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Persepolis: Restriction of Personal Freedom

What does it mean to be free? Freedom is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a state of independence where you can do what you like or want without restraint (OED online). In Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis*, Marji, a young girl growing up in post-revolutionary Iran, lacks the choice of whether or not to wear the veil in public. In Iran, the veil became mandatory for women to wear in public in 1980 when Marji was only 10 years old. The veil is a restraint on Marji's freedom of expression and individuality. In Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis*, the act of putting on and wearing the veil serves as a powerful symbol of Marji's relinquishment of personal freedom, reflecting Marji's internal conflict between conformity and religion versus rebellion.

Even as a young child, Marji shows resistance towards the veil and implies that it takes away her freedom. The first representation of the veil depicts Marji wearing the veil at school and sitting beside other girls in her class all looking completely uniform. The text above Marji's head says, "This is me when I was 10 years old. This was 1980" (Satrapi 3). The text above Marji's classmates says, "And this is a class photo. I'm sitting on the far left so you don't see me. From left to right: Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, Minna" (Satrapi 3). The text labeling the girls from left to right implies that they can't be individually identified without clarification. In this drawing of Marji and her friends, it is very hard to depict the differences between the children. Their veils are all the exact same length and shape. The children are drawn from the waist up sitting at a

desk with their arms crossed in an identical fashion. The girls are drawn to look uniform, implying Marji's individuality is being repressed by the veil. In addition, the girls in this drawing all have very blank and disappointed expressions. The panel below shows them acting rambunctiously and using their veils to play games. Without their veils, they are playing, smiling, and laughing, and with their veils, they are sitting with frowning faces in a still row. The text in this panel says, "We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to" (Satrapi 3). The children saw the veil as a hindrance in their playing and a reason they were separated from their male friends at school. In the bottom part of the graphic, there is a drawing of a girl wearing a veil and strangling another classmate that is not wearing her veil. The girl wearing the veil has the power because she is sitting on the other girl with her own veil wrapped around her neck. In Iran, the consequences of not wearing the veil in public were detrimental and the women who followed the rules and wore their veil with no resistance were often rewarded with power from the government. The girl who is getting strangled by the veil represents Marji's views on the way that the veil restricts her freedom. This graphic appeared at the start of the memoir to introduce the veil as a symbol of restriction of freedom for Marji.

The veil serves as a symbol of relinquishing freedom for Marji when the veil and freedom are directly contrasted during a depiction of a protest in the street. Near the start of the story, Marji witnesses her mother's disapproval of the veil when she leaves to demonstrate on the street. In this panel, Marji's mother and other women are depicted demonstrating against the veil in the street. On one side there are four women with their eyes shut, wearing veils, and yelling "the veil!" (Satrapi 5). On the other side of the panel there are four women with their eyes open yelling "freedom!" (Satrapi 5). The text above the panel reads, "Everywhere in the streets there

were demonstrators for and against the veil” (Satrapi 5). The women who are not wearing veils are drawn with more individual and unique features. Their body shape, hair length, eyes, and facial features are shown. In contrast, the women wearing the veil have no body shape shown and their veils are all connected as one black chunk of darkness on the page. The women without the veil have very determined facial expressions while the women with the veil seem to be much calmer. The women wearing the veil have their eyes shut and appear to be in a trance-like state. The veiled women are represented in this way because they have the government on their side and are content with the law that requires the veil. The contrast between the women on both sides represents the drive and determination of the women fighting for their rights to freedom. The women wearing the veil are chanting “veil” while the women without a veil are chanting “freedom”. The women are not chanting the opposite of the veil which would be “no veil”, they are chanting for freedom. This directly implies that they believe being forced to wear the veil is taking away their freedom. For Marji, seeing her mother protesting on the streets and chanting for her freedom further convinces Marji that the veil is a symbol of her forgoing freedom.

