**Voices of Empowerment: Exploring Gender Discourses through the**

**Poetry of Maya Angelou, Forugh Farrokhzad, Suheir Hammad, and Warsan Shire**

Karen Lee

Virginia Episcopal School

**Abstract**

This research paper looks into the lives, literary expressions, and societal influences of four prominent female poets who have utilized poetry as a medium to share messages on gender-related issues. The poets researched are Maya Angelou, Forugh Farrokhzad, Suheir Hammad, and Warsan Shire, each representing diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. The study begins by providing biographies of the selected poets, delving into their personal histories, cultural contexts, and the challenges they faced. Through an analysis of their styles and writings, the research aims to examine the ways the poets convey messages on gender equality, empowerment, and the challenges faced by women. Furthermore, this research investigates the societal impact of the selected poets, exploring how their poetry has contributed to shaping public discourse and fostering awareness around gender issues. This paper seeks to draw connections and distinctions between the four poets' approaches, shedding light on their contributions to the discourse on gender. Overall, this research offers a nuanced understanding of the diverse ways in which female poets engage with and impact discussions on gender issues through their biographies, writing styles, and societal influence.

**Introduction**

In literary history, various female poets have played pivotal roles in shaping and challenging societal norms, particularly in regard to gender perceptions and feminist movements. This research paper explores the impact of four poets—Maya Angelou, Forugh Farrokhzad, Suheir Hammad, and Warsan Shire—who, through their unique voices, have not only contributed to literature but have also transformed their works into social change. These poets, from diverse cultural backgrounds and periods, represent the changing gender dynamics and ideas on feminism. As we look into their biographies, socio-cultural contexts and distinct writing styles, we can explore the ways in which the poets address gender, identity, and societal expectations. By closely examining works from each poet, we aim to shed light on the influence these women have had on shaping perceptions of gender and contributing to the broader feminist discourse. The depiction of the female poets’ resilience, defiance, and activism provides a comprehensive lens to look into the diverse strategies employed by female poets in challenging patriarchy and fostering empowerment. This paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the power of poetry, highlighting its impact on redefining societal attitudes toward gender and supporting contemporary feminist movements.

1. **Maya Angelou**

Maya Angelou was a unique poet facing prejudice and being marginalized as both an African American and a woman. Women in society face unique stereotypes created in a male dominated society. The social construct of gender characterizes the norms, behaviors, and roles associated with both genders, creating a set of ideas on how each gender should be represented. Women are often confined to roles such as mothers, wives, and caretakers, making women feel inferior and subordinated in nearly every aspect of their lives. Until the mid-20th century, women faced limitations in their rights, such as the loss of independence and property when they marry, denying political citizenship, not being allowed to vote, get a divorce, and more. As Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher, wrote, “woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, women is handicapped.”

Yet Maya Angelou faced another restriction; her race. African Americans were doubly victimized, and discriminated against solely on the basis of their race. Seen as a subordinate class, African Americans were marginalized and in turn, were denied voting rights, property rights, and failed to be recognized as citizens for an extended duration of time. As a result, black women, facing double the restrictions, termed themselves as caged birds who were singing the songs of freedom to society, with the cage being a combination of both sexism and racism. With this image, women’s literature in the African American tradition emerged as a literary movement, along with the “Black Feminist Movement.” They aim to challenge the sexist, racist world by changing society’s pessimistic view of women’s chances of obtaining gender equality and denouncing the injustice suffered by women. As stated by Maya Angelou in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, “as always, again. We survived. The depths have been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls…I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race.”

