

Islamic, Universal Concepts in the Shahnamah

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Abstract

As an Iranian literary work, it might seem that The *Shahnamah* is a national Epic which has been composed to promote Persian language and protect historical and cultural identity of Iranians against the dominance of alien cultures. However, this paper attempt to argue that the investigation of the stories, characters, and the symbols presented in the *Shahnamah* indicate that Ferdowsi's thought and ideas go beyond the borders of a single culture and cover a broader scope which encompasses the whole universe and human beings. This is related to the fact that the *Shahnamah* is deeply rooted in Islamic ideas and world view. In this view, we find that the *Shahnamah* is a splendid literary work which by presenting typical ideas, images and profound human experiences such as reason, love, justice, creation, life, death and invalidity of secular life, among many others, conveys universal Islamic messages rather than mere nationalism and racism. In fact, while Ferdowsi is exploiting ancient Iranian stories, the very mythical nature of these stories gives an opportunity to him to address all human beings. These features in the *Shahnamah* hav ever since been the source of inspiration for different Iranian and non-Iranian artists to create valuable works in calligraphy, painting, poetry, story and play writing, music, cinema and other arts.

Key Words:Ferdowsi, Shahnamah, Epic, Cultural Identity, Myth, Universal Ideas.

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I. Introduction

Ferdowsi (932-1016 A.D.) is one of the greatest poets of Iran whose masterpiece, *Shahnamah*, brought him everlasting fame and glory. Since its composition (401_{A.H.}), many critics and scholars, in a wide range of books and articles, have investigated this work and have suggested different opposing views about Ferdowsi's life, thoughts, art and religion.

In most of these works it is suggested that Ferdowsi has created this work in order to save the national and cultural identity of Iranians and commemorate the race of Arya (Nodushan 1363_{A.H.}: 2). In this vein, they have tried to show that Ferdowsi's frame of reference has been nothing but nationalism, racism, and the religions of ancient Iran. The arguments usually center around the point that since most of the stories of the *Shahnamah* are about Iran and Iranians, thus, Ferdowsi's outlook is based on Zoroastrianism and/or Mazdaism (Meskoob 1356_{A.H.}: 69).

In this paper, however, by presenting several pieces of evidence, I will argue that, if we keep away from prejudice, we find that Ferdowsi is a writer who has portrayed more than other scholars. Rather, I will suggest that Ferdowsi's thought and art bear universally humanistic significance which directly originates from Islamic teachings.

2. Epic Poetry

The first point to mention is the fact that Ferdowsi addresses his audience using the lofty language of an epic. Considering the general properties of this genre and the wonders of its universe will lead us to a better understanding of Ferdowsi and his masterpiece.

"Epic being a long narrative poem is more purely a form of speech, related in an elevated style, whose subject matter consists of the exploits of heroic figures, men of great stature, whose exploits are given vast significance, affecting the fate of a tribe, nation, or the human race " (Mokhtari 1368_{A.H.}: 21). The hero is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance. The setting of the poem is ample in scale and may be worldwide and even larger (Abrams 1971: 51). The stories are derived from

mythical and historical materials developed in the oral tradition of a nation during a period of expansion and warfare.

Shahnamah as an example of this genre, can be divided into three parts: the mythical part, the heroic, and finally the historical. In the first part, the stories center around the creation of man and the course of his civilization. In this period the battle between evils and humans is the essence and main substance of the stories. Jamshid is the great king, who after defeating the evils, establishes human civilization. The discovery of fire, building the first human dwellings and medical sciences start in his reign. Hence, anarchy is cleared from the earth, and the humans forget the evils. This is the state of affairs until Jamshid becomes arrogant and conceited as a result of which Zahhak overthrows his monarchy and everything over turns.

