

**FROM MARGINS TO CENTER: THE EMERGENCE OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH RESISTANCE AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN JASMIN DARZNIK'S SONG OF A CAPTIVE BIRD****Aminova Nilufar Bahridinovna**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the emergence of female subjectivity in Jasmin Darznik's biographical novel *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018) through the intersecting lenses of postcolonial feminist theory, *écriture féminine*, and postmodern narrative analysis. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, Hélène Cixous's notion of feminine writing, and Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, this study argues that the protagonist Forough Farrokhzad's trajectory from social marginalization to artistic centrality constitutes a multi-layered model of female subject formation. The article demonstrates how Darznik constructs subjectivity through three interlocking mechanisms: the deconstruction of patriarchal confinement, the articulation of a distinctly feminine literary voice, and the transformation of personal resistance into collective social expression. The analysis reveals that the novel's symbolic architecture — particularly the cage metaphor — functions not merely as a spatial image of oppression, but as a dialectical site where subjugation and creative liberation are mutually constitutive.

**Keywords**

female subjectivity, subaltern theory, *écriture féminine*, postcolonial feminism, *Song of a Captive Bird*, Forough Farrokhzad, resistance, artistic expression, historiographic metafiction, hybridity.

**1. Introduction**

The emergence of female subjectivity in literary representation has long occupied a central position in feminist literary criticism and postcolonial cultural theory. When that emergence is rendered through the biographical reimagining of a historical woman who herself struggled against patriarchal erasure, the literary stakes become doubly significant. Jasmin Darznik's *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018) offers precisely such a layered artistic intervention: a novelistic reconstruction of the life of Iranian poet and filmmaker Forough Farrokhzad (1935–1967), whose defiance of mid-twentieth-century Iranian social norms made her a pivotal, if long-contested, figure in modern Persian literary history.

The novel's central preoccupation — how a woman moves from the margins of social intelligibility to the center of artistic and cultural life — raises questions that resonate far beyond its specific Iranian context. What are the conditions under which female subjectivity can be claimed, articulated, and sustained in a deeply patriarchal environment? What roles do resistance, bodily autonomy, and artistic practice play in this process? And how does the literary form itself — specifically the biographical novel with its postmodern self-consciousness — participate in constructing the very subjectivity it ostensibly represents?

This article argues that Darznik's novel presents the formation of female subjectivity as a three-phase process: first, the recognition and deconstruction of patriarchal confinement; second, the development of a distinctly feminine mode of expression; and third, the transformation of that expression into a vehicle for collective social articulation. These phases correspond, broadly, to the theoretical frameworks of Spivak and Bhabha's postcolonial feminist analysis, Cixous and Irigaray's concept of *écriture féminine*, and Hutcheon and Lyotard's postmodern critique of grand narratives. By bringing these frameworks into dialogue with Darznik's text, this study aims to

illuminate how the novel functions simultaneously as a feminist artistic statement and as a theoretical proposition about the conditions of female subject formation.

The significance of this inquiry extends to the field of comparative literary studies more broadly. *Song of a Captive Bird* occupies a productive intersection between Eastern literary tradition — with its deep archive of the caged bird as symbol of spiritual longing — and Western feminist theoretical discourse. This intersection, as this article will show, is not merely thematic but structural: the novel's narrative form enacts the very hybridity it describes in its protagonist.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Four Intersecting Paradigms

The analysis offered in this article draws on four theoretical paradigms that intersect at the question of female subjectivity in conditions of social and cultural oppression. Each paradigm illuminates a different dimension of the novel's central problematic, and their convergence provides a more comprehensive account than any single framework could offer.

The first paradigm is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory, as elaborated in her foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Spivak argues that colonial and patriarchal structures operate through what she calls epistemic violence — the systematic invalidation of marginalized subjects' knowledge, experience, and voice. The subaltern, she contends, is not simply silenced by brute force but rendered unintelligible: her speech is structurally disqualified before it can be heard [18]. This framework is particularly illuminating for Darznik's novel, which dramatizes precisely the mechanisms by which Forough's articulations are repeatedly disqualified — as madness, as immorality, as transgression — before being eventually received as art.

