

East Meets West

To many, America is known as the melting pot of the world; it is a place for new beginnings and a place where people have the opportunity to recreate their lives. There is a creative freedom in America that many outsiders are not as fortunate to have. With socially-constructed rules concerning how to dress and what to believe in, self-discovery becomes harder to achieve. For those who must live with imprisoning boundaries forced upon them, like women in the Middle East, individualism is almost impossible. For adolescents in these strict Middle-Eastern, Islamic-controlled countries, it is very difficult to construct individual personalities and therefore create who they want to be as adults. In these countries, women are especially disempowered because they must conform to their government's ideals for their society (such as every woman being forced to wear a veil in Iran). These girls' conformity often becomes so routine that they believe no escape from these chains is ever possible.

Oftentimes, especially in Iran, images of independent Western women, who possess their own style, opinions, reputation, and power, can become the crucial role models for these Eastern women. Such young girls, if they choose to, can take images of these role models and turn them into something that they can use in recreating their identities. In Alan Ball's film *Towelhead* (2008) and Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* (2000/2001), the adolescent female protagonists from Middle Eastern cultures desire to empower their own identities through utilizing Western media and its images of independent women, as well as the role models they encounter in their actual lives. It

takes this difficult balancing act to fully create one's identity if one is a woman living under Islamic laws.

Adolescent girls who have a Middle-Eastern background must find the perfect balance between what is expected of them in their environments and what they desire as individuals. From the time that they are born, these girls have social expectations created for them by the men in their lives. As seen in the Iran portrayed in *Persepolis*, women are restricted from wearing desired makeup (thus minimizing their individuality and disempowering them completely). If a woman refuses to wear a veil, she is considered a threat and is therefore shunned from her society. However, these girls must express themselves individually at some level, and this is the life-and-death struggle that they are engaged in on a daily basis. In Iran, the law restricts enjoyable events such as parties and family card games because any individual form of enjoyment is considered a rebellion against the state's Islamic law.

Government officials are afraid that these fun events will make people want to change the social standards of their society. This shows exactly how destructive a fascist government can be when it uses the customs of a religion solely for social control. When Marjane attends an art school, her anatomy class (which usually involves drawing nude bodies) is forced to draw a woman covered from head to toe with no body shape whatsoever. The artists in the class cannot therefore get a sense of her body image at all, thus showing that the government basically wants women to have an image that is ultimately a common, shapeless clump. The Islamic regime in Iran completely destroys any chance for women to have distinct attributes, and also obliterates any chance for people to create unique personal expressions or artworks.

In *Towelhead*, the socially-constructed gender roles, which Lebanese women and men also feel that they must conform to, are practically the same ones that we see in Iran. Women are not even allowed to wear tampons before they are married, something basically every Western woman does regularly. Lebanese girls are often so used to being diminished in their social standings that they unquestioningly accept their roles in society as pleasing servants. Jasira Maroun (Summer Bishil)'s undesired sexual intercourse with Mr. Vuoso (Aaron Eckhart) shows that she feels that it is her obligation to simply please the men in her life and provide them with whatever they ask of her. Although she finds it completely ludicrous, Jasira must also write her grandmother a letter filled with love (even though she has never met her grandmother before), just because her father tells her that this is what a proper young girl does. In addition, Thomas Bradley (Eugene Jones), the one boy in Jasira's life that she actually enjoys spending time with, is forbidden to ever spend time with her because her father, Rifat Maroun (Peter Macdissi), feels that the fact that he is black will diminish Rifat's ability to successfully assimilate into the predominantly white suburb where he lives in Texas. Jasira desires Thomas mainly because he perceives her as an empowered Western woman who is in complete control of her desires. In fact, Thomas lets Jasira decide whenever they are physically affectionate. This shows that Jasira wants to exist around people who recognize her as an empowered individual.

Rifat, however, never takes into consideration what his daughter wants, and is only focused on her image as a "perfect little angel" in a completely white society. Because of all the racist things that Lebanese people are faced with daily, especially in the wake of the anti-Arab sentiment in America during the first Gulf War, you might

assume that Jasira's father wouldn't mind that she sees a black boy. However, he is quite against it, showing exactly how corrupt the ideal of normalcy is in American culture as well as in Eastern cultures. The socially-set standards of life in today's societies throughout the world are often extremely corrupt. According to Tobin Siebers, identity is "a construction" or "a broad array of theories" concerning how "to navigate social environments" (*What is Identity?*). In this critical sense, "identity is not based solely on individuality per se or any natural 'essence', but the structures by which a person identifies and becomes identified with a set of social values..." (*What is Identity?*). Sadly, many people let social pressures completely control their choices regarding their identity construction.

