

## **Epic and National Self-Consciousness: The Case of Shahnameh**

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### **Abstract**

**This paper aims to explore the relationship between epic poetry and national self-consciousness and in particular study how Shahnameh may be analyzed from this angle. What is the relationship between the Shahnameh and the Iranian national self-consciousness? What can one say about the Iranian national self-consciousness on the basis of this text? What does the text reveal about the Iranian identity? A related question should also be answered, is the Shahnameh an epic? This is not a pedantic question concerned merely with definitions and labels. As will become clear, an epic reveals a great deal about the national consciousness of the people to whom it belongs (or who belong to it); to identify a poem as an epic, is to be making an important statement about the national consciousness of a people. The question of whether the Shahnameh is an epic or not is hence far from a pedantic one. It takes us right into the heart of Iranian national consciousness.**

**Keywords: Shahnameh, national self-consciousness, epic poetry, Iran.**

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## **Introduction**

The discussion will be carried out within the theoretical framework provided by Hegel's study of epic poetry in several of his works, in particular the *Aesthetics* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel's detailed analysis of works of epic and their relationship to national consciousness will provide us with important questions to ask about the text of the *Shahnameh*. In this way, we will be able to study the text in a manner that has not been tried before. One can only say something original about a text that has been analyzed by countless number of scholars, not when one tries to answer their questions in a different way but when one asks new questions.

The present paper, therefore, aims to subject *Shahnameh* to a series of questions that have not been asked about this text before. The questions

and the approach have been suggested by Hegel's philosophical study of a few famous Western epics. However, given the fact that Hegel focuses almost entirely on Homeric epic, the present paper too follows his argument in relation to *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. What Hegel does is to study these texts not from a purely literary point of view but to analyze them in relation to the whole social consciousness of a people. The paper follows Hegel's argument step by step and at each stage attempts to see how Hegel's question can be asked of the *Shahnameh* and tries to find ways of answering the question. Not all the questions asked may be satisfactorily answered; some may open up a discussion that might need more than one paper to answer. Whatever the answers, Hegel's philosophical discussion will help us study the *Shahnameh* in an original manner. At the end of the

paper we can answer the question of whether the Shahnameh is an epic. We would then be doing much more than just giving the Shahnameh a label.

### **Hegel's Discussion of Epic Poetry**

In the *Phenomenology* Hegel discusses epic poetry in a section of the book (chapter 7, section B) entitled "Religion in the form of art". He argues that man's religious experience has taken several forms. The lowest form is that of natural religion an obvious example of which we can find in the ancient Iranian tradition of the worship of trees and forests. Hegel however, also includes the idea of "God as light" and "the artificer" under this heading. The former refers to the Iranian religions of Mithraism and Zoroastrianism while the latter refers to the ancient religion of Egypt which manifests itself in grand

architecture. Hence art and religion are intrinsically involved. In this sense, art does not express the truth; it creates it. This latter idea is suggested by Heidegger but in one respect complements Hegel's argument (Heidegger "The Origin of the Work of Art" 1977). Art goes from the lower form of architecture and sculpture to the highest form that is poetry. Language for Hegel is a higher element than bricks and stones that are the elements used in the lower forms of art (1807/ English edition 1977:430). Unlike stones, language is self-conscious existence. It is in language that the national spirit becomes conscious of itself as the spirit of a people. Hegel writes:

Thus it is that the separate beautiful national Spirits unite into a single pantheon, the element and habitation of which is language. The pure intuition of itself as *universal humanity* has, in the actuality of the

national Spirit, this form: the national Spirit combines with the others which it constitutes through Nature a single nation, in a common undertaking, and for this task forms a collective nation and therewith a collective Heaven (1807/1977: 439-440).

Hegel seems to suggest that a people's religious consciousness initially consists in rituals and cults but once language becomes more developed and especially when writing is learned, language comes to replace the cults. The consciousness of a people is hence expressed in what Hegel calls "picture thinking" i.e. abstract concepts have not yet developed and man's understanding of the divine is seen in the forms of pictures. One might argue that the 'light' is perhaps one such 'picture' that appears in ancient Iran. In volume one of his *Aesthetics*, Hegel discusses the religion of Zoroaster

under the heading "unconscious symbolism".

The place of epic poetry in a nation's self-consciousness is explained in these terms: The external existence of this picture-thinking, *language*, is the earliest language, the Epic as such, which contains the universal content of the world (1807/1977:440).

