

CDA: a Comparison of Contemporary Iranian and American Poetry

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Abstract. This paper contains a comparison of a famous female poet from Iran and a well-known poet from the USA. In this paper issues such as the contexts they produced their work, the type of poems they wrote, and the type of audience they offered their work to, are examined. There is also an analysis of the acceptance as well as the critics of their poems and how they were viewed in the eyes of the readers who responded to their poems. Some of the views of the contemporary scholars are given in order to give a clear view of the similarities and the differences that exist between the styles of these two poets.

Keywords: Discourse, CDA, Comparative analysis, Contrastive analysis, Literature, Forough Farrokhzad, Nikki Giovanni

1. Introduction

This study is a contrastive analysis of Iranian and American poetry with a focus on two of the best-known female poets from each country: Forough Farrokhzad (from Iran) and Nikki Giovanni (from U.S.A). The reason is the numerous similarities existing between these women despite the differences. These similarities concern; 1: the topics of their poems 2: their style in saying a poem 3: efforts to gain voice for voiceless- women in the society 4: explicit expression of emotions. Yet a number of differences exist one of which is the difference concerning the tone of their poetry, which in the case of Farrokhzad is very gentle, and soft but for Giovanni is rather serious and harsh. In this paper the intentions will be focused on the thorough analysis of their discourse along with the distinguishing elements of CDA such as social power abuse, dominance and inequality in the social and political context and hopefully shedding light on the aspects of their work that have been kept dark so far.

2. Brief overview

2.1. Social and political context

Giovanni's first published collections of poetry grew out of her reaction to the assassination of famous political figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Robert Kennedy, and the absolute need she realized to heighten awareness of the predicament and the rights of black people. Black feeling, *Black talk* (1967) and *Black Judgment* (1968) demonstrate a tenacious yet harsh African-American viewpoint as Giovanni analyzes her upraising awareness in social as well as political domains. Concerning the political context, Civil Rights political activism had reached its height when Giovanni started producing poetry and she quite immediately came to be considered one of the most influential writers of the Black Art Movement (Proitsaki, 2000).

Forough Farrokhzad (January 5, 1935 -February 13, 1976) was an influential twentieth century Iranian poet and film director in a male-dominated era. She was the only female poet among all modern Iranian poets who practiced "new poetry". The short life of Farrokhzad carries much of the social and political confusion of mid-century Iranian life. Her poems speak of the social issues affecting considerably both political and private aspects of life as Iran adapted to out-growing wealth from petroleum, a quickly

developing media, and new intrusion by the state into everyday lives of Iranian people. Her personal history shows the existing conflicts between tradition and modernity during the 1930 and the 1960.

2.2. Subjects of the poems

Farrokhzad and Giovanni both chose very similar subjects for their poems such as; love and seduction, love of oneself, adulthood and death. However, a very outstanding theme that dominates the poems of Farrokhzad was "Feminism", whereas in the case of Giovanni we can clearly feel the presence of "Blackness".

Farrokhzad was born at a time when women in Iran were seen as inferiors and therefore having no need of formal education. Most women, Farrokhzad included, had to marry at very young ages and obey their husbands at every stage of their life. They did not have access to higher levels of education. Dissatisfied with her life, after getting a divorce, Farrokhzad decided to gain a voice for the desperate voice-less female population in Iran through her literary works. As Giovanni is a black herself for her blackness presents a self-evident frame of reference, a frame that also shapes the parameters within which the bulk of her concerns as a writer are to be located (Proitsaki,2000). The poetry of Nikki Giovanni has its origin in the Black Arts Movement.

In her work, Giovanni lifts her lived experiences as a Black woman and uses it as a lens through which she looks at the world. Even when she wants to put stress on individuality, this happens within the overall frame of Blackness; and when she talks about love she describes specifically "Black" love, love for "people who look like us/who think like us/who want to love us ("A Very Simple m Wish" *WM NP*).

