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# “Terrestrial Verses” on the borderline: an interdisciplinary decolonial reading of Forugh Farrokhzad and Frida Kahlo

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This article studies the social and historical underpinnings of Forugh Farrokhzad’s poem “Terrestrial Verses” (1962) and her documentary film *The House is Black* (1962) in light of Frida Kahlo’s painting, *Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States* (1932). I argue that this unlikely comparison—between neocolonial Mexico and postcolonial Iran—helps articulate a decolonial paradigm in Farrokhzad’s poetry that is often subdued in Persian literary studies. Few scholars have approached Frida Kahlo and Forugh Farrokhzad’s works from a post- or decolonial point of view, and almost no one has compared these two artists. Nevertheless, hitherto unseen aspects of their work address their politics, sense of worldliness, visions of decolonization, and dismantling of the colonial residues in their respective cultural contexts through their art and artistic expressions. In terms of Farrokhzad’s poetry, the history of medicine and public health in Iran is of high importance as I make my case. This interdisciplinary and comparative reading results in a new understanding of the epidemic of leprosy as an unintended consequence of the “colonial matrix of power” in Iran during WWI.

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Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens. (Poetry is a speaking picture, painting a silent poetry).  
—Simonides of Ceos

## Introduction

Forugh Farrokhzad, the progressive Iranian poet and filmmaker, and the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo are both notorious for their feminine voice, highly expressive art, and individuality as women of the Global South living in patriarchal societies. Their works have mainly been studied from biographical and feminist points of view, and their images in the public sphere are often accompanied by their painful lives. Nevertheless, a crucial gap exists in the body of scholarship devoted to the two artists because there is a recondite side to each of them: their political persuasions, awareness of global issues, and an acute sense of worldliness. They witnessed the First and the Second World Wars and their catastrophic consequences, which affected their lives and works, from two different and distant geographical vantage points. Furthermore, the modern nation-states of Iran and Mexico, from which their works originated, have to various degrees been victims of colonialism and the two World Wars during which they equally maintained their neutrality. Farrokhzad and Kahlo reflected on their contemporary political and global issues and personal experiences, using innovative images that I perceive as “decolonial aesthetics.” What appears to be merely national and local phenomena in their art is embedded in the aftermath of international events such as the World Wars and the neo/imperialist presence of world powers in their respective cultural habitats.

The central idea in Farrokhzad’s poem “Terrestrial Verses” (1962), which sits at the heart of this article, is that the poem illustrates the catastrophic environmental consequences of the exploitation of nuclear and chemical warfare by means of highlighting those ecological disasters instigated by these weapons. Additionally, she portrays the physical and mental diseases brought about due to being exposed to these chemicals and radiations which is an approach analogous to Kahlo’s in *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932). Furthermore, I view the national problem of the epidemic of leprosy in Iran, which is portrayed in the documentary film *The House is Black* (1962) and the poem “Terrestrial Verses,” as one of the unintended consequences of colonialism of the country by the foreign powers during WWI and subsequent international events using historical facts. Therefore, leprosy can be considered a postcolonial disease in Iran.

Although Kahlo and Farrokhzad’s personal issues, including their emotional, physical, and mental status, and the projection of these experiences in their artistic productions have been the subject of numerous investigations, their works of art have rarely been considered as their decolonial attempts due to their colonial background in Iran and Mexico, and broader global issues. The only existing research comparing Farrokhzad and Kahlo is “A Comparative Study of Death in Works by Forugh Farrokhzad and Frida Kahlo” by Arman Yaghoubpour and Elham Shams, which holds the abovementioned traditional viewpoint articulating that the emotional experiences in the lives of these two artists were the only motivation for creating their art.

In addition to the abovementioned attempts to act against the current using art and literature by Farrokhzad and Kahlo, they rebelled against another dominant discourse that oppressed them as women artists in their personal and social lives: patriarchy. Their art can be perceived as a form of unconventional resistance and empowerment. Both Farrokhzad and Kahlo experienced marginalization and discrimination as a result of their gender identity within their own country. As women, they were expected

to conform to the feminine stereotypes of their patriarchal societies, Iran and Mexico respectively. However, their resistance lies in their rejection of these norms and embracing their feminine identity.

Conducting this comparison which includes a poem, painting, and documentary film offers a nuanced exploration across various disciplines and media and the ways in which the artists express their concerns. Since, as women, it was not easy for Kahlo and Farrokhzad to express their dissatisfaction with the authorities and social-political status quo, their art was their refuge. As a result, there is an undercurrent of intersectional feminine resistance which cannot be ignored in this comparison. Therefore, a decolonial feminist approach will also be employed throughout the research. In this regard, this study will recognize the shared thematic and conceptual elements that contribute to this decolonial feminine resistance that the abovementioned mediums convey due to their unique inherent qualities. For instance, the documentary film demonstrates the realities of life with a colonial disease and the ways Farrokhzad demonstrates her resistance.

