

**The Body Remembers:
A Migratory Tale of Social Suffering and Witnessing**

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Abstract

Much has been written on the traumatic effects of suffering and structural violence, as well as the adverse impact of social policies on marginalized communities. Anthropological contribution to this literature concerns the act of witnessing as opposed to mere observation. Witnessing, I argue in this paper, makes it necessary for us to listen to the language of silence as expressed through the performative act: "the body remembers." I explore three avenues to illustrate how silence, the marker of human agency, may be recognized as language: (a) retrieval of voice of the sufferer, a first step towards healing; (b) testimonial speaking where one voice represents a polyphony of other voices; and (c) deployment of body as a mode of communication. To elucidate, these points I draw upon the migratory tale of an aging Iranian woman.

Key words: the body, suffering, witnessing, migration, Iranian women

(134 words)

Between Speech and Silence:

I was somebody once. I had a huge house in Iran. Here, in Canada, I am living in a tiny apartment that does not even have space to put my shoes.

I am not the type to depend on the children.

The desire that I have is to one day revisit my great homeland in Iran, and encounter a new and improved Iran, where people can live with their differences in peace and harmony.

What I have presented above are extracts of a narrative that Zahra, a 70 year old woman, dictated to her daughter Rima over a course of three months in 1999. I "met" Zahra/her daughter¹ at a well-being session that the ESL Iranian coordinator had organized in response to my suggestion for a forum on storytelling. The coordinator used the forum to test the feasibility of a pilot project on well-being. Her intent was to convince a funding agency on the therapeutic value of storytelling, otherwise dismissed as a leisurely pursuit.²

Creative/politicized use of field situations by research participants has been noted in other cases (Frank 2000; Ong 1995a). Zahra had her own take on the situation. She chose her daughter (grandson on another occasion)³ as a person who would cross the border with her story. This border must be considered as fluid so as to facilitate the telling and retelling of her story to multiple audiences: her family members who had only heard Zahra's story in bits and pieces; participants of the storytelling session where Zahra's story resonated with that of another woman - "I have nothing to live for. When I get up in the morning I am sad and depressed. When I go to bed, I am in the same state."⁴ - the researcher/reader; the two service providers who attended the session; and the teacher who heard Zahra's story through her grandson's school project. In

choosing to tell her story of pain and suffering to her daughter, Zahra wished to record her life for prosperity. The desire to undertake such an activity is specially strong among people whose lives have been rendered socially invisible (Myerhoff 1978).⁵

In taking the leap towards producing her own text, Zahra reverses the power dynamics in the field, much like Gelya Frank's (2000) research participant who introduced Frank as "my biographer" and not as "my researcher." It is important to recognize the initiative that the research participants take to express their agency and create themselves as subjects. The researchers' assumption that they have the sole "power" to create space for the the participants to speak reintroduces power dynamics through the back door. Zahra carries the issue of voice a step further and poses a challenge to the reader: Do we merely record stories of pain and suffering or should we engage in the act of witnessing? If the latter, how do we go about doing this?

A response to the above questions calls for a departure from conventional modes that focus on words as the only source of reading/interpreting a story. In this article, I argue that sufferers use silence as the language of communication, and validating this mode of expression is a first step towards taking the leap from being a detached to a vulnerable and witnessing observer. I elucidate this point through examples from the literature and through a close reading of Zahra's text. My presentation of the text is in keeping with Zahra's own framing of her story: childhood years, adulthood, and old age. In a concluding note, I comment on the dynamic relationship between silence and speech.

The Act of Witnessing

In *Vulnerable Observer*, anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996) brings to light an example of witnessing. Behar portrays a fictive scenario of a photographer, Rolf Carle, who records and casts his gaze on a thirteen-year-old girl trapped in the 1985 avalanche in Columbia. As the girl's heart and lungs collapse, Rolf Carle crouches down in the mud and throws his arms around the girl.

Behar uses this scenario to pose a number of questions: How can we connect with our

ethnographic participants without Othering them? Is it possible for an ethnographer do both: engage in the act of self-exposure and be a spectator? Do we act to release another from suffering or do we observe? The issues raised here continue to engage the attention of anthropologists as our discipline, according to Behar, does not allow us to represent what we see and hear in the field. What Behar does not take into account is that the ethnographic participants may also engage anthropologists on these very issues. By authoring her own text and using the silence/speech medium of communication, Zahra also responds to the questions posed by Behar. Let us first look at some examples from the literature.

