"*Yeki Bud, Yeki Nabud…*"

Farzaneh Milani

"*Yeki bud, yeki nabud*." Persian stories always begin with this paradoxical phrase, which, like "bir varmış, bir yokmuş," simply means: there was one and there wasn't one.[1] Throughout my childhood, "yeki bud, yeki nabud" was my key to a world of wonder and mystery.[2] Like Abracadabra, it had incantatory powers: now you see it, now you don't. It is so and it is not so. Bedazzled, I would throw open the gates of my ears and eyes and witness the birth of an enchanted world. On the wings of words, I would journey to a space of boundless possibilities where everything sounded real but was beyond my everyday reality. "Yeki bud, yeki nabud" was a reminder that every story is the ghost of the life that inspired it. It celebrated the birth of one while mourning the death of the other. It was the moment that eluded classification, when opposites lived in perfect harmony. Like dreams, like the unconscious, like nature in its infinite glory, it was a tangle of competing viewpoints. It was the reconciliation of the irreconcilable.

"Yeki bud, yeki nabud" was also a warning at the threshold of all stories. In its succinct and economical language, it questioned any notion of a singular truth, of a unified identity. It knew all too well that the mind creates its own elaborate, self-serving fictions, contaminating the story with shaky evidence. Refusing to choose one side or the other, it welcomed paradoxes and the elusive mutability of truth. It accepted the perpetual metamorphosis of life into death, of facts into fiction, of present into past and future. It was the conjunction but also the disjunction of life and its telling.

Before I knew it, however, childhood and its tantalizing tales came to an end. Chasing new dreams and different stories, I left my country and by leaving Iran, I became an Iranian. Uprooted and transplanted, I felt disoriented like a cat without whiskers. I looked every which way for a sense of familiarity and belonging. Immersed in discontinuities, I needed something solid to hold on to. Gradually, I adopted Iranian literature as my surrogate home, my portable homeland. It was a safe place to return to and from which to embark. I put down roots in it and found myself drawn, more than ever before, to the poetry of the contemporary poet, Forugh Farrokhzad. Against the advice of many, I decided to

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1 A shorter, slightly different version of this paper appeared in *The Southern Review*, summer 2002, V. 38, N. 3: 620-624.

2 "Yeki bud, yeki nabud" was often followed by "*gheyr as khoda hich kas nabud*," which means, "there was no one, but God." Although the appearing/disappearing act takes on a new meaning with this closure, the paradox remains the same. It refers to that mystical moment when God–or a literary equivalent–begins the act of creation. By seeing life in death and death in life, the storyteller can tell the story as if the dead were living.

write my dissertation on her life rather than on the life and fiction of the French novelist, Gustave Flaubert.

No full-length biography of Farrokhzad or, for that matter, of any Iranian woman, existed at the time. As for autobiographies, I could barely find any. A highly controversial singer/dancer, Banu Mahvash, and a well-known political activist, Malakeh E'tezadi, were the only women who had published their "life stories." In a sex-segregated society, women and their images are concealed behind tall walls, mandatory veils, and codes of silence. In a culture that idealizes women's public anonymity, publishing life narratives is the ultimate act of unveiling.[3]

Farrokhzad, however, was an exception. She constructed her artistic universe around the individual and the individualizing perspective, becoming a figure of intense controversy in the process. Invented and re-invented with an amazing abandon, she elicited scandalized attention and voyeuristic fascination. While living a rich and iconoclastic life with plenty of events to whet the appetite of any biographer, she produced poetry more autobiographical than had ever been attempted in Iran.

Criticized for her outrageous exhibitionism and accused of self-absorption, Farrokhzad became fair game in shameless snatch-and-publish operations. She suffered the transformation of her chosen privacy into a public spectacle. Tabloids masquerading as literary journals and investigative reporters turned literary critics made no distinction between life and art, fact and fiction, biographical data and tattletale.