3. Two distinct periods of work

Farrokhzad and Giovanni both experienced two distinct periods of poetry and this becomes evident through an attentive look toward their choice of terms. Farrokhzad's first period of poetry was reflected through her first three collection of poetry: *The wall*, *The captive*, *Rebellion*. Table 1, which is retrieved from "she'r-e-zaman-e-ma" (Hoghoughi, 1384), shows the order of most-used terms as well as their total number of repetitiveness in the first three collections of poetry.

Table 1: the most-used terms in the first three collections of Farrokhzad's poetry

Number	Terms and their nuances	Total number
1	Night and darkness	150
2	Heart and spirit	130
3	Love	120
4	Kiss	65
5	God	60
6	Death and grave	50
7	Hope	45
8	Sin	43
9	Prison and cage	39
10	Bosom	37

These choices of vocabularies show the basic tenants of Farrokhzad's perspective. One would say that the poet is most probably a woman who is captured in the prison of family traditions but still she stands against these morals and traditions and explicitly explains her needs and emotions.

Table 2 shows the same items as in the first table but its components are from the second period of Farrokhzad's poetry.

Table 2: the most-used terms in the last two collections of Farrokhzad's poetry

Numbers	Terms and their nuances	Total number
1	Night and darkness	100

2	Love	65
3	Nervousness	60
4	Doubtful adjectives	60
5	Window	50
6	Sound	50
7	Light- brightness-light	40
8	Star	30
9	Moon	30
10	Water	30

In this table, still the terms “night and darkness” rank first. “Love”, that previously had the first position, come in second. Comparing this table with the previous one, it contains usual romantic terms such as “hope” and “bosom”. Giovanni, who started to write in the late 1960s, was initially very militant and committed to the idea of revolution (Proitsaki, 2000). However, Giovanni’s first three volumes of poetry were incredibly successful, answering an exigency for unity, inspiration, and integrity in those who read them. She explicitly revealed the emotions and the demands of people who had felt voiceless, finding new audiences beyond the usual poetry-reading public. Her second collection of poetry “Black Judgment” sold six thousand copies in three months, almost six times the sale level expected of a poetry book (biography, 2006). After 1970 as she started to travel, making trips to Europe and Africa, she broadened her perspective and began to review her own life. Her introspection led to Gemini (1971), which earned a nomination for the National Book Award. Giovanni’s maturity is highlighted in My House (1972). Her perspective, the black revolutionary that made her famous, from this point includes a wide range of social issues and it is not any more limited to the blackness. Her rhymes are more gentle, more lyrical, and well pronounced. Love of the family, loneliness, and frustration – themes that were absent during her first period of poetry- are the center of attention in the second period.

4. Style of poetry

Farrokhzad and Giovanni both have a very informal and simple style of writing that can be easily understood by their readers.

4.1. Five distinctive criteria of Farrokhzad’s poetry (translated from She’r-e-zaman-e-ma, Houghoughi, 1384):

- Natural rhyme of discourse; Farrokhzad’s discourse in poetry has a natural rhyme that does not necessarily follow the specific rhymes of New Poetry.
- Scoffing criterion; criterion is always present in Farrokhzad’s discourse yet sometimes it is not as successful as it is intended to be.
- Repetition criterion; in some poems when she wants to put emphasis on some special aspects she repeats the words related to these aspects, they might be nouns adjectives or verbs.
- Combination of visual and literal expressions; each of the Farrokhzad’s poems is a combination of both literal and visual expressions.
- Uniqueness in self-expression; she knew very well all the words and expressions in Persian language and she made benefit of this knowledge to transfer her unique ideas in the best and easiest possible way.

4.2. Five Distinctive criteria of Giovanni’s poetry:

- Expressing strong racial pride and respect for family; Giovanni gained an intense appreciation for her African-American patrimony from her blunt grandmother, explaining in an interview, “I come from a long line of story tellers.” Moreover, throughout her work she always tried to show racial pride and great respect to her heritage.

