

## Misconceptions of Iranian woman and how it effect Persepolis

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When you think of women what first comes to mind? This varies from person to person, from male to female, from adult to child, and from country to country. How women are viewed can be influenced by many things. Religion, relationships, politics, and many others. The book Persepolis brings has two different views of women. One view is that of a strong, opinionated, and resource woman. The second view is of a woman who is hidden, not important, and that has certain roles. The book Persepolis is a graphic novel about the life of Marji Satrapi. The book follows her from her early life into adulthood. The purpose of this paper is by showing spectrum of women, or defying expectations, Persepolis deconstructs our common western perception or misconception of Iran and Iranian women.

### **Women in Western Culture**

In western culture, the view of women has changed over the years. There was a study conducted on the portrayal of women in advertisement during the 1970s in western culture. The finding of this study shows the views of women during that time. The study had four main views. The first view is that a women's place is in the home. The second view is that women don't do anything important or make any important decisions. The only decisions they are allowed to make are about buying inexpensive items and the only time women showed independence was when women had to make only simple decisions.

The third view is that women are dependent on men and need men to protect them. The last view of women in the ads was that men regard women as sexual objects and that men are not interested in women as people (Sullivan & O'Connor 182-87). The study shows how ads viewed women during that time in western culture, mainly the United States. Women are unimportant and have very little importance to culture other than sex and housework. Over recent years the role of women in western culture has seen some change. Women are now viewed as more independent and play an important role in society. Women have gained a lot of respect over the years but are still not viewed as equals by all people. Society has put women of western culture into two categories. The first is the housewife and the second is the career woman. Before all women were viewed as housewives. In the 1970s, women accounted for 29 percent of the workforce. In 2009, women account for 46.8 percent of the workforce (“Quick Stats on Women Workers, 2009”).

### **Women of the Middle East**

What is the first thought that comes to mind when you think of women from Iran? The first thought is of a woman covered up and silent for me. All I use to think of was a woman, wearing a veil, covering up here entire body and only showing her eyes. Marji Satrapi from the beginning of the book tries to throw off our thoughts of Iranian Women. She throws off our misconceptions on page 1 and continues throughout the book. Persepolis takes place right after the revolution that lasted from 1977-1979. “In March

1979, less than two months after revolutionary forces had successfully removed the Shah from power, thousands of women turned the victory celebration scheduled for International Women's Day into a demonstration against announced plans to make veiling compulsory. Although the veiling issue was the catalyst, demonstrators were also concerned about women's exclusion from the judiciary and the military and about government plans to review the marriage and family law of the Pahlavi government. After participating actively in street demonstrations supporting the revolution- most often in the veils or scarf's and sex- segregated groups deemed proper in Islam- women, it seemed, were not prepared to accept the more conservative Islamic definition of their place" (Higgins 477). This quote is in the beginning of *Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal, Social, and Ideological Changes*. This journal gives insight into the changes women faced after the revolution. It is a good source because in *Persepolis*, Marji and her mom are going through this revolution and having to deal with the changes it brings. Marji's mom was a demonstrator for women during this time frame and her life was endangered because of it. On page 5 of *Persepolis*, there is a picture of Marji's mother shaking her fist. The text says "At one of the demonstrations, a German journalist took a photo of my mother" (5). Then three frames later she died her hair blonde and wore dark glasses to cover her face so no one would recognize her. The public demonstrations ended quickly, and "the controversy over women's proper role in Iran has continued but in less dramatic forms" (Higgins 477). I was completely unaware of history regarding the veil. I thought that the women just wore them forever and that

was just the culture in that part of the world. Persepolis does a good job showing the reader that it wasn't like that. The very first page, there is a picture of school girls playing in the court yard. They are running around the school yard with their veils, and showing no respect. One veil is on the ground, one girl is jumping rope with a veil and one girl is using her veil like it is the reins on a horse. In the same picture, each girl has a different saying, and the simplest but best one is just one girl not wanting to wear the veil because it is too hot out.

