

## ELEMENTS OF HOPE AND LIFE IN THE POETRY OF FARROKHZAD AND PLATH

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper explores concepts of hope and life in poetry of Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), the famous Iranian contemporary poet, and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) one of the most appreciated American poets of twentieth century. If we study biography of these two contemporary poets, we will find that both Plath and Farrokhzad had a tortured life; both of them experienced death of their loved one, separation, disloyalty, marginalization as a woman poet and having a male figure who surpass them but it is not fair and true to say that their poetry is just a means to convey their disappointments or to say that their poetry is just about death and darkness. The researchers believe that there has been too much focus on elements of death, disappointment, hopeless 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 paper tries to find these optimistic elements in the poetry of these two poets.

**KEYWORDS:** Sylvia Plath, Forough, Farrokhzad, Hope, Life, Poetry

### INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath and Forough Farrokhzad are contemporary poets from the same era but different cultures and countries. What make these two poets similar is their view toward life and literature. In some respect they share same subjects. By studying their poetry we can understand that they peak of shared concepts in their poetry. In poetry of both we can find some signs of hope and willingness toward life.

Susan Bassnett stated that "a suicidal poet is a term has been used (and is still being used) in attempts to define and explain Sylvia Plath's writing. Some critics have seen her as schizoid, carrier of a death wish that they perceive in everything she ever wrote. Others have seen her as the victim of male brutality, destroyed by a faithless husband. "(Bloom 207) According to Bloom working on Sylvia Plath's poetry and prose for many years, reading the secondary source material, talking to people who knew her and, by no means least, writing her own poetry, Bassnett finds it impossible to accept any of these glib definitions, these reductions and over simplifications of a complex personality and multifaceted writer. Bassnett believes that "Plath's writing simply does not fit into these easy categories. Some of them show a fascination with death, others equally show delight in life and in living. Nor do the poems show a steady progress towards suicide. Read with hindsight, it can be seen that she went through several stages of anger, despair, grief, quietness and longing for an end to pain but those stages are not part of a steady movement towards dying. In a note in Encounter, Ted Hughes wrote: It is impossible that anyone could have been more in love with life, or more capable of happiness, than she was. Other friends and acquaintances have expressed similar astonishment that she could have taken her own life. Alvarez asserts his belief that she had never intended to die at all" (Bloom 208)

Bassnett says that those readers who study her works as a series of prefiguration of suicide will find plenty of references to death, many to suicidal death. But she believes that it is silly and illogical to read her poems as death wishes and as evidence of mental illness. "That she could have been judged to be mentally ill and unstable is a sign of the failure of many readers—especially male ones—to understand the dilemmas about which she tried to write." (Bloom 209) The same can be true for Iranian poet, ForoughFarrokhzad; Farrokhzad is more known for her death and despair poems than for her hopeful poems. According to the idea of Culler it is possible to find a connection between different components in a poem, and through these components we can understand the meaning of poem and this connection in a poem leads us to go beyond personal life of the poet and regard poem as an impersonal work of literature. NormanHolland also believes that a reader in a process of reading create the meaning of himself not the meaning of the poem. The reader extracts his own identity from the work of literature. (Bressler 86) Therefore when some readers or critics said that Forough is a poet who just speaks about death, pain or theme related to darkness maybe they are finding their own truth from Farrokhzad's poetry. The most straightforward way to reject the writing-as-prelude-to-dying reading is to go back to the poems and prose and look again at them.

Sylvia Plath speaks of concepts other than pain and disappointment. According to Arid "Plath's subjects are madness, family, relationship, growth and searching." There are lots of positive tones in Plath's poetry. For example "To be female in Poem for a birthday is to be protective and procreative". After every pain there is a solution, a hope, or a kind of positivity. "The tensions are resolved finally in a rebirth after suffering: 'We grow. / It hurts at first. Thered tongues will teach the truth.' " (Aird68) There is not just darkness or just brightness in her poems; the mentioned poem, for example, according to the idea of Arid explores symbolic contradictions such as fertility/ sterility, child/ adult, day/ night, death/ life, animal/ human, and lightness/ recovery. And the poems in *Crossing the Water* continue this exploration. Or in the poem *Tulips* Plath makes a contrast between whiteness or sterility of the hospital room and liveliness of tulips: 'Look how white everything is/ how quiet, how snowed in'. 'the tulips are too red/ I could hear them breathe.'

