



How the Idea of the Veil is Intertwined with the Quest of Identity in *Persepolis*

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the notion of Orientalism represented by *Said* 1978. Through this notion, the researcher sheds light on the symbolic icon of the veil in *The Complete Persepolis* by *Satrapi*. This study does not only analyze the iconic occurrence of the veil but also analyzes the quest of identity through *Satrapi*'s journey. The identity in *Satrapi*'s work is represented in two dimensions, namely, the personal quest for identity and the national identity of Iran. Under the light of Orientalism, *Satrapi* reflects how the Iranian nationality is mirrored in the Western mirror. On the other hand, the study tackles the notion of Occidentalism (Carrier, 1995). Under the light of Occidentalism, the researcher proves that *Satrapi* also reflects how the western culture is represented through Eastern mirror. The idea of veil and its impact on the quest for identity is represented perfectly through *Satrapi*'s techniques. The first technique used in this study is the graphic novels by which the idea is represented through iconic images; while the second technique used is the black-and-white symbolic images. *Satrapi* masters those techniques through which she narrates her journey from the childhood in Iran to the journey of a return.

Key Words: Graphic novel, Autobiography, Occidentalism, Orientalism, Veil, Identity.

الملخص

تناولت الدراسة الحالية مفهوم الاستشراق الذي قدم من قبل سعيد سنة ١٩٧٨. أن هذه لدراسة لم تركز فقط على حوادث الشر، لكنها ركزت حول البحث والسعي وراء الهوية من خلال جهود ساتراي، الذي أكد على أن الهوية تتمثل في بعدين: البحث وراء الهوية بشكل عام وعلى الهوية الوطنية لايران في ظل مفهوم الاستشراق. فقد عكس هذا الباحث الهوية الايرانية المعكوسة من خلال الافكار الغربية هذا من جانب. أما من الجانب الاخر فأن البحث قد تعامل مع مفهوم التنافس في صراح الافكار واية جهة هي المتفوقة في طرح الافكار التي يتقبلها المجتمع وهذه الفكرة قد طرحت من قبل كيرير عام ١٩٩٥. في ضوء هذه الفكرة، فقد برهن الباحث بأن ساتراي قد أكد على الثقافة الغربية كيف تمثل وماهي انعكاستها من خلال المرأة الشرقية. أن فكرة الحجاب وتأثيره على البحث والسعي وراء الهوية قد تجسد بكل تام من خلال أبحاث ساتراي واسالييه. أما الاسلوب الاول في الكتابة الذي استخدم في هذه الرسالة فهو الروايات ذات الوصف الحس والمفصل والتي تتمثل من خلال الصور الرمزية واما الطريقة الثانية التي استخدمت في هذه الروايات فهي الصور الرمزية. واجاد الكاتب في هذه الطرق من خلال سرد لرحلته بين اطفال ايران حيث جسد اسالييه وتقنياته في الكتابة والوصف الواضح الحي والمفصل.



Introduction

Graphic novels are the novels that use pictures and iconic images to narrate a story through. The graphic novel, under study, is written by *Satrap*. It narrates a journey of a young girl living in Iran during the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Under the technique of graphic novel, *Satrap* tries to illustrate the identity of being a feminist, or more accurately, a humanist using black-and-white pictures. She describes herself as marginal internally in the Iranian mirror and externally in the Western mirror. She bravely uses kind of ‘taboo’ words to exposes her internal life to the readers very clearly and to enable them discover what occurs inside the fanatical regime, worded differently, to recognize what happens behind the scene. The first graphic novel was published in 1842 in the US. It was titled as *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* by *Rodolphe Toffler*. This technique later was common between writers and has been criticized. One of the critics, *Chute* (2010), describes that the usage of graphic novels is used heavily recently to represent the image of women and to enable the writer to deliver the message without being involved. She advocates the graphic novels, for instance *Persepolis*, as they are written in a very simple way to be understood, even by children. This simplicity enables the readers to understand the iconic symbolic images. *Satrap* in *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* sheds light on the idea of orientalism and succeeds in representing the view of Eastern culture by the Western mirror. She also, represents that Arabs are considered as ‘exotic, inferior and uncivilized’ (*Said*, 1978). However, through Occidentalism (*Carrier*, 1995), she also sheds light on who Islamists exert effort to resist the Western approach.



Aim of the Study

The study aims at exploring the notion of Orientalism and Occidentalism in *The Complete Persepolis*. It studies the two series of *Persepolis* by *Satrap* to explore more about what lies beyond the lines in Iran and how the fanatical regime affects the Iranian identity. In addition, it aims at exploring the metaphor of veil and iconic representation to symbolize the writer's quest for identity. The current study uses quotations from the novel to give corroborative evidence for the analysis.

