



Women Poets Iranica
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Women Poets and the Assertion of Agency in the Supreme Leader's Annual Poetry Reading Nights

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“There is perhaps a tendency to romanticize resistance,” writes Lila Abu-Lughod—in her influential article “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women.”¹ Abu-Lughod observes that it is tempting to see resistance only in moments which directly counter the tyranny of dominant narratives of power. She also warns that in universalizing transgressive resistance we risk foreclosing questions about the workings of power. Abu-Lughod famously quips that “we should use resistance as a diagnostic of power.”² Along similar lines, several studies have taken account of the complexities and resilience of Iranian women’s resistance, assertions of agency, knowledge production, religious subjectivity, and citizenship in conformity to the Islamic Republic’s state power.³ Yet there is a tendency to read the works of Iranian women poets only within the emancipatory politics of an oppressor-oppressed paradigm where transgression is privileged as the paramount indicator of agency.

Thus, this essay is an examination of some of the poetry composed and recited by Iranian women poets for the Supreme Leader of the country in annually held poetry readings. There is nothing “transgressive” in these carefully staged events, where selected participants are officially invited to attend. Instead, what emerges through many of their poems is a display of the women poets’ agential capacity. They speak of love, yearning, and erotic desire in their ghazals—historically the most import-

ant lyric genre of poetry with its inherent ambiguity rooted in classical Persian mystical poetry.⁴ However, they also augment the classical ghazal by centering, for example, their own personal experiences of longing and desire. In this way, their assertions of agency-in-conformity problematizes transgression as the sole producer of agency. A few examples of their poems discussed here demonstrate how regulatory power does not only restrict and suppress but also produces other forms of agency and self-assertion.

Under Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei's tutelage as the Supreme Leader since 1989, and supported by his personal passion for classical didactic-mystical poetry and his own claims to poetic talent, poetry has become in Iran, "a unifying spectacle and a pedagogical tool."⁵ It is in this context of the Supreme Leader's political, religious, and assumed literary authority that the formal annual poetry reading ceremonies evolved into highly publicized productions with their own bureaucratic vetting and selection processes and choreographed performances.⁶ These carefully curated annual events demonstrate and reinforce the power, domination, and control of the Regime and its Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader thus stands in for the arbiter of "good" poetry, and by extension for the good of the nation. This is not a unique phenomenon; many dictators of totalitarian regimes have justified their political violence and absolute authority by recourse to their own literary output, in which they stand as the benevolent semi-divine father of the nation symbolically represented by adoring young women.⁷ These annual sessions in Iran are notably televised, popularized, and archived on the Leader's official website. As such, they set the tone for many aspects of state-sanctioned activities under the Islamic Republic, from dress code and gender segregation to expressions of piety, and other related thoughts and desires. In Fatemeh Shams' words, these widely publicized annual events that have been taking place for the past two decades are performances, rituals of "spectacle" with their own "Masonic" and "messianic" sense.⁸ While the participants are mostly men, the

¹Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, 1 (1990): 41-2.

²Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance," 42.

³For examples, Elizabeth M. Bucar, *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011); Azam Torab, *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2007); Shirin Saeidi, *Women and the Islamic Republic: How Gendered Citizenship Conditions the Iranian State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁴J. T. P. De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Poems* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 61.

⁵Fatemeh Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme: Poetic Co-option under the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 287.

⁶For the historical context, nomination, and organizational process of these annual sessions, see Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme*, 303-309.

⁷See Albrecht Koschorke and Konstantin Kaminskij, eds., *Tyrants Writing Poetry* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017).

⁸Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme*, 307.

⁹<https://www.aparat.com/v/861-wg/>.

¹⁰Here and all following translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

significance of gender in these annual events remains largely unexamined and prompts several important questions. What difference does being a woman poet make in these annual rituals? How does a highly regulated and carefully curated setting impact women poets' authorial voice? And in what ways do women poets assert their own agency while conforming to the strict parameters of the event?



