

Individual oral sample: *Persepolis* and Boris Johnson

opinion column

The first text that I selected for this IO is *Persepolis*, which is a graphic novel written by Marjane Satrapi. It's also a memoir of her childhood during the Iranian Revolution, and the selected chapter 'The Veil' is at the very beginning of the book and starts with the consequences of the revolution, particularly how it affected Marjane personally. The second text is an extract from Boris Johnson's opinion column for *The Telegraph*, which is a right-wing newspaper, and this article is his response to the recent burqa ban in Denmark. Both texts address the global issue of gender equality, with a focus on the objectification and dehumanization of women. *Persepolis* does so through the motif of the veil, which connects to Johnson's article as he reinforces its flaws. (0:49)

As *Persepolis* is a memoir written by Marjane herself, we get to see the story from her perspective, which is why the reader understands that the veil is a motif for oppression rather than its common interpretation as a symbol of modesty and religion. The first panel introduces us to Marjane and sets the tone for the rest of the chapter. Through her facial expressions, we can tell that she is unhappy, which is the only noticeable thing about her as the veil obscures the rest of her features. This panel is positioned next to an image of her classmates who are all presented in the same manner and the same sad expression. The repeated pattern of the black veil and the white shirt represents the lack of individualism that is generated by the veil. Additionally, it's important to note that Marjane places herself separate from her classmates, even going as far as to cut herself off from the second panel. This implies that she feels detached from society despite the fact that she blends in. This is contradictory to the symbol of the veil which is meant to represent conformity as Marjane proves that even with it she stands out. (1:53)

Next, I'd like to look at the juxtaposition between the second panel on the first page and the second panel on the second page. On the first page, we see Marjane's class after the revolution and on the second we see what it was like before. This juxtaposition allows the reader to visually understand the extent of change caused by the revolution. On the second page, before the revolution, we can see that everyone was an individual. They all seem to be wearing similar clothing, however they each have identifying features which make them unique. Also, we can tell that Marjane previously attended the co-educational school, meaning she would have received the same education as her male counterparts. So after the revolution, not only were the females segregated from the boys, but they were also forced to wear the veil while the boys' appearances remained unchanged. This is shown by their absence in the second panel on the first page as this panel symbolises a loss of individuality: something the boys had the privilege to avoid. Additionally, the veil presents a physical boundary between the two genders as it represents the figurative obstacles women must overcome in order to reach the same level as men. So by juxtaposing these two panels Marjane is showing the reader quite effectively the literal gaps in gender equality. (3:22)

The last panel at the bottom of the first page is particularly powerful due to its relative size in comparison to the others and because it puts an emphasis on the innocence of the children. By drawing the girls playing with the veil as if it were a toy, Marjane conveys to the

reader that they are rather naive as they don't understand the true purpose of the veil, yet Marjane is aware enough to understand that it isn't something that she wants. This is further reinforced by the white background of the veil as white is the colour commonly associated with innocence. Furthermore, the white background makes the veil stand out quite a bit, which draws the reader's attention to it, once again reminding us of its importance. (4:13)

Lastly, the panel in the bottom left-hand corner of the second page has an authority figure as the central point. This panel follows the rule of three as we see the figure in the centre with the boys standing as a physical barrier between the boys on the left and the girls on the right. Therefore, the panel is split into three sections. We can tell by doing so that gender segregation was a very strict rule that was going to be properly executed. Moreover, the figure seems to be pointing an accusatory finger in the direction of the girls, which represents how the rules are always a lot more restrictive for the girls and how easily people go around blaming women as Marjane and her classmates didn't do anything to warrant the oppression. (5:06)

The second extract, Boris Johnson's opinion column, presents the global issue in an everyday context. Firstly, Johnson states that women who wear the burqa go around looking like letterboxes on line 2. This is a rather crude simile as the comparison to an inanimate object is an entire basis for objectification, which is seriously denigrating of Muslim women. What makes this comment worse is the entitled tone Johnson maintains throughout the article as it shows that he believes that he has the right to say such a thing as he is a man. Johnson makes a further provocative comment, once again by using a simile when he compares Muslim women to bank robbers on line 10. So this time Johnson is equating women to criminals, which not only is incredibly unfair but also offensive to the Islamic community who are currently battling a lot of Islamophobia given the recent terrorist attacks. So by using these two similes Johnson is effectively demonstrating why Marjane viewed the veil as a symbol of oppression. However, Johnson shows that it's not the veil that is the issue, but it's rather the people who treat the women badly for wearing it. (6:21)

Next, Johnson makes a reference to British politician Jack Straw, who asked women visiting his constituency to consider uncovering their noses and mouths to allow for better communication. This direct mention implies that Johnson views Straw as a role model of sorts, particularly as they share similar opinions about the burqa. This is further enhanced by the historical context as Straw himself was Foreign Secretary from 2001 to 2006, which shows that Johnson seems to be following in his footsteps. So the very fact that these two prominent members of Parliament share such dogmatic attitudes justifies Marjane's fear of the consequences of wearing the veil as these two men are asserting their dominance over women simply for wearing odd bits of headgear, as described by Johnson on line 28. As previously mentioned, Johnson maintains an entitled tone throughout the article, which is really emphasized when he states, 'It's how we work' on line 14. In this sentence, he takes on a very matter-of-fact tone, which expresses his belief that he knows all. Furthermore, the short syntax of the sentence reflects that there is little room for argument as Johnson is simply stating the facts. It seems that in both *Persepolis* and Johnson's article men are portrayed in a bad light, which is to say they are presented as controlling and egoistic. (7:55)

To conclude, both texts complement each other nicely as they offer different perspectives on how gender inequality is created by the veil. Marjane, as a woman, demonstrates how the veil objectifies women by taking away her personality and what makes her unique, and Johnson does so by showing how people will objectify women simply for wearing the veil. So in *Persepolis* the veil is vilified and made to seem as the source of female dehumanization; however, it is also implied that society is at fault for attributing such power to the veil. Johnson's article is a testimony to this as he demonstrates exactly the sort of criticism women receive from society for wearing the veil. Essentially, the central idea of these two texts is that things only get as bad as you're willing to let them, in this context it being that gender inequality is only as extreme as a society allows it to be. (8:59)