There is a conflict between the speaker's simplicity of death and tulips' willingness toward life. Tulips bring the vitality of life to the room and provoke her to this vitality: 'Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise'/ then speakers says that 'the water I taste is warm'. "The mind of the I-speaker ranges out beyond the limits imposed on her. In this world of whiteness and motionlessness, the tulips are an intrusion, symbols of the life of activity outside— 'the tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me', 'the vivid tulips eat my oxygen', 'the tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals'. The redness of the tulips gradually forces the I-speaker to leave her death-in-life state. They breathe at her 'through the gift paper', they turn their faces to her and in the last two verses, as the pace of the language speeds up and the number of images increases, the tulips become a force for life, bearers of noise in verse 8 and warmth in verse 9, bringing the I-speaker back up out of her drowning state into an awareness of life:" (Bloom. 212) 'And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes/ Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me./ The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea, /And comes from a country far away as health'.

Moreover, red color of tulips has a hopeful connotation; it is symbol of blood, life and birth. The end of the poem comes with the word 'health', though it is 'far away' it is remembered: 'And comes from a country far away as health'. In the last stanza by saying that 'I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes'/ 'It's bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me', poet mentions that her heart beats and she is still alive like the blossom of tulips. At the end of the poem it is life in the form of tulips that dominate.

According to Bloom, in *Lady Lazarus* "out of the ashes of the concentration camps and the emotional ruins of the suicidal patient rises the mythical phoenix affirming her identity as both female and poet. As in *Fever* 130 the very experience of the pain is the means by which the persona grows to a new power: the first statement of this is in *Poem for a birthday*: 'we grow/ it hurts at first. The red tongues will reach the truth'." (Bloom 71) Plath speaks of pain but after that she also speaks of a new and fresh beginning.

Likewise about Farrokhzad one cannot say that it is only hopelessness that she is speaking about. It is partly depended on the reader and his background knowledge and feeling to get the meaning of her poetry; if a reader study her poetry with hopeful background he will find many examples of hope in Farrokhzad's poetry. It is not Farrokhzad who is hopeless but the situation at that period of life was desperate. Farrokhzad's writing of poetry began during miserable and depressing era of Iran. The years after *Kudeta* (28th of Mordad) in 1332 of Iran. Even in this desperate condition she is searching for love. It is correct that Farrokhzad wrote about hopeless and regretful conditions and spoke about her loneliness and painful life in poems like *Green Illusion* and *Those Days*, but she also wrote poems like *Conquest of the Garden* or *Another Birth* in which she is searching for a solution in order to get rid of pains of life; in these poems she speaks of recovery, life and birth.

She is trying to make a change and improvement both inside herself and outside world: 'None who fish/ in the tiny stream that drains out into a ditch/ Can ever fish up a pearl./ I know a sad little ocean sprite/ Down in her watery haven/ who oh so softly/ plays her heart through a flout/ A sad little sprite/ who dies from a kiss at night/ to be born from a kiss at dawn'. (*Another Birth*) The fisher man is looking for pearl. Pearl is symbol of life and hope. In order to find a pearl which reminds us of a bright and desirable life, one should seek it in bright and brilliant conditions like 'ocean' not in insignificant and diminutive conditions. Farrokhzad warns people against disdainful life and encourage them to a bright life. She wants people to expand their world and go toward ocean which reminds us of life, because it is in the ocean that one could 'be born' or find life, and to avoid 'ditch'. According to this poem anyone who has a 'haven' in the ocean will be born every dawn and never comes to death. Therefore we can see that Farrokhzad is hopefully urging people to progress and perfection in life.

She is such a great innovator that through her poetry encourages others to friendship, righteousness and strength. She is certainly successful in her goal and in giving a solution; "true love is the influential solution Farrokhzad introduced in her late poems as a means by which mankind can fight against the futility of empty life". (Shabahang 106) Farrokhzad tries to find solution through her poetry. In the poem *The Conquest of the Garden* "sun is supposed to be the symbol of life and energy, the true lovers getting immortal through their love, are compared to sun. with true love everything good and desirable is possible; darkness of night goes away, day breaks the black night and comes to life again, the gloomy sick atmosphere of night gives its place to the fresh air of the day, the lands get fertile the fruitful trees bloom into birth, evolution and pride. Therefore the miraculous rebirth of all immortal beauties is because of love according to Farrokhzad." (Shabahang 86) 'every body is scared'/ 'everybody is sacred but you and I'/ 'together joined lights'/ 'mirrors and water'/ 'and feared never'. In these lines we see symbols of life and hope. Light is traditionally symbol of hope or life; water is necessary for growth so is a symbol of birth and mirror is symbol of truth or reality. The speaker says that they are touching life and hope and their reality is happiness: 'it is about my fortunate locks'.

