CHAPTER SEVEN

Reading the Exile’s Body

Deafness and Diaspora in Kader Abdolah’s

My Father’s Notebook

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In My Father’s Notebook, Iranian-Dutch novelist Kader Abdolah explores the exile’s sense of linguistic displacement. The novel is a metafictional account of a son’s attempt to translate his father’s notebooks from an unknown language into Dutch, the author and narrator’s second or third language. The narrator’s father, Akbar, was deaf and wrote his notebook in his own invented language using a cuneiform script he had learned from a cave inscription. The narrative begins in third person and shifts to first person as Ishmael, Akbar’s son, tells the story of attempting to write a novel based on that notebook. I would like to suggest that Ishmael’s experience is emblematic of the diasporic condition. He is so distantly displaced from his cultural identity that any return to that past is impossible. The language he writes in (Dutch) is at several removes from the father’s invented language. However, what allows the protagonist to mitigate this sense of loss and linguistic displacement is, in part, memories of using sign language to communicate with his father. Sign language, far from the closed off and indecipherable
written text of his father’s notebook, is a relatively universal form of communication allowing for the physical embodiment of identity. Neither spoken nor written language can quite achieve this kind of linguistic embodiment of the self.

In a 2010 lecture titled “Literature as Resistance,” Abdolah describes how Persian began to feel like a useless, even oppressive, language for him as an exile:

I started writing my Persian books to continue my resistance against the Iranian regime. I had always fought against the dictator with my pen. My Persian words were bullets. But suddenly I couldn’t fight anymore with my Persian words. The Persian words that I put on paper were sick. They had no power anymore. The Persian language became for me as a gun without bullets. I wrote. I wrote. But I felt sick. I felt like a dying writer.

Having written against both the Pahlavi regime and the new Islamic Republic’s oppression of the Kurds, Abdolah found himself exiled from the language of cultural identity and political action. As his several novels and short story collections attest, Abdolah eventually turned to Dutch as a new language in which he could continue, with his words, to fight against the regime of the ayatollahs. Abdolah’s discussion of having to write in Dutch rather than Persian bears out the idea that migration involves a transformation of self: Abdolah had been transformed, partly through the language that he inhabited and that embodied him, into a Dutch writer, but one clearly defined by his experience of diaspora. He had to write through the very experience of exile.

Abdolah’s My Father’s Notebook explores this dilemma of the exiled writer. However, complicating the writer’s place between the language of home and host cultures is the third possibility of sign language shared between a deaf father and his son. In what follows, I argue that sign language offers an embodied sense of cultural identity that is not available either in written or in spoken language. Severed from spoken and written forms of Iranian cultural-linguistic identity, the protagonist of Abdolah’s novel reinvents his familial and cultural identity through sign language as an embodied linguistic sense of self.

SIGN LANGUAGE AND THE DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE

Abdolah—whose given name is Hossein Sadjadi Ghaemmaghami Farahani—includes several linguistic and discursive themes in his novel My Father’s Notebook (originally titled Spijkerschrift [Cuneiform] in Dutch). First, cuneiform script, with
its ancient national origins, appears as the dead and empty language of the father. Second, spoken and written Persian are closely tied to national and cultural identity. As Ishmael—the narrator-novelist protagonist—tells his story in Dutch, he must come to terms with the national language (spoken and written) that he has left behind. Third, Dutch becomes the language of migration. As Ishmael puts it, Dutch is the new ground upon which he must dwell. Finally, and most importantly, the improvised sign language used between the deaf father and his children becomes the language of familial space and of an alternative sense of identity. The languages multiply, but we can group them into written, spoken, and gestural forms of communication. Each becomes a potent way to create and reinvent the self, but gestural language offers a way out of the speech/writing dichotomy and allows for a true embodiment of self. Improvised sign language, as the language of the narrator’s father, links the narrator back to paternity and the nation, but without the ideological implications of either writing or speech. As an idiosyncratic familial invention in the protagonist’s home, improvised sign language challenges the primacy of Persian or even the foundational ancient language of Old Persian inscribed in cuneiform. Furthermore, as an attempt to translate his father’s notebook into Dutch, the novel itself links the adopted language of the diasporic writer back to the language of the father. Neither written nor spoken, neither Persian nor Dutch, gesture is a third language (a liminal linguistic space) that allows the narrator-author to triangulate these languages and translate the father’s text.

The spoken word and the written word have certain implications for national identity. The spoken word manifests traditional culture, which, in the case of this novel, includes the recitation of medieval Persian poetry and Shi’a para-Quranic stories (like the tale of Mahdi, the messianic imam said to dwell in a cave on Saffron Mountain). The written word constitutes the nation—constitutions must, after all, be written. It can also link the nation’s present to its past through monuments literally carved in stone and through literary or legal archives. The written word also modernizes the nation, as oral traditions become transformed into modern prose and poetry. However, by situating its own privileged language neither in speech nor in writing, but in gesture, *My Father’s Notebook* offers a possible way out of the dichotomies of orality and literacy.

Deaf studies scholars Sarah Batterbury and Paddy Ladd, along with cultural geographer Mike Gulliver, recently argued that there are “significant parallels” between the experiences of Sign Language Peoples (SLPs, or Deaf communities) and “those of First Nation peoples” (2899). I would argue that these concepts of
linguistic embodiment through sign language can also inform concepts of linguistic loss in diaspora. Batterby, Ladd, and Gulliver’s observations about how SLPs use language and how the use of sign language results in the embodiment of identity can guide our reading of Abdolah’s *My Father’s Notebook*, in which the diasporic protagonist is also a member of a Deaf community. In an article on geography, sign language, and identity, they argue:

> Although the grammars of different spoken languages show tremendous variation in the ways that they map deep pragmatic and semantic concepts into the actual syntax of a speech act, those of different sign languages are remarkably similar, to the extent of being, by comparison, almost identical. This is not surprising when we consider that visuo-gestural languages literally embody almost biologically determined requirements, constraints, and expansionary principles. (2900; my emphasis)

