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Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation

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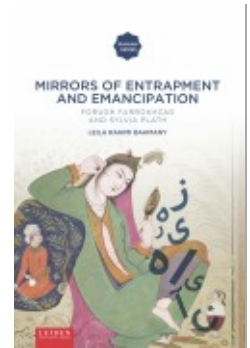
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Introduction: Women and Their Mirrors

Owing to the extremely complex and ambivalent nature of the mirror phenomenon, responses to the mirror or any *specular reflection*—the reflection provided by any mirror-like surface—have been ambivalent and contradictory. The mirror's power in reiterating a simulacrum of reality, elusive and delusive, has given rise to a cornucopia of similes and metaphors. The mirror metaphor of divine reflection, conceptualized to describe, as well as to prescribe, the nature of man's relationship with his God, is one of the most popular of these metaphors. Recurrent since the Middle Ages, it has been adopted by philosophers and poets both of the West and the Islamic lands. Moralists and theologians have embraced this mirror of divinity (and also the mirror as a tool of self-knowledge, often regarded as a prerequisite to the knowledge of one's God), adopted it in their texts repeatedly and further contributed to its becoming a key constitutive metaphor. On the other hand, they reject it vehemently when it fails to reflect God and man's relationship with Him. Once it fails to reflect God and his *imago*, the mirror becomes a tool in the hands of Satan and his fellow devils—themselves reversed simulacra of God—facilitating man's downfall by blocking his path to God with the sins of vanity and envy. This is why it is forbidden for Muslim pilgrims to look at themselves in the mirror during the hajj ceremony in Mecca. Likewise, the mirror has often been associated with witches, sorceresses and *femmes fatales*.

The rejection of the mirror appears more accentuated when it is associated with the feminine gender. The mirror reflects only the external and visible aspect of the subject, i.e. the body, and women have always been regarded as particularly interested in their external appearance. Hence, a close and complex relationship between a woman and her mirror is frequently posited. Woman-with-mirror imagery has usually been considered a symbol of vanity, indicating the vice of self-love, self-worship and "narcissism." The mirror's reflection of the subject's physical exteriority and the cultural assumptions of womanhood as well as women's complex, at times

paradoxical associations with their mirror images are indeed inextricably interwoven with the male gaze on women.

The mirror and the woman have both long been regarded as delusory and guileful, responsible for man's downfall. Woman's highest ambition is seen as to impress and seduce men with her outward image; just as the image in the mirror astounds and captures the person in front of it. Through the woman-with-mirror imagery, patriarchal culture further strengthens its conceptualization of women as sexual objects, as beings of mere appearances, always on the side of the seen. Women are historically regarded as essentially created for the gaze of the male and his desire. Woman-with-mirror imagery is thereby laden with negative values. It reinforces the conception of woman as vain, superficial and self-idolatrous, spending long periods of time in front of a mirror, taking particular delight in observing her reflection. This explains why Christian nuns were forbidden to look at their mirror-image and why in Iran young girls are forbidden to carry a mirror at school. On the other hand, the mirror, often accompanied by a pair of candlesticks, remains an integral part of a woman's dowry in Iranian culture. It is believed to bestow marital bliss and function apotropaically, safeguarding conjugal happiness against the evil eye. The mirror and candlesticks are treated as objects that the bride should always carefully keep and dearly cherish.

For men, by contrast, the mirror has traditionally symbolized mental reflectiveness and truthfulness. For them, contemplation of the specular self frequently hints at the virtue of prudence through self-knowledge. While women have generally been depicted as, and therefore consigned to, being obsessed with their specular reflection—even to the extent of being metaphorized into mirrors themselves—men have been credited with an interest in mental reflection. This aligns with the much discussed feminist notion of gendered binary opposition, which bespeaks the sphere of culture for men and nature for women. Concentrating on mirror imagery, this gender discrepancy exposes the different value loads that the mirror reserves for men and for women. Within the architecture of our gendered cultures, images of mirrors have been constructed as gender-differentiating “moralizing tableaux” personifying virtue or vice when they are not presented as mere “household appliance[s],” functioning as “ethically neutral, nonjudgmental [sic] representations.”¹

As manifested in numerous cases in art and literature, the mirror or looking glass has generally been held to be a female symbol of objectivity, and passivity.² The mirror's objectivity, passivity and its reflecting characteristic

have made it a popular metaphor for women and their historically objective position. Women were considered merely as selfless objects useful only for reflecting the male other and thereby granting him fake identity and delight in the patriarchal context. The objectivity of mirror/woman gives all other functions of both the mirror and the woman a matter of factness which is of course not true; the other functions such as passivity are indeed metaphorical as well as ideological. The same features have made the mirror a lunar symbol, too. The moon, like the mirror, has no light of its own; as a feminine symbol, it reflects the light of the sun while its nature remains totally unaffected.³

