

## Activist, Professional, Family Man: Masculinities in Marjane Satrapi's Work

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Marjane Satrapi's work is expectedly very alert to gender politics, given that the revolution that has led to her eventual exile expressed itself in terms of gendered oppression. Using the Iranian revolution's treatment of women as a starting point, in her work Satrapi moves on to questions of gender relations both before and after the revolution in Iran and also in Europe. I argue that Satrapi exposes the reader to a multiplicity of masculinities as products of their own particular cultural moment. While feminists have detailed the plight of Muslim women's lives under patriarchy, men, collectively, have been treated as mere beneficiaries of the gendered order.<sup>1</sup> The genre of women's memoirs that come from the Islamic world, and from Iran in particular, has become a knowledge industry in which

[T]he "silenced" Iranian woman finally finds a voice with which to speak, these memoirs reproduce reductive but familiar narratives which pin the constructed "Third-world woman" against her male counterpart while setting the stage for what is presumed to be her salvation.<sup>2</sup>

The concerns raised in the above quoted manifesto entitled 'A Genre in the Service of Empire' go to the heart of the material that Satrapi deals with in her graphic memoirs *Persepolis* and *Chicken with Plums*. While her memoirs seem to follow the genre of the conventional female-empiric narrative coming from Muslim countries, neither her memoirs, nor her medium fits comfortably with the genre conventions or the political consequences that Akhavan, Bashi, Kia and Shakhshari outline above. In these memoirs Satrapi recreates the lost space of her Iranian childhood and youth through black and white comic book figures that hark back to wood-carved figures.<sup>3</sup> I read Satrapi's work as an oblique 'writing back' to the popular narratives of collective male brutality, an attempt to expose different kinds of masculinities that are not necessarily annexed to image of the male clerical elite. Satrapi attempts a nuanced depiction that recognizes the plurality and hierarchy of masculinities- men as lay people, as members of a family, as practitioners of art. In her memoirs Satrapi exposes gender relations in both pre-revolutionary and post-revolution Iran and lets the reader explore the transformation of male role models within a historical context. In both her memoirs men and women suffer from the ideals of manhood and womanhood presented them: in *Persepolis*, the focus is on the effect of 'hypermasculinity'<sup>4</sup> promoted by

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<sup>1</sup> See, Deniz Kandiyoti, *Women, Islam and the State*, London: Macmillan, 1991

<sup>2</sup> You can find a more extended version of this article entitled 'A Genre in the Service of Empire' at <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?itemid=12010>

<sup>3</sup> In the Muslim Other, through certain popular industries of knowledge mentioned above, the European reader has come to see barbaric masculinity. Even in the women who wear the chador, western critics can only see the male imposition, and not the women who are actually wearing it. From a completely formal point of view, what the graphic narrative does, with ease, is to picture Iranian women both veiled and non-veiled, which may facilitate a western reader's understanding of Iranian women as individuals. As emphasized by these images we understand that compulsory or otherwise wearing of the chador may challenge but does not erase women's individuality at large. Through the use of the graphic genre Satrapi repudiates a way of seeing Iranian women only as a function of a dress code imposed by men.

<sup>4</sup> For an extended discussion see Shahin Gerami, 'Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men' *Men and Masculinities*, 3, p. 257-274

the Islamic regime on gender relations, while *Chicken with Plums* charts a male musician's life, ruined due to traditional concepts of masculinity- as an artist he is not considered 'man enough' to marry the woman he loves. The constellation of masculinities that Satrapi's characters have to contend with has been aptly described by Shahin Gerami, and her categorizations will inform my readings of Satrapi's characters' engagement with post and pre-revolution masculinities. This parallel reading enables us to see the differences and continuities in gender relations between the periods before and after the revolution. While Satrapi, like Gerami, acknowledges the role that piety plays as the basis of post-revolution Iranian masculinities, she exposes the hollowness of the symbols at the heart of the regime's constructs and tries to re-inscribe the role that familial, professional and class alliances play in the construction of male identities.

