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# BEYOND THE VEIL: GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF ISLAMIC WOMEN

By Jackie Duncan, *Mount Vernon Nazarene University*



Few symbols have the ability to polarize public opinion as the image of the veil. It has long been stigmatized as a form of oppression or a “symbol of backwardness...a visual cue to bolster claims of the rise in Islamic militancy.”<sup>1</sup> The majority of work written on the practice of veiling view it through a lens of assimilation. From this perspective, the veil becomes a road block to acculturation. The ambiguity of the identity of Islamic woman compounds this issue, so interpretation relies largely on the visual symbol of the veil, or *hijab*, as it is more commonly referred. This interpretation is largely problematic because she is not allowed an identity beyond the superficial. This perspective is directly challenged in the graphic novel *Persepolis* and the comic *Qahera*. *Persepolis* is a memoir of Marjane Satrapi’s coming of age in Iran during the fundamentalist revolution of the 1980s. *Qahera* is an online comic created by nineteen year old art student and native Egyptian, Deena Mohamed, that focuses on confronting women’s rights issues within Egypt. Both texts use provocative images of the veil to articulate a new understanding of the practice. This understanding centers around key issues for the contemporary Islamic woman: freedom, identity, and otherness. To develop a concrete understanding of these issues the practice and purpose of veiling needs to be established.

At the very core of the practice of veiling lies a deep respect for modesty within the public sphere. Islamic etiquette dictates that “the interaction between the sexes are based on good manners, formal behavior, decent and temperate language, and modest clothing.”<sup>2</sup> Both men and women have specific codes of conduct, but the veil is the most obvious marker of such practices. In other words, “honor and reputation are thus considered sacrosanct in Islam.”<sup>3</sup> The veil, in its most basic form, acts as a woman’s ticket to enter the public sphere while maintaining the form of modesty prescribed in the Qur’an. This is where interpretations can be gleaned that twist this context, and use veiling as a form of confinement and oppression for women. Modesty and the veil are ubiquitous terms within the Islamic. Within this sense of ubiquity, the practice of wearing a *hijab* resonates within a three-dimensional narrative: “The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight...The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. And finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden.”<sup>4</sup> The *hijab* is more than merely a scarf. It is a symbol of both faith and piety. This symbol creates a dichotomy when analyzing the concept of freedom in regards to the female protagonists within these graphic texts.

The form of freedom that is most intriguing within these texts deals with a juxtaposition of mobility. In the comic *Qahera*, every time she thwarts a would be aggressor, it is by a specific means; the loss of mobility. In Mohamed’s first comic, *Qahera* takes a staff across the kneecaps of the four men who were on the verge of assaulting a young woman (see fig. 1). This is symbolic because of the vital nature of the kneecap to the fluidity of movement. The shattering of this crucial component handicaps the aggressor, simultaneously putting him in a position of weakness. The men are then suspended off the ground by means of a chain link fence (see fig. 2). Suspending the aggressor is a common theme among Mohamed’s work. All of the antagonists who cross the path of *Qahera* end up in a sort of stasis, suspended and helpless. This loss of mobility takes on a different form in *Persepolis*.

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<sup>1</sup> Nayebzadah, Rahela. “Perceptions of the Veil: (Un)Veiling the Veiled Muslim Woman.” *MP Journal* 3, no. 1 (2010): 93-128. *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost (accessed Nov 4, 2013), 94.

<sup>2</sup> Hasan, Khola. “Hijab: A Symbol of Modesty or Seclusion?” *Islam and the Veil: Theoretical and Regional Contexts*. Ed. Theodore P. C. Gabriel and Rabiha Hannan. London: Continuum, 2011. 116-26. Print, 120.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Mernissi, Fatima. “The Hijab, the Veil.” In *The veil and the male elite: a feminist interpretation of women’s rights in Islam*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1991, 93-94.

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In one scene from the novel, after the fundamentalist regime has been founded, Marjane leaves her apartment, adhering to the new dress code by wearing a veil, but she is also wearing a denim jacket, jeans, sneakers, and a Michael Jackson button (see fig. 3). Each of these items are markers of western culture which potentially make her a target because of the divergent dress. She is stopped on the street by the women's branch of the Guardians of the Revolution and threatened to be taken to their headquarters for some type of punishment as described here: "They didn't have to inform my parents. I could be whipped. In short, anything could happen to me."<sup>5</sup> Her freedom is threatened because of her westernized dress, which is seen as flagrant disregard for the agenda of the Iranian fundamentalist regime. Mobility goes hand in hand with freedom in this context. Her ability to be seen in the public sphere is threatened due the act of embracing a variant form of dress. Freedom, in terms of the veil, is constant in both texts, but presented in different contexts which is potentially problematic.

