

DEFYING VOICES, DEFINING VOICES: THE POETIC
VOICE OF FOROUGH FARROKHZAD

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Abstract

This article highlights the literary contribution of Forough Farrokhzad, a Persian woman poet. Select poems are considered for a brief but meticulous study. The themes of the poems are about unrequited love, infidelity of men, neglect of women, rights of women, her country's affairs, wars etc. Farrokhzad is not only a feminist poet but also championed for the development of her country. Farrokhzad is a woman poet who not only wrote about socially relevant themes but also carried out her beliefs in real life as well. She also forayed into filmmaking and her maiden film "Khaneh siah ast or The House is Black" received critical acclaim. Her untimely demise at just 32 years has left a great void in the Iranian literary and popular culture. The article attempts to establish the fact that Forough Farrokhzad, indeed merits, the acknowledgement that she is a pioneer of Persian poetry and one of the most influential Persian poets of the 20th century.

Keywords: Persian literature, Iranian women, women's writing, voice of women,

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Introduction to the topic

In 1931, Virginia Woolf presented a paper to The Women's Service League, "Professions for Women" in which she states that as a woman writer she had to wage a war against a phantom in the house, which she refers to as "Angel in the House." This "Angel in the House," Woolf says, subdues her voice against voicing out her true feelings.

Woolf's contention was that women writers work under pressure of preconceived expectations of the society. In the same paper, Woolf also bemoans that no one really knows what a woman really is: "[. . .] what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill [1]"

One can comprehend that the gravity of the situation for a woman writer from mid east is far greater with wide-ranging consequences. This article is about one such courageous poet who called her "sisters" to stand up and claim their rights and to reach out for their identity. In spite of her country's background, the voice of this "sad little fairy" was heard loud and clear above all the din and above the pandemonium of internal and external wars. An earnest and ferocious woman poet has taken the Persian literary world by storm and tried to set free the hitherto bonded woman to find her self and identify. It is interesting to note that in Iran, Farrokhzad was actively writing and spreading feminism at the time the second wave of feminism swept across America.

Women write under the censorship of self, society and religion. The societal constraints dictate the range of topics a woman is allowed to write about. Women have to fight individually and in isolation as reported in the article The Guarded Tongue. It is rightly pointed out in the article that a censorship against a woman's writing "becomes one woman's misfortune rather than a cultural bias that is deeply gendered" [2].

Apart from intellectual and emotional satisfaction, women writers' writings should also aim at abolishing fear in women and making them aware of their rights. Writing is a manifold process for women writers from conservative countries as their writings not only satisfy their creative urge, but also help in the progress of their nation and address the problems of women in their countries.

Writings by women are different from writings on women by men as writings on women by men are aimed to project a perfect woman according to a man's view point, whereas the writings by women should frankly address the question of female subjugation and male supremacy.

In a traditional country like Iran, the voice of a woman is an aberration. Moreover, when this woman poet chooses to speak frankly about the status of women in her country, the status of her country in the world and about women's rights, it becomes a glaring deviation from the expected path of the conservatives. Nevertheless, Forough Farrokhzad's fiery voice was accepted and acclaimed in Persian literature and abroad. Though the literary world lost her in a tragic accident at a very young age, Farrokhzad's defying voice defined a woman to a great extent.

Introduction to Forough Farrokhzad



Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forough_Farrokhzad

Forough Farrokhzad (January 5, 1935 — February 13, 1967) is considered a pioneer of Iranian women poets based on her contribution to poetry. She not only revolutionized the genre but also Iranian popular culture. The uniqueness in her poetry lies in her audacity to go beyond the barriers of culture, tradition and parameters of literary conventions. This influential Iranian woman's poetic voice reverberates eternally in Iranian literary history. Her poetry is a message to society and her poetic style is such that it could reach the audience personally. Based on her works in the literary field and for the society, she is rightly considered as the most influential poet of Persian language in the 20th century.

In 1962, she made a film on Behkadeh Raji colony, a colony for lepers in her country and received critical acclaim for the film. She adopted the son of a leper couple, Hossein Mansouri, and brought him up as her own. In 1963, UNESCO produced a 30-minute film on Farrokhzad

and her works. Around this time, Italian film director, Bernardo Bertolucci, was so impressed with her that he made a 15- minute documentary on her.

“Nobody will introduce me to the sun,
Nobody will take me to the gathering of doves.
Keep the flight in mind-The bird may die.”

