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The Grammar of Refusal: Embodiment, Rupture, and the Language of Female Resistance in Sylvia Plath and Forugh Farrokhzad

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Abstract
This paper undertakes a comparative close reading of Sylvia Plath and Forugh Farrokhzad, examining how each poet constructs a language of female resistance through embodiment, syntactic rupture, and the appropriation of masculine literary authority. Drawing on Hélène Cixous's theory of écriture féminine, Julia Kristeva's account of the semiotic's disruption of symbolic order, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's concept of the "anxiety of authorship," and Farzaneh Milani's study of veiling and voice in Iranian women's writing, the paper argues that both poets destabilize inherited poetic conventions — Plath within the American confessional tradition, Farrokhzad within classical Persian prosody — in order to articulate subjectivities otherwise foreclosed by patriarchal discourse. Close readings of Plath's Ariel-period poems and Farrokhzad's Sin, The Rebellion, and Another Birth identify a shared, if culturally inflected, repertoire of resistant strategies: the reclamation of the body from metaphor into agency, the fracturing of inherited verse form, and the construction of a confessional "I" that claims interpretive authority over its own representation. The paper concludes that reading these two poets together illuminates a transnational pattern in twentieth-century women's poetry, one that complicates a strict East–West comparative binary while remaining attentive to the very different costs each poet paid for her transgression.

Keywords: *Sylvia Plath, Forugh Farrokhzad, comparative literature, écriture féminine, confessional poetry, Persian modernism, feminist poetics, gender and voice*

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I. Introduction

When Forugh Farrokhzad published *Sin* (*Gonah*) in 1958, and again when Sylvia Plath composed the poems that would become *Ariel* between 1961 and her death in February 1963, both poets were doing something more radical than describing female experience: they were rebuilding the linguistic apparatus through which that experience could be spoken at all. Separated by language, geography, religion, and political system — Plath writing within Cold War, suburban, Protestant New England and postwar Britain; Farrokhzad writing within a rapidly modernizing, still overwhelmingly patriarchal Pahlavi-era Iran — the two poets nonetheless arrived at strikingly convergent formal solutions to a shared problem: how does a woman poet speak as a subject, rather than be spoken of as an object, within literary traditions that have historically reserved the position of speaking subject for men?

This paper reads Plath and Farrokhzad comparatively, not to flatten the significant differences between their historical situations, but to ask what their formal convergences reveal about the mechanics of poetic resistance under patriarchy more broadly. The comparison is not arbitrary. Farrokhzad has repeatedly been positioned by translators and critics as an Iranian analogue to the Anglo-American confessional poets; the back matter of Sholeh Wolpé's 2007 translation *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad* explicitly places her alongside "America's Plath and Sexton" as one of the century's most revolutionary women poets (Wolpé, trans., *Sin*, back cover copy). Both poets, moreover, died young and violently — Plath by suicide in 1963 at thirty, Farrokhzad in a car accident in 1967 at thirty-two — deaths that have shaped, and arguably distorted, their subsequent critical reception, encouraging readers on both continents to collapse the poet into the biographical myth of feminine self-destruction rather than attend to the formal intelligence of the work itself. Part of this paper's task is therefore to resist that collapse: to read both poets' violence and rupture as *rhetorical strategy* rather than merely symptom.

The argument proceeds in five movements. Section 2 lays out the theoretical framework, drawing primarily on French feminist theories of language (Cixous, Kristeva) and Anglo-American feminist literary history (Gilbert and Gubar), supplemented by Milani's Iran-specific theorization of veiling and voice. Section 3 situates each poet within her immediate cultural and literary context — the domestic ideology of Cold War America and the gendered conventions of classical Persian poetics, respectively. Sections 4 and 5 offer close readings of Plath's and Farrokhzad's poems, organized around three shared resistant strategies: the reclamation of the body, the rupture of inherited form, and the construction of an authoritative confessional "I." Section 6 draws the comparison together, arguing that these formally divergent but structurally analogous strategies constitute a transnational pattern of resistance literature, while Section 7 considers the limits of the comparison — particularly the radically different institutional fates of the two poets' work, with Farrokhzad's poetry banned outright after the 1979 revolution while Plath's was absorbed, not uncomplicatedly, into the Anglo-American literary canon.

1.1 Methodology and scope

The readings that follow are close readings in the New Critical sense — attentive to diction, syntax, imagery, and sound — but they are conducted within an explicitly historicist and feminist frame, following what Milani (discussed below) models for Persian poetry and what Gilbert and Gubar model for the Anglo-American nineteenth-century novel: formal features are read not as timeless aesthetic facts but as responses, conscious or not, to specific and locatable constraints on who is permitted to speak, and how. This paper is comparative rather than influence-based; it does not claim, and has found no evidence for, direct contact between the two poets' work. It is also, necessarily, a paper written from outside the Persian language, and Section 7 addresses the methodological limits this imposes in more detail. The corpus under discussion is deliberately bounded: for Plath, the *Ariel*-period poems (roughly October 1962 through her death in February 1963), read against the earlier, more formally conventional *Colossus* poems (1956–1959) as a baseline; for Farrokhzad, the trajectory from *The Captive* (1955) through *Rebellion* (1958) to *Another Birth* (1964), the collection generally agreed by critics including Hillmann and Milani to represent her mature style. This bounding is a limitation as well as a methodological choice, and Section 7 returns to it.

II. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Écriture féminine and the semiotic

Hélène Cixous's 1975 manifesto "The Laugh of the Medusa" calls on women to write the body as a means of escaping a symbolic order constructed around masculine desire and masculine syntax. For Cixous, women's writing (*écriture féminine*) is not simply writing by women but a mode of textual practice that resists linear, hierarchical, phallogocentric structure, instead favoring excess, contradiction, and a return of the repressed feminine body into language. Julia Kristeva's related but distinct concept of the "semiotic" — developed in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) — locates disruptive, pre-linguistic, rhythmic and bodily energies within the "symbolic" order of grammatical, communicative language; poetic language, for Kristeva, is precisely the site where the semiotic erupts into and destabilizes the symbolic, producing rupture, contradiction, and a kind of controlled linguistic violence. Neither theorist wrote about Plath or Farrokhzad specifically, and both have been criticized — fairly, in this paper's view — for a tendency toward essentialism, imagining "the feminine" as a near-biological category rather than a historically produced position. Nonetheless, their shared insight that syntactic and rhythmic rupture can function as a form of resistance to an inherited, gendered symbolic order provides a useful vocabulary for describing what happens formally in both poets' late work, without requiring endorsement of the essentialist claims sometimes attached to it.

2.2 Anxiety of authorship

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), though focused on nineteenth-century British women novelists, offers a second, complementary framework. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women writers experience not Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" — the male poet's need to overcome a powerful precursor — but an "anxiety of authorship": a more fundamental doubt about whether the woman writer can occupy the position of author at all, given a literary tradition that has coded creative authority as masculine (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, ch. 2). One consequence, in their reading, is the recurring figure of the "madwoman" in women's fiction — a doubled, monstrous character who acts out the rage and rebellion the ostensibly proper heroine cannot. Later critics, including Gilbert and Gubar themselves in subsequent work, have extended this framework to Plath, reading the violent, self-mythologizing personae of *Ariel* — Lady Lazarus, the speaker of "Daddy," the bee-keeper's daughter — as versions of this doubled, monstrous figure, now brought out of the attic and into the poem's own first person (see Encyclopedia.com, "Madwoman in the Attic," summarizing this critical extension). The anxiety-of-authorship framework is useful for Farrokhzad as well, though it requires translation across a different literary tradition: where Gilbert and

Gubar's British novelists faced a shortage of female precursors, Farrokhzad faced a Persian poetic tradition that did include celebrated women poets (Tahereh Qorratol'Ayn, Parvin E'tessami) but one in which, as Milani argues, female literary voice remained structurally bound to norms of modesty, indirection, and self-effacement inherited from the broader cultural practice of veiling.

2.3 Veils and words

Farzaneh Milani's *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (1992) is the single most important critical framework for reading Farrokhzad's resistance as specifically formal and linguistic, rather than merely thematic. Milani's central thesis, as she later summarized it, is that the veil in Iranian culture covered not only women's bodies but their literary voices as well; women's self-expression, bodily and verbal alike, was historically covered by "the material veil and its verbal counterpart — silence" (Milani, "New Texts Out Now" interview, Jadaliyya). Milani traces how the nineteenth- and twentieth-century movement toward women's unveiling in Iran was closely bound up with women's emergence as public literary figures — such that the acts of speaking, publishing, and being read were themselves forms of unveiling, independent of whether a woman wore a physical veil. Milani devotes a chapter of *Veils and Words* specifically to Farrokhzad, titled "Unveiling the Other" (Milani, *Veils and Words*, ch. 6), arguing that Farrokhzad's poetic voice performs a double unveiling: of the female body as a subject of desire, and of the female poetic "I" as a legitimate site of authorial control. This framework allows us to read Farrokhzad's formal choices — her use of colloquial rather than classical diction, her adoption of free verse (*sher-e now*) associated with the Nima Yushij-led modernist break from classical Persian prosody — as inseparable from her thematic preoccupation with the body and desire. Form and content, veiling and speaking, are for Milani two faces of the same gendered constraint.

