

## Where Words Fail, Music Speaks

“I hate it here so I will go to  
secret gardens in my mind.

People need a key to get to  
The only one is mine.” — Taylor Swift, *I Hate It Here*

The little girl sat alone in her room while laughter drifted faintly from the street below. She wasn’t like the other children; she didn’t play with them, didn’t know their jokes, didn’t quite belong. Her companions were a stack of books, a secondhand MP3 player, and the one American song she couldn’t stop replaying. Taylor Swift’s voice filled the small room: “Shake it off, shake it off.” The girl mouthed the words without knowing what they meant, pretending to understand, pretending to belong to the world behind that voice. Little did she know that what began as a simple hobby would grow into the language through which she understood herself and the world.

I grew up in Iran, in a small apartment where the internet was slow and Western music was considered a sin. But for me, it felt like home. The first time I heard Taylor Swift, something inside me stirred. I couldn’t grasp her words, but I could feel them. The pulse of defiance, the echo of courage I didn’t yet have. Her voice became a bridge to somewhere I couldn’t name. Every night, I searched her name on Google, waiting for blurry videos to load. I’d watch her concerts and see girls my age singing, crying, waving handmade signs, and I’d imagine myself standing among them one day. I didn’t yet know the language of their songs, but I wanted to learn it. That desire was only the beginning.

I started writing Taylor’s lyrics in a notebook, line by line, next to Persian translations I pieced together with an old dictionary. *Love Story. Fearless. Enchanted.* I kept that notebook in a

sacred place no one could touch. Those lyrics became my first English words. I memorized them like prayers, not realizing that I was doing more than learning a language; I was teaching myself how to reach across borders. My teacher never knew that my vocabulary came from pop songs, or that my listening practice was Red on repeat. But slowly, English began to make sense, and with it, I began to see a world beyond my window: a world that belonged only to me, and no one had the key.

While others went to birthday parties or studied math, I spent hours with my headphones on, learning how words and emotions intertwined. When I was sad, I played *All Too Well* and understood heartbreak before I had ever fallen in love. When I felt invisible, I listened to *Begin Again* and believed that maybe reinvention was possible. Her music taught me that language was more than grammar; it was empathy, rhythm, and connection.

By the time I reached college, I was fluent. I could finally understand the songs that had once felt like riddles, and I realized that Taylor Swift hadn't just taught me English; she had given me a reason to love it. I chose to major in English Literature, chasing the beauty I had once heard without comprehension. Through her lyrics, I had learned that words could build worlds. Years later, when I arrived in the United States for my graduate studies, I carried that voice with me like a map. I was no longer the shy teenager hiding in her room, but I still felt caught between two identities; too Westernized for Iran, too foreign for America. Yet music became my constant translator. When I heard Taylor's songs in cafés or malls, I felt both foreign and familiar at once. The same lyrics that once made me dream of this place now made me feel at home in it.

I have come to understand this feeling as living in a liminal space. I am not entirely Iranian anymore, yet I will never be fully American. I exist somewhere in between, where languages overlap and identities blur. In this space, Persian and English coexist; Googoosh's

nostalgia and Taylor Swift's confessions live side by side<sup>1</sup>. It's a place where I can love Hafez and quote *You're On Your Own Kid* in the same breath<sup>2</sup>. At first, I thought this in-between identity meant that I belonged nowhere. But over time, I've realized the opposite is true: I belong to both. The act of translating myself has become my home. The little girl who once sang *Shake It Off* without understanding a single word now writes essays, teaches literature, and lives inside the world she once borrowed from a song.

And sometimes, when the noise of the world feels too much, I return to my secret garden. I play *I Hate It Here*, and when Taylor sings, "I hate it here so I will go to secret gardens in my mind" I smile. Because now I understand: that garden was never loneliness; it was home. Music didn't just teach me how to speak; it taught me how to belong—to exist between worlds without having to choose one. And now, it's not a sin anymore; not because I'm finally free to listen, but because I'm no longer listening alone. Somewhere, across oceans and languages, someone hums the same tune, someone finishes the same line—and in that shared silence after the music fades, I know that I'm understood.

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<sup>1</sup> Faegheh Atashin, known professionally as Googoosh, is an Iranian singer and former actress widely regarded as a pop icon.

<sup>2</sup> Hafez (also spelled Hafiz) was a fourteenth-century Persian poet whose lyrical verses are celebrated for their influence on Persian literature and culture.