

In The Name of Religion

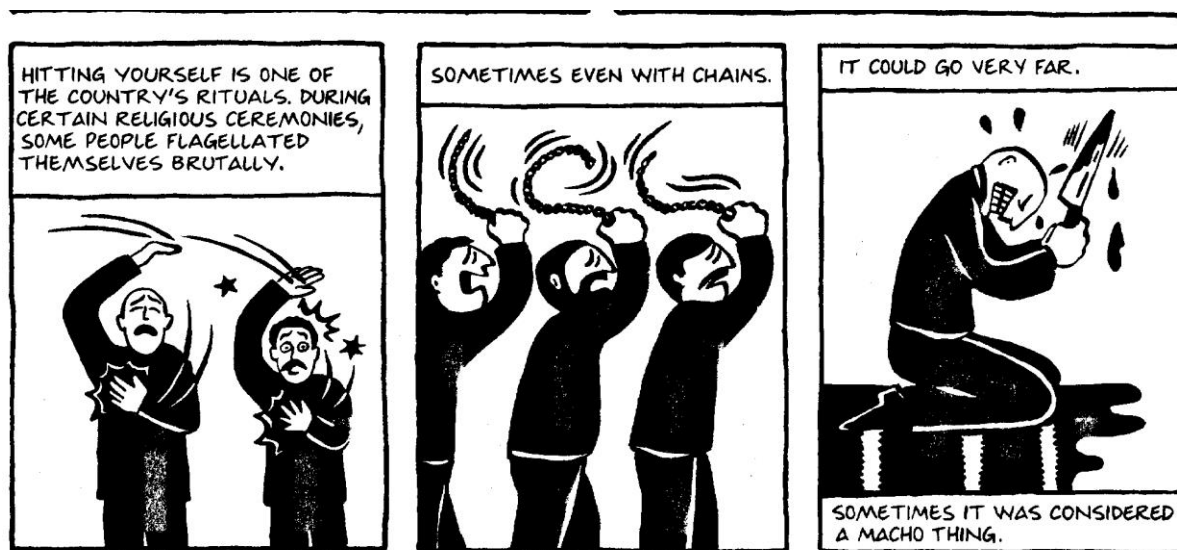
A Look Into Ritualistic Religious Performance in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis

Hannah Keziah Agustin

University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

Pay for your sins in the streets. Slice your head open with a sword. Beat your chest purple. Bruise yourself. Let blood water the ground you stand upon. *Mea maxima culpa*. This is penitence in Shi'i Islam, staged by actors carrying chains with knives, played by little girls who are told to slam their closed fists against their chests for people they do not know. Public and theatrical in every aspect. In Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, religion is a performance, consisting of actors, spectacle, drama, and action, all of which in some way expose the dissonance between external religious pressures and one's personal convictions. At the cost of obedience, carefully choreographed rituals are publicized. In this essay, I will examine self-flagellation in the context of Islam and the act of wearing the veil to protect the self — two external ceremonies done religiously but only out of fear rather than true piety.

Self-flagellation and Wounded Fidelity



As a way of being one with the sufferings of their brothers and sisters in God, the mortification of the flesh is deemed necessary. Creating these wounds of devotion is a demonstration of solidarity and allegiance to the martyrs. Marji captions the collage, “Hitting yourself is one of the country’s rituals. During certain religious ceremonies, some people flagellated themselves brutally. Sometimes even with chains. It could go very far” (96). Three men line up to carry chains for lashing their backs; their faces are contorted in anguish, jaws dropped and groaning. We see them wear the same clothes used inside temples, but this time it’s stained with blood. There is synchronicity in their movement and clothing, symbolizing unity, solidarity and brotherhood. They commemorate martyrdom through this bloodletting, carving their heads open while kneeling on a pool of blood, using the same posture Muslims use for daily prayer, *salat*. It is noticeable that the ritual is a public performance *shared* with others, and not a solitary act of piety done behind closed doors. The street is the stage. The metal whip is a prop. The sun is the lighting. Their cries and bellows are music. People congregate as it is performed in the company

of fellow brothers in the faith, developing camaraderie as they carry the same chains that harm them. Although not compulsory, these devotees purposely lacerate themselves even with the threat of physical risk. This raises a question on the authenticity of one's beliefs during the act of self-inflicting harm. Doesn't this go against the very fabric of religious morality? If the repetition of such acts allows one's spirituality and physicality to come together, then Religion encourages violence towards the self. These extremes perversify the love and joy that a relationship with God should bring.