Figure 1-Women poets reading their poem in Supreme Leader's annual poetry reading nights

Women Authorial Voice

A good example of a female authorial voice can be seen in Mojgan Abbaslou's presentation from 2009. In a video dated 1388/06/14 (September 5, 2009⁹), Abbaslou begins by greeting the Supreme Leader and the audience, addressing them as: "Honorable Father and exalted poets" (0:08"¹⁰ پدر بزرگوار و شاعران گرامی). She then establishes her professional credentials while signaling her requisite deference in accordance with the normative decorum of Persian culture: "I am a physician of course, but do not dare to use the epithet 'doctor' in the company of the present masters. I will offer (my poems) in a feminine way (زنانه), if you permit me." (0:12") She then proceeds to read two ghazals. The first one is about what it means to be a woman:



شبيه باد هميشه غريب و بى وطن است
 چقدر خسته و تنها چقدر مثل من است
 كتاب قصه پراز شرح بى وفايى اوست
 اگر چه او همه عمر فكر ما شدن است
 چه فرق ميكند عدرا و ليلي و شيرين
 كه او حكاييت يك روح در هزار تنست
 قرار نيست معماى ساده اى باشد
 كمى شبيه شما و كمى شبيه منست
 كسى كه كار جهان لنگ ميزند بى او
¹¹فرشته نيست پرى نيست حور نيست زن است

¹¹The text of her poem can be found here: <https://farsi.khame-nei.ir/others-note?id=33432>.

¹²The poet is lining up celebrated prominent females from Perso-Islamic history. 'Ozra is a reference to either Mary mother of Jesus, or Fatima daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, both praised for their virginal state; Leili and Shirin are legendary beloveds of classical Persian Poetry.

¹³"Wide-eyed damsels," commonly virgin maidens of paradise promised to faithful male believers in the Qur'an. For example, see Qur'an 44:54; 52:20; 55:56, 72; 56:22.

Always a stranger without a homeland like wind
 How tired and lonely, she is a lot like me!
 The story book(s) are filled with descriptions of her unfaithfulness
 Even though all her life she thinks about (nothing but) becoming "we"
 What difference does it make, 'Ozra or Leili or Shirin¹²
 She is (indeed) the saga of one soul in a thousand bodies
 She is not supposed to be a simple mystery
 She is a bit like you and a bit like me
 The one without whom the world's affairs will be in shambles
 Is not an angel, is not a fairy, is not a houri,¹³ she is a woman.

This ghazal is a condensed list of the wrongs experienced by women in Perso-Islamic literature: i.e., women are either categorically accused of and condemned for infidelity, or edified as the exceptional stuff of fairy tales. Abbaslou intentionally makes it unclear that the poem is about women until the very end, revealing the subject of this poem, the "woman," in a concluding moment, prompting the reader to re-read the poem once again from the beginning in light of this revelation. Abbaslou makes it clear that whether it is in the abundance of fables about unfaithful women, in the commodification of her virginity (like figures of Mary or Fatima in religious discourse), or in mythologizing her as the ethereal beloved of classical poetry, the

¹⁴Commenting on the poem at the end of each recitation is the sole prerogative of the Supreme Leader. I have never seen this breach of protocol in any of the other dozens of videos of poetry recitation by any of the other poets.

¹⁵<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=33432>.

“woman” remains “lonely,” “tired,” and misunderstood. It is interesting that the female poet is not speaking of “woman” as a mere concept, but twice substantiates her assertions by referring to her own self in the poem. In a sense she bears witness, so to speak, that the woman she speaks of “is a lot like me,” and “she is a bit like you, a bit like me.” In other words, she is pointing to the complexity of the lived experiences of women, attested to by her own experiences. She centers the “real” woman, who is rendered unrecognizable and left tired, lonely, and a stranger without a homeland, precisely because of the patriarchal dichotomy of the figuration of “woman” as either being unfaithful or a myth. It is interesting that immediately after she finishes this poem, and contrary to the protocol of these sessions, another woman poet on her left utters in a barely audible but uncontrollable voice, “Bravo” ⁴¹!(آفرین)

Abbaslou follows her first ghazal with a second poem of the same genre with a similar theme. Part of her second ghazal reads:

پری نبوده ام از قصه ها مرا ببرند
پرنده نیستم از گوشه قفس بخرند
زنم حقیقت تلخی پر از پریشانی
پراز زنان پشیمان که تلخ و در به درند
....

به خواهان غریبم که هر کجای زمین اسیر تلخی این روزگار بی پدرند
بهار تازه بگو سقف عشق کوتاه است
¹⁵بلندتر بنشینند دورتر ببرند

I have not been a fairy so they could cut me out of stories
I am not a bird so they can buy me from the corner of a cage.
I am “woman,” a bitter truth full of anguish
Full of regretful women who are bitter and displaced

....

