

# Forough's Existentialist Lifeworld: A Minimalist Reading

## Mohammad Reza Vaez Shahrestani

### Introduction

In 1835, Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and founder of existentialism, wrote his first existential text in a letter to a friend, Wilhelm Lund. In this letter, Kierkegaard explains the truth which is of practical concern for him:

What I really need is to be clear about what I am to do, not what I must know, except in the way knowledge must precede all action. It is a question of understanding my destiny, of seeing what the Deity really wants me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the Idea for which I am willing to live and die."<sup>1</sup>

In this quotation, Kierkegaard asserts that the main challenge of his life is to find a truth for which he can live and die. This is the essence of existentialism.<sup>2</sup>

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) investigates existentialism in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (*L'existentialisme est un humanisme*),<sup>3</sup> and states that the first principle of existentialism is "existence precedes

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (London: Granta Books Publications, 2007), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard developed this problem in the context of his radical approach to Christian faith; Nietzsche did so in light of his thesis of the death of God. Subsequent existential thought reflects this difference: while some writers—such as Sartre and Beauvoir—were resolutely atheist in outlook, others—such as Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, and Buber—variously explored the implications of the concept of 'authentic existence' for religious consciousness. For more see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism>.

<sup>3</sup> This work is based on a lecture called 'Existentialism is a Humanism' that Jean-Paul Sartre gave at Club Maintenant in Paris on 29 October 1945. It was published in French in 1946, and then as *Existentialism and Humanism* in an English translation by Philip Mairet in 1948. In the United States, a different English translation was published as *Existentialism is a Humanism* in 2007, with an introduction by Annie Cohen-Solal and notes and a preface by Arlette Elkäim-Sartre.

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essence.”<sup>4</sup> “The precedence of existence over essence” means that human beings first come into existence, then become aware of their existence and become part of the world. They then come to know themselves, create their own essence according to their will, and present a definition of themselves. In other words, when human beings come into existence, they create their essence through what they do in the course of their lives. This is existentialism’s concept of subjectivism. What Sartre means by subjectivism is that the human being “is nothing other than what he makes of himself.”<sup>5</sup>

At the heart of the first principle of existentialism lies the possibility of free choice for human beings. Sartre, paradoxically, says that human beings are condemned to be free: “condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”<sup>6</sup> It is possible that humans, through their free will and freedom, can create their essence, which is exemplified by their thoughts and personality. If this is so, human beings can move toward an ideal future with their own feet and without assistance.

If it is accepted that existence precedes essence, and human beings have free will<sup>7</sup>, they are responsible for what they do. To clarify, since existentialism has made human beings the sole owner of what they are, full responsibility for existence rests on them. Sartre therefore argues that “the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence.”<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that by saying that human beings are responsible for their existence, it is not meant that they are merely responsible for their own individuality, but it means that they, as individuals, are responsible for all

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 22. Sartre used masculinist language, which may be viewed as inappropriate in the twenty-first century.

<sup>6</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> There are also both a priori and empirical arguments against free will. For example, the most radical a priori argument is that free will is not merely contingently absent but is impossible. In recent decades, this argument is most associated with Galen Strawson. See Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), Chapter 2. In addition, great philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, and Arthur Schopenhauer consider free will as an illusion or ‘verbal’ issue.

<sup>8</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 23.

humanity,<sup>9</sup> because human individuals in every choice and every action are automatically creating the human being that each wants to be. Sartre asserts that "When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men."<sup>10</sup> In fact, according to existentialism, what I make of myself is the model and exemplary image for all humanity. This great responsibility for all mankind in every choice and action means humans should be cautious regarding their thoughts and behavior.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, existentialism clearly declares humanity is in anguish; in fact, when human beings commit themselves and realize that they can determine their way of life, as well as being the legislator who also chooses at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, such persons cannot deny their deep and complete responsibility, and this responsibility creates anguish for them.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time existentialism enjoyed a golden period in Europe, a noteworthy female poet lived in Iran. The twentieth century Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967) was not a passive or submissive human being. Her lifespan and the evolution of her poetry reveal that she consciously formed her essence according to her own free will. Forough's existential evolution shows that she was never satisfied with a pre-determined essence based on habits and instincts. With huge efforts, and undergoing significant difficulties and hardships, she tried to change her life and move on the path of improvement. From this perspective, it is possible to divide Forough's life into three periods: first, a period of wandering and doubt; second, a period of wisdom and hope; and third, a period of despair and emancipation.<sup>13</sup> In the first part of this article,

