



# Homeland Beyond Geography: Race, Memory, and Belonging in Iranian American and African American Literature

Mobina Ferdowsian

University of Chamran, Iran.

## Abstract

This essay examines the concept of homeland in Iranian American and African American literature, arguing that homeland is not a fixed geographical location but a dynamic construct shaped by race, memory, displacement, and historical experience. Drawing on diaspora theory, particularly the work of William Safran, James Clifford, Avtar Brah, Stuart Hall, the essay compares the representations of homeland in the writings of Porochista Khakpour, Marjane Satrapi, and Firoozeh Dumas with those of Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and W. E. B. Du Bois. While Iranian American writers portray homeland as an emotionally fragmented and transnational space negotiated between Iran and the United States, African American writers redefine homeland through memory, community, and cultural survival in response to the historical rupture of slavery. Bringing these literary traditions into conversation demonstrates that race fundamentally mediates access to home and national belonging, although it does so through distinct historical trajectories. Iranian American writers confront racialization through the logic of foreignness and the continual negotiation of transnational identity, whereas African American writers expose how slavery and white supremacy transformed homeland into an ethical and historical struggle rather than a recoverable place. By reading these traditions comparatively, the essay challenges geography-centered understandings of diaspora and argues that homeland functions as an evolving practice of identity formation shaped by racial formation, historical memory, and cultural resilience. Ultimately, both traditions reveal that the search for home is inseparable from the politics of belonging and the historical conditions that determine who is permitted to belong.

**Keywords:** African American literature, Diaspora, Homeland, Iranian American literature, Race.

## 1. Introduction

Few concepts in diaspora studies have generated as much scholarly attention as *homeland*. At first glance, homeland appears deceptively simple. It suggests an identifiable geographical location—a nation, territory, or birthplace to which displaced peoples maintain emotional, political, and cultural attachments. Yet modern diasporic literature consistently destabilizes this seemingly fixed definition. Rather than functioning as a stable point of origin, homeland emerges as a fluid, contested, and often imagined space shaped by memory, racial formation, displacement, historical violence, and national belonging. For diasporic writers, home frequently exists less as a physical destination than as an ongoing negotiation between multiple identities, multiple histories, and multiple places.

This instability becomes particularly visible when comparing Iranian American and African American literary traditions. Although both communities negotiate questions of displacement, belonging, and identity, they do so through fundamentally different historical trajectories. Iranian Americans generally originate from voluntary or semi-voluntary migration, particularly following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent political upheavals. Their relationship to homeland is therefore characterized by exile, nostalgia, political estrangement, and the possibility—however complicated—of physical return. African Americans, by contrast, inherit a history rooted in slavery and forced displacement. For them, homeland cannot simply be recovered because the original homeland was violently severed centuries ago through the transatlantic slave trade. Consequently, African American literature often reconstructs homeland through memory, ancestry, community, and cultural survival rather than geographical return.

Despite these different historical experiences, both literary traditions reveal that homeland is profoundly shaped by race. Race determines who is recognized as belonging within the American nation and who remains permanently positioned as an outsider. Iranian American writers repeatedly demonstrate that racialization after the Iranian Revolution, the hostage crisis, and particularly after September 11 transformed their relationship to both Iran and the United States. Likewise, African American writers expose how slavery and white supremacy rendered African Americans perpetual strangers within the very nation they helped build. Homeland therefore cannot be

understood apart from racial formation. It is not merely where one comes from but where one is permitted—or denied—the possibility of belonging. Etedali Rezapoorian and Mahmoudi give a detailed account of how Iranian American and African American experiences converge; The emergence of Iranian American literature coincided with the transformative era of Black liberation, allowing both literary traditions to converge in their exploration of racial identity, exclusion, and the contested meanings of home and national belonging (Etedali Rezapoorian and Mahmoudi, 2025, p.84).

This essay argues that Iranian American writers such as Porochista Khakpour and Firoozeh Dumas, together with the Iranian diasporic writer Marjane Satrapi, imagine homeland as a transnational and emotionally fragmented space negotiated between Iran and the United States. African American writers, particularly Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, radically redefine homeland by exposing how racial violence transforms the search for home into an ethical and historical struggle rather than a geographical one. Reading these traditions together demonstrates that homeland is not simply inherited but continually reconstructed through memory, race, storytelling, and cultural survival.

