

Canonizing Shahnameh in Early Modern Iran: A Historical-Semiotic Approach [In English]

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the process of canonizing *Shahnameh* as an emergent discursive and material site of cultural memory in early twentieth century in Iran. Of particular significance in this regard is the first Ferdowsi millenary celebrations and the concomitant Ferdowsi millennial conference held in 1934 as a turning point in modern discourses revolving around *Shahnameh*. There is a power-fraught dialectic of domestication and foreignization in appropriating *Shahnameh* as a mnemonic sign in this period. The authors closely read the signs of this emerging semiosphere in order to bring to the fore the problematic of monologizing cultural memory by means of ideological entextualization.

Key words: Shahnameh, Canon-Formation, Cultural Memory

1. Introduction

“Nations themselves *are* narrations.” (Said xiii)

In an often-quoted anecdote, it is reported that Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878-1944) would listen attentively to stories from Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* in late 1920s. In one of these sessions, he was presented with the story of Roshanak, daughter of Darius III, who was waiting to be carried to Alexander the Great, since the latter had conquered Iran, and would expectedly choose a wife from the royal family of the dethroned king for his growing political and personal appetites. Alexander had it that the city of Isfahan should be decorated with flowers and other accessories to celebrate this ceremonious coupling, literally and symbolically, of the new monarch with Iran. The people, however, put on black clothes in an act of nation-wide mourning (and resistance). In their eyes, this was not a celebration but a funeral, both for Iran and the king’s daughter. Having thus set the scene, our storyteller would then read the following lines from *Shahnameh* to Reza Shah:

The whole city was decorated with illuminations

smiles on their lips whilst deep sorrow in their hearts.

Hearing this, Reza Shah began to cry. He could not contain his tears for almost ten minutes. This was, anecdotal history has it, the first time “The Great King,” the paragon of macho masculinity for many Iranians, ever cried (Bastani-Parvizi 123). From this day to 1934 when he was photographed in front of the newly built Ferdowsi mausoleum while giving the conclusion speech of Ferdowsi millennial conference we do not know what went on in Reza Shah’s mind, while certainly he must have had a less than restful mind; but what we can account for with the benefit of retrospect, is that a new cultural semiosphere would gradually emerge in the meantime, including a new sense of nationhood which owes much of its strength to the fact of revisiting cultural myths and stories, best manifested by the iconic status of *Shahnameh*.

Reza Shah’s relation to *Shahnameh* was not as congenial as the above story might initially imply. Indeed, the first cinematic adaptation of *Shahnameh* made by Abdolhossein Sepanta called *Ferdowsi* (1934) did not seem to have impressed Reza Shah very deeply. The film is a biography of Ferdowsi which inserts poetic pieces from *Shahnameh* into its narrative. It was made on the occasion of Ferdowsi millenary celebrations and was only shown to a limited number of people. The representation of Mahmoud Ghaznavi, the tenth century sultan, was for Reza Shah not majestic enough and so the film had to be remade. Such love/hate, fascination/rejection, or what can be felicitously termed *ambivalent* relation to cultural heritage and literature, appear to remain at the heart of the intellectual discourses in Iran, a discursive field fraught with binary oppositions, white-and-black mentality, and certainly melancholic nostalgia.

Shahnameh or *The Book of Kings* is for many the architext and indeed the architecture of Persian language, identity, and culture. This is of course a claim made so often that its repetitive banality has turned it into quasi-gnomic and aphoristic common-sense statement, sometimes asphyxiating critical thought. Common sense, as Jonathan Culler argues, is indeed anathema to critical thought and theory: “The main effect of theory is the disputing of ‘common sense’: common-sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience” (Culler 4). In many ways, *Shahnameh*/Ferdowsi as a sign has become so naturalized that any discussion about it appears to ritualistically center on repeated themes and recurring ideas (i.e., national identity and epic grandeur of Iranian past mixed with some anti-Arab sentiments).

