

A Comparative Study of Sylvia Plath and Forough Farrokhzad Considering a Post-Lacanian Feminist theory

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Abstract: Although Farrokhzad (Iranian poet) and Sylvia Plath seem to have little in common, a French feminist study of their poems reveals that they share similar experiences in their dealings with personal and social critical issues reflected in their literary works. The present article is an effort to illustrate that the poetry of both these eminent poets carries with itself the unique female voice that Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray described in their critical theories. Accordingly, it focuses on Plath's and Farrokhzad's selected poems through the 'écriture féminine' to mention Cixous's term as the language of femininity in a patriarchal literary world.

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1. Introduction

Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), an Iranian poet and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), the American poet, who are from two different cultures, seem to have little in common. However recent theoretical developments in women's writing, prompt a new examination of the two seemingly incongruous poets. Both poets engaged in the project of attempting to emerge as something 'else' or the 'other' in a world that feminists posit as inherently phallogocentric.

Ann Rosalind Jones through her elaborations of French feminists suggests: 'If women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men' (Jones 1986: 366). The present article studies the selected poems of these two well-known poets while the theoretical focus remains on the work of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray and it discusses the validity of applying their theories to Plath's and Farrokhzad's writing. Feminism has spread irreducibly and cannot be simplified to a unified ideology hence it eludes definitions. The present study devotes to exploring the usage of feminist language as a means for obtaining feminist goals. The majority of contemporary rhetoricians whether affirm feminism or not have challenged the function of language as a neutral mirror of objective reality.

They assert that influenced by social relations, it plays powerful role in shaping human perceptions of the world. Feminism which is inevitably political, has discussed language as a means for both repressions and expression. Many feminists affirm that there is a difference in language between men and women. In other words they believe that it has a gender-based structure. However they do not have a unified attitude

towards it. Robin Lakoff, for instance, argues that speech pattern used by women exhibit powerlessness and inferiority and she asserts that they need to adopt a more powerful speech pattern similar to that used by men. (Hendricks 1999: 3) However Dale Spender claims that women's speech just needs to be reclaimed because it has been repressed by male dominant speech. Virginia Woolf, one of the first feminists, believes that language is man-made through which women cannot express their real feeling. 'It is' she argues 'too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use'. (Woolf 1990: 37). She continues that women must make their own language through adopting and changing the present language. More controversially discussions have been introduced by French feminists. Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva all drew attention to women's language.

They chiefly founded their studies on psychoanalytic and linguistic parameters while they criticized both Freud, in term of centralizing penis envy and of Oedipus and castration and Jacques Lacan for his reinforcing and extending Freud theory of paternity. Lacan implied Saussure's linguistic theory on Freud's psychoanalytic studies and accordingly illustrated a discourse based on "phallogocentrism, to mention Derrida's term to refer to the privileging of the masculine in the construction of meanings. However, feminist psychoanalysts have utilized Lacan's theories of mirror phase and the chora to give the mother a privileged position within the child's psychological development.

2. Women's Writing

Helen Cixous asserts that Western thought is based on systematic repression of women's experience. Cixous aligned with Derrida and claimed that in the so-called phallogocentric structure of language, there is no place for feminine writing. While she rejected Freudian

and Lacanian idea of women as lacking, she introduced and celebrated a new version of women's writing or 'écriture féminine' which is regarded as one of the most fundamental texts in feminist theories. 'Écriture féminine' has its root in the mother, in mother-child relations, before the child acquires the male-centered verbal language. Cixous asserts even if the infantile babblings are replaced by actual language or post-mirror phase, this pre-mirror phase is not lost rather it is repressed in the psyche. As a poststructuralist thinker Cixous knows that language is the source of meanings and realities and accordingly she persuades all women to write and create their own language. While phallus is a masculine metaphor in phallogocentric language introduced by Freud and Lacan, female body is the source of meaning in 'écriture féminine'.

And why don't you write? Write... I know why you haven't written. (And why I didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great-that is, for "great men"; and it's "silly." Besides, you've written a little, but in secret. Wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way; or because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty-so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until the next time. (Cixous 1989: 876-877)

Cixous sees feminine writing as a rediscovery of female body and the vice versa is also true. Connected to the metaphorical figure of Mother whose outstanding features are productivity, plurality, indeterminacy and flexibility, feminine writing is continuous, plural and overflowing with the potential of producing. She continues:

Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from "mother" (I mean outside her role functions: the "mother" as nonname and as source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink. (877)

Luce Irigaray like Cixous works from within Lacanian framework and places an emphasis on the women's body and maternal body. She connects writing to women's bodily pleasure. In her *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), she produces her own version of "women's writing" or *parler femme* which is an alternative to phallogocentric discourse. She aligns to Cixous in the fact that a woman's body determines both her identity and her mode of writing and thinking. In place of monolithic structure of phallogocentrism, she establishes diversity, fluidity and multiple possibilities inherent in the structure of female sexual experiences. Both Cixous and Irigaray put 'écriture féminine' or

'parler femme' into practice by their own writing. Their pastiche-like text evades closure and determinacy.

