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# Estranged Selves: Gendered Alienation in Forough Farrokhzad's "Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season" and T.S. Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady"

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## Abstract

This study explores the representation of alienation in Forough Farrokhzad's "Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season" and T.S. Eliot's "The Portrait of a Lady", with a focus on upper-middle-class women within modernist Persian and Anglo-American contexts. Through comparative analysis, close reading, thematic exploration, and contextual interpretation, the study explores how female despair is shaped by loneliness, identity loss, and patriarchal constraints. The findings of the research highlight the universal and yet distinctly gendered effect of modernity on women. The cross-cultural perspective of the study investigates the distinct ways in which Farrokhzad and Eliot portray female despair with regard to their cultural contexts. Through challenging the societal constraints of modern Iran and portraying post-war European cultural conventions, these authors offer a detailed understanding of how gender, culture, and patriarchy work together in order to shape the alienating effects of modernity. Employing intersectional feminism and, to a lesser extent, radical feminism, this study bridges Persian and Anglo-American poetic traditions and enriches feminist literary criticism. Thus, it provides new insights into the intersection of gender and alienating modernism, emphasizing the universal yet varied manifestations of female despair in modernist literature.

**Keywords:** Feminist criticism, Forough Farrokhzad, Gendered alienation, Modernist poetry, Patriarchal oppression, T.S. Eliot.

## I | Introduction

Numerous Alienation, as a major themes in modernist literature, is often associated with the existential struggles of individuals who try to find meaning in fragmented social and cultural environments. Using classical theories of alienation as the foundation of their work, feminist speculators have broadened the theme and constructed their own theory of alienation with gender-based considerations. To do so, they have drawn insights from both intersectional and radical feminism. This framework especially focuses on lived experiences of women in the context of patriarchal social structures where masculine domination serves as both the booster and perpetuator of gendered inequalities.

In her foundational text *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir explores how historically and socially women are defined in relation to men, as relative beings without autonomy, not by what they are but by what they are not, that is, not male. She posits that, since Aristotle's time, women have been seen as incomplete men, lacking certain qualities that render them defective. In her view, the human world is a male one, and this male humanity determines what it means to be a woman, not the



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woman herself. In this situation, the man is the “Subject, the Absolute”, and the woman is the “Other” (de Beauvoir, 2009, pp. 23-30). An outcome of this otherness and inferior position is the separation and alienation women feel from their society.

Another prominent thinker in feminism, Judith Butler (1990), considers gender a “performative construct”, shaped by social norms and regulative practices that dictate rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity. This performative social construct often limits individuals’ agency and perpetuates the systemic gender inequality existing in society. As a result of these constraints, women in particular often internalize these expectations of femininity, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and alienation, especially in their public spheres (Gür & Aksoy, 2024, p. 165). The role of modern poetry in this regard is of a mirror that reflects these social dynamics and complexities through its experimental and usually unconventional forms. Poets like Forough Farrokhzad and T. S. Eliot are good examples of this notion with their unique and innovative use of linguistic and poetic tools to express the gendered dimensions of alienation, each though shaped by their own distinct cultural backgrounds yet connected by shared modernist concerns.

Recognized as a pioneering feminist poetess in Iran, Farrokhzad criticized the patriarchal system in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Iran, where she expressed her experiences and her individuality as an outcast woman, from both her family and society, to voice the plight of women in the era of modernization (Raoufzadeh et al., 2019, p. 56). Likewise, alienation and disillusionment of post-World War I Europe are also delineated in the poetry of T. S. Eliot, as they mirror the emotional and spiritual crisis of the era and explore gendered relations.

Even though recent comparative literature, such as the one by Mehrpooyan (2024), has started to draw parallels among modernist traditions in the context of different cultures, few have explicitly addressed the intersection of gender and alienation in the works of Farrokhzad and Eliot. This gap is significant, as it ignores the possibility of cross-cultural understanding of the way modernist poets can negotiate personal and social estrangement with a gendered framing.

This study addresses the gap by analyzing the gendered alienation in the works of Farrokhzad and Eliot as reflected through their depiction of characters, their personal experiences, as well as their narrative voices. By comparing “Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season” and “The Portrait of a Lady”, this study seeks to answer ‘How do Farrokhzad and Eliot, despite their distinct cultural backgrounds, express parallel gendered experiences of alienation?’, and ‘What do these parallels reveal about the universality and specificity of modernist dislocation?’ This analysis attempts to shed light on the distinct yet convergent ways these poets respond to their cultural contexts through a feminist and comparative approach.

The study contributes to the scholarship of modernist literature by combining a cross-cultural approach based on the methodologies of the Russian school of comparative literature, namely its methodologies of influence and parallel studies, and the intersectional feminist theory. Thus, it helps to establish an interactive dialogue between Persian and Western literary traditions, which enhances our understanding of gendered alienation in modernist settings. It advances feminist scholarship on modernism through foregrounding gender, revealing how a poetess like Farrokhzad challenges male-dominated modernist canons. The findings of the research contribute to our knowledge of the universal dimensions of modernist literature and the crucial role of gender in shaping the poetical response to alienation.

