

The Language of Death and Bare Life:

Revisiting Forugh Farrokhzād's Poetry

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Death is a timeless subject which has occupied the minds of human beings throughout their far-reaching history, and scholars and writers have dealt with this subject in their own ways. In contemporary Persian poetry, death has an imposing presence, a good many modernist poets have tried to tame this wild subject in their artistic work, especially the poets who were writing during the period from the 1953 Iranian coup to the very beginning of the 1970s, when a degree of social peace and prosperity began to shine on the whole nation. An influential poet who was active at the first half of this period was Forugh Farrokhzād (1934-1967), who believed that every human being discovers the secret of their individuality in the mirror of their death, and it is in the face of death that they mature.

What [literature] does is plunge into this depth of existence which is neither being nor nothingness.

— Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire* (1995: 340)

The imaginary of a proleptic death - death that is in the future but has to be experienced today - is the sight from which thoughtful and concerned people write.

– Homi K. Bhabha (“The Burdened Life: On Migration and the Humanities,”

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1. Introduction

One of the amazing intricacies of human existence is that all experiences, even bitter and sad ones, become enjoyable and worthy of attention to readers when transmitted through art; and each artist renders them based on their thoughts and temperament. One such intricacy is death. Death is as old as human creation. For a long time, the problem of human mortality as a complex mystery has preoccupied the human mind and has been the subject of many philosophic, ritualistic and literary studies. Being and remaining unknown, death has caused different reactions from different people in different periods. Four thousand years ago, the Babylonian hero Gilgamesh thought about death. The whole story of *Gilgamesh*, the first known epic of humanity, is about confronting death and thinking

about it. The death of his friend Enkidu made Gilgamesh think about death and mortality, and he went on a quest to find immortality; however, his quest, like that of Orpheus's, did not come to fruition because, to use Lacanian terminology, the realm of the Real is beyond mortal reach, and only a kind of short, transient pleasure, in the form of *jouissance*, can be achieved.

Philippe Aries in *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974) offers a historical survey of death as a concept and argues that in the Middle Ages, death was not a terrifying concept but a necessary part of everyone's life cycle and people were not affrighted facing death as much as we are today. Coming to terms with death was a kind of acceptance of the order of nature. The concept of "Dance of Death" was introduced during the Middle Ages, and showed the universality of death and that everyone was equal in the face of death. "In the Middle Ages the ambition was to achieve a 'good death', and practical instruction manuals in the techniques of dying well, the *ars moriendi*, were written to this end" (Noys 2005: 14). For example, Rumi (1207-1273), a noted Persian poet and Sufi mystic, and his disciples saw themselves as the 'children of joy' (*Abnā' al-Sorur*), and they did not deny death; instead, they considered it an escape from the fetters of worldly life. They even say that Rumi ordered Salāh al-Din Zarkub not to let anyone cry and mourn after his death, as was usual then, but to celebrate and perform *Samā'* (a Sufi ceremony). Death was thus present everywhere and it was not an external phenomenon. As a result, there was no fear and anxiety.

Nevertheless, in the eighteenth century, the private and personal nature of death gradually diminished, and death was pulled into a more public atmosphere. What aroused fear was not so much "my death" as the "death of the other." It was as if another's death mattered, and there was a kind of disconnection between the individual and the concept of mortality. In the nineteenth century, when sentimentalism intensified, death enkindled intense emotions in people. No longer was death related to the individual himself but to the public, with a form of pretense and hysterical mourning. "[N]ovelistic episodes as the death of Little Nell in Charles Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) and the death of Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)" are telling examples (Abrams and Harpham 2005: 293). In the middle ages, it was not common to imagine a visit to the grave by a family member of the deceased, but in the nineteenth century, these mourning ceremonies became part of culture, and thus the cemetery became part of the public space of each city. In this situation, coming to terms with death is very difficult. Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" shows this change in the perception of death from a personal to a public matter. It also shows that people think death only comes for the other, not them. "This new form of death produced an 'intolerable anxiety,' as we have to live with the knowledge that we are always exposed to mass anonymous death" (Noys 2005: 14).

Such an anxiety, which was created in the modern era and was only exacerbated by two infamous world wars and the ever-present threat of a third nuclear war, exposes life to death and reduces life to what Giorgio Agamben (1942-) in *Homo Sacer* (1998) aptly calls “bare life,” a life reduced to mere survival, an exposed form of just being alive which can be taken at any moment.

The present article argues that the poetry of the famous Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzād (فروغ فرخزاد, 1934-1967)—an iconoclast and feminine pacemaker whose life tragically came to an end in a car accident—can best be understood and appreciated on the basis of an Agambenian understanding of ‘bare life’.