- Charismatic delivery; affected by Giovanni's simple yet blunt style of poetry and her courage to express the social and political demands of her fellow citizens, lots of Americans, black and white, children and adult, joined Giovanni's fan club.
- Outspoken advocacy; throughout her work, Giovanni always tried to speak on behalf of the black society, using her literary to gain a voice for this voice-less population. In addition, all of this happened without the fear of white political figures and their powers and dominance over the country.
- Revolutionary content and tone; Giovanni's early volumes of poetry gained appreciation and recognition for their overtly revolutionary and assertive content and tone.

5. Points of differentiation with other poets

Both of the poets have special criteria that distinguish them different from their counter parts and make their work unique.

5.1. Forough Farrokhzad

- New style of poetry: she is one of the five most famous modern Persian poets and of course the only woman among them who practiced "New Poetry".
- First female poet to explicitly express her emotions: it was a revolution in Iranian poetry since women had to keep their emotions to themselves. We can observe this fact in all of the traditional poems of Iran such as the ones of Hafez and Sa'di, where women are pictured as the Goddesses of coquetry and man is pictured as someone able to express his emotions toward this Goddess with the hope of a little attention from her part. Therefore, when Farrokhzad did t, it was quite revolutionary.
- Transcended her own literary role by making a film and painting; in 1962, Farrokhzad travelled to Tabriz, a city in north-west of Iran, to make a film about Iranians affected by leprosy. This documentary film, titled "The House is Black", won several international awards.

5.2. Nikki Giovanni

- Popularity; her simple and understandable style makes her work accessible to both adults and children. The sale of her poetry collections is incomparable with any other female poets at her time.
- Finding new audience; with expressing the feelings of Black population, who have always felt excluded from the society, she finds new audiences beyond the usual poetry-reading public.
- Transcending her literary role with writing for children and editing poetry collections; written for children of all ages, Giovanni's poems are unrhymed incantations of childhood pictures and emotions that focus a on African-American heritage and demonstrate issues and problems specific to black youngsters.

6. Being influenced by and having an influence on other poets

The influence of their work on the society is indisputable, but here we are going to focus on some special points related to each of these poets' situation.

6.1. Forough Farrokhzad

Mohammad Houghoughi in his book, *Sher'e-zaman-e-ma* "p.44", expresses Farrokhzad has not been influenced but rather influential. He strongly believes that the only impressions that had an effect on Farrokhzad's poetry came from her studies on Old Testament and her specific attention to Cinematography. In addition, he justifies his beliefs with the existing similarities between the works of Jewish poet Edith Sitwell and Farrokhzad and the fact that their works both are similar to the Judaic expressions. But as most of the scholars in the field believe, Farrokhzad in considered as one of the followers of Nima Youshij, father of New Poetry in Iran, and his new style of poetry specially at the very early stages of her work. Still undeniable similarities can be found between the work of Farrokhzad and Ahmad Shamlou, a very well known Iranian poet (1925-2000), especially in the usage of similar combinations an terms. Sohrab Sepehry is the only famous poet influenced by Farrokhzad (1928-1980). This influence is undeniable specially in one of the most popular collections of Sepehry , *Seday-e-pay-e-aab*, where numerous similarities between their work in terms of using similar themes, combination of words and subjects can be traced.

6.2. Nikki Giovanni

Giovanni, who is very much moved by her African-American heritage and her outspoken grandmother, also studied at an all-black college, in the history of which we can see the appearance of Black Art Movement and black renaissance. In addition to writing her own poetry, Giovanni offered exposure for other African-American women writers through NikTom, Ltd., a publishing cooperative she founded in 1970. Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Carolyn Rodgers, and Mari Evans were among those who benefited from Giovanni's work (biography, 2006).

