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The Shahnameh of Ferdowsi: An Icon to National Identity

LAINA FARHAT-HOLZMAN

Introduction

Epic poems are part of the heritage of many peoples around the world. Long before writing became the mode of transmitting culture and history, story tellers (usually in verse and song) have enthralled their communities with the inherited tales of the ancestors. The unifying theme of all epics is some heroic action by a hero or heroes: individuals who took on challenges for which death was a possibility.

Certain epics have been identified with specific creators: such as the Iliad attributed to Homer and the Aeneid, a work we know was written by Virgil. Others are so old and preliterate that by the time they were written down, the identity of the original author was lost.

I take it on faith that the world’s great epics were not the product of a committee; they are too good for that. In addition, most epics are in verse, which makes correct memorization easier than prose, an indication that there was a single original source. We also know that bards with talent were greatly honored by their societies—sometimes to the point of blinding them so that they could not find new employment.

Epics range the globe and appear through time from the first one we know, the Sumerian Gilgamesh, whose hero challenges death to retrieve his best friend, (this epic was written!) through ancient Greece (oral until much later writing), the Hebrew Bible (remnants of epics such as the story of David and Goliath and Moses and the Pharaoh), all written much later; the Aeneid (a written epic that is another take on the Trojan stories of the Greeks); the Spanish Epic of the Cid and his struggles with the Muslim invaders; the French Song of Roland, who supposedly saved France from the Muslim invasion; and a range of other oral and later written epics from the Germans, Finns, Irish, Indians, Norse, Native Americans, and
Polynesians, as well as Australian Aborigines.

Epics have always played the role of giving a people a sense of their historic continuity, a sense of language and its appropriate literary form, and above all, our earliest sense of peoplehood—which in some took the form of early nationalism.

Epics, although generally considered an archaic form, may yet be seen to be alive and well in cinema. The Star Wars series is but the latest form of heroic tale, of good in a fight against evil, one of the oldest themes in epics.

The Shahnameh

One epic that is little known in the west is the Persian epic: the Shahnameh—an enormous poetic opus written in the 10th century CE by a gifted Iranian poet, Ferdowsi. This single work not only illustrates what a people consider to be their history, but also reflects their values, their ancient religion, and their sense of nationhood at the point in their history when they had lost their national independence. In addition, while there are heroes of the classical type in this work, the real, ongoing hero is Iran itself. [Banani: 109]

This work’s further significance lies in its use of language (it was the first major work in modern Persian, a language that nearly disappeared under the onslaught of Arabic and Islam, and in its influence on the stories of other civilizations (Russian, Indian, Turkish, and Medieval Europe), as well as in the pictorial art of those same recipients of the stories.

In short, a study of the Shahnameh (Book of Kings) gives us a literary excuse for exploring how culture moves across time and space, becoming part of the global common heritage.

Origins

Iran’s beginnings can be traced back to the emergence of one branch of the Indo-European people known as Aryans (later Iranians) who migrated from somewhere in Central Asia or southern Siberia, branches of which spread down to India, others
to Europe by way of Greece, Rome, the Germanic peoples, and Scandinavians, and still another group into the Iranian plateau, once inhabited by a white population since gone. We know these Aryans to have been one people because of their once common language, now called the Indo-European language group. [Arberry]

The occupiers of the Iranian Plateau, Medes (later to be called Kurds), Persians, Bactrians, and other tribal groups, came late to written language. They, like many other peoples with vivid oral literature, feared a loss of their ability to memorize once writing was introduced. However, when the Persians unified their cousin kingdoms into a major and victorious fighting force in the 6th century BCE and found themselves in control of an international empire, writing was found necessary. In addition to using writing for government documents, there were the beginnings of writing the oral traditions of the native religion, Zoroastrianism, the world’s first revealed monotheistic religion, and the historic and mythological materials that had been handed down orally for a millennium. [Farhat-Holzman] Persia began to acquire a written literature.

Persia continued to be a major Eurasian political force from the time of Cyrus the Great (559 BCE) through three other dynasties with more or less continuity: the Seleucid (remnant of Alexander the Great), Parthian, and Sassanian. The Persians shared and competed with Rome for the domination of the Mediterranean and western Asian world, including at times parts of India.

