

Adaptation, A Part of Life

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One aspect of life that seems fairly consistent is change. Oddly enough, something that stays consistent throughout one's life is change and their challenge is how they deal it. The way that one deals with change is through adaptation. As a human being, if one did not adapt, it would be hard to live. In the graphic novel *Persepolis*, the main character and narrator, Marji, has to learn how to adapt throughout the entirety of her life. Marjane Satrapi creates a common foundation and universal theme that human beings alike can understand and all do within their lives. Through this, she gives us the base understanding of the necessity of adaptation in all lives.

Although adaptation is a must in many of the difficult circumstances that Marji is put in, she also has to adapt in other ways, as well. War, oppression and immigration are a few examples of aspects to which that Marji has to learn to adapt. Being a female, Marji, also is put in many situations where adaptation is a must. Her gender both helps and complicates her adaptation process. A key point throughout *Persepolis* is that it is a necessity for Marji to adapt throughout her life.

War: Bringing Much Change

We have probably all heard the saying that war is never a 'good' thing. In Marji's case, war was, at one point, her next door neighbor. At the young, tender age of ten, Marji was introduced to the horrific violence and other terrible aspects that war entails. Being the nosey, yet intelligent child that Marji was, she had many questions for her family and friends about what was going on. Her own parents partook in anti-war rallies, so stories of war and what was going on during that time in her country came home and became dinner conversation. Little did Marji know, at the mere age of ten, that the world as she knew it would be turned upside down from

war itself. She and her family were forced to make many sacrifices in order to adapt to the new style of life that war brought upon their country. One of the first ways that we see how war takes effect in Marji's life was through the Iranian citizen's rights. Many rights that people take for granted, such as dressing the way one pleases, were taken away because of war and a new government. Marji saw the effects of war also take place when it started to affect family and friends. The rallies against the revolution, including the ones that her own parents attended, started to include the deaths of people from her own community. A good example of this appears during the chapter 'The Hero's', when Marji's parents friends, Siamak Jari and Mohsen Shakiba were taken prisoner for writing opinionated articles and being involved in the revolutionary. The Satrapi family then heard about the terrible suffering and torture that the prisoners were going through (Satrapi 47-52).

The point of death during war really hit home with Marji's Uncle Anoosh. Uncle Anoosh came to stay with Marji and her family. During his stay, Marji became very close with her uncle. She enjoyed his stories and he answered many of her questions. Marji knew the day she came home from school and her uncle was not there, that he was taken as a prisoner. He was accused of being a Russian spy and executed. This execution of a loved one was an incident that really hit home for Marji. Part of her life was turned upside down. Home was a war zone where loved ones were suffering and dying. Marji had to learn how to live in a world like this with unfair laws and unjust punishment.

People Marji's age were also affected in another way by war. Young boys, some from Marji's own school, typically of the lower social class status, were promised redemption if they fought in the war. They were given gold keys by the government and told that if they wore these keys that they would be saved. This philosophy was taught and even believed by some of the people in Marji's community. At this point in Marji's life, with a serious war affecting her own male peers, Marji had to learn to understand what was going on around her, as well as adjust to

what was going on around her.

The physical aspect of Marji's hometown and country was greatly affected by war. When Marji returned from her schooling in Austria, she came back to a town turned upside down by the destruction of war. It was almost a foreign place when she returned. The atmosphere changed to a darkened place and it was apparent that a war was taking place by the damaged buildings, not to mention the soldiers patrolling the streets. Marji's adjusting process was slow and her parents even sent her to a psychiatrist for help in her process of adapting to home again. One wouldn't typically think that someone would need help adjusting to home, but in Marji's case, it was a difficult process since the home she once knew was upside down and completely different from the effect of war. Eventually by the end of the graphic novel, Marji leaves Iran for good because of all the horrific and life changing damage that war and the new government brought upon the country.