Forugh’s early poetry reflects her riotous family life; her father was an irascible officer in the army of Reza Shāh who managed his house in a dictatorial manner. She thought marriage would be a way out, so she married in the very first years of high school and then dropped out. However, after a short tumultuous married life, she was violently separated from her husband. That is perhaps the reason behind all the rage in her first published poems. Forugh sent her first poems to the renowned poet Fereydoon Moshiri (1926-2000), who was then in charge of the ‘Poetry Page’ in *Roshanfeker Magazine*. Her early poetry is characterized by a wild Romanticism and a candid sensuality which is narrated, for the very first time in Persian poetry, from a ‘feminine’ perspective.

2. Agamben’s Language of Death and ‘Bare Life’

Death is exclusive to human beings; animals simply perish because they have no consciousness of death and do not think about it. Heidegger believes that the only way we can understand the meaning of our whole existence is to consider our death not a distant possibility but an imminent certainty that may occur at any moment. In other words, we are “beings-towards-death” (Rée 1999: 42). In “Literature and the Right to Death,” in *The Work of Fire*, Maurice Blanchot voices his interesting view that “[d]eath alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain.... Without death, everything would sink into absurdity and nothingness” (Rée 1999: 324). Therefore, thinking about death and mortality is a distinctive aspect of being human. Human existence is defined by death. In the Book of Genesis it is stated that “thou shalt not eat of [the tree of knowledge]; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:17). To be human is thus to know and to think about death. Death is an intrinsic part of everyman’s life. Since we live in and by language, we should note the relationship between language and death. When we use language, death speaks in us. This is where Agamben’s ideas come to the fore.

There are three figures in the history of Western philosophy that had a permanent and fundamental influence on Agamben’s thought: Aristotle, Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin. The

conceptual framework in which Agamben works is largely taken from Aristotle, and his approach to issues of being, language and death is a complex combination of Heidegger and Benjamin's thoughts. Agamben believes that explaining the link between language and death is not possible without an explanation of the negative.

Human beings use language, but language is neither natural nor internal; it is 'outside,' 'extrinsic,' and must be learned from outside, from others. In other words, language is not owned by us and it does not belong to us. However, human culture has long been defined by its extrinsicness. The history of metaphysics has always recognized the human on the basis of his definite distinction from the animal, and the criterion of this distinction has always been the language (*logos*). In other words, human beings have always been defined as rational animals or, more precisely, animals that can use language. Agamben argues that this understanding of the existence of man, which defines him precisely because of what he lacks, leads to 'negativity' and cracks his existence. Thus, the history of metaphysics is faced with this fact that the most important aspect of our being—that is, language—is always a lack. As a human being, we have no home in language. This, Agamben argues, leads to nihilism. Therefore, nihilism is not a recent phenomenon, and has always been with us.

Giorgio Agamben opens his book *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (1991 [1982]) with a passage on the nature of language by Heidegger that reads:

Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought. It can, however, beckon us toward the way in which the nature of language draws us into its concern, and so relates us to itself, in case death belongs together with what reaches out for us, touches us. (Agamben 1991: xi)

Agamben ties the faculty for language with the concept of death and goes on to explore this connection, which is indeed related to the problem of the negative: "Just as the animal preserves the truth of sensuous things simply by devouring them, that is, by recognizing them as nothing, so language guards the unspeakable by speaking it, that is, by grasping it in its negativity" (Agamben 1991: 13). Thus, the human becomes the "place-holder" of nothingness (Agamben 1991: xii). The existence of life is incumbent on death; everything that enters life perforce moves towards death. This is the paradox of living and by taking every breath moving nearer to death.

By using language we expose ourselves to death; we live in "an unlocalizable zone of indistinction" between life and death (Agamben 1998: 19). In *Homo Sacer* (1998) Agamben observes that "The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word life" (Agamben 1998: 1).

They distinguished between the term *zoé*, which designated life in its general sense, and *bios*, “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (Agamben 1998: 1). In other words, “This distinction corresponded to a fundamental division in the Greeks’ political landscape. For them, ‘simple, natural life’ (*zoé*) was not the affair of the city (*polis*), but instead of the home (*oikos*), while *bios* was the life that concerned the *polis*” (Durantaye 2009: 205). However, it is not always easy to keep the private and public life completely aside; therefore, Agamben adds a third form: bare life (*La nuda vita*), which is neither *bios* nor *zoé*, but an abandoned life, reduced to its unspeakable violence, a life divested of its lifeness.

