CHAPTER TEN

Whose Knowledge? Whose Language?:
Reeds Crying Tales of Separation

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*Listen to the reed as it narrates
And complains of separations
Mowlana (Rumi), *Mathnavi Ma’navi*, Daftar 1, Line 1

*I am a dumb with a dream and the world is all deaf
I am unable to articulate it and people unable to hear
Shams Tabrizi*

We are well aware that given the currently prevailing social and cultural ways of performing knowledge (*knowledging*) and the mainstream dominant understandings of knowledge, especially in academic circles, our perspective is extremely difficult to express and even more difficult to appreciate. The mentalities of *development* have grown cancerously in behaviors, ways of life, and fundamental worldviews of people all around the world, and many alien imposed and imported ontological and epistemological assumptions and conceptions have overtly or covertly penetrated into all the nooks and crannies of thoughts and feelings of people to a degree that, in Iran or beyond, it is by no means an easy task to question them.

*Taken for granted* assumptions, understandings, and knowledges of various types are too deeply rooted in modern
communities and too subtly steering entire lives to be problematized easily. It is this very underlying and concealed nature of such assumptions that causes their interrogation to be perceived as a strange or even senseless attempt in vein. The naturalization and normalization of worldviews that are otherwise quite unnatural and abnormal in our historical context of life, makes their critics appear as ‘dumbs with dreams’ and the audience as ‘a world all deaf’.

Despite all this, the need to express the dreams is evident. As this chapter is the last one in the book, the discussions in the previous chapters make it easier for us to argue for such a need. All of those discussions do urge for crying the tales of separation from the roots of community cultures and the dominance of uniform globalized development. Therefore, this chapter explores ‘the language of knowledge’ in the case of a few instances of most fiercely battled contests over the forms of knowledge in the Iranian and/or Islamic context.

We view the problem of academic knowledge as centrally concerned with language not simply because languages are the means of communicating knowledge; not merely because throughout history, languages have been the main media of transferring knowledge through generations; not just because almost all forms of knowledge are recorded in a language; not only because all translation movements of various kinds have been centrally language movements; not merely because almost all sorts of fabrications and hegemonies in the history of knowledge have been done through fabrications of names and scripts\(^1\), that is, through language devices; and, not simply because different sides of battles over dominance and ownership of knowledge have been associated with a national or religious language as an identity marker.

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1. Such as the ones discussed in the writings of C. K. Raju, including his chapter in this book.
We are not focusing on language even because of the language problems like the one underlying this book, that is, the fact that a dozen authors, none of whom speak English as their first language, have to write in English in order for their contributions to be put together in a single volume; not even because of senseless claims like the one quoted by Claude Alvares and C. K. Raju in their chapters in this book about the worth of writings in non-European languages from the perspective of a European politician (pp. 36 and 150); and even not merely because in creating independent and West-free knowledge, non-Western communities may need to have a non-Western language to resort to and to rely on, as a flag of difference and belonging to the non-mainstream.

In fact, more fundamentally, we are not very much concerned with language’s, that seem to be underlying the concerns mentioned above. The phenomenon of language is beyond individual languages. The problem of the ownership of knowledge and the ownership of its language goes beyond individual languages and the confrontations among individual languages of rival groups. The essence of such controversies is the crucially underlying worldviews, understandings, and logics. Therefore, language is to be understood beyond an identity-shaping instrument\(^2\); beyond simplistic ‘language determinism’\(^3\); and, of course, beyond the communicative views that see language as ‘a tool for communication’\(^4\).

\(^2\) As, for example, espoused by the national academies of language, including the Iranian Academy of Persian Language and Literature, quite busy with forging Farsi equivalents for foreign terms and, therefore, reducing the encounter with the entire phenomenon of language to the level of single lexical items.

\(^3\) See, for example, Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, thought, and reality*, (Ed. J. B. Carroll), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956.

With this perspective, the ontological stance and the logical position is the determining issue in understanding language. Rooted in Arabic, the Farsi word for ‘logic’ is *mantegh*, which is of the same root as the word *notgh*, meaning ‘the ability to speak’, that is, the language ability. Whose language (*notgh*) we speak, whose logic (*mantegh*) we accept, and whose worldview we adopt, shapes our ways of life, including our ways of knowledging. On the other hand, of course, the way we perform knowledge shapes our logic and language, hence the perpetual interconnection between knowledging and languaging.

