

## The Authenticity of Forugh Farrokhzad: Her poetry, desire and poetics of body and self

*'...in my poetry I'm not searching for anything. But in my poetry I'm searching I'm searching for myself' - Forugh*

*My lover  
with his unashamed naked body  
at its unbreakable branches  
stood there like death.*

*The carved and restless lines  
following his restless body  
in the circular shape.*

*My lover  
seems to have passed  
through the forgotten generations.*

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*There is a city near the bank of a turbulent river  
With dens palm trees and lighted nights  
There is a city near the bank of the river  
Where my captive heart is imprisoned to a  
pride lover.*

*There is a city near the bank of its  
river for years we open our embraces to each other  
On the sands near the palm trees  
Where he steals kisses from my lips  
and eyes.*

Forugh Farrokhzad, modern Persian woman poet (1933–1967), left a great treasure of poetic works that she created during her very short life, and they changed us forever. Her moods, her deep understanding of her body, her inner and authentic depths for expressing herself through her writing without hesitation or fear, is a great testimony of a liberated woman who, despite all odds, advocates authenticity even from the depths of her solitude. It can unarguably be said that her poems have surpassed the works of any poet in Middle Eastern societies.

Forugh was the product of a repressive society which had closed all the doors to voices that she tried to promote: moderation, inclusion, freedom of speech, and freedom itself. She was the child of war, of what she had lived through and experienced under the Western occupation, and the Pahlavi's regime. It was a regime that did not know much except blind subjugation to the worst values of Western culture, and fear of Iranian people. This led it to create a garrison in which for decades bright minds were isolated, imprisoned or simply murdered, and millions lived in abject poverty. As a result this turned Iran into an ideologically fertile ground for the extreme left and fundamentalism, two forces that did not have a clear understating of democracy and collective inclusion, or respect for differences in a complex society such as Iran. That was one of the main reasons why Iranians largely took part in the 1979 revolution to overthrow the old regime. The negative sentiment was mostly the

result of massive anger toward the Shah's regime which the West supported since the coup d'état in 1954.

An agenda of modernisation and westernisation was imposed upon an ancient culture and people, at the expense of freedom and freedom of expression. The massive industrialisation of Iran during the oil boom of the 50s, 60s and 70s were forced upon young Iranian people during those years. They were expected to act like Westerners, but without the right to examine their past identity. This occurred in a stagnant and patriarchal environment; therefore it backfired. The system did not change anything for the poor, marginalised, intellectuals, educated people, artists, or women in particular. They could not enjoy life by freely expressing themselves.

Many artists and thinkers became involved with the extreme left or fundamentalist views of liberation. They propagated their views from either underground, prison, abroad or they went to opium houses to hide. People felt abounded by the voices of hope. There were some voices that spoke of the inclusion of all, and writing was their medium.

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In Iranian culture, it is a tradition for ordinary people to believe that when the authentic poets speaks, their voices are those of angels talking for freedom, or at least that they are the voices which soothes their collective hurts in hard times. In our modern poetry the instigator of this poetic hope was Nima Yushij who came from a small village called Yush in the province of Mazandaran near the Caspian Sea (1895–1960).

Nima's voice was unique for he changed the style of Persian classical poetry and the romantic and nostalgic voice of traditional poets that, with the exception of Omar Khayyam and Hafiz, for thousands of years did not challenge anything. When he established the modernist movement in Iran he was aware of the great need for a distinctive way of releasing the voice of the poet in his society. He urged others to challenge the fantastic and convoluted language of past poetry into the Iranian poets' world of reality.

His works were denied and attacked by traditionalists and he was systematically isolated from the institutions; both the religious establishment and the regime which wanted to maintain the status quo under any circumstances. They tried as sternly as they could to suppress this new approach to poetic expression during and after the first and second world wars. The Western occupation of Iran and the beginning of the cold war created an absolutist regime which blindly ruled through fear and paranoia. It unconditionally subjected itself to the West's interests by systematically ignoring Iranian people and accusing any progressive voice as the voice of communism, as a traitor or an ingrate.

