CHAPTER ONE

The Development of the Artistic Female Self in the Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad

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Between the views of those critics who value the literary merit of Forugh Farrokhzad’s poetry and those who consider it mere erotic verse, there is a significant interface: they all agree that her poetry drastically changed the path of self-expression in Iranian women’s literature. Farrokhzad daringly expressed herself on taboo topics, and the rebellious quality of her work under-mines the patriarchal rules of Iranian culture. She presented her intimate experiences, and by doing so created the image of a lonely genius in a patriarchal world too indifferent to a woman’s sufferings. To some readers, she has become an accessible idol whose personal experiences of nervous breakdowns and divorce, along with her tragic sudden death in 1967 at the age of only thirty-two, define the value of her poetry. As American critic Jasmin Darznik writes: “During her own lifetime, critics tended to conflate Farrokhzad’s poetry with the poetic persona of her verses, and when Forugh Farrokhzad is remembered today, it is still most often as a confessional poet, one who drew directly from her life to her art or, more pointedly, from her sex life to her erotic verses” (104).
The similarities between Farrokhzad and the persona she created have made her life story a point of reference in interpreting her work. The same can be said of the importance of Farrokhzad’s life story in the feminist movement of Iran. Her struggle both in life and in art to balance socially accepted roles for women with their personal aspirations and inner desires has made her the symbol of resistance to patriarchal power. While I concede that her life experiences made her the epitome of the progressive Iranian woman at the turn of the twenty-first century, I believe that she moved beyond this struggle into a realm of universal human experience. In trying to express her femininity, Farrokhzad found, defined, and constantly redefined her artistic self. The incorporation of personal experiences into art demonstrates this struggle in the lives of progressive women artists of her generation and places Farrokhzad among the poets of the confessional school.

The term “confessional poetry” was first used by critic M. L. Rosenthal, in a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* published in 1959 (154). The broad acceptance of the term resulted in some critics giving more weight to the candour of the poems than to their artistic qualities. Robert Phillips insists that “a true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove,” arguing that confessional poetry “dispenses with a symbol or formula for an emotion and gives the naked emotion direct, personally rather than impersonally” (8). He suggests that the more directly the poet exposes her inner feelings and desires, the greater the artistic value of her work. However, Bruce Bawer expresses a completely contrasting view, writing that “the best of confessional poetry is marked by balance, control, a sense of form and rhythm, and even a degree of detachment” (8). Bawer’s position is that confessional poetry should be more than simply an emotional outpouring that reflects the poet’s personal life and experiences. Nonetheless, as the poetry of the personal “I,” confessional poetry often reveals private experiences and feelings about a great range of issues, including death, depression, and love. The “I” of Farrokhzad’s poetry invites the reader to bear witness to the sufferings of the persona and to join her as she goes through distressing experiences. Through the use of personal material, she ventures into areas of female consciousness and feeling that had rarely been touched on by other forms of Persian poetry produced by women. To make her voice heard, Farrokhzad needed to break through the limitations and challenge societal expectations of her as a woman and as an artist.

In the course of discussing the poetry of another female confessional poet, Sylvia Plath, with whom Farrokhzad has been compared many times, Sandra
Gilbert also explores the work of Charlotte Brontë, referring to her novel Jane Eyre as a Bildungsroman. She states that Brontë “couldn’t write the serious, straightforward, neo-Miltonic account of the ‘growth of the poet’s mind’ that Wordsworth produced.” Primarily for psychosocial reasons, “[w]omen as a rule, even sophisticated women writers, haven’t until quite recently been brought to think of themselves as conscious subjects in the world. Deprived of education, votes, jobs, and property rights, they have also, even more significantly, been deprived of their own selfhood” (“A Fine, White Flying Myth” 249). In an earlier study of confessional poets, Gilbert aptly observes the difference between male and female confessional poetry:

The male confessional poet—Lowell, Berryman, Yeats—writes in the certainty that he is the inheritor of major traditions, the grandson of history, whose very anxieties, as Harold Bloom has noted, are defined by the ambiguities of the past that has shaped him as it shaped his fathers. The female poet, however, even when she is not consciously confessional like Plath or Saxton, writes in the hope of discovering or defining a self, a certainty, a tradition. (“My Name Is Darkness” 448)

Gilbert does not use the term Bildungsroman for the work of the female confessional poets but states that “[c]onsidering and discarding different metaphors, different propositions of identity,” the female confessional poet “seem[s] to be straining to formulate an ontology of selfhood, some irreducible and essential truth about her own nature” (448). However, Farzaneh Milani considers “[t]he whole canon of Farrokhzad’s poetry . . . as a kind of Bildungsroman.” Milani believes that the term “best embodies Farrokhzad’s emergence from cultural conditioning and her struggle to come to self-realization, warranting its adaptation to her journey and to her awakening” (136). Although Bildungsroman is a genre of novel and has most often been associated with the development of a male protagonist’s mind and character, the concept—or rather its subtype, Künstlerroman—can be used to study the development of the persona in the poetry of Farrokhzad. In what follows, I trace the formation of the female self in samples of Farrokhzad’s poetry. I begin by introducing the forces that shape the selfhood of the artistic female self; this is followed by a discussion of whether and how the persona goes through rebirth and recreation of her artistic self.

Autocratic political systems and cultural obstacles have prevented the freedom of expression in different periods of Iranian history and have resulted in the
formation of a complex system of metaphors and layers of meaning in Persian poetry. A cursory look at the history of Persian literature reveals how poetry has helped many in expressing their most radical criticism of cultural, social, religious, and political matters without facing any serious consequences. However, this situation has been the privilege of male poets, and the female experience has been glaringly absent from Persian poetry. In the mid-twentieth century, with certain cultural developments and the creation of more opportunities for women to participate in society, a new tradition of women’s poetry came into being that was highly self-reflective and self-revelatory. It was a new school of poetry by women, in which they openly expressed their feelings and emotions, braving stigmatization by the patriarchal and religious society. In what appeared as a sudden change in Iranian society’s cultural spirit, female poets shed their veils and raised their voices.

Up to this point in the history of Persian poetry, there is almost no trace of female experience, but, as Farzaneh Milani describes this new generation of women poets, “with body unveiled and pen in hand, they led the reader behind walls and veils to the domain of the private” (127). Unlike the obedient traditional woman who, as the Persian proverb says, “suffered and suppressed [besuz va besaz],” the women of this generation broke their silence and shared their complaints, emotions, and most intimate experiences with others.

Women who claimed their right to express themselves publicly challenged the patriarchal values of the Iranian society. The presence of these new voices was even hard for many enlightened male thinkers to accept (Milani 128–30). Religious institutions, which greatly influenced public opinion, equated female emancipation to women being physically exposed. Modernism was associated with technology, education, and progress, on one hand, and unrestrained sexual expression of women, on the other. Many artists and thinkers of the time reflected in their work the dual ideals of having roots in traditional values yet aspiring for change. Even fifty years after her death, the literary life of Forugh Farrokhzad exemplifies this state of cultural uncertainty in the Iranian mind.

Farrokhzad worked with two different conflicts, personal and sociocultural, that grew from the same root. As Kamran Talattof argues, while the general consensus among scholars is that her work can be divided into two distinct categories (the unrefined personal poetry of her early work and the valuable social poetry of her last two collections), elements of personal and social conflict can be observed in both her early and later poems. Also, according to Talattof, the structural and philosophical changes in her later poetry reveal “the natural flourishing of a
sensitive mind” (89). I believe that it was through this constant shuttling between the old values and the new, the personal conflicts and the social restrictions, that Farrokhzad’s artistic voice emerged and developed.