In the beginning of both *Persepolis* and *Towelhead*, this is exactly how the adolescents live their lives, conforming to society rather than being individuals in any positive sense. Because they are so young and unaware of how empowered women can be in other parts of the world, they are stuck in their own self-created states of disempowerment in their own countries (like Iran and Lebanon). As Marjane and Jasira grow older, they begin to look past their specific cultures' morals and begin to pay closer attention to role models in the media in order to create a new purpose for themselves. After all, the media is the ultimate playground for creativity, especially in adolescence. In *Persepolis*, Marjane looks towards popular Western music to help shape her individuality. She takes interests in *Iron Maiden* and Kim Wilde, two completely different types of music and looks that one might typically find in her culture. The loud music and the singers' looks inspire Marjane to rebel against her society and become a "punk-rock" devotee. The music helps her connect to what might possibly be her future

inner and outer self, something that is not encouraged by the government of Iran at all. It is when Marjane is living with Julie that she really gets a sense of the radical differences that exist between Eastern and Western cultures. She states: “in my own culture, parents were sacred. We at least owed them an answer.” Julie’s extreme sexuality and lack of respect for her mother compels Marjane to rethink her identity as an Iranian woman. Julie sleeps with different men constantly and she is not ashamed to tell people about it. In fact, she is proud of her sexuality and announces to Marjane that she has already slept with 18 different men. Marjane is utterly shocked by this. In her country, Julie would be considered a slut and therefore a threat to her society. At the same time, however, Marjane is not forgetting about her goal of assimilating to Western culture and becoming a unique individual. Although she primarily finds Julie’s actions inappropriate, she begins to accept Julie’s sexuality as a freedom that she might be able to integrate into her own life in a more positive way down the road.

According to Nietzsche, “amor fati” is “the love of one’s fate in a difficult, unmasterable, and non-ideal world...[it] is the power to love life’s imperfections, accidents, and flaws enough to learn from them and thereby effectively re-evaluate our old values,” (*Apollo and Dionysus*). Marjane uses the creative spirit of amor fati to her advantage especially when she is studying abroad in Austria. She takes the difficulties of assimilating to an unfamiliar Western culture and turns them into positive forces of growth and transformation. For example, when she becomes friends with Julie’s friend Momo, he is nothing like Marjane is used to. He has activist thoughts and kisses Marjane on the lips when greeting her (something that is strongly forbidden in Iran). Although Marjane does not agree with most of the things Momo says or does, Marjane uses

Momo's strong opinions as motivation to understand exactly what he is talking about and therefore educate herself in Western philosophy. She reads and listens until she is familiar with Momo's thought processes. It is through this knowledge that she begins to think like an individual with a more liberated Western mindset. Although Marjane still does not approve of the things that Momo does (such as smoke pot), she uses these things as guidelines to redefine what a balance between Eastern and Western cultural values might look like. When Marjane hears the mean people she met at a party talk badly about her and make fun of her for being a foreigner, rather than being upset about it, Marjane stands up for herself by explaining that she is proud to be who she is (*amor fati*).

Most importantly for Marjane, the most negative event of her life, her attempted suicide, becomes the event that changes her life profoundly for the better. Marjane's suicide attempt is so significant because, during the entire book, she is trying to find out who she really is, and trying to prove that women can ultimately have power in an Eastern society. However, by trying to kill herself, she is basically saying that this goal is unachievable. The fact that she survives shows that there is hope for the women of the Middle East and she has a purpose in life to spread this knowledge and encouragement to others. Marjane basically gets rid of her fear through this pushing of her limits to the ultimate breaking point. Marjane now realizes how lucky she is to still be alive and she knows she must take full advantage of life from now on. After this catharsis, Marjane decides to completely turn her life around. She makes her appearance more delectable and womanly, and she becomes a successful aerobics instructor according to the personal freedom she has found in Western individualism. It is after she tries to commit suicide that she finds true happiness with herself. Through all of these painful experiences

Marjane has, her knowledgeable horizons broaden and she fully understands what it is like to be an empowered woman who is capable of thinking for herself and looking the way that she wants to look (amor fati).

Once Marjane has returned to Iran from being abroad and being exposed to what Western culture is like, she is fully aware of the flaws in her nation's manipulation of religious ideology. When at art school, she has no shame in protesting against the fact that men can dress inappropriately but women get in trouble for the smallest things (such as wearing pants that are too wide, even though they still hide a woman's shape). When policemen accuse her of moving her "behind" in an obscene way while she runs, she yells at them to not "look at her ass." According to the article *Why Art Matters*, "religious and political leaders with agendas of many kinds typically scapegoat artists as *the* causes of social problems." This applies to the political leaders of Iran who do not allow any expression or creativity because they are afraid it will cause social problems like people desiring an empowered sense of sexuality.

