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Rebirth or resistance? Reconsidering poetic development in Forugh Farrokhzad's oeuvre

Abstract:

Critical studies of Forugh Farrokhzad's poetry often divide her work into two distinct phases: an early period characterised by confusion, remorse and self-doubt, and a later one of "rebirth" marked by creative confidence and autonomy. This article challenges that binary by arguing that emotional ambivalence – particularly the tension between self-doubt and self-confidence – remains a consistent thread throughout Farrokhzad's oeuvre. Through close readings of three poems – 'Sin', 'Only Sound Remains' and 'Green Delusion' – the article demonstrates how Farrokhzad's unconventional representations of love and desire not only defied the social norms of her time but also generated a voice – one that continued to show traces of self-doubt, inner conflict and resistance throughout her career. While 'Sin' stands out as one of her most significant early works despite its stylistic unevenness, later poems reveal a complex negotiation between vulnerability and assertion rather than a clean break between two distinct creative phases. By tracing this continuity, the article reconsiders Farrokhzad's poetic development as a sustained exploration of identity, internalised conflict and resistance.

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Forugh Farrokhzad, poetic voice, Persian literature, resistance, sexuality

Introduction

The records of female poets who have contributed to Persian literature go back to approximately 900 CE (Karachi, 2025). In the article ‘The History of Women’s Poetry: Beginning to the Present’, Ruhangiz Karachi (2025) identifies close to 900 female poets from the medieval period (circa 900–1400 CE) to the present, with around 750 of them emerging in the 20th century and beyond. These female poets have practiced a wide range of styles, including *Khurasani* (Iraqi), *Hendi* (Indian style), *Bazgasht* (Return style), and *No* (Modern style). They have also practiced a variety of forms, such as ghazal, *qasida*, *masnavi*, *ruba’i*, *do-beyti*, *she’r-e no* (free verse), *she’r-e sepid* (white poetry), prose poetry and modern ghazals, and covered a broad range of topics – from love, religion and mysticism to social, political and women’s issues (Karachi, 2025). Forugh Farrokhzad was among the most significant figures in a new wave of Iranian literature and culture that emerged in the mid-20th century (Brookshaw & Rahimieh, 2023, p. 1). Unlike earlier female poets whose work largely conformed to male-centric literary traditions – often erasing traces of female subjectivity – Farrokhzad developed a poetic voice that was unapologetically personal, sensual and self-aware (Milani, 1992, p. 127). In contrast to her predecessors, whose poetic personae were often gender-neutral or veiled, Farrokhzad’s work foregrounds a female speaker who resists societal expectations and openly articulates desire, self-doubt and emotional complexity. In the words of Abbas Milani (2022), Farrokhzad “freed the language of Persian poetry from many inhibitions and taboos” (p. 843). In doing so, Farrokhzad’s poetry challenges the conventional image of the woman in Persian literary tradition as the passive, patient beloved. Instead, her speaker assumes the role of the active lover (Simidchieva, 2010, p. 29), thereby creating a radical and unprecedented poetic discourse on women’s sexuality in modern Persian literature. This act of poetic self-assertion occurred in a sociocultural context where, as Effat Merghati-Khoei (2005) notes, “women and girls are basically instructed to practice sokoot (silence) as their basic mode in sexual interactions” (p. 135). Nearly half a century before this observation, Farrokhzad had already begun breaking this silence. In her own words: “Only through perseverance shall I be able to set the art free from the chains of rotten customs and provide everyone, especially women, with the right to freely express their hidden tender emotions without the fear of being ostracized” (as cited in Milani, 2016, p. 12). As her poetry evolved and with this motive in mind, she moved beyond internalised male gazes and sought to dismantle the ideological conditioning of her society.

While sexuality has long had a place in Persian literature – often as a metaphor for spiritual or moral insight, such as in the works of the famous 13th-century poet Rumi – Farrokhzad’s treatment of erotic desire is neither mystical nor moralistic. She writes with directness and clarity, making her poetry both modern in tone and accessible in form. As reflected in *Treasure of Speech*, a major anthology published in 1969 that listed 143 poets from over a millennium of Persian poetry – only two of whom were women – female perspectives were historically marginalised (Hillmann, 1987, p. 74). In a poetic tradition overwhelmingly shaped by male voices, she holds a unique place in Iranian literary history by speaking of bodily desire from a female perspective without reserve. In this context, Farrokhzad’s contributions mark a profound shift: in a society where “anxieties about female sexuality have for centuries stood at

the heart of legal and moral control of women's lives" (Darznik, 2010, p. 106), her poetic reclamation of female desire was both transgressive and transformative. Despite the significance of her work, critical scholarship on Farrokhzad has often followed a reductive biographical narrative that divides her poetic career into two distinct periods. The first is characterised by confusion, remorse and self-doubt, while the second, often aligned with the publication of *Another Birth*, is seen as a moment of creative "rebirth" marked by autonomy and self-assurance. In the words of Homa Katouzian (2023), "'pleasure' gives way to acceptance, and 'sin', to real self-assertion and self-confidence" (p. 7). This article challenges this dichotomy by arguing that ambivalence – particularly the fluctuation between self-doubt and confidence – remained a feature of Farrokhzad's poetry throughout her career. This reading complicates assumptions about linear artistic development. Rather than viewing ambivalence as a sign of immaturity or uncertainty to be overcome, Farrokhzad's work invites us to consider how doubt, contradiction and emotional complexity can be sustaining forces in creative expression. For writers – particularly those negotiating identity or trauma – this alternative model can be both empowering and creatively generative. It also challenges educators to rethink how voice, development and resolution are framed in the teaching of writing.

