Metaphor and the Senses:

How Dunya Mikhail Makes Homes for Readers in Poetic Fractures

Dunya Mikhail prefaces *In Her Feminine Sign*, written and published separately in Arabic and English, by writing, “The poet is at home in both texts, yet she remains a stranger.”¹ With a subtle touch and metaphoric distinction, this fluctuation of belonging and division between life in Baghdad and Michigan becomes central to her work. The collection removes the chasm between home and exile, fracturing the meaning of traditional identity and harbouring a feeling of discomfort. Divided by origin and connected by struggle, *In Her Feminine Sign* exposes the fractures within people. This essay will explore the way metaphoric cracks in the volume of poetry seek to divide, while the sensory and temporal nature of Dunya Mikhail’s work forces an experiential reading, whereby the speaker and reader become one. In doing so, it seeks to prove that *In Her Feminine Sign* is a transnational volume of acceptance designed to look beyond gender, ethnicity, and history.

This work invokes the senses and narrative time to create an experiential reading that pulls the reader, not just from their seat to the text, but to Michigan and Baghdad. There is an intense prioritization of auditory, gustatory, visual, tactile, and olfactory stimulation that immediately causes an emotive response in the reader. Yet, the fracturing between the experiential reading and our grounded place as readers replicates the split identity of the speaker.

In the “Author’s Note,” Dunya Mikhail writes that “To capture the poem in two lives is to mirror my exile, with all of its possibilities and risks.” While, of course, it is naïve to think the speaker and poet are ever the same, the personal denotation signals that her personal experiences inspired this work. As a result, it is unjust to analyze the meaning of *In Her Feminine Sign* without considering her personal history. Dunya Mikhail was born in Baghdad, where she faced censorship and interrogation as a journalist and translator. Since she left, and eventually moved to America in 1995, she has become a United Nations Human Rights Award for Freedom Writing winner and a Kresge Fellow. Her work largely explores injustices in Iraq with shades of hope and the honesty of testimony.

In an NPR interview, Mikhail revealed her view on poetry, saying that “poetry is not medicine- it’s an X-ray. It helps you see the wound and understand it.” In saying so, Mikhail demonstrates that her poetry is designed to help others witness their own struggles in her writing. More specifically, she says, “We feel alone, but we feel also together.” This line echoes the sense of fracturing and connection of *In Her Feminine Sign*. Meanwhile, a *World Literature Today* review states, “These are not poems about war or exile or trauma. They are poems that emanate from the women who live them, those who survive and those who are remembered.” Such assists

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2 Mikhail, p. 7, emphasis added.


4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

in understanding her approach to language and gender, to time and place: it is a testimony of Iraqi history, experienced both up close and from across the ocean.

When you pick up *In Her Feminine Sign*, it demands particular attention be given to the senses with a textured cover. In *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, Michel Serres presents the skin as a site of “generative identity” and “pliability.” To touch is, in following, to express a willingness to venture into the unknown and become something new. Consequently, drawing attention to touch with the stippled cover forces the reader to acknowledge their entrance into an immersive world, built with metaphor and structured with the senses. Further, the reader must violate the text by cracking the spine of the hardcover in order to find what is within. The structure is sturdier than is traditional and opening the text stains the black cover with a creased white line. This initial act alludes to the fracturing within the poetry collection in an incredibly visceral nature. For, as the reader bends the cover, they perform a metaphoric splintering between reader and speaker, and in doing so, carve the first line in a collection of two sides: Baghdad and Michigan, reader and speaker, Arabic and English, fossils and reanimated birds, silence and laments, witness and reflector.

Metaphors are designed to resemble likeness. However, Mikhail distorts their traditional use to demonstrate binaries within all people. In other words, she shows how things are different to show how we are alike. In the *Routledge Handbook of Metaphor*, Zoltán Kövecses writes that “[a] conceptual metaphor is understanding one domain of experience (that is typically abstract)
in terms of another (that is typically concrete).” Such is the approach of this work, whereby the caged, fossilized birds of “Song Inside a Fossil” are opposed by the scattered birds of “Baghdad in Detroit” just one page later. These knowable symbols stand in for the binaries of the speaker’s life, especially when Mikhail’s use of personal pronouns is considered. Through the metaphor of birds, this collection approaches the war-torn conditions of Iraq that tried to cage her voice as a journalist for the Baghdad Observer. Additionally, when the speaker says, “Song by song/ I scatter my birds”¹⁰, the reader hears a cry for home and newfound freedom. With this metaphor, there is a line drawn between movement and voice: birds have the freedom to fly anywhere in a way the speaker cannot, but they can also sing freely like she now can.

The distinction between sensory abilities is one embraced by the readers as a consequence of the changes in poetic metre. With each line, the syllables increase by two, building up the intensity of the poem so that by the time the speaker says, “away from the fog of smoke”, the reader can smell it.¹¹ In “Aesthetic and Emotional Effects of Meter and Rhyme in Poetry,” Obermeier and Menningaus write that “meter can influence the saliency of a stimulus and draws a perceiver’s attention toward a specific stimulus.”¹² In consequence, the pairing of lexical content (“smoke”) and structural composition births an olfactory element to the immersive poetry.