## II. Review of the related literature

Alienation, explored as a recurrent theme in literature, has been significantly influenced and shaped by modernist thought and scholarship. In early instances, such as Camus’s and Kafka’s absurdist novels, characters are portrayed as individuals struggling with absurdity, the tragic nature of human existence, and the alienation each of them experiences within their society. Recent scholarship has tried to bridge cultural studies with literary criticism in order to analyze and study how existential crises and psychological estrangement are presented in modern life (Houassi, 2023, pp. 5-6). By linking alienation to modernity and providing a groundwork for exploring its disorienting effects, these studies have been praised for their thorough representation of different aspects of existential alienation. However, as Laity (2018, pp. 1-2) argues, modernist scholarship often overlooked gender issues or insufficiently integrated them, suggesting that it remains necessary to approach modernism with a feminist perspective. These studies fall short in addressing gendered aspects, frequently generalizing the notion of the modern man without considering intersectional aspects of gender dynamics. This body of literature supports this research’s aim by

establishing alienation as a modernist cornerstone, which this study extends to gendered experiences in Farrokhzad's and Eliot's poetry, illuminating parallel female despair across cultural contexts.

A significant strand of research examines alienation in the feminist literature, particularly how it shapes women's experiences. Marxist feminist scholars, such as Duan (2022), analyze women's alienation within social reproduction, highlighting economic and class-based oppression (p. 34). Other scholars explore alienation arising from patriarchal dominance and "caste-based" oppression (Sneha & Chugh, 2024, p. 11369) or the disconnection women experience from their bodies and identities in capitalist patriarchal systems (Munawar & Chaudhary, 2022, p. 180). These studies often use close reading and historical analysis to reveal gendered oppression and its multifaceted nature. Although frequently commended for their intersectional exploration of different levels of oppression and, by doing so, they provide useful tools for unpacking systemic alienation, these studies mostly fail to address the poetic or literary particularity of texts, instead concentrating more on social theory than on textual practice. These feminist views support the objectives of this study by offering theoretical frames to analyze gendered alienation in the works of Farrokhzad and Eliot and enabling a cross-cultural comparison that shows universal, but context-specific female despair.

Transitioning to specific modernist poets, T. S. Eliot's works are frequently examined for their depiction of social disconnection and lost faith. His poetry reflects the fragmentation of the post-war European society amid declining traditional values (Alam & Ismail, 2023, pp. 1-3). In "The Portrait of a Lady", Eliot captures the profound societal disillusionment, one of the main characteristics of the modernist era. The poem, narrated by a young man who recounts three visits to an older woman who regards him as a friend, addresses the themes of fragmentation and isolation, especially among upper-middle-class women. The eventual failure of their friendship symbolizes the destruction of modern values, employing imagistic techniques to convey modernist alienation. The strength of these studies lies in their thorough historical contextualization of Eliot's fragmentation, where his poetry is effectively connected to the postwar malaise. Nevertheless, similar to many other works on Eliot and the theme of alienation, they are limited in their consideration of gendered relationships, and many tend to see isolation not as a gender-shaped experience but as a gender-neutral state. This scholarship contributes to this research by providing a framework for analyzing "The Portrait of a Lady" through a gendered lens, trying to address parallel experiences of female alienation in various cultural contexts.

On the same note, Forough Farrokhzad, who is considered to be the first modernist poetess in Iran, speaks of alienation in the poem "Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season". Her poetry, written in elegiac form, explores gender, sexuality, grief, and unrequited love in the frames of the restrictive religious and cultural conventions of Iran (Raoufzadeh et al., 2019, p. 56). The metaphors of entrapment and yearning used by Farrokhzad are a critique of classic gender roles, expressing the disconnection women feel from cultural traditions and modern society. Her stark imagery, explored in terms of formalist and feminist, vividly expresses the emotional chaos of women in oppressing settings. Literature on Farrokhzad is well received in its feminist form, offering insights into her metaphors of subversion, but has not undertaken a comparative engagement with male modernist authors. This body of work on Farrokhzad contributes to the objectives of this by highlighting her gendered resistance, which is examined in a cross-cultural comparison with Eliot to identify common instances of female despair in modernism.

Eliot's controversial depiction of women, as well as how he personally treated them, has gained attention over the years, leading many critics to focus on the misogynistic undertones in his portrayals. Lyndall Gordon, drawing on biographical materials, argues that Eliot's female characters are often depicted as stereotyped, as "baffling and alien creature[s], frozen in an image". The lady in "The Portrait of a Lady", a Bostonian socialite who attends concerts and expresses sentimental views about music, appears to fit into these stereotypes. While some readers find this portrayal offensive and misogynistic, other scholars offer alternative interpretations. Cyrena Pondrom, for instance, contends that critics like Gordon assume the reliability of the male narrator's perspective, which constructs the lady's sentimental and pretentious image (Liu, 2023, p. 239). Although its focus solely on Anglo-American contexts limits its cross-cultural applicability, Pondrom's study, by adopting a feminist perspective centered on the lady's experience, reveals new dimensions of the poem, enriching our understanding of its themes and challenging the male narrator's authority. This scholarship enriches this study's exploration by highlighting the multi-



layered nature of female isolation as depicted by Eliot, which this research contrasts with Farrokhzad's defiance to address universal gendered alienation in modernism.