Notwithstanding this, Ferdowsi and his *Shahnameh* are among the most widely discussed and written about in contemporary Iran. Ferdowsi/*Shahnameh* has its own annual day, many conferences, and other forms of commemoration. Yet, in contrast to many cinematic adaptations of the epic and other classic works in the West which turn passive into active memory, *Shahnameh* has not found its way

into the daily realm of imagination among the Iranians, and at best belongs to either the academics or to those few who through oral narrative-performance (*naqali*) intend to remember the book, though the performative viability of the latter seems difficult to reconcile with the demands of modern ways of living. It is more than ironic that one of the rare film adaptations of *Shahnameh*, *Siavash at Persepolis* (*Siavash dar Takht-e Jamshid*, 1967; dir. Fereyduun Rahnama) narrates with a metadiegetic-melancholic dark cinematic gaze the impossibility of enacting the heroic story of Siavash in the ruins of Persepolis and by analogy the ruins of modern world. Rahnama's view that "The past is our direction. Any past no matter how much we deride it is there: in the air we breathe, in the cadence of our words and sentences, just like the presence of yesterday in today" (Rahnama 124) appears in light of his film to be more of a nostalgic desire, and thus evinces a feeling of mourning for something lost, an affective regime that is not difficult to find in the literary works and films in modern Iran.

In a more recent adaptation, the enormously popular animation series "Rostam in Wonderland" (2012-13, created by Soroush Rezaei and Pouya Afshar) graphically depicts the contradictions and incompatibilities of the epic and the modern, a distinction that can be explained by adducing Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the epic in contrast to the novel. In one episode for instance, Rostam sent by *simorgh*, the legendary bird in *Shahnameh*, appears in Tehran in search of a panacea for Sohrab, the son he has unwittingly stabbed fatally in the story of "Rostam and Sohrab." Naturally, the citizens find him an oddity, a thing of the past. Struggling to find something, Rostam finally gets his hands on a drug said to cure his son; only it turns out it is a China-made drug of no use. Indeed, this parodic animation throws into relief the discontinuities and ruptures between the past and the present; furthermore, it emphasizes the need for social criticism. These examples are meant to belie the assumption that *Shahnameh* has an active role in the imaginative world of the cultural sphere in Iran.

In comparison to two other great Persian books, *Divane-Hafez* and *Gulistan* by Sa'di, which have always been available to readers in the course of time, *Shahnameh's* status as a written manuscript with a public readership is a modern phenomenon. Hafez and Sa'di also differ from Ferdowsi in that the former's writings have found their way to the cultural memory of Iranians in their daily lives given perhaps the fact that their lyricism contra the epic-mythological world of *Shahnameh*, and their shorter length, make them more accessible – as many proverbs and sayings borrowed from Hafez and Sa'di would testify. In other words, although for being part of the oral tradition of myths and stories the book has had a relatively continuous presence in Iranian history, the resurgence of *Shahnameh* as a written manuscript of wide literate readership coincides with the renewed interest in Persianate narratives of pre-Islamic culture and history that arose in late nineteenth-century Iran. In many ways, "the promotion of the

Shahnameh and its growing circulation [during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century] were in part a function of exterior standards shaping the selection of a national literary canon” (Marashi 60), a result of social and cultural factors rooted in the emergence of modernity in Iran.

In *The Five Realms of Presence (Panj Eghlim-e Hozur)*, the Iranian philosopher and cultural critic Darius Shaygan considers Ferdowsi along Khayyam, Rumi, Sa’adi, and Hafez as the five poets who are vital to the Persian language, culture, and identity, and in this sense poets who constitute the texture of Iranian culture. Although it risks overgeneralization and appears overtly schematic at times, Shaygan’s distinctions between these poets may shed some light on the (un)welcome reception of one and not the other. Khayyam, according to Shaygan, represents unsolvable oppositions in the mindset of Iranians, namely, belief/doubt, obedience/rebellion, moment/eternity, while being a philosopher-poet-mystic, he was also able to demystify and demythologize the world (Shaygan 11-12). Rumi is then considered to have epitomized the mystic tradition whose “placelessness” makes it move beyond historical and national borders (ibid 12), a cosmopolitan poet whose “culturality/culturalness” may be conveniently bracketed off. Sa’adi as a humanist *par excellence* brings together practical wisdom (cf. *paideia* in Greek) and lyric beauty (ibid 13). Hafez in turn is described as the poet of harmonious form and content whose audacity in revealing the hypocrisy and two-facedness of the over-pious has given him a sharp critical edge that many find necessary to keep in mind as a moral guideline (ibid 14). What Shaygan says about Ferdowsi, being relatively shorter than other sections in his book, melts down to the following:

Ferdowsi is the manifestation of epic grandeur, whose genealogy goes back to Avestan, Partian, and Sasanid myths and legends, which were resurrected a few years after the Arab invasion as a result of the national awakening and consciousness of Iranians, recounted in *Shahnameh*’s narrative. (ibid 11)

Shaygan’s own reading of *Shahnameh* is limited to showing the existence of *farr* as a requirement for kingship in the book (ibid 25-40). The claim that *Shahnameh* is automatically and by the sheer will of the book present in the cultural memory of Iranians is highly optimistic, and at best represents a nostalgic attitude toward the past.