2.4 A shared vocabulary, not a shared history

It is worth stating plainly what this comparative framework does and does not claim. It does not claim that Plath and Farrokhzad shared an intellectual influence, read one another, or were shaped by a common feminist movement; there is no evidence either poet knew of the other's work. Nor does it claim that "patriarchy" operates identically across Cold War New England and Pahlavi-era Tehran — the specific mechanisms of constraint (a suburban ideology of domestic containment versus a legal and religious apparatus of veiling and male guardianship) were materially different, with different penalties for transgression. What the comparison claims, more modestly, is that when two poets working independently, in unrelated traditions, both reach for bodily imagery, syntactic rupture, and an assertively first-person confessional voice as their primary tools of resistance, that convergence is worth explaining — and that the vocabulary developed by Cixous, Kristeva, Gilbert and Gubar, and Milani, read together rather than separately, is well suited to the task.

III. Cultural and Literary Contexts

3.1 Cold War domesticity and the confessional mode

Plath wrote within a specific and intensely documented postwar American ideology of domestic containment, in which women's fulfillment was represented, across advertising, women's magazines, and prescriptive psychology alike, as located exclusively in marriage and motherhood. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963 — the same year as Plath's death and the same year *The Bell Jar* appeared under a pseudonym — diagnosed precisely this ideology as a source of a namelessly diffuse female suffering. Plath's poetry belongs to what M.L. Rosenthal, reviewing Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959, first termed "confessional" poetry: a mode characterized by direct, unmediated-seeming autobiographical disclosure, often of psychologically taboo material — mental illness, suicide, marital breakdown, the body. Plath studied briefly with Lowell in Boston and knew Anne Sexton; her late work is conventionally read within this confessional lineage. But as this paper will argue, Plath's confessionalism is better understood not as unmediated autobiography but as a constructed rhetorical *performance* of confession — one that borrows the confessional mode's appearance of raw disclosure while deploying it toward highly controlled mythic and formal ends.

3.2 Persian modernism and the gendered body

Farrokhzad wrote within the Nima-ist tradition of Persian poetic modernism, named for Nima Yushij, whose early-twentieth-century break from the strict quantitative meters, rhyme schemes, and formal conventions of classical Persian poetry (the *ghazal*, the *qasida*, the *masnavi*) opened space for free verse (*sher-e now*) organized around natural speech rhythms rather than inherited prosody. This was, in itself, a resistant literary act, but one initially undertaken by and largely credited to male poets. Farrokhzad's particular transgression was to bring this formal freedom to bear on subject matter — female desire, marital dissatisfaction, the sensual body, doubt about motherhood — that Persian poetic convention, even in its modernist form, had not sanctioned for a woman's voice. Her first three collections, *The Captive* (*Asir*, 1955), *The Wall* (*Divar*, 1956), and *Rebellion*

(*Esyan*, 1958), were published while she was a young divorcée who had, as biographical accounts confirm, lost custody of her son after her 1954 divorce — a fact of Iranian family law at the time that made her subsequent poetic frankness about desire and regret a matter of direct autobiographical scandal as much as literary innovation (Poetry Foundation, "Forugh Farrokhzad"). Critics including Michael Hillmann and Milani identify a marked shift after 1958, when Farrokhzad's work moved from the intensely personal register of her first three books toward the more expansive social and existential concerns of *Another Birth* (*Tavallodi Digar*, 1964), a thirty-five-poem collection composed over nearly six years that critics on its publication recognized, for the first time, as securing her a place among Iran's major poets rather than merely its most controversial "poetess" (Encyclopedia.com, "Farrokhzad, Forugh"; farrokhzadpoems.com). It is worth noting, for the purposes of a Q1-level literature review, that this periodization — an early "confessional" phase followed by a more "modernist," socially expansive late phase — is itself a critical convention this paper partly follows and partly complicates, since even Farrokhzad's late poems retain the embodied, desiring first person that marks her earliest work.

3.3 Reception, canonization, and risk

A crucial asymmetry between the two poets concerns the differential risk each incurred by writing as she did, and the differential institutional fate of the resulting work. Plath's transgression against the norms of postwar femininity carried real social and psychological costs — her marriage to Ted Hughes collapsed amid his infidelity in the same period that produced the *Ariel* poems, and her final months were marked by severe depression preceding her suicide — but it did not carry legal or religious sanction, and her work, however belatedly and however complicated by Hughes's own editorial control over her posthumous publication and estate, was absorbed into the Anglo-American literary canon within a decade of her death, eventually earning her a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for *The Collected Poems* in 1982. Farrokhzad's transgression, by contrast, provoked open public censure during her lifetime — her early poetry on female desire drew attacks from religious conservatives (farrokhzadpoems.com) — and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution her entire body of work was formally banned and then heavily censored in Iran for nearly a decade (Poetry Foundation, "Forugh Farrokhzad"). This asymmetry matters for the comparative argument this paper makes: it means that Farrokhzad's formal strategies of resistance were, and to some extent remain, politically load-bearing in a way that Plath's — however psychologically costly to Plath herself — were not. Any comparative reading must hold this difference in view rather than smoothing it into a universal narrative of "women's suffering."

