

## DEPICTION OF ISLAMIC REVOLUTION OF 1979 IN MARJANE SATRAPI'S PERSEPOLIS

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### ABSTRACT

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 has occupied a prominent place in the history of Iran. Needless to say, it not only left an indelible mark on the culture but also on the societal structure of Iran. The Revolution, in general, is viewed as a mass movement, which gained enormity due to conscious efforts of the working class and the clergy in opposition of the monarchical state under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Backed by the US government, the regime of Shah was extremely influenced by its western policies due to which he showed his inclinations towards modernizing and secularizing the country which was hard pill for the Iranians to swallow, thus causing immense dissent and instability among the people at large. Undeniably, the revolution has always been much debated subject of scholarly research; however, the issue has remained unexplored in the field of graphic novel. The paper aims to study the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in the graphic novel *Persepolis* in the light of social, cultural and religious dimensions. Drawing upon the historical and political background of revolution, the study also articulates the struggle of Marji, the chief protagonist, who is torn between the ideological conflict of monarchical state and religion.

**KEYWORDS:** Iran, Popular Culture, Graphic Novels, Persepolis

### INTRODUCTION

The world history of major revolutions, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 holds a significant place not only in the terms of political upheaval but also the social and cultural change it brought to the Iranian society. What makes Islamic Revolution of Iran distinguishable from other revolutions of the past is the religion and Islamic teachings upon which the entire ideology of the revolution is based. In other words, it can be said that religion was the driving force behind the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Another characteristic which makes the Islamic revolution distinct from other revolutions is the huge participation of the people in the movement. Thus, it is to say that the revolution was immensely popular in the world history as it left an indelible impression of its magnanimity not only in the minds of Iranians but also the people of the world. In the paper, the prime focus is to present the Islamic Revolution through the new medium i.e., graphic novel. While comparing the significance of the present work dealing with multiple aspects of revolution, it explicitly delineates the social, cultural and religious dimensions of the revolution which went unnoticed and unexplored in the emerging field of graphic novel. The use of word 'graphic' clearly demonstrates a picture in the minds of readers, which is used by the novelist for a particular purpose. The objective of choosing the graphic novel for the subject is based on the reasoning of the effectiveness of a picture. In this context, it can be rightly said what Frederick R. Barnard has quoted "A picture paints a thousand words."

As an art form, graphic novels have evolved from comic books which first appeared in 1930s as reprints of newspaper strips. By definition, the graphic novel is the combination of text, panels and images arranged sequentially to

tell a story. It is so designed as to give the readers a unique and gripping way to convey the message. Artists using graphic novel as a vehicle for narrating their stories, fully utilize the tools like color, lines and shading in a way to create interest in the readers. *Persepolis*, the widely acclaimed autobiographical novel of Marjane Satrapi, has been aptly chosen for articulating the issue like Islamic Revolution for the subject.

Satrapi, an Iranian born French graphic novelist, through her magnum opus *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* (2007) garnered much acclaim and recognition worldwide. A prolific and innovative writer, Satrapi has emerged as one of the contemporary writer in the field of graphic novel. In *Persepolis*, she adopted the monochromatic style of graphic storytelling and drew in black and white. Arguably, the work which broke new ground for Satrapi's ingenuity, is undoubtedly is her debut novel *Persepolis*. Besides, her oeuvre comprises of *Embroideries* (2005), *Chicken with Plums* (2006), *Monsters are afraid of the Moon* (2006) and *The Sigh* (2011). It is interesting to note here that there is commonality in the background of the first two novels: the stories of these novels are set in Iran.

What cannot be denied here is the fact that *Persepolis* is more political than *Embroideries* and *Chicken with Plums* which are the amalgamation of personal and political elements. While *Embroideries* is all about interlocation about the love, sex and pain by the 'intergenerational group of female relatives and neighbors discussing sex over tea- a group that includes Marji and her mother and is helmed by the spirited grandmother so prominent in *Persepolis*,' *Chicken with Plums* deals with 'sensuality and focuses closely on the actual corporeality of dying' of Marji's uncle Nasser Ali Khan's suicide.