A poet who needs little introduction to the Asian poetry readers categorically merits an introduction to the poetry readers in other languages as well. Her poems are fittingly being translated into English and other languages as well.

Hailing from a country whose severe laws are an impediment to women’s progress, Forough Farrokhzad’s poetry made an amazing mark in literature. Her themes ranged from love to socially sensitive issues. The bitter experiences life dealt with this passionate woman poet helped her to embrace life and address its predicaments rather than disassociate from life. The increasing popularity of her poetry is a testimony that in life, art is more relevant than power or money and art withstands the adversities in life.

Farrokhzad’s Themes

In the poem, “Another Birth¹,” the lines below seem to be questioning life and its inadequacies. The hopelessness of dreams, life and relationships in this materialistic world are clearly and expertly depicted by this young woman poet.

Another Birth

Life is perhaps
a long street through which a woman holding
a basket passes every day

Life is perhaps
a rope with which a man hangs himself from a branch
life is perhaps a child returning home from school.

Life is perhaps lighting up a cigarette

¹ Most of Forough Farrokhzad’s poems are translated by Ahmad Karimi Hakkak and Maryam Dilmaghani from Persian language to English language.

in the narcotic repose between two love-makings
or the absent gaze of a passerby
who takes off his hat to another passerby
with a meaningless smile and a good morning .

Life is perhaps that enclosed moment
when my gaze destroys itself in the pupil of your eyes
and it is in the feeling
which I will put into the Moon's impression
and the Night's perception.

This poem further speaks of memories probably due to unrequited love and bitterness caused by her divorce as evidenced by the verses given below.

In a room as big as loneliness
my heart
which is as big as love
looks at the simple pretexts of its happiness
at the beautiful decay of flowers in the vase
at the sapling you planted in our garden
and the song of canaries
which sing to the size of a window.

.....

Farrokhzad's verses also expound that people can achieve success only when they take giant steps in life towards their goal. These perceptive verses, coming from a young woman of a restrained society, surprisingly disclose a woman who is matured beyond her age.

No fisherman shall ever find a pearl in a small brook
which empties into a pool.

In the same poem she also pens verses which most likely are an indication of the lonely life she lived.

I know a sad little fairy
who lives in an ocean
and ever so softly
plays her heart into a magic flute
a sad little fairy
who dies with one kiss each night
and is reborn with one kiss each dawn.

The Wind Will Take Us

The poem, 'The Wind Will Take Us,' talks about the lonely life of the poet as seen in the verses below.

In my small night, ah
the wind has a date with the leaves of the trees
in my small night there is agony of destruction
listen
do you hear the darkness blowing?
I look upon this bliss as a stranger
I am addicted to my despair.

clouds, like a procession of mourners
seem to be waiting for the moment of rain.
a moment
and then nothing
night shudders beyond this window
and the earth winds to a halt
beyond this window
something unknown is watching you and me.

Another of Farrokhzad's poems which talk about her loneliness and addiction to despair. Clouds which wait for rain realize after the great moment is over that there is nothing remaining to hold on to. Farrokhzad could be implying how lonely her life is in this poem. The poem goes on to indicate that the "night shudders beyond this window and the earth winds to a halt." Farrokhzad's personal life probably was very lonely as these verses indicate. This poem also reflects her expertise in using unusual similes and metaphors such as comparing 'clouds' to 'a procession of mourners.' Farrokhzad wrote mostly in first person, which gives the readers an impression of the influence of autobiographical elements in her poetry, probably true to some extent.

The joy of love echoes in 'Love Song' which is given below, where the verses also simultaneously sing about the pain of love or the period of lovelessness. Love, as a woman feels, seems to be universal in feeling and cuts across borders and boundaries as evidenced in Farrokhzad's poems.

Love Song

With you there is nothing to fear
But the pain of joyful tear
This sad heart of mine and profuse light?
This din of life in the abyss of blight?
The glance in your eyes is my field
And with it my eyes are sealed
Before this I had no other image
Or I would not but you envisage
The pain of love is a dark pain
Going and demeaning oneself in vain
Leaning against people with black sight
Defiling oneself with the filth of spite
Finding in caresses venom of wile
Finding villainy in friend's smile

This poem has the structure of a sonnet with 14 lines, out of which 8 lines sing the bliss of love and the last 6 lines, contrastingly, talk about the pain of love. The poem conveys the notion that the subject in the poem could be weary in trusting people based on her past experience in which

she was deceived. That could be the reason behind her not trusting love again even though she finds her soul mate.