To my stranger sisters wherever on earth, who are captives of these damned times

Say, o fresh spring: “The ceiling of love is low.



Higher they should perch, further they should fly.”

The Supreme Leader’s comments following Abbaslou’s recital are instructive:

Bravo, Bravo, it was very good, both from the point of view that something fair was said about women (درباره زن به انصاف حرفی) (گفته شد). This is good. Some people think that if they want to support women they must discuss feminist tendencies (گرایش‌های فمینیستی) and this non-sensical stuff, whereas defending women is good to be just like this (we must speak of), the truth (حقیقت) of women, [the] essence (ذات) of women, of the eminence (علو) of women, of [the] subtlety (لطافت) of women, these are what must be said, and [second point] your poem was good too. (02’:35”)

It seems that the Leader, too, detects a feminist critique of the unfortunate situation of women under the weight of religious-mystical patriarchy in these two poems. Hence, with his self-assuring pronouncement, declaring that these were not feminist poems, he is confirming that they actually are—or at least easily could be—feminist poems. The political context of its presentation notwithstanding, the first ghazal could be anthologized as reflecting the agential voice of contemporary female poets. In it we have a critique of the exploitation of women both in classical Persian poetry and in normative religious discourse. Significantly, in the second poem we also have the repetition of the female poet’s authorial voice in first-person singular.

¹⁶De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, 29-30.

¹⁷Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 294-295.



Figure 2- Women poets reading their poem in Supreme Leader's annual poetry reading nights

Panegyric Poetry and the *Ghazal*

The history of these poetry reading sessions before the Supreme Leader dates back to premodern court poetry. The court of a powerful ruler was the center of literary life and a source of financial support for poets who, in exchange for financial gains and fame for their literary skills, would immortalize the ruler and his deeds through their craft of poetry. It is not surprising that many of the poems read in these annual sessions are similar to the panegyric (*madih* or *madh*) poems that premodern poets composed for their wealthy patrons.¹⁶ What sets these contemporary annual sessions apart from the accomplished panegyric court poets of the past is that a significant portion of current participants are always female poets of varying age, education, and poetic talent. Their public participation in these events is consistent with the Regime's expectation of religious women to be publicly active citizens supporting its patriarchal policies, which paradoxically releases religious women from cultural restrictions and the control of their fathers and husbands.¹⁷ One young female poet alludes to this by referring to the Leader as the saviour of religious women from their earlier twentieth-century confinement at home:



منم آن چادر قاجاری اصلی
که از ترس رضا خانی تمام عمر را خانه نشین مانده
تو اما باران بعد از یأس هستی
که داغش بر دل خشکیده این سرزمین مانده¹⁸

I am that genuine Qajarian chador¹⁹
Who has remained confined to home, fearing a Reza Khan²⁰
But you are the rain after losing hope
Whose mark is left on this land's parched heart.

The female participants in these annual events recite their poems composed in the convention of the ghazal, which combines songs about earthly love and courtly poetry.²¹ Not surprisingly, the ghazal was favoured by the late Ayatollah Khomeini and continues to be favoured by the current Supreme Leader who co-opted and promoted a political “revisionist take” on this genre.²² As early as the twelfth century, the fusion of the secular with the mystical in expressions of love infused the ghazal with an erotic “transcendental potential” for the expression of the poet’s emotions.²³ Peculiarities of this genre have thus allowed female poets in these annual events to express implicit erotic desire for the leader, even in the highly desexualized context of such gatherings. One of the key characteristics of the ghazal is that the lover is represented by the “lyrical persona” of the poet, which distinguishes the speaking voice from the person of the poet. Another unique characteristic of the ghazal is that the addressed beloved is never identified; instead,, his/her identity remains obscured by the rich repertoire of developed fantastic imagery borrowed from natural or heavenly phenomena (e.g., a garden, flowers, rain, the sun and the moon), or from the animal world kingdom (e.g., the nightingale or turtle-dove), or from the mineral world (e.g., rubies and pearls).²⁴

These established conventions of the ghazal have afforded female poets much flexibility in expressing erotically-charged desire and love implicitly aimed at the Supreme Leader. In one

¹⁸<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/video-content?id=30167>.

