



Sylvia Plath's "Mirror" and Forough Farrokhzad's "The Bird May Die" Comparative Analysis from a Mystical Perspective

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Abstract

Sylvia Plath's *mirror* and Forough Farrokhzad's *the bird may die* are two of the best known poems in the aspect of femininity, fighting for feminine rights and equality. The two poets though living distances apart, respectively in America and Iran, had the same poetic perspectives. These poems can be viewed in the aspect of mysticism and mystical state. The term mysticism defined by William James and Frederick Crossfield Happold, is a state of mind experiencing the finding of the hidden truth and the true self. Many have said that the poem *mirror* dictates the feministic aspect of Sylvia Plath's life, and how women are visualized or valued by men, or that the poem demonstrates the aging of Plath into a wise and old woman. In this paper however we aim to introduce another perspective in which claims Sylvia Plath's *mirror* seeks mysticism and finding the true self. The narrator in the poem, first a mirror and then a lake, thinks its reflections out loud. This paper also aims to relate this matter to Forough Farrokhzad's poem *the bird may die*, a poem believed by critics to state the sufferings from social injustice of her time, though now seen through mystical spectacles. In the poem Farrokhzad declares her sorrow of darkness, and seeks an invitation to the birds' feast. Furthermore, this paper briefly introduces the troubled life of the two poets demonstrating the similarities of their situation and circumstances, and the effect of these difficulties on their poetry. On this paper first mysticism, its definition and theoretical studies by William James and Frederick Crossfield Happold are introduced, followed by a brief biography of Sylvia Plath and Forough Farrokhzad, stating the difficulties and problems they encountered, and then the mystical analysis of the two poems, analyzing each line for elements, metaphors, and symbolic features through a mystical point of view, are indicated accordingly. The bird, mirror, lake, night, water, fish, moon, and sun are all signs and symbols the poets used to demonstrate seeking mysticism, reality, and finding the true self, and also the obstacles which prevents them to do so. These two poems were the latest works of the poets, before they committed suicide.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, "Mirror", Forough Farrokhzad, "The Bird May Die", comparative analysis, mystical perspective

1. Introduction

"A beautiful woman looking at her image in the mirror may very well believe the image is herself. An ugly woman knows it is not." (Simone Weil 1973, *Waiting for God*)

What is truth? What is reality? All we do every day is automatic. We are living in autopilot mode. From the point when we wake up in the morning, brush our teeth before the mirror, and greet each other, till the night comes and we go to sleep. For once catch yourself on this pilot mode and focus on what you're really doing. Maybe you'll see what your truth is in the mirror while brushing your teeth.

Though living distances apart, the two contemporary poets, Sylvia Plath and Forough Farrokhzad lived much the same way and had very similar feelings. The two feminists experienced such problems in life that caused them both suicide. Their poems clearly speak their minds. This essay aims to demonstrate the mysticism in two of their poems - Farrokhzad's *the bird may die* and Plath's *mirror*- analyzing the elements and symbols of the poems that reveals their mysticism. Also referring to the events, beliefs, thoughts, and cultural effects that led them to this state of mind.

Many have said that the poem *mirror* dictates the feministic aspect of Sylvia Plath's life, and how women are visualized or valued by men, or that the poem demonstrates the aging of Plath into a wise and old woman. In this paper however we aim to introduce another perspective in which claims Sylvia Plath's *mirror* seeks mysticism and finding the true self. The narrator in the poem, first a mirror and then a lake, thinks its reflections out loud. This paper also aims to relate this matter to Forough Farrokhzad's poem *the bird may die* a poem believed by critics to state the sufferings from social

injustice of her time, though now seen through mystical spectacles. In the poem Farrokhzad declares her sorrow of darkness, and seeks an invitation to the birds' feast. The mystical perspective towards the poems *mirror* and *the bird may die* have not ever concretely been studied. By the declarations made in this paper the mystical aspect of the two poems is studied and reviewed, hence their similarities. It must be noted that the mentioned poems are of the poets' last poems before they committed suicide.