Complementing Spivak's framework is Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity and the "third space" of enunciation (1994). Bhabha argues that colonial and postcolonial subjects inhabit a liminal space between dominant and subordinate cultures, and that this liminality — rather than being a site of mere confusion — is productively generative of new cultural forms [3]. For Forough, as Darznik constructs her, this third space is the site of her poetic practice: she is neither fully assimilable into the traditional Iranian feminine ideal nor fully aligned with Western feminist models, but occupies an in-between position from which her distinctive voice emerges.

The second paradigm is the concept of *écriture féminine*, developed most influentially by Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) and by Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977). Cixous argues that women must write themselves into existence — must claim the body, the voice, and the text as sites of feminine self-expression that resist the phallogocentric ordering of dominant discourse [5]. Irigaray extends this argument by characterizing feminine language as inherently multiple, fluid, and resistant to the single-meaning structures of masculine discourse [9]. Both theorists provide a framework for understanding not merely what Forough writes about but how she writes — the formal and stylistic dimensions of her poetry as acts of self-constitution.

The third paradigm is Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction (1988) and Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern critique of grand narratives (1984). Hutcheon argues that postmodern fiction characteristically interrogates the boundary between historical fact and fictional construction, exposing both as narrative acts rather than transparent reflections of reality [10]. Lyotard's complementary insight — that postmodernity is defined by "incredulity toward metanarratives" and a consequent valorization of local, particular, "petit récit" forms of knowledge [12] — illuminates how Darznik's novel operates as a formal enactment of resistance to the grand narratives of Iranian patriarchal culture. Together, these frameworks reveal the novel's self-consciousness about its own status as a constructed account, and how this self-consciousness is integral to its feminist project.

### 3. The Cage and Its Contradictions: Confinement as the Ground of Subjectivity

The cage — announced in the novel's title and elaborated throughout its narrative — functions as the novel's central symbolic architecture. Yet, as this section will argue, Darznik constructs the cage not as a simple figure of oppression but as a dialectical site: a space that confines and, paradoxically, constitutes the subject it seeks to contain. This dialectic is central to the novel's contribution to feminist theory, and it operates through what Derrida would call the logic of the supplement — the oppressed term in a binary contains within itself the conditions for its own reversal [6].

The novel presents three distinct cages through which Forough passes. The first is her father's house, where gender segregation is naturalized as domestic order: her brothers move freely through the streets while she is confined to interior space. This confinement, Darznik makes clear, is experienced not initially as oppression but as nature — it is simply how the world is organized. Yet it is precisely this naturalization that Beauvoir's analysis of woman as the "second sex" explains: the patriarchal construction of femininity as immanence, as the condition of being-for-another rather than being-for-oneself, is achieved through the very seamlessness of its reproduction [4]. The father's house does not need to announce itself as a cage because it does not present itself as one.

The second cage is her husband's household, where control is exercised through the figure of her mother-in-law, Khanom Shapur — a woman who has fully internalized the patriarchal norms she enforces. This configuration is theoretically significant: Butler's analysis of gender performativity reveals how patriarchal norms are sustained not primarily through external coercion but through repeated performance, including by those who occupy subordinate positions within the gender hierarchy [3]. Khanom Shapur's surveillance of Forough's religious observance, domestic labor, and bodily comportment enacts what feminist theory has termed the "compulsory repetition" of femininity — and her position as woman enforcing norms upon another woman is a crucial element of Darznik's feminist analysis.

The third and most overtly coercive cage is the Rezayieh psychiatric institution, where Forough is confined not for mental illness but for social non-conformity. Here, Foucault's analysis of the psychiatric institution as a mechanism of social normalization is directly relevant: the diagnosis of madness serves as an instrument of epistemic violence, disqualifying the deviant subject's utterances and restoring the social order she has disrupted [7]. Spivak's subaltern theory converges with Foucauldian analysis at precisely this point: the institution does not merely imprison Forough's body; it attempts to disqualify her voice by attaching to it the stigma of pathology. That she continues to write in this context — that the institution becomes, paradoxically, a site of poetic intensification — is the novel's most powerful statement of the indestructibility of the creative subject.

