

**A Feminist Reading of Farrokhzad's and Plath's Poetry: A
Comparative Feminist Study, Concepts of Hope, Reason and Strength**

By

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Abstract

This thesis is an evaluation of poetry of Sylvia Plath (1932- 1963) and Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967) using feminist approach and finds the positive concepts of hope, reason and strength through feminine images in their poetry. Plath and Farrokhzad are from different cultures and different countries but they share the same concepts and themes in their poetry. By applying feminist theory to their works and finding the same concepts of hope, reason and strength in their poetry they break the boundaries and connect to each other in the world of literature. First it gives a critical biography of Plath and Farrokhzad. This part is a study of their family, cultural and educational background. The second chapter gives an account of feminist movement in general, and then it assesses poetry of Plath's and Farrokhzad's relationship to the women's movement. It will bring examples from their poetry to prove that Plath and Farrokhzad are feminist and their poems can be categorized as feminist poems. In order to criticize womanhood as a confinement, Farrokhzad in her mask of love challenges the traditional constricting social expectation of womanhood and wifhood while Plath scorns conventional submissive and obedient femininity and severely denounces a kind of marriage which alienate and enforce the passivity of women. The third chapter examines concepts of hope, reason and strength in the poetry of Plath and Farrokhzad. In fact it shows how women in their poetry reflect the three above mentioned concepts. Many critics considered only concepts of death, frustration, confusion, emotion and confessional ideas in both Plath's and Farrokhzad's poetry. But the present research proves that there are still positive and hopeful images of women in their poetry. Then chapter four is the last part of this thesis. This study examines how the woman poets in their distinctive poetic voice repossess a power to seek liberation from social conformity and reorient and affirm their unconventional poetic selves in the male literary tradition. And also it examines how women are dependent on their intellect and have hope toward life.

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Chapter One: Introduction

General Background

Sylvia Plath is a well-known contemporary American poet. Some critics believe that Plath is a confessional poet and writes about her personal subjects. They consider that Plath's own life is the material for her writing. Farrokhzad is one of the greatest Iranian contemporary poets. She has the same story as Sylvia Plath does. Critics mostly relate her poetry to her personal life or read Farrokhzad's poetry solely as a picture of her own life. But this is not a complete and fair interpretation of the works of these two poets.

A critical reading will prove that their poems give moral messages, ask for movement and change of society and give advice for better life. And also the women in their poetry are not always weak and frustrated women who anticipate death, or women who sacrifice reason for emotion in their life decisions. The women represented in their poetry are not always women who passively confess their problems but also women who try actively to find a solution and ask for public improvement.

The researcher of this thesis believes that there has been too much focus on elements of death, disappointment, hopelessness or negative aspects of Farrokhzad's and Plath's poetry. There are still some positive concepts in their poems such as hopefulness and life. Although these positive elements are few, we cannot ignore them and this thesis tries to find these optimistic elements in the feminist poetry of these two poets.

There are lots of articles, books and thesis on negative concepts and death wishes of Plath and Farrokhzad both in Iran and western countries. For example, A. Alvarez said that the root of Plath's suffering is her father's death. He both made Plath's poems personal and related the theme of suffering to her poems. But what prompts the researcher to study the

positive concepts in Plath's and Farrokhzad's poetry is the fact that it is an untouched research. Therefore it would be of great interest and importance to study Plath's and Farrokhzad's poetry in the light of positive concepts like hope, reason and strength which is the opposite of themes of death, sentimentality and weakness in their poems which has been worked on by other researchers and critics.

Comparing these two poets will be a fruitful study through which one can prove how they are similar and what make them so similar. They are from two different cultures and societies but their shared concepts and their same attitudes toward life and literature lead them to break the boundaries of distance of culture. There must be a profound system beneath resemblances of Plath and Farrokhzad. That is reflection of hopeful, intellectual and strong women in their poetry.

A Critical Biography of Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston's Memorial Hospital on October 27, 1932, to Aurelia and Otto Plath. Otto, was a biology professor and a well-respected authority on entomology at Boston University. His sudden death, eight years after Sylvia's birth, plunged the sensitive child into an abyss of grief, guilt, and angry despair.

