Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation: Forough Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath

Leila Rahimi Bahmany
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In 1992, Farzaneh Milani's groundbreaking *Veils and Words* brought into dialogue the fields of Iranian studies and feminist critical theory – two areas of humanist inquiry that, in some sense, need each other. Moreover, with works like Hamid Naficy's *The Making of Exile Cultures* (1993), interdisciplinary critical theory has informed many humanist and social science approaches to Iranian literature and culture. These links between integrated critical theory and Iranian studies can produce compelling and insightful analyses. However, the cadence of such work might be more in tune with one subfield than another. While the content and subject of these studies might include Iranian society, culture, or art, it is often the case that the critical method being deployed is more important than the historical, literary, or social content to which it is applied. Methodology eclipses the subject of analysis.

This is the case with Leila Rahimi Bahmany's *Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation* (*Mirrors*). Bahmany's work tells us more about the feminist critical genealogy brought to bear on the work of Sylvia Plath (d. 1963) and Forrough Farrokhzad (d. 1967) than it does about the works and lives of these poets themselves. But if, as I note above, these fields do "need" each other, then this book is worth exploring for both feminist scholars and Iranian studies specialists. Beyond specialists, however, the work does little to draw in a reader not already at least slightly familiar with debates in psychoanalytic feminist theory of the twentieth century.

Bahmany begins her book with the highly suggestive images of Narcissus and Echo from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. However, she quickly moves from this basis in classical western mythology to the relevance of these images for psychoanalysis and feminism. Thus, she rapidly establishes a theo-

retical foundation for her study within psychoanalytic critical theory, and gender studies specifically. She works through a history of mainly western conceptions of the individual "subject" as articulated in works by Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan, and explores how the conceptual framework of the "mirror" runs through the work of these authors (who themselves derive it from classical mythology and clinical observation). The mirror and its implications for gendered subjectivity are once again picked up by feminist critiques and revisions of these theories in the work of Jane Gallop, Hélène Cixous, Barbara Johnson, Luce Irigaray, and, especially, Julia Kristeva, among others.

It is Kristeva's notion of "the subject in process" that has particular resonance for Bahmany and for her readings of Farrokhzad and Plath. Kristeva's notion of process means both the process of becoming and the notion of being judged, or on trial. Thus the mirror, in this feminist framework, suggests not only the "entrapment" of the gaze or the mirror as the screen on which compulsory images of femininity and female subjectivity are projected, but also the potential "emancipation" of text as mirror in which the poet liberates herself from the abject and objectified "subjectivity" imposed on her by patriarchal society, whether in Iran or in the United States.

In this book, however, the mirror becomes a fairly narrowly conceived psychoanalytic tool of critical analysis. Though Bahmany refers to much earlier and broader conceptions of the mirror ranging from classical western mythology to a brief foray into Sufism as well as a passing reference to Lewis Carroll, the mirror metaphor remains tightly linked to the feminist psychoanalytic model. In this sense, the book is a welcome intervention in feminist psychoanalysis.

However, in staying so close to this area of expertise, the author misses the opportunity to apply these feminist lessons to other forms of analysis. For instance, the chapter on Farrokhzad offers surprisingly little on the poetic tradition with which she both engaged and critiqued. A brief consideration of Sufism is presented, but no link is made between Farrokhzad and her more immediate literary historical context. There is also not much offered about Farrokhzad's life, except brief generalities about her unhappy marriage. In fact, nothing is included about her work as a filmmaker. Farrokhzad's highly revered and now canonical film, *The House is Black*, opens with the striking image of a woman with leprosy *gazing into a mirror*. And within the first five minutes of this short poetic film essay we see images of windows, a secondary image and metaphor that Bahmany herself traces through Farrokhzad's work. The author stays so close to the feminist psychoanalytic debates that she excludes

some potentially key details of Farrokhzad's life *and* work that, ironically, could have shed even more light on these very same feminist theories.

Bahmany also only skims over modern or classical Iranian poetics and mysticism. For example, she does refer to the myth of the Simorgh (Persian mythical bird), but does not discuss the conclusion of that poem in which the thirty birds see their own reflection in a lake and find that their quest for divinity has led them back to a secular and specular image of themselves. I would imagine that this myth might even have been explored in the introduction, alongside her consideration of Ovid. However, I do not necessarily see this as a shortcoming of the study, but rather the author's choice to focus more on feminist psychoanalysis than on comparative mythology or comparative poetics.