In contrast, Farrokhzad's poetry is noted for its resistance to patriarchal norms. Scholars like Ghasemi and Pourgiv (2010) highlight her defiance of traditional gender roles, often using deconstructive methods to analyze her poetic form. Moshref Azad Tehrani's *The Princess of Poetry* further explores her modernist innovations, emphasizing structural and thematic modernity (Giv & Shahbazi, 2016, p. 1377). These studies underscore Farrokhzad's contribution to Persian literary modernism. Ghasemi and Pourgiv (2010) and Giv and Shahbazi (2016) are commended for their modernist analyses, which illuminate Farrokhzad's innovative resistance; however, they lack engagement with Anglo-American comparisons. These studies support the purpose of this research by offering valuable insights into the gendered voice of Farrokhzad so that it can be used to conduct a cross-cultural feminist analysis in parallel with Eliot to discuss similar experiences of gendered alienation.

To further develop the theme of feminism and alienation, other works explore intersections between gendered alienation and social class and cultural expectations. For instance, feminist socio-historical interpretations might be applied to studies on Eliot in order to investigate the ways in which the status of the lady as an upper-class person worsens her isolation in rigid social norms. In similar manner, Farrokhzad's work might be reviewed in terms of its portrayal of alienation as a means of rebellion against cultural silencing with her subversive voice under patriarchal limitations. Although these approaches have not been given much focus in the studies mentioned, they fit into the comparative feminist framework of the study.

Though extensive scholarship has been conducted on Eliot and Farrokhzad, few comparative studies have analyzed "The Portrait of a Lady" and "Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold

Season" through feminist, comparative, and alienation frameworks. By providing a cross-cultural comparison, this research aims to fill this gap, and sheds light on these themes in the context of modernist literature. It should be noted that by integrating feminist reading and cultural analysis, the study attempts to contribute to a more nuanced interpretation of the gender-related aspects of alienation.

### III. Methodology

This research is a qualitative comparative study grounded in the feminist literary theory to examine how gendered alienation is represented and thematically expressed in Forough Farrokhzad's "Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season" and T.S. Eliot's "The Portrait of a Lady". It combines close textual analysis, thematic inquiry, and contextual analysis in order to explore how the two poems express the alienation of upper-middle-class women in their respective Persian and Anglo-American modernist settings. Drawing on the major feminist critics such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Judith Butler (1990), this study focuses on the lived experiences of women and how they are treated in the modern society.

The study engages with the Russian School of Comparative Studies based on the philosophy of Communism and Russian Formalism, which attempts to answer the bias of French and American comparative traditions. Influenced by formalist thinkers like Roman Jakobson, who view literature as a "social property" and emphasize cross-cultural literary interactions, this research ensures robust theoretical depth. By integrating feminist and comparative frameworks, this approach provides a nuanced understanding of the intersections among gender, culture, and modernist dislocation, addressing the research question of how Farrokhzad and Eliot articulate parallel yet culturally distinct experiences of female despair. These experiences, examined through a feminist lens, are manifested as women's emotional disconnection from self and society and are conveyed through narrative voice and poetic form. By blending influence study with parallel study, the Russian School of Comparative Studies seeks to trace the influence of modernism, the "Emitter", on two distinctly different works of literature, the "Receiver", within the context of gendered alienation (Mahendran, 2017, pp. 23–61).

Through comparisons, this research aims to uncover how two writers, independent of one another, arrive at similar ideas. It does so by examining the theme of gendered alienation under the influence of modernism in the selected poetry of the authors under discussion. The validity of this comparison lies in the poets' shared engagement with modernist themes of gendered fragmentation and existential despair, despite their distinct cultural contexts, namely Iranian patriarchal constraints and the Anglo-American



post-war milieu, as well as the inherent differences between the Persian and English literary languages and the styles of poetry composition.



#### IV. Contextual background

##### 4.1. Gendered tensions in Iran's modernization: Farrokhzad's poetic context

The modernist movement emerged in France in the second half of the nineteenth century and quickly spread to other countries worldwide. This literary movement sought to break away from tradition and establish new aesthetic orders in response to the chaotic “fallen” modern world. Writers associated with this movement rejected prevailing literary conventions, positioning modernism as a “dialectical opposition to what is not functionally modern, or what they call tradition”. Although modernist works differ greatly from one another, they are commonly regarded as “cultural subversive” forces that “subvert” social order rather than conforming to existing social norms (Eysteinnsson, 1990, pp. 8-48). As Jahanbegloo (2004) notes, Iran's past 150 years reflect a struggle with the “temptations of modernity” (p. 3). Yet, the path toward modernity was not an easy one. The socio-cultural situation of Iran between the downfall of Muṣaddiq's national democratic government in 1953 and the Revolution of 1979 was full of diverse and even contradictory thoughts and ideologies, including secular modernists and clerical community.

Under the Pahlavi regime, the secular modernists held a powerful position in the formation of social perceptions and exercised authority in several fields, including politics. They promoted a romanticized Iranian national identity rooted in the legacy of ancient empires and the Aryan race.

