

Mother-Tongue and Father-Word in Jamalzadeh's *Farsi Shekar Ast*

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From the Shu'ûbiyeh movement of the seventh century (first century A.H.) through the calls for language reform and purification in the twentieth century, the sense of belonging to an Iranian 'imagined community' has been articulated in large part through reference to a shared linguistic bond. The construction of political and affective sodalities rooted in a common language was central to late Qajar and early Pahlavi-era attempts to consolidate a burgeoning national identity. But beyond this instrumentalization of the Persian language by public intellectuals and statesmen during the early period of nation-building, many writers and poets have also engaged—either directly or indirectly—with the question of how this language anchors identity within both the domestic sphere and the political realm.

Among the earliest and most paradigmatic examples of such literary representations of language problematics in Iran is Seyyed Mohammad Jamalzadeh's short story invoked in the title of this panel, "Persian is Sweet." In this paper, I argue that Jamalzadeh's deceptively simple narrative not only stages the tension between competing idioms of European modernity and Islamic tradition, but more generally juxtaposes the clamorous, Babel-like confusion of tongues among a diverse Iranian populace to the ominous silence of a hegemonic state's arbitrary rule. Ramazan, the bewildered, comic anti-hero of the story, voices a naïve, but nonetheless powerful desire to escape his dark "prison" of divisive heteroglossia, and return to the comforting familiarity of a 'true' Persian language that, he hopes, will make sense of the absurd semiotics of the Law. As such, Jamalzadeh's story foregrounds a highly emotionally-charged attachment to a transparent 'maternal' language against the backdrop of an inscrutable 'paternal' Logos.

Reconsidering Jamalzadeh's groundbreaking narrative through the prism of Benedict Anderson's writings on nationalism, Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of heteroglossia and dialogism, and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theorizations of the role of language in subject formation, I propose a new analytic framework for reading the internally-stratified and unstable languages of the incipient Iranian national home as staged in this text.

Writing Reform from the Margins: Minor(ity) Voices & the Question of Civil Society

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During the Khatami period, “civil society” (*jām'eh-ye madani*) became a catch phrase in Iranian political discourse, though the exact meaning of the term was unclear. Appropriated by myriad groups in their bids to influence the future of reform, civil society was a concept particularly appealing to feminists, who saw it as a way to redefine women's status in post-revolutionary Iran. Feminists often entered the debate through the “women's press,” where their writings questioned or sought to redefine the meaning of words key to legal and political discourse.

In this paper, I read Iranian feminists' gendering of the civil society debate in the women's press against two coeval popular novels' use of marriage as a metaphor for women's marginalized social status in contemporary Iran. Fatāneh Hāj Sāyyed Javādi's *The Morning After* (*Bāmdād-e Khomār*, 1374/1995) and Zoyā Pīrzād's *I Will Turn Off the Lights* (*Cherāgh'hā rā Man Khāmūsh Mikonam*, 1380/2002) both achieved record sales, but elicited very different critical responses: while leftist critics excoriated *The Morning After*—one went so far as to call it a novel that “contradicted the principles of civil society”—they responded positively to *I Will Turn Off the Lights*. Is *I Will Turn Off the Lights*, then, a novel that promotes civil society where *The Morning After* stymies it? More specifically, does its vision of companionate marriage and friendships between women promote the values of civil society as they have been conceived by women's rights activists in contemporary Iran? Pīrzād's status as a member of one of Iran's “recognized religious minorities” and her explicit “pre-translation” of Armenian themes and language into a Persian literary idiom raise important questions about language use and the enduring significance of Persian to Iran's literary traditions. Does Pīrzād's work challenge dominant ethno-religious and linguistic identities, or reinforce them? What are the implications of her writing for the feminist imagination of civil society, which has not explicitly discussed religious or ethnic identity?

The paper will examine the utility of Deleuze and Guattari's problematic theory of “minor literatures” for considering some of these questions, and will frame its discussion of the novels within a broader discursive analysis of the civil society debate as it took place within the pages of the now-defunct journal *Zanān*.

Translating Taghi Modarressi's Writing with an Accent

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In the 1980s and after a long hiatus, Taghi Modarressi resumed his career as a novelist. Although by then he had settled in the U.S. for quite some time, he felt that the only language in which he could write fiction was Persian. When he subsequently decided to translate his own novels from Persian into English, he drew on a concept he called writing with an accent. He believed that the English translation of his novels had to leave traces of what he considered the untranslatable and his own psychic ambivalences toward linguistic and cultural deracination. He had envisioned a similar process for translating his last novel, *The Virgin of Solitude*, which he completed before his death in 1997. I inherited the task of completing the translation he had begun shortly before his death. As his translator, I became deeply immersed in his writing and his unique approach to translation.

In this presentation I will focus on what became my dual task of translating *The Virgin of Solitude* into English and also editing the Persian original for publication. I will analyze the constant interplay of alienation and belonging underpinning Modarressi's fiction and his use of language, both Persian and English.

**The Fleshless Word:
Defamiliarizing Language and Literature in the Iranian Diaspora**

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Kader Abdolah's *My Father's Notebook: A Novel of Iran*, translated from the original Dutch into English by Susan Massotty, draws on Persian language and poetry as it describes how a deaf mute acquires literacy. This distanced relationship to the written and spoken word can be read as a metaphor for the socio-linguistic situation of Iranians living abroad who know the culture, literature, and language of Iran, but outside its visceral—oral and aural—reality. Like Aga Akbar, the deaf-mute in Abdolah's narrative, we experience the word without flesh.

However, it is his distance from the written and spoken word that allows Aga Akbar to re-imagine language and transform his world. Metaphorically, perhaps the same distanced connection to language allows the diasporic Iranian subject to re-imagine Persian and its place within hegemonies of gender, class, ethnicity, and culture within a national context so deeply informed by Persian and its literary practices. Like Akbar's distance from the spoken word, the defamiliarization of the mother tongue in diasporic contexts can enable a deconstructive performance of national identities.

By analyzing the deployment of Persian language and literature in English, this paper examines how the diasporic subject narrates his or her loss of language, and his or her re-vision and re-voicing of that language. Drawing on critical and theoretical concepts of translation and bilingualism, autobiographical meditations on the loss and reacquisition of Persian in Iranian-American memoirs, as well as fictional meditations on language—like Abdolah's—this paper argues that diasporic references to the mother tongue in another language (English) point to an absence which can be read *both* as a locus of loss and as a space of possibility.