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EXPLORING CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND IDENTITY STRUGGLES OF WOMEN IN MARJANE SATRAPI'S *PERSEPOLIS*

AUTHORED BY: NIKIL SANKAR NARAYANAN

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi is a pair of autobiographical graphic novels that narrate her experiences of growing up in Iran during a period of political instability. In the novels, she recounts her life in Iran both before and after the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah, the last shah of Iran, and demonstrates the cultural and identity struggles that Iranian women underwent after the rise of the Islamic fundamentalist, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This paper aims to illuminate these struggles by illustrating the women's constrained social freedom and dress codes, demonstrating the difficulties they faced in maintaining their identity amidst turbulent cultural and political circumstances, and examining the consequences of such adversities on their overall psychological and emotional well-being.

Satrapi adeptly depicts the cultural constraints imposed on Iranian women by highlighting their restricted social freedoms and dress codes in several instances of the graphic novel, especially in chapter 10, "The Trip", in part one of the graphic novel. In this chapter, within panels four and five of page 74, Marjane recounts the day when her mother, Taji Satrapi, was sexually intimidated by two Islamic fundamentalists when she didn't wear the veil as mandated by the Islamic Republic (Satrapi, *Persepolis* 74/4-5). Explicitly, in panel four, Satrapi expresses the issue at hand by coloring the background with stark black, and drawing teardrop shapes that emanate from Taji Satrapi in order to express the distress faced by Iranian women when they opposed the strict regulations of the Islamic radicals (Satrapi 74/4). Taji's conversation continues in panel five, where she describes that if "(she) didn't want that to happen, (she) should wear the veil..." (Satrapi 74/5), implying that if Iranian women wanted to lead a life without sexual harassment, they had to comply with the oppressive regime of the Ayatollahs and wear the veil like they were required to. Satrapi specifically employs complete black coloring for Taji's and her husband's attire, and contrarily uses complete white for Marjane's dress to symbolically represent the harsh societal expectations and limited freedom in dress codes for Iranian women (Satrapi 74).

Secondly, in *Persepolis*, Satrapi portrays the challenges that women face in maintaining their identities amidst changing cultural dynamics. She specifically outlines her struggles in adapting to the Western culture during her stay in Vienna after having come from a “traditionalist country” (Satrapi 31). For example, in part two of *Persepolis*, in chapter 23, “The Pill”, Marjane details how she was “put off” by the disturbing public displays of affection at the party (Satrapi 31), and was further taken aback when she heard that her friend Julie had a sexual relationship with her “nineteenth guy” (Satrapi 34/7). This was particularly surprising for her since she was raised in an orthodox community where the cultural landscape was entirely different, and sexual relationships before marriage were discrete, if not prohibited. In the subsequent chapter, “The Vegetable”, Satrapi recounts how she was susceptible to peer pressure when she was compelled to smoke a joint along with her friends and she recounts, in the bleed panel of page 39, that each time she engaged in such a culturally inappropriate activity, she felt as if she was “distancing” herself from her cultural roots and her parents (Satrapi 39/1). She employs a visual metaphor here, illustrating herself walking steadily away from her parents with elongated legs. Both these excerpts from part two of the graphic novel characterize Marjane’s challenges in maintaining her identity as an Iranian woman amongst shifting cultural circumstances, experiencing cultural dissonance during her time in a completely new cultural Western environment.

On the other hand, while Satrapi does offer insightful viewpoints into the diverse challenges that women face in maintaining their identities amidst changing cultural circumstances, she doesn’t necessarily provide a varied representation of the challenges endured by other Iranian women, since *Persepolis* is essentially an autobiographical story that centers around Satrapi and her family’s unique experiences and rather elite, progressive background. For instance, in one of her video interviews conducted by ‘Movieweb’, she discusses at length her reason for writing the novel and accepts the fact that *Persepolis* “is a very personal one, and it just engages with (her) own person” in timestamp 1:35, when she was asked her purpose behind creating the *Persepolis* graphic novels (“Persepolis - Exclusive: Marjane Satrapi”). Her reply strongly emphasizes the autobiographical nature of her novel, thereby exposing its limited framework in outlining the challenges faced by women from diverse cultural backgrounds. Hence, it has to be understood that while she does offer a detailed understanding of her own personal experiences in battling cultural challenges, she does not necessarily explore the diverse array of challenges and the perspectives of other Iranian women in *Persepolis*.