Focusing on three poems – 'Sin', 'Only Sound Remains' and 'Green Delusion', using our own translations – this article explores how Farrokhzad's expression of desire and emotional conflict destabilises the linear narrative of psychological or artistic development commonly applied to her work. It begins with 'Sin', one of her earliest and most controversial poems, to investigate why it continues to resonate despite its stylistic limitations. The article then moves to a close reading of her later works, namely 'Only Sound Remains' and 'Green Delusion', to reveal ongoing tensions in Farrokhzad's works rather than the resolved, post-rebirth persona proposed by other scholars. The article employs symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1913, as cited in Elliott, 2007, p. 27), which defines the self as a social construct resulting from an ongoing dialogue between the 'me' (the internalisation of social norms and expectations) and the 'I' (representing the individual's spontaneous, personal response to those expectations) to explore the tension between the poet and the establishment. By reconsidering Farrokhzad's oeuvre through the lens of sustained ambivalence, the article suggests that her struggle to articulate love and sexuality in a repressive cultural climate was never fully resolved. It argues that her life cannot be divided into two fully distinct periods as commonly claimed by critics – one filled with confusion, self-doubt and remorse, during which she created her first three volumes of poetry, and another of her 'rebirth' marked by self-confidence, growth and autonomy, when she wrote *Another Birth* and those poems published posthumously. This transition from self-doubt to self-confidence, from remorse to acceptance and from regret to contentment was never complete. Instead, a sustained exploration of the female self and resistance to gendered societal norms were central to her voice – and her legacy.

Characteristics of 'Sin': Regret or confession?

Farrokhzad's most controversial poem, 'Sin', has been described by critics as her weakest poem, lacking complexity and characterised by self-doubt and regret. In fact, Katouzian (2023) claims that "[i]t is a simple poem ... involving some repetition and employing commonplace

or unlikely figures of speech and literary devices” (p. 7). As highlighted by Katouzian (2023), the poem’s word choice is simplistic – for example, its description of an embrace being “warm and fiery” (Farrokhzad, 1968, p. 13) and later “hot” (p. 13). Moreover, the tone of the poem is constructed through amateur phrasing at times – phrases such as “mysterious eyes” and “yearning eyes” (p. 14) are redolent of Persian popular songs. Katouzian (2023) further claims that the poem’s weakness can be best appreciated in its original Persian, since the English translation can camouflage the weaknesses of form and substance. While we agree with Katouzian on the weakness of the poem, we argue that the translated form can, in some ways, be more informative than the original. The poem is comprised of connected doublets, and like all versification in Persian, is heavily dependent on metre and rhyme. Translation of a versified poem provides the opportunity to evaluate the originality of the poetic thinking and assess whether the piece on hand can achieve anything beyond mere versification. The imagery in ‘Sin’ – desire sparking a flame in the lover’s eyes, or the dance of red wine in the glass – is at best mediocre, as it lacks originality and depth. Similar images and metaphors are widespread in Persian poetry. While a poem is irreducible to its conceptual content, when written in prose, this poem’s conceptual content is readily summarised in one or two short sentences describing a forbidden sexual relationship.

One could argue that ‘Sin’ lacks sufficient ardour and emotional depth to transcend time as a work of art. It does not possess the timeless quality of the apocalyptic tone of her later work ‘Earthly Verses’, nor the powerful imagery of ‘Another Birth’ exemplified in the lines: “a sad little fairy / who dies with a kiss at night / and will be born again with a kiss at dawn” (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 169). However, the popularity of ‘Sin’ is not derived so much from its poetic features but rather its bold subversion of traditional gender norms and social expectations of women in Iran at the time of its publication, along with its confessional style.

Written during a period of significant social and political transformation in Iran, ‘Sin’ (*Gonah*) expresses a woman’s experience of desire and transgression in strikingly personal terms. Farrokhzad’s direct and intimate language challenged conventional norms of morality and gender roles in mid-20th century Iranian society, provoking strong reactions from both critics and readers. The poem reflects not only Farrokhzad’s distinctive voice but also broader tensions between tradition and modernity, public expectation and private longing. The poem was both celebrated and condemned for its frank exploration of sexual autonomy – a rarely addressed topic in Persian literary tradition, particularly when voiced by a woman. The poem not only ruptures conventional representations of women in Iranian poetry but also exemplifies Farrokhzad’s broader project of reclaiming the female body and voice from religious and cultural repression. ‘Sin’ therefore functions as a subversive act of self-authorship, using intimacy and confession to critique the moral codes that confine women’s subjectivity. The woman in this poem is not a mere object of desire but has her own agency. In this poem, the woman’s body enters Persian poetry not as something that only responds to male needs (and is inanimate in its absence) but as someone who wants, desires and demands autonomously.