Her early poems were on love and deceit. Despite the fact that Farrokhzad felt deceived by men whom she loved and trusted, she did not allow this feeling of betrayal to control her feelings or her social work. She was a very compassionate individual as evidenced by her social work.

In her later poems, we see that Farrokhzad veered into feminism, status of women in her country and socio-relevant issues.

In the poem, 'It is only Sound that Remains' Farrokhzad speaks about freedom, liberty and life beyond the man-made restrictions. Here 'birds' could be a metaphor for 'liberated women' and 'blue direction' could be 'the world of dreams and hopes' of women and the 'bug' could be the metaphor for 'mean people.'

It is only Sound that Remains

Why should I stop, why?
the birds have gone in search
of the blue direction.
the horizon is vertical, vertical
and movement fountain-like;
and at the limits of vision
shining planets spin.
the earth in elevation reaches repetition,
and air wells
changes into tunnels of connection;
and day is a vastness,
which does not fit into narrow mind
of newspaper worms.

.....

what can a swamp be?
what can a swamp be but the spawning ground
of corrupt insects?
swollen corpses scrawl the morgue's thoughts,
the unmanly one has hidden
his lack of manliness in blackness,
and the bug... ah,
when the bug talks,
why should I stop?
cooperation of lead letters is futile,
it will not save the lowly thought.
I am a descendant of the house of trees.
breathing stale air depresses me.
a bird which died advised me to
commit flight to memory.
the ultimate extent of powers is union,
joining with the bright principle of the sun
and pouring into the understanding of light.
it is natural for windmills to fall apart.

.....

I obey the four elements;
and the job of drawing up
the constitution of my heart
is not the business
of the local government of the blind.

The poet's desire to be only accountable to the four elements is very vividly depicted in these lines. Farrokhzad was writing against constraints and breaking the barriers to start a fresh liberated life. Her powerful lines voice against the government's ill-advised rules and regulations.

The poem, "Age Seven" is about nostalgia. The poet pines for her innocent childhood which is lost forever. She expresses that life that one lived after seven was nothing but 'insanity' and 'ignorance'.

Ay, age seven

Ay, the magnanimous moment of departure

Whatever happened after you,
happened in a mesh of insanity and ignorance.

.....

After you, where our playground was beneath the desk

we graduated from beneath the desks

to behind the desks

and from behind the desks

to top of the desks

and we played on top of the desks

and lost

we lost your color

Aah, age seven.

.....

The above lines depict the imposing expertise in the usage of metaphors of the young poet. The poet could possibly be implying that in childhood, we see children playing beneath the desks, as they grow up, they tend to work behind the desks and once death overtakes them, according to religious rights, the bodies are laid on tables to dress them up for the last rites. That could be the reason why the verses go on to say, 'we played on top of the desks/ and lost/ we lost your color/Aah, age seven'. Farrokhzad's perceptive poetry reveals that death wins over the people who are laid on the top of the desks. Death, according to Farrokhzad, is loss of hope and innocence with which one is blessed at the age of seven.

Farrokhzad explored various themes in her poetry from personal to global affairs. The topics she chose to voice her concern range from complex dilemmas of a woman's world to confronting the political situation in her country. Farrokhzad's poetry reveals that she is more concerned with improving the condition of women by drawing attention to the world beyond restraints where men and women can co-exist without subjugation.

Call to Arms

Only you, O Iranian woman, have remained
In bonds of wretchedness, misfortune, and cruelty;
If you want these bonds broken,
grasp the skirt of obstinacy

....

It is your warm embracing bosom
that nurtures proud and pompous man;
it is your joyous smile that bestows
on his heart warmth and vigour.

For that person who is your creation,
to enjoy preference and superiority is shameful;
woman, take action because a world
awaits and is in tune with you.

Sleeping in a dark grave is happier for you
than this abject servitude and misfortune;
where is that proud man..? Tell him
to bow his head henceforth at your threshold.

Where it that proud mane? Tell him to get up
because a woman is here rising to battle him;
her words are the truth, in which cause
she will never shed tears out of weakness.