Although she promised never to speak to God again after the death of her father, Plath, gave the appearance of being a socially well-adjusted child who excelled in every undertaking, dazzling her teachers in the Winthrop public school system and earning straight A's for her superior academic skills and writing abilities. She was just eight and a half when her first poem was published in the Boston Sunday *Herald*.

Plath lived in Winthrop with her mother and younger brother, Warren, until 1942, when Aurelia Plath purchased a house in Wellesley. These early years in Winthrop provided the poet with her powerful awareness of the beauty and terror of nature and instilled in her an abiding love and fear of the ocean, which she envisioned as female.

Wellesley was a middle-class, highly respectable, educational community whose attitudes were at first accepted wholeheartedly by the young idealistic girl who was beginning to have her poems and stories published in *Seventeen* magazine.

Her first story, *And Summer Will Not Come Again*, appeared in August 1950. In September 1950 Plath entered Smith College in Northampton on a scholarship. There she once again excelled academically and socially. Dubbed the golden girl by teachers and peers, she planned diligently for her writing career. She filled notebooks with stories, villanelles, sonnets, and rondels, shaping her poems with studious precision and winning many awards.

In August 1952 she won *Mademoiselle's* fiction contest, earning her a guest editorship at the magazine for June 1953. Her experiences in New York City were demoralizing and later became the basis for her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). Upon her return home Plath, depressed and in conflict with her hard-won image as the All-American girl, suffered a serious mental breakdown, attempted suicide, and was given shock treatments.

In February 1953 she had recovered enough to return to Smith. She was graduated *summa cum laude* and won a Fulbright fellowship to Cambridge, where she met her future husband, the poet Ted Hughes. They were married June 16, 1956, in London. After earning her graduate degree Plath returned to America to accept a teaching position at Smith for the academic term 1957-1958. She quit after a year to devote full time to her writing.

Plath and her husband were invited as writers-in-residence to Yaddo, in Saratoga Springs, where they lived and worked for two months. It was here that Plath completed many of the poems collected in *The Colossus*, her first volume, published in 1960, the year her first child--Frieda-- was born.

Another child, Nicholas, was born two years later. Not until "Three Women: A Monologue for Three Voices" (1962)- a radio play which was considered by some critics to be her transitional, formative work- would she begin to free her style. "Three Women" foreshadows some of Plath's later poetry in that its structure is dramatic and expressive of those feminist themes that mark her work. Almost all the poems in *Ariel* (1965), considered her finest work and written during the last few months of her life. She speaks through the voice of a woman who has found the voice that had for so long eluded her.

Not surprisingly, that voice offended many people for its unflinching directness and use of startling metaphors. In *Lady Lazarus*, "Herr Doktor," is compared to a Nazi scientist:

"Herr Enemy." In *Daddy* the speaker considers her father as "fascist, a brute chuffing me off like a Jew/A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen."

In later poetry published posthumously in *Crossing The Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1971) the woman speaker was able to voice her long-suppressed rage over years of doubleness, smiles, and compromise.

Ironically, although Plath is often regarded by critics as the poet of death, many of her poems especially her final poems, which deal with self and how self goes about creating and transcending itself in an irrational, destructive, materialistic world, clearly express her yearning for faith in the healing self-transforming powers of art.

Miracles occur

If you care to call those spasmodic

Tricks of radiance miracles.

The wait's begun again,

The long wait for the angel

For that rare, random descent.

(Back Rook in Rainy Weather 1960)

By February 1963 her marriage had ended; she was ill and living on the edge of another breakdown while caring for two small children in a cramped flat in London ravaged by the coldest winter in decades. On Monday, February 11, she killed herself. The last gesture she made was to leave her children two mugs of milk and a plate of buttered bread.

A Critical Biography of Forough Farrokhzad

Forough Farrokhzad was born on January 5, 1935 in Tehran into a middle class family of seven children (the third of seven children). She attended public schools through the ninth grade, thereafter graduating from junior high school at the age of fifteen; she transferred to Kamalolmolk Technical School, where she studied dressmaking and painting.