With her reputation tarnished, her pioneering contribution to Iranian literature trivialized, Farrokhzad reacted bitterly to the sensation-seeking interest in her personal life, an interest that all too often replaced the more serious attention that her work deserved. Showing a pronounced aversion to giving even the scantiest biographical data on herself, she dismissed all personal questions. Shortly before her untimely death in 1967, when she was asked to talk about her life in a radio interview, she dismissed the question. "Good heavens!" she protested. "Discussing this seems to me a rather boring and useless task."

To my chagrin, finding biographical data on this most autobiographical poet was not easy. Farrokhzad was not granted any academic recognition in her lifetime. She was never appointed as a poet in residence or a distinguished visiting professor in any institution; she was never awarded honorary doctorates; she was never asked to deliver a series of lectures, temptingly titled "Farrokhzad on Farrokhzad," in which she would delineate the magical transformation of a living

[3] Paradoxically, in the last few years, autobiographies and memoirs have become the preferred genre among Iranian women living in diaspora. See Dumas 2003, Hakkakian 2004, Goldin 2003, Nafisi 2003, Ramazani 2002, Satrapi 2003, Satrapi 2004, Satrapi 2005, and Moaveni 2005, among many others.

woman into beautifully crafted and composed words. No university, library, or research center housed her papers, letters, unpublished poems, or manuscripts.

Farrokhzad herself was not a self-documenting person. She did not keep a journal. Although she was a prolific correspondent, her letters were hitherto unpublished. I did not have at my disposal tapes of her therapy sessions or stacks of letters safely tucked away in some attic. By comparison to those lucky biographers who have records, manuscripts, and intimate source materials available to them, I found myself developing an acute case of access-envy and archive blues.

My plan of amassing information through interviews was also thwarted at every turn. Various men who claimed to have been Farrokhzad's lovers were all too eager to share their experiences. But those closest to the poet either refused to be interviewed or were unavailable. In fact, some of the most influential people in her life have granted no interviews then or now. Finally, when I met Ebrahim Golestan, a prominent novelist/filmmaker and Farrokhzad's lover for the last eight years of her life, he was quick to ask me why instead of Farrokhzad's biography I did not consider writing a cookbook in English. "Persian cuisine is exquisitely delicious," he told me with great conviction, "imagine what a contribution such a book will be."

Frustrated with the result of my interviews, trained to collect factual documents and surviving evidence, incapable of living with the anxiety of ambiguity that my research had generated, I settled for the easy way out. I did not want a keyhole view of Farrokhzad's life nor was I interested in turning into, what Janet Malcolm calls, a "professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers" (Malcolm 1993: 86), and triumphantly bearing my loot away. If Farrokhzad was so reticent about sharing biographical information, I argued conveniently in the introduction to my dissertation (Milani 1979: 13), who gave me the right to invade her privacy? I promised to put my biographical passion on hold until the day I knew the "facts" of her life.

Switching from poet to poetry, from biography to autobiography disguised as literary criticism, I opted for an analysis of Farrokhzad's work. With passion and urgency, I portrayed her as an exile in her own country, a woman who refused silence and exclusion by exploring new territories, re-scripting the plot of her life, recreating her own language, and reconstructing her style with little help from tradition. I saw in her art my own skirmishes as an immigrant and characterized it as a struggle against cultural conventions. I argued that it demonstrates a dizzying, dazzling mobility, a refusal to be confined within familiar boundaries, certainties, and norms while portraying simultaneously a sense of homelessness, of exile. Farrokhzad's poetry, I concluded, personifies the pleasures of hybridization, of mingling the old and the new, but also its many pains and problems.