Rather than viewing homeland as a fixed destination, both traditions suggest that it functions as an ongoing process of becoming. Yet race fundamentally alters the terms of that process. Iranian American writers confront exclusion through the logic of foreignness; African American writers confront exclusion through the logic of racial permanence. These distinct forms of marginalization produce different literary articulations of home while simultaneously revealing the limitations of the American national imaginary.

## 2. Homeland and Diaspora: Theoretical Perspectives

Modern discussions of homeland owe much to the development of diaspora studies during the late twentieth century. Early scholars generally treated diaspora as a condition defined by dispersion from an original homeland and by an enduring desire to return. William Safran's influential formulation identifies several characteristics common to diasporic communities: dispersal from an original center, collective memory of the homeland, partial alienation from the host society, and an ongoing aspiration for eventual return. Homeland, within this framework, remains the organizing center of diasporic consciousness. Even when return proves impossible, its imagined possibility continues to shape communal identity.

Safran's model captures certain dimensions of Iranian American experience remarkably well. Many first-generation Iranian immigrants maintain vivid emotional attachments to Iran despite decades of residence in the United States. Political exile, family separation, and memories of pre-revolutionary Iran often sustain powerful forms of nostalgia that continue across generations. Homeland survives as both memory and aspiration.

Yet Safran's formulation becomes less persuasive when applied either to later generations of Iranian Americans or to African Americans. For many second-generation Iranian Americans, Iran exists less as a lived homeland than as an inherited narrative transmitted through parents, family stories, language, and cultural rituals. Language itself is not merely a medium through which homeland is remembered but a site where identity is continually produced and negotiated. As Poorghorban and Ghaderi argue in their analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, language creates social meanings that participate in the construction of subjectivity, making it central to processes of identity formation rather than simply their expression. Their relationship to Iran is mediated rather than experiential. Likewise, African Americans cannot simply imagine returning to Africa because slavery violently interrupted genealogical continuity and erased precise geographical origins. Homeland therefore cannot function merely as a site awaiting return (Poorghorban and Ghaderi, 2022).

James Clifford challenges the tendency to define diaspora primarily through origins and the desire for return. Instead, he argues that diasporic identities are constituted through *routes* rather than *roots*: they emerge through movement, cultural translation, and ongoing negotiation across multiple social and historical contexts. Rather than preserving a singular attachment to an ancestral homeland, diasporic communities sustain overlapping affiliations that produce identities that are contingent, relational, and perpetually in formation. Clifford's intervention is particularly useful for understanding the racial trajectories examined in this study. Both Iranian American and African American identities are shaped not by static notions of origin but by continuous negotiations with changing racial, political, and cultural landscapes. This perspective also complicates the meaning of "Persia" within Iranian diasporic identity. As Mahmoudi (2026) argues, ancient Persia is not a fixed historical inheritance but a discursive construct whose meanings shift across different ideological and historical contexts. Although it frequently symbolizes imperial grandeur, decline, or otherness, "its image is neither one-dimensional nor monolithic, and serves other ideological agendas" (p.1). Seen through Clifford's emphasis on mobility and negotiation, Persia itself becomes less a stable point of origin than a flexible cultural resource that Iranian Americans continually reinterpret in response to contemporary racial formations. This fluid understanding of homeland also finds expression in Iranian cultural production beyond diasporic fiction. As Noofeli (2026) demonstrates in her study of Iranian Kurdish lullabies, cultural memory is preserved not through territorial attachment but through intimate practices such as song, storytelling, and maternal care. Homeland thus emerges less as a fixed geography than as an emotional and cultural practice that can travel across generations.

Clifford's emphasis on mobility and Mahmoudi's multi-dimensional and non-monolithic Persia resonate strongly with Iranian American literature. Characters in Porochista Khakpour's fiction frequently occupy several cultural worlds at once without fully belonging to any of them. Their identities emerge through continuous negotiation between Iran and America rather than through exclusive loyalty to either nation. Similarly, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* depicts exile not as simple displacement but as perpetual movement between competing cultural expectations. Neither Vienna nor Tehran fully becomes home.

Avtar Brah extends this argument through her influential concept of *diaspora space*. Brah distinguishes homeland from home, arguing that home consists not merely of geographical location but of everyday practices of belonging. Diaspora space encompasses the interactions among migrants, natives, and multiple communities whose histories intersect within shared social spaces. Homeland therefore becomes only one component of identity formation rather than its exclusive foundation.

