

## Bearers of Culture: Images of Veiling in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

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### ABSTRACT

*Much ink has been spilled on the history of veiling, revealing, and unveiling in various parts of the Muslim world, particularly in Iran. However, little mention is given in most scholarly works as to how it affects women and its ramifications in society. By examining the history of veiling in Iran and the study of veiling as represented in Marjane Satrapi's memoir, Persepolis, this paper sheds light on the ramifications of forced unveiling and veiling, and it also enlightens the readers to how the Iranian women became the yardstick with which the country's progress is measured. We argue that the two Acts of Unveiling and Veiling have been a mechanism in the service of patriarchy, which created division, conflict and segregation amongst women. We also argue that unlike the public perception that veiling is a phenomenon for Islamic hegemony and a heritage of Arab conquest, Persian women have used veiling centuries before the emergence of Islam, and in modern Iran, voluntary veiling can be used as a cultural sign of anti-imperialism.*

*Keywords: Iranian women; veil; West; patriarchy; anti-imperialism*

### INTRODUCTION

In Iran, veiling, as a practice, carried with it political agency and authority. Iranian women have been veiled, unveiled, and revealed in different periods. Women, as a social entity, have the inalienable right to express themselves to see if they want to veil or not; they, however, had been ignored through the past 150 years history of Iran. Urban Iranian women were veiled at the turn of the century, unveiled from 1936 to 1979, and then revealed after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Veiling has been a controversial issue over a century, and it transformed into an alternative model of female identity. The decrees by top Iranian authorities have demanded and forbidden the veil, and so veiled and unveiled women were not allowed entry into public transportations. A great number of people have spoken for or against the issue. In her book, *Veils and Words: The emerging voice of Iranian women writers*, Farzaneh Milani (1992, p. 19) writes:

Veiling has functioned more like a code that allowed anyone and everyone to vent their private aspirations, fears, dreams, and nightmares. An emblem now of progress, then of backwardness, a

badge now of nationalism, then of domination, a symbol of purity, then of corruption, the veil has accommodated itself to a puzzling diversity of personal and political ideologies.

The veil is widely cast, by Muslims and non-Muslims, as either a heritage of Arab conquest or Islamic hegemony. However, research findings prove that this piece of cloth has a history that antedates Islam and it originates in non-Arab Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies. Veiling was a sign of status which was practiced by the elite in ancient Persia. Keddie (1991, p. 3) claims, the “first reference to veiling is in Assyrian legal text that debates from the thirteenth century B.C, which restricted the practice to respectable women and forbade prostitutes from veiling.” This is also confirmed by Leila Ahmed (1992) where she argues that the veil used to be as a differentiation between “reputable” and “disreputable” women. Iranian women used the ‘veil’ or ‘hejab’ long before the emergence of Islam. Women in Medes period (the first residents of Persia) wore long dresses and long trousers up to their ankles. A few experts believe that it was Cyrus the Great who twelve centuries before Islam established the custom of covering women to protect their chastity (Mackey 1996). According to Will Durant (1935), the status of women after Darius declined, particularly amongst the rich. Women from the lower social class retained their freedom because they had to work and earn money. Upper class women were not allowed to leave their homes while in the state of menstrual. These women could not venture out except in a stretcher, covered from all four sides with curtains. They were not allowed to openly talk to any man and it was prohibited for married women to even see their nearest male relatives, like their fathers and brothers. There is no trace of women in inscriptions and monuments of the past (1935, p. 375).

With respect to veiling, there are two historical momentous incidents in modern Iran which had deleterious impact on the lives of women. The beginning of modernization processes in Iran can be seen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reformists of the period introduced new concepts of leadership, emancipation of women, law, and human rights. The initial modifications happened after the Constitutional Revolution of the 1906. The ruling monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi ratified the Unveiling Act in 1936, which prohibited women to appear veiled in public. The second incident happened in 1983 when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini reversed the changes introduced by the Pahlavi and implemented the Veiling Act, which banned women to appear unveiled in public (Price 2002, p. 1).