While I wrestled with my biographical conundrums, the dramatic fate of a movie by the Syrian-American director, Moustaffa Akkad, attracted my attention. A multi-million dollar project, *Mohammad, the Messenger of God*, was the first

cinematic biography of the Prophet. Beginning in the year 610 when Prophet Mohammad received his first revelation, it followed his rise as the spiritual and political founder of Islam. The director, a Muslim, had taken extra precautions not to offend Muslim sensibilities. He had submitted his script to Islamic scholars to be checked for historical accuracy and orthodoxy. More importantly, he had made sure not to impersonate Prophet Mohammed. The title character never appears in *Mohammad, the Messenger of God*. He is never seen or heard.[4] No actor plays his role. We see people address him, but never see him talk. We see the head of his camel, but not him riding the camel. We see his sword, but not his hand holding the sword.

Despite these preventive measures, the premiere of the film in March 1977 was halted by a small band of American Muslims who took 132 hostages in three Washington buildings for 38 hours.[5] One reporter was shot dead; four people were wounded. The gunmen found the film sacrilegious and demanded its immediate banning. The film was pulled on its opening day. To forestall further protest, the prophet's name was removed from the title, which became simply *The Message*. Still, the opposition was not appeased. There were demonstrations and bomb threats. A riot broke out in Pakistan. All Islamic countries, except Libya, banned the film.

The Grand Sheik, Abdel Halim Mahmoud of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, captured in a nutshell the major objection to the film. "The Koran is revelation," he announced, "and the life of the Prophet is a divine commentary on that revelation. The idea of them being portrayed by others is particularly offensive" (quoted in Schickel 1977: 17). Which others, I wondered, make the portrayal of the Prophet so particularly "offensive"? Who is and who is not allowed to offer commentaries on divine commentaries? What else lies at the core of this heretical violation of propriety? After all, the massive body of reports, called *Hadith* in Arabic, presents a more comprehensive biography of the Prophet Mohammad than any other man of his time or any prophet who preceded him. Second in authority only to the Qur'an, these biographical reports form an important part of Islamic canonical law. For fourteen centuries, the study of Mohammad's life has been and continues to be a crucial part of a Muslim scholar's education.

In *The Seductions of Biography,* Barbara Johnson writes, "There are always at least two people competing for control over the story of a life. Sometimes they are the biographer and the subject, sometimes the biographer and the Guardians of the subject's estate" (Rhiel and Suchoff [eds.] 1966: 119). In the Islamic world,

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4 "Akkad has solved part of the problem by having a tiny light bulb on the Panavision camera just above the lens. In all scenes where characters and crowds act or react to the Prophet, the 6-watt bulb is Mohammed's immanence." See Popular Epic: 24.

5 For a detailed description of these events, see *The New York Times*, Thursday, 10 March 1977; and *Time*, 21 March 1977, Vol. 109, no 12.

the clerics, the official scholars, have had total control over the biography of the Prophet Mohammad and, by extension, all life narratives. As guardians of his "authentic" biography and its "approved" commentary, they have disallowed anyone to appropriate their role. The film director and the camera, the storyteller, the painter, and the religiously untrained biographer are not permitted to intrude into the telling of lives. That would make them surrogate priests.

Identifying with Akkad's difficulties, deeply troubled by the violent reactions to his film, and aware of my own failure in writing Farrokhzad's biography, I became convinced that life narratives are misfits in the Islamic world.[6] A barrier as solid and forbidding as a veil seemed to cover private selves and forbid self-revelation and self-referentiality. This cultural context, I thought, insists upon a sharp separation between the inner and the outer, the private and the public. It is not conducive to the development of personal narratives and their generic uncovering of the self.

I found myself more and more fascinated by the openness and transparency of American culture. The first entry in my diary upon arrival was the observation that "there are no walls around the houses here." I came from Iran where walls and veils abounded. I came from a land where even paradise was imagined as a garden surrounded by celestial walls. Having been used to enclosures, equating openness with vulnerability and danger, I wondered how Americans felt protected in open spaces. Soon, I took this absence of walls as a metaphor for the up-front nature of verbal and nonverbal codes of communication in America. I was delighted to see self-narration as an acknowledged right of all Americans (in fact, their favorite pastime). I had never seen so many people eagerly recount their lives in books, magazines, on radio and television, in films, and in therapy sessions. Month after month, year after year, autobiographies were on the best-seller lists. People made autobiographical statements on their license plates. They marketed their confessions for mass consumption. They competed for airtime to sensationalize their private lives on talk shows.