One prominent writer in the movement is Maya Angelou. Angelou’s poetry explores themes of women, race, and power, demonstrating the process of struggle for national, racial, and lingual identity. Her poetry aptly captures the resistance in the background of post colonialism, as well as showing her culture and the history of traumatic violence through generations through colonization. Her work ties together with the idea of resistance through nationalism, aiming to get cultural liberation against white supremacy and control. Her poetry, more specifically, is composed largely of short lyrics and jazzy rhythms complemented with themes common to the life of African Americans. Angelou is a progressive black activist who faces the wounds of her ancestors and attempts to heal them with her literary thoughts. In fact, the life and work of Angelou are closely intertwined. Throughout her life, Angelou suffered constant displacement, longing for affection, and experienced abuse. Her work is an expression of a constant effort to extricate herself from the colors and impact of white people.

Maya Angelou, named Marguerite Ann Johnson, was born on April 4th, 1928. Angelou lived with her grandmother, a figure she refers to as “Momma” until she was six. Her grandmother provided a strict religious upbringing with little expressions of love, depriving her of physical affection. In 1935, Angelou was sexually abused and raped by her mother’s boyfriend, who her uncles beat to death after finding out about her abuse. She came to believe that her voice was poisonous and became mute for several years after the incident. She became pregnant as a teenager, and her son, Guy, was born in 1945. As said in her autobiographies, Angelou acted in ways that she believed would help her to fit in. She prostituted herself for her boyfriend to ensure his continued investment, argued with white staff members to prove her superiority, and experienced frequent anxiety and guilt. After living such a lifestyle, she married Tosh Angelos, a white man, in 1953. After her divorce, she rediscovered her love for dance and married Vus, a South African freedom fighter for a short time. She moved to Ghana, where she finally accepted her African American identity, eventually returning to America in 1965, where she developed her career in political activism and writing. She died on May 28th, 2014, at 86 years of age.

Angelou’s childhood impacted her writing as her childhood with her grandmother fostered an intense dislike of herself and her body, as well as an intense need for physical affection and intimacy. Her lack of physical affection and her further trauma by the abuse created a desperate need for validation and connection, reflected in her writing. She also felt that she needed to take responsibility for her choices, leading to a sense of responsibility in carrying out racial activism. She decided that she must be responsible for her choices, even her mistakes.

Maya Angelou employs a unique style of writing that well reflects the themes that she aims to convey. Her writing, overall, contains lyrical imagery and realism, which she uses to create a unique self-identity. She employs intense testimonial narratives and impersonal accounts of herself to reflect her memories of the past, loss of national identity and women’s cultural integrity. She uses narrative aspects and connects poetry with autobiographical elements to relate her life and the various issues she encountered. She continually references poverty, lack, deprivation, illiteracy, and traditions to produce an image of her life based on her pride in her gender and her race. Looking at herself as someone who has forgotten herself and her identity, she transposes her feelings into language through the use of native proverbs, slang, and colloquial language. Angelou also employs a direct, conversational style to share her stories with the readers, extensively using metaphors and similes to reflect her own experiences. She uses laughter and humor as a replacement for tears for dealing with sadness and suffering. Through her writing, Angelou became a strong and influential personality for all other women.

Research states that good literature has the power to raise new debates, which provide a new perspective for readers and society. “Literature cannot escape the influence of society, reflects the society when it is written.”

Maya Angelou’s writing has been a catalyst for change, spurring debate and controversy. Her poetry shares her feelings on socio-psychological inferiority, desire for liberation, and anger against marginalization, questioning the treatment of black traditions and values. All of her poetry is a process of recalling her past in an effort to help the black women seeking to survive against masculine prejudice and white hatred.

Her poetry epitomizes the concept of “woman” on three levels: universal, racial, and biographical. In terms of universality, she represents women with multiple shades, colors, and icons, reflecting women’s subordinate position in society and culture which forces them to be reduced to an individual only for sensual pleasures. In terms of race, Angelou represents the anguish of those who have suffered slavery, segregation, and racism. She states, “black women wrestled with the inescapable horror of undergoing pregnancies that could only result in feeding more chattels into the rapacious man of slavery.” In Afro-American poetry, “gender” has become a prominent sign of resistance because it unified the concept of “black” and “female.” Despite this, Angelou shares the message that people should not be ashamed of their natural belongings of race and gender and tells women to “resist considering herself a lesser version of her male counterpart.” She is conscious of the need for feminist emancipation from patriarchy and lays great emphasis on the independence of women. In terms of the biographical, she links her personal life to the challenges women face in society, sharing her struggles.