The Value of the Study

This paper explores the powerful talent of *Satrap* which enables her to narrate historical, personal and social events mentioned in *Persepolis*. Her talent lies in the utilization of the graphic novel technique by using iconic pictures. Although this technique is originally used to narrate stories for children, she succeeds in narrating complicated events representing the western and eastern chasms. The researcher reveals the iconic symbol of veil to uncover the national identity of Iran and the personal identity of *Satrap* herself. This study manages to go through the whole novel very deeply to explain the excelled usage of the black-and-white images through an autobiographic narration.

Literature Review

This section states more about the notion of the veil and the identity tackled in some of the previous studies. Besides, it demonstrates more about *Satrap* and



her technique of using graphic novels. It also illustrates the notion of autobiography and the notion of mirror which is excellently adopted by *Satrap*.

Previous Studies

Minaret 2005 by *Leila Aboulela* sheds light on the role of women in the Islamic Arabic society. She explores the struggle through which women try to create modern religious identity. *Aboulela* also focuses on the metaphor of veil and the role of it in every positive and negative situation. Her work explores the lives of the veiled women living in Britain. She uses this symbol of veil to explain the struggle of the women there that leads to explain the individual empowerment.

Hochel 2013 tries to explore more on the idea of 'veil or not to veil'. The idea of veil becomes a symbolic one. Some opinions view this as an icon of piety and others as an icon of oppression. The study by *Hochel* represents that the Western culture deals with the veil as rejection of modernity. Besides, some views consider veil as a support for violence. However, all of these views illustrate the strength of the 'non-verbal communication'. The study reflects that any iconic symbol is assigned meaning through the communication and the mentality of people. The outcome of this study, which is prolific, focuses on that beliefs can't depend on a kind of dress and on the influence of the nonverbal communication of a self-image or an attitude.

Satrap as a Graphic Novel Writer

Marjane Satrap is an Iranian French writer who was born in 1969. She is convinced that there is a gap between the Eastern Culture and the Western



Culture; therefore, she tries to bridge this gap through her graphic novels. She lived alone with her parents; her father was an engineer while her mother was a designer. She has no sisters or brothers. Through her childhood, she lived in Tehran. However, because of her parents' tendency, they wanted her to attend a French school to avoid her from facing the eastern culture. This paved her way to live in Austria after the Iranian revolution in 1979. Her parents sent her there to complete her education. When she was 19 years old, she returned back home. However at the 1990s, she went to Paris and got an Art Degree there.

She decided to narrate her story of her childhood in Iran. It was published under the title of *'Persepolis 1: The Story of a Childhood'* in 2000. She adopts the graphic novel technique to let her readers know more about Iran and its culture through the pictures. Then one year after, she went through narrating her journey outside Iran and her journey to return home. It was published in 2001 under the title of *'Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return'*. Through her second novel, she lets her readers know more about how the western culture treats the eastern nationalities. Both of these novels were written in French, and in 2003, they got translated into English. Her novel turned to be a movie in 2007 which was nominated, the then, to be the best animated movie. In addition to her graphic memoir *The Complete Persepolis*, she wrote *Broderies* in 2003 exploring her story in Iran. She also wrote other novels as *The Sigh* and *Chicken with Plums* both in 2004 and *The Voices* in 2014 in which she adopts the dark comedy technique.

Autobiography in Novels

Autobiography is a technique followed through writing a novel by which the author narrates his/her personal incidents in life. It is closely related to



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memoir. The distinction between memoir and autobiography emerges in that the former uses a kind of emphasis of the external events while the latter is mainly concerned with the internal events of the author her/himself as represented in *Persepolis*. French writers master these two techniques. One of the greatest writers using this method is *Duc de Saint-Simon* who wrote *Mémoires* 1723.

Autobiography is 'a sort of life' according to *Graham Greene* (1971). It has been started since the middle ages in many works as *Commentaries* by *Julius Caesar*.

The Symbolic Metaphor of Veil in The Complete Persepolis by Satrapi

A crucial issue to *Satrapi* in *Persepolis* is the metaphor of the veil. She opens her first part with 'The Veil' chapter in which *Satrapi* starts her journey in a quest of identity; again in the second part, another chapter is found which is entitled as 'The Veil' in which she more or less recaptures her identity. Accordingly, the idea of the veil is closely intertwined with the quest of identity. Thus, two kinds of veil are found with different backgrounds according to the first part and according to the second.

