

**Forugh Farrokhzad's Poetry and Film:
The "Eye/I" of Isolation in Forugh Farrokhzad's
*The House is Black***

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Forugh Farrokhzad is one of the greatest Iranian poets of the 20th Century. She is known not only for her poetry, but also for her film about a leper colony, *Khaneh Siah Ast (The House is Black)* (1962), which is widely considered to be the most significant Iranian film of the early 60s. A masterpiece, which received the Grand Prize in Oberhousen Film Festival in 1964, Chris Marker states that the film ranks among the best documentaries ever made. (Marker, *Facets Cine-Notes*) My research demonstrates that it is the portrayal of Farrokhzad's isolation that is hidden behind the isolation of the leper colony. In her poems "Vahm-e Sabz" [Green Illusion] (1962) and "Tavalodi Digar" [Another Birth] (1964), Farrokhzad describes the intensity of isolation and social alienation. In *The House is Black*, the isolation and social alienation of leper colony portrays Farrokhzad's similar experience in her life.

As Frederick Aicken notes, "One looks, in fact, not for poetry in the film, but for [the] poetry of the film" (Aicken 206). In *The House is Black*, one can see and hear the poetry of the film precisely because Farrokhzad wrote the screenplay; she directed and edited the film as well as narrating it. Epstein states that "cinema is the most real provider of the unreal, the mightiest provider of poetry" (qtd in Debrix 101). Farrokhzad's poetry is the powerful influence for her film, but more importantly, her life is the essential source of her poetry. Farrokhzad integrated her life into her film, especially her segregation and separation from the society in which she lived, and she associated her poetry and herself with the lepers in a way that lead to the great achievement of her film. As Milani asserts, "Farrokhzad views her role as a speaker for and to a particular community, a community of 'unarticulated' members'" (Milani 85).

Michael Hillman observes that Forugh Farrokhzad's life and life's work are as lyric statements (142). Farrokhzad poured her life and experiences into her poetry. For her film it is the same. As Jean Debrix says, "cinema, essentially, is magic – is poetry" (Debrix 86). The film is a reflection of Forugh's own isolation; in portraying the leper colony she portrays her own isolation in Iranian society. Moreover, in her film and poetry she critiques religion and she portrays the 'social leprosy' that she has suffered from all her life. Thus, "Farrokhzad's life and poetry cannot be separated" (Stricklin 32).

Hillman points out that Farrokhzad's life began in the capital city of Iran. Farrokhzad's family was part of a new urban middle class because of her father's position as a Colonel. Also because they were literate, the family belonged to a relatively small minority of Iranians in the 1930s (6). Yes, this is since, she was a little girl; Farrokhzad lived in a society where she belonged to the 'minority'.

In 1936, the ruling monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi legislated the Unveiling Act, which prohibited women from appearing veiled in public (Naghibi). As Farrokhzad grew up to be a young Iranian woman in the 50s and 60s, she was to realize that the removal of the veil from women's heads did not remove the social and the psychological veil in Iran. In Iran, "The veil, the legitimate, traditional and physical border of women in Iran had been shattered, yet the society remained rigidly patriarchal and religiously traditional" (Kassam 39).

Sabrina Kassam examines the politically and intellectually critical periods of modern Iran during the 1950s and 1960s prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. She notes the dilemma of Iranian intellectuals (especially the alienated intellectuals such as writers, poets of the 50s and 60s including Farrokhzad) and indicates that the intellectuals at the time thought that both Islam and the royalist tradition (namely, the Iranian monarchy) were responsible for the continued social and political ills of Iran (14): "But they had a love for the country even though they could not dispense with the tradition and they felt as if they belonged to a 'lost generation'" (Kassam 15).

Farrokhzad as an intellectual and a poet during the 1950s and 1960s belonged to the 'lost generation'. Kassam states that "'the lost generation', namely, the intellectuals of the 50s and 60s, thus suffered from what may be called double alienation. For Farrokhzad it was more than that, because she was a poet, an intellectual, she had to set her independent standards; also she was a Muslim female who was subordinated to the male" (Kassam 38). The superficial reforms alienated the intellectuals from society such that "Farrokhzad's poetry and life is a testimony to fact that Pahlavi's regime with reforms did not bring social change but brought contradictions and tensions" (Kassam 38).

Farzaneh Milani examines the "otherness" of women in Farrokhzad's poetry and states that as a 'woman' Farrokhzad was once more a part of a minority.(99) Elaine Showalter discusses the advantages of considering the "otherness" of women writers in a distinct tradition (qtd in Milani 99). Milani asserts that "Farrokhzad observed in one interview: 'Obviously, due to my psychological and ethical make-up—and, for instance, the fact of my being a woman, I view things differently.'" Farrokhzad's poetry has a character that reveals the morals, intimacy and background of a female subculture. Yet, in order to be aware of the sharp sense of 'otherness' of women in Farrokhzad's work that critiques male-oriented (Iranian) society,

one should be able to appreciate the crucial female subculture and understand its importance entirely. (Milani100). As a 'Muslim' 'female' 'intellectual' from a middle class family, Farrokhzad lived a life where she was always the part of the minority or the 'other'.

