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Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation

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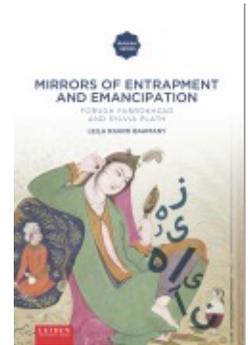
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Conclusion

A study of the mirror imagery and psychology of specular reflection in the works of Forugh Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath, as two contemporary paradigms from two different cultures, reveals much about the universality of the female subject's psycho-emotional problematics in relating to her own subjectivity as well as to the world around her. The study attempts to delineate universal traits of the feminine struggle for self-realization and self-expression across cultural borders and language barriers. The disturbance in relating to self and the other is caused mainly by the patriarchal culture's strict and suffocating definitions of womanhood, emblemized in literature as in life by the mirror imageries that burden women with oppressive values.

At times, the mirrors of these women fail to reiterate the images assigned to them by their culture, leaving them with desperate feelings of lack and the loneliness of an outsider. They themselves often fail in their function as mirrors to, and metaphors of, the male ego, and are therefore confronted with monstrous, unknown and unnamed others in their mirrors. The mere study of the mirror imagery in the works of these female authors helps us to understand their turbulent life story, a "her-story" of a subject in process, incessantly in flux and continually on trial. This is made possible because any psychological stance influences the female subject's mirror encounter. As their female identities stubbornly refuse to fit into the procrustean bed of fixed definitions (assigned by their cultures), women's mirrors, too, resist functioning homogeneously. Their mirrors are highly ambivalent and at times even prove extremely paradoxical. Therefore, the mirror encounter leaves them with disparate feelings.

Farrokhzad and Plath both draw upon the repertoire of the most popular mirror imageries in their literary cultures, but then turn against those traditional readings in their depictions; and therefore become emancipatory, in that they refuse to reduce or adapt their art to the cultural mores which reverberate in their societies. One such traditional mirror is the tran-

scendental mirror of divinity. This oxymoronic mirror reflects the invisible God or his reverse image, Satan or the demon. In her poetry, Farrokhzad invokes the metaphor of man as the mirror of God only to reflect her own desperate passivity, lack of agency and voicelessness as well as to denounce God's paralysing sovereignty. In this same mirror, Farrokhzad encounters Satan in whom she can confide as a fellow sufferer. Plath, on the other hand, invokes the recurrent image of the mirror as the tool of demons, sorcerers and witches. Through the mirror's de-realizing nature, providing the onlooker with a *fata morgana*, an alluring version of reality, the witch invites the onlooker into the sin of vanity and self-idolatry, whereas the only image permitted in the mirror is that of God. Farrokhzad and Plath also borrow the traditional mirror-eye metaphor, a metaphor based on the transparent reciprocity of the reflective surface and the organ of sight.

Both Farrokhzad and Plath, in their poems, refer to the mirror of the male gaze, where the woman is equated with her mirror image and regarded as a mere outward manifestation. The woman has to re-create her image constantly in accordance with the images of womanhood and female beauty with which her culture incessantly assails her in order to satisfy the male gaze and his voyeuristic desire. Farrokhzad's early poetry reveals her disturbed initial internalization of this concept, where her subjectivity is reified by male gaze. At times, her mirror becomes a substitute for the male gaze and his desire, essential for her narcissistic sense of existence and sense of self-continuity. The mirror is not merely an imitative site, where she can make herself appealing to the male gaze, but it also becomes a theatrical stage where she can rehearse her desires and imagination; a utopian space where her narcissism is satisfied. Though it seems excruciating for her, yet seeing no other utility for the mirror at this stage, she rejects it. Soon Farrokhzad becomes psychologically mature enough to outgrow this captivating mirror.

Plath, in her poetry, aesthetically portrays this mirror of the male gaze through the metaphorization of her own subjectivity into a mirror of the male ego and his desire, only to reject it vehemently. Plath also refers narcissism to its original male gender. For these male Narcissi, woman merely functions as a mirror/metaphor, on whose surface they can quench their narcissistic desire for the self. Plath manages to unveil and reject this hierarchical gender reciprocity which systematically deprives women of their own authentic images and confounds their agency, turning them into mere Echoes. In her novel, Plath portrays an example of such women turned into nothing more than mirror images through a minor character. There she

also chronicles her own extreme disturbance caused by society's constant imposition of such figurations of womanhood and its strict expectation placed on women to reiterate the exact images.