Furthermore, Batterby, Ladd, and Gulliver argue that “evidence is mounting that the cognitive effects of embracing sign language and visual learning support SLPs’ repeated statements that they embody a visually oriented ‘intelligence’ and geography, thereby providing support for their claims to an inalienable and valuable physical embodiment of cultural difference” (2904; my emphasis). Finally, Paddy Ladd has identified seven key tenets of Deaf discourse. He derives these tenets from speeches delivered by French Deaf leaders who held annual banquets in the 1840s as part of their efforts to promote Deaf culture and establish Deaf schools. At these banquets, Deaf people practiced and celebrated their different, rather than deficient, form of discourse. Drawing on a hearing journalist’s account of one of these banquets, Ladd identifies certain key elements of Deaf discourse, aspects of discourse that make communication more effective rather than making it deficient. This journalist went so far as to write that witnessing the grace and eloquence of the gestures of the Deaf speakers was enough “to make us wish we could unlearn speech” (Ladd 111). Attending to the tenets of Deaf discourse that result in such enviable eloquence for a hearing observer might help us rethink diaspora outside of traditionally postcolonial emphases on textuality. These tenets shift the focus from textuality to the dichotomy and dialectic between orality and gesture. Batterby, Ladd, and Gulliver summarize them as follows:

1. Sign languages have a unique nature and power and can express things that spoken languages cannot.
2. There is greater ease of international communication between sign languages than between spoken languages.
3. Consequently, SLPs offer the world a model of global citizenship.
4. SLPs’ existence on Earth is intentional, whether enacted by “God” or “nature,” for the purpose of modeling these principles.
5. Non-Deaf people can be regarded as “sign-impaired,” rather than SLPs being seen as “hearing-impaired.”
6. Sign languages are offered as a gift which can benefit non-Deaf peoples.
7. There should be a commitment to the betterment of all SLPs, as opposed to an educated elite. (2906)

This manifesto offers some insight into how a CODA (child of a Deaf adult) living in exile might experience language. Furthermore, the first three of Ladd’s principles, in particular, can help us think about how exile is experienced. If it is true that gestural, or signed, language is both more biologically grounded and more universally understood than written or spoken languages, then the language of gesture can be the bridge between home and host languages and cultures.

As linguist Sarah Taub, who studies ASL (American Sign Language), argues, sign language is iconic, containing an “abundance of visual imagery,” and using iconic signs metaphorically to create abstract meanings (2). In fact, Taub challenges one of the foundational concepts of structuralist and poststructuralist critical theory, the Saussurian notion of the arbitrariness of the sign. In this tradition (familiar by now in the disciplines of philosophy, anthropology, literary criticism, rhetoric and composition, and other humanities and social science fields), the concept of the arbitrary nature of the sign claims, in short, that “the highest property of language” is a “lack of connection between a word’s form and its meaning” (2). However, Taub counters that the “relative scarcity of iconicity in spoken language is not a virtue; it is merely a consequence of the fact that most phenomena do not have a characteristic noise to be used in motivating linguistic form” (3). She goes on to argue that while three-dimensionality is “crucial to language in many ways,” speech is a “one-dimensional sequential medium” (3). She reports that researchers are now finding that iconicity is common enough to be of serious interest in the spoken languages of the world; if sound were not so limited in what it can iconically represent, they [spoken languages] would no doubt have even more iconicity. Signed languages, created in physical space with the signer’s body and perceived visually, have incredible potential for iconic
expression of a broad range of basic conceptual structures (e.g., shapes, movements, locations, human actions), and this potential is fully realized. (3)

For an exile who is also a member of a Deaf community, the sense of linguistic unmooring so often a part of diasporic experience is mitigated by the deaf exile’s sense of embodiment in a language both deeply felt within the signers’ body and broadly shared beyond the national boundaries of spoken and written languages. Gestural or signed languages travel well. An exile who has experiential access to such a language can, potentially, resolve some of the dilemmas of diaspora: nostalgia and hope, loss and liberty, identity and community, and translation of identity. A close reading of My Father’s Notebook can help us see these relationships among spoken, written, and signed language in the diasporic experience. In this novel, Ishmael’s identity is deeply bound up with his shared use of gestural language with his deaf father. Thus, he is as much a member of a Deaf community or SLP as he is an Iranian or Kurd. By locating the most present and most clearly embodied language of the novel within sign language (that is, to locate the narrator-author’s most direct link with his father not through spoken or written language but through gesture or ostensive meaning), Abdolah points us to a third option outside of the speech/writing dichotomy.

The experience of diaspora can be understood as a transformation of self. Discussing the effects of English-language instruction among South Asian immigrants to Canada, Vijay Agnew argues, “Learning and adopting a new language changes the individual because all languages permit slightly varying forms of thought, imagination, and play” (44). I claim that My Father’s Notebook explores the possible ways in which the self can be re-embodied through language to re-create the self in exile. The unique place of an improvised sign language in this novel is especially important in helping to convey this sense of re-embodiment of self.

The novel explores the significance of language in diaspora by exploring multiple languages in a variety of forms. First, we have the ancient cuneiform script, as representing both an ancient language and the father’s invented language. The antediluvian origins of the nation and the irretrievable memories of the father are thus superimposed onto one another—written in a forgotten script and conveying idiosyncratic meanings. The father’s written language is doubly displaced: it uses a dead script and conveys a solipsistic meaning that the father alone understands. Second, we have Persian itself, which the narrator-author continues to understand, but which he relinquishes in favour of Dutch as the language of his novel. Third, there is Dutch, which is the author-narrator’s adopted language, but one
that he admits to struggling to master. Fourth, we encounter some untranslated sura from the Quran, formulaic verses that the narrator-author remembers without believing. One important sura—the story of the companions of the cave—figures prominently in the conclusion of the novel, which opens with the Quranic parable of the cave and explores the ways in which externalized, internalized, and embodied forms of language function both at home and in exile.