This paradox — that each intensification of confinement corresponds to an intensification of creative energy — is the formal and thematic core of the novel's contribution to feminist theory. It suggests that female subjectivity, as Darznik constructs it, is not prior to oppression but is in some sense produced through engagement with it. This is not a celebratory claim about the benefits of oppression; it is a more nuanced claim about the dialectical relationship between constraint and creative response. The cage does not make Forough a poet, but the rage, grief, and resistance it generates provide the affective and intellectual material from which her poetry is fashioned.

#### 4. Writing the Body, Writing the Self: *Écriture Féminine* and the Formation of a Feminine Voice

If the cage provides the conditions of possibility for Forough's emergence as a subject, the medium through which that emergence is enacted is writing — specifically, a mode of writing that enacts the claims of *écriture féminine* as theorized by Cixous and Irigaray. This section argues that Darznik's novel constructs Forough's poetic practice as a progressive development of a distinctly feminine literary voice — one that moves from early accommodation to masculine literary norms toward an increasingly radical articulation of feminine experience in its bodily, emotional, and intellectual dimensions.

Cixous's central claim in "The Laugh of the Medusa" is that women must write themselves — must inscribe the female body and its experiences into a textual space that has historically been organized by and for masculine subjects. This writing, she argues, cannot be merely thematic (writing about women) but must be formal: it must enact a different relationship to language, one that is multiple, overflowing, resistant to singular meaning [5]. The early poems that Forough writes in Darznik's novel are represented as still partially captured by dominant aesthetic norms — technically accomplished but emotionally hedged, reaching toward but not yet achieving the full articulation of feminine experience. As the novel progresses, however, her poetry becomes increasingly radical in its formal and thematic ambitions.

The pivotal moment in this development is the composition of poems that directly address female bodily experience — the "burning womb," the experience of desire, the textures of physical existence that had been systematically excluded from the Iranian poetic canon. These poems, Darznik represents as attracting first outrage — the male editor who glances at the title and advises her to return home — and then, gradually, recognition. The outrage is theoretically legible: as Irigaray argues, feminine language that refuses to organize itself according to phallogocentric single-meaning structures is experienced by the dominant discourse as disordering, as dangerous, as "not quite" language at all [9]. The editor's dismissal is not merely personal bias; it is the enactment of a structural incapacity to receive what Forough's poetry offers.

The novel's treatment of the relationship between writing and subjectivity is psychoanalytically sophisticated in ways that align with Lacanian as well as feminist theory. The early poems written in secret and hidden beneath the mattress figure a subjectivity not yet ready to present itself publicly — a voice that exists but has not yet claimed the social space necessary for reception. This hiding is not mere timidity; it reflects the structural reality that a feminine subject who makes herself visible too soon, without the social and artistic capital necessary to withstand the resulting challenge, risks being destroyed by the encounter. The gradual movement from hiding to publication to social reception enacts a careful negotiation of the conditions under which feminine speech can be heard.

The letters that Forough eventually receives from young women readers — "You say what I cannot say, not even to myself" — represent the culmination of this process. They confirm that her poetry has achieved what Cixous describes as the ideal of feminine writing: not merely self-expression but the articulation of a collective feminine experience that had previously been relegated to the realm of the inexpressible. In Spivak's terms, the subaltern has spoken — and has been heard. But the novel is careful to complicate this resolution: the hearing is partial, contested, and achieved at enormous personal cost. Female subjectivity, Darznik insists, is never simply achieved but must be continually reclaimed against the forces that seek to re-marginalize it.

