

**The Feminist Struggle for Identity in the Poetry of
Forugh Farrokhzad (Iran) and Fahmida Riaz
(Pakistan): A Comparative Study of Their
Translations**



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2012

DECLARATION

I, Miss ANJUM NASEEM RAO, Roll No. 090684036, student of M. Phil, in the subject of Applied Linguistics, session 2010-12, hereby declare that the matter printed in the thesis, titled *The Feminist Struggle for Identity in the Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad and Fahmida Riaz: A Comparative Study of their Translations* is my own work and has not been printed, published and submitted as research work, thesis or publication in any form in any University, Research Institution etc in Pakistan or abroad.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study demands certain things and the foremost is inspiration that was inculcated in me by my respectable teachers. I owe a special thank to my supervisor, Dr

Qabil Khan who guided me at every step and without his guidance and magnanimous help it would not be possible to execute this study. The chairperson of our department, Prof Anjum.P. Saleemi and the former Chairperson Dr Zafar Iqbal helped me a lot in this regard and I am grateful to them. I also thank those people who helped in the collection of data. I am grateful to all the members of my family who encouraged and supported me to undertake this project. I would particularly mention my mother whose prayers are a great source of strength for me. I cannot forget the well-timed support of my best friend Islam, who stood by me during every turmoil that I went through while writing this manuscript. At every step of my thesis writing, he was there to give me with his valuable and constructive feedback. He took out his precious time and guided me munificently in revising my work time and again. My husband, Asim Ikram has been a successive source of inspiration for me to update my knowledge. Without his efforts I could not be able to complete my study. And last but not the least, I am highly grateful to the whole staff of UMT library and that of certain other libraries such as Punjab University Library whose cooperation is unforgettable for me.

DEDICATED TO

My Mother & Abbu

Abstract

Identity is one of the fundamental concerns of human beings. What identity is and how it is formed are the key questions of this debate. An important aspect of this debate is gender that addresses core issue of the formation and projection of identity. Gender equality demands the review of masculine perceptions of women's identity and the feminist writers and activists across the world try to respond these queries and engage in the process of rectification of the falsely believed 'truths'. The process of identity formation requires certain input factors starting from the urge to know the truth. The truth seekers poets tend to do this job. The proposed study intends to explore the struggle of the two poets, Fahmida Riaz from Pakistan and Forugh Farrokhzad from Iran. Both these poets have dared to review the perceived standards and analyse them in the light of contemporary discoveries and truths.

The study contends that both the feminist poets stress on the awareness of women to their 'self' and skills. They believe that women must transgress from the prescribed roles assigned by the society. This can lead to the actualization of women's potential in social spheres of life. The main objectives of this research study are to explore the feminist elements in their works, analyze the perspective of these writers in terms of their cultural context, and relate the strength of these writers in terms of struggle for the feminism. It addresses the questions: How can it be determined that the struggle of Forugh Farrokhzad and Fahmida Riaz presented in their poetry is actually a struggle for the feminist identity? What are the feminist elements in the works of these female writers? How has feminism being defined in the cultural context of Iranian and Pakistani poets? The researcher relies only on the translated works of the afore-mentioned poetesses. The qualitative method of study is proposed for this purpose.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Purpose Statement

This thesis is an attempt to elaborate the comparison between the translations of the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad and Fahmida Riaz. Both women writers are caught in the struggle for a feminist identity. Both of them belong to the Muslim countries but still there are certain differences that are hallmark of their poetry. The present study makes a cross cultural comparison of feminist identities depicted in the works of the Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad and the Pakistani poet Fahmida Riaz. The basic emphasis is laid on

the depiction of the struggle for a feminist identity in the poetry of these writers. The supreme concern of present study is cultural comparison of feminist identities that have been reflected in the poetic works of these feminist writers. The study substantiates its findings with the help of textual references of their poetic works.