Oppression: Learning How to Adjust During Dominating Times

Among all the difficult changes that war brought to Iran and Marji's life, the new government also brought oppressing laws and rules with it. Oppression is defined in the dictionary as the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner (dictionary.com). This common definition of oppression fits perfectly for the way that Marji and the people in her country were treated in Iran. Before Marji was age ten, she and her family lived a pretty normal life according to Westernized culture. Her father had a well paying job, they all dressed how they pleased, her father owned a Cadillac, and Marji and her female relatives enjoyed the rights of women. All of these simple rights and objects that are, a lot of the time, taken for granted by the Westernized culture, were slowly but surely taken from Marji and her family. Debbie Notkin, author of the article, "Growing Up Graphic", states a very obvious irony about how *Persepolis* contrasts the typical 'adaptation' story, bringing us back and showing us the common ground to create a collective setting. Notkin states, "A Iranian woman from a leftist

family uses the quintessentially western format of the graphic novel to tell an incontrovertibly middle-eastern story.” (Notkin 3)

On the very first page of *Persepolis*, ‘the veil’ is shown and brought up. For ten years of Marji’s life, she never was told how she was supposed to dress. In her school, everyone dressed the way they pleased. Then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, her rights were taken from her and this was changed. The new Iranian government required women, by law, to wear a veil out in public. The ‘Islamic Revolution’ made not only this small change, but many more in Marji’s and the rest of the Iranian’s lives. Boys and girls were separated in schools, and there were several rallies a week against this revolution. These changes were only the beginning for Iran and Marji.

Marji did not quite understand the severe danger of the rallies her parents attended against the revolution until two major incidents occurred. One night, when her father was out for his usual rally, he did not return at the usual time. Marji’s mother was clearly distressed and the family thought that something had happened to her father since the rallies were illegal and many of those people were taken prisoner if caught. Even though he did indeed return that night, it was a rude awakening for Marji to one of the impacts of oppression and the lack of freedom of speech in her country. The second incident was when she finally got to attend one of the rallies with her parents, following upon her mother’s request that she start standing up for herself as a citizen and woman. This particular rally turned out in complete violence that frightened Marji and her parents so much that they decided to take a vacation.

This lack of freedom that was really starting to set in for Marji and her family is well-described in author Fernanda Ederstadt’s book review of *Persepolis*, stating ‘The nationwide jubilee is brief. Soon these same friends have been thrown back into jail or are murdered by the revolutionaries; Marji and her schoolmates take the veil and are taught self-flagellation instead of algebra...’ (Ederstadt 4) What Ederstadt describes in her review, is exactly what was going on in

Iran during this time in Marji's life. Her world was changing and life as she knew it growing up was over. The incidents described in Ederstadt's quote continue to further explain more examples and ways that oppression took over in and around Marji's life.

Through these examples of oppression in Marji's life in the 'new Iran', it is obvious and apparent that adaptation was a necessity. Without it, she would have trouble surviving. Marji had the tendency to speak her mind. She said what was on her mind because she was not only a very opinionated child, but also because her parents raised her that way. They raised Marji in a Westernized way, letting her speak her mind and make a lot of her own decisions. Notkin makes a good point and describes Marji as "...a rebellious teen in an environment where rebellion can be literally deadly." (Notkin 3) This part of Marji's adaptation was hindered when she spoke her mind a little too much in school, telling her teacher that she basically spoke of lies about the prisoners. She was saying that for a good cause, defending her uncle who was wrongly accused of being a Russian spy, but during a time where freedom of speech could result in prison, she was not adapting quite well to the strict new laws. This is specifically portrayed in the novel when one of Marji's teachers states that there are no more prisoners since the Islamic Republic originated. Marji's Uncle Anoosh was just imprisoned, so Marji corrected her. The result of this situation was a call home from school and fear for Marji's future life in Iran from her concerned parents. (Satrapi 144-146) Her parents then knew it was time to send her to Europe where she would be safe from war and also be able to speak her mind and not be punished in the way that the Iranian government did, so harshly. Marji was sent off to Austria and had to then try to adapt as an immigrant.