Farrokhzad’s first three collections—*The Captive* (*Asir* 1952), *The Wall* (*Divar* 1956), and *Rebellion* (*Eyan* 1957)—were, and still are, interpreted primarily in sexual terms (Milani 132). Their erotic nature prevented many early readers and critics from observing in them the evolving voice of a female artist. The publication of *The Captive* was a breath of fresh air and introduced new possibilities to women artists in Iran. As Michael Hillmann rightfully notes, the open expression of a woman’s emotion in *The Captive* was unprecedented in the Persian literary tradition (3–6). In a culture where women were expected to be silent and invisible, Farrokhzad’s outspokenness became controversial. Her search for autonomy and freedom and her harsh criticism of cultural and social ills begin here. The persona in the poems of *The Captive* is a young woman frustrated by limitations and haunted by feelings of loss and guilt. In the title poem, the woman is held motionless by her expected roles of mother and wife. The home—or to be more specific, the “house”—is a place of confinement and silence:

I think about it and yet I know  
I do not have the strength to leave this cage  
Even if the prisoner would let me go  
I am short of breath to fly away.

From behind the bars, each bright morning  
A smiling child looks at me  
As I start to sing the happy song  
His kissing lips near mine.

Oh endless sky if one day I choose to fly  
Away from this silent prison  
How will I answer the child’s crying eyes?  
Let me be for I’m a captive bird.’ (“The Captive” 13–24)

The image of a “captive bird,” which represents the persona’s aversion to the forced immobility within her home, recurs in Farrokhzad’s first three collections. Also, although the portrayal of men changes through the course of Farrokhzad’s poetic
career, they are depicted in her early poetry as emotionally unavailable. They objectify women, reducing them to a commodity:

He asks for winey kisses
What should I say to my hopeful heart?
He thinks about pleasure and ignorant of how
I think about that everlasting bliss. (“Stranger” 13–16)

While Farrokhzad constantly rejects this objectification, I agree with Simidchieva’s observation that there are “instances in which the dramatis persona looks at herself exclusively through the prism of paradigmatic patriarchal mores, which lay upon women the entire responsibility for sexual misconduct” (23). She is the one whose “fiery eyes” invite the man to a sinful pleasure (“Bitter Tale” 30). Despite this association with temptation, her role falls within the other stereotypical presentation of the female, that of the “angel in the house”: the caring mother and patient wife/beloved who suffers but keeps silent to avoid disturbing her man and her child. In accordance with this image, it is the man who is an active agent:

There is a city beside that river
Where my heart is held captive, in a proud man’s fist

On the sandy shore, and under palm trees
He has stolen kisses, from my eyes and lips (“Remembering the Past” 3–8)

As Shimidchieva argues, the personae in these poems is “a beguiling recipient of the man’s caresses, rather than his partner in passion” (26). Like Shahrzad (Scheherazade) of One Thousand and One Nights, her role is that of a caregiver and domesticator, but she lacks the legendary character’s determination and courage. Nonetheless, we should give credit to Farrokhzad because the description of intimate moments and the blunt expression of a woman’s feelings were textually rebellious moves in Persian literature. Had the young Farrokhzad taken The Captive to a publication house in an earlier time, it would have been rejected, but at a time of great cultural change, the daring and explicit content of her poetry justified its circulation.²

