



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

Discorso di Marjane Satrapi

The freedom of mind

Cerimonia di inaugurazione dell'Anno Accademico 2022-2023 -Università di Bologna

Hello, good afternoon, buonasera!

I'm extremely honoured, extremely happy, and extremely impressed to be here today in Bologna.

It is very peculiar for me to receive this prize in this University because when they wrote to me, they said that the Pope Francis was where I'm staying now. And in any the dimension of the world, if the pope and me are put in the same category, there is something going on, something not completely normal. But anyway, I'm very happy to be here.

As you all know, a revolution has been happening in Iran for more than four months. When I wrote *Persepolis* about 23 years ago - it was published exactly 23 years ago, and I wrote it 24 years ago - people were extremely convinced about what Iran was. They had an image of these very crazy people all against the West, where everybody wanted to kill all the Americans and westerners after seeing the film "Not without my daughter". This is a specialty of the human being: the less knowledge people have the more convinced they are. The less they know, the more they are sure about this little thing that they know because obviously the more you know, the more you know it is complicated. So, I started repeating myself by telling others "It is not like this, and it is not like that". And the reason why I wrote the book was that I did not like to repeat myself for one thousand times. I actually wrote the book to not be interrupted for once and to not have to tell the same story a thousand times. At the time, and even after that time, people thought that I was a very exceptional person coming from a leftist family from the big city of Tehran. And for this reason, I was not a representative of the Iranian people because I was not like the base of the Iranian people. And I was saying "Believe me, Iranian women are like me and ten times more", but nobody would believe me.

Anyway, today everybody is talking again about this story that, unfortunately, is the same story that happened 23 years ago, but with big differences. I'm here tonight to talk about these differences and to talk about history since we need to put everything in a historical perspective.

First of all, you should know that there is no single country in the world that has made more revolutions during the 20th and the 21st century than Iran. The first was in 1906 with the revolution for the constitutional monarchy, it was the first one in the whole Asian continent.



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

Then one in 1919. In 1953 we were the first country in the Asian continent to nationalise our oil. Then we had those of 1979, 1980 and we can go on with the mass murdering between the 1980 and 1988 when they killed about 20.000 young people who were the same age of people dying today. The whole world was silent about it as it believed that we, the Iranian people, deserved the government that we had. This is the fantasy of democracy because you have the right to choose, but even in a democracy, people don't always deserve the people ruling them. Do you, Italians, deserve Berlusconi or Salvini? No, you don't.

And yet, you are a democracy and you can choose. If Iranian people choose their government, it will not be called a dictatorship. You kill people, put them in jail, stop them from talking and if 80 percent of the Iranian people are with you then it's called a very solid democracy where we all agree to be stupid all at the same time.

What has changed now that I am very happy today to be here and talk about this? Despite the fact that Iranian made all these revolutions in the most pacific ways for more than a century, and they are now asking to be free, to own their own country to not have more than 60 percent of poor people. What has changed now? First of all, democracy is a culture, it is not this fantasy like George

Bush's America where you bomb countries and then put Coca-Cola machines in them and suddenly you have a democracy. It doesn't happen this way, it's a procedure. It certainly does not happen with wars and bombs and especially not by killing people.

When in 1979 we made the revolution in Iran, only 40 percent of Iranian people could read and write. We had 60 percent of illiterate people in Iran, while today we have more than 80 percent of literate people. This is one of the incredible things that the mullah did actually: they created schools and universities everywhere in the country. I was in one of their schools and they believed that studying in these schools would have made us become these fanatic little Muslims. But once you know how to read, then you don't read only what that they give you to read. You read whatever you want and you have access to forbidden books, you have access to Hegel.

The separation between the religion and state – the mixture of the two is explosive, it has never worked anywhere, and it will never work anywhere – takes centuries. Religion should be something extremely personal and has nothing to do with the government. They managed to make this separation within 44 years. In France, it took about three centuries. And just for that we should give them a thank-you prize as they made it faster to understand that you cannot rule a country with what God said. Who has seen God? Why does God talk to you and not to me? Why am I less chosen than you?

The biggest enemy of democratic culture is the patriarchal culture because they have the same scheme. Within the family, the father is the chief and has the last word. A dictator, as the father of the nation, has the last word. I'm not saying that women are so much better than men, because if it was the other way around, we would have a matriarchal culture and I



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

would be on the side of men. You must always be on the side of the oppressed ones. I don't like when people say that women are so much better than men. I think that the real meaning of feminism is that women and men are equal in everything, even in our bad and nasty side. If we say that a woman is incapable of lying, incapable of violence, incapable of manipulation, we are saying that this person is not a human being anymore but a little kitty. A human being is manipulative, a human being is violent, a human being lies. This is actually one of the specialties that the human being has, no other animal lies: this is what distinguishes us from the animals, we can create a better reality.