It is profound that Marjane turns to art school towards the end of the novel, and she turns out to be one of the strongest and unique women in her class because of her life lessons that she learned in Austria as well as her desire to be an artist. Marjane is clearly a new woman who has grown from her experiences and who does her best to be a self-empowered woman within her own struggling nation. Marjane uses her knowledge of Western culture to stand up for herself in hopes of making changes in the Eastern society and therefore eventually helping others to do the same. When she designs an amusement park for young boys and girls in Iran that is based on mythical and historical figures from Persia's past, she is attempting to positively integrate her Eastern and Western influences

into a single, empowered vision. Women like grandmother, even though they have little power for self-expression, still teach her the importance of thinking about exactly how her actions will affect other people. The fact that, in the end, Marjane must move to France in order to become a true artist, reveals how the Iran of today is not ready to positively recognize a young woman's creative talents. It is Marjane's hope that her memoir *Persepolis* will create more dialogue and inspire other people to fight for women's rights in Iran.

Like Marjane, Jasira turns to the media as well as the role models in her everyday life in the hopes of finding a more empowered identity for herself. Because Jasira is becoming more in touch with her sexuality as she gets older, and because she has no immediate family members to help her deal with it, she must create her own initiatory rite into womanhood. When she finds dirty magazines in Mr. Vuoso's house, she takes an immediate interest in the nude models. To her, they represent beautiful, strong, independent women. Jasira wants to be just like these women. To her, they represent everything an empowered woman should be because they appear to be in complete charge of men's desire—and not the other way around! This is rather ironic though, because, in American society, it is these women who are often strongly looked down upon and isolated. It is from looking at these women that Jasira believes she can have control and authorship over her sexuality. It is interesting to note that because Jasira does not look at these women through a moralistic lens they can become a positive force for change in her own life (*amor fati*).

The main female role model in the film for Melina is Melina Hines (Toni Collette). Melina serves as the only significant mother figure Jasira has ever had. Besides helping

her out with everyday woman troubles, Melina suspects something wrong is going on in Jasira's life, so she opens her house to Jasira. Probably understanding that Jasira is having sexual relations with Mr. Vuoso, and that her father teaches her nothing about sexual education, Melina buys Jasira a sexual education book. It is from this book that Jasira learns that Mr. Vuoso is actually raping her, something that changes her life forever. This rape is obviously an extremely negative part of Jasira's life. In the spirit of amor fati, it is through this rape and reading the sexual education book that she can finally be able to stand up for what she believes in and therefore create her own future adult identity.

When she takes responsibility for not preventing the rape and, in addition, takes the responsibility for its effects on her, it is clear that she has found her voice and has really grown up to be the empowered woman she always wanted to be. Rather than repressing her feelings as she used to, she expresses them in front of a room full of adults, including her father. Because repression is the primary force that allows men take advantage of her and steer her life in the ways that they want, when she expresses herself, Jasira takes complete control of her life. It is at this moment that she becomes happy for the first time. At the very end of the film when Melina is giving birth to her baby, Jasira is the one who is helping her give birth and not her father. Jasira's father is too weak and grossed out to help deliver Melina's baby, showing that, in the end, it is Jasira who is the truly strong one. During the film, Jasira was able to change herself and thus eventually help others as well. For this reason, she decides that she would rather be raised by her next door neighbor Melina and her husband (who speaks Arabic because he was in the Peace Corps). Jasira therefore acts to create her own future in the empowered spirit of amor fati.

She is even willing to make radical changes, like moving in with brand new mother and father figures.

As the viewer of the film and the reader of this graphic novel, I am now more aware of exactly how women are treated in Middle Eastern cultures. I know that there is not one solution that can solve this extreme form of sexism, but I know that slowly but surely Eastern countries can eventually become countries of equality if women like Jasira and Marjane are allowed to freely invent their own identities and social roles. The one big solution I see to this problem is creating art like *Persepolis* and *Towelhead*. The book and film show how young innocent girls can go from being subjects of sexism to rebels who can offer solutions to this worldwide problem. Many women in the Middle East or even America can become more aware of exactly how they can make a difference in their communities and hopefully one day change their nations to be more affirming of women's desires (*amor fati*). If more and more women continue to find their voices, and remain strong by not letting fear take them over, they can protest the evil that is being forced upon them. It is all a matter of women going out and making necessary changes for themselves rather than waiting for someone to make these changes for them. If we face our fears and just stand up for what we believe in rather than repressing our true feelings, we can break free of the sexist lifestyles that many Eastern as well as Western women endure on a daily basis.

WORK CITED PAGE

“On Art’s Relation to Life-At-Large: Apollo & Dionysus.” A Hollywood of Poetry Class Handout, Tulane University, December 5, 2009.

“What is Identity.” A Hollywood of Poetry Class Handout, Tulane University, December 5, 2009.

“Why Art Matters.” A Hollywood of Poetry Class Handout, Tulane University, December 5, 2009.