

THESIS

PERSEPOLIS & ORIENTALISM:
A CRITIQUE OF THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF SATRAPI'S MEMOIR

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ABSTRACT

PERSEPOLIS & ORIENTALISM:

A CRITIQUE OF THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF SARTRAPI'S MEMOIR

Since its publication in 2003 Marijane Satrapi's *Persepolis* series, it has met surprisingly little negative criticism in comparison to other recent, highly commercialized memoirs written by Iranian women. For instance, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has sparked an interesting controversy concerning the topical atmosphere and stereotypes contributing to the popularity of Iranian women's memoirs, particularly memoirs concerning the Iranian community at a time of increasing US intolerance towards the current political powers and cultural ideology of Iran.

Not only does Satrapi's memoir fall under such criticism, but that it can also be seen as more threatening to the perpetuation of anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic sentiments than Nafisi's memoir. Several factors contributing to this claim are its accessible graphic form, appealing child protagonist, and liminality of the author's position. I will also explore the academic credibility that graphic novels have achieved in the past decade and uncover the geopolitical climate and marketing variables of Satrapi's *Persepolis* success in Euro-America. Moreover, through analysis of this hybrid text, I will discuss the instances that reinforce stereotypes through the symbol of the veil as well as the depiction of Islam, without the context of the religion or culture. Such omission of context assists

to perpetuate such beliefs that Islamic countries are backward and barbaric and that the West should intervene to liberate oppressed people.

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On July 11 2004, Charles McGrath from *The New York Times Magazine* ran a story on the growing popularity of graphic novels where he claimed that this visual literary genre has now come to be seen as a “new literary form” and asserted that comics are thriving in a “newfound respectability” because “comic books are what novels used to be—an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal.” Although McGrath does little to recognize women in this new literary field and claims that “[t]he graphic novel is a man’s world, by and large,” artists like Marjane Satrapi have created a place in feminist graphic narratives that are both innovative and political. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, is a graphic memoir¹ account of Satrapi’s early childhood and adolescent years in Iran, in which she witnessed the fall of the Shah, the political and cultural transition to the Islamic Republic, as well as the trauma of the Iran-Iraq war.

The merit of the *Persepolis*’s series popularity has been a subject of debate in the United States and Europe. One common strain of criticism identifies the book’s “political topicality as its reason for success” (Chute 108). The focus here will be on the first book of the North American series, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, due to its historical focus and its success in comparison to *Persepolis II: The Story of a Return*, which centers around Satrapi’s life in Austria. Although Satrapi’s memoir has been met with approval in the West, the Iranian government has not been as supportive. What makes it unappealing to the Iranian government is not its accurate time-table portrayal of the political events that took place from 1979 to 1984—a chaotic and turbulent time in Iran’s modern history—but its reductive portrayal of Iranians and Islam during a critical moment in Western and Muslim world relations. Details that may satisfy Western

curiosity about such political times and peoples in Iran are filled in by Satrapi's accessible vignette chapters and pictorial frames. For example, the complex history of an Iran dominated by foreign powers over the past 2500 years is neatly summed up in a frame covering two-thirds of a page: "First our own emperors. Then the Arab Invasion from the West. Followed by the Mongolian invasion from the East. And Finally Modern Imperialism" (*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* 11). With such a concise recollection of history, this graphic memoir can lend itself to generalizations and crass depictions of Iran and the Islamic regime; such selected and partial accounts can help to perpetuate anti-Iranian sentiments as well as Islamic stigma in the Westernized world.²

Since its publication in 2003 Marijane Satrapi's *Persepolis* series has met surprisingly little negative criticism in comparison to other recent, highly commercialized memoirs also written by Iranian women. For instance, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has sparked an interesting controversy concerning the topical atmosphere contributing to the popularity of Iranian women's memoirs, particularly memoirs concerning the Iranian community at a time of increasing US intolerance towards the current political powers and cultural ideology of Iran. In light of the events of September 11th, along with the turbulent history between the US and Iran, Americans have come to view Iranians as a threat to their freedom, and recent discussions about a potential "American intervention" in Iran are becoming more probable if the current government does not give up its nuclear energy program. Due to such murmurings in the American political climate, literature concerning Iran and other Islamic nations show an emerging popularity within the last decade.

What makes Satrapi's memoir particularly intriguing is that, unlike Nafisi's, this graphic memoir is utilized as an educational tool in secondary classrooms to enlighten Western audiences about a mysterious and distant culture³ that has been stigmatized as an "Eastern Other." Some schools are even using *Persepolis* in place of historical novels in their curricula. Hamid Dabashi draws a connection between Nafisi's memoir and political motivation, arguing that such Eastern literary presentations of women's suppression by religious or cultural institutions are a traditional justification for moral and cultural legitimization of imperial intervention. Working from Gayatri Spivak's analysis of the moral rationale for British colonial rule in India—saving brown women from the atrocities of brown men—Dabashi charges these contemporary native memoirs with providing the present day "moral impetus" to sanction American imperial endeavors. Dabashi has directly accused some of these female authors, specifically Nafisi, of being "Native Informers" or "comprador intellectuals" who are servicing the American ideological machinery by perpetuating anti-Iranian sentiments. In addition, Dabashi accuses Nafisi of re-invoking a restrictive notion of the western literary canon in her memoir that centers on a forbidden book-club in Tehran, through her depiction of a group of students reading the classics of modern western literature in the privacy of Nafisi's home at a time of academic and literary censorship in Iran. The reading list of Nafisi's group, Dabashi argues, ignores a domestic Iranian literary tradition and the women participating lack an empathy with the underprivileged sections of the Iranian population. His criticism of Nafisi's memoir, though met alternatively with jeers and cheers,⁴ has served as a new way for scholars to analyze the embrace of such female memoirs by a Western audience.

Surprisingly, since the publication of Dabashi's criticism, there has been little assessment of female Iranian memoirs from Western critics in this vein. Perhaps such oversight can be attributed to the idea that some scholars believe the book is pro-Western. One professor commented on the possible reasoning behind the embrace of this graphic memoir in the classroom:

There is a certain self-congratulatory quality in the widespread embrace of PERSEPOLIS. And part of that comes from the way that both books come across as nicely "American" — both in their stories of individualism and repression and in their view of "culture," which can be simultaneously embraced/celebrated and rejected/repudiated. (qtd. in Evans)

It seems that one of the only essays that comments on the application of Dabashi's criticism to the *Persepolis* series is in Lopamudra Basu's piece "Crossing Cultures/Crossing Genres: The Re-invention of the Graphic Memoir", claiming that Satrapi's graphic memoir escapes Dabashi's criticism primarily because of its graphic medium:

The form of *Persepolis* enables it to be malleable enough to escape some of the controversial quagmires that more traditional autobiographies can fall into. Moreover because it embraces a popular cultural form, the graphic novel, it can mask the seriousness of its statement under the guise of comic laughter. (3)

Basu further attempts to bolster her argument by claiming that Satrapi avoids monologic presentations of Iranian woman as victims of Iranian religious patriarchy, and that through her attempt to explore different class systems, Satrapi challenges Western stereotypes of the East.

In this essay, I will argue that not only does Satrapi's memoir fall under Dabashi's criticism, but that it can also be seen as more threatening to the perpetuation of anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic sentiments than Nafisi's memoir. Several factors contributing to this claim are its accessible graphic form, appealing child protagonist, and liminality⁵ of

the author's position. I will explore the academic credibility that graphic novels have achieved in the past decade and uncover the geopolitical climate and marketing variables of Satrapi's *Persepolis* success in Euro-America. Also, through analysis of this hybrid text, I will discuss the instances that reinforce stereotypes through the symbol of the veil as well as the depiction of Islam, without the context of the religion or culture. Such omission of context assists to perpetuate such ideas that Islamic countries are backward and barbaric and that the West should intervene to liberate oppressed people.

I would like to make clear to readers that I do not believe Satrapi's piece is wholly damaging as an educational tool for readers about the Iranian culture; there are certainly redeeming elements to her graphic memoir. It is important that audiences are exposed to such multicultural material, but the proper foundational ideological and religious education is needed to provide readers a context of cultural practices and norms. Satrapi does illuminate the dynamic and individual side of Iran through her avatar and other personas throughout the piece, portraying uniqueness in a culture often viewed by Western readers as monolithic, as well as presenting glimpses of strong female figures that are commonly excluded from such texts. She also introduces readers to the complex political history of Iran, and as one American journalist from *Time Magazine* put it, she informs Westerners "That the so-called 'Islamic Revolution' began as a populist revolt that included secular, left-wing socialists is just one of this book's many surprises for someone like myself" (Arnold 2003). These are commendable aspects of her piece; however, the skewed aspects far outweigh the good due to the same lack of religious and cultural context in her memoir as in the typical western classroom.

Basu claims that Dabashi's controversy solely "impinges on the question of gender," and that his main source of discomfort with Nafasi's depiction of the restrictions of women's freedoms in revolutionary Iran⁶ is that it becomes a rationale for imperial interventions (Basu 3). I would argue that by "not teasing out the intricacies" of Dabashi's argument in her article, Basu trivializes the claims he makes about the danger of Nafasi's memoir so that she is able to dismiss easily the argument that Satrapi's *Persepolis* can be seen as product of Western bias (Basu 3). This is a familiar accusation that many feminists of color have faced because it can be argued that by representing gender oppressions in their societies truthfully, they invite criticisms for being anti-nationalists or pro-western. Basu also claims in her article that gender is Dabashi's main concern with the piece instead of the additional political implications of Nafasi's inaccurate portrayal of women due to the lack of the context of Islam. In fact, third world women writers who are commonly criticized as being pro-western have tended to portray their cultures in a Western light instead of within their own cultural context, which leads to an account of women that is not geographically, historically, or culturally grounded. Without a cultural context, and ignoring the voices of the religious female masses, such portrayals of 'women's oppression in Iran' are inaccurate and can serve Western political and military agendas. Dabashi's criticism is not strictly centered around the skewed portrayal of oppressed women in Iran, but is also about the portrayal of Iranians more generally, their culture, the promotion of "Western Classics" instead of indigenous literatures, the imperialistic uses of the book by US administrations to build a consensus for a military campaign against Iran, as well as the scholarly merit of Nafasi herself. A final claim that Dabashi makes against Nafasi is her depiction of the most demonic

character in her *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as an avid supporter of Edward Said, prompting Dabashi to claim: "If Edward Said dismantled the edifice of Orientalism, Azar Nafisi is recruited to re-accredit it" ("Native Informers" 10). These charges can be made against Satrapi as well, as *Persepolis*, especially with its graphic form, can be just as deleterious to perceptions of Iran in the West as Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has been in the last decade.

