

### **Unveiling the ‘Veil’: The Implementation of Allo-identification and the Oppression of the Iranian Women by the Fundamentalists in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis***

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#### **Abstract**

This article performs a close reading of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2007) and demonstrates how one’s individuality, sexuality, and identity get enmeshed with the uncanny ‘commercial outlets’ of the ‘oppressive’ religious stances; sometimes in the form of interpellation. This process of interpellation is contrived in a manipulative way by the traditional ideological state apparatuses and it furtively creates an ambivalent traumatic situation in the psyche of the people (especially women) and eventually leaves an iota of darkness inside them by placing them in different socio-political contexts. I argue that the novel shatters the politicized demarcation of a hegemonized nation like Iran through the portrayal of a child called Marji. It shows how Marji grows up in the midst of political unrest and starts questioning the authority about the sudden upheaval in her country which leads her to leave her so-called ‘privileged’ nation. Again, this article also tries to bring out the hollowness of the phallogocentric society which ensnares the Iranians in an invisible web made of ‘autocracy’ by incorporating a false consciousness into the psyche of the people living in it. This present study also seeks to explore questions of discrimination and inspection of an

individual (here Marji) while living in Austria and it investigates how her imagination of ‘self’ (Iran) and ‘other’ (Austria) recedes gradually in an unending loop of deference and ushers the fragmented transcultural experiences in her mind.

**Keywords:** *commercial outlets, sexuality, phallogentric society, false consciousness, transculturalism*

Within the receptacle of graphic narrative genre Marjane Satrapi has beautifully projected the religious, racial, ideological and political issues in her magnum opus *Persepolis* (2007). It fundamentally depicts the impact of Islamic fundamentalism on the minds of the Iranians; especially on the minds of the children of Iran in 1979. Through the black and white comic strips, *Persepolis* portrays the parochial outlook of the fundamentalists and the believers of fundamentalism during and after the time of Islamic Revolution in Iran. In this novel Satrapi tells her coming of age story of living in Iran and Austria in the aftermath of Islamic Revolution which, needless to say, moulds, rather pathetically transforms the socio-cultural position of a child (baby Marji), her consciousness and ultimately her understanding of the (un)-real society. Conditioned to be tools for the oppression in the name of religion, this text magnificently magnifies the issues like ‘body shaming’ and ‘moral policing’. Marji’s existence and her orientation get manifested through her confrontation with the destabilized version of the society and its rules which is conspicuous from her speech:

My (Marji’s) calamity could be summarized into one sentence:  
I was nothing. I was Westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West.  
I had no identity. I didn’t even know anymore why I was living.  
(Satrapi 272)

This is how Marji tries to locate her identity from the disjointed debris of society; she tries hard to grapple with her new entities in different ‘chronotopes’ (especially in Iran and Austria). The shifting of time and place enables her to think, and the more she thinks the more she comes to believe in the fact that she exists, and the more she becomes aware of her existence the more she prepares herself to stand against the atrocities of the religious dogmatism.

It is usually said that ‘a picture paints a thousand words’, and this is quite true about the graphic narratives. The content amalgamated with colorful or black and white pictures/sketches undoubtedly helps the readers to construct an image of the incident in their minds. The same view is shared by Hilary Chute, as she says:

It is through the flexible architecture of their pages, with their stitching of absence and presence that graphic

narratives comment powerfully on the efficacy and the limitations of narrativizing history (270).

Apart from visual literacy, graphic novels try to manifest many complex literacy skills to decode images and printed text, which unanimously enable the readers to choose their viewpoints. To speak the truth, comics and graphic novels bend (rather break) the traditional way of reading and understanding the plot by providing some colorful contents to the readers. One of the distinctive features of graphic novels is that they represent the substantial grammaticality of human 'body' (mainly female body) more overtly than any other narratives. This can be seen not only in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007), but also in Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), where two parallel lives, rather 'bodies' (Kari and Ruth) are painted with a color of darkness and death as they both tried to commit suicide and magically escaped death together to assert the fact of their camaraderie ('umbilical bond'). It goes without saying that, comics and graphic narratives pave the way to demonstrate human feelings and the idea of sexuality more pervasively than other genres. Satrapi's *Persepolis* symbolically presents female body as a subject of study from which one can derive some plurivocal possibilities of multidimensional forms of human desire. As the narrative is filled with ample amount of autobiographical anecdotes, it is not surprising to note that despite all the illustrations of female bodies it is the body of Satrapi that predominates. Satrapi's kunstfigur, Marjane is seen growing gradually from a teenage to a woman over the course of fourteen years, and as she grows up the readers can experience the sense of metamorphosis in her physical appearance. Interestingly, even Marji does not overlook the events of transformations of her body; she takes interest in exploring the prohibited/forbidden/untold (hetero)-sexual matrix which her body experiences.