As I have noted earlier, Farrokhzad's poetry portrays her separation from society. Amin Banani observes that the "self" of some poems can be a reflection of either her private world or the society she struggles in, but they are inseparable. The theme of alienation from both private self and public, the desperation of the person who struggles to influence both the society and her own life, and effort to attain combination of both, is what ties her private world and public world together. (qtd in Stricklin 15). Milani defines Farrokhzad's ways of communication as "fashioned style, a style that is most appropriate for the communication of her inner life and perceptions of outer reality" (Milani 8).

Since social alienation is a constant in Farrokhzad's, poetry, as Stricklin remarks, "the individual- agonized, isolated, and unsure ...- is the essential source of power and hope for society as well as for self" (Stricklin 6). The isolation, the pain of being apart from the comforts of conventional life is what Farrokhzad's speakers express in her poems. Farrokhzad left her husband, and abandoned her child; because of her relationships with other men, especially with Ebrahim Golestan, she was disapproved of by women and men in Tehrani society. Because Golestan was married, with children, his time and attention were divided. This is another factor that has intensified the isolation that Farrokhzad depicts in her poems "Green Illusion" and "Another Birth".

As Farrokhzad persisted in composing poetry about the struggles of being a woman in Iran or about her personal relationships with her partners or about the social ills of Iranian society, she risked social alienation. She portrayed these phases in *The House is Black* and in her poetry. Despite society's disapproval, Farrokhzad kept writing, yet she was tormented by it. Since she could not find a way to ease her pain, her discontent became her isolation. Farrokhzad felt these tensions and reflected this sense of alienation from her environment in her poetry. Her poems such as "Green Illusion" and "Another Birth" reflect the estrangement she often experienced.

So autobiographical is Farrokhzad's poetry that "there is always a confrontation between the individual and society that disapproves her" (Stricklin 81). Indeed, the first stanza of "Green Illusion" has the tone of an isolated speaker. The speaker is confined and lonely.

I wept in the mirror all day long
Spring had entrusted my window
to the green illusion of the trees
My body could not be contained
in the cocoon of my loneliness

and the smell of my paper crown had polluted
the atmosphere of that sunless scene (lines 1-6)

Writer and translator Jalal Khosroshahi recalls the day when Farrokhzad picked up a mirror and looked into it for a long time and cried. “She never talked about the reason of her crying. It is not an imaginative poem. It was in fact like that” (The Mirror of the Soul). Similarly, in the opening sequence of *The House is Black* a woman from the leper colony is looking at the mirror. Her face is almost covered, only her eyes are visible. She is not to be identified, just as Farrokhzad was not ‘recognized’ by the society at the time. The woman in the opening sequence is the alienated, isolated individual and one may say that she is one of Farrokhzad’s poem’s speakers.

The second stanza of “Green Illusion” announces the spring season but the isolated individual is captive inside to only watch. The paper crown symbolizes her poetry; she is isolated and she is by herself in her prison because she had written, because she kept writing even though society did not approve of her life and her poems. In the second stanza we see the contradictions between the isolated individual and the birds, the nature and children.

I could not; I could not any longer –
the sound of the street, the sound of the birds,
the sound of tennis balls being lost,
the fleeing clamour of children,
the dance of kites, like bubbles of soap,
climbing aloft at the tip of a stem of string,
and the wind, the wind, as if panting at the bottom of love making’s deepest
dark moments,
pressed upon the walls
of the silent citadel of my confidence
and through the ancient fissures
called my heart by name (7-18)

In *The House is Black*, ‘imprisonment’ and children’s’ play is used in a contradictory way. We see the isolated community of lepers, mostly adults, yet we see the contradictory image of the children’s play in the film. Just as in the poem, in her film, Farrokhzad uses children’s play to portray and reflect the imprisonment of the lepers in society.

As Stricklin suggests, not only in “Green Illusion,” but at every stage of her writing career, isolation and sadness characterize Farrokhzad’s speakers (89). Also, in “Another Birth” the speaker refers to her isolation and sadness (90). In “Another Birth” the speaker talks about fairy tales, yet the isolation of the fairy goes back to the idea of isolation in “Green Illusion” as

well. As Stricklin comments, the “fairy is isolated because she sings her song just like the poet herself who scandalized her patriarchal society” (Stricklin 124). Yet Forugh took the risk of being isolated and even with *The House is Black* she took the risk of framing the isolation.