Language hence does not just express the consciousness of a people; it *is* consciousness. Men think in language and, therefore, language is the house of consciousness. The earliest written form of the artistic form of language is epic. Epic, therefore, is not merely a literary genre; it is concerned with the relationship between the divine to the human and is, in this sense, a conscious alternative to the unconscious rituals practiced in the religion of the cult (Hegel, 1807/1977: 441).

The discussion of epic in the *Phenomenology* is a relatively short one. However, in volume two of his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel returns to the subject and this time deals with epic poetry extensively. Here he discusses the issue under three headings and tries to answer three questions about epic. These are:

a) First, the question arises about what character the general world-situation must have if it is to provide a ground on which an epic event can be adequately portrayed.

b) Secondly, we have to examine the quality of this individual event and consider of what sort it is.

c) Thirdly, we must cast a glance at the form in which these two sides are intertwined and moulded into the unity of a work of art (Hegel, English edition, 1975, p.1051).

The present paper will discuss all the above issues in relation to the *Shahnameh* but particular attention

will be paid to the first question.

Hegel's discussion so far has made it clear that works of epic arise at a certain time in a nation's history and that the existence of these works among a people tells us something about the national consciousness of that people. We can now get into more substantive details and ask under what specific conditions do works of epic arise and what in particular do they tell us about a people's national consciousness? Hegel answers the first question in the following manner: In epic proper the childlike consciousness of a people is expressed for the first time in poetic form. A genuine epic poem therefore falls into that middle period in which a people has awakened out of torpidity, and its spirit has been so far strengthened as to be able to produce its own world and feel itself at home in it, while conversely everything that later

becomes firm religious dogma or civil and moral law still remains a living attitude of mind from which no individual separated himself, and yet there is no separation between feeling and will (1975:1045).

There are several points in this passage that need to be discussed in relation to the *Shahnameh*. For Hegel epic is the first expression of a people's consciousness in poetic form. He is clearly thinking of the *Iliad*. Even Virgil does not pass this test.

The stage of civilization which gave rise to the Homeric poems remains in beautiful harmony with their subject-matter, whereas in Virgil every hexameter reminds us that the poet's way of looking at things is entirely different from the world he intends to present to us.(1975:1073)

The *Shahnameh* was needless to say, composed in medieval times. In

this sense, it is clearly not the first expression of the Iranian's consciousness. However, we must bear in mind the fact that Ferdousi composed his poem on the basis of ancient stories that he had collected. He informs us that he sought ancient stories from a number of different individuals. The *Shanameh* is largely based on the *Shahnameh-e Abu-Mansouri*, a work which was itself based on an ancient text the *Xwadaynamag*. This latter text was written in Middle Persian, and so is not old enough to be considered as the *first* expression of the Iranian national consciousness. The first expression of this consciousness would have to pre-date Avesta. No such text has been found; probably none ever existed. However, the stories in the *Shahnameh* are clearly older than the religion of Zoroaster. Indeed, as will become clear in the course of this paper, the *Shahnameh*

is an anti-Zoroastrian text.

Zoroastrianism is based on the opposition of good and evil. Writing about the Persian Zoroaster, Nietzsche argued "Zarathustra was the first to consider the fight of good and evil the very wheel in the machinery of things: the transposition of morality into the metaphysical realm, as a force, cause, and end in itself, is *his* work." (1967:327-8).

For Hegel too, the Persian religion of Zoroaster invented the universal principle of the Good. He writes: Rights and Duties in India are intimately connected with special classes, and are therefore only peculiarities attaching to man by the arrangement of Nature. In China this unity presents itself under the conditions of *paternal* government. In the Persian principle this unity is manifested as Light, which in this case is not simply light as such, the most universal physical element, but

at the same time also *spiritual* purity-the Good (Hegel, 1956:174-5).

The heroes in the *Shahnameh*, however, are beyond good and evil.<sup>1</sup> A clear example is Rostam. In this sense these heroes are anti-Zoroastrian. It will be argued below that there are two divine orders in the text and that these two are opposed to each other. One such order is the Zoroastrian one whose champions are Goshtasp and Esfandiyar. Rostam is supported by the other divine order that is not named in the *Shahnameh*. The story of the fight between Rostam and Esfandiyar is therefore, of central importance. Significantly Rostam receives the aid of the mythical bird *Simorg*. Symbols like the *Simorg* and Rostam's own *Babr-e Bayan* are clear indications of the existence of a

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1. For an extensive discussion of this point see the following paper by the present author: "Hero and heroism in the *Shahnameh* and the *Masnavi*"

set of pre-Zoroastrian myths. It is safe to assume that these myths and stories were not written down before Avesta, but constituted an oral tradition, remnants of which may even today be found whenever a *naqqal* recites stories from the Shahnameh in a *qahvehkaneh*. This oral tradition may be said to have constituted the first expression of the Iranian national self-consciousness.