In one of the images we can see how Marji goes to change her perception of life and sexuality by reading a book called *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir, where (according to Marji) Beauvoir had explained the fact that "if women peed standing up their perception of life would change" (Satrapi 177). But, Patil's way of portraying life and sexuality is different. Her masterpiece *Kari* projects the metropolitan culture that is disseminated through the pictures of heterosexual normality. Kari's ambiguous relationship with Angel and Ruth enables her to reconstruct her sexuality on the basis of her 'being', and her 'existence'. Her fascination for the lonely "snow-globe girl waiting endlessly, with only hope of a new snow blizzard to settle on her mantle" (Patil 48), suggests the fact that she identifies herself with the snow-globe girl and out of that imagination her perception of life gets disseminated, which is culminated in the image of blood on the white snow and her urge of a 'generous' fornication on the rose colored snow.

The conflict between racial incongruity and identity crisis is magnificently described by Satrapi through the eyes of an adolescent child. Marji's identity, her urge for a utopian state, her way of seeing things (both in Iran and Austria) get muddled up by the intervention of what Louis Althusser termed as

'Ideological State Apparatuses'. One of the leading comic theorists Scott McCloud proclaims comics as a form of intimate personal communication in which "individual voices still have a chance to be heard" (197).

The actual identity of Marji is actually camouflaged; her real 'Self' tries hard to come out of the veil (the 'Other') which gags her brutally from the very beginning. So, the image of 'veil' is put in a significant way to show the religious as well as political power of fundamentalism. The very opening chapter of the novel asserts the same fact. It is interesting to note that, the prime agenda behind this 'veil' as implemented by the fundamentalists is to negate the great wave of Westernization; as they think that Western culture and tradition may degrade or mar the heritage of the Middle East. But unfortunately, this 'veil' eventually entraps the free spirit of many people including the children of Iran, it puts them into a black cage made of religion and snatches the identity, the autonomy and most importantly the freedom from the people of Iran and gives them oppressive ideological norms in return. The strict ideology of fundamentalism goes to its apex when they decide to close all the universities, as according to them,

The educational system and what is written in school books, at all levels are decadent. Everything needs to be revised to ensure that our children are not led astray from the true path of Islam... That's why we're (Islamic revolutionists) closing all the universities for a while. Better to have no students at all than to educate future imperialists. (Satrapi 73)

However, Marji's adamant wish to become a prophet is strengthened by the intervention of her fickle-minded 'self' in the garb of God who instigates her to pursue in the field of becoming a 'prophet'. But her deep-rooted thought is shattered by the 'blue-eyed monster' called religion. Nevertheless, her wish to become a great scientist like Madam Currie is also destroyed. Satrapi actually chooses her child self to show the discursive and destabilized images of Iran and she chooses her adult self to stand against the rigidity of fundamentalism and the atrocities of its supporters.

The conflict between 'self' and the 'other' is manifested in a camouflaged way. Her identity in the 'Orient' is affected by the 'self'; and on the other hand, her identity in the 'Occident' is manipulated by the 'other' and this 'free-play' goes on both in the 'Orient' and in the 'Occident'. Again, the implementation of the veil manipulates the very orientation of the people of Iran and it manifests the idea of snatching one's identity in a vague way, and Satrapi uses her imagination beautifully with the aid of her artistic skill to portray the traumatic condition of Iran as she describes the effect and the outcome of the rigid fundamental rules in the chapter "The Trip".