## Theoretical framework

In my research, I take an interdisciplinary approach since, by including medical studies and other disciplines, a deeper understanding of the subject can be achieved. This approach fits well with Henry Remak’s seminal definition of comparative literature, which emphasizes the importance of viewing literature from a variety of perspectives. He defines the discipline as:

the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts.... It is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. (Stallknecht & Frenz, 1961).

Since the European Renaissance, we have been living in a world shaped by Euro-American imperialism, a world in which Asia and Latin America have been among the periphery of the dominant world order. Consequently, world history was primarily written and perceived from a European point of view. Walter Mignolo, the decolonial thinker, argues that the very concept of comparison and comparative methodology emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to define “Europe’s external others: Indians and Orientals ... [and] internal others: the south of Europe, the Catholic and Latin countries” (Mignolo, 2013). Along with discovering the so-called New World, there was a need to redefine the concept of comparison based on Europeans against the Indians. As a result, the comparison itself became a colonial tool. This superiority over the external Others of Europe was later defined as Orientalism which is a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” and “as a powerful political instrument of domination” (Said, 1978). As a result, the comparative point of view is almost always accompanied by two opposite superior and inferior poles.

According to Anibal Quijano, the Peruvian sociologist and humanist thinker, coloniality is based on two significant elements. First, “the codification of the difference between conquerors and conquered in the idea of race” (Quijano, 2000), and second, “the constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources and products,” which resulted in “slavery, serfdom, small independent commodity production, and reciprocity, together around and upon the basis of capital and the world market” (Quijano, 2000). Given these power and economy-related goals, the nature of the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized would include different types of hierarchy. For instance, as discussed in the following sections, the U.S. expanded

its territories by occupying the northern regions of Mexico. Similarly, Russia and Britain viewed Iran's oil fields and other resources as beneficial to their military and economic status.

Coloniality and modernity are strongly linked to each other. According to Walter D. Mignolo, they "are the two pillars of Western Civilizations" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), acting within the Colonial Matrix of Power which is an "apparatus that was built by a selected community of humans of a given religion (Christianity), in a continent called Europe and around the fifteenth century, in the process of defining themselves as humans" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Since then, Europe and later the U.S. were established as the center controlling the circulation of capital and power in the rest of the world, i.e., their peripheries.

Decolonial scholars follow three principal approaches. Firstly, they try "to deconstruct our very understanding of Modernity, which is traditionally conceptualized as a historically advanced expression of (Western) rationality" (Zavala, 2016). Second, decoloniality tries to redefine the borders that coloniality had drawn and bring the marginal communities to the foreground. And last but not least, decolonization is to make the world a place devoid of colonialism where the 'others,' peripheries and the repressed can recover their rights. Furthermore, "decolonial scholars look not for similarities and differences between two or more entities or texts but attempt to understand their location in the colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo, 2013). To sum up, decolonial practices try to break gender, race, and other hierarchies in which specific people are controlled by others.

The term *borderline* in the title of Kahlo's painting, *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, embodies the borderland between these two countries, a politically crucial region since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Other than implying the colonization of those regions over which the two countries struggled several times during the past hundreds of years, in Kahlo's painting, the significance of the US-Mexico border moves beyond the geographical implications and refers to the real and conceptual borders existing between lands, genders, races, and nations, against which both Farrokhzad and Kahlo tried to protest. These political struggles between the two countries created a hybrid space of cultures and languages in the region. "Hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (Ashcroft, Gareth, & Tiffin, 2007). Homi K. Bhabha calls this new zone the "Third Space of Enunciation" (1994), where new mixed cultural identities are shaped. Gloria Anzaldúa has dived into the depth of the cultural context of this specific border in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. According to her, two significant phenomena caused by the political history of this border are hybridity and marginality. As a result of the relationship between the people on the two sides of this border, Mexicans developed a hybrid culture and language under the influence of the English language and American culture, which was neither Mexican nor American.

Furthermore, decolonial feminism asks why the Western feminist framework and its colonial and imperialist influences on gender, race, and sexuality have come to dominate all discussions of art and literature, even in non-Western countries, and how those influences define the status of concepts such as central or marginal identities. Decolonial feminism also challenges the binary oppositions that coloniality imposes on the world. For instance, feminine and masculine, self and the other, and tradition and modernity. Farrokhzad and Kahlo do not fit into either category. They create a hybrid zone, specific to their art, which paves the way for future developments within their context. They do not necessarily conform to any dominant standards of feminine behavior or artistic representation; they use their own body as a medium of expression that reflects their pain, pleasure, and resistance.