In this sense, we may speak of the Shahnameh as a medieval translation into modern Persian, of a text, the *Xwadaynamag*, which itself had probably put down in writing, a number of stories and myths most of which pre-dated the Avesta. This point is important in terms of the latter part of Hegel's statement quoted above. An epic poem, according to Hegel, comes on the scene when a nation has awakened out of torpidity but before it has reached the stage in which religious dogmas and/or civil

and legal institutions are established. According to this argument, the stories and myths of this oral tradition must be pre-Avestan. For it is with Avesta that religious dogma is established in Iran. For Hegel, epic by definition belongs to an earlier era. The reasons for this will become clear below, but suffice it to say here that, in epic the moral basis of actions is personal and individual. In a sense, this is why there *can* be heroes. There is no religious text, no Bible upon which morality is based. There are no firm religious commandments that determine what the hero should do under any circumstance (Hegel, 1975: 1052-3).

Hegel maintains that the rise of Roman law and legal institutions created a world as a result of which the world-situation of epic came to an end. Laws established norms that determined action. We can add that in the Persian world this role was



partly played by Avesta. The hymns and prayers established a religious framework through which the world-situation of the ancient myths and stories, many of which we find in the Shahnameh, came to an end. The political and legal institutions introduced by Darius I too probably had a similar effect (Olmstead, 1948: 119-134).

Once religion and laws are established, "the result is that man's substantive obligations enter as a necessity external to him, not immanent in himself, and compelling him to recognize their validity" (Hegel, 1975: 1046). On the contrary, in the age of heroes, the ethical order is based upon the actions and character of the individuals.

Hegel argues that in epic the characters and heroes must have an independent position from the king. He cites the example of the *Iliad* in which Agamemnon is the king of

kings but the other princes are not his servants. Each prince has his own small army to command and maintains a relatively independent position vis-a-vis the king. It is this independent position which allows Achilles to initially defy the king and refrain from taking part in the war. Without this, there would have been no story to turn into an epic, for Hegel believes that the satisfaction of the wrath of Achilles is the basis of the poem.

On surface the Shahnameh cannot satisfy this demand, for the Persian notion of kingship insisted on the *absolute* authority of the king which meant that all the subject were in fact *bandeh* or *ra'yyat*. These two terms are difficult to render into English precisely because they relate to certain specific Iranian social institutions that do not have an exact equivalent in Western history. The two terms are often used as

synonyms and refer to the position of all the subjects. The king/ shah is ultimately the only one who is not a ra'yyat. The term *ra'yyat*, therefore, refers to the non-citizen who has no political or legal rights. The social status of the ra'yyat should be compared with the citizen of a Greek polis in order to see the differences between the Greek and the Persian worlds. As Hegel notes, in Iran only one man is free whereas in the Greek world a part of the population is free.

However, the position of the heroes in particular Rostam, is very different in the Shahnameh. In the story of Esfandiyar, for example, the King is angry with Rostam precisely because the latter has not shown due respect to the King. And of course when Esfandiyar meets Rostam and delivers the King's message to him that Rostam should be taken to the palace in chains, the old hero refuses and so the real story begins. Had he

agreed to the King's demands there would not have been a story to tell. Just as in the *Iliad* it is the satisfaction of Achilles' wrath that is the central point of the epic, so in the story of Esfandiyar it is the satisfaction of Rostam's honor that is the key to the story.

Problems between king Kavus and Rostam can also be seen in the stories of Sohrab and Siavoush, but this is not so central in these two stories as it is in the story of Esfandiyar.

The point that should be emphasized here is that in the story of Esfandiyar, Goshtasp and his son have both political and religious authority on their side. The prince is the successor to the throne as well as the defender of the religion of Zoroaster. He himself boastfully says *At first I took up arms to serve the faith, To cleanse the earth of idol worshipers (In the Dragon's Claws, p.74).*

Esfandiyar specifically mentions Zoroastera and invokes his authority and that of his book, which he has brought from Paradise. He says, referring to his father *The one who rules here now is Goshtasp Shah - His counselor is wise Jamasp, and by His side sits Zaratosht, who brought the Zand Avesta down to us from Paradise.* (Ibid, p.88).