The poem begins with a stark and candid admission: “I sinned, a gratifying sin / in an embrace, warm and ardent” (Farrokhzad, 1968, p. 13). This immediately positions the speaker as both

actor and confessor, but not a penitent. The repetition of the word “sin” throughout the poem evokes a religious framework, yet the language that surrounds it – “pleasure”, “warm”, “fiery” – resists the moral weight typically associated with transgression. Rather than expressing remorse, the speaker’s voice is intimate and assertive, as in the lines: “I sinned embraced by arms / hot and vindictive and iron” (p. 13), where physicality is neither hidden nor condemned but described with vivid immediacy. This bold articulation of female bodily desire, which is exceptionally uncommon in the literary culture of Iran, explains the poem’s lasting popularity – not solely for its poetic qualities, but for its fearless confrontation with the taboos surrounding women’s sexuality and autonomy.

The poem, with its not-so-elegant style, is a frank expression of the carnal desire of two bodies coming together with no grander purpose but meeting their sexual needs in a society where ethics are traditionally based on denial of, and contempt, for the body. This approach to the body is so integral to Iranian culture that even one of Farrokhzad’s early poems ‘Face to Face with God’, written shortly after ‘Sin’, expresses an obvious disdain for the body. The poem begins with the speaker admitting that she carries a source of sin and depravity in her chest. After a few stanzas, she writes of being weary and tired of her body and asks God for another – perhaps one that is pure and not polluted by her sins. The poem speaks of a love that can turn her into an angel of God’s paradise. Moreover, she wants to see in her lover the pure nature of God himself. The poem concludes with the speaker wishing for God to reveal His face and cleanse her of her pursuit of bodily pleasure. The contradiction in views towards the body demonstrated by these two poems is just one example of the ambivalence that underscores Farrokhzad’s works, while the more constant characteristic is her resistance to male-centric traditions.

The subject of ‘Sin’ is a woman. This is important, since there are few established female voices prior to Farrokhzad in Persian poetry and hers stands out as perhaps the first truly autobiographical voice among them. One example is Parvin Etesami, who is considered one of the most talented Iranian poets of the 20th century. Her career as a poet (1921–1941) coincides with the compulsory unveiling in Iran in 1936. Farzaneh Milani (2002) claims that the discomfort many Iranian women experienced at having their bodies exposed manifested in the tensions that exist in the works of Etesami. Milani (2002) observes a parallel “between the woman who tries to conceal her newly exposed body from men’s gaze and the pioneering poet who needs to hide her authorial identity from what she perceives as prying eyes and ears” (p. 102). Etesami expresses her support for women’s emancipation in her poems (Milani, 2002) but employs impersonal language. This point can be observed in ‘God’s Weaver’ (1926), one of Etesami’s poems discussed by Milani (2002). In this poem, the spider that “toiled ambitiously as with a spindle, its mind bent solely on its work” can be read as a symbol for an artist, the value of whose art is questioned by an arrogant observer and judged as a superficial task:

The lazy fellow said: “What a superficial job!
Heaven is in no need of such operations.
There are mountains to climb in this world’s workshop.

Who'll ever exalt you, you wisp of straw?"
 To this question, the spider responds that weaving is her calling and that there is another
 "market" where her work is appreciated.
 There exists another market, my dear Sir,
 Where my fabric is well appreciated...
 This is my calling, important or not.
 I am the apprentice, time is the master. (Etesami, 1926)

In 'God's Weaver', the artist's personal message is expressed through an impersonal voice and through symbols. However in 'Sin', the use of the first-person 'I' prompts the reader to assimilate the speaker and the poet, assuming that this is not just a woman narrating her fantasy, but a woman recalling a real incident – a real sin. The poem transgresses the norms that determine accepted language for a respectable woman in the time and place it was written and published. Such candid expression of bodily desire is deemed to be offensive in Iranian culture, where a restricted language of sexuality is used and it is common to employ euphemisms or body language to convey certain meanings. Even in medical contexts "a basic colloquial vocabulary" or "demonstrative pronouns with contextually implied meaning" are used for communication between patients and healthcare workers (Merghati-Khoei, 2005, p. 139). The voice of a woman who claims "prerogatives traditionally reserved for a man" (Milani, 1992, p. 141) becomes the dominant voice in Farrokhzad's poetry in general, and 'Sin' in particular. In 'Sin', Farrokhzad has turned the traditional role of man/lover/subject and woman/beloved/object on its head. It is the female protagonist of the poem who, transgressing societal norms, is committing a sin, reading the tale of love into her lover's ear and asking for her lover's life-giving embrace. Milani (1992) asserts that man, who has assumed the position of lover for centuries, becomes the beloved in her poetry. The female agency represented in this poem thus defies clichés of gender roles found in classical Persian literature.

