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Voices of Resistance and Renewal: Gender, Social Justice, and National Identity in Iranian Women's Poetry

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Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of gender, social justice, resistance, and national identity in the poems of three well-known Iranian poets: Parvin Etesami, Forugh Farrokhzad, Simin Behbahani and Rosa Jamali. The study uses Etesami's "The Orphan's Tear", Farrokhzad's "Reborn" and "Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season", Behbahani's "My Country, I Will Build You Again", Rosa Jamali's "The Last Street of Tehran" to analyse the themes of individual suffering, social inequality, female subjectivity, and collective renewal through the lens of Iranian women's perspective. By situating these poems in the sociopolitical and historical background of Iran, the article uses feminist literary criticism and close textual analysis to identify the power structures in society and the ways in which women respond to marginalization through their poetic expression. The article examines the ethical approach to suffering in Etesami's poems, while at the same time also looking to Farrokhzad's poetry for discussions of self-examination, alienation, and the possibility of personal and ontological renewal. Behbahani's poems can be read as expressions of national belonging, sacrifice, and the desire to rebuild a damaged homeland. Jamali opens the world of Institutional State Censorship, Totalitarian Suppression, and Forced Exile. Each poem and poetess express different but closely linked forms of resistance, in which personal experience gains broader social meaning. The study thus examines the intersectionality of women's experiences, in which Iranian women's poetry questions established social conventions and explores alternative possibilities for collective and individual life.

Keywords: Iranian women's poetry; Persian literature; feminist literary criticism; gender and resistance; social justice; female subjectivity; national identity; poetic voice; social transformation; Forugh Farrokhzad; Parvin Etesami; Simin Behbahani, Rosa Jamali.

INTRODUCTION

Iranian women's poetry is known both for its aesthetic practice and for its tendency to engage with the social and political world by defining women's space within it. Like the literary traditions in other non-Western countries, Iranian women's writing remained invisible and unrecognised for a long time within the literary canons. Despite this lack of acknowledgment, studying women's poetry and its historical development is highly significant. Through social intervention, Iranian women poets engage with questions of gender, individual freedom, injustice, alienation, and the homeland. These poets' personal experiences open a space for social interaction, because through their different styles, they reveal the link between poetic expression and social change.

Their poetry can be considered to be not only a form of individual expression but also an engagement with gendered experiences, social justice, national identity, resistance to social oppression, and responses to changing historical conditions in Iran. To understand Parvin Etesami's social criticism, it is necessary to grasp the importance of the Constitutional era, modernist literary movements, women's changing social positions, and the 1979 Revolution. Forugh Farrokhzad's modernist, self-questioning voice, Simin Behbahani's devotion to the homeland and Rosa Jamali visuals on state language suppression through physical tools and spatial boundaries show how women's poetic agency can take historically distinct forms: ethical and social critique in Etesami, personal and metaphysical resistance in Farrokhzad, and national commitment in Behbahani and Jamali.

Though the poems differ in form and voice, they collectively open poetic language to oppose injustice and create alternative visions of social mobility. This article examines how the selected poems represent social injustice, suffering, and marginality. Likewise, the following questions shall be raised. How do the poets use poetic voice, symbolism, imagery, and form to question established structures of power? How do female subjectivity, social responsibility, and national identity intersect in the poems? And how do the poems imagine resistance, renewal, and the possibility of social transformation? In "The Orphan's Tear", Parvin Etesami critiques suffering and social inequality; in "Reborn" and "Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season", Forugh Farrokhzad explores transformation, alienation, consciousness, and hope; Jamali articulates that homeland is reduced to a commodified, "cramped land" measured by "the palms of my hands", finally, in "My Country, I Will Build You Again", Simin Behbahani discusses national belonging, sacrifice, and resurrection. The selected poems, therefore, transform poetry into a space of female subjectivity and political imagination, demonstrating the poetess's negotiations with individual experience, social power, and collective renewal. The study uses the concepts such as sex, gender and desire in Judith Butler's *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* and Terry Eagleton's views on the relation between history, politics and literature in *Marxism and Literary Criticism.*