In this poem forest is green and breathing, air is clear and bright and the land is fertile and productive : 'in the fluid freshness of forest', ' it is not about a shaking whisper in the dark/ it is about Day and its invading spark/ it is about fresh air/ it is about a breeze over a fertile side/ it is about birth, evolution and pride'. Green is used positively in her

poetry; traditionally it symbolizes the secret of growth, life and fertility. There is no darkness, is it about day and brightness.

Love between these two people is like sun, full of life. The gaze of these lovers to each other brings light, life and hope for the two: 'two suns stares each other'. In this line two suns stands for the lovers. In this poem Farrokhzad believes that through true love one can change darkness into life and light. Farrokhzad optimistically is denying death; at least in this poem she is conquering over death. At the last stanza she inviting not only her lover but also all people to this beautiful and lovely life: 'come to turf' / 'come to turf' / 'and call my name'. So Farrokhzad is in search of a productive and profitable life not just standing and looking at grief. Another solution which Farrokhzad gives through her poetry is her own poem. She regards her poem a way to escape from death instead of expressing wish for death: 'My whole being is a dark chant/ which will carry you/ perpetuating you/ to the dawn of eternal growths and blossoming'. The poet gives a promise of undying state; she says her poem itself is a way toward liveliness and also a way to triumph over death. Creation is in exact contrast with death. Farrokhzad as an artist wants to reach an eternal life through creation of art (poetry, theatre, and cinema). She did not have any tendency in death, but also she avoided it. Her art was a good means to deny death and destruction. A person who writes such beautiful verses believes in the value of life.

Farrokhzad and Plath are poets who speak of concepts like death and darkness but at end or in the conclusion of their poem they come to this idea that finally darkness fades away and light appears. Farrokhzad's *Another Birth* and Plath's *Ariel* are proofs of this statement. At the beginning of *Another Birth* there are only dark and death: 'Life is perhaps/ a rope with which a man hangs himself from a branch'. But then it speaks of the 'dawn' of eternal growth and blossoming: 'I will plant my hands in the garden/ I will grow I know I know I know/ and swallows will lay eggs/ in the hollow of my ink-stained hands'. Garden as a gift changes the dark and hard life into a bright and beautiful one. "Through her poetry, the reader passes darkness and gets to light; he is carried to the beginning of an everlasting evolution and eternal blooming. The poet feels and lets the reader feel as if a new person full of warm and light is born in her. Images of 'dawn', 'growth' and 'blossoming' all symbolize a renewal and evolution which are in opposition to darkness spoken in first pars of poem." (Shabahang 111)

There is the same positive change in Plath's poetry. This change is a hopeful and optimistic one. The beginning of the poem *Ariel* regards black; it is just darkness and shadow that is extended everywhere: 'stasis in darkness'. But after that darkness disappears and blue, color of hope, purity and truth comes into view. Blue has positive tone, because sky is blue only in sunny days. The speaker moves ahead toward 'red eye' sun which is symbol of life and vitality: 'with the drive/ Into the red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning'. Red symbolizes life; it reminds reader of blood which is fundamental for life and living. We see transformation and movement which are central for life, instead of motionless and stillness which are characteristic of death. "Changing the setting from heavy 'darkness' to 'substanceless blue', Plath talks about another change and this is nothing but motion, getting weightless and going up through the air". (Shabahang 99) Moreover according to Shabahang in this poem 'sea' and 'wheat' are symbols of fertility and femininity: 'And now I/ Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas'.

"The speaker starts a journey from darkness to light, a journey from earth to heaven and a journey from corporeal I to spiritual I." (Shabahang 100)

Another resemblance between these two poets in relation to concept of life is idea of nature, garden and tree in their poems. Farrokhzad's *I Feel sorry for the Garden* and Plath's *Song for a Summer's Day* contribute to this term. According to Movahed, Farrokhzad was not against life but against the miserable way of living. In the poem *I Feel Sorry*

for the Garden Farrokhzad is the only person who cares for garden, nature and life. Green which stands for the garden in this poem is a sign of vitality, growth, life and salvation; and Farrokhzad notice to the garden. In this poem Farrokhzad herself not only has eager toward life but also critiques the people who do not place any value for life and its beauty. "the garden, its trees and flowers all stand for life, a fresh green life which is not thought about by these people; her father, mother, sister, brother and the neighbors are all too busy to care about the garden, the dying unspoiled beauty and about life." (Shabahang 78) She is the only person who sees the garden's beauty.

