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“Women, Life, Freedom”: Media and Uprisings in Iran

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Abstract

This research analyzes the use of Marjane Satrapi's graphic novels: *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2003) and her film *Persepolis* (2007) in regard to how media can teach history and political unrest and protestation, and how much of what is occurring in present day Iran of protests in regard to the death of Masha Amini and how the use of the hajib, while often a western feminist construct used to establish "orientalism" of Muslim women, also is a deeply rooted metaphor of the restrictions of women in Iran and the consequences of those who do not follow the laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Iranian Morality Police.

Keywords: Media, Persepolis, Hajib, Politics, Protest, Economics, Amini

“Women, Life, Freedom”: Media and Uprisings in Iran

Introduction

Necessary in current global media studies is an analysis of the connection between the autobiographical film (2007) and graphic novels (2003 and 2003) of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* with the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the current 2022 protests in Iran that followed the death of a Masha Amini who was arrested and beaten to death by the Iranian Morality Police on September 16, 2022 due to not wearing a hijab. She died while imprisoned, and protests began for the brutality that Amini received (Stilts, 2022). Consequently, this is not the first woman in Iran to be arrested and beaten and killed by the Iranian Morality Police, but the death of Masha Amini was the catalyst for the women of Iran to start protesting again and now men are also getting involved and even supporting the women by wearing hijabs to mock the cruelty of their government, and women are cutting their hair and burning their hijabs as signs of protests. The protests in Satrapi's work occurs in the late 1970's Iran, and a historic date in that period is March 8, 1979, when Iranian women in protest of (and in support of) “took to the streets” in Tehran on International Women's Day (Chan-Malik, 2011, p. 112).

There is a pattern with these protests beginning during the 40-day Islamic mourning ceremonies, but in *Persepolis*, these protests started in Tehran, the capital of Iran, but today's protests are spreading throughout Iran; these protests are increasing in intensity and size, and now shops have started closing due to how massive these protests are becoming in Iran since the death of Masha Amini. Two months have passed, and people have been jailed and killed by the hundreds, including women and children and men, and just for protesting and showing their dissatisfaction of the corrupt Iranian government; similarly, as introduced to us through the

media graphics of Satrapi in late 1970's Tehran. The killings are beginning to intensify in strength and numbers to an unimaginable scale of human rights violations in Iran, and the protests all started when Masha Amini's family were understandably furious at the Iranian Morality Police for falsifying her cause of death in September 2022. As Ezzatikarami and Ameri (2019) in their ironically negative lens of seeing Satrapi's work as westernized orientalist perspective, do highlight her media choice of graphic novels a wise choice to reach global audiences and teach the "hardships" of the Iranian Revolution (2019, p. 128). As Satrapi illustrates in her film and text, not much under the leadership of the Iranian Islamic Republic has changed for the rights of women, journalists, and many others in Iran. Through the use of differential media such as the graphic novel and film, Satrapi teaches through *Persepolis* the restrictions and punishments toward women in Iran of the late 20th century, and the social media of the 21st century continues to show the oppressive horrors and the torture and death of Masha Amini and many others and sound the call of "Women, life, freedom" (Horton, 2022) to a global audience.

Persepolis

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* has two graphic novels (2003 and 2003) and a film adaptation of both books (2007) that the global media enthusiast can analyze from both media sides on how the story is told. Both books were released in 2003. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003) tells the readers of Satrapi's childhood before and after the Shah, Mohammed Reza was overthrown due to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, an awful regime which led to an even worse one. The new government under Ruhollah Khomeini decided to make things worse, under the new Islamic Republic and its Morality Police which led to Satrapi's parents to send Marji abroad to Vienna at the end of the first book. In the second book, *Persepolis 2: The Story*

of a Return (2003) things do not fare any better for Satrapi abroad in Vienna, where she experiences many hurdles including western orientalism before she decides to go back to her parents in Tehran. This period of Satrapi in Austria illustrated what Hamidi (2022) meant when she shares that two months prior to Amini's death, her concern that Satrapi writes a western feminist view, but Hamidi does point out the ironic position Satrapi was in in Vienna as she identified herself as an Iranian woman: "Practicing a politics of location has two distinct aspects: on the one hand, feminists need to locate themselves in the world, on the other hand, the primary purpose of finding oneself is understanding the location of others" (2022, p. 255). Satrapi and her parents along with her grandmother decide it is best for her to return to Iran, to be with her family, their culture, and to discover herself. The film of *Persepolis*' animation, and keeping with the black and white print of the texts, is a great vehicle of media as well to bring all of this history, autobiography, cultural consciousness, and controversy to global audiences.

The purpose of both books and the film are to educate how both the Iranian Revolution and the war against Iraq in Iran were seen through a child's perspective in book one, and book two shows that the new government enforces the mandatory hijab when Marjane returns to Iran from Vienna, before going abroad to France in a self-imposed exile; this form of media teaches how visual imagery can teach an audience to what has occurred back in 1979 Iran and how the same government later does the same abusive treatment of women with Masha Amini's death, in September of this year. More specifically, according to Maggi (2020, p. 89), the form of usage of graphic novel media in print and transformed into film allows the audience to see Satrapi as she struggles seeing herself as "Self-Other" in her own community and the global community as a whole (2020, p. 89).

