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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Poetry as An Instrument of Female Liberation in Jasmin Darznik's Novel "Song of A Captive Bird"

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Abstract

This article examines how poetry functions as the primary instrument of female liberation in Jasmin Darznik's biographical novel Song of a Captive Bird (2018), which fictionalizes the life of Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad. The study investigates four interconnected functions of poetry in the novel: private self-constitution, psychological transformation, public resistance, and collective empowerment. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory and Patricia Waugh's concept of metafiction, the article argues that poetry is not merely a biographical detail or a literary theme but the structural practice through which the protagonist's liberation is enacted. In the world Darznik constructs, writing is not the record of a freedom already achieved — it is the means by which freedom is brought into existence.

KEYWORDS

Poetry, female liberation, subaltern theory, metafiction, Farrokhzad, JasminDarznik, Iranian literature, self-constitution, collective voice.

INTRODUCTION

In Jasmin Darznik's Song of a Captive Bird (2018), poetry is not incidental to the protagonist's story — it is the story. The novel fictionalizes the life of Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967), whose verse broke with every convention governing female public expression in mid-century Iran, and it traces, through the arc of her creative development, the process by which a woman constrained by patriarchal social structures gradually constructs, through the sustained practice of writing, a self capable of speaking for herself and eventually for others.

What distinguishes the novel's treatment of poetry from a conventional literary biography is its insistence on the constitutive rather than expressive character of creative practice. The protagonist does not write because she already has a self that needs expression; she writes in order to produce a self capable of speaking. Poetry is, in this account, not a reflection of liberation but one of its primary instruments — the practice through which freedom is enacted rather than simply recorded. This article examines that practice across four functional dimensions:private self-constitution,psychological transformation, public resistance, and collective empowerment. Spivak's (1988) subaltern theory and Waugh's (1984) concept of metafiction provide the principal analytical frameworks.

Poetry as Private Self-Constitution

The protagonist's creative practice begins under conditions of concealment. Her early poems must be hidden — kept from family members who would use them as evidence of deviance. This necessity of hiding is itself significant: it reveals that the social order has foreclosed the possibility of legitimate female creative expression, making the simple act of writing an act of

transgression. And yet writing persists, precisely because it serves a function that no other available practice can serve.That function is the construction of an autonomous inner life. As the novel represents it, the protagonist wrote not to communicate but to discover and to become herself — poetry is not the expression of a self that already exists but the practice through which the self comes into being. This understanding positions liberation not as the release of a pre-existing authentic selfhood but as the construction, through creative labor, of a subject who did not exist before the practice began. The cage constrains; but it is also, paradoxically, the condition within which the imprisoned subject begins the work of self-creation.

The private practice also operates as a form of cognitive resistance. Each poem forces a process of articulation — of finding words for experience that the social world around her has left unnamed. The protagonist who has written about desire, frustration, and refusal understands those states differently from the one who has merely felt them. Writing produces self-knowledge, and self-knowledge is itself a precondition for the more explicitly resistant forms of creative practice that the novel subsequently traces.

Poetry as Psychological Transformation

Beyond its constitutive function, poetry serves the protagonist as a means of psychological survival — a practice through which painful experience is converted into a form that can be inhabited without being destroyed by it. The most vivid illustration of this function in the novel is the poem addressed to her son after the legal proceedings that strip her of custody.

The poem is cast as a final lullaby — a form conventionally associated with comfort and intimate connection, here inhabited by loss and farewell. The formal choice is precise and deliberate: the lullaby structure holds the grief without resolving it, giving anguish a shape that can be borne. What the poem achieves is not the elimination of suffering but its transformation into material that can be contemplated and carried rather than simply endured. This is the psychological function of creative practice at its most essential: not catharsis in the sense of release, but the conversion of overwhelming experience into a form of life.

This function extends beyond individual episodes. Throughout the novel, poetry provides the protagonist with a means of processing and integrating the series of losses, humiliations, and constraints that constitute her social experience. The act of writing does not undo what has been suffered; it makes suffering survivable by giving it a form that can be understood, held, and ultimately transcended. In this sense, the psychological function of poetry is also a precondition for the more outward-facing forms of creative practice that the novel subsequently develops.

Poetry as Public Resistance

The transition from private to public poetry marks the novel's central turning point. When the protagonist begins publishing work that addresses female desire and domestic experience with an explicitness outside all conventions governing female public expression, she performs two acts simultaneously: she asserts her existence as a speaking subject in the public domain, and she forces her voice into a social field organized to deny it. Spivak's (1988) subaltern theory illuminates what is at stake. The subaltern condition is not simple voicelessness but the absence of institutional conditions within which speech can be received as legitimate. The protagonist speaks throughout the novel — argues, protests, makes claims — but her speech is consistently absorbed into frameworks.