Viewing Iran as an essentially self-effacing culture, I chose veiling–this portable wall–as the new topic for my research. For well over a decade, I studied the cultural significance and corollary of the veil. Finally, I concluded that in a

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6 I was not the only person presenting life narratives as cultural and literary misfits in the Middle East. In *Middle Eastern Lives*, the first book devoted to the topic, Marvin Zonis contended, "autobiography and biography are not yet part of the genres of literature in the Middle East" (See Kramer 1991: 61). Others compared the New Testament and the Qur'an regarding each religion's views on life narratives. In his biography of Prime Minister Hoveida, Abbas Milani stated, "The gospels, as the fount of Christianity, are essentially composed of four, sometimes conflicting, biographical narratives… In the Koran, on the other hand, the world and the word are created to show the glory of God. The prophet Mohammed, about whose life very little is offered and no ambiguity is tolerated, enters the narrative only to carry out the commands of his lord" See Milani 2000: XI.

veiled society, women are not the only ones veiled. The concrete, the specific, and the personal are also veiled. Communication is veiled. In a veiled society, I maintained, walls surround houses, dissimulation conceals heretic tendencies; houses become compartmentalized into inner and outer areas; abstractions supplant concreteness; art becomes impersonal; life narratives are rare. In such a society, there is no tradition of confession in either its Catholic sense or that practice's secular modern counterpart, psychotherapy.

It took me years to realize that in America, other kinds of walls existed. Many times, with eyes wide open, I stumbled over those walls, mile by glorious mile of invisible walls. Heaven knows how often, like an untrained dog, I ploughed right through the invisible fence and found myself trespassing on someone else's privacy. I asked indiscreet questions. I volunteered the wrong answers. I looked too closely when I should have averted my eyes. I listened with rapt attention when I should have pretended not to hear.

I did not realize invisible walls abounded in America. It took me several years and many embarrassing moments to understand how privacy could be protected without perceptible walls. The idea of invisible fences was alien to me. Eventually, I had to admit that this compulsively self-narrating culture has its own codes of silence, its own veils, its own walls. Open about certain issues, even its over-the-top kind of confessors consider certain topics off limits.

My acclimatization to American society taught me that life, like Truth, is covered with numerous veils. Finally, I had to acknowledge to myself that we reveal or conceal the truth of ourselves in the poems we craft, in the stories we spin, in the life narratives we produce. Perhaps biographies and autobiographies are not only means of self-expression but also invisible walls we erect to protect the unsaid and the irrepressible. Perhaps there is always another curtain to part, another layer to discard, another veil to rend. And there is always the desire to unveil, to uncover, to find creative channels for self-expression. I now believe that biographies and autobiographies in their modern, Western sense are like houses without walls around them. They simply claim to conjoin the private and the public, the inner and the outer. Iranians may not have written many life narratives of this kind, but, surely, they have interwoven the fabric of their lives in their art. I simply had to discard my narrow definition of biography and autobiography and look differently in different places.

I came to a humbling revelation that I simply cannot seize control of Farrokhzad's life; that, in fact, the self refuses to be fully narrated, to become a text, to be reduced to a language construct. Like the morning breeze on a beautiful spring day, a lived life is un-trappable. Like the sun in high noon, it is majestic, but cannot be looked at with naked eyes. Life, like truth, is covered with numerous veils. The more I unveil, the more there is to unveil.

Equipped with this liberating knowledge and twenty-five years of continued fascination with Farrokhzad's poetry, I have returned to my aborted project. Al-

though I can't claim to know Farrokhzad more intimately, I am ready to write my version of her life. This time, relying on the wisdom of millions of storytellers over thousands of years, I will begin my tale of Forugh Farrokhzad, with "yeki bud, yeki nabud."

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