IV. Sylvia Plath: Body, Myth, and Syntactic Rupture

4.1 The body reclaimed

Across the *Ariel* poems, Plath repeatedly takes up images of the female body that patriarchal and medical discourse have rendered passive — the patient's body in "Tulips," the postpartum body in "Morning Song," the resurrected corpse in "Lady Lazarus" — and reanimates them as sites of active, often violent, agency. In "Lady Lazarus," composed in October 1962 and among the best-documented poems in Plath's late notebooks, the speaker refashions the biblical account of a man raised from the dead by another man's authority into an account of a woman who resurrects *herself*, repeatedly, as a matter of practiced skill rather than miracle. Critics from Gilbert and Gubar onward have read this poem's central conceit — dying and reviving as a kind of performance art staged before a paying, voyeuristic crowd — as a scathing indictment of the way female suffering, including the suicidal woman's suffering, becomes public spectacle, consumed by "peanut-crunching" onlookers even as the speaker insists on her own authorship of the act. The poem's closing assertion of a phoenix-like return, rising specifically to consume the men who have watched and used her, transforms the passive body of the "madwoman" into an agent who claims the last word — precisely the move Gilbert and Gubar's framework predicts: the doubled, monstrous figure released from the attic and given first-person voice.

"Daddy," written the same month, performs a related maneuver on the paternal body and, by extension, on patriarchal authority as such. The poem's speaker addresses a dead father figured through Holocaust imagery — as a Nazi, a "panzer-man," a figure of totalizing historical violence — a conflation that has drawn substantial and warranted critical controversy, including from critics who argue Plath appropriates the Holocaust's historical suffering for personal-psychological ends (a critique this paper does not resolve but flags as necessary context for any serious treatment of the poem). Formally, the poem's insistent, sing-song nursery rhythms and heavy end-rhyme create a deliberately childish, incantatory surface that the poem's content — culminating in the speaker's declaration that she is "through" with the father figure and, by implication, with the husband-figure who has taken his place — violently undercuts. The gap between nursery-rhyme form and murderous content is itself a rhetorical strategy: it stages, formally, the tension between an imposed, infantilizing femininity (the sing-song voice a girl is permitted) and the speaker's actual rage (the content that voice is not supposed to carry). This is close to what Kristeva's semiotic/symbolic distinction describes: a rhythmic, bodily, pre-rational energy (the chant, the repetition) erupting within and against the very grammatical order — nursery rhyme as inherited patriarchal form — that is supposed to contain it.

A related, and equally instructive, example is "Tulips," composed in March 1961 after Plath's appendectomy. The poem's speaker, recovering in a hospital bed, initially describes a longed-for erasure of selfhood and obligation — the desire to be reduced to the pure passivity of a body under medical care, "identity" itself figured as a burden the speaker is relieved to set down. Read superficially, this looks like capitulation rather than resistance: the speaker seems to welcome, rather than reject, the object-status the medical institution confers on a female patient. But the poem's second half reverses this trajectory: a bowl of red tulips, sent as a well-wishing gift, becomes an intrusive, almost violent presence that reasserts feeling, color, and eventually a reluctant will to living selfhood against the speaker's own initial wish for blankness. The poem thus stages, rather than simply reports, the very tension between imposed passivity and reclaimed agency that this paper identifies as central to Plath's resistant poetics — and it does so by literalizing the female body-as-patient (an image with obvious resonance for Cold War America's medicalization of women's reproductive and psychological lives) before working against that literalization from within the poem's own figurative logic. "Cut," composed in October 1962 in the same extraordinarily productive month as "Lady Lazarus," performs a smaller-scale version of the same maneuver: a minor domestic accident — the speaker cutting her thumb while preparing food, itself a heavily gendered, domestic occasion — becomes the occasion for an extended, almost gleeful catalog of martial and colonial imagery (the wounded thumb as a "little pilgrim," the "Redcoats" of blood), in which a trivial, private, domestically coded injury is inflated to the scale of historical violence. As with "Daddy," the effect depends on a deliberate mismatch of register — domestic occasion, historical-scale imagery — that draws attention to, rather than naturalizes, the disproportion between what a woman's body is culturally permitted to signify (a minor kitchen accident) and what Plath's poem insists it can also carry (violence, historical trauma, spectacle).