Another distinguished French psychoanalyst obsessed with feminine language is Julia Kristeva. Although she refuses to be called feminism that is rooted "from her fear that any kind of political idiom, be it liberal, socialist or feminist, will necessarily reveal itself as yet another master-discourse" (Moi 1986: 10), it has been proved that she has played one of the central roles in French feminism.

Kristeva's account for women's writing was introduced through her resonant term, the semiotic, which is an unsystematized signifying process centered on mother and refers to pre-linguistic stage of development of the child.

What I call 'the semiotic' takes us back to the pre-linguistic states of childhood where the child babbles the sounds s/he hears, or where s/he articulates rhythms, alliterations, or stresses, trying to imitate his/her surroundings. In this state the child doesn't yet possess the necessary linguistic signs and thus there is no meaning in the strict sense of the term. It is only after the mirror phase or the experience of castration in the Oedipus complex that the individual becomes subjectively capable of taking on the signs of language, of articulation as it has been prescribed – and I call that 'the symbolic'. (Kristeva 1989: 19)

The semiotic stands against symbolic which associates with Oedipal and post-Oedipal phase in the constitution of subjectivity.

The symbolic refers to the grammar and structure of structure of signification while semiotic associates with rhythms, tones, movements connected to maternal body. In fact the semiotic is repressed in the process of acquiring of fatherly-controlled and male-made language, though symbolic never succeeds in replacing the semiotic thoroughly. Kristeva unites the non-verbal substances of the semiotic world with the verbal structure. She believes that the semiotic happens to disrupt the mature adult's language, although this disruption of the semiotic in poetic discourse is more frequent and it gives rise to a 'new language' different from the dominant language. Even though women are closer to the semiotic, the ability to write in this new language is not limited to female writers:

It is especially vital, for Kristeva, to acknowledge that what culture designates as feminine language is not, in a literal sense, the language used by women but rather the kind of language which disrupts the rigid rules of the Symbolic and, by implication, of patriarchy (Cavallaro 2003: 82).

3. Sylvia Plath and Womanly Language

Sylvia Plath started her literary career when literary world was still dominated by men and needed time and much effort to make a voice. Invited to Ted

Hughes and Sylvia Plath's apartment for dinner, Charles Doyle remembers Sylvia's cooking dinner and her cleaning the table and washing dishes while he and Ted sat for hours and were speaking on their poems though nothing was told about Sylvia's poetry (Wagner-Martin 2003: 108).

Publishers' lack of interest in her early poetry was mainly rooted in patriarchal prejudice. Most of her works were published after her death and she won a Pulitzer Prize around twenty years after she died. Her poetry reveals an intensely personal struggle with self-consciousness and a pioneering examination of societal limitations experienced by women. Accordingly, a female character that is in the process of perpetual 'self-becoming' particularly and symbolically through death and rebirth is a recurrent figure in most of her outstanding poems.

Plath's late work 'Ariel' has been considered by most feminists as an embodiment of her liberation from patriarchal constraints. Her female subject is struggling in the dilemma of "self" and "other" to articulate female subjectivity out of the inadequacies of language as a medium of expression. The title of her poem, Lady Lazarus, is an allusion to the biblical character, known as Lazarus, was a man whom Jesus resurrected from the dead, although Plath's version is a female character that faces death and rebirth.

The subverting voice in this poem is 'the Lady' who is not a biblical male figure nor resurrected by mythological and religious male power; rather is a phoenix who resurrects out of her 'self'. Plath once said that 'The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain resourceful woman.' (Bassnett 2005: 113).

The speaker wants to form a 'self' out of the 'otherness' and it is why that she restates the first person pronoun, I, twenty-two times. The poem is a psychological journey and a quest for subjectivity. In other words it illustrates the painful thematic journey from oppression to emancipation which partly derives from Plath's split from Ted and her exorcism of her mourning for her father. She satirically portrays the poetic persona as the object of a gazing crowd to convey patriarchal dismembering and commoditizing of the woman's body parts; 'Them unwrap me hand and foot/The big strip tease./Gentlemen, ladies/These are my hands,/My knees' (Plath 2003: 20).