2. Mysticism

Mysticism as dictionaries suggest is:

"the belief that knowledge of God and of real truth can be found through prayer and meditation rather than through reason and the senses." (Oxford advanced learner's dictionary)

"a religious practice in which people try to get knowledge of truth and to become united with God through prayer and meditation." (Longman dictionary of contemporary English)

"the belief that it is possible to directly obtain truth or achieve communication with God or other forces controlling the universe by prayer and contemplation." (Cambridge academic content dictionary)

"The doctrine of the Mystics, who professed a pure, sublime, and wholly disinterested devotion, and maintained that they had direct intercourse with the divine Spirit, and acquired a knowledge of God and of spiritual things unattainable by the natural intellect, and such as cannot be analyzed or explained." (Webster's 1913 dictionary)

Etymologically the word mysticism is similar to mystery and they both come from the Latin word *mysterium*, which comes from the Greek word *musterion* meaning secret rites. This term also is a descendant of the word *muein* meaning to initiate, to close or to keep secret. The root of the term *mu* can mean no and emptiness.

These definitions are universally accepted, but are not sufficient for the use of this paper, they are used just to give a whole idea about mysticism. We can get to the whole idea that mysticism is a state of mind when we are able to see the life we're living from another truthful perspective. Getting to know what reality is, where is the beginning and what is the end, what is the true self. It's the connection to a spiritual feeling and reaching towards it. It usually has happened to most people for a very short period of time. This mystic state may occur at any time or place; it may occur by practice or spontaneously. Regarding to the etymology of the term, it suggests that it means keeping secrets and emptiness of mind which lead to the idea of realizing the truth.

There are seven characteristics of mysticism suggested by William James and Frederick Crossfield Happold in their writings that are going to be used throughout this paper.

1. Ineffability:

"The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words." (James 2002: 295)

2. Noetic Quality:

"Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after time." (James 2002: 295)

3. Transiency:

"Mystical states cannot be sustained for long." (James 2002: 295)

4. Passivity

"Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power." (James 2002: 295)

5. Unity of Opposites

"A common characteristic of many mystical states is the presence of a consciousness of the Oneness of everything. ... In mystical experience the dilemma of duality is resolved. For to the mystic is given that unifying vision of the One in the All and the All in the One." (Happold 1990: 47)

6. Timelessness

"the experiences of the mystics are not understandable unless one is prepared to accept that there may be an entirely different dimension from that of clock time or indeed of any other sort of time. For the mystic feels himself to be in a dimension where time is not, where all is always now." (Happold 1990: 48)

7. The True Self

"In man there is another self, the true Self, which is not affected by ordinary happenings and which gives him a sense of identity through numerous bodily and mental transformations. It does not change in the slow changes of the organism, in the flux of sensations, in the dissipation of ideas, or in the fading of memories." (Happold 1990: 48-50)

3. Sylvia Plath, biography and poem analysis

Born and raised in Massachusetts, Sylvia Plath lost his father when he was 8. She attempted suicide when she was 11. After her marriage to Ted Hughes, her second pregnancy ended in miscarriage in 1961, few months before writing her poem *mirror*. She committed suicide two years later in 1963 at the age of 30. Plath had a hard time living with all the misfortunes she had to encounter, as it is understood from one of her suicide notes stating "blissfully succumbed to the whirling blackness that I honestly believed was eternal oblivion" - (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press). Having these in mind, we can take into account that her poetry was affected by her troubled life. Plath wrote *mirror* on October 23, 1961 which was published in her book *the collected poems*.

There are many essays written about Plath and her poetry. As for her poem *mirror* critics believe that it conceals the message of femininity, the way women are valued by patriarch society, lack of self-identity, or that it is related to her recent loss of a pregnancy. Another proposition suggested by this paper is that *mirror* proclaims mysticism and mystical beliefs Plath had developed while writing this poem.

The poem *mirror* by Sylvia Plath consists of two stanzas and is written in the form of free verse, so there are no rhymes or meter. Each stanza has nine lines; the first one denotes the mind of a mirror and the latter indicates that of a lake. Here is an analytical view considering the mystical concepts in the poem.

In the first line of the poem, the mirror introduces itself as *exact* and without any *preconceptions* which means showing exactly what the mirror sees, showing the truth, the reality which is defined in mysticism. In the second line the mirror swallows whatever it sees, anyone who stands in front of the mirror is swallowed by it, meaning the possibility of seeing the truth is available for every single person who is willing to face the reality. The only necessity is coming in front of the mirror. Another interpretation is that the poet suggests that reaching the mystic state in which the reality is to be found, is possible for anyone who seeks it.

The word *immediately* is referred to the third characteristic of the mysticism which dictates that this mystical state is immediate, abrupt, and unsustainable. According to the third line, life is *misted* by so many factors such as love or dislike, misted as if there is something hidden, some kind of secret, which demands to be cleared or revealed, this is exactly the same as the root meaning of mysticism. We should also notice that the word *mist* used in the third line resembles the word mystic. In the fourth line the mirror confesses to be *truthful* and not *cruel*. The reality, the truth presented by the mirror is not something we expect, on the contrary it may be hard and painful to encounter.