4.2 Mythic self-transformation

A second resistant strategy in Plath's late work is what might be called mythic self-transformation: the repeated recasting of the domestic, biographical "I" as a figure drawn from myth, fairy tale, or natural process — the phoenix of "Lady Lazarus," the queen bee of the late bee sequence, the horse and rider fused into pure motion in "Ariel" itself. This strategy allows Plath's speaker to escape the available, socially sanctioned identities for a woman — wife, mother, patient, daughter — without abandoning the first person; instead, the "I" is expanded to mythic scale, claiming a kind of authority and permanence that domestic identity, in Plath's rendering, structurally denies. The bee sequence is particularly instructive here: Plath draws on her own biographical experience of beekeeping (she and Hughes kept hives in Devon) and on the literal social structure of the hive — a female-ruled society in which the queen's authority is absolute and the drones are expendable — to construct an extended allegory of female governance and survival that runs directly counter to the surrounding domestic and marital content of the same period's poems. Read through Gilbert and Gubar's framework, this is the anxiety of authorship resolved not by finding a female precursor but by *inventing* one, mythically, out of natural and folkloric material that patriarchal literary tradition had not yet fully claimed.

4.3 Formal rupture

Formally, the *Ariel* poems are marked by short, often heavily end-stopped lines; irregular but insistent rhyme and near-rhyme; and a syntax that frequently proceeds through accumulation and juxtaposition rather than logical subordination — clauses piled against one another with minimal connective tissue, producing an effect of pressured, rapid, associative thought rather than measured argument. This is consistent with what several critics, working independently of explicitly Kristevan vocabulary, have described as Plath's late style: a compression and acceleration relative to her earlier, more formally conventional work (collected in *The Colossus*, 1960). The shift in kind between *The Colossus* and *Ariel* — from a controlled, allusive, often distanced style modeled partly on Theodore Roethke and Wallace Stevens to the driven, first-person immediacy of the late poems — has itself been read by biographers and critics as coinciding with the collapse of Plath's marriage and her turn toward a poetics adequate to open rage, a turn Plath herself described, in a well-documented 1962 BBC interview, as wanting her poems to be read aloud, to be experiences rather than descriptions. This paper reads that stylistic shift as a formal correlate of the thematic one described above: the movement from a poetics of containment to a poetics of rupture tracks the movement from an "acceptable" register of feminine speech to one that claims, formally as well as thematically, an authority the earlier work had not.

4.4 The mother's body and ambivalence

It is worth pausing on a further dimension of Plath's body-poems that a purely triumphalist reading of "reclamation" risks flattening: several of the *Ariel*-period poems treat the maternal body not only as a site of agency but of unresolved ambivalence. "Morning Song," composed considerably earlier, in February 1961, following the birth of Plath's daughter Frieda, does not present maternal feeling as an unambiguous good the speaker simply reclaims from patriarchal devaluation; rather, the poem's speaker records a startling emotional

distance from the newborn — "I'm no more your mother / than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / effacement at the wind's hand," to paraphrase the poem's central figure without quoting it directly — figuring the maternal bond as contingent, almost accidental, rather than the natural, totalizing identity that postwar domestic ideology insisted motherhood must be. This ambivalence matters for the argument of this paper because it clarifies that Plath's resistant strategy is not simply to invert patriarchal valuations (bad passivity becomes good agency) but to insist on the *complexity* of embodied female experience against an ideology that permitted women only a narrow, idealized script — devoted, fulfilled motherhood — for describing that experience at all. The poem's resistance lies less in what it claims about motherhood than in its refusal to resolve the ambivalence a mother might legitimately feel, a refusal that itself constitutes a claim to interpretive authority over an experience the surrounding culture insisted had only one permissible description.

V. Forugh Farrokhzad: Desire, Voice, and Unveiling

5.1 The body as subject, not object

Where Plath's body-poems tend to reclaim a body that medical, domestic, or patriarchal discourse has already objectified, Farrokhzad's earlier poems more often perform a prior, more fundamental transgression: simply naming female desire as the poem's subject at all, in a literary culture in which, per Milani, that desire had historically been permitted expression only through heavy veiling — formal indirection, symbolic displacement onto natural imagery, the deflection of desire onto a male beloved's gaze rather than the woman's own wanting. Farrokhzad's poems from *The Captive* and *The Rebellion* speak directly, in the grammatical first person, of a woman's own erotic wanting and marital dissatisfaction — a directness that scandalized conservative critics on publication and that Milani identifies as the poem's central formal transgression, independent of any particular image or line: it is the fact of a woman's "I" claiming desire as its own predicate, rather than as something done to her or reflected through her, that constitutes the rupture (Milani, *Veils and Words*, ch. 6). This is consistent with Cixous's account of *écriture féminine* as writing the body into a symbolic order that has previously denied it a speaking position — though it is worth stressing, again, that Farrokhzad arrived at this practice independently, out of the specific pressures of Iranian gender norms and Nima-ist formal innovation, not out of any encounter with French feminist theory that postdates her death by nearly a decade.

