WOMEN AND RELIGION POST 1979 REVOLUTION: DISMANTLING ANDROCENTRIC DISCOURSES IN ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM OF IRAN

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Abstract: "If anyone ever asks you what you do during the day, say you pray, you understand?" (*PI* 75) When religion becomes a compulsion, as evident in the post 1979 Iran, can it be faith anymore? Even though Marji in *Persepolis* has a strong faith in God, her faith has less to do with the amount of prayers she is required to make. *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* (2003)and *Persepolis: The Story of Homecoming* (2004), written by Marjane Satrapi chronicles the times prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and its aftermath. In the graphic memoir, the theme of religion is paradoxically portrayed to what it is supposed to be. This dichotomy becomes evident in the way Marji speaks with God and the later, the imposition of wearing '*hijab*' in post Revolutionary Iran by the Islamic Fundamentalists. In the contemporary period, religious teachings that justified gender hierarchy advocating male domination have come under the onslaught of the feminist movement. As a result, some of the organized religions had to modify their stance on women, marking the beginning of the contested debate between Islamic modernism and Islamic fundamentalism. Thus, the paper addresses two diverse discourses of the Islamic codes on women and their respective ideological politics that enfolds both the personal and the political, thereby highlighting the relationship between religion and women. This paper analyses these issues by particularly narrowing the gaze on Iranian political scenario using Satrapi's *Persepolis*.

Keywords: Iranian Revolution, Islamic Modernism, Islamic Fundamentalism, Religion and gendered discourse.

Introduction: In the contemporary period, religious teachings that justified gender hierarchy advocating male domination have come under the onslaught of the feminist movement. As a result some of the organized religions had to modify their stance on women, marking the beginning of the contested debate between Islamic modernism and Islamic fundamentalism. Thus, the paper addressed two diverse discourses of the Islamic codes on women and their respective ideological politics that enfolds both the personal and the political, thereby highlighting the relationship between religion and women.

As Mansoor Moaddel notes, *"in 'Islamic Fundamentalism', women are instructed to cover their bodies from head to toe with the exception of the face and hands, barred from performing certain social functions, given an inferior status to men, and preached to accept polygamy. In 'Islamic Modernism', in contrast, a group of theologians advanced a modernist exegesis of the Quran, arriving at an Islamic Feminist conception of gender relations. These scholars championed women's right to education and involvement in social affairs, questioned the existing restriction on women, criticized men's attitude and behavior towards women, and rejected polygamy"* (108).

Thus, the position of women in the society has been one of the most contested issues in the ideological debates between the Islamic World and Islamic Feminist and also, West in the contemporary times. Since the nineteenth century, Europe and its Westernized allies have predominantly condemned Islam for the gendered hierarchy Islam preaches, resulting in diverse response of the Islamic scholars. While Islamic Fundamentalists have outrightly attacked West for its cultural decadence, Islamic modernists, around the turn of the century, have advanced a modern exegesis of Quran arriving at an equitable Islamic conception of gender relation. Ironically, both Modernists and Fundamentalists claim their views to be rooted in the Islamic belief system, while engaging themselves with quite disparate Islamic notion of the status and role of women in the Islamic family system as well as the society. This paper thus, addresses these issues by particularly narrowing the gaze on Iranian political scenario using Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood* (2003) and *Persepolis: The Story of Homecoming* (2004).

The Revolution of 1979 led to a major shift in the arena of culture and politics in Iran. The capitalistic ways of life and modernized culture grown largely during Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was seen sacrilegious by the Islamic doctrine. This revolution, sparked by religious fundamentalists, led to Shah's overthrow from the monarchical power. It ushered in an Islamic regime, led by Ayatollah Khaomeini, replacing a pro-western monarchy for anti-western dictatorial theocracy, where maneuvering gender issue as a source of legitimacy has been a recurrent phenomenon of consolidation of power in this state – clergy strife. The persistent contest between gender and regime has prolonged the politicizing of norms of veiling and unveiling. The secular state under Shah's