The novel displays plurality of themes like identity-crisis, social inequality, fundamentalism and the Western influence. In addition, Islamic Revolution is among the most significant theme of *Persepolis*. As a graphic memoir, *Persepolis* depicts the life of Satrapi, who spent her childhood and later adolescent life in a period which was full of political turmoil and chaos. As a young girl, Marji witnessed the two major events: first, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which heralded a new beginning with full of challenges and political turbulence and the second, Iran-Iraq war which worsened the situation for Iranians. In *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*, Hillary Chute stated,

*Persepolis* narrates the trials and tribulations of precocious Marji and her upper class leftist parents; their protests against the Shah, later against the Islamic regime; Marji growing class consciousness; the torture and killing of family and friends; the havoc wreaked by Iran-Iraq War; and Marji's fierce and dangerous outspokenness which eventually leads her fearful parents to send her out of the country at age fourteen, after she hits one school Principal and disputes politics with another.

(Chapter 4)

### **Historical Overview of the Islamic Revolution**

Before exploring the nature of the Islamic revolution of 1979 in the novel, it is quite indispensable to comprehend the historical roots or the structural causes which occupy a significant place in this discussion. While a majority of scholars delved deeper in the causes behind the revolution, there is common chord which links them into one common fact that the Islamic revolution is the reaction to the policy of modernization and secularization of the country by the monarchial state under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Historically, he is known as the Shah who ruled the nation from 1941 until 1979, when the monarchy was finally overthrown and Islamic Republic came to power under Ayatollah Khomeini. The Pahlavi dynasty was also known as the Imperial State of Iran and it was the reigning constitutional monarchy. It is worth noting here about the historical background of the dynasty which ultimately set the platform for the uprising of 1979.

The Pahlavi dynasty was established after the overthrow of Ahmad Shah Qajar in a military coup. He was the last ruler of the Qajar dynasty who after being abdicated, exiled to France. After his deposal, the National Assembly (Majlis) convened as a constituent assembly and declared Reza Shah as the new ruler of the Imperial State of Iran. Prior to becoming the monarch of Iran, Reza Shah was an officer in Iran's Persian Cossack Brigade who proved his mettle in uprooting the Qajar dynasty. As an able soldier, Reza Shah established himself as the most powerful person in the country by virtue of his courage and determination. Driven by high aspirations, he formulated the plans of modernizing Iran which included development of large scale industries, implementing major infrastructure and a national public education system. As implicit in his reform plans, it is quite evident that his vision of forming a very strong centralized government was crystal clear in his mind. Consequently, he was quite successful in transforming Iran into a fully urbanized nation by accomplishing development projects.

From 1925 to 1941, the administration and the government of Iran under Reza Shah were quite influential at their positions. Due to industrialization and urbanization, new social classes emerged which consisted of industrial working class and a middle class. Meanwhile, the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 led to new development in which Britain and the Soviet Union together formed an alliance. Their alliance against the German was built upon the strategy of transporting supplies from the Persian Gulf to the Soviet Union which, in turn, was opposed by the ruler of the Iran who refused to drive away the Germans. The refusal by the Reza Shah to expel the Germans instigated the British and Russians to such an extent that it led to the arrest of the Shah and taking away the control of Iran's oil resources by the allies.

The year 1941 was the turning point for the Iranian Pahlavi dynasty as the invading parties dethroned the existing governing body of Iran and the regime under the Reza Shah collapsed. He was replaced by his successor Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi as the new constitutional monarch on 16 September 1941. Following the reform measures of his father, the Shah advocated the same in his regime, calling it as the 'White Revolution' in 1963. His 'White Revolution' is the term for the reform policy which included the reforms of the legal and educational institutions, land reform, extension of voting rights to women and the elimination of illiteracy. Nearly in less than two decades the nation developed into a major economic and military power of the Middle East. The effects of these development projects infuriated the religious leaders of the country. The section of clerics was highly discontent and showed their disapproval unanimously. The sole reason behind their opposition was due to the Shah's policy of Westernization and secularization of the nation. For the religious leaders, the modernization of the state symbolized the disobedience of the religious Islamic law and preaching. Their dissatisfaction was quite apparently seen when the bazaars lost their hold due to the setting up of small industries. These bazaars signified 'the social, financial, political, ideological, and historical links with religious establishment.' Thus, it suggests that the uprooting of the bazaars which was the stronghold of the traditional middle class, wielded strong influence on the clergy.

