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**POLITICAL AND CULTURAL PROJECTIONS OF NATION IN MARJANE
SATRAPI'S *PERSEPOLIS***

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Abstract:

Persepolis is a graphic memoir that not only throws light on the journey of an opinionated girl from childhood to womanhood but it also reflects the problems of living in a country like Iran. The country undergoes many drastic changes after 1980. The new ruling power is like a blow for many Iranians as veil is made compulsory and Islamic Fundamentalist lifestyle is expected to be followed. War between Iran and Iraq makes many civilians 'martyrs' while fighting for the nation. But is that the key to paradise in reality, as framed by rulers? This becomes an individual perspective and a questionable one. Marjane Satrapi highlights her personal experiences while living in a politically unstable country.

Keywords: *Islamic fundamentalism, Nationhood, Martyrdom, Feminism, etc.*

Iran, as a nation, witnessed a series of changes at the political, social, and cultural grounds, as the revolutions by common people dominated the scenario in Iran at different periods of time. Riley K. Smith writes in *Iran* (2009) that "Sometimes Christians were friends of Iran's Shahs, and sometimes they were foes" (Introduction). Reza Shah, Persia's new leader in 1925, was committed to Westernization of the country. People were encouraged to follow Western life style and veil was prohibited for women. Schools were modernized and free co-education introduced. Other political measures were taken to modernize the country which was considered by the King an essential step towards the progress of the country. Until 1979, Reza Shah was condemned by majority of people of Iran, for being a slave to foreigners. He spent the oil money of the country on latest American military technology and he failed to meet the demands of Iranian people. Morgan D. Rautzhan writes in his thesis on "Silent No Longer: Iranian Memoir as Islamic Feminist Space" (Rautzhan, 2012), "Reza Shah was fighting many conflicting battles in his struggle to modernize Iran. Struggling against the West taking advantage of Iran in oil concessions, while also wanting his country to be more modern, fighting with powerful mullahs and clerics, and taxing the public heavily to furnish his building projects led to his eventual downfall" (Rautzhan, 11). Due to Islamic Revolution that began in 1979, the King had to leave the country and Islamic fundamentalists came to power. Little did the people know that their existence would become worst? Extreme restrictions were imposed upon people and many were executed. Morgan D. Rautzhan writes:

Mohammad Reza Shah fell in 1979 and the Islamic Republic of Iran came into being. The leader of this revolution was a cleric named Ayatollah Khomeini who took little time to change nearly a decade of advancement, for women most markedly. Important laws enacted under the previous leadership were quickly abrogated, the Family



Protection Law was abolished and the hijab was once again made mandatory (Rautzhan, 16).

Memoirs written by Iranian women authors attempt to create Islamic feminist spaces. Women's rights in Iran and the question of democracy form an important part of the exploration of Iran through memoirs. Iran as a nation and the religion of Islam are identified and analysed within the historical framework. The memoirs highlight not only the reimagining of the Self but also the invention of the other. Comparison between eastern and western cultures also brings forth a comparative study based on race, ethnicity, and culture. The binary opposition of two cultures is put forward as a force that separates their basic thinking and lifestyle.

Persepolis, a graphic memoir by Marjane Satrapi, highlights the political and cultural undertones in a country like Iran where instability and chaos prevail. Satrapi, in her childhood, is full of enthusiasm for heroic activities and imagines her country as an ideal country. Her imagination projects patriotism as something extraordinarily heroic in which martyrdom and sacrifice for the country play essential role. The martyrs leave a deep imprint on Satrapi's mind, who is her heroes. As she grows, she understands the nuances of political system and the corruption related to it. Her frustration due to pointless executions of rebellious citizens and restrictions imposed upon common people especially women, brings her to the conclusion that fundamentalism can be dangerous. After experiencing the cruel form of restrictions imposed upon women in the name of religion, the whole concept of nation gets changed in her mind. The propaganda of ruling fundamentalists of being patriotic and killing many innocent people during wars makes Satrapi think at a deeper level regarding the concept of nationhood as a whole. Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities* about such autobiographies, "These narratives...are set in homogeneous empty time. Hence their frame is historical and their setting sociological" (Anderson, 204).

The lifestyle of people of Iran had changed drastically within few days in 1980. Veil, which was prohibited during Reza Shah's rule, became compulsory for females. Little girls going to school had to wear veils and they found them very uncomfortable as they were not habitual of them. The schools, which were earlier co-ed, were banned and boys and girls found themselves separated from each other. The Islamic Fundamentalists called it 'cultural revolution'. They were against all the symbols that represented western culture and capitalism. Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities*, "...so often in the "nation- building" policies of the new states one sees both a genuine, popular nationalist enthusiasm, and a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and so forth" (Anderson, 163). Fear was generated in the minds of people as Islamic Fundamentalists were very cruel to people who didn't follow them. Women, who wanted their freedom back, demonstrated in the streets against the wearing of veil. On the other side, there were also women who wanted veil to be made compulsory.

Marjane Satrapi belonged to a modern family that believed in progressive thoughts and freedom to be promoted in culture. Marjane Satrapi builds her memoir in a historical framework in which her grandfather was the Prince of Iran and how he was imprisoned by the new King and how he died in the prison. Marjane's grandmother had to live life in poverty. The new King promised a lot but never fulfilled those promises. People revolted against the King and those who got killed during revolution were called 'Martyrs'. Finally, Reza Shah had to leave the country and Islamic Fundamentalists came to power. People celebrated their victory but the worst was yet to come. People started leaving Iran and settling abroad when they came to know about the cruelty of Islamic Fundamentalist regime. The Islamic Fundamentalists had started killing those people who went against them or whose ideology didn't match their ideology. The Fundamentalist students took the



Americans as their hostages and the US Embassy was occupied by them. The Ministry of Education closed the universities in order to overhaul the education system. "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 (Rautzhan, 73). People were helpless and they could only follow whatever was dictated to oppress them. The dress codes of men and women were designed by the rulers and no one was allowed to betray their policies. There were open beatings and torture if people attempted to disobey them. Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities* about "...the processes by which the nation came to be imagined, and, once imagined, modelled, adapted and transformed" (Anderson, 141).