In another effort to bring the past into the present, albeit even less convincingly at moments, the contemporary Iranian political philosopher Javad Tabatabai, whose theory of *Iranshahr* has attracted the confirming attention of many and the critical responses of many more, returns to *Shahnameh* to argue that since the book’s time Iran has entered into various phases of “decadence/crisis/decline” from which it has never been able to restore itself – a Hegelian narrative of history marked by moments of decadence, especially by the crevices and cracks of modernity (For a critique of this view see Boroujerdi & Shomali). Against his

interpretation it can be argued that Ferdowsi was a self-conscious poet and among his kings with *farr* one can point to Fereyduun who through political mobilization of the people, and not supernatural powers, brings his enemy down, and in this sense the book should not be always read in its mythic-epic dimensions.

2. Discussion

Ferdowsi as a Mnemonic Sign

Being a self-conscious poet, Ferdowsi spent thirty years to write *Shahnameh* and hoped that his words would not fall onto deaf ears:

I've reached the end of this great history
And all the land will fill with talk of me
I shall not die, these seeds I've sown will save
My name and reputation from the grave,
And men of sense and wisdom will proclaim,
When I have gone, my praises and my fame. (Davis xii)

When Ferdowsi died in 1020, some of his fanatic contemporaries denied him a burial in Tus, an ancient city at northeast of Iran. He was then buried in his own garden. Although his unmarked grave drew the attention of many pilgrims, it was only as late as 1884 that a brick-built structure was erected in his name (Riahi 372-73).

Mohammad-Taqi Bahar (1886-1951), the most influential poet of early twentieth century in Iran and a politician-journalist of a wide caliber, having seen Ferdowsi's unremarkable grave in Tus, wrote two essays in 1923 addressed to Reza Khan, who was by the time only the head of the Iranian military force, emphasizing the need for building a monument worthy of the great poet, the "resurrecter of Iranian national identity and people" (Bahar 24). This was something new and much resistance would be seen. The Persian poet and satirist Iraj Mirza (1874-1926) wrote in response to Bahar's demand that:

They bury the poets alive
while building a monument for the dead Tus-poet
they get the money in the name of people
but surely spend it for their sons, daughters and in-laws. (qtd. in Parsinejad 127)

Iraj Mirza who was no traditionalist, and was sympathetic to the ideals of the constitutional revolution, e.g. progress, modernization, the future, instead of a nostalgic yearning for the past, could not of course stand against the new surge of attention and fascination with memorial signs and practices through a rediscovery of *Shahnameh*. However, Bahar and the people of his mindset had the upper hand. In 1926, a year after Reza Khan became Reza *Shah*, Bahar wrote a long poem in which he reminded the new king of the importance of preserving Iranian heritage through commemorating Ferdowsi (Bahar 145, 149), and soon a grand memorial people came to be held.

The dawning of the concept of nation-state and its material reality for the

Iranians was in many ways the direct result of the traumatic defeats that they had undergone in their encounter with the west in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In these encounters with the modern world, the Iranians gradually became aware of their own backwardness and inability to compete with the superior and more advanced countries. This indeed taught them many lessons including that the key to prosperity and progress lies in Europe, that in order not to experience a similar degradation in the future, possibilities of which were too strong to deny, they need to turn to Europe for building their nation – not that these are correct assumptions.

The transition from the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925) to modern Iran coincides with at least two important changes, namely, the development of national consciousness and the constitutional revolution. The constitutional revolution (1905-1911) in Iran was a paradigm shift, divesting the king, who used to be looked at as the shadow of god, from ubiquitous and autocratic power and sharing it among the people. This began in 1905, though the goals and ideals set by it were never fully achieved. The period from the Russian invasion in 1911 to the rise of Reza Shah in 1921 for many marked the political origins of modern Iranian nationalism (Marashi 53), the period in which signs of a growing mnemonic consciousness on a collective level were seen.

