

Unveiling Cultural Filters: Teaching “The Veil” in Puerto Rico and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

*A freshman English course designed to spark critical thinking in cross-cultural contexts for ESL students was taught in the Middle East (Spring, 2014) and in the Caribbean (Fall, 2014). The university experience was framed as a rite of passage. As models of how to narrate in-between-ness, students read stories from *Coming of Age around the World*. “The Veil” by Marjane Satrapi provoked dichotomized responses. This essay is a comparative analysis of student response to this excerpt from Satrapi’s graphic novel, *Persepolis*. Students’ voices are excerpted to illustrate how their respective dominant cultures—Wahabi Islam in Arabia, and U.S. mass media in Puerto Rico—acted as filters, veiling what they could see in this text. This essay surveys multi-disciplinary scholarship on veiling, as well as the critical reception of *Persepolis*, to suggest how Satrapi’s preferred reading, embedded in the visual narrative, challenges readers to see beyond apparent binary of “freedom” vs. “the veil.”*

Keywords

coming-of-age, freshman English, Persepolis, veiling, Middle East, Puerto Rico, visual narrative, ESL

1. Introduction

In late 2013, I developed a freshman English course meant to spark critical thinking in cross-cultural contexts for ESL students soon to enter a global information economy. I taught this course in Saudi Arabia (Spring, 2014), and then in Puerto Rico (Fall, 2014). Students first wrote an auto-ethnography, while we framed the university experience as a rite of passage. (Note 1) As models of how to narrate in-betweenness, we studied stories from *Coming of Age around the World* (Adiele & Frosch, 2007). “The Veil” by Marjane Satrapi provoked lively debate—for students both in the Middle East and in the Caribbean. The focus of the present essay is a comparative perspective on student response to this excerpt from Satrapi’s graphic novel, *Persepolis*. Their respective dominant cultures—Wahabi Islam in Arabia, and U.S. mass media in Puerto Rico—acted as filters, veiling what they could see in this text.



A general “fixation on veiling” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 7) makes intercultural dialogue about the issues visible in the strip above difficult, both in Middle Eastern and Western contexts. However, by analysing student responses in relation to context about the “New Islamic Veiling” provided by El Guindi (2005) and others, and interviews with Muslim women (Zhou, 2010), I want to argue that engaging stories like “The Veil” can even prepare those involved for an “unveiling of the mind” (El Saadawi, 1997, pp. 18-19). I do not start with any presumption of what this *mental unveiling* might entail, but it strikes me as a variation of Bob Marley’s “emancipation from mental slavery,” and thus is another conceptual tool in exploring with students just what critical thinking might require, in transnational and intercultural contexts.

In *Coming of Age*, the subtitle “The Veil” comes underneath “From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*,” a girl’s-eye-view of the Iranian revolution (Adele & Frosch, 2007). It can be placed in a growing genre of “the Iranian émigré graphic memoir” (Darda, 2013, p. 37); as part of “a new wave of autobiographical writing by diasporic Iranian women” (Naghbi & O’Malley, 2005, p. 223), and in broader terms, as a continuation of “the memoir boom of the late twentieth century, which was characterized by a proliferation of trauma stories” (Gilmore, 2011, p. 158).

A shorter version of “The Veil” also appears in the text I used in Puerto Rico (DiYanni, 2007). However, I used the longer version in the *Coming of Age* anthology, which includes a fuller range of themes I wanted to explore: intercultural relations, resistance, and comparative religion. This version is identical to the first chapter of the book *Persepolis*. At the same time, this “comic strip” functions as a stand-alone narrative with thematic kinship to other cross-cultural coming of age stories.

I will focus especially on one strip which dramatizes an opinion divide about the veil between Muslim and westernized women. There is more to this confrontation than at first meets the eye. However, the title of the book/film is in fact an important framing device. Persepolis in ancient Greek means “city of the Persians.” This allusion to a history pre-dating Islam is important, as “The Veil” gives readers, through a ten-year-old’s perspective, access to ancient religious prophets such as Zarathustra, as well as

an “avant-garde” family with its share of leftist would-be revolutionaries who were routinely jailed and tortured by the CIA-backed Shah.

Although Marjane Satrapi is a Westernized woman who has lived in Paris for decades, she is also an artist with a sophisticated vision, who gives readers open ended visual art subject to multiple interpretations. However, I quickly found out that both my students in Arabia, and those in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, looked at “The Veil” with cultural filters which sharply limited, in overtly ideological ways, what they were able to see. Teaching “The Veil” became, then, a “teachable moment” about just how difficult it can be to see beyond the perceptual filters of our own cultural bubble.