This distinction proves particularly illuminating for *Funny in Farsi*. Unlike narratives dominated by exile and trauma, Dumas emphasizes the ordinary experiences of immigrant life: schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, supermarkets, and family dinners. Home gradually emerges through daily practices rather than through dramatic declarations of national identity. This understanding resonates with Noofeli's study of Iranian Kurdish lullabies, which argues that home is sustained through everyday practices of care, storytelling, and emotional expression rather than through geography alone. Although Noofeli examines folk culture rather than diasporic literature, her analysis likewise demonstrates that belonging is produced through ordinary cultural practices that preserve memory and identity across changing historical and social contexts. The United States becomes home not because Iran disappears but because belonging develops through lived experience.

Stuart Hall similarly rejects essentialist understandings of cultural identity. For Hall, identity is not an immutable inheritance but a continual production shaped by history, representation, and power. Cultural identity therefore exists simultaneously as "being" and "becoming." Diasporic subjects reconstruct rather than recover their identities.

Hall's formulation becomes especially significant when considering race. Iranian American identity changed dramatically after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and again following September 11. Before these events, many Iranian immigrants experienced ambiguous racial positioning within American society (Etedali Rezapoorian and Mahmoudi, 2025, pp.80-82). Afterward, public discourse increasingly categorized Iranians within broader constructions of Middle Eastern, Muslim, or terrorist identities regardless of individual religious belief or political affiliation. Homeland itself consequently became racialized. Iran ceased functioning merely as a place of origin and instead became a marker through which American society interpreted Iranian American bodies.

Paul Gilroy similarly demonstrates that diaspora cannot be understood through national boundaries alone. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy argues that African diasporic identity emerges through transnational circulation rather than territorial rootedness. The Atlantic Ocean itself becomes a site of cultural production linking Africa, Europe, and the Americas through histories of slavery, resistance, and artistic creativity. Homeland no longer exists as a recoverable geographical point but as a network of historical memories connecting dispersed peoples.

Gilroy's intervention profoundly distinguishes African American experiences from those of Iranian Americans. Whereas Iranian Americans often imagine homeland through an identifiable nation-state, African American writers repeatedly reconstruct homeland through ancestral memory, communal resilience, and cultural continuity. Their literature demonstrates that slavery fundamentally transformed the meaning of origin itself.

These theoretical perspectives collectively reveal that homeland cannot be reduced to geography. Instead, homeland emerges as an imaginative, political, racial, and emotional construct continually reshaped by displacement, memory, and power. This understanding provides the foundation for examining how contemporary Iranian American writers negotiate homeland under conditions of racialization and transnational belonging.

### 3. Racializing Homeland: Porochista Khakpour and the Limits of Return

Among contemporary Iranian American writers, Porochista Khakpour perhaps most directly interrogates the unstable relationship between homeland, race, and national belonging. Rather than portraying Iran as a romanticized site of cultural authenticity, Khakpour repeatedly demonstrates that homeland is fragmented by political violence, exile, racialization, and memory. Her fiction rejects the binary assumption that immigrants simply exchange one home for another. Instead, she portrays displacement as producing a permanent state of in-betweenness in which neither Iran nor the United States can fully accommodate diasporic identity.

Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* centers on an Iranian immigrant family whose members possess profoundly different understandings of homeland. The first-generation parents continue to interpret Iran through nostalgia, political loss, and memory, while their American-born or American-raised children encounter Iran primarily through inherited narratives. Consequently, homeland becomes increasingly detached from physical geography and increasingly embedded within family relationships, language, and emotional inheritance.

This intergenerational difference illustrates one of the central tensions within diaspora studies. William Safran's notion of diaspora presumes that attachment to homeland persists across generations through collective memory and the possibility of return. Khakpour complicates this assumption by demonstrating that later generations inherit homeland indirectly. Their Iran is constructed through photographs, stories, family rituals, food, language, and fragments of memory transmitted by parents who themselves remain haunted by political exile. Homeland therefore shifts from lived experience to imaginative reconstruction.

The novel's central characters repeatedly experience displacement not because they physically lack a homeland but because they occupy incompatible national narratives. Iran remembers them as having left, while America never fully accepts them as belonging. Khakpour thus transforms exile into an ongoing psychological condition rather than a temporary geographical circumstance.

This condition becomes especially visible through the family's relationship to race. Their difficulties extend beyond immigration status or cultural adaptation. Instead, they stem from the ways American society racializes Middle Eastern identities, particularly after the Iranian Revolution and, more dramatically, after September 11. The family's bodies become interpreted through political events over which they exercise no control. Their identities cease to function as personal histories and instead become read as symbols within American national discourse.