His name Zahhak, and most ambitious he,
Light-happened, brave and fearless as could be...
Now it so happened Iblis on a day,
Com him to visit in a frindly way,
The chief's heart frome the right path led astray,
The youth his ears bent to his words that day.
Of all his evil doing unaware,
He was well pleased his sweet discovere to share.
Concience and heart to yield him he was led,
And thus was dust poured on the youth's own head
(ferdowsi, 1973: 22)

In the second part, which is the heroic era, the most important part of *Shahnamah*, great heroes arise. The greatest of these is Rostam, an ideal whose most perfect moral virtues have made him a perfect human being. Rostam is so unique that no character has ever resembled him in the literature of any language. He has been developed in the imagination of thousands of people in the course of time. A hero who has been created as the embodiment of their long standing dreams, wishes and ideals. The most important and magnificent heroic stories which appear in this

part of the *Shahnamah* were epic in its precise meaning, revealing its real beauty at its best. Everything such as time, place, episodes, and the like is extraordinary and supernatural, and the episodic nature of the plot, the lofty style and ornamental language, noble characters and supernatural events all contribute to this achievement.

Finally, in the third part, most stories convey historical events while the tone becomes less heroic.

3. Myth and symbolism in the *Shahnamah*

As regards the first part, mythical stories are said to be the manifestation of man's sublime and noble ideals and aspirations which do not originate from the science of knowing man but are rooted in the pure and innocent nature of human beings. In fact, myth presents life as it should be not as it is. "Eric Fromm maintains that myth is the symbolic manifestation of philosophical and religious thoughts and beliefs, the occurrence of significant events in time and place, and important psychological experiences of man" (Purnamdarian 1368: 150). Even a philosopher like Plato, who did not have much respect for poets, used myth in his *Republic* in order to project philosophical speculation beyond the point at which certain knowledge is possible (Huby, 1972: 11).

The use of myth allows the poet to give universal significance to his work as it embodies most general human experiences. On the other hand, the symbolic nature of the mythical stories gives potential meanings and interpretations beyond its literal meaning at different times. The potentiality of bearing layers of meaning gives the work everlasting importance. Ferdowsi himself refers to this potentiality when he says:

Do not suppose that this is mere legends and lies

They don't have the same meaning over time

Whatever of it which does not agree with reason

Signifies symbolic meaning

(Ferdowsi, 1363.; vol. 1: 8)

Therefore, it is not the case that myth and epic represent unnatural or unreal life, but as Fuller (Bulfin, 1959: 18) argues they represent a type of truth which cannot be revealed unless in the frame of symbolic stories. And, this is the view that we should adopt for reading the *Shahnamah*; otherwise, we will not be able to enter its realm and understand its wonderful mysterious world. It should be noted here that while mythical stories constitute the first part of the *Shahnamah*, the use of symbolic language is used throughout the second part as well. Now a question arises here: How can we interpret the mythical and symbolic stories specifically when they do not agree with common sense? Of course, the answer to this question is presented by Ferdowsi himself. He praises man for his reason with the aid of which he is able to understand things. In the introduction to the *Shahnamah*, he refers to reason as the main basis of creation, thought, faith, existence and life. He talks about reason with such a firm belief that the reader is naturally captivated. The two main virtues which Ferdowsi praises human beings are: his reason and soul. It's for the same reason when he first starts to praise God in the *Shahnamah* since it is God, who is the creator of reason and soul.

In the name of the Lord of the soul and of wisdom,
than whom thought can conceive nothing higher; the
Lord of all things nameable and of all space; the Lord
Who grants sustenance and is our Guide
(ferdowsi, 1967: 1)

Reason is specifically a human feature which shows itself as soon as he starts to speak. Thus, Ferdowsi chooses reason as the main factor of thought hundreds of years before Descartes and Voltaire. The view Ferdowsi expresses about reason, is, in fact, derived from Islam as the importance of reasoning in dealing with different affairs has been emphasized in many verses of the Quran:

Thus doth Allah make clear His Signs to you:
in order that ye may understand
(quran, Baqare, 242)

Ferdowsi guides his readers to understand his poetry with the help of reason. However, he knows that reason is not enough to discover the essence of everything: for instance, man cannot discover the nature of God with the aid of his reason. Therefore, he gives us another lamp in the light of which we can see things better and this is nothing but symbol. Thus, reason and symbol are the two main components of Ferdowsi's literary theory. This literary theory is also motivated by the Holy Quran while it emphasizes thinking and reasoning, it expresses some truths in the frame of ambiguous verses. Ferdowsi explicitly declares that the stories of *Shahnamah* are true:

Do not think that this is mere legend and lies.