Maya Angelou also seeks refuge in collectiveness. Though she shares her identity as a passionate girl, a sister, a lover, a prostitute, a beloved mother, a nationalist, and a writer, she also transforms into different shapes and names to identify with the various struggles. She seeks refuge in her collective identity with other African American women, inspiring others to do the same. She states, “our young must be taught that racial peculiarities do exist, but beneath the skin, beyond the differing features and into the true heart of being, fundamentally we are more alike.”

1. Poem “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou

This poem by Maya Angelou is based on the survival of the black community in America and how badly women were treated in society. She shares the history of oppression of black people by whites and describes how it is rooted in much pain, yet attempts to heal from the pain without any blame. Her positivity and love for people under the same conditions as her made her a strong woman. Through this poem she shares her desire for freedom and fair treatment, opposing the idea that women need to be fair, shy, and weak.

In this poem, she uses the first-person pronoun “I” to represent herself, standing as a voice for all Black women. The usage of this pronoun helps readers to identify with Angelou and expresses the idea that she will not let others’ opinions control her. The repetition of the phrase “I rise” portrays Angelou fighting against all odds and gaining success.

Through the poem, Angelou faces situations where society cannot accept a woman being confident and bold, as she is a threat to the male dominated society. By the end, she calls for oppressed black women to join her, demanding an explanation for the hatred and mistreatment. Despite this, Angelou rises, converting hatred into strength to rise up no matter how many times she fails. “You may shoot me with your words,/ you may cut me with your eyes,/ you may kill me with your hatefulness,/ but still, like air, I'll rise.”

1. Poem “Phenomenal Woman” by Maya Angelou

In this poem Angelou suggests an alternative perspective on what defines real beauty, rejecting the limiting societal expectations for women. Angelou discloses her secrets to beauty in which “pretty women”, or white women, do not understand. She claims that beauty refers to being ‘white’, and she rejects the beauty standards.

The repetition of the words “I am a woman” and “phenomenal woman” emphasizes her self-confidence regarding her beauty and her self- identity. She shares the message that her confidence is reflected in her physical appearance, which beautifies her. “Phenomenal woman, that’s me,” she says.

Overall, Maya Angelou encourages black women to do better in life and to feel confident in themselves so that white people, black men, and white women do not underestimate them. Through her poetry, she sheds light on the struggles of herself and other African American women, standing as a voice for voiceless women. Her writing and her words encourage them to rise into a world where there is no darkness of the past and to accept and love themselves the way they are. To quote Toni Morrison, “she has achieved a measure of true sainthood in their eyes by transcending brutal racism, sexual abuse, and poverty to become one of America’s most celebrated contemporary writers.”

1. **Forugh Farrokhzad**

Forugh Farrokhzad is an Iranian poet and filmmaker who challenged societal norms and advocated for women’s rights. Born in January 1935 in Tehran to an upper-middle class family, she was one of seven children under a strict military-minded father and young wife. Unlike many other girls, she went to a co-ed elementary school and then a technical high school, where she studied painting and dressmaking. While growing up, her mother was obsessed with dolls, completely surrounding herself with them and even asking to be buried with some of her favorite dolls. Farrokhzad’s childhood memories with her mother and her unique obsession are illustrated in Farrokhzad’s poem, “The Wind-Up Doll”, where she writes, “Like a wind-up doll one can look out/at the world through glass eyes,/spend years inside a felt box,/body stuffed with straw,/wrapped in layers of dainty lace.” Farrokhzad uses the doll to represent the superficial beauty and docility that is demanded of women in the patriarchal society, describing the doll’s enforced silence and confinement in a grotesque way.