In society today, since almost the beginning of history – not really the beginning of history as we had some matriarchal societies – we have a patriarchal culture and this is what you have to fight.

What happened in Iran is that when the Islamic Republic installed themselves – I was nine – we had to put the veil. The reason for this was that if the men saw our hair, they would get sexually excited and would get an erection. This means that, for example, now that I'm talking, every man here is having a little erection or the beginning of an erection. But nobody said that maybe we should ask these men to not have an erection or give them a little bag of ice to put down there each time they see our hair. With the Pavlov effect, after 20 times it doesn't have any effect. So, this happened and then we were having half of the right of the men.

To give you an example, in institutional settings, a testimony of a very intelligent woman professor in quantic physics with an IQ of 150 would count as half of the testimony of a man with an IQ of 69 just because she's a woman. It is a complete apartheid and, unfortunately, in the west today when we talk about this revolution, Westerners continue the same apartheid that the Islamic Republic created between men and women by calling this just a woman revolution.

It's true that the revolution started with women, but our boys followed us, they were behind us. This is the beauty of it: this is the first feminist revolution carried by man. Don't forget that the four people executed in Iran were men, don't forget that among the people in prison, there are lots of boys. Each time I got arrested in Iran, it was by women. It was women who beat me up, who stopped me, slapped me and called me a whore. It's not a war between men and women.

In front of you, you have a new generation that grew up with the internet and doesn't have the trauma we had. I had the trauma of the revolution, I had the trauma of the war, I had the trauma of the exile. Generation after generation had its trauma in our country. This generation Z - the one born after the year 2000 - was born not only with this trauma but not impressed by them, but also with this incredible thing called internet. I was the first one to criticize and be against any kind of social media thinking they were not good and that young people don't know what they are doing there. But actually, social media allowed them to grow up with the world, with the youth of the word, to be in contact with people that had their



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

same taste and liked their same music. An Iranian Boy who liked K-pop could maybe have a relationship with some kid in Korea!

Mahsa Amini was killed in Iran four and a half months ago because she was not wearing her veil the way she had to. Therefore, men could be tempted, and she deserved to die. This was really the beginning of the end, and I do believe in this revolution because that was the last drop because just right after that, our boys came to the street. When in 1980, in Iran they decided that the veil was mandatory and we had to cover our head, my mother went to demonstrate. I was 10 and I went with her, and my dad was also there but there weren't many men there. Worse than that, even the leftist opposition didn't support the women. They said that this had nothing to do with the fight of social classes, that it was not a problem. They forgot that women's right and human rights are the same. When you oblige half of the society, you consider them as second-hand citizen, you give them half of the rights. And what about the sexual minority? What about the religious minority? What about different tribes with different languages from ours?

We have in front of us a generation that is extremely instructed. I say this because I really gave myself to be in contact with many of them all over Iran. They come from all the social classes and they come from all over Iran. This is why we have to believe in this Revolution, and we have to support it.

In 2009, we had the green movement believing that the Islamic Republic system could be modified and reformed, but I never believed in that because a dictatorship that is opened to reform stops being a dictatorship. Dictatorship and reforms do not go together. But again, I come back to George Bush, who to me is a war criminal. I mean, Donald Trump was such an asshole, but as for George Bush everybody thinks that he was so sweet and nice. Isis was the result of what he did. What I want to say is that the chaos George Bush put in the whole region, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and in Syria prevented Iranians to change because change might bring chaos. But now they don't want this Islamic Republic because they want a democracy, they don't want the Islamic Republic because they want the separation between the religion and the state. Let's talk about numbers and facts: about 30 percent of Iranians call themselves atheists – that is much above anywhere in Europe –, more than 82 percent they want the Islamic Republic to disappear, and 6 percent of them don't have any opinion. It remains just a small fringe, about 10-12 percent, which is not convinced. A piece of that is represented by the oligarchs, who are people that even if they don't believe in this regime, they make huge amount of money with it.

We should not forget that they gave us half of the rights of men. We grew up hearing that we are worse than men. And what happened in Iran is that 60 percent of Iranians students are girls, 70 percent of Iranian engineers are women. My father was an engineer, and more than 60 percent of his colleagues were women engineers. He said that they are better not for feministic reasons, but



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

because they never make any mistake as they don't want to hear that they made a mistake because they are women.

I think that this is a mathematical relationship: half of the rights and we are trying and studying twice as hard. If you think about it, after the revolution the most successful Iranian people outside of Iran were women. I mean the Nobel Prize was a woman, a Fields Medal in mathematics was a woman, the New York Times published an article about the best 10 Bankers in America three of them were Iranian women, the first Iranian astronaut was a woman, among NASA engineers there are Iranian women, the person who sold the most books outside of Iran is a woman, me – I'm sorry, I sent myself a flower.

