

FARROKHZAD THE ICONOCLAST: A NEW WAVE IN THE VISUAL AND LITERARY ART OF IRAN

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ABSTRACT

Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967) is one of the foremost figures of modern Persian literature, an Iranian poet, painter, writer, actress, producer, editor and documentary film director, who wrote honestly about the essential human sentiments. She wrote in an unassuming way, with a voice of unparalleled genuineness. Her writings on passionate love, her choice to pursue an artistic career, her individualistic, unconventional life caused public displeasure. Her poetry presents her protest against these assumed notions regarding women and her place in the society. This paper discusses the artistic journey of the iconic Iranian poet to freedom and self-empowerment.

KEYWORDS: *Iran, Literature, Poetry, Documentary, Art*

INTRODUCTION

I write woman: woman must write woman.

Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

Farrokhzad was a new voice in Iran who revolutionized Persian poetry. She was fearless and expressed her feelings unabashed through her poetry. Focusing on women’s lives and the impact of patriarchy, she rebelled against the subservience and repression of women in the society. “a determined feminine voice—at once graceful, fragile, and relentless—was born with such confidence and alacrity that everyone had to stand still and take notice” (Dabashi, 2007, p.44). She rendered a new voice of protest and rebellion to rise above the conventions of society. In the following lines from the poem “My Sister” she persuades her fellow Iranian women and also women around the world to rise up and fight for their rights and to live a life free of any kind of bondage.

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

Nima Yushij (1895–1960), the founding father of modern Persian poetry has influenced her poetry. But she had her own independent style. As Ghasemi and Pourgiv (2010) observe

Classical Persian poetry was conservative with observance of decorum and limited traditional images.

The modern style of poetry began with the publication of the poetry of Nima Yushij and it opened the way to experimentation with rhyming and meter, and variations in line length. Farough Farrokhzad's poetry initially follows Nima Yushij's poetic style. However, Farrokhzad gives Nima Yushij's poetic style an independent female identity, a feminine sensibility and candour (p.763).

Farrokhzad wished to emancipate herself from the bonds of social constraints to pursue her dream. Her first volume of poetry *The Captive* was published in 1955, where she speaks of her troubled marriage and likens it to a prison and cage. In "The Ring" a poem from this volume, she refers to the wedding ring as a symbol of slavery.

This band
So lustrous and a glow
Is the clamp of bondage, of slavery.

Her early marriage, divorce and losing custody of her child caused her immense trauma. In 1955 she suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized for a month. She always knew that she was trapped in the traditional role assigned to a woman in her household. She wanted to accomplish her poetic passion. She knew if she had to pursue her desire to be a poet, she would not be living up to the expectations of her family. She was considered a rebellious soul, one who dared to leave her family, duties of her household and motherhood behind to pursue her desire for poetry. She had to choose between her family and her art. This divide is evident in her poem titled "Captive"

From behind the bars a child
smiles every light-choked morning,
and his lips give kisses wide-eyed
when I trill out thrilling songs.
Should I one day break out and flee,
what could I say to this crying child.

The second volume, *The Wall* was published in 1956. The wall stands for the repressed lives of women confined to the walls of their household. Her dissent is shown through the most outrageous poem in this volume is titled "Sin."

I have sinned a rapturous sin
in a warm inflamed embrace,
sinned in a pair of vindictive arms,
arms violent and ablaze.

Her third volume of poetry, the *Rebellion* was published in 1958. Her early collections of poetry expressed her emotions, fears and doubts. As Dabashi (2007) observes, "By the time she completes the third volume of her poetry, Farrokhzad has made a permanent sojourn to the darker half of her creative consciousness—into the negated, the denied, the repressed, the forbidden, the shameful, the guilty, the bedevilled shadows of herself and society"(p.54).

She took frequent trips to Europe and also published her travel narratives. People began to condemn her for traveling alone and abandoning her family. Her journey proved rewarding as she learned film production. *The House is Black* (1962), is a documentary about an Iranian leper colony. The film was applauded globally and earned her admiration

and won several prizes. As Dabashi (2007) notes the significance of *The House Is Black* is that it earned Farrokhzad new credentials as a serious artist and that of a secular intellectual of Iranian society at large; “that it is a document of the superstitious beliefs of a society that does not know that its cure is in science and not in religion” (p.45).

The House Is Black was shot on location at Aleper colony located in the Iranian province of Azerbaijan in north-western Iran. It heralded a new surge of filmmakers in Iran who merged the lyrical and symbolic uses of imagery and sound to depict realist narratives. Through the use of montage and poetry, she gives them beauty and resilience in the face of adversity. The film has two narratives alternated between a male voice and a female voice, that of Farrokhzad reciting her poems, Quran and passages from the Old Testament. This fusion of poetry and cinema foreshadowed the New Wave of Iranian cinema. Even though many credited Golestan as the first Iranian filmmaker to use direct sound, according to Rosenbaum “it’s worth noting that *The House is Black*, which clearly uses direct sound in spots, was made prior to *Brick and Mirror*, “raising at least the possibility that Farrokhzad might have been a pioneer in this technique in Iranian cinema” (2001).

In 1964 her fourth collection, *Rebirth/ Another Birth* was published. In this collection we get to see a mature art form which moves from personal to general human issues. *Another Birth* acknowledges the rise of a woman who is happy in her new found freedom. Ghasemi and Pourgivi (2010) states that “These poems present a progressively mature poetic outlook and a tendency to represent more general issues rather than private concerns. They suggest the poet’s attempt to reinvent herself in her own terms by erasing the inscription of personal history and to be reborn with an identity which is marked by her own self-awareness” (p.769). Her last collection *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season* was out just before her death.

She was at the zenith of her artistic excellence when an accident claimed her life at an early age of 32. She would always be remembered as a woman who fought against all odds to pursue what she had always desired- to be a poet- an artist. She fought for her individual identity. She has inspired not only generation of poets but also eminent filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira Makhmalbaf etc. Her poem, “The Wind Will Carry Us”, was an inspiration for Abbas Kiarostami’s film of the same title. She also inspired Kiarostami with her documentary as noted by Rosenbaum (2001)

“The most obvious parallel to *The House is Black* in Kiarostami’s career is his recent documentary feature *ABC Africa* (2001) about orphans of AIDS victims in Uganda — a film which goes even further than Farrokhzad in emphasizing the everyday joy of children at play in the midst of their apparent devastation, preferring to show us the victims’ pleasure over their suffering without in any way minimizing the gravity of their situation.”

Dabashi (2007) rightly claims that “she represents the best that the Persian poetic imagination had to offer, and as fate would have it she was also critically important in the rise of Iranian cinema. She touched Iranian cinema with a very specific mode of realism, a poetic realism” (68).

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