

Unveiling Voices and Empowering Narratives: A Comprehensive Exploration of Islamic Feminism in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

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Abstract

This literature paper delves into the intricate layers of Islamic feminism within Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis*. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of post-revolutionary Iran, providing a nuanced examination of the lives of Iranian women amid political and social transformations. Through a thorough analysis of female characters, with a focus on Marjane's experiences and those of her counterparts, the paper explores instances of resistance and agency as women navigate societal expectations. The concept of Islamic Feminism is introduced and contextualized, tracing its evolution, key principles, and objectives, while highlighting its role in challenging traditional gender norms within Islamic values. The historical and cultural background of Iran during the depicted period, encompassing the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath, sets the stage for feminist discourse.

Examining specific scenes and dialogues, the paper identifies and analyses elements in the narrative that reflect Islamic Feminist ideas, illustrating how Satrapi skilfully navigates the intersection of feminism and Islamic culture. Challenges and criticisms surrounding the application of the Islamic Feminism label to *Persepolis* are addressed, considering perspectives from both proponents and sceptics. The study concludes by discussing the potential impact of *Persepolis* on readers' understanding of Islamic Feminism and its broader contribution to conversations about feminism within Islamic contexts. Through a comprehensive examination, it highlights the significance of embracing diverse perspectives and employing dynamic approaches to comprehend the complexities of women's experiences within the Islamic context. By integrating *ijtihad* and pluralist, liberal-rationalist, and contextual approaches, it aims to unveil voices and empower narratives, ultimately fostering gender equality and justice for all. This abstract encapsulates the essence of the findings, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of Islamic feminism as pictured in *Persepolis*.

Keywords: Islamic Feminism, Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis, Post-Revolutionary Iran, Female Agency, Resistance, Feminist Discourse

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, a new wave of feminists has emerged, with women's issues taking center stage in modern Islamic discussions. Across Muslim-majority countries, individuals ranging from Muslim and secular feminists to those in positions of political authority seek Islamic-based solutions to contemporary challenges stemming from evolving gender dynamics. Increasingly, women are advocating for equality and actively participating in the political landscape of the Muslim world. Additionally, women are engaging in religious and cultural spheres to drive change and improve the status of women within Islamic societies. A topic of scholarly debate revolves around the classification of such solutions as "feminist" and whether they authentically represent women's perspectives. This leads to the question of whether the term "Islamic feminism" accurately captures the essence of these movements. In alignment with Moghissi's perspective, the term "Islamic feminism" is viewed within the broader context of contemporary feminism, which encompasses diverse ideologies, orientations, and geographic origins (1999, p.125). Feminism now encompasses a spectrum of beliefs, ranging from conservative to radical, religious to atheist, and individualistic to community-oriented, spanning various racial and cultural backgrounds. Given this expansive landscape, the question of whether a distinct category of feminism, self-identified or labeled by others as "Islamic feminism," is necessary appears redundant.

Islamic feminism, as outlined by Middle Eastern historian Margot Badran, is described as a global phenomenon. It is not a product of East or West. Indeed, it transcends East and West.... Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they be from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities. Islamic feminism is also growing in Muslim Diaspora and convert communities in the West. Islamic feminism is circulating increasing frequency in cyberspace (2002, p.3).

The fundamental methodologies of Islamic feminism, according to Badran, include "the classic Islamic methodologies of *ijtihad*

(independent investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an)." Additionally, Islamic feminists utilize "methods and tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc." In this process, they draw from their own experiences and questions as women. They emphasize, as elucidated by Badran, "that classical, and also much of post-classical, interpretation was based on men's experiences, male-centered questions, and the overall patriarchal societies in which they lived." The new generation of Islamic feminists, particularly in Iran, is thus incorporating significant postmodern concepts (2002, p.4).

Persepolis is a graphic novel written by Marjane Satrapi, an Iranian-born author and illustrator. Published in 2000, It is a powerful autobiographical work that recounts Satrapi's childhood and adolescence in Iran, particularly during the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Marjane Satrapi employs a unique visual storytelling style in *Persepolis*, using stark black-and-white illustrations to convey her personal experiences and reflections on the political and social upheavals in Iran. The narrative follows her journey from a spirited and outspoken young girl to a politically aware woman who eventually leaves her homeland. In the context of Islamic feminism, *Persepolis* provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by women in Iran, offering a nuanced portrayal of the impact of Islamic fundamentalism on their lives. Satrapi's narrative sheds light on the restrictive gender norms and the limitations imposed on women's autonomy within the framework of the Islamic Republic. Through her personal experiences, she navigates the complexities of identity, rebellion, and the quest for individual freedom within the constraints of a patriarchal society. Islamic feminism, as a theoretical framework, seeks to reconcile Islamic teachings with feminist principles, advocating for gender equality within an Islamic context.

In *Persepolis*, one can explore how Marjane Satrapi's narrative engages with Islamic feminism by critically examining the intersections of religion, gender, and power. The graphic novel offers a platform to analyse the ways in which women in Iran negotiate their identities and agency in the face of socio-political changes guided by Islamic principles. The graphic novel serves as a compelling literary work that not only narrates a personal coming-of-age story but also provides a lens through which to examine the intersection of Islamic principles and feminist ideologies. This paper aims to dissect the portrayal of Islamic feminism within *Persepolis* delving into the evolution and manifestation of feminist ideologies in the context of Islamic values. In the intricate tapestry of *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi blends personal anecdotes with societal transformations, prompting an exploration into instances of resistance, agency, and the subversion of conventional gender norms. By placing the novel within the historical and cultural context of Iran during the depicted era, this analysis aims to unveil the diverse ways in which *Persepolis* enriches the conversation on Islamic feminism. Drawing insights from scholarly works on Islamic feminism and graphic novels, this examination seeks to illuminate the nuanced intersections of feminism and Islamic culture evident in the pages of *Persepolis*. Through this in-depth exploration, the paper endeavours to provide a holistic comprehension of how Satrapi's narrative navigates and challenges established gender norms, thereby contributing significantly to the broader discourse on feminism and cultural identity.

According to Mersedeh Dad Mohammadi's "Reading More than Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*" (Mohammadi, 2016, p.22), Satrapi's stance in support of women's emancipation has positioned her as a figure associated with feminism. She acknowledges the perception of some French feminist circles regarding her as an advocate of an ideology proclaiming female superiority over men (Satrapi, 2004). Chute, for instance, asserts that *Persepolis* is distinctly feminist in its content and argues that the text exemplifies a feminist methodology in its form (2008, p.94). Despite these feminist interpretations, Satrapi herself disavows the label of a feminist advocate. She expresses discomfort with the notion of being associated with such perspectives, highlighting her reluctance to participate in what she perceives as a superficial understanding of feminism. Thus, Satrapi's public statements underscore her lack of alignment with conventional 'feminism,' emphasizing her nuanced perspective on women's issues.

These sick feminists, they believe that since they have shown their legs and their breasts, they are very free. The idea that they look down at these women just because they're putting a veil on their head, it is just too much, and I didn't want to participate in that at all. It would make me feel dirty, really (Satrapi, n.d.).