With Reza Shah's coming to power in 1925 the process of building the nation-state took an accelerated turn. He annulled the nineteenth century capitulations to the European countries and initiated a plan of homogenizing different Iranian tribes, demarcated the geographical boundaries of the Iranian country, and gradually officialized the Persian language, all of which created a new sense of collective consciousness and identity. The new discourse of nationalism of the time made some intellectuals side with Reza Shah against all odds. For example, Mirza Fatih Ali Akhundzadeh wrote that, "even if our king is a despot, thanks be to God he is one of us. Thank God we [...] are not enslaved by the foreigners. All the world knows how an Indian is treated by an Englishman" (qtd. in Adamiyat 116-17). Historically, the colonialist adventures of Britain whose nefarious rays had also affected the Iranian territory, though not as strongly as in India, can be understood as one reason for such exchanging of one devil for another, that is, preferring a local despot to a foreign colonizer. At any rate, it is clear that nativism and othering (in the sense of hating the non-local) are two sides of one coin.

In 1925, the Committee of National Heritage (*anjoman-e asar-e melli*) decided to celebrate and commemorate Ferdowsi. The first thing to do was to find where Ferdowsi was buried. Having found the burial place of Ferdowsi, Mohammad Ali Foroughi issued an announcement noting that it is necessary for all nations to commemorate the works of ancient writers. He expressed his sadness over the fact that someone who in his view had built the palace of Persian nation had no

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tomb to lie in. He announced that the Committee of National Heritage has decided to build a Ferdowsi mausoleum and invited the people to attend the ceremony (Forughi, "Ferdowsi's Tomb" 323). Not being able to find the necessary budget in the Committee, the Parliament helped Forughi in two installments for building the mausoleum, which further indicated the significance of this mission both among the lay and the political figures.

The year 1934 finally saw the fulfillment of many intellectuals and politicians' wishes when the mausoleum was officially unveiled. To give a sense of collective involvement, and also due to more practical economic pressures, the officials sold lottery tickets to meet the expenses. On 12th July 1934, a piece in *Ettelaat*, a newspaper in Iran, would ask the people to help build the monument in the following terms:

Now that after a thousand year the compatriots of Ferdowsi have born courageously the most severe historical events; they have indeed relied on the epic spirit of Ferdowsi. They are the Iranians who pride themselves over having such a skillful orator; Iranians who look at Ferdowsi as their greatest national icon; Iranians who under the three-colored Lion-and-Sun flag extinguish their thirst for national spirit through Ferdowsi; these are the ones who hold his millenary celebrations [...] It is a national duty to buy lottery tickets [...] to prove a historical truth: any Iranian loves his glorious ancient past, the grandeur of the ancient kings, and all manifestations of nationality and collective identity.

This was indeed an instance of what Benedict Anderson has called "the magic of nationalism" (Anderson 12), articulated as it is through a simplification and abstraction of history. In such a discursive maneuver, a narrative of golden age of primary authenticity, juxtaposed to a narrative of (imminent) loss and decadence mixed with an affective rhetoric, is summoned to invoke a sense of selfhood and collective belonging. The people in the above piece are ideologically interpellated, that is, positioned as not only modern subjects with collective agency but also subjects with an affective attachment to national icons.

There is a chronotopic dimension to nationalism in that temporality (continuity as memorial anchorage) and spatiality (monument as *lieux de mémoire*) go hand in hand to shape the parameters of an imagined community. Moreover, the association of a cultural icon with the people and not for example with the Shah as was practiced in the Qajar period was indeed a paradigm shift where the people themselves were addressed, and where Iran itself had become the subject of history. Put differently, Ferdowsi/*Shahnameh* acts as a floating cultural signifier which removes the distance between state and society and therefore creates bonds of solidarity and collective selfhood. On a broader level, Ferdowsi functioned in this context as an anchoring sign for political legitimation, and thus invited state-sponsored investments.

Simultaneous with the inauguration of the mausoleum, there was a Ferdowsi

millennium conference on the occasion of the thousandth year of Ferdowsi's birthday. These celebrations were held in Tehran, Mashhad, and Tus. One of the attendants in the Ferdowsi millenary celebrations wrote that "this was one of the most important cultural and scientific events in modern Iran because the gathering of such eminent scholars had not occurred before" (Riahi 374). The conference had gathered together forty Iranologists from seventeen countries and forty Iranian scholars. From 3 to 7 of August 1934 several speeches were presented at Tehran's Dar al-Fonun, a college founded in Tehran in 1851 by Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir, which marked the beginning of modern education in the country. Out of the essays presented in the conference, thirty-three were selected and published in 1935 in Tehran under the title *Ketab-e Hezare-ye Ferdowsi (The Book of Ferdowsi's Millennium)*. In the introduction to the collected papers presented in the Ferdowsi millennium conference, the minister of education of the time writes:

