

English Language and Literature – HL Essay – Example 1

Line of inquiry:

To what extent does Marjan Satrapi's *Persepolis* promote intercultural understanding or divide cultures and people?

Essay:

In 2014, the American Librarian Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom placed the graphic novel *Persepolis* on their top ten 'challenged books' for that year (American Librarians Association Office of Intellectual Freedom, 2018). Seven years earlier, upon a screening of the film *Persepolis* at the Cannes Film Festival, Iran sent an angry letter to the French embassy in Tehran to protest the film (Gulf News, 2007). The graphic novel and memoir by Marjane Satrapi has been widely discussed and taught since it came out in 2003. Interestingly it has been criticised in both the United States and the Middle East. This raises the line of inquiry: To what extent does Marjan Satrapi's *Persepolis* promote intercultural understanding or divide cultures and people? Through an analysis of the author's artistic style, narrative technique and use of symbolism readers can see why the graphic novel promotes more intercultural understanding than divisiveness.

For the most part, critics of *Persepolis* find the graphic novel too anti-Islamic. To understand this criticism and confusion, readers need to study the symbol of the veil in the graphic novel. From the opening pages it is clear that the veil, for Satrapi, symbolizes the oppression of women and children (Figure 1). The first frames suggest that the veil is more about conformity than religion. In the splash at the bottom of the first page a teacher hands out veils to the girls at her school, only for the girls to behave absurdly with them, using them to jump rope, play horse or pretend to torture each other, saying "Execution in the name of freedom" (Satrapi, 2003). It is from this point that the reader realizes that *Persepolis* is not just a memoir about growing up, but it is about growing up during the Islamic revolution in Iran in the 1980s and the unhealthy effects of religious fundamentalism on young people coming of age. This is where critics easily confuse their interpretation of the veil as symbol of religion with Satrapi's veil as a symbol of blind faith in a corrupt regime. In this sense, claiming that Satrapi is anti-Muslim misses the point of the graphic novel entirely. In fact she uses the veil to warn people against the fundamentalists who have hijacked this Islamic symbol for their fascist purposes. Sharing her message with young people is more likely to encourage tolerance and spread awareness about the dangers of fundamentalism than turn them against the Islam.

In the United States, parents of school-going children have also tried to ban Satrapi's graphic novel for opposite reasons: They fear it is too Islamic and anti-American. One father in Illinois "questioned why a book about Muslims was assigned on September 11" (Williams, 2015). Here too, readers have missed the point of the graphic novel, which was written with the intent to give the West a window into the troubled history of Iran. As Marjane Satrapi explains in her introduction: "This old and great civilization [Iran] has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism and terrorism. As an Iranian who

