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# “A CONTAINER RESHAPED BY ITS CONTENTS: THE BOYNDARIES OF LANGUAGE IN CRAIG THOMPSON’S ‘HABIBI’”

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## **Abstract**

Craig Thompson’s graphic novel “Habibi” is an intricate tracing of the lines that shape and separate religion, sexuality, language, possession, and storytelling, both from one another and within their own orders. The main vein of the story runs through the depiction of the physical body as a linguistically translatable unit, and conversely, language as a corporeal entity that operates in the same complex manner as a physical being. This accurately depicts the relationship between language and the physical world outside of stories as well. The storyline is largely based on themes of possession, sexuality and the intermingling of the two- the body is often depicted as something to be used for or against its owner depending on context and often, gender. The relationship between physical actions and bonds formal and informal is the main corpus for the text’s demonstration of the ties between the physical world and the ways we name and tame it. Examination of the narrative becomes more intricate alongside Thompson’s illustrations, which lend depth and weight to the words and reinforces the notion of their physical presence. The particular details of these illustrations add the dimension of symbolic familiarity that allows the narrative to be more recognizable in the light of our highly visual cultural lens; the language/body relationship is strengthened by this translation into visuals by converting the narrative into a visual realm that is more closely associated with physical presence than language’s seemingly anonymous presence as a framework. This paper attempts to uncover the implications of this body/language relationship as depicted by the

novel and explicitly demonstrated through its integration of written language with physical representation.

**Keywords:** linguistics, agency, sexuality, identity, naming, visual, narrative

When a reader picks up Craig Thompson's latest work, *Habibi*, it instantly makes an impression. The hardcover version (the only version) is a weighty, ornate book that commands respect- every time I've left it on a coffee table, a roommate or friend notices its presence and comments on its appearance, inevitably flipping through it and getting stuck regardless of what page they turn to first. The book centers on a pair of orphans, the young girl Dodola as she's shuffled through a series of male "caregivers" who are essentially legal rapists, and Cham/Zam/Habibi, the young boy she adopts while in slavery. The younger boy takes on a variety of names as his relationship with Dodola grows and becomes more complex, though he is referred to by his second name, Zam, for the majority of the novel. The story meanders through their lives and separations, exploring the many facets of their relationship, particularly Zam's sexual awakening and idolization of Dodola and Dodola's inability to define her own body. Intricate ink illustrations deepen the thematic power of "Habibi," adding complex, questioning layers to the text. The novel takes place in an unidentified, stereotyped Arabic landscape complete with harems, camels and an overbearing male gaze. Because of this, Thompson has been met with charges of Orientalism and sexualizing rape, but these fall short in light of the broader themes of the book (The Comics Journal). His use of sensationalized landscapes and women who exist only in a sexual realm is obviously meant as a criticism, and serves as a platform for showcasing the presiding theme of the book- the language of the body and the body as a language. This theme rides on top of the book's storyline, contained expertly in the space between the written text and illustrations; the graphic novel medium in general examines the relationship between written and visualized language, and "Habibi's" narrative themes of sexual and physical agency lends this particular book a magnifying glass for this purpose. Through his depiction of sexuality and relationships in both text and visual art, Thompson's "Habibi" addresses the implication of a physical body as a linguistically translatable unit, and conversely, language as a corporeal entity that

operates in the physical world.

The nature of this novel requires a debriefing of the plot before we can begin, as it does not appear in chronological order and contains information conveyed in illustration rather than text. As stated in the introduction, “Habibi” is the story of two orphans who find each other in a slave marketplace set in a fictional, Arabic-inspired world. Twelve-year-old Dodola meets the toddler Zam and the two escape into the desert, where Dodola acts as Zam’s surrogate mother for the next eight years. Abducted again, Dodola spends years in a harem lamenting their separation, tormented by the fact that Zam has been abandoned yet again, and finds herself impregnated with a child that *is* biologically hers. Meanwhile, Zam tries to survive on his own while attempting to reconcile his conflicted longing for Dodola—does he miss his mother, or his ideal lover? Searching for his identity and crushed by longing for both spiritual and sexual fulfillment, Zam travels through a variety of changes and personalities that only serve to fragment his identity. The two go through physical changes and experiences that are at odds with their physical identities, from pregnancy to castration to sexual commerce. Alongside the changes going on outside of their bodies, the pair also wrestles with their internal identities and the words they use to contain them, frequently brought to them in the forms of cultural and social norms shaped by their experiences. Their interweaving story and eventual reunion explores relationships with one’s own body and with others’, and examines the factors that impact how these relationships are formed and handled. Dodola and Zam find themselves caught in a limbo between what they feel and how they define themselves, ultimately dictated by the constraints of human language and its impact on the world. The progression of this trajectory are best examined alongside scrutiny of various themes and arguments in the following pages.