¹⁹A reference to a specific style of loose cloak (chador) worn by Iranian women over their other garments during Qajar Dynasty (1794-1925), which became the target Reza Shah’s ban in 1936.

²⁰A reference to Reza Shah’s public ban on women’s veils in 1936, which confined religious women to their home.

²¹For characteristics of the ghazal in classical Persian poetry, see De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, 53-61.

²²Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme*, 267, 311, and 341.

²³Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme*, 267, 311, and 341.

²⁴De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, 63-65.

²⁵<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=33442>.

²⁶Reference to a book by an older poet, Mirza Ali Muhammad, penname Asif (d. 1298 Shamsi/1919CE), who was from the same town as the poet.

such performative poem dated 1388/06/14 (September 5, 2009), for example, one female poet named Kobra Mousavai reads her poem entitled, “Your Eyes:”

چشم‌هایت
زبانزد همه اند و میان جان منند
چو شمس تبریزی شور ناگهان منند
تمام قونیه تا بلخ را در پی ات بودم
تویی که پرده چشمانت اصفهان منست
اگر چه اصفهان نصف جهان است اما
دو چشم عالم گیرت همه جهان منست
مخواب ای پری باغهای نیشابور
که پلک‌هایت پر و بال طوطیان منست
شبه لولی آشفته در تو تن شستم
که چشم‌های ترت جوی مولیان منست
سروشنامه آصف روایتی ساده است
از این دو پیغام آور که حرز جان منست
مخواه بی دل چشم‌های هندیت باشم
²⁵که شعرهایی چنین خارج از توان منست

Your Eyes

Are well-known by everyone, they are in the midst of my soul
Like Shams Tabrizi, they are a sudden outburst of my passion
I was looking for you all over Konya, all the way to Balkh
You, the curtain of whose eyes is my Isfahan
Even though “Isfahan is Half-the-World,” but
Your world-conquering eyes are my entire world
Don’t fall asleep, o fairy of Nishapur’s gardens
Because your eyelids are my parrots’ wings and feathers
Like a messy drunkard I washed my body in you
Because your wet eyes are like the Moulilian Creek
Asif’s Surūshnāmah²⁶ is a simple narrative
(So) bring me a message from these two (eyes), they are talis-
mans for my soul
Do not make me be a lover of your Hindu eyes
Because such poems are beyond my abilities.



With deft and moving imagery, this poem touches on established tropes of the Persian ghazal in addition to very well-known historical facts, persons, and places. For instance, the poet evokes the passion of the thirteenth-century antinomian Sufi Shams, the beloved of Rumi whose sudden disappearance caused much grief for Rumi.²⁷ It is reported that Rumi searched for Shams in Konya and sent people to find him in Syria, but here the sudden outburst of passion makes the poet search for her beloved from Konya, where Rumi lived and died, to Balkh, his birthplace. The beloved's eyes are compared to the splendid beauty of Isfahan, affectionately known as "Half-the-World," except the beloved's eyes are "the entire world" of the poet. The rest of the poem speaks of the beloved as the magical fairy in the beautiful gardens of Nishapur (an ancient city on the Silk Road located in the North East of Iran, the historical capital of a few dynasties), with colorful eyelids like the wings of a parrot. We are told that previous poets' books of poetry—Asif and his book, *Surūsh-nāmah*—are simplistic narratives; the real stories are in the eyes of her beloved with their talismanic, magical qualities. Weaving these imageries together speaks to the poet's impressive skill, but reading a sensual poem entitled "Your Eyes" while looking directly at the Supreme Leader's eyes makes it also profoundly personal and inevitably political.

In this way, Mousavai exploits the ambiguities of the classical ghazal to create a space for staging her personal experience of desire and love in the very moment of her reading, which goes against the Regime's strict censorship imposed on the event. She is entirely within the conventions of the ghazal, and recycles many of its tropes, but also diverges from the genre in appreciative ways. In the classical ghazal, the lover complains about the absence, indifference, or cruelty of the distant Beloved, the inaccessible Divine Being.²⁸ The sublimation of the beloved into an abstract plane is not a salient theme of this poem, however. Instead, for the poetic persona which Mousavai evokes, the experiences of her beloved's eyes and her adorations for them are more immediate, tangible, and personal. She cannot speak of

²⁷Franklin Lewis, *Rumi, Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: One World, 2000), 164-184.

