Film Guide

Persepolis

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Abstract

This film guide fosters an historical understanding of the award-winning animated film *Persepolis*. The first half of the film, upon which this film guide focuses, is an inside look at the conditions that gave rise to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the early years of the theocracy, including Iran’s tumultuous relationship with the United States and the calamitous Iran-Iraq war, through the eyes of a young girl named Marjane “Marji” Satrapi and her family. The guide contains a synopsis of the film and information on the historical context of the events the film depicts, as well as a set of key terms, discussion questions, and a list of further readings. This film guide is appropriate for use with the Berkley Center’s Religion and Conflict Case Study “Iran: Religious Elements of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.”

About this Film Guide

This film guide was crafted under the editorial direction of Eric Patterson, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Government and associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

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Citation
Title: Persepolis
Original Release: 27 June 2007
Run Time: 96 minutes
Producer: 2.4.7. Films
Language: French, English, Persian, German (English subtitles)
DVD Release: 2007
SYNOPSIS

Persepolis opens with the protagonist, Marjane “Marji” Satrapi, at an airport, unable to board a plane to Iran. As she waits, Marji begins reflecting upon her life. She first thinks back to herself as a nine-year-old girl in 1978 Tehran. Marji is an imaginative child and harbors dreams of being a prophet, as well as imitating Bruce Lee. Her childhood fantasies are presented amidst the social uprising against the US-supported shah of Iran. The hope for a better society expressed by many Iranians, including Marji’s middle-class family, is made evident through widespread participation in rallies and protests against the shah. Within this tumultuous and hopeful time, Marji struggles to make sense of what she perceives to be her generation’s perspective. In fact, Marji is highly influenced by her uncle Anoush, a communist, who, after recently being released from prison, explains his ordeal and the dangers associated with standing up for innocents and speaking out against the government.

Marji’s family becomes disenchanted when Islamic fundamentalists win elections to determine Iran’s new political system and usher in a restrictive and repressive form of governance. Laws dictating a modest dress code, a limited degree of political expression, and a general reorganization of social norms force Marji and her family to fit into an environment of increasing intolerance. Moreover, the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war expose Marji to horrendous levels of death and destruction, further intensifying an already difficult set of challenges. As a means of coping with a new reality, Marji’s family attempts to find some stability by hosting secret parties and indulging in simple—even illegal—pleasures. As Marji grows up, rather than conform, she rebels by listening to Western music, wearing Western clothing, and openly challenging her teachers about the true nature of the Iranian government.

Fearing for Marji’s safety, Marji’s parents arrange for her to attend school in Vienna, Austria in 1983. The second half of the film deals with her many challenges there: isolation, disillusionment, illness, and homelessness. Ultimately, Mari returns to Iran in 1993. As time passes, Mari’s disenchantment, along with a number of serious encounters with government officials, cause Marji’s family to decide that she must leave the country again—this time permanently—to avoid her being targeted by the authorities as a political dissident. Marji agrees and once again leaves her family in sadness.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1979 Iranian Revolution stands as a pivotal event in the history of modern Islam. The Iranian Revolution refers to events involving the overthrow of Iran’s monarchy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and its replacement with an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution. The event made Islam a political force from Morocco to Malaysia and it continues to influence politics in the Middle East as well as Muslims around the world.

Iran has a long history and has developed as a distinct political and cultural entity. Ancient Iran was known as Persia. Cyrus the Great (600 BC-530 BC) was the founder of the Persian Empire under the Achaemenid dynasty, a world empire of major historical importance whose capital was the city of Persepolis, located in the northeast of modern Shiraz in southwest Iran. Over time, the once great empire was overrun frequently and had its territory altered throughout the centuries. Iran has been invaded by Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Mongols, and others, and was often caught up in the affairs of larger powers.
Modern Iranian history has been marked by turmoil. A nationalist uprising against the shah—the title for Iranian kings—occurred in 1905, which was followed by the establishment of a limited constitutional monarchy in 1906. The discovery of oil in 1908 has since played a key role in Iranian history and development.

One of the key events in twentieth century Iranian history was the US-sponsored overthrow of the Iranian prime minister in 1953. In 1951, the government of nationalistic Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq nationalized the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). In the face of strong public support for Mossadeq, the shah fled to Rome. In August 1953, the United States and United Kingdom engineered a coup against Mossadeq, during which pro-shah army forces arrested the prime minister. The shah returned soon thereafter.