As Masoud Golsorkhi, an Iranian born journalist and editor, puts it in his 2008 article from *The Guardian*, "A Partial History," although he believes that Satrapi's graphic memoir is partly a subtle and powerful analysis of the politics of Iran and though its themes may be universal, "it would be a mistake to imagine Satrapi's story is typical. Her tale, as powerful and well-told as it is, is restricted by one important factor - her class." Unfortunately, despite the fact that the memoir as a genre is subjective, a dominant portion of the Western readers believe *Persepolis* is an objective, universal truth.⁷ The dynamics of class struggle formed a dominant thread to spark the Iranian revolution and are a powerful presence in politics today, but *Persepolis* fails to address them. Satrapi's family was part of an elite upper-class; they employed a maid, drove a Cadillac, and she attended a private, foreign French school (*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, 3, 6). When Vanessa E. Jones, in an article that appeared in *The Globe* in 2004, asked Satrapi about this element of class bias, Satrapi replied:

"Listen, my family is not the elite," she says. "No, no, no, no, no." A better description is middle class or perhaps upper middle class, she says. Then she concedes that since the middle class has disappeared in today's Iran, her parents probably do reside in the elite section of the class map. ("A Life in Graphic Detail" 3)

Being part of such a small demographic skews her perception of the Revolution's hold on the dominant population of Iranian citizens who, due to their illiteracy rate and lack of education, were positioned in the working- and lower-class rungs of society and felt the oppression of the imperialistic funded regime. As a result, the impact and cultural implementations of the Islamic Republic affected the Satrapi family much later, and less severely, than the rest of the country. For those in non-secular schools, which were funded by the government, the implementation of Islamic laws had been in place for some years, and since 89% of Iranian citizens are Muslim, Islamic code was part of everyday life in contrast to Satrapi's lifestyle ("Background Note: Iran").

Although Satrapi stays fairly true to the historical timeline of the political revolution, she had a distorted perspective on events due to her social class standing as well as religious beliefs. For Satrapi's family, the turn to Islamic fundamentalism was particularly restrictive and threatening; her parents were Marxist intellectuals and her great-grandfather, one of Iran's last emperors, was replaced by Reza Shah in the process of British colonization after the First World War. Due to the fact that a majority of people were of Muslim faith, the implementation of the Islamic Republic was not as shocking in the culture as Satrapi suggests, although punishments for violations were harsh. Observing that her family members were part of a small faction of wealthy citizens and were not practicing Muslims, (despite her childhood belief that she was the next Prophet), she was more affected by the religious shift compared to the majority of the population of Iranians who participated in such religious practices long before the revolution occurred.

What Satrapi also fails to address, whether it is due to her child memory point of view or simply age of her avatar, is that before the second Pahlavis Shah, Iran was governed by the Persian Constitution of 1906 which upheld Islamic influences over secular governmental laws. I stress “influence” here since the laws were overseen by a body of clerics, but punishment for not abiding by these secular laws was not as harsh as what we see through the eyes of Marji during the Islamic Revolution. Articles 1 and 2 of the laws of the Persian Constitution of 1906 established Islam as the official religion of Persia/Iran, and specified that all laws of the nation must be approved by a committee of Shi'a clerics. Later, these two articles were mainly ignored by the Pahlavis, which sometimes resulted in anger and uprising of clerics and religious masses.

Finally, her motivation for publishing and promoting her piece, as well as her cultural authority on the subject matter, must be taken into consideration in order to understand the instrumental purposes of this memoir in Euro-America. In an interview with Annie Tully in 2006 Satrapi directly confesses her weakness as a cultural authority and discloses her intended audience: "I am a foreigner in Iran. . . . Nowhere is my home any more . . . the book *Persepolis* I wrote for the other ones, not for Iranians" (2). This comment underscores Dabashi's critique of the use of such books to strengthen propaganda in the United States against Iran. In an interview with Anne-Marie O'Connor from the *Los Angeles Times* in 2005, Satrapi continues to be vocal about her account as biased:

"I was born in a certain place, in a certain time," Satrapi told a heavily Iranian American audience at UCLA's Royce Hall recently. "I might be unsure of many things, but I'm not unsure of what I've seen with my own eyes. This is not the story of Iran. I'm not speaking for the Iranian people. It is the story of Iran through my eyes. This was *my* truth." (1)

Although the memoir is seen as a subjective truth by scholars, general readers—Satrapi’s target audience— do not interpret the historical account this way⁸. If Satrapi had been forthcoming about such interpretations and the intended audience in her preface, her depictions of Iran, Iranians, and the Islamic Revolution might not have been criticized.

The points of Dabashi’s criticism that can be applied to Satrapi’s graphic memoir specifically are the marketing variables endorsed by Europeans and Americans that publicized the work more than other Iranian women’ memoirs in the last decade, the depiction of women as victims of the government and patriarchy, and the reinforcement of anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic sentiments through Orientalist stereotypes. Applying these key ideas from Dabashi’s criticism on Satrapi’s graphic memoir, I will demonstrate that Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* should be approached with caution as a “true representation” of Iranians and Islam.

Variables to Satrapi's Graphic Memoir Popularity

In Dabashi's criticism against Nafasi, he mentions several marketing variables promoted by neoconservatives that helped with the initial publication as well as monetary success of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (*Persepolis*, vols. 1 and 2 in French) was first published in France in 2000 and has since received several distinguished awards. This first volume of Satrapi's auto/biography sold 20,000 copies in a single year and won the 2001 Alph'Art Coup de Coeur Prize in Angoulême as well as the Prix du Lion in Belgium. *Persepolis, volumes 3 and 4* (*Persepolis: The Story of a Return* in English) were serialized in the French newspaper *Libération* and published in 2003. In October 2004, Satrapi received the prize of "Comic of the Year" in Frankfurt. The sales of these four volumes have passed 400,000 in France and over a million worldwide. More than a million people in 30 countries have read her books printed in 16 languages and marketed with several different book covers. When *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* was published in North America in 2003 it was immediately compared to Spiegelman's *Maus* and Joe Sacco's graphic reportage *Palestine*. These comparisons and association with L'Association comics publishing propelled Satrapi's work from the status of popular comic strip to the status of critically acclaimed "Commix," which is Spiegelman's term to designate multi-layered graphic stories and emphasize the co-mixing of private and public spheres necessary to the recreation of the past (Spiegelman, "Commix"). In the

New York Times, Fernanda Eberstadt claims, “*Persepolis* is the latest and one of the most delectable examples of a booming postmodern genre: autobiography by comic book.”

The enormous popular success of the autobiography in Europe and North America has granted *Persepolis* the status of “BD culte” (that is, a Bande Dessinée [BD] that is so popular the commix and artist have become a reference in the genre). It has been well received by the Western audience who has praised it for its humanizing of Middle Easterners where one critic claimed that “as a fifth-generation Canadian who has limited knowledge of the history or current situation in Iran, Satrapi's book did, indeed, show me a more accurate and more human picture of Iran and of Iranians. At a time when so much media attention is being given to Iran, this glimpse into life in Iran is very welcome and much needed” (Clarke 2). This type of attention can be seen as damaging as some Iranian critics believe that Satrapi’s memoir is Anti-Iranian (Riedemann 2007). Although the uneducated Westerner may praise the book for providing non-Iranian audiences “a unique glimpse into a nearly unknown and unreachable way of life,” the portrayal of Muslims and Iranian culture can be considered brutish and stereotypical by others, and that Satrapi’s omission of certain relevant factors from her account, particularly class, overlooks some of the issues that brought forth the revolution (Golsorkhi 1).^{ix} These instances of negative scholarly reception are outweighed by the massive amount of positive praise by popular Western magazines, book clubs and other literary groups that believe *Persepolis* “captures the true essence of this period” and does so in such a way “that it's easy for Western audiences to understand and sympathize” (Hersh and Strozykowski 2009). Satrapi’s success captured Sony’s attention, and it

contracted Satrapi to direct a film version of *Persepolis*. Kathleen Kennedy, who has worked with Steven Spielberg on projects such as *Schindler's List*, produced the English version of the movie. Sony Pictures Classics released the film in May 2007 and it won a Came'ra d'Or jury prize for best film by a new director at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival.

While the reviews and reception of Satrapi's graphic memoir have been positive, there are several aspects other than content that have contributed to the success of *Persepolis*, such as political timing. There have been numerous memoirs by Iranian women published throughout the past thirty years; the first to reach circulation was Tara Bahrapour's *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (2000), and since then, the number of memoirs by Iranian women has increased. By 2006, for instance, there were twelve publicized memoirs by Iranian women.^x In light of this catalogue of memoirs, I pose the same inquiry as Manuela Costantino does in face of the piece's accomplishments: why has this particular account become so popular?^{xi}

Studying the articles and conversations about *Persepolis* reveals several instrumental factors that have contributed to Satrapi's Western success, which are similar to those that bolstered Nafasi's memoir success. First and foremost, like Nafasi's memoir, Satrapi's graphic memoir was intended for a Western audience since its publication (Costantino 445). From this intention, it is hard to avoid the potential Native Informer qualities the piece may hold with her stereotypical representation of Islam and her class. Masoud Golsorkhi discusses this conflict:

So *Persepolis* (now an award-winning film directed by Vincent Paronnaud and Satrapi) is partly a subtle and powerful analysis of the politics of Iran. But though its themes may be universal, it would be a mistake to imagine Satrapi's story is typical. Her tale, as powerful and well-told as it is, is restricted by one important factor - her class. (1)

Golsokhi goes on to criticize Satrapi for leaving an important part of Iran's story untold: the point of view of the vast majority of poor Iranians and their practice of Islam. The memoir's child perspective, along with its popularity, can reach a large number of readers and shape their knowledge of Iran's culture and history.

Western readers are also drawn to Marjane's child persona Marji, who Costantino describes as "a sassy little girl whose take on the chaotic world around her provides a fresh and humorous understanding of Iranian culture and history" (Costantino 432). Readers of all ages can identify with the child narrator, sympathize with her, and most importantly learn with her about the complexities of the political and social state of Iran during the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. While *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* received similar success and was later combined with *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, it did not have the same resonating impact as its predecessor. The fact that Marjane is an older figure in the second part may have contributed to its poorer reception. Also, the appeal of the graphic memoir translated into a film version that follows the graphic medium, is a marketing tool that contributed to its international success.