For some time, Iran has been undergoing many civil wars and ethnic issues. The Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, along with other revolutions in Iran and the new debates on education, justice, citizenship, and women's participation in public spaces, have all opened up new opportunities for citizens to speak more freely about identity and equity. The expansion of modern education and women's participation in the sociopolitical landscape denote another major milestone in Iran's history. These opportunities, along with the emergence of modern Persian poetry, have enabled women to experiment with different literary forms. Thus, social criticism and literary innovation in Etesami's period, along with the subsequent modernist work of Farrokhzad, offer a useful contrast in Iran's social structure. Therefore, the

traces of education, literary institutions, gender relations, and political life cannot be removed from Iranian women's poetry.

Rather than adhere to traditional clerical influence, the Pahlavi period's Persian-centric national identity celebrated Iran's pre-Islamic history and the White Revolution, including the policies of rapid land redistribution, literacy programs, and expanded public rights for women, alongside heavy reliance on the secret police (SAVAK) to curb dissent. However, critics and opposition groups viewed these as artificial and as trampling on indigenous Iranian religious values. The 1979 Islamic Revolution and the theocratic shift, Mass Mobilisation, religio-nationalist identity, and sacred politics transformed Iran's entire political scene. As a result, criticism of violence, suffering, and political failure became common themes in Iranian poetry. Behbahani's poem "My Country, I Will Build You Again" is associated with the Iran–Iraq War and became a widely recognised expression of one's attachment to Iran.

This article analyses women poets in the speaking position in order to expose the difficulties which established gender expectations pose within feminist concepts and female subjectivity. The female perspective is important for understanding the relationship between women's voices and social authority, as well as their loneliness, embodiment, memory, self-reflection, personal freedom, and social conditions. Female speakers' voices are significant in each poetess's poetry, because they question the customary expectations placed on women. A close reading is also important for identifying how social power operates symbolically and for understanding how poetry imagines resistance. The combination of feminist study with materialist or Marxist criticism reveals the significance of poverty, inequality, labour, and social hierarchy, dominant social values, and alternative voices – particularly, where these poems deal with economic themes.

Rakhshandeh E'tesami, or Parvin Etesami, is a well-known female poet of early 20th century Iran who used traditional Persian forms and themes in her work. Her interest in social issues, justice, and the conduct of powerful, privileged groups enabled her to use inherited literary conventions to question society's prevailing systems. In particular, she used her poetic talent to critique the existing social arrangements. She wrote "The Orphan's Tear" during the late Qajar and early Pahlavi period (early 20th century), when Etesami operated in a society constrained by strict autocratic censorship and adherence to traditional social structures. She used the classical Persian *mosahebeh* (allegorical dialogue or debate) to deliver sharp political and moral critiques of monarchical tyranny, economic inequality, and political deceit, hiding her dissent behind didactic storytelling. As an example, one might consider the following lines:

> An orphan boy among this speaks his doubts,
> What is that sparkle that's atop his crown?
> She said: that's your heart's blood and my eye's tear!
> We were deceived by shepherd's staff and robe.
> He is a wolf; for many years he's known the flock.
> A beggar is the king who robs his flock;

The poem opens to thoughts of class oppression and institutional monarchical injustice. Etesami constructs her economic critique through a sharp visual binary. The public sees royalty through the image of a "sparkle" atop a "crown", but the old woman's response demystifies this wealth by defining it as "your heart's blood and my eye's tear!" The physical noun "heart's blood" denotes bodily exhaustion and fatal labour, while the reference to an "eye's tear" signifies systemic poverty. The jewel is revealed to be extracted human suffering, rather than divine right. The poet's diction in speaking of a "shepherd's staff and

robe" is meant to reference the ways in which pastoral and state authority can be used as a deceptive guise. Etesami exposes this predatory institutional role through the noun "wolf". By concluding that "[a] beggar is the king who robs his flock", Etesami inverts the traditional class hierarchy: the monarch is re-categorised not as the benefactor of his people, but as an illegitimate "beggar" living off forced expropriations from the vulnerable. Through an inquisitive orphan boy and a bent old crone, she exposes the ruling king's hypocrisy. The poet used many literary devices to expose the reality of her time. The king is a "wolf" in shepherd's clothing; the brilliant "sparkle that's atop his crown" is contrasted with the old woman's "twisted back bent low". The crown's sparkle is revealed to be "your heart's blood and my eye's tear"! The king is described as a "wolf" masquerading in a "shepherd's staff and robe" who "robs his flock", to cite a few examples. The orphan is a figure of social vulnerability. These poetic images of tears and suffering reveal the real poverty in Iran. The poem contrasts innocence and deprivation with privilege, indifference, or moral failure, and examines the relationship between the individual figure and broader structures of social responsibility.