In 1951 at sixteen Forough Farrokhzad married her cousin Parviz Shapour over the objections of families mainly because of Shapour's age. And a year later Forough's first and only son "Kamyar" was born. She separated from Parviz Shapour in 1954. Forough relinquished her son to her ex-husband's family in order to pursue her calling in poetry and independent life style.

In 1955 Farrokhzad's first collection, titled *The Captive*, contains forty-four poems was published. And in September that year she suffered a nervous breakdown and was taken to a psychiatric clinic.

In July 1956 Farrokhzad left Iran for the first time on a nine-months trip to Europe. In this year her second volume of verse, containing twenty-five short lyrics, called *The Wall*, was published.

In 1958 Farrokhzad's third collection *Rebellion*, appeared and securely established her as promising yet notorious poet. Farrokhzad's relationship with the controversial writer and cinematographer Ebrahim Golestan began and remained important in the poet's personal life until her death.

In 1962 she made a documentary movie about leper's colony title 'The house is Black.' The movie was acclaimed internationally and won several prizes. In 1963 UNESCO

produced a thirty minutes movie about Forough Farrokhzad. Also Bernardo Bertolucci came to Iran to interview her and decided to produce a fifteen minutes movie about the poet's life.

In 1964 Farrokhzad's fourth collection of poetry *Another Birth* contained thirty five poems which the poet had composed over a period of nearly six years was published.

In 1965 Forough's fifth collection of verse called *Let Us Believe In The Beginning Of The Cold Season* is in print and was published after her death.

On Monday February 14, 1967 Forough visited her mother, who later recalled their conversation over lunch as the nicest that they ever had. From her mother's home, on the way back, with Forough driving, at the intersection of Marvdasht and Loqumanoddowleh Streets in Darrus, her jeep station wagon swerved to avoid an oncoming vehicle and struck a wall. Thrown from her car, at the height of her creativity and barely thirty-two Forough Farrokhzad died of head injuries. She was buried beneath the falling snow in the Zahiro-Doleh in Tehran.

Review of Literature

Plath's and Farrokhzad's poetry have been studied by many critics and different literary approaches have been applied to their poetry. Mythological and confessional approaches are some instances of them.

A Comparative Study of Plath's and Farrokhzad's Poetry in Terms of Their Confessional Poetry is a thesis by Alireza Mansournia in Central Tehran University. This thesis tries to connect Plath's and Farrokhzad's poetry to death, disappointment and sadness. Mansournia read most of their poems from autobiographical point of view and he believed the material of their poems is based on Plath's and Farrokhzad's own life.

Mythology and Archetype in Plath's and Farrokhzad's Poetry: A Study of Death and Rebirth Concepts is another M.A thesis by Mehrnoosh Shabahang in Shahid Beheshti University. This research considers the concepts, theme and images of death in different poems by Plath and Farrokhzad through the light of mythology and archetype.

Feminism in Plath: A Study of Ariel and the Bell Jar. This thesis is written by Saghar Sharifi in Karaj Azad University. This is a study of Plath's two works through feminist criticism; one is a novel *The Bell Jar* and the other, *Ariel*, is a poem. This research mostly considers or highlights the concept of death and misery of women in Plath's feminist works.

Traumatized Bodies in the Works of Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood and Tony Morrison is PH.D thesis in Central Tehran University. This thesis includes imagery, structure and language of violence in Plath's poetry. It finds suffering, horror, torture and fear in the three mentioned women poets. The author regards Plath's poems as women's experiences of suffering.

Dr. Zia Movahed in his book, *Poetry and Knowledge* examines both Plath and Farrokhzad. In this book he considers the images of their poetry. He believes that there are so many images in their works some of which are uniquely made and used in one poem but not in the other ones. According to Movahed, in written poems the images are both necessary and beautiful. It is impossible to omit one of them or change its place. If so, confusion will happen.

A look at Forough Farrokhzad's poetry is a critical book by Dr. Sirus Shamisa. In this book Farrokhzad's poems are analyzed. Figurative language, literary techniques, diction, prosody, themes and motifs and social poetry of Farrokhzad's poetry are discussed here.