When I was finalizing the syllabus in Riyadh, some colleagues advised me not to teach “The Veil.” They had been warned by administrators to avoid any material referencing politics or religion. In fact, I was eventually told not to use the word “freedom” in any class material. (Note 2) For now, I want to make clear that teaching any curriculum which referenced religious or political authorities was high charged in the Middle East, especially in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I consulted with my students. They agreed that Satrapi’s inclusion of the images of an angry Islamic leader in Iran imposing a monocultural fundamentalism on students in 1980, and of a child’s representation of an imaginary God, could be controversial to some Saudi students. But they agreed that since this story was narrated through a ten-year-old’s point of view, it was permissible, since “all is permitted to children” (re: “The Emperor’s New Clothes”).

My decision to teach “The Veil” was also based on my university’s “Vision” of Humanities and Social Sciences aspirations: “*To create critical-minded, free-thinking students with the support of modern pedagogy and technology who will positively contribute to the workforce and a knowledge-based economy.*” That sanctioned me to provide students with material which, while respectful of local sensibilities, would help inspire critical thinking in cross-cultural contexts.

2. Rites of Passage as a Framework

Before moving on to analyze how two sets of students interpreted “The Veil” in divergent ways, it is necessary to first relate the way I framed these classes. This began by conceptualizing the university experience as a rite of passage (Stephens, 2014). Following is a sketch of what I shared with students, which I encouraged them to use as a framework for their own writing.

Rites of passage are choreographed initiation rituals (Bell, 1997) that mark *a transition from one stage of life to another* (Turner, 1969). This can be applied to any life transition, but it is most often used to describe and theorize the passage from childhood to young adulthood. The three-part typology of rites of passage outlined by Arthur Van Gennep, and later Victor Turner, is particularly applicable to what students experience during their university careers:

- 1) Separation (“cutting away” from the former self)
- 2) Transition (a *liminal* or threshold phase, re: the state of being between worlds)
- 3) Re-Incorporation (re-integration)—re-entering society with a new status.

Since we focused primarily on the transitional or in-between phase, and I had students write their auto-ethnographies about “how culture shapes me” during the transition to adulthood, a short definition of culture will be helpful, for readers as well as for students.

3. Defining Culture, and Cultural Framing of *The Veil*

Scholars from Edward Tylor to Edward Hall to Raymond Williams have noted that cultures, as “complex wholes” (Tylor, 1871, 1920, p. 1), or “a whole way of life” (Williams, 1958, 2002, p. 93), are largely invisible belief systems. They are “an invisible structure of life” (Reynolds & Valentine, 2011, p. 17), or as Hall (1990) put it, “underlying principles that shape our lives” (p. 3), molding us in a largely unconscious way.

The purpose of assignments designed to inspire critical thinking, like teaching “The Veil,” is to make culture visible. I try to give students tools to consciously reflect on their relationship to the cultures which structure their way of thinking and living. As a noun, cultures are structures which *house us*, in which we move and have various sorts of interaction. But as a verb, culture *structures* the way we move and think. Our way of life is structured by culture, like the way water structures how a fish swims. We swim in underlying culture, unconsciously. The objective is to become conscious of how “in [culture] we live and move and have our being.” (Note 3)

4. Shia Revolution and Saudi Reaction

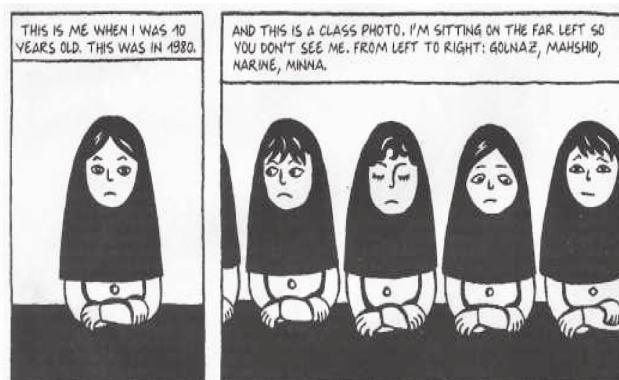
The dynamics of teaching “The Veil” in Saudi Arabia were only partially visible to me at the time I taught it. The Syrian, Palestinians Jordanian, Lebanese, and Pakistani students had a somewhat different orientation from my Saudi students’ Wahabi religious ideology. Saudis have long since absorbed a blinding cultural bias against Shias in general, and Iranians in particular (Matthiesen, 2013). This had both benefits and drawbacks. Some students were anxious about Satrapi’s depiction of an angry Shia cleric who forces the girls to wear veils, separates them from their male friends, and condemns all “Western” culture—including the French they had studied in their bilingual school, and rock music (Marji favors metal)—as “symbols of decadence.”