Secular in orientation, this current supported the Pahlavis' project of Westernization and, as a result, enjoyed the support of the regime. In contrast, the religious clerical community in Iran placed Islam at the heart of national identity while advocating for modernizing and socioeconomic development of the country without Western influence. They preferred traditions and sought to preserve them while engaging with aspects of modern reform, but their conservative position often stood in contrast to the secularism represented by the Pahlavi regime (Jahanbakhsh, 2000, pp. 65-69).

When reforms for developing Iran began in the late nineteenth century, all the segments of the society participated in the process, including the Islam-minded religious class, which helped gain public support. However, as these reforms assumed an increasingly secularist and modernist tone, the coalition fragmented, and each group pursued its own path. As a critic poetically remarked, the “attempt to brew wine resulted in vinegar” (Rajaei, 2007, p. 27).

During the Pahlavi rule (1925-1979), Westernization in Iran took place under ambitious urban development, education reforms and changing gender roles. The unveiling decree in 1936 was to liberate women, but the tensions created by continued patriarchy that arose along the way made many women feel alienated. Such social changes also prompted cultural changes where modernist values changed artistic expression.

The Persian literature was influenced by this modernization significantly. Such poets as Nima Yushij revolutionized poetic forms, leaving behind the traditional pattern to adopt free verse. According to Thompson (2022), Nima aimed to render poetry fresh in the context of social, political, and cultural changes of the Constitutional era in Iran. His innovations encouraged artists like Forough Farrokhzad to challenge conventions, break the rules, and experiment with topics like identity and defiance (Dehghani et al., 2020, p. 106). Their works mirrored the broader societal quest for individuality amidst the upheavals of rapid modernization.

Forough Farrokhzad, born in 1935, soon became one of the central figures of Persian literature, defying gender norms through her bold exploration of female desire, identity, and isolation. According to Milani, the roles of women writers in Iran's modernity remain underexplored, even underestimated, suppressed by a male literary system; yet poets like Farrokhzad confronted this marginalization and suppression by striving to be “describers and imaginers” rather than “described and imagined” (Jahanbegloo, 2020, p. 148).

Although Farrokhzad never explicitly identified as a feminist, her stance was both radical and existential in nature. In a radio interview, when asked about the feminist dimension of her poetry, she replied:

“If my poems, as you express, have an aspect of femininity, it is of course quite natural. After all, fortunately, I am a woman. Therefore, when I write, if I keep thinking, oh, I am a woman and I must



address feminine issues rather than human issues, then that is a kind of stopping and self-destruction ... . What matters is the work done by the person, not the work labeled as male or female.” (Wolpé, 2007, p. xxviii)

Farrokhzad uses poetry to protest patriarchal norms and demand freedom for Iranian women. Her defiance is intensely personal, emphasizing individual artistic freedom and direct confrontation with cultural patriarchy. Her poetry was protest poetry, giving voice to the inner world of women, their intimate secrets and desires, worries, longings, and aspirations, and sometimes expressed through silence. Such expressions of physical and emotional intimacy, which had barely been seen in the poetry of Persian women, placed her at the center of controversy, even among her own contemporaries (Mehrpooyan & Zakeri, 2023, pp. 30–34).

This protest is manifested in her poem, “Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season”, as it shows the alienation of women who are torn between the modernizing tendencies and the deep-rooted patriarchy of Iran. The “cold season” imagery symbolizes emotional barrenness, reflecting the isolation of women who endured moral scrutiny despite increasing social opportunities. Farrokhzad’s defiance, evident in her rejection of traditional poetic forms, can also be seen as a critique of the way Iran pursued Westernization while still being under the banner of patriarchy and gender inequality. As Giv and Shahbazi (2016) suggest, she was deeply engaged with her era’s transformations, redefining poetic expression accordingly (p. 1379). Her introspective and to some extent confessional narrative voice captures the existential crisis of a woman estranged both by societal constraints and impersonal progress. Not only does this context frame the fragmented structure of the poem and the rich metaphorical language, but it also questions idealized, prescribed narratives of emancipation for women while exposing the gendered costs of modernization in Iran.

Farrokhzad’s work, entangled with broader intellectual currents, drew upon existentialist themes to explore the tension between individual agency and societal expectation. Her innovative use of free verse and stark imagery challenged the aesthetic conventions of her time, placing her alongside global modernist experimentation while simultaneously grounding her critique in Iran’s specific socio-cultural struggles. This two-sided quality of her works positioned her as a bridge between the local tradition of Iran’s poetry and the universal discourses of modernity and experimentation. Her legacy underscores the complex interplay of gender, culture, and modernity in shaping literary innovation.

#### 4.2. Post-war Europe and Eliot’s poetic context

Modernism, as a literary movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that changed Western poetry, was quite influential on the works of T. S. Eliot, especially after World War I (1914–1918). The destruction caused by the war led to the erosion of traditional values and contributed to the theme of alienation. Alienation, developed by Karl Marx and derived from Georg Hegel’s concept of “Entfremdung”, denotes the individual’s separation from both the self and the surrounding milieu. It reflects a condition of estrangement in modern capitalist society, arising from an individual’s sense of worthlessness and meaninglessness (Sarfraz, 1997, p. 46). This pervasive condition not only informed philosophical and sociopolitical discourse but also became a central concern of modernist literature. It was in this intellectual and cultural background that Eliot, the “most celebrated and influential poet of the post-war period”, developed his own modernist aesthetic pattern. A pattern greatly influenced by the existing disillusionment and disruption of Europe (Chaparsi, 2021, pp. 219, 221).