(Ferdowsi, 1363: vol. 1: 8)

However, there are stories which apparently seem to be legends and pure product of fantasy. It is only the symbolic nature of these stories, which guides us to the depth of their truth. The symbolic stories have developed in the context of Ferdowsi's special Islamic thought and outlook. He uses certain allusions to help us to interpret some of these symbols, for example, in the end of the *Akvane Dive* story, he refers to demons as wicked people who are disobedient towards God:

Know that evils are wicked people

Who are not grateful to God.

(Ferdowsi, 1350: vol. IV: 1058)

Similarly, Rostam is not a mere product of fantasy; rather, he signifies an ideal heroic character that enjoys both physical and spiritual strength. He is never heedless of God. He acknowledges God as the main source of his strength and power; he fights in favor of his God only; and modesty is one of his remarkable virtues. Rostam's greatness is not in his physical capabilities but in the purity and sincerity of his soul and reason. He, in face to face with the Esfandiar, one of the greatest heroes of *Shahnameh*, says:

Know that God is my witness
And wisdom is my guide
(Ferdowsi, 1363: vol. IV: 1255)

He symbolizes a spiritual and religious human being in the actual world, the highest model to all human beings, an ideal whose virtues embody the teachings of great religions. He is loyal and devoted to his God and religion, decisive to fight against the carnal soul. He fights against injustice because of his compassion for the weak and resists King Goshtasb when he realizes that Goshtasb is a cruel, oppressive ruler (the same happens when Prometheus stands against the capricious Jupiter (Nodushan, 1356_{A.H.}: 117).

It is true that the *Shahnamah* is related to different eras in ancient Iran, but Iran here signifies an ideal country. It is a glorious and magnificent country full of justice and balance, which is the center of goodness, generosity, decency, righteousness, integrity morality, and benevolence. Man, the way Ferdowsi talks about him in the *Shahnamah*, is also an ideal man who follows his reason not his inhuman passionate desires. He is fair and impartial in his judgments, benevolent and full of love for perfection. These characteristics indicate that Rostam does not belong to a certain geographical region. On the contrary, he stands as a perfect model for all human beings for ever. He is a perfect man who thinks has a mission from God to defend goodness. At the end of the third adventure (khoun), after killing the magic dragon, he praises God and addresses him:

And on the name of God the hero called,
With water washed his body and his head,
To seek the word but in his God was led,
“O just one!” to his maker then he cried
Knowledge thou gavest me and strength and pride.
Be me foes many, or yet be they fow,
Grown angry, all but as one man I view.
(ferdowsi, 1973: 145)

Shahnamah is the story of struggle between good and evil. Its main theme is the critical resistance of good against the aggression of the dreadful evil. In this battle Iran is the pivot of goodness and righteousness; and, Turan symbolizes evil. If Iran is praised in *Shahnamah*, it is not for its own sake but in fact it is the goodness which is praised. Therefore, it is a holy action to defend Iran as the realm of goodness being attacked by the oppressor. The men who appear in the Iranian army endanger their lives for the same supreme cause. Thus, they are also devoted to moral values not racism or nationalism. On the other hand, Turan is the camp of aggression, wickedness, and immorality. The defense of goodness and moral principles is so important that the battle against wickedness becomes a holy one for the heroic figure and which should be respected at any rate. Those who have been innocently murdered cannot be ignored and the sinner who is responsible for their blood must be punished, even though the sinner is an offspring or a close relative of his own. This is why King Fereidun agrees with the death penalty of his son: and King Keykhosro fights against his grand father. Thus, relations, borders, race and nation are all subject to universal moral principles and values.

Similarly, the mythical kings in the *Shahnamah* stand for different types of people whose history and adventures denote man's struggle against barbarism and savagery and the progress of the civilization (Foroghi 1362_{A.H.}: 30).