The restored shah attempted to reform Iranian society and bring it in line with Western models. In 1961, Iran administered a series of economic, social, and administrative reforms—generally supported by the Kennedy administration—that became known as the shah’s White Revolution. The core of this program was land reform. Modernization and economic growth proceeded at an unprecedented rate, fueled by Iran’s vast petroleum reserves (the third largest in the world).

In little more than a generation, Iran went from a traditional, rural, and conservative country to one that was industrial, urban, and modern. Yet, despite the changes, the government was accused of corruption, incompetence, and heavy-handedness as well as failing to deliver all that was promised. In 1978, these shortcomings, along with what were considered to be slanderous remarks against Khomeini in a Tehran newspaper, led to thousands of young madrasa students taking part in massive protests. They were joined by thousands more young Iranians, mostly unemployed immigrants from rural areas, who began demonstrating against the regime’s excesses. Despite government efforts to curtail violent protests, the clashes resulted in a cycle of violence in which each death fueled further protest. Within this environment, demonstrators from the secular left and religious right merged under the larger umbrella of Shi’a Islam.

In 1978, domestic turmoil turned to revolution because of religious and political opposition to the shah’s rule, including abuses committed by SAVAK, the internal security and intelligence service. The revolution was composed of several groups, including nationalists, Islamists, Marxists, and others who came together to oppose the shah. In January 1979, the shah left Iran; he died abroad several years later.

On February 1, 1979, exiled religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from France. Khomeini assumed control of the revolution and established himself as supreme leader of a new, theocratic republic guided by Islamic principles. On April 1, 1979, Iran voted by national referendum to become an Islamic republic. Relying upon tremendous national support, Khomeini and elements within the clergy quickly moved to isolate and exclude former rivals from any position of power in the new regime, including left-wing opponents, nationalists, and intellectuals. The early days of the regime were characterized by severe human rights violations and political turmoil, including the seizure of the US Embassy compound and its occupants by Iranian student militants on November 4, 1979. Iranian authorities released the 52 hostages after 444 days of captivity.

In September of 1980, Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein—a Sunni Muslim—invaded Iran and launched strategic airstrikes. The war went on for eight years, killing millions, including thousands of Iranian youth who the government deployed as human minesweepers with the promise of glorious martyrdom. Iran defended itself and demanded the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Iranian territory and the return to the status quo for the Shatt al-Arab waterway as established under the 1975 Algiers Agreement signed by Iraq and Iran. Khomeini’s government turned down an Iraqi cease-fire proposal in 1982, making a new demand for Saddam Hussein’s removal as well. In 1988, Ayatollah Khomeini accepted a UN-brokered cease-fire agreement—Security Council Resolution 598—ending the war with Iraq. Neither nation had made any real gains in the war.

KEY TERMS

Identify and discuss the following:

Persepolis
Shah
Shi’a Islam
Madrasa
Shah’s White Revolution
Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq
Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi
Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini
Ali Khamenei
SAVAK
**Discussion Questions**

1. The Iranian Revolution was advanced by a coalition of nationalist, socialist, Marxist, intellectual, and Islamic groups. After the shah lost power, what explains the Ayatollah Khomeini’s ascendancy to post-revolutionary power? Why did support coalesce around the leader of a religious group rather than a different group seeking reform?

2. What does the movie say about Iranian attitudes to the West and especially the United States?

3. To what extent did the aggression of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq towards Iran strengthen Iranian political leadership? If you were a member of Marji’s family, how would you have balanced the real threat posed by Iraq with the desire to resist the agenda of the Iranian political leadership?

4. There seems to be mixed messages concerning the degree to which the shah was good or bad for Iran. What are the major critiques of the shah system within *Persepolis*? Are there lessons here for US foreign policy?

5. Throughout *Persepolis*, Marji and her family struggle to live a normal life. They have parties, make wine, buy illegal music/clothes, etc. In many respects, the film suggests that when people are faced with a difficult and unchangeable situation they resort to creating surface-level, superficial happiness. Do you share this interpretation? Should Marji and her family have done more to resist what they perceived to be an unjust social system? In other words, would increased activism have brought a fuller, perhaps more meaningful sense of happiness?
**Further Readings**


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1. This synopsis is adapted from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0808417/synopsis
2. http://repository.berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/20100112vanderwaagTheIranianRevolutionTeacherGuide.pdf