One may conclude that the author is expressing opposition to Iran's "cultural revolution." But in Riyadh, there were two loopholes. First, "children are permitted to speak freely." This is also a philosophical perspective, especially in literary form: in wartime, or situations of trauma, the "child witness" is not only "adequate," but, gets a pass from legalistic criterion, theological strictures, etc. (Gilmore, 2011, p. 159). But I began to suspect that at least an equally important factor that made this text permissible was the fact that the *angry cleric* was an Iranian Shia, not a Saudi Sunni. In the latter case including this in a Saudi class would have been impossible.

The Saudis I talked to took it as an article of faith that the Iranians wanted to seize the Arabian Peninsula, and take control of the holy sites (and Arabian oil reserves). Their paranoia made them myopic about regional sectarian politics. (Note 4) But that is beyond the focus of my present essay. I just want to give readers outside of the region some sense of how an "Islamic revolution" in Iran was hardly considered properly Islamic, by Saudis. Furthermore, the Iranian state, and Shia concentrations in the Gulf, were seen as existential threats to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. So Islamic politics from Iran were seen through a distorted filter by most Saudis. To some degree my students viewed "The Veil" as taking place in a cultural milieu which was foreign to them. But still, there was a degree of kinship: Saudis sympathized with the "new Islamic veiling" in Iran as a form of resistance to Western cultural imperialism (El Guindi, 2005, p. 72). There was also some awareness that Islamists in Iran were resisting a homicidal dictator propped up by the U.S. Thus they were predisposed to sympathize with resistance to imperial interference in the region, even if it was spearhead by a "heretical" offshoot of what they considered to be the true faith.

This backstory is subtext for Satrapi. She may want to "denaturalize" or defamiliarize our (mis) understandings of West Asia (Darda, 37) and Iran in particular (Botshon & Plastas, 2009, pp. 2-10). But "*Persepolis* absents the adult Satrapi from its frames" (Gilmore, 2011, p. 159). For the young Marji, politics and religion were just background, while the foreground point of view remains that of a 10-year-old. This earns a degree of trust because this child witness claims no "authoritative angle of vision" (Gilmore, 2011, pp. 159-160). Here is the first panel:



Depending on your point of view, Marji (Satrapi) and her schoolmates either look bored, or unhappy with the veil they have been required to wear. Marji's view that many were not thrilled with the veil is quickly apparent, but their reactions in the last panel

On the first page are consistent with their age group: the girls “raucously” use the veils “as props in their various games” (Matusz, 2013)—they skip rope, play pony, act out adult games (“execution in the name of freedom”). But childish exuberance for one reader is subversion for others: Naghibi and O’Malley (2005, p. 243) see the girls “undermining the veiling ordinance (in ways) that are contrary to their meant purpose of guarding female modesty.” Certainly, this scene conveys “the regime’s incapacity to keep young imaginations in check” (Tarlo, 2007, p. 348).



What eventually became apparent, by teaching “The Veil” to different sets of students in two different cultural and geopolitical contexts, is that this story shows readers *two competing definitions of freedom* and women engaging in *two different kinds of rebellion*. The possibility that veiled women in an Islamic context may be engaged in cultural resistance which they also define as freedom needs to be contemplated, before the student responses I will detail can be comprehended. Hearing what Muslim women say about freedom is a necessary exercise to read between the lines of the strip in which “Freedom” and “The Veil” seem to be opposed. (Note 5) Then we can defamiliarize the Western fantasy that “freedom” is utopian and veiling is dystopian.

My Saudi students expressed sympathy with the Iranian women who protested *for* the veil. They shared a sense in the region that veiling was both an expression of identity, and a form of resistance to imposed identities. The practice of “new Islamic veiling,” pioneered by Egyptian female university students in the 1970s, was in fact a path to power in professional settings, as well as “a rejection of Western materialism, consumerism, commercialism” (El Guindi, 2005, p. 60).