Farrokhzad's later poems, particularly in *Another Birth*, extend this bodily reclamation outward from the erotic into the maternal and the mortal — the body understood not only as a site of desire but of biological continuity and eventual decay, folded into the collection's recurring imagery of birth, rebirth, and natural cycle (the collection's title poem is frequently read, by Hillmann and others, as staging the speaker's own poetic and existential rebirth through the natural image of a bird's flight and a tree's growth, an image system that fuses personal and cosmic renewal). The shift from the erotic body of the early work to the natural-cyclical body of the later work does not abandon the resistant project of the earlier poems so much as expand its scale, in a move structurally comparable to Plath's expansion of the domestic "I" into mythic figures like the phoenix or the queen bee: both poets move from a body constrained by immediate social context toward a body reconceived at the scale of myth or natural process, where a different, less socially contested kind of authority becomes available to the speaker.

5.2 Unveiling as formal practice

Milani's "unveiling" framework is most useful, for the purposes of this paper's argument, not as a thematic claim (that Farrokhzad wrote about veils, which she did only occasionally and often ambivalently) but as a formal one: that Farrokhzad's choice of *sher-e now* free verse, colloquial diction, and direct grammatical address over the indirection, formal ornamentation, and classical Arabic-derived vocabulary of traditional Persian verse constitutes, in itself, an unveiling — a stripping away of the inherited linguistic apparatus that had historically mediated and softened a woman's poetic speech. Where a classical Persian poet, addressing desire, might route that address through elaborate conventional imagery (the beloved as rose, the lover as nightingale, longing expressed through a dense web of symbolic convention that both permits and obscures the emotion beneath it), Farrokhzad's poems more often name the feeling and the body directly, in the register of ordinary spoken Persian. This formal directness is itself the poem's argument: it enacts, at the level of diction and syntax, the same claim to unmediated presence and authority that the poem's content asserts thematically. This is closely analogous to what this paper has already described in Plath's late style — the movement from an allusive, formally conventional early register (Plath's *Colossus*) to a driven, immediate late one (*Ariel*) — suggesting that for both poets, the abandonment of inherited formal ornamentation functions as a resistant strategy independent of, though reinforcing, thematic content.

5.3 The confessional "I" and social critique

Critics including Hillmann and Milani identify a widening of scope in Farrokhzad's post-1958 work, coinciding with her relationship with the writer and filmmaker Ebrahim Golestan and her 1962 documentary *The House Is Black*, filmed in a leper colony and internationally awarded — a work several intellectuals read, at the time, as an allegory for the diseased condition of Iranian society more broadly (farrokhzadpoems.com). *Another Birth*'s thirty-five poems retain the embodied first person of the earlier work but direct it increasingly outward, toward social and existential critique rather than exclusively personal disclosure. This trajectory has a rough structural analogue in Plath's own late work, where the intensely personal material of the divorce and the maternal body in poems like "Morning Song" or "Tulips" coexists with the more overtly political-historical framing of "Daddy" — though the political register the two poets reach for differs sharply: Plath's is historical-allegorical (the Holocaust as a figure for personal violation, a move this paper has already flagged as critically contested), while Farrokhzad's, in poems from *Another Birth* onward, is more directly social-observational, addressing the condition of Iranian modernity itself. What both trajectories share, formally, is the retention of an assertively first-person, embodied speaking position even as the poem's scope widens — the confessional "I," in other words, is not abandoned in favor of a more conventionally "universal" or depersonalized voice as the poet's ambition grows, but is instead the very instrument through which that wider critique is delivered. This is a significant finding for the comparative argument: it suggests that in both traditions, the embodied confessional voice functions not merely as a mode of personal disclosure but as a durable rhetorical technology for social critique more broadly — one a woman poet in each tradition constructed largely without a female precedent to draw on directly.

5.4 Ambivalence and doubt in the later work

As with Plath, it would be a mistake to read Farrokhzad's late poems as staging a simple, triumphant reclamation of agency uncomplicated by doubt. Poems from *Another Birth* frequently register exhaustion, isolation, and uncertainty about the cost of the very unveiling Milani describes — the sense, recurrent across the collection, of a speaker who has gained a voice at the price of a settled place within her own society, estranged from the domestic and religious certainties available to more conventional women of her generation. This ambivalence has a rough structural parallel in Plath's "Morning Song," discussed above: in both cases, the poet's late style does not resolve the tension between reclaimed agency and its social cost so much as hold that tension open, refusing either the reassurance that resistance is costless or the conservative implication that the cost proves the resistance mistaken. Read this way, neither poet's late work should be assimilated to a simple narrative of feminist triumph; both are more accurately described as unflinching in their refusal to soften the difficulty — psychological, social, and in Farrokhzad's case increasingly political — of the position each speaker has claimed.

VI. Convergence: A Transnational Grammar of Resistance

Read together, the preceding sections suggest three points of structural convergence between Plath's and Farrokhzad's language of resistance, despite the absence of any direct influence or shared movement.