In many of the stories of the *Shahnamah* there is no clear cut geographical border. This point has led the famous German orientalist, Noldeke to claim that Ferdowsi did not know geography (Bozorge Alavi, 1369_{A.H.}: 95). But, Noldeke has, in fact, been unaware that the *Shahnamah* is the story of humanity and mankind as a heroic figure, a story in which all borders except the border between goodness and wickedness lose their importance. The distinction between the good and the bad is so important that issues such as time, place borders, race, tribe, ethnicity, family, all seem too trivial to deal with. This characteristic has made the *Shahnamah* an everlasting and universal masterpiece which stays fresh and vivid in all times and ages being read effectively. Noldeke admits that the *Shahnamah* is an eternally unique masterpiece which no literary work will ever be equal. A masterpiece which teaches us how to live and how to die.

Thus, in creating the *Shahnamah*, Ferdowsi has concentrated on principles and norms which make the very essence of humanity. The humanistic values motivate action all throughout the *Shahnamah* as it is the case when the biggest battles occur in order to defend Siavash and his innocence. It should be mentioned here that these principles and norms are the same values which form the dominant themes in Islamic religious texts. As mentioned above, most of these themes and concepts are implicated symbolic in the *Shahnamah*, and an inability to realize their mythical and symbolic aspects would lead to the ignorance of truths they are aimed to convey.

Ferdowsi and his faith

There is a misunderstanding about Ferdowsi and that is the belief that the ancient religions of Iran are the origin of his beliefs. Berteles, the Russian orientalist (1362_{A.H.}:190), without presenting any evidence and based on a superficial analysis, claims that dualism is the essence of Ferdowsi's beliefs. Zaehner (1955), an Oxford scholar asserts that Ferdowsi's religion was Zorvanism whose ideas were popular during the Sasanian era. However, the famous researcher of the *Shahnamah*, Noldeke (1369_{A.H.}: 72) rejects the idea that Ferdowsi has been a dualist or a follower of Mazdism and states that Ferdowsi had certainly been a monotheist. In fact, a close scrutiny of the *Shahnamah* and specifically its introduction clarifies the point that it is only Islamic faith which has inspired him to design the greatest epic of the world. Surely, there are many facts about the *Shahnamah* which indicate that nothing frames the core of Ferdowsi's beliefs except Islamic ideas.

First, he has been aware of the Islamic traditions and history, the translation of which can be found here and there in the *Shahnamah* (Foruzanfar, 1369_{A.H.}: 48).

First of creation do thou wisdom see,
The soul's own guardian, prayers's own guard to thee,
Thy prayer to thee is eye and ear and speech,
Through these both good and evil thee reach.
(ferdowsi, 1973: 3)

The translation of this Hadith:

The first Thing that God created is wisdom
(Foruzanfar, 1361: 202)

Second, his Islamic faith is evidently expressed in his admiration of the Prophet and Islamic leaders in the introduction to the *Shahnamah*. Moreover, many verses in the *Shahnamah* have been devoted to the Prophet (peace be on him) indicating the depth of Ferdowsi belief and his perfect faith in what he declares.

Indeed the knowledge and religion rescue you
The path of salvation must be investigated
Find the sayings of the prophet (Muhammad)
And wash away the darkness from your heart
I am the follower of the prophet
The worshiper of the soil under the feet of his successor (Ali-ben- Abitoaleb)
(Ferdowsi, 1363: vol. 1: 62)

Third, although Ferdowsi has admired Zoroaster and his religion, he has detestably rejected dualism and the worship of fire which are the core of Zoroastrian faith. He even claims that the essence of Zoroastrianism is clear from polytheism or dualism, and constantly praises the unique God in the words of kings and heroes. In a letter to Zal that represented of Rostam, he described his victory over the foe in this way:

First praise to God who created sun
Who created snakes and ants
Who created Mars, Venus and sun
Who created the high sky
(Ferdowsi, 1363: vol. 1: 182)

Fourth, his view that God created the Thing from Nothingness is an Islamic idea which sharply contrasts with Zoroastrianism (Rajaei 1356_{A.H.}: 458).

