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REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN MARJANE SATRAPI'S "PERSEPOLIS"

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ABSTRACT

The women's movement of the 1960s saw the importance of the "images of women" shown in literature. Women fiction writers globally depicted the multiple issues such as "gender inequality", "patriarchy" and "sexual objectification". Besides emancipating women from the age-old shackles of society these writers strove to subvert the stereotypical roles and images of women. In this backdrop the paper aims to study the images of Muslim women framed by Islamic socio-cultural practices in the Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis.* It also highlights how women become important religious and political agents through the emergence of the veil. It further opens a new perspective of the image of progressive Muslim women who rebel against this conventional practice and finally establishes her identity despite of being veiled.

KEYWORDS: Gender Inequality, Patriarchy, Sexual Objectification

INTRODUCTION

Delineating the status of women in society is neither a new subject nor is it fully settled one. Apparently, the task of representation of Muslim women in all her different domains like socio-political, religious, economical, and familial invites an in-depth analysis. Indeed, there are multiple issues which are likely to be focussed are: family laws pertaining to marriage and divorce, violence against women at home or in community. Islamic social customs like polygamy, gender discrimination, and excluding women from religious activities such as attendance in the mosque, deprivation from inheritance of property and ownership are found to be rampant in the Muslim society. Furthermore, the practice of veiling in the Islamic culture imprisons the self-identity of women, thus erasing their individuality. This process of marginalisation of women stems from the patriarchy. To quote Sarah Gamble,

> A system ruled over by men, whose authority is enforced through social, political,
> economic and religious institutions. All feminists oppose patriarchy, although they
> differ in their conceptualisation of it. Radical feminists tend to regard patriarchy as an
> all pervasive and ahistorical system.

(Gamble, p. 271)

Feminists have rightly stated that because our society and language are both androcentric, women are relegated to the margins. It is the means through which oppression of women is perpetuated sexually, economically and socially. Therefore, in order to overthrow the patriarchy the entire sex-gender system has to be deconstructed.. As Sarah Gamble rightly writes,

> Feminist theorists have posited the notion of an alienated female subjectivity as the
> female is determined socially, linguistically and biologically by patriarchy through
> entrance into the symbolic order and recognition of the primacy of the phallus.

(Gamble, p.307)

While the portrayal of women in comics has come on leaps and bounds since the Golden Age of Comics where women developed their role and there is still a long way to go. Needless to say, the depiction of women in comic books, movie adaptations and graphic novels has long provoked debate. Undoubtedly, a tendency to over-sexualize female characters and presenting them as sex objects is not new. Drawing the vital women's issues through the medium of graphic novel, prove to be useful for the contemporary social practices and conventions prevalent in the Muslim society.

The graphic novel is a sequential art combining both words and pictures. Its origin can be traced back to the early nineteenth century. Thus, depicting the multiple facets of the social and cultural realms of the Muslim society through the device of graphic novel is a well-knit effort by the novelist of *Persepolis*.

The present paper aims to study the representations of the Muslim women in the Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a much-acclaimed graphic novel. Besides writing *Persepolis* (2007), Satrapi has published other works which include *Embroideries* (2005) and *Chicken with Plums* (2006).

The novel garnered much world-wide acclaim and heightened the novelist to the zenith of the success. *Persepolis* is inspired and influenced by Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman from which the novelist borrows some stylistic elements from it.

Persepolis is Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir of growing up in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. The author has depicted her childhood up to her early adult years in Iran in black and white comic strips. She tells the poignant story of her life and years that saw the overthrow of the Shah regime, the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the devastating effects of war with Iraq.

The title of the novel comes from the ancient capital of Persian Empire located in modern-day Iran which was founded in the sixth century B.C by Darius I, later destroyed by Alexander the Great.

To begin with, the paper is designed into two parts. The first part of the article deals with the introduction of the history of Iranian civilization with its features and later showing the varied elements of Iranian society and culture. In this section, the key concern will be on the status of Iranian women, their gender roles in family and a host of other factors which determine their existence in society. The second part offers the detailed study of the novel *Persepolis* in the light of Iranian culture, customs and society in general and its impact on the Muslim women.

The history of Iran originates with the Achaemenian dynasty dating back about 2500 years ago. Despite of the continual invasion and occupation by Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Mongols and others Iran has always developed as a distinct political and cultural entity. These foreign invasions not only had a powerful impact on the social and economic life of the country but also influenced the culture and customs practiced by the Iranians in their lives. Despite of all these unexpected upheavals and conquest the country preserved its cultural integrity and heritage incessantly.

An exploration of the Iranian culture reveals the fact that it is class based and it is divided into two different classes i.e., traditional class and modern class. The former exhibits the tendency to defend the age-old social as well as cultural customs, conventions and practices while the latter follows the modern values and views. Family is one of the important social institutions which play a vital role in the social life of Iran.