Bare life is tied to sovereignty and hence ‘thanatopolitical’: “If there is a line in every modern state marking the point at which the decision on life becomes a decision on death, and biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics, this line no longer appears today as a stable border” (Agamben 1998: 122). Forugh’s poetry dramatizes this experience of being exposed to bare life in modern culture and reveals the “link between this exposure to death and our exposure to power” (Noys 2005: 6). Her poetry shows the “conceptual importance of the maintenance of a suspensive state between being and not-being” (Mills 2008: 38).

3. Forugh: Poetic Rebellion of a Captive

Agamben “rejects the simple opposition and hierarchy of philosophy and poetry that has structured Western thought at least since Plato. [...] Ultimately, he argues for a kind of synthesis of poetry and philosophy, which gives rise to an understanding of ‘critique’ as a particular way of knowing” (Mills 2008: 40-1). Here stands Forugh’s poetry and her fresh experiments with language. Her poems offer not only philosophical insights but also social critiques. Her poetic language has a unique relationship with the truth. She firmly believed that a poet’s task is not to cover things conservatively but to speak truth (truth in Greek philosophy is *Aletheia*, meaning “to uncover” or “to reveal”). Her documentary *The House Is Black* (1962) revealed for the first time the plights of Iranian lepers to the whole nation, those who “have neither the will to live nor the will to die” (Agamben 1998: 138.)

The first phase of Farrokhzād’s poetry, according to Shafi’i-Kadkani (1939-), coincided with the period that began with the 1953 Iranian coup d’état and lasted until the years 1961-1962. The government places certain restrictions upon artistic expression; therefore, the voice we hear in the poetry of this period is the voice of social symbolism, which is visible in Forugh’s early poems such as *The Captive* (1955), *The Wall* (1956) and *Rebellion* (1958). The issues of death and despair dominate the poetry of this period, and poets often think about death. These were all due to the defeat of the National Front after the August 1953 Coup (Shafi’i-Kadkani 2008: 60-62). As a result of the

government's thanatopolitics, the whole nation became exposed to a feeling of disillusionment as to the present condition and uncertainty as to the future. Artists turned to themselves and tried a more encoded manner of communication. In the case of female artists, the situation was even worse; they had to resist patriarchal cultural assumptions too:

Her poetry reveals the problems of a modern Iranian woman with all her conflicts, painful oscillations, and contradictions. It enriches the world of Persian poetry with its depiction of the tension and frequent paralysis touching the lives of these women who seek self-expression and social options in a culture not entirely accustomed to them. It explores the vulnerability of a woman who rejects unreflective conformity with the past and yet suffers from uncertainties about the future. (Milani, quoted in Brookshaw and Rahimieh 2010: 4-5)

Here the female body becomes politicized, or as Agamben puts it, “the individual as a simple living body become what is at stake in a society's political strategies” (1998: 3). The sovereign power produces a political body, and the poet, representing Iranian women, defies such power operations and in *The Captive* says: “I am tired and disgusted with my body,”¹ a body that was subject to “fear, suffocation and abject existence” (Farrokhzād, in Katouzian 2010: 15). This is in line with the Agambenian idea of ‘inclusive exclusion:’ “There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion” (Agamben 1998: 8). As a nonconformist female artist, Forugh is excluded, an *extraneus*, and yet is included in the shared destiny of the whole nation and hence subject to “the pure force of the law” (Agamben 1998: 27). Forugh's poems occupy a liminal space, and compellingly display how femininity can take the form of a “threshold of indiscernibility between exteriority and interiority, which the juridical order can therefore neither exclude nor include, neither forbid nor permit” (Agamben 1998: 136-137).

The marginal space of Forugh's poetry is indeed the peripheral space of femininity in a male-dominated society of her time, where women “are told nothing but tales of female lustfulness / That they are created to give men pleasure” (Farrokhzād 2014: 37); where women are “locked in domestic cages” and have forgotten “any hope for love” (Farrokhzād 2014: 54). This is the reason why the poet repeatedly asks death to “come over and give [her] lips and eternal kiss”:

¹ آه خدا چگونه تو را گویم / کز جسم خویش خسته و بیزار (translation by the author).