It goes without saying that by representing a traumatizing memory with a black frame, Satrapi implies that a "stylized form can represent "reality" better than realism itself" (Chute 270). One may say that Satrapi's images and lack

of color serve as a language to describe the traumatic situation in Iran. It is quite interesting to note that many female writers choose graphic novel as a medium to tell the autobiographical stories; Satrapi is not an exception. She mainly chooses this medium to achieve the goal of remembering. Through its layers of verbal-visual narration it depicts the memory as well as the trauma of the writer and the illustrator; and eventually helps the readers to grapple with the rhetoric of the conflict between 'self' and 'other'. Satrapi intends to make her readers understand the gravity of that tumultuous, chaotic situation of her country through her images, words, and form, by inviting her readers to engage themselves in a critical discourse with the text. Satrapi wants her readers to imagine the horrendous situation of the Iranians and this graphic narrative medium serves that purpose beautifully. She gives a first-hand account of the devastation as well as the loss of memory caused by the war mongers in a particular totalitarian regime. Her portrayal of the idiotic decisions taken by the nincompoops of Islamic Revolution makes us laugh.

One of the vivid portrayals of the atrocities of fundamentalism can be encountered when the fundamentalists verbally attacked Ebi (Marji's mother) as she was found roaming about on the streets unveiled, which was translated as a challenge to the rules and customs prescribed by them. Unanimously, the most important symbol in understanding the text is the veil. Satrapi imagines the veil as an instrument to control women. The veil provides several disturbing images. It not only curtails the autonomy of the women but also compels them to accept the customs thrust upon them by the Islamic Guardians of the Revolution. In Iran, Marji wears the veil as ordered by the fundamentalists, but after a certain point of time she realizes that, even while pursuing her higher education in a country which is presumably free, she hides herself under a succession of several emblematic 'veils'. These invisible veils try to oppress her psychologically. As a result, she feels that she is getting detached from her own culture, from her traditional values. She says:

the harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else's rules. (Satrapi 195)

Satrapi also throws enough light on the individuality of the Iranian women (despite wearing veil) in several ways. With the proliferation of multiple selves on the page *Persepolis* intends to make its readers understand the dialectical conversations of the myriads of unheard (visual) voices that these selves make. Here, Satrapi uses multiple narrative techniques to explore her memories. Using the narratological concept of focalization, critics have explored these multiple narrators.

Narratorial focalization in particular is neither necessarily nor exclusively concerned with consciousness presentation, but with the filtering of all events and extents in the story world. (Horstkotte and Pedri 335)

Interestingly, Marianne Hirsch has argued that there are certain important roles that play in the transmission of trauma; one of them is the role of daughters. She regards the mother-daughter bond as a quintessential model for the understanding of her concept of ‘allo-identification’ with the victim of the trauma. In her approach to the concept of ‘allo-identification’ Hirsch gives an interestingly appealing interpretation. She says that though ‘allo-identification’ happens ‘by adoption’ and not by family ties, it can also be identified by anybody who has been instrumental in the process of ‘adoption’. So, in that sense it has a universal approach. She writes:

If identifications learned and practiced within the family can be expanded to cross the boundaries of gender, family, race, and generation, then the identification between mothers and daughters form a clear example of how a shared intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, based in bodily connection, can be imagined. (Hirsch 77)


Last but not the least, Satrapi’s *Persepolis* tries to investigate the nature of trauma in a specific geographical/cultural domain which plays an important role in shaping the psychic/corporal boundary of an individual. Here, through the eyes of Marji we get to see or experience the brutality of a totalitarian regime in Iran. Her understanding of the ‘collateral damage’ caused by the combat leaves a traumatic memory in her psyche. Even when she leaves Iran for Austria, that memory still persists in her psyche and it keeps on haunting her and eventually impels her to return to her roots. Again, in her account in Iran she encounters several stories filled with multiples references of violence which become a part of her construction of identity. For example, in order to experience the traumatic situation of her grandfather who had to spend hours in a cell filled with water, Marji starts to stay in her bathwater for a very long time.

Unambiguously, the text engages its readers in a close understanding of the dichotomy between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ through several experiences of Marji. It can be said that Satrapi intends to explore the ontological factors behind the clash between the two. She has once claimed that *Persepolis* “is an attempt to explain Iran to the West, hopefully bringing the two together using humor” (Tempesta). Needless to say, this statement sums up all the conflicts of the novel beautifully; and this is the actual mastery of Satrapi.

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