This family is comprised of the male as its only decision-maker. In other words, patriarchy forms the core of the Iranian society. Since ancient times patriarchy has been a major institution which has its roots in religious, legal and cultural practices. Like all patriarchal cultures the male being the bread-earner and the head of the family while childbirth and child rearing has always been the domain of women. In the words of Elton L. Daniel and Ali Akbar Mahdi,

> Though Iranian culture remains patriarchal, women in Iran are diverse belong to different subcultures and social classes, and follow different traditions within the overall patriarchal culture. Women are ordered by the Islamic government to have appropriate hijab (veil), but Iranian women demonstrate a great deal of diversity in their physical appearance as well as their behaviours.

(*Culture and Customs of Iran*, p.158)

A number of factors reflecting the marginalised status of women in Iran like faulty educational system, Islamic laws regarding marriage, the women's right to divorce, the dress code in the form of veil and lastly the practice of polygamy. Undoubtedly, education is an indispensable necessity for the proper growth and development of an individual be it male or female. It was during the beginning of twentieth century that women were deprived of the right of pursuing education, politics and even the arts. But with the modernization initiated by the ruler Reza Shah in the 1930s there was a break away from the tradition of segregating women, thus, as a consequence the number of girls' students increased in schools. Besides, women were being hired in government offices. With the establishment of universities women gained more education and skills. It was the outcome of the modernization which paved the way for the improvement in the predicament of the women. It was during the Pahlavi dynasty that many legislative and political developments in the form of laws with the sole objective of amending their pathetic condition. The noteworthy among them include women's enfranchisement which was the part of the White Revolution in 1963 and Family Protection Act of 1967. The act of 1967, which was revised in 1975 had the objective to ameliorate the conditions for women. It brought about changes in the existing practices concerning the legal age and conditions of marriage, a woman's right to divorce and the practice of temporary marriage called "Sigheh".

Another feature of Islamic culture is the custom of polygyny in Iran which has become established part of traditional Islamic law and practice. It is considered as moral although it is undoubtedly unfair. Many western writers of nineteenth century discussed and wrote about the troubled situation of women in polygamous marriages. For feminists, it is the kind of violation of women's rights which degenerates their social standing. The issue of women's right to divorce in Islam is yet another social norm which highlights the gender inequality. To quote Elton L. Daniel and Ali Akbar Mahdi,

> According to the Shari'a men have the right to divorce at will, and women cannot initiate a divorce that their husbands oppose unless they can prove the husband's sexual impotence, drug addiction, incarceration for life or other conditions specified by religion.

(*Culture and Customs of Iran,* p.175)

Apart from this, there is one more social practice which has always been the subject of controversy. The Islamic practice of veiling is quite dominant phenomena. In an article "*The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women*" Homa Hoodfar writes,

> Veiling is a lived experience full of contradictions and multiple meanings. While it has clearly been a mechanism in the service of patriarchy, a means of regulating and controlling women's lives, women have used the same social institution to free themselves from the bonds of patriarchy.

(Hoodfar, p.5)

Islam follows a traditional belief regarding the proper dress code for Muslim women in the form of veil. The Islamic "veil", headscarf, or hijab refers to the form of clothing worn by women which covers and conceals the body from head to ankles, with the exception of the face, hands and feet. The "veil" has been interpreted on the basis of obedience to God, modesty, purity, belief and righteousness. Some Muslim women regard "veil" as oppressive and restrictive while others view it as an expression of religious belief and protection from the evil gaze of men. Therefore, it gives rise to multiple meanings associated with the use of veil in Islamic society. "Veiling has been institutionalised by Shari'a (Islamic law)". The holy book of Quran says,

> And tell the believing women to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things)
> and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts, etc) and not to show off their
> adornment except what must (ordinarily) appear thereof, that they should draw their
> veils over their Juyubihinna.

(*Quran*, S24:31)

There will be no exaggeration to say that the portrayal of Muslim women in Islamic country like Iran in all different perspectives of culture and customs throws ample light on their role and position in society. In a similar vein, Satrapi skillfully draws the culture, customs and the people in her autobiographical novel *Persepolis*. As an Iranian, Satrapi has spent a good part of her life in Iran, she brings forth true picture of the Iranian society with all its different hues. In the novel, her art of drawing cartoons is simple but effective which conveys the message convincingly to the reader. The text as well as the images are deftly blended in the novel. There are several themes intertwined in the novel such as nationalism, inequality of the social classes, Islamic Revolution, violence, survival and the childhood etc.

