**What contrasts do Satrapi’s experiences in *The Complete Persepolis* demonstrate between religiously fundamental Iranian culture and secular western culture?**

In *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, the author narrates her autobiography through a series of graphical anecdotes. From her memories of a religiously fundamental Iranian regime to her experiences in a liberal Austria, Satrapi illustrates the significant chapters of her life frame by frame. One of the most notable transitions in Satrapi’s life occurs when, after entering repeated conflict with her teachers in Iran, her parents send her off to Vienna to pursue a secular education. When Satrapi tries to assimilate in Austria, she instead feels like she is distancing herself from both her Iranian origins and her newfound western identity. The culture, or the material traits, beliefs, and social forms of different groups, is portrayed as drastically distinct in Vienna as compared to Iran (Merriam-Webster). Satrapi’s experiences in *The Complete Persepolis* demonstrate a sharp contrast between the religious culture in Iran and the secular culture in Vienna, as seen through differing behavioral norms and value systems in those places, which are influenced by distinct degrees of cultural control imposed by respective authorities.

Firstly, *Persepolis* highlights a contrast between behavioral expectations in Iran and that in Vienna. Primarily, Iran has strict codes on accepted attire – for example, since 1980 in Iran, for women it “became obligatory to wear the veil…” (Satrapi 3). In this panel, Marjane and her peers are depicted as unwilling to wear the veil – nonetheless, the strict expression of their instructor coerce them into doing so anyways. The rationale behind this decision was to protect women from possible rapists by concealing their hair (Globalist). Veil wearing quickly found expression as a behavioral norm in Iran, seeping into the material traits defining Iranian culture. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi portrays the veil as especially common in Tehran. Once, she even points out that “last year [one of her neighbors] was wearing a miniskirt… and now [she] is wearing a chador” (Satrapi 75). Such abrupt transitions to the veil characterize the swiftness and completeness with which it came to define public dress in Iran. On the contrary, there are no such dress restrictions in Austria. In fact, upon arriving in Vienna, Satrapi exclaims that it is “cool to go… without a veil” (Satrapi 156). Satrapi’s excitement juxtaposes the restrictive dress requirements in Iran and the greater freedom of attire in the west, demonstrating a gap between their respective cultures. Additionally, *Persepolis* contrasts differing standards on relationship behaviors in conservative Iran and in the more liberal Vienna. When Marjane is speaking to Julie in bed, Marjane is shocked by Julie’s carnal habits, recalling that “in [Iran], even when you had sex before marriage, you hid it” (Satrapi 182). This behavioral expectation of premarital abstinence in Iran is not common in Vienna, and Satrapi’s expression of shock after discovering so highlight differences in the cultures. After her first party in Austria, Satrapi asserts that she “really understood the meaning of ‘the sexual revolution’” (Satrapi 188). The sexual revolution refers to a wave of female sexual empowerment in western nations which caused for greater promiscuity in relationships (PBS). Satrapi’s uneasy recognition of it accentuates the controversiality of the concept and the difficulty for conservative backgrounds to accept it. After returning from Vienna, Satrapi’s newfound mindset about sexual norms provides more contrast with the fundamentalist cultural environment in Iran. When Marjane gets reprimanded by her art teacher for a lack of decency in her speech, she questions “what’s indecent about making love with your boyfriend?” (Satrapi 303). Carrying her western values, Marjane engages in conflict with the fundamentalist culture in Iran. Through repeated dispute on this matter with instructors and authority in Iran, Satrapi emphasizes the contrast on this behavioral expectation in the two cultures. Similarly, through numerous stories with references to the veil in Iran, *Persepolis* highlights the material behavioral contrast between fundamentalist Iranian culture and westernized culture.

Additionally, *Persepolis* also displays a difference between belief and value systems in religious Iran and in the westernized, secular Vienna. Namely, the ideal of martyrdom is emphasized much more in Iran. Due to the nation being engaged in war, those who sacrifice themselves for the country are highly respected, and because of that, many people strive to attain that ideal. After the overthrow of the Shah, Marjane witnesses a neighbor exclaiming that the demonstrations were hard and “a bullet almost hit [his] wife’s cheek, [and hence] liberty is priceless” (Satrapi 44). However, the text subsequently points out that the said individual’s wife had always had that spot on her face. This type of overt exaggeration emphasizes the importance that “heroism” and similar values hold in Iranian culture. From other similar practices by Iranians, such as self-flagellation in commemoration of religion, it is evident that Iranian culture weighs expression of loyalty to regime and to religion very heavily (NY Press). *Persepolis* depicts such beliefs as present through all ages and levels of Iranian society – for instance, young Marjane is shown to be fascinated by her uncle Anoosh, who she believed to be a “hero”. Symbols of martyrdom are found everywhere, from wall paintings to the names of streets (Middle Easy Eye). Marjane depicts herself as surrounded by concepts such as “to die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society” (Satrapi 115). By illustrating a recurring motif of martyrdom, Satrapi accentuates the extent to which it plays a role as an Iranian cultural value. However, *Persepolis* contrasts these Iranian values with their absence in Vienna. Upon arriving in Vienna, Marjane is greeted by her old friend Shirin’s family. Shirin talks to Marjane about matters such as scented pens and colored lipstick, causing Marjane to secretly disapprove how “while people were dying in [Iran], [Shirin] was talking… about trivial things” (Satrapi 156). Marjane’s unacceptance of Shirin’s attitude towards her home country and Marjane’s difficulty in accepting it highlights this difference between the two cultures. In the same way, when Marjane returns to Iran after four years in Austria, she feels “surrounded by the victims of a war [she] had fled” (Satrapi 251). The references to martyrs are so commonplace in Iran that Marjane feels shame to a considerable extent. This harsh readjustment back to Iran only furthermore emphasizes the distinct implications of this cultural value in Vienna as compared to Iran. Through repeated focus on the juxtaposition between attitudes in Vienna and in Austria towards ideals such as martyrdom, Satrapi hence contrasts the cultural value systems of the two places.

