

## THE NEXUS BETWEEN IRAN'S FEMINISM AND ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN *PERSEPOLIS*: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

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### Abstract

*Persepolis* (2007) is the distressing story of a young girl in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. It is through the eyes of the bright and candid 9-year-old Marjane that we see popular optimisms darted as fundamentalists take power and forcing the veil on women and imprisoning thousands. Intelligent and intrepid, Marjane outwits the "social guardians" and ascertains punk, ABBA, and Iron Maiden. Hitherto when her uncle is inane put to death and as bombs fall around Tehran in the Iran/Iraq war, the everyday panic that saturated existence in Iran is obvious. *Persepolis*, an animated film by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, is based on the four volumes of Satrapi's extensively read autobiographical detail narrative of the identical name. It informs the account of contemporary Iran through the life of a girl with impressive aspirations: to be the galaxy's last prophet and to shave her legs. Contradictory concepts in one existence throughout the film knit

together the turbulent history of Iran and Marjane's turbulent life. She was nine years old when the waves of revolution had risen to engulf the country. Waves that send her parents to the demonstrations, bring politics into her childhood games, free prisoners from the dungeons of the Shah Pahlavi regime, and finally lead to the overthrow of the monarchy. In the first part of the film, through a look at the life and struggle of three generations of Marjane's family, we are introduced to a history of dictatorship, oil and dependency, rebellion and revolution, suppression and more rebellion. Throughout the representation of the movie, the present study examines the dilemmas that women were facing with different political shifts as well as how the opportunist male politicians use and abuse women in order to maintain their patriarchal supremacy.

### 1. Introduction

Iran, a nation known for religious fanatics, nurturing monstrosity, a country of extremist rulers where people are still whipped for their wrong-doings like in the medieval times, has never been portrayed with such bold honesty before Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. The entire nation of Iran, representing a significant portion of the Muslim populace has been and still somewhat is misjudged by the world as fanatics and extremists. Ms. Satrapi boldly invades through such stigmatism and has managed to touch the hearts of the enlightened people around the globe, through an animated rendition of her autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis* (2007) resembling the upbringing of an Iranian young woman in the midst of the political turmoil it faced for decades following the Iranian Islamic Revolution.

The film is referred to by critics as, "One of the most fascinating, powerful, and moving narrative works ever seen in a long time" (Adams, 2007). The awards Satrapi received for the movie stands for such accreditation. The movie *Persepolis*, an animated version of its namesake graphic novel, co-directed by

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Vincent Paronnaud, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007) won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival 2007, Best Foreign Language Film at Sao Paulo International Film Festival 2007, British Film Institute Awards 2007, Rotterdam International Film Festival 2008 and was nominated for Academy Awards 2008 for Best Animated Feature as well as the Golden Globes 2008 for Best Foreign Language Film.

Both the directors, in real life, characterize within themselves rebels from the North and South. Satrapi was inspired by the success of her graphic novel, which is claimed by the critics to better serving the purpose than any other wordy novel would have. Notwithstanding the fact the Satrapi follows the line of the European artists whose works are derived by the art itself more than anything else. Vincent Paronnaud is often labeled as an underground artist who is a strong believer in freedom of thoughts and actions as well as expressions of intelligentsia. Taking in consideration the success of the film in the West, the union of the two rebels with a cause from East and West has made it through the east-phobia and dogmatism.

Against the forces of intolerance and superstition, Marjane, following her grandmother's example, takes an impetuous stand as a champion of enlightenment. Though she is self-confident and sometimes a little self-righteous, Ms. Satrapi doesn't wrap herself in heroism. The political dimensions of her story are as clear and bold as her graphic style, but "Persepolis" traffics more in feelings than in slogans, and dwells most persuasively on the uncertainty and ambivalence of adolescence.

### **2.1 Women in Iran before the Islamic Revolution**

Iran was ruled by Pahlavi Shahs between 1925 and 1979 and they initiated several alterations relating to women's rights. In the early hours, a case of transformation commenced by Reza

Shah was the 'obligatory unveiling of women' by a particular announcement on January 8, 1936 which, as the name implies, concerned the police force hauling the hijab away even from spiritual women, by power. Women's participation in the social order in general improved. Iranian women steadily more contributed in the financial system, the schooling division and in the labor force. Height of literacy was enhanced as well. Women gained lofty executive positions, such as ministers, artists, judges, scientists, athletes, etc.