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism remains indispensable for understanding this transformation. Orientalism constructs "the East" as the irrational, threatening opposite of the civilized West. Although Said wrote primarily about European colonial discourse, Khakpour demonstrates how similar representational structures continue to shape contemporary American understandings of Iranian identity. Her characters constantly negotiate stereotypes that precede them. They do not merely represent themselves; they must first dismantle the assumptions attached to being visibly Middle Eastern.

Homeland consequently becomes racialized. Iran is no longer simply remembered as birthplace or cultural origin; it becomes the source of American suspicion. The immigrant cannot invoke homeland innocently because homeland itself has been politically transformed into evidence of foreignness.

This distinction separates Khakpour from many earlier immigrant narratives in American literature. European immigrants often confront cultural prejudice, yet whiteness eventually enables incorporation into the American national body. Iranian Americans occupy a far more unstable racial position. Legally categorized as white for census purposes while socially racialized as Middle Eastern, Muslim, or terrorist, they experience what scholars such as Maghbouleh describe as racial ambiguity. Khakpour's fiction repeatedly reveals how this ambiguity produces profound psychological consequences.

Her memoir *Sick* extends these concerns into autobiography. Although the memoir primarily chronicles chronic illness, Lyme disease, addiction, and mental health, illness repeatedly intersects with migration and displacement. Khakpour refuses to isolate physical suffering from political history. Her body becomes another site upon which displacement is inscribed.

Rather than representing illness solely as biological dysfunction, *Sick* portrays the body itself as diasporic. It carries memories, trauma, migration, and racialization simultaneously. Home therefore cannot simply mean geographical settlement because the body itself refuses stability. Even while living in the United States, Khakpour experiences profound forms of unbelonging that cannot be solved through citizenship or professional success.

This bodily dimension significantly expands diaspora theory. Scholars often discuss homeland in terms of territory, memory, or cultural identity. Khakpour instead demonstrates that homeland also exists within physical experience. Chronic illness repeatedly disrupts ordinary assumptions about permanence, control, and belonging. The body itself becomes another homeland that can simultaneously nurture and betray.

Race intensifies this experience. Khakpour frequently reflects upon being misrecognized within American society. Following September 11, Middle Eastern bodies became increasingly interpreted through national security discourse. Although Khakpour's family possesses diverse political opinions and individual histories, American public discourse frequently collapses these distinctions into simplified categories of Muslim, Iranian, Arab, or terrorist. Individual biography disappears beneath racial representation.

This process fundamentally transforms homeland. Rather than existing solely in Iran, homeland now accompanies the immigrant through racial perception. Iran becomes portable—not because the immigrant chooses to carry it but because American society continually imposes it upon Iranian bodies.

Stuart Hall's understanding of identity as continual production becomes especially useful here. Identity emerges through representation rather than fixed inheritance. Khakpour's characters repeatedly reconstruct themselves in response to shifting political climates, media narratives, and racial assumptions. Homeland similarly changes meaning depending upon historical context. Before 1979, Iran signified one set of associations within American discourse; afterward, and especially after September 11, it acquired entirely different political meanings.

Yet Khakpour avoids reducing homeland to victimization. Her characters continually create alternative forms of belonging through family, friendship, artistic production, and storytelling. These practices resemble what Avtar Brah identifies as "home" rather than "homeland." Home emerges through everyday relationships instead of exclusive attachment to territory.

Nevertheless, Khakpour refuses optimistic resolutions. Her protagonists seldom discover a stable synthesis between Iranian and American identities. Instead, they continue inhabiting contradictions. Iran remains emotionally compelling yet politically inaccessible. America offers opportunity while simultaneously producing racial exclusion. The resulting condition is neither assimilation nor return but perpetual negotiation.

This negotiation distinguishes Iranian American literature from conventional immigrant narratives. The immigrant does not simply travel from homeland to hostland. Rather, homeland itself changes after migration. Memory reshapes geography, while political events transform emotional attachments. The homeland remembered by first-generation immigrants often no longer exists. Iran after the Revolution differs fundamentally from the Iran many families left behind. Return therefore becomes impossible not merely because of geographical distance but because history itself has altered the destination. As Amir Barati similarly argues in his reading of *The Runner*, modern Iranian history is marked by historical rupture rather than historical continuity. Political revolution, war, and modernization transform the homeland itself, making return less a recovery of an unchanged place than an encounter with a nation fundamentally altered by history (Barati, 2022, pp.1-7).