The words *god* and *meditate* in the fifth and the sixth line refer to the dictionary meaning of the word *mysticism*. As we know God breathed soul into human, the *eye of a little god*, defines seeing from the soul which God has given us. The mirror meditates, thinks, as it is a tool to reach a mystic state. The *wall* is what obscures our vision, it stands between us and the mystic truth. The mirror has been looking at this pink wall for a long time and this obscurity is what the mirror is living by. Sometimes people come into and go out of the room which just like the wall are another distraction.

The mirror then turns into a lake. The mirror resembles the lake in that they both have a reflective feature and need light in order to do so; but their difference is that the lake has depth and is always facing the sky, it contains water, an element that gives life to nature and living things; but the mirror is portable, usually facing another wall, solid with no depth. A woman bends over the lake in order to see herself, she looks into the lake seeking *what she really is*. Here again we can clearly see that the poet's purpose is to look for reality and truth. *She* indicates to a virtual person who is looking for her true self and true identity. And the poet herself is the lake which shows this truth.

In the 12th line poet point to yet some other obstacles, the *candles* and the *moon*. The poet refers to them as *liars*, just like the wall, they are what distract us from reality. The moon and the candles are introduced as liars since they only show a dim light, not belonging to them, which hides most of the defects and the ugly truths. The personified lake then sees the woman and reflects her true self *faithfully*. According to this line the lake is trustworthy.

The woman rewards the lake with *tears*, meaning that she cries, she is *agitated* and angry, for all the lies she has been hearing until now and also because the reality is not what she was expecting, as mentioned before the moon and the candles have been lying to her. The word reward means the prize given to someone who does good, so the woman knows the lake's good intension by telling her the truth, but this truth brings tears to her eyes which she gives to the lake. It should also be taken to account that this teary eye and the process of crying also means washing the eyes, clearing the vision, seeing differently. The lake is important to the woman, of course now that she knows what the truth is and how reality is reached, she can't deny it, so she often visits the lake, as to reach the truth and reality.

The woman, now aware of the truth, looks into the mirror every morning replacing the darkness of the room. The woman can't close her eyes to this realization of reality, so she keeps facing the mirror as a reminder. All through her life the woman has been looking at her reflection, wanting to see her beauty and youth, but now that reflection has drowned, gone, and dead, and instead an old woman is born. She is now grown, wise, and aware. The poet resembles the old woman to a terrible fish. This fish is the truth that each day rises towards her, meaning she understands more and more about the reality and the truth. The word fish is used because the persona of the poem is a lake and this fish, being the truth, lives deep down inside it. The word terrible is used since the truth is hard to take, unlike what she is used to see, her young beautiful self, now she is seeing her true self who is aged, and every day she has to live with the truth that has been opened up to her.

According to this analysis the poet, Sylvia Plath, two years before her suicide attempt, has experienced a mystical state. We may even be able to relate this fact as a reason for her suicide, considering that she could not handle the truth, or

even claim that she suicided as a fulfillment phase of her mystical experience. Another instance of experiencing mystical state is that of the poem *the bird may die* composed by Forough Farrokhzad which we are going to relate to Sylvia Plath's *mirror*. There are many articles and essays declaring the similarities of these two poets' techniques, aims, and beliefs. So now this paper aims to relate the mystical aspect of the two poems.

4. Forough Farrokhzad, biography and poem analysis

Forough Farrokhzad was born in 1935 in Tehran, Iran. She married Parviz Shapour at the age of 16 while Shapour was about 15 years older than her, causing them to be worlds apart in so many aspects, during which she wrote her first volume *Captive*. From here on she always regarded to herself as a captive bird which could not fly even if allowed freedom from the cage. This distance of thought between them led to the separation of the two after four years of marriage and a son of whom Shapour took the custody.

After the separation she traveled to Europe for a few months, then returned to Iran again and casted a movie named *the house is black* in 1962, by which she met the film-maker, Ebrahim Golestan. She adopted a child, changing his name, in order to fill the gap of her taken away son. She committed suicide in 1963 because of a quarrel with Golestan, but she is saved by her servant. She wrote five volumes on the whole and her final volume which was unfinished, *let us believe in the beginning of the cold season*, includes her last poem *the bird may die*.