Farrokhzad’s first published work was printed in the Roshanfekr (aka The Intellectual), a prestigious magazine in Iran. In her first published work, she wrote about a young woman confessing to a sexual awakening, describing her physical appearance in sexualized terms. The poems published described her affair with an editor of the magazine. Her first work was a sensation, a deliberate “reversal of a thousand years of Persian literature,” where men only wrote about their lovers and women did not write. Furthermore, while most Iranian poets used pseudonyms at the time, Farrokhzad printed her real name along with a photograph and a short biography.

Soon after the poem was published, she divorced her husband and lost custody of her son, Kamyar. Stress from the event pushed her to attempt suicide, which was followed by a month in a psychiatric institution. Soon after, she left Iran and studied languages and poetry in Germany. There she continued to publish her work, displaying her next poetry collection, Rebellion, which showed her claim to a bolder poetic identity with her experience as a Persian woman. In 1958 she returned to Iran and met the filmmaker and intellectual Ebrahim Golestan. They pursued an intense relationship, and Farrokhzad published another poetry collection, Another Birth (aka Rebirth), dedicated to Golestan. In the collection, her personal gaze widens to encompass society at large, satirizing government bureaucracy and the reduction of human life to a name and number on the ID card. Golestan was credited with influencing her best poetry but denied this statement, claiming that “she has the biggest influence on herself.”

Forugh Farrokhzad is sometimes considered the “Persian Sylvia Plath.” Not only did they write in a similar era, style, and even shared similar deaths, both of the poets wrote about their experiences as a woman and oppressive society. According to scholar Leila Rahimi Bahmany, both poets were tormented by the discrepancies between their “self-image as artists” and their cultures’ oppressive visions of women. They both struggled to retain their artistic self and represent their souls under the pressures of gender, marriage, and mental illness. Both poets also employed the image of a mirror as a gendered symbol of vanity and a deceptive tool for self-examination.

Farrokhzad’s poems deal with real, uncensored views on female desire, representing females beyond just a two-dimensional view. Her poems depict women’s sexual desires, acceptance of themselves, and roles in society. Farrokhzad aims to convey the viewpoint that “what is important is humanity, not being a man or a woman. If a poem can get to that point, it is no longer connected with its creator but with a world of poetry.” By illustrating shockingly honest views on women in a conservative society, Farrokhzad effectively establishes her poem as one belonging to the “world of poetry.”

When writing, Farrokhzad struggled with how her gender affected the reception of her work in a culture where women were often confined to traditional roles. Tehran, a province in Iran, was very disorienting during this era. Just after Farrokhzad was born, the Shah’s pro-Western regime passed a law banning the hijab, and schools and universities began opening their doors to women. Despite these seemingly progressive changes, patriarchal ideas and systems lingered. Women were seen as subordinate to men, constantly objectified and confined to their roles as housewives, and not allowed to enjoy the freedoms that they were supposed to have. The worst were the Iranian society’s views on marriage. In traditional society, marriage was the main goal of a woman’s life, even though it meant dependence and domestic seclusion. Moreover, men in Iran were free to take other wives and lovers, yet an adulterous woman could be killed for her transgression and her killers would barely be punished. Marriage was a chain, and Farrokhzad stated that the “ridiculous marriage at the age of sixteen destroyed my future life.”

Farrokhzad died in 1967, at age 32, due to a car accident. Ironically, years before her death, she wrote to Golestan to tell him, “I love you to an extent that I am terrified of what to do if you disappeared suddenly. I’ll become like an empty well.” Yet she disappeared in February of 1967. Despite her death, her work survived and was passed around in secret even after being banned and heavily censored after the 1979 revolution.

1. Poem “The Sin” by Forough Farrokhzad

Farrokhzad’s poem, “The Sin” describes in detail her affair in 1954 with Nasser Khodayar, the editor-in-chief of Roshanfekr. In her poem she described her sexual desires; “In dark and quiet seclusion/ absently I lay behind him./ His lips poured lust on mine,/ and I rose from the sorrow of a crazed heart.” This poem exposed Farrokhzad to controversy and public ridicule, as it was unconventional for a woman to talk about her sexuality and show such emotions.