The notion of the body as a language has long been considered in many fields, including but not limited to linguistics, biology, psychology, and our own literary analysis. The phrase “body language” is so much a part of our society that even young children recognize the idea, associating bad posture and shuffling steps with negativity, and a smiling embrace as positive. Leaving the explanation of “body language” at these often-defined signs is very short-sighted; however, as they imply that the popularly-referred to “body language” has a one-to-one correspondence and translatability. A language as defined in linguistics

is “an abstract cognitive system that uniquely allows humans to produce and comprehend meaningful utterances.” (pg. 660, *Language Files*) If the movements of the body are to be considered a language, we must associate it with the constraints also placed on verbal and signed languages—they are made up of a finite lexicon from which an infinite number of ideas can be communicated (Saussure). Muscular and skeletal systems only permit a certain range of motion from the human body, but that motion translates into the long- and short-term physical activities and responses that define a person. The interpretation of singular actions is not the main focus here, but the overall reading of bodies as they exist simultaneously in several spaces—physical existence (the body literally occupies space on Earth), emotional response (things happen to bodies and they react/bodies do things and they react), and socio-cultural existence (the space a body occupies in society). These spaces and the entities within them are inarguably affected by the corporeal language that defines and ultimately contains them, a “container reshaped by its contents” (Thompson, pg 84).

Many authors, philosophers, artists and scientists have explored the intersection of language and body, and to trace this history would take warehouses of ink, so just a few perspectives will be provided to set up a basic framework. One of the most pervasive readings of bodies is the body seen through a social lens, and feminist philosophy does a good job of outlining the ways in which this is done. Elizabeth Grosz’s “Volatile Bodies” examines this in detail, explaining the variety of methods in which a body is “inscribed.” The “Body as Inscriptive Surface” chapter speaks specifically of physical markings, but is also clearly referencing the less visible forms of social “marking” that define physical bodies. Grosz says “[...] scarifications mark the body as a public, collective, social category, in modes of inclusion of membership; they form maps of social needs, requirements and excesses. The body and its privileged zones of sensation, reception, and projection are coded by objects, categories, affiliations, lineages, which engender and make real the subject’s social, sexual, familial, marital, or economic position or identity within a social hierarchy. [...] It is crucial to note that these different procedures of corporeal inscription do not simply adorn or add to a body that is basically given through biology; they help constitute the very biological organization of the subject.” (pg. 140) Essentially, the things we do with and to our bodies (and others’) define us from the first moment of our lives. A prime example from Habibi is

the way in which familial titles of “mother” and “son” become convoluted and murky—Dodola nurtures Zam like he is her son, feeding him in both body and mind.<sup>1</sup> But she later finds herself unable to feel connected to her biological son, even moments after his birth, confusing her notions of motherhood. On the other side of the relationship we have Zam, who is unable to reconcile his opposing views of Dodola. As the only woman Zam has come in contact with prior to her abduction, Dodola ends up serving as both his maternal figure and the source of his first sexual yearning. BOTH characters eventually view the other as the only recipient of any of their love, romantic and familial. So what can we call this pair? Social definition and taboo grapples for a pathology to contain their relationship (and their individual identities, this confusion isn’t their only crisis at the hands of language) and falls short; we only have words that contradict one another in their singularity—surely Zam can’t be both a son and a not-son! But he is, just as Dodola is both a maternal figure and the source of his sexual awakening. And this linguistic constraint demonstrates exactly how a language can impose itself on physical reality, affecting the choices that Zam and Dodola allow themselves to make and the emotions they attempt to control in order to achieve harmony with what they define themselves as.