### 5. Small Narratives and Historiographic Metafiction: The Postmodern Dimension of Female Subjectivity

The third dimension of Darznik's construction of female subjectivity is its postmodern self-consciousness — the way in which the novel foregrounds its own status as a constructed narrative rather than a transparent account of historical events. This self-consciousness is not merely a formal exercise; it is integral to the novel's feminist project, insofar as it insists that the story of Forough's emergence as a subject is itself an act of construction — an act that participates in the making of the subjectivity it purports to represent.

Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction provides the most precise theoretical framework for this dimension of the novel. Historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon defines it, is fiction that "both installs and then subverts" historical discourses, using the conventions of historical narration while simultaneously questioning the epistemological claims of those conventions [10]. *Song of a Captive Bird* operates in precisely this mode: it draws on the documented facts of Forough Farrokhzad's life — her poetry, her films, the historical record of her reception — while filling the interior spaces of that record with imaginative constructions that cannot claim historical authority. The result is a text that is simultaneously biography and fiction, document and invention, historical recovery and imaginative projection.

The integration of Forough's actual poems into the novelistic narrative is the most prominent example of this historiographic metafiction at work. The poems are historical artifacts — they exist independently of Darznik's text and have their own documented reception history. Yet within the novel, they function as interior revelations — windows into the protagonist's psychological and emotional states at particular narrative moments. This dual status — simultaneously external historical document and internal psychological index — creates the characteristic instability of historiographic metafiction: the reader cannot fully determine whether she is encountering the historical Forough or the fictional construction, and this undecidability is itself a formal enactment of the novel's feminist argument.

Lytard's postmodern critique of grand narratives provides a complementary perspective on this dimension of the novel. The grand narratives that Darznik's novel deconstructs are those of Iranian patriarchal culture: the narrative that a good woman is a silent woman; that female desire is transgression; that the social order requires the subordination of feminine to masculine subjectivity. These narratives are not merely individual prejudices but systematic legitimating structures — what Lyotard would call "performative" language games that establish the rules by which knowledge claims are adjudicated and social positions assigned [12]. Forough's life, as Darznik constructs it, is a sustained *petit récit* — a small, local, particular story — that accumulates, over the course of the novel, sufficient force to delegitimize the grand narratives against which it is set.

The novel's postmodern dimension is also evident in its treatment of the relationship between Forough's life and her artistic production. The film *The House Is Black* (1963) — Forough's documentary about a leper colony — is presented in the novel as the culmination of her artistic and subjective development. The film's subject matter — the forgotten, the stigmatized, the socially excluded — mirrors Forough's own position as a woman whose cultural contributions have been systematically marginalized. In filming the lepers, she enacts a politics of visibility that is simultaneously a politics of self-representation: by insisting on the human dignity of those whom society has rendered invisible, she makes a claim for the visibility and dignity of her own gendered experience. The film is, in this sense, a metafictional act — a work of art that reflects on and enacts the conditions of its own production.

## 6. From Margin to Center: Resistance, Collectivity, and the Social Dimensions of Female Subjectivity

The trajectory described by this article's title — from margins to center — is not, in Darznik's novel, a purely individual achievement. Female subjectivity, as the novel constructs it, is not a private acquisition but a social relationship: it depends on recognition, on reception, on the existence of communities of readers and viewers who are capable of receiving what the feminine subject has to offer. This section examines the social dimensions of Forough's emergence as a subject, and argues that the novel presents female subjectivity as inherently collective — as constituted through relationships of solidarity, resistance, and mutual recognition.

Mohanty's transnational feminist framework is particularly relevant here. In "Under Western Eyes" (1988), Mohanty argues against the tendency of Western feminist discourse to construct a monolithic, universalized category of "Third World woman" — a figure of oppression defined against the putatively liberated Western feminist subject [13]. Mohanty insists instead on the specificity, diversity, and agency of women in postcolonial contexts — their resistance, their strategies of survival, their particular forms of solidarity and community. Darznik's novel enacts this insistence: Forough is not a generic figure of Eastern female oppression awaiting Western feminist liberation, but a specific, complex, historically situated agent whose resistance takes forms shaped by the particular contours of mid-twentieth-century Iranian culture.