There are different translations of the beginning of the poem. Sholeh Wolpé translates the beginning of the poem as, “I have sinned a rapturous sin/ in a warm enflamed embrace.” Other translators, Hasan Javadi and Susan Sallée, translate the beginning as, “I have sinned, a delectable sin,/ in an embrace with was ardent, like fire.” Farzaneh Milani translates the beginning as, “I sinned/ it was a most lustful sin/ I sinned in arms sturdy as iron,/ hot like fire and vengeful.” Despite these different translations, it is commonly agreed upon that the poem discusses the heat, embrace, and pleasure that she felt. Though the title of the poem is “The Sin,” and she declares herself a sinner from the very first line, she shows no repentance for her actions. She is not a victim but rather a co-conspirator, exhilarated by her power. The poem shows that women are not always victims and can reveal their emotions as well.

1. Poem “The Captive” by Forough Farrokhzad

The poem “The Captive” was part of her first poetry collection, “Captive”, where she openly wrote of the struggle between artistic freedom and domestic confinement. “O sky, if I want one day/ To fly from this silent prison,/ what shall I say to the weeping child’s eyes:/ forget about me, for I am a captive bird?” Here her thoughts on marriage and its confinement are shown, as well as her desire to leave the jail someday. The poems in this collection are addressed to unnamed men, who are the captive’s jailers.

In the poem “The Captive,” she writes about her unhappiness with her role as a homemaker. “I think about it, and yet I know/ I’ll never be able to leave this cage/ Even if the warden should let me go/ I’ve lost the strength to fly away.” In this poem, she refers to marriage as a cage or jail that she is held captive in and writes about her powerlessness and inability to escape the confinement. The cage serves as a metaphor for marriage, the warden for her husband, and uses the image of a bird repetitively to signify her and her ability to “fly away” and leave the marriage. Unlike what she wrote in the poem on her inability to leave her husband, she left her husband three years into her marriage and was forbidden from seeing her son as well.

In the collection’s afterword, she wrote that she had expected her poems to be controversial. “No woman before me took steps toward breaking the shackles binding women’s hands and feet,” she stated, sharing how she was controversial because she was the first to ever address the limitations and confinement that women are under in society.

1. Other poems by Forough Farrokhzad

Many of her other poems write about issues that women face and share her personal experiences. The 1957 poem, “Poem For You” is dedicated to her son, ending with a sense of hope that their connection can live on through her poetry despite her being banned from ever seeing her son again. “You will search for me in my words/ and tell yourself: My mother, that is who she was.”

In the poem “The Forgotten,” Farrokhzad uses a mirror to symbolize the despair of women seeking their own identities in a world of male desire. “O Mother, break this mirror/ What do I gain by adorning myself?” This poem actively addresses the objectification of women by the male gaze, displaying the struggles for liberty and freedom women have.

Many of her collections also discuss such issues. In her third collection, “Rebellion” (1958), she set out her determination to write verse and live freely, calling for the rising up of women against centuries of justice. The collection was aimed at the Iranian concept of manhood. Her most famous collection, “Another Birth” (1964) includes social commentary that satirizes the pretensions of both Iran’s Westernizing regime and its middle-class intellectuals. The collection mocks writers who clung to traditional and decorous rhymes in their verses, serving as a great example of her own writing voice. Through such pieces and many more, Farrokhzad shed light on the struggles of women and herself.