During the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah, the descendant of Reza Shah, many more noteworthy reforms were launched. For example in 1963, the Shah approved female suffrage and soon after women were voted to the Majlis (the parliament) and the upper house, and selected as juries and ministers in the cabinet. In 1967 Iranian family act was also transformed which enhanced the situation of women in Iranian social order. It was integrated in the civil regulations and was intended to defend wives, children and female divorcees. The broad drives of the reforms were to endorse egalitarianism between men and women in society. The Family Safety Laws of 1967 and 1973 required a husband to go to court to divorce rather than merely states overtly the triple talaq of "I divorce thee" three times, as predetermined by conventional Sharia Law. It permitted a wife to commence divorce and necessitate the first wife's consent for a husband to take a second wife. Child guardianship was left to new family defense courts rather than automatically decided to the father. The least age at which a female could get married was lifted from 13 to 15 in 1967 and to 18 in 1975 (Najmabadi, 1991).

### **2.2 Women in Iran after the Islamic Revolution**

Scores of Iranian women contributed in the Iranian Revolution and societal transforms has been welcomed by the best part of

women, however divisive among the marginal of secularized women. Subsequent the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran turned out to be an Islamic Republic. Throughout the age of post-Revolution tenet, Iranian women have had more chances in a quantity of areas and extra boundaries in others. One of the outstanding features of the revolution was the great involvement of women from customary backdrops in political protests and processions leading up to the ousted of the kingdom. The Iranian women who had achieved self-reliance and advanced edification under Pahlavi period took part in demonstrations against Shah to tumble the monarchy. The culture of education for women was established by the time of revolution so that even after the revolution, large numbers of women entered the civil service and higher education, and in 1996 fourteen women were voted to the Islamic Consultative Assembly. In 2003, Iran's first female adjudicator in the Pahlavi period, Shirin Ebadi, succeeded the Nobel Peace Prize for her contributions in upholding human rights (Afkhami, 1994).

Nevertheless, Ayatollah Khomeini gave the impression to convey admiration for concern later than he acquired authority. In May 1979, the day of festivity for Iranian's Women's Day, and the day after Ayatollah Khomeini forced hijab on women. He spoke tenderly of Fatimah (peace be upon her) as a role model for women by saying that although she was visited by the Angel Gabriel, this is not what made her unique. To him, her commendable personas were dual and evidently signified by the visits from Gabriel: her extraordinary saintly position and her outstanding decent disposition. He sustained to elucidate that Fatimah could have been instinctive with this saintly position or Fatimah could have gone through a kind of inimitable supernatural experience. For this reason, the Ayatollah believed she symbolized the idyllic female role

model. Fatimah's ethical distinction is viewed in three interrelated actions: resist, stirring men, and anguish. Fatimah enthused her husband as a religious Muslim; thus, Khomeini depicted analogous to this motivation with women of Iran and how they ought to attempt to pursue their sacred vocation like Fatimah. However, at the commencement of the revolution, it was declared that women showing on television would have to wear the hijab, but, few months later it was pronounced that women functioning in administration services and structures would also be required to be dressed in hijab, and a few months after that it was declared that all women had to show off the hijab in public. Boundaries on women have mottled over the history of the Republic of Iran. In the first years behind the revolution, females who did not cover most parts of their body were subject to sentence of detention. During the executive of Mohammad Khatami, restrictions became much less harsh (Sanasarian, 1982).

### 3. Research Objectives

- To comprehend the socio-economic status of Iranian women in the pre-revolution and post - revolution time;
- To understand the contribution of Iranian women in the process of political shifts;
- To realize the masculine conspiracy of utilizing Islam for obstructing feminine strength;
- To analyze the usage and abuse patterns of patriarchal social and political power spectrum.

#### **4. Definitions of Relevant Concepts and Theoretical Framework**

##### **4.1 Feminism**

Feminism implies a varied range of viewpoints, thoughts, actions, and schema for action. It questions the traditional way of thinking and values regarding men and women which are being practicing as internal tin the society; thus addresses the thoughts and standards about what customs is like for women just because they are women, contrasted to what the world is like for men just because they are men. The descriptive aspect of feminism assumed that women are not evaluated uniformly to men, and that women are underprivileged in contrast to men. It also means to an association where some individuals and groups working hand by hand in order to bring the desired gender sensitivity and create some alternative ways of thinking towards women in the society. In other words, feminism illustrates a way of life in which women, because they are women, are treated in a dissimilar way than men, and that, in that dissimilarity of conduct, women are at an annoyance; feminism believes that such conduct is edifying and consequently likely to transform; feminism seems to a special way of life as potential, and morals affecting that culture; and feminism includes that activism, independently and in groups, to create individual and societal transformation towards that more enviable way of life (de Beauvoir, 1949).