Mohamed's character adheres to the codes of modesty that give her both agency and freedom to act. This places her in a position of power that is both physical and moral. She flips the paradigm regarding the veil as a form of oppression, and places her protagonist in a position to have a tangible impact within her world while wearing a *hijab*. *Qahera* becomes a positive force for the betterment of her community while wearing the *hijab* with pride. In contrast, Satrapi's freedom is threatened because of her rebellion against the confines of the new regime she is now living under in Iran. She becomes a symbol of both rebellion and divergence that is brought to heel under the threat of violence. This fragmented representation of the practice of veiling reveals a greater issue that deals not with the *hijab*, but with the terms under which the practice is observed. This directly relates back to the power of interpretation, and the potential it has to warp an ideology. The veil can also be associated with protection in both texts due to the lack of retaliation against *Qahera* for her actions, and Satrapi's eventual adherence to the practice so that she can participate in her new environment. The freedom to choose whether to practice veiling or not is what both texts are essentially referring to. Satrapi uses her rebellious spirit to approach the issue, while *Qahera* is imbued with superpowers to become a visible symbol of power under a veil. This fragmented identity, present within the theme of freedom, can also be seen in the artwork of both texts.

Graphic representation of text does "not require less interpretation than prose but *more*."<sup>6</sup> Scott McCloud put it rather eloquently when he stated that "cartooning as a form of amplification through simplification. When we abstract an image through cartooning, we are not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details."<sup>7</sup> This medium brings more gravity to the experiences being conveyed to the reader. A picture becomes a conduit that does not require text to understand meaning. These texts use "a complex strategy for the representation of events and perspectives that may be difficult to communicate only through words."<sup>8</sup> This communication works within a forum of accessibility as well. The use of pictures over prose allows consumption by an audience that may not have access to the formal education that ensures literacy. The power of this medium lies within its accessibility and engagement.

The black and white imagery in both texts poses an interesting comparison. It could be argued that Satrapi's choice in using a black and white palette in her work was more a choice of expense over artistic expression. Yet Jan Baetens argues that "black and white is chosen for other reasons than just cost-effectiveness: particular artistic choices regarding form, line, and color play here an eminent role, and too strong an emphasis on financial

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<sup>5</sup> Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. 134.

<sup>6</sup> Darda, Joseph. "Graphic Ethics: Theorizing the Face in Marjane Satrapi's 'Persepolis.'" *College Literature* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 31-51. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed Nov 18, 2013). 33.

<sup>7</sup> McCloud, Scott. "The Vocabulary of Comics." In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Davis, Rocío G. "A Graphic Self." *Prose Studies* 27, no. 3 (December 2005): 264-279. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed Nov 9, 2013). 268.

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aspects would miss the point of this kind of work.”<sup>9</sup> Using this context to structure an interpretation of Satrapi’s novel, the absence of color takes on a new role. The stark imagery, coupled with the simplicity of the drawings “reflects and resonates with the perspective of its child protagonist.”<sup>10</sup> The simplicity of her work can also be attributed to a sense of equality as seen through the eyes of a child (see fig. 4). Every character has the same basic look, creating a palette of equality between the shifting faces of Satrapi’s narrative. This equality sets an interesting backdrop when looking at some of the issues that are faced within the novel. Satrapi encounters classism, sexism, fundamentalism, tradition, war, and religion all while keeping the same simplistic interpretation of her surroundings. The equality she sees alive in her world can not be stripped from her and that resilience is evident visually to the reader. Khola Hasan makes it very clear how equality is represented within the Qur’an in the essay “*Hijab: A Symbol of Modesty or Seclusion*”:

*For there is no doubt the Qur’an sees women as equal members of the human race, with an equal spiritual presence, equal accountability before their Lord for their actions, equal free will and freedom of conscience, equal liability for their dealings with other human beings, and an equal responsibility to obey divine commandments.*<sup>11</sup>

The repetitive use of equal brings attention to the imperative nature of changing this mindset. Satrapi’s work can be seen as a return to an interpretation of the Qur’an that is based on the teachings, rather than a fundamentalist interpretation. Where *Persepolis* approaches art with an uncomplicated air, Mohamed has a more nuanced approach to her comic.

