

The Voice and Power of Marjane Satrapi

By Eric Alviani

Persepolis is the story of Marjane Satrapi's coming of identity and learning what power is through her experience with religion and her exposure to the veil. I believe that Satrapi intentionally presents specific lessons that she learned through a series of events and relationships that transformed her into a woman of power. Through the relationships she shares with her family and other influential figures in her life, I plan to show how she discovered her voice and power.

Religion

“The great end in religious instruction, is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs; not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decision; not to burden memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought.”

- William Channing

Religion actively influences Marjane Satrapi, from her beliefs in God to the very institution whose oppression she overcame. Through her faith and witnessing first-hand the actions of an extremist Islamic government, Marjane discovered her identity, giving

her power as a woman, power as an Iranian, and the power to tell her story of overcoming religious ignorance.

“I was born with religion” (6) and with religion, she believed that she was going to become the last prophet. As a child, Marji has conversations with God nightly in which he appears in person and responds to her. At first she was steadfast that she was going to be a prophet, but as time went on she found herself denying her aspirations when her parents asked what she wanted to be, thinking “a prophet,” but saying “I want to be a doctor.” (9) When God confronts her, she says, “No, no, I will be a prophet but they mustn’t know.... I wanted to be justice, love and the wrath of God all in one.”(9) Over the next several chapters Marji was given situations that tested her faith, and forced her to choose between what she saw and what she believed.

In the chapter titled “The Water Cell”, Marji asserts that God had appointed the king of Iran to her parents. Ebi (Marjane’s father) sits her down and explains to her the events that led to the regime change, and revealing to her the conspiracy resulting in her very own great-grandfather being overthrown. “God did not choose the King.” (19) After the Shah being exiled in 1979, Marji’s teacher instructed her class, “Children, tear out all the photos of the shah from your books.”(44). Conflicted, Marji interjects, “But she was the one who told us that the shah was chosen by God!” in which she is instantly punished for simply noting the obvious hypocrisy. While Satrapi does not directly address the impact of her father and teacher declaring that God was not involved in her ancestor’s fall from power and their persecution/hardships that followed, this is the first time that Marji has to confront her faith in God’s intentions and involvement. While she desperately wants to believe in God, the overwhelming influence from school and family force her to

start to critically discern between what is true and what are the mislead interpretations of the masses.

Upon finding out that a schoolmate's father was involved in the mass political execution of communists, Marji and her friends took it upon themselves to punish Ramin for his father's actions. Marji's mom interrupts the group before they can attack Ramin with nails between their knuckles, and gently tells Marji, "It is not for you and me to do justice. I'd even say we have to learn to forgive." (46) Marji takes this sincerely to heart and learned the importance of believing that all things have a purpose. Almost immediately after this revelation, she learns of the carnage of torture and struggles with her mother's sudden stance, "All torturers should be massacred!"(52) When Marji asks her mother about forgiveness, her mother replies, "Bad people are dangerous. But forgiving them is too. Don't worry, there is justice on Earth." (53) Now Marji was torn between believing her mom's lessons in the power of forgiveness and accepting a new idea that not all people deserve to be forgiven. "I didn't know what Justice was. Now that the revolution was finally over once and for all, I abandoned the dialectic materialism of my comic strips. The only place I felt safe was in the arms of my friend. (The frame shows God cradling Marji)" (53). In this short series of events, Marji begins to learn how the complexity of viewing the world in black and white. At this point, she stills relies on her relationship with God to guide her, but she is slowly beginning to allow herself to be influenced by what her mom says.

Marjane's faith in God was destroyed when her recently discovered uncle Anoosh is executed. Anoosh's story of battling a corrupt government, his painful exile to Russia, and ironically being killed by the government that he fought to install greatly influenced

Marji's views of sacrifice for years. Deeply hurt that God could allow someone so close to her to be executed by the government that he already sacrificed everything for, she tells God, "Get out of my life!!! I never want to see you again!" (70) This was the last time that she talked with God, and consequently was the most monumental event in her life religiously.

