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The Complex Transformation of Home

Erin Mast

The concept of “home” is generally one that transcends human differences. No matter geographic location, culture, language, age, or gender, most everyone has their own meaning of home. For many, home is redefined with time and experiences. Children move away from their parents. Immigrants flock to a new country for safety. Or, it can be as simple as moving to a new house down the street. Author Marjane Satrapi is one that knows the struggle of having to continually redefine home. As an Iranian woman who grew up in a war-torn country, abroad in the safety of Europe, and now in the United States, she has had to understand what home means in a multitude of contexts. In her autobiography, *Persepolis*, she uses the unique medium of graphic design to illustrate her evolving relationship with home. To achieve this, she includes a symbolic bird painting on Marji’s bedroom wall that consistently transforms during impactful moments in her Marji’s life.

When Marji is a child, home, very simply, is an immovable safe place. This is cleverly captured by the initial bird painting above Marji’s bed. The pure white bird faces the morbid black background with its head cocked defiantly and beak open to whatever the bird wishes to say (Satrapi 12). It is not coincidental that Marji is reading in the darkness beneath her confidently perched friend. Home, both her house and her country, is still a place where she can dream without fear. This includes the desire to be educated and successful as a woman. Within the comfort of her own home, she could read all the books she could get her hands on (Satrapi 32), as depicted by the towers of novels that surround her like turrets (Satrapi 12). Very much like the bird on her wall, she is unafraid of the power of words, despite being surrounded by the deafening silence of the oppressive government. She knows words are her weapon, which is why she is often telling her parents she wants “to demonstrate on the street... [because] for a revolution to succeed, an entire population must support it” (Satrapi 17). She still has great pride in her country and people and wants to be able to fight for the betterment of it.

Unfortunately, Marji learns fairly quickly that her words are not safe outside of her home, although her parents often extend her a safety net. When Marji and her classmates start to goof around during the mandatory

beating of the breast, their teacher suspends the entire class when they take a stance against her (Satrapi 97). This decision brings every parent to the teacher's office, very unhappy with the situation (Satrapi 98). In this case, their teacher, hidden in her black garb symbolizes the oppressive darkness Marji is using her words against. The black also is reminiscent of the dark background that threatens to overpower the singing bird on her bedroom wall. Although her words did not work out of the safety of her own home, her parents, an extension of home, came to her defense, reminding her that they would always love and support her.

When Marji is a little older, she once again faces the realization that her voice is not usually welcome outside of her bedroom walls. When she is confronted by the Guardians of the Revolution, who also hide behind their head to toe black garb, they yell at her for wearing "punk shoes", a Michael Jackson pin, tight jeans and a headscarf not pulled down low enough (Satrapi 133). Similarly, to the incident with her teacher, she has no means to fight back with her own voice due to fear of greater punishment. However, this time her parents cannot come to her defense. When she gets home, she feels the urge to regain the control that was unfairly taken from her and sings at the top of her lungs in her bedroom. She once again is the bird trying to make its voice heard against the merciless darkness.

As Marji continues to grow older, and see her beloved country fall deeper into chaos, she begins to realize that home is not always going to be a safe place. This transformation in her definition of home is greatly expedited by seeing the hand of one of her friends and neighbors sticking out of the rubble of their destroyed house (Satrapi 72). When she begins to realize that her house and country are not going to protect her voice and passions, she turns to what will, her family. Even though her family cannot always protect her from the darkness around them, she realizes that their stability and permanency is what makes a home. Once again, Satrapi's use of the bird imagery in Marji's house mirrors the new understandings she is coming to. While Marji listens to her Uncle Anoosh the bird peers over her shoulder, but it has taken on a more solemn black coloring this time. Despite the change in coloring, it still stands proud and has a wide inquisitive white eye that starkly contrasts the dark coloring of the wings. The background also makes a significant change, becoming a pure and contrasting white (Satrapi 56). All of this coincides with the lessons she learns from Uncle Anoosh who was locked away in prison for nine years but was able to come back to his family and feel the same love. (Satrapi 60).

In this context, Anoosh is the darkness. He was overcome by those who wanted to silence his voice, but he kept his head held high because he knew he was surrounded by the love of his family who would also be his home, waiting for him to return. After telling his story, Anoosh makes sure to tell Marji that it is important that she knows the stories he tells because their

family memory must not be lost (Satrapi 60). He also gifts her a swan he made in prison out of bread. This physical gifting of a bird is his way to give her his voice that will not only be able to preserve her family's future, but the future of her country. The bright future is also symbolized in the white background of the photo hanging above the pair. Even though Marji learns that it is harder to be together as a family when one does not conform to one's society's definition of it, the bonds and love of family is a compass that will always lead you home, no matter where that may be.

What brings Marji back home after her trials and tribulations abroad is not solely her family, but herself. When she is at the lowest point of her life thus far--homeless and letting herself be carried by the tramway--she realizes that without any sense of home she has lost her sense of identity (Satrapi 238). Home for Marji becomes staring in the mirror at herself covered in a veil again for the first time in years (Satrapi 245). It is both the harshness of seeing herself conform to the reality of her childhood, but it is also the familiarity of seeing the veil, a symbol of home. It is neither completely good, nor completely bad, but what makes something home is familiarity. Once again Satrapi cleverly uses the bird guarding her room to elaborate on this transformation. The bird that she sees when she walks back into her room for the first time in many years is almost completely black and set against a black background. The shape of the bird comes from the sliver of a white outline that highlights the shape (Satrapi 247). The oppressive darkness is not only meant to reinforce the burdens of living in Iran, but in this scene, it is meant to illustrate the emptiness inside Marji. The delicate white outline, or one may even say silver lining of the bird is the ray of hope that will always emanate from home. The bird may not be completely recognizable or look anything like it did when she was a child, but it looks familiar.

While home, Marji begins to redefine who she is, as a student, as a woman in Iran, as a lover, and as a daughter. Eventually, she finds herself through what she loved as a child, creatively expressing herself. Although her new home is not one to support a woman's voice, she speaks through her art, her dance parties, and she is even able to use her voice to make changes to the dress code for the female art students at her university (Satrapi 298). Just like the bird on her wall as a child, she is starting to regain the light in herself by relying on what feels familiar and right. Although being in Iran is what helped Marji find herself and the feeling of home again, she came to the very important realization that home is not really the house she grew up in, or even the country of Iran, it is where she can truly be herself and nurture a sense of comfort and familiarity. Of course, her family is a vital part of her home, but they do not need to be with her every day for her to feel at home. Their love and support have always been the silver lining around the darkness. By the end of the book, Marji finally understands this idea for herself. She tries to make Iran a true home; however, she knows that the

comfort she is searching for will not be accessible in her country. Just like the evolving bird on her wall she knows that to be her authentic self, she will have to open her wings and fly away. Although this requires leaving behind her family and friends, she has developed a meaning of home that is transformative and ultimately rooted in herself.

Works Cited

Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. Pantheon Books, 2010.