1.2 Identity and the process of its formation:

Identity is neither stagnant nor absolute; it is rather constructed and reconstructed by intellectual input. Feminists believe that woman's identity has been viewed through the masculine perspectives. It should be reviewed and seen by women themselves. Men are usually perceived as superior because they are physically strong and can earn livelihood for themselves and for the dependent members of their families. But the feminists argue that since the women have or may have better aesthetic and intellectual qualities, so the sole criterion should not be the physical strength. Probably that's how they are better or the equal of men. There is no need to mention here that Amazon women are not only a myth but in our contemporary world the physical strength of women has also been acknowledged in many domains.

1.3 Key features of feminist identity:

As far as gender roles are concerned, different intellectuals define them differently. It is a general sociological thought that gender roles are constructed through social norms even though the essentialists believe that biological factors determine the gender and not social or outward circumstances. The social constructionists believe that gender roles are not permanent and they can be changed. Men can do anything that women can do. In the domain of psychology, three approaches are used to study the concept of gender. Vicki S. Helgeson sums up these approaches in her book, *Psychology of Gender*. According to her, the first approach uses sex as a subject variable. It implies that "sex is an attribute of a

person; investigators compare the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of men and women.”ⁱ (Helgeson, 63) This approach is traditional and more or less confirms the social conventions. The writer introduces the second approach as “an individual differences approach”ⁱⁱ. (Helgeson, 63) This approach shows “how gender roles influence people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.”ⁱⁱⁱ (Helgeson, 63) The third approach examines sex as a stimulus or target variable and records “how people respond to the categories of male and female.”^{iv} (Helgeson, 64)

Patriarchal social norms and practices are not acceptable for the feminist writers and political activists. They believe that women have their own identities and they cannot be led by the nose of men in authority. They strive for a change in these common social norms and practices. Major sources of authority in patriarchal society are religious scholars, traditions, culture and saint-like figures (who are always males). Whatever they say, it practically holds sway. Feminists question the illusions that are given to women to remain satisfied with their prescribed roles. They question the validity of paradise of home, subservience of woman to man, suppression of woman and status of home. ‘Angel in the house’ is a metaphor that shows how women have been perceived by patriarchs; this image is countered by that of the mad woman in the attic. The woman’s urge to transgress the limits imposed by masculine thoughts, customs or standards is corner stone of women’s love and struggle for change. Feminist identity has marks of dissatisfaction with patriarchal standards, urge for transgression against the limits and restrictions, rebellion against the ‘normal’ behaviour even endangering the risk to be charged as ‘abnormal’. It requires restructuring and reconstruction of woman image by reinterpreting the epistemology, history and seminal texts. It also challenges to the masculine fantasies regarding woman and replaces them by psycho-biological evidence. The struggle for feminist identity is not confined to any single domain; rather it encompasses from public

to private self, individual fascination to socio-political laws, theory to application, concern for human rights to advocacy for an exclusive status, and interaction with man to the interaction with God.

1.4 Poetry of feminist poets as a medium for this awareness:

The poetic sensibilities of a large group of poets have also been influenced by this consciousness and their political leanings. Their poetry is neither propaganda nor a medium for the promotion or projection of any agenda. That's quite a different experience. The poets explore and express the domain of human experience that has not yet been appropriately described and needs to be expressed again. Their association with the political philosophy of feminism varies from person to person and they are not primarily committed to 'ism'. The commitment is secondary to their poetic experience. However, their poetic experience challenges hegemonic authoritative experience of male poets and the generalization of this experience. So this experience comes close to political endeavour of the poet. The feminist poetry is an attempt to surface the hidden expression of woman experience and faculties on one side and share this awareness with the readers to review the universe or at least our human world.

1.5 The emphasis of both the poets on feminist identity:

The stress of both these feminist writers is on the awareness of women to their 'self' and skills. They believe that women must transgress from the prescribed roles assigned by the society. This can lead to the actualization of women's potential in social spheres of life.

1.6 Aims and Objectives:

The main aims and objectives of this research study are given below:

1. To explore the feminist elements in the works of Iranian and Pakistani poets.
2. To analyze the perspective of these writers in terms of their cultural context.
3. To relate the strength of these writers in terms of struggle for the feminism.

1.7 Research Questions:

The research questions that are addressed in this study are mentioned below.