Urban centers such as London, where Eliot resided, were the embodiment of the empty promises of modernity, marked by industrialization, social upheaval, and declining religious certainties. This disrupted landscape of a burning Europe contributed to modernist literature and its focus on individuals making their way through a world that now had lost its meaning. To capture this chaos, poets like Eliot explored these fragmented individuals and their fractured lives and narratives.

Known for his criticism of the spiritual and social decay of post-war Europe, Eliot, born in the United States in 1888 and settled in England by 1914, emerged as a leading modernist poet. With his innovative and complex style, he used poetry to mirror the superficiality of a society where hollow rituals masked existential desperation. Brooker (2005) describes his style as “strikingly modern, avant-garde, [and] fragmented”, reflecting the collapse of Western morality and spirituality (p. 130). The female character in “The Portrait of a Lady” and her social life, depicted as a cycle of repetitive interactions, teas, concerts, and polite conversations, may be regarded as a symbol of women trapped within a patriarchal society. The ironic

tone and fragmented structure of the poem are a reflection of a lost, fractured society, where women sought to find an authentic identity and assert agency while confronting rigid norms and expectations. The gap between desire and social norms, between true self and expectations, is underscored by Eliot's understated yet incisive imagery. In general, they serve the purpose of the poem and enhance its critique of the alienating effects of modernity, with a focus on women.

The stereotypical representation of women as alien, romanticized figures depicted by Eliot has been criticized by feminists like Gordon, yet even this, according to some critics, misogynist portrayal of gendered alienation reflects modernism's broader theme of isolation, intensified by post-war Europe's moral vacuum (Liu, 2023, p. 239). By depicting the lady's stifled emotions, Eliot demonstrates how women were constantly constrained by social decorum. "The Portrait of a Lady" critiques the failure of modernity to foster meaningful connections like the relationship between the lady and the narrator, and in doing so uses understated imagery and conversational rhythms exposing the gendered costs of societal disruption, and illuminating the impacts of postwar Europe on female alienation. Such emphasis on gendered experience and the actuality of women in contemporary society, as expressed by Eliot, aligns with modernist discussions about subjectivity as a fluid and fragmented process and not a stable, unified one, thus reflecting the influence of modernity in shaping individuals' identity where fragmented literary forms mirror fractured selves. Influenced by contemporary intellectual schools like psychoanalysis, Eliot uniquely uses free verse and juxtaposition and deepens the portrayal of psychological and social disconnection in the poem. He highlights the intersection of personal and collective disillusionment through situating the lady's plight within a broader existential crisis. His work is, indeed, a poignant reflection of how modernism engages with a rapidly changing world.

#### 4.3. Cultural and social influences on gendered alienation

In her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone De Beauvoir deals with the issue of gender as a social construct. She argues that this construct has no scientific basis and is only a reflection of cultural myths. Further, she supports her argument by emphasizing the role that social structures such as marriage and domestic labor play in reinforcing women's subordinate positions, defining them in relation to men, as a condition of "otherness" that restricts freedom and ultimately results in alienation. Recent studies support De Beauvoir's theory, emphasizing that patriarchal systems reinforce this othering, isolating women from authentic selfhood and creating a sense of deep alienation and existential crisis (Saeed & Rehman, 2021, pp. 69-75).

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further develops this line of thought. In her book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler questions the traditional division between sex and gender, arguing that both categories are socially constructed in the form of performative acts. She critiques the binary assumption that biological sex defines gender identity, rather arguing that gender is constantly produced through repeated social performances in a regulation process.

Drawing on these perspectives, the selfhood and identity of women are not natural but instead constructed and created in the cultural and social processes that perpetuate normative expectations. Such forces play a significant role in gendered alienation as the subjectivity and individuality of women are diminished by patriarchal orders. These orders dictate strict ideals and force women to conform to a "template of perfection" that maintains patriarchal standards. The inability to meet these expectations and standards often leads to social alienation, a condition where women are rejected and isolated by their communities (Du, 2025, pp. 105-107). This process highlights the larger social pattern of excluding those who do not conform to the prescribed social expectations of gender roles, which further emphasizes the lack of connection between women and their own identities and society.

Industrialization and social upheaval of post-war Europe created an "age of anxiety", where individual autonomy was eroding, leading to an increased sense of dislocation (Alam & Ismail, 2023, p. 1). T. S. Eliot, as an outsider after relocating from America to England, channels this sense of alienation into the hollow rituals of the female character in "The Portrait of a Lady".

The line "I shall sit here, serving tea to friends" (Eliot, n.d., line 68) encapsulates the stifling patriarchal decorum that suppresses emotional authenticity, rendering the lady's actions performative and devoid of genuine self-expression. Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of performativity, the lady's character is constructed through these repeated social gestures; her identity depends upon such hollow rituals, which ultimately lead to her own disconnection from self and society.