In 'Of the sins of Forugh Farrokhzad', Katouzian (2023) writes that the poem ends with Farrokhzad remorsefully addressing God. However the final stanza, "O God, how do I know what I did in that dark and quiet seclusion" (Farrokhzad, 1968, p. 15) reads more like a rhetorical question and does not necessarily convey any sign of real remorse. Rather, the confession reads as the recollection of a cherished memory. It relates to an earlier stanza, where Farrokhzad (1968) writes:

I read into his ear the tale of love:
 I want you, O, my dearest,
 I want you, O, life-giving embrace,
 O, you, my frenzied lover. (p. 14)

The protagonist of the poem calls the whole experience a sin. However, there is no real sign of regret and no word to indicate repentance. Nor is there a possibility for the reader to conclude that the protagonist is confessing to set an example, to ask for forgiveness or to condemn the action. The poem reads as a confession, but not a remorseful one. The protagonist confesses to her sinful act – however, her sense of guilt does not necessarily equate to feelings of remorse.

Rather, it conveys the positive sense of a chance to escape the sorrow of the speaker's crazed heart and to read the tale of love into her lover's ear.

Beyond Sin: A Rebirth?

Critics of Farrokhzad's works have argued that her later works represent a rebirth where defiance, self-doubt and regret dissolve to make way for a more self-assured and liberated Iranian woman. Katouzian (2023) writes that "[i]t is in the later poems, and especially those of the period of her 'rebirth', that 'pleasure' gives way to acceptance, and 'sin', to real self-assertion and self-confidence" (p. 7). He continues that this "acquired sense of freedom, independence and responsibility ... closes the seasons of 'pleasurable sins', 'errors', and 'mistakes' combined with guilt, regret and self-reproach" (p. 12). To argue this point, Katouzian (2023) cites Farrokhzad's poem 'In the cold street of night', where she writes: "I am not remorseful. I am thinking of this submission, this painful submission" (p. 16). In reference to this line of the poem, Katouzian (2023) argues that "this time there is no defiant confession of sin, nor is there any self-doubt, nor any regrets of what has happened" (p. 16). John Zubizarreta (1992) asserts a similar point when he writes: "by the time she publishes *Another Birth* in 1963, she offers an image of a new liberated, thoughtful, Iranian woman: sensual, caring, complex, confident, and free" (p. 421). Though it is not deniable that her later works "record the achievements of a woman who is in contact with all aspects of her being" (Milani, 1982, p. 125), this somewhat utopian claim assumes that a woman has – almost single-handedly – fully transcended millennia of a male-dominated culture, including its ethos, burdens and moral prohibitions, despite her short life span of 32 years and her even shorter span of 12 years as a published poet. Through close reading of two of her poems – 'Only Sound Remains' and 'Green Delusion' – we argue that ambivalence and in particular fluctuations between self-doubt and self-confidence are central to her life and poetry, not only in her early work but even in the poems of the period of her 'rebirth'. Varying in degree and weakening as she evolves and matures both as a person and as a poet, they are nonetheless always present in her life and its mirror, her poetry.

One of the signs of internal conflict in Farrokhzad's works can be observed through examining her positioning of the self within the context of the literary and publishing establishment of her time. George Mead, founding father of symbolic interactionism, famously defined the self as a social product (Mead, 1913 as cited in Elliott, 2007, p. 27). In his conceptualisation of the self, there is a central distinction between the 'I' and the 'me'. The socialised self, 'me', is built by internalising other people's attitudes during one's early life. The 'I' on the other hand is a mixture of desires and dispositions. The self is distinguished from others through the spontaneous wishes of the 'I', which is responsible for creativity and innovation. The ambivalent self, evident in the poems 'Only Sound Remains' and 'Green Delusion', emerges from the interplay between the creative 'I' and the socialised 'me' as the poet navigates social life, asserts her identity and resists conformity. A close reading of 'Only Sound Remains' reveals this poem as a conflict between the poet's individuality and the expectations imposed by the establishment. In both 'Sin' and 'Only Sound Remains', the female speaker resists the cultural expectations placed upon her – whether by embracing desire or by refusing to be

silenced and insisting on living a life full of motion and creativity. Farrokhzad's work repeatedly returns to the tension between internal experience and external judgement, using the confessional voice not to express repentance but to assert presence in a world that seeks to silence or erase it. Where 'Sin' is heated and corporeal, 'Only Sound Remains' is spectral and restrained – together, they demonstrate the range of Farrokhzad's poetic resistance to the moral and gendered confines of her time.

While 'Sin' foregrounds bodily pleasure and the bold rejection of traditional morality, 'Only Sound Remains' continues to focus on the theme of resistance yet does so through the more subtle concept of transgression through movement. The first sign of movement in 'Only Sound Remains' is in the phrase: "Why should I stop?", and is repeated five times throughout the poem. In Farsi, the semantic meaning of the word توقف (translated here as "stop") can cover a range of meanings such as "stopping from movement", "stopping to think", "pause" and "discontinuation". Furthermore, the lines that precede or succeed this question convey that the question should be read as a rhetorical one. Therefore, one of the themes of the poem reveals itself to be continuation, movement and persistence. This is mainly expressed through a collection of binaries. For instance, the speaker establishes a binary between movement and stagnancy. The poem starts with the "search of the blue direction" by birds:

Why should I stop, why?
The birds have gone in search of the blue
direction,
the horizon is vertical,
the horizon is vertical and movement: fountainlike
... And day is a vastness
that does not fit into the limited imagination
of a newspaper worm (Farrokhzad, 1975, pp. 76–77).