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¹⁰ Mikhail, p. 15.

¹¹ Mikhail, p. 15.

Birds have long been used as metaphorical creatures, as is evident through the feminist works we read this semester. In a way, Mikhail’s repetition of the bird metaphor pays homage to Maya Angelou’s “Caged Bird” that contrasts the condition of a free bird and a caged bird through extended metaphor.13 In saying this, Mikhail’s metaphor is more complicated because neither bird is wholly free or caged. Thus, they, like the speaker, are in a perpetual juxtaposition of confused ability.

In “Poetry and the Senses,” Ronald J. Goba poses that “[i]t is perhaps necessary to “add” two senses [to the traditional five] (thermal: pertaining to hot and cold, and kinetic: pertaining to motion).”14 With this in mind, the limited movement acts as a block to human ability, while the freedom of speech directly opposes the loss. While the contradiction of freedoms is troublesome to evaluate and respond to, the reader is made to understand because they are in a similar position: Forced to move through the established volume, but free interpret and evaluate it as they wish.

Juxtapositions, like that of the fossilized and reanimate bird, are what makes In Her Feminine Sign the powerful collection that it is. It is through duality that Mikhail not only presents the immediate struggles of the speaker, but the perpetual struggle of her position. The speaker is (1) a woman forced to leave her home, (2) making a place for herself somewhere else, (3) struggling with leaving and watching the destruction of her home, (4) struggling with the guilt of starting to belong, and also (5) failing to feel that Michigan is her home. The juxtaposition within

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the speaker’s world is intense, but through conceptual and extended metaphors, the reader gravitates to her condition until they too exist in the confused state of ideological contiguity.

The volume is written in a way that expresses her division: in two languages, which are described as distinct sides of a mirror, as both her home and her exile (simultaneously). Yet, Mikhail makes special note that she “didn’t translate them… [she] wrote them twice.”15 In doing so, the two texts are defined as individual works. The cognitive theory of language suggests that “meaning does not reside in language so much as it is accessed by it, […] that language is the product, not of a separate structural system within the brain, but of the general cognitive processes that enable the human mind to conceptualize experiences.”16 In following, Mikhail’s double-writing is significant to the “embodied understanding” of the texts. Had *In Her Feminine Sign* been translated, the language, according to cognitive theory, would not be overly significant. But, given the rewriting, it suggests that the speaker’s experiences could be accessed differently with the language used. This presents a complete division within the speaker.

It is clear that the volume seeks to find ways to bridge divisions, to help the reader understand the speaker’s struggle, and for the individual to understand the other. Where metaphors divide, worldbuilding collides. The two versions of *In Her Feminine Sign*, are explicitly linked by one aspect: the tablets. These act as a visual representation of Mikhail’s poetry that the reader can interpret to tell their own story. Incorporating a visual component to the written collection acts as an intermediary between the two works, as well as the speaker and reader. Additionally, the

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15 Mikhail, p. 7.

replication of the Sumerian language presents symbols as a way to bridge the divide between cultures, for it is in this way that she begins to meld her life in a Baghdad and Michigan together. The singular consistency encourages us all to invite the stranger into our lives and acknowledge our mirror half. What’s more, it positions language/social structures as our divider, rather than our beings.

The mission of encouraging acceptance is most evident when the speaker says she is “hopeful that East and West may meet in that crossing line between two languages.”

This encourages meaningful consideration about the root of the division between Eastern and Western culture, especially when we all experience the suffering, dreaming, and love carved into the stones. In this way, it would appear that it is the fractures in humanity that bind us together. And, what are clay tablets, but purposefully fractured stones? Meaning exists at the point the stones come under strain, and people are connected when they look at cracks. Evidently, Dunya Mikhail’s volume of poetry is layered with metaphoric cracks. *In Her Feminine Sign* is poetry about duality and how humans will be connected when they abandon structural norms.

The Sumerian stones are not the only visual poetry that lies within *In Her Feminine Sign*. In fact, the volume is largely compiled in a visually-driven manner designed to compose a temporal direction. Such is most explicit in “On Ground Zero,” which digs with “[b]are hands” from the top of the page down to “Ground Zero” and then back to the top of the page “in flight.”

The sense of journey Mikhail creates through her visual mapping of the poem is significant to the reader’s experiential relationship with the speaker. While all poetry has a visual dimension, traditional

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17 Mikhail, p. 7.
18 Ibid, p. 70.
layouts do not call attention to their physical attributes. In *Reading Visual Poetry*, Willard writes that “[w]hat actually happens [when a reader comes across visual poetry] is that the viewer mentally recreates the original picture. In a certain sense, the viewer becomes an artist himself.”

