



DECONSTRUCTING THE MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT IRANIAN WOMAN: A CHARACTER STUDY OF MARJI IN MARJANE SATRAPI'S GRAPHIC MEMOIR *PERSEPOLIS: THE STORY OF A CHILDHOOD*

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ABSTRACT

Many writers have written on the history of veiling in different parts of the world, especially in Iran. But very few have given concentration on its effect on the minds of women. Apart from that, numerous misinterpretations have been done about Iranian women by presenting them as conservative and orthodox. This paper is an attempt to enlighten the readers regarding the history of forced veiling and unveiling in Iran and its repercussions in the minds of Iranian women through an examination of Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. Satrapi's graphic memoir has been praised as a masterpiece in black and white which presents us a different picture of Iranian women.

KEYWORDS : Graphic memoir, Veil, Patriarchy, Iranian women, Identity

The practice of veiling has always attracted many interpretations across the globe. Mainly it has been stigmatized as a symbol of oppression or even backwardness. Veiling is linked with many other issues like freedom, identity, modernity, patriarchy, culture and so on. In order to have a good understanding of the issues surrounding the concept of veiling, the purpose and practice of veiling needs to be established clearly.

The very idea that lies under the practice of veiling is that there are specific codes of conduct for both men and women within the public sphere in Islamic religion. According to Islamic belief veil is symbolic of modesty and respect. But this has undergone many interpretations and reinterpretations over many centuries and it has become a tool of confinement and oppression of women.

When it comes to the country of Iran, veiling has a long history to reveal. Iranian women has always been misrepresented as backward and conservative. This impression is created mainly because of the image of them wearing a veil, all covered up. Marjane Satrapi in her graphic memoir *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* deconstructs this misconception through the portrayal of Marji as a rebel.

Before going into the novel it is relevant to peep into the history of veiling in Iran. We can see Iranian women who have been veiled, unveiled and reveiled in different periods as we turn the pages of the history of Iran. It is generally believed that veil is a practice started as a result of Arab conquest or as a part of Islamic culture. But studies prove that it is not the case. It actually originated in the non-Arab Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies. Veiling was practiced by the elite in ancient Persia as a symbol of status.

In modern Iran, two historical incidents are crucial in understanding the role of veil in the country. The ruling monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi was influenced by modernisation and he started steps to unveil the Iranian women when he returned from Italy in 1934. He introduced many reforms regarding education and employment in the country. He then approved the Unveiling Act in 1936. There were mixed response from the public. Soldiers had orders to arrest veiled women and this led to protests. Civil servants were forced to bring their wives to official ceremonies. Many feminists praised this step taken by Reza Shah as an attempt to democratize gender roles, but many others protested against this. While many elite women accepted the Unveiling Act, lower middle class women were reluctant to unveil. In short forced unveiling, used as an attempt to westernize Iran, was not well received by a great number of Iranian women. Many religious families stopped sending their daughters to school because they believed that unveiling is immoral.

In 1979, the anti-Shah movement became rampant and it led to the overthrow of Shah. In 1983 the new ruler Ayatollah Khomeini approved the Veiling Act which made women not to appear unveiled in public. As a result many women either left the country or

remained inside their homes. Women became mere objects as they had to conform to the authority's decisions of unveiling and veiling. Thus the two Acts of Unveiling and Veiling left deep scars in women's identity.

In Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, the author narrates her story from childhood to adult years in Iran. The story begins with the introduction of veil in Iran after the overthrow of Reza Shah and during Ayatollah Khomeini's regime. The practice of forced veiling has great impact on young Marji's life as she says,

Then came 1980. The year it became obligatory to wear the veil at school. We didn't really liked to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to. And also because the year before, in 1979, we were in a French non-religious school where boys and girls were together. And then suddenly in 1980, all bilingual schools must be closed down... we found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends (3-4).

Young Marji finds herself torn between her Islamic religion and her modern French education. She feels herself alienated from her friends at school. She was very religious in her mind, at the same time her family was very modern and progressive minded. Therefore she is confused and tormented which Satrapi depicts through the following image of Marji:



Fig. 1

Marji's confused state of mind is explicit even in her attire. She says, "I put my 1983 denim jacket with the Michael Jackson button, and of course my headscarf (131)." This odd mix of western dress and the veil portrays her fragmented identity. Satrapi shows how veil became a symbol to measure women. Those who were veiled are religious believers and those who do not wear veil are considered traitors. She explains the demonstration after the Islamic Revolution in which her mother also participated. On one side there were women covered up with black chadors and on the other side women were unveiled.

Through the depiction of how her mother is attacked by the guards for not wearing the veil in public, Satrapi portrays the power of a patriarchal society. The consequence of being arrested by the guards for breaching the rules were very severe. Those women who want to show resistance could only do so by showing a few strands of hair.

Marji, may be because of the influence of a family with modern beliefs, develops an independent nature. She has her own opinions about everything. She didn't pay much attention to common rules. She is a rebel which can be clearly seen in many of the scenes depicted in the novel. Marji's mother raised her to be strong and even at a very young age she insists that she should be taken along with her mother or the demonstration against the regime. Even though her mother didn't take her there, she goes there along with Mehri who came to babysit her. Little Marji's strength can be seen where she is shown participating in the demonstration. She shouted from morning till night. She surely destroys all our preconceptions about women in Iran.

Marji's family is open and involves her in all their discussions, even about the political issues of the country. She shows a great knowledge regarding all that is happening in Iran at that time. The reader witness all the crisis and political events of the country through her eyes. Her mother gives her freedom to go out alone because she trusts her. To a great extent it is her mother's character that is reflected in her. Her mother is a fighter and she is no less a fighter than her.

Marji is not afraid of getting in to trouble. When she paints her nails and her mother warns her that she might get arrested for this, she responds simply that she will put her hands in the pockets. She refuses to be like other women. She displays her resistance against the veil and embraces western culture.

Marji's parents fear that she will be killed because of her rebellious nature and they send her to Austria. Her father says, "We feel it's better for you to be far away and happy than close by and miserable" (148). Her family understands her well. Marji finds it hard to leave her parents but shows great courage for a girl of that age to go and live far away from her family.

After reading *Persepolis*, Marji surely deconstructs our misconceptions of Iranian women by being a special woman who is strong, energetic and independent. Throughout the novel she questions the norms of a patriarchal society. She is not ready to oppress her dreams and desires and shows her determination in confronting the obstacles that comes her way. She subverts the practice of viewing Iranian women as mere victims of political institutions.

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