My first example comes from Fiona Ross's work on "The hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission." Taking a gendered perspective, this author argues that we must learn to read silence in women's testimonies. Like Visweswaran (1994), she recognizes that women's subordinate social position do not allow them to tell in words their stories of pain and suffering. Ross, however, cautions us not to impute silence as a marker of passivity. She argues that silence is women's signature of agency as it is through this medium of communication that women convey layers of experiences that are dismissed in official narratives. Her analysis of women's testimonial data indicate that women speak in a rich language, using socially valorized metaphors like that of family and domesticity. The listener's task therefore, she concludes, is to acknowledge that silence marks particular kinds of knowing and that "women's silences can be recognized as language, and we need carefully to probe the cadences of silences, the gaps between fragile words, in order to hear what women say" (2001, 273).

On a second front, Maya Todeschini's research on the bombed Japanese women (Hiroshima and Nagasaki 1945) reveal that subordinate groups await appropriate time and context before speaking; otherwise they risk the possibility of not being heard. In the case of Japanese women, this author shows that they could only speak and subvert the official narrative on bombing when they assumed the culturally recognized status of motherhood. In their stories, the bombed women (*hibakusha* women) avoided using the official discourse that subdued their

experiences. Using the metaphor of the body as a weapon, the women conveyed the message that they were the embodiment of radiation - a position that subverted the official narratives that delegitimized their anxieties on their disrupted role as producers of human species. Women's discourse on the embodiment of the bomb allowed them to invoke a gendered vulnerability through which they could transform "their tainted bodies, the fear of producing abnormal offspring, into a weapon to reclaim the bomb as a moral and ethical issue that concerns the community as a whole" (2001,137).

So far we have established that the act of witnessing/listening to silence involves two impulses: (a) assume the position of a vulnerable observer, thereby blurring the conventional boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity to the extent possible, and (b) listen to the silences between words in order to establish a context for a richer and a fuller story to validate experiences of pain and suffering that otherwise remain unrecognized. Once we acknowledge that women's silence can be recognized as language, we can engage into more layered reading of the text in question. The genre of silence lends itself to three performative acts: retrieval of voice, a first step towards healing; testimonial speaking where one voice represents a polyphony of other voices; and deployment of metaphors and words through which one can establish one's moral authority. We may note here that the language of silence creates a collective identity and a bond among subordinate groups. Women can then witness each other's stories of pain and suffering.

The above examples show that subordinate groups use multiple mediums to convey their experiences of pain and suffering. Among these mediums, silence is an important marker of agency. Silence does not rule out speech. Once we acknowledge that women's silence can be recognized as language we can learn to read "the cadences of silences, the gaps between fragile words, in order to hear what it is that women say" - to reiterate Ross's important observation.

We have also noted that silence is not confined to a lone voice but gives rise to a collective identity: "black women of the apartheid era" and "the bombed women of Hiroshima and Nagashaki." A collective front makes it possible for women to speak authoritatively about

their condition as a whole with all its contradictions and nuances. Zahra's sharing of her story, as noted earlier, was not an isolated occurrence. She was motivated to speak at a time when other Iranian women were telling their stories to each other in the presence of service providers and the researcher.

A common theme of displacement and mental well-being (read pain and suffering/the soft knife of politics) informed women's stories, despite variations in relation to particular trajectories of life. It must be noted that women's most intense experiences of pain were ironically felt in Canada, a place where they had sought refuge. As one woman expressed it: "It was easier to live in turmoil back at home because we did not expect anything different. But here in Canada, we were not prepared for this kind of suffering and hardship."

The experiences of suffering concern isolation and lack of opportunity for work and social engagement. This situation, as noted earlier, was brought about by structural exclusion of Iranian women from the nation-state of Canada, along with their social construction as the Other. Structural exclusion/Othering has been an integral part of Zahra's life lived first in Iran, then as a refugee in El Salvador and Japan, and finally as a landed immigrant in Canada. Zahra's sharing of her story then is directed towards evoking a response from the reader/listener. In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank informs us:

The ill, and all those who suffer, can also be healers. Their injuries become the source of the potency of their stories. Through their stories, the ill create empathic bonds between themselves and their listeners. These bonds expand as the stories are retold. Those who listen tell others, and the circle of shared experience widens. Because stories can heal, the wounded healer and wounded storyteller are not separate but are different aspects of the same figure (1995, xii).