In this climate, however, the poor could not talk. So the children of the rich and middle class started to talk. They were children of modernisation and they looked extremely modern, but despite the fact that they were living with a newly imposed look, nothing had really changed inside their psyche. Those who were privileged and had a chance to gain an education were forced to keep this false modernity at any cost, without causing any challenge to it. And this was a recipe for disaster, which took place later. Most of the youth who came from this privileged background began to question the patriarchal and one-dimensional tradition of the social structures they were living in, either in their private homes or in the wider society where they were forced to live comfortably. They needed more democracy and freedom of expression in that closed society. For they experienced it first hand in their comfortable, modern lifestyle. They were told that they were free to follow this golden age of Iranian prosperity and happiness whilst the strict and traditional behaviours of a rigid feudalistic and patriarchal attitudes were dictated to most of them at home.

Some of these individuals realised that this modernity was just a tragic joke. They wanted to find a space to truly live their lives as they wished. They did not want to have anything to do with either the hypocrisy of traditionalists who hid under religious indoctrination, or the absolutist system which advocated modernity for its own sake. They wanted a new space where they could authentically, individually, and without fear communicate with all people through their arts. They dreamt for a pluralistic and open society for all Iranians, to overcome centuries of their shortcomings.

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Forugh was one of these thinkers who experienced this suppression within her modern family life and society. The climate in which most of these individuals had lived provided a solid ground for some outstanding poets, filmmakers, writers, painters and playwrights to adopt a democratic modernism, and created some important works. In this great gathering of artists Forugh's voice stands out. She as an individual and poet captures the repression of women and people, without slogans. Her politics was her body and her experience as a woman, and her message was against traditional society, which was in a macabre dance with modernity. Her struggle was to expose all hypocrisy regardless of their names and isms. Her poetry runs against the social and ancient norms and attitudes of a male society, which prevented her from being herself.

From the time she began writing, she searched for the space of selfhood. She started from the simplicity of a young and inexperienced poet and insisted to become an experienced poet and woman, in order to declare herself to the world. This is explicit in her last work. She changed herself and the world around her in the course of ten years, and sat to enjoy the freedom that she worked so hard and paid so gravely for. Yet the world is full of paradoxes, and a tragic accident took her young life, leaving her works behind for us to learn from. What would have happened to her if she had lived and witnessed the revolution of 1979?

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The Pahlavi's regime created an environment that was fixated on Western culture and greed. This divided Iranian thinkers and artists alike. Some took to isolation and lived in the world of nothingness, most compromised themselves, and others turned their works into ideological formats. All of these groups had further alienated the masses of people and amidst this desperate environment Forugh's voice and a few others were the voices of hope.

She and a few poets and artists declared their displeasure about the hypocrisy of men's traditional thinking in so-called modern society and fought for the authenticity of the poet and artist as the voice of herself/himself. The poets attacked anything to do with ideology and committed themselves to the search for absolute and immediate experiences. 'No to ideology', they said. 'We escape from the lies of ideology and the business of commitment', they declared. As far as responsibility was concerned, the poet is only responsible for his or her own works and their inner lives, which is revolutionary and awake.

In Iranian culture Forugh was, is, and will be a unique woman for many reasons. And one of them is that she was, is, and will be a great poet who left a legacy. This needs to be considered in order to understand her complex personality, Iranian women poetry, and women in general. Her life was her poetry and her poems were her body, which embodied centuries of repression.

Tragically in the West the women in Iran are seen as slavish, submissive and prisoners of a veiled society. To be a poet of high quality in the Persian language and culture is a great honour to be bestowed with. And to be a unique female voice who wrote freely about what she felt and

experienced is a revolution. Forugh's poetry shook the dominant male culture in Iran which, for thousands of years, like most places, dominated women.

Forugh's life was just like her work. She never separated her inner turbulence and needs from her external life. She was, and the poetry she left behind is a great testimony to her authentic self. Her direct expressions of her sensuality, the desire for her lover, and her lust for life are legendary.

In terms of her poetic and innovative style in Persian language, her poetry has influenced the poetic voice of the Iranian tradition forever. Her poignant and simple writing is a forceful example of a woman who knows what she has to do to express her immediate needs and her personal and social freedom. The expressions in her poetry are the uncompromising cries of a woman who is deeply searching for her identity in a repressive world. Her struggle was initially against a society that forced her to inherit centuries of denial as a solitary woman. It was a society which had denied her freedom of an intimate relationship with the man she chose to be with, rather than the one who was chosen for her. She knew the fear of speaking of her true feelings in such a rigid and closed society, but she chose to say it.

