Sample commentary - Persepolis

I remember my initiation. It was the first day of class after summer vacation.

Welcome, girls of Iran, the war has taken the flower of our nation's youth!

Then the loudspeakers started to sing.

Babababababababababababababababababa!

Hey troops of... be I ready, I'd be ready!

Let's go children, on the heart!

Whack!

Whack!

And all together, we began the session.

It wasn't as bad as one might think. We'd seen it before.

Hitting yourself is one of the country's rituals, during certain religious ceremonies, some people flagellated themselves brutally.

Sometimes even with chains.

It could go very far.

Sometimes it was considered a macho thing.
Sample commentary

Marjane Satrapi uses a broad range of stylistic and structural features in Persepolis. First of all, one cannot ignore her use of blacks and whites. This use of heavy graphic weight could be said to reflect the stark contrasting themes of the graphic novel: secularism versus religious fundamentalism, adults versus children, or even good versus evil. In this passage, we also see the juxtaposition of childhood innocence and religious fanaticism. The extreme Muslims look very devout as they flagellate themselves. While the children look confused and bewildered.

To continue on the topic of the author's artistic style, besides a stark use of blacks and whites, Satrapi has chosen for figures who appear very universal, simplistic and iconic. In the first panel the children appear like an army of covered, young Muslims girls, with no unique identity. Their facial features consist of simple lines to depict eyes, noses and mouths. Their expressions of bewilderment, in the second and fourth panel are all very similar. The use of emanata emphasizes their confusion and innocence, as question marks are placed over their heads. The author’s portrayal of the fundamentalists is equally simple and iconic. Emanata is used to depict the ‘whacking’ noise made as they beat their chests. Stars of pain appear on the men that beat themselves and big blood drops spray from a man's head as he cuts himself. The pool of blood below him seems fresh, as it shimmers with simple white lines. From the looks of their eyebrows and open mouths, they appear in a trance of some kind.

Marjane Satrapi uses a combination of direct and indirect narration that can only be found in graphic novels. Her voice appears in the voice over boxes throughout the panels. She speaks directly to the reader, who presumably does not know much about the Islam. She explains that self-mutilation is part of an extreme Muslim culture. The final three frames make a transition from heavy direct narration, where she explains that some people flagellated themselves brutally, to indirect narration, where she simply shows what she means by how ‘far’ it could go. Furthermore, direct speech is used regularly through the use of speech bubbles. The teacher speaks to the children and the loudspeakers are heard in the background, all of which allow the setting to come to life.

As far as layout is concerned, Satrapi combines several interesting shots to create a very abstract, out-of-context setting. There is a mismatch in the first frame of a medium shot of the teacher and a high angle shot of the students in the same frame, making for an impossible perspective. Similarly the loudspeaker is unrealistically larger than the teacher standing beside it, making for another impossible moment. The backgrounds are completely white, meaning that these black, covered girls in the foreground could appear anywhere. The medium shots of the men flagellating themselves on a white background also make them appear in a kind of no man’s land. Satrapi uses these impossible perspectives and blank backgrounds to emphasize the extremist ideas that are being portrayed in the foregrounds.

The use of gutters and transitions on this page from Persepolis are characteristic of Satrapi’s graphic novel as they regularly require the reader to make a few mental
leaps. Unlike many comic books in the West, Satrapi uses a great amount of non-sequitur transitions. These are transitions in which the one panel does not have any relation to the next panel. We see this in the transition from the fourth to fifth panel, from the fifth to the sixth and from the sixth to the seventh panel. The cognitive abstraction that is made here is from Marjane who is learning to beat herself as a girl in 1980 to Iranian men who beat themselves in general. This is her way of depicting her youth in the greater history of Iran. In the first four frames there are subject to subject transitions, in which we see the girls learning how to beat themselves from four different angles to emphasize the strange nature of this event. You could also argue that there is a motion to motion transition from the teacher beating herself to the students beating themselves, which emphasizes the way in which they were taught through drilling and imitation.

All in all, Satrapi makes use of a broad range of devices that graphic novelists have at their disposal. It’s fair to say she has mastered this medium.