Oh My Lot is This

The Eternal Life and Words of Forough Farrokhzad:

A Commentary on Social Justice and Female Sexuality in Modern Iran

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Introduction

The tragically short, but exuberant life and influential legacy of poet and artist Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967) is one that many Iranians have deemed a Javdaneh Forough; an eternal fire.¹ Forough has been revered for the boldness and intimacy her poetry invoked, the ways in which she broke new grounds with her modernist form and for her uncensored commentary on Iranian struggles with sexuality, religion, nationalism, and modernity.² Her position within modern Iranian poetry has been critically examined by scholars for her contribution to modernist literary style, her outspokenness as a female poet, and for the legacy she left behind; for the eternal fire her words sparked. Forough, through her iconoclastic and erotic verses, was able to transcend personal experience and “tell a larger national story” of the social injustices and intricacies of modernity that troubled her generation.³ By historicizing her life and deconstructing her poetry, I argue that Forough embodied the formation of a unique womanhood and female sexuality in modern Iran.

Undoubtedly, Forough is the most significant voice in Iranian women’s poetry and that alone would be enough to consider her work and life an important facet of Iranian history. In addition, Forough is considered one of Iran’s leading modernist poets, a prominent intellectual, and some argue that she is, “the most Persian of the Persian modernist poets”, for her ability to so accurately and effortlessly depict imageries and realities of Iranian life in her poems.⁴ Her poetry was able to embody the complex and complicated entanglements of old and new, Western and Persian, and tradition and modernity that characterized Iran’s political and social milieu of the time. In this sense, understanding the events that shaped her life and deconstructing

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⁴ Bitter Loss, 53.
Forough’s poetry, provides a glimpse into the intricacies and struggles of the Iranian people, especially women, during the twentieth century. Foroughs’ verses reflect the independence, intimacy, sexuality, and modern sensibility she grappled with in her everyday experiences and which she embodied in her poetry.

Each of Foroughs’ collections provide a unique and intimate autobiography of her life and eye-opening commentaries on the various social and sexual constraints and expectations she faced, along with her rebellious transformations. Even from her youth and modest beginnings, Forough exhibited the subtle signs of those spirited sparks and the internal inferno within her; burning for a release. Her early works, *The Captive* and *The Wall*, showcase the way Forough confronts traditional sexual anxieties and was acclaimed for its open and honest dialogue about her sexuality and sexual desires; pushing the boundaries and challenging society’s legal and moral control over women’s lives. Her third collection, *Rebellion*, embodied a formative transition for Forough, in poetic vision and lifestyle. She later described the work as, “the hopeless thrashing of arms and legs between two stages of life… the final gasps for breath before a sort of release.” Her last and most exalted collection, *Reborn*, exemplifies Forough’s growing political focus and her transformation into a cornerstone of the Iranian intellectual community. In these last poems, Forough’s work had reached a level of maturity and had achieved a political and social voice that was unmatched and immortal.

### From Tinder to Flame: Forough’s Modest Beginnings to Her Poetic Ignitions

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7 *A Lonely Woman*, 34.
8 *Sin Selected Poems*, xxvii.
Just as there can be no flame without the kindling that feeds the fire, no person’s life and developmental trajectory can be fully understood without acknowledgement of their past. Many of the leading scholars on Forough and her work believe that, “her poetry was the verbal expression of her life”, and therefore her upbringing and early life experiences are imperative in understanding the formation of her character and the circumstances that inspired her earlier collections.\(^9\) The *Javdaneh Forough* was born Forughzaman Farrokhzad in Tehran, on the fifth of January, 1935, to a middle class family of seven children.\(^10\) Forough was born and raised in the throes of “dramatic changes and comprehensive, if superficial, modernization and westernization” in Iran, which was implemented by monarch Reza Shah Pahlavi.\(^11\) Forough’s family was headed by her authoritarian father, a career military officer and a member of the Cossack Brigade, who wholeheartedly supported Pahlavi’s nationalist, secular and westernizing policies. Aside from his authoritarian nature, Forough does credit her father with “stimulating intellectual and artistic curiosity” in all of her siblings and educating her, as well as her two sisters, in a society where women were vastly illiterate.\(^12\)