In Farsi, the word, پرنده (translated here as "bird") can also be used to refer to anyone or anything with the ability to fly, connoting freedom. The word used in Farsi for "blue" (آبی) literally means something that has the colour of water and carries the positive connotation of life and growth. This creates the image of one moving freely in search of life. The following stanzas, with references to the vertical horizon and fountain-like movements, emphasise this imagery through the image of a free bird that can fly fountain-like and against gravity. The word "bird" enters the poem again later when the speaker says that she has taken the advice of a bird "which had died" and advised her "to commit flight to memory":

I'm a descendent of the trees
breathing the stale air depresses me
a bird which had died advised me to
commit flight to memory. (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 79)

Since the dead cannot advise, it is the observation of death that has reminded the poet what matters and what should be committed to memory is the flight: "the search of the blue

direction". The poet dies – it is only the poem's "sound that remains". This sound continues to move, even after the death of the poet:

In contrast, the poet uses the imagery of a rotting windmill to signify stagnancy, as its movement does not go beyond the endless circular movement of its vanes.
The ultimate object of all forces is to be united,
to be united with the origin of the bright light
and to be poured into the light's intelligence.
It is natural that windmills rot. (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 79)

This repetition of the same movement signifies a lack of ambition and is an undesirable state of existence. The life of an artist who keeps doing what has been done for centuries – for instance, following the classic forms in Persian poetry – is like the repetitive movement of a windmill's vanes. However, the one who breaks free from the old forms in her art and goes beyond the established norms in her life is like a bird breaking free from societal norms to experience life differently, moving like a fountain against gravity, defying all the limiting norms of life and art.

Another binary that exists throughout the poem is death and corruption on the one hand, and life and growth on the other. The concepts of death and corruption appear first when the speaker mentions the death of "corrupt cells" in the "womb of the moon":

Why should I stop?
The path passes through the capillaries of life.
The quality of the cultivating environment of
the womb of the moon
will kill the corrupt cells.
And in the chemical atmosphere after sunrise,
it is only sound,
sound that will be absorbed by the particles of time.
Why should I stop?
What can a swamp be?
What can it be, but a place for corrupted insects to spawn.
The swollen corpses give birth to morgue's thoughts.
The unmanly one,
has hidden his lack of manliness in darkness,
and the cockroach...ah
when the cockroach talks.
Why should I stop?
Collaboration of lead letters is in vain.
Collaboration of lead letters
will not save the lowly thought. (Farrokhzad, 1975, pp. 77–78)

Moon in Farsi (ماه) is used to describe beauty and the womb is the place where life grows. The poet refers to the "womb of the moon" as a "cultivating environment". We suggest that the term "corrupt cells" here can be read as a reference to an unworthy art that cannot survive the test of time. This point can be put into perspective when one pays attention to another theme

of the poem: immortality through art. The concept is reminiscent of the myth of Orpheus, whose head and lyre continued to sing after his own death (Ovid, 2004). This immortality is expressed by the speaker in ‘Only Sound Remains’ when she writes: “And in the chemical atmosphere after sunrise, it is only sound, sound that will be absorbed by the particles of time”. Sunrise in Iranian literature has been used figuratively to show the victory of good over evil and truth over falsehood. “After sunrise” is the moment when sound “will be absorbed by the particles of time” and this absorption and unification with time guarantees the sound’s immortality.

The concept of corruption reappears a few lines later in the poet’s description of a swamp that she uses to signify death. The word مرداب is translated as “swamp” here, literally means “dead water” in Farsi. It is dead because of its stagnancy. A few lines later, the speaker talks about “the sound of water’s lucid desire to flow” (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 80). The water’s natural tendency is to flow and if it is not met, what is left behind is “dead water” – a swamp. The swamp is a crux; the binaries of stagnancy and movement (swamp versus sea), death and corruption against life and growth (swamp versus trees), and light against darkness (swamp versus sun) condense in the word. Here, the “swamp” can be seen as a symbol for a dead, stagnant society that can only give birth to corrupt people. Conversely, the concept of growth enters the poem through the metaphor of the speaker’s relationship to trees in the line: “I’m a descendent of the trees” (p. 79). This image gains intensity in the following lines, where the speaker tells of how the stale air depresses her, in opposition to corrupt insects that thrive in the rotten atmosphere of a swamp:

Why should I stop?
 I hold the unripe bunches of wheat
 under my breasts
 and breastfeed them.
 Sound, sound, only sound,
 the sound of water’s lucid desire to flow
 the sound of the pouring of starlight on the wall
 of the earth’s femininity
 the sound of the formation of the fetus of meaning
 and the expansion of love’s communal mind
 sound, sound, sound, it is only sound that remains.
 In the land of dwarfs,
 the criteria of evaluations
 have always travelled in the orbit of zero.
 Why should I stop?
 I obey the four elements
 and codification of the constitution of my heart
 is not a task for the local government of the blind.
 What have I got to do with the lengthy howling
 of wildness in animals’ sexual organs?
 What have I got to do with the pathetic movement
 of a worm in a fleshy vacuum?
 The bloodstained ancestry of flowers has
 committed me to life.