In the Middle East, students more readily voiced the view that freedom is relative. Asked to react to the freedom vs. the veil strip, several female students focused on the anger of the Westernized Iranian women. “The author seems to want us to see the Islamic women are blind,” said Maria. “But we can see that they are able to see what is best for them, while the Westernized women see only what they have learned from the Western media.” During discussion, Leila observed that anger was blinding, but faith can give believers freedom from blinding emotions such as anger. “They are imagining a future in which they feel safe, and valued,” Leila said.

A male student who had gone to high school in the U.S. drew a parallel to the use of veils in weddings. “You want the woman to be fresh and new for one day,” he said. “We want it to be that way for life.” I did not voice my scepticism about the desirability of a woman who wears a mask of eternal innocence. But spaces of seclusion have value, it should be acknowledged. Whether in romance, religion, or other domains, we have templates of acquiring new vision through withdrawal into isolation (Bailey, 2003, p. 18). Surely in our era of 24/7 availability and commercialized promiscuity, there is a cultural logic for sometimes retreating behind the veil.

5. Inside and Outside *The Veil*: International Perspectives

Insight into why many educated Muslim women perceive the veil as a form of freedom is provided by Zhou Yun, who interviewed Pakistani female students during a year she taught in Islamabad. As a non-Muslim outsider, Yun begins “Behind the Veil” with a journal excerpt. This sheds light on her ability to empathize with the testimony of her female subjects. When she first arrived, although she tried to dress conservatively, she felt constantly besieged. She wrote:

At the beginning I felt angry yet powerless ... Gradually I started to walk with my neck slightly bent and eyes casting down. I no longer wear make-up ... I try to make myself look small, plain and unnoticeable. Sometimes I let my mind drift and pretend to be at some other places. It suddenly dawns on me that I WANT to be invisible. (Yun, 2010, p. 84)

That led her to empathize with the worldview of her subjects. She frames this through feminist theories of the “male gaze.” All the interviewees’ remark, she notes:

... that one function of Burqa is to prevent the women who wear them from the male gaze. When asked about their experience in Burqa, the women unanimously stated that they feel safer and more comfortable. The invisibility provided by Burqa, while sometimes constructed by outsiders as confinement, violation and concealment of female beauty and humanity, is much needed and appreciated by the women in Burqa. (Yun, 2010, p. 85)

One response was particularly revealing:

R: In your opinion, what are some special benefits and advantages of veiling?

F: It covers you properly as a candy without cover will be attack [sic] by bees, accordingly without veil you’ll become the center of all the eyes. (Yun, 2010, p. 85)

At root here are “culturally different interpretations of respect,” Yun argues. This cross-cultural perspective can help make intelligible why many Muslim women feel the veil gives them freedom—from disrespect. While in some cultures, “respect is obtained when attention is given to somebody via eye contact, smiling etc. for certain Muslim women, respect means NOT paying attention to or noticing them”. (Yun, 2010, p. 85)

The “candy and bee” analogy expresses a general view of the male gaze and harassment as “signs of disrespect.” In her commentary on her respondents’ testimony, Yun writes: “through their reasoning it is only fair to say that the invisibility provided by Burqa ... provides the women in Burqa with a sense of

respect and dignity, thus, becomes a total opposite of dehumanization and confinement” (Yun, 2010, p. 85). For female students in Islamic countries, there is another empowering function of veiling. As a marker it enables a rite of passage into domains traditionally reserved for men. Veiling becomes “a form of opportunity—it allows women physical mobility in public spaces,” and thus is “used to affirm identity, challenge authority, and negotiate change” (Basu, 2010, p. 52). Yun’s respondent Sitara mentions that when women don the burqa, “they (men) think they (the veiling women) ... know Islam” (Yun, 2010, p. 86). Therefore they are treated as serious scholars, and gain entry into new professions. This “can also lead to self-empowerment” (Yun, 2010, p. 87).

Modern veiling was a bottom-up movement, pioneered by Egyptian women in the mid-1970s for reasons of professional advancement (El Guindi, 1999, 2005). The female pioneers, who were protesting their exclusion from domains such as Islamic Studies, sewed their own hijabs at home. They created an imagined version of “classic” Islamic women, who had a valued voice in the public sphere of their era. As a result they gained entry to positions of influence.