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<sup>9</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> This categorization has been adapted from Mahmoud Nikbakht's research with some changes by this author. See Mahmoud Nikbakht, *From Being Lost to Emancipation* (Isfahan: Mash'al Publishing House, 1993). In this book (published in Persian), Nikbakht divided Forough's life into three periods: a) a period of being lost and in ignorance; b) a period of finding the self and cognizance; and c) a period of going beyond the self and emancipation. I agree with Nikbakht's schema, but have made minor changes to it, in order to bring it into harmony with the thesis of this article. See also Mohammad Reza Vaez Shahrestani, *I am Nothing, except some Echo of a Song: A Philosophical Observation*

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Forough's existential life (henceforth *lifeworld*) and its changes during these three periods will be analysed, and a minimalist and existentialist reading of her lifeworld will be presented.

Then, in the second part, through a comparative study of Forough's poems and some principles of existentialism, other correspondences between her lifeworld and existentialism will be identified. In this section, Forough's sense of responsibility toward her society, and her attempt at portraying the existing deficiencies and moral issues of her lifetime, will be discussed. In addition, after explaining that "loneliness" and "abandonment" are arguably key characteristics of a person who is existentialist, it will be explained that Forough experienced such "loneliness" and "abandonment" in her life, too. Furthermore, existentialism means that there is *no world except the human world* (Humanism), and in this regard, Forough as a writer pointed out that *we should never wish for another world* (that is, a non-human world). The final link between Forough's lifeworld and existentialism is that within the existential worldview the role of the artist and writer is to reveal the evils and vices of society. Forough also wanted to awaken her audience to responsibility by depicting the evils in the world in some of her poems.

### **Forough's Lifeworld: The First Period**

The first period, based on the poems in Forough's first three books, *The Captive* (1952), *The Wall* (1956), and *Rebellion* (1957), is the period of 'wandering and doubt.' At this time, Forough is like a captive trapped between the limited concepts of reality and morality, and the human instinct for the unlimited.<sup>14</sup> In this period she talks about the demands and desires of the body, youth, illusion and anticipation, the perplexity of her aimless being, and the slave-like status of women. She expresses romantic feelings, laments the absence of the beloved, and complains about a remorseless sweetheart.

This period opens with *The Captive*. The poems in this debut collection are mainly about Forough's habits and instincts. She starts *The Captive* with the description of nocturnal desires, and in the very first poem

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*concerning the Poems and Lifeworld of Forough* (Tehran: Negahe Moaser Publications, 2018), Chapter 1 (in Persian).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Nikbakht, *From Being Lost to Emancipation*, p. 20.

she talks about carnal and youthful desires as well as illusion and anticipation.<sup>15</sup>

I am waiting for the sleep, but alas / the sleep does not return to my eyes / I say this in melancholic and sad tone / May be it does not come out of coquetry /... Drowned in this innocent youth I am / Drowned in the moments of oblivion / Drowned in this caressing greeting / In kisses and sights and embraces / I want him in this night of solitude / with the eyes lost in the visit / with pain, the silent pain of beauty / brimful of all of myself.<sup>16</sup>

In this book, Forough sometimes laments her aimless existence, seeking isolation, separation from those she knows, and the two-faced nature of human beings.<sup>17</sup> At other times, she talks about hope and light, although she still considers herself a captive in a cage.<sup>18</sup>

At times, Forough uses ordinary language to speak about the slave status of women; for example, she considers the wedding ring to be comparable to the ring (shackle) of slavery.<sup>19</sup> She realizes that “she is an instrument,”<sup>20</sup> although at other times in an honest and intrepid manner – she is not afraid of infamy and dishonor – she expresses her desires and whims.<sup>21</sup> By reviewing the poems in the *The Captive*, it can be said that the subject matter of these poems – which are autobiographical and consequently ‘self-poetry’ – on the one hand shows the poet’s mind which is entangled in instinct and habit, and on the other hand, witnesses the poet’s struggles with the objective and subjective worlds. In fact, in these poems, Forough is oscillating between reality and dreams, and in each situation swings to one side or another.<sup>22</sup>

In her next book, *The Wall*, Forough attempts to move beyond her instincts and habits. In this era, she is still engulfed in wanderings, dreams and illusions; Forough even calls herself “dream’s bride.”<sup>23</sup> With an intoxicated and dreamlike perspective, she talks about the legend of a

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Nikbakht, *From Being Lost to Emancipation*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Night and Desire’ from *The Captive*. See Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems* (Tehran: Shadan Publications, 2004), p. 16. Forough’s poems were published in Persian and all translations are the author’s.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Wild’ from *The Captive*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Captive’ from *The Captive*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Ring’ from *The Captive*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Bitter Legend’ from *The Captive*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Hidden Painting’ from *The Captive*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> For more information, see Nikbakht, *From Being Lost to Emancipation*, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> ‘On the Grave of Leili’ from *The Wall*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 138.