Farrokhzad’s defiant declaration of independence through the expression of sexual freedom continues through her second collection, The Wall (Divar), which
starts with the infamous “Sin.” The breathless metre of the poem, its passionate tone, and the fact that it describes a sexual encounter from a woman’s perspective have made it taboo. But in addition to challenging the limits of sexual description, Farrokhzad pushes the textual boundaries by questioning the representation of women/the beloved in Persian literature. Symbolized in the character of “Leili,” the quintessential sweetheart is portrayed in Islamic-Persian literature as a disinterested, aloof beloved for whom the lover has to go through extremes. She is mysterious, cunning, and merciless. But in Farrokhzad’s “On Leyli’s Grave,” the beloved/poetic persona is no longer perplexing and unapproachable. If “in Leyli’s surreptitious eyes [. . .] night had blossomed” (9) and her feelings were unclear, in the eyes of the beloved in this poem, “the fiery flower of love has bloomed” (10). The speaker does not understand why Leyli’s disinterest in love is counted as a virtue; she asks: “Who was Leili? What’s the tale of her dark eyes?” (6). Unlike Leyli, the persona is active in love: she is not just a beloved; she is also a lover who meets her beloved in honesty and calls herself “the bride of lasting thoughts and imaginations” (18). Her candour results in her infamy among the crowd of people who do not accept a woman’s outspokenness. The walls function as a synecdoche for the house that imprisons her and, by extension, a metonym for the society that restrains her. It is with this perception of society that the persona looks at art as a realm of infinite freedom.

“The Wall,” which also lends its title to the collection, reflects the liberation inherent in artistic creation. On the surface, the poem is a feminist objection to the cultural limitations placed on women’s freedom of movement, but at a deeper level, it criticizes the patriarchal view of women:

In the hasty passing of cold moments
Your wild eyes in their silence
Build walls around me.
From you I run to untrodden paths. (1–4)

It is not what Farrokhzad does or says but how she is perceived that brings about her limitation. To bypass these obstacles, she turns to a way left rather untried by her predecessors: that of poetic creation.

The critique of the male gaze and the liberating force of artistic creation introduced by Farrokhzad in her earlier poems continue in her third collection, Rebellion. Furthermore, in John Zubizarreta’s words, this collection moves “from
an acknowledged captivity to a self-conscious awareness of the nature of the particular barriers and then to a rebellious, complex struggle with wide-ranging issues of human value and human identity” (423). In other words, Farrokhzad’s concern with women’s freedom and her search for a female identity—formed in spite of social norms—turns into a lament about the human condition and a poetic rebellion against it. “Servitude Mutiny,” “Godly Mutiny,” and “God’s Rebellion” are direct objections to the human condition and to the God who, detached from human experiences, maintains his power by casting fear on people and reminding them of the punishments of the day of justice. She calls herself “the child of one pleasure-filled night” (37) and the result of “a body entwined around another body” (39) that had no choice in coming into being. In “Godly Mutiny,” she sees God as the “insidious laughter of death” (85) who does not understand human misery. A woman’s quest for personal identity and freedom expands and becomes more inclusive: she addresses both the human condition and human identity.

It is in *Another Birth*, her fourth collection, that Farrokhzad enters a new phase of her artistic creativity and depicts the birth of a liberated and autonomous self. “Rebirth,” which is a reflection on life and being, starts with this line: “My entire being is a dark chant” (1). *Ayeh*, translated here as “chant,” refers to the lines of the Quran. The religious connotation of *ayeh* indicates the persona’s view of herself as sacred and divine. She has built a sacred self through the projection of life in art:

I
Know a sad little fairy
Who takes abode in an ocean
And who ever so softly
Plays her heart into a wooden flute;
A sad little fairy
Who dies with a single kiss every night
And is born every morn with another. (62–69)

The persona’s identity is constantly reformed through art. To use Foucauldian terminology, it is in the free space provided by art that she is able to nourish her agency and try different modes of being a self: to die and be reborn. There is also a change in the tone of the poems that address sociocultural issues. In Farrokhzad’s first three collections, the poems have a predominantly personal tone. In *Another Birth*, even in the poems that specifically address women’s issues, like “Windup Doll,” the tone
is no longer admonishing or defiant. Rather, it is descriptive of a situation in which a woman’s agency can play an important role. As mentioned earlier, in “On Leyli’s Grave” (from The Wall), Farrokhzad challenges the age-old representation of the woman as beloved; in “My Beloved” (from Another Birth), she goes further and both switches and surpasses the man/woman, lover/beloved dichotomies.