Rostam cannot claim either religious or political authority. This is very different from the world of the *Iliad* in which Agamemnon has no religious authority. Indeed, even his political authority, as has been pointed out already, does not extend to issuing commands to the independent princes. The gods too are divided among themselves, each one supporting a different side in the war. They even have different positions with regard to the differences in the Greek camp. The

monotheistic religion of Zoroastera does not leave room for there to be several divine authorities. Therefore, *AhuraMazda* supports one side and that is the side of Esfandiyar. In Greece too, the kings may have been regarded as god's representatives. Some scholars have argued that Agamemnon was originally a god. However, as Chadwick argues "...it must be remembered that this aspect of kingship is not brought forward in the [Homeric] poems" (Chadwick, 1912:382). In short, "[t]he religious aspect of kingship is not very prominent in the Homeric poems" (Ibid: 380). The king's position is no more than that of a priest who carries out certain rituals with the cooperation of some of his princes. Goshtasp, on the other hand, has been personally chosen by Zoroastera as the guardian of the new religion and Esfandiyar has gone through a certain ritual at the

hand of Zoroastera that has made him *ro'in tan*. Esfandiyar is therefore, no longer a man like any other. He has now partaken of divine powers. His mythical powers are clear testimony of his very especial position *visa via* the Zoroastrian god. To fight Esfandiyar and to kill him amounts to a declaration of war on the Zoroasterian god. This becomes clear in the way fate is viewed by the two combatants. Rostam while riding to meet Esfandiyar in battle says to Zavareh, his own brother *Fortune favors the man who is just* (1999:95).

On the other hand Esfandiyar thinks that *Yazdan* is on his side and that fortune favors him *In war my one companion is Yazdan. And fortune smiles on everything I do* (1999:97).

Clearly the two heroes are thinking of two different divine orders. Rostam is not a Zoroastrian

and hence does not accept the religious authority of Esfandiyar. If he were he would no choice but to accept Esfandiyar's claim that god is on his side. If Rostam were a Zoroastrian, Esfandiyar's statement quoted above that Zoroastera sits by the side of Goshtasp would have been enough for him to lay down his arms and obey the king.

What makes this story even more interesting is that in killing Esfandiyar and denying the authority of Zoroastera, Rostam relies not so much on his own powers, which fail him, but on a mythical bird which is no doubt part of a different divine order. In short, the battle between Rostam and Esfandiyar may be viewed as a fight between two different divine orders. However, *Simorg* gives the story another twist by say to Rostam *Whoever sheds Esfandiyar's blood Will be destroyed himself by*

fate. What's more, So long as he shall live, misery Will cling to him. While he's on earth he'll lead A wretched Life-unfortunate and poor-And suffer more when he's passed on This is a very strange prophecy to make for the one who is about to show Rostam how to overcome Esfandiyar. One wonders if there is after all a fate that is greater than the gods and to which even the divinities are subject. Hegel argues:

But if a national epic is to win the abiding interest of other peoples and times too, then the world it describes must not be only that of a particular nation; it must be such that what is universally human is firmly impressed at the same time on the particular nation described and on its heroes and their deeds (1975: 1057-8).

This universal principle, as I have already argued elsewhere, is the

principle of love. In the Shahnameh, heroism and courage are related to, even based upon, love. Love for Ferdousi is this worldly; it is the love of a father for his son that he is fated to kill. It is the love of one brother for another (in the story of Esfandiyar). It is the courage to embrace life with all its challenges and dangers. This is why the Shahnameh describes in detail not only the senses of battle but also that of *bazm*, the festivities and the feasts. The final point made by Hegel in the section on the world-situation of epic is that epic describes a conflict between two nations. This conflict must ultimately take the form of war. The war however, must involve a conflict over two opposing principles. According to Hegel, the war in the Iliad is a conflict between the Greek principle of individuality and the Asiatic who did not recognize this

principle. For Hegel, this is a turning point in Greek history that defines what it means to be Greek. The war ends by the triumph of the higher principle.

Concerning the war in the Iliad, Hegel writes "the Greeks take the field against the Asiatic and thereby fight the first epic battles...which constitute in Greek history a turning-point in world-history" (1975:1061).