To dissect Satrapi's deliberate disassociation from feminism, an exploration of the historical evolution of women's concerns across three distinct stages becomes essential. According to Alldred and Dennison, in the nineteenth century, "European" feminist critique initially addressed the male-centric nature of society, with the initial women's movement emerging as a response to socio-political exclusion and advocating for "equality and integration" (Saadallah, 2004, p. 216). The second wave of feminism, self-defined in the 1960s, faced criticism, notably the claim that it did not adequately represent all women, particularly women of colour who experienced multiple oppressions based on race, gender, and class (Zack, 2005, p.1-2). Satrapi appears to position herself against this prevailing attitude within Second-Wave feminism. The Third Wave, according to Saadallah, challenges notions of unity and collectively, embracing diversity and responding to emerging issues rather than fitting all women into structures conceptualized by the Second Wave (2004, p.219). However, Zack emphasizes the need for Third-Wave feminism to be more inclusive, rejecting the transformation of biological differences into barriers and urging recognition of common selfhood across all women (2005, p.23). Despite this ideal, Third-Wave feminism, rooted in differences of race, gender, or sex, still grapples with an imperial dynamic and struggles to fully account for complex factors of identity and experience, such as religion (Seedat, 2013, p.28)

Yet 'religion' is a factor that intersects other identity categories, and like other categories can also be sub-divided. The religious and spiritual can be broken down according to tradition, denomination, or any number of variances which can add layers of complexity to how women define themselves. In overlooking religion, third wave feminism brackets out the complicated work religions do, in their many complex forms, in people's lives. (Llewellyn, et. al., 2013, p. 250).

Satrapi's primary concern regarding feminism revolves around what she identifies as "exclusive feminism," wherein she perceives the term "feminism" as predominantly associated with "Western" women, thus excluding Iranian women from this notion. This exclusion may explain Satrapi's reluctance "to being co-opted into an uncritical feminist framework" (Seedat, 2013, p. 27). She aimed to blur the distinctions between the struggles for equality faced by Muslim women and those experienced by Western women.

Badran states that Islamic feminism "derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women and men, in the totality of their existence" (Badran, 2002, p.3). Leila Ahmed, a prominent Islamic feminist, emphasizes the importance of recognizing diverse perspectives and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to feminism. In her book "Women and Gender in Islam," Ahmed contends that Western feminism can sometimes overlook the agency and empowerment experienced by Muslim women within their religious and cultural frameworks. Amina Wadud, another influential Islamic feminist, echoes this sentiment in her work "Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective," urging a nuanced understanding of Islamic teachings and their potential for fostering gender equality. These scholars advocate for a feminism that respects the autonomy of Muslim women, acknowledging their ability to reconcile faith and feminism on their terms. By highlighting the importance of context-specific feminism, these voices emphasize the need to engage with Islamic principles to address the unique challenges and aspirations of Muslim women. *Persepolis*, which illustrates the complexities of Iranian women's lives, showcases the significance of recognizing a distinct Islamic feminism that aligns with the cultural and religious context in which Muslim women navigate their identities and struggles.

The essence lies in the approach of reformist interpretations towards women's issues, which involves drawing from more woman-friendly sources within the existing authoritative exegetical texts. Hence, Islamic feminists adopt a strategy of direct interpretation, asserting their agency in the process. Mehrangiz Kar consolidates this stance by proclaiming, "It is time for *ijtihad*" (1993). Just as Islamic feminists seek to reinterpret religious texts to address women's issues, Satrapi reinterprets history and culture to amplify women's voices and experiences. Thus, both Satrapi and Islamic feminists exemplify the imperative of reclaiming agency through direct interpretation and challenging existing power structures.

2. Review of Literature

Several studies have discussed and analysed Satrapi's *Persepolis* from various perspectives; however, studies have yet to apply the theory of Islamic feminism to analyse Marji's character who emerges as a focal point, navigating the constraints and expectations imposed by societal norms. Therefore, this paper attempts to bridge the gap in the relevant literature by examining the character's journey that encapsulates the multifaceted dimensions of Islamic feminism, while unravelling the complexities of female agency, identity, and resistance within a patriarchal structure.

Mersedeh Dad Mohammadi, in his thesis, "Reading More than Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*" reclaims the analysis of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, being attentive to the stereotypical and partial tendencies present in orientalist representations by both Iranian officials and "Western" media and leadership. The themes derived from this analysis relate to the author's message and intentions in creating her work. The *intentio lectoris*, representing what audiences believe or are led to believe, suggests that orientalist paradigms shape the meaning of the work or Satrapi's agenda. Despite enthusiastic global reception, *Persepolis* faces a polarized response in Iran, contextualized within (neo)orientalist critique. The thesis identifies potentials and problems in these receptions, emphasizing the necessity of reclaiming excluded aspects of *Persepolis*' analysis that have been devalued by external agencies. It notices a reluctance among "Western" media to acknowledge Satrapi's dual and neutral position, leaving her work susceptible to cliché. The analysis seeks to affirm rationality, fluidity, and duality while presenting new and beneficial ways to argue Satrapi's position and intention. Rooted in a feminist standpoint perspective, the thesis engages with restrictive regulations, contextualizing them within an analysis of selected post-revolutionary autobiographical literature. The thesis also analyses the Iranian position on *Persepolis* by understanding the theological and political thought of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Revolution, and the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurists), along with national and international responses (Mohammadi, 2016).

Azadeh Ghanizadeh's article "Global Mobility and Subaltern Knowledge: A Transnational Feminist Perspective on Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*" critically examines the portrayal of class, ethnicity, and religion in popular writings by Iranian women, with a primary focus on Marjane Satrapi's memoir, *Persepolis*. Employing a transnational feminist framework, the article critiques the Eurocentric and Islamophobic elements in *Persepolis* and its reception, challenging the common perception of the work as multiculturalist and feminist. The analysis delves into how demographic differences in immigration and diaspora spaces are influenced by unchecked capitalist and colonial world markets, catering to readers intrigued by migration narratives. Concentrating on the representation of the 1979 Islamic revolution and its aftermath, the article unveils Eurocentric feminism camouflaged within multiculturalist rhetoric in *Persepolis*, arguing that migration stories can sometimes foster distance and misunderstanding rather than genuine knowledge. To counter this, the article contrasts Satrapi's work with "Under the Shadow," highlighting its anti-authoritarian and anti-patriarchal critique that avoids typical orientalist and colonialist depictions of Islam and Muslims in discussions related to the Middle East. This diaspora film critiques patriarchal colonialism and masculinist Islam simultaneously, offering a nuanced perspective and challenging the Eurocentric rhetoric found in *Persepolis* and related texts (Ghanizadeh, 2022).

The research article "On the Characteristics of Islamic Feminism in *Persepolis*" by Chang Meng and Nianjia Ren looks into the examination of Islamic feminism using *Persepolis* as a focal point, with a focus on understanding its characteristics within the Middle East. The analysis encompasses an exploration of historical roots, political tendencies, and resistance methods, all of which underscore the

universal plea for women's autonomous identity and social standing. The paper also analyses the evolution of Middle Eastern feminism, influenced by both Western feminism and its distinct regional context, which is closely linked with nationalism. This paper highlights their substantial contributions to the global struggle for women's independence and liberation, and how despite the potential risk of instrumentalization for political purposes, Middle Eastern feminists consistently adopt a pragmatic and measured approach, aligning themselves with the broader global feminist movement (Meng, et al., 2020).