## Discussion

**Farrokhzad's transnationalism: historical background.** Farrokhzad and Kahlo, two women who experienced the hybridity and marginality of the countries of the Global South in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, criticized local and global inequalities through their sensitive art. To examine how the postcolonial marginality and hybridity and their feminist decolonial mindset are embodied in their artistic productions, it is necessary to discuss the historical and political background that gave rise to the creation of these artworks.

One of the most important motivations for Farrokhzad was the critical status of leprosy in Iran during the 1930s and 40s. Therefore, it is necessary to explain several scientific and historical facts in order to better understand Farrokhzad's poetry in the proper global context. The first important term is leprosy, a long-term disease caused by *Mycobacterium leprae* bacteria. It may affect different body parts, such as skin, respiratory tract, eyes, and nerves. According to WHO, the symptoms of leprosy may "take as long as twenty years or even more to occur" (Leprosy, 2019) because the bacterium multiplies gradually. The disease can occur in all ages. All ethnicities are of equal sensitivity to it; therefore, if it is widespread in a region, it is due to environmental, economic, and social circumstances unrelated to genetic issues. Leprosy is spread through close and frequent contact with the infected. Low temperature, lack of hygiene, and poor living conditions multiply the chance of catching the disease.

Farrokhzad was informed by the medical facts about leprosy and its history in Iran. The status of leprosy in Iran was retold during the Qajar era (1789–1925) by several European physicians and travelers who resided in Iran for considerable periods of time, long before she started working on her film projects, such as John Luis Schlimmer (1819–1881), Jacob Eduard Polak (1818–1891), and Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau (1816–1882). In the documents published by these authors, Azarbaijan and other northwestern regions of Iran are introduced as the endemic foci of leprosy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, and more recently, Willem Floor, in *Public Health in Qajar Iran*, highlights Azarbaijan, Khorasan, Kermanshah, and Kurdistan as the epicenters of the disease in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Floor declared as well that lepers were not welcomed in the cities and were banished to deprived areas out of towns where they lived in poor conditions due to the stigma of the disease, which Farrokhzad addressed and exposed in her film.

During and after the First World War, British and Russian soldiers were present in Iran between 1914 and 1921. British soldiers, some dispatched to Iran from India (Abbasi, 2019), were experiencing severe epidemics of leprosy in India. In 1881 there were an estimated number of 120,000 lepers (Kakar, 1996) in India, and 73 lepers' asylums were located in areas under British rule (Kakar, 1996). Furthermore, the number of leper asylums in India rose from 73 in 1911 to 94 in 1921, among which 73 were located in areas under British rule (Kakar, 1996). Therefore, the British soldiers who were exposed to leprosy in India were responsible for carrying the disease into the country and for the significant rise in the number of lepers in the following years.

Similarly, in 1900 and 1901, leprosy severely threatened people in more than 49 districts of Russia ("The Spread", 1901). Fifteen years after this epidemic in Russia, WWI started when many Russian soldiers entered occupied Iran, many of whom carried the causative bacteria inside their bodies. The Russian troops entered Iran from Azarbaijan, the region that later became the disease's main epicenter. Russians were responsible for spreading leprosy in other countries as well. For instance, "[i]n the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, leprosy was imported by Lithuanian rural workers immigrating from the Russian empire into East Prussia" (Hundeiker, Brömmelhaus, 2007). A breakout of leprosy

in Iran emerged during the 1940s, almost twenty years after WWI and the famine, which is as long as the hidden period of leprosy.

According to Mohammad Gholi Majd in his book *The Great Persian Famine and Genocide in Persia, 1917–1919*, the invasion of other countries, Russia and Britain in particular, to Iran during WWI was the primary reason behind the Great Persian Famine of 1917–1919. I am of the opinion that this famine led to the spread of leprosy in Iran. It was a widespread hunger and disease under the rule of the last king of the Qajar era during WWI (Sniegoski, 2013). Although Iran declared neutrality in this war, the country was influenced by the conflicts between the Central Powers and the Allies. Russia took control of the northern part of Iran, and the British army occupied the southern provinces. Iran had already become a playing field for the old Russia vs. Britain colonial rivalry.

British and Russian forces entered Iran through Kurdistan and other western and northwestern provinces. According to Martin Henry Donohoe, a member of the British Dunsterforce commanded by General Dunsterville, in his memoir *With the Persian Expedition*, British forces entered Iran through Kermanshah province. Accordingly:

We were now well over the frontier and found ourselves in a land of desolation and death. Our way lay past ruined and deserted villages, many of the inhabitants of which have been blotted out by famine. ... On the other side of the frontier I had heard a good deal as to the appealing economic conditions of Persia, and of the shortage of food; but now, brought face to face with the terrible reality I understood for the first time its full significance (Donohoe, 1919).

