

# Identity Politics of Migrant Literature —Focusing on a Persian-Dutch Writer, Kader Abdolah

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## 1. Migrant Literature

Migrant literature has been claiming an increasingly important position in multi-cultural studies. Migrant Literature provides a space in which uprooted people explore their cultural identities and diasporic dependence. Migrant literature therefore is often closely linked with ‘the experience of diaspora’ and ‘the narrative of exile’. The exile-narrative, according to Woodhull (1993, 100), inscribes a nomadic subject that exists on a cultural boundary and negotiates necessarily hybrid and unstable identities, as it is positioned “between conflicting traditions - linguistic, social, ideological.”

One of the most representative migrant writers in the Netherlands is Kader Abdolah, a Persian(Iranian)-Dutch writer. This study focuses on the identity politics of Abdolah in his autobiographical novel and on the manner in which the migrant writer demonstrates his liminal self-positioning and auto-ethnographical performance.

## 2. Biographical background

Kader Abdollah (alias of Hossein Sadjadi Ghaemmaghani Farahani) was born in 1954 in Arak, in southwestern Iran. His deaf-mute father was a carpet knoter in the religious city of Arak, and Abdolah grew up in a strict Islamite family. He studied physics at the Tehran University from 1972 to 1977. During those years he became actively involved with the Fadaian, a Marxist underground student movement that opposed the authoritarian policies of the Shah and, after his deposition in 1979, the fundamentalist regime under Ayatollah Khomeini. After graduating, he continued his political activities and inter alia wrote two journalistic books which were subsequently banned. These activities resulted in his having to flee from Iran in 1985. In 1988, Abdolah arrived in the Netherlands as a political refugee. He then received political asylum and, after being reunited with his family in the Netherlands, was able to become involved with a new life in exile.

In the Netherlands, he learned the language and established himself as a writer. He made his

debut in 1993 with the *De adelaars* (The Eagles) a collection of short stories, which was immediately awarded *Het Gouden Ezelsoor*, the significant newcomer prize for the best-selling debut work. *De meisjes en de partizanen* (The girls and the partisans) (1995) was on the list of both the AKO and the Libris Literature Prize and was awarded the Charlotte Köhler scholarship, an incentive grant for the most promising writer of the moment. Kader Abdolah has been a columnist for the newspaper *De Volkskrant* since 1996. In these columns he examines topical and personal issues from the perspective of the political refugee. In 1998 he received the Mundial Award for his cultural achievements in the field of international cooperation, peace and security. For his novel *Spijkerschrift* (My Farther's Notebook) (2000), Abdolah was awarded the E. du Perron Prize, which was established in recognition of persons or institutions "that have become eligible through making an active cultural contribution towards the promotion of mutual understanding and good relations between the various population groups living in the Netherlands" (Press articles January 2003).

Abdolah's position as a columnist of one of the most important newspapers and his literary activities made him a public personage. In 2007 he was guest writer at the Leiden University, which is an important sign in the context of canonization. He presented a seminar on Persian traditions, namely the literary aspects of the Koran in a Dutch literary and academic context. Against this background, Van Voorst (2007, 20) argues that Abdolah has been fully assimilated into the Dutch literary system: "institutional aspects surrounding the work of Abdolah (presentation, imaging, reception, awards and literary sidelines) [...] determine the positioning of Abdolah at a particular moment in the Dutch literary system." In a discussion on multicultural Netherlands, Abdolah in one of his columns exclaimed: "The Netherlands now is also ours!" to which De Boer (2000) commented: "Sure, Abdolah, and the opposite is also true; anyone who reads Dutch, may feel fortunate that Abdolah, or his work at least, is also of the Netherlands."

Abdolah's work thus receives a mostly positive reception, amongst others in the context of a multicultural society. Abdolah's background is amply discussed, as well as the themes of his work, namely exile or life 'between two cultures'. Many of his books have since been widely reprinted and translated into all major European languages. Abdolah has thereby occupied a position as a representative of Dutch literature.

### **3. The liminal position of migrant**

In Abdolah's case, much of his work represents the experience of exile with a sense of displacement and loss as a central topic. That emotional basis is also evident from his words (in Dala 1999): "When I see myself in the mirror, I see a student who is no more. The old Kader is gone, the dreams have flown. [...] After my flight I was an outsider in both Iran and the Nether-

lands. These are the laws of exile: nothing is certain, everything is unclear you are nowhere at home.”

