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Researched Analysis

The Importance of Choice

The conflict behind wearing veils in Muslim societies has been discussed time and time again in regards to its importance and relevance to the culture because of its oppression for Islamic women. Modern women who argue against the veil see it as a means of controlling their behavior and taking away civil liberties by enforcing its dress. Traditional women who favor the veil see it as a means of empowerment and modesty which leads to men respecting them in public spaces. In the biographical graphic novel *Persepolis* written by Marjane Satrapi, the author addresses this issue of the veil in a variety of occasions. Coming from her personal experiences with the veil, she expresses how it and the Muslim practices which enforce its wearing create an environment where women lack social liberties and freedom of expression. The way in which Muslim women's appearances and behaviors are controlled, especially in regards to veiling, creates an oppressive environment because women lack the basic human right of freedom of choice to express themselves.

David Selbourne discusses the restrictions placed upon women that dictate what behaviors and appearances, and punishments for defying those, are acceptable and unacceptable in his book *The Losing Battle with Islam*. Furthermore, Miriam Cooke argues in her novel *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* that while some disagree with the wearing of the veil, many use it as a tool of empowerment and a means of coming closer to their religion. In addition, Anna Secor conducted a study called *The Veil and Urban Space in Istanbul: Women's Dress, Mobility and Islamic Knowledge* that looks at how the veil empowers women by giving them mobility and a connection with their religion, but also discusses that such practices are founded on relations of power and control.

The obligation of wearing the veil in Muslim cultures is argued to be oppressive because of the strict and violent rules which are used to enforce and regulate women's veiling. In the first chapter of *Persepolis*, Marjane recalls the first time wearing the veil was enforced in schools and all other public domains – amidst the Islamic Revolution. At such a young age, she was not angered or upset by the implementation of wearing the veil but it confused her, “we didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to” (Satrapi 3). At such a young age, the obligatory rules of wearing the veil at school had no immediate effect on her self-image or perspective.

Even as a teen, the veil was merely an additional item of clothing to be worn when on the street. However, when Marjane encounters the guardians of the revolution later on in the novel, they threaten to arrest her for being improperly veiled due to her punk accessories and thus not abiding by the duties of Muslim women. This was Satrapi's first encounter where her freedom of expression was inhibited beyond just wearing the veil and she ran the risk of getting into serious trouble because of it. Thankfully she was wearing her veil, yet in a more extreme case, Selbourne writes about “the shooting dead...of two unveiled teenage schoolgirls waiting at a bus-stop” (Selbourne 84). This killing highlights how girls and young women are treated violently for expressing themselves in opposition to the norm. An extreme action such as this emphasizes how strongly people feel about women's appearances in Muslim cultures; the perpetrators took a stranger's individual choice as a personal attack or statement against their religion when in reality it is about personal choice and freedom of expression. While Marjane's encounter was not nearly as violent or horrific, one can see the prevalence for outsider interference and control on women's behavior in regards to veiling.

Getting ready to return home from her time studying abroad, Marjane pulls out her veil which had not been worn in years and places it upon her head while saying to herself, “I again put on my veil...and so much for my individual and social liberties” (Satrapi 245). Having experienced a life outside of Iran's dictatorship on women's dress she realized and understood that by being forced to veil herself she loses her individual self-expression and the equal liberty of choice over her body that she was granted as a woman in Europe. During her time in Europe, Marjane experimented with different hair styles and clothing options, her appearance often changing as she matured and went through different stages in her life. In addition, women in Europe are treated as equals, meaning they are given the same rights and freedoms as men; for example, Marjane was given the chance to embrace her sexuality – something unacceptable outside marriage in Iran. Returning to Iran after experiencing this liberal lifestyle, Satrapi became more aware of the oppressive culture on women; travelling to cultures distinct from where one grew up helps one gain insight into the culture and practices of their homeland because one becomes aware of customs that go unnoticed or taken for granted.

