



Body, Love and Maternity in Sylvia Plath and Forough Farrokhzad: A Study Based on Helen Cixous's *Écriture Feminine*

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath and Forough Farrokhzad share same themes and concerns in their poetry and same points in their lives. Living in the tumult of post-war era, they are the advocates of *Écriture Feminine* proposed by Helen Cixous in "The Laugh of Medusa" as a model which follows feminine desire and the language of body. By applying *Écriture Feminine* these poets deconstruct Jacques Lacan's phallogocentrism and Sigmund Freud's misogynist psychoanalytic closure. They are not afraid to talk about their bodies and love; they are pioneers who transgress phallogocentrism. The toils of motherhood and contradictory reactions toward pregnancy are major themes in their work.

Key words: Sylvia Plath; Forough Farrokhzad; Helen Cixous; *Écriture Feminine*; Body; Motherhood

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INTRODUCTION

Helen Cixous is a professor, French feminist writer, poet, playwright, philosopher, literary critic and rhetorician. Along with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, she is considered one of the mothers of poststructuralist feminist theory. She has published widely, her first novel was a semi-autobiographical work named *Dedans* (Inside). Her other works include twenty-three volumes of poems, six

books of essays, five plays, and numerous influential articles. In the 1976's article, *The Laugh of Medusa*, she began writing about the relationship between sexuality and language. In this article she argues that despite their control of the signifying system and their intense self-regard, men had little to say about their own sexuality. To a psychoanalytic reading of culture, it is male sexual organ that operates to unify power, truth and order. Yet display of engorged or erect male sexual organ remains controversial, and is one of the key definitions of pornographic representation. The erection is therefore emblematic of masculine power: it operates most effectively when concealed (Mansfield, 96).

The Laugh of Medusa by Helen Cixous is a critique of phallogocentrism. According to Lacan discourse is phallogocentric: that is, it is centered and organized throughout by implicit recourse to the phallus (used in symbolic sense) both as its supposed "logos" or ground, and as its prime signifier and power source. Phallogocentrism, it is claimed, manifests itself in Western discourse not only in its vocabulary and syntax, but also in its rigorous rules of logic, its proclivity for fixed classifications and oppositions, and its criteria for what are traditionally considered to be valid evidence and objective knowledge (Abrams, 97).

Cixous also criticizes Freud misogynist psychoanalytic closure. For Freud the major determinant of subjectivity was the gender formation. This formation was distributed around the corners of the oedipal triangle. In this triangle the father is seen to be defined by ownership of penis, the mother by lack of penis and the son by his need to choose between the relationships to the penis that each of these positions seemed to offer. In this theory, the masculine is the defining norm of subjectivity, distributing positions around its fixity. These other positions lack a way of defining themselves. They can only be known in terms of something that they are not, or do not have. The feminine, therefore, is defined by what is absent from it, and the

success of all subjective formations is assessed in terms of what exact relationship each has to the marker of the masculine. This is perhaps one of the clearest examples of what is called the self/other or same/different dialectic, where a fixed or normal position is identified as the standard, self or same, and the other or the different is measured against it. This automatically subordinates the other to the self, making it appear to have either too much or too little of something and therefore to be inadequate or imperfect. Whatever gets chosen somewhat arbitrarily as the norm immediately arrogates to itself the prestige of being natural and right. In the case of Freud, even women's desire was to be defined in terms of the want of a penis, even though it was not part of the female body—hence the doctrine of 'penis envy' (Mansfield, 93-94). Cixous insists that a woman must write of herself and her body to break from phallogocentric system. In this paper by utilizing the ambit of *L'écriture Feminine*, Farrokhzad's and Plath's poetry has been discussed.