##### **4.2 Islamic Revolution**

Iran was ruled anciently, by the Qajar Dynasty. The Shahs of the Persian (Iran) Royal Family of Qajar ruled over Iran from 1785 till 1925. The last Shah to rule Iran was the Sultan, Ahmad Shah Qajar who was overthrown by the commander of the Persian Cossack Brigade, Reza Khan, in a coup staged in the year 1921. Reza Khan was subsequently proclaimed Shah as Reza Shah Pahlavi and reined till 1941. The 1979 Iranian Revolution

overthrew the dictatorship of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and was replaced by the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Pahlavi Dynasty was backed up by the West because of the prevailing "Oil Interest" of the United States. Thus, the Pahlavi government was pro-western economy and culture. However, the Iranian revolution caused a major impediment for people with oil interests. The Pahlavis were supplanted by an extremist Islamic Republic (Afary, 1996).

Headed by its supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the new Islamic Republic was extremely anti-Western and adopted an anti-American foreign policy. Their beliefs were of "neither East nor West", and were allegedly scaffold by the strict adherence to policies like mandatory veil (hijab) for women, and opposition to the United States and Israel. According to history as well as the film *Persepolis* (2007), many illiterate clerk level people were enabled by the new republic to gain positions of power simply because of their loyalty towards the pro-religion backward principles of the new government. The country was from then, run based on the rules and laws imposed by the Islamic Jurists. Most importantly, the new governments' anti-West attitude was not helpful for the international oil politics. Therefore, the situation that had arisen required a major intervention (Rostami, 2001).

Thus, Saddam Hussein was sent in by the West, to get rid of the extremists, which is popularly known as the Iran-Iraq war or First Persian Gulf War. The war lasted an unrelenting span of almost eight years and caused both the nations a huge humane and economic damage only to reach a stalemate. Satrapi boldly states in *Persepolis* (2007), "The West sold weapons to both sides and we stupidly played their cynical game. Eight years for nothing. A million dead for nothing". Towards the end as Iraq constantly bombarded over Iran, the cynic government started executing political prisoners who refused to swear their loyalty towards the extremist regime. To highlight the crisis in

this Middle Eastern region it is important to note the source of Iraqi finance of the war. In total, Iraq received \$35 billion in loans from the West and between \$30 and \$40 billion from the Persian Gulf states during the 1980s. The *Iraqgate* scandal revealed a funneling US taxpayer dollar to fund Iraq's invasion.

#### 4.3 *Persepolis* (2007)

*Persepolis* is a brave political expression. It is very cleverly scripted. Underlying beneath the layers of wit and humor a deep message of intellectual suppression is delineated. It is simultaneously an endeavor to disabuse the world of the misperceptions of Iran as a monoculture of fundamentalism, religious fanaticism and extremism. *Persepolis* (2007), features the growing up of rebellious young girl, in the wake of the Iranian Revolution. *Persepolis*, literally translated means, "the city of Persia". Director, Marjane Satrapi focuses all her efforts in portraying the struggles of young girl to overcome the numerous hurdles of life in the conservative Iran to grow up to become an wise, independent, conscious individual.

Satrapi was clever in blending a perfect mix of torments, of tyrants, of misperceptions, of life giving her audience an experience so close to *life*. It was her way of revealing the real picture of the Iranians, countering the face propagated by the extremist rulers. In her pursuit to disabuse the "Iranians" from the monstrous stigma their extremist rulers had managed to achieve in front of the world. Satrapi's efforts were to solely humanize the Iranians in front of the world, and that she did with utmost glory. Like any other adolescent, from anywhere around the world, Marjane sees herself in various characters, throughout the film as a communist, pot-smoker, anarchist, punk, feminist, lover, and free-spirited aerobics teacher and sometimes as nothing much at all.

The film is divided in certain episodes, each individually portraying separate aspects of the Satrapi's life. The film begins on a high note, with the picture of bubbly, curious young Satrapi who loves all the things any other kid her age would want. Notwithstanding the fact that she comes from a very educated family of intellectuals, she within her young self possess the inherited traits of intellectuality. Her sensitivity towards the happenings around her truly speaks of her impressionable qualities. In subsequent episodes, Satrapi along with audience are made aware of the background of the revolution and the hurdles of her own family members. With time and exposure to various realities of life, young inquisitive Satrapi starts losing her innocence, her dreams start being shattered, her beliefs are challenged and in an utmost evitable way the rebellion running down her veins are brought out. As Satrapi's life is launched out in full throttle, the film starts taking new dimensions. Satrapi's life becomes the representation of the tormented Iran. Further, through Satrapi's own experience the audience gets to know about the absurdities imposed by the fanatic government. The lively portrayal of Satrapi's experience agitates the mind of the meddlesome neighbors, illiterate government officials running important positions and audacious government atrocities.