Similarly, in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Iran, modernization efforts intertwined with entrenched patriarchal constraints, marginalized the poetess Forough Farrokhzad. Rejected by her strict father and ostracized after her divorce, Farrokhzad articulated her alienation through vivid imagery: “In this world... there is a wall and wall and wall” (Yusefi, 2015, p. 31). This image of never-ending boundaries is a reflection of the overwhelming social systems that oppressed her, taking away her right to define herself as an independent identity. In contrast to Eliot and the way he depicts a passive character alienated as a result of hollow social performances, Farrokhzad resists alienation, turning poetic form into an act of rebellion. Using her unique poetic voice, marked by introspection and a defiance of traditional rules of Persian poetry, she challenged the male-dominated culture that sought to silence her. Through creative expression, she tried to resist societal judgment and reclaim her agency (Raoufzadeh et al., 2019, p. 60).

Overall, Eliot’s depiction of estrangement in the lady’s sterile life and Farrokhzad’s imageries, though emerging from different cultural and historical contexts, illustrate how societal expectations fracture individual identity.

## V. Comparative analysis

### 5.1. Alienation

Alienation, although an abstruse concept, has long been a central concern in existentialist philosophy as well as sociological analysis. In early theological writings, it denoted separation from God, a spiritual estrangement that anticipates the existentialist sense of being cast into an indifferent universe. Existentialist thinkers radicalize this insight by shifting the focus from abstract spirit to the lived experience of the individual. Later, influenced by German idealist philosophy, Hegel distinguished two types of alienation. In the first form, the individual experiences a state of separation, “Entfremdung”, an imposed and undesirable alienation. In the second form, the individual voluntarily surrenders or transfers his rights to another, the desirable “Entäußerung”. Marx extended this notion of alienation to productive activity, conceiving it as the experience of the world and oneself passively and receptively, as a subject separated from the object. While Marx grounds alienation in material and economic relations, existentialist philosophers reinterpret it as a fundamental dimension of human existence (Sarfraz, 1997, pp. 46-48).

Over time, different perspectives have been ascribed to alienation. However, the most relevant to the goals of this study is the concept most extensively used by Fromm (1955), namely self-estrangement. “By alienation, he meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself” (p. 117). This psychological dislocation often produces social isolation, a theme that resonates strongly in modernist literature. Pappenheim (1968) argues that modernity fosters a fear of losing individuality, renders individuals strangers to themselves, and positions them as lonely “outsiders” in a chaotic civilization (p. 24).

In literature, alienation refers to the conditions where social structures have an oppressive nature. It also critiques the increasing detachment of modern societies. As modernity evolves, alienation acquires new dimensions, yet it retains its core characteristics, including lack of identity, estrangement, isolation, and loneliness. These traits resonate in modernist poetry, where individuals grapple with their place in fragmented societies. This alienation often intersects with gender, as societal norms exacerbate women’s disconnection, limiting their agency and voice within patriarchal frameworks.

### 5.2. Thematic analysis: Loneliness, loss of identity, patriarchy

Through thematic comparison, this section elaborates on themes of loneliness, loss of identity, and patriarchal constraints in the works of T. S. Eliot, “The Portrait of a Lady” (1915), and Forough Farrokhzad, “Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season” (1963), in order to highlight the gendered dimensions of alienation in modernist literature and poetry.

The theme of ‘loneliness’ is considered to be a central emotional state in Farrokhzad’s poem. The speaker of the poem is depicted not only as physically alone but also existentially detached from society, nature, and even herself. From the very beginning lines, Farrokhzad places her character within the context of a feminist perspectives: “And here I am / a woman alone” (Farrokhzad, 2022, lines 1–2). Loneliness is immediately put forward for the reader, but this loneliness is not a fleeting feeling; it is the result of a condition, the condition of being a woman.



Using de Beauvoir's theory as groundwork, the roots of this marginalization can be traced to the constructed nature of gender, to the ways society constructs gendered roles for women and defines them as the inferior "other". In the traditional society of modernist Iran, where patriarchal values still dominated literary composition, Farrokhzad pictured this condition as existing on the "threshold of a cold season" (Farrokhzad, 2022, line 3). Employing the image of "a cold season" to intensify the feeling of alienation. This "cold season" is a symbol of a frozen emotional landscape where warmth and connection are no longer existing, and women are not the controllers of their destinies, their fate is determined by the patriarchal constraints and prescribed gender roles.

Eliot also delves into the concept of loneliness in his work, but, in his poem, the theme is associated with the anxieties and emotional detachment of modernism. For him, the shallow, superficial modern relationships are built upon the concept of loneliness, where individuals are trapped within their subjectivities and are unable to form authentic bonds. The lady of the poem is the representation of the modern woman in a society that failed to understand her. For her, being alone in this modern world represents one of the greatest existential fears, a fear so great that she sees a life without friends and companions as a nightmare, a "cauchemar" (Eliot, line 28). Yet, her companion, the narrator, is the embodiment of the indifferent modern world, one that "smiles, of course, / and goes on drinking tea" (Eliot, lines 50-51), one that dismisses her plea to be understood as an "out-of-tune voice from a broken violin" (Eliot, lines 56-57), and one that, only by "virtue of being a man", considers the lady's struggles insignificant, giving impetus to de Beauvoir's ideas (de Beauvoir, 2009, p. 25). His use of multi layered ironies and complex tone, highlights the absurdity of this modern relationship. The irony begins with the title itself. In contrast to the typical assumptions about portraits, the subject of this portrait is not praised or celebrated. She is here to be shown with all her flaws and vulnerabilities. Though the tone of the speaker is polite and sophisticated, this sophistication is a derision to the lady's plights. The narrator is well aware of the lady's efforts in forging genuine emotional connection, but decides to dismiss them. By diminishing the lady's emotional anguish, the male narrator of the poem intensifies her loneliness, making her even lonelier.

