FIRDOWSI:
NATIONAL CHARACTER IN PERSIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

It is compulsory for every citizen to look after their national identity and to raise it up. Nationalism spirit will bring up confidence and national union in dealing with any foreign threats. Literature-sourced nationalism has become an important role in its exertion. It can be found in the most phenomenal literature in Persian, named Shah Nameh, written by Firdowsi that has made the people and the language of Persian risen out of “intellectual silence” during Arab conquest. In approximately three centuries, Persian territory was under Arab authority, though, Persian language has remained exist when other language in conquered territories were totally influenced by Arabic. In writings, some writers would always minimize the use of Arabic as a means of giving pressures on Arabic expanding influence in the region at that time.

Keywords: nationalism, Firdowsi, Shahnameh, Iran, epic, heroes

Introduction

The word of Persia or Farsi often refers to a language name of Persian state, which is currently known as Iran. As Iran king request, the name of Persia has been changed into Iran in 1935. Since then, the name of Iran was commonly used by other countries in diplomatic terms. The original word of Pars or Fars was from a tribe name in Pars area, in southwest Iran, where ancient Greek people considered it as a common name of the area, it was then known as what it is in 600 BC after generating conquerors such as Cyrus (559-530 BC) and Darius (521-485 BC). Indo-Iran tribes commonly called them as “ary” or “airy” which has a meaning of noble of brave. Iran was named based on their own race, while the tribe that has conquered Indus valley and Gangga valley was named “arya vart”. This tribe, which then has taken control of Iranian highlands, named their land as “airyan”, which means Aryan state. Since then, the name has become Eran or Iran.

Persian language is one of the oldest languages in the world which its speakers today reached approximately a hundred millions of people. The root of Persian is Indo-Iran that was sourced to Indo-European languages. The reason of why Persian has been extensively spread all over Asia and Europe was because of enormous movement conducted by Aryan people from Caucasus (Siberia) to Iranian highlands since 3000 BC until 13th century AD continuously.
Currently, Persian language becomes the national language of Iran, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Samarkand and Bukhara inhabitants which were part of today Uzbekistan speak Persian as their daily language.

Persian language is divided into three periods: ancient period, medieval period, and modern era after Muslim invasion that has used Arabic letters (hijayyah) in its writing. Some of the biggest kingdoms centuries ago were Persian, Rome, Greek, and Chinese. Geographically, Persian was in a strategic position at that time. That is the reason why Persian has become one of the oldest civilizations in the world as well as their culture and literature. Persian literature which was developed since hundreds of years before century era can be seen on Zoroaster or Majusti “Avesta” holy book. This holy book mostly contains of praises and greatness of God “Ahuramazda” written in poems. The name of Avesta was originally from what has been cited in the book, therefore scholars named the book as “Avesta”. Avesta language is the root of ancient Persian before Parthi language, Soghdi, and Pahlevy. Until now, Zoroaster is one of recognized religions in Iran.

The Advent of Islam in Persia

Islamic military attacking Sasanid dynasty has taken a kickoff since 7th century of AD in Abu Bakar caliphate era and has reached its highest peak in Umar caliphate era. The killing of Yazdgird III king, the last king from Sasanid Dynasty, has become the point where Islamic military has greatly destroyed Sasanid dynasty. Since then, Arabs invasion to the land of Persia has been the most influential invasion in the history of Persia.

