

**The Veil, The Heroes, The Dowry, and The Vegetable:  
Culture, Hope, Choices, and Change**  
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## **A Foreign Story**

*The Complete Persepolis* is an autobiography written by Marjane Satrapi that tells a story about a young girl growing up in Iran, who later continues her journey in Austria. Satrapi wrote the novel in graphic form, bringing in simple, yet vividly descriptive, pictures. Satrapi has won many awards for her unique autobiography and has continued her graphic novel style and has published three other titles. *The Complete Persepolis* made its way to America and was just as successful. The reasoning was due to the fact that Satrapi took her story of growing up in Iran and presented it in a way that bluntly tells its readers that what it truly is, a women's coming of age story.

Although Satrapi lived and grew up in Iran and Austria, her story is very relatable and translatable. The things she goes through, her conforming to her country, and her exploration of herself are all relatable to everyone. She bridges the gap between Iran and her readers of other countries. With no doubt it is clear that Satrapi did experience some cultural things that may not be present in every culture, but that doesn't stop this novel from being anything short then relatable.

Marjane Satrapi, with *The Complete Persepolis*, has created a foreign women's not-so-foreign coming of age story. Dealing with her country, finding her heroes, making choices, growing into herself and all make Satrapi's Iran story universal.

## The Veil (Culture)

Satrapi lived a very normal childhood. She grew up in a house that can be safely classified as middle class and her childhood worries were no worse than any others. Like any other child Marjane was living in a country much different from others, though. And although she may have not had a difficult childhood, the country had some difficult times. But what is interesting about a child living in another country, no matter what the situation of the country is, they are still just a child. In Iran though, Satrapi will soon become a child that is faced with a culture changing garment, the veil.

One of the most common characteristics that Iranian women have is the wearing of a black veil. Today in society this is not just common; it is what most distinguishes eastern women. Most strangers to this particular garment more than likely do not know the reason for wearing the veil. According to a journal article in *Gender and Society*, if one contrasts the two leading points, gender and society, one can come to a better understanding of the reasons behind why women “veil” themselves. It is stated within the article that some Iran women “veil to express their strongly held convictions about gender differences.” But it also states that other women wear a veil to critique Western colonialism in the Middle East (Ghazal 396). Knowing and understanding the reasoning behind the wearing of the veil enhances the idea of why and how women are treated in a non-western country. No matter what kind of knowledge is gained though, we will never quite understand what Satrapi was going through during the time when the veil became a usual garment among women. Fortunately though, Satrapi does a great job expressing to her readers in *Persepolis* what it was like for a young girl to have to wear this “confusing” piece of head wear, as she shows in the following image:



For a young child growing up in Iran, it must be completely difficult to what seems like a pointless change. By the reactions of Satrapi and her classmates, it becomes apparent that the wearing of the veil is confusing to young children. It does not make sense to Satrapi, nor does it seem plausible. For the innocence of a child, this act taking place in Iran can only become clear if it is explained to the wondering child. Satrapi, through relatives returning home and by seeing her parents rebel against the leaders of the country, comes to a better understanding at how pointless the veil actually is. Satrapi starts to learn that the veil is a way for women to conceal themselves, putting them at a different social stature than men. It is a symbol, a constant reminder of what it is hiding, concealing, preserving. As Satrapi gains knowledge of the choices of her country, especially about the veil, she truly starts to get affected by her country. As a young girl Satrapi has to deal with the fact that things “are the way they are” and that there isn’t a whole lot she can do about it.

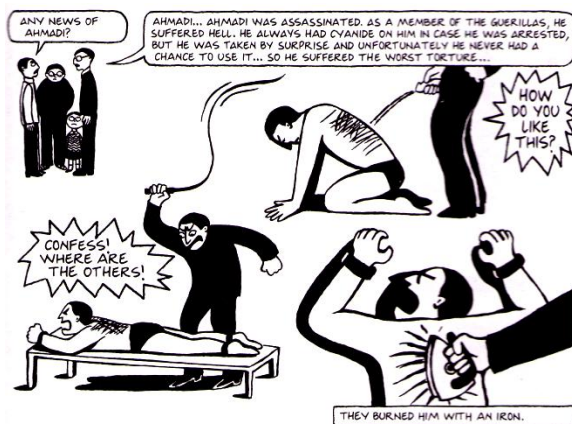
Although women wearing a veil is something that comes into effect while Satrapi is young, and although it is something that is directly related to non-western ways of life, the confusion and torment Satrapi feels is completely normal. There comes a certain age where children accept the ways of their country and the citizens that create it. Satrapi is starting to become a part of Iran. She is finding out what is right and wrong, what is acceptable and not acceptable, and about how Iran is run. Taking that into consideration, it is safe to say that Satrapi is going through her childhood stages in her life and experiencing what any other child