DISCUSSION

Over a span of thirty years (1930s to 1960s) two poets appear in two different countries with two different cultures who astonishingly share the same concerns and themes. Both are well-known figures of their own times who show manifested courage in expressing and undermining taboos. As Karen Jackson Ford has argued in her important book *Gender and the Poetics of Excess: Moments of Brocade* both poets devise aesthetics of excess. A "Poetics of Excess" see (ks to resist or transgress the oppressive, limiting, silencing constraints of convention (13). One of them is famous Sylvia Plath who was born on October 27, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts, to Otto Plath and Aurelia Schober. Plath matriculated at Smith College; she wrote and published even while still a student. While at Smith she suffered the mental breakdown and attempted suicide, after six months of treatment, however, Plath recovered, returned to Smith and graduated in 1955. She traveled to England, met English poet Ted Hughes, and married him on June 1656. In 1962, after learning of his affair with another woman, Plath separated from Hughes. She wrote poetry now recognized as stunningly original in its anger, its vivid colors, and its depiction of sunshine, energy, and life juxtaposed to the seductive lure of despair, emptiness, and darkness.

In 1963, Plath committed suicide. She inhaled gas from her kitchen stove. Simultaneous to Plath, Forough Farrokhzad starts writing in Iran. She was born in January, 1935, in Tehran. She attended public schools through the ninth grade, thereafter received some training in sewing and painting and married when she was seventeen. After a year she gave birth to her only child, Kamyar. Her marriage failed and Forough relinquished her son to her ex-husband's family in order to pursue her calling in

poetry and independent life style. In 1952, her first poem collection, *The Captive*, was published. Her increasingly mature volumes of poetry include: *The Wall*, *Rebellion*, *Another Birth*, and the posthumously published *Let's Believe in the Opening of the Cold Season*. She studied film production with Iranian intellectual and film maker Ibrahim Golestan and won a prize for documentaries with her film about a leper colony in Tabriz, Iran. In 1967, she was planning to play the lead role in a Tehran stage production of Shaw's *St. Joan*, when she met her untimely death in an automobile crash.

Both poets belong to the "Confessional School of Poetry". Their poetry reveals intimate moments of their lives. And like most of Confessional Poets, they focus on particularly painful moments or experiences often related to more historical or cultural problems (Ousby, 89).

In 2001, the psychologist James C. Kaufman coined the term, *Sylvia Plath Effect*, referring to the phenomenon that the poets especially females are more susceptible to mental illnesses than other creative writers (37-50). Forough and Sylvia were not exceptions; they suffered from mental breakdowns which led them to commit suicide. In her poem *Lady Lazarus*, Sylvia Plath talks about the art of dying and claims that she is exceptionally good at committing suicide.

"Daddy I have had to kill you. /You died before I had time—", this is Sylvia Plath talking about her Nazi father. *Daddy* is a transgressive poem which dares to think, and say the inconceivable. The poem represents the lack of communication and powerlessness, a daughter who has been a victim desires killing her father to escape the passivity which has been forced upon her. Sylvia suffered from insufficient fatherly affection, so did Forough.

In a letter to her father she blamed him for not understanding her character and forcing her to do everything, good or bad, in covert.

This paper seeks new feminist and psychological investigation within Plath's and Farrokhzad's poems referring to Helen Cixous theories about feminine writing. Feminism is not a uniquely twentieth-century phenomenon but since the early twentieth century it has grown to encompass a vast series of concerns: a rewriting of literary history so as to include the contributions of women; the tracing of a female literary tradition; theories of sexuality and sexual difference, drawing on psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the social sciences; the representation of women in male literature; the role of gender in both literary creation and literary criticism; above all, feminist critics have displayed a persistent concern with both experience and language (Habib, 667-668).

In this paper the ideas of Algerian critic, Helen Cixous which are expressed in her strong manifesto "The Laugh of Medusa" are applied. This radical feminist critic concentrates on the concept "*Écriture Feminine*" or feminine writing – "the inscription of the female body

and female difference in language and text", as Elaine Showalter defines it (Lodge, 300).