1. How can it be determined that the struggle of Forugh Farrokhzad and Fahmida Riaz presented in their poetry is actually a struggle for the feminist identity?
2. What are the feminist elements in the works of these female writers?
3. How has feminism being defined in the cultural context of Iranian and Pakistani poets?
4. What relation does the linguistic analysis of these poets demonstrate between their ideas and their language?

1.8 Background:

Representation of women has always been controversial. History shows that women have been blamed for their weak physique. Their social role is determined differently in each society. The previous century has been a turning point for the recognition of women's rights and the perception of Reality with a feminist understanding. Asian women have also been travelling on the road of modernity, empowerment and woman consciousness. But there is still more to do. Louise Edwards and Mina Roces introduce the modern Asian woman as a person who "exudes contradiction and ambivalence as she straddles between tradition and modernity, victimisation and agency, between being a subject and an object."^v (Edwards & Roces, 10)The case of South Asian women especially Iranians and Pakistanis can also be discussed in the same paradigm. The women of these two countries are striving for their rights on one side and they have been denied so many common rights on the other. For

somehow a similar social scenario, their voices also sound alike. They appear to be the residents of the same grave where they have been buried by their so called masters.

Since the age of Greeks, status of women has been a great controversy. The two Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, differ in their views about the role of women in society. Aristotle's low opinion about women is evidence of the fact that Athenian society undermined women's capabilities. Moreover, Greek woman had less important part to play in important matters of life. Reproduction was her primary function. However, we see a different type of woman, Clytemnestra, in Aeschylus' tragedy *Orestia*. This woman is quite powerful and possesses a sanguine heart. She is the accomplice in the murder of her husband with her paramour. It indicates there cannot be oversimplification of the idea how women were presented in Greek age.

Aristotle's stance about women is considerably different than that of Plato's. He perceives women as a mere "deformity in nature" (Okin, 1994:13). He only acknowledges

that women are child bearing creatures. Okin agrees that Aristotle makes some very unfortunate comments about women. Aristotle believes that a woman should sedulously obey her husband. (Okin, 13) A.W.H Atkins has discussed in his book *Merit and Responsibility* that Greek used the highest words for praise only for men.

Aristotle's way of passing a judgment on the status and state of woman is deductive. Whatever he finds in his society he states it that seems without any genuine consensus. Okin points out that "the functionalist treatment of women is itself founded on the assumption of the Aristotelian hierarchy, in which woman is naturally placed in an inferior position." (Okin,13)We see Greek literature as a varied manifestation of

feminism. Nonetheless, In *Orestia* trilogy goddess Athena gave the vote in favour of son and not in favour of mother.

Freedman writes in the introduction of her book on feminism that feminism has been divided in three different theoretical families: liberal feminism, Marxist or social feminism and radical feminism (Freedman, 2002: 5). She further explains that liberal feminist's campaign for equal rights of women is within the framework of liberal state, it also strives for the extension of rights and privileges to women by ensuring their "equal citizenship with men" (p.5). Marxist and social feminist directly attacked "gender inequality" and "women oppression" as a manifestation of capitalistic infrastructure (p.5). Radical feminists, however, believe that patriarchal system alone is responsible for undue subjugation of women that is "not a product of capitalism" (p.5)

Walters in her book, "*Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*", points out the negative connotation the word feminism refers to. One might feel it is something like a man-hater, but this definition does not really apply to everyone who supports feminism. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley published their collection of essays, "Who is Afraid of Feminism?" They argued that "attack on feminism merge into a wider misogyny" and feminist is the name given to despised woman. (p.5)

Ambreen Salahud-Din, a Pakistani researcher, maintains the point that feminism works at three different levels i.e intellectual, economic and socio-political. She quotes Hippel, a friend of Immanuel Kant, to substantiate her argument. Hippel produced a book 'on the civil improvements of women'. He argues that women's abilities are same as men's but these are deliberately suppressed (Salahud-Din, 9).