Conversely, the stark and reflective voice of Farrokhzad captures the existential weight of navigating Iran's modernization, where traditional patriarchal values stood in the way of female freedom. Drawing on the influence-study method of the Russian comparative school and analyzing the loneliness depicted by both poets, it becomes clear that modernism and social structures play a crucial shaping role in isolating women and limiting their agency.

In terms of alienation, 'loss of identity' serves as an intensifying element, separating individuals, especially women, from their society and their authentic selves. As argued by Gür and Aksoy, women's alienation is nuanced and multifaceted, arising from conflicting pressures. According to their analysis, as a result of societal pressures, women become estranged from the "perception of femininity" prescribed by the society and from their own sense of self (Gür & Aksoy, 2024, p. 169). This ongoing negotiation between external expectations and personal identity leads women to question their societal roles, distancing them from the qualities of "being the woman they know". In this process, their sense of belonging to both public and private spheres is lost, which makes them strangers to their own identity and gender (ibid, p. 179).

Both poets vividly explored the theme of identity loss in their respective poems. In Eliot's work, the female character, constrained by the decorum of upper-middle-class life, undergoes a profound loss of identity; all that is left of her are repetitive social rituals, teas, concerts, and polite conversations. Her faltering speech, "I shall sit here, serving tea to friends..." (Eliot, line 68), represents her entrapment in performative routines. She has lost her own definition of self in what the society asks her to be. This aspect of the poem situates it within feminist critique, illustrating Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, as the character's identity and selfhood are produced and sustained through the cultural processes that are inextricably linked to patriarchy, enforcing normative expectations placed upon women.

By contrast, Farrokhzad's speaker is the embodiment of a fragmented sense of self, a self that is torn between pursuing personal desires and the dictations of patriarchal authority. Her efforts in defining herself both as a woman and an independent individual in the religious, patriarchal society of Iran result in an empty image: "Hollow one / Hollow complacent one" (Farrokhzad, lines 145-146). This depiction



highlights the intersection of gender, cultural and social expectations, and religious traditions in fracturing an individual's identity, pushing them toward emptiness. In this sense, the poem echoes intersectional feminism with its focus on the compounding effects of multiple axes of oppression on the lived experience of women.

The described suffering of these female characters highlights the major role that cultural and social institutions play in the destruction of personal identity by forcing women to adhere to prescribed gendered roles in various settings, revealing the dehumanizing effects of societal expectations on women's sense of self.

Patriarchal constraints significantly amplify women's alienation. Sneha and Chugh (2024) argue that women experience profound alienation within patriarchal structures, where their agency is curtailed and their voices are suppressed. They assert that the repression of women's voices and the dismissal of their experiences "deprive them of their autonomy" and desires.

In T. S. Eliot's poem, the female character's emotions are muted by the rigid norms of a male-dominated modernist society. Her uneasy, melancholic tone, her failed attempt to fully express her emotions, and her inability to articulate "all the things to be said, or left unsaid" (Eliot, line 7) all stem from the expectations imposed upon her. She constantly shapes and reshapes herself in order to fit into these expectations, while her fear of aging, "youth is cruel" and "has no remorse" (Eliot, line 48), mirrors the social pressures on unmarried women, a central source of her alienation (Saleem & Bani-Ata, 2011, p. 285).

Yet, silence is not always the sole outcome of alienation; resistance can also be a result of it. When facing patriarchal oppression and marginalization, women may find strength, a strength that enables them to question norms and expectations, reclaim their voices, and assert independence (Sneha & Chugh, 2024, p. 11372). This relationship between strength and resistance is greatly represented in the work of Forough Farrokhzad. Although she never explicitly identified herself as a feminist, her poetry engages with radical feminism and its critique of patriarchal systems as the root of women's oppression. Through her taboo thematic exploration, "I am naked, naked, naked" (Farrokhzad, line 87), and refusal to follow the traditional rules of Persian poetry, she resists the restrictive gender norms of her society. The heavy burden of patriarchal authority is expressed in her lament, "The savior lies in his tomb" (Farrokhzad, line 13), showing her frustration with the system that takes away her freedom; for her, the savior does not come from the outer patriarchal world but from the resistance within herself.

Analyzed in comparison, it is evident that Eliot and Farrokhzad each reveal their own distinct cultural responses to gendered oppression caused by patriarchy. Eliot's female character, with her crafted use of irony and subdued tone, remains silent, reflecting a more passive resistance to social constraints. In contrast to this acceptance is the fearless defiance of Farrokhzad. Embracing the risk of marginalization, she employs vivid imagery and taboo-breaking themes to expose the hypocrisies of Iranian society. Together, these poets illuminate how alienation, while universal in its reach, may produce culturally specific forms of resistance.

