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Box from Iran

by Fahad Ullah Khan

(English 1130)

A package was seen at the front door. When closely examined, the address was written in Farsi suggesting that this package came from the historic country Iran. As I further investigated, a memory box was found inside the package with “Marji” written on the box. The box itself had the subtle aesthetics that would complement its age and reflect the history of the owner. With words such as “Freedom” and “Revolution” engraved on the lid of the box, the childhood memories and experiences of the little girl could be imagined.

At first, while handling the box, a shift in weight could be felt accompanied by a rattle of mysterious contents which I was eager to uncover. I placed the box on the study table and began to open it. Upon removing the lid, a few items became prominent to my eye. Amongst these items were an old black silk veil, a key, some photographs, a crumpled letter and finally a hardened old bread in the shape of a swan.

The veil had traditional Persian embroidery with a small logo and a school name written on it. The sentimental value attached to it comes from the time when Marjane and her friends used to go to the French school which supported the co-education system. When school came under the forceful enforcement of the Shariah law under the 1979 Islamic revolution, girls were forced to wear the veil. The fundamentalists explained that the veil represents your modesty and protects you from the evil eye: “To protect women from all the potential rapists, they decreed that wearing the veil was obligatory” (74). For little Marji, this was hard to understand and was one of the reasons that caused her to be rebellious about these conservative laws. In 1980, the new law was against anything that would be influenced by western culture: “All bilingual schools must be closed down. They are the symbol of capitalism” (4). Soon questions about gender differences began to arise in her head: Why do I have to wear this? Why do men not wear this?

The biggest factor influencing the revolution was the difference in social classes. The story behind the crumpled letter found in the box symbolizes this difference. Marjane soon discovered that she was in a higher class because her family had a maid, Mehri, who lived with them and had taken care of her since her birth. Mehri was more than a sister to Marji and would love to play and spend time together regardless of the difference in social class. A time came when Mehri fell in love with the boy next door, who thought of Mehri being Marji’s older sister. Soon letters became the source of communication between the two. Due to coming from a lower-class family, Mehri’s parents couldn’t afford her to send her to school due to which she couldn’t read or write. This obstruction was soon overcome by Marji when she began to write letters on behalf of her maid. The word broke out and Marji’s father came to know about the situation. Upon his confrontation, Marji questioned her father, “But is it her fault that she was born where she was born?” (37). Marji’s father answered her true concern by saying, “In this country, you must stay within your own social class” (37). The reality was enigmatic for little Marji and she had no other way to fix this social difference and the least she could do to make her maid feel good was to sleep with her. Marji comforted her maid by saying, “We were not in the same social class but at least we were in the same bed” (37). The revolution enlarged this social gap between the people and is perfectly depicted through these moments by the author.

The next following object from the box was a couple of photographs taken by Marji’s father. The photographs showed the pre-revolution city where the people could be seen wearing western clothes and embracing the culture. Following these came those photographs which were taken during

the rallies against the revolution. One night her father went out to take these photographs. Marjane knew that her father had been taking pictures of the demonstrations even though it was forbidden and could lead to serious consequences. As the family eagerly waited for him, gloomy thoughts began to arise in Marji's mind: "I thought that my father was dead, that they had shot him" (30). After hours of the long wait, he finally returned home. He described the family what he had captured in the form of photographs that he took of the people carrying bodies out of the hospital, honoring them for serving in the revolution even if they didn't. "People came out carrying the body of a young man killed by the army, he was honored like a martyr. A crowd gathered to take him to the Baheshte Zahra cemetery" (31).

The swan made from the bread had a deep meaning within itself. For Marji, her Uncle Anoosh played a vital part in her understanding of right and wrong. She was really amazed by the struggles of her uncle and how he fought for democracy. Her uncle gave her the swan which he had made in the prison as a gift that would symbolize all the hardships which she and her family went through for the sake of their cause: "I tell you all this because it is important that you know. Our family memory must not be lost" (60). At one point where the political situations escalated, several people including Anoosh were arrested and were taken in as inmates for death row. During his time in jail, his last wish was to meet Marji. During this emotional meetup, he said to Marji, "You have honored me with your visit. You are the little girl I always wanted to have. Here! I made you another bread-swan" (69). As a memory of himself, he gave her another swan. After a few days, the news brought the death of her uncle which caused her to break down deep inside herself. Through these events, the writer portrayed the themes of family, death, and torture.

The golden plastic key is also known as the "Key to the Paradise" (100) and signifies the false hopes of being rewarded in the life after death. Young males were given these keys and were brainwashed in schools to fight in the Iraq-Iran war. When Marji and her mother went to talk to Mrs. Nasrine in school regarding this issue, she told her that, "they gave this to my son at school. They told the boys that if they went to war and were lucky enough to die, this key would get them into heaven" (99). Due to this illusory deception, many lives were lost on the battlefield and yet nothing was achieved on either end. The author describes this in the text: "The key to paradise was for poor people. Thousands of young kids promised a better life, exploded in the minefields with their keys around their necks" (102).

In conclusion, all the things which I had explored inside the memory box, were true reflections of how Marjane's childhood was sculpted by such factors which affected her life. Each holds its own significance as each one them relates to her fight for freedom. Throughout the text, it can be witnessed that the writer chose the informal approach to deliver her message to the audience. The deep emotions embedded in the story were presented in the form of artistic illustrations and easy to understand words. The craft of the writing ensures that the reader's interest stays intact as the story progresses.

Works Cited

Satrap, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Pantheon, 2004.