Historically, the language of knowledge in Iran used to be rooted in *hekmat* (wisdom). Ferdowsi, Khayyam, Nezami, and Naser Khosrow, all poets; Ibn Sina and Razi, primarily physicians; Abou Reihan Birouni, an astronomer; and Molla Sadra, a philosopher, were all known as *hakim* (wise person). In everyday life of ordinary people, too, knowledgeable people were known as *hakim*; a local person knowledgeable in traditional medicine was referred to as *hakim* and an elderly wise man not necessarily even literate, but experienced enough and with a wealth of wise words, was also known as *hakim*. The language of knowledge used to shape the language of poetry and the language of *hekmat* in poetry was the rich and always renewing source of the language of everyday life.

In ancient Iran the aim of teaching was to bring up children in a way to be virtuous, God, to be well behaved, to

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5. The view of language we explore here is similar to some accounts of ‘discourse’ as reflected in the work of Teun van Dijk. See, for example, Teun van Dijk, Critical discourse analysis, in D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin, and H. Hamilton (Eds.), *Handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352–371), Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

6. There are about five hundred proverbs and sayings in the everyday language of the speakers of Persian from the writings of Sa’di.
learn professions and arts, and to be conscious of the health of body and soul. After Islam entered Iran, seeking knowledge was promoted more than ever before and led to the so called golden age of Islamic knowledge and the forms of knowledge and ways of knowledging which developed within this era continued to strive through eight centuries of political and social ups and downs in various types of madreseh.

Nevertheless, since about four centuries ago things started to change with ways of knowledging. More conspicuously, about two hundred years ago, arguably marked with the beginning of the Qajar dynasty, and more specifically, with the start of modern schooling by Amir Kabir, performances of knowledge were hit by acts aimed at bringing about fruits similar to those of Europe. Amir Kabir was acquainted with European life styles during his stay in Russia and Istanbul. Based on that acquaintance, he felt that Iran needed people familiar with modern forms of knowledge, and, therefore the idea of the first official modern school in Iran, called Darolfonoon (the house of techniques), was triggered.

Amir Kabir believed that European consultants would not benefit Iran and there could not be much hope to what they do for the country. Moreover, the actual launch of Darolfonoon was after he was removed from power and later killed by the Qajar king. Therefore, his personal intentions and ideas about the outcome of his initiative are not easy to judge, but Darolfonoon was the first step in officially fragmenting ways of knowledging in Iran, mainly into the two general categories of traditional madreseh (maktab) and modern schools and universities, and that meant a cut between the intellectual tradition of the country and the future directions. For various reasons, Darolfonoon graduates were not given considerable posts or jobs within the political and administrative structure of the country, but they did play an important role in bringing
European culture and lifestyle into Iran, mostly through translation and compilation of textbooks.

Most disastrously, in the past eighty years, in the time that may be referred to in numerous ways, including the (post)modern age, the globalization era, the digital age, the age of the global village, the space age, and the time of big bombs, as well as the age of ‘necessary terrorists’\textsuperscript{7}, the age of (cultural) massacres, and ‘the age of looting’\textsuperscript{8}, ways of knowledging started to become so distracted that even in the very early times of this period, prescriptions for healing the back-stayed Iran included the idea to become Westernized from head to toe\textsuperscript{9}.

It might well be argued that this went on as the overt official policy for decades and despite occasional struggles against it (like the ones by Al-e Ahmad, Shariati, and Motahhari, as well as the off and on challenges by the traditional religious schools of howzeh), this kind of mentality did find its way into people’s lives through technology, media, and of course, schools and universities. Even since the 1979 Islamic revolution with clear anti-Western orientations at its heart, and with official attempts at dismantling Western mentalities, many Western forms of knowledge, especially within educational institutions, have continued to subtly survive through all reforms and reconstructions.

Instead of developing a grand-theoretical argument on the nature of distractions and deviations in the forms of knowledge and in ways of knowledging in Iran, we will attempt to present a few specific examples to illustrate the problem and will also discuss how people-in-community is

\textsuperscript{7} Yusef J. Progler, \textit{Necessary terrorists}, Other India Press, 2005.
\textsuperscript{8} Munir Fasheh, The age of looting, online: www.almoulaqa.com/The_Age_of_Lootingen.aspx, 2003.
\textsuperscript{9} This is a famous quote by Taghizadeh, an early twentieth century Iranian intellectual.
still the hope. The first instance of alienated knowledging is
the case of early school literacy and science education.
Traditionally, learning to read and write used to start with the
Holy Quran and Sa’di’s Golestan. Learning reading normally
started without a now common practice of mastering the list
of the alphabet. The starting point was just starting to read the
texts and to grapple with its forms and meanings at the same
time. Notably, the first sentence that was read in Quran was

\[ \text{بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم} \] (In the name of Allah the Beneficent the
Merciful) and the first one in Golestan was

\[ \text{منت خداي را عز وجل} \] (Praise to God, the glorious and the great).

