

Shahnameh after 1000 Years

M.A. Eslami Nodoushan

Professor of Persian Literature, University of Tehran

One thousand years after the creation of *Shâhnâme*, the book of myths, epics and history of Iranians, what is there to be learned from it? What are the attractions of this book of verses that has rightfully obtained the honourable title of “the book of Iranian identity”? These are the questions that come to mind as an unprecedented curiosity and enthusiasm towards *Shâhnâme* is observed among our people, in particular the young generation.

What can be learned from *Shâhnâme* can be summarised as follows:

Our forefathers lived in the land they affectionately called Iran-va-eja for many millennia. They were people known for their spiritual and physical strength who later founded one of the greatest civilizations of the world. They continued to dominate one half of the known world for more than a thousand years (known to the Western world as the Persian Empire). They had a strong conviction that the good will always overcome the evil and that their country was the “Chosen Land” where this victory was to be reached. The revelation of this constituent of our past remains the major attraction of *Shâhnâme*.

As well as gaining historic insight from *Shâhnâme* one can also find a thorough understanding of the ancient Persian’s way of life, their beliefs, their fears, and their outlook towards life in general. This is achieved not only through the actions and words of the characters of *Shâhnâme* but also from Ferdowsi’s own reflections upon those events. One thousand years later, the lessons that can be learned from *Shâhnâme*, are endowed with freshness, strength and vitality. It is this superior characteristic of *Shâhnâme* that remains unparalleled in the immensity of Persian literary works.

Although Persian literature is rich with masterpieces such as those of Masnavi Mowlavi, both the *Bustan* and *Golestan* of Sa’di and the *Divan* of Hâfiz, no other literary work provides us with a resolute guide to our past with such clarity as that of *Shâhnâme*. This clear portrayal of the Persians’ beliefs and their ancient way of life was created in an era of relative Persian political autonomy and, as a result, efflorescence of Persian literature. The illustration of social and cultural identity of Iranians in the ancient times can be considered as the second most important aspect of *Shâhnâme*.

In addition to attaining historic, social and cultural insight from *Shâhnâme*, one can acquire a humane spirituality through the life of the poet himself. Ferdowsi’s life is a model of awareness of humanity and its noble cause. Despite all the available traps of wealth and material gains, he chose a simple life and at times was in sheer poverty. Ferdowsi chose, against all odds, to dedicate his life to the inscription of his peoples’ history and their cultural heritage.

Ferdowsi rejuvenated the language of his people in some of the most awe-inspiring simple yet rich poems. He shall always remain the true hero of Iranians for his life-long labour to guard and preserve the Persian language. He salvaged his peoples’ heritage from threats of oblivion in times of turbulence and destruction. He saved this heritage in a way that after a millennium, Persians owe the survival of their identity and language to virtually no one but Ferdowsi. The last, but certainly not least attractive characteristic of *Shâhnâme* remains its tremendous literary and poetic calibre, arguably superior in every aspect to any literary work created so far.

It is appropriate, a millennium after the creation of *Shâhnâme*, to inquire about the extent to which we can acquire information and wisdom from the masterly eloquence of its creator. In recent years, the curiosity value of this epic and its attraction perceived for all Iranians, and in particular

the younger generation, gives added importance of attending to such an inquiry. It is timely, in the age of science and perceived factual knowledge, to take a long overdue and fresh look at *Shâhnâmeh*, in order to determine what Iranians and the world can discover and learn from this book of 'millennia'.

After Islam, the Persian language, one of the richest as far as poetry is concerned, became the major apparatus for the exhibition of the Iranian identity, its talent, intellect and genius. Apart from the four great masterpieces of poetry, mentioned above, the Persian language is blessed with at least twenty works of poetic excellence, all of which are considered to be among the superior works of classic literature. Also there are at least hundreds of poetic collection that are of significant poetic quality, plus a vast collection of medium quality Persian poems, too many to enumerate.

The motives behind the development and creation of such wealth of artistic mastery in the form of poetry, and the reasons for the domination of Iranian thought by poetry in 'post-Islamic' Iran, falls beyond the scope of this paper. However, it seems that, in resorting mainly to poetic thoughts and poetic avenues of expression, and paying less attention to other branches of art and artistic expression, Iranians were in search of some 'ideal' they had lost and of a 'Utopia'. There appears to have been an emotional need that inspired Iranians to state what and how they felt, both to understand and know themselves as well as soothe and comfort their hearts.