THE LITERATE SELF: WRITING AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Books and writing play an important role in Abdolah’s novel. For instance, ancient writing becomes national treasure, and legal documents construct civil identity. Even the novel inside the novel is a metafictional translation of the father’s writing into the son’s. Several important written texts—the Old Persian cuneiform inscription, the legal documents constructing Akbar’s patrimony, the notebook (also in cuneiform) that documents Akbar’s thoughts, and Ishmael’s attempted translation of that notebook—punctuate the narrative of this novel as the exiled hearing son tries to find a sense of place in diaspora. It is only by trying to translate the writings of his deaf father that he is able to come to terms with his literate self.

Aga Akbar, a carpet mender, is taught in his youth by his uncle to write down his experiences and emotions in his own made-up language using a cuneiform script presumably based on the Old Persian or Pahlavi language that European Orientalists have uncovered in a cave on Saffron Mountain, a fictionalized setting that Abdolah situates within Senejan. The cuneiform inscription is the manifestation of Iran’s “spiritual legacy” (39). However, written language in particular is also a means of control, especially in the colonial or semi-colonial context. A nation’s dead or long-forgotten languages, some of which exist only in written form, convey not only the proclamations of ancient kings but also the means by which a colonized culture can be known and controlled. As Elleke Boehmer puts it, “The text, a vehicle of imperial authority, symbolized and in some cases indeed performed the act of taking possession” (13). But if control was textual, so, too, were challenges to it: “resistance to imperial domination—especially on the part of those who lacked guns or money—frequently assumed textual form” (15). In this Orientalist context, Akbar’s notebook, written in a cuneiform script under the scrutiny of European Orientalists, constitutes both colonial constructions and postcolonial deconstructions of self.
We can think of the notebook as the kind of “hidden transcript” discussed by Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin in relation to “diasporic consciousness.” The undecipherable text resists power structures that themselves rely on textuality: the “only modes of resistance, in diaspora, that are logical, that make sense, are those that will enable the continuation of . . . cultural and spiritual activity” (66). Hence, according to the Boyarin brothers, “in order for seditious discourse to be formed, there have to be ‘autonomous social sites’ either hidden from the eyes of the dominating population or hidden from their ears because of ‘linguistic codes impenetrable to outsiders’” (66). When Akbar is introduced to a three-thousand-year-old cuneiform script by his uncle, Kazem, deep “inside the cave,” it is clearly demarcated as a language of power, in that the “first king of Persia ordered that a cuneiform inscription be chiseled into the rock, beyond the reach of sun, wind, rain, and time” (Abdollah, My Father’s Notebook 20). However, the inscription “has never been deciphered” (20). Initially, indecipherability excludes Akbar from power (in that knowledge, especially of a language, means power). He is excluded both from spoken language and from the ancient ancestral language of the early Persian kings that European Orientalists claim for themselves. However, Akbar is able to turn this power relationship around when he creates his own indecipherable languages, both written and signed. Indeed, the written language recuperates the language that the European scholars decipher from the cuneiform carvings. Then, once Akbar has used this script to create his own “written” word, the indecipherability of Akbar’s notebook puts the narrator, Ishmael, simultaneously in the position of the “outsider” and in the role of the expert laying claim to the nation’s cultural legacy. As the father’s notebook falls into the son’s hands, it takes on some of the qualities that the Boyarins associate with the indecipherable texts of diasporic consciousness.

The documents surrounding Akbar’s name and patrimony present a different but similar set of problems in how the literate self, as I’m calling it, is constructed in this novel. Being both deaf and illiterate, Akbar has no access to the very documents that construct him socially. He is the illegitimate son of Aga Hadi Mahmud Ghaznavi Khorasani, a nobleman who arranged a temporary marriage with Akbar’s mother, Hajar. Hajar had six other children, but Akbar is the only one born to Khorasani. Hajar goes to Khorasani and demands that Akbar bear his name: “I’m not asking you to make him an heir. Just to have Akbar’s name recorded in an official document.” Khorasani relents: “The imam wrote a few lines in a book, then drew up a document and had the nobleman sign it” (Abadollah, My Father’s
However, after the nobleman’s death, Akbar loses even his name and title: “The document turned out to be worthless. After the nobleman died his heirs bribed the local imam and had Aga Akbar’s name removed from the will.” But for Hajar, “it hardly mattered. [. . .] Aga Akbar’s parentage was known” (14). Here, the direct patrimony from the father takes on the questionable form of legal documents that can be reneged on, corrupted, and erased. Moreover, as a form of knowledge produced by clerics who serve the wealthy landowner, the legal document establishes power relations between social classes and castes.