It is almost a truism to claim that maleness is as socially constructed as femaleness- as indeed any other aspect of identity. It will serve us, however, to remember what ingredients go into constructions of gendered identity so that we can understand how Satrapi's view of masculinities are shaped. As Emma Sinclair-Webb argues:

Factors of class, labour market relations, ethnicity and sexuality, as well as individual experience and relations with family and peers, are centrally implicated in the formation of men's identities, in patterns of association and in the categories men find themselves occupying and sometimes also consciously seek to occupy.<sup>5</sup>

In Satrapi's work class and family relations become the important markers through which masculinity is defined. Naturally, Satrapi's ideals of masculinity emerge from her own class, and in fact, from her immediate family. Masculinity is, simply defined, behaviour and traits that are deemed appropriate for a man in a given culture, and is very much associated with those who control and fully participate in its dominant institutions.

While we have come to understand and experience masculinity as a tool of patriarchal male hegemony, masculinity, as a basis on which men construct their identity, it is conventionally associated with all things good, brave, loyal and benevolent. In that sense, it covers a wide variety of virtues that 'if needs be' can be taken on by women. Satrapi deals with this association of laudable qualities with masculinity, this normativity of masculinity, head on in *Persepolis* by relating that as a child she had always wanted to become a prophet. In the book there is a frame in which she depicts various prophets and then underneath, in another frame, she, as a child, appears smiling at the line of prophets, her head shining like the sun. The prophets knit their brows to ask "A Woman?"<sup>6</sup> However, this does not affect her relations with God, and she continues to hold council with him quite late into her teens. Marjane<sup>7</sup> is happy acting out male role models, playing Che Guevara to her male friends' Fidel and Trotsky in their child's role-play.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Satrapi makes clear from the very start that her family belong to the left leaning middle classes, and we realize that in their ranks, as well, male role models are the norm.

It is generally believed and argued that the Islamic revolution discredited some prerevolutionary masculinity types such as artists and certain kinds of professionals. However, strict demarcations that disprivileged the 'artistic' were, as Satrapi shows, already in

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<sup>5</sup> Mai Ghoussoub & Emma Sinclair-Webb (eds.), *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identities and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, (London: Saqi Books, 2006), p. 7

<sup>6</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*, (New York: Pantheon, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> When referring to narrated Marjane Satrapi as character I will use 'Marjane' and when referring to the narrating Marjane Satrapi, the author I will use 'Satrapi'.

<sup>8</sup> Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p. 10.

place before the revolution. Gerami identifies a list of pre-revolution male categories and hierarchies as follows:

In prerevolutionary culture, the central masculine prototypes were the merchants (bazzaris), the professionals, engineers, doctors, and professors (doctor -o- mohandes), military officers (sarhang- va- afsar), civil service employees (karmands), workers (kargar and amaleh), and peasants (dehati). Less significant peripheral prototypes were urban cowboys (jahel) and misfits (lat-ha).<sup>9</sup>

The influence of the labour market, and that of the professions on masculinities in pre-revolutionary Iran as suggested by Gerami can be clearly seen in Satrapi's work as well. In *Chicken with Plums*, which is set in the pre-revolution period, Satrapi tells the story of an uncle called Nasser Ali whose life is practically ruined because the father of the woman he loves forbids their marriage. The father believes working as an artist Nasser Ali won't be able to take good care of his daughter. He is reminiscent of another uncle, Anoosh, in *Persepolis*, who is a leftist activist who ends up in prison. Anoosh speaks to Marjane about his ideals and his lovelife with great openness and carves out swans from the pieces of bread that they give him in prison. He becomes the type of masculinity that Satrapi seems to favour the most, that of the poet warrior. We know that Satrapi has little time for inactive men, or men who don't fight for the values they believe in. In the section of the book that she speaks about her time in Europe she portrays a conversation she has with her Austrian boyfriend who puts on a show of being a socialist. She is going out to demonstrate against the Nazis, he refuses to go along and continues to type at his desk and says