With the collapse of the Sassanid dynasty came the loss of political leadership and the one thousand years of Persian dominance in the known world. After many ups-and-downs and soul-searching, Iranians replaced their lost dominance with that of their new superiority in literature. The platform of a 'royal successorship' was found in the realm of culture.

The re-claiming of the Iranians' sense of nationhood, the reassertions of political poetry and political demands, the widening of the historic existence and historic ties with the past, and, most important of all, the building of a new path that led to self-respect of Iranians, these all began with the onset of the creation of *Shâhnâmeh*. Iranians, with their new-found self-confidence, were able to continue to remain as Iranians within the Islamic ambience, as an independent and proud nation.

Shâhnâmeh is not an ordinary epic, covering particular events in a certain frame of time. Had this been the case, it would have lost its appeal to people, with all the harsh events of history. Rather, *Shâhnâmeh* is a vast humane literature with deep roots in the existence of human beings, and with strong ties to the depths of humans' lives. From a worldly outlook, the work can be considered as a source from which four major and original streams of Iranian thoughts converge. These four streams of thought are:

1. the Iranian nationality: the preservation of national identity and character
2. the 'Khayyamistic concept': the art of seizing time and enjoying life
3. Ethics
4. Gnosticism and the gnostic outlook: a certain positive mysticism

In what follows, these four major points will be discussed.

1. Preserving National Identity

Shâhnâmeh does not promote blind nationalism, but aims at a healthy recognition of the originality and historic achievements of Persia. It reminds the nation of its noble and humane characteristics, and leaves it for people to decide whether those characteristics are worth being kept and nurtured or not. If a particular set of national characteristics is perceived by its inheritors as righteous and worthy of adherence, then the nation is able to draw moral strength from its presentation and is able to meet the challenges of present and future.

Shâhnâmeh looks at our past, examines old memories, reminds Iranian who they have been, rejuvenates national character, and in short blows life, spirit and magnanimity into a country and its people. It has given meaning to human lives and vivacity to a nation which suffered multiple

invasions and had faced the loss of its self-confidence. *Shâhnâmeh* is a document that states to this people that their country belongs to those who have lived in it for many millennia and not to the invaders.

It is this perceived message that we find recurrent, openly or concealed, in all post-*Shâhnâmeh* literary works of Iran. Assadi-Tusi, Fakhreddin Gorgâni and Nezâmi Ganjavi versify the glories of ancient Iran. Nâsser Khosrow becomes a poet who narrates his pro-wisdom verses with a distinct pan-Iranian inclination.¹ Both Khâghâni and Hâfiz have dedicated a special place to the past grandeur of Iran in their works,² and hence the distinguished impact of *Shâhnâmeh* in hundreds of other works that followed it becomes apparent.

The long forgotten traditional names (such as Fereydun, Rostam, Sohrâb and Siâvash,³ and the inherited ways of life of Iranians took hold of the totality of Persian literature. This happened in such intensity that Iran can never again withdraw from the attraction and allure of its past heritage that shone through the verses of *Shâhnâmeh*.

2. The Khayyamistic Concept: the Art of Seizing Time and Enjoying Life

Quatrains attributed to Omar Khayyam, and thousands of others versified imitating his style and following his thoughts, invite people to pause and reflect upon life, to treasure life and take pleasure from it, and to value the time they have on Earth. Khayyam had found the principal root to all these concepts in *Shâhnâmeh*. The origin of these thoughts dates back to times immemorial, and before Ferdowsi other poets addressed them, too. But it is *Shâhnâmeh* that puts forth a vivid “graveyard of powers and beauties” lost and gone, and through the life story of its heroes, clearly reminds one to take advantage of all of life in full.

Equally, throughout the book, Ferdowsi’s personal reflections, stemming from the *Shâhnâmeh* itself, have added to the richness of these thoughts. Hâfiz was the last great poet who, with a gnostic touch, sometimes in a whisper and sometimes with the resonance of a glass of wine, repeated:

Take to delight of presence;
that from this two-way abode
We would not meet each other;
Once we pass through.

3. Ethics

The universal outlook of *Shâhnâmeh* is based on the battle of good and evil, the war of light and darkness, represented by events and incidents and many wise reflections made upon them. It can be said that the totality of all human experiences are summed up in this book, and in this regard it is perhaps only comparable to writings of William Shakespeare.