Forough and her mother also had a very strained and arduous relationship. Forough’s sisters describe their mother as being a slave to the rules and an enforcer of order; running the household through harsh regimentation and discipline. Forough often draws upon a specific image of her mother, pregnant and crying alone on the edge of the bed, trying to cope with the news that her husband is passionately in love with another woman; all the while Forough is

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\(^11\)*A Lonely Woman*, 5.
\(^12\) Ibid, 6.
watching her through a keyhole. This memory, of her mother in such a vulnerable and weak state, is an interesting juxtaposition to her mother's controlling and rigid nature. Puran, Forough’s sister, opines that it was actually their regimented upbringing and emphasis on rules and obedience that, “contributed to Forough’s later outspokenness and determination to be independent”, which would define her life and her poetry. By the age of sixteen, Forough was already embracing her passions in the arts and her independent spirit. That same year, Forough became enamored of her distant relative, Parviz Shapur, who was fifteen years her senior, and within a year they were married, living in the small city of Ahvaz together, and Forough gave birth to her first and only child; her son, Kamyar.

Soon after the birth of her son, in the summer of 1954, Forough begins to publish some of her earliest works of poetry and starts to make frequent trips to Tehran to meet up with editors. Within these earliest poems, Forough acknowledges that her marriage is failing and by the fall of 1954, begins to write about a lover in Tehran:

“Come here, o self-centered male creature,
come open the door of the cage.
I am that bird, that bird who for a long time
has had thoughts in her head of flying…
Come open the door so that

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13 Sin Selected Poems, xxvii
14 A Lonely Woman, 6.
15 Forough Farrokhzad Poet of Modern Iran, 2.
I might spread my wings
toward the bright sky of poetry.
If you allow me flight,
I will become a flower
in the rose garden of poetry…”

Later in that same poem, Forough refers to herself as being “in that prison whose jailer you were,” possibly speaking to her lover in Tehran or her husband in Ahvas. Either way, Forough begins, in this poem and others published in 1954, to express her feelings and fears of being bound and suffocated by the constraints of a traditional married life in Iran. It is within this mindset and anxious environment that Forough writes and publishes her first collection, called The Captive, in the summer of 1955.

In this collection of forty-four poems, Forough speaks with a “serious, searching” and overall unsatisfied tone. Her revolutionary approach to writing about love and sensuality, in this collection, pushed the boundaries of what was accepted by Iranian women, and how love had been historically depicted in Persian literature. Instead of the women being the subject of desire, Forough made men, their bodies, and their love, her poetic subjects, and the center of her passionate and sexual desires. While radiating with sensuality, vitality and hope, these poems also reflect Forough’s palpable cage and constraints; the conflicting emotions and doubts she is grappling with as a young wife, mother, woman, and poet. While this collection does not reflect an explicitly Iranian environment or situation, it does establish Forough’s unique feminine perspective as being modern, as opposed to traditional; an aspect that would draw many

17 A Lonely Woman, 14.
18 Ibid, 16.
19 Sin Selected Poems, xx
modernists and like minded women to her work. Forough’s commentary on female sexuality in *The Captive* was unparalleled at the time and the way she, “wrote of sexuality with fresh candor and from an unabashedly female point of view”, sparked the first flames in her short, but incredible eventful and explosive career.

Shortly after the release of her first collection, *The Captive*, Forough’s attempted reconciliation of her marriage with Shapur failed and she filed for divorce. In the divorce, Forough’s husband was awarded custody of their son, Kamyar, due to Forough’s multiple, and documented, affairs. Forough later admitted that she knew she was not prepared to raise her child, or continue her life as a housewife because her “personal and professional” commitment to poetry and her desire for an independent life meant more to her at that moment of her life. Forough acknowledges the reality of her situation and the reasons for her inner conflict and decisions in her poem, *The Abandoned House*:

“\[I know now that from that distant home life’s happiness has flown away. I know now that a child in tears grieves over separation from his mother. But I, upset and weary of spirit, head toward desire’s road. My lover is poetry, my solace is poetry. I am going to seek my lover.\]”

Forough often reflects on her troublesome relationship with her son, and the thought of him resenting her or thinking that she abandoned him, is a “source of great sorrow and constant

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20 *A Lonely Woman*, 16-17.
21 *Forough Goes West*, 106.
22 *A Lonely Woman*, 23.
torment” in her life and expressed within her work.\(^{24}\) Through this tumultuous point in her life, Forough refused to evade her feelings and instead turned to her poetry as a tool of self-exploration and self-expression. It was in these moments of self-reflection, that Forough composed one of her most famous and controversial poems, *The Sin*, about a passionate affair she had with a lover from Tehran. The quatrain sequence\(^{25}\) is saturated in sexual desire and titillating imagery. It begins with the scandalous stanza:

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“I have sinned a rapturous sin
in a warm inflamed embrace.
Sin in a pair of vindictive arms,
arms violent and ablaze.”\(^{26}\)
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This poem was groundbreaking, not only because Forough openly celebrates committing a carnal sin, but in this work she unashamedly expressed an “intimately feminine point of view”, which conflicted with ‘traditional’ cultural mores and Iranian literary style of the time.\(^{27}\) When the poem was first published in 1955 in *Rowshanfekr*, a popular literary journal in Tehran, it received harsh criticism from the conservative circles of the society, but would later be remembered for the radical and empowering effects it had on Iran’s literary scene, especially for women.

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\(^{24}\) *Sin Selected Poems*, xxi.

\(^{25}\) A quatrain sequence is a type of stanza, or an entire poem, consisting of four lines.


\(^{27}\) *Sin Selected Poems*, xxi.
Shortly after she published *The Sin*, Forough struggled to handle the stress of divorce, social criticism, rejection, and the painful separation from her son, and fell ill. In early September of 1955, Forough suffered from a nervous breakdown and was admitted to Rezai Psychiatric Clinic where they began giving her electroshock therapy. During her hospitalization, Nader Naderpur, one of the most prominent and popular poets in Iran in the late 1950s, frequently visited Forough and recalls that she was often, “distraught… and delirious”, and had developed a, “new aggressiveness in her personality.”\(^{28}\) Shortly after her release, Forough and Naderpur spent much time together and quickly developed a relationship; the first close relationship Forough had developed with another notable literary figure. Naderpur had a reputation as a young modernist poet and introduced Forough to the innovative and contemporary literary circles in Tehran, which he frequented. Their relationship was passionate and enabled Forough to make connections and grow as a writer, but it only last a few months and by mid-March 1956, it was over.\(^{29}\) In the aftermath of her hospitalization and her brief romance with Naderpur, Forough publishes her second collection, called *The Wall*, in 1956.

The poems and mood of *The Wall*, was in many ways, a natural continuation of the sentiments expressed in her first collection, *The Captive*.\(^{30}\) This collection is a commentary on the sense of “bondage” imposed on Forough, and Iranian women, both by love and by their society and cultural norms.\(^{31}\) While *The Captive* portrays the nuanced predicaments of the modern Iranian women, *The Wall*, aims to reflect on the suffocating state and sense of captivity these women, and herself, endure. Like many other women in Iran during the mid-1950s, Forough would have been the subject of conflicting views; held amidst the undercurrent of

\(^{28}\) *A Lonely Woman*, 26.
\(^{29}\) Ibid, 26-27.
\(^{30}\) *A Lonely Woman*, 29.
\(^{31}\) *Sin Selected Poems*, xxii.
strong traditional assumptions and the opposing waves of modernity which questioned and challenged those societal boundaries. Forough grapples with these contradictions and societal transformations in her poem, *Lost*:

“I keep asking the wretched mirror:  
Tell me, who am I in your eyes?  
but I can vividly see that I am not  
even a shade of the woman I used to be…  
Yes, this is me, but so what?  
She who was in me is gone, gone.  
I mumble furiously, insanely,  
Who was she? Who?”