Her suffering may seem like an individual struggle and experience, but it questions the morality of society. Her poems are not only about the pain of one vulnerable person but also the social relationships that make such suffering possible or allow it to continue in the first place. Through her poem, she challenges injustice through ethical questioning, even when her language is not explicitly revolutionary or feminist in the contemporary sense of the term.

Etesami's ethical and socially observant voice can be compared with Farrokhzad's more modernist exploration of the speaking self. This study considers two of Forugh Farrokhzad's poems, which offer an opportunity to explore both transformation and social disillusionment. Writing in the 1950s and 1960s under the Pahlavi regime, Farrokhzad pioneered modern Iranian free verse. Amid rapid, state-led Westernisation and urban modernisation, as well as deep political suppression following the 1953 coup, Farrokhzad broke traditional literary taboos by giving voice to unrestrained female interiority, existential anxiety, and domestic confinement in a modernising metropolis. She opened up the possibilities of women's poetic expression by placing female experience, emotional richness, and individual consciousness at the centre of her poetry. Because she challenged the established expectations regarding women's literary and social identities, she is considered a major representative of modern Persian poetry. Above all, she believed in the female speaker's importance as an active interpreter of her world. Her works are widely associated with questioning gender conventions and developing a distinctive, modernist voice.

The title "Reborn" suggests renewal and transformation. The poem unties the relationship between poetic creation and the speaker's sense of identity. Images drawn from everyday life, nature, love, and existence give the poem a new dimension. The poem shows how the speaker actively constructs new forms of meaning, instead of passively accepting inherited definitions of life. The poem represents transformation as personal, artistic, relational, or some combination thereof. Given the importance of the poem's imagery and changes in voice, Farrokhzad's poetic speaker can be read as an agent who questions the boundaries imposed on female identity. In this way, the poem's constructed, speaking self can challenge established assumptions about women's roles and identities through personal desire and cultural convention. Emotional vulnerability and creative agency are important themes in "Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season" and "Reborn", in which she addresses gender inequality, patriarchal confinement, and domestic violence. In "Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season", she proclaims:

And here I am,
a lonely woman
on the threshold of a cold season
the night I felt the pain and a being
formed in my womb,
the night I became an acacia bride....
I think my mother wept that night.
She who wears love's crown
and has withered in the folds of her
wedding gown?
Look how the one who spoke with
words...
was nailed to the cross of
apprehensions.
And in "Reborn" as:
All my being is a dark verse.
that repeats you to the dawn
of unfading flowering and growth.
I conjured you in my poem with a sigh.
and grafted you to water, fire, and
trees.

Farrokhzad explicitly establishes a female perspective as "a lonely woman". In describing traditional matrimony, the line "I think my mother wept that night" frames the daughter becoming an "acacia bride" not as a celebration, but as an intergenerational tragedy of lost autonomy. This institutional decay of female identity is reinforced in the description of a woman who "has withered in the folds of her wedding gown", where the verb "withered" conveys physical and emotional atrophy within domestic structures. Farrokhzad analyses systemic misogyny against women who demand expression: the woman who "spoke with words" is "nailed to the cross of apprehensions", utilising images of religious martyrdom to illustrate punishment for female speech. The physical reality of domestic assault is mapped directly onto the body in the observation that the "branches of your fingers . . . left a mark on her cheek". Furthermore, in "Reborn", the line "My lot is a sky that can be shut out, by the mere hanging of a curtain" uses the domestic object "curtain" as a metaphor for how easily female freedom is domesticized and hidden away.