Poetry of Our Age: Forough Farrokhzad is another useful book written by Mohammad Houghoughi. This book examines lots of Farrokhzad's poems; it considers the relationship between words in her poetry and the theme of the work. This book also discusses the development Farrokhzad's poetry.

The Fairy Princess of Poetry, Forough Farrokhzad's Life and Poems is a book written by Mahmood M. Azad. This book is about Farrokhzad's life and poetry. It gives a picture of the poet's experiences, her family background and an analysis of her poems.

Living Permanently, Staying On the Top by Behrooz Jalali consists of Farrokhzad's memories and letters. It also has a critical chapter on her poetry which examines her poetry from different perspectives.

A Study of Poetry of Women in Iranian Contemporary Literature is a book by Shahrbanoo Hosseinzade Boolaghi. This book examines poetry of Iranian women poets and their major themes with main focus on five women poets: Parvin Etesami, Forough Farrokhzad, Sepideh Kashani, Simin Behbehani and Tahere Saffarzade. According to this

book, Farrokhzad writes fearlessly about different thought and needs of women in her poems. This book considers the specific characteristics of Farrokhzad's poetry, what makes her a distinct poet and what leads to her excellence over others.

And about Sylvia Plath there exist a huge number of critical books and articles but only a few of them are available in Iran. Some critics like Sara Maryssael focus their attention on the numerous factors in Sylvia Plath's poetry through which understanding them becomes easier for reader. These factors are introduced as the selected points of view of her and the poetic techniques such as imagery, figurative language, structure and tone. Maryssael considered theme of death in Plath's poetry and said that theme of death is reflected in many levels in her poetry and Plath used different imageries to represent the theme of death.

Representing Sylvia Plath is another book about Plath's life and poetry. This book is edited by Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain who considered Plath's poetry from different perspectives; one of them is confessional poetry. They believed that Plath's poetry rooted in her emotion and her misery in life. Her relationship with her father and her husband are among the source of her inspiration for writing poetry.

Sylvia Plath, An Introduction to Poetry by Susan Bassnett is another useful source for this research. It represents different opinions on Plath's poetry. Bassnett wrote about Plath:

"She did not see poetry primarily as a conduit for her personal feelings, but rather as a conscious process of crafting through which experience and emotion could be refined in an alchemical sense and transformed into something new." (Bassnett 2)

The last part of this book examines Plath's letters and critical views on them.

Significance of the Study

The present research is a comparative study; a comparison between poetry of the famous Iranian contemporary poet, Forough Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath, one of the most appreciated American poets of twentieth century. According to Vida Bozorgchami the field of comparative study has been established two centuries ago in the world, but it is not an independent field in Iran yet. She believes that the researches done in this field of human understanding are inadequate and few. We do not have any distinct or self-reliant field of study about comparative literature in our universities.

According to Anooshirvani, the most important problem regarding comparative literature is in giving a correct definition of it. He believes that this field has not been defined correctly and also leads to the misunderstanding of students and researchers. And this misconception is the reason that this field has not been developed in our country. Alireza Anooshirvani defines comparative literature as: "comparative literature is, in one hand, the study of literature beyond the scope of one country, and in the other hand, it is the study of literature with other fields of study like fine arts (like painting, sculpturing, architecture and music), philosophy, history, social science (like politics, economics), experimental science, religion and others. In short comparative literature is the comparison between a literature with other literatures and also the comparison between literature and other domains in human knowledge." (Anooshirvani 221) He emphasizes the importance of comparative literature by bringing a quote from Ferdinand Brunetiere, a French critic: "we cannot understand ourselves well if we only understand ourselves." (Anooshirvani 7)

A researcher who works on comparative literature, recognized literature not as specified to a particular country or society but also considers it as the shared point of different countries; it is a means that connects different cultures. Literature breaks the boundaries.