rule attempted to undermine the potency of the clergy by stripping them of control over women, by enforcing unveil. Conversely, when the clergy when came in power, it redefined the status of women by making veil compulsory and thereby, relocating women as the focal point of the Islamization process. Maneuvering gender issue as a source of legitimacy has been a recurrent phenomenon of consolidation of power in this state – clergy strife. The persistent contest between gender and regime has prolonged the politicizing of norms of veiling and unveiling. The secular state under Shah's rule attempted to undermine the potency of the clergy by stripping them of control over women, by enforcing unveil. Conversely, when the clergy when came in power, it redefined the status of women by making veil compulsory and thereby, relocating women as the focal point of the Islamization process. Thus, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Islam and Islamic movement have been the central tenets within which debates on women and gender have been placed. Religion and religious ideology have been singled out to explain the subordination of women. Under the Republic policies of Islam, the state obsessively, at times violently, regulates its heteronormative codes, the onus of which lies on women.

Satrapi, in her graphic memoir Persepolis, narrates how as a young girl of ten, she was obliged to wear veil in a school and was subjected to the religious ritual mourning of breast beating for the martyrs of the Iran – Iraq war. "The regime had understood that one person leaving her house while asking herself – 'Are my trousers long enough?', 'Is my veil in place?', 'Can my make – up be seen?', 'Are they going to whip me?', no longer asks herself – 'Where is my freedom of thought?', 'Where is my freedom of speech?', 'My life, is it livable?', states Marjane Satrapi in *Pesepolis: The Story of Homecoming* (148). Veil has therefore, been the ultimate cultural signifier in Middle East, appropriated by both West and the Islam with various motives, reflecting not merely the change in the regime of the state but also the struggle between the state and the clergy over women's sexuality, highlighting how women have been the focal point of both Westernizing and Islamizing process.

Although veil is symptomatic of a systematic repression of women, it is also adopted as a conscious political choice, an idea which Satrapi's narrative remains ignorant to. Veil and its representations are therefore indispensable for post-colonial feminist critique, to emphasize the understanding of a localized meaning rather than accepting a universal knowledge from the Western vantage point. Yet Satrapi's narrative portrays a series of events that counter stereotypical representations of Muslim women as passive victims, emphasizing their autonomous individual selves beneath the veil.While

stating the gendered interpretation of Quran, Asma Burlas emphasizes that issues in such hierarchies of gender relation is not so much that a specific sex has been ascribed to the God, but that a specific meaning has been ascribed to this sex historically, that has served to legitimize the sexual hierarchy. As such, the appropriation of the sacred knowledge to engender or sexualize God and thereby, to humanize and anthromorphise God as male also underwrites male privilege. Thus, it is this exclusiveness of the male symbolism that reinforces gender stereotypes and sexual oppression (Burlas 94 – 95). Burlas further questions the patriarchal edifice of Islam as a religion and states how Islam need not be read as a patriarchal religion. She states, *I[i]f by patriarchy, we mean father – rule and/ or politics of male privilege based in theories of sexual differentiation. Both forms of patriarchy [religion and society] associate male/ masculine with the Self, knowledge, truth, and sovereignty, while representing the women as different, unequal or the "Other"* (93).

A persistent theme revolving around all the religious ideology involves the status of women around the deity and society. Female deities were predominant in the religions of the ancient world. However, in theologically more mature religions this positive image of female deity was made to disappear, thereafter, resulting in a designation of inferior status to women. Women were considered a dangerous, and threatening source of temptation to the male celibacy, endowed with a lower aptitude and hence, completely dependent on men. Moaddel cites how Christian women were instructed to be compliant and obedient wives to their husbands. While Muslim women were veiled form the strangers, Jewish were denied opportunity to study Torah, and Chinese and Hindu women were denied the opportunity to read the Confucian and the Vedas, respectively. Thus, under the onslaught of the contemporary feminists, the practices of male privilege have come to be questioned and the established religions are made to modify their stance.

The religious teachings on women in the aftermath of 1979 Revolution were produced within the context of Islamic Fundamentalist movement and in reaction to the Shah's modernization policies. Thus, to mark the beginning of an era in opposition to the Shah's rule and his Western cultural decadence, gender segregation and male domination came to be considered as Iran's traditional culture. The imposition of *hijab* in post revolutionary Iran signified a battle between women and the State over the control of the individual's body and personal space. With the rise of Islamic discourse as the dominant organizational system, the issue of *hijab* or 'veiling' as compulsory gained an added relevance. Mortaza Motahhari's *The Problem of Veiling* became

the standard expose of women's social role with the coming of Islamic Fundamentalists. Motahhari argues that "besides the many practical deviations that have been created in regards to veiling, this and other issues related to women have become a vehicle for a group of impure individuals and mercenaries in order to generate controversies about the holy religion of Islam, and our youth, not property guided from the religious standpoint, are influenced by these controversies" (xi-xii). By equating unveiling with nudity and then reducing it to the level of an endemic, he claims it unveiling as "without doubt the phenomenon of 'nudity' is the disease of our era".