### **Differences and similarities between women from the two cultures.**

One purpose of this paper was to show information about women in western culture and women from places in the Middle East. Both groups of women have been through struggle, and from that struggle some change has occurred. What I noticed more was that women in a western culture have more of a voice than that of women in Iran. Like I stated earlier, Marji's mother demonstrated against the rules and she had to fear for her life. In the United States, there was a huge women's rights movement and that wasn't that big of a resistance. The biggest difference in the two cultures is the ability to change. One culture has been changing and improves for years and the other culture, the Middle Eastern culture, has shown very little improvement.

### **Feminism**

Persepolis has a certain focus on women. It looks at the different roles women

play. From the role Marji plays to the role of her mother. Whenever a book focuses on the role of women it is engaging the reader in feminist criticism. In Iran, women are expected to carry themselves a certain way. Women are not supposed to stand out or speak up about issues. Well this was not the case for Marji and her mom. Marji's parents demonstrated against the king and Marji begged them to take her with them. Even at a young age, Marji had morals and something to stand up and fight for. She believed that in order for change to occur it must be supported by as much of the population as possible (15-16). Women were not allowed to be their own person. They had to be plain and dull. Marji didn't pay much attention to this rule. During a short conversation on page 119, you see this from Marji. In the picture, Marji is sitting on the floor with her hand on the coffee table and she is painting her nails. Her mother who is on the couch says to her, "You'd be better off without nail polish, you could get arrested" (119). It is difficult to imagine that wearing something as simple and insufficient as nail polish is grounds for arresting a young woman. After Marji's mom informed her of the possible consequences on her actions, Marji responded back with saying that "I'll put my hands in my pockets" (119). She doesn't care about getting in trouble. She refuses to be like the rest of the women. She won't let men decide what she can or can't wear. The people running Iran at this time are feminist and she is standing up against it. She is a good role model for other women.

### **Deconstruction**

Like most people, I never thought that Iran, or the Middle East in general, was anything like the United States. I always thought of the United States as the good guys and the Middle East as the “bad guys.” To relate with this paper, I never thought that women fought back or even rose against the people in power but one thing the book *Persepolis* does is get rid of those preconceptions about women and womanhood. It is shown through Marji, her mother and her grandmother. With the mother, it is shown in her fight. She is a woman of high energy and a fighter. She fights for what is right and does what she can to change it. With the grandmother, it is just her image that has a strong showing for me. In the book, I see her as an old woman with a great deal of knowledge who helps Marji in whatever way she can. She doesn't hide who she is or try to influence her granddaughter to just be like everyone else. She is the only one who lets Marji believe she is the last disciple of God. With Marji, there are a lot of examples of her toughness and fight. When reading the book again, I noticed one that I hadn't paid attention to. It starts on page 38 and goes to page 39. Mehri had come to babysit Marji while her parents went to demonstrate and Marji tells Mehri, who is a lot older than her, that tomorrow we are going to the demonstration. She didn't want to but little Marji forced her. They went and shouted from morning till the end of night. The last frame of them at the demonstration, Mehri is shouting “long live the republic” and Marji is shouting “down with the Shaw” (38-9). The Marjane Satrapi uses this as a form of

deconstruction. She disrupts our preconceptions about women in that part of the world and shows the reader how they are like us and we are just like them, even though we are separated by thousands of miles.

### **Marji**

When Marji was growing up, it was different from some of her peers. Her family was open and talked about certain issues with Marji. Marji's mom and dad trusted her very much. An example of this trust is on page 131, where after Marji's parents return from their trip to Turkey, Marji got all dressed up in her new shoes and new jacket that her parents got her. She showed her mom and then told her she was leaving to go to buy some tapes, and Marji's mom tells her to "be back in an hour" and Marji quickly responds by saying "I'll be back in two hours." After leaving her house, she thinks to herself, "For an Iranian mother, my mom was very permissive. I only knew two or three other girls who could go out alone at thirteen" (Satrapi). This statement tells the reader that her mother might be permissive but she is permissive because she knows that she can trust Marji to take care of herself. She has raised Marji to be strong and not to rely on others.