Through the rest of the book, Marji is forced to conform to the standards of the religious fanatics. She began her masquerade when she has to tell people that she prays rigorously every day (75) and has to beat her breast to mourn the continuously growing number of martyrs (95). Having little to no faith now, Marji learns of the government's new campaign to brainwash young men into blindly wanting to sacrifice themselves for their country. Schools began distributing gold painted plastic keys, telling boys, "...if they went to war and were lucky enough to die, this key would get them into heaven." (99) Under the pretense of religion, Iran strictly enforced new laws against social gatherings and all items of decadence, "They found records and video-cassettes at their place. A deck of cards, a chess set, in other words, everything that's banned... It earned him seventy-five lashes."(105)

If the sudden loss of all mediums to enjoy themselves were not enough, the already sovereign Guardians of the Revolution expanded to include female branches and were imputed with the responsibility of maintaining (often by using excessive punishment) the decreed moral code (132). Marji almost experienced the punishment for herself when she was caught wearing punk shoes, tight jeans, a denim jacket, and pin of Michael Jackson, all of which were prohibited as signs of decadence (133). The power that the Guardians of the Revolution held allowed them to enforce crimes at their

immoderate zealot discretion, “At the committee, they didn’t have to inform my parents. They could detain me for hours, or for days. I could be whipped. In short, anything could happen to me.”(134) By examining the government’s actions in the name of religion at this point, Marjane begins to comprehend and recognize the danger of the power that the extremist used to terrorize the nation into complete conformity.

In an attempt to rebel against the institution, Marji refused to comply with her principal’s repeated warning about wearing jewelry, and accidentally knocked over the principal when she tried removing Marji’s bracelet (143). As one might conclude from the strict laws, she was instantly expelled. It didn’t take her long at her new school to get into trouble, stating evidence to disprove her religion teacher’s claim, “Since the Islamic Republic was founded, we no longer have political prisoners.”(144) She stated the facts regarding Anoosh’s death and that under the new regime, political prisoners have increased 100-fold and concluding, “How dare you lie to us like that?” (144). Her father received his daughter’s rebellion with pride, but her mother’s reaction provided the family with a new fear of how the government exercise laws, “You know that it’s against the law to kill a virgin... so a Guardian of the Revolution marries her... and takes her virginity before executing her.” (145) Marji was shocked to learn that the Islamic law required men to marry and have sex with a sentenced virgin, only having to supply an insulting dowry equivalent to 5 American dollars, all in exchange for the life of virgin girls. To Marji, the morals of Islam began to trouble her more and more; the sacrifice of martyrs no longer seemed to serve its purpose, “All night long, I thought of that phrase: ‘to die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society.’ Niloufar (an 18 year old acquaintance) was a real martyr, and her blood certainly did not fee our society’s veins.”

(146) With Iran in a state where women have no rights, families unable to celebrate, and bombings becoming normality in a land of instability, Marji was sent by herself to Austria to escape the religious prosecution.

Marji simply describes her experience in Europe as “an exile” in an interview with Michael Mann in 2008. During her travels through Austria and parts of Europe, Marji gets herself expelled from a catholic nunnery when she responds to a nun insulting her Iranian heritage and education with, “It’s true what they say about you, too. You were all prostitutes before becoming nuns!” (177). Her last remark in regards to the church was, “In every religion, you find the same extremists.” (177)

Following that dismissal, Marjane lived with her childhood friend Julie. Marji learned about “The Sexual Revolution” (188) through Julie’s overly active sex life compared to her religion that required abstinence. The de-sensitizing effect that Julie had on Marji influenced her to have sex with her first boyfriend Enrique, “I had grown up in a country where the sex act was never consummated until after marriage... But this was different. I felt ready to lose my innocence. I didn’t want to be a timid virgin any longer.” (212) She decided to defy her religion, but she learned the value of making a decision for herself and her ability to do what she found to be right. She spent the next 2 years battling a series of trials ranging from being manipulated by the people she cared about, to failing health and self-esteem, to losing her pride in her culture. Lost, she accepts defeat and returns to Iran, and to the religious oppression patiently waiting for her return.