On the occasion of the millennium of the most eminent of all Persian poets, Abul-Qasim Ferdowsi, in the month of September / October, 1934 (Mehrmah, 1313), the Ministry of Education decided to celebrate his memory to the end that his compatriots might gratefully remember his lofty ideals, his great genius of *amor patria* as depicted in his words of everlasting magnificence. (n.p; originally in English)

"For the love of country" is an apt description. Indeed, both building the mausoleum, millenary celebrations, and the conference were more than a casual homage to a long-dead poet. It was what the French historian Pierre Nora describes as a *lieu de mémoire*, a symbolic event, site, or object designed to "inhibit forgetting, to fix a state of things, to immortalize death, and to materialize the immaterial [...] all in order to capture the maximum possible meaning with the fewest possible signs" (Nora 1, 15). What Nora described in the abstract was in fact a phenomenon universal to the experience of nationalism, whether in France, Iran, or elsewhere – the conscious effort by state elites to organize, construct, and produce a collective historical consciousness for their national polity.

Whether in built institutions such as museums and mausoleums or in commemorative festivities such as parades and anniversaries, the preoccupation with assigning a fixed public memory to a given community seems to have been a central characteristic of the modern nation, a handmaiden of state-building (Marashi 111). However, it should be also noted that there is a degree of historical anachronism in attributing *amor patria* to Ferdowsi in that as Mahmoud Omidzalar contends "[t]hose who declare that the poet was worried about the fate of his endangered culture and the purity of his native language, and responded to these anxieties by composing the *Shahnameh*, fail to understand that these were not *his* concerns. They are ours" (Omidzalar, *Poetics* 74). Theoretically speaking, Benedict Anderson has convincingly demonstrated in *Imagined Communities*:

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Origins of Nationalism that national consciousness and identity are the products of modernity. Although, one might see the word “Iran” in pre-modern texts and discourses, what it referred to was different from its contemporary use as collectivity and nationality. In other words, modernity and national identity are literally coterminous with each other.

Needless to say, monuments and statuary depicting historical personages are among the most ubiquitous expressions of commemorative symbolism, what Eric Hobsbawm has called “the cult of the Founding Fathers” (Hobsbawm, *Nations* 112). This type of symbolism links the meaning of the image to the authority of the institution or state perceived to be sponsoring the image, appropriating (or even confiscating) floating signifiers for its own interests. Thus, Hobsbawm suggests that commemorative statutory works to build bonds of social cohesion and structures of loyalty (“Introduction” 9). This is especially so in modernity given the wealth of media which could construct and circulate images of national identification.

The construction of the mausoleum and the respects paid to Ferdowsi by national political leaders and international arbiters of cultural prestige drew attention to his memory and reinforced his place in the national pantheon. Images of the millennium conference attendees and the reconstructed Ferdowsi mausoleum were soon published in journals to advertise and aggrandize the new sense of collective selfhood and facilitate the circulation of memorial signs in the public’s mind. This was further marked by the new program of naming streets after Ferdowsi, making and installing statues of Ferdowsi, and publishing summaries and abridged versions of *Shahnameh* for wide readership. The latter was in many ways an important change in printing and literacy status given the fact that until 1934 no editions of *Shahnameh* had been produced that circulated on a mass level (Marashi 131). In other words, literature, especially Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, was a major factor in reshaping of an imagined community on a mass-mobilized level.

In 1933, a leaflet promoting the reconstruction of Ferdowsi mausoleum depicted *simorgh* carrying a copy of *Shahnameh* in its mouth while the rendering of the mausoleum at the background was accompanied with the following lines among others:

Buildings turn into ruin
because of the sun and rain
But I have founded a palace out of poetry
that no wind or rain can ruin.

What Ferdowsi metaphorically says about building something found its literal and material realization during the millenary celebrations. Simorgh in *Shahnameh* appears two times to help Zal. Once when Rudabeh is about to give birth to Rostam but cannot because of the infant’s size, and the other time when Rostam

is fatally wounded in the fight with Esfandiar. In each case, Zal burns a feather of the bird to invoke simorgh's help. What is important to note here is that simorgh is a savior bird, that is, it is called upon when there is great danger and insurmountable problems. Hence, one of the connotations of the leaflet is the foreboding of a precarious state that requires immediate action. The people who looked at it, given their collective memories, would be made to feel that something is in danger and should be thus thought for, a premonition not dissimilar to a narrative/discursive vision of decadence and crisis assumed in the work of many Iranian intellectuals and writers.