Reading Zahra's Story

Early Years of Life: Childhood and Marriage

"I was born into a family who lived in the center of Iran in a dry hot desert city called Yazd. Not only were the temperature uncomfortable and at times unbearable, so were the people." By putting people and harsh desert climate on the same plane, Zahra conveys with intensity the persecution of the Baha'i community, and the sense of mission that governed her early life. As a second daughter in the family, Zahra was compelled to deal with social oppression with the help of her father whom she considered to be "very capable, strong man. He had undying faith that carried him through hard times." Her mother was caring but naïve and also sick. As Zahra expresses it. "From the time I can remember, my mother was always ill." It then fell upon Zahra to perform household tasks from a young age.

At the age of five, I would do the shopping for the entire household while also caring out the duties of vacuuming and cleaning the home on a regular basis. A few years after this time, at the age of ten, I was looking after and caring for my six younger siblings.

It is interesting to note that Zahra makes no mention of the role that her elder sister and other older siblings would have played in running the house. This silence may be explained in relation to two factors. First, Zahra's story is a testimonial that as a matter of fact captures a poignant lack: namely, loss of childhood brought about by a political situation whose everyday impact took the form of, "I would remember my father coming home after receiving beatings in the street." Second, first person talk/silence allows Zahra to speak with authority along the lines: "I have been there and so you have to believe my story."

As Frank has expressed it: "In stories, the teller not only recovers her voice; she becomes a witness to the conditions that rob others of their voices. When any person recovers her voice,

many people begin to speak through that story" (1995, xii). Zahra beckons us to listen through the cadences of silence in her story. This message is brought home through vivid account exemplified in two other events: martyrdom and marriage.

Martyrdom

Zahra's account of martyrdom begins from the time when her father was two years old. "He was forced to endure a great hardship. My grandfather, who was his father, was martyred simply for his belief in a religion, the Baha'i faith." On her mother's side, there were 17 religious martyrs. It is difficult for us to imagine what it is like to lose 18 members in one family. Zahra takes the reader into the heart of everyday life where the impact of tragedy is keenly felt. She recalls how her mother would sit by the door around 4 p.m. listening for her husband's footsteps. If her mother heard the sound of wobbling, she would run out with her first aid kit to administer the beatings he received on his way home. Zahra recalled how her family was forced to forego sleep so that they could draw water from the well at night – a source that they were forbidden to use. But Zahra also related acts of kindness, for example, when Muslims would sell them bread under the table and would look another way when the Baha'is would touch the fruit on the stalls. During times when no Baha'i was to be hired by a Muslim, some prospective employers changed the names on the forms to prevent detection by the state. Yet, Baha'is, according to Zahra, would never write their names differently "so firm were they in their beliefs." Referring to her father's life, Zahra notes:

Due to the untimely death of my grandfather, my father was forced to accept the responsibility of caring for his two sisters and his mom for most of his life. Although the situation was brought upon him shoulders, he graciously accepted it, and his strong character enabled him to do a fine job.

Soon after another tragedy hit the family. Her aunt's husband died in a car accident. This time her

father took charge of eight of his children.

Now my father would look after not only his two sisters and his mother along his own wife and children, but he would also become the father to his eight nephews and nieces. My responsibility became much greater as well, as I would also have to watch over my cousins.

People who go through difficult times feel the need to tell their stories to recover their voice that pain and suffering take away. But the voice that speaks also (re)members how disrupted events are reconstituted so that life could go on even under most difficult circumstances. As the sufferer recovers her voice, other people can speak through the story that is being related. Through recovering her voice (the act of storytelling), Zahra becomes a witness to the collective experiences of her family. In a situation of pain and suffering, many people can speak through the story of one person. This explains why Zahra once again does not bring to the fore the role of her siblings in the enormous amount of care and work that now formed part of her familial life.

Marriage:

At a mere 15 years of age, I married a twenty-five-year old man. It was not arranged, as were the majority of the weddings at the time. Rather it was two people who genuinely fell in love.

Zahra considers her marriage as compensation for her difficult childhood experiences. Her happiness was enhanced by the fact that her husband's family was well-to-do and that her mother-in-law loved her like a daughter. But this state of affairs did not last for long as once again her life was encompassed by struggles for survival.

Her family was hit by a cycle of bankruptcies.

My husband's family business went bankrupt. He had ran the business with his father and his brother, and at this point, his father would stay at home while his brother made every attempt to revive the business and bring it out of bankruptcy.

To assist the family, Zahra's husband (Riaz) took on the job of a teacher, a position that compelled him to be on the move "just because he was a Baha'i." This and many other state-initiated strategies were put into place to make life difficult for members of the Baha'i community.