Do you know the bloodstained ancestry of the
flowers? (Farrokhzad, 1975, pp. 79-81)

The concept of growth continues to develop here through the image of the speaker breastfeeding the “unripe bunches of wheat”. In Iranian culture, wheat means bread and bread means life. Thus, the poet is giving life to her art and contributing to artistic growth.

We suggest that binaries, such as that of growth and stagnancy, work together to put into perspective a major conflict between the speaker and the establishment. This antagonism is most clearly expressed when the poet refuses to allow “the local government of the blind” to codify the constitution of her heart. The word محلی, translated here as “local”, is also used in Farsi to refer to something provincial. The word حکومت, translated as “government”, likely refers to those who determined the norms in life or in art in her time. Therefore, “the local government of the blind” may allude to a group of people, artists and intellectuals with a provincial mentality who are blind to other possibilities in life and art due to a lack of imagination and ambition, but who still try to codify her heart by imposing upon her their perspectives on poetry, life, morality and propriety. The members of this “local government of the blind” and their characteristics are highlighted throughout the poem. The first such stanza for example, reads: “And day is a vastness that doesn’t fit into the limited imagination of a newspaper worm”. To understand this line, the meanings of two words must be teased out. In Farsi روز, translated here as “day”, can also refer to life. “Newspaper worm”, a neologism coined by the poet, has no semantic precedent in Farsi; its meaning can only be constructed through its context. The speaker refers to the “newspaper worm” as someone with a limited imagination who is not capable of imagining the vastness of life and its potential. Another scornful word is نامرد, translated here as “unmanly one”, referring to anyone who lacks courage. The “cockroach” – with connotations of being revolting and feeble – is another example. Furthermore, the poet talks about the “dwarfs” and their land in which “the criteria of evaluations / has always travelled in the orbit of zero”. This is a land where everything in life and art is judged based on a myopic perspective. It could therefore be argued that the stanza: “Collaboration of lead letters is in vain / Collaboration of lead letters will not save the lowly thought”, is about expressing those limited visions of the establishment. “Collaboration of lead letters” refers to publishing in a printing house and was mostly a privilege of the elites. The speaker conveys the thought that being published does not in itself save one’s work from being lowly and dwarfish.

In opposition to “the local government of the blind”, the speaker does not follow established norms in either life or poetry but obeys “the four elements”. In ancient Greece, fire, water, air and earth were understood to be the elements that sustained life, forming both the universe and human bodies. The universal quality of these four elements is represented as determining the poet’s life and art, in contrast to the provincality of “the local government of the blind”. A few lines later however, she makes it clear that for her, following nature is not about physical intimacy: “What have I got to do with the pathetic movement of a worm in a fleshy vacuum?”, contesting the very point often put forward by her critics. What has committed her to life is rather “the bloodstained ancestry of flowers”. Flowers in Persian poetry are used figuratively

to describe women and a beautiful woman's skin is often described as finer than a rose petal. It could then be argued that she is describing women's skin as having been bloodstained for generations and using this imagery to justify her ambition not to stop. The authorial 'I' used throughout this poem describes her movement along the path "through the capillaries of life". By continuing, she shows that she does not care for the judgment of the "newspaper worm" and does not intend to consult "the local government of the blind" on matters of the heart and life. Nonetheless, the self-assurance demonstrated by the speaker of 'Only Sound Remains' was short lived as ambivalence once again emerged in her writing of 'Green Delusion'.

Like 'Only Sound Remains', 'Green Delusion' belongs to the time considered the period of Farrokhzad's 'rebirth' by critics. In 'Green Delusion', Farrokhzad again returns to the language of entrapment and yearning but cloaks her critique in imagery drawn from nature and dreams. The "green delusion" of the title evokes both fertility and falsity – a world that promises growth but delivers disillusionment. Like in 'Sin' and 'Only Sound Remains', the speaker's voice is at once intimate and estranged, describing the contours of a self that is paying the price of refusing to be fully subdued by being deprived of a simple life and burdened by the existential despair of an artist. The poem's surreal textures and elusive tone do not mark a departure from Farrokhzad's earlier concerns. Rather, they offer a different poetic register for expressing the dissonance between desire and reality, and the persistent struggle against the boundaries imposed on female subjectivity.