At the end of *Portretten en een oude droom* (Portraits and an old dream), the situation of the exile and the feeling of homelessness are compared with the myth of the ostrich. The ostriches first used to be camels in the desert, but they, through their desire to fly, to leave home and hearth, ended up in South Africa. Once they had landed, they could not fly again; and the people used their skin to make clothes, shoes and bags. And they had to keep on laying eggs forever, says Dawoed (Abdolah 2003, 180). Emigration also is a unifying experience between Dawoed and the Dutch poet who has been living in South Africa for fourteen years. The poet confesses her sense of alienation: “I feel that I may not write poetry in Afrikaans. If I present a reading of one of my poems anywhere, everybody looks ascance. Then it seems as if I have stolen something. They never invite me to their lectures. My poems simply do not count. I feel so alone in this country” (Abdolah 2003, 24-5).

The shared and common experience of a migrant is expressed, among other things, by the narrator during his visit to “The House of The Netherlands” in Cape Town, of which he says, “I had more to talk about (*with the Dutch in Cape Town*) than with the Dutch in the Netherlands. We understood one another .... We immediately began to talk about immigration, language, culture and the Netherlands” (Abdolah 2003, 63-64, own addition). The establishment of common codes in relation to the loss of their homeland, culture and language is in a sense a necessary means for establishing the shared cultural identity of exiles. Dawoed, in *Portraits*, wants to discover similarities with other exiles and immigrants. The meeting with a Ugandan fugitive reminds Dawoed of his own experience as a refugee and he sympathizes and identifies the common situation of exile:

“I felt at home. I had also lived in that manner for a while when I was in flight. I knew his potatoes, the single onion, the letters and the broken mirror. He received me like a family member, an older brother ... I knew his stuff. The old newspaper, the blunt knife and aroma of the tea. Everything was familiar to me. Only his black hands told me that I was in Africa. It was so familiar that I wanted to remain there, to listen to him as he spoke on the topics I knew so well” (Abdolah 2003, 79).

He has compassion with the (Flemish) guide who meets the narrator in Durban, and feels kinship with respect to the language problem of the immigrant: “His ancestors came to South Africa in the seventeenth century. He spoke Dutch well, but he had the same problems I have with the Dutch language: hesitation and always correcting your sentences” (Abdolah, 2003, 73).

In this way the writer found himself to be in South Africa in a space in which ‘his identity in exile’ was able to identify common codes that could be transcended in a shared experience. Enlightening in this respect is what Abdolah said in an interview (Van Soest, 1998), namely that he had to write about the fate of the exile for all Kader Abdolahs in the Netherlands.

#### 4. Migrant literature as auto-ethnography

The inextricable link between the writer and his roots is stressed and the reaffirmation of his cultural identity is explicitly presented in *Spijkerschrift* (My Father’s Notebook): “Suddenly I found myself unable to function properly on my own. I needed my father’s burden, or I would lose my equilibrium” (Abdolah 2000, 212) and “I did not consider myself as someone other than my father. How can I explain it, I was him and he was me, we were one person” (Abdolah 2000, 136).

The structure of *Spijkerschrift* represents the hybrid characteristic of his oeuvre. *Spijkerschrift* moreover begins and ends with the same story from the Koran (2000:9, 373). Abdolah thus positions himself in an old Persian literary tradition. The narrative structure allows different stories to flow dialogically into one another: he creates a dialogue between the Persian and the Dutch in which Prince Willem-Alexander and the Queen are compared with the father, Ishmael, and Tine (Abdolah 2000, 208-210). In his work, the expression of his cultural identity not only means that the writer places his own culture in the country of destination, in a Dutch context, but also that continuity with the culture of the country of origin is created automatically.

That Abdolah takes on the role of cultural mediator is evident, not only from his translation of *Kélilé en Demné* (2002), a classical Persian work from the early Middle Ages, or *Het huis van de moskee* (2005), the poignant family saga that suggestively portrays the Iranian tragedy (Etty 2005), but also in his book, *de Boodschapper* (2008) and *de Koran* (2008). Here he presents a modern Dutch version of the Koran, and he paints a portrait of the Prophet Muhammad. Peelen (2008) sees the work of Abdolah with its heady language and unmistakable Oriental atmosphere as “a direct enrichment of Dutch literature”.

Abdolah, however, has identified more with Persian culture since his debut collection in 1993. He manages to (re)construct cultural stories and to reposition them within the Dutch community. In this regard, Brouwers (2007, 11) notes: “Without his work, the image of Iran would have been colored in minimally in Dutch literature, and only from the outside.” As a cultural mediator Abdolah is positioned in his work, both as a confidant and as an outsider of both cultures, as auto-ethnographic *agency*.