The temporality of the mirror and the *Zeitlichkeit* of the specular reflection have not escaped the attention of these poets. Within their mirrors, both Farrokhzad and Plath encounter not only their present selves but also their previous selves, the selves that they constantly put on brutal trial within their mirror courts, criticizing them harshly and at times rejecting them vehemently. The mirror, for both these poets, proves to be a virtual heterotopic site of memory. The same mirror can become mantic, too, prophesying their future images within its frame. It is within these mirrors that the female poets confront the grotesquery, the monstrosity of the future self devoured by degenerating time and death.

The same temporality of the mirror causes a shocking image dislocation when the mother appears in the daughter's mirror. Farrokhzad's and Plath's ambivalent feelings towards their mothers are portrayed through this image dislocation, taking place within their private mirrors. They both encounter the image of their mothers within their own mirrors, indicating the daughter's adaptation of the mother's, as well as her foremothers', identity and destiny. While Plath recurrently demonstrates her ambivalent feelings of fear, disdain and contempt towards this identity-merging, i.e., the pre-oedipal desire to return to the "undifferentiated mother," and to adopt the face and the fate of the mother, Farrokhzad, on the other hand, appears to become able to grow out of her ambivalent feelings towards her mother.¹ At one point, Farrokhzad embraces this merging with the mother peacefully by saluting her mother who was living within her mirror.

While Farrokhzad confronts the desired image of her son within the illusory-imaginary space of her mirror, Plath traces her own self and the effacement of that self reflected within the mirror of her children. Moreover, through mirror imagery, Plath can express her ambivalent feelings towards motherhood. On the one hand, her poetry discloses that she is well aware of the cultural images surrounding a childless woman—a Narcissa spinning spider-like webs round herself—while, on the other hand, she reveals how overwhelmed, perplexed, insecure and threatened she feels towards this motherhood and her new-born mirrors.

Moreover, the mirror provides Farrokhzad and Plath with an introspective space, a space where they come to the realization, as well as the presentation, of the exasperating fragmentation and multiplicity of their inner selves, and ultimately their madness. Within their mirrors, they come across

the uncanny, the grotesque and monstrous otherness of their inner selves. The uncanniness which leaves them with the terrifying sense of abjectness, of the sense of being in between, of a suspension between life and death. All these frightening images reveal much about the anxious difficulty of these poets in bringing together their own authentic and desired image of self, on the one hand, and the images of womanhood imposed on them by their cultures, on the other. Through their mirror imageries, Farrokhzad and Plath can disclose their desperate entrapment within the paradoxical situation their culture has created for them. On the one hand, they long for the security of feeling a sense of belonging to their society with its images of womanhood, while on the other, they desire to step out of the stifling images of womanhood by realizing their own authentic images and adopting their own voices.

While Farrokhzad and Plath have both portrayed instances of the captivating mirror for the female subjectivity, they have also provided their readers with an emancipatory mirror. Acknowledging the desperate loneliness of the quest for the authentic female self, Farrokhzad openly invites her readers to consult their mirrors for redemption. She appears to have become capable of rejecting the established images of womanhood; the images her narcissistic patriarchal culture incessantly forces on her mirror; the images she once used to envy. Farrokhzad saw enough of life to realize the emancipatory nature of the mirror in giving her self-awareness and reflecting back her desired image of selfhood. Plath, envisaging herself as a witch as well as a terrifying other, an abject Medusan figure, ultimately survives, daring to look victoriously at her mirror—the demon's eyes and a cold inserting glass—fashioned to intimidate and control female non-conformists.

Finally, text, for Farrokhzad and for Plath, has the same psychological function as their mirror. Text, like their mirror, remains a heterotopic oblique space where they can encounter their antithetical multiple selves—fluid and ever-changing. Onto their text-mirrors they can continually reflect and objectify their subjects in their constant becomings, and thereby be assured of their existence. Therefore, the text for them turns into a desideratum, not a luxury. The mirror-text is a space they seek for their true subjectivity and their authentic voice. In their existential *angst*, Farrokhzad and Plath project their selves onto its surface and then introject the projected self into their structure of consciousness. Indeed, this is what makes their life stories and their art merge, making it impossible to draw a demarcation line between the two.

It is within this space (mirror and text) that these female authors are engaged in an ongoing debate, on the one hand, between their own selves and the recurrent self-images their culture impose on them and, on the other hand, among the multiple contradictory selves within. Through writing Farrokhzad and Plath can inscribe the gendered history of their subjects within their texts. In the simulacrum the mirror provides, far more than similiarites, the contrasts—representational, epistemological, ontological as well as political—are divulged. Therefore, text-mirror, for them, becomes a space, and a window, where the visible and the invisible, the being and the seeming, the interior and the exterior, the private and the public, introspection and the mimesis and finally the imaginary and the real converge.