Women became bearers of culture as their bodies became tied to national identities, and as they had to conform to the authorities’ decisions of unveiling and veiling. Under the Pahlavi’s, they had to unveil to show that Iran is a country with modern and western culture; and under the Islamic regime, they had to veil to exhibit that Iran has a resistance culture to that of the West and follows an Islamic culture. It has clearly been a mechanism in the service of patriarchy, a means of regulating and controlling the women’s lives. A woman’s body has been turned into a ground of contention where ideals of westernization and resistance to western powers were acted upon. The two Acts of Unveiling and Veiling fractured women’s identity by modifying the women into objects.

### THE POLITICS OF UNVEILING

Both the Pahlavi and the Islamic Republic have used the un/veiling practices to echo the ambitions of the state. Reza Shah began to introduce measures to unveil the Iranian women when he returned from Turkey in 1934. He was influenced by Kemal Ataturk’s politics of modernization and advocacy of unveiling women. He introduced mandatory unveiling of

women and reforms such as universal rights for all schooling, education, and employment. The dominant feminists celebrated this law of unveiling despite the violence of this action (Naghibi 2007, p. 44); it is interesting to note that the dominant feminists of that time were following Western feminist ideologies that were being introduced into Iran by the West. The veil, as a sign of cultural difference, has been in close link with its transformation into a symbol of modernism; in fact Sadeghi (2007, p. 133) maintains that “dressing up for modernity has been fashioned through undressing women”. The emancipation of women was completely supported in all respects by the state and veiling was always regarded as a major obstacle towards modernization.

According to Ashraf Pahlavi, Reza Shah’s daughter, Reza Shah decided to abolish the “chador,” the traditional veil. Here again was an example of the paradox that was my father. Though I never felt he was willing to relax his strict control over us at home, he did make the historic decision to present the Queen, my sister Shams, and me, unveiled, to the population of Tehran. To Reza Shah, as to any Persian man, anything considering his wife and family was a private matter. You could sooner ask him how much money he earned or how much his house cost before you could ask questions about his wife or daughters. At home my father was very much a man of an earlier generation (I remembered he ordered me to change my clothes “at once” because I had appeared at lunch in a sleeveless dress). But as the King, he was prepared to put aside his strong personal feelings in the interest of bringing progress to his country. (1980, p. 24)

The Ministry of Education initiated taking the steps and prepared everything for unveiling. To encourage unveiling, women inspectors were sent to girls’ schools. In 1934, women teachers and students were galvanized to appear unveiled in schools. Prime Minister Foroughi threw a tea party for the cabinet ministers in which they were all told to bring their wives along. Soon after that, mixed social gatherings were encouraged and became rampant. The central government was determined to abolish the cultural institution of veiling through legislation. On January 1936, Reza Shah, a very devout Muslim and traditional man himself, attended the convocation ceremonies of the graduates in medicine and midwifery. He attended along with his unveiled and western dressed wife and daughters. This became the official start of the compulsory unveiling. Finally, in 1936, the Unveiling Act ordered all women out of their veils irrespective of age, social status and religious inclination. Reza Shah’s soldiers had strict orders to arrest veiled women and to tear the veils off their heads. Violence was the response to sporadic protests. There are many accounts of women being beaten and harassed in this period. Hence, the upper class women appeared unveiled in public. Civil servants were coerced to bring along their unveiled wives to official ceremonies, where friends and relatives met each other’s wives for the first time (Milani 1992, pp. 33-34). Unveiling the women was an effort to democratize gender roles. While Iranian elite feminists praised Reza Shah as an enlightened ruler, many other women protested against the decree. Reza Shah “was modernizing the country by destroying the boundaries” and this Unveiling Act “ostensibly liberated women while denying them the freedom to choose how to present themselves in public” (Naghibi 2007, p.45). Reza Shah’s modernization program was a blind imitation of Ataturk’s reforms. He used European sources to renew the nation through body, attire and language. He believed that he could change the West’s pre-conceived notion about Iran as uncivilized people due to the stories of harems and polygamy. That became the reason for his plan to westernize the country. Minoos Moallem (2005) argues that the Unveiling Act

did very little to modernize and liberate the Iranian women, instead it allowed the male soldiers to civilize the Iranian women by forcing the European model of attire on their bodies.