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young woman in the city who leaves her town on the arm of a proud prince.<sup>24</sup> However, the fundamental difference here is that in some of the poems she is aware that she is wandering, and talks of her past as “former acts of madness”:

After all those acts of madness, ah, alas / I can't believe that I've grown wise  
/ It seems that she has died in me, / I'm so weary, so silent, so nullified /  
Every moment I ask the mirror in despair, / What am I, at least in your eyes?  
/ But in the mirror I see that I am / Alas, not even a shadow of what I was / I  
seek not the road to the city of day / Undoubtedly, I sleep in the depths of a  
grave / A pearl I possess, but out of fear / In the heart of the marshes I hid it  
away.<sup>25</sup>

Forough, after all the youthful desires and passions that resulted from her instincts (she refers to them as “summer tumult of a sudden love”), finds herself in the autumn of life. By using that analogy from nature, Forough expresses the wish that she was truly like the autumn, so that she could express all her internal feelings of loss and the passing of time.

Therefore, she speaks of her mind, the house of “grief, pain, and suspicion,” as she encounters the “bitter face of the winter of youth”:

Before me: The bitter face of the winter of youth. / Behind me: The  
turbulence of the summer of a sudden romance. / My chest: The dwelling  
place of sorrow, pain and mistrust. / I wish I were like autumn... I wish I  
were like autumn.<sup>26</sup>

In summary, it can be said that the Forough of *The Wall* has understood that the desires and the illusory ideals of the past are mirages. Therefore, when she is faced with reality and its paradoxical domain, she doubts her previous cognizance, and this doubt consequently causes her to pose certain philosophical questions.

In the last poem of this book, when Forough faces the phenomenon of the shadow and wishes to describe it, she asks some deep questions about her existence, and the essence of the world around her. Consequently, she finds herself floating in endless questions:

At night on the damp road / It seems our shadows are fleeing from us /  
Away from us in the bent of the road / ... they move softly toward each  
other / ... How often have I said to myself / does life find color in our  
shadows? / or are we the shadows of ourselves? / ... I ask you is darkness a  
pleasure or a pain? / Is body a prison or a desert of freedom? / What is the

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Dream’ from *The Wall*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 119.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Lost’ from *The Wall*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Woe-worshipper’ from *The Wall*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 127.

darkness of night? / Whose black soul night is? / What does he say? / Tired, wanderer, and confused / I race down the road of endless questions.<sup>27</sup>

The last product of this first period of Forough's life is rich in the existential concerns and life-destroying pains of her first encounters with the world. Forough, at this stage of her life, continues to pose existential questions. However, the main difference here is that her attitude toward reality has found a deeper foundation; "Eventually I asked myself gently / What am I? Where do I begin?"<sup>28</sup>

In her next collection of poems, *Rebellion*, Forough shifts from general philosophical musings to her revolt against God.<sup>29</sup>

On my lips there is a shadow of a mysterious question / There is a mild pain in my heart which burns my being / I want to share the secret of this rebellious soul / tonight with you / Oh does my whimper get into you? / So that you smash the stone of narcissism / and sit with me once who am humble / you drink the pain of being from my poetry / I have depressed for years within myself but today / I raise flame-like to burn your stack / Either you extinguish my impatient uproar / or I teach you some other method.<sup>30</sup>

The significant characteristic of this volume is that compared to the first two, especially *The Captive*, Forough has changed her position toward God.

In the poem 'Face to Face with God' in *The Captive* Forough prays; she has a very humble and modest status, and like a sinful servant she asks God for forgiveness:

From my bright eyes snatch / the eagerness to run to another; / ... and teach my eyes / to shy away from the shining eyes of others... / O lord, O lord... / show your face and pluck from my heart / the zest for sin and selfishness. / do not tolerate an insignificant slave's / rebelliousness and refuge-seeking in others. / hear my needful clamor, / O able, unique God.<sup>31</sup>

In *Rebellion*, Forough's language and perspective have changed. It seems that Forough, by contemplating the problem of evil and some other theological debates, has come to doubt her previous faith, especially in the

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<sup>27</sup> 'World of Shadows' from *The Wall*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 174.