For God from nothing every thing has made,
So that His power might be thus displayed.
(ferdowsi, 1973: 3)

Fifth Ferdowsi respects other religions with great consideration, but his own religion is undoubtedly Islam. His belief in the unity of God, prophethood, resurrection, eternity of the soul, paradise and hell, which are all main elements of Islamic faith, are evidently manifested in different parts of the *Shahnamah*.

I have believed this idea and believe it for ever
Surely, I am the follower of Heidar(Ali-ben- Abitoaleb)
(Ferdowsi, 1363: vol. 1: 8)

Egocentrism or self-indulgence, which is widely blamed and rejected in Islamic texts, is the source of all the wickedness and rebels in the *Shahnamah*. It is self-conceit which brings about the decline of Jamshid's throne usurped by the brutal Zahhak whose reign brought a thousand years of slavery and suffering for Iranians. Jamshid to the sages of his tribe arrogantly said:

None in the world I know myself beside.
Only through me the word has virtue known:
Like me has none possessed the royal throne.
The word in beauty I alone arrayed,
All trouble on the face of earth allayed
(ferdowsi, 1973: 20)

And this arrogance spoiled Iranian peace and brought about disputes and wars and culminated to the end of Zahhak a thousand year ruling:

There rose on this from all Iran a shout,
On all sides war and tumult raged about,
The white and brilliant day to darkness turned,
And men of Jamshid the connection spurned...

When Zahhak sat upon the throne asking,
A thousand years of him were on the wing.
Fortuon to him displayed on evil face,
But yet he lived a very lengthy space.
The custums of the good were then concealed,
And of the mad ones evry hope revealed.
Virtue was scorned and majic had its way,
Hidden was truth, ill practised in the day.
The Divs streched out their hands towrds ill alone,
Man spoke of good But in a lowered tone. ll
(ferdowsi, 1973: 27&30)

Another recurrent theme in *Shahnamah* is the unreliability of the world which is unquestionably one of the topics in Islamic thought. This unreliability is evidenced by the death phenomenon. Death and mortality are basic elements to remind man of the outcome of his deeds. No one can rely on his endowments and worldly powers which cannot support him for ever. Even Isfandiar who is blessed with the sacred water and has become immortal cannot avoid death. Rostam, the most powerful of all, who does not surrender to any power, is also helpless before death and subject to his fate, meets death, the end point of every life. In the begining of the story of the Rostam and sohrab, Ferdowsi talks about the cruelly of death and its mystry:

If the death is justice, what is injustice
Why is much cry and shout about justice
You may not understand this secret
You can not find this way
(Ferdowsi, 1363: vol. 1: 345)

Sixth, most of the instructions and teachings in the Quran are on the basis of thee principles of unity, resurrection and good conduct. All the prophets have been sent to establish these three words. A close examination of the *Shahnamah* indicates

that the theme of its stories is nothing but the illustration and clarification of these three ideas. All the stories are related to the unity of God one way or another. All the heroes entering the battlefield start their fight with God's praise. All through *Shahnamah* death and resurrection is mentioned: and finally, all the behavior and deeds of people are judged by the standards of good conduct.

Seventh, when Ferdowsi wants to speak about the value of verbal art, he states that the best example of speech is Quran, a miracle which no man-made speech can ever surpass:

If God's word was not good
How could Quran guide us?
(Ferdowsi, 1363: vol. 1: 23)

Eighth, whatever Ferdowsi comments on, for example concepts such as reason, greed, hypocrisy, oppression, justice, and the like are evidently compatible with the Quran and Islamic tradition, rather than any other school of thought (Farzam 1990). Ferdowsi acknowledges that Islam is the best and greatest religion and explicitly talks about his faith in Islam and its noble leaders. Of course, Ferdowsi is not a mystic lover of Islam but he must be considered as a benevolent well-wisher of goodness and good conduct who deeply believes in Islam and its principles (Reza 1356_{A.H.} : 458 and Nodushan, 1363_{A.H.} :2). He devotes the opening and closing verses of the *Shahnamah* to the praise of God and his unity, which is also repeatedly mentioned all throughout the epic. He believes that paradise and hell are real truths; and when people leave this world they will be present before God. His description of the paradise is the same as that of the Quran:

(Here is) a parable of the Garden which the righteous are promised:
in it are rivers of water incorruptible; rivers of milk of which the taste never
changes; rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink; and rivers of honey pure and
clear...
(Quran, mohammad, 15)

The God, the owner of the rivers of wine and hony

The same, the spring of milk and clear water

(Ferdowsi, 1363: vol. 1: 6)

The hereafter is where man's deeds will be judged. He remembers Kaba which has been built by Abraham by the command of God with great respect.