Upon her return, her religious activity primarily revolved around her views towards the veil and the religious institution that controlled Iran. At this point in her life,

Marjane is motivated by her accomplishments more than by her faith, leading to the analysis of her battle with the veil.

The Veil

“Shall any gazer see with mortal eyes, Or any searcher know by mortal mind? Veil after veil will lift -but here must be veil upon veil behind”

-Edwin Arnold

The title of the first section “The Veil” reflects a major influence of Marjane Satrapi’s life, as she battles its oppression in her life and in school. Marji begins her story by a brief summary of why the veil was made mandatory for all women, but presented it much like a joke. The first page shows all of the schoolgirls playing with the veils, and as the book continues, Marji firmly remains against the institution of blindly following a ruling decided by the emperor of Iran.

Like most kids, Marji learns a lot of her opinion towards the veil from her parents. Her opposition to the veil was greatly influenced by her parents actively protesting, her mother was actually featured on the cover of European and Iranian newspapers protesting, “I was really proud of her.”(5). This pride in her mother taking a stand against the veil was only a start in Marji’s empowerment. A year later, Taji (Marjane’s mother) insisted on letting Marji attend a demonstration against the veil. This turned into a riot, showing violence to her innocent eyes for the first time. With rebellion in her blood and the world before her, she did not let this episode stop her. Marjane learned at an early age

the importance of voicing her opinions and standing up for what she believed through the example of her parents.

Years later, when Marji was attending art school in Iran, she meets 2 girls who teach her about how to wear the Maghnaeh(hooded head scarf). As described on page 293, women were slowly beginning to make advancements, one-eighth of an inch more of their hair showing at a time. While it wasn't the most rebellious act ever, the women of the school used the situation to push for change. On page 297, Marji voices her opinion and stands up against the proposed amendment pushing for more concealment, pointing to the unfair standards towards women and the obvious hypocrisy of the situation. She first argues that adding more restrictions would conflict with their need for mobility to function in art classes. She then points to the possibility that it isn't a religious stance for their protection, but rather that is an attack against fashion and individuality. She even continues to say, "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?" (297). She was then approached by the Islamic Commission to adapt the uniform to a functional, but follow the standards proposed by the administration. Marji applied a few subtle differences to the wardrobe that meant a lot for herself and her fellow students. Taking the initiative gave Marji a sense of power, "and this is how I recovered by self-esteem and my dignity. For the first time in a long time, I was happy with myself." (298) This was another monumental step to Marjane's development into a woman of power, learning through her success the importance of standing up for what she believes in.

While she made a difference in what the students wore, she had very little power regarding what the models wore in her art classes. Initially the class required that the models show no skin, but the class was able to reach an agreement with the teacher to at least feature models that showed distinguishable limbs. Despite the aggressive limitations of their institution, Marji and other women "...would go to one another's houses, where we posed for each other (without veils).... We had at last found a place of freedom." This rebellion was appreciated and encouraged by their professor, "Bravo! An artist should defy the law! I congratulate you!" (304). With this new outlet of expression, Marji gained a new sense of identity and power. All of a sudden she was aware of what was happening around her, the fact that there was still hope in a country in which women's rights had been stripped. Marjane Satrapi's battle with the oppression of the veil concluded with her eventually moving away from Iran, taking away any power the veil held over her.

The Importance of Self-Power

"I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."

- Albert Einstein, In Imagination

While Satrapi's circumstances may be unique to her, we all struggle with a presence that threatens to define us. To each of you, I charge you with a mission: Never allow ignorant or misguided beliefs influence your power to judge, never allow a moment sway your ability to create, and never allow anyone or anything to disillusion you from your dreams. If you succeed in this mission, I assure you that you will be more true, more pure, more steadfast in your morals, and will shine with a brilliance that could lead a nation.