While the Sassanian Empire focused its military efforts on keeping the barbarians from Central Asia out of their greatly extended northern borders, another barbarian force, in 637 CE, entered from the south: the Arabs, who were armed with zeal from a new and vibrant religion, Islam, as well as their Bedouin zeal for loot and rapine. The Sassanian empire, which had taxed its peasantry into penury to support their military burden, crumbled under the Arab assault.

Within the next few centuries, Iran was completely subdued and both forced and seduced into accepting the new reli-
gion, along with its language and writing system. Arab cultural imperialism was a mighty vehicle; most of the civilizations it conquered, from Egypt through all of North Africa, succumbed to Arabic and Arabization. Persia did not. [Levi]

Arabic was learned and used by the host of literati employed by the Muslim powers, but Persian went underground, where it was transformed and enriched by Arabic vocabulary and writing system, to emerge three centuries after the conquest as Modern Farsi. English went through a similar transformation under the Norman French occupation, with the same result: a language capable of wonders in poetry and prose.

By the 10th century, a new group of conquerors appeared on the scene: the Seljuks, the first of the Turkic tribes out of Central Asia to move west and seize power. (The Ottoman Turks were the last of these waves, and they succeeded in creating an empire that lasted from the 16th to the 20th century CE.)

The Seljuks dominated eastern Iran, but were themselves seduced by Islam and by Persian culture, which was just beginning to recover from its Arab-inflicted disaster. Persian was now spoken again in public, and was apparently adopted by the Seljuks. One sultan took on the task of patronizing Persian literati; he supported the effort of researching and producing a history of the Persian people and their kings. In a court competition, one winning poet was assigned the task of recreating the history of the Persian Kings, for which he was promised one gold piece for every rhyming couplet that he produced.

This poet was Ferdowsi, an educated but impoverished land owner from Tus, in north-eastern Iran. Ferdowsi took on the task, and at the end of 30 years, it was complete. He produced a masterpiece of 30,000 rhyming couplets, a poem that traced Iran’s history from the creation of the world to the Arab conquest, at which point it stops—a not-too subtle snub illustrating the elite Persian opinion of Arabs. Although Islam could never be overtly attacked, the old religion, Zoroastrianism, was honored in the spirit of this work.

That Ferdowsi accomplished his intent: to resurrect
Persian national identity, is evident in the work's history. The *Shahnameh* became the treasure of every great private library in Iran, where an elegantly illustrated and illuminated manuscript became the family's treasure. In a humbler way, it became the favorite story of every Persian village visited by an itinerant story teller. [Arnberry: 47] It traveled by sea and land, and was taken up by story tellers in Russia, and was liberally borrowed from by later Persian poets and the poets of the European romances several centuries later. Good stories travel (as do good jokes that circumnavigate the globe on the Internet).

Today, even after an assault by resurgent Islam in the hands of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the *Shahnameh* is still alive and well in Iran, still doing its subversive best to remind Persians who they are. Radio Tehran begins each morning with recitations from the *Shahnameh*, accompanied by a drum beat, to which Iranians do their morning setting-up exercises.

Even more fascinating is a semi-religious (ostensibly Shiite Islamic) fraternity favored and supported by the merchant class, called the *Zur Khaneh* (House of Power), in which the members perform feats of strength to the recitation of the *Shahnameh* and a drum beat.

The athletes wear elaborate leather trousers adapted from one of the heroes of the *Shahnameh*: the blacksmith Kava, who led the first commoner revolt against an unjust king. Kava wore such leather trousers and used his leather apron as a war standard.

**The Work Itself**

The *Shahnameh* recounts the history of Iran, beginning with the creation of the world and the introduction of the arts of civilization (fire, cooking, metallurgy, law) and ends with the Arab conquest. The work is not precisely chronological, but there is a general movement through time. Some of the characters live for hundreds of years (as do some of the characters in the Bible), but most have normal life spans. There are many shahs who come and go, as well as heroes and villains, who also come and go. The only lasting image is that of Iran itself, and a suc-
cession of sunrises and sunsets, no two ever exactly alike, yet illustrative of the passage of time.