How can this criterion be applied to the Shahnameh? As will be argued below, one of the differences between the Shahnameh and the *Iliad* is that whereas the latter tells the story of one war, the former is, of course, made up of a number of stories some of which are purely mythical while others are semi-historical. There is therefore, no one single conflict in the Shahnameh. However, much of the text deals with the central conflict between the Iranians and the *Touranian*. In this

sense, Hegel's criterion of the existence of a central conflict is satisfied. But the question remains, is this, a conflict over contending principles? If the answer is positive then what are these principles and does the higher principle win? These questions take us to the heart of the Iranian national consciousness as seen in the Shahnameh. They are not however, easy to answer.

Hegel's identification of the spirit of free individuality as the essence of the Greek civilization is widely shared by many others. In like fashion, we too may ask ourselves what is the principle upon which the Iranian national consciousness is based.

In the story of Esfandiyar, the king has a monopoly of political and religious authority and the old hero, Rostam, is left with no authority on his side save human love. Rostam has no external authority on which to

rely. He is fighting to save his own dignity as the old hero of a nation. As the hero of an entire nation, he symbolizes their self-respect. To submit to the demands of the king and the young prince would be to destroy the hopes and the self-respect of a people. It is the dignity and love of man that is at stake. As I have argued elsewhere, the despotic Iranian world denied any authority to its heroes. Political *and* religious despotism was the dominant form of life in Iran and hence the common people and their heroes had no authority to back their claims except love. Love, however, has come to mean different things to different generations of Iranians. As already noted, for Ferdousi, it meant a love of life here and now. The noble character for Ferdousi, was the one that met the challenges of this life with courage and yet was aware that no matter how brave or powerful he

might be, he could never escape the ultimate challenge of death.

To tempt death is the hero's destiny. The crucial thing for the heroic spirit is not so much to go down fighting, as to have a tincture of will in one's death, to see it through and be its master (Hamori, 1974:10).

The centrality of love in the Iranian national consciousness has never been questioned. The reason for this has been that the monopoly of all political and religious authority often in the hands of one person has left the authority of love as the only alternative for the common men and their heroes. To legitimize their actions in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, men need the backing of some kind of authority. Every hero in the *Iliad* has the backing of one or a few of the gods. Rostam in his many battles has ultimately only the authority of love, love of what is

to be human, the dignity of man; love of Iran; love of life itself in the face of the demons that want to destroy it (*Div-e Safid*). It is this that in the end justifies not only his fight against the *Touranian* but perhaps more significantly, his refusal to obey Goshtasp and the decision to fight Esfandiyar.

What constitutes the core of the Iranian national consciousness is the realization that, love is the only authority left to a nation that lives under despotic rule. To think of the Iranians without the authority of love would be tantamount to thinking of the Greeks without the principle of free individuality. This would be to miss the essential aspect of a nation's life.

Hegel's second heading is entitled, "The individual epic action". Under this, Hegel studies more closely the particular features of works of epic and analyses the internal structure of

these works. First, the work of epic must portray an individual event. Secondly, unlike that of drama, the focus of attention in epic is not on action. What epic describes is an event not an action. The distinction is an important one.

In the case of *action* everything is referred back to the agent's inner character, his duty, disposition, purpose, etc.; whereas in the case of *events* the external side too acquires its unimpaired right, because it is objective reality which provides both the form of the whole and also a principle part of the content itself (1975:1063-4).

Thirdly, whereas in tragedy fate is partly internal, in epic, fate is a wholly external necessity. In drama including tragedy, the main focus of attention is on the actions of the players, especially those of the hero. Fate is a not a merely external phenomenon. The hero's downfall is



brought about largely as a result of his own actions. That is why the concept of the 'tragic flaw' plays an important part here. Fate is hence partly internal to the character of the hero.

In epic, on the other hand, necessity is external to the hero and his actions. What attracts our interest here is an entire event that is taking shape in front of our eyes. The hero finds himself in a no-win situation. The tragedy is the result, not of his actions, but of the situation in which he finds himself. No matter what he does, he cannot avoid tragedy. Hegel writes

In this sense we can maintain that what rules in epic, though not, as is commonly supposed, in drama, is fate. In drama, owing to the sort of aim which a character is determined to carry out in given and known circumstances, with all the resulting collisions, he creates his fate *himself*,

whereas in epic character has his fate made for him (1975:1070).

How do these considerations relate to the Shahnameh?