-I write. Culture and education are the lethal weapons against all kinds of fundamentalism. We have to educate the people so that they don't vote for Nazis.  
-Yeah, the intellectuals are too precious to waste their time shouting!  
-Whatever...  
-In any case, it is the cowardice of people like you who give dictators the chance to install themselves.<sup>10</sup>

After this exchange between the figures, in the narrator's box Satrapi writes: "These arguments marked the beginning of the end of our story."<sup>11</sup> This is an expected attitude from Marjane, who grows up reading Marx, in a house full of political discussion *and* political activism. Indeed, she has been groomed, in a way, as the perfect *rafiq*, mostly among male playmates. A *rafiq* as Germani explains

was a young man with short hair, wearing regulation blue jeans and shirt, an army jacket for winter, heavy shoes, and all together having a crumpled and unkempt appearance. A must was a heavy mustache. If a beard was adopted, it must be a goatee for one not to be confused with the Islamic groups. Women comrades were expected to emulate this appearance as much as possible.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gerami, 'Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men' *Men and Masculinities*, p. 264.

<sup>10</sup> Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p. 229.

<sup>11</sup> *Persepolis*, p. 229.

<sup>12</sup> Gerami, 'Mullahs, Martyrs and Men', p. 263.

The *rafiq* is at once a companion in whose company one can strive for a better world *and*, as exposed by Gerami, a ‘flight from the feminine’.<sup>13</sup> The flight from the feminine in Iran right before/during the revolution is ideologically charged as women, who were forced to take off their veil and encouraged to participate in public life during the Shah’s regime became the most visible faces of westernization, and thus an easy figure for censure for the anti-imperialists. Thus, women who wanted to be within anti-imperialist movements had to renounce West-imposed cultural norms and develop their own, and downplaying feminine aspects of one’s appearance became part of resistance. As Gerami observes, informed by Afsanah Najmabadi,<sup>14</sup> the westernized women dressed in European clothes were at the receiving end of every political group’s censure.<sup>15</sup>

The censure women get for ‘westernized behaviour’ is treated, albeit somewhat obliquely, in *Chicken with Plums* as well. Women are shown to be finding their feet in the public space, and not always in a welcome manner, even within ‘enlightened’ circles. The scene in which Nasser Ali sees Irane for the first time is very telling about the anxieties of the ‘westernized woman’ who seems to be demonized by all ranks of Iranian men- an anxiety couched, maybe, in a discourse of anti-imperialist and religious worries, but still revealing an anxiety about male authority. Irane comes into her father’s shop and the following scene ensues:

-Irane! Where in the world are you going?  
 -I’m off to do some shopping [The graphics show Irane demurely looking at Nasser Ali rather than her father]<sup>16</sup>  
 -Be back in an hour [the father says this eyebrows raised with a wagging finger]  
 -Pfff [father shakes his head] I swear! Ever since they banned the veil, we’ve been heading straight towards decadence.<sup>17</sup>

to drive the point home Satrapi provides us with the footnote: “In January 1936, Reza Shah forbade the wearing of the veil in Iran”.<sup>18</sup> The scene, through the words and the expressions on the characters’ faces suggests that the men don’t quite know how to react to the newly found freedom of the women to be visible in public space. The father is concerned because his authority as father seems to be contested, and Nasser Ali is quite unprepared to fight off Irane’s charms. So the Islamic regime’s ethos that men’s piety somehow needs protection from the women<sup>19</sup> is mirrored here in a pre-revolution context, with secular male anxiety about women causing irregular behaviour in men: both religious and secular men seem to be ‘threatened’ by increased female visibility.

*Chicken with Plums* provides a good study of masculinities in Iran before the revolution and allows us to assess them against the prototypes encouraged by the Islamic regime. The book opens with Nasser Ali’s decision to starve himself to death and then we learn the chain of events that has led to his decision. His artistic sensibilities start to cause him trouble at school, and he grows in the shadow of his academically much better performing

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the idea of ‘the flight from the feminine’ see also Michael S. Kimmel “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity.” In Peter F. Murphy (Ed.), *Feminism and Masculinities* (pp. 182-99). Oxford: Oxford UP.