As he describes, the only meal of the residents of the region was a piece of bread per day. In the deserted and bare lands near Kermanshah, which were occupied by Russian forces, “[t]here was no seed wheat, and consequently, no crops had been sown. Many tillers of the soil had fled for their lives; those who were remained were dying of hunger in this war-ravaged region” (Donohoe, 1919). Famine and lack of hygiene, two main reasons for the spread of leprosy, existed in these regions.

Eventually, witnessing the gradual rise in the number of lepers, and to prevent the disease from spreading in the larger cities, in 1920, the ruler of Azarbaijan founded Bababaghi hospice leper colony in Tabriz. This need for a lazaret indicates a significant increase in leprosy cases. By 1921, there were three leper colonies in Iran located in Azarbaijan, Khorasan, and Kermanshah, where patients could live and work, although in absolute isolation. The provinces with fewer cases before the famine and war were potential places for the epidemic after the situation became appropriate for spreading the disease. Almost 20 years later, leprosy became an epidemic in many cities of Iran.

Although the history of leprosy in Iran dates back to ancient times, and the first known manuscript that mentioned the existence of the disease in Iran was Avesta (Mortazavi, 2001), the epidemic had not been this serious in the country before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, and at least since that period of time, leprosy has been a postcolonial disease in the country. Considering the abovementioned historical and medical evidence, it is possible to conclude that the Russian and British soldiers carried the disease to Iran. Juxtaposed with the Great Famine, also a postcolonial disaster, the nationwide epidemic of leprosy was the aftermath of global events. Therefore, Farrokhzad’s abovementioned literary and artistic productions are her attempts at illustrating postcolonial issues.

**Farrokhzad’s poetics and politics.** *The House is Black* and “Terrestrial Verses” are both considered turning points in Farrokhzad’s artistic career. The poem was printed in her poetry collection *Rebirth* (1964). In *Rebirth*, Farrokhzad shows her social and

political motivations and tacitly illustrates the influence of several global events on her artistic imagination. Moreover, for the first time, she connotes her decolonial mindset in these works. This poem is one of her most politically charged poems which explores several multifaceted subjects. Firstly, it connotes that the lepers’ lifestyle at Bababaghi leper house in Northwestern Iran was an indirect outcome of the occupation of Iran during WWI. Secondly, and more symbolically, it refers to the unintended consequences of WWII bombings and imperialism around the globe.

Similarly, *The House is Black* focuses on the same subject matter, life in an isolated leper colony, though more directly. Before and while producing *The House is Black*, Farrokhzad resided with the lepers in the colony and accepted the risk of infection to witness their lives closely. After this experience, she arranged a meeting with the minister of health of the time to ask for improved living conditions at Bababaghi (Saffarian, 2002). Consequently, the lepers called her their “guardian angel” (Saffarian, 2002).

This documentary could have served as an inspiration for Jean-Daniel Pollet in producing his documentary film *L’Ordre* (1973). This documentary has various similarities to that of Farrokhzad’s. It tells the story of an abandoned leper colony on a Greek island called Spinalonga. The film was produced under a Greek dictatorship, the Greek Junta (1967–1974). The subject matter and techniques employed in filming and editing the film resemble those of *The House is Black*. Moreover, the opening and ending scenes, the narrators’ voices and tones, and the sequence of events are similar.

Farrokhzad’s unique experience as an outsider who resided in a leper colony was manifested in her works. Significant parts of “Terrestrial Verses” and various scenes in *The House is Black* reflect Farrokhzad’s experience at Bababaghi. The lepers who live in this colony are described as “prisoners” (Farrokhzad, *Rebirth*, 1963) whose voices can never be heard since they are confined in a “cave” (Farrokhzad, *Rebirth*, 1963) and loiter, waiting for their death. This futility is similarly displayed in *The House is Black* in a one-minute scene where the narrator, which is Farrokhzad herself, recites a poem that includes the days of the week in a meager voice while the viewer sees the image of a leper going back and forth along a wall (Farrokhzad, *The House is Black*, 1962). It is important to note that people outside this colony were not aware of the existence of this place; therefore, Farrokhzad calls them “the time-forgotten ones” (Farrokhzad, *The House is Black*, 1962).

In *The House is Black* and in “Terrestrial Verses,” some sections focus on how the concept of the future is perceived by the children of the lepers born and raised in the colony. For instance, in a part of the poem Farrokhzad says: “Tomorrow/ came to have a mute lost meaning in children’s minds” (Farrokhzad, *Rebirth*, 1963). Comparably, Kahlo displayed a dreadful and vague image of the future of colonized Mexico by painting an unpleasant image of the country covered in dark clouds that move from the U.S. towards her country in *The Borderline Between Mexico and the United States*.