What is particularly interesting about the medium of illustration in the film industry is the ability to seamlessly dub the dialogue and narration in a desired language. Unlike foreign film translations, *Persepolis* was not compromised in this transformation and the traces of disenchantment are avoided through its medium. Regardless of the publication format of *Persepolis*, the memoir itself can also be placed in the genre of "exile narrative", which is a familiar genre for

readers who, under this assumption, are more comfortable with the topics and issues of the piece.^{xii}

Satrapi with her graphic medium stands out amongst other Iranian women memoir-writers who pursue a traditional prose memoir approach. Enlisting the graphic medium, as opposed to strictly prose writing, allows Satrapi to reach a broad and more age-diverse audience that may be drawn to her piece due to its unthreatening qualities. With this idea in mind, I believe that *Persepolis* has the ability to reach a larger, wider age-range, and more educationally diverse audience than *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. With such a broad potential audience, the possibility of a call for “Western Benevolence”^{xiii} is dangerously increased, and the perpetuation of anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic sentiments becomes reinforced through the capitalistic market. In addition, *Persepolis* is seen by the public as a history lesson^{xiv}, a deceptive inaccuracy for readers desiring to be educated while at the same time being entertained. Satrapi not only connects with her readers with the use of her child persona, but also with her negative depiction of Muslim leaders and Islamic practices. These, which she portrays as often bizarre, primitive and brutish, further strengthen her connections with non-Iranian readers who may be prejudicially inclined to accept such a depiction of Islam. (A detailed analysis of her portrayals of Muslims will be discussed in the “Islam in the American Imagination” chapter of this study)

Along with these variables, the conditions of marketing and of political climate, as well as its pedagogical nature, have made *Persepolis* one of the most popular graphic memoirs in the past decade and susceptible to Dabashi’s

criticism. As Manuela Costantino points out, *Persepolis I* was published in France at a time when the country was struggling with the debate over veiled Muslim girls in public schools. Its momentum during this time could be seen as a political attempt to shape an understanding of Middle Eastern cultural practices “by presenting a liberal Middle Eastern viewpoint amidst radical unrest” (Costantino 433). The potential for subliminal messages through marketing strategies could be seen as a tool in supporting a national political agenda in France at the time “that avoids discussions about economic problems in order to articulate a debate about cultural and racial issues.” When President Jacques Chirac announced the government’s plan to pass a law banning the veil in public schools in December 2003, politically active citizens argued that the government’s campaign against the veil had been a ploy to deflect attention from economic issues. Critics of then-Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin’s argued on French television news programs that the government was fueling anti-immigrant sentiments, suggesting that the presence of “foreigners,” unable to adapt to and fit into French culture, was in fact the root of the economic problems that the country was facing (Costantino 434). In light of the tense political and cultural debate in France, using a text like *Persepolis* in primary public schools may, on the surface, be seen as a way of teaching young French students about foreign cultures, but may also be viewed as a way to reinforce the national political agenda and perpetuate Islamophobia throughout France.^{xv} Understanding how France handled issues concerning Muslims in their country after 9/11 is of particular interest to this criticism as France harbors the greatest Muslim population of Western

Europe, estimated at between 4 and 6 million, and the presence of Islam has over the last two decades acquired a symbolic value even more dramatic than the demographic impact of Muslims (qtd. in Senior 13).^{xvi} This political handling reveals that the very concept of Islamophobia in France has been subject to heated discussion and polemics. Satrapi has repeatedly emphasized her love for France; in light of such controversial political debates centered around the veil ban, in this context her autobiography does seem to show that the veil is indeed a form of oppression of Middle Eastern women, further galvanizing support for the campaign for Western intervention that Dabashi warns of in his criticism against Nafasi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. (A detailed analysis of her perception of the veil will be discussed in the "Misconceptions of the Veil: A Reinforcement of Orientalism" chapter of this study)

While the simple artistry (which can be described as a wood-cut look) and cultural history of *Persepolis* help contribute to its popularity with Western readers, it has taken on even more importance in the current geopolitical climate. In a review for *Time*, Andre Arnold supports the idea that the mass popularity of the graphic novel was bolstered by the political atmosphere at the time of publication:

Written with astonishing detail and from the point of view of a child, "Persepolis" domesticates world events and makes them relatable and real. It pulls back the veil on a culture that utterly preoccupies us, but about which we know little. Its complicated personal portrait makes it impossible to think of Iran as the monolithic fundamentalist terror state of our fears. (1)

Indeed the political climate since September 11th has brought more curiosity about Middle Eastern culture; *Persepolis* is topical for the time of its publication and this can account for one of the elements of its immense popularity. In a case study conducted by

Amy Malek, she also credits the trajectory of *Persepolis* to a market eager for such memoirs:

Amidst the popularity of memoirs in general, and women's memoirs, in particular, the post-9/11 atmosphere has created a level of curiosity towards Iran that, though it may have originated in the 1980s, was never satiated or answered publicly by Iranians themselves until recently. As Americans and others around the world seek insight into a country and a people that have been deemed "evil" and an imminent threat to Western society, Iranian exiles—and their children—have also begun to re-examine and work through their identities and histories. Many have found a voice in the memoir genre, letting go of what Farideh Goldin has termed an "imported taboo" of "speaking and writing candidly from our Iranian past." (361-62)

Satrapi's memoir began to gather momentum in the United States in 2003-2004 as well, during a time when America had begun to expand efforts in its "War on Terror" and color security codes dictated the height of panic or conditions of calm in airports and government spaces. As mentioned before, in France, the public debate of banning Muslim girls in secular public schools from wearing the veil was in full swing during this time; in the United States the memoir was put on the reading list at West Point and other North American educational institutions, with a slew of unit guides and pedagogical supplements. And, as in France, its convenient arrival in the political climate of the time helped expose citizens to a culture they knew little about. The fact that the memoir has become part of a curriculum at a military institution reinforces Dabashi's claim that such literary pieces contribute to the justification for imperial rule and intervention as well as helping to promote Islamophobia in the West. Whitlock questions such political motives and asks: "One has to wonder, indeed, had [*Persepolis*] displayed anti-American or anti-Western sentiment, would it have been so widely circulated and therefore popular?"(Costantino 433).

The political timing and release of Satrapi's graphic memoir is not the only element that contributes to its commercial success, but some clever packaging and marketing strategies also strengthened its reach to a Western audience. The book-covers for the *Persepolis* series differ greatly between France and the North American market. Each cover of the four French volumes display cartoon figures mounted on muscular horses. (see Figure 1) Volumes 1 and 2 depict men, who may look like Persian historical figures poised with a knife or sword, frozen in a position of attack as if in the midst of battle. The form on the cover of the 3rd Volume, mistaken by some scholars as a woman horse rider, is actually a colonial figure with a curled white wig and long leather riding boots, in a reared-up position on his horse which gives an aggressive and strong quality to the illustration. What emphasizes this opposition of figures from the first two volumes is that the horse rider in volume is facing left, or "West" in a war pose, whereas the first two male figures in volumes 1 and 2 are facing the opposite direction, or "East". This

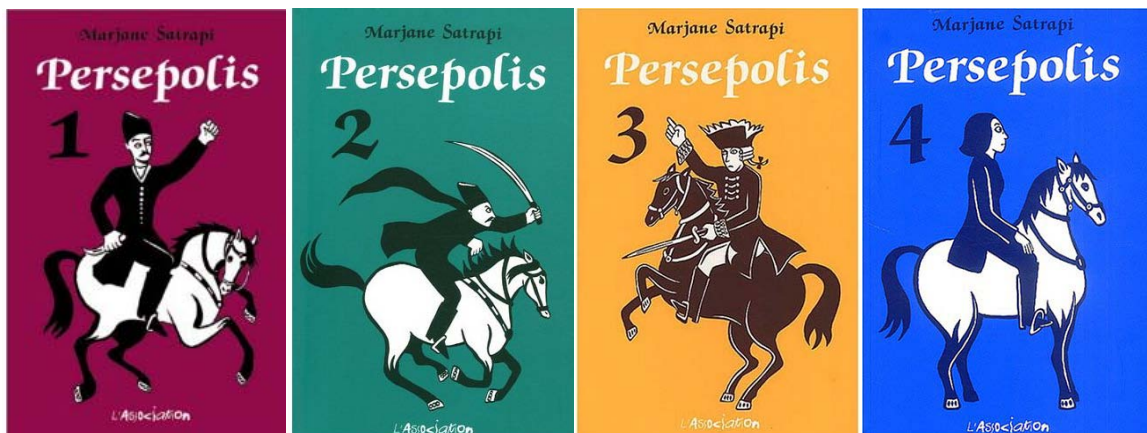


Fig.1 From *Persépolis*, tome 1-4 by Marjane Satrapi, copyright L'Asscoation, Paris, France. October 2002

interpretation counters Costantino's claim of the horse-rider in volume 3 as female and is somehow artistically associated with the Volume 4 cover that features Marijane as an adult.^{xvii} Costantino also suggests that the Marijane echoes the famous pose of the French figure Joan of Arc, which would appeal to the French reader. While the other covers picture these male figures in war-like poses, Marijane is pictured in a more static pose, without weapons or war-like facial expressions. She is simply mounted on her horse, facing to the right like her Persian male figures, staring blankly ahead. There are no revealing expressions in her face and she is not even holding on to the reins of the horse. This image may comment on Satrapi's lack of control during her life or experiences in a turbulent Iranian history. These four covers appeal to the French national pride of fighting against foreign invasion in order to protect its national identity and subliminally to support a national political agenda, particularly the veil ban in December of 2003.

The "veil" also plays an important role in the creation of the book-covers for the North American market. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, the first volume circulated in the market, depicts a subdued black and white illustration of an unsmiling Marji draped with a veil that covers her shoulders and breast. The fact that she is depicted frowning, immediately appeals to a "Westerner's Benevolence" to liberate the oppressed women and children society that they have seen through the media. Her arms are crossed in front of her and only strands of her bangs have any lighting details in them. The illustration is centered on a loud, red book-cover with black stencil designs that invoke images of the Middle East. Many critics believe that this cover reinforces a female Muslim identity and stereotype and presents the idea of Western humanitarian actions by inviting the reader to hear a more intimate story than other media have presented.

Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return features the same stencil designs, but this time on a blue background with a grown-up Marijane, veil-less and in a gender neutral black shirt. Marijane is looking back at the reader with a somewhat surprised look on her face, making the reader perhaps wonder what is making her uncomfortable (which some may assume is a negative reaction to her position in Iranian society). (see Figure 2). *The Complete Persepolis*, which combines Parts 1 and 2 of the series, was released in October 2007, just two months before the film release in the United States. This cover shares its image with the movie poster for the production and is much different from the book-covers in both France and North America. What is most interesting is that *Persepolis* the animated film was marketed to appeal specifically to child viewers. The clips that are shown in the shorter trailer highlight Marji playing air guitar in her room, and other scenes that reinforce the childhood persona. This sends a misconstrued message about the content of the piece, suggesting that the film is suited for young children and promotes a skewed storyline that would appeal to that certain age group. To reinforce such

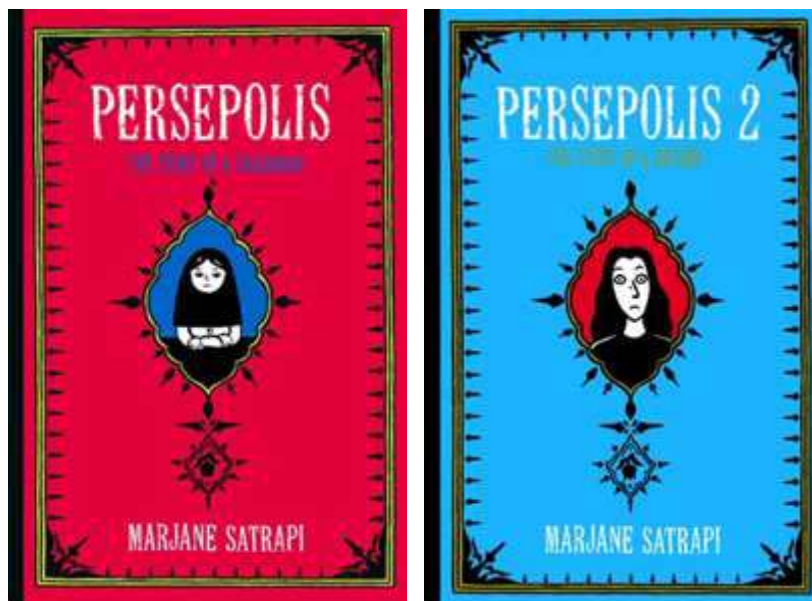


Fig. 2. From *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood* . New York: Pantheon, 2003; From *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*. New York: Pantheon, 2004.

propaganda, on December 9th, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association announced their picks for the best movies of 2007. In the category of animated film, the LAFCA announced a tie: *Persepolis* and *Ratatouille*. The plot of the animated film *Ratatouille* revolves around a mouse that has the ability to cook culinary masterpieces, while *Persepolis* situates itself about the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. However, the serious subject matter of Satrapi's piece was never highlighted in movie trailers in the West, and marketers trying to appeal to a younger audience used a humorous clip of Marji dancing and singing along to the Survivor song "Eye of the Tiger." The clip is taken out of context and is not representative of the film as a whole. One surprised Western audience member revealed, "Persepolis has moments of humor and light relief, but it is far more widely punctuated with horror, anger and disappointment" (Hersh 2).