She died in 1967 at the age of 32, in a car accident in which she swerved her car in order not to hit a school bus. But some evidence claim that she knew that she was going to die. In an interview to her family it is said that she complained about having no time and that she was going to die. Some documents were stolen by Golestan from her house the night when she died. These evidence may lead to the conclusion that the accident was suicidal or planned.

Farrokhzad in her poems complains about the society and the power of men and diminutive perspective of the society towards women. Just like Plath, she was a feminist fighting for feminine liberation and equal civil rights. So it is clear that Farrokhzad also had a terribly hard life and she demonstrated it in her poems. By analyzing her last poem of her final volume, here we point out the elements and clues, though are not as much as Plath's *mirror's*, that prove Farrokhzad too had reached a mystical state as Plath did.

The poet in her first line of the poem expresses depression, she feels sad and blue. The first line is repeated to stress and emphasize the melancholic sense of the poem. Then the poet goes outside on the porch and rubs her fingers, it is night and the sky is dark and gloomy, the night is cold and silent, this is the state of unawareness where the mysticism is unknown to the person. Poet touches this dark and stretched skin of night over the sky, meaning she is aware of the unawareness. She knows that there is something needed to be known. She lacks a sense of knowledge and information. The skin of the night is like a shell, obscuring the light, being the truth and reality.

The poet then introduces light or lamp, the opposite of the black of the night, to relate to the contact or relationship. The light is off and dark, meaning the contact is lost and cut, this line is repeated again to stress the importance of the disconnection. The light refers to wisdom of reality and the truth itself. Then the poet complains that there is no one to guide her to the light. She wants to be introduced to the sun, meaning she has never seen the sun before and she wants to meet it for the first time. She wants to get to know the sun, the light, the reality and the truth behind the dark shell of the night. But it's all in vein because there is no one to guide her, there is no one to communicate with her.

There is also no one to take her to the feast of sparrows. She knows that there is a feast, where the sparrows are celebrating and happy, she wants to be guided to that feast. She is seeking that happiness, but no one offers to help her. This happiness is reached by going to the feast, and reaching the light, in other words, reaching the truth. The poet has referred to herself as a bird all throughout her poetry; a bird which is captivated and caged, and has forgotten how to fly. Even if there was anyone to free her, she can't fly and needs someone to help her to do so. In this poem she also is a bird and yearns to join other birds that are having a feast, but again is unable to do so. These other birds having a feast, are in the light of the truth. She too wants to be under the sun, which is the source of the light and reality.

At the last two line the poet advises and helplessly asks to remember the flight, for a flightless bird is as good as dead. Remembering the flight means even if you're caged you should fly in your mind, not forgetting how to do it, suggesting that if you want to seek the truth you should know how to do so, and not knowing how the truth is sought is a doom in which you die. The bird is introduced to be mortal, but the mortality is specified to this caged bird which is the poet herself, other birds that are outside of the cage, or those at the feast, are immortal, indicating the immortality of the truth and reality.

5. Conclusion

Though there are not much indicators to relate Farrokhzad's *the bird may die* to mysticism, but still those few evidences analyzed are obvious enough. By studying the two analyzes it is understood that the two works, Plath's *mirror* and Farrokhzad's *the bird may die* consist of elements, symbols, and signs in which clearly demonstrate the mysticism. For instance, the poets both refer to darkness as an obstacle hiding the truth and reality, not allowing them to reach the happiness that they are seeking in the light of the wisdom of truth. The two poets suffered from the patriarch society and tried to fight for gender equality in their poetry.

They both use natural symbols, such as lake, night, water, bird, fish, moon, and sun, declaring the important sense of out in the nature, far from the chaos of the suburbs, image to the reader's mind. They both refer to themselves as personified objects. They both mention the mortality and aging nature of humanity. They both are looking for the light of reality, searching for freedom, seeking the truth. "in my poetry I'm not searching for anything. But in my poetry I'm

searching I'm searching for myself" (Forough Farrokhzad) is the quotation from Farrokhzad claiming her desire to seek her true self.

The bird in Farrokhzad's and the mirror in Plath's are the main focusing elements of their poems in which the poets embodied themselves. Further researches can be carried out into the connections of the poets' suicides and their mystical experience approved in their latest poetry. The usage of the words bird and mirror are repetitious throughout both poets' works and can also be subjects to research, specially the immensely use of the word mirror in Farrokhzad's poetry which is the title of Plath's poem mentioned in this paper.

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