After Farrokhzad’s funeral, Iran’s leading literary journal, Sokhan, wrote, “Forough is perhaps the first female writer in Persian literature to express the emotions and romantic feelings of the feminine gender in her verse with distinctive frankness and elegance, for which reason she inaugurated a new chapter in Persian poetry.” She was a pioneer in Iran, among the first to write about women and voice women’s opinions on social issues. Her achievements are particularly incredible considering the restrictive nature of the environment she was in. After the overthrow of Iran’s secular monarchy in 1979, the Islamic Republic banned her poetry for almost a decade. Yet this censorship only elevated her appeal to the new generations of Iranians, and her writing and legacy continued to persist. Like an Iranian poet, Fatemeh Shams said, “she always had one eye back on tradition, and one eye toward the future,” writing for a better future for women in Iran.

1. **Forugh Farrokhzad**

Suheir Hammad is an Arab American poet. She was born to Palestinian parents in a Jordanian refugee camp in 1979 and immigrated with her parents to New York City when she was five years old. She grew up in Brooklyn, forming her identity as a Palestinian living in Brooklyn and a woman who identifies as black. As a teenager, she began writing poetry, drawing on her family’s history and her own experiences as a Palestinian Muslim woman in New York City. Some of her most famous works are her memoir, Drops of This Story (1996) and three poetry collections: Born Palestinian Born Black (1996), Zaatar Diva (2006), and Breaking Poems (2008). Aside from being a poet, she is a political activist who speaks on behalf of Palestinians and an Arab American feminist who aims to subvert negative stereotypes.

Through her poetry, Hammad explores the unique perspective and struggles of Arab feminism. Western feminism does not always fit the needs and expectations of women. While Western feminism is grounded in Western thought, ideology and values, Arab women’s struggle is tightly related to the religious, cultural, and political values of the Arab world. Arab feminism aims to focus on Arab women’s lives and experiences as they confront gender-specific issues that diverge from those dealt with by women who belong to the “First World” in contrast to the “Third World”. The agendas have large differences, as the agendas of Arab feminism mainly target goals such as combating intensified racism and violence, resisting prejudice, and answering back the bias of certain hegemonic US feminisms.

Palestinian women are a specific group of women who are subject to multilayered forms of oppression. They face pressures of gender and nationalism, as well as both Arab patriarchy and Western prejudice, making them perpetually anxious to combat both forms of oppression and marginalization. Like Susan Muaddi Darraj said, Arab women face “sexism in two distinct realms.” Suheir Hammad writes about her experiences as a Palestinian woman, aligning herself with the group of women and illustrating the various layers of discrimination and prejudice she is put under.

For Hammad, artistic creation and literary career are inevitably shaped by politics. “I do not know how to separate the political effects in a personal life,” Hammad said. In her poetry, Hammad displays the struggle against domineering patriarchal regimes and oppressive colonial structures. She has a clear feminist stance and a nationalist spirit. The political feminism in her poems is clearly manifested in her ongoing militancy to get better visibility and more palpable confirmation of rights as respectable citizens. She strongly resists Arab patriarchy in her poems. The criticism in her poems targets the patriarchal structures and repressive forces that seek to stifle Arab women’s potential and freedom. She especially emphasizes the Arab family structure, which deals with girls and women in a biased way, allowing boys and men more freedom and autonomy throughout life.

1. Poem “Manifest Destiny” by Suheir Hammad

In this poem Hammad sits with four other women poets who “should have been other people/ with other people.” These women could have held different positions or jobs, such as “a neo-nazi Aryan baby breeder,” a “gyrating video hoochie,” or a “rich corporate robot,” but because they chose their own identities, they decided to become poets, scholars, and political activists. In the poem she borrows a culture-specific notion of the Manifest Destiny, an idea of achieving one’s dream in America, and applies it to herself. She reflects the manifest destiny on herself and other women in similar situations as her, sharing an inspirational belief that women can become what they set their minds to.

Her poem ends with an indictment of the flaw in families that impedes self-fulfillment. She states, “we four all missing family who wouldn’t understand/ creating a family/ we struggling to understand/ we were where we needed to be/ we are who have to be.” In her poem, she shows her desire to become a poet and her family’s discouragement to reflect the underlying structure of the traditional Arab family, which is supportive and oppressive to women. The limiting nature of the families in Arab can make women feel attached and resistant to their families, restricting the potential of women.