The social dimension of Forough's subjectivity is most clearly visible in the novel's treatment of her relationships with other women. The secondary female figures — her mother Turan, her mother-in-law Khanom Shapur, her sister Puran — are not simply obstacles or supports to the protagonist's development but are themselves subjects whose different strategies of negotiating patriarchal constraint illuminate the range of possibilities available to women in her context. Turan's accommodation, Shapur's internalization and enforcement of patriarchal norms, Puran's gradual withdrawal of solidarity — these represent not individual moral failures but structural positions within the patriarchal order, and Darznik treats them with analytic rather than judgmental attention.

The most explicitly social dimension of Forough's emergence is the letters she receives from women readers who find in her poetry an articulation of experiences they had been unable to express. These letters constitute a community of reception — a readership that is also a political formation, insofar as the shared recognition of Forough's poetry creates a space of collective consciousness that did not previously exist. This is the moment at which female subjectivity becomes, in Spivak's terms, not merely individual articulation but collective enunciation: the subaltern has not only spoken but has been heard by others who recognize themselves in her speech.

The novel's conclusion — with *The House Is Black* receiving international recognition and Forough in conversation with Bernardo Bertolucci — presents this emergence as complete in one sense but ongoing in another. The international recognition confirms that her voice has reached beyond the specific cultural context that sought to silence it; yet the novel does not sentimentalize this achievement. The cost of Forough's emergence — the loss of her child, the psychiatric institutionalization, the social ostracism — remains as a permanent mark on the landscape of the novel's resolution. Female subjectivity, Darznik insists, is achieved not despite these costs but through them; and the achievement is never final, never secure, always requiring to be reclaimed.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has argued that Jasmin Darznik's *Song of a Captive Bird* constructs the emergence of female subjectivity as a three-phase process — the deconstruction of patriarchal confinement, the development of an *écriture féminine*, and the social articulation of that voice as collective expression — and that this process is rendered through a postmodern narrative form that is itself an enactment of the feminist argument it advances. The convergence of postcolonial feminist theory (Spivak, Bhabha), feminine writing theory (Cixous, Irigaray), and postmodern narrative analysis (Hutcheon, Lyotard) provides a framework adequate to the novel's theoretical ambitions and cultural complexity.

Several conclusions follow from this analysis. First, the novel's cage metaphor functions not as a simple figure of oppression but as a dialectical site in which subjugation and creative response are mutually constitutive. This has implications for feminist literary criticism more broadly: it suggests that representations of female oppression need not be read as mere documentation of victimhood but as potential sites of creative and theoretical insight into the conditions of subject formation.

Second, the novel's treatment of *écriture féminine* is historically specific in ways that complicate Cixous's more universalist claims. Forough's feminine writing emerges from the particular resources and constraints of the Persian literary tradition, and its radical qualities are legible only against that tradition. This historicization of feminine writing practice is a significant contribution to the feminist literary critical conversation.

Third, the novel's postmodern self-consciousness — its historiographic metafictional dimension — is not merely a formal feature but a feminist theoretical position. By insisting on the constructed character of Forough's story, Darznik makes a claim about the constructed character of all stories of female subjectivity: they are not recoveries of a pre-existing reality but productions that participate in making the reality they represent. This is a postmodern insight with specifically feminist implications, insofar as it reveals the political stakes of representation — the power involved in determining whose stories are told and how.

Finally, the novel's insistence on the social and collective dimensions of female subjectivity — on the community of women readers whose recognition completes the circuit of Forough's articulation — points toward a feminist politics that is neither purely individualist nor abstractly collective, but grounded in the specific relationships and communities through which women support, sustain, and recognize one another. This is perhaps the most important contribution of *Song of a Captive Bird* to contemporary feminist thought: its vision of female subjectivity as irreducibly relational — formed not in isolation but in the space between self and other, margin and center, silence and speech.

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