In the way of criticizing *Persepolis*, the critics find it as of very fascinating and unique representation of Iran's occurrences following the Islamic Revolution. One of the preferred fractions about this book was the arrangement of graphic panels. Satrapi illustrated very straightforward images, which somehow conveyed a great intensity of feeling and striking weight. The differences between glow and gloomy were obvious and very successful in conversing the messages. There was also a great deal of symbolism in the panels. In a review published in *The Guardian*, Sai Wish stated "Overall, I would give this book a

10 out of 10. I would recommend this to girls and boys who are 12 and older; this book deals with very mature subject matter, and does depict scenes of violence at times. There is also a fair amount of cursing, especially by some adults" (Wish, Sai, 2014).

#### 4.4 Feminist Media Studies

Feminist media studies are important epistemological aspects of media analysis for its conceptual and methodological uniqueness. At the beginning, the UK and USA based feminists were fighting for more power and control over social, political, educational and economic spheres. In the 1860s, they were demanding for the redefinition of existing mind-set about women. One of the main mottos of that time was to bring a more progressive concept about womanhood. They identified the media's negative role in this regard. These 'first wave' feminists, which are also known as suffragists, began in late nineteenth century. One of the important aspects of that time was that the feminists were motivated for the establishment of their own periodicals. Through those periodicals, they were fighting for their demands (Zonnen, 1994).

The second wave of feminism started in the 1960s. This period was remarkable for the introduction and expansion of systematic research into media images of women. Feminist scholars conducted their studies on films, television dramas, advertisings, soap operas, comic books and so on. According to the second wave of feminism, the stereotypical and inferior representation of women in the media has made these ideas very common to the society. These ideas became so evident that people can't imagine the different images of women.

The third wave of feminism emerged in the 1970s. Here, feminist scholars became much more critical than ever before. They started to question the concepts of patriarchy and

capitalism. They became more interested to examine the role of media in perpetuating patriarchy and capitalism through their day-to-day representation (Krolokke, and Sorensen, 2006).

The most recent approach of feminist media studies is the multicultural approach. The previous approaches of feminism was primarily concentrated on white, middle-class, heterosexual western woman. The black, lower-class and eastern women were ignored. Multicultural feminist approach tends to focus on these women. Because, if attention is given only to the western white women, it will create a division among women rather than to unite them. The eastern and black women are more vulnerable due to the colonial history, illiteracy, fundamentalism, social taboos, lack of economic independence and so on. Special emphasis should be given on them within the framework of multicultural feminist media studies (*ibid*).

However, the three waves of feminist media studies identified some new areas to study and it is also innovative regarding methodology. It believed that the notion of value-free research which implied neutrality and indifference towards the research subjects, is unable to ensure women presence in the sample. The feminist methodology demands for women presence in the research sample which can be achieved through purposive inclusion of women in the research objects. Another methodological uniqueness is the horizontal relationship between researcher and research objects which will prevent the top-down approach and help the researcher to understand from below. The research process should become a reciprocal process where both the researcher and the research object should collaborate in a cyclic way. Another aspect of feminist media studies is to understand the society, media and social discourses from feminist lenses. As males are dominating the academic development and construction of knowledge

historically, their constructed knowledge and discourses are predominantly biased and ignore women's' experiences. Feminist media studies urged for understanding of knowledge and discourses from women's' perspectives. It also suggests for unique study areas to understand women's' position through collective conscientization which are not suggested before by the traditional research methods; for example, gender bias in kids' rhymes, violence against women in commercial jingles etc (Zonnen, 1994).

As almost all media institutions are owned, operated and controlled by males, the reproduction of media notions are basically biased towards male and ignored women's' real scenario and show reluctance to create alternative perspectives. Feminist media studies want to examine media contents from media's political –economic perspectives. The media content is also influence by the audience criteria which is also predominantly male; subsequently, the media contents want to satisfy the major audiences by portraying traditional and stereotypical womanhood. Feminist media studies also urge for analyzing media contents from the audience's perspective. As media industries are dependent on advertisers for their survival, they remain helpless for developing healthy and balanced contents on women. Commercials are identified as the blood for the life of TV. It is obvious that commercials will explore the attitudes of the products' manufactures; and undoubtedly, most of the manufactures are male. For this reason, the role of media advertisements in gender stereotyping is a highly criticized issue by feminist media scholars. In this regard, media has less power to uphold gender sensitivity. Feminist media studies want to examine the influence of male gaze in the complex dynamics of sponsoring media contents and portraying distorted women images. Almost all creative personnel for developing creative programs are male;

concurrently, they featured women from a man's lens and explore traditional perspectives of viewing women. Feminist media studies want to examine the women images created by male directors, scriptwriters, music composers and whatsoever so on. The three modes of media analysis; i.e. production, content and reception, are targets of criticisms and scrutiny of feminism. It tries to understand the male influence on these areas and relate those influences on women representation from a feminist lens; furthermore, it also wants to create consciousness through research works about sound and logical presentation of women in media contents. Feminist media studies urge for the women empowerment in the top decision making positions of media industries and encourage women to explore their intelligence for creating creative contents through which they can tell their own story and experiences to rebuild the patriarchal history and society. The epistemology of this thinking is that women have to mobilize their own experiences to express their own history ( Krollokke, and Sorensen, 2006).