Finally, Satrapi sheds light on the consequences of cultural and political constraints on women's psychological and emotional well-being. One such consequence can be prominently observed in part one of the graphic novel, in chapter 3, "The Water Cell", where Marjane's mother, Taji Satrapi, describes her traumatic experiences of witnessing her father's suffering in jail. Taji's father was a Persian prince who was stripped of all his royal possessions by Reza Shah Pahlavi, and he eventually transformed into a devout communist (Satrapi 23/8). However, his communist-driven actions and speeches were deemed politically incorrect at that point in time, and thus he was imprisoned and physically tortured, eventually resulting in him developing rheumatism later in his life (Satrapi 25/2). Although Taji was merely an eye-witness to her father's suffering, Taji's choice of words and facial expressions, coupled with Satrapi's blend of the black and white palette, symbolically convey that Taji was quite traumatized by her father's agony even though she was quite young at that time (Satrapi 24/3-4). On panel 4 of page 24, she recounted, "Every time there was a knock on the door, (she) thought they were coming to take (her) father to prison" (Satrapi 24/4), and she reflected in the subsequent panel that "One out of two times it was really true" (Satrapi 24/5). Altogether, within these excerpts of the novel, Satrapi demonstrates the psychological and emotional impact on women, especially on Taji Satrapi, when her father physically suffered due to his diverse political view and his communist beliefs in imperial Iran.

In spite of Satrapi illustrating the impact of cultural and political constraints on women's psychological and emotional well-being, she also illustrates moments of resilience and strength in women within those constraints. For instance, in part two of the graphic novel, in chapter 24, "The Vegetable", Satrapi recounts revealing her true identity to her friends after having faked it at first. On page 43 of the same chapter, she details how she confronted her friends when she overheard them gossiping about her country behind her back. Her bold declaration, "I am Iranian and proud of it!" (Satrapi 43/1), of her real identity, visually accentuated through Satrapi's deliberate black and white color scheme, symbolizes her resilience to societal pressures. Furthermore, in panel 6 of the same page, Satrapi strategically colors a black dress and background while reflecting that "For the first time in a year, (she) felt proud" (Satrapi 43/6), thereby demonstrating her emotional transformation throughout her time in Vienna. Likewise, she recounts her grandmother's wise words, "If (she) wasn't comfortable with (herself), (she) would never be comfortable" (Satrapi 43/6), and acknowledges her determination to find inner peace despite the cultural constraints imposed upon her. Therefore, through these excerpts from the novel, Satrapi outlines women's ability to assert their identities

and find strength within the cultural challenges they face, thereby shedding light on the interplay between societal pressures and resilience, a subtle theme under the purview of psychoanalytic theory (Graber et al.).

Satrapi demonstrates similar moments where Iranian women assert their independence in one of her other novels, *Embroideries*. In this novel, Satrapi narrates the character of one Amineh Arshadian, a loyal woman faithfully married to her husband Houshang who, on the other hand, was perfidious and had affairs with multiple women (Satrapi, *Embroideries* 56). This behavior was socially acceptable and it was exercised by most men as a means of asserting dominance over their wives. In *Embroideries*, Satrapi illustrates how Amineh effectively challenged this notion by leaving Houshang after engaging in an illicit affair with another man while still legally married (Satrapi, *Embroideries* 58). To a large extent, Amineh's assertiveness in her marriage demonstrates her independence from traditional gender roles and her feminist audacity in opposing societal norms.

On the whole, in *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi aptly captures the cultural constraints and identity struggles faced by Iranian women by illustrating their restricted social freedom and dress codes, exploring the complexities in maintaining their identity amongst changing cultural circumstances, and revealing the profound consequences of cultural and political constraints on women's psychological and emotional well-being. Ultimately, through *Persepolis*, Satrapi encourages readers to not only recognize the hardships of Iranian women but also acknowledge their resilience, self-discovery, and perseverance in the face of tragedy.

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