However, Akbar eventually has access to a form of writing that falls outside both the nationalist/colonialist writing of ancient Persian kings and the corruptible documents written by religious legal scholars: the cuneiform symbols in his own notebook. When Akbar’s uncle, Kazem, shows him the nobleman’s library, Akbar discovers a new way of both expressing and understanding himself. “Oh, Allah, Allah, what a lot of books!” Kazem exclaims. They turn to one book in particular and Kazem says, “Hey, Akbar, come here. You see this book? It’s been written by hand” (18). And it is at this point in Abdolah’s novel that Kazem teaches Akbar to write his own book. The chiselled and inked documents of kings and akhunds (Muslim clerics) are replaced by the handwritten journal of the “literate” self. The Persian king ordered others to chisel cuneiform letters into the cave wall, and the nobleman directs an akhund to draw up a legal document. These are words and documents intended not to embody the self but to control others, to command. Kazem, in contrast, leads Akbar to write his own book. Akbar’s book is both completely his own and that of the nation because it is written semantically in his own personal language but with a script associated with the nation’s antediluvian origins. Kazem takes Akbar to the cave with the ancient inscription and tells him, “Now get out your pen and notebook. [. . .] I want you to write down the text. Look carefully at all the symbols, at all those cuneiform words, and write them down on the paper, one by one. [. . .] Just write” (21). But, of course, Akbar cannot and does not write. He resists, subtly, even the commands of his poet uncle. Rather, he draws: “Aga Akbar may or may not have understood what his uncle had in mind, but in any case he started copying the text. He stared at the cuneiform script and did his best to draw each character, one by one, in his notebook” (22; my emphasis). The semantic function of language is replaced by the tactile, visual, and aesthetic act of drawing the shapes of the letters. Rather than being commanded by the language of ancient kings or being defined legally by the documents of lawyers and clerics, Akbar makes the language radically his own.
Interestingly, as Orientalist scholars begin to decipher the cuneiform script, they give Akbar the key to open his own invented language. As Kazem tells Ishmael, “In those days he had quite a bit of contact with the foreigners who went to the cave, the ones who were trying to decipher the text. I think he’d learned something from those experts—something about other reliefs, or maybe even a likely translation” (23). Akbar finds himself caught between three forces whose power derives from textuality: the ancient Persian origins of the nation, the modern legalistic discourse of clerics, and the Orientalist appropriation of Persianness (both cultural and linguistic). And it is out of these that he manifests a self through textuality, a script that avoids either “the command of language or the language of command,” to quote Bernand Cohn’s phrase. Finally, Akbar reads to Kazem what he has written: “I, I, I am the son of the horseman, the horseman from the palace, the palace on the mountain, the mountain across from the cave. In that cave is a letter, a letter from a king, a letter carved in the rock, from the time when there were no pens, only hammers and chisels” (24). The repetition of the incantatory first person traces Akbar’s now auto-literate self back through ancestry, geography, and history. Later, in his work as a carpet mender, he comes across the script again. Saffron Mountain, in My Father’s Notebook, is known for its carpets, and, in addition to images of birds, a “motif that made its way into their carpets was the cuneiform script” (26). Cuneiform is chiselled, written, and woven into Akbar’s world. Akbar thus remakes the ancient Persian script and modern Iranian legal discourse into an indecipherable text over which he alone has power as author and translator, until the notebook falls into the hands of his son, who must decipher it in exile.

Ishmael’s interest in books is often at odds with his father’s illiteracy, but his literacy breaks down in diaspora in at least two ways: first, he must learn to speak and write in Dutch, and second, he finds himself unable to read his father’s notebook. The father’s radically idiosyncratic (even solipsistic) language reverses the roles of illiterate father and literate son. A bibliophile since his childhood, Ishmael finds that in exile, his words have been stripped of meaning, and his literate self bereft of identity.

One of Akbar’s names for Ishmael is “The Boy Who Crawls Under the Covers and Reads” (156). The illiterate father fosters the son’s love of books, bringing books home for Ishmael; unable to read their titles or know their content, however, Akbar’s acquisition of texts falls short of Ishmael’s desires: “They weren’t books you’d read for fun. One old book he’d found at work, for example, was about cotton and thread. Another was filled with numbers and tables” (143).
Soon, neighbourhood kids begin to take these books from Akbar and taunt him. Embarrassed by his father, even Ishmael begins to taunt his father. Instead of reading the books his father brings him, Ishmael turns to Dr. Pur Bahlul, a dentist who treats Akbar’s rotting teeth on credit and opens his library to Ishmael. Bahlul, it turns out, is a leading figure in the Iranian Left and is arrested a year after Ishmael meets him; his association with Ishmael also introduces the latter to political literacy, the brand of leftist politics emerging in Iran in the 1960s. The only book that Ishmael and his father seem to share an interest in is Sa’di’s *The Rose Garden*, which I will return to below when I discuss gestural language. For now, it is important to note that with the exception of one of Iran’s key national poets, the written word divides father from son. Indeed, father and son cannot even come to terms with the Holy Quran, which Ishmael tells his father “doesn’t come from heaven. It’s a book—a good book—but it has nothing to do with heaven” (168).

After Ishmael has joined Iran’s leftist movement, the written word—specifically, print—takes on a material reality that leaves its imprint on his body. The leftists, though suppressed by Mohammad Reza Shah, survive the Islamic Revolution, but with their leadership almost completely eliminated. Ishmael’s job in the new fight against Khomeini is to print revolutionary newssheets and slogans with a heavy industrial stencilling machine. Abdolah devotes several pages to describing how Ishmael acquires, transports, and stores this heavy printing press. The weight of the machine injures Ishmael’s back so that he both literally and symbolically bears the burden of writing:

I eased the machine off my back and set it down on the bed. I tried to straighten up again, but couldn’t. [. . .] I spent the next quarter of an hour bent over, on my knees, until the pain subsided.

To this day I’m still plagued by backaches. Sometimes when I’ve been sitting at my computer for too long, I feel a jab of pain when I try to stand up. I have to hunch my shoulders, then slowly straighten my back. (287–88)

Writing in an age of mechanical reproduction and in an age of revolution leaves its mark not only on paper and on the minds of readers but on the very body of the writer. Moreover, the burden continues to weigh on him as he sits at his computer, *writing* in exile.

What Ishmael is writing in exile interests us as well because Ishmael’s diasporic writing is a return to Akbar’s notebook. This relationship between the father’s national script and the son’s exilic writing is further complicated by the novel’s
metafictional structure, combining Ishmael's first-person narration with the limited-omniscient “voice-over” of a third-person narrator. The third-person narrator tells us at the outset that he will take us through Akbar's life and Ishmael's birth and coming of age but that then, Ishmael himself will take over because the book we are reading is, in fact, Ishmael's attempt to write a novel based on the translation of his father's cuneiform notebook. The literate self, then, is part of the very structure of the novel, not just a theme or subject within it. We move from the Iranian national context into the diasporic context of Holland through a narrative shift from an omniscient third person to a first-person narrator who has lost his linguistic power: having to learn Dutch and his father's cuneiform language at the same time. He must translate from an almost indecipherable language into one that he barely understands. It is out of this radically indeterminate linguistic space that the novel itself emerges. What I call the “literate self” is born in the space between “author” and “narrator,” and between an illiterate father and a son writing in a second language.