#### **4.5 Feminist Film Theory**

Feminist film theory has appeared in the past 20 years to turn out to be a huge and prosperous ground. Its leading approach, illustrated by renowned journals as *Screen and Camera Obscura*, engrosses an academic blend of semiotics, Althusserian Marxism, and Lacanian psychotherapy. On this sight, individual subjects are shaped in the course of multifaceted signifiatory procedures, including cinema; customary Hollywood cinema's typical pragmatist texts are sources of bourgeois ideas. Supplementary to this hypothesis by Laura Mulvey's essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1975), was the feminist contention that men and women are differentially situated by cinema: men as subjects recognizing with means who impel the film's account ahead, women as matter for manly craving and fetishistic

gazing. Mulvey's thesis is deeply devoted in hypothesis. It is cited as 'the beginning paper of feminist film theory' (Modleski, 1989), as provided that 'the theoretical grounds for the rejection of Hollywood and its pleasures' (Penley, 1988), and even as setting out feminist film theory's adage. Mulvey assumed a broad depiction of cinema as a representational means which, like further facets of mass culture, outlines viewers as bourgeois subjects. She used Lacanian psychoanalysis to position her explanation of gendered partisanship, longing, and visual enjoyment. Mulvey permitted modest likelihood of confrontation or significant spectatorship, and renowned no differences in construction or consequence of pragmatist movies. Evidently, her observation has been much condemned and more advanced, as writers (as well as Mulvey herself) have noted concerns heaved by discrepancies among women, facts like male masochism, or genres that operate in unique ways, such as comedy, melodrama, and horror. Still, writers in feminist film theory usually presume Mulvey's basic considerations and catch a number of versions of psychoanalytic theory as a desideratum. Main matters are regularly observed only in terms of some modification or criterion of psychoanalytic theory. Thus Barbara Creed's book *The Monstrous-Feminine* argues that the fact that women in terror films are frequently not sufferers but monstrous dictated a revise of key features of Freudian hypothesis, mainly his speculation of the Oedipus complex and castration calamity. (Creed, 1993). Creed spins in its place to Kristeva's theory of the hopeless and the motherly. Far less often, Mulvey's critics have accepted further stridently dissimilar hypothetical foundations such as cultural studies, identity politics, deconstruction, or the philosophy of Foucault. Ever since in the early hours of eighties, the viewer has become a key centre of dispute in feminist film theory. In current critical studies the

feminine viewer is shaped variously as a lack within a form of address that privileges masculine theme arrangements, the point of a detailed generic address (work on 'women's' genres) and as a subject from whose arrangement textual meaning becomes destabilized and delight reconceived.

#### 4.6 Media Representation Theory

David Chandler (2001) defines Media representation as:

Representation refers to the construction in any medium (especially the mass media) of aspects of reality such as people places objects events and cultural identities. The term refers to the process as well as to its products. For instance into the key markers of identity (class, age, gender and ethnicity) representation involves not only how identities are represented within the text but also how they are constructed in the process of production and reception (Chandler, 2001).

Representation refers to the creation in any medium (particularly the mass media) of facets of 'reality' such as populace, places, matters, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts. Such representations may be in verbal communication or inscription as well as motionless or moving pictures. The term refers to the practices involved as well as to its products. For example, in relation to the key indicators of distinctiveness - Class, Age, Gender and Ethnicity - representation engrosses not only how identities are characterized (or somewhat constructed) within the text but also how they are constructed in the processes of production and reception by people whose identities are also differentially marked in relation to such demographic factors. Consider, for instance, the issue of 'the gaze'. How do men look at images of women, women at men, men at men and women at women? A key in the study of representation concern is with the way in which representations are made to seem 'natural'. Systems of

representation are the means by which the concerns of ideologies are framed; such systems 'position' their subjects. Semiotics and content analysis (quantitative) are the main methods of formal analysis of representation. In this context of representation, Stuart Hall emphasized the interpretation of media texts by the spectators. In his essay, 'Encoding/Decoding', Hall has examined spectator's involvement in the production of meaning. He argued about the encoding processes of the producers and the decoding processes of the spectators. This interaction will only take place if there are some common backgrounds between the encoder and the decoder. Age, sex, race, educational level, gender, religion, ethnicity etc. constitute the backgrounds between the producer and the spectator. For this, Hall mentioned that the messages are not always interpreted in the similar fashion as they were planned for. He pointed three types of probable readings of any representation: a dominant or preferred reading, b) a negotiated reading and an oppositional reading. When the spectators perceived the similar meaning of a media text, it will result a dominant reading. If the viewers partially perceived the text according to the producers' intention, it will yield the negotiated reading. On the other hand, if the viewers conceived the text in an unintended way, oppositional readings occurred (Hall, 1993).