In *Shâhnâmeh*, life is considered the most precious and invaluable possession of humans, but not at any cost. Death is the worst of demons, but not always. There exists a balance between life and death: where the preservation of human dignity is at stake, life should be shed without any hesitation. Hence, there is something more precious than life and that is the “essence of life”, that is called *Nâm*.⁴ One who dies with a good name has indeed overcome this most fierce of demons, death. One should attain dignity even if body is to perish, it is only then that one can claim that his or her obligation towards the humanity has been fulfilled.

¹ Assadi-Tusi authored the book of verses called *Garshâsb-nâmeh*; Gorgâni was the creator of the book of verses called *Veis va Râmin*; Ganjavi produced five versified stories known as *Panj Manzumeh* or *Khamse-ye Ganjavi*; while Nâsser Khosrow was an Iranian Philosopher and poet (of twelfth century CE).

² 5. Khâghâni’s book of verses known as *Divân-e Khâghâni*; Hâfiz, of course, being one of the four great poets of Persia (see the chapter by Paul Smith in this volume).

³ These being names of the most notable epic heroes in *Shâhnâmeh*.

⁴ Literally meaning ‘name’, but implying also ‘fame’ for having been good and lived a glorious life.

What is wisdom (= *kherad* in *Shâhnâme*)? The standard and sets of rules by which human values and merits can be verified and evaluated. It is the understanding and the ability to differentiate between good and evil that have been attained through the practical experience, along with the acquired knowledge and spiritual findings of our ancestors as linked with practical life and relevant to preserving moral and humane values. Indeed the Creator who has a direct and non-mediatory relationship with humans and watches over them and their deeds. The Creator is the crystallization of universal intellect, higher than the “essence of life”, beyond all and above everything. If there was to be one characteristic that one could assign to the Creator, that would have to be “the creator of soul/life and wisdom”. The Creator created soul/life (= *Jân* in *Shâhnâme*) for living and wisdom to direct humans in the path of life. It is in this world that one receives the rewards or punishments for one’s deeds, and there will also be an inquiry hereafter.

The next word that is frequently repeated in *Shâhnâme* and carries an immense importance with it is *dâd*, that can be translated to justice, forthrightness, uprightness and fairness. However, this word in *Shâhnâme* has a vast meaning, beyond that of the same word found in other Persian literary works. Its meaning is not only the conventional perception of justice, the granting of one’s right by way of rejecting injustice, but also preserving the balance in all of life and living. This means that one should receive according to one’s right and capability in all aspects of life, be it economically, socially or judiciary. In *Shâhnâme*, it is not only the recognition of rights that is significant but of more importance is the capacity to deliver of correct judgement.

It is a fortunate coincidence that *Shâhnâme* was created in an era that Iranians as a nation were not morally defeated, and energy, hope and vigour were still present amongst them. It was shortly after that time, with the coming of Ghaznavid and Saljouqid,⁵ that Iran fell under the Abbasids’ and the Turks’ dominations. The union of rulers and clergy created such an intolerable atmosphere that people were forced to find comfort in mysticism and gnosticism. Gnostic literature, despite all its excellence and commendable teaching, was not free from negative propositions and suggestions of effortlessness. It is *Shâhnâme*, however, a book of direct response, that calls upon all powers of life and existence of the time, to resist, oppose and stand against the forces that had united to destroy the stature of Iran.

A third way in opposition to both religious dogma and mysticism - both these suffering from extremism and from a withdrawal from the inherent nature of life - was needed. *Shâhnâme* proposes the way of wisdom. Its invitation to wisdom faced up to humanness and at the same time was deeply rooted in Iranian culture. In this light *Shâhnâme* cannot only be considered a book of events. It is a record of life and a register of time - with direct links to the essence of living and life’s positive aspects and its necessities.

Proposals and ethical advices given in *Shâhnâme* brings back the entirety of philosophical thoughts of pre-Islamic Iran that are products of thousands of years of development in Iran through the ups-and-downs of its history. One can say that these pieces of advice were procreative of most wise counsels that followed in the Persian literature of the next thousand years. Not that some divergences in poetic tenor failed to emerge, however. In the poems of Sa’di, for example, a note of detachment from life and individual discipline can be detected; and in other great works of Persian literature produced at times of fatigue and exhaustion, signs of negativity and pessimism were apparent.

In Persian literary works, *Shâhnâme* shines above all in providing us with a healthy code for living, quite suitable with today’s modern life. It encompasses everything. It notes the importance of body and soul, and recognizes their roles in a wholesome living. *Shâhnâme* teaches one the ability to live on this Earth without undermining one’s desire to lead an enjoyable existence. This is real gnosticism, the pursuit of an almatem, an objective within the framework of a set of principles, and not the search for an impossibility.