The opposing clergy showed their resentment for the Shah due to anti-religious reforms and policies. As the Shah turned his deaf ear to the protesting voices of the religious leaders, the political atmosphere was adversely affected. In the minds of clergy, the state had become the glaring instance of capitalism. Also, the Resurgence Party was formed with the twofold aim: to exercise 'control over the intelligentsia and the urban working class'; second, 'to extend state power into the bazaars and the religious establishment.' Soon, the party opened new branches in the bazaars which led to weakening of the traditional guilds. The new guilds were created which were directly controlled and regulated by the state bureaucrats.

Their policy was further aggravated the situation when the party insisted upon 'the need to raise the minimum raise for the workers of bazaars, to force shopkeepers and workshop owners to take out medical insurance for their

employees, and to extend even more credits to the prosperous entrepreneurs who opened up large restaurants, supermarkets and department stores.' Also, there had been the disparity in terms of bank interest: big businessmen were much profited as they could borrow at 6 percent while the small businessmen were burdened with high interest rate of 20-30 percent. Undoubtedly, these banks were the clear targets for the revolutionaries. Besides, the party had also made the declaration of Shah as the spiritual guide for the Iranians. Under the governance of Shah, the Shari'a laws were disregarded, the age of marriage for girls from 15 to 18 and for boys from 18 to 20, was increased. The women who wore veils were insulted. Needless to say, the changes provoked the religious people for whom it was considered as the moral decadence. Conspicuous in these structural causes of the revolution, the time had come for the political change in Iran. Finally, the revolution was led by one of the religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini who later headed up the government of Iran. Admittedly, the Islamic Republic of Iran was established as the new form of government based mainly on the religious beliefs and laws. They demonstrated strict adherence to the Islamic laws and the morality. Due to their extreme obedience to the rules and customs, they were known as Islamic fundamentalists as they could not tolerate any form of disobedience from the indigenous Shari'a code derived from Koran and the *sunna* custom and Prophet Muhammad. Put simply, it amply explains the religious fundamentalism which will be discussed at length in the paper.

From all aforementioned account of the background of the Islamic revolution, the structural causes of the movement have been brought into limelight in order to fully comprehend the history of modern Iran. The historical information has been used to understand the basic structure of the graphic novel *Persepolis*. In particular, the key concern of the paper is to demonstrate the revolution in the various perspectives: social, cultural and religious.

In the novel, the dual dimensions (social and religious) of the revolution are so interwoven that it is difficult to dissect them separately. During the revolution, the clergy were becoming the legitimate authorities who involved themselves in emphasizing the importance of religion. Gradually, these religious leaders came into prominence; their influence was quite visible from the religious sphere to political sphere. For them, their major concern was modeled over the propagation of Islamic laws. More specifically, Islam and its preaching were regarded as of utmost important. Their opposition against the regime which was anti-Islamic and capitalistic in nature led them to unite.

While a host of scholars and historians have projected many theoretical approaches to study the nature of Islamic Revolution like *Nature History Approach*, *Socio-psychological Theories*, *Political- Institutional Approach*, and lastly *Resource Mobilization Approach*, the approach which deems to be useful for the work is the one provided by Said Arjomand. In order to define the revolution the form of social perspective, the Social Movement Model proposed by Said Arjomand proves to be very helpful. Misagh Parsa in his work *Social origins of the Iranian Revolution*, mentions about the social movement model for explaining the nature of revolution,

According to Arjomand rapid social change led to dislocation, "normative disturbance," disorientation (1986:383). To reintegrate themselves into the community and reaffirm their collective cultural identity (Arjomand 1981: 312), dislocated individuals and groups- specifically recent migrants, the urban poor, and the new middle class- embraced an Islamic revival from the mid 1960s onward. The clergy opposed the Shah because his policies had systematically undermined their position.