## 5. Method of Research

The analysis of this paper has drawn by following the technique of film narratology as this method helps to deconstruct the images, meanings and narrations constructed through the portrayals in film or television. It examines the modes of narrative constructions, our insights of both civilizing object and the planet around us. The reading of narrative is mainly significant as our classification of point and space in narrative shape comprises one of the main ways we create

connotation in general. As Hayden White puts is, "far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted" (cited in Prince, 1994). Under the frequency and significance of narrative media in our lives (television, film, fiction), narratology is also a helpful base to have before one commencing examining popular culture. In defining the rationality of this study is while the research has been done on a movie that depicts the real life incidents and occurrences of Marjane Satrape, the analysis has reflected the realities inside Iran concerning the dichotomies regarding women's rights issues and patriarchal Islamic politics. The major limitation of this piece is only one method film narratology has used in this study; however, research area remained narrow and for this reason, the findings could not be generalized and supported by other methods.

## 6. The Appraisal of *Persepolis* (2007): Dominant Themes

### 6.1 The Rebellion of the Dragon

Mergie Satrapi like any other little girl, loves Fries with Ketchup. Her favorite hero is Bruce Lee. She always wore Adidas sneakers. Young Mergie's sociability and affable mannerisms portrayed at the very beginning of the film was no surprise given her she was an ancestor of the prince who was overthrown by the Shah regime. Blended with her becoming curiosity and unrelentingly jubilant youth, young Mergie wants to be the last prophet of the world. As a prophet she wants to establish new rules that her angel heart feels are idealistically euphoric, such as, chicken every day for the poor, special treatment for the elderly and several others. Young Marjane's thoughts and dreams and

sensitivity towards the injustices she felt intensely that led her to wish to become a prophet is simply a representation of how the mind, when free and unbound cherishes humanity.

Mergie's enthusiasm to establish freedom is portrayed far more strongly as she imitates her parents going to processions and enchanting slogan, "down with the Shah". Her young mind constantly depicts her intense sensitivity towards the happening of the surroundings. As she meets Laly's father who had been imprisoned by the Shah, she learns new definitions of "Heroism", being imprisoned for holding independent beliefs. She also learns about the heinous tortures of the Shah regimes and duly makes effort to apply such towards those who she thought as enemy, for example the neighbor kid who's father worked for the Shah. Implications of the conflict in Iran spreads so far that, we see young Mergie to take up measures to start rumors against the neighbor kid so that her friends join her to bring justice to the millions killed.

Mergie Satrapi soon finds her idol in life. Her uncle who was imprisoned by the Shah is freed after the revolution. She finds it most attractive that her uncle was behind the bars 9 years, which was more than Laly's father. Her hero was better than that of her friends. Mergie's uncle, Anoush also takes her under his wing as a daughter he never had, and tells her stories of their families' gallant struggles against the oppressions and fight for the justice. He bestows upon her the family memory of glory and young Mergie too joyfully accepts. But, soon Anoush is executed. Young Mergie for the first time in her life faces major emotional distress. Her beliefs are shattered. Later in life, we see the reflection of her uncle's rebellion and courage within Satrapi in the face of various injustices.

## 6.2 In the hope, for a Change

Fearing for her safety in a time of war and political repression, Marjane's parents send her to Austria to study at a French school. From this part of the film the states of Mergie and tormented Iran are juxtaposed to run parallel. For example, the alienation Mergie experiences at Vienna are a jejune counterpart to the anxiety felt back home in Iran. She momentarily loses herself for a while in the new.

She grows accustomed to the catholic regulations imposed by the nuns, acquires a few friends who find her culture and war stories fascinating. She finds herself indulged friends superficial rebellions to nothing, their nonchalance, nihilism, strong likings to death metal music but not for long. She soon realizes compared to the situation she had to face at home, these anarchists are just kidding themselves.

Marjane soon finds out that her Middle Eastern looks and demeanor is frightening to normal people as captivating it is for her anarchist friends. Marjane learns the harsh prejudices of racism. Soon she finds little to sustain her in the easy nihilism of European alternative culture. And it is in Vienna that the full morose of her situation becomes clear, a dilemma that is hardly hers alone. Either she can be more or less free and give up her home, or she can return home at the cost of her freedom and individuality. It is also the time when the prejudices of the west and the troubles at home put her in an intense state of identity crisis.