Experts mostly have dissimilar arguments regarding the main reason of this invasion. Some of the reasons are Islamization, trading route invasion, climate change, poverty and hunger, an attempt to set Arabian people in free of Sasanid authority, Pan-Arabism, and so forth. The first time Arabian people entering Sasanid area was in 633 AD, when general Khalid bin Walid invaded the so-called Iraq area. As Khalid was moved to front of Rome in Levant, Muslim people eventually lost their authority as the result of Persian counter attack. The second invasion was started in 636 AD under Saad bin Abi Waqqas, when the victory in Qadisiyyah brought Sasanid control out of western Persia to a permanent end. Zagros mountain then became a natural stumbling block between Rasyidin Caliphate and Sassaniyah dynasty. As the result of continuous Persian attacks to the area, Caliph Umar ordered a complete invasion toward Persian Sasaniyah Dynasty in 642 AD, which was ended up in a total conquest of Sassaniyah in the middle of 644 AD. Rapid conquest over Persian in the series of ramified attacks were mostly well-organized. These were commanded by Caliph Umar from city of Madinah, which is frankly located in thousands of mile away from Persia, and these were being the biggest achievement that has led his reputation to a political and military strategy expert.
After the advent of Islam, the language and literature of Persian was burdensome to develop because it was still dominated by Arabic language. The knowledge of Arabic was critical since the rulers were Arabic-speaking people at that time. It was also used for Islamic-teaching spread across the area. Therefore, Arabic was dominant and has been their national language for approximately one and half century. As the result, Persian scientists wrote their papers in Arabic. Persian-descent scientists who wrote in Arabic at that time were Ibn Sina, ar Razi, al Biruni, al Ghazali, and Sibaweah the Nahwu initiator. Beside that, there were many Persian poet who wrote in Arabic, one of them was Abu Nuas, an Ahvaz-born poet.

The Resurgence of Persian Language

Nationalism is one of citizen awareness as a means of representing idealism and national identity. Regardless of various nationalism definitions, a nationalist is a person who loves his own people and his own land, and even emphasizes national interests rather than self-interest. Melani Budianta in her article titled “Diverse voices: Indonesian literature and nation-building” (2007:57) stated that nation-building process in literature discourse is not shaped linear and singular which tends to bring people into one single even political entity. Otherwise, it provides spaces for discussion and continuous dialogue in order to enrich and to finalize these national concepts and feelings. (by Suryadi: Sastra, Etnisitas, Agama dan Kebangsaan, 2013).

Language and literature along with its history is the most sensitive and the most effective media in expressing feelings, thoughts, and souls of people, because literature and art have a particular spot inside people as a media that can explain means and purposes the community was established for. In a multicultural community, the language and literature will become multicultural as well. One of them was Persian that has their own culture and ancient civilization that has been begun since 2500 BC.

One of the most important part of Iran history is the chronological order since pre-Islamic period, Islamic period, until modern era. Persian Kingdom reached its peak of glory in Sasanid Dynasty era, when monarch system was applied and zoroaster was being recognized. Monarch system and zoroaster were faded out along with Islamic conquest in Persia. The Arabs conquered the land of Persia for approximately three centuries.

There are interesting facts to discuss behind this three-centuries-long Arabian conquest. The first one is the language. Persian language still exists when other languages all over the Arabs-conquered area were shifted to Arabic. Farsi or Persian language is an active language Persian people speak until today after Persian median language or Pahlavi that has become lingua franca in Sasanid period or before Arabs conquest.

According to Hodgson, the limit of Persian excellence or Persian supremacy era in Islamic culture is that “Persian language advent generates more-than-a-literature results: Farsi
language transfers a new level of comprehensive cultural approach in Islamic world. At this point, when Arabic defends their position as official language, theology, science, and philosophy. Persian language elevates to become political and cultural language in the most part of Islamic world, even to penetrate through research and science with a huge effect and influence. Furthermore, its supremacy has become a standard and pattern by other languages to reach the highest peak of literature. After Arabic and Persian, then the third language in classic world (Islam) was Turkish which its literature has roots in Persian traditions. (Ehsan Yarshater: Kehadiran Bangsa Iran di Dunia Islam, 2012)"

Through Middle Eastern political fragmentation existence that has been initiated since Islamic civilization establishment period, Persian (new) language continuously replaced Arabic in Iran, Anatolia, Central Asia as well as India continent as a support of Islamic civilization and even more as a lingua franca. The fact that the use of Arabic has never been adopted by common people makes Persian language a scientific language.

For approximately two centuries in Arabic conquest, Persian literature was inactive. When the Arabs conquered over Persian, Semitic-origin people who speak cognate languages to Arabic in western areas of Eufrat river replaced their language with Arabic. Meanwhile, Aryan people who occupied eastern areas of Eufrat river remained speaking their original language. According to Sadeqi, local languages were still being used in cities and villages, although Arabic had become official language.