1. Poem “Leaves and Leaving” by Suheir Hammad

In this poem, Hammad reflects a similar idea as the poem “Manifest Destiny”, as she illustrates the traditional nature of Arab families and the restrictions on women. She starts the poem by showing a deeply romantic celebration of her birthday amid fond recollections of motherly and fatherly love, yet ends by remembering the reality. “Tonight it is raining in/ the tradition of my parents/ who wanted a daughter/ not a writer.” Through this poem, she strongly emphasizes the expectations placed upon daughters and women in traditional Arab society and reflects on how she earned herself a new identity that exceeds these expectations.

1. Poem “Bint il neel” by Suheir Hammad

This poem pays tribute to Umm Kulthum, an icon of Arab music and art. In this poem, the adoration shown to this star is personal, while her feminist defense is political. Hammad overly praises the singer and her exceptional talent yet deliberately projects a gender perspective onto the singer’s portrait to magnify her strength and artistic accomplishment. As a woman in a culture that at times wittingly neglects women’s talents and marginalizes them, Umm Kulthum’s achievements are exceptional and fight against the stereotypes. “You were young and a novelty/ voice so big baba dressed you/ a boy, and you traveled/ to the ears/ of rich men learned men/ men of leisure with shillings and servants/ entrances for you to shadow.”

In the poem, Hammad emphasizes the star’s superiority to demonstrate that Arab women can excel and influence a male audience. “And though it was men and/ their gods started it/ you sang for women/ for my mother and her daughters.” Through this, she shares the message that while her gift and fame have been largely shaped and enhanced by masculine figures, her songs and messages have been mainly for women, attempting to empower them.

Hammad also uses food tropes as prejudice against women. Through the food imagery, including the term “delicious,” she intensifies the male propensity to make women the mere recipient and sole target of sexual fantasies. For instance, she states, “Why is it men/ describe our colors/ as edible?...is it/ because they are/ always ever/ so ready to/ eat us/ ?” metaphorically referring to women as the “main dish.” Under Arab patriarchy, manhood dictates that women are mere bodies that are reduced to a locus of desire and fancy. Through her poems, Hammad criticizes the notion that men and patriarchal structures own female bodies, control them, and resist the patriarchy prevalent in society.

1. **Forugh Farrokhzad**

Warsan Shire, a renowned Somali-British poet, was born in 1988 in Nairobi, Kenya, to Somali parents who later migrated to London when she was still an infant. Growing up in a diasporic Somali community, Shire experienced the intersection of multiple cultures, languages, and identities. Her early exposure to the complexities of displacement and the struggle for identity profoundly influenced her poetic voice. Shire's journey into the literary world began with her involvement in London's vibrant spoken-word poetry scene. However, it was her online presence and the publication of her chapbook "Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth" in 2011 that catapulted her into international acclaim.

Warsan Shire's writing style is characterized by its visceral honesty, raw emotion, and a keen observation of human experiences. She often weaves together the personal and the political, delving into themes of love, loss, displacement, and the human condition. Shire's poetry is known for its vivid imagery, evocative language, and profound ability to capture the essence of the human spirit. Her work has a universal appeal, resonating with readers from diverse backgrounds who find solace and understanding in the depth of her words.