We need to support them in any way possible. I was walking in Bologna, and everybody wanted to cut their hair to show solidarity. You don't need to cut your hair, just cut the ties with the guardian of the Revolution. Believe me, politicians care about public opinion and if the public opinion is for a certain cause, it counts a lot as politicians just want to be re-elected and want power. If each of us participate in the public opinion, then politics must take action. This is the soft power of human beings.

The subject of my talk was the freedom of mind and I just want to come to that as I see a lot of students here. What makes us human beings, no matter what we believe in, it's something I call the freedom of mind. This means that it doesn't matter what your belief and your convictions are, you can say that you are a free person when you can go above your own convictions. This means that I'm against the veil, I hate it, I hate to cover my head, and I know it means that I'm a sexual object.

In all religions, the original sin is on the woman and nobody considers that maybe she was just a very curious and intelligent person wanting to know the taste of the apple and that Adam was so stupid to follow her when he could have refused to eat it. I don't understand why this is Eve's fault and not Adam's. But let's go back to what I wanted to say.

I hate this, but I think that it is above me as it is a human right that goes beyond of what I believe. Everybody has a right to have the religion they want, to get dressed and behave accordingly until they don't go and force it onto other people. When they banned the veil in France, they thought that I agreed with that as I hate the veil. However, I'm against banning everything and I think that our freedom stops the moment that the freedom of somebody else's starts. We are either all of us free together or we are not free at all, our freedom starts all at the same place and the freedom of one cannot stop the freedom of the other one. There must be tolerance.

Why is the human being so scared of freedom? Because the ultimate price to pay for freedom is loneliness. If you really want to behave, do, and say exactly what you want the moment that you want, then you become a very lonely person which is my case. At the same time, it should not be like this.



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

I have lived in Europe more than 34 years; I spent my adolescence and all my adult life in Europe. Here I found these people that sometimes have good hearts, but they are saying that this is their culture, and we have to respect it. Believe me, there is no culture in which a woman likes her clitoris to be cut. That does not exist. It's not a cultural faculty. There is no human being who is born and love to be a slave, that doesn't exist. Human beings like to be free.

Human rights are not a Westerner thing. They are a standard for all humans to live properly and decently. They have to be respected. I told you, young people, that if you are free, you will become lonely and this is not very good, but really think for yourself, think what you think you know.

The majority of the people are not right, just consider the number of stupid people there are, you can imagine that the opinion of the majority of the people is either extremely mediocre or stupid or the mixture of both. Minorities can sometimes be right, but the majority is always wrong.

You must have your own ethic of life; you must find the answer to your question yourself.

Morality is for me something very relative as it keeps changing. For example, 100 years ago a virgin woman would be a good woman to marry, today if you're 35 years old and you're a virgin you have a psychological problem, and nobody wants you. Lying is very bad, but if you lie because you want to save your comrades' lives to not let them go to prison, then lying is very good. Stealing is bad but if you are one of the Victor Hugo's *Misérables*, and you steal the bread to give it to Fantine and her kid, then stealing is good. It depends, it is extremely relative.

But ethic is not relative. Ethic has to do with the relationship between you and yourself, and you know what is right, and everybody has to know what is right for them. Believe me that if you are in a room of a thousand people as we are today and even if 999 of us think that you are wrong, but you still think you're right, believe me that you're right.

Thank you very much.



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

Marjane Satrapi risponde alle domande del pubblico

1) What can we learn from somebody who has lived the first revolution of 1979 and this revolution? What can be learned from History? Since the first Revolution was hijacked by the islamist Khomeini, can this revolution be hijacked as well by the Pahlavi family? What lesson could we learn not to let the revolution be hijacked again?

As I said during the speech, in 1979, 60 percent of our country was illiterate, and two things could put everyone together: nationalism and religion. There was no school, but quranic schools. When in 80s they obliged women to put the veil, most of the men were very happy about it. This is one of the reasons why even if we could have had so many girls going to the university, fathers would not let their daughters study because the university would be a place of lust and love and all sorts of bad things.

Suddenly, women could go study, and this gave to a fringe of the population a possibility that they didn't have before. Now, we are in a society that has changed. I said that the biggest enemy of democracy is the patriarchal culture, and now we have women that are much more educated than our men. This, in the long term, it gave the results that we have today where you have this beautiful Revolution when boys and girls are together.

I think that this revolution cannot be hijacked because I trust the intelligence of our people, I trust the maturity of our people. I think that I have received a slap from the young people that I still feel on my own face. I was judging them thinking they were only on Instagram sending photos of themselves and suddenly they taught us a lesson of what courage is, what being brave is, what unity and not being scared means. "I go out and I lose my eyes, no problem, I get executed no problem". I don't think that these people will let anybody hijack their transition. The future of Iran is in the hands of people like this. In the political prison of Iran, you already have so many elite people, we have there enough educated people to make 25 governments.