Abdolah's novel is modelled, at least in part, after Dutch author Multatuli’s (Edward Douwes Dekker) *Max Havelaar*, in which the narrator distinguishes himself from the writers of verse and theatre, whose genres amount to forms of lying (either to serve the dictates of rhyming or to cover real-world vice with imagined virtue), and states: “Well, reader, this book owes its existence to my inviolable love for truth, and my zeal for business. I will tell you how all this has happened” (Multatuli 9). Ishmael (and Abdolah through Ishmael) quotes the opening passage of *Max Havelaar* directly and makes a similar claim to truth to the point that author and narrator seem to merge. When he receives his father's notebook from an aunt, he tells the reader, “I've never written a book before, but I'd like to try and write one now, because if it's at all possible, I'd like to put my father's writings into a readable form” (99). Ishmael/Abdolah acknowledges the distance between his own story and that of his father: a linguistic gap between Dutch and Farsi, between speech and gesture, between computer font and cuneiform script. “I'm sitting at my desk in the attic,” Ishmael writes, “staring out the window. Everything in the Flevopolder is new: the soil still smells of fish, the trees are young, and the birds build their nests with fresh twigs. There are no ancient words, no ancient love stories, no ancient feuds” (100). By contrast, “Everything in my father's notebook is old: the mountains, the well, the cave, the cuneiform relief, even the railroad. That's why I don't put pen to paper. I can't imagine writing a novel in this new ground” (100).
And yet he does write. Later in the novel, in fact, he tells his Dutch friend Louis, “I've got a story for you, Louis. [. . .] I’m writing a book. A novel. In Dutch.” He goes on to explain that the book is about his father, who kept a diary all his life but “wrote it in an unknown language—a kind of cuneiform that he invented himself.” So Ishmael has to decipher it: “I look at a passage, then try to read it and transcribe it. No, ‘transcribe’ isn’t the right word. I try to translate it into Dutch” (195). He is attempting to carry over a story from an unknown language written in a dead script into a known language and a living script. He compares himself to the small part of the great sea now “diked in by the Dutch. Much as I, a little patch of ancient Persian culture, have been surrounded by a Dutch dike” (100). Retrieving the past whole, like trying to re-create the sea, is impossible. However, he concludes, “just as Holland invented this ground, this landscape, I can use my father’s cuneiform writings to invent something new” (100). The novel we are reading is the author-narrator’s attempt to make a living story from a dead language, to reanimate the fleshless word of diaspora. Ishmael’s father, Akbar, comes across a handwritten book in his own biological father’s library and is inspired (and encouraged by his uncle) to write his own. Ishmael comes across his father’s handwritten notebook and is inspired to translate it into Dutch. However, in each case, the writer attempts to inscribe the self, to make the self legible. Although this challenges certain discursive forms of power and resists the marginalization of exile, it does not quite embody the self. The oral/aural self—and the gestural self, in particular—begin to do so more fully.

THE ORAL/aural SELF: SPEECH AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The third-person narrator of the first third of the novel tells us: “The following story cannot be found in the Holy Book, or in any other book, and yet the villagers on Saffron Mountain believe it and tell it to their children” (57). The story in question is the key tenet in the Twelver form of Shi’a Islam, which states that Mahdi, the twelfth imam in the line of succession from the Prophet Mohammad, went into occultation as a child and will return on the day of judgment. The inhabitants of Saffron Mountain believe that the Mahdi climbed up the mountain, where he took refuge in a cave, and is still hiding in their well:

If you take an oil lamp and go into the cave, all the way to the very back, you will still see, even today, the ashes from his fire.
Mahdi wanted to stay in the cave even longer, but the Arabs following him had managed to track him down.

So he climbed even higher, until he reached that miraculous rock face. There he realized that he was going to be Muhammad’s last successor and that he had to hide in the well and wait until he was called.

Many centuries have gone by since then. He’s still waiting in the well. In the well of Mahdi ibn Hassan Askari. (57)

The story depicts “Arabs” as the villains who “tried to kill Mahdi.” Like the mountain assimilating the modern railroad, this story suggests that Iranians assimilated Islam into their own sense of national identity. The oral narrative of the well as a sacred place within Iran turns the religious and political message of Arab invaders into a naturalized representation of a distinctly Iranian version of Islam.

In addition to this oral myth from Twelver Shi’ism that affords Akbar a communal sense of identity through orality, his relationship with his uncle, Kazem, gives him a more individual and personal sense of identity through the spoken word. For example, Akbar’s marriage is fostered by Kazem’s poetic voice. Searching for a place to rest for a few nights on one of his many journeys away from the village, Kazem approaches the house of a fellow opium smoker but is confronted by the man’s hard-headed daughter, Tina. When she rejects his plea to let him into her father’s house, Kazem says, “I’m not your average opium smoker. [. . .] I read books and I know hundreds of poems by heart. I also write them. If you open the door, I’ll write a poem especially for you” (85). Although he refers to written poetry, he presents these things in the form of sweet talk—the persuasive and seductive voice of the poet. Tina is eventually persuaded to meet and ultimately marry Akbar, and a spoken recitation from the Quran marks the marriage ceremony, during which the “imam recited a short melodious sura: ‘Ar-rahman, alam al-Qur’an, Khalaqa al-insan, ‘allamahu al-bayan. Ash-shams wa al-qamaru be-husbanin, wa as-sama’a rafa ‘ha wa waza’a al-mizan’” (90).² These lines—untranslated in both the Dutch original and the English translation—are the first five lines of the fifty-fifth sura of the Quran (“The Beneficent”), one of many sura that point to signs of proof of Allah’s existence and his beneficence. As untranslated transliteration, the brief passage underscores the importance of recited rather than written or silently read verse. Moreover, it points to language itself as one of those merciful and beneficent creations of God: “Khalaqa al-insan, ‘allamahu al-bayan” can be translated as “He created man, and taught him speech.”
In contrast to this orthodox Quranic verse that sanctifies Akbar’s marriage, it is the mystical words of Hafez, spoken by Kazem, that bless Akbar’s birth. When Ishmael is born to Tina and Akbar, the play between written and recited poetry and between silence and sound establishes Ishmael’s infantile and subconscious identity as an outgrowth of that play. When Tina gives birth, there is “an ominous silence”: “According to family tradition, no one was allowed to break the silence yet” (91). Once Ishmael is brought in to the men, no one is to speak until the appropriate words are spoken into Ishmael’s ears:

A while later the oldest woman in the house took Ishmael in her arms and brought him into the guest room. No one spoke, because the first word, the first sentence to reach the baby’s unspoiled mind had to be a poem—an ancient melodic verse. Not a word uttered by a midwife or an aunt’s joyful cry, not an everyday word from the mouth of a neighbor, but a poem by Hafez, the medieval master of Persian poetry. (91)

Kazem then takes a volume of Hafez from the shelf:

Kazem Khan brought his opium-scented mouth to Ishmael’s ear and whispered:

[. . .]