The publication of poetry is an attempt to overcome this condition through creative insistence. It does not immediately succeed: the social response is condemnation, intensified scrutiny, and the deployment of moral frameworks to discredit her. But the condemnation is itself a form of recognition — the social order does not ignore what she has done but mobilizes against it, which confirms that her voice has achieved a presence in the public domain that the earlier clandestine writing could not.

The protagonist's recognition of her own public resistance is expressed in the novel with characteristic ambivalence: she is terrified, she has no real sense of what she is doing, but she cannot find a reason for silence that does not stem from fear, insecurity, or shame. This articulation is significant. It does not heroize resistance; it represents it as something undertaken despite fear rather than in the absence of it, under conditions of uncertainty rather than of secure conviction. The liberation that public poetry enables is, in the novel's terms, a practice sustained against the resistance of a social order that has powerful interests in preventing it.

Poetry as Collective Empowerment

The fourth and most socially consequential function of poetry in the novel emerges through the letters the protagonist begins to receive from women readers. These letters — telling

her that her writing expresses what they themselves cannot say, not even to themselves — reveal that her individual act of creative courage has a collective dimension. The experience she has articulated is not merely her own; it is shared by many women who have had neither the language nor the social permission to articulate it. Her poetry has created the discursive conditions within which that shared experience becomes, at least partially and provisionally, speakable.

This collective function inverts the subaltern condition that Spivak identifies. If the subaltern lacks the institutional conditions for legitimate reception, the protagonist's sustained creative presence contributes to the construction of those conditions — not fully or permanently, but genuinely. A readership capable of recognizing female experience as a legitimate subject of public discourse is itself a social achievement, and the protagonist's poetry has participated in producing it.

Patricia Waugh's (1984) concept of metafiction is relevant here. The protagonist's poems do not merely represent experience; they enact and transform it. The poem Conquest of the Garden, with its imagery of open windows and fresh air, does not simply describe liberation — it performs it, creating in language a space of freedom that becomes available to the readers who encounter it. Writing is not the window onto liberation; it is the act of opening the window. And in opening it publicly, the protagonist makes the opening available to those whose windows remain shut.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four principal findings emerge from the analysis. First, the progression from private to public creative practice is not merely biographical but structural: each stage enables the next, and the full social significance of the protagonist's poetry is only realized when the private constitutive function, the psychological transformative function, and the public resistant function have all been developed and integrated. Liberation through poetry is a cumulative process, not a single act.

Second, the constitutive character of poetry in the novel has significant implications for how liberation is theorized. The protagonist does not write to express a self she already possesses; she writes to produce the self she is becoming. This means that liberation cannot be understood as recovery — as the restoration of an authentic selfhood that social structures have repressed — but must be understood as creation: the ongoing production, through sustained practice, of a subject capable of speaking and of being heard.

Third, the collective dimension of the liberation motif is inseparable from its individual dimension. The protagonist's poetry achieves its fullest meaning not when it speaks for herself alone but when it creates the conditions within which others begin to speak. Individual creative courage is socially generative — it produces discursive conditions that extend beyond the individual who first created them.

Fourth, the metafictional character of the novel's representation of poetry prevents any purely thematic reading. Poetry is not only what the novel is about; it is what the novel enacts — the practice through which its protagonist becomes who she is. The liberation motif is structurally embodied in the narrative rather than merely illustrated by it.

CONCLUSION

Jasmin Darznik's novel Song of a Captive Bird makes poetry central to its representation of female liberation not as a thematic choice but as a structural commitment. The four functions analyzed in this article — self-constitution, psychological transformation, public resistance, and collective empowerment — are dimensions of a single integrated practice through which the protagonist's liberation is enacted rather than simply described.

The novel's deepest argument is that poetry is not a retreat from the social world but one of the most demanding forms of engagement with it: a practice that takes on the constraints of language and convention in order to find, within and against them, new possibilities for expression and new conditions for what can be received as speech. For the protagonist of Song of a Captive Bird, as for the historical Forugh Farrokhzad whose life the novel fictionalizes, poetry was not the record of a liberation achieved elsewhere. It was the liberation itself — enacted word by word, poem by poem, in the space between the life she was given and the life she made.