“Terrestrial Verses” can also be interpreted from the point of view of its geo/political motivations. Amongst the images described in the poem, some correspond to the shocking situation after the nuclear bombing of Japan at the end of WWII, where Farrokhzad illustrates how human beings and the environment are affected by the bombing. Moreover, this description is comparable to post-war Mexico painted by Kahlo, discussed later in this article. According to Farzaneh Milani, a scholar with prolific writings on Farrokhzad, “Terrestrial Verses is about the political suffocation and apathy the poet witnessed around her. Indeed, since the poem was composed after World War II in an interconnected world, one can argue it might be related to that catastrophic war” (Milani, 2019).

Unlike many who believe that “Terrestrial Verses” is filled with religious signs and portrays an apocalyptic religious scene, I am of the opinion that the described apocalypse, which is the catastrophic environmental situation in the poem, is brought about by the nuclear and chemical warfare and wartime sexual violence and is not religious. Farrokhzad stresses the negative consequences of the violent acts during the two World Wars, commenting on the question of faith and materialistic issues vis-a-vis moralities. The similar subject of using weapons of mass destruction during and after WWI by the Western countries, the U.S. in particular, was raised by Kahlo in her painting as well.

“Terrestrial Verses” opens with a portrayal of the environmental and natural disasters caused by nuclear weapons. Farrokhzad begins the poem by describing bare lands and dead animals as follows “blessing left the land./ and the green grass on the plain dried up,/ and the fish in the seas dried up” (Farrokhzad, Rebirth, 1963). This stanza refers to the drying up of lands as an aftermath of their radiation exposure to nuclear radiation, which makes them barren for decades after the incident. After the WWII nuclear bombing of Japan, the animals were either dead or, like humans, experienced damage to their genetic materials. Likewise, Kahlo raises the disastrous consequences of war for the environment in her painting *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* by picturing the dried lands of Mexico that deteriorated during the war.

In the third stanza, Farrokhzad raises the subject of pregnant women who give birth to dead and abnormal children due to being in contact with nuclear radiation. As reported by research conducted in Nagasaki in 1950, almost ten years before the poem was composed, pregnant women exposed to radiation in this city gave birth to children with “abnormally shaped small head—microcephaly—accompanied by mental retardation” (Yamazaki, 2007). Farrokhzad mentions this problem in chilling details: “pregnant women/gave birth to headless infants, / and cradles out of shame/ took refuge in graves” (Farrokhzad, Rebirth, 1963). Comparably, Kahlo highlighted the issue of pregnant women’s vulnerability and weakness during wars by painting a brown female fertility figure who holds a dead child in her hands. As women, the two artists deeply understood the challenges that women face when it comes to failed pregnancies. Kahlo had even experienced it in her life. Since their corresponding contexts did not allow them to speak for women’s rights explicitly and did not even value women worthy of having specific rights, they were forced to wrap their opposition in layers of art, which they were successful in. Their feminine voice has, therefore, amplified the affectability of their disguised resistance against crimes that lead to such incidences. Thanks to the efforts of such pioneer female artists, now one of the most debated issues in feminist discourses is pregnancy and the rights that women have.

Farrokhzad describes “the fallen group of people” (Farrokhzad, Rebirth, 1963) who are “discouraged” (Farrokhzad, Rebirth, 1963), weak and fragile after a war or bombing walking among the dead bodies and the ruins of their hometown. Farrokhzad explains the “bitter and black days” (Farrokhzad, Rebirth, 1963) where prophets have lost their holiness. It could refer to the political and religious leaders of the time who were involved in materialistic and power issues and their ignorance of the moral codes. She explains that people no longer have trustworthy leaders who guide them without materialistic intentions. These people are like “lost lambs” (Farrokhzad, Rebirth, 1963) who wander in the world without a shepherd. Although Farrokhzad was a revolutionary woman living in 1960s Iran, her standing up to the authorities was not an option as it is for contemporary women in many countries. She was a progressive woman in terms of her contributions to poetry, cinema, and Persian art and literature in general; however, as a woman, she was not either

expected or allowed to have an opinion about the social and political status quo, not to mention stand against it. Therefore, her feminist artistic activities channeled through demonstrating the status of leprosy as a colonial disease in Iran can be considered a decolonial feminist aesthetic.

Farrokhzad has also explored the role of the media and their falsification of reality in the fifth stanza. She compares the media to a mirror that reflects everything upside down, mentioning the political games in which they play a crucial role. For example, she claims that the media glorifies dishonest people, picturing them as saints with a bright halo. “In the eyes of mirrors,/ movements, and colors, and images/ seemed reflected upside down,/ and over the heads of base clowns/ and prostitutes’ shameful visages/ a holy bright halo/ burned like a blazing umbrella” (Farrokhzad, Rebirth, 1963).