Tahirian dynasty period (821-873) and Safarian dynasty (861-1003) are the first period of Iranian nationalism growth, while Samanid period (819-999) was the time the highest peak and the advancement of Iranian cultures were being implemented. Samanid dynasty was the first dynasty led by Iranian after the advent of Islam. Samanid dynasty was established by a Samarqand-origin man named Saman. In this period, conquered Samanid areas were Khurasan and Transoxania, and Persian language was placed in epic nationalism poetries. In proses, Persian books were written such as Kasyf al Mahjub Hujweiri, Siyasat nameh Nizam al Mulk, Tarikh Baihaqi and so forth. Among those great artistic literatures in Farsi, this paper will be focusing on Firdowsi and his phenomenal work titled “Shahname” or commonly translated in English with “The Epic of Kings” or “Book of Kings”.

Brief History of Firdowsi

Hakim Abu al Qasim Firdowsi, an Iranian-born epic poet and a writer, was born in Thoos, Khurasan, Iran, located in Baj village, between 329-330 Hijriya or 940 AD. This villager kid who maintained his ancestors culture and tradition spent his lifetime in Thoos. He just ever
traveled once to Ghazni to come before Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi, after finishing his great creation of Shahname, to be presented to the sultan. Firdowi’s education record has never been revealed, but his literatures proved that he was a genius who mastered various fields of science such as philosophy, theology, and Arabic literature. Beside his imagination potential, his skills in choosing and picking words seemed to have a strength which made him a great poet.

Firdowsi’s father was a rich landlord. Since the first time Firdowsi started his study, he fell in love with books about ancient Iranian kings. Raised in dehqan (landlord) family, Firdowsi often faced ancient Iranian culture, and he deepened this knowledge by taking ancient knowledge as his study. This is what has shaped his perspective in poetry world.

Document and data about Firdowsi’s life that we read today was from Nezami Aruzi, a 12th century poet who visited Thoos in 1116 or 1117 to gather information about Firdowsi’s life. According to Nezami-e Aruzi, Firdowsi was born in a landlord family next Thous village in Khorasan province, northeastern Iran. Firdowsi was married in his 28. Firdowsi spent thirty three years long to write Shahnameh.

As a boy, Firdowsi loved to play in a riverside that had a bridge which would be easily ruined by flood, because no one was able to build a strong bridge that can hold up the flood. One day, Firdowsi stated that he wanted to make sufficient amount of money to build a strong bridge that can hold the flood up. Firdowsi became a famous poet and was hired by the king to write Persian history. The king placed Firdowsi in an exclusive room in his palace, that has paintings covering the wall, to inspire Firdowsi’s poetry. The king told him that he would pay him a thousand of gold in every single thousand line of his poetry.

After thirty years of work between 977-1010, Firdowsi wrote sixty thousand lines - Shahnameh by changing prose to poetry, known in Persian as masnawi. Firdowsi excludes Sultan Mahmud in various places in his creation in 250 lines. Some of them were hyperbolic hailing on Sultan. He gave poetries to the king and asked for sixty thousands of gold the king promised him. But, during this thirty years of work, Firdowsi’s work was often argued by the king. Firdowsi felt like the king did not appreciate him nor his work. The king thought Firdowsi was too arrogant and he just gave him sixty thousands of silver instead of gold. Firdowsi was upset. He left the palace and went home to Thous, but he left a poetry he put on the wall of his work room for the king for years. Many people reported his behavior to the king. Eventually, the king was regretful and sent camel carts to Thous along with his sixty thousands of gold and other valuable things, such as silk, brocade, suede, perfume, and spices. But the king’s present was too late, it was told that Firdowsi was dead before the cart’s arrival. When the king’s caravan arrived in one of the city gates, Firdowsi’s coffin and his funeral were on its way on the other gate. According to Zabihullah Safa, quarrel and dispute between Sultan and Firdowsi, a genius Persian researcher and nationalist who loved his own land was caused by ethnicity and nationality.
Epic Poetry and Shahnameh

The following is one of introduction in Shahnameh about the highness of value of sense.