Juxtaposing these two animated films reinforces the clever marketing strategies of the Western agenda. As much as *Persepolis* received praise for this nomination, Iranians and Iranian-Americans were not so enthusiastic. The Iranian government condemned the animated film, claiming that it was "Islamophobic," and part of a convoluted French-American plot to destabilize Iran, which is the exact criticism of Dabashi concerning such Iranian pieces marketed in Euro-America.

This packaging of Satrapi's graphic memoir targets not only specific national audiences, but promotes its marketing in the education institutions as well. The pedagogical merit of the *Persepolis* series has been widely developed in educational institutions in France and North America as well as in light of its animated film release in the winter of 2007. According to one source, as of 2004, almost half a million copies had been sold worldwide, both volumes spent numerous weeks on the *New York Times* non-

fiction bestseller lists, and over 160 colleges and high schools in the United States use *Persepolis* for gender/political science classes (Jones 2004). These numbers are far above that of Nafasi's memoir, and generate a raised brow in light of Dabahi's criticism.

Throughout the series, Satrapi presents the subject of education methodically. She focuses on how the educational system in Iran influenced the curriculum and political messages. There are several instances where she challenges her teacher's statements about current politics and Iranian history as well as depictions of her autobiographical avatar tackling viewpoints of history, authoritative accounts of events, and involvement in protests (*Persepolis: A Story of a Childhood* 144-47). Since the initial print release of *Persepolis*, there have been several American institutions that have used her graphic memoir for the secondary school, not limited to the English classroom, but included in cross-content subjects such as women's studies, political science, human rights and sociology, as well as religion and government. The fact that this memoir is being used in a classroom as a substitution for a historical novel supports the Imperialist need for moral support for its intervention endeavors. Theoretical frameworks and universal themes, like coming-of-age stories and multiculturalism, are other elements of the *Persepolis* series' appeal. The US marketer for *Persepolis*, shortly after the release of the animated film, made a call to social studies teachers to consider the film for their classroom:

The National Council for Social Studies, the largest association in the United States devoted solely to social studies education states: "In a democratic and multicultural society, students need to understand multiple perspectives that derive from different cultural vantage points. This understanding will allow them to relate to people in our nation and throughout the world." *Persepolis* is offered for your consideration as such a film – capable of bringing to life the realities of living through an Islamic Revolution and its effects on family life. Because the film is about a young girl in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, your students will be able to relate to the history, politics, religion and human rights issues in

the film through the eyes of someone close to their age. *Persepolis* also shows how the ordeals of teenagers throughout the world have common elements while at the same time driving home the contrasts of a society that represses freedom of expression. (Bilello)

Again, here, the child persona of Satrapi's memoir is used as an element for persuasion and interest to the avid and non-avid reader alike. There are countless educational sites on the internet that provide numerous teaching resources for Satrapi's graphic memoir for mostly secondary and post-secondary levels. There are even blogs and articles that have been published to foster its pedagogical merit, not to mention scholarly attention to the educational merit of the graphic memoir. Lisa Botshon and Melinda Plastas, authors of *Homeland In/Security: A Discussion and Workshop on Teaching Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis*, have been long time advocates of the use of *Persepolis* in the classroom:

One of the great challenges of teaching in the post—9/11 United States is contending with persistent stereotypes and misinformation about Islam, "Arabs," "Arab Americans," and the "Middle East" within our student bodies. Since 2003 we have been employing Iranian author Marjane Satrapi's work in the classroom as a way to begin discussions about race, terrorism, and war, and particularly about how these issues are gendered and has sold over a million copies worldwide and has been taught in hundreds of classrooms around the nation. . . *Persepolis* has proven to be a useful tool to begin such explorations in courses that range from women's studies to composition to history to politics, and it has yielded significant results in terms of students' critical thinking. (Botshon and Plastas 1)

With its strategic marketing ploy to Euro-America and the political climate of the graphic memoir release, Satrapi's *Persepolis* series has gained unforeseen popularity. The suggested pedagogical merit of the piece and its distribution to countless classrooms across the world can be seen, through the lens of Dabashi's criticism, as reinforcing American Oriental stereotypes and perhaps perpetuating anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic sentiments.

Misconceptions of the Veil: A Reinforcement of Orientalism

Written for a non-Iranian audience, one of Satrapi's intentions for her graphic memoir *Persepolis* is to illuminate for a Western audience the people of Iran. In several of her interviews, Satrapi explained that one of her goals with the graphic memoir was to redress some of the misconceptions that many Westerners have concerning Iran, its history, and its people. Through her autobiographical avatar, Satrapi claimed that she hoped to educate her readers by bringing humanity to a culture that Westerners know little about in order to refute common stereotypes and misconceptions about Iranians. For example, in an interview with the Pantheon Staff, she states: "From the time I came to France in 1994, I was always telling stories about life in Iran to my friends. We'd see pieces about Iran on television, but they didn't represent my experience at all. I had to keep saying, 'No, it's not like that there.' I've been justifying why it isn't negative to be Iranian for almost twenty years" (2009). Although Satrapi attempts to challenge and dispel common Western and Oriental representation through the guise of humor,¹⁸ she undermines her own graphic memoir, by perpetuating negative Iranian and Islamic stereotypes by not grounding her depictions in a cultural or ideological context.

In Chandra Mohanty's essay, "Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity" she poses the cautionary query about what it means to speak or write as a "first world" woman about "third world" women. She expresses her concern about how such depictions of "Third World" women are often not "geographically, historically, and culturally grounded" and thus misrepresent women's roles, cultural

practices, and shared ideologies (824). Satrapi draws from her experience to write about a culture she was born into. As she put it, she is a foreigner herself in Iran¹⁹ and writes her account from a Western perspective. According to Mohanty such writers' stance runs the risk of marginalizing or ghettoizing Western feminist discourse, and lends itself to the production of the "Third World woman" as a singular, monolithic subject in some (Western) feminist texts (825). These women are portrayed as oppressed victims in an Islamic, uncivilized culture, and as Hamid Dabashi points out, such depictions help bolster the Imperialist intervention agenda:

[This] body of literature, perhaps best represented by Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, ordinarily points to concerns about the plight of Muslim women in the Islamic world and yet put that predicament squarely at the service of the US ideological psy-op, militarily stipulated in the US global warmongering. As President Bush has repeatedly indicated, the US is now engaged in a prolonged war with terrorism. This terrorism has an ostensibly "Islamic" disposition and provenance. "Islam" in this particular reading is vile, violent, and above all abusive of women--and thus fighting against Islamic terrorism, *ipso facto*, is also to save Muslim women from the evil of their men. (2)

This liberation of an oppressed people also falls under Gayatri Spivak's, a distinguished feminist, imperialist intervention concept of "White men saving brown women from brown men," discussed in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Without the context of cultural variables, depictions of women and the "Eastern" culture are in danger of making overarching generalizations and producing/representing a composite, singular "Third World woman"—an image that appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse.²⁰ In other "liberation cases" in the past decade, it is also the white who is charged to save the brown woman. In their study, "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency" Charles

Hirshkind and Saba Mahmood discuss the US strategy of such perceptions of “Third World women” that was used to help fund and encourage the “liberation of the oppressed peoples” in Afghanistan. Following the September 11th attacks, the *burqa*-clad body of the Afghan woman became “the visible sign of an invisible enemy that threatens not only ‘us,’ citizens of the West, but our entire civilization”:

This image, one foregrounded initially by the Feminist Majority campaign though later seized on by the Bush administration and the mainstream media, served as a key element in the construction of the Taliban as an enemy particularly deserving of our wrath because of their harsh treatment of women. As Laura Bush put it in her November 17th radio address to the nation: “Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror—not only because our hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorist would like to impose on the rest of us.” Not surprisingly, the military success of Operation Enduring Freedom was celebrated first and foremost as the liberation of Afghan women from Taliban control. (341-2)

Laura Bush’s statement is flawed in several rhetorical aspects. She uses the binary Orientalist view that the ‘East’ is uncivilized and the ‘West’ is a sophisticated culture, the women and children of Islamic countries are oppressed under religious rule, and most shockingly, if we as a nation do not intervene, such oppression and injustice will be pressed upon white women in the United States. Such iconic generalizations have been reflected in non-native and native accounts, such as Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and can be said to exist in Satrapi’s *Persepolis* when her depiction of the veil without the cultural or religious context of the garment is examined more closely. Before I examine such depictions in detail, I would like to briefly discuss Satrapi’s liminal identity, as well as some of the common assumptions about the veil in Islamic culture.

As mentioned in Amy Malek’s “Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* Series”, Satrapi as an author falls under

Arnold van Gennep's early twentieth century concept of *liminality*²¹: the traveler who "wavers between two worlds" and consequently this exile maintains a double relationship and dual loyalty to their home land and migrated space.²² Due to her liminality, class position, scant religious practices, as well as confession by Satrapi herself, it can be argued that she aligns herself with the Western perspective of cultural portrayals which inevitably reinforces skewed generalizations of the Iranian culture as well as Islam. Mohanty comments on Western feminist writings on women in the Third World that demonstrate the universal operation of male dominance and female exploitation.