In her illuminating work, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, La Belle observes that the theme of women gazing in the mirror solely as an indication of vanity can be found until the nineteenth century when a new trend in the study of the psychological implications of self-contemplation started to flourish.⁴ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the mirror was no longer a mere locus of self-representation; it had become a site of identification and ego formation as well. Ever since the term “narcissism,” based on the Greek mythological figure of Narcissus, was coined in psychoanalysis, the term “narcissistic” has gained widespread usage. Despite the psychoanalytical definition of narcissism as a primary human need, it has been ethically loaded with negative values and usually attributed to women. The stigmatization of women as narcissists has been systematically enforced by a cultural onslaught of stereotyped imagery, a system of stock concepts and tropes, and rhetorical and interpretive strategies, all of them contributing to encoding the definitions and norms of womanhood.

The abundance and persistent power of these imageries, or the “figurations of womanhood,” which Meyers aptly names “cultural noise pollution,” have led to their historical internalization by women and the fossilization of these gender norms within the geology of our culture.⁵ These figurations have sometimes had a devastating influence on women’s self-portraits and self-narratives, undermining their agency and self-determination. By internalizing these imageries, women have indeed incorporated them into the structure of their selves, to the extent that they have even turned into the mouthpiece of patriarchy by echoing these noises. Meyers further explains:

Pernicious as well is the particular narcissistic economy that cultural norms impose on women. Not only does this economy obstruct women’s self-determination, but, perversely, it also undermines their narcissistic

satisfaction. The stereotype of the narcissistic woman and the ubiquitous pictorial tropes and narratives that keep it alive encode a no-win feminine psychodynamic of eroticized estrangement from self—a subjectivity of self-doubt, perplexity, and frustration that defeats authentic narcissistic agency.⁶

The recurrent mirror imageries and metaphors represent and forge women as entities definable in their totality by their specular self. These imageries are structured to conceptualize women as reflective tableaux for the satisfaction of desire and the gaze of men. By ignoring and systematically repressing women's inner complexities, these mirror imageries inextricably trap women within a "distressland," to draw upon Kristeva's terminology;⁷ a distressland of fragmentation, "self-doubt, perplexity, and frustration."⁸ Here Kristeva alludes to Lewis Carroll's stories of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and his *Through the Looking Glass*, in which Alice steps through a looking-glass into a wonderland. On the other hand, these figurative meanings of the mirror have provided many female writers with a starting point of self affirmation and self reflection, which in turn allows for one to lead an interrogation of social images of women (as is the aim of the present study).

Though the mirror is an external apparatus, there is a complex and ambiguous psychological interiority to it. The psychological interiority of the mirror provides a woman with a space within which she can search for a proof of her existence and the quality of her identity.⁹ As Spencer notes, the activity of gazing and contemplating one's mirror image by women is more "an act of self-exploration" than one of "self-expression."¹⁰ Contrary to the popular cultural beliefs depicted in the traditional presentation of women, particularly in male texts, it is not always out of appeasing vanity, but often out of desperation that a woman observes herself continually in the mirror. It has been noted that in a time of psychological crisis, women turn to their mirror with higher frequency. In her careful study of women's behavioural patterns in asylums, Elaine Showalter, the American feminist literary critic, observes that schizophrenic women in particular are obsessed with continual observation of themselves in mirrors for a confirmation of their existence:

The "withness" of the flesh, and its proper management, adornment, and disposition, are a crucial and repeated motif in the schizophrenic women's sense of themselves as unoccupied bodies. Feeling that they have no secure identities, the women look to external appearances for

confirmation that they exist. Thus they continually look at their faces in the mirror, but out of desperation rather than narcissism.¹¹

In this regard, the mirror, for women, is not a thing turned to for narcissistic self-satisfaction out of sheer joy; on the contrary, it is often associated with pain and distress. It is a tool that a woman in her existential-psychological *angst* turns to in the hope of finding her lost identity, her true self. Particularly when a woman receives no acknowledgement of her existential identity in her society, the mirror can seem to be the only answer. That is why women turn to the mirror more and more in times of personal crisis. But the mirror does not necessarily provide the distressed woman with the answer she is looking for. The mirror can submerge a depressed woman further into the depths of disillusionment and pain. Evoking the famous story, Kristeva describes the trapped woman's anguished position thus:

Like an Alice in distressland, the depressed woman cannot put up with mirrors. Her image and that of others arouse within her wounded narcissism, violence, and the desire to kill—from which she protects herself by going through the looking glass and settling down in that other world where, by limitlessly spreading her constrained sorrow, she regains a hallucinated completeness.¹²