### 5. Identity politics between past and present

Said (2000, 173) once said that exile is a discontinuous form of existence or “a condition or terminal sorrow”. According to Said, an exile can never let go of his past and nostalgia is settled permanently within him, in other words, “[t]he achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever” (Said 2000, 173). His own lost past plays a most important role in Abdolah’s tales. The memories of migrants are often linked to the identity issue because memories are an important source of identity.

In negotiating with the past and formulating a new image of its origin, the author has to begin with a visit to his past. If a physical visit is not possible, it becomes a metaphorical visit, namely to memories of the past, which then form the basis for negotiations to establish a minimal continuity of the self (between past and present), and in order to form a new identity. This idea emerges clearly in Kader Abdolah’s work: “I do not want to linger in my past. But you can hardly live in a new society if you can not even put your past in order. Therefore, I immerse myself in the jottings of my father, for what he has written, is also my history. So if I can arrange his script a bit in the Dutch language, I can more easily enter further into this new society” (2000, 110). His history therefore is important for his survival in his new society. The experiences of the past must be integrated into those of the present; the former self must be adapted to the current self.

According to the Surinamese-Dutch writer Anil Ramdas (1992, 29), sharing the personal memory is a social and, in a wider sense, a political action. The past is first and foremost a personal memory, but it is “the task, the responsibility, the sacred duty of these writers” to make it public (Ramdas 1992, 29) and the personal thereby gains a political tinge. In the autobiographical tale of the migrant writer, it is clearly seen how the writer can give sociopolitical form to the personal memory and a fragmented or splintered identity. According to Ramdas (1992, 29), it is their duty to constantly go on a journey to the lost homeland and to tell the reader what they have found there, or have lost.

The political dimension of Abdolah’s oeuvre is also a manifestation of his position in view of his new community, the Dutch readers. *Spijkerschrift* is a book resembling a Persian carpet interwoven with oriental tales and Dutch landscapes, with the image of an ancient village in the Saffraanberg and a newly built city in the Flevopolder. The writer keeps trying to find a connection between past and present, between Persia and the Netherlands. But it is also the Dutch language that links present and past. He moreover seems to reveal a special relationship to the Dutch canonical literature, *Max Havelaar* (Abdolah 2000, 123). Regarding the intermingling

of the Dutch literature in his autobiographical texts, Warren (2000) notes: “He really wants to be a Dutch writer, someone who is part of our literature”. Kader Abdolah confirms “that the literature no longer is the private domain of the born and bred Dutch” (Bresser 2000).

In 2000 Abdolah, for *Spijkerschrift*, received a royal distinction for his unique contribution to the Dutch language. As Van Dijk (2003) asserts, Abdolah’s work achieved status within Dutch literature as an example of how language is able to bring worlds together and how literature can work innovatively on language. Abdolah has used the language of the Netherlands in his call for a tolerant multicultural society: particularly as a columnist he has often attacked Dutch policy vigorously and has unmasked the famous Dutch tolerance mercilessly while stressing that “there are thousands and thousands in this country who live between two cultures” (Abdolah 2001, 13).

## 6. Conclusion

Abdolah’s authorship has been given a new dimension through his experience of exile, as he has said in an interview (Riemersma 1997): “In Iran I was a Persian writer, now I am a writer for exiles. I am actually doing it because of millions of people who are on the run. I interpret longing, anxiety, homesickness of such people.” His positioning of himself and his identity politics therefore follow two directions: In the first instance he actively came to know a new culture and language to confirm his position in the new country. On the other hand, he, as an exile, has brought his own past to the present, to his new homeland. In this way he has provided his Persian culture with a place in the Dutch language.

In this liminal space a dialogical polyphony of culture and identity can take place, as well as the crossing of the barrier between the self and other, between past and present, and between the Dutch and the Persian. The final effect of the liminal positioning and hybrid identity is that it can lead to positive dialectic mediation between literary and socio-cultural terms. Abdolah’s citation of Persian words in *Spijkerschrift* (Abdolah 2000, 331) refers to this dialectical operation of liminality:

*“ Loss is an experience to a new path.*

*A new opportunity to think in a different way.*

*Losing is not the end of everything, but the end of a particular way of thinking. Who falls somewhere rises somewhere else again. That is the law of life.”*

The “law” of liminality is maybe creating a space for an alternative arrangement in which both own identity as well as the social structure are constantly challenged and negotiated. By means of his auto-ethnographic attitude and liminal self-positioning that are addressed in different

ways in the texts, Abdolah finally manages to create a heterotopic space (a space of otherness and of alternative arrangement) within both the Dutch community and in the Dutch literary field. Abdolah's liminal identity, his Persian origin and his current Dutch identity, are renegotiated in that space and reimaged. This is a *conditio sine qua non* for Abdolah, and for many other migrant writers.

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