In the first three collections, both men and women are depicted as caught in their stereotypical gender roles, but the man in “My Beloved” is beyond masculine clichés. As Milani observes, “[a]fter centuries of posing as the lover, man finally becomes the beloved” (141). He is not a fragment of an imagination or an emotionally unavailable man too concerned with his image. He is personable and simple:

He is wildly free
Like a healthy instinct
In the heart of an inhabited island.
He cleans
With the strips torn from Majnun’s tent,
The street’s dust
From his shoes. (23–28)

Just as she questions Leyli’s portrait in an earlier poem, in “My Beloved,” Farrokhzad criticizes the image of Majnun as a lover whose unrequited love has made him miserable. Not only are the man’s feelings reciprocated, but he also grows in this love and, in an unprecedented turn in Persian literature, he becomes the beloved as well as the lover. “He is a simple man” who “loves purely” the simple little joys of life, “a tree / a dish of ice-cream” (50–53), and it is with this man that the persona conquers the garden of life. “The Conquest of the Garden” describes an Edenic place in which, confident about her choices and way of life, the speaker discards her doubts. Empowered by love, she has put aside all conventions:

Everyone is afraid
Everyone is afraid, but you and I
Joined the lamp, water and mirror
And we were not afraid. (12–15)

This Edenic garden is also a place of equality in which the lovers have “picked the apple / from that distant playful branch” (10–11), a place where they were not lured
into picking it but chose to do so. The speaker is no longer feeling unsure or guilty. Her feelings and her intellect are in harmony with each other. Even the spear-like cry of the crow (a bird that represents an ill omen and a spreader of gossip) that flew over them and took the news of their unconventional union to the city (lines 1–5) cannot affect her. She is no longer confined within the invisible walls of tradition and norms. Her partnership and equality with the man in the matter of love, the most natural and basic relationship between the sexes, demonstrate her freedom from social and personal restrictions.

The persona’s voice in the personal and social arenas is best reflected in Farrokhzad’s last collection, Let Us Believe in the Dawning of the Cold Season, which was published posthumously. In the personal arena, the voice is that of a strong and defiant artist no longer in need of a muse; it is the voice of a woman who does not even need the security of a simple man’s love and who is completely reliant on her own strength and aspirations. She asks:

Why should I stop, why?
The birds have flown in search of a blue dimension.
The horizon is vertical
The horizon is vertical and motion: fountained. (“It Is Only the Voice That Remains” 1–4)

She celebrates life, motion, and artistic creativity. The persona comes to the understanding that it is only her voice, her artistic creation, that remains and brings about her boundless freedom; accordingly, she refuses to be silenced and stopped. In “Remember the Flight,” the persona presents a wholesome and formed identity. She is no longer concerned with physical limitations or engaged in the numerous aspects of her newly found freedom. She has established her identity independently:

No one
Will introduce me to the sun
No one will introduce me to the sparrows’ feast.

Remember the flight,
The bird is mortal. (7–11)
Outside the confining veils and borders, in the realm of artistic creation, she has constructed a personal autonomous self.

In this collection, Farrokhzad also ventures into the social arena. In the poem “I Grieve for the Garden,” she combines her accessible and simple diction with allegory and symbolism and a prophetic yet innocent tone to create an urgent voice. In this poem, the garden represents the Iran of the time when the Shah, rather than expressing concern about the country’s needs, was engaged in justifying his autocracy by celebrating the history of the monarchy:

Father says:
“It’s past my time
It’s past my time
I’ve carried my load
And I’ve done my job”
And in his room from dawn to dusk,
He reads Shahnameh
Or Nasekh-al-tavarikh.³ (20–27)

While “Father” represents the monarchy, “Mother” stands for another important institution of power in society: religion. Mother thinks that praying and observing religious doctrines can solve all the nation’s problems. To her, the garden’s infection is a punishment from God for the sins and disbelief of the people—the sins that are the result of Iran’s modernization and introduction to Western culture:

Mother always looks at the bottom of things
She seeks the signs of some transgression
And thinks the garden is infected
By the blasphemy of a plant. (37–40)

The brother represents the elite group of people who criticize the way modernization is imposed on the society yet remain apathetic and impractical:

My brother calls the garden “a graveyard”
He laughs at the confusion of herbs
And counts
The number of
Dead fish rotting
Under the sick surface of water. (49–54)

The sister stands in opposition to the brother, as she is mesmerized by superficial modernization and takes pleasure and pride in material affluence:

She lives on the other side of the city
Inside her fake home
With her fake goldfish
Under the loving protection of her fake husband
And under the branches of a fake apple tree
She sings fake songs
And makes natural children. (74–80)

The brother and sister represent the young generation, drowned in a modernization that is taking place on a superficial and materialistic level. But the persona, the artist woman, thinks there is a chance to save the garden that is slowly decaying:

I think the garden can be taken to the hospital
I think . . .
I think . . .
I think . . .
And the heart of the garden is swollen under the sun
And the mind of the garden is very slowly draining
Of green memories. (111–17)

The garden is left unplowed. The speaker is the only one who has confidence in the forgotten potential of the garden. The hope that the persona displays in Farrokhzad’s later poetry is far from the disappointments of the speaker of her earlier poems, who had surrendered to society’s expectations.

Farrokhzad’s journey toward an autonomous poetic self can be traced from her early collections to her later ones. The limited and confined “I” moves toward the free, expanded, and universal “self.” The representation of this free woman affected Forugh Farrokhzad’s own reputation and continues to influence the reading of her poetry today. In Goli Taraqqi’s words: “[T]ired of being a captive in the prison of traditions of a society which condemns her true identity and her
womanhood, Farrokhzad breaks traditional and moral rules and finds her freedom in what others call ‘disgrace’ and ‘stigma’” (54). She continues to be criticized for her nonconformity to traditional poetic forms and themes and is stigmatized for her choices in personal life. Like the persona in her poetry, Farrokhzad was excessive and restless. She had an internal urge for a life filled with pure and unprecedented moments and with experiences beyond the daily engagements and cautious uncertainty and dismay.

Through poetry, Farrokhzad recorded the progress of an artistic female self. She celebrated the experience of motherhood and, in her early works, attempted to create a balance between the outer/social role of mother and wife and the inner, personal desire to be an artist. The poems document the struggles between her inner and outer selves, her traditional responsibilities and artistic desires. In her early poetry, achieving equilibrium between these roles is close to impossible, since the persona looks at herself solely through a patriarchal lens. She is in need of the male gaze and is thoroughly dependent on it for the realization of herself and her place in the world. Farrokhzad’s revolt and her declaration of independence are manifested through her support for the freedom of poetic expression, partly reflected in the sexual exposure in her poems. Poetry was the space of liberty where she explored her selfhood, defined and redefined it. Rahimi Bahmany notes that, for Farrokhzad, “self-realization is closely related to self-narration” and “non-productivity” equals “non-existence” (81). “Love” is a central theme; it is a human prerogative and highly desirable. However, its value and its effect on the human mind are equal to the value and effect of art. Art became Farrokhzad’s friend; it became the love, the lover, and the beloved she had long desired. Poetry gave her strength to resist the normalizing effect of society and its negative power, and a space to try different modes of selfhood. Artistic creation and celebration of the female experience resulted in the rebirth of a persona who was not limited to gender roles dictated by society.

NOTES

1 Throughout, I quote from Farrokhzad’s collected poems (Panj Ketab). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own, and numbers in parentheses refer to lines, not pages.
2 See Shoja’odin Shafa’s preface to Asir (The Captive).
3 Shahnameh (The Book of Kings) is Iran’s national epic written by Ferdowsi. Nasekh-al-Tavarikh is a multi-volume history book composed by court historian Mohammad Taghi Sepehr in the nineteenth century.
WORKS CITED

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