## 6.3 The Return

Marjane, for the first time experiences love and intimate relationship in Austria, which ends in a severe betrayal. Her broken heart, loneliness and homesickness make life so hard

for her that she decides to return to Iran, the Iran of 1988. The war had just ended. The Islamic regime made a massacre of political prisoners, executing each and every individual refusing to giving up their ideals. The war had left nearly a million people killed or crippled. Endless streets had been renamed after the dead, and a walk in the city is "a walk in a cemetery" as Marjane states in the film.

Again, the life of tormented Marjane and the situation of the devastated Iran bear in each other an uncanny resemblance.. Just before the truce Iraq bombed Iran everyday, as if to wipe out Iran of the face of the earth. Similarly, Right before returning to Iran, life in the West tormented Satrapi until she could take no more. Marjane tormented by the deception and hardship to establish an identity for her somehow is tantamount to the hardship of the nation Iran, affected by the international politics of the West, devastated within and without. However, even if the relevance of international politics is somewhat intimated ever so subtly it is not without an equal impact that of the Islamic rulers.

Marjane's failure in Austria, combined with the grayness and the weight of death in the Iran, takes the force out of her. She starts thinking about death. It is here that god (and Marx) come to her and tell her to be brave. Marx cheerfully emphasizes that the struggle continues. Marjane decides not to give up hope. She gets up and puts her decision to practice. She takes exams, goes to university and starts yet another episode of her life.

In the 1992 Iran, grown up Marjane is faced with grown up problems of living under the conservative rulers. In her art class, they are only provided with a veiled and imperviously covered model to work on, the conservative

guards catch up with her running to catch a bus and forbids her to run because it looked obscene to them. Even, the guards arrested an innocent man whom Marjane falsely accuses to get away with her own faults. Marjane vocally renounces the discrimination of the male and female attires deemed descent. Most of all, she finds it very real that every step she takes is bounded with some kind of obstacles which are though, can be overcome through paying the conservative guards.

#### **6.4 The God and the Grandma**

One of the obsessions of Marjane was to become the last prophet, to establish new rule and order to provide for the poor and old. And little Margie, strictly maintained her correspondence as future prophet. In her dilemma and distress, her God gives her solace. She at first finds it hard to believe that the Shah was not a worthy ruler for she thought the Shah was chosen by the God. But her beliefs are crushed for the first time as her father reveals to her the real face of the Shah's regime.

Soon enough, Marjane, the to be prophet is faced with more moral dilemma. Just after the revolution, on a neighborhood street, Marjane and other children chase a boy whose father is a member of the Savak, the Shah's torturing secret police as Marjane spreads rumors that the boy's father had killed a million people, Her plans go in vein as mother intervenes. But little Marjane is left with torment of failing to establish justice for innocent dead people. Afterward, Marjane's god tells her not to worry and to leave justice to him and that the wicked shall be punished. Marjane is made hopeful again by her God that justice shall be served. In other words, the hope that the revolution will make things right is still in the air.

Later, after Anoush's execution, god appears again, but this time pleads weakness and says he is unable to do anything. Now the revolution has been defeated. Marjane rejects him, but this rejection is not permanent, as consciousness is not permanent and no decision is immune to wavering. The realities outside our mind interact constantly with our beliefs and our knowledge and lead to ups and downs in the developmental process of our life and thought.

If god represents Marjane's struggle to understand reality, her Grandma plays the role of experience and consciousness. She is a colorful major presence throughout the movie, full of experiences, yet cheerful and good-humored in her sarcastic ridicule of everything she feels is wrong. She curses freely and treats herself to good smell everyday. She teaches Marjane to preserve her integrity. Wherever Marjane turns her back on her values out of weakness or fear, whether in the face of racism in Austria or the Pasdaran in Iran, Grandma emphasizes the importance of perseverance in one's principles, since she has seen and knows that human beings, even in the hardest of situations, have choices.

Most of all, Marjane's Grandma is an important source of Marjane's inner strength, her conscious guide through all the troubles and most importantly supportive friendly figure to shelter Marjane whenever needed.

### **6.5 Saving the Face of Middle-East**

As we see Marjane's brutal experience of racial stigmatism, it is in fact a very real issue in the Western countries. The Middle-East crisis has long prevailed and the West has always been after the oil abundant countries. It seemed much easier to acquire their mineral resources once taken under control by military forces. However, to be able to spend on such military intervention public support is very important. Western people in general

never get to see the real people, how their life is. This dehumanization of Middle Eastern populace by the media has enabled such atrocities that prevailed in the post revolution Iran possible.