Conversely, their bodies serve as a method for subjugating themselves to language—by merely existing, a physical body demands distinction and categorization and affects the ways in which this is done. As Grosz says on page 144 of *Volatile Bodies*: “All of us [...] are caught up in modes of self-production and self-observation; these modes may entwine us in various networks of power, but never do they render us merely passive and compliant. [...] It is not as if a subject outside of these regimes is in any sense more free of constraint, less amenable to social power relations, or any closer to a state of nature. At best such a subject remains indeterminate, nonfunctional, as incapable of social resistance as of social compliance.” This argues the idea that without defining ourselves and others, we are unable to function, and that proves largely true, even in daily life. If one were reading this paper unaware of why it had ended up on their desk or what exactly they were expected to do with it, it would be rather difficult to discern, much of anything other than that it was a stack of papers with ink on them. Scott McCloud addresses this more tangibly on page 26 of “Understanding Comics,” showing us Magritte’s “The Treachery of Images” alongside images of cows, stop signs and cheeseburgers, telling us that “this is not

a cow. This is not law. This is not food. [...] Welcome to the strange and wonderful world of the icon!"<sup>2</sup> Applied to our physical reality, bodies take on the definition of icons—no body is innately a victim, a rapist, a slave or a sultan until their bodily experiences allow their culture to define them as such.

So now we can see how the content of the story supports the notion of body as language and vice versa, but how is this representation organized? *Habibi* is a graphic novel or a comic book, both names serve the necessary purpose, and this lends itself quite nicely to the examination of body as text. McCloud explains in "Understanding Comics" the underlying reasons that comics have such a resonance on the reader. One of the many reasons is that "Our identities belong permanently to the conceptual world. They can't be seen, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted. They're merely ideas. And everything else—at the start—belongs to the sensual world, the world outside us. Gradually we reach beyond ourselves. We encounter the sight, smell, touch, taste and sound of our own bodies. And of the world around us. And soon we discover that the objects of our physical world can also cross over and possess identities of their own. Or, as extensions begin to glow with the life we lend to them. [...] By de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts (40-41)." McCloud essentially argues that this use of comics to place the reader in the realm of concept while showing them physical detail allows for a more tangible view of concepts in regard to our reality by intersecting words and visual art. Our lives, as demonstrated by Dodola and Zam, are often an intersection of the physical realities we deal with and our conceptualized expectation of these realities, a notion that the graphic form of this novel illuminates in convincing detail. By rendering concepts as physical entities on the page, such as the literal demonization of Dodola's sexuality<sup>3</sup> or Zam's all-consuming rage<sup>4</sup> at his own desires, Craig Thompson demonstrates their physical realities more efficiently than a textual narrative would have. This is not to discount the value of textual accounts of these phenomena, but to show how the form of this book very closely resembles the themes which it examines.

Turning to the first page of Chapter One, "River Map," Thompson immediately invites introspection about the aim of the story.<sup>5</sup> The first two panels show a black spot, developing into a raging river and reads:

“From the Divine Pen fell the first drop of ink. And from the drop, a river.” The next panels depict a drought, and the young girl who comes to be known as Dodola staring at the sun in ceremonial clothing. In a flashback later in the book, Dodola describes how she got her name- Dodola was “the rain goddess from the far northwest.” Her parents would strip and then dress her in plants and flowers and lead her in a parade, dousing her with water and “waiting for the heavenly bodies to open up and give us rain.” Following the devastation of the drought, Dodola is sold by her father into marriage to a scribe. Their marriage is consummated, and the young Dodola sits crying on her husband’s bed, who tells her “I am your husband. There is no shame,” as he holds up the bloodstained sheet reminiscent of the ink spot on the first page, “You should be proud of this mark. It proves you were pure.”<sup>6</sup> These few opening pages begins the inquest into the relationship between the word and the body- when the purity of water failed her family and the stories of the heavens failed to deliver, Dodola’s virginity is turned into the symbolic raindrop. At this point in their lives, her family can no longer rely on the hope from stories and tradition to bring prosperity, they can only act on physical imperatives- in order to save their own bodies from dehydration and starvation, they exchange Dodola’s body.