This “hallucinated completeness” which the female subject can only conceive within the space of her mirror follows what Lacan discussed as the first identification of a child with her mirror image in its totality as a whole, complete singular entity, which is indeed a misrecognition. Thereupon, some feminist critics plead for a cure for women's fatally wounded narcissism. They speak out for these women's need for “an emancipated narcissism”: a narcissism in which a satisfying normal relationship with one's image is established. This emancipated narcissism will grant women the self-esteem essential to prevent their falling into the trap of self-effacement enforced as the norm by “cultural noise pollution.”¹³ Schultz explains Kristeva's pleas in these words:

In light of the strictures imposed, in light of the drowning of our particularity in a society flooding us with ready-made images and clichés, Kristeva pleads for rescuing Narcissus—an idiosyncratic figure if ever there was one, a figure *ex negativo*, a figure that stands for our right to give our selves to our own images.¹⁴

As Schultz observes, Kristeva is arguing for more genuine figurations of womanhood, “a figure *ex negativo*,” defined or presented as what a woman actually is *not* or what she excludes. These figurations should embrace the plural multiplicities and peculiarities of the concept, rejecting all stereotyped images and clichés.

The highly ambivalent essence of the mirror accounts for the ambiguous, even contradictory responses that the motif of the mirror elicits from modern female authors and feminists. These women break the mirror, totally rejecting it when it represents women’s being manacled to the patriarchal images of feminine vanity and mere appearance. These authors spurn the mirror when it appropriates them as the object of male desire and his gaze, confounding their agency and incarcerating them within the realm of visibilities. On the other hand, paradoxically, they espouse the mirror when it becomes a medium for self-awareness, a site for constructing a true female self. They cherish the mirror when it becomes a means of facilitating the development of their emancipated narcissistic relationship with their own bodies and subjectivities as well as with the world around them.

For the reasons mentioned above, some feminist writers, poets and artists have taken up the task of deconstructing the cultural images and the linguistic codes of what “woman” means. They have struggled to reconceptualize women’s relationship with their mirrors in different feminist terms, for instance, by creating imagery in which women reject their own specular images in favour of more mental reflectiveness, by being involved in reading or writing, by choosing their own forms of outward appearance not necessarily in line with culturally-established dictates, and by speaking up about their own experiences rather than mimicking the dominant cultural voices or even by enjoying their own images not in terms of the other. Through inscribing the reality of their lives into their texts and by giving voice to even their most private and personal experiences, these women have provided us with alternative modes of selfhood and identity.

The mirror’s close reciprocity with subjectivity and *Weltanschauung*, with one’s body, voice and agency, is especially evident in the works of two controversial and iconic female poets of the post-Second World War twentieth century, the Iranian Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967) and the American Sylvia Plath (1932–1963). A study of their oeuvre reveals remarkable similarities in tone and subject, despite the fact that no link or any sort of influence can be traced between them. Plath did not read Persian and Farrokhzad had no acquaintance with foreign languages at the beginning of her short

career, beside the fact that both women were hardly known at the time they wrote. They achieved world-wide fame only after their deaths. In their artistic works, Farrokhzad and Plath both draw heavily and with remarkable honesty on their personal, most private life experiences.

Farrokhzad and Plath, who constitute the focus of the research in this book, both faced extreme difficulties in reconciling their own predilections and artistic ambitions on the one hand and the stringent expectations of patriarchal culture on femininity on the other. Their troublesome marital lives had devastating impacts on their psycho-emotional states and both their marriages ended in divorce. They experienced mental breakdowns over and over again and were hospitalized in psychiatric clinics where they both underwent electroconvulsive therapy. They both exhibited self-destructive behaviour in several suicide attempts and they both died young, in their early thirties. Farrokhzad and Plath were incessantly tortured by the extreme discrepancy they realized between their self-image as artists (containing their ideal image) and the images of true womanhood that their culture continuously and systematically forced on them. These disturbing discrepancies are portrayed meticulously and with marked vivacity and candidness in their highly subjective works. The clashing confrontations between their self-image and the cultural image of womanhood, as well as their constant adaptations of images and identities, are documented most markedly through their encounter with their mirror images as well as through their employment of mirror metaphors.

This study consists of three chapters. In Chapter One a general overview is provided of some of the most dominant mirror imageries and the most influential theories on the mirror and the phenomenon of mirroring. It is against this backdrop that I will locate the individual experience of these female poets, Farrokhzad and Plath, with their mirror. The analysis begins with a study of two popular myths, that of Narcissus and Echo and that of Medusa, both of which have mirroring and gaze as their locus. Ovid's myth of Narcissus and Echo, as presented in his *Metamorphoses*, is the first significant example of specular self-imagery and the consequences of self-recognition, or even misrecognition, in literature. Ovid, who became a canonical author over the centuries, had an extensive influence on Western thought. Ovid combined the two meanings attributed to the mirror, vanity and cognition, in his male character Narcissus. He also combined the story of the male Narcissus with that of the female Echo, recognizing their common theme of doubling and the inseparable dynamics of one's self-image and one's voice. After reflecting on the myth of Narcissus, I will move on to

another myth in which the mirror, reflection and immobilizing gaze are key elements: the Medusa myth. These two Greek myths have both descriptive and prescriptive functions, portraying the already existing cultural views as well as further solidifying those views.