Mohanty critiques the proof of universalism by the use of an arithmetic method:

The greater the number of women who wear the veil, the more universal is the sexual segregation and control of women. Similarly, a large number of different, fragmented examples from a variety of countries also apparently add up to a universal fact. For instance, Muslim women in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Egypt all wear some sort of a veil. Hence the argument goes, sexual control of women is a universal fact in those countries. (828)

This universalism equation of sexual control of veiled women has been used in feminist journals. For instance, in her essay "Female Genital Mutilation and Human Rights," Fran Hosken states that "Rape, forced prostitution, polygamy, genital mutilation, pornography, the beatings of girls and women, purdah (the segregation of women) are all violations of basic human rights" (15). By equating purdah with rape, domestic violence, and forced prostitution, Hosken asserts that purdah exists only as a sexually controlling function and avoids exploring purdah in the context of Islam. This is a descriptive generalization and is an analytical leap from the practice of wearing the veil to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women. While there may be a physical similarity in veils worn by women in Saudi Arabia and Iran, the specific meaning

attached to its practice varies according to the cultural and ideological context. It is the lack of explanation of such context in Satrapi's memoir that helps perpetuate such iconic associations and stereotypes, and that force us to question the motives of her publication in light of her claimed intent to educate non-Iranians about a stigmatized culture. A well-established stereotype familiar to a Western audience is that of the veiled woman as a sexual and exotic object. Gillian Whitlock describes this stereotype as:

The classic colonial fantasy of the veiled female body becoming available to our gaze. The Orientalist iconography of the harem confirms the promise that shadows every cover where we see a veiled woman, and are promised a lifting of the veil. The promise that the veil can be pierced to reveal the compliant sexualized woman who is waiting, desiring, needing to be unveiled and taken. (59)

This colonial fantasy often centers on females "veiled by the chador" in and depicted as "nondescript, obliterated, silenced" ("Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics"74). Satrapi has the opportunity to open her graphic memoir with any one unforgettable moment of her childhood, but chooses to begin her memoir out of chronological order by opening her piece with a chapter called "The Veil" (*Persepolis: A Story of a Childhood* 3). This is a curious choice as her memoir focuses on her early years of her childhood and the implementation of the veil, historically and organizationally, did not occur until halfway into her piece (*Persepolis: A Story of a Childhood* 75). If her aim was to dispel the stereotypes of the Iranian culture, why does she choose to begin her memoir by amplifying one of the most intractable symbols of cultural difference between Muslim societies and the West? Why does she not frame the cultural and ideological context of the veil accurately? According to Toril Moi in her essay "Feminist, Female, Feminine" when one is analyzing literature from a feminist point of view, one must be familiar with

the “set of culturally defined characteristics” (123). That is to say, what one culture may define as ‘women’s social roles’ may not be relatable to other cultures. Instead Satrapi opens her book with the initial panels immediately representing the veil negatively without the dominant cultural or religious context and practice. The illustration draws the reader’s eye to a frowning child in a veil that covers most of her body, and then a row of girls, who look identical in appearance and facial expressions, due to the dominating veil (see Figure 3).

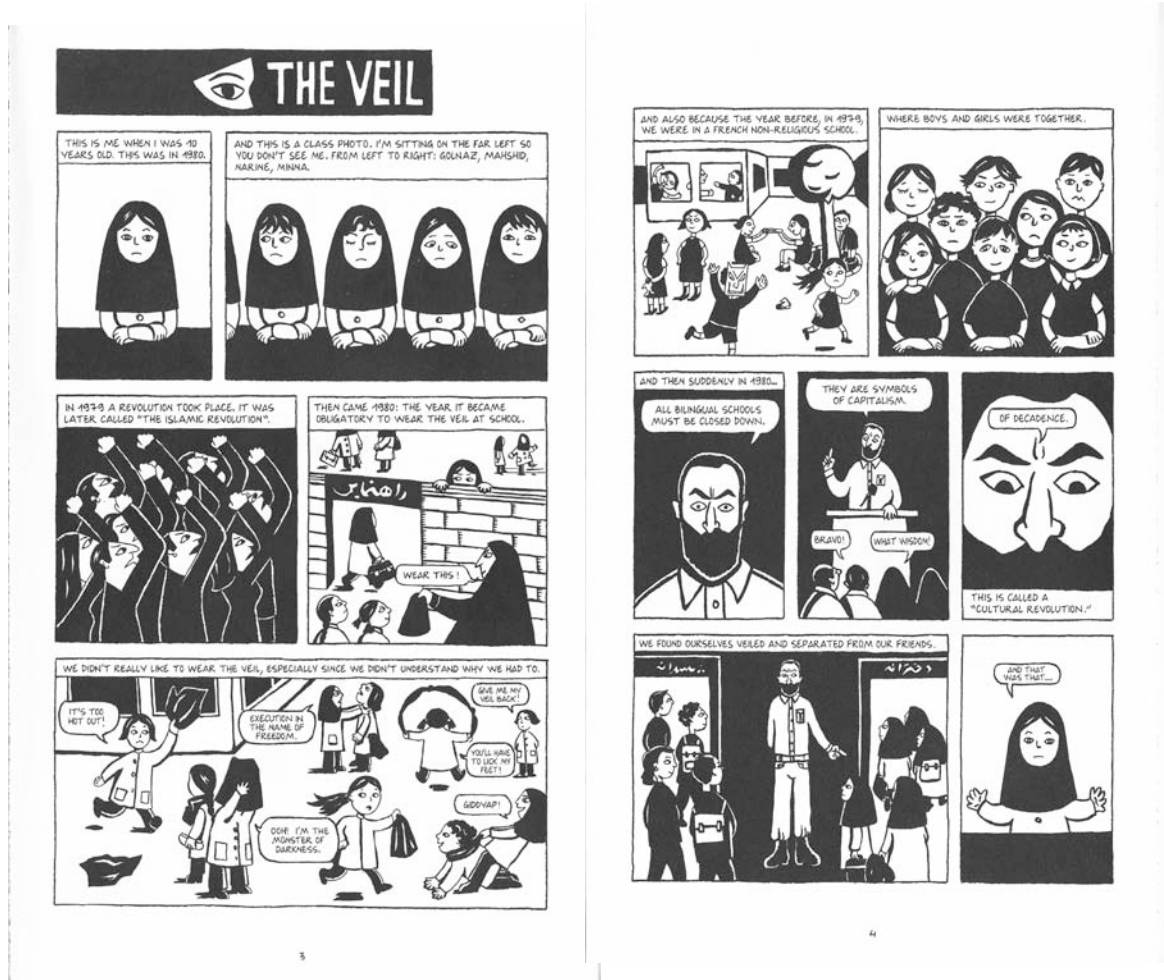


Fig. 3. From *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood* . New York: Pantheon, 2003: 3-4

What we must keep in mind is that Satrapi is both the writer and illustrator of her graphic memoir, so all visuals and prose are direct intentions of the author. Debbie Notkin, in a review of the book for *The Women's Review of Books*, comments on the effect of the way Satrapi opens her memoir:

In the second panel of *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi lets her readers know what we can expect from the rest of the book. The panel shows four little girls in Islamic veils lined up in a neat little row. On the far left, we see the barest suggestions of a fifth girl. The text reads, in part, 'This is a class photo. I am sitting on the far left so you don't see me.' Satrapi, like all autobiographers, controls what we see and how we see it: unlike many, however, she is extremely cognizant of her control and wants her readers to share her understanding. ("Growing Up Graphic 8)

What she wants us to see as readers immediately is the negative effect of the veil, particularly on young girls. Satrapi has the opportunity to quickly rectify this negative association by educating her non-Iranian readers about the cultural, historical, and religious connotations of this misinterpreted image; however, she doesn't even attempt to put it in such context. Instead, she aligns herself with the Western audience by claiming: "We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to...we found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends" (3, 4).

What is particularly peculiar about this statement is that since Satrapi lived in Iran for so long, despite her class position and religious practices, it is difficult to believe that she was not informed about the context of the veil or purdah by her educated parents due to the overwhelming 98% population of Muslims in the country (CIA-World Factbook). Why would Satrapi choose not to dispel such images that are "far from the truth"? (*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Introduction). In her article, "Marji: Popular Commix Heroine Breathing Life into the Writing of History" Manuela

Costantino also comments on these opening pages: “The frame also demonstrates that the veil was as foreign to her and her classmates as it would be to her non-Muslim readers, and the irreverent uses of what they tend to read as a symbol of fundamentalist oppression clearly illustrate Satrapi’s views on the veil,” and concludes that an explanation should have accompanied the imposition of the veil for readers (432). For Satrapi’s family, the turn to Islamic fundamentalism was particularly restrictive and threatening, for her parents were Marxist intellectuals, and her great-grandfather one of Iran’s last emperors, replaced by Reza Shah in the process of British colonization after the First World War for the majority of the population, the implementation was not as uncomfortable due to their religious practices.

The specific meaning attached to the veil varies according to the historical, cultural, and ideological context of its practice. Mohanty explains that the “symbolic space” occupied by the practice of “*pardah* may be similar in certain contexts, but this does not automatically indicate that the practices themselves have identical significance in the social realm” (828). For example, as is well known, Iranian upper/middle-class²³ women veiled themselves during the 1979 revolution to indicate solidarity with their veiled, working-class sisters, while in contemporary Iran, Islamic laws dictate that all Iranian women wear veils once they reach puberty. While in both instances, similar reasons are offered for the veil—opposition to the Shah and Western cultural colonization in the first case and the Islamization of Iran in the second—the concrete meanings attached to Iranian women wearing the veil is clearly different in both historical contexts. In the first case, wearing the veil is both an oppositional and revolutionary gesture on the part of the Iranian upper/middle-class women; in the second case it was an institutional

mandate that was a normal and common practice amongst Muslim women before the 1979 revolution.²⁴

Another function of the veil, especially in contemporary Iran, is the desexualization of women, neutralizing any conceived eroticism or agency in the face of men, and some feel the veil helps them be more expressive. In the article "A Walled Society," Dr. Farzaneh Milani discusses how women wearing veils do not feel oppressed and describes how many women wear it simply for protection. She believes that these women feel more secure when they travel and are not harassed by leering men. Women should be able, according to the author, to unveil their voice in writing without worrying if someone judges them for wearing a veil. The author completely supports a woman's choice not to wear or wear the veil, but she also states it has nothing to do with their freedom of mind. For instance, she states many women who do not wear the veil are hampered in the expression of their thoughts, but there are veiled women who are able to express themselves freely in their writing. Thus, the author argues that freedom is a state of mind and not one of physical dress (Mailani 15). The veil, in many cases, asserts a woman's religious identity and wearing it is preferred to being uncovered.

The implementation of the contemporary practices of purdah can be seen as an oppositional gesture as well. The Islamic government believed that any institution or practice associated with an outside, Euro-American country was damaging to the Iranian identity and virtue. As a result, when privatized bilingual schools were closed and turned into public institutions—which also allowed students of all class systems to attend school—boys and girls were separated. Once again, Satrapi chooses to remain silent about the foundations of these cultural and religious practices in her graphic memoir and

compounds the idea of oppression and separation of women to the Western reader.