Dodola’s husband teaches her to read and write, starting with the “bā” character (ب), telling her “This line is the veil...and this point is the divine essence.”<sup>7</sup> Again, the point resembles the ink/bloodstain left from the loss of Dodola’s virginity. This divine essence that makes up the meaning of the bā’ directly parallels Dodola’s own “divine essence,”- underneath her veil of innocence was first her virginity, now replaced by her ability to tell stories with both these letters and her body. This is a new veil in itself, in that the ambiguity of language and the body veil the “divine essence” of the stories’ messages. Dodola teaches Zam to read, and this character holds special meaning for him as well, as the beginning of the Arabic phrase that Dodola teaches him to keep himself safe: “bismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm,” or “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” The bā’ recurs frequently throughout the story, and as stated on pages 38-39, “Bismillah becomes a circle. It can be tangled up in many forms.”<sup>8</sup> These frames show the Bismillah phrase twisted into traditional forms such as a pear or a bird. Dodola tells Zam of an ancient Chinese myth in which magic squares are revealed, each with corresponding letters and numbers- bā’s number is two. She tells Zam that if he keeps the magic squares and remembers the words



“bismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm,” he will be safe from evil. Thompson interjects here with a quotation from Rumi’s poem “Bismillah:” “Say Bismillah, In the name of God / as the priest does with a knife when he offers an animal. / Bismillah your old self / To find your real name.” He tells the story of Zam’s renaming based on the story of Ishmael and Hagar being left in the desert, but for our purposes this focus on “Bismillah” serves to influence Zam’s sexuality and guilt in the future. On multiple occasions, Zam reinvents himself to try to escape his lust for Dodola, each time desperate to devote his life to God and cast aside his corporeal, suffering desire. These words of Rumi’s follow Zam throughout the story, exemplifying his attempts to rid himself of bodily sins: as he attacks his erections (Thompson, 166), *especially* when he becomes a eunuch and later as he contemplates suicide in order to escape from his ruined body. Despite all of his renaming, Zam is never able to become what he considers his true self since he feels unable to reconnect with God, ultimately due to the “sinful” nature of his lusts. Zam’s transformations are one of the key examples of the written/spoken word’s ability to function in the physical realm—due to the word of God and the words he has heard from the mouths of men (Dodola’s rapists), he is consumed with self-loathing and unable to escape his arousal, leading to his physical violence against his genitals. He is voluntarily castrated and entered into the world of the hijra, though he doesn’t truly feel a “feminine spirit” within him. He merely wishes to remove what makes him physically male and thus leave the realm of other males, who he cannot see without remembering Dodola’s rape. Zam cannot translate the words of others into his own body’s actions, so he changes his body in order to suit the rules governing him, an ultimately failing errand of denial that merely leaves his self-loathing to turn within, lacking a physical expression to blame.

One of the most troublesome roles a body can take on is that of a mother, and Dodola’s maternal identity is at odds on every page of *Habibi*. When she becomes pregnant with the sultan’s child, Dodola begins to feel as though she has become “a container reshaped but its contents,” a statement that reflects all bodies at some time or another.<sup>9</sup> She compares her frame to that of hers pre-pregnancy, saying that “— my real self [was] buried in layers of fat and aching bone. I’d once used my body to my advantage, but even then it didn’t belong to me, possessed instead by the LUSTS of men.” The panels depicting this shift show her slender body crushed by a grotesquely obese version of

herself, juxtaposed with her seductively posed frame on the other page.<sup>10</sup> These panels are especially telling of our theme, demonstrating how Dodola's body was indeed "a container reshaped by its contents," whether that content be a fetus or a man. This touches on an important point in feminine philosophy that, more broadly, applies to both main characters in this story. Throughout history, many women's only sense of agency has come from either motherhood or exploitive use of their own bodies to charm men, but this example shows how these agencies are not especially empowering, as they require a subversion of the female body rather than a step away from that ideology (Irigaray). Zam provides us with examples that show how men are just as firmly encased in these subversions though—Zam is only able to find his identity within sex and righteousness, depending on what urge he's leaning into that day. This is also a common phenomenon today with many men feeling torn between social expectations to be a high-performing sex machine and to be the benevolent hero. Zam is unable to extricate lust from *predatory* lust, as it all seems quite animal to him.