<sup>14</sup> For an extended discussion see Afsanah Najmabadi, *Hazards of Modernity and Mortality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran*, in Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Women, Islam and State*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991)

<sup>15</sup> Gerami, ‘Mullahs, Martyrs and Men’, p. 262.

<sup>16</sup> I am using square brackets to describe the facial expressions as drawn by Satrapi.

<sup>17</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Chicken with Plums*, (New York: Pantheon, 2006), p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Chicken with Plums*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Gerami, ‘Mullahs, Martyrs and Men’, p. 260.

brother. In his spats with his brother who becomes a communist, we learn that the category of the 'politically unengaged' artist is one that is deemed 'useless' by leftist circles as well. When he is not allowed to marry the woman he loves, he is further emasculated as he gives into his mother's plea to marry another woman, the woman who has had 'designs' on him from very early on. Gender expectations, Satrapi thus lets us know, affect the lives of men just as much as they effect women's- in this case driving Nasser Ali into marriage with a woman he does not love, a marriage that later is unable to provide the emotional support he needs.

Satrapi makes it clear that relations with family and peers inflect greatly the kind of 'masculinity' that a subject will experience. Nasser Ali's masculinity is defined very much through his (failing) performance as lover, husband and father. He is emasculated because he is not seen fit to provide for a household and not able to transfer character traits to his offspring: "Nasser Ali Khan didn't like Mozaffar for two very precise reasons: first, because his wife had decided alone to bring this child to the world, and second, because the two of them had nothing in common..."<sup>20</sup> To drive the point home Satrapi explains what became of his children, making it clear that they did not inherit any of his artistic sensibilities. Nasser Ali's life is in many ways defined through his relationships with the women around him; Irane, his wife, and his mother who in death is declared to be a saint. The 'masculinity' needed to run the house is taken on by his wife who provides for the family and who thus has a right to criticize his choices and indeed break his tar.

In many ways masculinity as a function of man's position as head of the family is reflected in the way masculinities are defined in post-revolutionary Iran. For the mullahs, the women all become 'sisters/daughters' for whose honour the men are responsible. They become the proper, authoritative fathers that men before the revolution (like Irane's father in failing to stop his daughter to have a love affair in the first place) failed to be.<sup>21</sup> I find Gerami's categorization of the regime's prototypes useful for a reading of Satrapi's understanding of masculinity:

The hypermasculine culture of the revolution created many prototypes. Three versions of masculinities in post-revolutionary Iran stand out, lasting well beyond the revolutionary stage: the martyr as brave and innocent, the mullah as otherworldly and pious, and ordinary men as sexual and dominant. Women were not discouraged from emulating the manly traits of the first two prototypes.<sup>22</sup>

The three categories that Gerami identifies are all interlinked through a hierarchy, or a division of labour for piety. According to Gerami's classification men derive their authority, or claim masculinity, as a function of their relationship with the figure of the mullah and the martyr. This system is sustained, as has been discussed above, by very strong symbols, particularly the image of the martyr whose face is everywhere and who acts as the altarpiece to the mullahs' construction of masculinity. The martyr is of course a category that gains greater currency after the Iran-Iraq war, which is depicted with very stark imagery by Satrapi. As Gerami explains: "The martyr is a young, unmarried (virgin, innocent) man, fearless and

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<sup>20</sup> *Chicken with Plums*, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> In the discourse of the mullah, the Pahlavi system is very much associated with the feminine: "vain, soft, superfluous, and corrupting. The prerevolutionary period is described by the word *fetneh*, or seductress. The pious and vengeful men of God battle the sultry femme fatale of consumerism and Westernism. The Republic has advocated a lifestyle of sparse, pious, and joyless devotion to Islam." (Gerami, 'Mullahs, Martyrs and Men',<sup>5</sup> p. 265)

<sup>22</sup> Gerami, 'Mullahs, Martyrs and Men', p. 264.