Thus, taken on its own terms, the book is a deeply insightful consideration of key feminist theorists of the late twentieth century. As applied to Farrokhzad, the feminist debate around reflection, identity, and subjectivity is put into a new and interesting light. On the one hand, the mirror as social apparatus "entraps" women and imposes its demands upon the female subject, thereby imprisoning the female self within sexual objectification, gendered social subject-positions, and abjection. On the other hand, the mirror, particularly writing as reflection, can function as a pathway of self-discovery, self-construction, and ultimately "emancipation." Farrokhzad's recurring use of the mirror motif along with images of windows allows her to explore both of these valences of the mirror. Farrokhzad used writing itself as a way of shattering the mirrors of patriarchal Iranian society that limited the agency and identity of women. Of particular interest is the argument that Bahmany traces throughout feminist psychoanalytic theory: Kristeva's notion of the "subject in process," which compellingly combines the meaning of being on trial (processed, as if through the mechanisms of discipline and punishment) with that of becoming.

Bahmany's analysis of Plath is no less compelling and insightful within the context of the history of psychoanalytic critical theory. The chapter does a better job of placing Plath within an Anglo-American literary historical context than the Farrokhzad chapter did in placing the Iranian poet within her modern Iranian context. With Farrokhzad, the author makes elliptical references to Sufism, but with Plath she traces a relatively more direct line to poems like "Vanity Fair" and Thackeray's novel by that name, and even to *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Ironically, and this may well be an intentionally counter-intuitive move, Bahmany has more to say about the "veil" in discussing Plath than she did in discussing Farrokhzad. Drawing on the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan

Gubar, Bahmany explores how the veil symbolizes womanhood as socially incomplete. In fact, one of the most convincing and important moments in the book comes about halfway through the Plath chapter. Here, she highlights the gendered ways in which authorship and influence are imagined, contrasting Harold Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" with Gilbert and Gubar's conception of a "secret sisterhood." The mirror gaze is transformed from the entrapment of patriarchal heterosexism to the emancipation of matriarchal feminist identification. This key insight might help explain Bahmany's own light touch when it comes to tracing literary inheritance in any detail. That would be a Bloomian, not a feminist, move.

However, this sort of insight is in contrast to the sometimes highly speculative and ungrounded claims that Bahmany makes, such as that many "female authors have reported their horrible confrontation with an uncanny otherness or a monster within their mirror" (p. 203). Even though a fascinating and suggestive image, it seems to be based on speculation about the specular.

Ultimately, as I have already suggested about the work as a whole, the chapter on Plath seems caught between what we might call biographical experience on the one hand and themes within the poetry on the other. Providing so little biographical detail leaves the analysis of these poets' lives as women only half formed. And focusing on image and theme in the poems rather than the formal elements of poetics shortchanges one of the most promising lines of critical inquiry: the notion of writing as mirror. Bahmany focuses on mirror imagery within the writing more than she does on writing as reflection.

The author's conclusion helps to bring into focus her choice to see the poet's life through their work. It is, she claims, "impossible to draw a demarcation line between [the poets'] life stories and their art" (p. 246). However, even though that demarcation is perhaps impossible, it might have helped to mark, at least provisionally, such a distinction to enable the reader to navigate the poets' life and work and then synthesize them. Still, this is an excellent work of scholarship, particularly if one reads it as an intervention in feminist psychoanalytic literary critical theory.

Perhaps the most important contributions of this book is her translation of many of Farrokhzad's poems in an appendix. Indeed, if one of the author's most compelling ideas is the potential for mirroring to create a "secret sisterhood" of matrilineal authorship, then perhaps *translation* is itself an act of emancipatory feminist solidarity. In a sense, the link between Plath and Farrokhzad is a form of translation. Bahmany's translations do more than analyze this idea. They embody it.

In fact, I would recommend that readers begin reading this book with a leisurely and reflective perusal of the appendix. A reading of these translations, and, for those who have some Persian literacy, a reading of the originals can give the reader an embodied experience of precisely what Bahmany wants us to take away from her work: the experience of reading as reflection and writing as mirror. Translation, in a sense, does both at once.

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