Nancy K. Miller's article, "Out of the Family: Generations of Women in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," critically examines Satrapi's graphic memoir to provide a novel understanding of familial legacies and feminist generations. Through the strategic use of black-and-white stylized images and the intricate arrangement of panels, Satrapi skilfully portrays the interactions of three generations of women within the realms of memory and history. Miller highlights the autobiographical nature of this narrative, digging into the development of a transnational artist, where dissident genealogies emerge not only from familial ties but also from literary influences. *Persepolis*, as analysed by Miller, unfolds as a complex narrative that intertwines political and personal dimensions, presenting an intergenerational legacy shaped through acts of rereading and translation. The memoir offers a nuanced exploration of the relationships between women across time and space, challenging conventional notions of family and feminism. As Miller reflects on the intersection of gender and generations, she emphasizes the significance of Satrapi's imagery in countering stereotypes, both on a foreign and domestic scale. In the context of the still-fragile threshold of the twenty-first century, *Persepolis* emerges as a rich source that contributes to the evolving discourse on women's experiences and the dynamic nature of generational narratives (Miller, 2007)

3. Methodology

This study employs a multifaceted methodology to comprehensively analyse the graphic memoir *Persepolis* through the lens of Islamic feminism. Firstly, a thorough examination of the textual features, including plot, characters, themes, and settings, is conducted. The analysis specifically delves into how gender is portrayed within these features and how they intersect with Islamic teachings and cultural practices. Additionally, the author's historical and cultural context is scrutinized to understand the societal norms and religious beliefs influencing the author's worldview. This contextual exploration sheds light on the author's perspective on gender and religion as reflected in the text. Furthermore, Islamic feminist theory is applied to scrutinize the portrayal of gender, power, resistance, and agency within the text. The analysis incorporates insights from Islamic scholarship, investigating how Islamic teachings and cultural practices are manifested in the text and exploring ways in which the narrative challenges or reinforces patriarchal norms. Finally, the methodology centres on amplifying women's voices and experiences, particularly those of Muslim women, within the analysis. This approach seeks to identify and analyse instances portraying women as agents of change or resistance to patriarchal structures within the narrative. Through this comprehensive methodology, the study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how *Persepolis* engages with Islamic feminism, weaving together pluralistic, liberal-rationalist, contextual, and scholarly dimensions in the analysis.

3.1 Approaches

In propelling this research forward and challenging entrenched patriarchal interpretations of Islam, a crucial imperative lies in adopting pluralistic, contextual, and intellectual approaches. "Great religious traditions are invariably complex and rich, which makes it possible for one to view them along many dimensions. Islam is no exception" (Bahlul, 2015, p.35-36). Islamic feminists have fervently questioned conventional understandings of gender roles within Islamic theology, advocating for a more egalitarian and inclusive religious framework. Their proactive stance involves critically engaging with Islamic texts and traditions, rejecting patriarchal interpretations that perpetuate gender discrimination. Central to their ethos is the championing of agency and empowerment for Muslim women, asserting their right to make choices in alignment with their values. Practically, achieving this necessitates a reinterpretation of Islamic scriptures, acknowledging the imperative for a pluralistic approach that respects the diverse cultural, social, and political contexts shaping the lives of Muslim women. Emphasizing the significance of diversity and inclusivity within the feminist movement itself, Islamic feminists acknowledge and respect the varied experiences and perspectives of women from different backgrounds. Consequently, this paper advocates for an approach to Islamic texts that is both contextual and pluralistic, taking into account historical and cultural contexts, as well as the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly women in the graphic novel *Persepolis*. This multifaceted perspective recognizes the need for an intellectual dimension in approaching Islam, acknowledging the choice between emphasizing Islam as a revealed religion or as a rational one.

Bahlul in his article "On the Idea of Islamic Feminism", states that "the intellectual dimension refers to the intellectual attitude with which one can approach Islam. Thus, one may choose to emphasize the character of Islam as a revealed religion, or one may choose to emphasize the rational character of Islam. (The interplay between reason and revelation is a constant theme in all religions, and Islam is no exception in this regard.)" (p.36). Satrapi's *Persepolis* embodies a pluralistic narrative that resonates with the diverse perspectives advocated by Islamic feminists. The character of Marjane's grandmother, embodying devout and traditional Islamic practices, becomes a representative of one facet within the spectrum of Islamic beliefs. In contrast, Marjane's deliberate questioning of religious norms and her engagements with secular individuals underscore a pluralistic view of Islam. This portrayal aligns with the inclusive ethos embraced by Islamic feminists, emphasizing the acceptance of a range of interpretations and practices within the Islamic framework. The contextual richness of Satrapi's work is particularly pronounced in her meticulous consideration of historical and cultural contexts. Set against the tumultuous backdrop of the Iranian Revolution, the depiction of gender roles becomes intricately entwined with the socio-political climate. Marjane's experiences during and after the revolution serve as a lens through which the impact of historical events on the construction of women's identities in Iranian society is revealed. This contextual approach mirrors the emphasis of Islamic feminists on considering

socio-political circumstances in understanding and challenging gender norms within Islamic contexts. Satrapi's intellectual approach towards Islam, as portrayed in the graphic memoir, echoes the sentiments of Islamic feminists grappling with belief systems on both rational and spiritual planes. Marjane's intellectual journey, marked by her questioning of religious doctrines and engagement in philosophical discussions, serves as a testament to an intellectual attitude toward Islam. The deliberate juxtaposition of religious teachings with rational considerations, evident throughout the narrative, underscores the intricate interplay between faith and reason. This complexity aligns with the intellectual approach of Islamic feminists who advocate for critical engagement with Islamic texts and traditions while emphasizing the importance of rational interpretation.

3.1.1 Pluralistic Approach

The path of religious pluralism starts with the fact that our world contains a number of religious faiths having different ideas of the nature of divinity as the main and fundamental principle of religions and therefore, different and various dogmas, rites, and rituals (Hosseini, 2010, p.94).

Religious pluralism refers to the coexistence of different religious beliefs and practices within a society or on a global scale. The assertion that our world contains numerous religious faiths with differing ideas about the nature of divinity underscores the vast array of religious traditions that exist. Indeed, across cultures and civilizations, people have developed various understandings of the divine, ranging from monotheistic beliefs in a single, all-powerful God to polytheistic traditions with multiple deities, as well as non-theistic philosophies that do not necessarily involve a concept of God. Embracing religious pluralism involves respecting and valuing the beliefs and practices of others, even when they differ from one's own. It entails recognizing the inherent worth and validity of different religious perspectives, rather than asserting the superiority of one's own faith over others. This attitude of inclusivity and openness fosters mutual understanding, dialogue, and cooperation among individuals and communities of different religious backgrounds. In his article, Hosseini also discusses how, according to John Hick, a prominent figure in the advancement and advocacy of "religious pluralism" during the twentieth century, this differentiation can also be observed within religions. "The same religion can have different forms in different cultures. Within one culture, different religions can take similar forms. And, of course, religion is practiced by people, who are all different" (Rosenberg, 2018). Every individual is unique, and regardless of the perceived steadfastness of a religion, adaptations will inevitably occur based on the specific context of time and place in which it is practiced. "With practices even though they were covered from head to foot, you got to the point where you could guess their shape, the way they wore their hair and even their political opinions. Obviously, the more a woman showed, the more progressive and modern she was" (Satrapi, 2000, p.296). Even among women who lived through the Iranian revolution simultaneously, each had her unique manner of dressing that served as a means to convey her political perspectives.

Within the Islamic faith itself, various sects exist, including Sunni, and Shia, each with distinct viewpoints and interpretations.

The main difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims is based on whether or not they believe that Prophet Muhammad explicitly designated a successor. Sunni Muslims believe that the Prophet did not explicitly declare a successor. Shia Muslims believe that the Prophet publicly designated his cousin and son-in-law, Hazrat Ali (peace be upon him), as the first in a line of hereditary Imams from the Prophet's family to lead the community after him (The Ismaili, 2022).

The divergence in fundamental beliefs, such as the succession of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), within Islam, underscores the dynamic nature of religious interpretation and the existence of diverse perspectives within the faith. This diversity challenges the notion of any religion, including Islam, being monolithic or impervious to change. One significant area where this pluralism manifests is in the realm of Islamic feminism. Islamic feminism emerges within the context of these diverse interpretations, seeking to challenge and reinterpret traditional patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Religious pluralism acknowledges the coexistence of diverse religious beliefs and practices, stemming from differing understandings of the divine across cultures and civilizations. This inclusivity values the validity of various religious perspectives, fostering mutual respect, dialogue, and cooperation among individuals and communities. Within religions themselves, such as Islam, variations exist, exemplified by the Sunni-Shia divide, highlighting the dynamic nature of religious interpretation. Even within a single faith, such as Islam, diverse viewpoints emerge, challenging traditional notions and paving the way for movements like Islamic feminism. Ultimately, religious pluralism embraces the uniqueness of individuals and the evolving nature of religious expression, promoting harmony amidst diversity.