In an invitation card sent by the Ferdowsi club in 1934 to the public to attend the opening unveiling ceremony, Ferdowsi is depicted in the foreground, a pen in his hand, while gazing at the image of the mausoleum in the background. Evidently, not only words but also material sites and images are suggested to be the preconditions for practicing collective remembrance. Yet, we should point out that the objectification of memory risks the danger of confining a literary work/author to a set of fixed associations, meanings, and interpretations, and hence precludes the openness of the work to polyphony, multiplicity, and multidirectionality. Also, neither the material inscription of memory nor its absence do directly correlate with the active and dynamic reception of a work or an author. Ann Rigney's claim that the public sphere, where cultural memories emerge and are played out, is governed by a principle of scarcity (i.e., not all literary texts can become ensconced in the complex circulation processes of cultural memory) can explain this phenomenon (Rigney 211).

In "The Semiotics of Collective Memories," Brigittine M. French argues that memory is a hermeneutic phenomenon rather than a concrete object; it is involved in the dialectic of entextualization and erasure. Moreover, French highlights that the authorization of memory requires expert knowledge. This latter point illustrates to a large extent the significant role that orientalists have played in the canonization of *Shahnameh* in Iran. In fact, the influence of such eminent orientalists as Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930), Arthur Christensen (1875-1945), Henri Massé (1886-1969), Vladimir Minorsky (1877-1966), Yevgeny Bertels (1890-1957), Jan Rypka (1886-1968), among many others, who except for the first were all present in the millennium conference, cannot be emphasized enough. The orientalists and other representatives from the European countries "reinforced [the] feeling of respect and affirmed Reza Shah's national project" (Marashi 129). The assumed prestige that the foreign guests accorded to the conference was considerably influential in how *Shahnameh* was canonized.

The opening speech of the conference made by Mohammad-Ali Foroughi (1877-1942), the prime minister and a politician-scholar of high caliber, best demonstrates the need for recognition by the world for the re-entextualization of

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Shahnameh in modern Iran. In fact, Forughī whose affordable *Summary of Shahnameh*, which had cut down the book almost to half of its original size, was one of the most important channels for public readership of the book in the 1930s, played a pivotal role in convening the celebrations and the conference, and in ascribing a political stature to the book.

In his short speech, having welcomed the guests as the representative of “His Majesty the King [Reza Shah],” Forughī then cites a line by Sa’adi, namely, “no journey is too long when you are in search of a friend” to say that while most of the guests have travelled long distances to gather in Tehran, it is because of the spiritual values of *Shahnameh*, and in fact it is Ferdowsi who is the real host (16). Then he cites two lines from Hafez, the first of which reads: “Real distance matters not in a spiritual journey.” The function of this latter line is clearly to underline once more that while geographically and culturally people gathering in Iran are different, what makes them similar is a spiritual search epitomized in an interest in *Shahnameh*. Revealingly, what he next says with a tone of self-abnegation, citing a line by Hafez that “we the compatriots of Ferdowsi” who are “shackled by fate in our small abode” reflects the need for proving oneself in the face of modernity (and its symbolic delegates) as discussed above. In this sense, there is an irony in inviting non-Iranians to celebrate the national poet of Iran. In fact, the speech may be read to suggest that the Iranians themselves seem not to have been able to adequately appreciate the importance of Ferdowsi. The in-betweenness of Forughī’s position is best reflected in his metaphor of matter and spirit as he notes: “we are much obliged by your presence here but it is no wonder since while Ferdowsi physically belongs to the interests of Iranianhood (*iraniyat*), he is spiritually the child of humanity, or if I venture to say he is one of the fathers of humanity” (16). The need for recognition in the face of incipient modernity and the emerging sense of collective consciousness and national identity appear to have rendered the spirit and flesh of modern Iranian subjects into two separate worlds.