To make the matter worse, war began between Iran and Iraq. The chaos prevailed in Iran after war started. Many people became homeless. Young boys were sent to fight the war under the pretext that they would go to heaven after becoming martyrs. A key to paradise used to hang around their necks while going for fighting war. Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities* about the willingness of people to die during wars and the concept of nation in their minds:

Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (Anderson, 7).

The girls in schools of Iran were lined up twice a day to mourn the war heroes who were dead. Funeral marches were carried and females were supposed to beat their breasts. During religious ceremonies men beat themselves brutally, sometimes even with chains. Young people were not allowed to gather for parties and they were beaten with lashes if they were found doing that. Hefty amount of fine was imposed upon them. People were not allowed to keep wine in their homes.

As Marjane was growing, she was becoming more and more daring. Sometimes she bunked classes and went around with her friends. She argued with her mother when she felt that she cannot tolerate anyone's domination. The pointless killings of so many people during the war hurt Marjane deeply. She could not understand how people could be executed by Islamic Fundamentalists just because they opposed the ideology of the regime. Marjane is sent to Austria for education as her bold nature could be dangerous for her survival. After going to Austria, Marjane compares her Eastern culture with Western culture. There is a lot of freedom enjoyed by young people which is not possible in Iran. She also faces discrimination as an Iranian living among whites. At last, Marjane decides to go back to Iran and she has to wear the veil again. Gurudev Mehar writes about the feeling of nostalgia for home country, "Home becomes a site where one negotiates belonging and unbelonging in relation to the Cultural identity which is firmly grounded in one's homeland...When individuals are uprooted from their houses, they experience strong sense of loss and long for the thingness for the home, its qualified ability to be a home" (Mehar, 155-156).

After coming back to Iran, Marjane suffers from depression due to her past failures. She also finds it very difficult to again adjust with restrictions imposed upon women in Iran. "It wasn't just the veil to which I had to readjust, there were also all the images: the sixty-five-foot high murals presenting martyrs, adorned with slogans honoring them, slogans like "the martyr is the heart of history" or "I hope to be a martyr myself" or "A martyr lives forever" (Satrapi, 252).

Most of the streets were renamed after the names of martyrs which was very disturbing for Marjane. While walking on the road, she felt as if she was walking through a cemetery. She felt as if she was surrounded by victims of war everywhere. The feeling of roaming on the streets of Iran was



like walking with dead people. “People don't know anymore why we've had eight years of war. Why their children have died...This entire war was just a big set up to destroy both the Iranian and the Iraqi armies....Eight years of war for nothing! So now the state names streets after martyrs to flatter the families of the victims. In this way, perhaps, they'll find some meaning in all this absurdity” (Satrapi, 255). Marjane found it very absurd that some mothers were claiming to be overjoyed by the death of their children. What kind of faith it was? The mothers believed that their children had gone straight to paradise after becoming martyrs. Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities* about these emotions of dying for one's country:

Dying for one's country, which usually one does not choose, assumes a moral grandeur...for these are all bodies one can join or leave at easy will. Dying for the revolution also draws its grandeur from the degree to which it is felt to be something fundamentally pure (Anderson, 144).

Marjane ponders, what do the countries get from wars? Lakhs of people get killed, many become disabled by the chemical weapons, and many lose their minds due to the explosions. There are orphans, widows, refugees and material destruction everywhere. Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities* about such imaginations of nationhood, “Nation, nationality, nationalism - all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse” (Anderson, 3).

Young girls living in Iran found a way to resist the oppression by Islamic Fundamentalists. They wore makeup and western clothes which were prohibited. “A part of me understood them. When something is forbidden, it takes on a disproportionate importance. Much later, I learned that making themselves up and wanting to follow Western ways was an act of resistance on their part” (Satrapi, 261). It was becoming impossible for Marjane to follow the restrictions which were imposed upon women. Stuart Hall writes in *Identity, Culture, Community and Difference* (1990) about such ideological transformation, “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall, 223).

Marjane asked herself whether it was right to tolerate curbs on freedom of thought and freedom of speech. Was her life really livable? “It's only natural! When we're afraid, we lose all sense of analysis and reflection. Our fear paralyzes us. Besides, fear has always been the driving force behind all dictators' repression” (Satrapi, 304). The life of girls was completely different in private and their dressing style totally opposite in public. They attended parties every night as an act of rebellion. When they got caught, they had to run. The restrictions imposed by Islamic Fundamentalists had become a curse on them. Stuart Hall writes in his essay on “Encoding/Decoding” (1973) in which there are codes according to which the receivers interpret and act after something is communicated to them. The people who follow hegemonic code follow the instructions as they are communicated whereas the people who follow oppositional code oppose the policies that are communicated. The young people of Iran choose to follow oppositional code when restrictions are imposed on their freedom.

Marjane decides to leave Iran and settle abroad as living under restrictions cannot be a part of her personality. Homi Bhabha writes about this urge for cultural translation, “And one last time, there is a return to the performance of the identity as iteration, the re-creation of the self in the world of the travel, the resettlement of the borderline community of migration” (Bhabha, 12). Marjane's mother says to her, “This time you're leaving for good. You are a free woman. The Iran of today is not for you. I forbid you to come back!” (Satrapi, 343)



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