Zahra stated that the family bankruptcies were livable owing to the birth of children. "At the same time [bankruptcy] my first daughter was born. The joy of this birth would come to balance the sorrow of the bankruptcy." Her husband joined the family business once it was revived but not for long.

After a while, my first son was born, and along with his birth came the second bankruptcy of the business. This time around, the bankruptcy hit hard, and shocked and saddened everyone involved. My husband went back to teaching. This time around, he was destined to be the "travelling" teacher and was constantly sent from one village to another.

By the time Zahra was twenty two years old, she had four children (two boys and two girls) and had moved nine times with her husband. Then came a cathartic event that made Zahra speak through her wounds: her four-year-old son accidentally swallowed a coin. "The coin remained in his body and when the doctors tried to remove it in the small town we were living in, they were unsuccessful. Not only did they fail but they actually did more damage to his body [liver]." Zahra and her husband took their son to Tehran for treatment, a move that compelled Riaz to leave his work. Zahra's family in Yazd took care of the other children.

The treatment took six months, during which time the family stayed with acquaintances. "Since we would not dare be a burden to any of these families, we would constantly be on the move with a very sick child to make our stay pleasant with each household." But her son's condition got worse. The coin was removed with ease but the wounds on the liver could not be healed. At the house where Zahra was staying, the woman had become pregnant after three miscarriages. Her husband and family members ensured that she was not exposed to bad news of any kind.

On my son's last surgery, it became evident that he only had a short time to live as the doctors could not do anything more to help. On the night that he passed away, my husband and I alerted on one so as to not upset the fragile lady of the home. I buried my face into a pillow and cried all through the night so she would not hear my sorrow. In the morning, I carried the dead body of my son covered in a blanket and without informing them of the tragedy, thanked them and walked away as if nothing was wrong and my child was merely sleeping.

When Zahra returned to Yazd she had to console her two older children "who had grown to dearly love their younger brother," and she had to bond with her one-year-old daughter. She did not mourn in front of the children "so as not to upset them any further ... I held back my tears for months. It is only natural for a mother to have to mourn her child and in order to do that visible signs of emotion are necessary. For me to have to deny this was incredibly difficult."

All this stress came symbolically to a halt one day a few months after the passing of my son. I had decided to go to the storage area to do some cleaning and while I was doing this, I came across some of my son's clothing from the time he was a baby.

Nothing would stop me at this point as the tears began to flow continuously. There were my first tears in many months and with the children not around, I didn't hold myself back. Right after this I got very sick with rheumatism and after four months this disease affected me greatly to the point that I could barely walk.

Zahra does not openly mourn the death of her son so that another woman can have peace; Zahra does not openly mourn the death of her son so that her children are spared the grief. Zahra is the sacrificial mother who swallows pain so that other people's lives are not disrupted. But the script does not end here. In embodying (swallowing) pain that should otherwise have been shared, Zahra effects a spatial shift from the individual to the social. This is because when the body speaks it encompasses other bodies, especially ones that are vulnerable. As Frank has expressed it, the body is not mute, it is inarticulate; "it does not use speech, yet begets it ... " (1995, 2). When the body is not medicalized (read individualized), it reveals societal fault lines. The fault line in question is continual marginalization of the Baha'i community from the nation-state of Iran.

Zahra's inability to mourn for her son is correlated to this structural factor. Her collapsed body ("I could barely walk") is a commentary on the treatment that society has accorded to her, her family, and her community. Zahra's body language (the language of silence) announces the life long hardships (socially incurred) that she and her family had endured as a member of the Baha'i community. A summary statement on the Baha'is would be helpful.

The Community

Baha'i religion was founded in Iran in the mid-nineteen century under the leadership of Bab. Bab claimed that he was both the prophet of a new revelation and the twelfth Imam whose return was expected by the Shi'as, the religion of the majority in Iran. The Iranian clerical establishment thus perceived the Baha'i faith as a threat to their status and power. It is not surprising to note that during times of political instability, the persecution of the Baha'is reached

its height and even amounted to execution of its leaders. The Baha'is do not enjoy civil rights accorded to the citizens of Iran. Compared with other religious minorities such as the Jews, the Christians and the Zoroastrians, the Baha'is fare worse (Baha'i International Community, 1981, Taherzadeh 1992). Depending on the political agendas of the people in power, the Baha'is have been denied employment and opportunities for higher education. Their property has been confiscated and the community as a whole has been subject to continual physical and verbal harassment. Yet, the Baha'is have persevered despite tremendous odds including mass execution of their leaders. Social oppression and centuries of persecution have resulted in one development that the Bahai'is take pride in: they are a well-educated community spread around the world (Hatcher & Martin, 1985, Kazemzadeh 2000).