The Historical Forugh Farrokhzad and the Novel's Creative Fidelity

One of the central questions raised by biographical fiction as a genre is the relationship between historical fidelity and creative transformation — the degree to which a novelist is entitled to reshape, interpret, or imaginatively supplement the documentary record in service of a literary argument. Darznik's novel navigates this question with considerable sophistication in its representation of Farrokhzad's poetry. The

poems that appear in the novel — The Gift, Another Birth, I Will Greet the Sun Again, Conquest of the Garden — are not invented by Darznik but drawn from Farrokhzad's actual published work. What the novel adds is a fictional account of the conditions under which they were written: the emotional, biographical, and social circumstances from which they emerged. In doing so, Darznik situates the poetry within a narrative of creative development that the poems themselves cannot supply — they are the products of experience that the experience alone cannot explain.

This fictional reconstruction of poetic genesis is itself a form of argument about the relationship between life and art. By showing how particular biographical circumstances — the experience of confinement, the loss of custody, the public condemnation — generate particular poems, Darznik makes a claim about the social determination of creative form: that the specific features of Farrokhzad's poetry — its imagery of enclosure and longing, its foregrounding of female desire, its formal tension between constraint and excess — are not accidental but the product of the particular life from which they emerged. The novel does not reduce the poetry to biography; it shows how biography provides the raw material that creative practice transforms. And in showing this transformation, it makes the case for creative practice as a form of knowledge — a mode of understanding experience that is unavailable through any other means.

The historical Farrokhzad's own statements about her creative practice are consistent with the understanding of poetry that Darznik's novel attributes to her fictional counterpart. In interviews and essays, Farrokhzad described poetry as a form of self-discovery rather than self-expression — as a practice through which she came to understand her own experience rather than one through which she communicated an understanding already achieved. This account of the constitutive rather than expressive character of creative practice, which the present article has identified as central to Darznik's novelistic argument, thus has its basis in the historical record. Darznik amplifies and formalizes what Farrokhzad herself articulated, translating it from a set of biographical statements into a structural principle of the novel's narrative.

Poetry, Language, and the Politics of Naming

One dimension of poetry's liberatory function in the novel that deserves extended analysis is what might be called the politics of naming — the capacity of poetry to bring into language experiences, states, and dimensions of consciousness that the dominant cultural discourse has left unnamed or has actively designated as unnameable. Patriarchal social orders do not only restrict what women can do; they restrict what can be said, and therefore — in the sense that language structures the possibilities of thought — what can be fully experienced and understood. The conventions governing female public speech in mid-century Iran excluded from legitimate expression precisely those aspects of female experience — sexual desire, bodily autonomy, ambivalence about the maternal role, dissatisfaction with the domestic life — that most directly challenge the dominant order's account of what women are and should be.

Farrokhzad's poetry transgresses these linguistic prohibitions systematically and deliberately. By naming what has been designated unnameable — by bringing into public discourse the dimensions of female experience that the dominant order has worked to keep private, individual, and shameful — she performs an act of liberation that operates at the level of language itself. This is not merely personal liberation; it is a form of social intervention. Once a dimension of experience has been named in public — once it has been given a form that can be recognized, shared, and discussed — the conditions under which it can be thought, felt, and contested are permanently altered. The woman who has read Farrokhzad's poetry about desire does not merely know that another woman has felt what she has felt; she has been given a language for her own experience that she did not have before.

Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision — the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction — provides a useful framework for understanding what Farrokhzad's poetry achieves in relation to the Persian literary tradition. Farrokhzad does not reject that tradition; she inhabits it with a female body and a female consciousness, and the act of inhabiting it in this way transforms both the tradition and the consciousness that encounters it. The ghazal form, the classical imagery of the rose garden and the beloved, the spiritual vocabulary of mystical poetry — all of these are present in Farrokhzad's work, but they are inhabited differently, by a subject whose desires and limitations are not those of the male lyric tradition. This re-vision of the tradition through female experience is itself a political act, and the novel's account of it as a liberatory practice is consistent with the political character that Rich

attributes to women's literary re-vision more generally.

The novel's representation of the reaction to Farrokhzad's naming — the public condemnation, the accusations of shamelessness, the intensified social scrutiny — confirms the political significance of what she has done. The dominant order does not respond to her poetry with indifference; it responds with alarm, with mobilization, with the deployment of discrediting strategies that reveal how threatening the act of naming has been registered as being. If the naming were merely personal, the response would be personal; because it is public and potentially generative of a new discursive space, the response is social and institutional. The scale of the reaction is itself a measure of the scale of what the poetry has achieved, and Darznik's novel renders this dynamic with a clarity that is one of its most politically astute formal choices.

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