²⁸De Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, 68.

the cruelty of the beloved that is a common theme in the ghazal, because that would no doubt push the poem into the realm of oppositional politics (i.e., a critique of the Supreme Leader). Let us not forget that in addition to the conventions of the classical ghazal, she has to conform to the strict ideological parameters set by the Regime. Yet, because it is her lyrical persona that is the speaking subject, she cannot be faulted for writing sensually about her adoration for her beloved's eyes, which could very well be assumed to be the Supreme Leader's.



Figure 3- A women presenting her poetry book to Supreme Leader

Women Poets' Desire

The subtleties of female poets' desires are noticeable in another erotic poem recited for the Supreme Leader (dated 2017). The young poet Tayebah Abbasi begins by offering the Supreme Leader, "the kindest greeting to the kindest father" (سلام به مهربان ترین پدر). It is significant that, like many other female poets, she looks directly and smiles at the Leader while uttering her greeting and reciting her poem. She continues:

گرچه در شب دلتنگی من صبح آهی نیست
ولی تا کوچه های شرقی العفو راهی نیست
مرا اشراق رویت کافی است ای نور قدوسی



که فیض دیگران - چون شمع - گاهی هست، گاهی نیست
برای آن کسی که لای شب بوها تو را می جست
به غیر از متن خوشبوی شقایق جان پناهی نیست
نظر بازی نباشد در مرام عاشقان، هیهات
که چشمم بی تماشای تو در بند نگاهی نیست
کجا باید تو را پیدا کنم هر جا که آهی هست
²⁹ کجا باید تو را پیدا کنم هر جا که راهی نیست

Even though there is no end to my desolate nights in the form
of a morning sigh
But the eastern alleys of forgiveness are not too far
The illumination (emanating from) your face is enough for me,
O sacred light
Because others' blessings are sometimes there, sometimes not,
(they are inconsistent) like
(the light of) a candle
For the one seeking you among night-scented flowers
There is no shelter except amid the fragrance of poppies
Exchanging amorous glances is not the way of lovers, far from
it
My eyes are not attracted to anyone's glance, except beholding
your pleasant sight
Where must I find you? Wherever there is a sigh
Wherever must I find you? Wherever there is no way out.

Here, Abbasi employs the formal conventions and richness of classical Persian love poetry such as “forgiveness” (العفو), “illumination” (اشراق), “sacred light” (نور قدوسی), “candle” (شمع), “blessing” (فیض) and “exchanging amorous glances” (نظر بازی), which give her poem a mystical quality and facilitate subtle expressions of love and desire. Similar to the previous poem, ambiguities of the ghazal makes it impossible to assert with certainty whether the addressee is the Supreme Leader or not. What is certain and significant, however, is the expression of desire by a female poet who longs for her beloved/lover. Similar to the previous poem by Mousavai, where the female poet's

³⁰Sirus Shamisa, *Shāhid-bāzī dar adabiyāt-i Fārsī* [Shahid-bazi in Persian Literature] (Tehran: Ferdows, 2002); Lloyd Ridgeon, "The Controversy of Shaykh Awhad al-Din Kirmani and Handsome, Moon-Faced Youths: A Case Study of Shahid-Bazi in Medieval Sufism," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 1 (2012): 3–30.

³¹On a side note, her poem would have been truly subversive if, like past male poets, she had eroticized a beardless young boy.

lyrical persona allowed her to express her embodied desire (to wash her body in the wetness of her beloved's eyes, for example) and her mobility (searching for her beloved across a vast geographical region), here, too, Abbasi's poetic voice speaks of her mobility (in alleyways of love), her vision (of the sacred light of love), her sense of smell (her lover's fragrance), and her sight (exchanging amorous glances with her beloved). The poem thus conveys not only a richness of multi-sensuousness, but also a sense of movement of the female author and the urgency of her longing; these latter two elements significant in a socio-political context in which women's movement and desires are subject to their male-guardians' whims and restricted to officially sanctioned boundaries.