Nature in the form of garden stands for life and its freshness brings hope. She is worried about destruction of life and its beauty when she says that 'nobody care for the flowers/ nobody cares for fishes/ nobody wants to believe that little garden is dying'. She wants to keep the beauty of life. Although no one notices the nature and its beauty she has hope for improvement: 'I think we can bring the little garden to the clinic'. She anticipates some recovery of garden and life; she hopes that life becomes well. In Plath's *Song for a Summer* day, author's love of nature is clear. Author's love of nature derives her love for another person and finds love in her life. 'Sheen of the noon sun striking/ Took my heart as if/ It were a green-tipped leaf/ Kindled by my love's pleasing/ Into an ardent blazing'. In these lines she expresses how her love is similar to a strangely burning fire which is symbol of health and life. Sun and green are symbol of life, growth and birth. And 'leaf' reminds us spring and a new beginning.

The poem reflects simple pleasure of nature in a summer day in the country. Speaker expresses her happy experience and the beauty of nature. There is no fear, sadness or timidity in their actions, whether they might be stopping to visit a cow or picking a bouquet of flower or simply holding hands. 'Sweet grass sprang for their grazing'. 'The air was bright for looking: /Most far in blue, aloft, /Clouds steered a burnished drift; /Larks' nip and tuck arising/ Came in for my love's praising. In these lines Plath like Farrokhzad gives picture of nature and attractiveness of life: brightness of air, shimmering clouds and larks. Lark traditionally is known for the happy and musical sound, it is the dawn bird. Plath used lark as an occasion to express delight in nature and hope for higher joy and optimism. Plath's other poems which reflect images of hope and life are *Morning Song* and *Three Women*. According to Bassnett end of *Three women* reflect hope and possibility. There is representation of creation and optimism: 'The little grasses / crack through stone, and they are green with life'. "The city of stone comes alive again and the woman too, in time, will heal and perhaps will succeed in giving birth". (Bloom. 218) The woman speaker in this poem still has hope and anticipates happiness and satisfaction.

The first stanza of *Morning Song* begins with the word love, which is a good hint of the theme of the poem: 'Love set you going like a fat gold watch. /The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry /Took its place among the elements'. It is the birth of a son. This word, love, it is said to be the reason of the baby's coming to the world. This coming, the sense of movement of the action, is compared with that of a watch, as an object that starts working at a certain point, in the life of a person; this certain point can be the moment of the birth. This mentioned watch is a gold watch, the adjective gold gives an idea of the importance of the concept compared to it, in this case the newborn. Gold is color of sun which stands for life and beginning. The second stanza describes how the arrival of the new born has been welcomed: 'Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue. /In a drafty museum, your nakedness /Shadows our safety. /We stand round blankly as walls'. The first verse talks about the echoes of the voices of the parents magnifying his arrival which give idea of the happiness brought to them by the birth. According to Linda Wanger- Martin, this poem represents the blissful and delighted experience of being a mother. Although the speaker sees herself as 'cow- heavy and floral/ In my Victorian night gown', she considers her ability to fulfill the baby's need as her advantage and a unique experience: 'I wake to listen: A far sea moves in my ear/ one cry and I stumble from bed. (Wanger- Martin 96) As we see in his poem

Plath is speaking about positive aspects of life like birth of a child and 'breathe'. This poem appreciates birth and coming to this world.

Farrokhzad in her poem *Another Birth* convey image of hope through 'child': 'Life is perhaps a child /returning from school'. Child is symbol of wish and hope for parent and life in the form of child means to have hope in life.

Farrokhzad's other poem which reflect hope and life is *I will Greet Sun again*. Death is not wanted by Farrokhzad. In this poem she is in search of a new beginning, she still has hope because she is concerning with sun which is the same as a new day. 'I will come/ I will come/ I will come'. In these lines we see her emphasis on her willingness for life.

## CONCLUSIONS

By comparing these two poets we realize what make them similar and what major concepts in their poetry are. Poetry of both is poetry of hope. Colors and imagery are very important in their poetry in order to get their message and meanings. Through color and imagery we can find positive symbols in their poetry. They are women poets who try to find hope in their life. They both speak about their experiences which are the same; experiences like love or being mother.

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