⁵ Two families of Turkish origin that ruled in Iran from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries CE.

4. Gnosticism and Gnostic outlook: a Certain Positive Mysticism

Gnosticism, with its major impact on Iranian thought, derives one of its most important aspects from *Shâhnâmeh*, but there it is presented delicately as a positive path that does not bear the slightest harm on practical life. Its teachings involve the notion of living on this earth without losing the desire of a life that is superior to this life. Genuine Gnosticism does not promote the search for an unrealizable life. It urges the pursuit of an ideal within the framework of certain sets of principles. The respect for these moral codes is in line with open and flexible rules, allowing freedom as long as the rules' foundations are not impaired. However, once these foundations are damaged, even dedication to homeland and nation can not be said to justify departure from them. It is this principle of adhering to the foundation of moral codes that forces Siâvash (one of the *Shahnameh's* heroes) to leave his country and his people for a rival country.

Many of the *Shâhnâmeh's* teachings are repeated in the revelations of Sufi saints. One example is the direct relationship of humans with the source of life: the Creator. Many of the expressions and phrases in Persian gnostic literature that have metaphoric meanings have roots in *Shâhnâmeh*, some such being *Jâm-e Jahân-Been*, *Raksh*, *Simorgh*, *Az*, *Kherad*, *Rushanâii*, and *Zolmat*.⁶ The Mazda philosophy has taken hold of Iranian gnosticism. Sohrevardi,⁷ inspired by *Shâhnâmeh*, became one of the advocates and interpreters of this philosophy.

It is on the basis of the principle of "wisdom" that gnostic literature departs from *Shâhnâmeh*. In the former 'love', the sense of inner inspiration and inner movement, is replaced with 'intellect' and 'wisdom'. Such substitution is a result of the social consequences in which *Shâhnâmeh* and gnostic literature were created. The epic had been created in an optimistic society, and thus in an environment where earthly solutions to social problems have not yet been exhausted. Gnosticism, however, because of disappointment in the workability of such solutions for social affairs, migrates its espousers to 'heaven'.

Another distinguishing character of teachings of *Shâhnâmeh* is the principle of doing good for the goodness' sake. Although the recompense of the realm hereafter is taken into consideration, the masterpiece advances good work for the improvement of this world's predicaments. *Minu* (the heaven) in *Shâhnâmeh* is a domain endowed with happiness and light, not a world with an unlimited supply of good foods and drinks and other delicacies that humans experience in their earthly existence. Even the superstitious beliefs of the latter part of the Sassanid era have been eliminated from its pages. Judgement is mentioned but there are no references to horror and torture - as found in the ancient text *Ardaviraf-nameh*.

Shâhnâmeh is rare in Persian literature for teaching absolute wisdom. Nâsser Khosrow, another supporter of pure and absolute wisdom, looks at wisdom from a different angle. He employs wisdom to prove the upright case of the Ismaili movement against the Baghdad Caliphacy. Ferdowsi is impartial; he suggests that pure wisdom is above all creeds, politics, beliefs and faiths. He promotes a universal wisdom in agreement with human nature and contemporary life, with inclinations towards the fair side of human spirit. There is no hesitation in disapproving the evil in friends and commending good in foes in the wisdom that he promotes. The war between Iran and Turan (Turkestan) is more a war based on righteous principles and values than a war based on nationalistic and or racial grounds. Evil deeds are attributed to their leaders, while civilians and soldiers are not condemned.

Another signal of Ferdowsi's impartiality lies in his portrayal of women in *Shâhnâmeh*, which will be briefly mentioned here. Rudâbeh, Tahmineh, Faranguis and Manijeh are the ideal women

⁶ *Jâm-e Jahân-Been* is a legendary cup that reveals the secrets of the world; *Raksh* was Rostam's loyal horse; *Simorgh* was the mythical bird that nurtured Zâl, Rostam's father; the rest are spirits of Greed, Wisdom, Light and Darkness respectively.