experiences while growing up. And even though everyone does not know what it is like to be a woman who is oppressed due to a simple garment, everyone knows what it is like to have been a child conforming to the ways of her/his country.

As Satrapi grows older and becomes more and more affected by her country, she also learns an abundance of information about the Iranian government. The things that give Satrapi hope though are simple and normal. For Satrapi, if she meets anyone who has fought against the Iranian government, you are bound to be some sort of hero.

## The Heroes (Hope)

Torture, cruel circumstances, prisoners, it all plays a vital role in the success of the Iranian government showing its country what its leaders are capable of doing. But making it out of all that, in Iran during the revolution that is what makes you a hero, which is what defines a hero for Satrapi.



Although Satrapi never experienced the wrath of the Iranian leaders, she still heard about it first hand from people who had experienced it. When her uncle returns from war Satrapi is not just excited to know someone that survived the Iranian revolution but also to hear firsthand what happened to prisoners of war.

Hearing these stories, above all, are just another way that Satrapi has to be a subject of her country. Although Marjane was never tortured, being a woman, she still heard about the experiences and still had to conform herself into knowing what her government is capable of

doing. Under the rule of the Iranian government the citizens of the country are nothing more than sheep that the government herds in the right direction. No matter how many Iranian casualties there are or how many people are tortured, the citizens, in the government's eyes, don't stand a chance against them and their rule over Iran. And while Satrapi continues to grow through her childhood this is a constant reminder for her. As she grows she learns more and more about the hardships and the war that her country is going through. She is becoming more cultured and is starting to become an "Iranian." She is becoming a part of her culture and she is doing this by becoming aware of what is going on in Iran. Through the exploration of her country though, as stated before, she creates lasting memories, strong bonds between those around her, and finds her very own hero.

No matter where one lives, no matter what country one belongs to, and no matter what one's culture is, everyone is influenced by what is going on in their country. War happens almost all of the time, casualties are in abundance, and almost everyone knows someone who has experienced hardships in their life. And most of the time, those hardships are what define someone, which in turn justifies them as a hero to someone. According to Webster dictionary, a hero is "a person who, in the opinion of others, has heroic qualities or has performed a heroic act and is regarded as a model or ideal." Just like Satrapi, everyone has someone who they put on a pedestal because of the heroic things they have done. A lot of times, especially in America, heroes are defined through the things they do for the country. Someone who gives their life in war, in America is a genuine, immediate hero.

**“There are lots of Heroes n my family. My grandpa was in prison, my Uncle Anoosh too: for NINE YEARS! He was even in the U.S.S.R. My Great-Uncle Fereydoon proclaimed a democratic state and he was . . .”**  
**-Young Marjane Satrapi**

Once again, heroes are determined by the state of one's country. And once again, people classify and become more understanding of their country through the heroes they possess.

## **The Dowry (Choices)**

It is almost shortly after Satrapi starts to establish herself as a child and begins to truly understand her country and her culture that she goes through one of the biggest changes of her life.

The climax of her first half of the graphic novel ended as Satrapi is boarding a plane to Austria. After being expelled from her school for "hitting" the principal after the principal tried to confiscate a bracelet Satrapi was wearing in memory of a neighbor who died, Satrapi's parents decide it would be best for her to attend school in Austria. Her parents assure her that "it's better for you to be far away and happy than close by and miserable" (Satrapi 148). This is a climactic point in Satrapi's life and a very memorable moment at that. In a country where the culture and the society are getting so bad, the only means of escaping for a child is for her parents to send her to another country it is quite discomfoting.