3.1.2 Liberal-Rationalist Approach

Islamic feminism can be achieved within the context of a liberal-rationalist understanding of Islam. Regarding divine will as rational implies that God embodies both reasonableness and goodness. Regardless of our intentions, acknowledging God's goodness is essential, even if we concede that God transcends human understanding. In any proper conception of religion, attributing goodness to God is unavoidable. From this theological perspective, God's goodness entails not only willing what is beneficial for humanity but also ensuring that divine commands and prohibitions ultimately serve human interests and well-being. Embracing the notion that divine will is inherently good leads to introducing a crucial distinction in the process of *ijtihad*, the exercise of independent reasoning in Islamic law. This distinction lies between the essential divine purposes and designs, and the multitude of historically contingent rules and judgments crafted to fulfil these essential purposes and designs.

Now, Indeed, we have conferred dignity on the children of Adam, and borne them ever land and sea, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favored them far above most of Our creation (Quran,17:70).

God has bestowed inherent dignity upon all of humanity, without favouring men over women or vice versa when it comes to providing blessings. The privilege of receiving goodness extends equally to the entire human race. In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi portrays the complexities of navigating personal beliefs and societal norms within the context of Islam. Despite the restrictive environment imposed during the Iranian revolution, individuals grapple with interpretations of divine will and their implications for personal agency. Through her experiences and reflections, Satrapi explores the tension between traditional interpretations of Islam and the pursuit of gender equality and human welfare.

There is an additional aspect of Islam that warrants special consideration in this paper. This dimension can be referred to in various ways, and distinctions can be made within it. Bahlul referred to it as "the intellectual dimension," which pertains to the intellectual stance one adopts toward Islam. This encompasses emphasizing Islam as a revealed religion versus emphasizing its rational character. The interplay between reason and revelation is a recurring theme in all religions, including Islam.

If we accept the idea that jurisprudence "is simply an effort to understand the sharia and to interpret it," then it follows that that one should be able to question [jurisprudence], since it is a human effort, a product of the human mind. No reading of a religious text is an innocent reading. This is what many Muslim jurists admit in their writings. We find many of them saying, either in the introduction to their work, or in the conclusion, that their efforts of interpretation are their own individual efforts, and should not be taken as being "the" true interpretation of Islam (Banani, 1993, p.23).

Practicing *ijtihad* necessitates a rational approach to faith. At its core, this entails ensuring that one's life is aligned with reason and common sense to the fullest extent possible. The essence of gender-conscious *ijtihad* is to emphasize the importance of gender in interpreting religious texts and extracting the ethical principles they contain. Historically, these tasks have been undertaken solely by men, often resulting in a portrayal of God in a masculine image that serves to uphold and safeguard their interests. The task for Islamic feminism is to critically examine religious texts and traditions with the aim of reclaiming, at least in part, their relevance for women.

This paper employs a liberal-rationalist approach to analyse the agency of Muslim women depicted in *Persepolis*. Through this lens, the focus is on examining the capacity of Muslim women to act with autonomy and assert their rights within the socio-political context portrayed in the narrative. By applying a liberal rationalist perspective, the analysis seeks to understand how the characters navigate and negotiate their roles, identities, and aspirations amidst the complexities of their environment. This approach entails considering the rational choices and decisions made by Muslim women in *Persepolis*, as well as exploring how their actions reflect broader themes of individual freedom, social justice, and empowerment. In the context of Islamic feminism, a liberal-rationalist approach offers a framework for interpreting religious texts and traditions in a manner that aligns with principles of reason, goodness, and equality. This perspective emphasizes the inherent goodness of divine will and the need to distinguish between essential divine purposes and contingent human interpretations. By advocating for *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning within Islamic law, this approach seeks to ensure that religious teachings uphold human welfare and dignity, including gender equality. Drawing on Quranic verses and scholarly insights, the paper explores how Muslim women navigate their identities and agency within the socio-political landscape, as depicted in *Persepolis*. Through the lens of liberal rationalism, it analyses their choices and actions, highlighting themes of autonomy, social justice, and empowerment amidst cultural and religious complexities.

3.1.3 Contextual Approach

To understand how feminist ideas can be integrated into an Islamic conceptual framework, it's essential to acknowledge that religious traditions are not completely detached from history, even when they claim divine origin. The influence of history on our interpretation of religion is intricate. A contemporary approach to contextualizing religious texts involves understanding them within their historical context. This approach aligns with the longstanding practice of examining the "occasions of revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzul*) to discern meanings and guidance in light of specific historical circumstances. By recognizing historical moments as integral to the revelation of religious texts, we acknowledge that our understanding of faith is shaped by historical conditions. Sometimes, historical developments compel us to adopt new interpretations and practices, which, although different from voluntary interpretations, still constitute acts of interpretation influenced by historical context.

God will not take you to task for a slip in your oaths; but He will take you to task for such bonds as you have made by oath, whereof the expiation is to feed ten poor persons with the average of the food you serve to your families, or to clothe them, or set free a slave; or if any finds not the means, let him fast for three days. That is the expiation of your oaths when you have sworn (Quran, 5:89).

It is commonly understood that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, did not explicitly prohibit slavery. Verses in Islamic scripture, such as the one mentioned, are interpreted as acknowledging the existence of slavery and implicitly tolerating it. However, this acknowledgment doesn't imply that Islam inherently condones slavery as morally acceptable. The Qur'an doesn't expressly forbid owning, buying, or selling slaves. Nevertheless, in contemporary times, where our moral standards have progressed to deem slavery morally reprehensible and have even made it illegal, the question arises of how to reconcile such verses with modern ethical sensibilities. Likewise, it is high time to promote gender equality within the religion through the principles of Islamic feminism and it can be possible using the contextual approach.

In *Persepolis*, under the Iranian revolution, the authorities have weaponized these age-old religious moral codes and forced them upon their people, especially Muslim women. In today's world, these moral codes are against the basic freedom of an individual.

“Lower your scarf, you little whore! Aren’t you ashamed to wear tight jeans like these??” (Satrapi, 2000, p.133). The guardians of the revolution are chastising Satrapi for her appearance, specifically her scarf and tight jeans. Their use of derogatory language like “whore” is a means of exerting control and enforcing their interpretation of Islamic dress codes and moral standards. They are committing this cruelty in the name of Islam solely under the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran. Because nowhere in the Quran is it mentioned that it is mandatory to wear hijab, to the extent of forcing it upon Muslim women in inhumane ways. People are taking it upon themselves to be the guardians of Islam and come up with new rules and codes, making it impossible to be feminist. However, through proper contextual study and interpretations of the religious texts, it can be achieved.

“O you who have believed, do not enter the houses of the Prophet except when you are permitted for a meal... And when you ask [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a separation (Hijab)” (Quran 33:53). Asma Lamrabet in her article “How Does the Quran Address the Issue of Muslim Women’s Veil or Hijab?” argues that the term “Hijab” originally applied solely to the wives of the Prophet Muhammad and served a specific contextual purpose: to safeguard their privacy. This requirement did not prescribe a particular style of clothing but rather emphasized the importance of respecting personal boundaries and practicing good manners within Arabian society at that time. Lamrabet asserts that the contemporary understanding of the Hijab as a headscarf is a misinterpretation. Instead, she contends that the essence of the Hijab was to establish a symbolic separation between the public and private spheres during the time of the Prophet. Its primary objective was to elevate the status of the prophet’s wives as exemplary figures, known as Mothers of the Believers (2019).