⁷ Shahâbeddin Sohrevardi was a well known Persian philosopher and poet.

created by Ferdowsi, with his own personality reflected in their characters. These women are strong, brave and duty-conscious. They are all of non-Iranian origins, another proof of Ferdowsi's impartiality. It is very rare in ancient literature that one finds such a representation of women: a perfect balance between spiritual virtues and physical beauty. These ideal women are created and placed in real situations. Ferdowsi's account of women in a fair and unbiased way is unparalleled in ancient literature. This can be confirmed with a comparative study of women in the *Iliad* of Homer and other specimens of Greek literature. The conflict between Agamemmon and Achilles over their slave maidens, the behaviour of Clytemnestra (Agamemmon's wife) towards her husband, the tragic behaviour of Menelaus and her daughter with Andromak (Hector's widow),⁸ all substantiate the high nobility of Ferdowsi's view of women in classic ancient literature.

Another noteworthy aspect of *Shâhnâmeh* is the dominant principle and spirit of nobility. Bloodshed is not tolerated, that is, unless there arises a matter of good and righteous principles, before which even the closest of relations also lose value. Fereyduin in this respect gives consent to the death of his two sons. In contrast, Ferdowsi also reveals the danger that principles of evil can present to close relations: Afrâsiâb, in preserving his monarchy and his country, wanted to kill his daughter, but he also showed enough flexibility to reverse his wish with the intervention of the elders.

The inclination to plunder is not seen in any of the wars in *Shâhnâmeh*. Although plunder comes with all wars, the characters of the epic kill and are killed in a manly style in order to preserve their honour and dignity, and not to plunder. The heroes of *Shâhnâmeh* are earthly characters, just like other human beings; their outstanding character and shine is a result of their own effort and hard work. There is no hero in *Shâhnâmeh* who is not prone to mistakes and therefore is not uncriticizable. The value of each lies with this humanly character. They belong to their land and perform their duties towards it. This is a concept basic to Ferdowsi's originality; it takes over the totality of *Shâhnâmeh* and flows like a Spring breeze throughout its pages.

Ferdowsi is in possession of a great soul and a noble spirit, with an unspoilt folk culture that allowed him to create a fascinating and earthly atmosphere in his book. An archaic social environment in which people, dead for many centuries, was re-created by Ferdowsi so that they became immortal by his breath of life. The following few lines, whether from Ferdowsi or attributed to him, indicate the factual contents of *Shâhnâmeh* and his giving life and immortality to heroes of his people:

All these famous and vigorous people;
Whom of I have given account and abode;
All been dead for a lengthy time;
Become alive again from my word;
To them I am the Messiah;
Who showed the way of life to their souls.

The greatest value obtainable from *Shâhnâmeh* is the human's vastness of soul and warmth of heart. No other book is so abundant in wisdom in such a natural way. In gnostic literature: Attâr, Mowlavi, Sa'di and Hâfiz try to displace humans from their earthly place and fly them high up in heavens. In their creative imagination, the day-to-day lives of humans are not present in their works. In order for humans to fly to their desired heaven, Shâhbâz-e Sedreh Neshin and Morgh-e Bagh-e Malakut,⁹ exceptional beings, come in. Examples of humans given in these works also live away from society and outside the orbit of human social life. Ferdowsi does not make humans fly; he tells them to be what they are, but wants them to be humane, noble and magnanimous.

⁸ Alluding to Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Andromades*.

⁹ The heavenly bird of paradise and the bird of the garden of angels respectively.

Shâhnâmeh revolves around human beings and real life. Humans have serious responsibilities and have to perform their duties to life and humanity. Life is a worthy gift to all and requires to be cherished. That is done by benefiting from all the beauties and goodness of life. Also the hardship that gives meaning to life should be shared among all humans, and one should be ready to tackle them, all sharing the load of humanity:

You are the chosen of the two Universes;
 the nurtured through so many means;
 Your Beginning: Thoughts;
 Your End: Accountable
 Hence do not take yourselves insignificant.

Ferdowsi's words and style is also different from those of his contemporaries, with the exception of Mowlavi Rumi who has his own unique style of poetry. Where *Shâhnâmeh* is a single river worthy of this Earth's nature, other Persian works can be thought of as clear and flowing streams. *Shâhnâmeh* flows over fields and valleys, through and around the mountains and overcomes all barriers. Under the starry sky, in the light of day and darkness of night, it flows towards an ocean, the ocean of life. It is the eruption of human genius that manifests itself from time to time at a corner of this globe. Human society, like the nature itself, has fields, mountains, valleys and difficult terrains, it has altitudes that sometimes elevate beyond imagination. One such height of human creation is *Shâhnâmeh*. Together with some other literary works, it represents the explosion of unconventional human nature.



Buynuz Pile Carpet, Shusha, Azerbaijan, 19th Century