In consequence, Mikhail’s use of visual poetry requires the reader to have an active relationship with the text. “[V]isual creations”, Willard continues, “interpret the world in which we live.” Such demonstrates that the stylistic choice helps to establish the reader’s place in the story, and it is because of the sensory-focused approach that the volume becomes immersive.

As the reader accesses the first poem, they are confronted with grammar, the largely silent though defining aspect of language. Mikhail writes, “Everything has a gender/ in Arabic”, and it is, for the first time, that the reader watches the speaker remark on her loss of home. While the line spacing is not spoken aloud, the enjambment is a silent act of recollection that Arabic is not the vernacular anymore. The syntactical disobedience of the line exposes a gap in the speaker’s identity, and in a time where she seeks to explain something new to the reader, her own visible struggle welcomes mutual growth and learning.

Auditory stimulation is essential to the work, as is evident through the continued echoing of a bird’s song. In consequence, repeated sounds are linked with freedom. When Mikhail writes, “Every grain a bell/ relentlessly ringing.” she brings to life the sound of the bell through the repeated “r” sound, and the reader’s senses are inundated with the instinctual noises of animated

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20 Mikhail, p. 162.

21 Ibid, p. 11.

22 Ibid, p. 66.
poetry. “Ringing” already signifies repeated sounds, so adding “relentlessly” is a distinct choice. In light of the immersive nature, the next line, “Where will the ringing carry them?”\(^{23}\) becomes like metapoetry. It speaks to the power of repeated noise, and the purposeful choice to prioritize sensory reactions. “Where will this mantra take us?” the reader is made to ask.

The mission of the text comes to a head with “The Others.” “We are not dead, and those are not our ghosts.”\(^{24}\) the speaker says in denial. “They call on us, / and we are in the middle of the river.”\(^{25}\) only to write next, “We call on them/ and they are in the middle/ of the river.”\(^{26}\) This union of “we” and “them”, paired with an inability to acknowledge they are the same, asks the reader to reconsider who they believe they are not. In this way, it opens the reader to an experiential reading, whereby the speaker and reader become one, in the same way that “we” becomes “them.” However, the fact that they become one “in the middle of the river” is important. For, this poem solidifies the idea that we may best understand humanity if we disregard pre-established ideas.

“The Others” calls upon the composite parts of being in order to help the audience experience the same struggle. It forces the reader to question what they see, with reference to “ghosts” and “changeable” shadows.\(^{27}\) It then moves to the tactile as she says, “[t]heir hollows are not our cracks”. Next, our ears, with “They call on us”. With sensory stimulation, every line is a juxtaposition designed to present artificial differences. “Hollows” are contrasted from “cracks”

\(^{23}\) Mikhail, p. 66.

\(^{24}\) Ibid, p. 71.

\(^{25}\) Ibid, p. 71.

\(^{26}\) Ibid, p. 72.

\(^{27}\) Ibid, p. 71.
and “shapes” are considered distinct and unrelated. Yet, because the reader witnesses, touches, and hears the poetry, they recognize the likeness between “we” and “them,” despite the verbalized distinctions. In consequence, “The Others” requires the reader to disregard established ideas and find their own meaning in the world. Thus, magnifying the importance of rejecting bias and offering others the opportunity to prove who they are.

Like a mirror to the introduction, the conclusion ends “in silence.” This is directly opposed to the prioritization of voice and sound throughout the work, transforming the silences at either end into listening periods and the work into a conversational piece. This sensory-driven strategy reinforces the central purpose of the work, to encourage mutual connection through struggle, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, and history. We can understand each other when we empathize. We can relate when we listen. Consistently, the reader is drawn in with sound, with touch, and with sight “to the middle”: the point between Arabic and English (the Sumerian stones), the moment fossilized birds fly, and in the river when “we” and “them” become one. In combination, the sensory-development and metaphoric fracturing of the work encourage the reader to feel as if they have also been brought “to the middle,” where they are free of pre-established societal barriers.

If we consider all of the divisions in the text, it is, by and large, the sensory responses that ground the reader in the cracks. Where metaphors expose and explore the speaker’s troubles, the language and texture of the text guide us to experience them as well. In Her Feminine Sign is

28 Mikhail, p. 71.
30 Ibid, p. 75.
designed to guide the reader in understanding the other. As a poetic collision of opposition and emotion, conceptual metaphor and sensory diction/style are utilized to transform the reader into the speaker and begin to empathize with the struggle for freedom and belonging. It is more than a semi-biographical exploration of refuge and yearning, it is an experiential transformation of acceptance that encourages readers to find mutual struggle and reflect on their own equivocal identity. In Her Feminine Sign “holds a mirror to the [reader], while the [text] behaves as if [the] text is actually her mirror.” 31 Through visual poetry, metaphoric fracturing, and auditory stimulation, Mikhail’s work extends past gender, ethnicity, and history to develop a nonconformist vision for the world: we are what we are not.

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31 Mikhail, p. 7.
Bibliography


Mikhail, Dunya, In Her Feminine Sign (New York: New Directions, 2019).