*I want you, and I know  
That I can never take you in my arms:  
You are like that clear, bright sky,  
And I am a captive bird in this cage*

(‘The Captive’, *Selected Poems*, 1955)

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Her poetic journey started when she was nineteen and in the course of three years she published three of her major works which were titled ‘Captive’ (Asir 1955), ‘The Wall’ (Divar 1957), and ‘Rebellion’ (Osyan 1958). ‘The Captive’ was published when she was only twenty years old, and in the depths of her unhappiness. She knew that she had to find her freedom and was aware that she had many things to say about it.

*I must say something  
I must say something  
In the shivering moment at daybreak  
When space blends with something strange  
Like the portents of puberty  
I want  
To surrender to some revolt  
I want  
To pour down out of that vast cloud  
I want  
To say no no no.*

She dared to leave an unhappy marriage when she is only twenty-one, after three years of life with a man who she did not love and had nothing in common with. In captivity she boldly expressed her needs as a young woman and poet. In this book she pours her heart out about the lover she wishes to be with. This kind of expression in any shape or form was unheard of by any woman in Persian culture and poetry. It was always the man who had the freedom to express these feelings of longing for a lover, and no woman in Persian history dared to do the same. But Forugh was uninhibited and

fearless, and made a conscious decision to let go. The publication of 'The Captive' was a real shock to Iran's tyrannical family structure amidst its authoritarian and patriarchal society.

Her works have become the only format from which young women in Iran could learn about this unique woman who was born from within their language and culture, a voice which spoke for them not long ago, one which envisaged a new birth. 'I don't know where I want to go – I don't know what I'm searching for night and day. What my tired gaze is searching. Why this heart of mine is burning within itself.' Or 'O, hey, man who has burned my lips with the sparkling flames of kisses'. She comes out and rebels against the social conventions which forces woman to hide their passion.

*They have said that that woman is a mad woman  
Who gives kisses freely from her lips:  
Yes, but kisses from her lips.  
Bestow life on my dead lips.*

*May the thought of reputation never be in my head.  
This is I who seeks you for satisfaction in this way.*

*I crave solitude and your embrace',  
I carve solitude and the lips of the cup.*

She persists to make herself clear by using 'I' often, and by communicating honestly to her readers. At this stage she is a captive of her domestic life. She sees it and searches for a solution to free her soul and body. She moans, 'Not I need strength I'm in this thought and I know that I will never be able to help myself to free myself from this prison which is kept by the man'. She is nineteen when she asks herself these questions and she knows that she is the answer. She is restless but she needs time to answer these questions by taking action and she will.

And for that she had endured great pain, but her desire was to free herself and not be captive to the old ways. She needed her inner strength in such a hostile place, which had all the power to enslave her to its fixed definitions of her gender and her art. She knew that she had to rebel in order to free herself from dilemmas she was facing, and at a great cost.

*In the silence of the temple of desire  
I am lying beside your passionate body  
My kisses have left their marks on your shoulders  
Like fiery bites of a snake.  
(The Song of Beauty)*

*I with the cold lips of the mooring breeze  
Write a melody for you  
I'm that shining star  
Which journey in the sky for you.*

*You are in me and you are separate from me  
You are with me and your gaze is elsewhere.*

After leaving her married life her greatest hope lay in looking for a lover who appreciated her as a free woman and as a poet. Someone who she could be with and to whom she could share her inner self without being caged again and forced to obey the rules which told her she could express the realities of her desire. She is fearful.

*I ponder, but I know  
I will never escape this cage  
For even if the jailer let me go  
I have no strength to fly.*

There is something here about Forugh that needs to be taken note of; the historical context from which she writes needs to be understood. It is the time during which Pahlavi's power is at its peak. The decadence of false modernity and fear of any opposing view is so intense that Iran is in absolute darkness. The forces of so called modernity is operating on the one hand, and the fundamentalist forces are on the other. In the midst of this is the Left, which is entangled within itself and trying to find a way to propagate its agenda; it ends up sending confused messages to the masses, who are desperate for fresh air to breathe. The confused leadership leaves people disillusioned.