THE VEIL

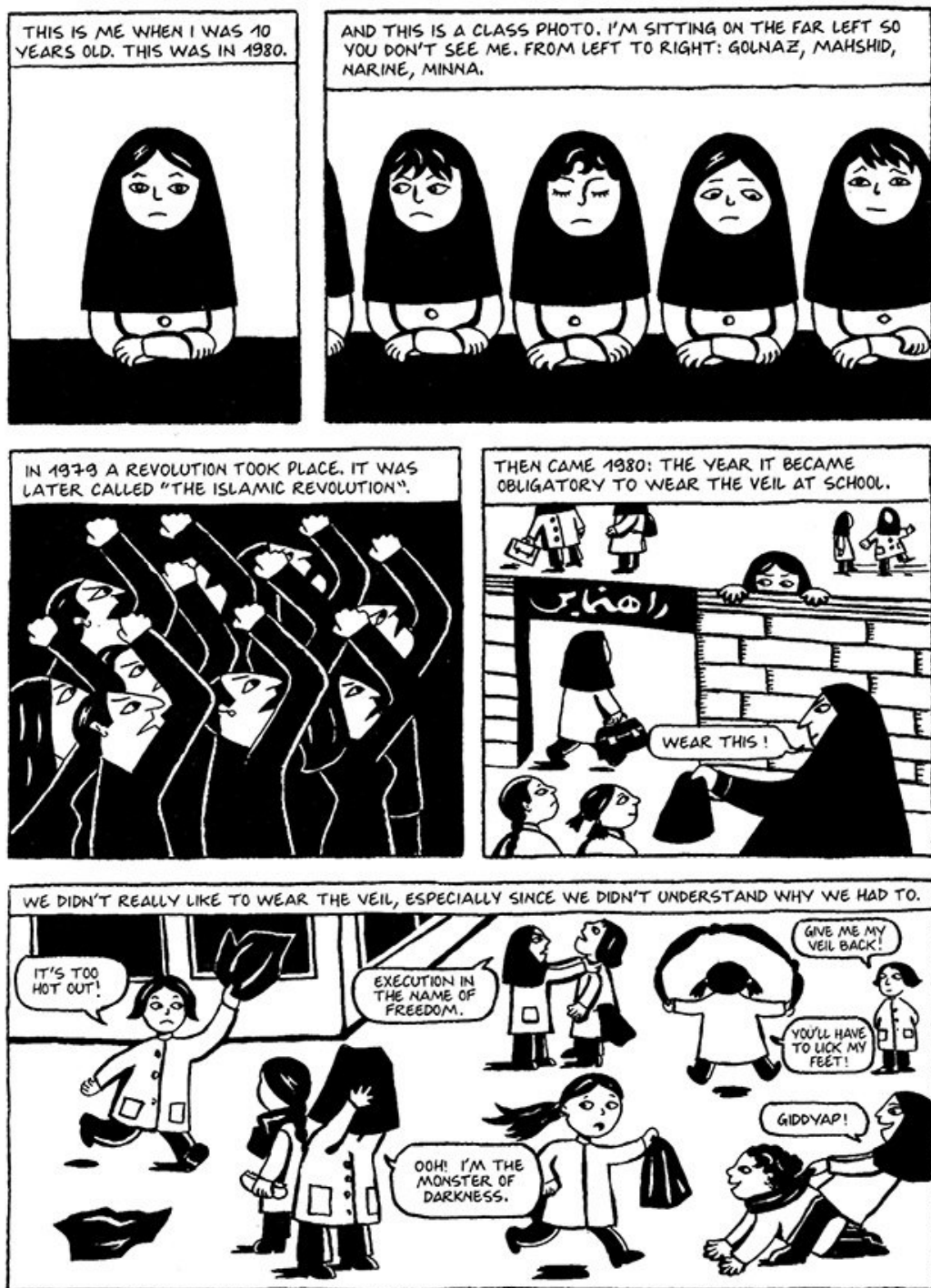


Figure 1: Page 3 from *Persepolis*

has lived more than half my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists” (Satrapi, 2003). For this reason, her memoir is broken down into episodes from her life, which involve real people who have tried to fight the hardships of totalitarianism from within the country, unsuccessfully. Her mother and father are capitalists and secularists, who fight for democracy. They host parties with intellectuals, they protest in the streets and they look out for family and friends. The plot, which culminates at the end of Part I, is about her parents losing their fight, despite their efforts, against religious extremism and an oppressive government, as they send their daughter, Marjane, to a boarding school in Austria for her own safety. Figure 2 shows Marjane’s mother crying and falling into her father’s arms. It captures the conflict they feel as parents who want the best for their only child but cannot provide it without sending her far away. Parents who try to ban *Persepolis* from American school libraries fail to see how its message is about the fight for freedom from persecution, an ideal which should inherently appeal to Americans, as their ancestors made sacrifices to migrate to the New World. Reading this graphic novel should help build common ground among readers and sympathy for anyone who has had to immigrate.



Figure 2: Page 153 from *Persepolis*

Another criticism of Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel is that it is too graphic in its depiction of violence. This is one of several reasons that the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) tried to ban Satrapi's graphic novel from school libraries (Berlatsky, 2013). There are certainly scenes of torture, in which a friend of the family is, in a rather clinical way, dismembered. This scene, depicted here in Figure 3, like every page of the graphic novel, has been drawn in black and white, with no shades of grey. Her style of drawing is simplistic, abstract and cartoon-esque, which is a curious choice for depicting ideas as complicated as torture and totalitarianism. In fact her style is the opposite of graphic, as it makes horrific images palatable for young readers. For example, when young Marjane is told how dissidents were tortured with an iron on page 51, she includes drawings of herself as a girl looking toward her mother's ironing board, wondering how it could be used as a torturing device. Young readers can identify with Marjane as a character, as they can only wonder about prisons and torture. If the purpose of Marjane Satrapi is to warn about the evils of totalitarianism, then these drawings and her drawing style make this message accessible to a wider audience, including young individuals. Denying young readers access to Satrapi's graphic novel is not going to protect them but deny them the opportunity to learn from the horrors of history. The banning of this graphic novel in Iran further acts as a denial of their violent history, which stifles any hopes of accountability and democracy in this country. Drawing her drawings in such a way could not confront the people of Iran with their history in a way that is more black and white than this, figuratively speaking.