Immigration: Freedom from Iran but Still Oppressed in Culture

Marji had many opportunities and freedom rights that were taken from her in her home country, Iran. As an immigrant in Austria, she had many more liberties and freedom's,

but was still adapting in a more common way. Although Marji technically had a better life through her education and being ‘free’, she still struggled with issues that were in need of adaptation such simple issues like fitting in or becoming a woman. Her previous situations of adaption may seem far off and distant from anything we may go through during our lifetime, but during Marji’s stay and troubles in Austria, her situations are more common and bring us back to the base foundation that we can relate to. Author of “Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East”, Azar Nafisi, creates a good description of some of the major things Marji is torn away from when sent to Austria: “...at the age of fourteen she is torn away from her loving parents, her extended family, and all her closest friends. Her parents send her to live in Vienna where she attends a French school. Four years later she returns to Iran...” (Nafisi 2)

When Marji first arrived in Austria, there was a change right off the bat. Her transformation and adaptation process began when Marji’s mother’s best friend, Zozo, whom she was staying with, had her go to the salon and change her hairstyle in order to fit in. She was already, by that, letting herself conform. After a short stay with Zozo and her family, Zozo felt that her apartment was ‘too small’, and sent Marji to a boarding house/school run by nuns. This was the first in many changes of atmosphere and homes Marji had to adapt to during her stay in Austria to multiple changes in environment, as many young teens must do in situations such as new schools or friend groups.

Marji had some major adjustments to make right directly after moving into the boarding house. First, she had a language barrier with her her roommate, something she had never had to deal with before. Sharing her living space with someone was another barrier she had to adapt to, especially with a stranger such as her roommate, Lucia. Marji had no friends at school since she started in the middle of their school year. She was a foreigner trying to adapt and fit in with kids her own age. Although she was not technically being oppressed as in Iran,

she still had to go through an adaptation process. Through this long process of adaptation Marji goes through in Austria, she also learns a lot about herself and somewhat of the person she was to be by the time she leaves to go back home.

Changes in Becoming A Woman

We have seen that *Persepolis* has many different adaptation themes throughout. Another running adaptation theme is how Marji ‘grows up’ and becomes a woman throughout the novel. It is highly evident that this is a coming to age story. Marji’s growing up process proves that this is also an adaptation process that was necessary to go through to become the woman she is at the end of the novel. Yes, Marji had other adaptation processes that were discussed, such as war, immigration and oppression, but the adaptation process of growing up and becoming her own person/woman is probably one of the most important and universal. The reason it is the most important, is because it ties into all the other adaptation processes.

At the beginning of the novel, we see a young adolescent Marji, who is full of curiosity and is still naïve. She is trying to figure out her turning country and gather as much information as she can as well as become involved. She also had to become strong and mature a lot quicker than most children due to the severe circumstances that her country was in from war and oppression, as previously discussed. From an early age, she saw death, oppression and change. Even one of her childhood dreams of becoming like Marie Currie was crushed due to lack of rights causing Marji to realize the seriousness of the adjusting she must do in her future life.

One ‘passage to adulthood’, was something probably very typical to Western culture and relatable to most people. Although most of the adaptation processes previously discussed were serious, this one is a bit more comical. Marji wants to be taken seriously as an adult, so she decided she needed to smoke a cigarette in order to begin this process. As being a young child, at that point in her life smoking a cigarette does not get her the credibility and adult-like attention

that she was hoping for at the time. She still has many adolescent traits, such as partying with her friends and worrying about her 'punk' attire for the themed party, while boys her own age are out fighting a war. These examples show how at the beginning of the novel, Marji was still naïve and worried about normal child-like issues.

While staying in Austria, it is probably safe to say that Marji has her biggest adaptation process in growing into the woman she is at the end of the novel. She gained quite a large amount of independence being on her own. She became aware of her femininity through adapting to her environment.

Marji's friends in Europe were outspoken and definitely had their own style and voice. Through seeing this, Marji came into her own style. She completely changed her hair, makeup and clothing for reasons like fitting in and feeling more feminine, as many young teenage girls do. Her adaptation to European society did not stop there. She dabbled with drugs and eventually those drugs became a normality in her life. She became something her parents warned her about and she eventually did become ashamed of her actions. Although she was pressured into doing these things, she decided to try them herself and also stop doing them herself. Her weak actions lead her to take strong actions in adapting into the woman she wanted to eventually become.