Not only is she the speaking subject of this love poem, but the female poet is also the author of the gaze as she literally "exchanges" glances with the Leader (which are well captured in the video recording of the event). This real-life exchange is reiterated textually in the poem as she speaks of "exchanging amorous glances" between lovers. Notably, "exchanging amorous glances" (نظربازی) was the practice of male Sufis contemplating the Divine by gazing at the form of a beardless young boy.³⁰ Here, the poet confirms her fidelity to the established conventions of the mystical ghazal, but also authorizes herself to depart from the normative homoerotic glances directed at an adolescent boy.³¹ Instead, she turns her authorial gaze on her own beloved, the Supreme Leader. In this turn of the gaze, we can read an implicit declaration of her superiority over the classical male poets who turned to a worldly source (e.g., a young beardless boy) away from the Divine. She states instead that the path of love is not through exchanging amorous glances. Using the first person singular voice she declares herself superior because she is not distracted by gazing at anyone other than her beloved. In effect, she is returning the patriarchal gaze and objectifying the Leader who is bound by the decorum of the event to sit quietly for those few moments when the poem is being recited. For these few moments, at least, she is not a completely passive



recipient of the Regime's scheming nor subject to the Supreme Leader's "guidance." However temporarily, she becomes a speaking subject and the instigator of a counter gaze. In this way, Abbasi turns the ghazal into a medium for expressions of her playful fantasies, the Supreme Leader as the object of her love and the meeting hall as the site of broadcasting her message of desire.³²

³²As Marshal McLuhan would say, the ghazal is the message. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London and New York: Routledge, 1964, 2001), 7.

³³<https://www.mashregnews.ir/news/593741/> . Tir 3, 1395 [June 23, 2016].

These expressions of desire for the Supreme Leader have an embodied dimension that extends beyond the sanctioned evenings of poetry reading. Tayebeh Abbasi is quoted in news sources as describing the Leader as "more luminescent and kinder than I imagined." She goes on to express her intense desire for touching him when she sees him in a gathering that follows one of these meetings. Abbasi states that she could not believe she was in the same space as the Leader, "beside a Leader that I am in love with" (رهبری که عاشقش هستم!³³) She repeats her "love" for the Supreme Leader at the end of this piece as well, stating: "Take away everything that you wish from my heart / but not the love of my Leader (عشق رهبرم) even for a second." She ponders about seeing the Leader in person: "I said to myself, O God! How is all this grandeur (ابهت) gathered in addition to his Eminence's (حضرت آقا) flawless temperament (طبع روان) and his cheerful spirit (روحیه‌ی پرنشاط)?" She then goes on to express her intense desire to kiss his cloak (عبا):

The closer we got to the end of the session my heart would beat faster. The session ended and I ran uncontrollably towards the Light [the Leader]. I was two steps away from His Eminence the Moon (حضرت ماه), but his bodyguards did not let me kiss his cloak (عبا). ... I remained alone, and my tears, and my tears, and my tears.

The only thing that consoled her in those moments of uncontrollable crying, she says, was putting the ring that "His Eminence" had gifted her on her eyes. Receiving the Leader's personal ring referred to here is an important gesture that confers a

³⁴There are other “special” recipients of his ring(s) as well, like the families of martyrs and athletes. The historical roots of this gesture of gifting his own ring on special occasions go back to the Shia Imams, prophets and kings of the past. See, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi’ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 93; Khalid Sindawi, “‘Tell your Cousin to Place a Ring on his Right Hand and Set It with a Camelian’: Notes on Wearing the Ring on the Right Hand among Shiites,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 57.2 (2012): 295-320.

³⁵Torab, *Performing Islam*, 235.

³⁶Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 37-38.

³⁷Mahdi Tourage, *Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 37.

high prestige on the female poets who receive it. ³⁴ Here, Abbasi is not just bragging about her special status as a recipient of the Leader’s ring; rather, she infuses the ring with libidinal significance, “somatising” her erotic longing, to use Torab’s term. ³⁵

The Erotics of Desire

In these poetry readings, the Regime rigidly controls sexuality through sanitized language, dress code, and carefully arranged bodies in the space of the meeting hall. The entire sessions are set up to actively exclude sexual tension, but it is important to note how the “sexual” is different from the “erotic” and how theorizing the difference between the two is germane to the process of agentive production. On the one hand, sexuality is related to the instinctual drives, organic functions, and appetites that can be gratified as they ebb and flow in accordance with biological-psychological needs. ³⁶ The erotic, on the other hand, is tied to desire, and desire can never be fully articulated or satisfied. Desire is defined by the indefinite postponement of its fulfillment, similar to the erotic, which is defined as the perpetual deferral of consummation. ³⁷ In the poetry of female poets participating in these events, the erotics of desire are discursively constructed as expressions of love for the Supreme Leader, longing and yearning for physical contact with him (or by personal objects belonging to him). The Regime’s goal in organizing and regulating these sessions is to instrumentalize the poetics of desire in the service of its own power. However, the emancipatory potential of desire and the erotic exceeds the imposed disciplinary censorship of its setting.