Khakpour repeatedly emphasizes this impossibility. Homeland survives through memory rather than physical recovery. Yet memory itself proves unreliable, selective, and continually reconstructed. Her fiction therefore refuses nostalgia's promise that returning home would restore lost wholeness.

Instead, homeland becomes an unfinished narrative. Like identity itself, it remains continually rewritten.

This insight ultimately positions Khakpour within broader conversations about race and diaspora in American literature. Her work demonstrates that homeland cannot be understood independently from the racial structures governing national belonging. Iranian Americans do not simply remember Iran; they remember it while simultaneously negotiating American racial formations that continually redefine what Iran signifies. Homeland thus becomes both personal memory and public stereotype.

In this respect, Khakpour establishes an important bridge to African American literature. Although the historical trajectories of Iranian Americans and African Americans differ profoundly, both traditions demonstrate that race fundamentally mediates access to home and national belonging. The difference lies not in whether race matters but in how it structures the experience of exclusion. Iranian American writers frequently portray characters who are racialized as perpetual foreigners despite their citizenship or cultural integration, while African American writers confront a history in which Blackness itself has been positioned as incompatible with full American belonging. Consequently, one of the enduring projects of African American literature has been to reclaim Black humanity from centuries of dehumanization under slavery and segregation. Zora Neale Hurston stands as one of the most significant voices in this tradition. Rejecting representations of African Americans as a social "problem," Hurston's fiction celebrates the richness of Black life, culture, and individuality, insisting upon the dignity and complexity of ordinary Black existence. As Etedali Rezapoorian (2024) argues, Hurston's fiction functions as a powerful act of rehumanization, challenging centuries of racial discourse that denied African Americans their full humanity (p.102). Although Khakpour writes from a different historical and racial context, her work similarly resists reductive stereotypes by depicting Iranian Americans as fully realized individuals whose

identities extend beyond the political and racial labels imposed upon them. Both writers therefore employ literature as a means of restoring humanity to communities whose identities have been shaped by racialized narratives of otherness.

Iranian American writers negotiate homeland through exile and racialization, whereas African American writers inherit racialization before homeland itself can even be imagined. Understanding this distinction requires turning to another influential Iranian diasporic text, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, where exile further complicates the relationship between nation, identity, and home.

#### 4. Exile, Revolution, and the Fragmentation of Homeland: Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

If Porochista Khakpour demonstrates that homeland is continuously reshaped through racialization in the United States, Marjane Satrapi reveals that homeland may become unstable long before migration begins. *Persepolis* portrays exile not as the loss of an already coherent homeland but as the consequence of political revolution that fundamentally transforms the nation itself. Home is therefore fractured internally before it is abandoned geographically. Satrapi's memoir illustrates that migration does not separate the individual from an unchanged homeland; rather, it exposes how homeland itself has become historically unstable.

Although Satrapi is better understood as an Iranian French rather than an Iranian American writer, *Persepolis* occupies an important place within broader Iranian diasporic literature because it explores many of the same questions that later emerge in Iranian American narratives. Like Khakpour, Satrapi rejects simplistic notions of return. Instead, she demonstrates that homeland is continually reconstructed through memory, political change, and personal experience.

The memoir begins by presenting Iran as a complex and intellectually vibrant society rather than the monolithic image often reproduced in Western media. Satrapi's childhood is marked by political discussion, family gatherings, demonstrations, and cultural life. Her parents are politically engaged intellectuals who oppose authoritarianism while remaining deeply attached to Iranian history and culture. Consequently, the homeland initially appears neither idyllic nor oppressive but dynamic and internally contested.

The Islamic Revolution dramatically alters this relationship. Rather than merely changing the government, the Revolution transforms everyday life, public space, education, gender relations, and individual identity. Mandatory veiling, political executions, censorship, and the Iran-Iraq War gradually reshape the nation's social fabric. Homeland therefore becomes historically divided into distinct temporal realities: pre-revolutionary Iran survives only through memory, while post-revolutionary Iran increasingly becomes unfamiliar even to those who never physically leave.