However, the new generations currently involved in major
knowledging arenas of the country have normally started their
literacy with parroting the alphabet and the first sentence that
almost all people have started with, is something that may be
literally translated as ‘Dad gave water’ and, of course, the
original Farsi sentence is equally meaningless. The only
justification for reliance on such a string of words is that it is
composed of only three letters of the alphabet, so it is the
easiest Farsi sentence that could be made and, therefore, it is
the best sentence to start with.

In the case of early science education, as early as the third
grade, a similarly highjacked way of knowledging pops up;
the introduction of the so called ‘scientific method’. The first
few pages of the third grade science book introduce the
concepts of observation, hypothesis, and theory, through
illustrating a simple experiment, the language of which is
obviously rooted in positivist knowledging traditions:

Act like scientists
A scientist thinks about everything carefully. You, too, can
think like scientist.
To think like scientists, observe everything carefully…
Make hypotheses…
After making a hypothesis, you should design an experiment to test and see if your hypothesis is right or wrong…

During the experiment, observe everything carefully and make notes of whatever happens…

Think about the causes of whatever you observe and then make a conclusion…\textsuperscript{10}

Such disturbed acts of teaching and learning literacy, not surprisingly, lead to the fact that today Ferdowsi, Mowlana (Rumi), Sa’di, and Hafez would not qualify if they apply for a PhD program in a department of Persian language and literature in an Iranian university. In science, this could be the starting point of seeing science as ‘subduing’ nature, rather than understanding and living with it.\textsuperscript{11} What follows is a tacit glossary of terms in the everyday language of knowledge, increasingly influenced by schools, universities, textbooks (and multimedia materials), exams, and mass media. The glossary may include words like progress, development, educated, literate, scientific, academic, research, grade, degree, rank, and the like. The terms are conceived in ways similar to the interpretations of fabricated conceptions presented in ‘The Development dictionary’ by Sachs\textsuperscript{12}.

The second instance is the case of the so called Islamic university ranking system. In 2005 the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) initiated an action plan which


\textsuperscript{11} While the view of science aimed to ‘conquer and subdue’ nature is well known form Francis Bacon, the founder of modern science, the contemporary Islamic philosopher Ayatollah Javadi Amoli makes a delicate distinction between viewing science as dealing with tabiat (nature) or exploring khelghat (creation), inherently always reminding a khalegh (creator).

included a science and technology related innovative decision on a specific ranking system for universities of the OIC member states. After several meetings at different levels of the OIC, a set of mechanisms, procedures, and criteria were decided upon as the structuring elements of the new ranking system. A glimpse of the announced intentions of the initiative shows that at macro-levels, there was an idea of the interested nature of the global academic scientific trends. Part of the introductory section of the ‘Report on adopted Criteria, Procedures and Mechanisms for Ranking of Universities of OIC’ reads: “The quest for knowledge is a pillar of the Islamic Faith… This is the time that we as Muslim Ummah should accord more attention to the promotion of quality higher education in our societies.”\textsuperscript{13}

However, when it comes to actually doing something in line with this perspective, the language of universality and neutrality of science related procedures seems to prevail. The same introductory section reads: “…very few universities from the OIC region are ranked among the Top 500 World Universities”. To remedy the problem, the suggested solution is “to select at least 20 Universities within the OIC Region to be strengthened and elevated to the rank of Top 500 World Universities”.

A quick comparison of the criteria of the so called world ranking systems and the adopted criteria of the OIC university ranking will show the extent to which an apparently alternative initiative is captured by the mantegh of the dominant ranking views. The major categories of indicators adopted by the UK based Times Higher Education University Ranking\textsuperscript{14} are: economic activity (including research income


\textsuperscript{14} www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=411907
from industry); international diversity (including the ratio of international to domestic students and staff); institutional indicators (including undergraduate entrants, the number of degrees awarded, and institutional income); and research indicators (including academic papers, citation impact, and research).

Shanghai Jiao Tong World University Ranking (China)\(^{15}\) sticks to the same structure by adding a few more frankly stated indicators of dependence on Western knowledge such as the number of alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals and the number of articles published in Nature and Science. Likewise, The Global Universities Ranking (Russia)\(^{16}\) follows on, with a few indicators expressing the same logic in different (and sometimes awkward) ways (like the capacity of the university’s computer centre; the number of the university students who went abroad for part-time studying; and the number of the university professors who went abroad for teaching and research work).