The elements noted above are reflected in Zahra's life story. She considers her family as pioneers of the faith but this status has meant sacrifice on her part. She embodies her family's pain and suffering, as noted throughout this article. It is her wound then that tells her story and that of her family and community.

In her work on *nervos/hunger* among the people of Alto do Cruzeiro (Brazil), Nancy Scheper-Hughes advances two possibilities. On the one hand, a person "can be open and responsive to the covert language of the organs, recognizing in his trembling hands and 'paralyzed' legs the language of suffering, protest, defiance, and resistance." On the other hand, "he can silence it, cut it off by surrendering more and more of his consciousness and pain to the technical domain of medicine, where they will be transformed into a 'disease' to be treated with an injection, a nerve pill, a soporific. Once safely medicated, however, the scream of protest is silenced, and the desperate message in the battle is lost" (1992:214).

Zahra's narrative reveals that the language of the body, however subdued, is never silenced. The issue is whether we can develop the sensibility to hear the story emanating from the body. Zahra's usage of body language/language of silence is determined by circumstances of her life.

The storage incident, Zahra informs us, made her feel better despite the fact that the family had to make a fresh start: "We lost all of our money once again and had to borrow a loan to start our life ground up once again." Eight years after the death of her son, "we were in happy times once again. My last child, a beautiful girl, was born. She brought happiness to everyone in the family." Once again their happiness was short lived.

Faced by ongoing persecution, many Baha'is left Yazd among whom were Zahra's three older children. Settling in three different countries (El Salvador, Philippines and Germany), each child acted as a pioneer of the Bahai'i faith. Zahra and her family (husband and ten-year-old daughter) moved to Tehran. Zahra's husband secured a good job and the couple bought a big house. "Our new house was massive, but seemed so empty without the entire family." Zahra did not have much time to think of the vacuum left by the absence of her children. The new Islamic government did not take kindly to the community. Zahra expresses her distress using body language.

I suffered a major car accident around this time in Iran. I was lucky to be alive, and was in crutches and a body in cast for one year. Even up to this day, when specific parts of my body are lightly touched, I feel great pain.

Medical anthropologists have informed us that the body in sickness is a "polysemic system" (Lock & Kaufert 1998, 16). Consider the observations made by French.

[E]ven the most apparently subjective and personal of experiences -- the experience of one's own body -- is shaped in important ways by the relations of power and domination in which the body is involved. These relationships are embedded in the social order and part of the experience of everyone who participates in that order (1994, 69).

The fact that Zahra places the accident in-between a personal/familial occurrence (settling down in Tehran) and a highly charged political event (forced migration), cautions us not to confine ourselves to a discreet reading of this event. Our attention is drawn to a body in cast/a body in pain. This body implicates the social. A body in cast exists in a disengaged state from the world but ironically it is in this immobilized state that it gains power to speak. As the individual body exists as a social hieroglyph in mythic communication with others, to use Allen Feldman's words (cf. French, *ibid*), what it has to say must be contextualized. In Zahra's case the context concerns momentary withdrawal (one year) from society that has not been kind to her. A body in pain continues to engage the world in a manner that critiques and identifies the societal fault lines much like the hungry bodies of the people of Alto in Northeast Brazil (Scheper-Hughes 1992).

Forced Migration and Settlement

Nation states are fragile units whose socially constructed boundaries are permeable and subject to perceived symbolic and military threats. The fragility of the nation state is a function of its elitist and exclusive make up (Lee & Cardinal 1998). Minorities (includes women) are then policed and contained to ensure that they do not disrupt the status quo of this imagined unit; the policing is accentuated during uncertain times such as revolution or economic crisis. The persecution of the Baha'i community may be explained within this framework. As an indigenous movement within Shia' Islam, the Bahai's have been considered as a special threat. During the time of the Iranian Revolution, in Zahra's words:

The Bahai's were being bothered and discriminated against at an alarming rate. The wealthier Bahai's, who were the main target of the uprising, left Iran. The revolution of Iran was about to begin. The Shah of Iran was ousted and things were getting dangerous. The Islamic Republic of Iran was established, and with the establishment, the Baha'is were being arrested or killed

for nothing except their belief. The stress that seemed to disappear in the past few years all rushed back tenfoldThe one aspect of their attack that frightened me the most was the way they would target young girls.