Satrapi’s perspective on veiling has evolved. Marji expresses her family’s Westernized perspective on freedom for women. Still, Satrapi is a Persian patriot (*Persepolis*, p. 83). Her family had long protested fearlessly against authoritarianism—against the Shahs, before protesting a different set of restrictions on freedom imposed by Islamic revolutionaries. Predictably, efforts in the West to restrict how Muslim women could dress led Satrapi to “defend the veil.” Bans on the Islamic head scarf in schools in France and Belgium (Scott, 2005; Franklin, 2013), and knee-jerk positions taken by some Western feminists, pushed Satrapi in a new direction. She noted the “height of irony ... that the veil has become a symbol of rebellion” (Constantino, 2008, p. 434). (Note 6)

As many scholars have noted, “liberating women from the veil” has been a rationale for military intervention. The imagined unveiling is, for conservative women and liberal feminists alike, “the significant moment that marks a transition to modernity and hence ‘freedom’” (Basu, 2010, p. 40; Behiery, 2013, p. 389). Dr. Basu, an Associate Professor at the University of Kentucky’s Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, sees the mainstream feminist view of veiling as “fetishism”: “The equation of agency and liberation with renouncing the burqa is indeed one of the prime fetishes that characterize the Western feminist relationship to Muslim women” (Basu, p. 40). It was this blinkered view of freedom voiced by “western women” which led Satrapi to comment that “the women who are forced to wear the veil, and the women who are portrayed naked to sell anything from car tyres to orange juice are both facing a form of oppression.” (Note 7)

6. Familial Varieties of Veiling and Resistance

Satrapi’s “graphic narrative” functions as a “bridge,” observes Hillary Chute, between men in her field who explore public sphere issues (war and politics), and a female private sphere—“the child-oriented testimonies of many ... women authors” (Chute, 2008, p. 94). (Note 8) This perspective on a broader family history in *Persepolis* can help readers resist the temptation to read “The Veil” in a binary fashion.

Satrapı frames *Persepolis* as fulfilling the mandate of Marji's Marxist uncle Anoosh, who tells her that she must "never forget" their family history (Satrapı 2006, p. 60). The day before his execution, he asks to see Marji during the only visit he is allowed, thus making sacred her mission-to-remember (Satrapı, 2006, p. 69). The familial history is by necessity both personal and political, so *Persepolis* charts the "the political confluence of the everyday and the historical" (Chute, 2008, pp. 94-97).

In this context the child witness records what she recalls both about her family and her nation during the trauma of revolution. This is the back story in *Persepolis*. Marji's family were not neutral observers. Family members did not just "protest the rise of Islamic fundamentalism," but had a history of opposition to the Shah (Botshon & Plastas, 2010, p. 4). Family members had suffered torture, imprisonment, and even the ultimate sacrifice at the hands of the Shah's regime.

So although Marji's mother is one of those Westernized women shouting for freedom, it cannot be said that she has no common ground with the veiled women, who "protested against the Shah and Western cultural colonization" (Ayotte & Husain, 2005, p. 117).



In fact, "the struggle against the Shah brought out the greatest political participation of women in the history of Iran" (Del, 2003, p. 66; Ahmed, 1992, p. 233). Read in that context, the apparent opposition between Muslim and Westernized women is itself a veil, which conceals an at least partial unity of purpose between these two groups in preceding years. (Note 9)

After Marji's mom is photographed at a protest, her photo appears in the European press. As a result,

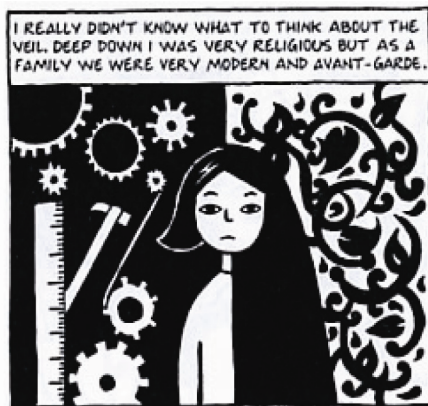


She goes underground—she dyes her blond, then dons dark glasses and wears a muffler up to her nose as she walks in front of five disembodied bearded faces, the glowering male guardians of the Islamic revolution. (Note 10)

This section illustrates that veiling has many forms and purposes. It also shows that the binary of the two sides is only apparent. Satrapı represents their respective truths as complementary. In the freedom

vs. the-veil strip, both groups feel they are in possession of a truth. They are committed to a utilitarian good for all women. Although they envision a radically different future for Iran, they have been united in opposition to the totalitarianism of the Shah. As Chiu notes (2008, p. 103), “Graphically, their bodily profiles read similarly despite the divergence of their political positions.” Both groups adopt a universal iconography of protest. Through this gesture of “the raised arm, *Persepolis* illustrates a nation of political disunity that is grafted to protesters’ unity.”