Thereafter the two most influential pertinent theories in psychoanalysis are succinctly addressed: Freud's theory on narcissism and Lacan's theory about the mirror stage. Moreover, I will study the mirror's spatiotemporal feature, which renders it into an ideal metaphor for the memory and imagination. I will further link the mirror of memory/imagination to the mother-daughter reciprocal mirroring, their merging of identities and women's fearful anticipation of old age, degeneration and death. Finally, in this chapter, the similar functions of text and mirror as subjective semiotic modes are discussed. Both mirror and text provide women with a means of self-representation as well as self-construction. When women existentially need reflectiveness, objectification and assertion of the self, especially in a context where no other means of proving that existence is left open to them, texts and the mirrors can supply this interchangeably. The mirroring function of the text becomes undeniably evident in the autobiographical writings of women when the experience of the self is translated into the textual self. Although all the myths and theories discussed in this chapter have emerged in the West, they can be drawn upon (maybe with a few exceptions in detail) to penetrate deeper into the intricacies of Farrokhzad's metaphoric use of the mirror, as I attempt to demonstrate in the following chapter.

In Chapter Two, I will study Forugh Farrokhzad's use of mirror imagery and the psychology of mirroring in her poems. In her poetry, Farrokhzad employs two of the most recurrent mirror imageries of classical Persian literature, namely the mirror as an eye and the mirror of the heart, which is used in a mystical as well as in a non-mystical sense. Farrokhzad's desperate search for an authentic subjectivity and voice, and *herstory* of turbulent personal and artistic development, a chronicle of subject in process within her mirror-text, is discussed. Her mirror imagery reveals how she sets out on a lonely, tempestuous quest for an authentic self image; initially departing from psycho-emotional captivity to the male gaze and the internalization of the images of womanhood imposed by her culture, and then moving on to her symbolic desire to break that mirror and set herself free. In her process of becomings, Farrokhzad passes through troubling times when she is frightened by the otherness of her image. The monstrous grotesquery of her image is caused by the distance she keeps from her culture's established figurations of womanhood. In her quest for the self, Farrokhzad ultimately

reaches a stage where she acknowledges the mirror's powers in granting self-consciousness. Now she can openly acknowledge the mirror's power in constructing the emancipated subject. Farrokhzad also draws on the temporal and virtual features of the mirror when adopting it as a metaphor for the memory and imagination. She also reveals her initial ambivalent feelings towards her mirroring of the image of her mother and her adaptation of her mother's face, identity and life story. Farrokhzad ultimately hails this mutual mirroring and merging with the mother in her mirror. Finally, the text, for Farrokhzad, functions like her mirror. The mirror-text becomes not only a site for searching after and representing her true self but also a site for reconstructing it.

In Chapter Three, I will study Sylvia Plath's aesthetic use of her kaleidoscopic mirror images. I attempt to show how these ambivalent images can give us a portrayal of Plath's tumultuous herstory of relating to her own image and to those beyond her. Plath draws upon some of the most recurrent mirror images associated with womanhood from the repertoire of classical English literature, one of these being the mirror as a powerful and dangerous tool in the hands of envious witches and *femmes fatales*.¹⁵ Plath also employs the popular image of the barren woman as a spider trapped within her own web of solipsism, a cultural idea that is further promoted by Freud. Plath aesthetically portrays the brutality of male Narcissa and how they can immobilize women by turning them into their own flat mirrors in which they can see only a delusive reflection of themselves. Plath's wielding of the images of reciprocal mirroring between mother and child is also studied. Like Farrokhzad, Plath unveils a fearful resentment towards the adaptation of her mother's face and the merging of identities through an image dislocation that takes place within her mirror. In this chapter, some examples of Plath's encounter with her contradictory mirror images are analysed. The faces in Plath's mirrors leave Plath and her readers with an overwhelming shock due to their terrifying alienated otherness, their grotesque monstrosity as well as their turning into a coveted desirable object of gaze—a radiant Venus.

In the Conclusion, I weave together the mirror images of Forugh Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath studied in Chapters Two and Three. I discuss their commonalities and their differences, as well as the implications of these for further research. Finally, at the end of the book, I include an appendix in which readers may find the complete version of those poems of Farrokhzad quoted in part in the text together with my translations of them. Some of these poems have been translated for the first time.