In integrating feminist ideas into an Islamic framework, the contextual approach proves vital by acknowledging the interplay between religious traditions and historical context. This perspective recognizes that religious texts, including the Quran, are influenced by the social, political, and cultural milieu of their time. By contextualizing verses within their historical circumstances, we gain insight into their intended meanings and guidance, while also recognizing the need for contemporary interpretation. For instance, while historical interpretations may have tolerated practices like slavery, modern ethical standards prompt us to reevaluate such interpretations through the lens of justice and equality. Similarly, embracing Islamic feminism within this contextual framework allows for a nuanced understanding of gender equality within Islam, facilitating interpretations that align with contemporary values and aspirations for social justice. By engaging with the historical context of religious teachings, we navigate the complexities of tradition and progress, fostering a dynamic and inclusive Islamic discourse that resonates with the realities of today’s world.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Persepolis offers a compelling platform to explore the multifaceted experiences of women in contemporary Iran. This analysis delves into the intricate interplay of the veil, education, and marriage, utilizing a dynamic approach informed by pluralistic, liberal-rationalist, and contextual Islamic feminism. A pluralistic approach fosters recognition of diverse interpretations of Islam and individual agency in navigating social norms. The veil, for instance, is acknowledged as representing both faith and cultural identity for some, while embodying oppression and patriarchal control for others. Education, while empowering, can also perpetuate societal expectations. Even marriage, potentially offering companionship and fulfilment, can be entangled with power dynamics and limitations. A liberal-rationalist lens critically examines these practices against universal principles of equality, freedom, and individual autonomy. It challenges harmful customs that restrict women’s choices and advocates for reforms that ensure their full participation in both public and private spheres.

However, solely relying on a liberal-rationalist approach risks neglecting the specificities of the Iranian context. Therefore, a contextual Islamic feminist perspective is embraced, acknowledging the influence of history, culture, and political realities on women’s lives. This perspective engages with interpretations of Islam that promote gender justice and challenge patriarchal readings that subjugate women. By employing these interconnected perspectives, the analysis moves beyond simplistic binaries and engages in a deeper discussion. It seeks to understand the experiences of women in *Persepolis* not as monolithic but as shaped by individual choices, societal pressures, and the evolving interpretations of Islam. Ultimately, this analysis aims to contribute to a broader conversation about empowering women within the complexities of Islamic societies. It invites a deeper understanding of their diverse challenges and opportunities, fostering dialogue and advocating for a future where their voices and agency are fully recognized and respected.

4.1 The Agency of Muslim Women in *Persepolis*

“I shall define action or agency as the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world” (Giddens, 1976, p.75). Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* offers a powerful counterpoint to the pervasive narrative of Muslim women lacking agency. While acknowledging societal constraints, Satrapi portrays a rich portrait of female characters who actively navigate limitations and carve out their own paths. We see Marjane herself defying expectations, questioning authority, and pursuing education despite societal norms. Her mother, during the political unrest in the country, displays a revolutionary spirit as an activist. Even within arranged marriages, we witness complexities and love emerging. However, the fight for the agency isn’t without its struggles. The issue of veiling becomes a battleground, highlighting the tension between individual choice and cultural identity. We see women facing political persecution, highlighting the need to dismantle patriarchal interpretations that exclude females from public spheres. The narrative underscores the importance of education, echoing the Islamic feminist call for empowering women through knowledge. While limitations persist, *Persepolis* dismantles the monolithic view of Muslim women as passive victims. It showcases their resilience, adaptability, and agency in navigating complex social structures. It serves as a reminder that even within restricted contexts, women can and do carve out spaces for agency, challenging norms and shaping their own destinies. By amplifying these voices, *Persepolis* offers a crucial perspective within the discourse of Islamic feminism, reminding us that agency is not simply a matter of

absence of limitations, but also of the active choices and negotiations women make within them.

4.1.1 Marjane's Defiance of Mandatory Veiling

"Veiling is a lived experience full of contradictions and multiple meanings" (Hoodfar, 1997). According to Anna Piela's article "Muslim Women and the Politics of the Headscarf", as the Islamic Revolution unfolded in Iran in 1979, the hijab emerged as a focal point through which external observers interpreted—or misinterpreted—events there. Western media viewed the head-covering chador ("tent" in Farsi) as evidence of Iranian society's perception of women as inferior, overlooking the fact that women themselves had initially donned them spontaneously and voluntarily as a form of protest the previous year. When Ayatollah Khomeini mandated that women must wear the chador, dissenters were often portrayed simply as Iranian-style second-wave feminists, echoing the demands of their Western counterparts. The anti-colonial dimension of their protests, particularly criticism of Western powers' involvement in Iran's oil industry, was overlooked. This, according to Sylvia Chan-Malik, marked the genesis of a new dichotomy: "Islam" versus "feminism." Additionally, it signalled the juncture at which feminism began to align with state interests, laying the groundwork for future justifications for military intervention under the guise of liberating women from male oppression. Gender equality became positioned as an "American" value to be enforced through military means (2018). We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to. And also because the year before, in 1979 we were in a French non-religious school. Where boys and girls were together (Satrapi, 2000, p.3).

Marjane Satrapi's recollection in *Persepolis* of her aversion to wearing the veil, particularly due to her prior experience in a secular French school, resonates with the perspectives of Islamic feminists such as Amina Wadud, Ziauddin Sardar, and Fatema Mernissi. Satrapi's discomfort with the veil reflects a sentiment echoed by Wadud, who perceives it as a tool of male control that restricts women's autonomy and confines them to predefined roles within society. "The veil represents a system of male control...it serves to keep women in their place" (Wadud, 1992, p.120). Similarly, Sardar views the veil as a symbol of the erasure of women's individuality, reducing them to mere objects of sexual desire rather than recognizing their inherent worth and agency. "The veil signifies an attempt to erase women's individuality and reduce them to mere sexual objects" (Sardar, 2011, p.156). Satrapi's reference to her schooling experience underscores the clash between her upbringing in a secular environment, where gender segregation was not enforced, and the imposition of veiling upon her in Iran. This dichotomy aligns with Mernissi's assertion that the veil serves to reinforce gender-based separation, marking women as different and subordinate to men. "The veil becomes a marker of difference, reinforcing the separation between men and women" (Mernissi, 1975, p.98). Satrapi's reluctance to embrace the veil thus reflects a broader critique within Islamic feminism regarding its role in perpetuating patriarchal norms and limiting women's freedom and agency.

They insulted me. They said that women like me should be pushed up against a wall and fucked. And then thrown in the garbage...and that if I didn't want that to happen, I should wear the veil (Satrapi, 2000, p.74).

In this poignant moment from *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi recounts a chilling encounter with fundamentalists that sheds light on the oppressive nature of their ideology. Satrapi's experience illustrates the insidious coercion employed by extremists to enforce conformity to their interpretation of Islamic practices, particularly regarding the veil.

The politicization of women's bodies has been a fixture in nation-building. Throughout history, women's bodies have been used as political and ideological battlegrounds, upon which ruling elites debate and issue laws aimed at defining a nation's identity and values. In this context, a woman's body is not viewed as an individual human being but is rather seen as a representation of the country as a whole. The body serves as both a political instrument and a central component of a narrative dictating control and national identity (2022).