<sup>28</sup> 'The Rebellion of Slavery' from *Rebellion*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 178.

<sup>29</sup> I believe that this poem is the pinnacle of Forough's rebelliousness, in expressing pains and her existential concerns in a brave and intrepid manner. Moreover, in this poem Forough talks about subjects such as determinism, free will and the problem of evil, which are important theoretical issues in philosophy.

<sup>30</sup> 'The Rebellion of Slavery' from *Rebellion*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 178.

<sup>31</sup> 'Face to face with God' from *The Captive*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 90.

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first two poems ('Servant Rebellion' and 'Divine Rebellion').<sup>32</sup> Despite this inner turmoil, she still thinks of herself as a servant facing God.

Yet, in the final poem of the collection, she observes and adores life with a hopeful and romantic attitude. Nevertheless, she points out to the absurdity of life and absurdity of self in a clever way:

Oh, life this is me who still / am full of you despite all absurdity / I am not of  
the mind to tear the threads / Neither do I want to flee from you / ... I am in  
love, in love with the morning star / in love with the wandering clouds / in  
love with the rainy days / in love with whatever bears your name on it.<sup>33</sup>

Angela Sadeghi Tehrani has described Forough's poetic journey as "an apprenticeship to life, a personal history of growth and change"<sup>34</sup> and she situates Forough in a culture that was uncomfortable with the passionate emotions she expressed, all the more radically because her poetry was public and was therefore read by strangers, not intimate friends. Her initial poetic zone was that of the emotions; this was later to be overtaken by an intellectual focus and philosophical reflection. Forough has described this stage of her life like this:

I hadn't been made yet, hadn't found my language and my form, and my mental sphere. I was in a small and dense environment that we call it family life. Then I got rid of all those things, I changed my environment; actually, it was changed naturally and forcibly. *The Wall* and *Rebellion* are in fact hopeless paddlings between two stages of life. They are the final breaths before achieving emancipation. One arrives to the period of thinking. When you are young, emotions have loose roots, but more attractions. They will dry up and finish if they are not later led by thinking.<sup>35</sup>

### Forough's Lifeworld: The Second Period

Forough's fourth book of poetry is the summit of her conscious presence in the world. In it Forough's cognizance of finding herself is celebrated, and she has aptly named it *Another Birth* (1963). In fact, Forough, after leaving behind the wandering of the first period, comes to know the subjective and

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<sup>32</sup> For more information see Soroush Dabbagh, 'Disability of the Concrete Hands', in *Blue Sphere Philosophy* (Tehran: Serat Publications, 2015), p. 183.

<sup>33</sup> 'Life' from *Rebellion*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 217.

<sup>34</sup> Angela Sadeghi Tehrani, 'Forough Farrokhzad – An Uproar in the Contemporary Persian Poetry', *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 10 (2014), p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Shahnaz Moradi Kouchi, *Coming to Know Forough Farrokhzad* (Tehran: Ghatreh Publications, 2005), p. 15.



objective,<sup>36</sup> understands the decay and transience of her own life, and makes her poetry an arena to express this cognizance.<sup>37</sup> In the early poems of this book, the first aspects of “decay” and “transience” can be clearly seen.

My sad love is so smeared / with the fear of decay / that all my life shivers / when I look at you / it is as if from a window / I see my single tree, covered in leaves / in the yellow fever of autumn / it is as if I see an image on the rumpled currents of flowing water... / what are you but a moment, a moment that opens / my eyes in the desert of cognizance?<sup>38</sup>

Also, in the poem ‘The Wind Will Carry Us Away’ Forough says:

In my small night, ah / the wind has a date with the leaves of the trees / in my small night there is agony of destruction / listen / do you hear the darkness blowing? / I look upon this bliss as a stranger / I am addicted to my despair / listen do you hear the darkness blowing? / ... a moment / and then nothing / night shudders beyond this window / and the earth winds to a halt / beyond this window.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, at this time of her life, bright rays of hope start to appear in her poetry.