Wartime rape and sexual violence were among the challenges that the occupied and colonized countries, such as Japan, faced during WWII. A significant number of women and children were raped or raped–murdered by American soldiers in Japan. This catastrophe was the aftermath of the colonization of the East (i.e., Japan) by the West (i.e., the U.S.), which Farrokhzad reflected in her poem. “They would attack one another;/ men would slash each other’s throats with knives/ and sleep/ with prepubescent girls/ in beds of blood” (Farrokhzad, Rebirth, 1963). Similar to what is mentioned above about pregnancy, rape is one of the most traumatizing issues for women. Interestingly, Farrokhzad referred to this issue in her decolonial feminist art.

Farrokhzad’s abovementioned works highlight her rejection of the colonization of the countries of the Global South, the use of weapons of mass destruction, and wartime sexual violence by the so-called Western authoritative countries. WWI–II and the subsequent colonization and violence brought about countless irreparable damages to the colonized and vulnerable countries, to a few of which Farrokhzad referred, although indirectly, in her poetry and cinema. Similarly, Kahlo protested against the same consequences of war and global injustices from a different geographical vantage point, Latin America, and through a different medium, visual arts.

**Kahlo: a decolonial reading of Mestizo art.** *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, Fig. 1, reflects discernably the historical context in which it was created and the painter’s political mindset. This painting addresses the history of the political and cultural relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, including few but expressive elements in the landscape. Kahlo borrowed various elements from Mexican folk art, Aztecs in particular. This painting seeks to decolonize the observer’s mind by returning to native and indigenous traditions of Mexican culture as they existed in the pre-colonial era. This includes returning to valuing women’s status in pre-historic Mexican societies as central figures instead of marginal and minor. Similarly, Farrokhzad employed elements of Persian traditions and culture to demonstrate the marginal status of women in the country and to act against it. She especially used elements that are related to the religious aspect of Iranian culture which men have used throughout history to oppress women.

Kahlo’s painting can be seen as an example of how decolonial feminism can create objects, forms, norms, performances, experiences, traditions, and collaborations that unsettle or take a measure of distance from neocolonial modalities of power and sociality. It can also be seen as an invitation to rethink our own identities in relation to others who are different from us in ways that we may not be aware of or comfortable with. It can also be seen as an inspiration to imagine new possibilities for creating art that is more inclusive, diverse, democratic, and transformative.



**Fig. 1 Self-portrait on the borderline between Mexico and the United States.** 1932, oil on metal, 31 × 25 cm. The painting illustrates the painting standing on a stone that marks the border between the United States and Mexico. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./ DACS 2022. copyright © Christie's Images/ Bridgeman Images, all rights reserved.

The painting is divided into two sections. The left side of the painting illustrates the Mexican landscape, which is natural and alive, in contrast to the industrialized American society on the right side. In the foreground of the left half, Kahlo has painted Mexican Cacti, which establish a connection between both sides by their roots which turn into cables along the border. In the background is a half-ruined Aztec pyramid, the Sun, and the Moon. In the middle ground, there are the deteriorated parts of an Aztec temple similar to the one located at Teopanzalco, Cuernavaca (Vaillant, 1944), two clay sculptures of Aztec women, the brown one from Jalisco, which was explained in the previous sections, and the white one from Colima and a Totonaca stone skull. On the other side, Kahlo has painted industrialized America, the Ford factory, and its smoking chimneys which blur the U.S. flag, industrial tools, and several modern equipment such as a loudspeaker, a blower, and a light. Furthermore, the figure of Kahlo herself stands on the border between these two countries on a stone wearing a European dress, holding the flag of Mexico and a cigarette in her hands.

The painting is designed symmetrically. The foreground, middle ground, and background are all symmetrical, and Kahlo is the line of symmetry. To be more accurate, each element on the right side is related to its parallel object on the left. The objects on the American side have replaced or destroyed the ones on the Mexican side. In other words, the purpose is to demonstrate that is that the industrialized tools on the right have replaced natural elements on the left. From right to left, there is a gray shadow starting from the U.S. side, expanding towards Mexico, and only a small part is still clear, which will be contaminated soon.

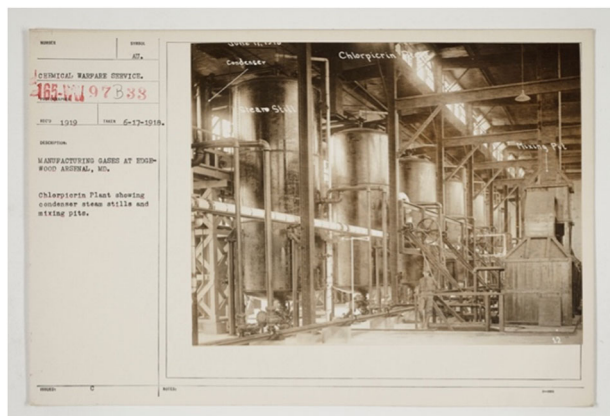
Sun, which is of considerable significance, is one of the elements that this painting and Farrokhzad's poem "Terrestrial Verses" have in common. Their difference is that Sun is dead in the poem; however, it has a strange face with closed eyes, is red, and emits solar flares in the painting. Kahlo borrowed various elements from Mexican folk art, Aztecs in particular. Sun and Moon are of exceptionally high importance in Aztec rituals, myths, and religion. The Sun God or Tonatiuh is one of the greatest Gods. "Sun worship [was] an essential part of the Aztec religion" (Vaillant, 1944) since the figure exists in most of their