There is a dialectical relation between the suppression of desire and the reproduction of pleasure. As the above examples demonstrate, the female poets’ conformity to the regulatory machinations of the Regime and Persian literary conventions conditions the greater possibility of the production of surplus meaning and an excess of pleasure. Their sensual venture into the rich stock of the Persian ghazal, as well as their libidinal



investment in embodied erotic gestures, are indicative of their agentival capacity to act in their own best interests. Their discursive erotic indulgences generate playful erotic fantasies that may also include the desire for submission. We can theorize this production of surplus pleasure through conformist creativity as *jouissance*, a position that blurs the lines dividing submission-resistance, conformity-defiance, or pain-pleasure binaries.³⁸ In this context, the denial of pleasure and the pleasure of denial are two sides of the same coin, so to speak. This is, then, an important instance of conformist agency not tied to a pre-defined “teleology of emancipation.”³⁹ A comparison with the liberatory form of agency rooted in sexuality is instructive here.

By way of contrast, consider one of Forugh Farrokhzad’s best known poems, “I Sinned,” where she speaks frankly of an intimate sexual affair. This apparently confessional poem has been considered by many to be a brave gesture of defiance against social and literary conventions, contributing to Farrokhzad’s reputation as an avant-garde poet. She is called a woman “who boldly followed the dictates of her heart, casting aside traditional norms if they stifled her individuality.”⁴⁰ “I Sinned” begins with these lines:

Beside a body, tremulous and dazed
I sinned, I voluptuously sinned.⁴¹

The poet goes on to express her desire for her lover, stating that “I want you, O mad lover of mine,” and describes their passionate kissing as “passion poured from his lips into mine.” The poem ends with these lines:

I sinned, I voluptuously sinned
in arms hot and fiery
I sinned in his arms
Iron-strong, hot, and avenging.

Many readers and translators of this poem have discerned an

³⁸In my formulation of “surplus pleasure” I am indebted to Jacques Lacan’s formulation of *jouissance*. See, Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 94.

³⁹Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2001): 210.

⁴⁰Marta Simidchieva, “Men and Women Together: Love, Marriage and Gender in Forugh Farrokhzad’s *Asir*,” in Forugh Farrokhzad, *Poet of Modern Iran: Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry*, ed. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Nasrin Rahimieh (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 19.

⁴¹Translations of this poem used here are by Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voice of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 143.

⁴²Milani, *Veils and Words*, 144.

⁴³For example, see Firouzeh Dianat, "Iranian Female Authors and 'The Anxiety of Authorship,'" in *Persian Language, Literature and Culture: New Leaves, Fresh Looks*, ed. Kamran Talattof (New York: Routledge, 2015), 337.

⁴⁴Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.

⁴⁵Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.

⁴⁶Homa Katouzian writes about Farrokhzad's feelings of guilt and remorse. See Homa Katouzian, "Of the Sins of Forough Farrokhzad," in *Forough Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran: Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry*, ed. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Nasrin Rahimieh (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 7-18.

emancipatory trajectory in its "transgressive" imagery. For example, Farzaneh Milani describes this poem as, "radical," containing "subversions of power and propriety," not an allegorical erotic poem "camouflaged by ... metaphors, symbols."⁴² These assessments suggest that liberatory narratives in the works of female authors are often made recognizable in ostensibly subversive acts that directly challenge oppressive patriarchal norms. These acts are usually expected to result in "social mistreatment," displacement, [and] psychological or economic consequences for the author.⁴³ However, as I indicated at the beginning of this essay, transgression cannot be the sole arbiter of agency. This is not to deny the emancipatory potential of transgression, but to underline its contextual and relational nature. In fact, some feminist theorists like Judith Butler have shown that transgression is "immanent to power," not external to it: "the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms."⁴⁴ In other words, transgression is inevitably located within constellations of power; transgression of one set of relations is conformity to another. Surely Farrokhzad's poem contains "violations of many codes,"⁴⁵ but these violations are contingent upon the tacit acknowledgement that the "sin" the poet is speaking of refers to her extra-marital affair with a married man. That is to say, this poem can be transgressively liberating only in relation to specific social codes and cultural coordinates. These assumptions invite us to ask: Would the poem not be more subversive of compulsory heteronormative monogamy if the female poet's lover were a woman? Would this poem still be radical, have literary significance, and be so widely anthologized if the subject matter was rape or incest? There is speculation about the psychological impact of this extra marital affair on the poet,⁴⁶ but what was the impact of this affair on the wife of Farrokhzad's married lover?

