RELIGION, WAR AND LOSS OF INNOCENCE:

A Semiotic Analysis of *Persepolis*

Josh Bradshaw
Linfield College
This study examined Marjane Satrapi’s novel *Persepolis* to better understand her attempts to deconstruct U.S. stereotypes and perceptions of Iranian culture during the Iranian Revolution. This artifact offers a unique perspective since it was written as a personal memoir in the graphic novel format. Using semiotic and feminist frameworks, the analysis looked at varying forms of oppression during that time period as well as the signs imbedded in the text. The study allowed for conclusions to be made regarding the common stereotypes placed upon the Iranian and Middle Eastern cultures by the U.S. culture as well as Satrapi’s presentation of alternative perspectives.

The paper upon which this poster was based was written for the Senior Seminar course in Communication Arts. The paper was competitively selected for presentation at the Northwest Communication Association Conference in April 2016, where the author received the award for the Top Undergraduate Paper.
**Purpose:** To analyze the graphic novel, *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi, and its communicative properties regarding oppression. More specifically, the study analyzed signs and themes in the graphic novel and compared them to common U.S. preconceptions and stereotypes regarding the Iranian culture.
1. What significant signs are used in the novel?
   • What do they signify and what themes do they suggest?

2. What U.S. stereotypes did Satrapi address in her graphic novel?
METHODS

Semiotic Analysis:

• The study of symbols and meaning
• Ferdinand de Saussure and Arthur Asa Berger

Feminist Criticism

• Investigates how oppression is created, resisted and deconstructed
• Sonja Foss
The analysis uncovered numerous signs that suggested three prominent themes:

- Modernists vs. Fundamentalists
- Groupthink
- Female Empowerment
MODERNISTS VS. FUNDAMENTALISTS

- Left half of drawing:
  - Cogs and educational tools
- Right half of drawing:
  - Ornate drawings and the veil
- Stereotype:
  - Modernists were oppressed by fundamentalists because of differing religious beliefs and ideologies.

(Satrapi 6)
• Children were sent to war.
  • Promised an afterlife if they died with a “golden” key around their neck

• The lack of features on the dying children depicted them as expendable.

• Stereotype:
  • Fundamentalists used brainwashing and violence to control people.
• Mother looks like a rebel leader ready to fight.

• Satrapi’s mother’s overall demeanor changed:
  • Compassionate to Aggressive

• Stereotype:
  • Middle Eastern women are seen as being weak-minded.

(Satrapi 76)
RQ 1: What significant signs are used in the novel?

A: Each of the chosen images were powerful and typically were repeated throughout the graphic novel. As stated previously, there were three very prominent themes that appeared in support of the chosen signs: Modernists vs. Fundamentalists; Groupthink; Female Empowerment.

RQ 2: What U.S. stereotypes did Satrapi address in her graphic novel?

A: Satrapi addressed three stereotypes regarding Iranian Culture: religious extremism; brainwashing and use of violence by Fundamentalists; and women are weak-minded. Although not every stereotype was dispelled completely, Satrapi provided another perspective that can change the way the reader looks at Iran.
CONCLUSIONS

• Graphic novels are a unique medium for the development of meaning, especially personal narratives.

• Overall, this study suggests that analyzing and understanding how stereotypical signs and oppressive ideologies are constructed and reinforced within a culture is critical to creating rhetoric that can deconstruct and remove them.