The adopted indicators for the ranking of OIC universities hardly show any trace of a different mantegh and notgh. The OIC ranking indicators are: research (including research volume as indicated by the number of published articles, research quality as indicated by the number of citations, and patents); education (including the ratio of faculty members with PhD to the total number of faculty, alumni that become highly cited researchers, and students winning international Olympiads); and international outlook (including the ratio of international faculty to total faculty, the ratio of international

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16. www.globaluniversitiesranking.org
students to the total number of students, and interestingly, the ratio of faculty members with foreign PhD degrees to the total number of faculty members); and socio-economic impact (including contracts and consultancies, entrepreneurship programs and industrial linkages, and the number of incubated projects and spin-off companies).\textsuperscript{17}

The language of this set of indicators is surprisingly similar to that of the other ranking systems, from which the OIC is ironically trying to distance itself. The language of the indicators may give away their underlying logic and worldview. Frequent use of words like volume of research, ratio, and number may be interpreted as reflecting a quantitative positivist position, which is even worsened when one adds all the mathematical formulae and calculations employed to quantify qualities such as learning; the language of citation, patents, awards, winning, Olympiads, international, and foreign, may be indicating a heavy reliance on the dominant sources of legitimacy, and, the logic behind words such as contracts, consultancies, entrepreneurship, industrial linkages, and companies may be understood as an indication of the extent to which the worldview of profiteering and capitalist success is directing academic endeavors. As Doostdar and Mirhosseini discussed elsewhere,

...the OIC set of criteria tend to only scratch on the surface of the ranking issue and the proposed university ranking is fundamentally trapped within the global mainstream trend of university ranking procedures. The core conceptions, taken for granted and almost left untreated, continue to exist under the newly fabricated and friendly looking disguise...

If we are to simply adopt the so called international standards..., then what is the logic of initiating a separate ranking system?...

\textsuperscript{17} OIC Report, cited above.
Rather than dealing with the rudimentary concepts reflected in these criteria, the supposedly alternative OIC criteria could question the core of the globally dominant educational quality assessment procedures: What are the values that shape the basis of awards? What kind of writings tend to be cited more? Who cites them and why? What are the values and criteria in which the so-called international Olympiads are based?18

The pain is that while the OIC sees itself as “the collective voice of the Muslim world and ensuring to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world” and to “galvanize the Ummah into a unified body” and represent “Muslims by espousing all causes close to the hearts of over 1.5 billion Muslims of the world”19, when it comes to taking some actual measure, the mantegh and the notgh turns to sound almost completely the same as the globalized voice of knowing by making statements like: “In all Islamic countries, there are few technical schools, colleges and universities and they have hardly any research centres of international standard” and “According to UNDP’s Human Development Report (2007–2008), the countries of the globe have been categorized at 3 levels of human development… In the Islamic world only 10 countries have been placed amongst countries with 'high human development’”20.

Closely related to the ranking story, is the issue of Islamic science citation. As part of the bigger ranking business, there was an initiation for an alternative indexing system for journal articles published within the OIC countries. The initiative

revolved around the language of Islamization of knowledge and the initiative was called the Islamic Science Citation Center (ISC). Iran played a major role in the initiative and ISC headquarters and its administrative and executive sections were decided to be based in Iran. The Iranian Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution approved an ISC Policy Plan in 2008, with general objectives including “considering local needs and Islamic values” in initiating innovative research; “exercising needful attention to the Islamic laws and moralities in production and provision of science”; and “proposing suitable instruments and mechanisms that would fulfill optimally the information needs of the Islamic Ummah”21.

Having set off from such an inspiring point of departure, one may find it quite ironic to see that in early 2010 a news item goes with the headline A memorandum of understanding signed with the Thompson company (ISI): ISC articles to be indexed under ISI. As the news item reads, according to the head of the Regional Information Center for Science and Technology, located in Iran, ISC signed a memorandum of understanding with the Thompson Reuters company to index ISC articles in the ISI. He also said that ISI agreed to cooperate in the ranking of the universities of the Islamic countries and to hold scientometrics workshops for the Iranian universities. He further said that because national languages hinder the inclusion of journals in ISI, articles published in Islamic countries will be processed according to ISI standards and, therefore, their inclusion in ISI will be facilitated.

We do not suppose that this needs further analysis and explanation because it is obvious that the act has turned to move exactly in the opposite direction of the stated intention.