Veil through Occidentalism in Persepolis 1: The story of a Childhood

In the light of the first part, the veil is represented as a concrete material with an eastern background. From the very beginning, *Satrapi* presents herself and her colleagues as veiled. She expresses herself as a marginalized person with representing a photo of herself with her colleagues and says: 'So you don't see me' Ch. The Veil, Pg.3.



The picture with this quotation clarifies how she recognizes herself in the early stages in which she is supposed to forge her identity. Throughout the first chapter, it is clear that women are exposed to the idea of the veil which is a new notion for Iranians then. They didn't use to it before the Islamists' reign. The struggle of women and their exposure to this new trend paves the way to the readers to understand that Iranian women are going to change their deep-rooted identity and faith. Accordingly, they don't understand its value as what *Satrapi* says in 'The Veil' chapter:

'We didn't like to wear the veil; especially we didn't understand why we had to'. Ch. The Veil, Pg. 3

This quotation obviously expresses the idea of the coercion imposed by the Islamists or, more accurately, the fundamentalists to veil and cover women. From here, it is worth to notice the role of politics in the social life. Because of the political revolution which took place in Iran 1979 and called as '*the Islamic revolution*', the Islamists, who are men, hold a control over women under the banner of Islam. Ironically, this revolution is supposed to emancipate the nation from the oppression and the absurdity of the Shah's regime. But on the contrary, this revolution turns the society upside down and it supersedes a tyrant with another mask of tyranny. Moreover, it puts more restrictions over the society. Such restrictions lead to a real chasm: there is a group of women against the veil and another group is for it. This chasm leads to the oppression and the aggression against those who are against the veil. So, later *Satrapi's* mother '*died her hair and wore dark glasses for a long time*, Ch. The Veil, Pg. 5' as a tool to hide herself from the disciples of the Islamic revolution. By doing so, she



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is only trying to hide her identity. Afterwards it is represented that Satrapi's mother gets insulted because of the veil; she says:

'They insulted me ... and if I don't want that to happen, I should wear the veil' Ch. The Trip, Pg. 74.

She describes this situation by which the two fundamentalists insult her mother and oblige her to veil otherwise she *'should be pushed up against a wall and fucked'*.

This quotation clearly demonstrates that not only women are oppressed under the fanatical regime in Iran but also those who protect the Islamic revolution are hypocrite and know nothing about Islam. Women, in their view, are turned to be mere objects which should be veiled without giving any attention to their humane body or their integrity. By turning to be mere objects, the veil becomes, especially for the young Satrapi, a material to cover women's bodies and to put barriers between them and others who are apparently protecting the Islamic revolution. In this juncture, the veil becomes a psychological barrier just in order to be away from the new political regime's grip. However, to be involved in the society and in the same time not to violate any fanatical principle, she and her gender should veil even if unwillingly. So, in return, she becomes not only a hypocrite but also a liar. This leads inevitably to the fracture of her identity. In *'Kim Wilde'* chapter, she resists the fanatical matrix of the society; she is drawn wearing sneaker and Michael Jackson button. Because she resists the rules of the Islamic regime, she gets caught by the guardian. And to get out of this trouble, she prefers to lie and says:



‘Ma’am, my mother is dead and my step mother is very cruel and if I don’t go home right away, she’ll kill me...’ Ch. Kim Wilde, Pg. 134.

Being afraid of the disciples of the Islamic revolution, she becomes very careful about ‘others’. This idea of the others and how they can judge her has a great effect on forging her identity. The idea of the others emerges very obvious in ‘*The Wine*’ chapter when Satrapi’s mother tries to close the windows with black curtains saying:

‘The black curtains are to protect us from our neighbors. Across the street, they are totally devoted to the new regime. A glimpse of what goes on in our house would be enough for them to denounce u.’ Ch.: *The Wine*, Pg. 105.

From this point on, it is clear enough to figure out the symbolical metaphor of the veil. The veil again becomes a symbol of separation. The first result of the veil is represented in the idea of the gender separation in the education. They separate girls from boys- the idea which is novel to the Iranian society. Then, the veil, again, separates modernists, who are against the veil, from the fundamentalists, who are devoted to the new fanatical principles. The modernists begin putting barriers and limits to avoid monitoring by the fundamentalists. So, apparently, they pretend that they are disciples of the revolution but deeply inside, they do whatever they want. Accordingly, the veil becomes equivalent to the idea of hypocrisy. For more exposition, the Iranian society is apparently veiled and is controlled by the fanatical regime, but inside homes, it is a free society holding parties and allowing people to drink wine as what ‘*The Wine*’ chapter represents. Because of this chasm between the life outside homes and the life inside homes, a conflict appears inside Satrapi’s



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identity itself. Satrapi narrates this conflict through a picture of being half-veiled and half-unveiled saying:

'I really didn't know what to think about the veil. Deep down I was very religious but as a family we were very modern and avant-grade' Ch. The Veil, Pg. 6.