These circumstances compelled Zahra to send her thirteen-year-old daughter to a Baha'i school in India, a step that was difficult for Zahra as she felt lonely without her children. When Zahra got the news that five members of her husband's religious committee were arrested and martyred, she decided to leave Iran. Zahra's observation is echoed by Farr (1999) who notes that soon after the 1978 Iranian Revolution, many Baha'is were attacked by angry mobs. Out of the 700 Baha'i leaders who were detained, many were killed. Under these circumstances, Zahra and Riaz got 400,000 *tomans* (Iranian currency) for a house that had cost them 2 million *tomans*. Riaz's retirement money was cut off.

Everything that we had come to know was suddenly gone from our very eyes. With nothing but two suitcases, we left for El Salvador where my son was living. When we left the country we didn't realize that we would be leaving for good. All my dreams were violently shattered.

In El Salvador, Zahra and her husband started a new life.

[M]y husband was able to get some work. Her would be a baker in our own house (with a lot of my help), and we would approach various stores and sell the sweets at a bulk. We once again started from the ground up, and didn't do so poorly.

Zahra stated that she felt depressed owing to "the sudden departure from home I had known for the longest time ... " Her youngest daughter from India joined them and registered for a course in dentistry. Soon after there was a revolution in El Salvador and the family were

compelled to leave for Japan. As refugees they feared for their safety.

In Japan, Zahra and Riaz experienced cultural shock as they did not know the language and "we were not used to the food and their culture is one of the most unique in the entire world." With the little money that they had and drawing upon their experience in El Salvador, the couple started the bakery business but it did not work "as the idea of selling sweets out of your own home wasn't such a success with the Japanese and we lost all our money that we had invested. We were bankrupt once again." Her husband retired and this meant that the couple had to turn to their daughter and son-in-law for financial support. The fact that her sixty-three-year-old husband had to stay at home was hard for Zahra: "[I]t crushed him and it hurt me to have to watch him suffer internally."

While in Japan, Zahra got the news that her eldest daughter's seventeen-year-old marriage was coming to an end. All the sisters kept the news away from her because of her fragile health. Eventually, they let her know.

When it became official, there was no choice but for my daughters to tell me. This news broke my spirit and I got ulcers and my stomach began to bleed internally. I needed an operation, and after this operation, two-thirds of my stomach had been removed. Soon after her second daughter who had been married for a short time to her cousin was divorced. A third incident concerned the death of her daughter-in-law from cancer. For Zahra the cumulative impact of these crises was: "I was my weakest, illest (sic), most unstable point.

During this time, an earthquake occurred in Kobe. Once again, Zahra resorts to body language.

Physically and emotionally at an all time low, we moved to Canada. Since my diabetes was related to stress, and I was

immensely stressed out, my diabetes had become unmanageable.

Due to the earthquake I was emotionally traumatized. Again I was forced to leave with my daughter (who had migrated to Canada from Japan six months before the earthquake). The idea of me burdening my daughter was hard to handle. I began to lose weight and became quite sick.

The fact that her life time struggle, perseverance, and hard work were giving way to a state of dependency was unbearable for Zahra. She experienced depression that resonated with another woman in the storytelling session, as noted above. "When I get up in the morning, I am sad and depressed. When I go to bed, I am in the same state." As for her life in Canada, Zahra did not have much to say except: "My house does not have enough room for my own shoes." This sentence is emblematic of the physical and social confinement that has been Zahra's experience as an aging immigrant woman in Canada. Her concerns are articulated through the silent language of the body.

The Silent Language of the Body

"People certainly talk about their bodies in illness stories; what is harder to hear in the story is the body creating the person," writes A. Frank (1995, 53). Body begets speech at the time when language fails. How do we then recognize a speaking body? In other words, how do we witness a bodily-inscribed story? Two approaches have been suggested in the literature.

Representing the first approach, Arthur Kleinman (1998) suggests that the body speaks through symptoms of illness. Bodily expression of symptoms, he argues, contain two messages: embodiment of social trauma and transformative possibilities, also referred to as bodily praxis (Lock & Kaufert, 1998). It is important to note that this latter process does not occur as a matter of course. Lived bodies create history and it is within this space that the body expresses itself socially. Hence, it is through the language of symptoms that the speaking body endeavours to

connect with the world.