The persona of this poem is filled with regrets, self-doubt and craving for a simpler life. We suggest that two iterations in this poem set the theme of the text: "Which summit, which peak?", iterated three times; and "I couldn't, I just couldn't anymore", iterated twice. These two lines read together reveal the theme of the poem to be one of self-doubt and disillusionment. In this poem, the 'me' (the socialised self) has taken over and is questioning the choices made by the creative, unconventional 'I'. The poem starts with the speaker crying in front of the mirror and is not a short cry evoked by the whims of the moment but continues throughout the whole day:

The whole day I was crying in the mirror.
Spring had passed my window
to the trees' green delusion.
My body does not fit into the cocoon of my loneliness
and the odour of my paper crown
had polluted the air of that sunless realm. (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 117)

The mirror suggests self-reflection and crying in front of the mirror can allude to the pain caused by confronting the self. This line then can be read as a moment of existential crisis. Spring is a special season in Iranian culture as it marks the beginning of the New Year. Moreover, spring figuratively represents rebirth, growth and a new start, and feature in the most famous prayers in the first moments of the New Year. A window's main function is to provide light that in Farsi, has always been associated with truth as well as zest for life, while trees symbolise growth. According to the speaker, spring – the very promise of rebirth – has deprived her of light, of truth and of her passion for life by handing her window over to the trees and

their green delusion, their false promise of growth. The speaker continues: “my body would not fit into the cocoon of my loneliness, / and the odour of my paper crown / had polluted the air of that sunless realm”. The cocoon is a place of transformation and usually has a positive connotation because it allows for a caterpillar to metamorphosise into a butterfly with the ability to fly. However, here the emphasis is on loneliness rather than transformation, conveying a desire to escape. The paper crown, similar to those children wear during games, conveys how the speaker feels about the recognition she has finally received as a poet. Now, in the absence of the window and sunlight, it has turned musty around her head. A few stanzas later, she writes: “The whole day my gaze was staring into my life’s eyes” (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 118), and suggests that what has been making her cry the whole day is the painful self-examination and the reckoning with the choices she has made in her life.

The next part of the poem is filled with imagery that shows regret and growing self-doubt. The protagonist reflects on lost joy and fading confidence as everyday sounds and memories turn into painful reminders of her existential despair. The poem moves from personal sorrow to a sense of betrayal by language and even by love:

I couldn't, I just couldn't anymore
 sound of the alley, sound of the birds
 sound of the broadcloth balls getting lost
 and the running frenzy of children
 and dancing of balloons
 which were ascending like soap bubbles
 at the end of a rope
 and wind, and wind as if it was breathing
 in the deepest dark moments of lovemaking,
 they were all squeezing the fence of my quiescent castle of confidence
 and through old cracks, were calling my heart's name.
 The whole day my gaze
 was staring into my life's eyes
 into those anxious frightened eyes
 who were evading my fixed gaze
 and like liars,
 were taking asylum in the safe seclusion of eyelids.
 Which summit, which peak?
 Aren't all these winding roads
 ceasing to exist in that cold sucking mouth?
 What did you give me, O you words,
 you deceivers of the credulous, and you,
 the abstinence of flesh and desires?
 If I put a flower in my hair
 wouldn't that be more enticing than this fraud,
 than this paper crown,
 which has rotted on the top of my head?
 How the desert's spirit captured me
 and the charm of the moon distanced me from
 the faith of the herd
 How did the incompleteness of my heart grow

and no other half completed this half!
 How did I wait and see
 that earth was vanishing under my feet
 and the warmth of my mate's body
 cannot meet the frivolous expectation of my body! (Farrokhzad, 1969, pp. 118–120)

Starting with “I couldn’t, I just couldn’t anymore”, the speaker highlights that she has reached a breaking point, a moment when she finds the emotional burden too much to endure. It is interesting to note that the word “sound” conveys different meanings and connotations in ‘Green Delusion’ than it does in ‘Only Sound Remains’. In ‘Green Delusion’, sound does not represent poetry and art, but day-to-day life: alley, birds, broadcloth balls, wind and children. These do not promise immortality through art, but squeeze her confidence and give rise to self-doubt by reminding her of all the sacrifices she has made for her art. We suggest that the “old cracks” may symbolise the speaker’s emotional vulnerabilities representing openings through which the lively, almost innocent world of sound invites her towards life, while unsettling her by reminding her of pain and fragility. The same goes for the concept of death. In ‘Only Sound Remains’, “a bird which had died” reminds her of the importance of remembering the flight and encourages her not to stop but to go on her chosen path. However in ‘Green Delusion’, she asks: “Aren’t all these winding roads / ceasing to exist in that cold sucking mouth?” and the inevitability of death makes what she has achieved as an artist seem as worthless as a “paper crown”. Placing a flower in one’s hair creates an image of natural beauty and femininity and stands in contrast to the “paper crown”, a symbol of false authority and fake identity. She is the naive one, deceived by words, who has sacrificed her desire for her art – perhaps the desire to have a simple life as a “whole” woman that she describes later in the poem. She continues by wondering how she was captured by “desert’s spirit” and distanced from “the faith of the herd” by “the charm of the moon”. The phrase “the faith of the herd” can refer to the beliefs of the majority. Thus, the magic of beauty and art has distracted her and led her astray from the norms defined by the majority both in life and in poetry and has turned her into a lonely woman. The final stanzas depict the speaker’s sense of being betrayed by love as she passively witnesses the disappearance of her grounding while realising that her perhaps unrealistic expectations of love cannot provide the comfort and stability she once sought.