The quotation above proves the confusion and the conflict in which the young girl is. Despite these kinds of diaspora and confusion, the grandmother plays an important role in keeping her within the framework of integrity. The mother and the grandmother intensify the notions of feminism and socialism during her childhood. On the other hand, her father and her uncle participate in formulation her rebellious character and being obsessed with the idea of having a hero. Because of her rebellious character, she is forced to leave her country not to be caught by the fundamentalists. In the last chapter, *'The Dowry'*, of the first part, Satrapi faces the most important principles of her life to follow. She spends her last night in Iran with her grandmother who advises her saying:

'Always keep your dignity and be true to yourself'. Ch. The Dowry, Pg. 150

Then Satrapi herself says: *'I smelled my grandma's bosom and it smelled good. I'll never forget that smell.'* Ch. The Dowry, Pg. 150

Those two quotations help in reshaping Satrapi's future giving her a kind of hope to form her identity according to her grandmother's advice. Then, the final scene occurs where her mother faints when Satrapi is leaving her country. It is



very important because it shows the reader that Satrapi is going to formulate her identity alone under the light of a complete different culture.

Veil through Orientalism in Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return

According to the second part, there is a different type of veil with a different journey for her quest of identity. Satrapi leaves her homeland when she is a child and on the edge of her adolescence to start her journey alone in a western secular society. In 'The Soup' chapter, she lives with nuns where she faces a new religion and at the same time lacks communication with her roommate. Meanwhile, she feels strange so she tries to be accepted by *others*. However, in Austria the idea of *others* refers to the secular society as a whole, unlike Iran. To be accepted, she adopts another symbol of veil. She does not have the ability to integrate herself in the socially biased society which rejects her identity. So, she tries to hide her true identity. Through 'The Vegetable' chapter, Satrapi represents herself cutting her hair and changing her appearance for the sake of acceptance. Then, she denies her Iranian identity when she claims that she is French. This attempt of hiding her identity has symbolical and psychological references.

In the light of such symbolical references, it is clear that she is exposed to another kind of veiling. It is not a concrete material. Rather, it is an abstract one. Because of the exile and the prejudice against Iran, she wants to cover her Iranian identity and to put barrier between her and others. Satrapi, as a writer, succeeds through this barrier in enabling the readers to understand the psychological reference. In the nun house where she lives in Austria, she faces a situation with one of the nun who speaks with her very aggressively and says:



'It is true what they say about Iranians. They have no education'. Ch. Pasta, Pg. 23

In that situation, Satrapi depicts a situation through her pictures to explore how she, as a young girl, faces another kind of discrimination in her host country. Apart from the gender discrimination in homeland, she finds a racial discrimination in her host land. Because of this discrimination, she feels ashamed of being Iranian so she denies that, worded differently, she veils and covers her Iranian identity. But it is not a long time to rebel and to voice her true identity. In *'The Vegetables'* chapter, when she is in the restaurant, Satrapi depicts a very powerful image in which she shouts out saying:

'I am Iranian and proud of it.' Ch. The Vegetables, Pg. 43.

From here, it can be safely deduced that she begins the first step in her way to recollect herself. Although she is unveiled, she is still in an inner conflict. The reasons behind her identity fragmentation and her conflict in the western country may include the ideas of insecurity and having no stability. Later, Satrapi represents herself as being alone and homeless. She has no place to stay in, moves from one place to another and experiences a real fracture in her personality. Subsequently, she ends up in destitution. In *'The Veil'* chapter, it is clear enough to notice that she loses her identity completely when she is searching for food in the garbage. Satrapi represents herself and says:

'It is incredible how quickly you can lose your dignity. I found myself smoking butts, looking for food in trash cans.' Ch. The Veil, Pg. 85.

Through this journey from ‘*The Veil*’ chapter in the first part, *Persepolis 1*, to ‘*The Veil*’ chapter in the second part, *Persepolis 2*, Satrapi undergoes changes and a lot of experiences which affect her identity. Thanks to these changes, she grows up, becomes mature and decides to leave Austria willingly as a sign to show that she recaptures her identity.