Through her frustration and confusion, Forough considers the “vulnerability of a woman who rejects unreflective conformity” of the past, and yet still struggles with the uncertainties of the future. In these two earlier works, *The Captive* and *The Wall*, Forough explores the conflicting currents and impulses of a woman's life, through her intimate expression of sexuality and sensuality, and the employment of a revolutionary female point of view within her literary style. These collections embrace and represent the plight of the emergent modern Persian womanhood.

**Burning Through Barriers: From Rebellion to Rebirth**

Shortly after the release of *The Wall*, Forough left Tehran for the first time and began a nine-month

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33 Forugh Farrokhzad Poet of Modern Iran, 5.
34 Ibid, 3-5.
excursion through Europe, in attempts to escape the “cruel circle of male dominated literati” that was Tehran.\textsuperscript{35} This trip allowed Forough space to breathe, and strengthened her health and sanity. Separation from Tehran encouraged Forough to reflect on her previously captive and caged position as a women in Iran, and inspired her third collection in 1958, rightfully titled, \textit{Rebellion}. This collection exhibited significant differences from her first two collections and marked a clear shift and evolution in Forough’s literary style and tone.\textsuperscript{36} In these poems, Forough begins to contemplate and unpack the, complex “relationship between personal agonies and social quandaries” and broadens her narrative to include more than just her individual struggles.\textsuperscript{37} In \textit{Rebellion}, Forough displays a clear departure from the self and the development of a collective voice, “on behalf of a collective revolt, transcending the earlier boundaries of her personal experiences.”\textsuperscript{38} Forough, in these poems, was able to use her intimate personal narratives to comment on social aspects, such as identity, theology, and free will, in order to engage a wider audience.

The collection, in its entirety, embodies a mood and a specific anger that is reminiscent of the tone used in debates among intellectuals in the late 1959s and 1960s. Through her commentary on larger social questions and inconsistencies, Forough acknowledges that these contradictions are not limited to her personal perceptions of individuality, but instead permeate throughout the, “social fabric of society, philosophy, religious beliefs, and identity”, in a modern Iran.\textsuperscript{39} In her poem, \textit{Divine Rebellion}, Forough’s criticism of Iran’s current state, the social oppression and corruption and her discontent towards it is increasingly clear:

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Sin Selected Poems}, xxii.
\textsuperscript{37} Forough Farrokhzad Poet of Modern Iran, 87.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 87.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 87.
“Weary of divine asceticism,  
at midnight in Satan’s bed  
I would seek refuge in the downward slopes  
of fresh sin.  
I would choose at the price of  
the golden crown of godhood,  
the dark and painful pleasure  
of sin’s embrace.”

Her trip to Europe restored Forough’s energetic spirit and allowed her to look back on Iran and evaluate the society and her life in critical and innovative ways. In this collection, Forough would often take personal struggles and emotions and place them within a more modern and politicized context. For example, in her piece, A Poem for You, Forough takes the very personal and emotional subject of her estranged relationship with her son, and places it within the context of Iran’s socio-political situation and anxieties about the future, in order to appeal to a wider audience and build up a collective voice.

The poem begins:

“This is the last lullaby I sing  
by your cradle  
My dear sweetheart,  
Our town  
Has long become Satan’s nest  
The day will come when  
Your rueful eyes will  
Glide over this pained song;  
Searching for me in my words,  
you will say inwardly:

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41 Forugh Farrokhzad Poet of Modern Iran, 88.
Both of these pieces embody Forough’s transition from the personal to the collective, from naivety to a critical outlook, and the overall politicized tone of *Rebellion*. Her mood was reminiscent and reflective of the pessimistic characteristics of many modernist Iranian poets towards the social and political conditions throughout the post-Mosaddeq, pre-Khomeini era. For Forough, *Rebellion* marked the point when she was able to escape and move past the feelings of captivity and enclosing walls that had, for so long, hindered her growth. In this transitionary period, Forough matured, personally and within her poetry, and she refers to this time, and *Rebellion*, as, “the hopeless thrashing of arms and legs between two stages of life… the final gasps for breath before a sort of release.” That “release” would result in Forough’s most renowned and enduring collections, *A Rebirth*.