Satrapi's experience aligns with Mobashra Tazamal's observation in "On the Politicization of Muslim Women's Bodies" that women's bodies are often politicized and used as tools in nation-building efforts. The verbal abuse hurled at Satrapi reflects the dehumanizing rhetoric used to intimidate and control women who resist adherence to conservative dress codes. The fundamentalists' threats of sexual violence and degradation are deeply disturbing, highlighting the extreme lengths to which they are willing to go to enforce compliance with their narrow worldview. By invoking graphic and degrading imagery of women being assaulted and discarded, the fundamentalists seek to instil fear and submission in Satrapi and others who resist their dictates. Moreover, the fundamentalists' assertion that wearing the veil is a safeguard against such violence underscores the perverse logic employed to justify the imposition of restrictive dress codes. By framing the veil as a form of protection against sexual assault, they attempt to manipulate women into believing that their safety and dignity are contingent upon their adherence to prescribed modes of dress. Egyptian-American scholar of Islam Leila Ahmed in her book "Women and Gender in Islam" states that "State-enforced veiling erases women's voices and undermines their democratic rights" (1992, p.187). Satrapi's encounter with fundamentalists serves as a stark reminder of the oppressive reality faced by women in societies where extremist ideologies hold sway and it has nothing to do with the true religious texts.

In the chapter titled "The Exam" within the graphic novel, Marjane Satrapi undergoes an "ideological test" as part of her admission process for Graphic Arts at a college in Iran. When the examiner asked her whether she wore a hijab while she lived in Austria, she honestly replied:

No, I have always thought that if women's hair posed so many problems, God would certainly have made us bald... the prophet Mohammad said: "God is closer to us than our jugular veins." God is always in us! Right? (Satrapi, 2000, p.286).

Satrapi pushes back against traditional views of female modesty through an Islamic feminist lens. She challenges the idea that women's hair is inherently tempting or provocative. She humorously argues that if hair were truly problematic, God wouldn't have created women

with it. This calls out the patriarchal interpretations of religious teachings that have historically limited women's freedom and autonomy. Satrapi strengthens her argument by referencing Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) saying, "God is closer to us than our jugular veins." This quote emphasizes the inherent spiritual equality between men and women, aligning with Islamic feminist principles. It subverts traditional interpretations that often favour men over women. Through this analysis, Satrapi critiques restrictive gender norms and interpretations of religious texts used to justify women's subjugation. She proposes a vision of Islam that champions equality, dignity, and spiritual connection for all, regardless of gender. By highlighting God's presence within everyone, Satrapi advocates for a more inclusive and empowering interpretation of Islam that respects and values women's agency and autonomy.

Many power-hungry authorities exploit the hijab as a political symbol to exert control and manipulate societal perceptions. While Islam emphasizes modesty, decency, and integrity as core values, these authorities often distort the significance of hijab to serve their own agendas. By reducing Islam to a woman's dress, they oversimplify and misrepresent the religion, diverting attention from broader spiritual principles. These authorities capitalize on societal pressure to conform to specific interpretations of hijab, labelling those who do not adhere strictly as flawed Muslims. This narrow focus on outward appearance allows them to exert control over individuals, creating a facade of religious piety while disregarding true spiritual fulfilment.

The Quran mentioned the word 'hijab' seven times, none of which were related to the head cover we know today. It mostly refers to separators, walls, or items that protect someone or keep them hidden, like in verse 53 of Surah Al-Ahzab: "And when you ask [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a Hijab (A separation or a wall)." The hijab mentioned here refers to a wall or anything that keeps the Prophet's wives hidden from the visitor's view. It's a form of respecting the Prophet's private life and sanctifying his wives. So, it doesn't actually represent a form of clothing (Elmessiry, 2023).

Despite hijab not being among the five pillars of Islam, these authorities amplify its importance, imposing rigid standards and dictates on women's attire. They manipulate religious texts to reinforce their power dynamics, enforcing arbitrary rules on how hijab should be worn, despite Allah's lack of specification regarding its appearance. By politicizing hijab, these authorities exploit women's bodies as symbols of religious identity, reinforcing patriarchal structures and perpetuating their own dominance. In doing so, they distort the essence of Islam, prioritizing outward displays of religious observance over genuine spiritual connection and submission to Allah. Ultimately, this manipulation serves to consolidate their power and control over the populace, rather than fostering true religious devotion and understanding.

4.1.2 Marjane's Pursuit of Education and Career Aspirations

Islam teaches that education is a divine obligation for both genders. According to the Quran and *hadiths*, women are equally obligated to seek knowledge and excel in it. The Quran emphasizes the paramount importance of knowledge, with over 800 references to the word "*ilm*" (knowledge) and its derivatives. It asserts that knowledge has been integral to the Islamic world from its inception, as stated in (Quran, 96:1–5):

Read. Read in the name of thy Lord who created;
[He] created the human being from blood clot.
Read in the name of thy Lord who taught by the pen:
[He] taught the human being what he did not know.

Shariah principles dictate that when a commandment is revealed, it encompasses both genders, regardless of the gender-specific language used. Ignoring this principle negates fundamental Islamic practices for women, such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and almsgiving. Although many commandments are articulated in masculine terms, women are still obliged to observe and adhere to these laws. The teachings of the *sunnah* (the body of traditional social and legal customs and practices of the Islamic community) and *hadith* (recorded sayings of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him) further confirm that education is a duty for both men and women. Restricting women and girls from accessing education impedes their afterlife journey and obstructs their fulfilment of Allah's prescribed duty.

In the early epochs of Islam, women like Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her), the wife of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and Umm Salama, who transmitted hadiths, were notable scholars, actively involved in preserving the traditions of the Prophet. However, evolving interpretations of religious texts, coupled with societal norms and cultural practices, led to restrictions on women in certain scholarly endeavours. As societies grew more conservative or patriarchal, traditional gender roles became more entrenched, limiting women's participation in public and scholarly spheres. Nevertheless, Islamic history is diverse, with periods and places where women continued to play significant roles in scholarship. To renew the inclusion of women in Islamic scholarship and challenge limiting traditional views, the principles of *ijtihad*, governing religious interpretation, can be invoked. *Ijtihad* facilitates a dynamic interpretation of Islamic teachings, considering core principles while adapting to changing circumstances. In the context of educating Muslim women in modern times, *ijtihad* can be applied to promote gender equality, intellectual growth, and empowerment. This may involve revisiting restrictive interpretations and cultural norms hindering women's academic pursuits. By drawing on principles of justice, equality, and the pursuit of knowledge within Islam, *ijtihad* can guide the development of educational systems providing Muslim women access to diverse fields of study.

The Prophetic tradition emphasizes the importance of seeking knowledge for both genders. Leveraging *ijtihad*, modern educational

challenges can be addressed by incorporating technology, science, and various academic disciplines while upholding Islamic values. Through *ijtihad*, Muslim women can pursue higher education, engage in critical thinking, and contribute meaningfully to society, aligning with Islam's emphasis on knowledge and intellectual development for all believers. "The Ministry of Education has decreed that universities will close at the end of the month... no more universities, and I wanted to study Chemistry. I wanted to be like Marie Curie" (Satrapi, 2000, p.73). The quote provided depicts Satrapi's experiences growing up during the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This particular excerpt reflects the impact of the revolutionaries' decision to close universities in Iran. One aspect of many transformations during the revolution was the desire to distance Iran from Western influence, including Western education. In line with their ideology, the revolutionary leaders decided to close universities in Iran to ban what they perceived as Western education and promote what they considered the "true path of Islam." This decision had profound consequences for individuals like the protagonist in *Persepolis* who harboured aspirations for higher education and careers that were now deemed incompatible with the new regime's vision. The closure of universities meant that countless young Iranians were denied the opportunity to pursue their academic ambitions and careers in fields like science, literature, and the arts. This restriction not only hindered personal aspirations but also represented a broader suppression of intellectual freedom and diversity of thought within Iranian society.