However, again in her homeland, she can’t integrate in this shallow society. In ‘*The Joke*’ chapter, her friends begin to talk about things which are completely different from what she gets used to. Thus, she feels again the hypocrisy of the society. However, a very crucial point to notice here is that she does not only return back to this hypocrisy but also again to the oppression. These kinds of hypocrisy and oppression are depicted through ‘*The Socks*’ chapter when she is stopped by the guardians of the revolution and told:

‘Stop running... when you run, your behind makes movements that are... obscene!’ Ch. The Socks, Pg. 147

It is very worth to notice that ironically instead of being religious and not looking at women, fundamentalists exercise coercion over women by preventing them from moving freely in the streets. Because of her rebellious character and the change that happens in her identity, she calls for equality and says:

‘Why is it that I, as a woman, am expected to feel nothing when watching these men with their clothes sculpted on? But they, as men, can get excited by two-inches less of my head scarf?’ Ch. The Convocation, Pg. 143



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Here Satrapi comments not only on the restrictiveness of the veil, but also on a fundamental injustice in Iranian society, namely, the inequality between men and women. Through *Satrapi's* depiction, the veil which is supposed to be a symbol of religion becomes a symbol of political oppression. Because of this oppression, women should cover their body, be detained in their home, and protect themselves from men. Satrapi understands the discrimination against women because of her journey from childhood to adulthood in which she fulfills her quest of the humanist identity.

The last scene of the second part is very powerful where she becomes independent and fully-free woman. So, she becomes herself. As known, the idea of the identity is not a static thing; it is a constantly changing thing, undergoes process, and never stops. So, it is not a simple challenge for Satrapi to choose to be herself imitating neither western nor eastern. She becomes a free-spirit to accept others as they are. Before leaving Iran again willingly, she recollects her memory and her cultural heritage. This shift in decision-making, to leave willingly, is a sign of the change in her identity and a proof of self-consciousness. Through her experience inside Iran and outside, she becomes mature. Instead of being socialist or feminist, she becomes humanist calling for the justice and equality for women as human.

General discussion

Persepolis is a graphic novel in which *Satrapi* tries to reveal two kinds of identities nationally and personally. The first attempt is about the glorious and the national history of Iran. Iran's identity gets affected by the political life just as Satrapi's identity. The second is about her personal quest for identity. Through her graphic novel technique, she succeeds in breaking the stereotyped

ideas about Iran and manages to stimulate her readers through these visual images to be sympathized with her. Not only does she use the technique of graphic novels but also the black-and-white images as a flashback to refer to her memory. Through the black-and-white technique, she succeeds in demonstrating the presence of two different hemispheres. These hemispheres are the East and the West. But at the same time, she tries to represent the shallowness of western community in contrast to the oppressive system of the eastern community. The outlook of the eastern society is the hypocrisy and the coercion which revolves around 'the veil' whereas the shallowness of the western society revolves around 'the false freedom and unveiling'. So, *Satrap*i endeavors to state that the coercion exercised by the fundamentalists to veil women leads to the identity crisis; while the freedom of the secular society to unveil women leads her to recapture her identity.

Through her journey from the childhood to her return back, she forges her own identity, worded differently, she turns to be Marjane Satrapi. The depiction of her iconic images declares that it is not simple for her to get her identity thorough the conflict of veiling and unveiling. However, she chooses not to imitate neither western nor eastern. The last scene of *Persepolis 1*, where she leaves Iran unwillingly, and the last scene in *Persepolis 2*, where she leaves Iran willingly, reveal the shift that has happened in her identity as she becomes a mature humanist. She says:

'Freedom had a price.' Ch. The End, Pg. 187



Conclusion

In brief, because of mixing religion with politics, the personal and national identities are fractured and veiled. Through Marjane's vision, the readers are able to change their vision towards Iran. Not only does she prove that Iran is an ordinary country but also she represents the antithesis between the real life and the official representation of the Iranian nation. Satrapi succeeds in resolving the quest for the identity and represents the veil with different interpretations. The veil for her is a concrete material which covers women's body. It is, also, a symbol of separation between men and women as what happens in the schools in the first chapter '*The Veil*', a symbol of division within the same society by stratifying the nation between fundamentalists and modernists, a symbol of nationalization, and a symbol of coercion by men over women. Moreover, the veil is a psychological barrier between her and others. The idea of the *others* has different interpretations as well. In her home land, it refers to men so she veils literally; while in her host country, it refers to the secular society so she veils symbolically when she denies her Iranian identity.



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