Purdah (meaning "curtain") is the practice of concealing women from men who are not directly related to them. According to one definition:

Purdah is a curtain which makes sharp separation between the world of man and that of a woman, between the community as a whole and the family which is its heart, between the street and the home, the public and the private, just as it sharply separates society and the individual. (Schuon 18)

This takes two forms: physical segregation of the sexes, and the requirement for women to cover their bodies and conceal their form. Purdah exists in various forms in the Islamic world and among Hindu women in parts of India. In the Muslim world, preventing women from being seen by men is closely linked to the concept of *Namus*, which is an ethical category, a virtue, in Middle Eastern Muslim patriarchal character. It is a strongly gender-specific category of relations within a family described in terms of honor, attention, respect/respectability, and modesty. The term is often translated as "honor." It is important to note that the concept of *Namus* in respect to sexual integrity of family members is an ancient, exclusively cultural concept which predates Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Some critics see purdah as an evil influence that has only suffocated the rights of women and perpetuated male chauvinism. According to Susan P. Arnett in her article, "Purdah," such critics often point towards the Muslims in India who have shut off women from the outside world in order to make them ignorant of the practicalities of life. To them it has deprived the woman of economic independence and forces these females to produce chauvinistic boys and submissive girls. In order to keep females submissive, women know only what their fathers, husbands, and sons want them to know. Critics see women who practice purdah as having no voice or free will. Others, mostly believers in

Islam, see purdah as a positive and respectful practice that actually liberates women. It is viewed as liberating because it brings about an aura of respect. Women are looked at as individuals who are judged not by their physical beauty but by their inner beauty and mind. By covering themselves, women are not looked at as sex objects that can be dominated. For the Muslims, purdah is an act of faith that entails the acts of honor, respect, and dignity. Islam exalts the status of women by commanding that women should enjoy equal rights with men and remain on the same footing as them. When a woman covers herself she places herself on a higher level and allows men to see and respect her for her intellect, faith, and personality. The physical person is to play no role in social interaction.

Such modest garments are also not restricted simply to women, but to males as well. The Koran²⁵, Islam's holy book and treated as the literal word of God, tells Muslims – men and women – to dress modestly. Male modesty has been interpreted to be covering the area from the navel to the knee – and for women it is generally seen as covering everything except their face, hands and feet when in the presence of men they are not related or married to. What is important to note here is those women wear hijabs predominantly in public or at social events where they are surrounded by men they are not married or related to. Once they are with male relatives or with other women, they are not required to wear them. “Tell the faithful women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts and not display their beauty except what is apparent of it, and to extend their scarf to cover their bosom” (Quran, 24:31). This covering of private areas is applicable to men as well, but women are often the gender that is publicized for their modest garments in the media. In *Women and Gender*, Leila Ahmed states: “it was the discourses of the

West, and specifically the discourse of colonial domination, that in the first place determined the meaning of the veil in geopolitical discourses and thereby set the terms for its emergence as a symbol of resistance” (235). This interpretation of the veil is evident in Iran’s attempt to nationalize itself, while the Islamic republic provided a loud response to the Westernized world by implementing public dress codes for women and men. Satrapi casually explains that men were required to follow a dress code as well (see Figure 4):

But let’s be fair. If women faced prison when they refused to wear the veil, it was also forbidden for men to wear neckties (that dreaded symbol of the West). And if women’s hair got men excited, the same thing could be said of men’s bare arms. And so, wearing short-sleeved shirts was also forbidden. There was a kind of justice after all. (75)

Many Westerners don’t believe that men had dress codes and, although not as extreme as women, men were attacked for violating such rules, as we see when Maji’s family is stopped after a forbidden social event and her father is tagged as “Western trash” for simply wearing a tie and is subject to a house search by the Pasdaran, Iranian Revolutionary Police (108). Even though Satrapi mentions this male restriction, she does little to bring it up elsewhere in her text.



Fig. 4. From *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood* . New York: Pantheon, 2003: 75

Satrapi continues to associate the veil with limitation and restriction throughout the rest of her memoir. After viewing a public address concerning the renegotiating of the curriculum at universities in order to remove “decadence” from the educational institutions, Marjane’s mother exclaims: “Soon they’re actually going to force us to wear the veil and you, you’ll have to trade your car for a camel. God, what a backward policy” (73). Here, once again, the veil practice is misconstrued and associated with an uncivilized, camel riding culture. Once the veil was actually put into practice, the government’s reasons for such implementation were broadcast and Marjane’s mother had a different reaction after a traumatic encounter with the Pastardan who approached her for not wearing the veil (see Figure 5).

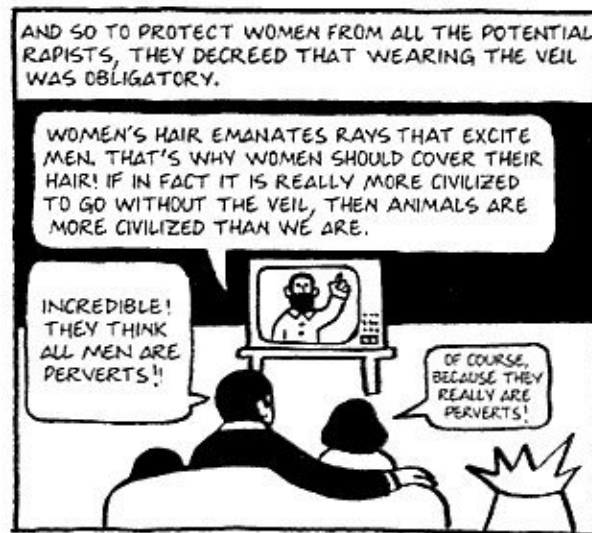


Fig. 5. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York: Pantheon, 2003: 74

In this section, Satrapi expresses that the implementation of the veil was for protection from men who are “perverts” instead of a symbol of respect or honor for women and those who practice Islam. The subordinate status often related to the veil and

Islam has spurred one leading French feminist, Elizabeth Badinter to state: "The veil...is the symbol of the oppression of a sex. Putting on torn jeans, wearing yellow, green, or blue hair, this is an act of freedom with regard to social conventions. Putting a veil on the head, this is an act of submission. It burdens a woman's whole life" (Qtd in Moruzii, 662). Although Satrapi, a French citizen, is opposed to wearing the veil, when the French veil ban was put into effect, she responded with a surprising statement:

I have been incredibly surprised by the reaction of French feminists, who have publicly campaigned for the banning of "this visible symbol of the submission of women". The western woman is so entranced by the idea that her emancipation comes from the miniskirt that she is convinced that if you have something on your head you are nothing. The women who are forced to wear the veil, and the women who are portrayed naked to sell everything from car tires to orange juice, are both facing a form of oppression. But for me, anything that uses the language of banning is wrong (*The Guardian 2*)

This is a surprising statement made by Satrapi in light of her portrayal of the veil in her graphic memoir. If such sentiments had been expressed by Satrapi in the Introduction to *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (such as the perspective interpretations of events during this time mentioned in earlier sections) perhaps her graphic memoir would be viewed differently by her Western audience. According to Mahmood, a woman's voluntary adoption of what many feminists consider to be patriarchal practices are often explained by feminists in terms of false consciousness, or an internalization of patriarchal social values by those who live within the asphyxiating confines of traditional societies (353). In the Westerners' eyes, it seems that a Muslim woman can only be one of two things, either uncovered and therefore liberated, or veiled, and thus, to some degree, still subordinate.

Islam in the American Imagination

Aspects of Orientalism identified throughout the *Persepolis* series are not exclusive to the oppressive depiction of women. Common crass characteristics attributed to Orientalism are the depiction of the Oriental Other: inscrutability, religious extremism and being backward culturally, scientifically and in technologically. A central idea of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1979) is that Western knowledge about the East is not generated from facts or reality, but from preconceived archetypes that envision all "Eastern" societies as fundamentally similar to one another, and fundamentally dissimilar to "Western" societies. This *a priori* knowledge establishes "the East" as antithetical to "the West". Such Eastern knowledge is constructed with literary texts and historical records that often show limited understanding of the facts of life in the Middle East. Following the ideas of Michel Foucault, Said emphasized the relationship between power and knowledge in scholarly and popular thinking, in particular regarding European views of the Islamic Arab world. Said argued that Orient and Occident worked as oppositional terms, so that the "Orient" was constructed as a negative inversion of Western culture (Lockman 205).

Although Satrapi challenges this "backwards" perception by showing small factions of liberals of the East through her family in the *Persepolis* series, in some cases, she reinforces prototypical views of the Orient with her depiction of Islamic practices by not grounding such images in the cultural and religious context of Iran. Satrapi, in her *Introduction*, claims she would like to refute such images:

Since [the Islamic revolution], this old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who lived more than half my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists. (2)

I would also add that an entire nation should not be judged by solely what occurred thirty-two years ago nor should *Persepolis* be viewed as objective truth. A majority of Western readers who do read this memoir, take it as more of a historical fact than a subjective interpretation.²⁶ With such literature geared towards the Western reader, along with collections of images highlighted by the media, the image of Islam is drastically distorted. In a section of her article titled “The Pariahs of the World”, Saba Mahmood tackles such Western, specifically American, perceptions:

[N]ote the variety of ideas, images, and fears that Islam fundamentalism evokes in the American imagination: women wearing headscarves (now, *burqas*), the cutting off of hands and heads, massive crowds praying in unison, the imposition of a normative public morality grounded in a puritanical and legalistic interpretation of religious texts, a rejection and hatred of the West and its globalized culture, the desire to put aside history and return to a pristine past, and the quick recourse to violence against those who are different. (348)

Like the universalism of the veil mentioned earlier, the notion of Islamic fundamentalism collapses a rather diverse collection of images and descriptions, linking them together as characteristics of a singular, socio-religious formation. Mahmood argues that such generalizations are not just a problem of definition, but that such images are used to strengthen political strategies:

[...] that is, the reduction effected by terms like fundamentalism allows US public opinion in this moment to equate those who attacked New York and Washington with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, with those Islamic schools that impart a strict interpretation of Islam, with Muslim preachers who criticize the US for its liberal social mores, with Arab families in Detroit that have daughters who wear headscarves. In so far as

these different actors and institutions may be thought of as different faces of a global fundamentalism, now increasingly associated with terrorism, they may also be conceived of as legitimate targets, whether for intelligence gathering or for aerial bombing. (349)

Unfortunately, Iran and Iranians are often linked to fundamentalism and terrorism (Clarke). In the chapter “The Bicycle” in the opening pages of *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Satrapi challenges the perception of the “Oriental other” as being uneducated and primitive. She begins the chapter by actually reinforcing what Edward Said terms “power relations” through a brief history of “2500 years of tyranny and submission” (11). Said defines the power relations between the two cultures: “the relation of the West and the Orient was a relationship of power and of complicated dominance.” According to him this relationship existed as political, intellectual, cultural and moral power. This power relation is said to be the fueling force behind the myths and suppositions surrounding the “Oriental” culture. Thus, the discourse was created and employed by the western colonial power to dominate, restructure and control the Orient. The need by a colonial power to control and dominate is reinforced through the last “occupation” of Iran through what Satrapi identifies in her panel as “modern Imperialism.” This graphic statement, in isolation, contributes to the submissive and passive perception of Iran and can be seen as further perpetuating Said’s perception of power relations. Sending images of a culture being dominated by outside forces devalues the richness and strength of the Iranian culture.