In direct or indirect manners, the differences in behavioral norms and value systems in Iranian and Viennese cultures can be attributed to differing degrees of cultural control imposed by governmental authority. In Iran, the observed culture is greatly a result of laws and restrictions set by the regime. Such regulations are often enforced in brutal ways, which causes greater conformity to the rules as a result of fear – and when these enforced practices come to characterize the physical and mental traits of Iranian society, they become part of Iranian culture. Once, when Marjane’s mother is outside without a veil, she is told by two fundamentalists, likely enforcers of the law, that “if [she] didn’t want [consequences] to happen, [she] should wear the veil” (Satrapi 74). Strict modes of enforcement allow laws such as the veil to evolve into the material culture. However, culture does not solely consist of the traits and beliefs of a group – social forms of groups are also part of their culture. Hence, in another way, strict laws such as the ban on alcohol and other regulations have come to shape the culture in Iran as they have encouraged the public to evolve behaviors in certain ways. For example, after Satrapi has extensive interaction with colleagues and friends met in art class in an Iranian university, she “became conscious of the contrast between the official representation of [Iran] and the real life of the people” (Satrapi 304). Marjane demonstrates that in reality, imposed laws have not altered the way the people behave – they have only made the “illegal” activities by the people more hidden. For example, the ban on alcohol has only shifted drinking parties to home (Hafezi). Comparisons of Marjane’s perceptions of the Iranian public and her activity with her friends justifies that the regime has caused citizens to create a culture in which they followed strict regulations on the surface did not adhere to them when alone. This creates a sort of “dual culture” among the people in which they behave drastically different in public versus in private. On the contrary, in Vienna, there were no such cultural regulations imposed by the government. Marjane had traveled to Austria “with the idea of leaving a religious Iran for an open and secular Europe” (Satrapi 155). Therefore, the culture in Vienna is much more open and one-sided as the actions of citizens are generally unhindered by authority. This lack of restraint allows for greater freedom of self-expression as compared to Iran. By comparing degrees of conformity to cultural regulations in Iran and in Vienna, Satrapi hence contrasts the culture created by the people in response to authority.

In conclusion, *The Complete Persepolis* demonstrates contrast between religious Iranian culture and secular Viennese culture with respect to their behavioral norms and value systems, with heavy emphasis on elements such as the veil and a belief in martyrdom which are present in Iran but not in Vienna. This culture on the surface is heavily influenced by regulations imposed by the government – but when the restrictions in Iran have become strict, the people developed a new form of life behind the walls to gratify themselves. This nocturnal behavior has also come to characterize differences between the cultures in *Persepolis* as Satrapi places emphasis on the means she and her friends use to have fun in Iran and in Vienna – demonstrating a dual-faced culture present in Iran but not in Vienna. Hence, by looking at Satrapi’s portrayal of her life and her experiences in these quite polar societies, inferences are drawn about what makes these cultures different and what impact they have on the people.

**Bibliography:**

“Culture.” Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture).

Hafezi, Parisa. “Getting Drunk in a Muslim Country: Iran's Secret Party Scene Revealed.” The Independent, Independent Digital News and Media, 27 Mar. 2014, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/drunk-in-tehran-the-islamic-state-s-secret-party-scene-9217419.html.

“In Pictures: How Iran Remembers Its War Dead.” Middle East Eye, www.middleeasteye.net/discover/pictures-iran-war-dead-martyr-mural-memorial.

“Iran - Behind the Veil.” The Globalist, 1 June 2001, [www.theglobalist.com/iran-behind-the-veil/](http://www.theglobalist.com/iran-behind-the-veil/).

Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. Pantheon, 2003.

“The Art of the Iranian Revolution.” Www.nypress.com, www.nypress.com/news/the-art-of-the-iranian-revolution-LYNP1020000229302299980.

“The Pill and the Sexual Revolution.” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-and-sexual-revolution/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-and-sexual-revolution/).