First, unlike the *Iliad*, the Shahnameh does not relate an individual event. It is of course made up of many stories, some of which pre-date the birth of its chief hero, Rostam while some of the others relate to the time after his death. In this sense, the text deviates from Hegel's definition of the term. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why Hegel is reluctant to call Shahnameh an epic (1975:1097-8). However, bearing in mind the other points that are to follow, this should not be considered a determining factor.

Secondly, the Shahnameh too discusses events rather than actions. Its focus of attention is not on the actions of its heroes or their inner psychology, but the situations in

which they find themselves. Rostam finds himself in an impossible situation in the story of Sohrab. It is not his *actions* that lead to tragedy; the situation is tragic by itself. Or again in the story of Esfandiyar, the old hero finds himself in a no-win situation. There is therefore, thirdly, an external necessity that drives the characters including the chief hero to the tragic end. Fate is clearly at work. Ferdousi calls it *rozegar*, *zamaneh* (times), *charkh*(wheel), *nebeshteh be sar* (that which has been written in ones chart). These expressions reflect a preoccupation between the stars and the physical universe on the one hand and the fate of people living on earth on the other. It is safe to assume that these assumptions go back to the Babylonians and their astrological beliefs. According to this, the positions of the stars and the configurations in the sky had a

determining influence on men's daily lives. In this sense, fate in the Shahnameh is not the unfolding of the wishes of *Ahuramazda*. The beliefs that constitute fate are clearly older than the religion of Zoroaster. Fate as external necessity is not divine; it is also not usually good or beneficial to good men. In this sense, fate is blind. This is far from the attitude that one meets for example in the poems of Rumi where fate is the unfolding of the will of a beneficent God.

The issue of fate in the Shahnameh is problematic. Is it, for example, fate that decides the destiny of Sohrab, Esfandiyar or Siavoush? If there is an external necessity that is not divine, how is it to be explained? What is blind fate? These questions are not easy to answer. In the case of the *Iliad*, for example, we know that there is an external necessity; it is part of a

divine order to which the gods themselves are also subject and it casts a shadow over the entire story: Achilles keeps saying that he knows he is going to die young. Esfandiyar, Sohrab or Siavoush do not show any consciousness of the coming doom. Sohrab's confidence and even optimism contrasts very clearly with Achilles' certainty of the coming doom.

In terms of Hegel's theory, this lack of a divine clearly defined external necessity may be the biggest problem in the *Shahnameh*. If there is a reason why we should think twice before calling the *Shahnameh*, a work of epic, this is surely it. Yet it is clear that there is an external necessity at work. In the story of Sohrab, the old hero, Rostam, kills the one man in the enemy's camp who could have revealed the identity of the father to the son, while the young hero's attempts to find Rostam

with the aid of Hojir are futile. And here Ferdousi makes it very clear than there is an external fate at work.

Tu gity cheh sazi ke khod sakhtast  
Jahandar az in kar pardakhtast  
Zamaneh nebeshteh degar goneh  
dasht Chonan ku gozarad bebayad  
gozasht (What can one do? This  
world is already made. There is no  
task that He has left undone. The writ  
of fate was otherwise, alas. What it  
commands will finish as it must)  
(Ferdowsi, 1987:100-1).

However, the fate referred to here cannot be Zoroastrian, chiefly because the *Shahnameh* is not a Zoroastrian text. If we maintain that this fate is pre-Zoroastrian, then we must be able to identify these pre-Zoroasterian deities. The reader must be able to see a divine order in the text and identify the external necessity with this order. No such order exists in the *Shahnameh*. As was shown above, Ferousi shows us

some elements of a pre-Zoroastrian divine order for example, the mythical bird, *Simorg* that comes to the aid of Rostam. But on whose authority does this mythical bird help Rostam kill the defender of the new religion? This question is not answered in the text. And it is this lack of a clearly well defined divine order that is ultimately the biggest problem in the text. One may, therefore, argue that the deaths of Esfandiyar, Sohrab or Siavoush do not "make sense". These deaths cannot be understood with reference to a divine order. It is this, which is lacking.

In this sense, it could be argued that the source of the problem in the *Shahnameh* is that the text is a medieval translation into verse of a number of stories that are ancient. This would in some ways be the equivalent of having a Medieval Latin translation of the *Iliad* while

the original had been lost. Would we then call this Latin translation made by a poet who professed to be a Christian, a work of epic? This is to some extent the situation we are facing today with the *Shahnameh*. How can Ferdousi who declares his Islamic faith, re-create for us, the pre-Zoroastrian world in which the action of the heroes took place and in which they probably make sense? This is not to argue that Ferdousi has in any sense, failed. It is to see the realities of the two very different worlds in which he lived and about which he wrote. He cannot re-create the divine order of the ancient world, because he does not believe in it himself. To expect him to re-create that would be to expect the impossible.