Until today, he deserves to be praised  
O the owner of mind

Until today, what you know of mind  
Tell that until other people hear that

Of all God has given, mind is more valuable  
Where I have to praise you from

Mind is the guide  
Mind is also the heart opener

Mind is also connecting two worlds  
From it, where happiness comes

And also from it, where sadness come  
Which sometimes increased and decreased

Although your mind is now being black  
But your soul is still white

Because day and night are impossible in one time  
Because happiness is impossible to come forever

What have been told by the smart will be valuable if it is heard by the owner of mind

Those who never appreciate mind will be in sadness  
And be thinking that people who do are crazy

And all that has been done will become useless  
Mind is the eyes of soul strength

Appreciate it forever  
because you without eyes will never see the beauty of nature

What has been created first is mind  
And your soul keeper is in three sections
Eyes, ears, and tongue
With these three, with no doubt you will arrive

In good dead and bad dead
With mind and soul, there will be courage to praise it

Those who have no courage
Just listen

Far before writings becomes a common culture, oral tradition about ancient heritage was an interesting attraction to people. Poets using epic language seemed to have expressed nationalism feelings and souls clearly and firmly. As it brings patriotism spirits, oral tradition would identify national identity and would become their own pride. Shahnameh, however, has become Iranian nationalism unifier in order to raise their national confidence. Earlier, a poet named Daqiqi (935/942-976/980) who had lived before Firdowsi was tasked by King Samanid to write Persian epic poetry. After finishing 1000 lines, he was passed away. Shahnameh then was continued by Firdowsi and it was finished in 1010 AD. Shahnameh written by Firdowsi has widely become famous as a Iranian national epic. This great book was repeatedly copied along with calligraph and beautiful paintings. This book, until today in certain moments, is often read by oral experts. The legend that contains of 60,000 thousand lines of poetry, 62 stories, and 990 titles tells about the stories of fifty kings in ancient Persian mythology.

One of brief important stories in Shahnameh is as the following: The Saturn Time is a reminder of lost and death however the next raising sun brings a new day of hope. In the first circle of creation, cruelty is an external shape (evil). In the second cycle, we see the beginning of family hatred, poor and vicious behavior that penetrates in human character. Two sons of Shah Feridun who are greedy and envious toward their innocent siblings thought their father is on their siblings’ side. Then they killed them and eventually all of them were involved in a killing and avenging cycle. In the next cycle, all characters are apathy, egoistic, and cruel.

This trend seems to reflect two things: first, Persian conquest by the Arabs and portraits of Zoroastraism last days in the land of Persian. Ferdowsi seems to be sad due to Persian empire fall and the next rulers were the Arab and the Turkish. Therefore in certain parts, Shahnameh seems to have biased on anti-Arabs and anti-Turkish. Shahnameh is one of his attempts in maintaining memories of Persian greatness and in showing to next generation, thus they could learn and try to establish a better world.

This book is divided into three sections. The first tells about ancient Persian mythology. After praising-to-Allah introduction, Shahnameh delivers an explanation about the creation of world and human as what it was believed by the Sasanians. This introduction is followed by the first human story, Keyumars, who had become the first king. Hushang, the grandchild of
Siyamak, accidentally found fire and hosted Sadeh party to respect on the fire. The story of Tahmuras, Jamshid, Zahhak, Kawa, or Kaveh, Fereydun, and his three sons, Salm, Tur, and Iraj as well as his grandson Manuchehr are involved in this part.

Mytology session in Shahnameh is relatively short which is about 2,100 lines of poet or is just about four percent of the entire book content. Both stories tell about Persian legendary kings and two Persian primary heroes, Rostam and Sohrab. Almost two third of the Shahnameh talks about heroic session, started from Manuchehr administration until Alexander the great conquest. The main figure in this period is the role that was played by Saka or Sistani, a hero who shows up as the important person in Persian dynasty.

Garshasp is briefly mentioned along with his son Nariman. His successor is his son Zal and Zal’s son is brave-man Rostam then his son Faramarz. Feudalism society that have fascinating way of living was described in Shahnameh with various luxuries. The way Ferdowsi describes was viable and it impressed readers that they feel like they were involved in the story or even they saw it themselves at no distance. The story plot was significantly moving, with enriched and diversified languages. Among these outlined stories in this part, the most famous ones are the romance Zal and Rudaba, Haft Khan (Seven Phases) from Rostam, Rostam and Sohrab, Siyavash and Sudaba, Rostam and Akvan Div, romansa Bizhan and Manizheh, war with Afrasiyab, Daqiqi about Goshtasp and Arjasp as well as tragic duel between Rostam and Esfandyar. It needs to be noted that Rostam legend and Sohrab was proved only in Shahnameh, as usual Firdowsi started it with detailed lyric. In this part, Firdowsi was in the peak of his poetic expertise and he had become a great teacher in story telling. The third combines historical facts and legends, tells kings adventures semi-myth with Persian kings. In this part, readers can see that Firdowsi himself mourned over the conquest of his own land and over what he said as the arrival of dark armies.