7. Presence of other competitors

Parvin Etesami (1907-1941) was the first female poet Iran who emerged in early twentieth century. After this famous poet, we had Forough Farrokhzad who became an icon in the field of poetry among women, and at the time the only other female poet in Iran was Simin Behbahani. After quite a long time of writing poems, this Iranian poet was inclined to produce work, which resembled that of Forough Farrokhzad. Therefore, between 1950 and 1960, a period that was Farrokhzad's heyday, she was considered the only female individual to practice writing new poetry. However, while Giovanni was producing her work, there existed other female poets in the American society such as Rita Dove who was not as popular as Giovanni but was very much accredited by her contemporary scholars. One more issue to mention about Giovanni is that other poets did work quite similarly in black art poetry whose work resembled one another such as LeRoi Jones, Haki R. Madhubuti, and Sonia Sanchez.

8. Acceptance by scholars

It is very shaky in both cases. Although Giovanni became very popular, reached real celebrity status among people but her work remained rather controversial within the academy. In Ekaterini Georgoudaki's *Race, Gender, and Class Perception* (1991), Giovanni is among the five African American poets whose work is examined, while Michael R. Strickland *African American poets* (1996) she is one of the ten outstanding African American poets introduced. Giovanni received numerous awards for her work, including honors from the National Council of Negro Women, the National Association of Radio, and Television Announcers, NNACP image award, the Langstone Hughes award for distinguished contributions to Arts and Letters, the Rosa Park Women of Courage Award, and twenty honorary degrees from colleges around the US.

Shojaeddin Shafa, in the preface of *The Wall*, mentions, "In my opinion, what is new and interesting about Farrokhzad's poems is the artistic aspect of a female poet's confessions in addition to her dexterity in intimate reflection of her emotions". Shahriar (1906-September 18, 1988), in an interview about arts and literature, says "... Forough primarily followed me, she was a poet by all means, but was defaced. Both her poetry and ethics were defaced. If she had had a masterpiece, then she would have been eternal, but she never had any masterpieces although she had what it took to be a great poet." Forough did not achieve any awards in the field of poetry; the only award that she gained was for the movie "The House is Black".

9. Critics

9.1. Forough Farrokhzad

- The critics of her society were often negative towards her poetry, criticizing the contents for their open expression of thoughts that were not often either discussed or at least attributed to women.
- Forough's poems have often been labeled confessions rather than a poem. She has often been addressed as "Forough the individualist" and "Forough the feminist" because of writing controversial poetry with a very strong feminine voice.
- She was viewed as a disgrace and an outcast for defying both the social morals and religious values.

9.2. Nikki Giovanni

- Scholars believe that her poems suffer from not following through and from not attaining a full-enough realization.
- More criticism that is recent attempts to make way for new readings of Giovanni's work by freeing her writing from outmoded political contexts and oppressive aesthetic assumptions.

- Critics viewed some of her work as somber, full of emotional ups and downs, fear and insecurity and the weight of everyday responsibilities. This was specifically the case when she published *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* (1978).

10. Conclusion

In spite of all the similarities between the poems of these two poets, there are undeniable differences. These differences consist of socio-political situation of the countries where they lived. Nikki Giovanni released her writings in an environment where freedom existed to express whatever she wanted especially about the inequality that existed in the American society at the time. However, Forough Farrokhzad released her poems in a context that the sociopolitical constraints of the society did not allow women to express ideas such as seduction, love, passion, and women's freedom.

One more issue to mention about Forough Farrokhzad is she passed away at 32. She did not have the opportunity to promote her poems among different academic and literary circles and expect feedback from them. In the case of Giovanni, quite the opposite was true. She has been a professor in the faculty of Arts and Literature for almost forty years, so she had the opportunity to have contacts with academics and scholars. As a result, she had the chance to express her accomplishments among scholars that could evaluate her works and strengthen the positive points existing in her them. Under such circumstances, she had the opportunity to make her poems popular and even achieve awards. Overall, the poetry offered by these two poems was outstanding and will remain valuable in both of the countries where they were published. There are still people who are attracted to their work and read them because they find some kind of connection between what these writers are trying to express and what they are seeking for.

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