strong. He is depicted with eyes cast forward to jihad and the blessed state of martyrdom.”<sup>23</sup> The mullahs as holders of religious knowledge use the image of the martyrs, the embodiment of the ultimate sacrifice for the ‘true religion’, to keep the behaviour of ordinary men (and women) in check. The image of the martyr proves personally important for Satrapi: when she returns to Iran from her studies in Austria, she sits the exam for the Fine Arts College in Tehran and as she predicts, she has to produce a painting of a martyr. She draws one that is based on Michelangelo’s *La Pieta*.<sup>24</sup>

The regime, expectedly, evokes the image of the martyr for the further suppression of women. One day, the whole department is gathered to listen to a cautionary lecture by the bearded elite. The gist of the narrative is men, or rather their piousness, are continuously threatened by the presence of women, and the foremost mission of the regime is to make sure that all obstacles should be removed from righteous life that men should lead. For piousness, now, is the most important characteristic that makes up hegemonic masculinity.

We can’t allow ourselves to behave loosely! It’s the blood of our martyrs which has nourished the flowers of our republic. To allow oneself to behave indecently is to trample on the blood of those who gave their lives for our freedom. Also I am asking the young ladies present here to wear less-wide trousers and longer head-scarves. You should cover your hair well, you should not wear makeup, you should...<sup>25</sup>

Marjane responds to the official rhetoric of women causing destructive desire by saying “You don’t hesitate to comment on us, but our brothers present here have all shapes and sizes of haircuts and clothes. Sometimes, they wear clothes so tight that we can see everything”<sup>26</sup>, raising the spectre of women’s desire. Much earlier in the memoir, Satrapi contemplates on the martyrs, particularly in the chapter *The Key*. The young Marjane is still not fully aware of the disciplining power of the regime and after a day of beating of breasts for mourning at school, she starts making fun of the martyrs and her parents are called to the school to be censured. The narrating Satrapi is reflecting on herself as a child, recognizing the sad waste of young lives, by having her uncle explain the situation to her father:

It’s awful... Every day I see buses full of kids arriving [...] They come from the poor areas, you can tell... First they convince them that afterlife is even better than Disneyland, then they put them in a trance with all their songs... It’s nuts! They hypnotize them and just toss them into battle. Absolute carnage.<sup>27</sup>

Thus Satrapi successfully subverts the idea of martyrdom as masculinity and presents it as a boon offered falsely to young men from disprivileged backgrounds. We see, once again, that being male does not necessarily mean one can partake in the privileges of masculinity: masculinity is a location of power from where authority and privilege are dished out unequally among the classes. The current order of the mullahs in Iran that defines hegemonic masculinity is based on a grid of relations as exposed by Satrapi’s various engagements with representations of the regime. In the last page of *The Key* chapter, through her black and white pictures that offer a great sense of contrast, Satrapi juxtaposes the images

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<sup>23</sup> Gerami continues: “Depicted as leading a group of women and older male martyrs, or [...] depicted in the foreground of fully veiled women and young girls, protecting them and the country’s honor.” (Gerami, ‘Mullahs, Martyrs and Men’, p. 267)

<sup>24</sup> Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p. 281.

<sup>25</sup> *Persepolis*, p. 296.

<sup>26</sup> *Persepolis*, p. 297.

<sup>27</sup> *Persepolis*, p. 101.

of the boys that are supposed to be the embodiment of Iranian masculinity being blown to smithereens, with the image of Marjane dancing at a party with her friends. The primary point made here is clearly the privileged status of Marjane and a jab at the class system, but more importantly, the senselessness of the waste of young lives for the survival of the regime, and the viciousness of the discourse of masculinity that has helped drive these young men into battle. The caption for the image of the blown bodies reads: “The key to paradise was for poor people. Thousands of young kids, promised a better life, exploded on the minefields with their keys around their necks.”<sup>28</sup> Masculinity, surely, is everything to do with being a man, of having responsibility and agency. Here, by emphasizing the fact that this image of masculinity is placed on the shoulders of mere kids, Satrapi reveals the contradiction at the heart of this construction.