The most famous figure in Shahnameh is Rustam and his son Sohrab who was dead by his own father. Rostam unconsciously fought and killed his own son. Rustam is Iranian hero and champion. He is the son of Zal and Rudabeh (the daughter of Mihrab, Kabul ruler and the grandson of Zahhak). He is the son of Saam bin Nairam from Pashang. The abnormal birth of Rustam took place in Sistan. The baby condition who is physically oversize makes Zal ask for advice from Simurgh. When Rustam was one day old, he seems to be a one year old boy. He drinks milk out of his nurses and when he eats, he could eat five times more than what adults do.

In his teen, the legendary Rustam was able to kill a wild white elephant by one hit using his grandfather stick. At the same time, he could successfully capture Sepand fortress, a place where Nariman was killed. As an adult, he was described as a strong and heavy man, so he could breakdown stones when he walked. When Afrasiyab invaded Iran for the first time, Rustam needed a horse which he would rely on to fight the enemy in battlefield. After checking up all the horses, there was only one horse named Rakhsh that is strong enough to be mounted by
Rustam. After chosen as Rustam’s horse, Rakhsh was loyal to serve Rustam until they both died. Rakhsh was involved in wars together with Rustam in the battlefield, and he also can communicate and give alerts to Rustam regarding upcoming dangers. Rustam was ordered by Zal to go to Alburz Mountain to save Kayqubad and to bring him back to Iranian kingdom. Soon after that, Rustam was involved in Keyqubad war fighting Turanian Afrasiyab and embarassed them. For more than 600 years since Manuchehr administration until Kaykhusrau, Rustam is Iranian national champion. He joined almost every wars, and during those times he also defended Iran integrity against the Turanians. When Kaykavus was put in jail in Mazandaran, Rustam went over seven obstacles (Haft Khan) to kill white Div and to save Kaykavus. He also saved Kaykavus from prison in Hamavar and saved Bizhan from well Arzhang in Turan.

One day, young Rustam search for his stolen horse. He search for it until entering Samangan kingdom. There, he became a guest of Samangan king, the he married king Tahmineh’s daughter then a boy was born named Suhrab. When Suhrab was adult, he unconsciously dealt with his own father in a battlefield. Rustam himself unconsciously killed his own son Suhrob. After Suhrab death, he returned to attack Turan, defeating Afrasiyab. Soon after that, he returned to Zabul, called by Kaykavus.

One last war in Rustam’s life is his meeting with Isfandiyar, Gushtasp’s son. Isfandiyar was known to have many lives, to be tough, to be strong, to have metal body. He decided to take Rustam alive and to bring him to his father to put him on trial. In that dule, Rustam almost lost his own life. Eventually he was helped by the father Zal who asked for advice from Simurgh. According to Simurgh, Rustam look after a tree named Gaz to take out the branch and to create an arrow out of it. He was asked to target Esfandiyar’s eyes using the arrow, because that is the only non-metal-layered part of his body.

Rustam, his horse Rakhsh and his brother Zavareh was being defrauded by Shaghad, his step brother who is also the king of Kabul. They fell down to the bottom of a well where Shaghdad digged in purpose. Before Rustam was dead, from the well bottom, he released an arrow that went through a tree in where Shaghad was hiding behind.

Rustam who has strong character, smart, good-humored, caring, loyal, and fast in doing anything. He is the master of intimidating and frightening enemies before starting the war. Dialogue of psychological war against Suhrab, Ashkabus, Khaqan Cina, and Isfandiyar is unique parts Firdowsi has created in order to show talents of these Iranian national champion. According to Levy, central figure and hero in Shahname is Iran itself.

*Be name khudavand jaan o Khirad*
*Kazin bartar andisheh bar nagoozarad*
In the name of God, the owner of soul and mind  
Who created this mind not greater than Him.