Due to Satrapi’s social standing and fickle religious devotions,²⁷ she depicts Islamic tradition much as uninformed Westerners do: as a bizarre and extreme religion. A particular excerpt from the graphic narrative that is distastefully done is Satrapi’s illustrations of Islamic religious ceremonies, specifically the customs and rituals

connected to Ashura. Out of context, the rituals and costumes that are implemented throughout this celebration may seem extreme. However, with the proper religious explanation and context, such rituals are understood and can be compared to some Catholic religious practices. Ashura²⁸ is an Islamic holiday observed on the 10th of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic year. Originally, Muhammad designated Ashura as a day of fasting from sunset to sunset, which is believed to be perhaps patterned on the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). For Muslims of all schools of thought it's a special day. For Sunnis, Ashura marks the day on which Moses (known as Mousa in the Koran) and his people escaped from Egyptian servitude by walking through the Red Sea, parted by divine intervention. When Jewish-Muslim relations became strained, however, Muhammad designated Ramadan the Muslim month of fasting, making Ashura a voluntary fast.

For the Shia, Ashura and the ten days preceding it are days of lamentation for the death of Husayn, the third Shia Imam and grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. At the Battle of Karbala, Husayn and many members of his family were vastly outnumbered and killed by the forces of the Sunni Caliph, Yazid of Damascus. His fall crystallized the schism between the Shia and the Sunni branches of Islam. This was rooted in a dispute about the legitimacy of competing claims for spiritual and temporal leadership of the Muslim world between Husayn, as a direct descendent of the Prophet, and the line of successors chosen from the Prophet's companions.

The event led to the split between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam, and it is of central importance in Shia Islam. For Shi'a Muslims, rituals and observances on Ashura consist primarily of public expressions of mourning and grief. Some Shi'as express

mourning by flagellating (zanjeer) themselves on the back with chains, beating their heads, or ritually cutting themselves. This is intended to connect them with Husayn's suffering and death as an aid to salvation on the Day of Judgment. Here Satrapi describes this event in a negative and bizarre light, implying that some of these rituals were conducted for machismo motivations, and not for devout reasons (see Figure 6): “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.”



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Fig. 6. From *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood* . New York: Pantheon, 2003: 96

Such rituals are not practiced for male confirmation, but have a much more devout, religious meaning that is not shared only by the male gender, but is practiced by women as well.²⁹

Modern flagellation still exists in some regions practicing Catholicism, not just in Islamic regions. Steve Royston, a UK born writer for *MideastPosts*, comments on the Ashura from an educated Western point of view when he visited Bahrain during the holiday and remarks on the similarity between such ceremonies and Christian practices:

I'm not a Muslim. Nor am I a theologian or a mystic. In the two hours I spent listening and watching, I couldn't begin to understand the intricacies of Shia theology. But I was struck by the gentle emotion of the occasion, and by parallels with the Christian observance of Easter. Those who look askance at the ritual self-mutilation practiced by some Shia at the height of the Ashura observance should think also of Easter processions in many devout Catholic communities around the world, some of which involve ritual crucifixion. Themes of guilt, redemption and inner contemplation are common to both faiths. But the raw emotions and seeming harshness of the climactic Shia observance of Ashura were not in evidence, and I was touched by the warmth of the welcome I received. ("An Encounter with the True Meaning of Ashura")

In his observation of zanjeer, he combats the negative depiction of Ashura, like that in Satrapi's memoir, with a more humanistic account and celebration that can be related to other dominant religions. He continues to add that Islam is often demonized through the media:

During my time in the Middle East, I have mingled both with Sunni and Shia Muslims. Images of Islam reach the West via TV, YouTube and the print media – the Haj, Ashura and Ramadan. Historical and current events frame our picture of Islam – the Muslim conquests, the Golden Age, the Crusades, the fall of Constantinople, the Ottoman Court, and today, jihad, terrorism, the Taliban, veiled women, Iran, sectarian strife and Iraq. In the West, we fuel our paranoia by seizing upon messages of hatred rather than love. (2)

Modern processions of flagellants are still a feature of various Mediterranean Catholic countries, mainly in Spain, Portugal and Italy and some former colonies, usually every year during Lent. For example, in the commune of Guardia Sanframondi in Campania, Italy, such parades are organized once every seven years. In modern times, more extreme practices of mortification of the flesh may have been used to obtain altered states of consciousness for the goal of inducing religious experiences or visions. Medical research has shown that great pain releases endorphins which can have such effect. Some Christians in the Philippines practice flagellation as a form of devout worship, sometimes

in addition to self-crucifixion. The idea of beating oneself in devotion to God can be found in the Bible³⁰ but Westerners do not stigmatize such practices of their familiar religious institutions. The beating of one's chest is also found in the Bible for mourning practices, and is practiced predominantly during Ashura and is called matham. It is a common Shia display of devotion in remembrance of the suffering that was inflicted on Shi'a's in the past (Slaats, "A Call to the Media"). Of course all media has a degree of bias or subjectivity in their reports that are bound to creep in, but it should be the responsibility of people from misrepresented cultures to educate others on such misconceptions. Although the media is free to choose how they report on certain issues, they are not allowed to distort facts or to take them so much out of context that they can only give a wrong idea to the public. By omitting such context to Ashura, Satrapi is dangerously reinforcing such distorted images to her Western audience, using her authority as a Native to add to the damage of such misconceptions. Jonas Slaats, author and editor of *Yunus News*, speaks against such media misrepresentation in the article, "A Call to the Media to be Responsible in its Reporting about Islam," and stresses the need for accurate representation of a stigmatized culture in light of a skewed CNN report on practices of zanjeer and matham in Iraq during a pilgrimage to the Shrine of the Imam:

Through ignorance and prejudice Islam is 'demonized' and 'barbarized' enough all over world. We do not need the media to add to that any further. [...] But to simply copy-paste information about a ritual, without really checking or contextualizing it, certainly in such sensitive issues, is plain wrong from both a journalistic and an ethical point of view. Many who have read such articles will be startled to think that Shi'as are "weird and uncivilized people who beat themselves with chains and swords." A Shi'a might very well think the same of Christian if he reads an article about Easter that casually drops in the flagellants of New Mexico and the devotional crucifixions in the Philippines without any further explanation. In our contemporary society which is so sensitive to all things religious, a

reporter of such issues has to keep in mind that he has a big responsibility to report, and not to distort. (2)

Without contextualizing such Islamic ceremonies, the public is bound to have a skewed perspective of such rituals; one man in Britain who witnessed the ceremony even interpreted it as anti-western without understanding the true religious context: “I was told it was part of a religious ceremony but the anti-western sentiment was clear. If the public had seen what was going on they would have reported it to the police. It was like a scene from a horror film” (Jarvis & Bhatia 2). How the ceremony was considered anti-western is not made clear in the article or interview, which further demonstrates the western intolerance of the Islamic culture. It is up to people of such cultures who have a voice in popular media, like Satrapi, to educate others about such contexts to avoid compounding negative stereotypes that perpetuate anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic sentiments. Although Satrapi does a better job at representing the small female liberal culture of Iran, she does little to illuminate the ideas and religious familiarities of Islam and the dominant population of individuals in past and contemporary Iran.

Why This Matters

As political tensions regarding the Middle East continue to mount, it is important that Americans are educated not only about the motives involved in military action, but about the humanity that is forgotten in the face of the region's all-too-often stigmatized cultures and religion. Unfortunately the reality is that Americans are often deeply ignorant of the Islamic world and of the degree of involvement that the American government has had in it. Although some critics may view Hamid Dabashi's criticism of *Reading Lolita in Iran* as crass and as stepping over a bright line of civil discourse in his attack, scholars also respond that his "polemic reveals the tremendous stress that bellicose exchanges between two political republics—Iran and the United States—have placed Iranian-American scholars and writers in the Republic of letters" (Byrne 2). Hamid Dabashi's provocative statements coincide with a period of intense turmoil in U.S.-Iranian relations. What should be made clear is that Dabashi wrote his criticism three years prior to its publication in the Egyptian English-language newspaper *Al-Ahram* in June of 2006, so his criticism was not a trigger of emotional frustration, but one that was well thought out with the tides of U.S. activity in the Middle East. The motivation behind his essay was not to attack Nafasi's piece directly, but attack the idea of her piece because of his "fear of another war" when he read an article that reported that the Bush administration was preparing an airstrike against Iran (Byrne 1). In fear for his people, as well as the danger of American media portrayal of Middle Easterners, Dabashi believed that he needed to respond to a call of action.

Presumably, Nafasi's memoir, like Satrapi's *Persepolis* series, was not intended as an instrument of U.S. propaganda, though as Dabashi claims, it is hard to dismiss that such literary works are misused by the U.S. administration. It is important to acknowledge that artistic works can be manipulated and pressed into the service of ideological campaigns to manufacture consent for imperial projects. Despite the several promising features of *Persepolis*, the informed reader can reasonably be skeptical with respect to the medium, marketing and educational uses of the piece, even without regard to the misrepresentation of the symbol of the veil and the de-contextualization of Islamic practices. As Slaats mentions in his essay, our contemporary society is so sensitive to all things religious, "a reporter of such issues has to keep in mind that he has a big responsibility to report, not to distort" (2).

Such stigmatization does not seem to be waning as new controversies are erupting all over the world concerning Muslims and the symbol of veil and can be predicted to intensify as the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks will be saturating the media in September. In August, the Australian Parliament will vote on a bill that would require Muslim women to remove veils and show their faces to police on request or risk a prison sentence under proposed new laws³¹ (McGuirk 1). Not only has such insensitivity resonated on a political level, the intolerance of the veil has been seen through sporting competitions as well. Such intolerance has surfaced most notably with the recent qualifications for the 2012 Olympics in London. On June 3rd, the Iranian Women's soccer team was disqualified before they were able to compete in their second qualifying round against Jordan due to the hijabs team members wore on the field. The women soccer players had played through the first round of qualifying matches but were prohibited

from playing in a match that would decide their participation in the 2012 games because FIFA believed that the scarves were a choking risk despite the modified form-fitting hijabs the Iranian team created for the competition (Erdbrink 2011).

The demonization of Islam is a common practice in Euro-American media and there is no need to bolster such a skewed representation with literature that perpetuates the same prejudice. Yet, that is exactly what Satrapi's *Persepolis* does for Western readers, uneducated in the religious and cultural context of Iran, who take a 'native's' account as absolute truth due to the author's perceived ethos and first-hand knowledge. We must question the media and the pieces that are promoted during such geopolitical times and be careful of what we perceive as truth. Just because the events that occurred during the Iranian Revolution were dramatic or even traumatic to its citizens, does not mean that such an atmosphere still exists in the present. It is important not to confuse history with the present—take action for yourself and explore the intentions of such media and do not be afraid to question them. It is up to individuals to take responsibility to educate themselves thoroughly about issues. We must not take the word of one to be the truth of the whole.