**An Eternal Fire: Another Birth to the Transcendence of Death**

In 1958, shortly after the publication of *Rebellion*, Forough finds a job at the Golestan Film Studio and quickly builds a relationship with manager Ebrahim Golestan and they become lovers. Golestan, a controversial writer and cinematographer, was married at the time and their affair leads to further scandal and social criticism of Forough’s sexual actions. Despite the negative attention, Forough and Golestan become close and passionate lovers, and Forough considered Golestan, and their relationship, “of paramount importance”, to her until her death. Forough was drawn to Golestan’s confidence, success, revolutionary ideals, and his independent manner. In a poem dedicated to Golestan titled *My Beloved*, Forough describes her lover as someone who:

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43 *A Lonely Woman*, 35.
44 *A Lonely Woman*, 38.
“like nature
has an unavoidable, frank meaning.
In conquering me, he
confirms
the candid law of power.
He is savagely free
like a healthy instinct
deep in an uninhabited island.”

Golestan was actively involved in the engaged intellectual art circles and integrated Forough into these literary and cinematic communities. These artists were heavily influenced by “idealistic revolutionary discourse” and modernist thought, and as Forough began to embed herself deeper into these circles, she experienced a shift in her social and stylistic representations. This shift was embodied in her fourth collection, titled Another Birth, published in 1963.

Another Birth, from the moment it was published, received raving reviews within the literary scene and, “modernist critics immediately hailed it as a milestone in the short history of modernist Persian poetry.”46 The literary community acknowledged this collection as proof that Forough had transformed from a ‘poetess’ to a remarkable poet and that she had reached an untouchable level of maturity, in both content and form.47 The collection’s stylistic redirection was aimed at broadening poetic concerns, imagery, and diction to embody political symbolism which could be voiced through the colloquial language of the common Persian; effortlessly and accurately portraying Iranian reality. While Forough alludes to the past in this collection, and insights nostalgia, the narrator does not desire what is old or known, but instead there is, ‘an

45 Farrokhzad, Forough, Ma’shuq-e Man (My Beloved), Another Birth. Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1964, 78-82.
46 A Lonely Woman, 48.
47 Sin Selected Poems, xxvi.
immense sense of urgency for a revolt” within these works.\textsuperscript{48} Forough’s poetic and personal rebellion echoed the desire for social change, challenge to the status quo, and advocated for the implementation of a ruling structure that is attuned to the needs of the masses. In Forough’s piece, \textit{I Feel Sorry for the Garden}, she reflects on the explosive social events, as well as the rise in a militant leftist discourse, through revolutionary symbolism:

\begin{quote}
“Instead of flowers,
Out neighbors plant
bombs and machineguns in their gardens.
Our neighbors
cover their tiled ponds,
Turning them into
Secret storerooms of gunpowder.
And our neighbors’ children
fill their schoolbags
\end{quote}

With little bombs.”\textsuperscript{49}

In many of her narratives that articulate social revolt, Forough acknowledges the disappointments or broke promises of the society, but counters them with hope and achievements expressed in a dreamlike state. Forough used metaphors to expresses this dreamlike desire for revolutionary change that characterized leftist and Marxist poetry at the time. This political symbolism was apparent in her most famous works from this collection, \textit{Earthly Verse, To Ali His Mother Said One Day, Rebirth,} and \textit{O Jewel-studded Land}.

\textit{O Jewel-studded Land}, was a satirical poem named after the Pahlavi era’s patriotic anthem, which mocked the regime and their ‘modern’ innovations. The poem begins with Forough, exalted with mocking joy as she receives her \textit{shenasnameh}, her identity card:

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{48} Forough Farrokhzad Poet of Modern Iran, 89.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 90.
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“I’ve won
I registered myself…
my worries are over now
in the homeland’s loving bosom.
My pacifier: glorious historical traditions,
my lullaby: civilization and culture…
my worries are now over.”