drawings and sculptures. Two of the largest structures in Teotihuacan, the capital of Aztecs, are dedicated to the Sun God and his wife, the Moon Deity. George C. Vaillant, in his book *Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise and Fall of the Aztec Nation*, contends that "the world passed through four or five ages, or Suns ... Our present age, is under the control of the Sun God" (Vaillant, 1944) and in this painting, the wrath of this God is clearly portrayed since it emits flares.

The other interpretation of the Sun emitting solar flare in the painting could be a scientific one. From a scientific point of view, "[a] solar flare is an intense burst of radiation coming from the release of magnetic energy associated with sunspots. Flares are our solar system's largest explosive events. They are seen as bright areas on the Sun and they can last from minutes to hours" (Dunbar, 2017). For the first time, a flare was observed by Richard Carrington and Richard Hodgson in 1859, almost 70 years before the painting was drawn. "The amount of energy released [by the flare] is the equivalent of millions of 100-megaton hydrogen bombs exploding at the same time" (Dunbar, 2017) which is an incredible destructive power. This temple in the painting is half-destroyed. Its left half, which is located under the Sun, is destroyed while the other one under the Moon is not. So, there could be two reasons for the deterioration of Mexico in the painting. First, American neo-imperialism, and second, the solar flare, which could represent the wrath of the Sun God as it rules this era, symbolizing Kahlo's anger towards such geopolitical events as the American foreign policy.

In the background of the right half of this painting, the Ford River Rouge Plant is portrayed. On March 7, 1932, the year Kahlo painted this artwork, the Ford Hunger March or Ford Massacre took place in Detroit during the Great Depression. It was a march by the unemployed Ford workers who demanded to have their jobs back. During this demonstration, five workers were shot and killed by the police and Ford Motors Company security guards, and over 60 were injured. At the time in Detroit, the unemployment rate was almost 50 percent, with 75 percent of the workforce at this plant having been laid off, as people were dying of cold and hunger without public relief (Sugar, 1980). This event inspired Kahlo to draw this factory in her painting to show her rejection of the brutality against the working class. This point of view originated in her affiliation with the Mexican Communist Party and her Marxist inclination. Similarly, according to Iraj Mesdaghi, Farrokhzad joined an Iranian Marxist association when she was already a famous poet. However, while she was preparing herself for the military phase, the other members of the group were arrested, and thanks to their silence, her membership was not revealed to the officials (Mesdaghi, 2010). This tendency can also be one of the reasons for her postcolonial turn. Similar to Kahlo, Farrokhzad lived in a society that struggled with injustice and colonialism and had experienced the World Wars first-hand.

Sarah M. Lowe claims that the black object at the bottom of the painting is a "generator" (1991), but according to the scientific definition of a generator, it is technically impossible. An electric generator is a tool that converts mechanical energy into electrical power so it can be used in other systems and circuits. However, the object in the painting is connected to electricity as its source of power, therefore it is not a generator. Moreover, for the same reason, it is not a dynamo. It can be a blower or a fan which needs electricity to run. The significance of the blower in this side of the painting is America's suggested strategy against chemical weapons in 1915 during WWI. The initiator of chemical warfare was the German army, launching a chlorine bomb on Ypres, Belgium, on April 22, 1915. Two months after this attack, the idea of using blowers and fans against the chemical gases was proposed by the U.S. In July 1915, *Scientific American* published an article proposing this idea.



**Fig. 2 Chemical warfare service—plants—Edgewood Arsenal and others —manufacturing gases at Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland.** The image shows a Chloropicrin plant including condenser steam stills and mixing pits. This figure is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of U.S. National Archives, Public Domain Archives; copyright © US National Archives, all rights reserved.

The gray objects standing on the right side of the painting in the middle ground are condenser steam stills and mixing pits of a chemical weapon manufacturing factory, which resemble the plant in Edgewood, Arsenal, Maryland, displayed in Fig. 2. Their figure resembles marching soldiers. This similarity demonstrates Kahlo's rejection of American military policies and their frequent usage of chemical warfare.

