**In *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, how does the symbol of the veil highlight tension 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 Marjane’s life occurs when, after entering repeated conflict over cultural conformation with her teachers in Iran, her parents send her off to Vienna to pursue a secular education. When Marjane tries to assimilate in Austria, she instead feels like she is drawing a veil over her past – distancing herself from both her Iranian origins and her newfound western identity. In *The Complete Persepolis*, the symbol of the veil highlights physical and ideological differences between religiously fundamental Iranian culture and secular western culture, which perpetuate tension and nonconformance for individuals exposed to both cultures.

The symbol of the veil accentuates contrast between the accepted dress and behavioral expectations of fundamentalist and secular cultures, highlighting tensions regarding physical attire between the east and the west. The first chapter in *The Complete Persepolis* is titled “The Veil”, bringing attention to this symbol before anything else. Since 1980, in Iran “it became obligatory to wear the veil” (Satrapi 3). In surrounding panels, Marjane and her peers carry cheerless faces and she states that she dislikes the veil. Nonetheless, the stern expression of her instructor coerce them into doing so anyways. The rationale behind this decision was to protect women from possible rapists by concealing their hair (Globalist). Due to strict enforcement by legal authorities, veil wearing quickly found expression as a behavioral norm in Iran. On the other hand, there were no such dress restrictions in the secular Austria. Upon arriving in Vienna, Marjane exclaims that it is “cool to go… without a veil” (Satrapi 156). This excitement juxtaposes the restrictive dress codes in conservative Iran with the greater freedom of attire in the liberal west, demonstrating a gap between the physical expectations of the respective cultures. However, these differences have caused tensions between the respective different cultures. For example, when the veil was first imposed, Marjane explains that she “didn’t really know what to think about the veil. Deep down [she] was very religious but [her family was] very modern and avant-garde” (Satrapi 6). In the frame, Marjane is depicted as being physically torn between her religious background and her family’s western practices. This demonstrates how the veil symbolizes the divisive and nature of the physical practices of the different cultures, which continues to manifest itself throughout the rest of the novel.

Additionally, the recurring symbol of the veil highlights ideological tension between the cultures of Iran and the secular west by juxtaposing differences in beliefs and values. For example, 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 [physical consequences] to happen, [she] should wear the veil” (Satrapi 74). The veil is tied into concepts of religious beliefs in fundamentalist Iran, with opposition to veil-wearing becoming synonymous with dissent against their religion in the eyes of the revolution. However, in Vienna, nobody wore the veil – to Marjane, such freedom was symbolic of the liberties in the secular west. To her, veil-wearing was symbolic of a confined and traditionalist mindset, while a lack of such dress codes represented a greater freedom of thought which was much yearned for. For example, when leaving Vienna and returning to Iran, Marjane laments that “[she] again put on [her] veil… so much for [her] individual and social liberties” (Satrapi 245). In this frame, Marjane is wearing the veil and standing in front of a mirror. Her eyes are visibly dejected as she stares back at herself. In this scene, the mirror is symbolic of a sense of self-reflection – Satrapi wishes to convey how words cannot explain how her mental ideologies have shifted ever since she moved to Vienna. The symbol of the veil serves only as a reminder of these changes. These differences between secular and religious ideologies generate tension between the respective cultures, which is arguably most prominent for those who have experienced both cultures firsthand. For example, Satrapi explains that “the reason why [Marjane and her peers] were so rebellious was that [their] generation had known secular schools…” (Satrapi 98). Even though most of her friends had never lived in the west, they had experienced education which mimicked the ideals of the west. Because they had this contrast, they felt the tension between fundamental Iranian culture and secular western culture most prominently.

Furthermore, because the veil serves not only as a reminder of divisive cultural differences, but also as a symbol of oppression, which perpetuates dissent for individuals trapped between eastern laws and western ideals. To begin, the veil had always been characterized as a tool of oppression. Marjane observed that a woman leaving her house asking “is my veil in place?” no longer asks herself “where is my freedom of speech? Where is my freedom of thought?” (Satrapi 302). Behind ideological connections and physical justification, the fundamentalist regime had been utilizing policies such as that of the veil to consolidate power and quell dissenting voices. Additionally, the veil was also an excuse for terrorizing or criminalizing the public. For example, once when Marjane was out on the streets buying tapes of Kim Wilde, she was stopped by two Guardians of the Revolution and questioned about her westernized attire. She is also called out for wearing her veil properly – “Lower your scarf, you little whore!”, the Guardians said (Satrapi 133). Nonetheless, the Guardians let Marjane leave unharmed in the end. Through this encounter, it is evident that the Iranian regime simply uses veil mandates as an excuse to antagonize citizens, symbolizing oppression. Because of the interconnectedness of the veil and its symbolism, the citizenry in Iran also responds to these forms of oppression with implicitly rebellious actions. For instance, Satrapi notes that “the way people dressed became an ideological sign… You showed your opposition to the regime by letting a few strands of hair show” (Satrapi 75). Veil wearing quickly became a form of expression for the Iranian population, allowing them to speak out against the fundamentalist culture that the regime championed. This connects to the other side of veil-wearing as an ideological symbol – when wearing the veil, you were implicitly complying to the religion, but when refusing to do so properly, you were going against it. Over the years, Satrapi notes that women in Iran have been gaining more and more ground regarding veil-wearing – they “were winning an eighth of an inch of hair and losing an eighth of an inch of veil” (Satrapi 293). Such a prominent quote frames veil wearing as a struggle against fundamentalist ideals. This is characteristic of the inherent clash between western secular and eastern traditionalist culture.

In conclusion, In *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, the veil symbolizes differences between fundamentalist Iranian culture and secular western culture, which manifests itself in the form of tensions between the cultures, best reflected visibly in those who know both cultures. The veil may be one significant way in which the tension between fundamentalist Iranian culture and secular Viennese culture is exemplified, but more importantly, it is also a form of expression which allows people to alleviate their internal stress.

**Bibliography:**

“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.

HL2 First Draft Note: I wrote this whole essay in a couple of days, and I know its still relatively unpolished. Here are some things that I plan on doing:

* Finding more sources to contextualize
* Cutting unnecessary words and adding more analysis in
* Changing up some parts of my body paragraphs to be more explicit – this is a 2 am essay, so its just a word dump right now (sorry, but I had to meet the first draft deadline)
* Be more clear about how I have a coherent organizational structure (wording nuances should make this clear)

I haven’t had time to do these yet though… keep in mind when reading/peer reviewing please. Feel free to point out the shortfalls of my writing, but also just keep in mind that I just haven’t gotten around to drilling down on small writing details yet. I only really think my intro paragraph is good tbh ☹