Two lines of poet above are part of the first poet in Shahnameh introduction. Firdowsi started his work praising god most gracious and most merciful which is the greatest introduction. Gentle soul and pure thought are the most valuable grace the God gives to human. Thought helped by purity is human guide in living the life in order to reach happiness in the world and thereafter so that there will be logical-thinking perfect human. Then it was continued by fourteen lines contained of praises toward God as well as explanation of God’s greatness and human weakness that has never reached God, but has to comply toward God. It was continued by twenty two lines contained praises toward common sense that it is the first thing God created. Continued by twenty five lines of poet about how the world was created and sixteen lines about human creation and its position as the most noble among other creations. Eight lines about sun creation and eight lines about moon creation, how these both rotated. Continued by thirty three lines contained of praises to the messenger and his family. Then another nineteen lines about Shahnameh background continued by eleven lines about the story of poet named Daqiqi. Shahnameh introduction was ended by one twenty five lines about praises toward Abu Mansur Daqiqi and Sultan Mahmud Gaznavi.

Bassi ranj burdam dar in sii sāl  
Ajam zendeh kardam bedin pārsi

During these thirty years, I fought over exhaustion  
In Farsi, I give desire to Ajam people (Persian)

Two lines above are the clear proof of nationalism Firdowsi has written. To him, Persian language is a media, not the purpose of nationalism itself. Firdowsi, like another poets who lived in the same era with him, searched and arranged the words until miracle and beautiful languages are created, hoping that from these language, there would be nationalism feelings inside the readers. According to Zabihullah Safa, there are four things in Shahnameh:

1. Firdowsi in his poetry has successfully maintained ancient Iranian folklore that has been cited by various references and they are retold into beautiful poetries.
2. Fidowsi describes nature condition, battlefield, heroes, physical fights, and armies launching so perfectly. This shows the writer genius and expertise.
3. In Shahnameh, scenes like revenges, spites, racial pride and love were wrapped into great epic.
4. Language Firdowsi used is very exceptional. This can been seen from the way he changed rhyming prose words. This can be recognized by those who understand Persian literature secrets.
Jalal Khaliqi Mutlaq, known as Shahnameh expert detailed nationalism points in Shahnameh. The first one: maintaining Iranian culture, since book of khuda e Nameh historical books in Pahlevi language translated in Arabic and Persian was unable to be found anywhere no more, Shahnameh has become the last main reference for us today which contains of information regarding Iranian ancestors, geography, arts, literatures, and family tradition as well as ancient Iranian administration and government. The second one is spiritual idealism that has been shown up by fighting against cruelties which are opposite with the way Iranians behave, this story illustrates almost all the themes in Shahnameh.

The third one is maintaining Farsi language purity. Reviewed by diction and grammar selection, Shahnameh has the strongest foundation among other works. At the time when Persian was in its extinction threat, Firdowsi passed away and left his work forever. The fourth is nationalism message. This message is uncommon but Iran has to claim as the world leader. This message is not mentioned by Firdowsi himself but he was just a mouthpiece from their ancestors. Therefore, there is a belief from Iranian ancestors that the world is divided into seven countries, one of them is Iran and Iran has to be the strongest and Iranian people have to be the most properous by mentioning free and victory people. Arya that was mentioned in Avesta holy book and written in Achaemenid script has the meaning of Iranian and freedom. Opposite with Iran, other countries, particularly Turkey and Arabs are countries that lost their lands. National feeling which is so-called nationalism today is a thousands-of- years result from the ruler that has ever led this big part of the world. When Arabs victory over Persia was gained through Bani Umayyah for three centuries, this nationalism spirit was rebuilt.

Conclusion

Shahnameh is a symbol of Persian language golden’s day. This has been the most important document for Iranian identity. The most important motivation Firdowsi wrote this work is to arouse Persian people over the ruler injustices through epic poetry language. Firdowsi, who is known as Persian language hero, has considerably saved Persian language. Because of what he has worked on, Persian language is still used until today. He left a phenomenal work for today generation. For most of Iranian people, reading legendary stories of ancient Persian kings makes them love their country more and be proud of their land and their own language. After Firdowsi, then there were another works titled nationalism written by scientists such as Imam Ghazali, Nizam al Mulk, Saadi and Hafez.
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