The *Laugh of Medusa* structured like a poem and its major theme is the need for a female writing and it clarifies the nature of such writing. In her text, Cixous charges that men have "riveted us between two horrifying myth: between the Medusa and the abyss." The "abyss" refers to the connotations and implications of Freud's designations of woman as a "dark continent," pregnant with a mystery recalcitrant to analysis and understanding, and signifying lack, castration, negativity, and dependence. Cixous of course resists this view. And, countering the other myth, that of a woman as Medusa, she affirms: "you only have to look at the medusa straight on to see her. And she is not deadly. She is beautiful and she is laughing (Habib, 702).

GIVING MEDUSA

Cixous believes that in women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the code (Cixous, 882).

And Laura Alexander in her text, *Helen Cixous and the Rhetoric of Feminine Desire: Re-writing the Medusa*, elaborates more on the concept of motherhood and pregnancy according to Cixous. She contends that the operation of mother and pregnancy symbolizes the body's reproductive faculty and the regenerative force of the mind and through this maternal love, feminine writing originates. Cixous wants woman to reclaim her natural self-expression and look to the creative mother within to write, whether writing assumes form of lived experience, actual childbirth, or written expression. Both Sylvia Plath and Forough Farrokhzad were mothers and their motherhood affects their poems and their poems include the themes of maternity and pregnancy.

A Poem for You by Farrokhzad; *Metaphors*, *Morning Song* and *Three Women* by Plath are maternity-oriented poems by these poets. A Poem for You written by Farrokhzad was composed in late July, 1957 and it was dedicated to her son, Kamyar. The poem is the last lullaby of a mother who is leaving her child to go against the societal conventions and follow a literary career.

Let the shadow of me the wanderer
Be separate and far from your shadow
When one day we reach one another,
Standing between us will be none other than God. (7-10).

Sylvia Plath's "Metaphors" is about a woman feeling insignificant and shrugging the pregnancy off. The poem uses rich metaphors to compare the narrator and different objects to make the reader see and feel the point more clearly: "O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!" (4).

Morning Song belongs to the book of *Ariel*. In the poem, Plath expresses her own attitude to the arrival of

her new born baby. Although the baby is the result of love but the melancholic tone is sensed through the whole poem. The narrator feels worried, she stands like a wall expectant for unfortunate events and this well expressed in these lines: "In a drafty museum, your nakedness shadows our safety/ we stand round blankly as walls." (5-6)

And *Three Women* is described by Steven Gould Axelrod as one of Plath's important social poems. It "reflects on the dilemmas of women's bodies and choices in masculinist society" (78).

The poem tells the stories of three pregnant women in three different ways; Plath depicts women's experience of pregnancy. The first is a woman who is giving birth to her child and takes the baby home, the second is a woman who experiences miscarriage and the third one is a college student who is giving birth after an unwanted pregnancy.

Sister, rise up after your freedom

Why are you quiet?

In medium, in her knowledge of unconscious mind, in the latent forces in language and in her oneness with body and motherhood, Forough is not comparable to any woman. With unfamiliar language of body she tries to fill the gap between body and soul. Body is her turning point of a search, a search for a latent self. Her body like her poetry reflects the inner emotions and the problems of the period and the body is the tool of her poetry. She was an individual, a poet who captures the repression of women and people, without slogan. Her politics was her body and her experience as a woman, and her message was against traditional society which was in macabre dance with modernity. Her struggle was to expose all hypocrisy regardless of names and isms. Her poetry runs against the social and ancient norms and attitudes of a male society, which prevented her from being herself (Aidani, 3). Writing of body is not only Forough's belief, but also her faith. Ignoring all dominant rules of society, Forough makes us familiar with the silenced body. She explores to change the world; she is the actual embodiment of the female poet who is desired by Helen Cixous. As Clara Junker notes, Cixous's method invites women "to write their body in order to discover themselves. She must explore her *jouissance*, her sexual pleasures, so as to bring down the phallogocentric discourse and ultimately, change the world" (426).