Politics and Economy in Iran.

The politics and economy in Iran during the events of *Persepolis* and the current protest to wearing the hijab due to the death of Masha Amini been largely the same, if not more oppressive by the Iranian government and the Morality Police in today's Iran than in the 1980's. In *Persepolis* the mandatory hijab was a newly implemented law by the new regime, and has been more restrictive on women since then due to Iranian political leaders of the Islamic Republic government, under Shia clerical rule of Ayatollah Khomeini who saw himself and his fellow Shia clerics as "the guardian of Iranian character and traditions" (Buchan, 2013, p. 420). The Shia "Guardians" are now being stood up to by both women and men. The politics of 2022 Iran is now being upturned whether by athletes such as climber Elnaz Rekabi not seen and supposedly under house arrest since climbing in South Korea without her hijab (Bissett, 2022); similarly, is the fate of Hengameh Ghaziani and Katayoun Riahi, famous Iranian film actors after Ghaziani posted a picture on her Instagram account of herself without the hijab: "Maybe this will be my last post. From this moment on, whatever happens to me, know that as always, I am with Iranian people until my last breath," Ghaziani wrote on Instagram on Saturday [November 19, 2022]" (Smith, 2022). In addition, the Iranian men's soccer team refused to sing the Iranian national anthem at the World Cup in Qatar on November 21, 2022, and in response, the government blocked television footage of the silent protest in Iran. However, through media of television: the world has seen and heard the Iran soccer team's captain Ehsan Hajsafi:

"We have to accept that the situation in our country is not good and that our people are not happy, they are discontent," Hajsafi said at a press conference. "We are here, but it does not mean we should not be their voice or that we should not respect them. Whatever we have is theirs." (Smith, 2022)

And the politics of Iran is also hurting the economy of Iran as with the protests of Masha Amini's death at the hands of the Iranian Morality Police, which has now forced stores to close due to the intensity of the protests (Grambell, 2022). The interpretations of Islamic Law under the Iranian Islamic Republic government is to blame for the turmoil, and media, such as graphic novels and social media, along with television and film footage, is letting the world know of the atrocities occurring in Iran, as witnessed in BBC (2022) "‘Woman, Life, Freedom’: The Rallying Cry of Iran's Protests" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mp2fLcx0fk4> (2022).

While the dominant religion of Iran has always been Islam, the current Iranian government has made strict laws against women in Iran after the Shah had been dethroned during the Iranian Revolution, which is taught in *Persepolis*. As Tafakori (2022) points out in the review of *Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran* by Nazanin Shahrokni, the Islamic Republic regime after overthrowing the Shah in 1979, claimed that they were the reformer and would be more "inclusive" than the prior regime, and the opposite actually occurred under Khomeini: "the latter [was and is] more exclusionary toward women" (Tafakori, 2022). The Islamic Republic continues to restrict Iranian women by making said laws worse throughout the late 20th and 21st centuries. However, with the current protests over the hijab at full swing, the death of Masha Amini has ignited a religious and secular protest of freedoms' fire throughout the country of Iran, and the Iranian government is just adding fuel to said fire by arresting and killing women who refuse to wear the veil during these protests (and the men who lend voice and action to their cause). During the protests following the 40 days of mourning as is Islamic custom, in Iran, roads were blocked to Amini's grave and even her brother was "threatened with arrest" (Abbasi & Mhaidli, 2022).

Currently, the Iranian government is struggling to keep the protests under control in late November of 2022, which could indicate that a big change could occur very soon in Iran as the current regime are now forced to switch off international television and often turn off any internet access and jailing journalists such as Niloofar Hamedei who refused to write the government's lie that Amini died from pre-existing conditions (Benoit & Loenicker 2022). To show how intense things are becoming in the State of Iran, protestors have reported that on November 17, 2022, fire was set to the ancestral museum home of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini which the Islamic Republic denies: "The opposition group 1500tasvir reported that the fire was set on Thursday night when protests took place in Khomein, where the late leader's house is located" (De Luce, 2022). Without social media, internet, filming, television, reporting, the world would be kept in the dark for all the Islamic Republic is doing to their citizens. But it is the women of Iran who "are once more not just symbols of victimization but also agents of change and activism" (Mardorossian, 2022).