A nightingale once sat with a bright petal in its beak,
But this memento of its loved one merely made it weep.
“Why bewail this token of your heart’s desire,” I cried.
“It makes me long for her all the more,” the songbird sighed. (91–92)

However, this mellifluous poetic whisper is contrasted by the misguided scream of an anxious deaf father. In one of the few “quotations” from the father’s notebook, the narrator explains why Ishmael has always had trouble with his left ear:

I didn’t know if the baby had been born yet. Suddenly I saw Kazem Khan’s gold tooth gleam. I knew then that the baby had been born. My aunt came in with the baby in her arms. I was afraid the baby would be a deaf-mute like me, and I wanted to see if he was deaf. I know it was wrong, but suddenly I stood up, ran over to my aunt, took the baby from her, put my mouth to his ear and spoke into it. The baby screamed and turned blue. Kazem Khan snatched him from me and shoved me out of the house. I went and stood at the window. Everyone frowned at me. I had shouted into the baby’s ear. Everyone said it would be damaged for good. It was stupid of me, stupid. Akbar is stupid. (92–93)
The narrator’s commentary on Akbar’s description, however, redeems Akbar by suggesting that the deaf father’s voice marks the son, embodies his identity physically in the ringing in his ear: “Damaged? No, not really, but whenever Ishmael was sick, or under stress, or feeling discouraged, whenever he fell down and had to stand up again, a voice shouted in his ear. His father’s voice. Aga Akbar was always inside him” (93). Clearly, the father’s embodied voice and its bodily presence in Ishmael’s ear gives Ishmael an oral/aural sense of self, despite the father’s deafness. Like the heavy stencil machine that Ishmael uses in his work with revolutionary leftists and that leaves its mark not only on paper but on Ishmael’s body in the form of physical pain, so too does the spoken word make a permanent change to Ishmael’s body. But in both cases, the physical mark is not “damage” so much as a reminder of how Ishmael is the embodiment of discourses and languages (written, spoken, or, as we shall see, signed) that speak through him.

THE GESTURAL SELF: SIGN LANGUAGE AND INDIVIDUAL EMBODIMENT

By contrast to the national identities established by spoken and written languages, the novel presents a distinctly familial and personal identity established through signed language. Abdolah’s narrator tells us,

The family, especially his mother, communicated with him [Aga Akbar] in a simple sign language. A language that consisted of about one hundred signs. A language that worked best at home, with the family, though the neighbours also understood it to some extent. But the power of that language manifested itself most in the communication between Mother and Aga, and later between Aga and Ishmael. (7; my emphasis)

Here, we have a third form of language, one situated neither in oral/aural forms of cultural identity nor in the written forms of national monuments. The gestural language of sign is associated with the familial space. Mother tongue becomes the entire maternal and paternal body, not just through Aga Akbar but also through Aga Akbar’s mother and, later, through Ishmael and his sister, Golden Bell.

For Ishmael, embodying his father through gestural language is often a burden. He describes how the sons of blind and deaf men “became their fathers’ eyes” and ears, and the bodily connection between them was a key to the survival of the father and the identity of the son (101). He goes on to elaborate: “The moment the baby started to crawl, the blind father placed the palm of his left hand on the
baby’s shoulder and showed him how to be his guide. The child soon realized that he was an extension of his father” (101–02). Clearly, the son’s inheritance is embodied in the touch of the hand to the shoulder, the movement of the body guiding another, even in infancy. “The sons of the deaf-mutes had an even more difficult task,” Ishmael writes in a passage that he, apparently, has excised from the final version of the book. These sons “had to serve as the mouths, minds, and memories of their fathers” (102). Again, the sons become the embodiment of the fathers, but in this case, the embodiment of their language: mouths, minds, memories. They are no less embodied, though, than the filial guides of blind fathers. They are the word made flesh, quite literally. They must express the “minds, mouths, and memories” of the father through the movement of hands and bodies. The word of the father exists as the very body of the son.

The work of Taub, along with that of Batterbury, Ladd, and Gulliver, cited above, clearly suggests that gestural language is an important way in which the self is linguistically embodied and that this embodiment has ideological implications for what Batterbury, Ladd, and Gulliver call “Oralism.” These claims are also supported by cognitive evidence in the work of Jordan Zlatev. Zlatev argues that the “gap between language and embodiment” can be minimized through “bodily mimesis,” defined as the “volitional use of the body for constructing and communicating representations.” Bodily mimesis, furthermore, leads to the broader concept of “mimetic schemas,” or “body-based, pre-linguistic, consciously accessible representations that serve as the child’s first concepts” (Zlatev 301). Admittedly, Zlatev’s concept excludes sign language because, as he claims, sign language is organized through a set of symbolic conventions and manual letter shapes; thus, the movement of the body is completely abstracted into ideographical representation and a hand alphabet. In other words, it has the same arbitrariness that structuralist linguistics and poststructuralist theory associate with written and spoken language. However, as Taub has argued, even within a formally conventionalized symbolic system like American Sign Language, the relationship between bodily and manual movement relies on certain mimetic relationships. In the context of my own argument, bodily mimesis and bodily schemas make sense in that the “sign language” at work in My Father’s Notebook is not a formally established and recognized language like ASL but rather a homemade form of communication using the body to represent objects, images, and ideas that the interlocutor can understand by reference to the visual world and to his or her own body.
The way that Akbar names Ishmael, for example, is significant both in Akbar’s use of sign language to form a proper name and in Ishmael’s remembered sense of self through his father’s gestures rather than his spoken or written words. The first name Akbar gives Ishmael is “Mine”: “He had different names for all of us, and he changed them whenever there was a major change in our lives. For example, in the beginning I was called Mine” (156). What’s interesting here is that the designation of proper names coincides with “major changes.” Every crisis or triumph calls for a new name. But even more interesting is that these names are given through gesture: “When he put his right hand to the left side of his chest, everyone knew he was referring to Ishmael” (156). Thus, it is the movement of the father’s body, not the sound of a father’s voice, that signifies Ishmael. The hand-to-heart gesture metaphorically points to ownership, which, by analogy, points to paternity. Furthermore, it is also the son’s movements and physical presence that win him other proper names such as “The Boy Who Crawls Under the Covers and Reads” to designate Ishmael as a boy, “The Man Who Wears Glasses” to refer to him as a young adult, “The Man Who Is Never Here” for Ishmael as a student, and “The Man Who Went Away” after Ishmael leaves Iran. The very naming of self relies on these uses of language as the body both of the namer and the named (Abdolah, My Father’s Notebook 156).