(p.8)

Implicit in the argument of Arjomand, it was the clergy who were socially involved in the revolution and wanted to transform the country on the basis of social moral values necessary for the cultural development of the Iranians and the

state. The fundamental motive behind the opposition was based on the principle for saving the nation from moral degeneration and decadence caused by the westernization. In this connection, the first major step taken by them was educational reforms. In the opening chapter, the author has shown herself in veil. Marji, a ten year old girl in veil, has drawn in unhappy mood. Her face is the clear picture of the prevailing social condition which entrapped her freedom and identity within the veil which had been made mandatory by the Islamic Republic in 1980. Making the situation more critical, the government closed down all the French non-religious school. They asserted that “they are symbols of capitalism and of decadence.” (Satrapi p.4)



Figure 1

The author has explicitly drawn the image where one of the religious leaders made his point clear on television program by saying that “the educational system and what is written in school books, at all levels, are decadent. Everything needs to be revised to ensure that our children are not led astray from the true path of Islam... That’s why we’re closing all the universities for a while. Better to have no students at all than to educate future imperialists” (Satrapi p.73). The evil consequences of the closing of the universities led to end of Marji’s dream of becoming scientist like Madam Curie.



Figure 2

In the image above, offers a vivid picture of the social as well religious approach of the revolutionist as the interviewee (in the panel above) clearly asserted “Everything needs to be revised to ensure that our children are not led astray from the true path of Islam” (Satrapi p.73). The use of the expression “astray from the true path of Islam” reinforces the fear of erosion of social and moral values of the future generation (young boys and girls). The public declaration to close the universities by the religious authorities indicates the extreme hatred against the imperialistic nature of the nation

under Shah. It is worth noting here the idea of associating education with the political or religious aspects illustrates the character of ‘fundamentalism’ of the religious leaders.

The term ‘fundamentalism’ applies to “orientation to the world that is ‘anti-intellectual’, ‘bigoted’, and ‘intolerant’. It is applied to those whose lifestyle and politics are unacceptable to modern, western eyes and, most particularly, to those who would break down the barrier we have erected [in America] between church and state (Ruthven p.7). In the novel, the element of fundamentalism has surfaced when the fundamentalist verbally assaulted Ebi (mother of Marji) as she was found unveiled in public, which for them, was the defiance of the custom prescribed by them. The words “women like me should be pushed up against a wall and fucked. And thrown in the garbage...and that if I didn’t want that to happen, I should wear the veil” (Satrapi p.74) explicates the fundamentalist nature of the people who were against any sign of modernity. The author clearly reflects the idea in the image below:



Figure 3

Taking the particular aspect of veiling in the Islamic societies which was enforced with the inception of Islamic Revolution, it compels us to interrogate the issue of morality and immorality in the case of women. The indecent behavior of the fundamentalists with women not veiled obligates the people to ask: Were their approach behind the revolution social?

Furthermore, the author has depicted the role of Guardians of Revolution (the women’s branch) who were assigned with the job to “to put us back on the straight and narrow by explaining the duties of Muslim Women” (Satrapi p.133). They were assigned to arrest women, if found ‘improperly veiled’ (Satrapi p.134). In the condition of showing any sign of violating the rule, they were allowed to take the punitive measures against the offender. The novelist has strikingly drawn the idea through the image below:



Figure 4

The graphic novelist has dexterously utilizes the events and incidents to project and bring forth the theme of Islamic Revolution and expose and unify the fragmented historical facts to settle.

## CONCLUSIONS

From all the descriptions and graphic representations that support the idea of the socio-cultural and religious ideologies for the revolution, it can be conclusively said that *Persepolis* is the mirror image of the Iranian revolution. The work is significant as it addresses various issues such as the religious fundamentalism and the custom of veiling, which set the stage for discussing new dimensions for further research. Also, the analysis explicates the impact of the revolution on Marji, the protagonist, whose experiences gained during the period enables us to perceive how she and women like her sustained herself in the tough times torn between revolutionary ideology and the (Islamic) religion fundamentalism.

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