The novel opens with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which brought immense chaos and turmoil in the lives of Iranian people. At its outset, it made mandatory law to wear "veil" in school, failing to which will be considered as an opponent and will be dealt severely by the fundamentalists. Marji who is shown in the opening frame as veiled, is seen with a big frown and sad. Satrapi assumes the imposition of the "veil" as a oppressive garment for the women along with the elucidation of the possibilities of the "veil" as a site of resistance for challenging authoritarian control. Thus, her sole decision to open the novel with title "The Veil" reveals her identity as a novelist who offers diverse understandings of the meanings attached to it. The veil and the Islamic ethics have been closely linked in Muslim Culture. It is considered as an excuse to curtail women's mobility and independence.
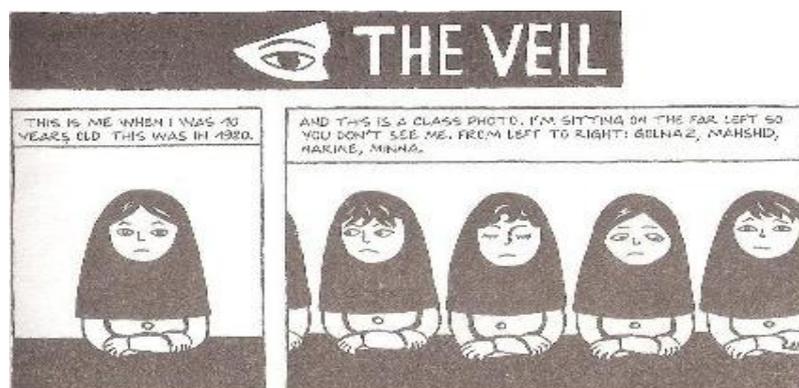

Figure 1: Persepolis, 2003, p.3

For the young Marji, the "veil" becomes a symbol of oppression that radically transforms her life. This veiling of body is linked with the objectification of women in Iran under the highly repressive political regime. She illustrates how serious outcomes can be if the "veiling" is not obeyed.

Figure 2: Persepolis, p.74

In the *Persepolis*, one of the religious fundamentalists declares, "Women's hair emanates rays that excite men. That's why women should cover their hair! If in fact it is really more civilized to go without veil, then animals are more civilized than we are"(*Persepolis*, p.74). On the whole, the perception regarding the concept of "veil" is synonymous with the repression of women under the guise of cultural and religious identity.

In addition to this, the Cultural Revolution of 1979 also brought about a drastic change in educational system in Iran. As a consequence, the religious fanatics intended to teach their fanaticism to new generation of children and adolescents. All the bilingual schools where boys and girls studying together, were closed down on the grounds of decadence. This is quite evident in the following frame from of the novel.

Figure 3: Persepolis p.4

Clearly, the closing of the universities ordered by the ministry of the government kills the dreams and desires of Marji who wanted to study chemistry and be like Marie Curie. All her hopes are shattered. It explicitly shows that how the system affects one's life.

Figure 4: Persepolis, p.73)

Born and brought up in modern, liberal and avant-garde family, her parents never isolated Marji from the Iranian social, cultural and moral values. She was given all the freedom and choice. She always maintained her cultural identity as Iranian women.

Figure 5: Persepolis, p.132)

On the contrary the harsh laws imposed by the Islamic Revolution put an end to all her independence and movement. The arrest and the execution of eighteen-year old Nilofaur is another vibrant example for the brutality and the violence of the regime.
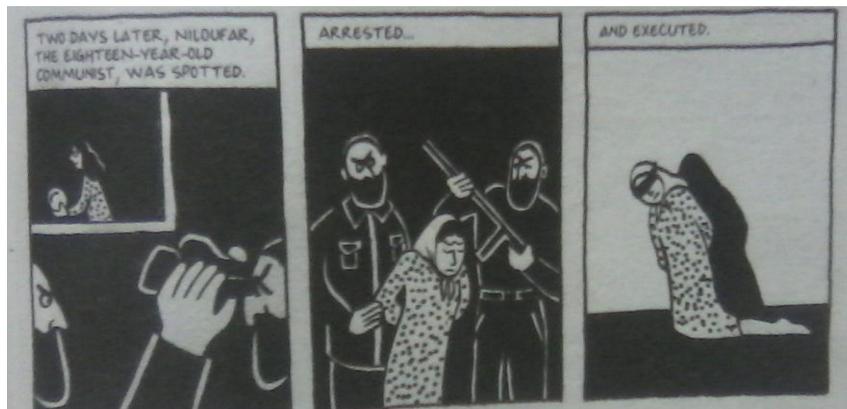
Figure 6: Persepolis, p.125)

Wearing make-up, loud laugh, showing your wrist all symbolize the opposition to the culture and become the subject of subversion. The intensity of terror and havoc created by the religious fundamentalists was so deeply ingrained in the minds of women that they narrowed down their freedom of thought and lost of peace of mind. Under such circumstances, the definition of life for Muslim women is articulated as a form of imprisonment which made them slave to the male-dominated society.

In her effort to establish her career as an artist, Marji faced enormous cultural constraints which tried to retard her inner urge for success. But she never gave up her goals

Figure 7: Persepolis, p.333

Throughout the novel, Marji questions the disparity in the gender in the society which ultimately weakens the existence of the fair sex. The strict patriarchal norms caused Iranian women to kill their dreams and desires of their lives.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper explicates the representation of Muslim women whose life and experiences are full of struggle and the sacrifice for their identity, freedom and individuality which the author has interpreted with utmost clarity through her black and white comic strips. Marji, the central protagonist, has explicitly manifested her inner determination and perseverance even after confronting the various constraints and obstacles during her period of studies in Iran. The stringent laws and customs of Iran did not undermine Marji's desire to grow and achieve her goals. Her endeavour to build an environment for the Iranian women, who can have freedom to construct her identity even within the veil, is undoubtedly commendable.

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