This temporal fragmentation complicates traditional diaspora theory. William Safran assumes that homeland remains relatively stable while migrants become dispersed. Satrapi instead demonstrates that homeland itself changes. One cannot simply return because the destination no longer exists in the form remembered. Return therefore becomes impossible not merely because of geographical distance but because historical transformation has erased the familiar homeland.

The memoir's visual form reinforces this instability. Satrapi's stark black-and-white illustrations continually emphasize absence, fragmentation, and memory rather than photographic realism. Faces frequently become simplified silhouettes, backgrounds dissolve into empty space, and scenes shift rapidly between intimate domestic life and national catastrophe. The graphic form itself suggests that homeland survives through selective recollection rather than complete historical recovery.

Memory consequently becomes both indispensable and unreliable. Like Khakpour, Satrapi refuses nostalgic idealization. Childhood memories preserve warmth and intimacy, yet they coexist with imprisonment, torture, war, and political repression. Homeland therefore contains contradictory emotional registers that resist simplification. Iran remains beloved precisely because it cannot be reduced either to national pride or political trauma.

This complexity becomes particularly visible after Satrapi relocates to Vienna. Migration initially appears to offer freedom from political repression. Yet Europe quickly exposes another form of exclusion. Satrapi discovers that geographical escape does not guarantee belonging. Instead, she encounters racialized assumptions that position her as fundamentally foreign regardless of her education, language acquisition, or personal beliefs.

Unlike Khakpour's post-9/11 America, Satrapi's Europe does not primarily construct Iranian identity through terrorism. Instead, it frequently reproduces Orientalist assumptions that imagine Iran as culturally backward, religiously fanatical, and fundamentally incompatible with European modernity. Satrapi repeatedly finds herself functioning as an unofficial spokesperson for an entire civilization, expected to explain or defend political actions entirely beyond her control.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism becomes particularly relevant here. Satrapi demonstrates that Western representations of Iran rarely distinguish between government, religion, ethnicity, and individual experience. Iran becomes an abstract political symbol rather than a society composed of millions of diverse lives. Consequently, Satrapi's personal identity is repeatedly overwhelmed by geopolitical narratives imposed upon her by others.

This racialization differs from Khakpour's American context while remaining structurally similar. In both cases, homeland ceases to be solely an emotional attachment and instead becomes a racial marker interpreted by dominant society. Iran accompanies the migrant not only through memory but through public perception. The immigrant carries homeland because others continually remind her that she belongs elsewhere.

Gender further complicates Satrapi's understanding of home. Unlike many male-centered migration narratives, *Persepolis* demonstrates that women's relationships to homeland are mediated by state regulation of the female body. Mandatory veiling, restrictions on public behavior, and surveillance transform ordinary spaces into sites of political control. Home therefore cannot simply be imagined as national territory because women's experiences within that territory remain profoundly unequal.

This gendered perspective distinguishes Satrapi from many canonical theories of diaspora, which often privilege national identity over embodied experience. Homeland becomes inseparable from questions of bodily

autonomy, public visibility, and personal freedom. Migration simultaneously promises liberation and produces new forms of alienation.

The memoir repeatedly illustrates Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Satrapi ultimately belongs fully neither to Europe nor to Iran. She develops a hybrid identity that cannot be reduced to either national culture. Yet Bhabha's notion of hybridity should not be romanticized. For Satrapi, hybridity frequently produces loneliness, confusion, and psychological fragmentation rather than celebratory multiculturalism.

The emotional climax of *Persepolis* occurs not through triumphant assimilation but through the recognition that belonging has become permanently divided. Returning to Iran fails to restore wholeness because exile has already transformed the self. Conversely, remaining in Europe cannot erase the emotional pull of Iranian history, language, and family. Homeland thus exists simultaneously in multiple locations while remaining complete in none.

This understanding significantly revises the concept of return. Traditional diaspora narratives often imagine return as the culmination of exile. Satrapi instead portrays return as another form of displacement. Home has changed, the exile has changed, and historical time prevents recovery of the past. Returning therefore produces estrangement rather than reconciliation.

At this point, important similarities emerge between Iranian diasporic literature and African American writing. Toni Morrison similarly rejects the possibility that historical trauma can simply be overcome through geographical movement. In *Beloved*, formerly enslaved people escape Kentucky for Ohio, yet psychological captivity accompanies them. Freedom does not erase memory because trauma remains embodied. Likewise, Satrapi discovers that migration cannot dissolve historical experience. Homeland persists within consciousness even when physical borders have been crossed.