For Iranian modernists who view European women as sophisticated and cultured, the veil became an impediment to progress. Its banishment was vital to the advancement of the country and its dissociation from the Arab Islamic culture (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001, p. 54). This coerced act of unveiling was applauded by the Pahlavi and Western feminists as an epitome of social progress; however, it was denounced by the clergy of the time. Their reaction to Reza Shah's unveiling policy played an important part in the women's reaction as well as the general society's discontent with the situation. Lower middle-class women were inflicted with pain and terror, as they were reluctant to unveil. "To them, the veil was a source of respect, virtue, and pride. It was a symbol of passage from childhood to adulthood" (Milani 1992, p.35). Forced unveiling, an attempt at national westernization was not well received amongst a great number of Iranian women. These women saw the law as an abuse of their bodies and their sense of selves. Veiling was important to women for various reasons. It was a custom passed down to women from past generations and these women were strict followers of the tradition. Many women had become so habituated to wear the veil that this piece of cloth became a 'second skin' to them. On the repercussions of this forced Unveiling Act, Hoodfar writes:

For many women it was such an embarrassing situation that they just stayed home. Many independent women became dependant on men, while those who did not have a male present in the household suffered most because they had to beg favors from their neighbors... Women became even more dependent on men since they now had to ask for man's collaboration in order to perform activities they had previously performed independently. This gave men a degree of control over women they had never before possessed. It also reinforced the idea that households without adult men were odd and abnormal. (1993, pp. 261-63)

Moreover, devout families stopped sending their daughters to school because of the presupposition that unveiling brings along immorality and lust (Hoodfar 1993, p. 263). The women who valued and respected the veil tried to attenuate its abolition with all their hearts and souls. Some of them avoid going out and others would go hidden in a sack, carried by their husbands or brothers, in cases of emergency like a visit to a public bath. Some women chose to split up instead of appearing unveiled. Some husbands were aided by their wives to find a temporary wife who could accompany them to official ceremonies (Milani 1992, p. 35). In "*Jashn-e-Farkhondeh*" (1977), Jalal Al-e Ahmad depicts how a devout man violates the state's law that demands him to come to a party accompanied by his unveiled wife. He marries a woman for a limited time relying on the institution of temporary marriage. The temporary wife would be the daughter of a friend who marries him for the two hours during which he has to attend the party. Meanwhile, his own wife stays back at home, not affected by the royal ordinance.

### THE POLITICS OF REVEILING

Despite the violent method adopted by the state to obliterate the veil, the ban was lifted in 1941 when Reza Shah was forced to abdicate and his son Mohammad Reza Shah was enthroned. Gita Hashemi (2000) claims that Ayatollah Borujerdi, the first recognized *marja-e-taghlid* (Shia's source of imitation) knew that Mohammad Reza Shah would be unstable

politically and he was aware of Mohammad Reza Shah's fear of the increasing influence of the leftist. Therefore, he took advantage of the new situation and reached an agreement with the young Shah to support the monarchy and silence his politically instigated colleagues and students in return for lifting the ban and relaxing his father's secular policies (Hashemi 2000, p. 11). The Unveiling Act was abolished and women were apparently free to opt to veil or not to veil. At the turn of the century, upper class urban women were veiled, but the situation was changed by the 1940's. Upper and middle class women remained unveiled as they were symbol of modern secular state while lower class women returned to wear the 'hejab'. Mohammad Reza Shah continued his father's modernization program. He had 'agents of development' whose duty was to modernize the rural women and make them aware of their rights. Scattering these 'agents of development' into villages had some ramifications such as the physical abuse of the women by their fathers or their husbands as they felt that their honor would be disgraced by the intrusion of the agents (Naghibi 2007, pp.51-52). There was a discriminatory policy against the veiled women despite the seemingly free choice for women. Hoodfar (1993, p. 263) affirms the discrimination:

The government, through its discriminatory policies, effectively denied veiled women access to employment in the government sector, which is the single most important national employer, particularly of women. The practice of excluding veiled women hit them particularly hard as they had few other options for employment. Historically, the traditional bazaar sector rarely employed female workers, and while the modern private sector employed some blue-collar workers who wore the traditional chador, rarely did they extend this policy to white-collar jobs. A blunt indication of this discrimination was clear in the policies covering the use of social facilities such as clubs for civil servants provided by most government agencies or even private hotels and some restaurants, which denied service to women who observed the *hejab*.