In this thesis feminist theory underlines Plath's and Farrokhzad's poetry. It will be explained that feminism has the same concept and aim in different countries; although there are some differences in different cultures, the chief aim of feminism is the same. This theory makes their works not only universal but also everlasting. The feminist theory on the whole and the concepts of hope, reason and strength in feminist poetry of Plath and Farrokhzad are the major subjects dealt with in this research paper in order to reveal the existence of the positive concepts in their feminist works.

A brief survey of the emergence of feminism, feminist movement and feminist criticism and some dictionary definitions will form the first step of this research. Then the researcher will bring an analysis of Farrokhzad's and Plath's works through feminist approach. And the last step of the present research is a close critical reading of feminist works of the mentioned poets in order to find concepts of hope, reason and strength in their poetry.

The researcher selected Sylvia Plath and Forough Farrokhzad. They are both admirable contemporary poets. They are forerunners of many writers. There are some differences in them due to their different cultural conventions but still there are many relationships between their works.

The present research is supposed to answer some questions about feminism, the positive concepts in poetry of Farrokhzad and Plath, and how it is possible to find elements of hope or life, reason or intellectuality, and strength or power in feminist works as follows:

- 1-Who are Sylvia Plath and Forough Farrokhzad?
- 2-What are feminist elements in poetry of Plath and Farrokhzad?
- 3-Do their poems undermine or reinforce patriarchal ideology?

4-Do their works accept or question the traditional view of gender?

5- What do positive concepts of life, reason and strength mean?

6-Are feminist works always dark and frustrating?

7-How a feminist work can convey positive concepts and hopefulness?

8-What do the poetry of Plath and Farrokhzad suggest about women's creativity and strength?

9-What are features of women depicted by Plath and Farrokhzad? Are they weak, sentimental and with death wishes or strong, intellectual and full of life?

Thesis Outline

This thesis includes four chapters all of which support the hypothesis represented in the title. Chapter one includes biography of Plath and Farrokhzad, the argumentative part, discussion question, literature review and methodology and approach.

Chapter two first gives definition of feminism, and the changes that it brought to society and literature. Then it speaks of feminism in the Plath's and Farrokhzad's poetry. A close practical reading of their poems in terms of feminist criticism is given through lucid and clear examples from their poetry.

Chapter three considers positive concepts in the poetry of Plath and Farrokhzad. This chapter shows that the women in the poetry of Plath and Farrokhzad are representatives of hopefulness, reason and power. It gives the reader examples from their poetry in order to reinforce the thesis hypothesis.

Chapter four is the last part of this thesis. A summing of all subjects discussed through this research is given in this chapter. Then findings and some suggestions for further research is presented at the end of this chapter. At the very end of this thesis comes the bibliography to introduce sources which have been used in this study for those who are interested to follow this discussion.

Methodology and Approach

The approach which is used in the present research is feminist criticism in order to find concepts of hope, reason and strength through symbols and images in the poetry of Plath and Farrokhzad. Through feminist approach it will be proved feminine experiences, for example experience of becoming a mother, are enjoyable.

As Plath and Farrokhzad died in early 1960s they did not take part in the women's liberation movement which took place in late 60s. But regarding feminism as a way of expressing women's desires, experience and thought from a feminine point of view, we can find traces of feminist aspects in their works and also their poetry echoes concerns of contemporary feminist movement.

Feminists believe that throughout history and in most societies, women have always been regarded as inferior, mostly in the form of having fewer and less important roles. They were supposed to be bound to home and household activities. Their only role was a wife or a mother. They were denied access to outside activities, higher education, professional jobs and voting. Feminism comes to reject these ideas and feminist criticism considers these ideas in a work of literature. In a feminist criticism, according to Lois Tyson, "our goal is to use feminist theory to help enrich our reading of literary works; to help us see some important ideas they illustrate that we might not have seen so clearly or so deeply without feminist theory; and to help us see the ways in which patriarchal ideology blinds us to our own participation in, or at least complicity with, sexist agendas." (Tyson 120)

"Feminist criticism's self-affirmation over the past several decades as it engages with both critiques from within and encounters from without- encounters with psychoanalysis, Marxism, poststructuralism, ethnic studies, postcolonial theory and lesbian and gay studies-