Farrokhzad's cold-season imagery connects the speaker's individual isolation to a wider sense of social exhaustion, disillusionment, and historical crisis. The poem opens with a woman alone at the threshold of a cold season, establishing a link between female solitude and a bleak worldview. Its images of coldness, decay, silence, and destruction can be read as more than just descriptions of personal sadness. In the poem "Let Us Believe in the Dawn of the Cold Season", the cold season symbolises crisis or stagnation. The lonely female speaker and her relationship to the surrounding world are visible in the images of wind, decay, and damaged or confined life. The relationship between personal disillusionment and broader social alienation can be seen in the tension between the desire for intimacy and the difficulty of finding a meaningful connection with someone else. The poem's despair represents complete withdrawal from society or a form of consciousness that makes resistance possible. The poem does not end in coldness alone, however; it also imagines renewal. The imagery creates a certain tension between destruction and regeneration, suggesting that hope need not deny suffering. In both poems, renewal can be explored as a transformation of perception and existence, although the different poems should not be assumed to offer identical versions or interpretations of rebirth.

The poet speaks in an unfiltered, personal female voice about "a lonely woman on the threshold of a cold season" facing the difficulties of ageing, loss, and social hypocrisy. The poem navigates through existential isolation, described as a "room the size of loneliness", while pursuing spiritual renewal, promising: "I will sprout". She breaks from classical meter and rhyme scheme in order to opt for a more natural, colloquial rhythm, as well as interior monologue and variable line lengths. The poems move dynamically between domestic interiority, urban decay, existential

anxiety, and visions of organic rebirth. To silence the oppression, she used words pinned "to the cross of apprehensions". She also used refrains and anaphora, such as in the lines: "Time passed and the clock sounded four times", "The wind blows in the alley", "I am cold"; "This is my lot"; and "Let us believe, let us believe in the dawn of the cold season". In all of these examples, she expresses herself in a melancholic, intimate, existential, yet fiercely resilient way.

Simin Behbahani composed "My Country, I Will Build You Again" in 1981, following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Reflecting on the outbreak of the devastating Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Behbahani's poem reflects the problems of national trauma, immense loss of life, and civil disruption. Known for modernising the traditional ghazal form, Behbahani channelled collective anguish into an unrelenting civic oath to rebuild the nation. Behbahani's poem "My Country, I Will Build You Again" demonstrates how the lyric voice can engage with public life and national identity, without abandoning emotional intensity. As an icon in modern Persian poetry, the intelligentsia and literati have affectionately referred to her as the "Lioness of Iran". She innovated the Persian ghazal tradition to express political and social themes. For her, the homeland is both a geographical place and a community shaped by shared histories and experiences. Behbahani is known for expanding the possibilities of the ghazal and for dealing with social and political subjects through poetry. She presents national reconstruction as an ethical and emotional commitment, in which the speaker offers herself up in service to the homeland.

The poem's imagery of bricks, bones, blood, tears, and rebuilding makes the nation appear as a damaged body or home requiring restoration. Its language links personal sacrifice with collective survival. The poem's tribute to Simin Daneshvar, identified as a major figure in Persian storytelling, also offers an occasion to discuss literary solidarity among Iranian women writers. The following lines show how the themes of institutional war, state trauma, and civic exploitation reverberate through her work:

> My country, I will build you again,
> if need be, with bricks made from my life . . .
>
> I will build columns to support your roof,
> if need be, with my bones . . .
> I will wash again the blood off your body.
> with torrents of my tears . . .
> though my poems have settled in blood.

Written in the context of post-revolutionary conflict and war, Behbahani directly addresses institutional devastation through repeated references to state bloodshed, such as in the lines "wash again the blood off your body" and "poems have settled in blood". The civic critique lies in the literalization of bodily sacrifice. Behbahani pairs structural construction verbs ("build" and "support") with raw anatomical nouns, speaking of "bricks made from my life" and "columns . . . with my bones". By framing national restoration as an act that requires each citizen's "bones" and "life", the wording emphasises how state-level military and political collapse forces ordinary citizens to pay for institutional survival with their own physical bodies. The first-person, singular speaker declares her commitment to the community through the metaphor of rebuilding and the material language of construction. The body appears as a source of sacrifice and national renewal in the poem's contrast between injury and restoration, which also calls attention to the relationship between individual suffering and collective belonging. Though she used a modernised ghazal, she retains the lyric intensity, rhythmic drive, and pledge-like nature of the classical ghazal, while reshaping its line structures to accommodate civic and

patriotic themes. Structurally, the poem is a declarative strophic pledge, built around an accumulating series of personal vows: "I will build...", "I will wash...", "I will paint..." In this sequence of lines, the poem escalates from personal sacrifice to national revival.