Westernized and Islamic protesters are united in a patriotic iconography of protest, but they have incommensurable definitions of freedom. We get only the partial witness of a child, but this child can still glimpse an underlying unity that is invisible for most adults. Thus, in the frame just after her mother’s “reverse veiling,”



Satrapı portrays young Marji’s split identity. One half is veiled; framed by Persian art. Behind her unveiled half are items of scientific progress. The adult Satrapı, speaking for the perspective of Marji, writes that “deep down I was very religious.” But as her family was “very modern and avant-garde ... I really didn’t know what to think about the veil” (Satrapı, 2004, p. 6).

As Tarlo perceptively observes in her commentary on “sartorial” choices in *Persepolis*, Marji identifies with both the veiled and non-veiled halves, “but under the new regime ... these choices ... seem to have become contradictory” (Tarlo, 2007, p. 348).

Let us move now to a closer look at the “filtered” readings of my Western students. According to Theresa Tensuan, Satrapı’s focus on Marji and her family “recasts the simplistic scripts Westerners have assigned to the region labeled ‘the Middle East’ by showing [its] complicated political history” (Tensuan, 2006, p. 957). But that recasting is far from obvious to many Western readers. Their simplistic scripts can remain obvious to them, even after exposure to alternative readings; even when guided to explore the author’s own more nuanced “preferred interpretation.” In the following section, I will spell out how the invisibility of our “underlying principles” often shapes our interpretations in largely unconscious ways.

7. Puerto Rican Perspectives

In the fall of 2014, I began a tenure-track position in English at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez. I was tasked with sparking intercultural awareness in Honors students who were, within their own rich island culture, often insular. In “Advanced English” courses, I utilized a

curriculum almost identical to what I had taught in KSA. When we arrived at discussion of “The Veil,” I found that it was extraordinarily difficult to get students to see past their cultural filters, and imagine Islamic women as other than blinded, or enslaved.

After we had discussed the freedom vs. the veil frame, on a quiz I included this question:

“How does the visual narrative in this panel from “The Veil” re-frame what might be a temptation to read the women on the left as blind(ed)?”

Class discussion the class prior to the quiz had been extensive. Then I addressed the class after handing out the quiz, to make sure students understood that I wanted them to *go beyond the obvious or easy answer*. Specifically: a) I directed them *not* to equate closed eyes with blindness, or the veil as anti-freedom; b) they should use visual cues from the strip to suggest another reading. I made it clear that I was not taking a position either for or against the veil, but rather, that this was an exercise in close reading—in not jumping to conclusions, so that we could look for evidence in the text that there was more than one plausible way to read the scene. Indeed, as I suggested both during discussion and before the quiz, this strip makes evident that “veils = blindness/lack of freedom” was not the author’s preferred reading.

Some students made perceptive comments during discussion. Women from both groups shouted slogans (“freedom!”/“the veil!”) with exclamation points, one pointed out, suggesting a certain equivalence. Of those who commented on the anger of the Westernized women, Andrea proposed a thought experiment: if you took away the visual markers and the words, so that all the women were dressed the same, and you did not know what they were saying, or their political or religious views, then who would you choose to spend time with? They would naturally gravitate towards “peaceful women,” it was agreed. “Angry women” were a type that students had seen in film, and knew in their experience. Most people learn to steer clear of the “angry woman” type.

Yet under quiz conditions, many students, even after being redirected twice away from a “blinded” interpretation, still followed it. Gustavo wrote: “Their eyes being closed might suggest that they are closed to accept any other way of life other than their own. They see anything different and close their eyes so they don’t have to look at it.” It seemed to be inconceivable for most students that an educated woman could consciously choose to adapt, or retain, the practice of veiling. As Aranice wrote: “... they have been tricked into fighting for the veil.”

Many of the responses had a moralistic undertone, with an at least implicit condemnation of Islamic culture. In Shayna’s view: “They have their eyes closed as if they don’t want to see another perspective that isn’t what they are accustomed to. They can’t handle change and have their minds set. They are blinded because of the veil and their culture.”

Some of the responses seemed to express a degree of projection. “The women are brain washed by religion and their government because they are being told that doing things a certain way is the right way and they don’t have an opinion on it,” wrote Neyshka. It is easy to describe the “other” as

brainwashed when we have not yet defamiliarized our own cultural norms. My Muslim students had routinely described American students as brainwashed.

Even some of my best students were in this case unable to look outside of their own cultural filters. For example Yajaira wrote: “The women on the left have their eyes closed, which may be the author’s way of saying that these women do not understand the truth or are ‘blinded’ to any other point of view but their own.”