Arthur Frank's work exemplifies the second approach. This author notes that bodies are communicative by nature and hence they use stories to convey critical messages to the world. Rather than being individual acts of narration, the stories, notes Frank, contain narrative truths suppressed by the dominant language. Stories make it possible for sufferers to position themselves as witnesses to their traumas, inviting audiences to reciprocate by becoming witnesses in turn. This is what gives the story its power.

As Frank expresses it: "What makes an illness story good is the act of witnessing that says, implicitly or explicitly, 'I will tell you not what you want to hear but what I know to be true because I have lived it'" (1995, 63). For Frank, reclaiming of a voice begins with the body that in turn creates the self which connects with people who empathize with the sufferers. It is in this context that we can understand the observation made by the research participants of this study: "One woman's story is everyone's story."

The silent language of the body (symptoms) and bodily-inscribed story are used by Zahra to convey her life experiences. A close reading of her narrative reveals the following language of symptoms.

- Stressed ten times during the detention of the Baha'i leaders during the revolution.
- Distraught when her daughter left for India.
- Depressed when forced to migrate from Iran.
- Hurt and crushed in spirit when her husband's business failed in Japan.
- Diabetes got worse, developed ulcers and her stomach bled internally. when her daughter's divorce was finalized.
- Became weak and ill when her daughter-in-law died
- Was in poor physical and emotional health during the Kobe earthquake

- Was traumatized from the after effects of the earthquake
- Lost wait and became quite sick in Canada when she realized that she would have to depend on her daughter

Through life-long experience of pain and suffering, Zahra develops a rich vocabulary of symptoms that she uses to tell her story. It is only because Zahra is involved in her own act of witnessing that she does not merely tell a survival story. Survival in itself, as Frank informs us, is devoid of "any particular responsibility other than continuing to survive" (1995, 66). A relevant question here is: What is involved in becoming a witness?

First, becoming a witness means taking the responsibility of stating what happened. Zahra considers this to be a life-long calling. Right from the time that she begins her story up to the time when she migrates to Canada, Zahra guides the reader to particular events in her life/family/community. The underlying theme conveyed is that of trauma, beginning with childhood and continuing into old age. The issue is not merely of telling but establishing moral authority. She lets the reader know that she is a witness to pain and suffering because she embodies these experiences, individually and collectively in the form of a testimony.

Second, our reception of this testimony cannot be as detached spectators, as witnessing implies a relationship. The kind of hearing required must take into account the presence of the teller, not the content of the story per se but the suffering body of the teller. This impulse calls for thinking with stories in a way that does not allow one to move on once the story has been heard; the impulse requires one to live in the story (Frank *ibid*). In this regard, there is always another story behind the one that has been told. And this story is that of systemic and structural oppression.

Zahra's story is anchored in a suffering body. To put it another way, it is her body that gives birth to her story. Healing and reconstruction occur when the story is shared with others. Zahra's tells her story in Canada in the context of an aging body whose life-long suffering has not

abated but has become intensified, as expressed in the metaphor of the “shoes.” She is saying that if the house that she lives in does not have space for her shoes - a dispensable item - how will it accommodate her physical, social, cultural and spiritual needs? Zahra is referring to the isolation and confinement that she experiences as a result of being rendered dependent in her old age. Having worked all her life to maintain her freedom and identity as a Baha’i woman, she finds it hard to accept the fact that Canada does not have space for her in her old age -a position that arises from denigration of older people, compounded for an immigrant (read racialized) woman.

Our act of witnessing Zahra’s narrative must therefore take into account her present reality as an aging immigrant women, a subject on which Zahra speaks through the language of silence and to which we must now turn. As noted earlier, Zahra does not talk about this part of her life except through one sentence: “I live in a house that does not even have space to keep my shoes.”

Aging Immigrant Women

It is commonplace knowledge that aging immigrant women have received scant attention in the literature. This is odd as feminist, ethnic and gerontological studies would gain much from a view anchored on the margins of society. Furthermore, as Lamb (2000) and Dossa (1999) have noted, these various bodies of work would benefit from the inclusion of age. As the foundation story of humankind, age brings into focus elements of "flux, multivocality, change and process" (Lamb 2000, 8).

Substantive erasure of age in these bodies of work may be explained in relation to two factors: categorization of marginal groups into discrete units, and their hierarchical arrangement where age (being old) is relegated to the lowest rung, owing to its low status in society. The aged are perceived to be dependable service population (Estes 1979). Those who are racialized and gendered (two forms of subordination) fare worse as their social invisibility is compounded. In Canada, for example, older immigrant women (and men) are admitted under the category of

dependents as they can only enter the country if they are sponsored by their sons and daughters. This situation translates into a ten-year waiting period for state-based benefits that mainstream older people are entitled to by law.