American feminist Betty Friedan says that a woman's real enemy is degradation of the self, which is also voiced by Farrokhzad as seen in the above lines [3]. Farrokhzad further opines that a woman need not bow before man; man is nothing but her own creation.

In the poem, "I feel Little Garden's Pain," Farrokhzad's anguish for the deterioration of her country is explicitly expressed. In this poem also we see her expertise in using metaphors like the 'little garden' for 'country,' 'brothers' and 'sisters' are fellow citizens, 'flowers' and 'birds' could be 'innocent children and women compatriots.'

Nobody cares for flowers.

Nobody cares for birds.

Nobody wants to believe that Little Garden is dying,
Nobody wants to believe that Little Garden's heart-
is swollen in this parching heat.

.....

My father says:

"I am done with life,
I am done with life and I did my work."

In his room, all day long-
he is reading history and poems.

He tells my mom:

"Who cares about upkeep of the yard?"

I am ill and old and my pension-pay, is just to carry on.”

My mother’s entire life is a prayer book,
spread at the doors of fright of Hell.
My mother is looking every where-
for the blessed parts of things.

.....

My bother gets drunk,
My brother blows up mirrors,
plates and painting frames.

He is trying so hard, so hard, so hard to show-
that he is very desperate, sad and drawn.

He takes his ID, his lighter, and his despair-
to streets, to bistros and to shops.
His despair is so tiny that every night,
it gets lost in the crowd of a bar.

The above lines portray of a weak man and his imagined turmoils which are minuscule and insignificant. Also he is extremely immature as he is under the impression that drinking to forget is a solution to his problems. In these lines, Farrokhzad could be talking about the present generation which lacks focus and maturity.

....

My sister is living in uptown now.
Now, she has a sham house,
Now, she has an artificial plant.
She stays with her fake husband,

They listen to synthetic music,
And they will make lots of natural kids.

In the above lines, she could be talking about hypocritical women who think that material wealth is more important than intellectual wealth. These are the women who hate their country but would do nothing to change its state.

....

Our courtyard is feeling lonely.
Our courtyard is feeling lonely.
The whole day, it sounds like razing and hammering:
Our neighbors are implanting mines in their field,
Our neighbors are mounting a safety cover for their pool,
Our neighbors' basement looks like a secret arsenal base.
Our neighbor's children are fighting with noisy guns and bombs.
Our courtyard is feeling scared.

Her concern for the safety of her country and countrymen comes alive in the above lines.

And I am scared of this Heartless Time.
I am scared of all those Wasted Hands.
I am scared of all these Stranger Heads.
I am so lonely, like a nerd in Math Class.

....

And Little Garden's mind is slowly losing its green past.
In the last line of the poem, she laments the damage done to her country and countrymen and the loss of her country's rich inheritance.

“I Will Greet the Sun Again” is one of her famous poems in which she raises to greet the sun or in other words an enlightened world. In this poem also we see the dexterous use of metaphors like ‘sun’ for ‘enlightened world’

I am sending-
my warmest greetings to the sun,
and to the tender rivers that streamed in my veins,
and to the raining clouds that forever carried- my endless dreams-
to the other side.

.....

I will arrive!
And then,
all the closed gates will be shattered by Love,
And all the forsaken isles will be invaded by Love,
And there, I will greet everybody who loves.

And, I know:
There will be a girl,
still standing in front of the gates,
those soaked gates-
in the Deluge of Love.

I will greet her again as well.
I will greet her again as well.

Her expectations that her country will be deluged by love can be seen in the above lines. The girl she is referring to could be her lost childhood which she presumes will be regained in the new country. We not only see a citizen’s love for her countrymen but also visualize the hopes and aspirations of a judicious and sensible poet.

“Friday” is another of Farrokhzad’s renowned poems.

Friday

My silent Friday,
My deserted Friday,
My Friday: sad, like dusty-
forsaken lanes.
My Friday,
The cold day of ailing, idle thoughts;
The moist day of endless, cruel bore,
My Friday, loaded with grief,
mournful of my fading faith,
and of my vain hope,

Oh, my Friday,
this renouncing day...

In the above poem, Farrokhzad seems to seek answers for the “silent Friday.” Friday is considered as very auspicious and holy by people of Islam. The devout Muslim men all over the world go to mosques to offer prayers. But on this particular Friday, the roads and lanes are deserted; the day is loaded with “grief,” “fading faith” and “vain hope.”