In ‘The Wind Will Take Us’, after she expresses her strange views on happiness, hopelessness, it is possible to see a flicker of hope in her thoughts and imagination:

Beyond this window / something unknown is watching you and me. / O green from head to foot / place your hands like a burning memory / in my loving hands / give your lips to the caresses / of my loving lips / like the warm perception of being / the wind will take us / the wind will take us (The Wind Will Take Us)<sup>40</sup>

This is reinforced in the poem ‘Another Birth’, in which Forough asserts that she “will plant my hands in the garden / I will grow I know I know I know / and swallows will lay eggs / in the hollow of my ink-stained hands.”<sup>41</sup>

However, this flicker of hope only comes to Forough when she is dreaming, and in the world of the imagination. In other words, whereas in

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<sup>36</sup> After reading Nima’s poetry, Forough understood the importance and necessity of knowing the self and world around her. Cf. Nikbakht, *From Being Lost to Emancipation*, pp. 33-35.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Nikbakht, *From Being Lost to Emancipation*, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Subsistence’ from *Another Birth*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 228.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The Wind Will Carry Us Away’ from *Another Birth*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 238.

<sup>40</sup> ‘The Wind Will Carry Us Away’ from *Another Birth*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 238.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Another Birth’ from *Another Birth*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 324.

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Forough's daily life darkness is dominant and everything smells of decay, sometimes light and hope enter her mind, and she repeatedly asks the question: "Does this blackness and decay tunnel into light and lead to somewhere?"<sup>42</sup> From another perspective, perhaps this flicker of hope for Forough reflects spiritual concerns, or the faith that in the past had another colour and flavour in the horizon of her thoughts? It seems that faith, which once entailed serenity and calmness for her, no longer holds these comforts, and she enviously dreams of her former faith, and the sense of serenity and certainty that accompanied it.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps still / Behind the crushed eyes / Amidst the chill / There had remained / Something faint and half-alive / In whose breathless effort / Wanted to believe / In the innocence of the song of waters / Perhaps, but what an infinite vacuum! / The sun was dead / And nobody knew / The name of that sad dove / Which has escaped the hearts / Is faith. / O Imprisoned Voice / Can the majesty of thy despair / Ever penetrate into light / Through this disgusting night?<sup>44</sup>

This far, it can be said that Forough's lifeworld conforms to the first principle of existentialism. In other words, her existence precedes her essence. As noted above, in the beginning she is caught in the web of her desires and instincts. Then she moves beyond her desires and instincts, and by facing the domain of reality, reaches a philosophical scepticism. This scepticism poses endless questions for her. After that, by coming to know the subjective and objective world, she discovers decay as the dominant truth of her life, and consequently finds herself in the wilderness of cognizance. In other words, this process shows that Forough, after finding existence, does not accept her pre-determined essence and tries to create her existence through will and cognizance.

I have used the word 'minimalist' of my existential reading of Forough's lifeworld, because according to Sartre's definition of existentialism, the first and the central principle of this school of thought is subjectivism or "precedence of existence over essence." As it was seen, Forough's lifeworld entails this minimalistic requirement. In other words, the fact that Forough's "existence precedes [her] essence" shows that she

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<sup>42</sup> For more details in this regard see: Vaez Shahrestani, *I am Nothing, except some Echo of a Song*, Chapter 1.

<sup>43</sup> For different categorizations of faith, see Soroush Dabbagh, 'The Cleanliness of the Songs of Waters: An Exploration of Kinds of Faith', in *Blue Sphere Philosophy* (Tehran: Serat Publications, 2015), p. 209.

<sup>44</sup> 'Terrestrial Verses' from *Another Birth*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 279.

has the core quality to be considered an existentialist. In the remainder of this article, the third period of Forough's life will be explored, and some of the other correspondences between Forough's lifeworld and existentialism are explained.

### **Forough's Lifeworld: The Third Period**

The third period opens with the book *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season* (1963), which is Forough's period of "hopelessness and emancipation." The major difference between the poetic expressions of Forough's life with those of the previous periods is that not even a flicker of hope survives. She has experienced her personal transience in this world and the world's impermanence in extreme ways. Decay and death are uppermost in her mind, and she imagines people, "the alive in this side of beginning" and "the dead at the other side of ending line", clawing at its phosphoric roots:<sup>45</sup>