Father Time, a Saturn-like image, is a reminder of the tragedy of death and loss, yet the next sunrise comes, bringing with it hope of a new day. [Banani: 109-110]

In the first cycle of creation, evil is external (the devil). In the second cycle, we see the beginnings of family hatred, bad behavior, and evil permeating human nature. Shah Fereidun’s two eldest sons have greed and envy toward their innocent younger brother and, thinking their father favors him, they murder him. The murdered prince’s son avenges the murder, and all are immersed in the cycle of murder and revenge, blood and more blood.

In the third cycle, we encounter a series of flawed shahs. There is a Phaedra-like story of Shah Kay Kavus, his wife Sudabeh, and her passion and rejection by her stepson, Siyavosh.

In the next cycle, all the players are unsympathetic and selfish and evil. This epic on the whole is darker over all than most other epics, most of which have some sort of resolution and catharsis. This tone seems reflective of two things, perhaps: the conquest of the Persians by the Arabs, and a reflection of the last days of Persian Zoroastrianism. The old religion had been fraught with heresies, and somehow Zoroaster’s optimistic view of man’s ability to choose had become life denying and negative toward this world. There is an enormous amount of bad luck and bad fate here.

It is only in the characterizations of the work’s many figures, both male and female, that Zoroaster’s original view of the human condition comes through. Zoroaster emphasized human free will. We find all of Ferdowsi’s characters complex. Nobody is an archetype or a puppet. The best characters have bad flaws, and the worst have moments of humanity. [Banani: 114]

Rostam, the Epic’s Main Hero

The most important hero in the work is Rostam, a champion who defends a series of very inadequate Shahs but does not
seek their power for himself. He has become the Persian exemplar of that rare creature, a disinterested hero who does his duty for its own sake. That there have been very few such heroes or kings in Persian history is not the point; hope still springs eternal.

Rostam has a magical birth. His father, Zal, who was exposed on a mountain top upon his birth because his own father considered the white-haired (albino) baby a bad omen, was nurtured by Simorq, a great mother bird. When Zal grew up and was restored to his now regretful father, the Simorq gave him a feather to burn at a time of great need. The time came when Zal’s beautiful wife was close to death in childbirth because of the enormous size of her baby. The bird came, performed a painless surgery, and Rostam was born, heroic even in his infancy.

At three, Rostam killed a runaway elephant with a war club. In adulthood, he became an unparalleled champion, serving one shah after another, never seeking their power even in the face of repeated attempts of people to unseat their flawed monarchs and replace them with the honorable Rostam.

Rostam is shown to be a staunch defender of good against evil (a very Zoroastrian viewpoint), and he attempts to keep his kings on the straight and narrow. One of his kings took it into his head that he wanted to fly; he attached four eagles to his throne and hung meat just out of range of their mouths. The eagles took off, and Rostam was compelled to rescue the silly king.

Other kings engage in ill-advised military ventures, which Rostam must help resolve. These shahs are shown to be vain and often foolish (a long experience of Iranians) and Rostam is frequently annoyed to the point of quitting. He himself is not without flaws; he is thin-skinned and quick to take offense and is an enormous glutton and binge drinker when the mood seizes him, but somehow or other, he always comes around and is recalled to his duty.

The shahs are often shown to be both dependent upon, and afraid of, Rostam. They frequently project that he might want their job, which he really does not want; out of which comes
the greatest tragedy of his life.

Rostam has only one sexual encounter that we are told about (like our own cowboys, he seems to prefer his horse), with a very beautiful and superior princess. After an instant marriage and one night of love, Rostam leaves his bride with the gift of a bracelet to be given to a daughter if such should be born, or to be given to a son upon coming of age, with instructions to send his son to him. He is not much of a father. [Davidson: 146]

A son, Sohrab, is born, who appears to have the attributes of his father. Upon adolescence, his mother sends him into the world to seek his father. The two finally meet on the battlefield, each unknown to the other but both known to their respective kings, who fear telling them the truth. Each king imagines that he could lose his throne to the combined might of father and son, should they know each other and join forces.