“Another Birth” is another poem in which one can understand Farrokhzad’s perception of life. In the first stanza, the speaker sees herself existing in the dark verse. Farrokhzad certainly has a biblical overtone, the use of the word “verse” refers to the *ayehs* in Koran; the speaker here completely associates herself with the poem, “Another Birth”.

All my existence is a dark verse
which repeating you in itself will take you
to the dawn of eternal blossoming and growth
I have sighed to you in this verse, ah,
in this verse I have grafted you
to tree and water and fire (1-7)

In the second stanza, Farrokhzad defines life by the portrayals of everyday events reoccurring, the repetition of things. In the film, in order to signify the same events reoccurring everyday, Farrokhzad has placed the scene where the man walks as he touches the wall while Farrokhzad mumbles in the background “Saturday”, “Sunday”, “Monday.” He touches the wall each day and walks back and forth. The mentally unstable man who sings and dances by himself is also a reoccurring character with the same dance and same song. In the film’s production of re-petitions such as, the scenes of every day routines of the leper colony, how lepers are given their medication, how lepers take their food, how lepers light a cigarette, signifies the lines below:

Perhaps life
is a long street on which a woman with a basket
passes everyday
Perhaps life
is a rope with which a man hangs himself from a tree
Perhaps life is a child running from school

Perhaps life is lighting a cigarette
in the languid interval between two embraces
or in the mindless transit of a passer-by
who tips his hat
and with a meaningless smile says “good morning”
to another passer-by

Perhaps life is that thwarted moment
when my gaze destroys itself in the pupil of your eyes
and this lies a sensation
which I will mingle with the perception of the moon

and discover the darkness (8-24)

In the third stanza the loneliness is measured by space, a room, such that the idea of isolation and imprisonment is a part of Farrokhzad's portrayal of loneliness. Thus the speaker has very little happiness in her life, but the size amount of despair and sorrow is much more than that of happiness. In fact, Forugh's mother, brother and sister all indicate that Forugh was in deep sorrow and she was very sad. (The Green Cold) The room-sized loneliness is very large compared to the window-sized happiness, which is in the heart of the speaker of the poem. Since the speaker identifies herself with poetry in the very first stanza, I believe this stanza particularly portrays the loneliness of Farrokhzad herself.

"Not only in this poem but in each of Farrokhzad's poems the window functions as a door to a prison than anything else" (Stricklin 118). Yet the image of the window in the film and the "window" she has used in her poetry shows us how she has experienced the outside world. With the window image she also protests the sterile world. Especially, she uses the window scenes in the middle of the man's walk by the wall and the voice over that repeats each day of the week. As Fereydoun Moshiri indicates "The film is poetry itself. Instead of a monologue or speech, a person recites the days of the week: to show the passage of time for the lepers, in the city of Tabriz" (Summit of the Wave). The woman, the man, the child, the boots, the pans and pots are individually put behind the window. The objects and the lepers "objectified" by the society are seen through a window. Yet we feel their isolation from outside and they are trapped in their room-size loneliness.

In a room the size of one loneliness
my heart
the size of one love
looks at the simple pretexts of its happiness,
at the fading of the beauty of the flowers in the vase
at the sapling you planted in the garden of our house
at the song of the canaries
that sing at the size of one window
Ah...
This is my lot
This is my lot
My lot
Is a sky which hanging of a curtain steals from me
My lot is descending an abandoned stair
To find something decay and exile
My lot is a grief-stricken walk in the garden of memories
And surrendering my soul in the sadness of a voice
That says to me:
"I love

Your hands” (26-44)

The private and the political as well as the personal and the public can not be separated in Farrokhzad’s poetry (Milani 62). In addition, in the film *The House is Black* Farrokhzad forms the screen-play as a poem and criticizes the social and political issues of Iranian society through the isolated leper colony and her alienation from the society. Stricklin views Farrokhzad’s poems centering on social experience as looking to the individual as the source of hope in addressing social and cultural ills (Stricklin 16). Farrokhzad characterizes the society by words such as insincerity and pretentious virtue, when she criticizes them. Farrokhzad’s main focus in her last collections is that the superficiality of society as well as the negative aspects of society and how they affect other people (Stricklin 12).

Hillman defines the significance of ‘Earthy Verses’, and notes that “[t]he poem where Farrokhzad describes a world from which the light of faith has disappeared”. She pictures a world with out the idea of paradise, but ironically she uses Koranic expressions (Hillman 51) In *The House is Black*, Farrokhzad uses parts of *Koran* and *Torah* in the screen-play. Farrokhzad criticizes the hope the leper colony has in God, although the disease can only be cured by medical science. Amir Mas’ud Farrokhzad states that “*The House is Black* depicts a leprous society in which the people trust in God and seek a cure for their condition through prayer, whereas only science and surgery can affect a cure. Without such treatment, the social leprosy will remain and increase” (qtd in Hillman 44). The second part of the film takes place in the school where students one by one say prayers to God, thanking God for giving them hands, feet and ears and creating them. The irony in the picture is that the students who are in that school are a part of the leper colony as well, so the students actually do not really have the ears, the feet and the hands to be thankful for.