On page 161, we see one of the many other ways that Dodola's body is turned into language—following the rape that Zam witnesses, he runs and hides in the engine room of their ship until Dodola finds him and demands he eats. Zam vomits up the food, unable to stomach the idea of eating anything that was obtained through what he saw in the desert. This scene has contained within it a multitude of examples of physical linguistics—first; Dodola uses her body as a business tool, which is taken from her in a ploy of intimidation. Once the food has been given (a bit of extra from the rapist's friend to make up for that little indiscretion), Dodola has become a martyred figure, literally sacrificing her body for food of which Zam must eat. Soon, Dodola's body becomes the catalyst in Zam's cycle of shame—despite the motherly words and actions that she aims at him, all he can see when lost in the desert is her body, shaping the landscape around him. Page 181 depicts one of the book's essential themes: "People were crying out for water, but the sources had dried up and there wasn't enough to share. When the world is on its last breath, however, the masses will need something to distract them from the destruction—and my body will still be a commodity. This is the world of men." These panels depict Dodola's body torn apart by demon hands, and a smaller panel of Zam in the bathtub, preparing to attack his erection.<sup>11</sup> This reflects back on a point I mentioned earlier, about Dodola's body being converted into a symbolic raindrop during a

drought—but instead of using her body simply to receive nourishment, she also plans to use it to help others escape their lack of such, a function long-held by stories. While stories soothe Zam, the notion of Dodola’s body as a commodity to be used tortures him, as evidenced by his self-mutilative sexual aggression.

Since Zam has been raised in relative isolation, his exposure to relationships comes purely from his experiences with Dodola, and the strangers they engage into commerce with. Since his only introduction to sex has been through accidental glances of Dodola and as witness to her rapes, Zam’s sexual identity is one clouded in shame and anxiety. Unable to separate his own healthy, natural sexual responses and urges from that of the aggressive men who force and take advantage of Dodola, Zam finds himself trapped in a body that is not his own, once again “a container reshaped by its contents.” Since for Zam his sexual urges are wrong and shameful, his body which contains them becomes a prison for him as well, just as Dodola’s does during her pregnancy. Clashed in Dodola’s maternal grasp one night after witnessing her rape, Zam dreams he is the desert rapist on top of Dodola, and wakes terrified. This clearly evidences his inability to separate sex from violence since rape is the only form of intercourse he knows anything about.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout *Habibi*, ancient stories hailing from numerous traditions are used to mirror the events of the book and as a method for tracing the trails of tropes and customs into their present portrayal (Lawson). Seen in light of the contemporary culture in which he writes, Thompson is clearly critiquing, or at least depicting, the internalized beliefs and reactions to many interpersonal relationships and events.

These stories taken from traditions including but not limited to Hinduism, all three Abrahamic religions and Slavic tradition are all told in accordance with the events of Dodola and Zam’s lives, usually relating to the manner in which their bodies are being used. Stories of legendary sacrifice are a prevalent reminder of one cornerstone of the pair’s relationship—Dodola’s figurative Eucharist in allowing her body for sexual consumption in place of food; Zam’s identification with the martyr for purity and abstinence through self-mutilation, Bahuchara Mata (349, 337-340). The story of Bahuchara Mata is an especially apt reflection of Zam’s confused sexuality, and the panels depicting this provide an even stronger representation: the patron goddess of the hijra, “She was accosted in the desert by thieves. But more than her

money they wanted her body. So to protect herself from rape—she cut off her own breasts—and offered them to the thieves in exchange for her virtue. She bled to death in the desert. A martyr[,] an emblem of abstinence, impotence, and self-mutilation[.]” The scene shows Habibi buried in the sand, as is customary following this castration, hallucinating that he is suckling from the nipple of the eviscerated breasts of Bahuchara Mata.<sup>13</sup>

This goddess shows us the new depth to Zam’s sexual identity as a result of his castration—his conflicting views of Dodola as his self-sacrificing benefactor and his sexual fantasy coincide in this dual representation of Zam’s desires. Since his sexual desires stemming from anatomy he does not understand entices his body to attack him with unwanted urges (much like Bahuchara Mata’s body attracts rapists), Zam offers his genitals up for the sake of purity in an effort to vindicate himself of his shameful attraction to Dodola. This scene also helps to explain the source of his guilt, a sort of Freudian anxiety about sexualizing the woman who has raised him. In a symbolic tribute to Dodola’s sacrifice of her body for his survival, Zam attempts to reconcile this debt by using his own body among the hijra as traditional entertainment and nearly sex work, and to live without sexual desire in penance for that inherent sin. In this attempt to disconnect from his corporeal self, Zam hopes to become nearer to God, but merely removes a connection to this world, in which the idea of the sacred is contained: “The world means nothing now. I need no one.” Despite this, he still feels the sexual desire when touched by a fellow, very attractive and traditionally feminine hijra.