Satrapi, at the airport, is assured once again by her parents that this is the smartest choice, that she will be happier in Austria, that Iran is not helpful for her anymore. Satrapi boards the plane, only turning to see her parents one last time before leaving, only to regret the decision to do so.

Satrapi, in extreme circumstances, found out what it is like to have to do something life changing that you may not want to do. Not only that, but she had to do it at only fourteen. No longer a child anymore, Satrapi had to do something that she never dreamed of doing. She had to make a choice that would affect the rest of her life. This is something that every teenager must

do, that every person must do now and then in their life. Although choices may not be as extreme as leaving everything that you are to live somewhere else, choices are still being made every moment of every day. Satrapi tried to make the best decision for herself and even after she returns she isn't quite sure whether it was the right one or not.. But the time she spent there truly helped define her as a young woman.

## The Vegetable (Change)

*The Complete Persepolis* is a clear and complete coming of age story, but what would this kind of story be without a coming-to-understand-yourself “moment?” Something that Satrapi is able to do throughout all of her graphic novels is provide a clear, precise picture for her reader, something that is usually left up to some interpretation for the reader. This is a very brilliant way of producing an autobiography, because Satrapi can share with us what she possibly couldn't otherwise. By using a graphic novel, Satrapi can use the placing of the graphics along with the different elements such as mirroring effect or contrast between two different pages that are either side to side or front to back to make things more real.

Now living in Austria and becoming more comfortable to the different way of life, Satrapi begins to go through some natural and personal changes. While looking at a particular graphic of Satrapi is physically changing the reader then makes a simple page turn and it is almost a complete mirrored image of the previous page. Only this time it is reflecting the changes that she is performing on herself.



Cutting her hair, changing her makeup, piercing her ears, and changing her clothing these are all changes that are under Satrapi's own disposal, changes that she is making in hopes of becoming better acquainting with Austrian culture.

During all of the physical and willing changes Satrapi is faced with a very hard mental change also. Born in Iran and spending a great deal of her young childhood there, she is now spending a great deal of time growing in Austria, a country much different than her own. Satrapi is forced to accept the new changes in culture, but along the way morphs herself into something that rejects her true roots. She is becoming westernized, a part of the country that she now calls home.

This is quite honestly the most real situation that Satrapi is illustrated in. Satrapi has to deal with herself, something that everyone must face at some point in their life. Satrapi sees herself physically change, which is out of control, and because she cannot control these changes, she determines herself as a person by taking control of the parts of her life that she does have complete control over. This is something that everyone can relate to. How Satrapi changes herself, though, is also a reflection of the culture and people she hangs around: fitting in; a prime goal by all teenagers, no matter the country, race, or culture. This passage of *Persepolis* is by far the most relatable part of the novel.

## **A Not So Foreign Story**

Upon return to Iran, Satrapi was now a well established young adult, but when you establish yourself in one country and have to return to another, there is bound to be some difficulties. After much grief and a lot of trial and error, Satrapi has become who she is, but she did this in Austria. Although Satrapi's roots are still held in Iran, she is still a different person



than she was when she left. She has changed and now, more than ever, she must remember who she is and finish growing up.

Marjane Satrapi created a graphic novel masterpiece with her story. She showed everyone her roots, her problems, her reality, and, of course, herself. She grew up just as any other child would and she had normal road bumps along the way. She was influenced by her country to dress and live a certain way, she found heroes within those who fought and lived for her country, she made choices that would affect the rest of her life, and she explored herself and embraced the changes that happened to her. Satrapi loved her family, missed her family, learned about her country, went to school, made friends, experimented with her looks, had compassion for those who have seen worse, and found happiness when all seemed to have faded away. She lived a life that is not much different from our own. That is what is believed to be the reason why Marjane Satrapi set out to do with her story, *The Complete Persepolis*. She shows to everyone that, although she may have been foreign, her story is not-so-foreign, and her experiences are much more relatable than what meets the eye.

Satrapi was a child growing up in Iran during the revolution, she was confused by the clothing given to her, she was shocked by her parents' decision to send her to Austria, she was confused by her changes, she embraced her changes, she moved back to her home and loved Iran once again. Above all, Marjane Satrapi is a woman, a foreign woman with a not-so-foreign woman's life.

Works Cited

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