In this situation people were looking to poets who expressed themselves rather than chanting slogans. People were looking for a new language to find a place to feel their sense of dignity, which was crushed by dictatorial policies of the regime. Alongside great modernist poets Nima Yushij, Ahmad Shamlou, Sohrab Sepehri and others, Forugh seems to be the only one who directly talks about and rebels against traditions. She tackled the subject matters that were impossible to talk about. Her courageous language directly expressed the hidden desires of Iranian women; the emotions and feelings of women who are neglected not only from their physical needs but also their civil human rights.

But she was her own subject matter and her desire was to express her freedom; she did not just chant slogans. She insisted on talking about how she felt and whom she wanted to share her body, life, and freedom with. And amidst the suffocating atmosphere she was always fighting with shadows (there are many of them on the road to freedom). It is not surprising that she has become the voice of liberation of women in Iran and the Middle East. In 'The Wall' she lives in the world of shadows and youthfulness.

*At night on the damp road  
How often have I said to myself?  
I race down the road of endless questions*

This was written at a crucial time, when she was beginning to feel at ease with herself and her body, even though she was still in pain after feeling the guilt leaving her husband and her son, who she was not allowed to see. However, painfully and tragically she followed her path to find her new birth and her poetry where she could express her poetic and artistic voice. Of the deserted home, she says:

*I know that now a child is crying  
Full of sorrow of separation from his mother  
But wounded at heart and distressed  
I'm on the path of my desire  
My friend and beloved is poetry  
And I go to find it*

This was, in her creative and personal life, the moment when she discovers her beloved, both physically and poetically. And it is here that she stopped writing the cries of an unhappy woman who was despised by society.

Forugh also maintained friendships with both male and female poets who were extremely erudite and understanding of her needs; they gave her the space to be herself. They helped her find her poetic

vision and from here she began to understand society rather than standing against it; she was beginning to grow up and understand its complexities. Her later works were still preoccupied with the same themes, but they were dealt with more maturely. She came to say, 'Yes, now I know I'm an individual and my poetry is for all humankind'. She felt that she arrived at her maturity as a woman and as the people's poet with not many shadows in the time of writing 'Born Again'.

*The clock flew away  
The curtain went away with the wind  
I had squeezed him  
In the halo of fire  
I wanted to speak  
But, ohh!  
His dense shady eyelashes  
Like the fringes of a silk curtain  
Flowed from the depth of darkness  
Along the quiver, that deadly quivers,  
Down the lost end of mine*

*I felt I was being freed,  
I felt I was being freed,*

*I felt my skin burst in the expansion of love  
I felt my fiery mass melt slowly,  
And then it trickled  
Trickled,  
Trickled  
Down into the moon, the sunken, agitated dark moon*

(“Union, Born Again”)

Forugh triggered the newness of modern Persian poetry and dissolved the fear of tradition. Her poetry is about authenticity, mutual love between lovers, and the need for freedom. And she knew it when she said:

*From love love love  
This exiled island  
From the revolution of ocean  
And the explosion of the moment  
I have freed a passenger  
To go through with*

To finish this brief insight on a great woman who lived such a short life but left us such a great legacy it is worthwhile to quote one of Iranian important critic Mohammad Hoghghi who effectively explained her life and personality:

‘Forugh Farrokhzad has one face with two profiles, the first profile is the mirror of the poet who wrote “The Captive”, “The Wall” and “Rebellion” and the second profile is the face of the poet who wrote “Born Again” and let us believe in the beginning of the cold season published 1975 posthumously. Both profiles represent the originality and authentically of the poets two stages. The first mirror represents a woman alone in captive in the walls of the home, alone and struggling with tradition and her female and motherly emotions and desire for a lover. And the second mirror of this

profile is representative of an infinite world where the woman is lonely in the universe but free to express her new birth.'

Now more than ever it must be stressed that Forugh's compelling poetic and personal voice needs greater attention in order to better understand the situation of modernity, gender relations, the ignorance of the West about the complexities of Iranian people, and the path towards greater democracy in society such as Iran and other Middle Eastern countries.

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