As depicted on page 360 by a stump cut off but still spreading roots, Zam has only removed the physical manifestation of his sexual identity as far as he can recognize it, not realizing the multitude of unnamed and unconscious factors playing into his urges. Since his only acquaintance with sexuality is from his own unwanted and unexplained erections while thinking of Dodola and witnessing her rape (with the very same type of anatomy like his which responds to her), he can only associate his anatomical response with that violence—thus, the fear and shame.

Through this representation of their sexual turmoil through a traditional story demonstrating the cultural value of abstinence and martyrdom, we see how words can literally become the actions of a body through the conditioned responses depicted by them. The

repetition of these stories enforces and perpetuates their central themes and intents derived from the culture in which they were formed, influencing the shape of them in the present (Althusser). For Zam and Dodola (along with the rest of the world), their culture has inscribed on them titles for their relationship, their actions, and everything around them. They relate to one another and to their circumstances through stories, essentially attempting to name and understand a society they are largely on the outskirts of, but still influenced by. This internalized, generative naming system is not exclusive to socio-cultural shaping, but also takes form in a way that seems abstract at first, but is actually quite precise. On pages 470-475 of *Habibi*, we see Dodola close to death following her near-drowning in toxic water, healed by the literal consumption of a doctor's knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Healers in every culture and location throughout history have transcribed their knowledge of the physical world into decipherable codes that can be understood by their peers and those that come after them and used to perform physical action on living subjects. Without the names and internalized recognition of such chemical units as mass, reactivity and substance, physical science and medicine would be completely unable to organize their specific terms into comprehensible and practical use (250).

Meaning can become fluid if not rigorously tied down and separated from what it is not, which we see when Dodola uses semantics to turn water into gold (301)—depending on context, the names and meanings we use can become ambiguous (Derrida). This is another crucial aspect of interpersonal relationships that we see demonstrated by Zam and Dodola—the two do not exist in a contextual vacuum and thus change along with their circumstances. Before he can even walk, Zam is entangled in an identity crisis of names, that given to him by his biological mother and those given to him by Dodola.<sup>15</sup> Depending on which woman he's in the care of, his names switch meaning between the ideologically-driven Cham (an alternate spelling of the biblical Ham), Zam (from ZamZam, the well that baby Ishmael discovered) and Habibi (Arabic for "my baby"). For Dodola, Zam's variety of names is representative of the multiple angles from which she comes to view him, first as the surrogate child through whom she can vicariously redeem her own lost childhood, and later as the protective man who cherishes her (626). As for Zam, he only knows Dodola by one name which encapsulates all of his intermingled emotions for her—his desire, protectiveness, and reverence toward her cannot be defined

within any of the social terms that they might fall into such as mother or lover, but are all present in his understanding of her name (405).<sup>16</sup>

One of the main points of this argument is based in the crossing of boundaries, and the means by which those boundaries are established and ultimately faulty, particularly the boundary between symbolic language and physical reality (Derrida). On page 546 of *Habibi*, Dodola confesses while watching the palace from the safe distance of her new temporary home that “This proximity to the site of both our separation and reunion disrupted the boundaries within me.” This statement is essentially reflective of the entirety of Zam and Dodola’s relationship—their intimate proximity has created the difficulty in distinguishing what binds and what separates them, a search that leads them to drastic measures in an attempt to close any gaps. Zam admits near the end of the book in the text-only chapter “Orphan’s Prayer” that he has replaced God with Dodola, comparing his worship of her to that of a graven image. Zam’s understanding of God leads him to believe that reverence of anything other than a supreme being is just as sinful as his turning Dodola “into an object of lust,” the two issues wrapping up in one another to drive him to suicide at the sight of his impurity. Just as he has attempted to become closer to God by ridding himself of his body’s desires, he also tries to understand and become Dodola. Zam reveres her benevolence, affection and vulnerability to the point of worship, and sees countless trespasses against her divine characteristics done to Dodola by men, and begins to associate masculinity with violence. “I searched for Dodola in my own femininity. I claimed I wanted to be closer to God, but—again in my blasphemy—I meant Dodola. I cut off what made us different. I wanted both halves to meet within me.” For Zam, the separation between he and Dodola seems to be largely widened by his own perceived innate evils, and attempts to remove this with his foray into femininity.

