

Women in the Middle East – Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*

Recommended Use: This unit was developed for an Introduction to Human Rights class that was taught online. It was part of a module on Women’s Rights and was preceded by a module on group rights in general and information on the history of Women’s Rights. Use in any level human rights class or women’s rights class. The format works for both the original online setting as well as in offline classes.

Keywords: Women’s Rights, Middle East, *Persepolis*, discrimination, stereotypes, Islam, graphic novel

Objectives: Students will be able to reflect on the topic of women’s rights (in Iran). Students will be able to compare one or more news articles to the Iranian graphic novel *Persepolis*. They will be able to formulate a standpoint and recognize biases/constructions in media.

Reading(s)/ Material(s):

- Marjane Satrapi. *Persepolis. The Story of a Childhood*. (ISBN: 978-0375714573)
- One or more recent articles that provide an outside view of women in the Middle East (e.g. Hubbard, Ben. “Saudi Women Rise Up Quietly.” *New York Times*. Web. 10/27/2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/27/world/middleeast/a-mostly-quiet-effort-to-put-saudi-women-in-drivers-seats.html?_r=0)

Synopsis: *Persepolis* is Marjane Satrapi’s memoir of growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. Satrapi tells the story of her life in Tehran from ages six to fourteen, years that saw the overthrow of the Shah’s regime, the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, and the devastating effects of war with Iraq. The intelligent and outspoken only child of committed Marxists and the great-granddaughter of one of Iran’s last emperors, Marjane bears witness to a childhood uniquely entwined with the history of her country. *Persepolis* is a portrait of daily life in Iran and shows the bewildering contradictions between home life and public life.

Background Information: None necessary. Possible readings for inclusion in module on Women’s Rights:

- Olympe de Gouges. Declaration of the Rights of Woman: <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/decwom2.html>
- Katarina Tomasevski. “Women’s Rights.” *Human Rights: Concepts and Standards*. 231-258.
- Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>
- Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/Beijing%20full%20report%20E.pdf>

Discussion Questions/Activity:

1. Warm-up activity in class, at home, or online (Wiki, blog, journal etc.) – Associations

[note: this should be done before the students read the graphic novel]

Write down what comes to your mind when you think of women in the Middle East. What kind of pictures come to your mind? What rights are they maybe lacking? Also add how you arrive at your thoughts (news articles, movies, books, personal experience). Do you think your view is similar to the view most Americans have? You are not expected to prove your statements or research the actual situation of women in the Middle East, this exercise is about collecting personal associations.

2. Discussion in class or online (chat, group discussion etc.)

Compare the associations of the first activity (and possibly the sources for your assumptions) critically with the presentation of women in the graphic novel *Persepolis*. Formulate and defend your own standpoint.

These guiding questions can help you:

1. Were your assumptions accurate? Does it change your opinion? Why or why not?
2. Do you see problems in either or both representations of women's rights in (US) news media and in novels?
3. Does it make a difference who writes the articles/the novels, i.e. does it make a difference where the writers come from?
4. Comparing it to the US, are any of the issues that Marjane experiences comparable to the situation of women in the US?

[note: the instructor should steer the discussion to deconstruct stereotypes about Muslim women and show the essentializing bias that is prevalent in news media or the associations of activity 1; a discussion on Islam and Human Rights can follow, research of reports on the situation of women in different countries of the Middle East etc., UNESCO has some reports available:

<http://datatopics.worldbank.org/hnp/files/edstats/IRNgmrpro03.pdf>

3. Expanding activity (written exercise or discussion in class/online)

Read the news article. Compare and contrast the views presented in the article and in Satrapi's account. Reconsider questions 4-6 in the previous activity. Discuss.