"Audience" Reaction

The readers and viewers of both books and film of *Persepolis* get a glimpse of the early form of the current Iranian government and Morality Police from a child's perspective from Marjane Satrapi in the first book, which is the first half of the film and shows the steady increase of women's rights violations in the second book, which is the second half of the film from Satrapi's late teenage to early adult years; the research surrounding Satrapi's works focus on the gamut of the ability of networking either from media as a genre or from perspectives of the question of whether or not Satrapi is a feminist sharing culture or utilizing orientalism on her fellow Iranian women. The film and books of *Persepolis*, while first published in French in 2003 and 2005, are available in English and many languages allowing global audience to the

autobiographical memoirs of Satrapi's childhood, teenage, and adult years and use the media of graphic novel format—both in printed text and film—to teach the history of Iran from the fall of the Shah to the rise of the Islamic Republic. Since the publication of her works, social media and streaming have become the new media landscape for networking and getting the message out about the lives of women in Iran and their activism, and the men who stand with them.

The current Hijab protests have been posted on social media for many months of 2022 and accelerated with the death of Masha Amini by the Iranian Morality Police back in September of 2022. The events started with her family protesting that her death had been falsified by the Morality Police and the Iranian government. Gradually more Iranian people started to support the family, some are relatives of the late Masha Amini and her parents, some are athletes, some are journalists, all are Iranian citizens who are protesting against both the Iranian government and their Morality Police. The network of social media is unifying the citizens of Iran to protest and act in an online “bandwagon” as Rasler (2022) surmises: “Social networks play a critical role in reducing uncertainty because they provide a forum for exchanging information and coordinating protest actions” (2022, p. 146). The people of Iran are putting their lives on the line; starting with women cutting their hair and burning their hijabs to demonstrate that they are not afraid of sacrifice and consequences for women's rights. The catalyst for this, even prior to the death of Amini was the new hijab laws announced in Iran on June 28, 2017 that: “...supplemented the previous 639 punishment laws by passing a new law that made resisting hijab a moral offenses and stipulated 10 years of imprisonment...” (Basmehchi et al., 2022, p. 29). Iranian men have also joined in on the protests: both genders are protesting against their own government that can very well kill them for protesting, and even as recent as November 21, 2022, it is being reported that both genders who are imprisoned are being horribly tortured and raped by the Iranian police.

Without the mode of social media, and those brave enough to share the truths inside Iran, the world may not have known the atrocities and the truths. Protests have changed governments in Iran since the 1970's. The people are standing up again.

Conclusion

Persepolis shows how protests leading to and after the Shah was dethroned by the people of Iran and in his place of power, the Shia clergy under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the newly appointed leadership and government of the Islamic Republic took over and began to make things worse for women in Iran; in the graphic novels and film, the audience learns that after everyone celebrated that they overthrew the Shah and his supporters, from Marjane Satrapi's point of view, during her pre-adolescent years. As a teen, under the government of Khomeini, Satrapi was becoming a teenager with western pop culture influence shared with her by her socialist liberal parents, and this leads her audience to being introduced to the Morality Police who are no fans of teenage Satrapi's fashion or music. Satrapi is caught by the Iranian Morality Police: the same police now silencing those of the Hijab protests of 2022. Eventually as an adult, after returning from Austria to Iran, it is determined that Iran is no longer for Satrapi or safe for her, and she relocates permanently to France, at her parents' encouragement. The mash-up of these scenes from the film provide illustration to Satrapi's experiences:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0b4KPWEG0c> (Kellum, 2015) (Paronnaud & Satrapi, 2007). The media of the graphic novel and film teaches through *Persepolis* the restrictions and punishments toward women in Iran of the late 20th century, and the social media of the 21st century continues to show the oppressive horrors.

In the current hijab protests due to the death of Masha Amini, social media shows how the Iranian government and the Iranian Morality Police had made things worse for women than

they even were in the late 20th century; the death of Masha Amini was shown in international social media, and it served as a catalyst for the people Iran to revolt in protest, which has been going on since August of 2022, and is still growing throughout Iran in November of 2022. However, the news of the protests has gotten so intense that journalists are now fleeing the country due to the Iranian government and Morality Police struggling to contain the situation and the police are killing people en masse indiscriminately, including children (King & Winarnita, 2022). Also, the current coverage was from medics leaking information to the journalists at CNN as of November 21, 2022, (CNN, 2022) show the bravery of Iranians as they know that whether through protest or sharing of knowledge to the world, that the consequences are deadly, but there is going to be a big change happening in Iran soon, and everyone is watching as the use of differential media such as since the graphic novels and film of *Persepolis*, the audience has a front row seat to the restrictions and punishments toward women in Iran of the late 20th century, and the social media of the 21st century continues to show the oppressive horrors and the torture and death of Masha Amini and those who stand up to protest in her name: The women (and men) of Iran are proof that hashtag activism and social media provide a loud voice to share the violence toward women in Iran, and has even evolved to reach a wider audience than Satrapi had and still has. And in Iran, and around the world: “‘Women, life, freedom’ has become the signature call of this growing rebellion” (Horton, 2022). The contribution of this analysis of the connection between the autobiographical film (2007) and graphic novels (2003 and 2003) of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* with the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the current 2022 protests in Iran after the death of a Masha Amini will bring historical and current insight from primary and secondary refereed sources to keep the conversation of the rights of women going in Iran.

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