The frayed boundaries of both motherhood and companionship complicate events for Dodola, who, like Zam, is at odds with her sexual identity. The key difference in their identity confusion is that Dodola seems much less conscious of the motivations behind her actions and adapts for survival according to the path she follows without much examination beforehand, whereas Zam is obsessed with the possible trajectory of any thought he has. Raising Zam from an early age, Dodola builds a protective bond with him not unlike that of a mother or older sibling, growing to think of him as her responsibility to care for in both

body and mind. Zam becomes the one person who does not force Dodola to submit to them and relies on her for more than her commodity value. This echoes a touted benefit of motherhood, unconditional love from a being to whom you are the center of the world, at least for a period of time. Considering the vast lack of lasting affection and respect in Dodola's life by the time she is raising this orphan child, it is no surprise that she becomes deeply attached to her surrogate son. But the complication comes in from her corner first when her biological son Rajab is born and she feels no connection with him, and later when she enters into a sexual relationship with Zam. An important fact to remember is that Dodola is impregnated involuntarily by the sultan during her time as his favorite courtesan, and that Zam was a child she willingly saved from the same circumstances she found herself in at the slave market. For Dodola, her body has been so frequently used as a tool rather than a living entity, that the biological distinction between a child conceived in her womb and one pulled into her void barely exists.

Despite the fact that Dodola carries and gives birth to Rajab, she feels as though her true child is the one that she chose.<sup>17</sup> This desire for choice forms an impassable gulf between Dodola and Rajab that is filled by Nadidah, her wet nurse. During her pregnancy and Rajab's life, Dodola feels much closer to the lost Zam than to her own child—the mere existence of the pair's desire to be together is a factor that unites them independently of their bodies, though in absence neither can be expressed. In the fits of feverish poisoning on pages 461-467, Dodola expresses that her "womb was unfaithful," as she hallucinates Zam and her "swallowing mouthfuls of sewage [...] The space between us filled up with boxes and bottles and plastic bags and half-digested meals." The panel clearly depicts the couple's perceived distance with all of the "garbage" around them—their failures and crises that pile up within identities.<sup>18</sup> The two also share the bond of having cast off their pasts and the traditions that bridled them when Dodola escaped with Zam and changed his name: "Holding that child in my arms, I blessed exclusively the moment, cursing along with the past the future when he would outgrow me (497)."

The ultimate moment of their desires and needs' reconciliation comes at the end of the book, starting on page 632 when Dodola asks to see Zam's scar. Dodola explains to Zam that physical penetration isn't the only way to connect, and shows him how abandoning the carnal aspect of bodily connection can be just as fulfilling. "During sex, my

spirit always disconnected from my body. Hovering above the lamp as vapor. Over time, my sky crowded with churning, sweaty faces. When Zam anchored me, the dark clouds dissolved. I grasped hold of my vapor—and drew it back into my body.” Finally given the choice to express their emotions and needs in a linguistically impossible way, Dodola and Zam are able to connect in a way that satisfies them both.<sup>19</sup>

By abandoning the society that had literally imprisoned them as slaves while still demanding a “civil” and appropriate relationship, the two have also left behind the linguistic constraints. As the two lay in their makeshift bed, Dodola’s thoughts narrate: “If the soul overflows, another is able to contain it.”<sup>20</sup> This is the heart of the matter- one intangible sentiment overflowing from one person into another, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Essentially communication through both body and language works by defining an ambiguous approximation of the overflow so we can try to contain it and understand its originating point in the other person.

The main point of this argument has been to demonstrate both the various invisible boundaries and bridges between language and the physical world as we interact with it, a physical world that includes everyone in it. Interpersonal relationships can often seem like a simple correspondence of conversation and lunch plans, but this close look at Zam and Dodola shows how extensively linguistic categorization impacts our responses and decisions regarding other people and the world around us. Just through naming the elements and making sure someone else will recognize and build on them down the line, we have entire scientific fields; reminding oppressors of the crimes of the persecuted has shaped entire populations and cultures; being given one title often closes the door on any other. Craig Thompson’s *Habibi* is just one example, but a powerful one, of how language and bodies are both inextricable from and reliant upon one another, but it is a powerful one.



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