘I’ who both asserts her role in directing the narrative and is unmasked as a constructed fiction by her past.





Fig. 9: From *Nylon Road* (p. 127) by Parsua Bashi. Reprinted by permission of Kein & Aber AG, and Parsua Bashi. All rights reserved.

## Conclusion

38 The figure of Bashi's Parsua in *Nylon Road* remains a locus of competing claims about the 'truth' of her experience. Neither her present-time 'I' nor any of her past selves emerges as



the victor in this clash of views. Through the lens of graphic memoir the succession of encounters shows how forming an identity is an intersectional process of construction across national, religious, and ideological borders in which women are inevitably devalued as gendered subjects. The narrator, whether as leftist Iranian resister in the Islamic Republic or ‘liberated’ Euro-migrant, is a dialogical subject whose dynamic and ever-incomplete project of self-invention is inflected by her multiple, conflicting identity positions. Although Swiss Parsua seeks to be neither nostalgic nor in denial about her past experience in Iran, the dialogue with her past selves discloses that subjects are inescapably interpellated by location and historical moment.

39 Thus *Nylon Road* poses issues for both readers of the Iranian diaspora and those in the West. At the same time that it acknowledges – in often funny and sometimes harrowing detail – the post-revolutionary excesses and blind spots of the Islamic Republic, it also suggests that neither Western market capitalism nor Soviet-style socialism can adequately redress forms of prejudice toward outsiders and violence toward women. Its dialogical structure resists the binary logic of much testimonial memoir in which the West serves as a locus of rescue for Middle Eastern emigrants, a transnational identification that requires reconfiguring memory. Particularly in light of Bashi’s 2009 return to Iran, her ironic rendering of violent repression in the Islamic Republic of Iran, compulsory conformity under Soviet socialism, and materialist excess in the name of tolerance in the West, leaves readers with provocative questions about whether any ‘elsewhere’ can serve as an adequate locus of rescue.

40 In sum, Bashi’s open-ended, dialogical structure ensures that, while *Nylon Road* was written in the West, it is decidedly not ‘written for the West.’ At a time when the publication of memoirs critical of the Islamic Republic is impossible in Iran, *Nylon Road*’s summoning of the past, embodied in its active narrators, enables her to present controversial views of gender relations and probe stereotypes about the ‘looks’ and beliefs of women--Iranian, European, and globally--that produce a different self-recognition: “What I am now is the result of their lives” (18).

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