In discussing the importance of writing and its failure to embody fully Ishmael’s self and to reproduce completely his relation to his father, I noted above that books created a wall between Ishmael and his father rather than bringing them closer, with one exception: the book that bonds the son to the father is Sa’di’s The Rose Garden as Ishmael attempts to “translate” Sa’di’s work through bodily mimesis. The hekayah, or “stories,” rendered in verse range from the morally didactic to the broadly satirical. Most importantly, Abdolah narrates the exchange between Ishmael and Akbar about Sa’di through gesture and signs. The hekayat that Ishmael attempts to interpret into bodily mimesis is the story of the centipede. Ishmael attempts to show this through gestures (which are conveyed to us only through a retranslation of those gestures into dialogue): “A centipede, you know, the insect, the little insect with lots of legs that crawls so fast . . . hold on, I’ll bring the oil lamp a bit closer.” The narrative switches from dialogue to the description of bodily movements: “I drew a centipede in the dust with a stick and made a rapid movement with my finger” (146). The story tells of a man without arms or legs who swats a centipede and kills it. But Akbar, for whom legs and arms are so crucial, latches onto the logical conundrum: “How can he swat an insect if he doesn’t have any
arms or legs?’ my father signed” (147). In fact, Ishmael’s interpretation of the story as having to do with the inevitability of death fails to persuade. Nevertheless, the physical embodiment of the narrative and the father and son’s gestural conversation lead Akbar to reflect: “That was clever of the writer. Can you read another story?” The bond that Ishmael and Akbar fail to cement through books is established more fully through gestures and signs, through the body.

Similarly, when Ishmael attempts to describe astrophysics to his father, we once again turn to the intensely embodied language of gesture and the body. This embodiment of outer space is an outgrowth of their conversation about the existence of God. Attempting to prove to his father that the universe was not created by a God but emerged from the big bang, Ishmael first turns to a book (again, attempting to rely on literacy, which proves inadequate) but must revert to the intimate and direct language of sign. Ishmael recalls, “I got up and hunted around for a book on outer space, one with lots of pictures of stars.” When these pictures fail to convince Akbar that such vast empty spaces and orbital relationships exist, Ishmael uses his hands and body: “I did my best. I tried to tell him, in our simple sign language, all that I had learned. But he stared at me in perplexed silence” (169). Ishmael recounts what he tried next:

I gestured toward the stars, collected all those stars in my left hand, added the river that ran through our town, threw in the mountains for good measure, placed my father on top, squeezed them all together into a ball, and then transferred that ball of matter to my right hand. I held it up in front of his eyes and suddenly let it explode: “B-o-o-o-m! Stars, stars, more stars, then the sun, then the earth, then the moon then my father and then me . . . do you understand what I’m saying?” (169–70)

However, Ishmael’s increasingly outward view of the world—as an exile but also in this focus on “outer space” as a way to explain his atheism—takes him away from a connection with his father. He remembers that, no, “he didn’t understand. I didn’t either” (170). He reflects, “I’d wandered far away, so far away that I could no longer connect these theories with my ‘not praying’” (170). Ishmael also recalls his father as a man who “went away,” who wandered and went up into the mountains to stay for an extended period. “My father went away again for a long time,” he says (170). And then Ishmael himself goes away. I would like to suggest that this movement away is not just into exile from the nation, but a movement away from embodiment, a movement away from the body. Borrowing terms from cognitive
linguistics, and the work of Zlatev in particular, we can see the experiences of Ishmael, Akbar, and Golden Bell as some combination of interoceptive (perceptual focus on internal sensations of, for example, the organs), exteroceptive (experience of the self’s relationship to the world around it), and proprioceptive (sensory focus on the body itself, and its movements). Ishmael and Akbar attempt to communicate in proprioceptive space, but each in his own way is steeped in exteroception—moving away. It is through the intercession of Golden Bell, who moves inward and helps Akbar articulate his embodied self, that some of this dilemma of gestural communication is resolved.