Read alongside the second speech made by Ali Asghar Hekmat (1893-1980), then minister of education, the discursive field of self-other recognition in Forughī’s views becomes more accentuated. Hekmat’s speech, originally in French, takes up the theme of the universality of *Shahnameh*. According to him, the gathering of so many eminent scholars from around the world in Iran shows that knowledge and learning know no national boundaries. He uses the image of butterflies accosting the light of a candle [*Shahnameh*] to emphasize the universality and cosmopolitan-humanist values of literature (17). Hekmat contrasts the spiritual aspects of literature to the assumed materialism of the contemporary world by saying that any dialogue among nations would fail if limited to material and economic interests, and thus a spiritual groundwork for mutual understanding is necessary (17-18). One connotation of this was to refashion the ancient past in a way as to infuse it with modern characteristics while also inviting comparisons with the present

condition of decay and backwardness on a local level. Also, the interpretive-subjective attitude to the modern as a negative phenomenon is one way of depicting the past as positive, a teleological narrative of loss is at work once again.

The Book of Ferdowsi's Millennium contains another piece by Forughī, a letter sent later to be published in the collection, titled "The Status of Ferdowsi and the Significance of *Shahnameh*." Early in this essay, he says:

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is the greatest book of poetry in Persian both in its quantity and quality, rather, it is one of the masterpieces of world literature. And had I not always treaded on the path of prudence for the fear that my words may sound vain I would have said *Shahnameh* is the greatest literary work of humanity. (27)

His self-deprecatory rhetoric aside, one could question the criterion according to which Forughī has reached the conclusion that *Shahnameh* is the greatest of literary heritage of humanity. For him, although *Shahnameh* has not invented the stories it narrates and only retells the preexisting ones, its value lies in the fact that it is in poetry and unlike other sources written in prose and often in Arabic, *Shahnameh* has found its way into the hearts and minds of Iranians and has thus preserved Persian language and history (28). Forughī reminds all Iranians to familiarize themselves and others with *Shahnameh*. His tone is mixed with diffidence on the one hand and a sense of uniqueness of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* on the other. Interestingly, the piece takes a new turn when the confidence in his writing begins to dwindle as he ponders over the objection that *Shahnameh* is only a collection of myths and legends, and thus devoid of any historical truth (29). Similar to contemporary controversies over cultural memory and history, Forughī asks daringly, "But my dear friend, what is meant by history, and what are its uses?" (29).

Clearly, Forughī's attempt to appropriate history as a form of active memory through *Shahnameh* can be understood within the larger framework of the need for creating historical continuity and a sense of collectivity in Iran. His own answer to the problem is that cultural memory narrated orally and transmitted through different generations has a more significant role among nations than historiography. Accordingly, Forughī writes,

Each nation needs a direction and a shared ground for solidarity and cooperation, and the best direction lies in our past heritage though it may not be real. What matters is that people believe in its truth, and indeed Iranians have always believed in their great kings [...], any people who consider Kaveh, Rostam, Giv, Bizhan, Iraj, Manuchehr, Keykhosrow, and Keyqobad as one of themselves are Iranian. (30)

Forughī's views, when read against the background of nationalist agendas of his time seem to imply in its subtext that Iranians have always needed and revered

kings, and moreover, it is for assumed enmity with the “other” that one needs to preserve the collective memory of a nation.

Another manifestation of the desire to be recognized by others in the Ferdowsi millennium conference is the act of comparing *Shahnameh* to *Iliad*. As a look at contemporary *Shahnameh-Iliad* comparisons both within academic and non-academic fields shows, self-other relations through comparison seem to be dichotomized between the incommensurability and unification theses, meaning, *Shahnameh* is claimed to be either incomparable to any other literary works because of its singularity and uniqueness, or it is identical to *Iliad* because they purportedly share “Aryan” roots. One such a thesis was presented by Nasrollah Falsafi as early as the 1934 conference.

Nasrollah Falsafi (1901-1981) presented his “Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* and Homer’s *Iliad*” in the conference, a piece which tries to prove the moral superiority of the Persian epic. It is of course more than easy to criticize Falsafi’s nationalism. In one of his writings, he elucidates appraisingly Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), one of the founders of the theory of the Aryan master race, for Falsafi believes that Gobineau’s theory of the superiority of Aryan race has helped improve the solidarity and socio-political power of Germany. Falsafi refers approvingly to Gobineau’s view that Persia is the cradle of Aryan civilization and the origin of humanity (Purfayaz et al. 40).

In his “Ferdowsi’s Patriotism,” Falsafi uses such descriptions as “pure Persian race” (*nezhad-e pak-e Irani*) over and over again, and even “pure Persian blood” (411) when talking about *Shahnameh*’s historical context in relation to the Arab conquest. Two of the lines he cites twice from *Shahnameh* to support his claims about the alleged racial degeneration of Iranians following the Arab invasion are:

A mongrel race will appear
From the mixing of Persians, Turks, and Arabs
That will be neither Iranian, nor Turkish, nor Arab
Their words will be as worthless gibberish.