One coming to age passage for a girl is having a boyfriend and falling in love. We see this theme in many Western movies and television shows, giving this part of adaptation in Marji's life a relatable process. Marji does both while in Europe. Both of these men disappoint. Her first boyfriend comes to terms with the fact that he is homosexual. The second, Markus, with whom she falls in love, with cheats on her. Someone she loved and depended on hurt her deeply. Through this, she learned that she doesn't want a man in her life who doesn't treat her the way that she should be treated.

Marji's relationship with her parents changed after her return from Europe. Her adaptation to adulthood is coming closer through this understanding. Marji definitely appreciates

home, as in where her family lives, a lot more after being homeless in Europe for a period of time and missed the love that her family gave to her after losing someone she loved, Markus. She could have adult-like conversations with her parents and for example, smoke cigarette's with them at the kitchen table. It is more of an adult to adult relationship versus a adult to child relationship.

As previously discussed, Marji's adaptation to her hometown in Iran after returning from Europe was difficult. It was so difficult, that Marji even tried to commit suicide. Her suicide attempt was an awakening that lead her to getting her 'adult-life' the way she wanted it. From that period on she began doing things she wanted like going to the gym, going to college, becoming an aerobics instructor and even getting married. The process wasn't easy, but it was necessary since Iran was not changing. Her relationship with her, then fiancé, had to be kept hidden and these laws were followed by Marji since she was living in Iran again and could not be as open about who she was with, like in Europe. By the end of the novel *Marjane Satrapi*, aside from the three other instances of adaptation discussed, completed a normal process of adapting from a young naïve girl to a experienced, intelligent, goal-setting woman.

Feminism: Seen Throughout *Persepolis*

Marji's identity as an Iranian woman was tested through many instances throughout *Persepolis*. 'Bullying' of friends and her gender roles as an adolescent female is one example. During Marji's stay in Europe, we saw flashes and instances where she struggles with growing into a young adult. Her sense of responsibility was tested and through all her mistakes she began to find herself. This process of adaptation of growing into herself and becoming a woman go beyond her time in Europe. They stay much after that and are seen until the end of *Persepolis*. The literary criticism of Feminism is widely shown in the novel. Lois Tyson has an excellent way of defining Feminism. Tyson states that Feminism, "...examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political,

social and psychological oppression of women.” (Tyson 83). We clearly saw the oppression of women and specially Marji through examples such as wearing the veil and not being able to have freedom of speech. Westernized roles of women, such as women working, were present before the new Iranian government took over. After this new government was elected women’s rights were taken away slowly. Beyond the oppression aspect of Feminism, we see an example of how Marji, even though she is a strong believer in thinking for oneself and being independent still reaches out for those ‘traditional’ feminine roles. The typical feminine roles that she reaches for are having a man in her life and getting married because that is the ‘traditional’ the right of passage when you love someone. Although she speaks out about the oppression within Feminism, she still falls into the traditional ways, at times during her overall adaptation process.

Wrapping It Up

Throughout the life of Marjane Satrapi, it is evident that she needed to adapt to various situations, surroundings and sometimes unfortunate circumstances. Although she did not always want to make these changes, they were necessary and made her who she is as a person today. Being a female in a country where women are much discriminated was quite a set-back, as well as a complication in moving forward as a human being, but she always seemed to pull through. Even with minor set-backs, Marji got through them through the process of adaptation. The theme of the process of adaptation sticks throughout the entirety of the novel and is proven over and over again to be apparent in Marji’s life. Satrapi created a main universal foundation for the novel which was adaptation. At a first glance, a Westernized person may not think they have anything in common with a girl or woman from Iran such as Satrapi, but this novel proved that this possible. She had some extreme measures of adaptation, like war and oppression, that we may not be able to relate to, but also had other, more common adaptation processes that are necessary to life, such as growing up and finding one’s femininity.

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