The poem's imagery shows an architectural and bodily confluence through lines requesting the interlocutor to "build columns to support your roof . . . with my bones", as well as the lines speaking of "bricks made from my life". Other notable references include the poem's call to "wash again the blood off your body, with torrents of my tears" or to "paint my poems blue with the colour of our sky". These metaphors present the physical body as raw construction material in order to express the speaker's wish to have her own physical form (bones, life, tears) become literal material with which to rebuild the homeland. In addition, the "resurrector of 'old bones'" acts as a metaphor for spiritual and national rebirth amidst wartime destruction. The refrains – "I will build...", "I will wash...", "I will paint...", "I will begin...", "I will recite..." – are delivered in a heroic, fiery, devotionally patriotic, and maternal tone. At one point, she speaks as a collective elder – "Old I may be..." –, offering her own physical body to rebuild her nation. The resolute dedication, despite bloodshed and old age, can be heard: "given the chance, I will learn".

Behbahani's poem presents hope as an active devotion to rebuilding, rather than a passive belief that political or social problems will disappear on their own. She also discusses how the promise to reconstruct the homeland may express grief, responsibility, solidarity, and a desire for a more humane future, situating the poem in the context of the Iran–Iraq War while distinguishing attachment to the country and its people from unquestioning support for political authority. The poem's emphasis on rebuilding can be read as a way of imagining national continuity amid destruction.

In "The Last Street of Tehran", Rosa Jamali, representing the post-revolutionary generation writing in the 1990s and 2000s, uses a contemporary voice to reflect the realities of political displacement, forced migration, state censorship of language, and the pain of living in diaspora. Her surrealist, fragmented, modern verse articulates the dislocation she felt while leaving Tehran behind at the airport border. At the airport, she speaks during departure, pondering the realities of censorship and physical separation from the homeland. She says she refuses to return – "I won't be back" –, marking the physical pain of departure. The themes of institutional state censorship, totalitarian suppression, and forced exile are expressed quite memorably in the lines:

> With scissors
> They're cutting something.
> Alphabets drooping on the soil
> Vanished letters of our names"
> "You've locked up my mother's breath!"
> "Sticking the pieces of my face together to make me laugh?"
> "No . . . !
> I won't be back
> I will not return to the last street of Tehran.
> I left a single shoe here.
> For you
> To put on
> And follow me!"

Jamali depicts state censorship through the physical implement "scissors" and the violent verb "cutting". The state's assault on expression is personified in the image of "Alphabet drooping on the soil", transforming language into a severed, dying organism. The phrase "Vanished letters of our names" explicitly identifies institutional totalitarianism as a force that erases citizen identity and historical memory. The accusation "You've locked up my mother's breath!" applies the institutional mechanism of imprisonment ("locked up") to basic human respiration, capturing state power's choking reach into personal life. The

question "Sticking the pieces of my face together to make me laugh?" critiques enforced state conformity and fake compliance. Finally, the imagery of leaving a "single shoe" at the border while declaring "I won't be back" highlights forced exile as the ultimate consequence of institutional hostility.

The poem uses broken syntax, jarring lineation, and montage-like imagery to express dislocation and state censorship. Set at the airport boundary during departure, the poem jumps erratically between memory, desert wind, the violent cutting of language, and a final exit. Some of the most memorable images showing the physical violence on language and body include the following: "The whirlwind from the sandy desert is blowing through our house"; "The wind stiffens my teeth". "With scissors, they're cutting something, Alphabets drooping on the soil"; "Drenched our, Torn-up lips!". The poem also uses the line "I left a single shoe here, For you, To put on, And follow me!" as synecdoche of departure. As a metaphor, the homeland shrinks down to "this cramped land, It's the size of the palms of my hands", while her reference to "Alphabet drooping on the soil" metaphorizes political censorship and the death of free expression. "*Sticking the pieces of my face together to make me laugh?*" repeats as a questioning motif, in a traumatised, fragmented, defiant, and dislocated tone.