### 5.3. Character portrayal in depicting gendered alienation

The male narrator's control over the narrative, especially his descriptions of the lady and his selected dialogues, restricts our access to the inner thoughts or subjective world of the lady in "The Portrait of a Lady". Eliot deliberately avoids emotional expressions, keeping the lady always at a distance. Though his use of detailed images like "four wax candles" and "bowl of lilacs" evokes the lady's world, there is no door for the reader to fully enter her emotional experience. This, along with the fragmented perspective and structure of the poem, highlights the modernist detachment of the poem, a main characteristic of modernism and of Eliot. Concluding from this limited perspective, the lady can be seen as a passive figure constrained by upper-middle-class decorum. Her identity is rendered void, as she constantly seeks to define herself through hollow social rituals and in relation to others, in this case, the indifferent male narrator.

Like many of Eliot's characters, she struggles with an existential quest for purpose; yet, she is neglected by the modern society. Her speech, "But what have I, but what have I, my friend, / To give you, what can you receive from me" (Eliot, lines 64-65), reveals a diminished sense of agency, underscoring the "dehumanizing effects of modern life" (Houassi, 2023, p. 5). She exemplifies Hegel's concept of *Entfremdung*, as an individual separated from herself and society.

Aiken further describes her as "our dear deplorable friend, Miss X, serving tea so exquisitely among her bric-a-brac", a frustrated modern woman entrapped by her circumstances. Her self-directed monologues,

characterized as “talking to hear herself talk”, underscore the failure of meaningful communication and intensify her isolation (Abdul-Sada & Abd, 2024, pp. 12-16). Like many other modern characters, her emotional sincerity is kept at a distance; she is detached from her audience, her society, and, most importantly, herself. This depiction situates her within modernist perspectives; she represents the outcome of a society that produces lost identities, alienated in a meaningless world. Her estrangement is further compounded by her gender: she is portrayed as a “portrait”, a static, observed object devoid of autonomy. Her existence is reduced to a performative role within a stifling social framework and engages this depiction with feminist critique. Through this portrayal, not only her alienation is highlighted, but also the broader societal and patriarchal structures that dictate such disconnection are criticized.

Taking into consideration the autobiographical nature of the poem, the way Farrokhzad portrays her character can be seen as a reflection of the struggles she herself went through while trying to navigate societal marginalization as a woman in a patriarchal society. This personal touch makes her speaker more authentic and a powerful representation of individuals struggling with alienation in a rapidly changing world. In “Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season”, the female character is on an existential quest, trying to understand herself and find meaning in the chaotic modern world. This existential search for answers is evident in her questions: “Where do I come from? / That I reek of the smell of night?” (Farrokhzad, lines 190-191).

Farrokhzad’s speaker, quite unlike the socially passive female characters recurrent in other modern literary works, actively challenges alienating societal forces, especially the ones stemming from patriarchal orders. These orders tend to confine women to restrictive roles, creating a profound sense of isolation. The speaker’s nonconformity regarding these oppressive standards, showcases her rebellious nature, positioning her as a figure of resistance against the forces that alienate her.

Within a feminist approach, even though the female character here is forced to be defined as the “other” due to the male-dominated nature of the Iranian society, she tries to assert her authenticity while being aware of the marginalizing consequences this act of rebellion will follow. In contrast to the passive character of the “lady”, who accepts her alienation, Farrokhzad’s speaker uses her isolation as a catalyst, paving her way toward self-assertion and fighting against the patriarchal conventions that attempt to define her. She is the embodiment of both the pain of alienation and the strength to resist it, and this two-sidedness of her character is what distinguishes her work among other modern works. Her poetry serves as a profound commentary on the existential and gendered dimensions of alienation in the modern era, providing a detailed exploration of the female experience.

## VI. Conclusion and implications

This comparative study of Forough Farrokhzad’s “Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season” and T. S. Eliot’s “The Portrait of a Lady” highlights the universal but culturally specific nature of gendered alienation in modernist poetry. With its fresh cross-cultural perspective and juxtaposition of the defiant voice of Farrokhzad with the ironic detachment of Eliot, this study bridges Persian and Anglo-American literary traditions, enhances our understanding of the convergent aspects of feminist and modernist studies, and fosters a dynamic dialogue between them, thereby making a valuable contribution to both fields. The analysis, however, has been limited in scope. By concentrating on a single poem by each author, it cannot represent the complete scope of their work or reflect the broader reception histories that might complicate the current reading. Future studies may expand the corpus, using more than one text in order to offer a more layered comparative framework. Finally, the implication of this study is not limited by a mere juxtaposition of two poets. What emerges is a recognition that gendered alienation, though thematically recurring, takes various forms. This study invites further inquiry into how women’s voices, particularly those from non-Western contexts, can be better incorporated into comparative modernist studies affirming the power of poetry to expose and resist the gendered costs of modernity, creating a deeper understanding of the role of women’s voices in shaping modernist narratives.



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