For my Creative Writing class, I reworded the question:

“Using the visual narrative in this frame ... re-frame the temptation to read the women on the left as blind(ed). In other words, use visual cues to look beyond what might seem obvious, that the closed eyes mean ideological/religious blindness.”

As with the Advanced English class, we had earlier discussed alternative interpretations. After handing out the quiz, I again re-emphasized—this time in a more emphatic way—that I wanted them to give a different interpretation, other than the women on the left as blind, and to base this interpretation on visual narrative.

But a majority of the responses still followed the “blinded” template. The ideological bluntness of some responses was sobering. Beatriz, for example, wrote that “the black dresses and veils in the women of the left represent *darkness in their soul*, for believing in the religious values instead of opening their minds to what the women on the right are saying.”

Such responses inspired me to research the recent history of veiling in the Muslim world, and the myopia of Western anti-veiling “crusades.” These campaigns have been copiously documented, are now the subject of a large body of multidisciplinary criticism. In “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” Lila Abu-Lughod reflected: “we need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women’s unfreedom” (Abu-Lughod, 2003, p. 786). How? Like many other scholars in the field, Abu-Lughod is keen to historicize “modern Islamic veiling,” and call attention to its innovation and adaptation by professional women. Since the mid-1970s the various forms of veiling used by women in Asia and the Middle East not only marks piety, but “can be read as a sign of urban sophistication, a sort of modernity” (Abu-Lughod, 2003, p. 786).

Although many of Puerto Rican students seemed blinded by cultural filters, a significant minority glimpsed (by tying the visual narrative to wider themes brought up in class) that more than one type of freedom is conceivable as a “common good” for women. For example, a student in my Creative Writing class, Joseph, wrote that “freedom for the left women is the veil. They draw their power from it, and it’s not that they’re blind, it is just that they do not have the need to see to express what they deem correct for their country.”

Several students followed the prompt about visual cues, and engaged in critical thinking. For Isabel, “Another way to interpret this visual is that the women have their eyes closed because they are praying for the salvation of all the women who are rejecting a rule made by their superior. They are praying for

them to understand.” In a similar way, Mariella said that the pro-veil women “establish a sense of spiritual confidence as if they were praying in a serene and pacific manner. Meanwhile, the women on the right seem bothered by this tranquillity.” Joseph described the Islamic women as “focused and un-phased,” unlike the “angry women on the right,” who are “mad at this new way of living that separates them from their westernized life.”

Some students glimpsed a certain corrective logic in Islamic prohibitions on public displays of sexuality—especially in comparison to excesses in the U.S. What might *we* see, if we attempted to look *through the closed eyes* of the Muslim women in Satrapi’s graphic narrative, and imagine what they saw—and opposed—in the “freedom” for which Westernized Iranian women agitated? Through the eyes of the other, sexual display and the eroticizing of young girls are central, inescapable components of our commercial culture. One might not want to choose one extreme or another, but for parents with daughters, at least, the concerns of Muslim parents may resonate.

Some students voiced the threat that a blind devotion to freedom might entail. Valeria wrote: “Not all [the Muslim women] raise their fists like the other group, suggesting that being calm is being ‘coherent’ or ‘civilized’ regarding to your position. *Having open eyes but blinding rage is of no use.*” Vision is a form of sight shaped by faith, several students recognized. For Kelian, the religious women “are devoted and have such incredible faith that they do not need their eyes, for they already see what they want to see.” Hence, “they walk by faith.” (Note 11)

8. Conclusion

Analysts of graphic narratives have pointed out that “readers depend on accepted, visual conventions in order to understand what they see; visual typing provides quick comprehension” (Eisner, p. 102). But as we have seen in this essay, the way in which the veil tends to be typed is over-determined. It takes considerable work to see beyond our cultural preconceptions.

Although “veiled woman” may be a visual typing that suggests “oppressed woman in need of saving” in the West, the visual design works against an overly ideological, us vs. them binary reading. Building on Eisner’s work, Chiu argues (as discussed earlier) that an ideological national disunity is “grafted to protesters’ unity” (Chiu, p. 103). That disunity is grafted on the people not only by Islamic fundamentalists, but by the projected (mis)readings of Western audiences whose of perceptual filters are activated by the “visual typing” of the veil.