NOTES

¹ I will expand on the use of Hillary Chute's term "graphic narrative" instead of the more common nomenclature "graphic novel," and narrow my use to "graphic memoir" concerning Satrapi's visual memoir, due to the understanding that this medium, "from men and women alike, claim their own historicity—even as they work to destabilize standard narratives of history" (92). Graphic narratives function very differently than the prose in texts void of illustrations: the work of reader interpretation is controlled by the artist-author; the authors show us the interpretation rather than leaving it up to the reader to construe.

² More detailed examples of such depictions will be discussed in the sections "Misconceptions of the Veil and the Reinforcement of Orientalism Ideas" and "Islam in the American Imagination."

³ On September 12, 2003, Catherine Clarke in a review of the memoir documents the reaction of one American reader: "Reading *Persepolis* gives those of us who know little about Iran a glimpse of what life is like there." Satrapi's historical summaries have also been criticized for "lacking insight."

⁴ For more about the reception of *Persepolis*, see "The Collision of Prose and Politics" by Richard Bryne.

⁵ The concept of liminality is a qualitative approach which seeks to examine the construction and negotiation of identity issues within any given diaspora, including hybridity, liminality, and interrogations of the third space created in and by exile. In Amy Malek's "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* Series," she argues that Satrapi's liminality allowed her to create a third space where issues of exile, return, and identity negotiations can be performed while bending and blending Western genres with Iranian history and culture.

⁶ Many readers associate the Iran of 1979 with the Iran of today. This is no fault of the general reader as Iran has effectively closed its doors to the United States due to their fear of aggressive U.S. political intervention. As a result, modern Iran is still a mystery to the Western culture that is not aware of its social developments and increased gender equality since the revolution. Women freely work alongside men in high power positions in industries and politics and two-thirds of those who graduate from post-secondary institutions are female. This is a very different depiction of how women are treated in Iran than Westerners are familiar with, which contributes to the stereotypes of Iranians and Islam. (*Background Note: Iran*)

⁷ "Your books have been a lesson for us of our history, and given us insight into our parents' experiences," a college-age woman with long, dark hair and blue jeans told Satrapi." Quote from *Unveiled, Unvarnished: In Marjane's Satrapi's graphic novels, stereotypes unravel as Iranian Women stand their ground* By: Anne-Marie O'Connor. What is interesting here is that a 2nd generation diasporic Iranian equates Satrapi's account with her own family's, developing a collective memoir for the whole experience.

⁸ This statement is based on of the reviews posted in Amazon.com as well as the commentary by Andre Arnold, Cathyrn Clarke, Rebecca Hersh, Anne-Marie O'Connor.

⁹ For more, see Masoud Golsorkhi "A Partial History". Golsorkhi writes, "The dynamics of class struggle formed a background to the Iranian revolution and are a powerful presence in politics today, but Persepolis fails to address them. Satrapi doesn't seem to realise that the great unwashed who mistreat her friends and family (for example, the window cleaner who becomes a hospital manager) are as motivated by class antagonism as they are by Islamic revolutionary ideology."

¹⁰ See Tara Bahrapour, *To See and See Again* (New York, 1999), Gelareh Asayesh, *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* (Boston, 2000), NESTA Ramazani, *The Dance of the Rose and Nightingale* (Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East) (Syracuse, 2002), Firoozeh Dumas *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* (New York, 2003), Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: Story of a Childhood* (New York, 2003), Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York, 2003), Farideh Goldin, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman* (London, 2003), Marjane Satrapi *Persepolis 2: Story of a Return* (New York, 2004), Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (New York, 2004), Farah Pahlavi, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah – A memoir* (New York, 2004), Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (New York, 2005), Afschineh Latifi, *Even After All This Time: a Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* (New York, 2005).

¹¹ Many statistics and merits included in this section have been drawn from Manuela Costantino's article: "Marji: Popular Commix Heroine Breathing Life into the Writing of History". Costantino is one of the few that has reviewed Satrapi's work beyond the surface level, paving the way for future critiques of *Persepolis*.

¹² The concept of the exile narrative in correlation to Satrapi's work has been investigated primarily by Amy Malek in her case study of the piece and is echoed in Costantino's analysis as she states how readers who approach this as an exile piece "are comfortable with a story that depicts a liberal, educated Iranian family struggling to survive in a war-torn country, with parents who ultimately realize that their only child must leave Iran for the safety of Europe."

¹³ Western Benevolence is referred to here as the social need to help "liberate and oppressed culture" which helps bolster the demand for imperial intervention in such countries (Dabashi). Readers in the mass market for life narratives take up autobiographical stories empathetically, and in terms of human rights campaign, cry for social justice and support military campaigns that claim their service motives are based on liberating oppressed people from their current regime.

¹⁴ Such discussions have been observed in amazon.com reviews and blog forums. For specific conversations on this topic, see Cathryn Clarke's in *The Iranian*.

¹⁵ For more, see: Christopher Allen's "Justifying Islamophobia: A Post-9/11 Consideration of the European Union contexts." He was coauthor of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia's "Summary Report into Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001," and has since written widely on Islamophobia and British Muslims.

¹⁶ For more about the presence of Islam in Europe see Esther Benbassa's comments from "The importance of schooling takes precedence over exclusion" (2004) in Nancy Senior's essay, "The Muslim Headscarf Controversy in French Schools: A Sign of Inclusion or of Exclusion?"

¹⁷ "On the first two volumes, these figures look like the Persian historical heroes of Iran's rich and complex history; on the last two volumes, the horse rider is a woman, one of which is clearly Marjane, in a pose echoing Joan of Arc. (433)

¹⁸ For example, In *Persepolis*, Satrapi challenges this exotic sexualized idea of the veiled woman as an Oriental other by depicting herself as an awkward and unattractive adolescent. The chapter titled "The

Vegetable,” devotes a whole page to the history of her particular stages of puberty in whole devoted page. She describes her deformities by opening with a frame that illustrates her autobiographical avatar’s resemblance to the “Incredible Hulk.” Her biological changes are portrayed as so rapid, her clothes (which resemble that of a man) have split with a violent ferocity. Each panel follows the enlargement of specific facial and body features that expand and contort as each panel progresses. She caps off her unattractive record with the statement, “In short, I was in an ugly state seemingly without an end”. This humorous depiction of adolescent change challenges the idea that the veil hides sexual and erotic beauty which allows her to bring this idea of the Oriental other into a familiar context. No adolescent, in any country, can escape the horrors of puberty and other biological changes. This approach allows the Western audience to identify with the mysterious other and helps dispel the common notion of a sexual and erotic female hiding underneath a veil.

¹⁹ As mentioned in the Introduction, Satrapi expresses the disconnection between herself and her Iranian cultural In an interview with Annie Tully in 2006 for *Bookslut*.

²⁰ This argument is similar to Homi Bhabha’s definition of colonial discourse as strategically creating a space for a subject people through the production of knowledge and the exercise of power: “[C]olonial discourse is an apparatus of power, an apparatus that turns in the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of space for a subject of people through the production of knowledge in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited. It (i.e. colonial discourse) seeks authorization for its strategies by the production of knowledge by coloniser and colonised which are stereotypical but antithetically evaluated” (Bhabha 1983, 23).

²¹ As Malek explores this concept in her study, she credits Hamid Naficy as a major influence on her overview as he applies Gennep’s liminal diasporic identity to the modern migration and exilic culture. Naficy applies this concept in his analysis of Iranian diaspora recorded in his book *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* which remains, over ten years after its publication, one of the more serious cultural studies of Iranian diaspora.

²² I would like to clarify my use of the terms *exile* and *diasporic*. Due to this essay’s focus, I will not go into the numerous arguments regarding these terms. Rather, using Amy Malek’s “Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis Series*” research, I will acknowledge here the significant contributions of Safran, Cohen, Gilroy, Marienstras and others to the study of diasporas, and responding to the changes within diasporas and exile that require fluid definitions of both terms. This essay will assume the notion of diaspora as defined by Ted Swedenberg and Smadar Levie, who argue that exiles can and often do live *within* diaspora: *Diaspora* refers to the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places—their connections to a space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with ‘back home.’ See Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* (1996), 14.

²³ I merge classes as it is debated if there really existed a middle class during the reign of the Shah. A citizen was either upper/elite class or working class due to extreme economical class systems.

²⁴ What Satrapi fails to address, whether it is due to her childlike point of view or simply age, is that before the second Pahlavis Shah, Iran was governed by the Persian Constitution of 1906 which held Islamic influences over governmental laws. I stress “influence” here since the laws were overseen by a body of clerics, but punishment for not abiding by these laws, Not religious laws, were not as harsh as we see through the eyes of Manji during the Islamic Revolution Article 1 and 2 of the laws of the Persian Constitution of 1906, established Islam as the official religion of Persia/Iran, and specified that all laws of the nation must be approved by a committee of Shi’a clerics. Later, these two articles were mainly ignored by the Pahlavis, which sometimes resulted in anger and uprising of clerics and religious masses.

²⁵ The name of the holy book of Islam can be spelled several ways in English. Pronounced *ku-RAHN*, the words Koran, Quran and Qur'an are all transliterations from the original Arabic. Some people prefer Qur'an, saying it most closely resembles the original Arabic spelling and pronunciation. Westerners tend to use the Koran spelling perhaps since it is easily recognized and pronounced by an American audience.

²⁶ See for example, Clarke: "As a fifth-generation Canadian who has limited knowledge of the history or current situation in Iran, Satrapi's book did, indeed, show me a more accurate and more human picture of Iran and of Iranians."

²⁷ The childhood persona denounces God and her religious devotion shortly after her uncle was put to death (*Persepolis*, 70) which, not coincidentally, occurs right before the veil implementation chapter.

²⁸ Also spelled Aashurah, 'Ashurah or Aashoorah

²⁹ For more, see "*Ashura* and the Ritual Emancipation of Women in Morocco" by Mohammed Maarouf.

³⁰ Isaiah 22:12 shows that this type of mourning was ordained by God: "On that Day the Lords called for weeping and beating the breast, shaving the head and putting on sack cloth" "You are now at ease, be anxious; tremble, you who have no cares. Strip yourselves bare; put a cloth round your waists and beat yourselves" Isaiah 32:11 "Howl, Heshbon, for Ai is despoiled. Cry aloud you villages round Rabbath Ammon, put on sack cloth and beat your breast and score your body with gashes" Jeremiah 49:3 "The crowd that had assembled for the spectacle, when they saw what had happened went home beating their breasts" *The Bible, Luke 23:48*

³¹ Under the law proposed by the government of New South Wales, which includes Sydney, a woman who defies police by refusing to remove her face veil could be sentenced to a year in prison and fined \$5,900. The bill has been condemned by civil libertarians and many Muslims as an overreaction to a traffic offense case involving a Muslim woman driver in a "niqab," or a veil that reveals only the eyes. The government says the law would require motorists and criminal suspects to remove any head coverings so that police can identify them. Critics say the bill smacks of anti-Muslim bias given how few women in Australia wear burqas. In a population of 23 million, only about 400,000 Australians are Muslim. Community advocates estimate that fewer than 2,000 women wear face veils, and it is likely that even a smaller percentage drives.

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