Marji is conflicted about fighting for her freedom and individuality and risking parts of her religion, versus submitting to the government's demands. At the beginning of the novel, Marji is depicted with her face and body split down the middle onto two sides. On one side, Marji's hair and sweater are visible as well as gears, a ruler, and a hammer in the background. On the other side, she is wearing a veil and you can not see any of her body shape or hair. The background is white with black leaves and swirls drawn over it. The writing above the image reads, “I really didn't know what to think about the veil, deep down I was very religious but as a family, we were very modern and avant-garde” (Satrapi 6). Marji, being so young, often fluctuates in her opinions and beliefs. She was born into an activist family and often witnessed

her parents protesting against the government. Marji has been religious from a young age. She read from her holy book and often times spoke to God before bed. This drawing split between two sides represents Marji's conflicted views. On one side, Marji is depicted more uniquely with her features clearly shown. We can see the shape of her body as well as the shape and texture of her hair. This half of Marji represents her rebellious thoughts and desires to fight for her rights and follow in her parent's footsteps. The gears in the image illustrate Marji's growing brain and opinions. They are different sizes and shapes which show her many different thoughts and how often they change. The hammer depicts Marji's rebellious nature and willingness to fight for what she believes in. At only 10 years old, Marji is eager to fight for her rights and begs her parents to allow her to demonstrate on the street with them (Satrapi 17). Lastly, the ruler, similar to the gears, represents Marji's calculating thoughts and abilities to draw her own conclusions. Overall, all of the tools drawn in the background are slightly different from each other, representing the freedom of different opinions and views. The background is black, while all of the tools and Marji's clothes are drawn in white. The white color is representing the light and hope created by individual thoughts and freedom. The darkness filling the background represents the revolution and repression of freedom. On the other side of the drawing, Marji is wearing the veil. Her features are hidden and all that is visible is her face. The veil is taking away Marji's individual uniqueness. Additionally, the government forcing her to wear the veil represses her freedom as well as her working brain and activist opinions. Repeated leaves and swirls drawn over the background represent Marji's personal religious beliefs. Marji is very connected with religion at the beginning of the story and often refers to God as a guide when confronted with difficulty. The leaves and swirls surround Marji and take over the light in the background. This

contrast of a light background and dark swirls represents Marji's internal conflict between her religion and conformity and the desire to rebel against the government for repressing her choices.

At the end of the story, after living in Austria for five years, Marji suppresses her rebellious nature and submits by putting on her veil to go back to Iran. In the panel, Margi's back is facing the reader and you can see her face reflecting in the mirror. Without looking in the mirror, there would be no way to recognize the person standing in the drawing. Marji's entire outfit and veil are completely black and there are no distinguishing features to be seen. The veil restricts Marji's individuality by repressing her features. In the mirror, Marji is frowning and her eyes look tired and defeated. In this drawing of Marji, the veil symbolizes her loss of freedom when she chooses to go back to Iran after living in Austria. The text above Marji's head says, "...and so much for my individual and social liberties" (Satrapi 245). Marji is directly saying in the text that putting on her veil is surrendering her individuality and freedom of expression. The text at the bottom of the panel reads, "... I needed so badly to go home" (Satrapi 245). At this moment, Marji conforms to the veil and suppresses her rebellious impulses in order to return to her homeland.

In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir, the veil symbolizes Marji's surrender of her personal freedom and reflects her internal struggle between conformity and religious tradition versus nonconformity and rebellion. From an early age, Marji opposes the veil which limits her freedom, as shown through her and her classmates' identical and unhappy expressions while wearing it. The veil symbolizes a loss of freedom for Marji as she witnesses her mother protesting in the street with women chanting for and against the veil, highlighting the contrast between those wearing the veil and those fighting for freedom. Marj is torn between her religious beliefs and the government's demands to wear a veil and conform to their rules. At the end of the

story, Marji puts on her veil to conform and go back to Iran, symbolizing her loss of freedom and individuality. The memoir shows how the Iranian revolution and subsequent rule of the Islamic Republic led to the suppression of personal freedoms and the imposition of strict religious and cultural norms on the Iranian people. Through the character of Marji, Satrapi emphasizes the importance of standing up for one's beliefs and fighting for personal freedom, even in the face of overwhelming opposition. Overall, the broader significance of freedom in *Persepolis* is that it provides a powerful example of the struggle for freedom and individuality in the face of authoritarianism, and highlights the importance of human rights and civil liberties.

Citation

"freedom, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2023,
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