The closing declaration of the woman's ability to 'eat men like air' sounds a performance of revenge against the male figure that the speaker identifies as her 'Enemy'. Resurrected out of her ashes and this time having a magical power, Lady Lazarus vengefully warns 'Herr God, Herr Lucifer' (24) who are two components of the social contract. She attacks these two

polar agencies of control functioning within Christian cultures - God and the Devil - which associates with Kristevan view of an oppressive and limiting patriarchal doctrine. Likewise, in 'Daddy' the speaker revolts against 'the powerful white male who has lied to her, betrayed her, spent her money, and abandoned her - all the while expecting her to perform the household task, however menial; a variety of sexual services, and the bearing of, and caring of his children' (Wagner-Martin 2003: 119).

The persona turns away startlingly from the powerful male force that had dominated her life, even if she once innocently adored it. The reoccurrence of similar phrases and images is deduced in 'Daddy' which has been frequently applied primarily to Ted and to her father. Jackaman writes that in 'Daddy', Plath has Ted 'waiting in line as the son-in-law to inherit from the father direct power over the female' (83). Stanza fifteen explicitly pulls together what the reader has suspected:

*If I've killed one man, I've killed two-
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know. (106)*

Enriching her view, Plath does not restrict her theme to her personal affaire; that is Ted or her father are not to be considered on a personal level, rather she describes the oppressors of the poem as Nazi's 'With your Luftwaffe/ Panzer-man, panzer-man, o- You/ Not God but a swastika/ A man in black with a meinkampf look' (108). In fact the poem seeks vigorously to renounce patriarchy, and not merely 'Ted' and 'Otto'.

*Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you (108)*

One of the most formidable images of the poem is 'the boot in the face' the use of a boot also has specific connotations linked into a web of victimhood; one has to be pretty low down on the ground to have a boot on one's face. It conveys the state of oppression of the narrator so severely. Nevertheless she claims that 'Every woman adores a Fascist' the fact that reveals the speaker's self-criticizing. Hammer argues that despite initial impressions of the first half of the poem, Plath is both the "victim and aggressor" (Hammer 2007:154). Examining the following three lines, 'You do not do, you do not do/ any more, black shoe/ in which I have lived like a foot/ for thirty years...' (106), he points out that Plath's narrator who as a foot has lived in the oppressor's shoe for thirty years is blamable of becoming her own oppressor and forming a circle of self-abuse (154).

Thus, he concludes, Plath's emancipation, at least partly, must be from herself, the version of herself that had submitted to patriarchal domination. She indeed revolts against her previous submersion into

phallogocentric notion of marriage and domesticity. Plath's compelling desire to write the body deserves to be considered as a major shaping influence in her work. Christina Britzolakis argues that Plath writes in a language 'closer to the body', closer to human experience, to birth, to death, and to cognitive function. She ties her analysis to Kristeva's theory, by alluding to the heavy alliteration that dominates the phonology of the poem, coupled with the consistency of the structure that lends the poem a 'nursery rhyme' feel (177).

This returning to the 'semiotic' or to infantile structures of communication, symbolizes according to Kristeva, a need to return to the primordial state of the chora- to escape the patriarchal imprisonment of language. 'Daddy' is abounded with such features which is strongly reminiscent of 'baby talk' or semiotic modality: through repetitions of words, phrases and sound, alliterations, truncations, and similar features the speaker revolts against social contract of language. In the poem's eighty lines, forty-two ends in an 'oo' sound, creating a sonic landscape that contains an almost oppressive beat, a rhythmic march through the words:

*Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw (106)*

Finally her poem, 'Ariel' which indicates Plath's complex use of color imagery illustrates a movement from darkness to light, from 'stasis' and stillness towards a state of incredible speed and indeed from captivity to freedom. It contains both a female voice and language full of feminine and sexual images; 'Thighs, hair, flakes from my heels' (arouses a sexual connotation), Godiva, and 'the child's cry'- (feminine duties).

The poem, many critics believe, was inspired by the horse on which Plath was learning to ride. It draws together some of the most sexual and bodily imagery of Plath's poetry. Through changing of tone, shifting in theme and breaking the rhyme scheme, the speaker violates the order expected by the reader.