Nevertheless, the differences remain equally significant. Satrapi remembers a homeland she once inhabited. Morrison's characters inherit the consequences of a homeland violently erased generations before. African American literature therefore approaches homeland through reconstruction rather than recollection. Iran continues to exist as a contemporary nation-state accessible, however problematically, to Satrapi. Africa functions quite differently within African American literature because slavery disrupted genealogical continuity, linguistic inheritance, and geographical specificity.

This distinction reveals one of the central arguments of this essay. Race transforms homeland differently across these literary traditions. Iranian diasporic writers negotiate exclusion because American and European societies continually position them as foreigners despite citizenship or cultural participation. African American writers confront a deeper historical paradox: they are not regarded as foreigners but as perpetual internal outsiders whose ancestral homeland has been systematically obscured through slavery and racial capitalism. Their relationship to homeland therefore cannot be organized around return. Instead, homeland must be imagined through community, collective memory, and cultural survival.

Satrapi's memoir thus serves as a crucial bridge between Iranian American and African American literary traditions. It demonstrates that homeland is neither stable nor recoverable while simultaneously revealing that the particular historical conditions of racial formation fundamentally shape how different diasporic communities imagine belonging. If Khakpour emphasizes racialization in contemporary America and Satrapi foregrounds political revolution and exile, Firoozeh Dumas offers a strikingly different perspective. Through humor, everyday life, and ordinary acts of cultural negotiation, *Funny in Farsi* suggests that homeland may be reconstructed not only through memory and loss but also through laughter, adaptation, and the gradual creation of new forms of belonging within American society.

## 5. Humor, Everyday Belonging, and the Reconstruction of Homeland: Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi*

Unlike Porochista Khakpour and Marjane Satrapi, whose works emphasize exile, political upheaval, and fractured identities, Firoozeh Dumas approaches homeland through humor and the ordinary experiences of immigrant life. In *Funny in Farsi*, homeland is neither an idealized Iran nor a place that demands return. Instead, it becomes a living cultural inheritance preserved through family traditions, language, food, and storytelling while new attachments are formed in the United States. Dumas's memoir demonstrates that belonging develops through everyday interactions rather than dramatic declarations of national identity. Although the family encounters prejudice and misunderstanding—particularly after the Iranian Revolution—Dumas consistently emphasizes resilience, suggesting that home can exist simultaneously in multiple places. Iran remains central to her identity, yet California gradually becomes a genuine home through lived experience rather than complete assimilation.

Dumas's portrayal of homeland offers an important contrast to African American literature. Whereas Iranian American immigrants can often maintain direct cultural, linguistic, and familial ties to Iran, African Americans inherit a history in which slavery violently severed such connections. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* illustrates that the search for homeland requires reconstructing ancestral memory rather than returning to a known geographical origin. Similarly, James Baldwin argues that African Americans must claim a nation that has historically denied their belonging. Race therefore shapes homeland differently across these traditions. For Dumas, racialization positions Iranian Americans as perpetual foreigners despite their efforts to belong. For Morrison and Baldwin, racialization produces a more profound paradox: African Americans are native to the United States through generations of history, yet they continue to struggle for full recognition within the national community. Both traditions reveal that homeland is ultimately less a fixed place than an ongoing negotiation between memory, identity, and the politics of belonging.

## 6. Homeland, Race, and the Politics of Belonging: Iranian American and African American Perspectives

Reading Iranian American and African American literature together reveals that homeland is never merely a geographical location but a racialized and historical construct (Etedali Rezapoorian and Mahmoudi, 2025, pp.76-80). For Iranian American writers, homeland remains a tangible nation that can be remembered, revisited, or

imagined, yet racialization in the United States complicates their ability to belong. Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and especially after September 11, Iranian Americans increasingly found themselves identified through political stereotypes that cast them as perpetual foreigners. Khakpour exposes how this racialization transforms homeland into both a source of cultural identity and a marker of exclusion, while Dumas emphasizes the everyday negotiation of belonging despite prejudice. Satrapi similarly illustrates that exile produces an enduring sense of displacement because neither Iran nor the West offers complete acceptance. In each case, homeland is preserved through memory, family, and cultural continuity, but race mediates how that homeland is understood within American society.