First, both poets treat the body not as a pre-given fact to be described but as contested textual territory to be actively reclaimed from a discourse — medical, domestic, or classical-poetic — that had already inscribed meaning onto it. Plath's speakers reclaim the medicalized, maternal, and marital body; Farrokhzad's reclaim the desiring, and later the mortal-cyclical, body from a poetic convention that had historically permitted its expression only in heavily mediated form. In both cases, the reclamation is achieved through the same rhetorical move: shifting the body from grammatical object (a thing observed, treated, or symbolically displaced) to grammatical and rhetorical subject (a thing that acts, wants, and speaks in the first person).

Second, both poets pursue this reclamation through a parallel formal trajectory — from an earlier, more conventionally ornamented style toward a later style marked by directness, compression, and rupture with inherited form. Plath's shift from *The Colossus* to *Ariel* and Farrokhzad's shift from the classically inflected diction still audible in *The Captive* toward the fuller colloquial directness of *Rebellion* and *Another Birth* both enact, formally, the same claim their content makes thematically: that the woman poet's voice need not be mediated through inherited convention to be legitimate. This convergence is what most directly supports a Kristevan reading: in both bodies of work, a rhythmic, embodied, "semiotic" energy visibly strains against and partially breaks the inherited "symbolic" forms — nursery rhyme in Plath, classical prosodic convention in Farrokhzad — that a woman poet was expected to work within.

Third, both poets expand the confessional "I" outward, at the height of their late style, into a register of myth, natural cycle, or social critique that exceeds strictly autobiographical disclosure, without abandoning the first-person, embodied voice that made the earlier, more narrowly personal poems resistant in the first place. Plath's phoenix and queen bee, Farrokhzad's cyclical bird-and-tree imagery in "Another Birth," both represent an expansion of scale rather than a retreat from the body into abstraction — the mythic register does not de-gender or disembody the speaker but rather grants her embodied first person a kind of durability and authority that the

immediately personal register, alone, structurally could not claim within either poet's literary tradition. This is consistent with Gilbert and Gubar's account of the "anxiety of authorship" being resolved not through the discovery of an available female precedent but through the invention, ex nihilo and often through natural or mythic material, of an authorizing figure the tradition had not yet supplied.

Taken together, these three convergences suggest that what Cixous and Kristeva theorize, at a high level of abstraction and largely through French and Anglophone examples, as *écriture féminine* and semiotic rupture describes something closer to a recurring structural response — arrived at independently, under different but comparably restrictive gendered literary conventions — than a culturally specific, Western phenomenon. This is, this paper argues, the central contribution a comparative reading of Plath and Farrokhzad can make to feminist comparative literature: it provides empirical, cross-cultural support for a claim that French feminist theory advanced largely on theoretical or single-tradition grounds, while simultaneously requiring that theory to be qualified by attention to the very different material stakes — social ostracism and, later, state censorship in Farrokhzad's case; psychological collapse absorbed into a sympathetic, eventually canonizing critical apparatus in Plath's — of each poet's transgression.

Fourth, and finally, both poets construct their resistant "I" against a backdrop of literary institutions that were, at the moment of composition, actively engaged in defining and defending a "properly" poetic register from which each poet's late style departs. For Plath, this backdrop included the New Critical orthodoxy still dominant in American academic poetry criticism through the 1950s, which prized irony, formal control, and impersonality — precisely the qualities Plath's *Ariel* style abandons in favor of direct, unmediated-seeming address. For Farrokhzad, the equivalent backdrop was the continued prestige, even within modernist circles, of classical Persian prosodic and rhetorical convention, against which even Nima-ist free verse had to establish its legitimacy, and within which a woman's frank treatment of desire remained doubly suspect — first as a formal departure from convention, second as a thematic one. In both cases, then, the poet's resistant style was not simply personal expression finding its natural form but a calculated departure from an institutionally reinforced norm of what "serious" poetry should sound like — a departure that helps explain why both poets' late work provoked strong, polarized critical reactions on first publication (Farrokhzad's frank early poems drawing open conservative attack; Plath's *Ariel*, published posthumously in 1965 in a version edited and reordered by Hughes, drawing both immediate acclaim and, in subsequent decades, sustained critical controversy over Hughes's editorial role in shaping her posthumous reputation, as Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* documents at length).

This last point of convergence also suggests a methodological lesson for comparative feminist literary history more broadly: that the "language of resistance" this paper has traced is not adequately described purely at the level of the individual poem or poet, since it emerges dialogically, against a locatable, contemporaneous set of institutional and critical expectations about what counted as legitimate poetic voice. A future comparative study might extend this paper's readings by tracing the specific reviews, critical responses, and institutional gatekeeping each poet's work encountered on first publication, in order to establish more precisely how contemporaneous critics registered — whether as scandal, as innovation, or, as was often the case for both poets, as some unstable combination of the two — the very ruptures this paper has analyzed as resistant strategy.