The boy keeps asking if the other champion is Rostam, without saying why he asks. Rostam, like gunslingers of the old west, fears that this new young blood may be his nemesis, and denies that he is Rostam. The two fight, and through a trick, Rostam kills the boy—and finds out too late that it is his own son. Matthew Arnold’s rendition of this story is familiar to English speakers, and even without the moving Persian verse, brings tears to the reader.

Other popular stories from the Shahnameh

Along with heroic tales are romances, comic episodes, and fascinating character studies. Several of the best of the romances stem from the Sassanian period, the last era of independent Persia.

When Shah Khosrow Parviz wanted to marry, an emissary from Armenia brought him a picture of the beautiful Armenian princess, Shirin. The Persian emissary did the same with Shirin. The impetuous pair each set out instantly for the homeland of the other, smitten with love.

Along the way, Shirin stopped to bathe in a forest pool and Parviz, hidden behind the trees, saw her. He did not recog-
nize her from the picture, but was once more smitten by love at the sight of this strange woman. It was not until some time later when the two finally met that he realized that this was the same woman of his dreams from the forest glade.

During their long and happy marriage, another adventure befalls Shirin. She catches the eye of Persia’s most famous sculptor, Farhad. Boldly, Farhad seeks out the king and tells him he is in love with Queen Shirin. Khosrow Parviz is very taken by the youth’s sincerity, but is not about to relinquish his wife. To put him off, he assigns him a seemingly impossible task: to carve his way through a distant mountain, which Farhad agrees to do. The artist sets forth, and spurred on by his love, nearly completes the work in just a few years. The anxious king resolves the problem by sending an old woman to tell Farhad that Shirin had died. The young lover despairs, and throws himself off the rocks to his death. The desperate love and self destruction of this tale reminds one of the Tristan stories centuries later in Europe.

Another story with endless significance for Iran is the revolt of the blacksmith Kava. A flawed and terrible king, Zahhak, spouts serpents from his shoulders that must daily be fed the hearts of his subjects’ youths and maidens. When this situation becomes intolerable, a common blacksmith takes off his leather apron and using it as a standard, leads a revolt to unseat the monstrous king.

This tale reverberated during the waning reign of Mohammad Pahlavi, and was resurrected to remove that “unjust” king. Anyone who tried to resurrect this story during the reign of an even more monstrous dictator, the Ayatollah Khomeini, was instantly dispatched. It did not work there. One must be careful where—and against whom—one trots out mythology.

**Literary Assessment of the Shahnameh**

Persian scholars compare Ferdowsi with Shakespeare in that both showed genuine compassion for the poor and the wronged, a sense of social justice, courageous and vocal con-
demnation of irresponsible rulers, altruism and idealism. The conservative landowner Ferdowsi and the middle class city man Shakespeare also shared the values of monarchical legitimacy, abhorrence of anarchy, fear of heresy, and a dread of unruly mobs. [Ferdowsi: xix]

Ferdowsi is also compared with Homer, particularly in the comparison of Achilles and Rostam. Both heroes are kings of remote provinces. Both are primarily heroic, secondarily monarchs. Both are in a way kingmakers to their national kings. [Davidson: 101] Both authors ennobled the oral epic without losing its spontaneity. Both immortalized the past and bequeathed the future to the language and life of their nation.

The oral tradition of both authors lie close to the surface by using simple meter and rhyme schemes suited to long narrative and that aid in memorizing. The heroes of both epics are affixed with appropriate epithets and are easily recognizable, even without mention of their names. Both make use of repetition to assist recapitulation. Episodes of battle and heroism are modulated by sequences of chase, banquets and idyllic revels, ceremonious councils and parleys. Both poems abound in warm human touches that evoke pathos and enhance the evolving drama.

One of this work’s most honored scholars, Amin Banani, says of it: “It is this universality together with its faithful and unresolved reflection of the human paradox that is the essence of the Shah Nama’s art and the cause of its timelessness; for it permits every generation to seek its own resolution.” [Banani: 119]

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