Iranians grew dissatisfied with the modernization programs conceived by the Shah's administration. Many Iranian women not only participated voluntarily in the practice of veiling but also claimed that the veil is the mark of resistance, agency and cultural membership (Naghibi 2007). A great number of Iranians believed that the practice of veiling should be strengthened to eradicate the rupture of the Iranian culture and identity. The veil as a sign of anti-imperialist resistance was gaining popularity. Veiling became a sign not only of abhorrence to the Shah and repudiation of the Western control but it also brought back their culture and identity that was fractured earlier. Having seen himself in jeopardy, Mohammad Reza Shah decided to restore religion in politics. As Sandra Mackey (1996) verifies, in 1978 the Shah of Iran "tried to restore some of the royal family's credentials. Empress Farah went on pilgrimage to Mecca and the Shah touted the amount of money he had spent on the beautification of the shrine at Mashahd" (1996, p. 280). Princess Shahnaz, Mohammad Reza Shah's daughter, appeared with *rusari* (scarf over one's head), which covered her hair fully, in public. One of the Queen's maids had turned into a religious person, going from miniskirt to the veil (Milani 1992, p. 37). However, the restoration was too late to mend as "the political winds were already blowing in another direction" (Naghibi 2007, p. 58).

According to Girgis (1996), as displeasure escalated, three men appeared to pave the way for an Islamic Revolution: Ayatollah Khomeini, Shariati and Motahari. Amongst these men, Khomeini supported a conservative approach to Islam and Shariati was more liberal than Ayatollah Khomeini. Shariati's writings had a dramatic impact upon women and intellectuals (Girgis 1996). Influenced by Shariati's concept of modernized Islam and Khomeini's religious preservations, a change occurred in sentiments with regards to veiling

which instigated socio-political events in Iran. In 1979, the anti-Shah movement plucked enough courage to come to streets and shout slogans against the Shah which led to the overthrow of Shah. One month after the Revolution in March 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed that women should not wear miniskirts to work and they should wear the Islamic form of modest dress. This was the cause of the first massive demonstration which some women appeared unveiled.

Apparently the Islamic state ignored the fact that a great number of Iranian women protested to make sure that they have the freedom to veil as they were influenced by concept of modernized Islam preached by Shariati. Immediately after the demonstration, the prime minister of the time, Mr. Bazargan, announced that Ayatollah Khomeini's statement had been distorted by the corrupt royalists and counterrevolutionary people (Milani 1992). He claimed that Ayatollah Khomeini never forced veiling on women and Islam is the religion of encouragement not coercion or force. All the demonstrations and activities of feminists caused a delay in enforcing the Veiling Act. However, the second historical moment in Iran happened in 1983, when Ayatollah Khomeini ratified the Veiling Act which made women not to appear unveiled in public (Milani 1992, pp. 37-38). According to Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf (2009), the new government overlooks the fact that "during the demonstration and activities leading up to the revolution, veiled and unveiled women all participated in the protests against the tyrannies of the previous regime" and even "to show their unity and for the sake of homogeneity and solidarity, these women chose to veil themselves" (2009: 547). The fact that they veiled for the purpose of unity is commendable.

Under the new regime, however, women, who played an important role in the revolution, were no longer free to choose either to veil or not to veil. Those women who were against the veil preferred to either leave Iran or remain confined to their homes (Hoodfar 1993). Veiling was a must despite the differences in religion, ethnicity and class. Therefore, a great number of people fled the country because the women in the family resisted to veil. However, the regime believed that the Veiling Act came to mean as a facilitator for a professional workspace, where women could do their job with no fear of sexual harassment. As Ayatollah Khomeini said "What we don't want and what Islam doesn't want, is to make a woman as an object, a puppet in the hands of men" (qtd in Ramazani 1980, p. 30). Camelia Entekhabi Fard addresses the differences and intricacies of mandatory veiling:

To feminists in the West, the veil optimizes everything that is wrong with the Iranian revolution. But the hejab means different things to different people; it is simultaneously a symbol of domination and liberation, of piety and rebellion. For Iranian men, the hejab has traditionally been a means of defending women's honor and protecting their chastity... But for Iranian women, the hejab has an entirely different meaning: it affords a convenient protection for their public lives. In a society where an unveiled female is seen as sexually available, most women would wear some kind of hejab outside their homes even without state coercion- and many who have entered the workforce and the academy would simply return to their traditional roles rather than remove their veils. (2001, p. 72)

On the forced practice of veiling, Zalipour et al. (2011), in their article entitled "The Veil and Veiled Identities in Iranian Diasporic Writing", argue that the practice of veiling forms identities of a female character as *women*. They opine that veiling of the head should be a "freedom of choice" and should "not mean veiling of the mind" (2011, p. 2). The mandatory veiling, just like the coerced unveiling, "foists construction of new identities" on women (2011, p. 3). They believe that the concept of veiling should be questioned once

associated with the gender identity of characters as women and when it becomes a means to veil women's identities.

### WOMEN IN *PERSEPOLIS*: VICTIMIZED SIGNIFIER OF FRAGMENTED IRANIAN SELF

In *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003), Marjane Satrapi commences her youth narrative with the introduction of the veil in the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Shah's overthrow and during Ayatollah Khomeini's religious regime. The Veil is being introduced through a child's eyes. In a chapter entitled "The Veil", the audience faces the first traumatic split that has a great impact on young Marji's identity, and the re-veiling of the Iranian society. At the outset of *Persepolis*, Satrapi demonstrates how the forced veiling physically segregates her from the rest of the society:

Then came 1980. The year it became obligatory to wear the veil at school. We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to. And also because the year before, in 1979, we were in a French non-religious school where boys and girls were together. And then suddenly in 1980, all bilingual schools must be closed down. They are symbols of capitalism, of decadence [...]. We found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends. (Satrapi 2003, pp. 3-4)

Therefore, for young Marji wearing the veil develops in her a feeling of alienation from her friends and opposite sex at schools. She is fully cognizant of the fact that the veil, as a national symbol, separates her in copious ways, including body and mind. The first few pages reveal how the veil fragments her mind and identity when she states "I really don'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" (6). She constantly struggles between her Islamic religion and her French, modern education. The young Marji, therefore, is undecided which to choose. To veil, she demonstrates her support and devotion to the country, and to unveil she would encounter a separation within her country as the women in the society are veiled. The following figure is sketched to show her fragmented mind and identity:



FIGURE 1. From *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood*. 2003: 6

She also shows off her fragmented identity through a portrayal of her attire. Split between modernity and tradition she says "I put my 1983 Nikes on and my denim jacket with the Michael Jackson button, and of course, my headscarf" (131). The combination of Western

attire and the veil shows the fragmented identity of Marji and how she is split between two identities. She is, indeed, torn between her country and modernism:



FIGURE 2. From *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood*. 2003: 131

Satrapi explains that in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the veil became a benchmark with which women are measured. Those who wear the veil are devoted believers and those who do not wear the veil are traitors and westoxified (Sichani 2007). The veil becomes a site of struggle and division. The author depicts this division of women when she tells the readers about the demonstration that happens after the Revolution. Satrapi shows how on the left side, women are all covered up with black chadors, while on the right hand, women are unveiled (5).



FIGURE 3. From *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood*. 2003: 5

Satrapi depicts the consequences of not wearing the veil in public, early after the Revolution, when her mother is attacked by the Revolutionary guards. Through the attack upon her mother, the author demonstrates the power that men have over women's moral status, hence a patriarchal society. No women could escape the veil, unless they physically leave the country. As the revolutionary guards gained comprehensive control over imposing the veil, the benchmark of dissimilarity amongst women of the society has abated. Further in the post-revolution period, the physical differences between traditional and modern women were less apparent than the immediate post-revolution as women could show a few strands of hair. While some women continue to wear the veil, black chador, head to toe, the modern women have a headscarf with which they could show their resistance to the regime by "letting a few strands of hair show" (75) and covers her body with a long jacket. Unable to unveil to show

resistance, women are only left with the choice of showing a few strands of hair to signify their political stands.