The borderline between the two countries is one of the obvious projections of the colonization of Mexico by the U.S. The border is marked by a stone on which Kahlo herself is standing in a pink 19<sup>th</sup>-century European dress, representing the culture of the colonizer country (i.e., the U.S.), while she seems to be a combination of the two different worlds. Unlike her clothing in this painting, she wore Tehuana in her lifetime and other self-portraits. Tehuana is a dress worn by the Zapotec women living in a matriarchal society based in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. These women were economically independent and free; therefore, they likely inspired Kahlo. The dress also represents Kahlo's political involvement in Mexicanidad (National Mexican Identity). As Kettenmann claims the artist's Tehuana dress and pre-Columbian jewelry "perfectly matched the growing spirit of nationalism and the revived interest in Indian culture" (2000). Most critics believe that Kahlo's Tehuana dress has political implications and that she deliberately chose a primitive painting style because primitiveness was a part of Mexicanness. Furthermore, her hands in this painting noticeably represent the dual personality developed due to colonization. In her right hand, Kahlo holds a cigarette pointed toward the American side, and on her left, she has the national flag of Mexico pointed to the left side. The juxtaposition of the dress, the cigarette, and the flag against "a Coatlicue-like necklace with bones" (Helland, 1991) on her neck completes this contrast. On the stone that marks this border, Kahlo is standing on a stone on which it is written "Carmen Rivera pintó su retrato el año de 1932," meaning Carmen Rivera painted her portrait in 1932. Kahlo's full name was Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón. Rivera was her husband's (Diego Rivera) family name. She may have used this name since in the U.S., she was always recognized as Rivera's wife, and her art was either ignored or was not adequately appreciated. Kahlo used Carmen possibly for two reasons. Firstly, Carmen was her Christian name, and she preferred to use that in the U.S. Secondly, early in the 1930s when she created this painting, the

Nazis were rising in Europe. She was against them due to her Jewish roots; therefore, she preferred to hide her German origin. By picturing herself as a hybrid figure, she portrays how colonialism functions once it is internalized. This internalization leads to a sense of inferiority felt by the citizens of the colonized countries as a result of colonization. The duality that Kahlo pictured in this painting is depicted by Gloria Anzaldúa, who has reflected on her *mestiza* identity. According to her, "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture" (Anzaldúa, 1999). Anzaldúa has also developed plural personalities due to living in the intersection of two geographically adjacent but culturally opposite countries, one still traditional and natural, the other modernized and industrial. As *mestiza* women who were not adequately appreciated, admired, and understood, Kahlo and Anzaldúa both experienced a process of othering that haunted them forever.

Although Helland considers this painting as "Kahlo's idealization of the Aztec past" (1991), I believe that it is not merely a projection of Kahlo's passion for Mexico and Aztecs, for if it were there would be no reason to picture herself as a colonized subject to stress the consequences of colonization of Mexico by the U.S. Similarly, if she intended to highlight her national identity, she would not have written the name she was called in the U.S. on the stone. The intention of the painting is summarized in Terry Smith's words that European and Mexican-American cultures can "never fuse ... into one whole" (1993).

After his election, Donald Trump promised to build a wall on the borderland between the U.S. and Mexico and "make Mexico pay for it" (Cummings, 2019). The result of voting on this subject showed that more than half of the Americans opposed building this new wall. In general, the Republicans were more supportive of Trump. During this time, this painting was taken from its owner's private collection in New York City to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for public exhibition in October 2017 as "a timely response to the anti-immigrant stance of Donald Trump" (D'Arcy, 2016). Moreover, the painting was used in many posters as well as online materials to protest against Trump's policy. There have also been other paintings that have gained the same political significance during the history of the world. A blue sheet covered a copy of Picasso's *Guernica* in the U.N. during a press conference by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on the issue of bombing in Iraq at the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003.

## Conclusion

Living and working in both colonizer and colonized countries, witnessing major global events, being communists, and traveling to Europe gave Kahlo and Farrokhzad a political and social point of view different from their contemporary artists. These events were the lenses through which they looked at the world, created their own narratives, and gave them the motivation to create the above-mentioned works. Similar to Farrokhzad, Kahlo's political motivations were never taken as seriously as her vibrant feminine art. I tried to highlight in the article the two artists' overlooked parts of art, their decolonial mindset and attempts, and their awareness of global issues.

Farrokhzad and Kahlo drew inspiration from elements of their cultural heritage in their works of art in order to address their resistance against the political mainstream. They employed symbols, motifs, stories, and rituals from their culture to express their resistance in their art. They both addressed issues such as women's rights, human rights, environmental protection, anti-colonialism, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism, among others, through their art which inspired other artists, activists, intellectuals, and movements around the world. Their way of viewing war, although was shaped

under various forms of oppression, is still innovative. They focused on those aspects of war that are not usually considered important. The postcolonial and decolonial readings of Mexican paintings and comparing them with Iranian art and literature resulted in a new web connecting Latin America to Asia. What should never be forgotten in this research is that nationalism and colonialism are two sides of the same coin, and that is why decolonization is impossible without criticizing nationalism.

### Data availability

All data analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

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### Author contributions

The author (ZM) confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

### Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

### Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

### Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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