It is important here to note that the above lines are spoken by Rostam, who as depicted in *Shahnameh* is a Sassanid general who dies in battle against the invading Muslims. His degrading attitude toward the other “nezhads” is understandable to some extent given the historical circumstances and more importantly the narrative logic of a heroic story, something Falsafi fails to take into consideration. To read from this story a history of pure Iranian blood which was presumably contaminated by the Arabs is at best anachronism and vulgar essentialist thinking. In fact, the so-called pure Iranian “race” was never pure because there has never been such a thing. As Mahmoud Omidzalar writes in discussing the above lines:

Arab invasion aside, *all* empires, almost by definition, have diverse populations, because they bring a diverse group of linguistic and ethnic populations under a

single, usually centralized administration. Romans, Chinese, Ottoman, and more recently, British and American empires have all spread their culture, thought, and institutions across many peoples, while being changed themselves by their subjects. For this reason, the so-called mixing of “bloods” is the natural state of empires. (Omidasalar, *Poetics* 72)

Given the inexorable fact that all cultures and identities are always hybrid and that the idea of a pure race is a myth, if not repugnant ideological concoction, Falsafi’s fixation on the notion is either because of his too much immersion in Arthur de Gobineau’s writings or simply because of having been carried away by the poisonous winds of vulgar patriotism-nationalism in his time. We should also add that the word “nezhad” in *Shahnameh* simply means “lineage” and does not have any racial connotations (see also Edmund Hayes, “The Death of Kings”). As Mahmoud Omidasalar puts it most poignantly,

[...], speaking an Indo-European language has no racial connotations whatsoever. In other words, speaking an Iranian language is not the same thing as being an “Aryan,” as so many Iranians are quick to point out to anyone who is willing to listen. “Aryan” as racial or ethnic category is an apparition that slithered out of the most gruesome delusions of Western European ethnocentrism. The history of the term is covered with *gore* – not glory, and most civilized people would loathe to associate themselves with such a term. (Omidasalar, *Iran’s Epic* 35; see also Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*)

3. Conclusion

Canon-formation has a regulatory function in the culture. In times of crisis and states of transition, a culture anchors itself in a certain semiotic field known as the canon. Put differently, canon-formation is a process by which the self-image of a culture is redefined. Similar to intertextuality and translation, canonization communicates (or fails to do so) the voices of the past to the contemporary audience. Canon-formation is a media of cultural memory which is socio-politically adjusted to re-imagine the identity of community in certain historical moments. A canon is a textual community for remembering but also a field of competition for capital. When literary cultural memory is ideologically interpellated onto the subjectivity of agents, the autonomy of the field of literature is fringed upon. Authors and writers sometimes try to preserve the autonomy of the field of literature by rewriting literary cultural memory or by proposing new de-ideological interpretations of texts.

While it must be evident by now that the subtext of the millennium celebrations for Ferdowsi, and of the conference in particular, was to elevate Ferdowsi and the Iranian nation as a whole to a privileged status by advertising the idea that Ferdowsi/*Shahnameh* and the modern world are compatible, there existed also an ambivalence in self-history (identification vs. alienation) and self-other (nationalism vs. cosmopolitanism) relations, which appear to mark the scene of Iranian intellectual activities since then. The proliferation of commemorative practices, memorial signs, and common historical memories in this sense should be understood in the wider discursive field where these putative oppositions (i.e., self/history, self/other, tradition/modernity) compete with each other. Hobsbawm argues that an interest in cultural memory “occur[s] more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed” (“Introduction” 4). Indeed, as being constantly a society in transition, Iran in general and the intellectual discourses in particular, remain dichotomized in these problematic oppositions. Yet, cultural memory requires to move beyond these oppositions to reconnect to the contemporary semiosphere. As Shahrokh Meskub, one of the few *Shahnameh* scholars whose works speak to the modern reader and given his humanist cosmopolitanism to the world at large notes:

Collective memory or tradition runs through different generations until it finds a fertile soil to grow like a strong tree or meet a wasteland or a mirage and forsake us all. Tradition is only alive and dynamic when it moves beyond itself and leaves itself behind like the relation of river to a source. Dead tradition is either mourning for a corpse or the compulsive repetition of past rituals. (Meskoob 12-13)

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