Etesami contrasts the brilliant display of royal power with the hidden cost of human suffering: the "sparkle that's atop his crown" is revealed not to be a jewel, but "your heart's blood and my eye's tear!". Behbahani transforms the human body itself into literal construction materials for the nation: she pledges to build columns with her "bones," make bricks from her "life," and wash away blood with "torrents of my tears". Farrokhzad uses stark urban and winter motifs — cement hands, a clock striking four, dead snakes around a throat, and paper stars —to symbolise mechanical alienation and patriarchal constraint[1]. Yet she also counters this coldness with organic metaphors of female rebirth: planting her hands in the garden soil to sprout, growing green saplings beneath the snow, and housing nesting swallows in her palms. Jamali presents harsh desert imagery — the Lut desert whirlwind, sandy winds sticking faces together, and breath frozen captive — to evoke physical and geographical harshness. Farrokhzad highlights social mechanisation by speaking of the place where "the sparrows' language dies at the factory" and words are nailed "to the cross of apprehensions". Jamali visualises political censorship as physical violence against language itself: scissors cutting "Alphabets drooping on the soil" and the "Vanished letters of our names," leaving a single shoe behind as a symbol of exile.

Across these four works, Iranian poetry transitions from external moral fable to raw psychological interiority, maternal civic endurance, and post-modern diasporic fracture. While Etesami critiques power through maintaining allegorical distance, Farrokhzad, Behbahani, and Jamali place the female body at the centre of political, domestic, and national struggles — through spiritual rebirth, physical sacrifice, or the pain of exile. The poets share a concern with suffering and transformation, but they approach social problems through different poetic strategies. For Parvin Etesami, suffering, ethical responsibility, and social injustice are central, and the preferred form of resistance is moral and social criticism. For Forugh Farrokhzad, female consciousness, alienation, and renewal are central, while self-definition and challenges to restrictive identities provide the main forms of resistance. For Simin Behbahani, national belonging, injury, reconstruction, common commitment, and national renewal are all forms of resistance. Considered together, what all of these examples prove is that the poems should not be reduced to a single definition of resistance. Etesami's ethical questioning, Farrokhzad's exploration of female subjectivity, and Behbahani's national commitment are connected yet distinct forms of

poetic engagement. The poems reveal different relationships between the individual speaker and the wider social world. The vulnerable individual becomes a means of examining social responsibility. The isolated or self-questioning individual becomes a site of critical consciousness. The individual speaker becomes a voice of collective attachment and reconstruction. Women's poetic agency operates at the intersection of individual experience and public meaning.

The poems provide distinct ways of speaking about social suffering, female agency, and the possibility of change and how gendered embodiment, domestic spatiality, marriage, and state-enforced silence shape female subjectivities. And examines class relations, surplus labor extraction, economic commodities, and the physical machinery of state censorship. Etesami's social criticism, Farrokhzad's exploration of female consciousness and renewal, and Behbahani's devotion to national reconstruction demonstrate the wide range of Iranian women's poetic engagements with public and private life. These poems matter not only for their themes, but also for their use of voice, imagery, metaphor, and poetic form. Likewise, the poems contribute to the study of women's writing beyond Iran. Their representation of social vulnerability, self-definition, and communal hope offers new ways to investigate how women writers negotiate the relationship between gender, cultural expectations, and political change. Iranian women's poetry should be read not as a marginal supplement to national literary history, but as a uniquely important site where questions of justice, identity, and social transformation are articulated and contested. Given that the poems come from different literary and political moments, Etesami's early twentieth-century social criticism, Farrokhzad's mid-century modernism, and Behbahani's wartime national poetry and Rosa Jamali's critique on state oppression targets female vitality directly should be situated in their respective contexts, instead of being placed within one undifferentiated account of Iranian women's experience.

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