Believe me, they don't need us. I also think that Iranians outside the country, me included, cannot go and decide for the people of Iran. This is a big discussion that I have sometimes with people, and it really drives me mad. After 30 years, how can you be in the reality of this society that we left? Society evolved and I remember when I came to France in 94 and I saw the diaspora and they were saying "Oh Iran is like this, Iran is like that" and in my brain I was like "Fuck you! It's not true, I just came from there".

You lived in an Iran of 14 years ago, you're completely unaware of how it is now, and I always promised to myself that I will not become one of these people. This is why after I made the film Persepolis, I didn't talk about it anymore and it stopped in 94 when I actually left Iran. After that, I stopped going on television because I was 45 and they were telling me I was a representative of the Iranian youth. I was like a middle-aged woman, youth is 20 years old, so go find one of them.



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

Now, I talk because I owe them that, we owe them that, because they cannot speak. Because they get shot, because the internet is cut, and so we have to be their voice. I found 10 very young persons with whom I talk weekly just to have the feeling. But this revolution, you know, it's like waves: it has ups and downs, but there is no doubt that we will succeed. The Islamic Republic is a corpse, it is a dead corpse full of nasty stinky insects, and people are just pushing it away to make the space clean and get rid of the bad smell and construct something new. That takes time, it's not going to happen in six months. But it's not going to take six years neither. So, for me, whatever change it is, it will come inside of Iran. Who are we to decide for them?

2) How do you see the role of art in this period? I mean as an illustrator, how important have you found the role of art in this period?

The role of art in this period or in any period is the cement of society. You take art and culture away from any society, it falls apart. All these revolutionary songs, the animations, the illustrations, the short films that have been made, they were a lot and I try to show as much as I can through my Instagram page. I think that at the same time it's a little bit tricky because people are really dying in the streets, they're taking bullets, so when the art come from Iran I find it great. It gives awareness. When you have an illustrator from Italy who makes something about Iran and then one from Chile and then the one from America etc., all of that attracts attention. It is part of the public opinion. But about whether we can change society with art, I think we should stay humble. As I say, art is the cement of the society, but the doctors and the engineers and the architect are the big bricks of society. But artists are the cement and without the cement, the bricks they don't hold together.

3) This question is related to the future as you have also talked about it a little. How do you see the future? And also, the future means that we should consider all the years resulting in this revolution which is not a five-month movement. It is rooted in before and in all the people who have paid for democracy, for searching for democracy and have not been seen until now that the voice has become very loud. How would you picture this moment in the future?

The savagery of the Islamic Republic goes beyond words. It's much worse than whatever people can imagine. In the 80s, they killed two brothers aged 12 and 14 because they were communists. When they stopped a girl who was a virgin, they forced her to marry the guardian of the revolution because according to the Islamic rule law you could not execute a virgin girl, so this guy would rape her so she would not be a virgin and she could be executed. This is what we are talking about. In the summer of 1988, each month 4.000 people were executed. Within three months, they killed about 15-16.000 people. The savagery is huge, so the question about all these people that have paid is: are we going to take Revenge? This is this is a very important question because the anger is there.

I hope that what I will see is lots of trials. This is what I would like to see. If I make the parallel with my personal story, the first time I wrote Persepolis, I wrote 50 pages and I



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

thought "Oh, I'm so brilliant, I'm so intelligent, oh it's great, what a talent". One month after, I read it and I thought "This is shit, I deserve to die." It's always like this, I read it again and I'm like "Jesus Christ, I'm so angry, I'm exactly like the guardian of the revolution, I have the same hate, I have the same anger but I think that I'm on the on the on the right side."

I hope that we will not do that again. We cannot wash blood with blood because then their kids will want to come after us and kill us and then we want to go and kill them and then we just keep on killing. It has to stop and the way of doing it is trials. If we want to kill a monster, if we want this to finish, each of them has to come and explain why they did what they did. Then if we understand why they did it, we can get rid of it. Like, I will put all of them and a little spoon by little spoon, each of them they will have to fill up the lake that dried up to fill it up again. Force them to reconstruct whatever they destroyed in the country.

I see a very bright future I mean with this youth, with this degree of intelligence, with this preparation for the democracy, I am more than optimistic. I'm not even optimistic, it's a certainty It is going to be a great country and then I go I can go back. I tell my husband that I don't think that in my lifetime I can go back to Iran, but bury me in Iran because I was born in a place, then I lived wherever, but then I'm buried in the same place. And my whole life will kind of make a perfect circle, it will make sense. It's not the dead me who is going there, it is me very alive who is going to go there, I'm sure of that.

So, yes, I see a very bright future. Thank you!