How do we then include age as a social marker in the literature and also into immigration and social service policies? There is no simple answer to this question only a series of interrogations. First we may note that inclusion of case-study material devoid of epistemology and of the lived reality of people will not take us very far. To reverse social invisibility of aging immigrant women, we need to keep into the forefront such questions as: how is social knowledge produced? For whom and for what purpose? (Moore 1996). We also need to recognize that analytical inclusion of age, gender, and race (aging immigrant women) brings to light more nuanced perspectives on the working of nation-states. It is from this point of view that we may want to revisit Zahra's life story as a starting point for discussion and reflection on these issues.

It is evident that Zahra's life course has been shaped by the working of the nation-state. In the countries where she lived (Iran, El Salvador, Japan and Canada), it is the state policy that determined the circumstances of her life. In Iran she, her family, and her community faced outright persecution while in the other three countries, it was state indifference and apathy that led to her experience of isolation, compounded in Canada partly because of age. Zahra attributes her depression and state of ill-health to this indifference. Non-intervention approaches that take the form of deprivation of resources are as detrimental as direct but negative intervention such as Othering of racialized minorities – a commonplace scenario in the service sector (Anderson & Kirkham 1998).

We must also note that gendering of nation-states has a strong impact on the lives of women, and more so, on minority women. In Zahra's case, the martyrdom of largely male members of her family meant that her domestic workload increased substantive. Zahra grew up not knowing what it is like to be a child. Throughout her life, she carried the burden of caring for her family and by extrapolation the Baha'i community, and the nation-state. Her work for the

latter can be appreciated at two levels. First, without the discursive deployment and material exploitation of minorities, nation-states would not have the building blocks to foster themselves as imagined communities.

At the discursive level, minorities provide the contrasting image on which nations feed on: uncivilized/civilized; backward/developed, their oppressed women/our liberated women, and so on. Materially, minorities have been the source of cheap labour filling in two slots within nation-states: manual and professional.

The Baha'is were used at both the discursive and material levels: they were the renegades who had departed from the state religion of Shi'a Islam. Second, despite their persecution, the Baha'is served Iran well (Kazemzadeh 2000). They provided professional expertise in areas that would otherwise have been bereft of this service. (Zahra's husband's work as a travelling teacher is a good example).

It is important to note that the Iranian state did not function in isolation. Its policies were governed by western imperialism (British and American). It is not a coincidence that the banner of the 1978-79 revolution was anti-imperialism/anti-westernization. Here there is a correlation between the persecution of the Baha'is and the state's position. In times when the state felt relatively secure, the persecution of the Bahai's lessened and vice versa (Kazemzadeh 2000, Farr 1999).

Second, minorities bring to light the fault lines of nation-states. An illustrative example is found in *The Dark Side of the Nation*. In this work, Bannerji (2000) argues that the Canadian policy of multiculturalism, initiated by the state to supposedly advance the interests of racialized minorities, in fact serves to contain the tensions between the two founding nations: the French and the British.

Occupying the status of a refugee in El Salvador and Japan and that of a landed immigrant status (read dependent) in Canada, Zahra is in a position to critique these nation-states. Using the silent language of the body - symptoms and bodily-inscribed story - Zahra implicates

these societies for rendering her socially invisible. This point is poignantly brought home by the fact that she does not want her life of pain and suffering to be reduced to nothing. It is for this reason that Zahra acts as a witness to her story with the hope of engaging the readers so that they can live in her story and feel her pain, especially at the time when she has reached old age. Zahra calls upon the reader to read her story from within and in-between spaces of silence and speech.

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¹ The term “met” is in inverted commas as I met Zahra only through her story. Zahra was too ill to attend the sessions and she chose to tell her story through her daughter.

² The participants of the storytelling session were drawn from the ESL class, the parameters of which were defined in the mission statement: “training for integration into Canadian society.” Anything beyond this, for example, therapeutic storytelling was dismissed as a waste of time.

³ With Zahra’s permission, Rima gave me a copy of the story that Zahra related to her grandson for a school project.

⁴ It was this woman’s story that inspired Zahra to participate in the storytelling session, vicariously through Rima.

⁵ In her work on elderly Jewish community in California, Myerhoff found that storytelling was the primary means through which men and women from this community found meaning in life. Stories help them to reverse their socially invisible status.

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