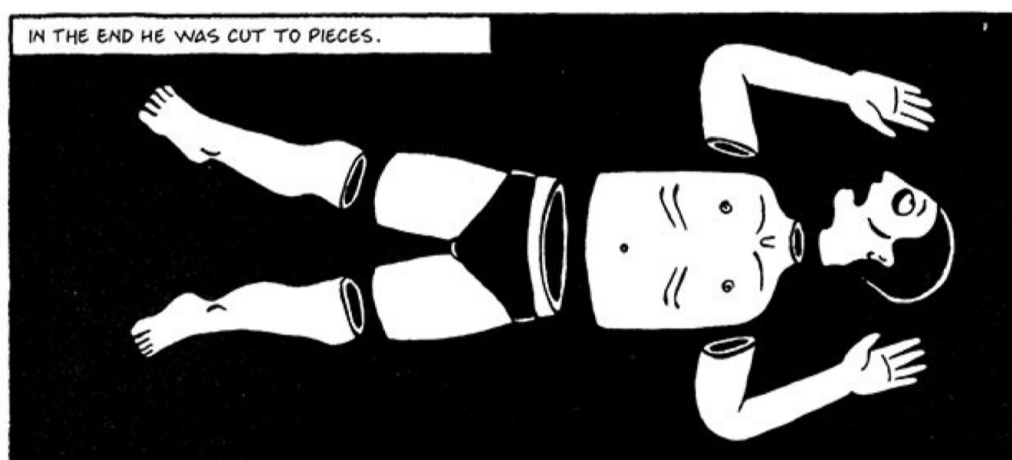


Figure 3: Page 52 from *Persepolis*

Finally, Iranian critics of *Persepolis* claim that Satrapi's graphic novel incites revolutionary ideas. Rebellion is certainly a motif that runs throughout the novel as Marjane questions authority throughout her teenage years. She skips school and speaks out against her teacher's conformist activities of chest beating and slogan chanting. In each scene that shows action and dialogue, there is an older, wiser Satrapi providing narrative in voice-over boxes. The tone of this voice is often informative, like the voice-over of a documentary on the history of Iran, but also cheeky, as she reflects on the trials of growing up and becoming an individual. Figure 4 offers a good example of the multiple functions of the voice-over, which is clearly not there to instigate protest, but to inform readers about

the history of her country and reflect on her life. In an interview with Golnaz Esfandiari she says: “I did *Persepolis* not as a political act, but because I had enough of all the nonsense that was being said about my country, and I thought I would tell my story as a part of the truth about my country” (Esfandiari, 2010). Her story strikes a chord with readers and viewers who can identify with her as a victim of oppression and a survivor of war. As she described to CBS in 2007: “Poor Muslims saw the humanity in the story, its personal point of view. They understood I’m not judging. I’m asking questions” (Ramsey, 2005). If *Persepolis* is criticized for inciting revolution, it is done so by those who fear critical thinking and the inherent truths of Marjane Satrapi’s personal story.



Figure 4: Page 117 from *Persepolis*

All in all, the graphic novel and memoir *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi has done more to build bridges across cultures than to divide people. Criticisms from readers in the United States in particular seem out of place, as the Satrapi’s story aims to promote religious tolerance and freedom of expression. Concerns that it is anti-Islamic are understandable, especially in light of Satrapi’s use of the symbol of the veil to comment on oppression in a theocracy. Nevertheless, she seems to tell her story for the sake of telling her story, hoping that readers can come to their own conclusions and be more enlightened and informed about the history of a troubled nation.

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