CAVE ALLEGORIES

The third and final “book” of Abdolah’s novel, like the first, is titled “The Cave,” while the second one is “New Ground.” In addition to moving back from first- to third-person narration, Book 3 intertwines the narrative of Ishmael’s departure from Iran with that of Golden Bell’s imprisonment within Iran: “Golden Bell had been arrested six weeks after Ishmael’s escape” (289). Ishmael, before going to Holland, spent some years in the Soviet Union and stayed there after 1989. The contrast between Soviet and post-Soviet society, even for expatriates like Ishmael, is categorical and almost traumatic: “The entire social system had been turned upside down. [. . .] It took him months to realize where he was and what had happened” (287). Like the Kahafians who dwell in the cave for three hundred years to emerge into a society they do not understand, Ishmael lives in exile in a society that goes through a radical revolution (the end of the Soviet system), and its changes are tantamount to centuries of transformation, leaving the system upside down and the exile lost. This is like Jemiliga, one of the companions of the cave, in the allegory as Abdolah quotes it in the opening and closing pages of the novel: “Jemiliga then left the cave with the silver coin in the palm of his hand. When he reached the city, he saw that everything had changed and that he did not understand the language” (319). By contrast, Golden Bell is sent into an internal exile just as Ishmael leaves for an external one. Much of My Father’s Notebook, in fact, concerns Ishmael’s attempts to overcome his bewilderment. His exile leads him to be disconnected from Iran’s reality and the reality of the Kurdish nationalist movement within the nation. He is left to decipher languages that have lost their reference points for him.
Not only are their forms of exile (one internal, the other external) diametrically opposed, but Ishmael and Golden Bell’s relationships with Akbar are also markedly different. Both Ishmael and Golden Bell try to teach Akbar what they have learned in books about physics. In the days during which Akbar and his wife, Tina, seek to learn what has happened to Golden Bell, who fails to appear during a prison visit, Akbar “thought about the fact that Golden Bell was more patient than Ishmael. She explained things to him with endless patience” (301). More specifically, “Ishmael always talked to him about big things—the sky, the stars, the earth, the moon—but Golden Bell always talked to him about little things” (301). As Ishmael attempted to move Akbar’s thinking outside his world, Golden Bell attempted to lead him further into it:

One time she picked up a stone. “There are tiny things moving around inside,” she said.

“Inside the stone?” Akbar couldn’t believe it.

“Yes. Little tiny things that revolve around each other,” Golden Bell explained, “the way the earth revolves around the sun.”

He still couldn’t believe it. “That’s impossible,” he signed. “A stone is just a stone. If you smash it with a hammer, you wouldn’t see a thing. No earth, no sun.”

Golden Bell handed him a hammer. He smashed the stone. “You see, no sun.”

“Make it even smaller,” she said.

He did it. Smaller and smaller and smaller. He banged away at the stone until it was just a heap of sand, and it couldn’t get any smaller.

“The sun is inside the tiniest grain of sand,” Golden Bell said.

Akbar laughed out loud. (301–02)

Mirroring the contrast between Ishmael’s exile and Golden Bell’s imprisonment, their embodied uses of language situate Ishmael in the external world (the “New Ground” of the Netherlands, space, the universe) and place Golden Bell squarely within (inside the stone, inside the cave, inside Evin Prison). Like the Mahdi, and like the companions of the cave, Golden Bell’s imprisonment is a movement into an internal exile. Golden Bell takes this further as she tries to take Akbar inside himself, both physiologically and, one might argue, spiritually:
She’s smart, he thought as he neared the prison. She gets all of that from books. He remembered another of Golden Bell’s explanations. One time she laid her head on his chest and said, “Boom, boom, boom.”
“What do you mean, ‘boom, boom, boom?’” he signed.
“Here, just under your ribs, you’ve got a motor,” she replied.
“A motor?”
He laughed, but she opened a book and showed him a picture of the motor under his ribs that went boom, boom, boom. (302)

Unlike Ishmael’s extraverted or exogamous linguistic self-construction, Golden Bell’s self-construction is endogamous. An exogamous way of knowing the self reaches out for an identification of self in relation to others. Ishmael reaches out through exile, through his knowledge of astrophysics, and through his interest in Dutch culture and literature. This is parallel to what Shaun Gallagher calls exteroceptive perception of the world—an outward visceral orientation between self and other (279–80). Figuratively, this can be thought of as the Orientalist’s desire to gain command of a foreign language. By contrast, endogamous ways of knowing the self turn inward. Figuratively, again, this might be the orientation of the nationalist whose know-nothing view of the external world can become chauvinistic. However, in a more positive sense, endogamous ways of knowing are analogous to what Ghallager calls interoceptive perception (279–80). In the novel, Golden Bell pursues this interoceptive or endogamous sense of identity. She turns inward, embracing a cultural identity under attack, and she corrects Ishmael’s astrophysicist view of the universe with a cellular-level sense of the physical world.

CONCLUSION

This contrast between Golden Bell’s inner world and Ishmael’s outer space is, however, only part of the answer, and a deeper reading shows that Abdolah’s novel does not restrict itself to such tidy dichotomies. In fact, Ishmael eventually has to turn inward, and Golden Bell’s political activism constitutes a radically outward approach to the world. Furthermore, unlike the Orientalist’s relationship to cuneiform script, Ishmael’s command of the ancient writing technology brings him closer to the domestic language of his father rather than the foreign language of empire. Thus, each character’s sense of self is, and must be, closer to an embodied sense of self balanced between endogamy and exogamy, between interoceptive and exteroceptive forms of perception. This embodied identity is not just a middle
ground, but something akin to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the “minimal bodily equilibrium” of perception (122). It is an enactment of the self at the site of the body. An invented familial sign language is a key way in which the self is enacted at the level of the body. Akbar’s language of gesture is the novel’s central image of this kind of embodiment of the self. The significance of all other languages in the novel, whether spoken or written, European or Asian, and all other senses of the self derive their form from, and must be understood in relation to, Akbar’s embodied language of gesture.

NOTES

1 This is the title of the second chapter of Cohn’s Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge, in which he claims a functional importance for the Persian language as a pragmatic means of legal control. See esp. pp. 16–19.

2 This remains untranslated in the novel. From M. H. Shakir’s translation of the Quran, we have this: “The Beneficent God taught the Quran. He created man, taught him the mode of expression. The sun and the moon follow a reckoning” (359).

3 Iranians had access to schools for the Deaf beginning in the 1920s, but in the remote, fictionalized Senejan of this novel, such access is limited. A man of Akbar’s generation would probably not have attended one of the schools opened by Jabbar Baghchehban, the trailblazing Iranian teacher who established the first schools for Deaf children in 1928. See Jabbar Baghchehban’s autobiography, Roshangar-e Tariki (The Illuminator of Darkness).

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