Forough, in this stanza, aims to highlight how the speaker’s worries have just begun, because identity cards, in this context, are merely tools of social control to legitimize the protection that the Pahlavi regime offers through its “highly bureaucratised legal system.” Forough, in this poem, also comments on the degradation of Iranian’s rich culture and tradition, due to empty superficiality of modern life, such the country’s newfound obsession with the materialistic lottery and plastic roses. She paints an environment in Iran which has lost its authenticity and all its ties to true Iranianess; eliciting a response from the readers to revolt against these unnatural and detrimental social norms and practices.

In this final collection, Forough’s personal and social aspirations “merge ingeniously” to provide her writing with a new depth of voice, which resulted in some of her most memorable and enduring pieces; one of those being her poem, Rebirth. Rebirth is intimate, provocative, intricate, imaginative, and reflective. Forough, in this masterpiece, grapples with the power and meaning of religion, secular entanglements with religious sentiments, the development of happiness, the evolution of love, the significance of memories, life and death. The entirety of the poem can be interpreted as a transition from dark to light and a commentary on the fragility of

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51 A Lonely Woman, 52.
52 Forugh Farrokhzad Poet of Modern Iran, 91.
human life. The speaker is reviewing her life and deciphering what in life is important and what aspects are fleeting or permanent on this journey:

“The journey of a form along the line of time
an inseminating the line of time with the form,
a form consciousness of an image,
returning from a feast in the mirror.
And it is in this way
that someone dies
and someone lives on.”\(^{53}\)

She concludes that the length of time a human is alive is no longer than a brief, “feast in the mirror”; a fleeting reflection of what you have become and what you will soon cease to be.\(^ {54}\) For Forough, “ideas and creative thinking alone achieve permanence”, and therefore only her poetry, her words and her art can inspire and create true life within her personal existence.\(^ {55}\) After Another Birth, Forough was considered the cornerstone of the Iranian intellectual community and her poetry was revered for its independent and influential voice; whether it confronted female sexuality, addressed the contradictions of modernity or criticized the Pahlavi’s regime for their lack of authenticity and Iraniness. Forough’s poetic prowess and her ability to “tell a larger national story” of the social injustices and intricacies of modernity that troubled her generation was unmatched at the time.

**Conclusions**

On Monday, February 14, 1967, Forough left the studio she was working at to pay her mother a visit. Just before leaving, she gave her mother a kiss on the lips and her mother recalls

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\(^{54}\) *A Lonely Woman*, 116.

that her lips were cold, as if she was on “the threshold of death”.

While on her way back to the studio, Forough swerves to avoid an oncoming car and she is thrown from her jeep, her body tossed onto the hard cement. At the age of thirty-two years old, just three short years after the publication of her timeless work Another Birth, Forough Farrokhzad was dead. At her funeral she was buried under the snow, but her eternal fire, her Javdaneh Forough still burns bright. Though her career and life were devastatingly short, she was an explosive and determined personality, that blossomed into an iconic figure within the literary, modern, and female communities of Iran, and whose work and words live on.

At the end of Rebirth, Forough came to a conclusion about life and death that would come to define her and her work. She concluded that “death comes to those who cannot so impress time” and that life remains for those who occupy more space than they were given, those who “impregnate the line with art”.

With all that Forough Farrokhzad has contributed to art, to literature, to Iranian modernity, and to concepts of female sexuality, her life, her influence, and her words will never die and they remain eternal.

Since the time of Forough’s death, Iran has faced political and social upheaval, a revolution, and an extreme and influential political transformation. All of these events could be used as intellectual and inspirational fuel for an artist or an activist, the way Forough used the political and social events and environment around her to fuel her art and her poetry. Yet, surprisingly, no individual has embodied a similar voice of discontent and rebellion within the

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56 Sin Selected Poems, xxx.
57 A Lonely Woman, 116.
Islamic Republic of Iran as Forough did in the late 1950s and 1960s. Why could this be? Why has there not been another Forough in Iran - a rebellious and talented intellectual fire, to pick up where Forough abruptly left off?

Works Cited


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