The imposition of *hijab* in post revolutionary Iran signified a battle between women and the State over the control of the individual's body and personal space. This battle was taken up by those women who did not identify with the Islamic cause. It was these women and the power struggle which presented the most serious threat to the legitimacy of Islamic revolution's policy of *hijab* as the protector of Islamic family. Satrapi can be placed within the set of revolutionaries who did not identify with the Islamic Fundamentalists. Iran born and 'Lycee Francais' educated Marji, is made aware of the rigidity of the Islamic regime by her parents who stage their own rebellion by drinking wine and having parties at home. Inevitably, Marji goes about denouncing the rigid world views of Iran by incorporating western fads and practices in the traditional landscape. Not only she wears denim jacket and Nike shoes, but also gets a Michael Jackson button stitched to it along with the *hijab* interposed by the religious fundamentalists. Marji is also shown head banging to Iron Maiden music and singing Kim Wilde songs, a symbol of decadence, strictly forbidden in the Iranian society. The fashionable shapes and colours of their so – called Islamic uniforms, their mild make up faces and their thin tights made them a distinguishable cast. This group of women were identified by the authorities as violators of the spirit of segregation rules and were targeted for re – education and punishment. A new term '*bad- hijabi women*' was invented to describe women whose *hijab* didn't adequately cover them to make them anonymous enough. However on the other hand, contemporary visual and traditional print media has led to an unquestioned representation of Muslim women, particularly women of Middle East as passive victims, silenced and oppressed by patriarchal Islamic societies. Veil and its representations are therefore, indispensable for post-colonial feminist critique, to emphasize the understanding of a localized meaning rather than accepting a universal knowledge from the western vantage point. Although veil is symptomatic of a systematic repression of women, the graphic

novels of Satrapi portrays a series of events that counter such stereotypical representations emphasizing their autonomous individual selves beneath. To state an instance, Satrapi comes back to Iran and finds her friends in veil resembling "heroines of American TV series" (*Persepolis II* 105). Adopting western standards of beauty and wearing makeup is not a slavish imitation of the western culture but in fact "an act of resistance on their part". This act of resistance, even though subtle, complicates the western stereotype of Iranian veiled women as passively submissive.

Since Iran's encounter with modernity, as already stated, there has been an increase in the social awareness on the part of women as active agents, giving rise to a women question or *mas'aleyeh zan* in Iran, whose boundaries has been designed by the Islamic regime, which sought to construct a monolithic image of 'ideal Muslim women'. However, at turn of the century, the practice has diversified in incorporation of both the traditionalist and modernist elements in the Islamic regime, giving rise to 'Islamic Feminism'. The emergence of Islamic feminism as an indigenous Islamist women's group has been challenging, time and again, various policies designed for women form within the State. Contrary to the economic and ideological status of Satrapi, who belonged to non – practicing Marxist Muslim family, Helen Watson says, commentators who identify themselves both as Muslim and feminist aim at the potential emancipation of Muslim as represented by Islam, stressing that the 'true message' of the Quran was altered and distorted by interpretations which sought to preserve the patriarchal pre – Islamic traditions (147). Fatima Mernissi has argued that the manipulation of the Quranic scripture is nothing more than "a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies. Since all power from the seventh century on was legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false (pre – Islamic) traditions" (*Veil and the Male Elite* 9). Satrapi in similar terms challenges the stereotypical binaries employed for the portrayal of parochial Middle Eastern family and representation of Muslim women. Thus, the paper addresses women's position focalizing on the ideals proposed by Islamic feminism, which provides an alternative to the notion of the 'Muslim woman', while challenging regime's gender policies and marking the closure of the dichotomous construction – of the West and the East, of modernism and Islamism as exclusionary classifications, thereby giving Iranian Muslim women opportunities to reflect themselves in both feminist and cultural identity.

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