It seems just enough to remind ourselves that the entire ISC initiative was basically started to counter the internationally dominant indexing systems and to consider Islamic values, Islamic laws and moralities, and to fulfill the needs of the Islamic Ummah. The reminder would be even stronger if the following quote from ISI web page is added. In a section that describes the inclusion criteria for journals, as part of the ‘basic journal standards’, the following is mentioned:

**English is the universal language of science at this time in history.** It is for this reason that Thomson Reuters focuses on journals that publish full text in English or at very least, their bibliographic information in English. …it is clear that the journals most important to the international research community will publish full text in English. This is especially true in the natural sciences. In addition, **all journals must have cited references in the Roman alphabet.**

(Emphasis added)

This may seem very disappointing and all a call of despair but the roots of community life in the soil of traditional Iranian-Islamic culture are far from uprooted. The *mantegh* and *notgh* of *hekmat* and transcendence is still living in many aspects of life in our community. It is true that real flowers in the soil of culture are crushed within modern institutional structures like schools and universities as well as many other micro-institutions in the society, and this even includes many aspects of community life and even the most uninstitutional aspects of family life.

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22. See http://thomsonreuters.com/products_services/science/free/essays/journal_selection_process


24. As observable in a newspaper science section mini-article, injecting awareness to the minds of its readers about the correlation between a particular type of diet for pregnant women and the rate of later success of their babies in entering colleges!
schooled as such, this has continued to happen through mass media as the school on air. However, outside the realm of schooled and mass media stricken mentalities, flames of hope do continue to strive in the form of languages, logics, and knowledges not much perceivable and penetrable by globalized knowledging trends.

Many people seem to exclusively live with the language of ‘Dad gave water’; the language of hypotheses and experiments; the language of scientific neutrality and universality; the language of titles and ranks; the language of schools, universities, and mass media; and the language of globalization. But many of the same people live a – quantitatively and qualitatively – considerable part of their lives outside the suffocating atmosphere of alien ways of knowledging. These people-in-community aspects of life shape the most noticeable flames of hope that are detectable amidst all the intrusions. Many of the same people who are brought up with the logic of schools and the language of ‘Dad gave water’, are also, one way or another, in touch – though not living, as such – with the poetry of Mowlana, Sa’di, and Hafez. So, the language of hekmat – though sidelined – is not dead.

Many of the same people who indulge themselves into all (mis)conceptions of scientific objectivity, rigor, and material exactness; many of the same people who seem to wholeheartedly believe in academic measures and standards; and many of those who direct their entire career towards writing and publishing academic articles that comply with the criteria of the so called international journals, also do their daily religious practices. Many of these people do their namaz (prayers) and rouzeh (fasting), and many of them do regularly read the Holy Quran.

Many of the same people who tend to be captured by all manipulations of the media coming from all corners of the
world, do also hear the call of *azaan* several times a day from the media around them. Many of the same people who seem to be disappointingly taken by the hardly sense making talk on almost totally translated texts in Western psychology, education, and sometimes absurdly presented ‘family studies’ and ‘women’s studies’, do live in traditionally rooted family structures with their unique traditions of family relations, teachings, learnings, and respect.

Many of the same people who believe in the academic knowledge structure of ‘economics’ as the solution to the economic problems of the country; many of the same people who do believe in such fabrications as The World Bank, The International Monetary Fund, The World Trade Organization, and the so called free market policies as the optimum path to prosperity; and many of those who seek to absorb any kind of pseudo-knowledge propagated under rubrics like business administration, marketing, commerce, and so on, do also live (or at least grapple) with the ideas of *halaal* and *haraam*.

Many of the same people who stick to and believe in academic and media shaped modern Western conceptions of social structures, citizenship, and international relations, do also go on religious pilgrimage to Mecca and the Shi’a holy cities situated in, otherwise austere, Iraq. And this defies all those mainstream academic notions of sociology.

Many of the same people who expose themselves to modern arts, give their ears to sometimes nerve racking music coming from nowhere, live in a disastrous architectural environment, and worship Hollywood as the ultimate point of the so called art-industry of cinema, do also occasionally pass by the well known traditional Iranian forms of the arts of architecture, miniature, and calligraphy as well as traditional forms of theater, and of course, poetry, all rooted in the language and knowledge of *hekmat*. 
Many of the same people who have been indoctrinated through the mass media, schools, universities, textbooks, and other fabrications of this sort to view the world through the sentimental perspective and language of peace, security, human rights, and democracy, do also dedicate themselves to the tragedy of *ashoura*, the ideals of *Imam Hossein* (*Alayhessalam*), and the idea of *shahadat* (martyrdom), that disturb all those chic notions.

It is all these flames of hope that can still create a possibility for encountering, challenging, and confronting the language and logic of academic knowledge. This very still-living possibility of ‘crying tales of separation’ is itself the biggest hope emerging from the spirit of people-in-community to resist the intrusion of the knowledge and the language of development and (post)modernization into these realms of hope.