

The use of the veil symbol in persepolis by rising above the veil:

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Persepolis is the tale of Marjane Satrapi's life. It follows her from her childhood in Iran, through war and exile. She moves to Austria, only to return to Iran. Her adventures are littered with one reoccurring motif: the veil. The veil – a scarf forced upon Iranian women to wear – follows Marjane throughout her life like a shadow. It represents religion, oppression and perhaps, to an extent, it also represents home. In this essay, the different ways in which the veil is mentioned and represented throughout the book will be discussed.

Persepolis begins with a chapter titled “ The Veil”, in which the government implements policy that forces women and girls to wear the veil. This first chapter establishes the key features of the veil and the effects of wearing it. The first two panels (see below) show how the veils makes women look uniform. It takes away their individuality. It unifies but also oppresses them.

The Veil might be the first physical chapter of Persepolis, but chronologically it is not the first one. Persepolis opens “ in medias res”, in the middle of the story rather than at the beginning. This further signifies the importance of the chapter and its central theme of the veil. Satrapi made the conscious choice of putting this chapter first instead of starting at the beginning of the story. It follows that the veil must have been important to Satrapi herself and to her life story.

The veil, in Satrapi's view, also represented separation. With the introduction of the veil also came some other rules. Not only were girls and women made to wear veils, they were also separated from the opposite sex, virtually at all times. All schools that used to be co-educated now became single-sex

schools only. Satrapi described this experience as: “ We found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends” . This separation between men and women was sudden and made little sense to Satrapi. However, the veil did not only separate men and women. The separation was present between different groups of women too. Some women supported the veil while many opposed it. It resulted in “ demonstrations for and against the veil” . Typical of Persepolis, Satrapi’s words are made stronger by powerful imagery representations (see below)3.

There is a stark difference between the two groups. The author also conveys some deeper message through imagery. It is notable that all of the veiled women have their eyes closed, while their opposition has their eyes opened. This may represent the ignorance the veil portrays. The veil was imposed by the government to inflict control over the women of Iran and those who complied can be seen as those who “ closed their eyes” to reality.

On the very next page, we find out that Satrapi herself is very conflicted about the veil (see below)

Since the veil was meant to represent religion, Satrapi felt compelled to wear it out of her love for God. At the same time, she seems to realize the impracticality and absurdity of the veil. She sees it as “ not-modern”, perhaps old-fashioned. The imagery used also reflects Satrapi’s feelings. On one hand she appreciates the veil spiritually as a symbol of religion and belonging. On the other hand, her reasonable side understands the oppression wearing the veil represents. Furthermore, this image shows that

veil or no veil the person remains the same. It shows that the veil might attempt to oppress one but that the person under the veil shall remain unchanged.

Throughout the middle section of the Persepolis (originally Persepolis II) the audience is confronted by the effect and impacts of the veil in everyday life. On page 79, Satrapi's grandmother complains about the veil " Oh! I'm taking this off. It's too hot!" . This shows that wearing the veil is very uncomfortable and women (at least in Satrapi's family) only wear it when it's absolute necessary. In context with Satrapi's political views this shows that the veil is confining and women rebel against this confinement by refusing to wear the veil at all times. Another instance of this occurs ten pages later. When Marjane's mother arrives home in a hurry to phone a family friend, before she makes the call, she takes off her veil. In the progression of one panel to another , in a few seconds, she gets rid of the veil as soon as she enters house. She does this despite having a very important task to fulfill.

The aforementioned idea of the veil as something that takes away the identity of women reoccurs later on in Persepolis (see below) .

In perhaps one of the most important panels of Persepolis the audience is again confronted by the main ideas the veil represents. Now, more strongly than in " The Veil", girls are unified, almost indistinguishable from each other. Now not only their appearance matches but also the task they are performing. At first glance they all indeed look the same. However, on closer inspection we find that all the girls have different haircuts, slightly varying

expressions and features. This leads us to another reoccurring idea: the veil might attempt to degrade and make women uniform, but in the end, women will remain diverse and unique.

Throughout Persepolis there are certain instances, filled with humor, which highlight the absurdity of wearing the veil. The first example of this is when some of the parents are called into Satrapi's school due to some of the behavioral issues exhibited by the girls of the school. The principal says: "Anyway, that's how it is! Either they obey the law, or they're expelled!! And make sure they wear their veils correctly..." Then, Satrapi's father replies: "If hair is as stimulating as you say, then you need to shave your moustache!" The initial reason why the government imposed the veil on women was because supposedly women's hair is very stimulating and so in effect it puts them into danger. Men become dangerous to women due to their hair. Therefore, they must cover their hair in order to stop 'stimulating' men. Marjane's father's comment represents the view of many: that wearing the veil is pointless and its only purpose is oppression of women in the name of Islam.

Another example of a humorous encounter with the veil takes place during a drawing lesson Satrapi attends at college. Female art students gather to draw a female figure. The model would traditionally be naked in order to allow the artists to learn how to draw realistic figures. Due to the laws imposed by the state, having a nude model was impossible. The model had to be veiled from head to toe (see below) .

Satrapi's comment " We nevertheless learned to draw drapes" shows the objectification of women in Iran at the time. In this instance women are synonymous with drapes. The veil objectifies women ridding them of all the features that make a woman beautiful. This instance also shows the impracticality of the veil and how it reformed even art education. While the expectations of students are similar to those studying in other countries, the veil is keeping them from fulfilling these expectations. Aspiring artists of Iran cannot get past the very basic practice of drawing a nude woman due to the veil. Therefore, the veil further oppresses women through impacting their education for the worse.

At point in Persepolis, the veil represents home and sacrifice to Satrapi. Just before she returns to Tehran from Vienna she puts her veil back on. She also writes: "... And so much for my individual and social liberties... I needed so badly to go home." Although she is not happy to say goodbye to her liberties that wearing the veil will rob her of, she is willing to make that sacrifice in order to be able to go home. While social and individual liberties are nice, nothing replaces family and home in our life. As Simone Weil said: " To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul". For Satrapi, no matter what the price is she needs to go home because she feels very alone in Vienna. She wants to return to her roots despite the political state of her country.

In conclusion, in Persepolis the main idea conveyed about the veil is that it is something enforced by the government in order to oppress women. They disguise this oppression saying that the veil is enforced in the name of Islam.

The motif of the veil is important to Satrapi as she continuously brings it up. Her account of her history and her encounters with the veil give a unique and very heart-felt perspective. Through Satrapi's eyes the audience acquires a perspective on the veil, regardless of the audience's personal encounters with the veil. Although the veil is mainly focused on as a form of oppression it also represents a piece of home to Satrapi - a sacrifice to be made to be rooted.