African American literature presents a fundamentally different conception of homeland because slavery severed direct connections to an ancestral homeland centuries ago. Toni Morrison repeatedly demonstrates that home cannot simply be recovered through return but must be reconstructed through memory, ancestry, and community. In *Beloved*, Sethe's escape from Sweet Home to Ohio does not produce a secure homeland because slavery continues to haunt both memory and place. The house at 124 Bluestone Road becomes a powerful metaphor for the persistence of historical trauma: although it is legally free space, it remains psychologically occupied by the violence of slavery. Morrison suggests that homeland is not guaranteed by geography or legal freedom but by the difficult work of remembering and confronting the past. Mahmoudi and Etedali Rezapoorian's (2025) work on Black temporality is informative: they argue that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* fundamentally challenges Western notions of linear historical time by constructing a distinctly Black temporality rooted in trauma, memory, and resistance. Rather than presenting slavery as a completed historical event, Morrison collapses the boundaries between past and present through recursive narration, ghostly presence, and fragmented chronology, demonstrating that the violence of slavery continues to shape Black life in the present.

Drawing primarily on Tao Leigh Goffe's concept of "maroon time," their work argues that Morrison rejects Enlightenment ideas of progress, closure, and chronological history in favor of a cyclical, fugitive temporality centered on survival rather than productivity. It examines Morrison's use of free indirect discourse, the haunting of 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe's memories, the symbolism of the Black maternal body, and the novel's recursive pacing to show how *Beloved* creates an alternative grammar of time that resists white historiography and racial capitalism (Mahmoud and Etedali Rezapoorian, 2025, pp.102-109).

Similarly, *Song of Solomon* transforms Milkman's journey south into a symbolic search for ancestral origins. His discovery of family history does not culminate in a return to Africa but in an understanding that homeland survives through collective memory, oral tradition, and cultural inheritance. In *Home*, Morrison again complicates conventional ideas of belonging through Frank Money's return from the Korean War to Lotus, Georgia. Although Lotus initially represents the racial oppression he sought to escape, Frank ultimately discovers that home is neither an idealized place nor a site of permanent exile but a community reshaped through healing and mutual care. Across these novels, Morrison rejects homeland as a fixed territory and instead locates it in historical consciousness, communal responsibility, and the recovery of erased histories.

Ta-Nehisi Coates extends Morrison's insights by emphasizing that the Black struggle for homeland is inseparable from the politics of the body and citizenship. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates argues that African Americans have never been fully incorporated into the American national project because the nation itself was built upon the exploitation of Black bodies. His description of "the Dream" exposes the myth of America as a universally accessible homeland; for many Black Americans, the promise of equal belonging remains continually undermined by structural racism and state violence. Unlike Iranian American writers, whose homeland exists outside the United States even as they seek acceptance within it, Coates argues that African Americans possess no alternative homeland to which they can meaningfully return. Their history, labor, and culture are inseparable from the United States, yet they continue to confront a nation that often refuses to recognize their full humanity. Homeland therefore becomes an ethical and political claim rather than a geographical reality. Morrison and Coates together reveal that African American literature redefines homeland through historical memory and resistance, challenging national narratives that equate citizenship with belonging. When read alongside Khakpour, Satrapi, and Dumas, their works demonstrate that race fundamentally shapes not only access to homeland but also the very possibility of imagining what home can mean.

## 7. Conclusion

The concept of homeland in Iranian American and African American literature ultimately transcends geography. Through the works of Porochista Khakpour, Marjane Satrapi, and Firoozeh Dumas, homeland emerges as a dynamic space shaped by memory, migration, political upheaval, and racialization. Although these writers remain emotionally connected to Iran, they reject the notion that home can be fully recovered through physical return. Instead, homeland is continually reconstructed through family narratives, language, cultural practices, and the everyday work of negotiating life in the United States. Their texts reveal that migration transforms both the migrant and the homeland, making return an emotionally compelling yet ultimately incomplete resolution.

African American writers extend this insight by demonstrating that homeland cannot always be located in a recoverable place. Morrison, Baldwin, Du Bois, and Coates reveal that slavery and white supremacy fundamentally altered the relationship between race and belonging, requiring African Americans to reconstruct home through collective memory, community, and cultural survival rather than geographic return. Bringing these traditions into conversation highlights the central role of race in shaping diasporic identity. While Iranian American writers negotiate homeland through exile and transnational belonging, African American writers expose homeland as a struggle for recognition within a nation built upon racial exclusion. Together, these literary traditions redefine homeland not as a fixed territory but as an evolving practice of memory, identity, and resistance, demonstrating that the search for home is inseparable from the historical and racial conditions that determine who is allowed to belong.

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