Butler further argues that transgressions are not pre-discursive constructs or inherently emancipatory, nor are the possibilities of agency foreclosed by the constitutive constraints of power. "The emancipatory model of agency" is surely "inspiring,"



writes Butler, but it suffers from the presumption that transgressive acts make a feminist subject accessible outside of relations of power.⁴⁷ For example, in Firouzeh Dianat's estimation, "Farrokhzad's poems about her feeling and perception of society have had revolutionary effects on women as they inspire them to stand up and present 'I.'"⁴⁸ If transgression is not a pre-discursive construct and the possibility of agency is not foreclosed by conformity to power, then what are the constraints of power on the production of agency? In Farrokhzad's poem, is agency produced by her use of the first person singular? Or is it produced by the subject matter of her poem, that is, a pleasurable sin? Should we look for the emergence of agency only where structures of power are confronted? Is Farrokhzad's poetry revolutionary because it is "feminine poetry?"⁴⁹ Female poets reading their sensual poems before the Supreme Leader, too, speak in their own personal voice. They speak of love and longing and desire to touch or be touched; one of them clearly tells the Leader before reading her poem that she is offering it "in a feminine way" as noted above. What these questions and observations tell us is that neither of these agential practices, neither transgressive agency nor conformist creativity, are outside the impositions of power. As Butler concludes, agency "is not a transcendental category, but a contingent and fragile possibility opened up in the midst of constituting relations."⁵⁰ Therefore, to augment Abu-Lughod's proposition with which I began, not just transgression but conformity can also be used as a diagnostic of power.

Concluding Remarks

The intersection and entanglements of power and erotic desire in these annual poetry reading sessions complicates the lines of presumed stability that distinguish transgression and conformity and privilege the latter over the former. As the examples discussed here demonstrate, transgression, conformity, as well as emancipation and resistance are not merely products of power, they are producers of it. Via Michel Foucault, Abu-Lughod

⁴⁷Judith Butler, "For a Careful Reading," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 136.

⁴⁸Dianat, "Iranian Female Authors," 346.

⁴⁹Peyman Vahabzadeh, "Rebellion Action and 'Guerrilla Poetry': Dialectics of Art and Life in 1970's Iran," in *Persian Language, Literature and Culture: New Leaves, Fresh Looks*, ed. Kamran Talattof (New York: Routledge, 2015), 108.

⁵⁰Butler, "For a Careful Reading," 137.

⁵¹Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978), 95-96; quoted in Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance," 42.

⁵²Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 15.

reminds us that power does not only work negatively by denying and restricting, but also positively by "producing forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, goods, and discourses."⁵¹ Therefore, the production of a feminist agency is not an event but a complex process. The female poets in these annual evenings of poetry reading are not simply subjects desired for their poetic talent and submission, they are also desiring subjects. In the transgressive mode of writing, agency is produced despite imposed limitations. In the conformist model, like the female poets reading their poetry in these annual events, it is produced because of their conformity. The Regime's express goal in these poetry reading nights aims to further consolidate its normative authority through the reproduction of the ghazal. However, it cannot entirely control its own revisionist take due to what the ghazal enables. Hence, the sophisticated resources of the classical Persian ghazal become particularly effective tools for female poets to voice their critique of their own circumstances under the Islamic Republic and to express their authorial voice and erotic desires. They rearticulate the ghazal and its tropes in ways that conform to but also exceed the original pre-modern context and the contemporary Regime's normative directives, confirming what theorists like Butler argue: that agency is "a reiterative and rearticulatory practice."⁵² Herein lies the significance of female poets reading their poetry before the Supreme Leader: their eroticized poems, gestures, even their veiled public presence open up discursive pathways towards pleasure, creativity, and agency in ways that have remained obscured precisely because of the general tendency to romanticize resistance and transgression.