Other ideas which are observed in the *Shahnamah* and clearly indicate Ferdowsi's deep knowledge and belief in Islam are his comments on other prophets such as Xezr, Abraham and Moses, who are all mentioned in Quran. His belief that Jesus was the messenger of God and that he was not crucified; the idea that whoever is killed in an Islamic war is a martyr (Shirani 1374_{A.H.}:200); the superiority of reason and speech to other human merits, the dignity of the artists; love toward God and people and the importance of serving and helping them are all lessons which he has learned from Islam.

Ninth, although Ferdowsi has referred to Greek and Iranian ideas about the creation of the universe, he is more affected by the Islamic views on the basis of which he has judged what other schools of thought have claimed about issues such as genesis of the world, the creation of the earth, heavens and stars (Mohajerani 1372_{A.H.}).

Therefore, on the basis of these observations, it is not unreasonable to call Ferdowsi 'Hakim' because in Islamic culture Hakim refers to a man of philosophy and theology. And, In 'Sharia', the Islamic code, Hakim refers to someone whose words and action are compatible with the rules of religion (Jorjani, 1345_{A.H.}: 182).

Another Islamic aspect observed in *Shahnamah* is the dissemination of moral values. Ferdowsi, who has been deeply impressed by the Islamic culture and has been aware of the moral teachings of Quran and Islamic traditions has most eloquently manifested them in poetic language. Numerous moral verses in *Shahnamah* indicate that it has been extremely intended to be a didactic literary work and that Ferdowsi has been delicately instructing people that it is only good deeds which sanctions man's salvation.

Horace in his *Ars Poetica* provides the classical formula for defining literature when he states. " ...that poets teach and delight" (Danziger & Johnson 1968). Ferdowsi both delights and instructs at his best combining the useful and the beautiful. In order to achieve this goal he brings up concepts such as goodness and wickedness, truth and lie, honesty and infidelity, right and wrong, justice and injustice, bashfulness and impudence, kindness and cruelty, forgiveness and revenge, among many others; and thus, creates the loftiest ethical teachings based on the Islamic worldview in his poetry. That is why chastity and purity dominates the atmosphere of the stories in *Shahnamah*. The women in *Shahnamah* with the exception of Sudabeh are all among the most pious and virtuous; and their love is always accompanied with chastity.

Conclusion

Considering different aspects of *Shahnamah* including its themes, the concepts involved, and its symbolism indicate that the scope of this literary work is not confined to the borders of a certain country or race. Rather, what we find is the fact that it aims at a higher and more supreme goal. It addresses the human race seeking peace, unity, and perfection for everyone. And thus, it achieves a universal function which mirrors Islamic thought and purpose.

More precisely, with his peculiar outlook, Ferdowsi vividly pictures the human race with all his positive and negative potentials, his strengths and weaknesses and his opposing motives. Then taking a wide scope considers man's position in the universe and emphasizes his eternal peculiarities in order to show him his ultimate perfection. Thus, he creates a sensational epic with the most elegant and harmonious manifestation of heroic, literary, historical, intellectual, philosophical, and religious concepts and issues. It is true that *Shahnamah* is displaying persian pride and character as a nation and the essence of their civilization and culture. But, at the same time, it relates the heroic action of a dynamic mankind, who by relying on spiritual values fights against his mighty fate in order to prove himself as the peak of excellency and perfection. In Ernest Renan's words, Ferdowsi believes in honor and

spirituality. He is a humanist who acknowledges civilization as the optimal purpose of man's existence (Sajjadi 135_{A.H.}: 10). These are the reasons which explain why the *Shahnamah* has achieved widespread popularity all over the world as an Islamic art.

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