After you / We headed towards the graveyards... / And death was breathing  
under grandmother's robe / And Death was that massive tree, / That the alive  
of this side were hanging their pleas / on its dried leaves. / And the dead of  
the other side, / were stretching their frozen hands, / to reach out to its  
phosphoric roots. / And Death was sitting on the peak of a sacred vault /  
Where suddenly four marine tulips grew / On its four void corners.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, Forough's flicker of hope begins to disappear in the final poems of *Another Birth*. In those poems, Forough's despair becomes larger than the patience of her soul, and she even thinks about spring as a green mirage:

I could not, I could no more / My footsteps at the end, / confessed to the vain  
futility of the route / And despair, at last, defeated the patience of my soul. /  
Then spring, / that Green Mirage, / while passing cross my sight, / whispered  
to me: / "Look! / You have never advanced, / you have been drowning."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> In this regard, Zia Movahed believes that although Forough has a glorious and praiseworthy ascent in *Another Birth*, later she has a deep descent in *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. In other words, he thinks that Forough in *Another Birth* has gone beyond the trivialities, self-humiliations, and self-pity, and her voice makes the reader ponder, without asking the reader to pity her. But she has an emotional and personal approach in *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. See Zia Movahed, 'Forough's Ascent and Descent', in *Yesterday and Today of Persian Poetry* (Tehran: Hermes Publications, 2010) (in Persian), p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> 'After You' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 343.

<sup>47</sup> 'Green Mirage' from *Another Birth*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 292.

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From then on, having experienced the sense of being trapped and perishing, her poetic persona is searching for ways of transcending reality and achieving emancipation.<sup>48</sup> She talks about this concept in the very last poem of *Another Birth*: “I Know a sad little fairy / Down in her watery haven / Who oh so softly / Plays her heart through a flute, / A sad little fairy / Who dies from a kiss at night / To be born from a kiss at dawn.”<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, in the poem ‘Someone Who Is Not Like Anyone’ in *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*, she says:

I've had a dream that someone is coming. /... Someone is coming, / someone is coming / someone better, someone who is like no one, / how good bright light is, how good bright light is, / someone who in his heart is with us, / in his breathing is with us, / in his voice is with us, / ... someone from the rain, / from the sound of rain splashing, / from among the whispering petunias.<sup>50</sup>

Also, as noted earlier, from another perspective it can be argued that in *Another Birth* Forough still hopes to regain her faith, the faith that accompanied serenity and patience in her past, she planted her hand in the garden and was hopeful that it will grow. But it seems that later despair overcomes her, and she understands the inability of her concrete hands to grow, and recognises the beginning of the cold season:<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Nikbakht, *From Being Lost to Emancipation*, p. 91.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Another Birth’ from *Another Birth*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 324.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Someone Comes’ from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 357.

<sup>51</sup> Forough died in a car accident on 13 February 1967, at the age of 32. In order to avoid a school bus, she swerved her Jeep and hit a wall; she died before reaching the hospital. Her last book of poems, *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*, was published posthumously, and is considered by some critics to be one of the highlights of modern Persian poetry. Several famous poets and writers have written elegies in verse and prose for Forough. I will conclude by quoting some parts of Sohrab Sepehri's poem ‘Friend’: “She was great / And belonged to the present time / And had affinity with all bright horizons. / And fathomed the language of the earth and water. / ... She was the image of her solitude. / ... Again, and again we saw her / Basket in hand/ Going to pluck a cluster of glad tidings. / Alas, / She failed to sit in full view of the pigeons / And walked to the brink of Nil / And stretched out beyond the patient Lights. / And she did not mind at all / How lonely we would feel / To eat apples/ At the intervals of the distressing closing of doors!” See Moradi Kouchi, *Coming to Know Forough Farrokhzad*, p. 564. Furthermore, for more detail about Forough and her poetry, see Michael Craig Hillmann, *A Lonely Woman: Forough Farrokhzad and her Poetry* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1987).

And this is I / a woman alone / at the threshold of a cold season / at the beginning of understanding / the polluted existence of the earth / and the simple and sad pessimism of the sky / and the incapacity of these concrete hands.<sup>52</sup>

In the final poem of *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*, Forough merely talks about a remembrance that will remain in the memories: "Keep the flight in mind, / The bird may die."<sup>53</sup>

### Some Other Correspondences Between Forough's Lifeworld and Existentialism

In this part, some of the other correspondences between Forough's lifeworld and existentialism will be discussed. First, as noted earlier, in existentialism everybody is not only responsible for his or her own existence but also for all of humanity. In other words, the individual is responsible for her or himself and everyone else. In this regard, the poem 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season* is one of the clear examples which shows Forough's sense of responsibility toward her society, that of mid-twentieth century Iran. She portrays the decay of society and expresses the social reasons for that:

No one is thinking about the flowers, / no one is thinking about the fish, / no one wants / to believe that the garden is dying, / that the garden's heart has swollen under the sun, / that the garden's mind is slowly / being drained of green memories, / that the garden's senses are / a separate thing rotting huddled in a corner. /... Father says to Mother: / to hell with all birds and fish. / When I die, then what difference will it make / that there is a garden / or there isn't a garden? / My retirement pension is enough for me.<sup>54</sup>

The attitude of Father, that money and personal comfort are sufficient and that he feels no responsibility to care for the natural world, represents human selfishness and a lack of concern both for nature and for those who will be born in the future, into a damaged world.

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<sup>52</sup> 'Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 331.

<sup>53</sup> 'The Bird May Die' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 365.

<sup>54</sup> 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 351.

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Mahmoud Nikbakht believes that here Forough, instead of considering poetry as the linguistic equivalent of a revelation which uncovers the deeper and unknown layers of mankind and the world, uses it *to simply and clearly* express her ideas, so that she assists society to discover and bury its death and achieve another birth. He says:

Forough in the poem "I Feel Sorry for the Garden" in order to show the decay of society and its social reasons, uses an anecdotal sketch and by techniques of prose description creates a narrative about a house in which the flowers and the fish are dying... later in the second stanza by speaking about the emptiness of the pond, drought, and the wait for the rain, mentions the reason for their death. Then in each of the next four stanzas narrates the speech and behavior of each family member and creates a general but brief sketch of them. In this way, she creates types, not individuals, who represent various groups in a society. All of them are passive and metamorphosed humans who testify to this death in their own way and create a shelter out of their characteristics and the culture of their society. In this way, they can take shelter against the necessities and requirements and justify and hide their passivity.<sup>55</sup>

Also, in almost all the poems of *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season* this characteristic is evident. Forough, *especially* in the opening poem, and more generally throughout the book, as a member of society, talks about the world of frozen minds, words, and sounds.<sup>56</sup>

With a very clear mind, and acknowledging the hopelessness of the situation, Forough critiques many of the deficiencies and moral issues of contemporary Iranian culture in the later years of the last Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (reigned 1941-1979).

Dear stars! / Dear paper stars! / when lie is blowing through the air like  
wind, / How can one / take refuge in the verses of defeated prophets? /  
... I greet you, innocent darkness! / I greet you, night! / You altered eyes  
of this desert's wolves / to the tears of faith and trust. / And nearby your  
lakes / the spirits of old trees / are making love / to the souls of blades. /  
I am coming from the land of frozen minds, words, sounds / And this  
land is like a hole of snakes. / This land is full of friends / who hold your  
hands / and hang you in their heads.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Nikbakht, *From Being Lost to Emancipation*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>56</sup> For more examples like this in Forough's poetry see these poems in *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*: 'Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season', 'After You', 'Window', 'I Feel Sorry for the Garden', and 'It Is Only Sound that Remains'.

<sup>57</sup> 'Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 331.

The imagery of death is powerful and ever-present in this last collection of Forough's poetry. The poem 'After You' contains violent images of murder and betrayal among lovers and friends, and the paradoxical struggle of individuals to hold onto identity while they "strangled the calls of the seagulls" preferring "the sound of sirens, bells, sirens." Among such circumstances, Forough seems to ask, how could love survive? She laments: "After you, / We murdered each other, / And we convicted friends to the court. / After you, / We placed our anxious hearts, / in our crammed pockets, / and we assessed the fate of love."<sup>58</sup>

Second, the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky once wrote: "If God does not exist, everything is permissible," and subsequently Sartre claimed: "This is the starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and man is consequently abandoned, for he cannot find anything to rely on – neither within nor without."<sup>59</sup> In the second kind of existentialism, which is the irreligious existentialism propounded by Sartre, the human being is "abandoned" and "alone." In other words, according to this philosophical school, humans are alone in the arena of life, and against the sky and nature. They are cast into this world, and there is no causal determinism or metaphysical power that they can lean upon or resort to, in order to achieve consolation.