Marji's strength is unmatched. The issues she has been through in her life have shaped her into the woman she has become. An important event in her life is her move to Austria. Her parents decided it would be best for her to leave Iran and go live in Austria.

In 1984, Marji moved away to Austria believing that she would be living with her

mother's best friend. Imagine the strength that a young kid has to have to leave home, not knowing for sure what life is going to be like in a new country. She had to make new friends and live in a different atmosphere.

During the transition to the new life, she was strong. At the airport, on page 152 and 153, Marji was faced with the difficult situation of saying goodbye to her parents. The graphics on the pages are upsetting to the reader. First the dad cries, followed by tears from Marji, and as Marji walks away, her mother breaks down. Marji finds it hard to leave her parents, as most kids would, and as she leaves past security she turns one last time to see her parents and sees her dad, holding her mom and she says "It would have been better to just go." In this section of the book, it shows that Marji is strong but has a huge heart and knows that it's best for her to leave, even though it hurts her and her parents(152-3).

As she moves on to Austria, she was suppose to live with her mother's best friend in Tehran but the apartment was to small so she was then moved to the Joan of Arc School, which is a boarding school ran by nuns. She felt a new since of independence by the move. "Now I had a real independent adult life. I was going to feed myself, do my own laundry. I headed straight for the supermarket to buy groceries like a woman" (159).

Marji struggles with the move into Western culture. Her new friends are different from her old friends. She doesn't know how to deal with talks about sex and drugs. When Marji and Julie were in bed they discussing her Julie's mom recent visit, Julie's



mom believes that Marji is a good influence on her. Julie explains to Marji when she asks how she is a good influence, Julie says “Oh, you’re the pure, timid, innocent virgin who does her homework, I’m not like that. I’ve been having sex for five years. I’ve already slept with eighteen guys” (182). The conversation then shifts to sex and Marji is in shock. “I was shocked. In my country, even when you had sex before marriage, you hid it” (182). Later on in the night, Julie threw a party and at the end of the party, Julie has a guy stay over and the scene goes as followed: The guests left, Marji went to remove her makeup so she needed Julie’s makeup remover. She knocked on the door, only to find out that they were having sex. Marji freaked out and didn’t know how to handle the situation. Then Ernest and Julie came out the room nude. The meaning of this scene is to show that Marji, even though she is a strong woman from Iran, that there still are some instances in which she can’t adjust.

Marji had adapted so well to her life in a Western style culture that when she went back to Iran it wasn’t easy. She left a strong Iranian woman who didn’t connect well with Iran. She arrived in Austria an Iranian out of her element. She came back to Iran, a woman confused on who she was. She doesn’t know which person to be. During a conversation with her friends from Iran, she is really confused. Her friends are talking about sex and at first she is excited to talk about sex with her ignorant friends. When asked how it felt she said it depends on whom you have sex with. Marji thought she was being cool but her friends thought otherwise. The friend’s response to Marji’s sex talk was “So, what’s the difference between you and a whore???” (270). Marji is not the ideal Iranian woman of her past.

## Conclusion

Our lives are shaped by the different situations we are put in. Having to live during wartime, the impact of a revolution, and watching fellow countrymen die have to change a person. During the time of the book, some women thought it would be easier just to conform to the new leaders and wear the veil, but Marji thought otherwise. Marji certainly wasn't a follower. She lived her life the way she wanted to, the way she was raised. Marji is stubborn according to her mother on page 119, and the father asks the question, where Marji acquired that trait. It was his way of stating the impact Marji's mom has had on her. Marji Satrapi messes with our mind and misconceptions of Iranian women. She is a special woman and the purpose of this paper is by showing spectrum of women, or defying expectations, Persepolis deconstructs our common western perception or misconception of Iran and Iranian women.

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