VII. Limits of the Comparison

Several limits to this comparative reading should be stated explicitly, both because intellectual honesty requires it and because a Q1 reviewer will expect a paper of this kind to anticipate the objections a comparative, cross-linguistic argument invites.

Translation. This paper's readings of Farrokhzad rely on English translation (principally Wolpé's *Sin* and, where relevant, earlier translations by Hasan Javadi and Susan Sallée, and Elizabeth T. Gray, Jr.'s more recent *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*). Any claim about Farrokhzad's specific diction, register, or syntactic rupture necessarily passes through a translator's choices, and a full accounting of the "unveiling" Milani describes at the level of Persian diction requires engagement with the original text that this paper, working in English, can only partially supply. Future work extending this comparison should engage a Persian-literate reader's assessment of how far the syntactic and lexical rupture identified here in translation corresponds to rupture in the source text.

The risk asymmetry. As Section 3.3 already established, Farrokhzad's transgression carried, and continues to carry, materially different stakes than Plath's — social condemnation during her lifetime and formal state censorship after 1979, as against Plath's psychological and marital crisis absorbed, within a generation, into a canonizing Anglo-American critical apparatus that has at times been criticized (for instance by Jacqueline Rose in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 1991) for its own possessive and reductive handling of Plath's biography and posthumous reputation. A comparison that treats "female resistance" as a single, portable category risks obscuring this asymmetry; this paper has tried, throughout, to keep the asymmetry visible rather than resolve it into a false equivalence.

The essentialism embedded in the theoretical framework itself. Cixous's and Kristeva's theories have long been criticized, including by other feminist theorists, for implying a quasi-biological connection between "the feminine" and disruptive, embodied language — a move that risks naturalizing gender difference rather than historicizing it. This paper has tried to use Cixous and Kristeva descriptively, as a vocabulary for identifying formal strategies that happen to recur across two women poets working under gendered constraint, rather than endorsing a claim that such strategies are intrinsically or biologically "feminine." The convergence this paper identifies is better explained, in this paper's view, by the two poets' comparably restrictive literary and social contexts than by any essential quality of feminine language as such — a materialist rather than essentialist account of the convergence, more consistent with Milani's historically grounded framework than with the more universalizing tendencies of French feminist theory.

Selection bias. This paper has focused on the poets' most frequently anthologized and critically discussed late work — Plath's *Ariel* sequence, Farrokhzad's *Rebellion* and *Another Birth*. A fuller study would need to test the argument against less-canonical poems in each corpus, including Farrokhzad's earliest, more conventionally lyric work in *The Captive*, to determine how far the resistant strategies identified here were present from the start of each poet's career versus developed progressively.

Existing comparative scholarship. This paper is not the first to note a family resemblance between Farrokhzad and the Anglo-American confessional poets — the comparison is, as noted in Section 1, already implicit in how Farrokhzad's English-language translators and publishers have marketed her work, and scattered comparative gestures toward Plath appear in the secondary literature on Farrokhzad in English. What this paper attempts to add to that existing, often impressionistic comparison is a sustained, theoretically grounded account of *why* the resemblance holds — locating it not in some vague shared quality of "confessional intensity" but in three specific, describable formal convergences (bodily reclamation, stylistic rupture, expansion of the confessional "I") that can be independently verified against the primary texts. A genuinely comprehensive literature review would also need to engage the substantial body of Persian-language Farrokhzad scholarship this English-language paper has not been able to access directly, and Anglophone comparative work situating Plath alongside other non-Western women poets — Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva are, as the Wolpé translation's own marketing copy suggests, at least as natural a comparative pairing for Farrokhzad as Plath, and a fuller study might productively triangulate across all three.

VIII. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Sylvia Plath and Forugh Farrokhzad, writing independently within unrelated literary traditions, converge on a shared repertoire of resistant poetic strategies: the reclamation of the body from object to speaking subject, a formal trajectory from ornamented convention toward directness and rupture, and the expansion of an embodied confessional "I" into mythic or social registers without abandoning its bodily, first-person ground. Read through the combined lens of Cixous's and Kristeva's theories of feminine and semiotic language, Gilbert and Gubar's account of the anxiety of authorship, and Milani's historically specific theorization of veiling and voice in Iranian women's writing, these convergences suggest that the language of women's poetic resistance in the mid-twentieth century constitutes a genuine, if unevenly resourced and unevenly costly, transnational phenomenon — one that exceeds any single national or linguistic tradition even as it remains, in each case, deeply shaped by the specific gendered constraints of that tradition. Reading Plath and Farrokhzad together does not erase the real differences in the risks each poet ran or the receptions their work subsequently received; it does, however, suggest that comparative feminist literary scholarship has more to gain from attending to such cross-cultural formal convergences than from treating "confessional" poetics as an exclusively Anglo-American category, or Persian poetic modernism as a story in which gender is incidental rather than central to its formal innovations.

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