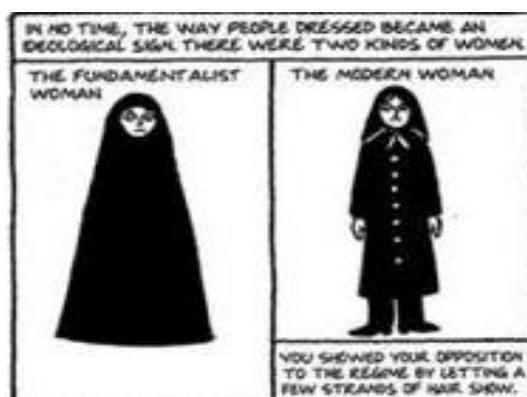


FIGURE 4. From *Persepolis: The story of a Childhood*. 2003: 75

The veil became a conspicuous marker of separation between men and women. At the very beginning of *Persepolis*, the boys and girls at school are separated, which in fact fosters the idea that there is a physical and social differentiation between men and women in Iran. Women have to carry out this symbolic distinction, yet it is men’s duty to monitor this symbol. Towards the end of *Persepolis*, through her attire and actions in public sphere, Marjane displays her resistance against the veil. She openly embraces Western culture by listening to Iron Maiden, Kim Wilde, and Michael Jackson and shows her Western side of identity by wearing Western attire. While having tight pants and denim jacket on, with a few strands of hair shown, she confronts the Revolutionary guards by whom she was reprimanded. She has to concoct a lie to get scot-free. She simply says “my mother’s dead. My stepmother is really cruel and if I don’t go home right away, she’ll kill me [...]. She’ll burn me with the clothes iron” (134). Once she realizes that the Western attire can jeopardize her life, she retreats back to home where she listen to the song “ We’re kids in America, Whoa” (134) in her own private space. For many Iranian women during the Revolution, confining to their homes as their private spaces and making themselves invisible in the public led to their fragmented identities.

## CONCLUSION

The issue of veiling in Iran is still as divisive as those two Veiling and Unveiling Acts. The mandatory Acts of Veiling and Unveiling of 1983 and 1936 respectively cannot be considered entirely successful because authorities used coercion to unveil and veil. It has clearly been a mechanism in the service of patriarchy, a means of regulating and controlling the women’s lives. A woman’s body has been turned into a ground of contention where ideals of westernization and resistance to western powers were acted upon. These Acts fractured women’s identity by modifying the women into objects. Instead of uniting the nation, the mandatory unveiling and veiling created division, conflict and segregation not only between a man and a woman but also between a woman and her country. In both cases, there were a considerable number of people against them. Moallem (2005) narrates how the coerced unveiling, experienced by her grandmother and the forced veiling she has experienced, enabled them to share simultaneous ruptures in their identity during the two different regimes. “Both of us share an incorporated traumatic memory of citizenship in the modern nation-state. She was forced to unveil; I was forced to veil. Living in different times, we were

obliged by our fellow countrymen respectively to reject and adopt veiling. Our bodies were Othered by civic necessity” (2005, p. 69). However, the fact that voluntary veiling [not the compulsory veiling] has become a symbol of anti-imperialism after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 should be applauded and one should constantly be reminded that veiling only makes sense in its socio-cultural embeddedness.

The veil is a sign with a multiple layers of meaning and its classification as a symbol of resistance to the West is amongst its most prominent meanings. Voluntary veiling is an empowering tool of self-expression through which women increase their relationship with their own faith and culture. The incentive behind voluntary veiling arises from the fact that it re-establishes a link with authentic past culturally and its dissociation from the West. The movement back to the veil can be considered as a re-affirmation of traditional values and identities. Therefore, by adopting the veil, these Iranian women express a repudiation of Western lifestyle and engagement with distinguishing themselves from the Western women. Voluntary veiling means liberation from the dictated and foreign identities and consumerist behaviors, which is increasingly a materialistic culture.

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