Mohamed’s work relies on a similar palette of black and white, with the addition of grey. The use of grey is restricted to *Qahera* only (see fig. 5). Her robes and veil bear the only swipes of pewter throughout the series, except for the occasional use within a background. This use of grey intentionally sets the protagonist apart visually within her black and white landscape. It is visual evidence that this woman is set apart from her environment. Superpowers and a strong agenda for Islamic women’s rights are further affirmation of this fact. The grey also symbolizes something else far more complex. *Qahera* exists in a world of absolutes. Whether she is the battling some form of misogyny or white savior complex, her world is made up of polarized ideologies that are represented within the black and white palette of the comic. The introduction of grey symbolizes a new order or ideology. Her veiling is not a form of oppression or adherence to inequality. She is expressing her right to practice both her religion and tradition within the practice of veiling. *Qahera* represents a new form of the Islamic woman, one that does not bend to the constraints of outside sources. The same can be said of Satrapi in her struggle to establish her identity “between cultural, political, religious, linguistic and social demands and impositions.”<sup>12</sup> In her battle to establish her identity, she is providing a foundation for a complicated persona that can not be simplified by the aesthetic of veiling (see fig. 6). Instead, she poses an alternative formula presented in a hybrid nature that embodies elements of different ideologies. Both interpretations offer an understanding for a more complex interpretation of the Islamic women through their perceptions of the veil. A complexity that is compounded by veiling being stamped as an inherent symbol of otherness.

Women of Islam who choose to observe the custom of veiling “cannot escape being marked as other.”<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> Baetens, Jan. “From Black & White to Color and Back: What Does It Mean (not) to Use Color?” *College Literature* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 111-128. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed Nov 4, 2013). 112.

<sup>10</sup> Davis. “A Graphic Self,” 271.

<sup>11</sup> Hasan. “Hijab,” 115-116.

<sup>12</sup> Davis. “A Graphic Self,” 273.

<sup>13</sup> Abdurraqib, Samaa. “Hijab” Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature.” *Melus* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 55-70. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed Nov 18, 2013). 56.

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veil acts a marker of otherness due to the dualism of the practice being both an inclusive and exclusive custom. *Qahera* embraces this otherness, and the veil becomes a resurrected symbol that she is wielding and redefining. In every comic, *Qahera* is hobbling some ideology that potentially oppresses or misrepresents Islamic women. Whether she is battling sexual harassment, white savior ideologies, or sexism, she is presenting a new perspective of Islamic women. A perspective that is rooted in strength and independence. *Qahera* states this fact much more eloquently when dealing with the FEMEN group who are trying to strip her of her veil to free her from oppression, “You seem unable to understand that we do not need your help.”<sup>14</sup> *Qahera* is in direct opposition to those that think women of Islam have no voice. Samaa Abdurraqib posits that “Muslim women who choose to veil are constantly combating the discursive construction that labels them as always oppressed, it becomes difficult to hear voices that assert otherwise.”<sup>15</sup> *Qahera* stands as a symbol of one voice that asserts otherwise. Satrapi’s voice on the matter forms a different interpretation of the practice through the lens of otherness and exclusion.

In *Persepolis*, Satrapi’s forced observation of veiling pushes her into a state of rebellion, which is ultimately exclusionary when her parents send her to Austria at the end of the novel, because they fear that she will eventually be killed for her outspoken ways. As Satrapi’s father states when he is breaking the news to a teenage Satrapi, “We feel it’s better for you to be far away and happy than close by and miserable. Judging by the situation here, you’ll be better off somewhere else.”<sup>16</sup> She is purged from her homeland in order to save her life. This exclusion, coupled with the inclusive nature of *Qahera*, creates a fragmented identity associated with the Muslim woman. It breaks this one dimensional view of an entire culture and thwarts those who “attempt to read individual characters as representative of all Muslim women.”<sup>17</sup>

*Persepolis* and *Qahera* offer different interpretations of the contemporary Islamic women that coalesce into a multifaceted and complex identity that goes beyond the practice of veiling. The veil is an observance of faith that does not define the Islamic female as a subject of oppression. Instead it offers a forum to ask questions and try to understand another culture and faith. The veil should not cease a conversation, but facilitate an avenue of acceptance that promotes growth of both mind and soul. Both of these texts foster an environment that leads to this type of enlightenment by using provocative images of the veil to explore the issues of freedom, identity, and otherness.