Wounds invite sympathy. It disturbs the ethos. It parades suffering, angst, and ache that others do not feel. It crucifies the self — center stage — with one's agency and permission. When it is done in public, one plays the victim and dwells on the wounds for other people's pity party. These scars flatter religiosity; it is the most daunting and eye-catching stunt that screams devout and saintly. What is quite trivial about this is Marji's remark on the grotesque exhibition as "a macho thing" (96). It could be possible that the histrionics are done as an ostentatious display of one's pride, an egotistical assurance of what one can and *will* go through in the name of Religion. It brags self-righteousness. This public act of penitence is an exaggeration which provokes others to feel guilty for a crime they did not commit. It is putting blood into the innocent's hands; sadly, this is still justified as a way of processing grief and commemoration for those who have fought against tyranny.

But because of the existence of the private and public self and the internalized split between the two, we'll never know the authenticity of one's purpose for doing the rituals. No one can ever examine one's intentions for walking barefoot for miles and slashing the back open. It is between God and the self. From the words and image, we experience the agony. As we see the clenching

of the teeth, we are unwillingly convicted and condemned. Still, it makes us wonder what symbolism is inherent in all this hurting. What is the point of all these?

Unveiling the Veil: Examining the Private and Public Self



Satrapi manipulates the pictorial medium with such careful precision. She flattens the image by having no point of focus, crowding the panel with small kids playing with the veil. She says, “We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to” (3). From this, we can deduce that the imposition of the veil is coerced by the Islamic regime. Below the narrative caption, we see little girls use the veil as a shield from the sun, as a jump rope, as reins for horseback riding, as a costume for the monster of darkness. In the cluttered frame, their innocence shows; joking about “execution in the name of freedom” (3) still has no bearing. With the placing of the shadows below the girls’ feet, it can be said that it is lunch time; the sun is scorching hot and its overall brightness dominates the frame. Wearing a veil over the little girls’ school uniforms only adds up to the heat and discomfort, so they remove it. Since then, it has always limited, restricted, and restrained their actions.

Again, the theme echoes with symbolic resonance as we see the girls in the front yard of their school a few years later (95). The scene of the veil repeats, but this time they have greater cognizance of the implications of this ritual; they have been raised by the revolution. They've seen families and friends die; their eyes are glassy and frightened but hiding unease, unwilling to show any hint of fear. They know their place in society now; it has been indoctrinated to every fiber of their being. Marji wrote, "At school, they lined us up twice a day to mourn the war dead. They put on funeral marches and we had to beat our breasts" (95). We see uniformity in the way they beat their chest, in how they dress, and how confused they were; still, as a symbol of their allegiance and submission to Islam and the theocracy, they repeat the rituals with the funeral marches serenading the background. From the moment they dress up for school, they put the hijab on, even under the denim jacket and fancy clothing (131). The self is denied into submission to the demands of the ritualistic religious group, but it has no choice. It is a small nut in a big war machine. The individual spirit is diminished. Being different is called *resistance*. Theocracies and militant regimes crush the self because the self seeks liberty, and fundamentalists cannot control people if their self-awareness and enlightenment hinders them from obeying.

Thankfully, the veil covers. The veil also symbolizes protection; it is a boundary which separates the self from the world. This is the concrete demarcation of the private and the public identity. This costume allows one to blend in, even when one's internal stance is in defiance against the theocracy; it conceals. It allows women everywhere to take up the role of the religious, the demure, and the holy. This frame of modesty stops people from asking questions; it shields them from the word "whore" and un-vilifies them as objects of male lust. It gives room for another identity to be taken up into existence — an identity which can make others believe that you are one of them, even when you take the veil off at the end of the day.

The conclusion is this: Religion, as portrayed in *Persepolis*, imposes rules obeyed by its followers for the sake of performance. It is an institution which, when followed without careful scrutiny, can poison one's morale. It has the ability to dehumanize and desensitize as a result of the violence it encourages. Like Marji, Religion can scar people and draw them away from having an authentic relationship with God — the good God who has called Marji His celestial light, His last and best choice (8). These rituals impose invariance, legalism, traditionalism, and formalism, as if all these save people from eternal damnation. If doing is believing, then call these people giants in the faith. But in the end, when all is said and done and we stand in front of the judgment seat at the throne room of God, are all these enough?

Works Cited:

Satrapı, Marjane, and Mattias Ripa. *Persepolis*. Pantheon Books, 2004.