For long, the Western Imperialists have established a very negative image of the Middle Eastern and Iranian people of being expendable fanatic Muslims. The unbecoming rulers of Iran failed to maintain the face of Iran or Middle East simply because of their ignorance and negligence toward the outside world. But this remiss attitude does not reflect an unanimous attribute of the Iranian people, neither any Middle Eastern. This contributes to a construction of unreal picture of the Middle East that prepares Western minds for murder on a mass scale.

*Persepolis (2007)*, is an approach of the author to humanize the Middle Eastern people to the West. By portraying her own personal life, home life and how her family reacted to the political situations, Satrapi managed to portray the lives many, if not all, Iranians who are secular and believe in the freedom of expression and independence of thoughts. Satrapi, intentionally shows her and her family's affiliation with the elements of Western culture such as, partying, drinking, choice of music, clothes etc.

In the film, the directors have taken the contradiction-ridden life of a girl from a country shaken by revolution and mired in war, a world full of love and walls, and turned it into a fine work of art. And thus they have brought the people of both sides of the divide closer. In an interview Satrapi says, "If we don't look at people as humans, we can bombard them and nothing happens. Every day hundreds of people are killed in Iraq and we have not even observed a minute of silence."

Satrapi's black and white animation portrays the Iranian people more realistically than a 1000 articles. Viewers see that

despite the rule of death over the country, people celebrate life in its many forms, even if it means they will get in trouble for putting on lipstick or lose their life for partying. Nothing brings people closer together than real knowledge of each other's situation, problems and dreams. Satrapi managed to do just that.

### 6.6 Conflicted by Conflicts

Although based on the one of the most crucial conflicts of the Middle East, *Persepolis* (2007) does not feature mainly the conflict itself. Rather, it focuses on the implications that a conflict poses to the lives of the civilian people in the conflicted area/country. Through the life of the young girl, the film delineates significant issues that are affected or effected by a conflict.

Satrapi's parents, uncle and other close relatives actively participated in the protesting the tyrannies of the unjust rulers. This implies that the contradictions of fundamentals in a society constantly push some privileged intellectuals into rebellion against the system. These individuals come to realize the passé nature of the dominant paradigms. The sense and understanding of the need for a paradigm shift or a change in the world around and build a better one on a whole new basis puts them in the ranks of the oppressed and even, at times, at the head of their struggles. In the film we saw, in Iran, many intellectuals such as Satrapi's relatives having to sacrifice their lives for the cause.

As we see Satrapi's close relatives are unable to take a severely ill patient for treatment because the illiterate hospital director does not feel its necessary or Satrapi's father being harassed at gun point by child soldiers, the film really makes a strong point of how helpless of the general people become when a conflict situation arises. The scene makes us deeply feel the impotence of people in the face of the new reactionaries in

power, and the rule of ignorance and superstition against science, logic and the interests of the people.

### 7. Concluding Remarks

Revolutions or conflict situations often result in reinforcement of backward tendencies among the people which can be a tool in the hands of the new ruling class. Many exploit the opportunities provided aroused by the situation to move into a position previously unreachable. At times such a tendency among the lower strata is linked with a feeling of revenge against those who had privileged positions in the past; and such violence often targets not the ruling classes, but the educated middle strata. As a result, the great majority continue to be looted and suppressed. The Islamic Republic of Iran, used the reactionary ideological resource, to control the people and establish and preserve its rule. It exploited the backward tendency to keep a populist image and maintain its base among a section of the masses. The result was vicious suppression of intellectuals and the masses.

*Persepolis*, in its own narrative style exposes the audacities, absurdities and discriminations of the Islamic Republic. However subtly, it does not overlook the role of the West in bringing puppet tyrants to power and suppressing the people. As little Marjane's father explains to her about how the Shah gained power the audience are given the hint of the root of the cause being somehow related to a interest of the West. Viewers become aware of the role of Britain in the coup that brought the father of the Shah to power, the pillage of the country's oil, the training of Savak torturers by the CIA, and the sale of arms by Western countries to both sides in the Iran-Iraq war. These are all reminders that Iran does not exist in a vacuum but is a part of a system that has spread its tentacles throughout the globe and that the struggle there is part of the struggle against that global system.

*Persepolis* (2007) manages to portray an important humane message through its portrayal of Satrapi's life. Early on life, little Marjane is seen curious and acting with alacrity, full dreams, dreams to change the world for good. But as she grows up, her realities starts shaping her life, crushing her dreams, destroying her beliefs and finally tormented her soul to the breaking point, at which point, Satrapi is found without dreams and ambitions. Constant hurdles and attack on independent thought simply alienated her innate potentials. And in the end, Marjane Satrapi is forced to take her dreams elsewhere.

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