

An Abbreviated History of Modern Iran

In the 1920s, Iran had become dependent on economic support from Britain and other countries, which angered many of the citizens. The loans from Britain were not of disinterested generosity, but rather calculated to produce a profit from oil ventures. On February 21, 1921, Reza Khan and 3,000 men marched into Tehran and “requested the shah appoint a young civilian reformer, Sayyid Zia Tabataba, as prime minister” (Cleveland 185). Tabataba was merely a figurehead; Reza Khan eventually strong-armed out of his position and took over himself.

The public that was angered and active before the reign of Reza Shah, though hesitant at first, came to respect and revere Reza Shah as a national icon (Cleveland 186). The conception of the Pahlavi dynasty is said to be signaled when “Reza Shah, a former officer in the Cossack Brigade, seized the royal crown and placed it on his own head” (Cleveland 175). The former Qajar dynasty was dissolved in all aspects by 1925.

Reza Khan was a reformer who concerned himself with bringing Iran into the modern industrialized marketplace. In 1935, the name of the country was officially changed from “Persia” to the modern-day “Iran.” Reza Shah focused on revitalizing the army, drawing on the masses of peasants for use as moldable bodies and minds. The need to educate the soldiers in order for them to perform their duties increased literacy and led to a focus on education within Iran as a whole (Axworthy). For a time, it appeared that Iran was flourishing.

Then, amongst the turmoil of World War II, Reza Shah made the fateful decision not to deport German nationals. This led to the Allied occupation of Tehran and the abdication of the Shah; he was exiled to South Africa and remained there until he died in July 1944 (Axworthy 230). Reza Shah’s son, Mohammed Reza came into power proving him to be more connected to books and theories than the needs and pulse of the Iranian people.

After a power struggle between other political factions, the shah eventually regained power and in a measure to further modernize Iran enacted what has become known as “The White Revolution.” The Revolution is called white because there was no bloodshed during this transition (Cleveland 295). Agriculture, railways and ports, literacy, education and labor organizations became the focus of the government. The shah granted women increased rights and sought to Westernize Iran as much as possible. SAVAK, the shah’s security service, became increasingly cunning and brutal, peaking after the White Revolution with the Shah relying on their services to make problems “disappear” quickly and quietly.

All of these elements combined to lead to the eventual conservative backlash in which the Revolution of 1979 was rooted. The Revolution brought back Islamic ideals and mores, which were welcomed at first before becoming constricting and overbearing. Iran has always been an Islamic theocracy in some fashion; the time period after the Revolution of 1979, during which Persepolis is set, is demonstratively one of the more severe upswings in the enforcement of fundamentalist Islam.

It is here that Satrapi’s book begins. Knowing the topography of the political landscape in Iran is crucial to not only understanding what Persepolis is all about but also crucial to effectively and comprehensively educating students about it as well. Intertwined with the history of Iran is the history of Islam. It is imperative that one is informed on the myths and realities of Islam in order to express only truthful assertions to students as well.

An Abbreviated History and Defense of the Graphic Novel Genre

It is a well-known fact that Art Spiegelman’s Maus changed what comics were. The publication of Maus in 1987 signaled the public recognition of a genre that was alive, though underground for decades prior. Maus was special because it took an issue that was truly heart wrenching and made it (arguably) more digestible by placing it in a metaphorical and visual context. Spiegelman’s graphic novels paved the way for Marjane Satrapi and her decision to relay her story in the form of a graphic novel.

Since their introduction into society, comics have been considered children’s reading material. However, in the increasingly multi-sensory world we live in, standard black-and-white typewritten text is not necessarily the best available way to express a concept or narrative. Since 1987, graphic novels have slowly crept into the realm of possibility within mainstream education curriculum. Literary devices, theme, plot and other hallmarks of “English Class” are present in the same capacity as a standard novel and often the pictures lend to an additional level of complexity that must be deciphered.

Persepolis revisits and retells the complicated history and politics of a country in a way that is understandable to middle-school students and above. Because the content is accessible to children means only that it is written in such a manner that it is universally understandable, not that the text is not appropriate for adult or college readers. Instead the appeal of the graphic novel form is that the content counterbalances the simplicity of the language and “help” the reader receives from the pictures. The politics and history of the Middle East is a topic that a small minority of educated adults can intelligently relate; therefore, if Satrapi’s book educates even one person, aged 15 or 55, then the form has proven to be worthwhile.

Teaching graphic novels in conjunction with other various texts provides students with the best possible type of ELA education: Multiple Literacies (Monin). The more students are prepared to decode and figure out in different shapes and sizes, the more successful students will be at problem-solving in future classes as well as in life. The use of graphic novels in classroom supports this non-traditional approach to literature.