A famous yet relevant definition of feminism is put forward by B. David, "Feminism includes any form of opposition to any form of social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex" (David, 6). Women had to fight for their right to vote. But in the beginning it was a burning issue. Seneca Fall Convention held on 19th and 20th July 1848 became the foundation of women suffrage movement, 32 men and 68 women signed a declaration. The declaration stated "We hold these truths to be self evident ... that all men and women are created equal... the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpation by man of woman's rights, having indirect object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her." (Salahud-Din, 3) Suffrage issue was given due importance in European countries. In the United States it was rejected in 1872, but in 1920 it was passed. New Zealand was the first country to grant equal rights to women (1893) followed by Australia (1902).

In 1960s the first bud bloomed when women wrestled to get the right for voting. Second wave occurred during the 1960s civil war when the African-American women were striving to attain equality and that inspired women to renew their struggle. Effects of feminism on Pakistani and Iranian poetry are quite deep and noticeable. Women of these areas are quite dynamic in their thinking.

The basic theme that lurks behind the feminist diction employed by these writers is identity of women that is suppressed in their societies under different cultural banners. As far as the ideas about feminist identity are concerned, female being is always considered a weak person. Trujillo (2000) propounds this idea that females have no identity of their own. "For many Chicanas, our identification as women, that is, as

complete women, comes from the belief that we need to be connected to a man” (Trujillo, 2000: 5). She further makes a point that women undervalue themselves because men around them and society as a whole underestimate them (p.5).

As far as the Islamic feminism is concerned, it’s different versions are practised in different countries. For example an Islamic state like Turkey also objects to head cover and on the same lines a non Islamic state France does not approve of it. Coming towards Iranian society and their culture, it is important to state that Islamic Iranian society before the revolution is quite different from the one that we see after the Iranian revolution. It is believed that the Iranian Constitutional Revolution which took place between 1905 and 1911 triggered a spontaneous and intense women's movement.

Kishwar Naheed (2008) reveals that women were “compulsory unveiled” in 1936. Reza Shah wanted to utilize women’s potential in development of the country (p.82). Naheed further points out that “Gender equalities have intensified since the revolution of 1978-79 where emphasis on Islamic fundamentalism has meant that women have returned to wearing the veil and given up a number of freedoms”(Naheed, 2008:82).

Islamfiche (2004) highlights, in the preface of the book, *Two Poems from Iranian Poet Forugh Farrokhzad*, the importance of Farugh Farokhzad in literary history for three major reasons. First, she embraced a new style of poetry after Nima Yushij and it was reflected in rhyme, imagery and the individual voice. Second, her diction is highly bold and suggestive; especially her poem “Sin” stirred a lot of criticism by orthodox misogynist critics of that time. Third, she took pleasure in audaciously becoming a political activist under the Pahlavi government. (Islamfiche, 2004:1)

Just like the controversial figure of Forugh Farrokhzad, the Voice of Fahmida Riaz is also considered a rebellious one. Fahmida's first book *Tongue of Stone* symbolizes a woman as a creature who has no right and challenges prevalent social beliefs. She is not supposed to raise her voice. Salahuddin(2005) in her book *Feminism in Modern Urdu Poetesses* translates a poem by Fahmida Riaz. She quotes that "I need the freedom of geese sitting on the beaches. My eyes and my own self, both aspire for freedom" (p.125). These lines clearly reflect the social pattern of thinking. Patriarchal Society poses so many restrictions on women that a female continuously feels as "trapped" or "Aseer" (p.125).

Fahmida's feminist poetry alludes to the too many restrictions that are imposed on a woman. Some Urdu poets have continued this tradition. Kishwar Naheed, (2008) a renowned Urdu poet, in her poem "Talibaa" reiterates the same concerns when she writes "maybe a girl has a bright burning face and she is also pious, yet the order or the verdict is that she will have to stick to internal courtyard only"(129). Reading feminist concerns in the poetry, the reader recalls Fahmida's defiance,

What shall I do, Sire, with this black veil?

Why do you bestow on me this great favour?

(“Four Walls and the Black Veil”, 96)

This study has explored similarities that both of these poetesses share in their selected texts. The researcher analyzes the representation of social injustices done by the society in the poetry of both the female writers.