Iranian citizens and many other individuals from Muslim countries argue that “the rigorous necessity for heav[ily] veiling women [is that] their faces were declared to be a ‘source of corruption’ for men unrelated to them...[and] that ‘allowing women to mix with men’ was ‘the root of every evil and catastrophe’ and was ‘highly punishable’” (Selbourne 84). In most countries, women are highly sexualized. Through this quote, Selbourne argues that women's need to wear veils stems from their need to be untouched by the eyes of strangers – highlighting that in order to contain men's “uncontrollable” desire, a woman must cover herself to be protected. In addition, women are given the blame for this “corruption” when its man's urges which should be regulated and controlled. Similarly, Cooke states that “The reason that women must veil is not Qur'anic but rather because of men's, especially old men's, lechery” (Cooke 134). As men are seen to innately be unable to contain their sexual desire and lustfulness, Muslim societies – however, this mentality is found in many cultures, turn to controlling women's behaviors and abilities in order to avoid a “crime of passion”. So much emphasis is put upon women's bodies; they are oversexualized, often seen in a negative way, and treated as a woman's sole characteristic. Secor states that “Veiling has become part of the creation and symbolic representation of geographies of...exclusion based on gender” (Secor 10). The obsession with controlling women's appearances is rooted in gender stereotypes and men's presumed inability to control their actions and aggressive impulses. While veiling empowers some, the reasons for implementation are based on a need to control and disturb a woman's life so that men can live peacefully. Marjane experienced this first hand when she was late to catch her bus one day. Running in order to make it on time, Marjane was stopped by two guardians of the revolution who ordered her to stop running saying, “when you run, your behind makes movements that are...how do you say...obscene!” (Satrapi 301). In response, Marjane yells “well then don't look at my ass!” (Satrapi 301) This encounter illustrates how a woman's body is inherently viewed from a sexual point of view and then manipulated to reduce the sexuality. Marjane missed her bus because her need to run to make it in time was overcome by Iran's societal needs for women to not be sexual in any shape or form. While Satrapi's experience was not directly related to her veil, it deepens one's understanding of how woman's bodies and appearances are controlled to maintain the status quo.

At the root of the issue is the word “choice”. When Muslim women are granted the choice to veil themselves or not, it no longer becomes a symbol of oppression and subjugation but rather one that can be used to empower and honor their culture and religion if they so choose to wear a veil. In his book *The Losing Battle With Islam*, Selbourne compares the lives of Muslim women in Middle Eastern countries to those living in the United Kingdom. In terms of the choice to veil, Selbourne writes “women, and especially the girls, wait in hope of some freedoms that most of the rest of British [Muslim] citizens take for granted” (Selbourne 240). Here, Selbourne emphasizes how British Muslim women who are free to express themselves, through veiling or not veiling, take for granted this right while hundreds of thousands of women in other countries are not given the right to choose; it is governmentally mandated and enforced.

Societies with much Muslim influence create an oppressive environment for women due to the intense controlling of women's appearances and behaviors which revoke from women fundamental human rights of freedom of choice. Marjane Satrapi realizes and expresses these feelings about the veil in her novel *Persepolis*, seeing it as an object which removes her social liberties and individuality, making her and all the other women identical. The veil itself is not oppressive or harmful, it's quite beautiful actually. But it becomes oppressive when a woman's body is seen as inherently sexual so that it needs to be forcefully controlled to ensure modesty. The matter of choice is all societies need to grant their citizens, because once an individual's choice is revoked the system becomes one of oppression.

Reflection

When expanding my research rhetorical analysis I mainly focused on editing and adding more detail where needed. Following Jenny's feedback, I made a few grammatical changes, but mainly focused on added sentences analyzing and explaining the significance of a quote, adding transitions between paragraphs, and ensuring that each paragraph was tied back to *Persepolis* and Marjane. My Works Cited page also had some errors which I corrected and added. Originally, I considered adding another paragraph to include some of my other thoughts about the topic; however, it did not directly relate to *Persepolis* and ultimately I believed it would disrupt the flow of the essay.

Works Cited

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