Under the second section, one last point deserves attention. Hegel argues that at the heart of epic is an individual who "stands in the mist of

a whole nation whose aim and existence in a widely correlated inner and outer world provides the immovable and actual foundation for every particular individual" (1975: 1070). How far does Rostam fill this role? Once again the question is not an easy one. The relationship between the individual and the nation is a complex one in the *Iliad*. Achilles can play the role that he does largely because the Greeks valued the principle of free individuality. As has been argued this principle does not exist in the *Shahnameh*, so the question arises, what role can Rostam play in the text? It would probably take another paper to answer this question fully; here we can only point to some key elements in Rostam's role in the *Shahnameh*. His military prowess is perhaps the first element in his role to attract attention. It requires no further comment. As Davis has

argued, the title of *dastan* already suggests that Rostam is a trickster who is willing and able to use trickery to defeat his enemies when his physical power fails him (Davis, 1999). This is clearly the case in three of the most important battles of his life: the fight against *Div-e Safid*, and the battles with Sohrab and Esfandiyar. In his fight against Sohrab, when the old hero is overpowered, he cheats by telling Sohrab that according to an old Iranian tradition, the young hero could only kill him if he would overpower him a second time. In this way, he escapes certain death and kills his son when he gets the chance. In the story of Esfandiyar, as already noted, the old hero kills the young prince with the aid of the magical powers of the *Simorg*.

Guile plays an important part in the *Shahnameh*. As Clinton has noted, the heroes and the villain in

the text equally use deceit and trickery to achieve their ends. Rostam is no exception (Clinton, 1999a). But he uses guile not for his personal gain, but as part of his overall service to his country. His actions are guided, not only by his unbounded love for Iran, but also by his love of life and his own dignity as the old hero of an entire nation (this becomes particularly clear in the story of Esfandiyar). In short, Rostam, like the Iranian people whom he represents, is a complex character. No simple identification of him as for example the trickster can do justice to his character. He remains, however, the mirror in which the Iranian people can view their strengths as well as their weaknesses.

Hegel discusses the third aspect of epic under the title of 'the epic as a fully unified whole'. He compares epic to some of the other genres.

Lyric poetry is fundamentally concerned with the inner life of the individual. Drama is mainly concerned with the actions of the heroes and their consequences.

But in epic, over and above the encompassing national life on which the action is based, both inner and outer reality have their place, and thus here there is spread out before us all the detail of what can be regarded as the poetry of human existence(1975, p.1078).

Unlike lyric poetry, epic poetry is therefore concerned both with the inner and the outer lives of its heroes. Unlike drama, it describes an event not an action. In terms of Persian literature, one can compare the *Shahnameh* with for example Rumi's *Divan-e Shams*. The latter is clearly concerned more with man's inner spiritual life. Rumi focuses, not on the external events of man's life, but on his inner feelings. The world

within is more important than the world outside. This is not the case in the Shahnameh. Here there is little attention paid to the inner psychology of the heroes. Indeed, one may wish for more information about the states of minds of the great heroes of the text, Rostam, Sohrab, Esfandiyar and Siavash. Ferdousi does not provide us with any detailed knowledge of what these heroes felt or thought on any particular occasion. Unlike Rumi, Ferdousi only provides us with glimpses to his own personal character. Compared to the reader of the Shahnameh, the reader of Rumi is in the enviable position of knowing a great deal about the personal psychology of the poet. Such however, is the nature of epic that it does concentrate on the inner life of its heroes. This is not a failure of Ferdousi's art, but an intrinsic aspect of its greatness.

Hegel's description of epic as "the poetry of human existence" portrays the Shahnameh beautifully. The text gives us a panoramic view of life that includes not only, war, heroism and death, but also *bazm*, festivities and the great passion for life. In short, it deals, not only with death, but also, with life; this is why it is the poetry of human existence.

### **Conclusion**

A nation's consciousness can be studied in its art. The tools used by a nation in archeology and sculpture, the lower forms of art for Hegel, are unconscious elements. However, language is conscious existence. Epic is historically one of the first forms in which a nation builds a work of art on the basis of this conscious element. It therefore, replaces the earlier forms of the religion of cults. To study a nation's work of epic is to go into the heart of

a nation's consciousness of itself and how it views the relationship between the divine and the human elements.

