

Narrative Analysis: *Persepolis*

In 'Moscow,' Marji receives a visit from her paternal uncle Anoosh, who she has never met – he had been imprisoned for her entire life. She is quite drawn to him, immediately seeing in him the heroism she wishes she saw in her father. Up to this point in the novel, she is portrayed as very independent-minded, and is not one to 'play the child' around adults; this changes around Anoosh, who she venerates. By cozying up to him, she also gains control over him – he allies himself with her rather than her parents, and remains silent as her parents give up on trying to put her to bed for the evening before she's had a chance to hear his stories. Anoosh, for his part, seems very eager to play the role of the loving uncle, and we later learn why: he has long been separated from his own children, and it is unclear if or when he will be able to see them again.

Anoosh spends the evening with Marji recounting the story of his adult life. He tells her how he left home at the age of 18 to join his uncle Fereydoon at the justice ministry of Azerbaijan, which had recently proclaimed independence. As he says this, the narrative form of the illustrations changes – Anoosh 'takes over', and his reflective voice appears in the omniscient boxes on top of each drawing. This is one of the rare instances where Marji is willing to cede her control over the reflective pulse that runs through *Persepolis*. Upon arriving to work one day, he tells, Anoosh saw soldiers surrounding the Ministry, preparing to arrest his uncle. He fled on foot, making a long trek through the snow to his parents' house; he didn't stay long, knowing that the Shah's police were looking for him, and shortly thereafter he went into exile in the USSR.

As this point, Anoosh's control of the narrative ends as Marji interrupts to ask what happened to Fereydoon. Here we begin to see a shift in both of the characters' roles in the dialogue – Marji begins to gain agency and maturity in the exchange, and Anoosh becomes more somber. He recounts that Fereydoon was arrested and sentenced to death; on the evening before his execution, he arranged for a visit from his girlfriend with the intention of making a child. She became pregnant, and left for Switzerland soon after. Anoosh is now shown facing away from Marji for the first time, looking lost in reverie. Of his cousin, he is able to say only that "I heard he looks a lot like his father." Clearly, he would have liked to have known the boy, and the impossibility of this serves to further undermine the strong, cosmopolitan character Marji first saw him as, and he becomes more vulnerable as he actively engages with his past.

Marji offers to make Anoosh hot chocolate in exchange for more stories. We move to the kitchen, where Marji assumes the role of inquiring hostess as Anoosh fields her questions at the kitchen table. She asks about his life in the USSR; when he says that he worked towards a doctorate in Marxism-Leninism, she knowingly mentions dialectic materialism, eliciting a shocked response from her uncle. Asked how she knows about that, she says "I read the comic book version." Here, Satrapi slices through the narrative and wryly nudges the reader. This brief comment alone

allows Satrapi to remind us what we're learning and how, and encourages us to take the inquisitive attitude of a child like Marji to the story she's telling. By situating her reading of the comic book within a larger narrative learning experience, Satrapi reminds the reader that the history is ultimately one that we have to discover ourselves, and that we cannot rely solely on what she gives us. Rather, she suggests, we should use it as a basis from which to engage with those whose experiences might otherwise be inaccessible to us. This interjection hints at a broader, more political defense of the graphic novel form. Rather than being 'high-brow' and exclusive as a form of knowledge, the graphic novel makes "serious" subject matter accessible, lends itself to a broader reception and engagement.

In the context of *Persepolis*, the graphic novel or comic book form allows a child like Marji to interact with her uncle on a far more level playing field. Its mention signals a broader shift in the relationship between Marji and Anoosh as the chapter progresses. It begins with Anoosh carrying her in his arms to tuck her in, but at this point she's becoming the "mature" one and the voice of calm reason in a discussion that has begun to make her uncle very emotional. He becomes the confused one, and to an extent, they switch roles: Marji begins to guide him through his recollection. The body language illustrated at this point also conveys the same shift in the relationship – Anoosh is seated and looks sullen, rather than animated as he did before, and Marji is standing, either with her arms crossed or her hand on her uncle's shoulder as he looks off into the distance. Anoosh allows himself to be vulnerable with Marji, and in doing so, establishes a far more open and trusting relationship than that between an other adult-child pairing in the book, including that between Marji and her parents. It's as though, through this shifting vulnerability, Satrapi is suggesting that such violent histories carry so much weight that to participate in their sharing (as teller or told), the burden must be shared: the participants take turns feeling light and feeling heavy, feeling comfortable and feeling powerless. This trading-off exhibits a mutual responsibility and respect for the other, and the trust that in agreeing to help bear your burden, the listener won't let you down.

Anyways, Anoosh carries on with his story, and the relationship between the two of them quickly reverts to the original adult-child dynamic. Anoosh is again the one with knowing eyes, and Marji appears in the illustrations as much smaller, all of a sudden. She compares her uncle's experience with that of Laly's father, which seems childish again, sits cross-legged on the floor, and is eventually carried back to bed and tucked in by her uncle. The burden has shifted back, and Anoosh closes the window on his past. As he does this, he explains to Marji why he shared so much: it is important to him that the family's memory is not lost, whether or not it's difficult and whether or not she understands. This, to the reader, implies a sense of finality: Anoosh knows that he may not have another chance to tell this story, that his time with Marji is limited. Marji promises never to forget what she's learned, in effect promising to bear the burden when her uncle no longer can. These seem like simple words from a child, and the reader is left uncertain as to whether this is a promise she will keep. I suspect that Satrapi is aware of this, setting up remembrance as a challenge rather than a given.

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