The poem below talks about the constraints a woman faces in coming out of a bad marriage. Even though, she finds true love, circumstances play a role in her life in such a way that it is difficult for her to break her bonds and reach out for true love. Farrokhzad uses the metaphor ‘captive bird’ for a woman in a loveless marriage. She further goes on to say that for a woman, it is impossible to leave her child in spite of a bad marriage as the mother feels she is responsible for the child’s happiness. A woman can allow her life to be shattered in ruins but she will not be the cause of ruin of a home or a child’s world.

The Captive [Asir]

I want you, yet I know that never
Can I embrace you to my heart’s content

you are that clear and bright sky.
I, in this corner of the cage, am a captive bird.

from behind the cold and dark bars
directing toward you my rueful look of astonishment,
I am thinking that a hand might come
and I might suddenly spread my wings in your direction.

I am thinking that in a moment of neglect
I might fly from this silent prison,
laugh in the eyes of the man who is my jailer
and beside you begin life anew.

I am thinking these things, yet I know
that I can not, dare not leave this prison.
even if the jailer would wish it,
no breath or breeze remains for my flight.

from behind the bars, every bright morning
the look of a child smile in my face;
when I begin a song of joy,
his lips come toward me with a kiss.

O sky, if I want one day
To fly from this silent prison,
What shall I say to the weeping child's eyes:
Forget about me, for I am a captive bird?

I am that candle which illumines ruins
With the burning of her heart.
If I want to choose silent darkness,

I will bring a nest to ruin.

Yet another poem on marital bond, these poems could be based on her broken marriage. In the poem below, she explains the significance of a marriage band as the bond of labour and slavery.

The Wedding Band

The girl smiled and said: What
is the secret of this gold ring,
the secret of this ring that so tightly
embraces my finger,
the secret of this band
that sparkles and shines so?
the man was startled and said:
it's the ring of good fortune, the ring of life.

.....

The woman grew agitated and cried out:
O my, this ring that
still sparkles and shines
is the band of slavery and servitude

The above lines could be an indication of the unhappy marriage Farrokhzad led.

“The Sin” is a poem which conveys the earnestness of the poet. Considering the times and the place from which she wrote, this poem could be a path breaker in Persian literature.

The Sin [Gonah]

I sinned a sin full of pleasure,

In an embrace which was warm and fiery.
I sinned surrounded by arms
that were hot and avenging and iron.

.....

The above poem is the inner voice of a woman who sought pleasure out of marriage. It is a poem about a woman who was happy with her lover for a few hours perhaps, at the same time, ended up with guilt feelings eventually. Yet, she is honest about her feelings. In Iran, in the 1960s, this poem could have created quite a havoc for its content. As we can see from her poetry, we can comprehend that Farrokhzad's voice is not a voice that wavered; her voice is a genuine and distinctive voice which made men and women think and act. Farrokhzad was a poet who broke new grounds and who set new visions for the creation of a liberal world where men and women could co-exist as equals without domination or subjugation.

Farrokhzad's defying voice is a clarion call for all women around the world to rise up and fight for their rights, as we see in the poem "To my Sister." She enlightens women that they need not live the roles of "an object of pleasure" or "married wife" of a much married old man for the sake of their livelihood. She exhorts them to rise up and claim a new life where they can live a free life without being tyrannised and humiliated every second.

To my Sister

Sister, rise up after your freedom,
why are you quiet?
rise up because henceforth
you have to imbibe the blood of tyrannical men.

Seek your rights, Sister,
from those who keep you weak,
from those whose myriad tricks and schemes
keep you seated in a corner of the house.

How long will you be the object of pleasure
In the harem of men's lust?
how long will you bow your proud head at his feet
like a benighted servant?

How long for the sake of a morsel of bread,
will you keep becoming an aged haji's temporary wife,
seeing second and third rival wives.
oppression and cruelty, my sister, for how long?

This angry moan of yours
Must surely become a clamorous scream.
you must tear apart this heavy bond
so that your life might be free.

Rise up and uproot the roots of oppression.
give comfort to your bleeding heart.
for the sake of your freedom, strive
to change the law, rise up.

Not only Farrokhzad's poetry, but the social work she has done in Iran in the 1960s should be an eye-opener for men and women all over the world. Her life advocates people to stand up for their beliefs and work towards realizing them. Through her social work and poetry, Farrokhzad defied the traditions and re-defined the role of a woman.

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