It has been shown in the paper, that when one studies the *Shahnameh* in the light of the above argument, one can come across some points that have often been ignored or downplayed. The *Shahnameh* is of course a medieval text, but it is ultimately based on ancient pre-Avestan stories that date back to an oral tradition. The fact that these stories were apparently never put down in writing before the *Avesta* is itself due to the fact that writing in Persia developed later than in Greece. However, we are very lucky to possess the *Shahnameh* that provides us with a window to the ancient Iranian consciousness.

There exists here the fragment of a divine pre-Zoroastrian order which is seen for example in the mythical

powers of the *Simorg*. The fact that this divine/mythical power is symbolized in a bird is significant. It shows that this divine order had been one closed to nature, a religion of nature which corresponds not only to Hegel's theory of the growth of religious consciousness but also conforms to the studies done by students of the history of religion. This shows that we are on the right track. *Simorg* is part of a religion based on nature.

An important difference between the Greek and the Persian notions of epic has been noted here. The Greek notion of religion was polytheistic. It allowed for the existence of several authorities. The protagonists in the *Iliad* have the support of different authorities. Over and above them all is Fate, that is, external necessity. The existence of this external necessity implies that the death of the heroes is not absurd, but tragic.



In the case of Iran, the early rise of the religion of Zoroaster meant that the first texts in Iran were already Zoroastrian. The pre-Avestan religious beliefs probably never appeared in writing. The stories in the *Shahnameh* reflect, what may be termed, a fragmented consciousness. There is no clear divine order, no identifiable fate and yet the heroes seem to cling on to the wreckage of what could not have been saved in its entirety. What exists in the text is the *ruins* of a divine order that had once existed. The text does not explicitly reject the Zoroastrian faith, but clearly history in the *Shahnameh* is not the unfolding of the will of *Ahuramazda*. So the consciousness reflected in the *Shahnameh* is fragmented. The deaths of its heroes border between the absurd and the tragic. These are fragmented lives; the deaths too are partly tragic,

partly absurd.

The only authority left to the common people of Iran (as distinguished from their kings and the priests of the Zoroastrian religion) and their heroes, is the love of life and the dignity of man. Yet the authority of love is unable to stand up to the mighty powers that oppose it—the authority of the kings and the priests. This is most clearly seen in the story of Esfandiyar. Rostam is here left with no authority at all. In this sense, he almost resembles not the hero, but the anti-hero. What cruel fate! It is very indicative of the fragmentation of the Iranian consciousness that its main hero has, by the end of his life, become almost the anti-hero. What better way to show the impasse in which an entire nation finds itself?

We can now finally address the question of whether the *Shahnameh* should be considered a work of epic.

According to the analysis in this paper, the Shahnameh can be considered a work of epic. However, the world it portrays is in some respects very different from the world we find in the Homeric poems. One can sum up these differences by saying that whereas the Homeric poems show a consciousness in its youth, the Shahnameh portrays the ruins of a by-gone world. It is not accidental that this paper should end, like the magnificent Shahnameh itself, on a sad note.

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## حماسه خودآگاهی ملی : مورد شاهنامه

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این مقاله با هدف کشف رابطه بین شعر حماسی و خودآگاهی ملی و در مطالعه خاص چگونگی شاهنامه ممکن است از این زاویه مورد تجزیه و تحلیل .چه رابطه‌ای بین شاهنامه و خودآگاهی ملی ایران است؟ چه کاری می تواند یک مورد ملی خودآگاهی ایران بر اساس این متن می گویند؟ متن چه آشکار در مورد هویت ایرانی؟ یک سوال مرتبط نیز باید پاسخ داده شود، شاهنامه حماسه است؟

این یک سوال فضل‌فروشانه صرفا با تعاریف و برجسب مربوط نیست. به عنوان روشن خواهد شد، حماسه نشان می‌دهد مقدار زیادی در مورد آگاهی ملی مردم به چه کسی تعلق یا که به آن تعلق دارند برای شناسایی یک شعر به عنوان یک حماسه است، به ساخت یک بیانیه مهم در مورد آگاهی ملی از مردم است. این سوال که آیا شاهنامه حماسه است یا نه از این رو دور از یک فضل‌فروشانه است. این به ما طول می کشد به سمت راست قلب از آگاهی ملی ایران.

واژگان کلیدی: شاهنامه، خودآگاهی ملی، شعر حماسی، ایران.

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