Yet Farrokhzad placed the irony and the sarcasm in the screen play on purpose. She did not only make a documentary on leprosy. She reflected her own isolation through the colony; she criticized the Islamic hope of the colony and she criticizes the Iranian society of which she disapproved throughout her life. Aicken mentions that “the film must not be content to reveal and capture superficial beauty; if it has any claims to be considered as an art form, it must be able to explore the inwardness of things” (Aicken 206). Milani writes that Farrokhzad once said in an interview, “Content and form? Well, obviously, with my frame of mind, I attach a great importance to content...Content is not created for the sake of form; rather, it is the form that evolves out of the content. Altogether, I really don’t care about the form (74).

Aicken argues that the film camera is the essential toy in the hands of the movie director (207). In the case of *The House is Black*, the spectators’ vision is black and white. Farrokhzad’s choice of black and white reflects

dualities and dilemmas she has experienced and she highlights the juxtapositions of life. Emami once said that “her poetic vision and the strong content of the film have been fused together to create a documentary of lyric quality from a subject that appears so macabre from a distance” (Hillman 133).

Aicken points out that in the film the sight of ordinary men consists of isolated snapshots. Film critic Houshang Golmakadi finds the editing of *The House is Black* amazing and adds “[t]hat’s because she understood rhythm very well” (Summit of the Wave). Farrokhzad’s every shot in this film is so distinct, and the sight and sound of each scene is so different than the previous scenes, that the art of editing Farrokhzad uses becomes a powerful device in the creation of emotions. As Houshang Golshiri points out, the strength of Farrokhzad’s poetry is in the images. Indeed, scene becomes a stanza.

Farrokhzad literally associated herself with the leper colony during the shootings of the film. Amir Karrari talks about Farrokhzad’s interactions with the leper colony during the shootings, “Her relationship with these people was more sincere than [her relationships with] normal people.” He affirms that they even thought that Farrokhzad had a close friend or a relative with leprosy. They could not think of another cause that could familiarize her with the disease otherwise. As Karrari recalls, the wedding scene was actually a wedding in the leper colony that the crew was invited to, “... [i]t was such a beautiful scene when Forugh got up and started to dance for them. They were thrilled by this dance and acted as if we were the sick instead of them”. (Summit of the Wave)

When Farrokhzad was interviewed by Bernardo Bertolucci about her film, she said that it would be normal to focus on the disease when shooting a film on leprosy. She added “But this place to me represented an example, a model, a reduced form of a closed world, with all its diseases, difficulties and hardships” (Summit of the Wave). In fact, the isolation and entrapment she felt within the society resembles the closed world of the leper colony. In addition, film maker Bahram Bayzai remembers Farrokhzad being really angry and intolerant of the negative reviews at the premiere of the film. This also demonstrates how much importance she gives to her film or, one may say, how she internalized her work.

In addition, Farrokhzad indicates that she does not see lepers as ugly beings; she just thinks that they look different. She even adopted a child named “Hossein” from the colony and Amir Karrari remembers the special bond between Farrokhzad and the seven year old Hossein. In an interview in the short film, *Forough Farrokhzad: Young Revolutionary Poetess of Tehran* by Maryam Habibian, one of the interviewees talks about how the people of the Leper Colony still believe that Farrokhzad will come back one day as the messiah. He says, “They don’t believe Farrokhzad is actually dead.” Dabashi

thinks that “the film has a poetic treatment of leprosy to it” (Dabashi 26). He also says that Farrokhzad “detects and unveils the poetic souls hidden inside these ravaged bodies and does so with a quiet elegance that has never been matched” (Dabashi, 223).

According to Kaveh Golestan, the importance of *The House is Black*, is that it is the first time in Iranian cinema that the composition of images has such strength. He concludes that *The House is Black* “is one of the most powerful black and white photographic compositions in the world that deal with a very complicated form of human suffering” (Summit of the Wave). In fact, Ahmad Reza Ahmadi points out that the main theme of Farrokhzad’s art is humanity also the human who is under pressure.

Farrokhzad’s film is the crucial and critically ignored element in contextualizing her poetry. Even though poetry was Farrokhzad’s main passion, her tongue which she used as the tool of communication in *The House is Black* her inner life and her visualized perceptions of the society are blended. Her film is another tool of communication, which she uses. Aicken states that the most memorable moments in the cinema defeat complete analysis because they all possess this personal emotional factor which poetry demands.(210) *The House is Black* is one of those memorable moments in the cinema, just as Farrokhzad is one of the most memorable female poet in the history of literature.

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