Men’s masculinities are monitored, not so much as in prerevolutionary Iran through class distinctions and ability to earn money, but as has been suggested above, through signs of piety. As Germani explains men

Being in the public, they faced scrutiny in terms of adherence to the mandatory Islamic codes. From their clothes, their demeanor, their smoking, or whether they participated in the office noon prayer, men were scrutinized or questioned [...] Among the professional men, a clean-shaven face is a sign of protest emerging at some offices. Add to this a tucked-in shirt, eau de cologne, and/or a three-piece suit, and the signs of resistance are all there. Some professionals such as doctors go to the extreme of wearing a tie to register their opposition to the mullahs’ codes.<sup>29</sup>

Naturally, no man in Marjane’s family grows a beard. Through her illustrations she shows the reader how men, too, revolted against the regime through small acts- like having their shirts tucked in, not growing beards, and rarely, by wearing a tie. On their way home from a party cut short because of a possible raid, Marjane’s family is stopped by the police and his father is accused of having drunk alcohol (which previous pictures suggests he has). When he denies it, the policeman (who interestingly has no beard or moustache) says: “You think I’m stupid?!!! I can tell by your tie! Piece of Westernized trash”.<sup>30</sup> The accusation of being western seems, in the world that Satrapi depicts, one that can easily lead to arrest. However, on this occasion, Marjane’s mother, modestly dressed in a headscarf intervenes saying she is old enough to be the policeman’s mother, that she is the mother of a twelve year old and asks for forgiveness, and the policeman stops. “You are lucky to have this woman for your wife, otherwise you’d be in hell!”<sup>31</sup> he says to Marjane’s father. It is an instance in which we observe how masculinity expressed through a patronizing championing women’s rights, supposedly through Islam, may at times even paralyze efforts of vigilantism.

When Marjane’s family tries to procure a passport for a sick uncle, they are faced with the impossible bureaucracy of the regime that tries to discourage people from traveling. In one of their many visits to various offices, this time for the authorization to travel for medical purposes, they come across a man they used to know:

All that creepy window washed had to do to become director of the hospital was to grow a beard and put on a suit! The fate of my husband depends on a window washer! Now he’s so religious that he won’t look a woman in the eye. The pathetic fool!<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Persepolis*, p. 102.

<sup>29</sup> Germani, ‘Mullahs, Martyrs and Men’, p. 272.

<sup>30</sup> Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p. 108.

<sup>31</sup> *Persepolis*, p. 109.

<sup>32</sup> Satrapi, *Persepolis*, p. 121.

This observation of Marjane's aunt chimes with Gerami's above observation that masculinity, and the authority stemming from it, is no longer connected to class and professional associations as in the Shah era but to superficial, outward signs of piety. This scene also makes clear that the restructuring of post-revolution masculinity is very much connected to pre-revolution resentment: all that is to do with the Shah regime becomes suspect. The power relations expressed through piety have replaced the power relations expressed through class and professional training. Satrapi thus clearly shows that the while definition of hegemonic masculinity changes with the changing of the institutions of the current order, they are very much informed by what has gone before.

Satrapi demonstrates how the most important building block of masculinity has changed, from class and professional membership to piety. She shows that she does not have time for either element, and that masculinity for her, in the sense of 'good, loyal, brave, benevolent' qualities, lies beyond these divisions. Satrapi is very much aware of masculinity's attendant sacrifices: they may change form with changing regimes but sacrificing one's self for family, for art, and for society reveals itself to be a fundamental aspect of the construct of masculinity under whatever auspices it occurs. For her, if masculinity is to be the norm, then it has to be one that is made up of uprightness in whatever position of power or dispossession one may find oneself in. That is the basis on which she sings praises to the leftist men who brave (and die in) prisons, and that is why she acknowledges the mullah who values her truthful answer (an answer that reveals less than required religious zeal on her side) and offers her a place after the university interview. Satrapi's models of masculinity remain a benevolent God with whom she keeps counsel, her uncle Anoosh who shares with her his experiences without patronizing her and to a certain extent her uncle Nasser Ali who rather dies than compromise his art. Her understanding of masculinity is thus, one can argue, very much informed by the idea of the *rafiq*, a co-traveler on the path to freedom and emancipation for all, despite the undertones of the flight from the feminine.

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