Celebrating her physical body, the speaker tosses her clothing off like a rebellious Godiva and rides naked, free, fast, and fully herself toward her goal: 'White/Godiva, I unpeel --/Dead hands, dead stringencies' (Plath, 62). Additionally, to 'foam to wheat' and to 'glitter of sea' have arguably much more resonance when considered in terms of female orgasm.

The speaker tries to form herself a new identity and this 'I'-ness is reinforced by the repetitive [i] sound in the last lines of the poem in the words 'cry, I, flies, suicidal, drive, Eye'. Furthermore, 'wheat', 'sea' and 'water' certainly seems closely connected with female fertility.

4. Farrokhzad's womanly writing

Although Farrokhzad was one of the first female poets who broke the taboos of speaking about her body and corporeal love, she started her literary career in a patriarchal atmosphere of conservative society. She was born in Tehran to career military officer Colonel Mohammad Bagher Farrokhzad and his wife Touran Vaziri-Tabar in 1935. Her unsuccessful marriage led to her separation from her only child, Kamyar. Farrokhzad's first volumes, entitled *The Captive*, *The Wall* and *The Rebellion* do not have the maturity and sophistication of her later volumes. The present study focuses on her later skillful volumes *The Rebirth* and *Let's Believe in the Cold Season*. Many of her poems represent feminine sensibility, voicing the inner self of a woman who speaks about love, hate, death and life, simultaneously.

Her articulation about the women's issues and the way in which they are oppressed by the society has surprised many who were not used to such transparency. She wrote woman and womanly issues in a literary world of Persian literature which was constructed from male vantage points in which the male narrators actually spoke for the females. Shamloo, one of the most eminent contemporary poets argues in *The Poetic Manifestation*, 'Farrokhzad's writings some times are too feminine that I could not read them with a loud voice. When I do it, it seems as if I have worn a dress. When I hum her poetry, I hear them in the voice of a woman' (Shamloo 1992: 97).

The female voice comes out of the darkness of conventional orthodoxy of the society. 'My entire verse/ is a dark verse/ It will take you/ to the down of blooms/ flight and light' (Farrokhzad 2000: 44). Like Plath, among her overwhelming themes was recreating her identity and expressing her psychological 'self' out of this gloomy and ominous world. The fluidity and colorful language of 'free verse' which was a new style and form in Persian poetry practiced by Farrokhzad skillfully, is associated with womanly writing introduced by French feminists. Accordingly, 'The Rebirth' is more a piece of painting with its rich imagery than a verbal form of language; 'Life perhaps/ is that long shady road/ where every day a woman wanders/ with her basket of fruit' (44).

The emphatic focus on imagery and rhythm is accompanied by the images of fertility as a female feature in this poem; 'I shall plant my hands in the garden/ And I will grow I know I know oh I know/ And in my hand's ink-stained hollow/ The swallow/ Shall lay its eggs' (45).

Farrokhzad's nostalgic attitudes toward the pleasurable childhood world, the time that her world was not dominated by 'fatherly order' in 'Age Seven' associates to the semiotic in pre-Oedipal phase in the

constitution of subjectivity: 'Ay, age seven/ Ay, the magnanimous moment of departure/Whatever happened after you,/ happened in a mesh of insanity and ignorance' (Farrokhzad, 444). After this age Forough emphasizes 'the window which was a lively and bright connection/ between the bird and us/between the breeze and us/ broke/broke/broke' (445). It is the illustration of the life when the child enters the limit of social contracts. Although Farrokhzad seems had not been aware of the psychoanalytic theory of French feminists, the realm she portrays, its relations with nature through its "bright connections to bird" and 'breeze', domination of alliterations and repetitions, and the world that was connected to femininity reflect the Kristevan motherly-controlled non-verbal world of pre-Oedipal phase: 'We lost everything we must have lost/ we started treading without a lantern/ and moon/ moon/ the kind Feminine/was always there / in the childhood memories of a clay and straw rooftop/ and above the young plantations/ dreading the swamp of crickets' (445). In 'clockwork doll', Raoshani argues, the speaker protests against the silence and inactivity of Iranian women (Azad 2005: 35); it is an objection of both society that victimizes women and demolishes them to 'clockwork doll' and indeed the women of the society who contribute to devaluing themselves through their passivity. In searching and recreating a new identity appropriate to and harmonious with female psyche or better to say restoring the stolen identity, Farrokhzad establishes victorious 'self'.

She declares in her 'The rich homeland' triumphantly "I am the winner/ I have registered myself gloriously in an ID" (436).

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