The real problem lies in the fact that social factors are not in harmony with Islamic ideologies. They are rather in contrast with religion. Society imposes restrictions on its individuals and forces them to confirm their cultural norms. Certain norms of Pakistani culture seem influenced by the Hindu culture because a considerable majority of the Muslims living here have been converted from Hinduism.

In Pakistan during the regime of Zia-ul-Haq, a military demagogue, the situation became worst. The Hindu women in the Indian subcontinent before the creation of Pakistan were far ahead of Muslim women. Mullahs stopped women from getting education. They thought women should not be given the chance to excel in education because in that way they would be liberal. But the Muslim women resisted against these thoughts and they have proved now that a Muslim woman does not mean that she has to shun the way of progress and technological or scientific advancement in any way.

1.9 Implications of the Study:

The researcher has explored the social and cultural differences as well as their representation in the poetry of these feminist writers. The researcher has tried to reflect feminist theory in South Asian context. Social differences found in the works of these two writers have been discussed with reference to the literary movements.

1.10 Limitations of the Study:

As the researcher is unfamiliar with Persian language, so it is quite difficult to get exactly at the real point of view of Forugh Farrokhzad. The researcher has relied only on the translation of the afore-mentioned poetess. Moreover, the constraints of time and space also limit the job of the researcher.

1.11 A brief introduction of forthcoming chapters:

The research plan shows that Chapter 1, Feminism and Feminist Poetry, capsules the overview of feminist thought and practice and traces its reflections in English, Urdu and Persian literature particularly poetry. Chapter 2, Fahmida's Quest for Feminist Identity, analyzes the major concerns of the poet and evaluates her concept of identity formation. Chapter 3, Forugh's Another Birth, traces the development of poet's perceptions and expressions and evaluates the feminist concerns of her poetry. Chapter 4, Struggle for Feminist Identity, discusses the similarities and differences of both the poets, Fahmida Riaz and Forugh Farrokhzad, in the context of their contemporary societies. Conclusion sums up the arguments presented in the previous chapters.

1.12 METHODOLOGY:

The method of this research is qualitative. The researcher has proved after reading the translated texts *Four Walls and a Black Veil* by Fahmida Riaz and *Another Birth and Other Poems* by Forugh Farrokhzad. This study focuses on the selected poems of the above mentioned books that truly depict the feminist psychology and comparison of the writing styles of these poets. The researcher reads the English translation of selected poems of Fahmida Riaz and Forugh Farrokhzad and tries to justify their feminist stance. The researcher analyzes the primary sources that are the translations of Forugh Farrokhzad and Fahmida Riaz. The researcher also takes into account the secondary sources of these writers. This research study falls into the paradigm of descriptive research. The researcher has interpreted various selected verses from the above mentioned works of Forugh Farrokhzad and Fahmida Riaz.

1.13 Data Analysis:

Qualitative Analysis of Data: The researcher has taken five poems from each poet's book and analyzed them in the light of feminist identity crisis and struggle to preserve that identity. The names of the selected poems of Fahmida Riaz are 'The Impure Women', 'Four Walls and a Black Veil', 'To a Girl', 'Admi ki Zindagi' and 'Surah-e-Yaseen'. Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad that have been analysed include 'Captive', 'Sin', 'Earthly Verses', 'Another Birth', and 'The Conquest of the Garden'.

1.14 Conclusion:

It is hoped that the present study will be quite valuable from literary as well as sociolinguistic point of view as both the poetesses show great struggle for maintaining or establishing their identities in their corresponding male-dominated societies. It will also be helpful in understanding the literary trends of feminist writings in the social scenario of South Asia.

ⁱ Helgeson, Vicki S. (2005). *Psychology of Gender*. Delhi, Pearson Education. p 63

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ⁱⁱⁱ Helgeson, Vicki S. (2005). *Psychology of Gender*. Delhi, Pearson Education. p 63

^{iv} Helgeson, Vicki S. (2005). *Psychology of Gender*. Delhi, Pearson Education. p 64

^v Edwards, Louise, and Mina Roces, ed. (1995). *Women in Asia: Tradition, modernity and globalization*.