The following stanzas create the image of the life of a “simple whole woman” that the speaker feels she cannot acquire because she was seduced by “the charm of the moon”, by the desire to follow art and creativity in life:

Which summit, which peak?
 Give me asylum, o bewildered lights
 O dubious bright houses
 on whose sunny roofs, washed clothes are
 swaying in the embrace of scented smoke.
 Give me asylum, O simple whole women
 whose slender fingertips, from above the skin,
 trace the delightful movement of a fetus
 and in whose collar the air always smells of fresh milk.

Which summit, which peak?
 Give me asylum, oh you, flamed stoves—
 horseshoes of happiness—and the singing of
 copper dishes in smoke-smudged kitchens
 and the sad twitter of sewing machine
 and the day-and-night battle of mop and carpet
 give me asylum all the greedy loves
 whose painful desire to survive
 covers the bed—in which you're possessed—
 by magic water and fresh spots of blood. (Farrokhzad, 1969, pp. 120–121)

In these stanzas, the speaker describes the life of a homemaker through the actions of making and washing clothes, cooking, cleaning the house, becoming pregnant and breastfeeding. The line “Give me asylum, O simple whole women” implies the poet’s craving for such a life. In Farsi the word کامل, translated here as “whole”, means something or someone that is complete and can also mean wise. The speaker requests to be granted asylum by those women whom she considers the wise and complete ones. Unlike in ‘Only Sound Remains’ where stagnancy and repetition are associated with death, here the repetition of these day-to-day tasks is associated with being whole and complete.

Continuing with the image of stagnancy in the following stanzas, the speaker describes the sensation of death in her spine and positions herself as an abandoned corpse:

The whole day, the whole day
 abandoned, abandoned, like a corpse on the water
 I was drifting towards the most terrifying rock
 towards the deepest water-caves
 and flesh-eating fish
 and my spine
 was twinging with the sensation of death.
 I couldn’t, I couldn’t anymore.
 My feet echoed with the denial of the path
 and my despair had grown larger than my spirit’s endurance. (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 122)

The imagery of a dreadful death by flesh-eating fish appears right before she announces that she cannot continue anymore. Her feet “echoed with the denial of the path”, the path that in ‘Only Sound Remains’ passed “through the capillaries of life”. Where her path in ‘Only Sound Remains’ was underpinned by a determination to live fully, every step in ‘Green Delusion’ makes her question her choice and her path.

The speaker, or a disillusioned and weary version of her, ends this poem with a sad realisation as spring, the very promise of growth and rebirth, tells her that her life has never been one of progress and growth, but one of decline:

And that spring, and that green delusion
 which was passing by the window,

was saying to my heart
 “Look, you never advanced, you have descended”. (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 122)

In contrast to ‘Only Sound Remains’ and its expression of confidence in the poet’s chosen path, ‘Green Delusion’ narrates the sense of being cheated out of something real for a sham. It suggests that she has been deceived into finding words more alluring than a flower in her hair and by false promises of growth that have taken away her chance of being a “simple whole woman” and have brought her nothing but a “paper crown”. In this context, Farrokhzad felt that she had to give up the possibility of a simple life to pursue art and that this decision meant going against the grain, leaving her an outcast doomed to live the life of a “lonely woman”. Therefore despite the longing for an existence as a “simple whole woman” in the poem, Farrokhzad continues to critique the gendered societal norms in which she lives.

Conclusion

Farrokhzad’s life and poetry were filled with pleasure, a craving for love, and a sense of guilt, remorse, regret and self-doubt. The transition from self-doubt to self-confidence, from remorse to acceptance and from regret to contentment was never complete. Farrokhzad continued to wrestle with her demons until the very end. Furthermore, while much of her work demonstrated ambivalence in the form of internal conflicts about the self and the poet’s place in the world, Farrokhzad’s poetics also showed a sustained exploration of identity and resistance to mid-20th century gendered social norms in Iran. The development of her voice was thus far more complex than could be explained by the binary proposed by critics of her work.

Taken together, ‘Sin’, ‘Only Sound Remains’ and ‘Green Delusion’ form a layered exploration of a woman self-navigating a repressive social order. While ‘Sin’ confronts the accepted gendered morality through the articulation of desire, and ‘Only Sound Remains’ uses imagery of movement and stagnancy to illustrate the speaker’s drive to subvert the will of corrupt forces, ‘Green Delusion’ presents a much less self-assured speaker, disillusioned by an internalised exile from the existence of “whole” women. Across all three poems, Farrokhzad confronts and challenges the systems that confine women – whether through religious doctrine, social silence or emotional displacement. Her speakers may shift in tone and imagery, but they are united in their refusal or inability to conform, their insistence on voicing inner truths and their exposure of the gap between appearance and experience. These poems, each in their own way, assert that what remains – whether it is pleasure, sound or delusion – is still a form of resistance, however ambivalent that may be.

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