مرگ من روزی فرا خواهد رسید
 در بهاری روشن از امواج نور،
 در زمستانی غبارآلود و دور
 یا خزانی خالی از فریاد و شور،
 مرگ من روزی فرا خواهد رسید
 روزی از این تلخ و شیرین روزه
 روز پوچی همچو روزان دگر
 سایه‌ای ز امروزها، دیروزها،
 ناگهان خوابی مرا خواهد ربود
 من تهی خواهم شد از فریاد درد.
 (Farrokhzād 2014: 215)

Death will come to me someday,
 One day in spring, bright and lovely,
 One winter day, dusty, distant,
 One empty autumn day, devoid of joy.
 My death will come someday to me
 One bittersweet day, like all my days
 One hollow day like yesterday,
 In shadow of today or of tomorrow.
 Suddenly sleep will creep over me,
 And I will become empty of all painful cries.²

Forugh used poetry as a vent for her ideas about social injustice towards women which has robbed women of life zest: “This is a pain that has to be cured / Lest death might intervene” (Farrokhzād 2014: 56). Forugh was the first poet to publicly attempt to erase patriarchal views and values from Persian poetry. Her social outlook was shaped by her feminine emotions, and her artistic rebellion was indeed an uprising against violence and discrimination towards women.

The next phase of Forugh’s poetry, from 1961 up until her untimely death in 1967, was formed, according to Kadkani (Shafi’i-Kadkani 2008: 64), in a period which witnessed the rise of armed struggles against the Shah and his government. It is when the breakdown of traditional interests becomes more pronounced, and the frustration of the poets gains an existential orientation. Many a great writer of this period seeks to examine the meanings attached to the concept of death. Therefore, one dominant theme in the poems of Mehdi Akhavān Sāless (1929-1990), Ahmad Shāmlu (1925-2000), and Forugh Farrokhzād is death and despair—the ‘bare life.’

² Translation by the author.

Akhavān's poem "Inscription," as well as his famous "Winter," illustrates the poet's bleak view of life. He paints a cold world, a world full of darkness in which people are not able to communicate; this dark image of life and the themes of defeat and disappointment are almost always evident in Akhavān's poetry. Thus, the feeling of defeat in understanding the world, the belief in difficulties of life, compels the poet to present an unpleasant image of life: "The lover knows love / So do I the life / I have seen its ups and downs / Fie on it / And whatever meaning it may have" (Akhavān 2015: 233).³

Forugh's view of life and her sense of frustration are to some extent close to the viewpoint of Akhavān. Apart from many an emotional failure she suffered in her youth, Forugh found herself caught up in a sociopolitical space filled with anxiety and absurdity, to the point that she saw everything in a halo of death: "Believe me, I am not alive / I am so dead that nothing else proves my death" (Farrokhzād, 99). Thus emerges 'bare life,' when the borderline between life and death blurs. "In the notion of bare life the interlacing of politics and life has become so tight" that it has affected aspects as diverse as biological life, sexuality, death, etc. (Agamben 1998: 120). This 'politicization of life' is an implicit signifier of totalitarianism, "marking the point at which the decision on life becomes a decision on death, and biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics" (Agamben 1998: 122). In *Another Birth* (1963) she sees oppressive power relations in "[her] little night [which] is filled with fear of destruction" and asks her readers to harken to the "blasts of darkness" (Farrokhzād 2014: 34). She feels like a captive who "[f]rom the impasse of darkness / From the morose morass of this world / [releases her] needful cries" (Farrokhzād 2014: 37) In a letter, Forugh writes: "I don't know what it means to arrive, but it must be an end towards which the whole of my being moves" (Katouzian 2010: 15). Sometimes Farrokhzād seems to accept death as a way of escaping from deceit and duplicity:

می‌سوزم از این دورویی و نیرنگ
/ یکرنگی کودکانه می‌خواهم،
ای مرگ از آن لبان خاموش
/ یک بوسه جاودانه می‌خواهم.
(Farrokhzād 2014 : 67)

I'm burning from this duplicity,
I want a kind of childish honesty;
O death! From thy sweet lips,

³ (translation by the author) عشق را عاشق شناسد، زندگی را من / من که عمری دیده‌ام پایین و بالایش / که تف بر صورتش، لعنت به معنایش

I want an eternal kiss!⁴

4. Conclusion

Death is one of the most important facts of human life, and thinking about death leads to fundamental questions concerning the concept of life and its meaning. Given the everlasting presence of death in all literature, it can be said that it is *in* language that death exists. Using language is the sign of pain; it guards the unspeakable. There is a negativity that dwells inside the meaning, the *Meinung*. The meaning defies and defers expression. Moreover, when we use language in society, we find a political existence. Our bare life is now politicized; *zoé* is replaced by *polis*, where power dominates. The concept of ‘bare life’ or life devoid of value applies to people who have lost their individuality in the thanatopolitical power operations of the ruling regime. Agamben believes that the production of a thanatopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. Yet Forugh believed that every human being discovers the secret of their individuality in the mirror of their death. It is in the face of death that they mature. Thinking about the meaning of life and death may reduce the fear of dying and enable us to speak truth to power.

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⁴ Translation by the author.

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