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<sup>14</sup> Mohamed, Deena. “Qahera.” *Qahera*. <http://qahera.tumblr.com> (accessed November 23, 2013).

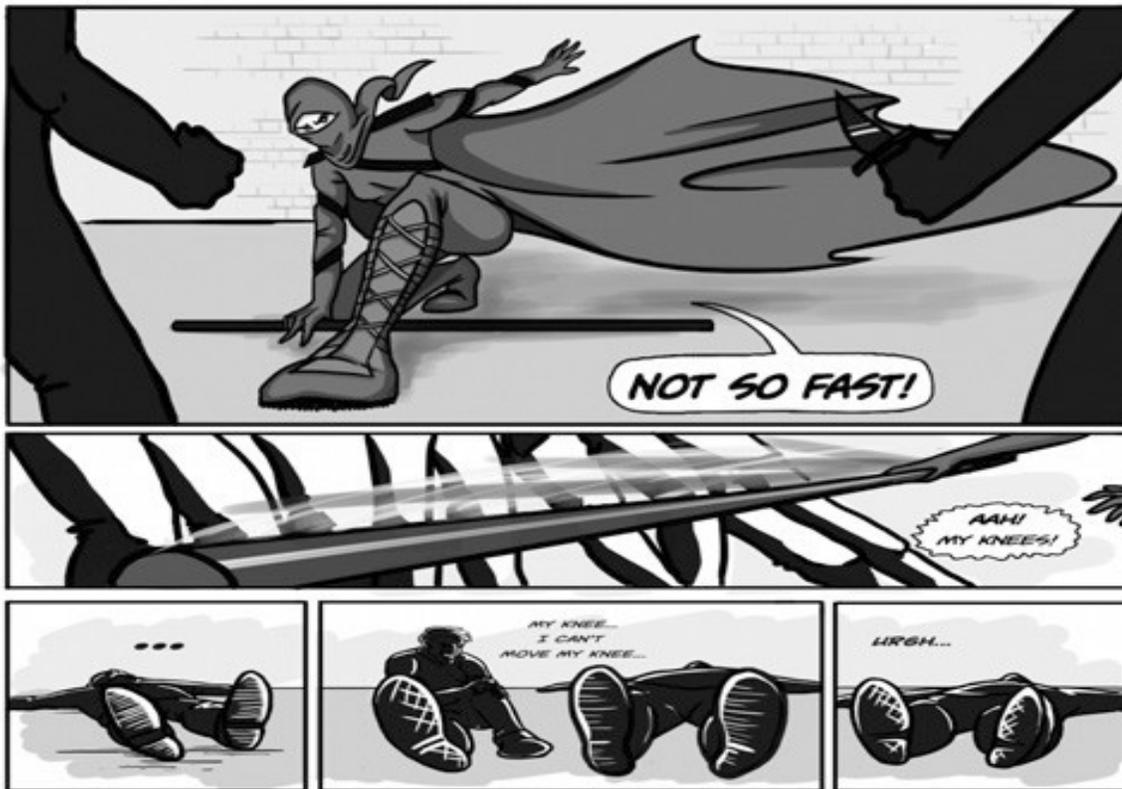
<sup>15</sup> Abdurraqib. “Hijab” Scenes, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Satrapi. *The Complete Persepolis*, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Abdurraqib. “Hijab” Scenes, 63.

**FIG. 1.** Qahera thwarting men who engaged in sexual harassment.

(Mohamed, Deena. *Qahera*. Tumbler, Cario. Sept 2, 2013. Graphic. <http://qahera.tumblr.com>)



**FIG. 2.** Qahera disposing of the men who were sexually harassing a woman.

(Mohamed, Deena. *Qahera*. tumbler, Cario. Sept 2, 2013. Graphic. <http://qahera.tumblr.com>)





**FIG. 5.** The use of grey to set apart Qahera is evident here.  
(Mohamed, Deena. Qahera. tumblr, Cario. July 20, 2013. Graphic. <http://qahera.tumblr.com>)



**FIG. 6.** This scene shows the hybrid identity of Satrapi taking place.  
(Satrapi, Marjane. The Complete Persepolis. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007. 6. Print.)



**FIG. 7.** This scene show the altercation between Qahera and FEMEN.  
(Mohamed, Deena. Qahera. tumblr, Cario. July 20, 2013. Graphic. <http://qahera.tumblr.com>)



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