This characteristic of existentialism is found in the second and third periods of Forough's life. Forough's encounter with the world is a demystified encounter, and it is just enough to think about the memory and recollection of flight:

I feel sad / I feel blue. / I go outside and rub my cold fingers / on the sleek shell of the silent night. / I see that all lights of contact are dark, / All lanes to relate us are blocked. / Nobody will introduce me to the sun, / Nobody will take me to the gathering of doves. / Keep the flight in mind, / The bird may die.<sup>60</sup>

In this period, after Forough discovers decay as the truth of her life, she experiences 'loneliness' and 'abandonment' in extreme ways; she

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<sup>58</sup> 'After You' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 343.

<sup>59</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 29.

<sup>60</sup> 'The Bird May Die' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 365.

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expresses her existentialist condition like this: "I am cold / I am cold, / and it is like I will never warm up. / My Beloved, my sole Beloved, / How aged was that wine?"<sup>61</sup>

Third, Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, believes that existentialism is a kind of "humanism."<sup>62</sup> In fact, humanism in existentialism means that there is *no world except the human world*; whatever is there is a world that has been made by human beings, who have to conquer new territories, and move forward beyond the world of yesterday. It is interesting that the same quality is evidenced in the second and third periods of Forough's life. For example, in the poem 'On the Earth' from the collection *Another Birth*, she claims that she has stood on the Earth:

Never have I wished / to be a star in the mirage of sky / or like the spirit  
of the chosen ones / become a silent companion to the angels / Never  
have I been away from the earth / ... I am standing on earth / so that the  
stars worship me / so that the breezes caress me...<sup>63</sup>

It seems to the reader that Forough believes she is floating in the world in the *here and now* and she does not wish for another world, a non-human world.

Fourth and finally, according to the literary philosophical school of Existentialism, the role of the artist and writer is primarily to reveal evils and vices. In other words, according to existentialism, artists identify evil and responsible human beings combat it to bring about change. In fact, the maxim of existentialist movement is "presentation in order to change." Thus, literary works in the existentialist register do not simply represent the world as it is, nor do they represent an ideal world of how things should be. Rather, literary existentialism is a representation of a part of this world that has wrongfully come into

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<sup>61</sup> 'Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 331.

<sup>62</sup> Sartre has used this concept in contrast to materialism and idealism. He does not believe that actions are the result of the environment. On the other hand, he does not believe that human beings are totally separate from their environment. According to Sartre, any action and truth includes both the material and the environment, and the human subjectivity and idea, which is what a human being makes of himself. See Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p. 18 and p. 41.

<sup>63</sup> 'On the Earth' from *Another Birth*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 233.



existence and must be changed. Forough expresses this in 'Earthly Verses' from *Another Birth*:

Then / The sun turned cold / And abundance left lands / And in deserts  
shrubs dried / And in deeps the fish died / ... In the dens of solitude /  
Vanity was born, / The blood smelled of opium and hemp, / The  
pregnant women / Gave birth to headless babies... / What a bitter and  
dark time! / ... The sun was dead / The sun was dead, and tomorrow /  
Was a vague lost concept / In children's minds...<sup>64</sup>

In almost all the poems of *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*, Forough recites the evils and vices of the world around her. It is as if in these poems she – in her sense of responsibility toward other members of the society – intends to awaken the reader's mind by depicting evils and causing anguish, and by informing the readers of their responsibility, inviting them to think about change:

in the land of dwarfs / the criteria of comparison / have always traveled  
in the orbit of zero. / why should I stop? / I obey the four elements; / and  
the job of drawing up the constitution of my heart / is not the business /  
of the local government of the blind. / What is the lengthy whimpering  
wildness / in animal's sexual organs to me? / What to me is the worm's  
humble movement / in its fleshy vacuum? / The bleeding ancestry of  
flowers / has committed me to life. / Are you familiar with the bleeding  
ancestry of the flowers?<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

It has been argued that the first and central principle of existentialism is "existence precedes essence". The existential evolution of the acclaimed Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad demonstrates that she was never satisfied with a pre-determined essence based on her habits and instincts. In other words, her existence precedes her essence in the personal philosophy, she developed through her literary art, and it is appropriate to evaluate her poetry through the lens of Sartre's existentialism. Additionally, secondary existentialist concepts and concerns, such as personal responsibility, abandonment in the world of nature, the value of humanism and a human-centered perspective, and

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<sup>64</sup> 'Terrestrial Verses' from *Another Birth*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 279.

<sup>65</sup> 'It Is Only Sound That Remains' from *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*. Forough Farrokhzad, *Collected Poems*, p. 362.

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artistic representation directed toward change are some of the other correspondences between Forough's lifeworld and Sartrean existentialism.