In retrospect, a cross-cultural perspective on veiling would be of great use for students, and should probably be required reading before beginning Satrapi. Among scholars developing comparative views on veiling (Tariq, 2013), Samantha Feder’s remarks are especially relevant here. For Hassidic Jews and Catholic nuns as well as for many Muslim women, head-scarves “can be read as forms of resistance, of subverting sexual objectification, and as ways to *gain access to the public sphere*,” she writes (Feder, 2013, p. 443). Women in many different cultural contexts have viewed variations of veiling as a “liberating invention.” That seems counter-intuitive for many in the West, but over and over again,

Muslim women express the notion that being free to have a public life/career is a central factor in their embrace of head-covering. The anthropologist Hanna Papanek (1982), after fieldwork in Pakistan, described the burqa as “portable seclusion.” It provided a sort of mobile privacy to women, in which they could pursue careers, and gain a public sphere voice, yet retain a “moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities” (Abu-Lughod, 2003, p. 785). This is some of the context necessary for readers to understand why Satrapi, who was personally opposed to the imposition of the veil, still allowed her women (as an artist, a Muslim, and a Persian) to express different concepts of freedom.

Bringing readers to examine the Islamic Revolution through the avatar of Marji, Satrapi fills the frame on which we have concentrated with great nuance. It “demonstrates that the veil was foreign to her and her classmates as it would be to her non-Muslim readers” (Constantino, p. 435). As we have seen, Marji did not see the “veiled and non-veiled halves” of her identity, family, and nation as contradictory. This binary was imposed—first by an ideological regime, and now by “the regime of Western-style freedom.” Despite the best intentions of the author, and the educators who teach Satrapi’s text, many Western readers are still prone to project a binary ideology on a child’s intuitive synthesis. This text, then, is a window on a larger, profound challenge to normative models of integration (Laborde, 2008, p. 202). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, one must become as a child to enter the kingdom—a wiser state of consciousness. Satrapi’s child-guide remains popular with educators worldwide because she provides a means to cleanse our “doors of perception” regarding “The Veil”, and other enduring mysteries.

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Notes

Note 1. Gregory, S. (2014, April). *Rites of Passage in a Saudi University: Digital Liminality and Cross-Cultural Re-integration*. Presented at ICCMTD 2014: International Conference on Communication, Media, Technology and Design, Istanbul, Turkey.

Note 2. Efforts to repress references to freedom, included attempted censorship of free speech at an international conference, is mentioned in Gregory, S. (2014). Recording the Rhythm of Change: A Rhetoric of Revolution in *The Square*. *Bright Lights Film Journal*.

Note 3. In keeping with the view that scriptures are also a form of culture which often invisibly structure our thinking, I have adapted this from Acts 17:28.

Note 4. Madawi, A. (2011). Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11(3), 513-526. Also Lawrence, P. (2014). *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*. Oxford UP; Toby, M. (2013). *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't*. Stanford UP; Frederick, M. W. (2013). *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*. Columbia UP. For a broad view of the Shias as dissidents: Stéphane, L. (2011). *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

Note 5. Tarlo (2007, p. 348) writes that "through an image of herself half-covered, half-uncovered ... Satrapi beautifully illustrates her ambivalence to these choices." Under the new regime, "the veiled and non-veiled halves ... seem to have become contradictory."

Note 6. Aside from passage in France and Belgium, anti-burqa legislation also passed in the Netherlands (Moors, 2009) and was mooted in Denmark, during “a gradual hardening of attitudes toward veil dressing practices in the European Union across the political spectrum (Franklin, 2013, p. 395). See also Patti, T. L. (2010). What Can Multicultural Theory Tell Us About Integrating Muslims in Europe? *Political Studies Review*, 8, 308-321.

Note 7. Marjane, S. (2003). Veiled Threat. *Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/women/story/0,3604,1105177,00.html>. Quoted in Constantino (2008, p. 435) “The power exercised upon bodies by veiling is no more cruel or barbaric than the control, supervision, training, and constraining of bodies by other practices, such as bras, stiletto heels, corsets, cosmetics, and so on” (Yeğenoğlu, 1998, p. 116).

Note 8. Such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*.

Note 9. The 1st Shah banned veils in the 1920s, but the women whose support the Shahs counted eroded: the ban on veiling was symptomatic of much broader restrictions on freedom which increasingly became intolerable for Westernized and Islamic women alike. Del Collins, 67.

Note 10. The imprisoning enemy is imagined as a bearded man (Basu, 2010, p. 44).

Note 11. His interpretation may allude to the passage by Paul, “I walk by faith and not by sight.”