Warsan Shire's debut poetry collection, "Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head's Language of the Body," explores themes of trauma, displacement, and the struggles faced by the Somali community in exile. Shire, a Somali-British poet, feels a responsibility to document the stories of Somali people and uses her writing as a mirror for the community. She draws on her own experiences as well as the collective experiences of Somali refugees to give voice to their struggles. The collection is characterized by Shire's poetic obsessions, such as maladaptive daydreaming and dissociation. Her poems often read like dream diaries or urgent whispers, addressing a silent confidante. The language in her poems is visceral and raw, reflecting the emotional and physical wounds inflicted on individuals and communities. Shire's extended family members are refugees of the ongoing civil war in Somalia, and she bears witness to their experiences through her writing. The poems in the collection also explore the complexities of identity and belonging. Shire addresses the experiences of being foreign and feeling foreign to everything one loves. She delves into the disconnection felt by individuals who are caught between two worlds and the struggle to find a sense of home and self. Shire's own journey to Somalia in 2013, after writing the poem "Home," adds a personal dimension to her exploration of displacement and belonging. One recurring theme in Shire's work is the mother-daughter relationship. She explores the complexities of this dynamic, often depicting a fierce and sometimes tumultuous dance between mothers and daughters. Shire herself took on a caretaker role at a young age, helping to raise her mother's other children. This history of mothering and caretaking informs her exploration of womanhood and identity.

Beyond her literary contributions, Warsan Shire is a passionate advocate for gender equality, and her poetry serves as a powerful tool for activism. She fearlessly addresses issues such as the marginalization of women, the refugee experience, and the impact of conflict on women's lives. Shire's ability to articulate the often silenced and overlooked experiences of women adds a unique dimension to her activism. Her work challenges societal norms, demanding attention to the voices and struggles of those who are often marginalized and oppressed.

1. Poem “Home” by Warsan Shire

Warsan Shire's poem "Home" is an exploration of displacement and the search for belonging. Shire captures the universal experience of being caught between worlds. Shire uses evocative language, vividly portraying the emotional toll of leaving one's homeland and the struggle to find a sense of home in a foreign land. “...even then you carried the anthem under/ your breath/ only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet.” The recurring motif of body parts and the raw, visceral imagery serve to emphasize the physical and emotional disintegration that can accompany the forced migration. Through the careful selection of words and metaphors, Shire invites readers to empathize with the complexities of identity and the yearning for a place that feels like home. The poem addresses issues on the global refugee crisis and the human cost of geopolitical conflicts.

1. Poem “For Women who are ‘Difficult’ to Love” by Warsan Shire

In "For Women Who Are 'Difficult' to Love," Shire challenges societal expectations and stereotypes placed on women, particularly those who defy conventional norms. The poem is a celebration of women who resist conformity and assert their independence. Shire employs a direct and assertive tone, reclaiming the narrative of women who are often dismissed as "difficult" for daring to express their desires and boundaries. From the very opening, she states, “you are a horse running alone/ and he tries to tame you/ compares you to an impossible highway/ to a burning house/ says you are blinding him.” The poet's use of stark and unapologetic language confronts the double standards imposed on women, making this piece a powerful feminist statement. Shire's ability to illustrate such experiences creates a resonance that encourages readers to reflect on their own biases and perceptions of women who refuse to conform to societal norms.

Warsan Shire's impact on contemporary literature and activism is profound. Her poetry has not only garnered critical acclaim but has also resonated with a global audience, sparking important conversations about identity, displacement, and the human condition. Through her activism for gender equality, Shire has become a powerful voice for the marginalized and disenfranchised. She has inspired a new generation of writers and activists to use their voices to address social and political issues. In a world grappling with complex challenges, Warsan Shire stands as a beacon, using her art to illuminate the human experience and advocate for a more just and compassionate world.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the exploration of the lives, writing styles, and poetic works of Maya Angelou, Forugh Farrokhzad, Suheir Hammad, and Warsan Shire has shed light on the profound and enduring impact these female poets have had on shaping perceptions of gender and contributing to the feminist movements of their respective eras. Through the exploration of their biographies, unique writing styles, and selected works, it is shown how the poets engaged with and confronted societal norms, often challenging the status quo and advocating for the empowerment of women. Collectively, their voices underscore the universality of the struggle for gender equality. These poets have ignited conversations, fostered solidarity, and sparked a reflection on gender justice. Their legacies continue to inspire new generations of poets and activists to cultivate a world where poetic expression serves as a catalyst for social change.

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