"You are fourteen and I know how I brought you up. Above all, I trust your education" (Satrapi, 2000, p.147). Satrapi's mother, recognizing the limitations and challenges her daughter faced in Iran, made the difficult decision to send her to Austria for further education. This decision reflects the sacrifices parents sometimes make to ensure their children have access to better opportunities, particularly in environments where educational prospects are restricted or uncertain. The mother's statement, "Above all, I trust your education," underscores the value she places on education as a means of empowerment and personal growth. This is exactly what Islamic feminism promotes. Despite the challenges and uncertainties associated with sending her daughter abroad, she expresses confidence in the foundation of knowledge and values she has instilled in her. Moreover, this quote highlights the role of education as a form of liberation and empowerment, especially for women facing societal constraints and limitations on their freedom and opportunities. By investing in her daughter's education and trusting in her abilities, Satrapi's mother demonstrates a commitment to breaking barriers and pursuing a better future.

Muslim women have access to diverse resources for seeking knowledge and are not inherently restricted from doing so. Instead, historical accounts suggest that they pursued education opportunistically, learning from whoever was available. Ibn al-Athir, in his work *Usd al-ghabah fi marifat al-Saḥabah* ('The Lions of the Forest and the Knowledge about the Companions'), records a narration attributed to Abd Rabbih ibn al-Hakam, who reported from the daughter of Ruqayyah from her mother. She recounted an incident, stating: "When the Prophet – *salla-l-lahu alay-hi wa-sallam* – came seeking victory at Ta'if, he came to me", followed by the narration of the entire *hadith*. This indicates that there were no inherent restrictions on women seeking knowledge from men, and vice versa. However, it was the authorities who enforced segregation between women and men in schools and universities, as depicted in *Persepolis*. "To keep us from straying off the straight path, our studios were separated from those of the boys" (Satrapi, 2000, p.301). Even in the anatomy drawing class, the model had to be covered, which kills the sole purpose of it. Satrapi sarcastically narrates the situation as, "But not a single part of her body was visible. We nevertheless learned to draw drapes" (p.301). But Islamic jurists have, out of necessity, allowed doctors to examine and even touch the afflicted area of a non-Mahram patient if required. This permission is documented in the reputable book of Hanafi jurisprudence, *al-Hidāyah*.

It is permissible for a doctor to look at the area affected by an illness for a non-Mahram woman. This permissibility is on the basis of need, and it is appropriate that women are made aware of how to cure themselves, because it is easier for the same gender to look at each another. Likewise, it is permissible for a male doctor to look at the rear private area of a patient in order to administer an injection because this is the medicinal treatment for them, and to do this due to an illness is permissible (*al-Hidāyah*, p.60).

If such an action is deemed permissible, then how does it differ from an artist viewing a nude, which is also essential for their work, and therefore has to be permissible? The contextual analysis enables the application of Islamic feminist theory. Here, the protagonist's education serves as a lens to examine the struggles and aspirations of Muslim women within an Islamic context. Initially, Marjane's education encompasses both secular and religious knowledge, reflecting a period of relative freedom for women before the revolution. Islamic feminists, like Amina Wadud, in her book "Qur'an and Woman" advocate for reinterpreting religious texts to empower women, a concept echoed in Marjane's early educational experiences as she navigates various knowledge domains.

Education has been a cornerstone of Islam from the very beginning. The first word revealed in the Qur'an was 'read,' and the first verse of the Qur'an addressed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was 'read in the name of your Lord who created.' This emphasis on education and knowledge is not gender-specific. There is nothing in the Qur'an or the Prophetic tradition that indicates that men are more intelligent than women or that women should be deprived of the opportunity to learn and explore the world (Wadud, 1992).

However, as the Islamic Revolution unfolded, educational opportunities for women diminished due to strict dress codes and restricted curriculum content, reflecting the influence of conservative ideologies. Scholars like Fatema Mernissi critique such constraints, asserting women's rights to education within Islamic boundaries. Marjane's challenges within the education system mirror these societal shifts, illustrating how political and religious ideologies can impact women's access to knowledge. Throughout *Persepolis*, Marjane's thirst for knowledge persists despite societal limitations. Islamic feminists advocate for women's agency and intellectual engagement within Islam, underscoring the significance of education for women's empowerment. Marjane's decision to pursue education abroad can be interpreted as a form of resistance and a quest for intellectual freedom, aligning with Islamic feminist principles of women's autonomy and the

pursuit of knowledge.

4.1.2 Exploring Agency and Resistance in Marriage within *Persepolis*

The Holy Quran often emphasizes the equality of both male and female believers by addressing them as "believing men and women," highlighting their equal rights, duties, virtues, and merits within Islam. Islam stands out as a religion that initially granted women a position of dignity and honour, countering the prevalent discrimination against them before its advent. In pre-Islamic Arabia, women faced severe injustices, including the practice of burying female infants alive, exploiting women for entertainment such as naked dancing during annual fairs near the Ka'ba, and treating them as mere possessions devoid of rights, dignity, or respect. Islam emerged as a force against such inhumanity and inequality, offering a comprehensive code of conduct applicable to both men and women. To comprehend the rights, honour, dignity, and status accorded to women in Islam, one needs to only consider the condition of women before the arrival of Islam. During that era, women were treated akin to slaves, often enduring treatment worse than that of animals (Badawi,1980). The Prophet (peace be upon him) advocated for the cessation of all forms of torture, cruelty, and inhumanity towards women, displaying magnanimity in his interactions with them. He advised Muslims to fear Allah in their treatment of women, stating: "The best of you are those who are best to their wives." Additionally, he emphasized that a Muslim should not harbour hatred towards his wife and encouraged finding goodness in her even amidst displeasure. Furthermore, he emphasized that the greater the civility and kindness a Muslim show towards his wife, the greater his faith.

However, this is not the Islam *Persepolis* portrays under the "Islamic" regime of the revolutionary Iranian rulers. In an instance from the graphic novel Satrapi's father explains to her what happened to a girl named Niloufar they previously met. How the guardian of the revolution married her to take her virginity away in order to kill her.

Traditionally, when a girl gets married, the husband is supposed to pay her dowry. If the girl dies, the husband has to give the dowry to her family. That's what happened with Niloufar. After she was executed, to make sure her awful fate was understood, they sent 500 tumans to her parents (Satrapi, 2000, p.146).

This cruelty is not mentioned or allowed in any of the religious texts. This is fine evidence of how Muslims adhere to their own cultural practices and customs, where women often become subject to cultural issues, patriarchal norms, and political oppression. Despite the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet advocating for gender equality and the rights, dignity, and status of women, some individuals exploit and discriminate against women by manipulating certain verses of the text to diminish their humanity. Fatema Mernissi is a Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist who has written extensively on women's rights and Islam. In her book, "The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam," Mernissi cites a Hadith to argue that women should have the right to choose their spouse: "A woman came to the Prophet and said: 'I have been forced to marry so-and-so.' The Prophet gave her the choice of staying with her husband or leaving him. She chose to leave him." Mernissi argues that this Hadith shows that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) recognized women's right to choose their spouse and that forced or arranged marriages are not consistent with Islamic values. We see this agency in marriage being employed by Satrapi when she decides to marry Reza, "a few days later, my decision was made: I was going to get married. I announced it to my father. He invited us, me and Reza, to a restaurant to talk about it" (Satrapi, 2000, p.315). In the restaurant, Satrapi's father being a feminist makes sure that his daughter "enjoys the right to divorce" in a country that doesn't guarantee it. This way, the text avoids presenting a monolithic view of Islamic marriage, suggesting room for individual interpretation and adaptation.

Allah has ordained men and women as companions, enabling them to procreate and coexist harmoniously in accordance with His commandments and the teachings of His Messenger. Allah declares:

And among His signs is this that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. Undoubtedly in these are signs for those who reflect (Quran, 30:21).