Karun like a girl's disheveled hair
Swing on the earth's bare shoulders
The sun is gone and night hot breathe
Drink from the chests of strong pulses. (1-4)

Kushiyar Parsi believes that after "Sorrow" from *Captive* the essence of Forough's poetry emerges. From now on the language changes to the language of body and desire. In order to visualize the feminine language Forough uses the polymorphous capacity of language and vocabulary's diversity. Her language has no resemblance to ancient familiar language of pregnancy, regeneration and *jouissance*. Forough tries to form her own specific

expressive style. Farrokhzad always goes against the grain and she is extremely unconventional in her poetry. She made all sacrifices to be authentic. "Green Delusion" is described by Farzaneh Milani as her eloquent statement of those sacrifices. In this poem, which Milani entitles in translation "Green Terror", the ever honest poet reveals that her decision to live as an individualistic female and artist is not without its price, doubts, questions, and twinges of regrets remain to roads not taken and more conventional, more accepted roles rejected. The speaker in "Green Delusion" recognizes that nature can no longer be a comforting idyllic force in her life, that she is far beyond able to seek refuge in comfortable maternal and other domestic female roles, and that her steadfast search for life's meaning has deprived her of the comfort of religious faith.

Every word, oblivious to its root, from milk, tear, and blood to the head, body, and rock has its own new sense of freshness and finds new meaning in Forough's poetry. Farrokhzad's choice of terms with their new forms and new places is in the service of her new look of body. Her effort is to change the mythic qualities of language and to introduce a new language. Her effort to achieve this language is more obvious in "Sin" from Wall collection:

I sinned, a sin all filled with pleasure
 Wrapped in an embraced, warm and fiery
 I sinned in a pair of arms
 That was vibrant, virile, and violent. (1-4)

Writing of this bare culture is reflected in the word virile and makes us think in a new way. Poetry is her magic wand and Language is sometimes dependent on the gender and desire but sometimes it is dependent on the belief and death.

After the "Wall" collection Forough's poetry becomes more technical, more structured and modern. Body is not described by concepts anymore. Each word transforms into a metaphor, from now on the big concern is the form not the language.

Poetry deals with the effective way of using the words and their contrasts. Forough's concern for the form leads to the new details in her poetry. Despite its limitations, language is the key to the liberation. Every word, metaphor and simile is selected carefully. In "Another birth", we face the daring use of words and a kind of liberation.

Forough's conscious combining of form and content and her attention to the language in her work is the diversity that French theorists such as Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray search in literature and they call it the core of *Ecriture Feminine*. There is a direct relationship between her distancing from traditional language and her use of body language. Forough's poems are written to make the sound difference more noticeable. Reading "Another Birth" poems isn't easy, they should be read loudly. Sound which is a part of body is demanded.

Alicia Ostriker has an important place in second-wave feminist critique, she is interested in work which is "Explicitly female in the sense that the writers have chosen to explore experiences central to their sex and she regards Plath's work as exemplary of these concerns. This critic is particularly engaged with female by Plath's representation of female body, looking, for example, at motifs of strangulation, violence and mutilation in "Medusa", "Cut", and elsewhere.

Voices as various as "Pursuit", "Spinster", "The Disquieting Muses", "On the Decline of Oracles", "Electra on Azalea Path", "Metaphors", "Poem for a Birthday", "You're", "Tulips", "Three Women", "Lady Lazarus", "Words" talk about desire, oppression, subjectivity, creativity, the family, pregnancy, transgression, children, the body and language. Her writing from early stories and The Colossus poems, through to the defiant Ariel brings female consciousness, female experience, and for some feminist critics a specific female language, into the foreground (Gill, 119).

CONCLUSION

As Helen Cixous says it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded-which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system (Cixous, 883).

Though there is no theory to describe *Ecriture Feminine*, it exists, it represents in every word, metaphor, and sound which can be heard in Plath and Farrokhzad's poetry. They are iconoclast poets who transgress the phallogocentric system by talking about body, love, and motherhood. They are women who are not afraid to talk about female experience and by talking and writing of female experience show that "the Dark Continent is neither dark nor unemployable (Cixous, 884)

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