

More than a veil



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More Than a Veil A Feminist Readings of Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis Cultural differences have been on the foreground of the ongoing struggle between the United States and Iran since the 1970's. Stereotypes are built on misunderstandings which can prove costly in international relationships. Our national media coverage of Iran portrays radical Islamic men oppressing their female counterparts. Many American citizens have narrow opinions on Iranian women, most of them dealing with the infamous veil that Islamic girls wear females.

Marjane Satrapi in her biographical novel Persepolis examines Iranian women's roles in the Islamic Revolution, breaks the myth of the oppressing veil, and demonstrates how Iranian boys and girls are socially constructed. Satrapi does all of this with a nontraditional writing style as she challenges the more common coming of manhood tale called a Bildungsroman (Barry p. 129) with her own coming of womanhood narrative. In America it is widely believed that women in Iran are to be seen and not heard. That Iran is controlled by an extreme patriarchy where women voice no opinions on social issues.

However, we see in Persepolis that Marjane comes from a family with strong women like her mother and grandmother. Her mother routinely takes part in protesting alongside her husband in the streets of Tehran. (Satrapi p. 18) Marjane's mother is an example of the misconception that women in Iran are subjects. Marjane's mother illustrates to us how women all across Iran were active during the Islamic Revolution, as protestors, collaborators, or victims. (Botshon p. 5) Agency is not just shown in adult women in Persepolis but also in adolescent girls.

Many Americans are quick to point out the veil which covers an Islamic women's face as a sign of the extreme patriarchy in Iran. However, in the beginning of *Persepolis* we see Marjane as a child and other little girls taking their veils off at school to use them for games like jump rope. (Satrapi p. 3) This imagery immediately shatters our connotations of disciplined Iranian girls and focuses us more on the playful resistance which the school girls demonstrate. This rebellious nature of Marjane does not stop in childhood despite the oppressive agenda of the school board.

Marjane's self-expression continues as a teenager when she adopts American culture ideas like punk rock clothing and even owning a Kim Wilde and Iron Maiden poster, which her parent smuggled in from Turkey. (Satrapi p. 127-129) In all of these scenes Marjane is drawn on the pages of the novel without having her veil on. These scenes are an example of how some girls were not submissive to Islamic rule as is it often depicted in our own media. Even though women had proactive roles in the Islamic Revolution they were still constructed and treated differently in Iranian culture.

Marjane's mother speaks of the violent soldiers she had encounter in the streets of Tehran one day when she was caught not wearing the mandatory veil; " They insulted me. They said that women like me should be pushed up against a wall and fucked. And then thrown in the garbage...And that if I didn't want that to happen, I should wear the veil. "(Satrapi p. 74) In this scene it is clear that the Islamic regime agenda is to suppress Iranian women's individuality, but how come these military men are so violent?

The answer may be in the way that girls and boys were socially constructed during the Islamic Revolution. In Iranian culture it is common for boys to

learn military values at school while girls would learn more suitable household skills like knitting and sewing so that they could make winter hoods for the soldiers. At a young age boys are taught to be soldiers and take part in war while girls are helping war efforts indirectly. Aggression in boys to some people may seem natural; however, in Iran young boys are being taught this social trait.

The veil itself is a way that Islam fundamentalist try to construct their women into being oppressed and submissive. The wearing of the veil is enforced by school officials who have an Islamic agenda, however; many girls are taught contradictory ideas about the veil by their parents at home. Marjane would have been more susceptible to Islam fundamentalists if she did not come from a family with strong independent female figures. Satrapi demonstrates clearly that gender roles are taught in institutions like religion and school and are not natural.

Even more importantly Satrapi writes about how she rebelled against these norms, which makes *Persepolis* an original narrative of growing up as a girl in Iran. *Persepolis* in its roots is a personal female memoir of Marjane Satrapi's growth into womanhood while being raised in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. The story of Marjane Satrapi's life cannot be duplicated by another author. Marjane grew up in a confusing time where complex issues of religions, politics, and class formed an authentic female version of a classic Bildungsroman tale.

Satrapi's *Persepolis* questions western thought about Iranian women. Without Marjane Satrapi's personal experience it is easy to believe that a similar Islamic Revolution tale told by a female protagonist would focus on

the hardships of being oppressed and not the variety of social classes that depict rebellious Iranian women. Without Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis could have had an unoriginal western stereotypical story about Iranian women. Marjane Satrapi literally makes herself the central character as the author.

Persepolis as a feminist work shows the value of women in Iranian society, the social construction of girls and boys, and the complex issues in Marjane's life which are reflected in her work. Many misconceptions about Iranian women are dismissed in Persepolis. Satrapi shows Iranian women as agents with a cause rather than subjects with no voice. Although we are use to the typical submissive Iranian women waiting for liberation, Satrapi blows this belief up for western reader. Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis humanizes the Iranian female population which is all too often illustrated in United States' media as being oppressed by a veil.

Works Cited Babak. Elahi. Frames and Mirrors in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis. University Nebraska Press. Vo. 15 No. 1-2. 2007. 312-325. Article. Barry. Peter. Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory. 3rd ed. Manchester. Manchester University Press. 2009 Print. Botshon. Lisa. Plastas. Melinda. Homeland In/Security: A Discussion and Workshop on Teaching Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis. University of Illinois Press. FeministTeacher, Vol 20. No. 1. 2009. 1-14. Article. Satrapi. Marjane. The Complete Persepolis. New York. Pantheon Books. 2007. Print.