In Islam, marriage is an act that brings pleasure to Allah as it adheres to His guidance for husbands and wives to love and assist each other in nurturing the next generation as devout servants of Allah. While marriage fulfils the natural urge for sexual intimacy, it also serves the purpose of ensuring the continuity of future generations (Ganai, 1991). In her article titled "Muslim Marriage Contracts: Female Agency and Autonomy," Hadia Mubarak provides detailed insights, supported by evidence from the Quran itself, illustrating that both the bridegroom and the bride hold equal importance in initiating a valid marriage, as either party can propose and the other must accept for the union to be recognized. Through a legitimate marriage contract, mutual inheritance rights are established, and the wife is entitled to her dowry and financial support. However, it's essential to note that marriage does not grant the husband unrestricted authority over the wife's person or possessions beyond what is lawful and her rightful share. Often misconstrued as a bridal dowry, the matrimonial gift, or *mahr*, is a fundamental aspect of the Muslim marriage contract. It represents a gift that the husband commits to providing his future wife as a condition of the marriage agreement, with both partners consenting to its nature and amount. The inclusion of the *mahr* in the marriage contract is guided by various Quranic verses, including verse 4:4, which urges men to "give the women (on marriage) their dower as a free gift." Islamic law grants the bride exclusive entitlement to this marital gift, affirming her as a contractual party rather than a mere transactional object. Muslim women possess the autonomy to choose their life partners, and no one, including their parents or guardians, can coerce them into marriage against their will. The marriage of an adult woman who has been previously married without her consent is deemed invalid, and marrying a mature virgin girl without her consent is prohibited. Islam underscores the utmost respect for women and guarantees their rights, dignity, honour, and equal status alongside men in marriage, underscoring that the consent of both parties, the bridegroom and the bride, is fundamental for a valid marriage. In this context, no one holds superiority, making marriage in Islam undoubtedly feminist (2014).

In situations of extreme emergency, Islam permits divorce if all efforts to reconcile have proven futile. Recognizing the impossibility of sustaining conjugal harmony, Islam advocates for amicable separation over miserable coexistence, which can turn a home into a hellish environment. In the article “The Rights of Women in Islam and Some Misconceptions: An Analysis from Bangladesh Perspective”, Manjur Hossain Patoari mentions about how Islam provides women with rights concerning marriage dissolution through various avenues. Firstly, delegated divorce, known as *Talaque-e-tafweez*, allows the husband to delegate the power of divorce to the wife, enabling her to exercise this right during or after the marriage. Importantly, this delegated authority is irrevocable, even if the husband seeks legal action for the restitution of conjugal rights. Secondly, redemption, or *Khul'a*, permits a wife to seek divorce through mutual agreement, wherein she forfeits her claim to the dower and compensates the husband for her own property. Lastly, mutual release, or *Mubar'at*, allows both parties to divorce when they experience aversion, freeing each other from further obligations. This form of divorce is irrevocable upon acceptance by both parties (2019). But when these basic rights were denied to the Iranian women, Satrapi resists and called out the baseless patriarchal interpretation of the religion by religious men stating,

If a guy kills ten women in the presence of fifteen others, no one can condemn him because in a murder case, we can't even testify! He's also the one who has the right to divorce and even if he gives it to you, he nonetheless has the custody of the children! I heard a religious man justify this law by saying that man was the grain and woman, the earth in which the grain grew, therefore the child naturally belonged to his father! (Satrapi, 2000, p.339).

It is right what Satrapi's grandmother says, “take your time, think about it, and the day you don't want in anymore, you leave him! When a tooth is rotten, you have to pull it out!” (p.335). It is fair to seek divorce rather than endure unhappiness in a failing marriage, and in this context, women should possess equal authority as men; it is their fundamental entitlement. The personal laws governing Muslims' lives are plagued by numerous misinterpretations, distortions, and biases against women, rendering them inadequate in addressing the complexities of modern life. Regarding divorce, contemporary idealists argue that the traditional interpretation of Sharia law not only conflicts with principles of human rights and gender equality but also diverges from the fundamental ethos and core norms of Islamic law. Satrapi, echoing the sentiments of numerous thinkers, asserts that religion is a personal affair and should not be intertwined with politics or imposed on society as a whole. She contends that Islam, in its essence, is not inherently “fundamentalist.” Instead, Satrapi argues that it is the extremists and fanatics within any religious tradition who exploit the power of Islam to justify their policies. This perspective aligns with the principles of Islamic feminism, which emphasizes the distinction between the true teachings of Islam and the misuse of religion to perpetuate patriarchal and oppressive systems. Islamic feminists argue that Islam when interpreted through a gender-egalitarian lens, can provide a framework for advocating women's rights and challenging oppressive practices without rejecting the faith itself. The core tenet is to separate genuine religious principles from the distortions propagated by those who manipulate religion for their political or patriarchal agendas.

5. Conclusion

This paper gives a clear understanding that Islam is not a uniform entity. Furthermore, Islam has been and continues to be practiced across the globe in diverse cultural contexts, both geographically and historically. In examining the multifaceted dimensions of Islamic feminism as depicted in Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis*, it becomes evident that a comprehensive exploration reveals a proper understanding of the intersectionality between religion, culture, and gender dynamics.

In conclusion, the examination of Islamic feminism through the lens of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* reveals the multifaceted nature of women's experiences and struggles within the Islamic context. Through the utilization of *ijtihad* and various feminist approaches—pluralist, liberal-rationalist, and contextual—we have gained insights into the complexities surrounding the concepts of the veil, education, and marriage, and their significance in the empowerment of women.

Firstly, the veil, often regarded as a symbol of oppression, undergoes a nuanced exploration in *Persepolis*. Through contextual analysis, we uncover how the veil serves as a site of resistance, agency, and negotiation for Marjane and other women in Iran. The pluralist approach acknowledges diverse interpretations of the veil within Islamic feminism, allowing for the recognition of individual autonomy and choice. Meanwhile, the liberal-rationalist perspective emphasizes the importance of women's rights to self-expression and bodily autonomy, challenging traditional patriarchal interpretations. Ultimately, *ijtihad* enables a dynamic re-evaluation of the veil, paving the way for women to assert their agency in defining its meaning and significance.

Secondly, the portrayal of education in *Persepolis* illuminates the transformative potential of knowledge for women's empowerment. The contextual approach underscores the historical and cultural factors shaping women's access to education in Iran, highlighting the need for reform and inclusivity. Through a liberal-rationalist lens, education emerges as a fundamental right, enabling women to challenge societal norms and pursue intellectual growth. Pluralist perspectives acknowledge the diversity of educational experiences among women and advocate for inclusive policies that promote gender equality. Employing *ijtihad*, Islamic feminism encourages critical engagement with religious texts to support women's right to education and intellectual development.

Lastly, the exploration of marriage in *Persepolis* unveils the complexities of women's agency and autonomy within marital relationships. Contextual analysis reveals the historical and cultural influences shaping women's experiences of marriage in Iran. Pluralist perspectives recognize diverse interpretations of Islamic teachings on marriage, emphasizing the need for inclusivity and gender equality. Liberal-rationalist approaches advocate for legal reforms that uphold women's rights within marriage, including the right to divorce and consent. Through *ijtihad*, Islamic feminism promotes reinterpretations of religious texts to support women's autonomy and equality in

marital relationships.

In essence, the comprehensive examination of Islamic feminism in Persepolis illustrates the importance of embracing diverse perspectives and employing dynamic approaches to address the complexities of women's experiences within the Islamic context. By integrating *ijtihad* and pluralist, liberal-rationalist, and contextual approaches, Islamic feminism emerges as a vibrant and inclusive movement that seeks to unveil voices and empower narratives, ultimately advancing gender equality and justice for all.

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Authors contributions

Liyana K was responsible for the data collection and drafting of the manuscript. Dr. M. Alagesan was responsible for proofreading it.

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