



# Women in Theocracy: A Study of the Impact of Islamic Revolution on Women in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

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*Abstract:* The Islamic Revolution of 1979 changed lives in Iran. The Revolution, initially embraced by the Iranians seeking freedom from the oppressive and externally supported Shah, ultimately led to the ascension of a regime dominated by conservative religious fundamentalists. *Persepolis* depicts the Islamic Republic's repressive rules, which were mainly targeting women. The novel is also instrumental in portraying the removal of personal God and religion from the lives of the people. The fall of a civilized community into a theocracy is evident.

*Keywords:* Theocracy, Islamic Revolution, *Persepolis*, Women, graphic Novel.

Graphic narratives were stigmatized as books only for children. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* played a crucial role in the history of graphic novels. It removed this stigma and prompted the readers and critics to treat graphic narratives as a serious art form. *Persepolis* narrates the memories of Satrapi's childhood set against the background of the Islamic Revolution and Iran- Iraq war (Capitano, 2014, p.169). The graphic representation of these historical events and their effect on ordinary people, specifically on women and children, attracted serious readers across the globe.

The attempt at westernization of the nation by Reza Shaw and the discovery of oil created a new scene in Iran. The Western countries plotted to overthrow Reza Shaw, and he was succeeded by his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Later, the nationalization of the oil industry provoked the U.S. and U.K. The CIA and MI6 organized a coup, and Reza Shaw came back to the throne. Iran also witnessed the rise of the religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini. His preachings were well received. He accused the rulers of being irreligious and puppets of Western power. He was in exile, but countless tapes and print versions of his speeches were smuggled into Iran. In 1978, anti-government protests began, and many people were killed. Khomeini led the protest from Iraq. Eventually, Shaw and his family fled Iran, and Khomeini declared Iran an Islamic Republic (Afar, 2024).

Marjane Satrapi opens her book in 1980, "the year it became obligatory to wear the Veil at school" (Satrapi, 2004, p.3). The students used to play with the veils since they were too innocent to understand the politics behind it. The same revolution later paved the way for an Islamic theocracy. As a result, the authorities closed the bilingual and mixed schools. The mixed schools were seen as a symbol of capitalism and decadence.

Even though the family of Satrapi was modernized, they were religious. She imagines God as a personal friend. She talked with him about all the topics. She wants to be a prophet so that she can provide more for the

poor. God was her own until the conservatives of the religion took God away from her. The regime captured the personal God and personal religion of believers to use as their tool.

One of the aftermaths of theocracy was the establishment of mosque-based groups named committees. They roamed the streets and arrested anyone without veils. They forced everyone to follow new dress codes and rules. These groups unleashed terror. The introduction of the veil for women is also used as a repressive tool. A picture of Satrapi's mother protesting against the veil came in the newspaper, and it was circulated. Hence, she had to paint her hair and wear sunglasses to avoid any possible attacks against her. Later in the novel, we witness that she is threatened by the conservatives, saying that she should be brutally raped since she doesn't have a veil. A religious leader proclaims: "Women's hair emanates that excite men. That's why women should cover their hair!" (Satrapi, 2004, p. 74) To protect women from potential rapists, wearing a veil became compulsory. The women are accused of these rapes. They never address the perversion of men, but they place the responsibility on women. The fall of a civilized community is evident in this incident. Conservative religious ideologies blind them.

When religion and politics join hands, the plight of the ordinary people increases. Satrapi shares an event of the cruelty of the Shah. Some people locked the doors of the Rex cinema from outside and set fire to it. The BBC said there were 400 victims; the Shah said that a group of religious fanatics was behind the massacre. But the people knew that Shah was also responsible for this event. He joined hands with the fanatics. They were against film, music, and art. They believed that by eradicating people who enjoy art, they could purge society.

After the revolution, religion was taken as a tool for nationalistic and political needs. The state brainwashed the youth using religion. The needs of the state are presented as the needs of God. Nasrin, the maid of the Satrapi family, comes with a plastic key given to her child from school. The boys in school were encouraged to join the army. They were given a golden painted key made of plastic and told that if they went to battle and were lucky enough to die, the key would get them to heaven. The boys are told that in paradise, there will be plenty of food, women, and houses made of gold and diamonds (Satrapi, 2004, p. 99). The state sends the boys to the war front after injecting them with false promises.

When religion is reduced to mere tools, many hypocrites emanate. Many self-proclaimed religious leaders appear, and they take bribes from the ordinary citizen. The novel also portrays self-proclaimed soldiers who try to control the people. They were also corrupted to the core.

The regime used schools to impart their propaganda. New heroes and villains were introduced. The teachers claim that the Islamic regime abolished any kind of political imprisonment, while in reality, thousands are arrested (Satrapi, 2004, p.144). Since secular schools and teachers were abolished, the students are taught false information, which upholds the values of theocracy.

When the revolution started, the religious leaders took the help of intellectual allies. But they were too keen to cut all the ties with them after the revolution. The intellectuals with left ideologies were arrested, and many of them were later executed. The case of Niloufar, an 18-year-old alleged communist, is an example of the cruelty of theocracy. The government and religious officials finally spotted her, arrested her, and executed her. Since it is against the law to kill a virgin, a guardian of the revolution married her and took her virginity before executing her. Traditionally, when a girl dies, the husband must give her family the dowry. After the execution of Niloufar, they send 500 tumans (equivalent to 5 dollars) to her parents. The plight of women under a theocracy is unimaginable.

The combination of conservative ideology and religious extremism fostered a patriarchal societal structure, diminishing the status and autonomy of women. Women's attire, educational opportunities, and societal roles are dictated by male authority figures within this framework. The Family Protection Act of 1967, aimed at strengthening women's rights and protections within the institution of marriage, was subsequently invalidated (Afar, 2024). The status of women in Iran is suddenly reversed. Satrapi, in an interview, says:

we come from a situation that suddenly the government in our country decided we were worth half of the men - my witness counts half that of a mentally handicapped man just because he's a man. The basic culture is not that the woman is nothing - Iran is not Saudi Arabia - the women, they are educated, they are cultivated, they work. You have women that are judges, they are doctors, they are journalists, they work. So these women, when you tell them that their witness doesn't count as much as that of the guy who is going to wash the windows, even when the woman is a researcher in, I don't know, nuclear science or whatever, it makes you have more reason to talk, actually, because you are repressed. Our men are in a better situation, so they don't have any shouts, they don't need to be heard as much as we do (Root, 2007, p.151).

The religious leaders made it clear that the value of men is greater than that of women. The development Iran has gained over the years is demolished. Satrapi exposed the situations of women and children in a theocracy.

Conclusion:

The Revolution, initially embraced by the Iranians seeking freedom from the oppressive and externally supported Shah, ultimately led to the ascension of a regime dominated by conservative religious fundamentalists. These leaders viewed Western-style modernity as incompatible with Islamic values. In the graphic novel, the depiction of the Islamic Republic's repressive religious dictates highlights a stark contrast with the genuine religious sentiments and beliefs experienced by individuals. The personal religion and personal God of the believers are suspended, and they were reintroduced as part of a rigid institution. The disappearance of Satrapi's personal God from the novel proves the institutionalization of God in a theocracy. The role of women in a theocracy is reduced and sometimes nullified. Satrapi shed light on the plight of women and children living within a theocratic regime.

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