

## The *Shahname* of Firdausi: Persian Educational Repository

Mostafa Bahraman<sup>+</sup> and ANISWAL Abd Ghani

School of Humanities, University Sains Malaysia

**Abstract.** The *Shahname* of Firdausi is the longest and oldest national epic poem of Iranians and Persian speakers around the world. The *Shahname* is regarded by Persian speakers as a literary masterpiece; it is also a repository of Persian's history and cultural values. Firdausi wrote the *Shahname* in "pure" Persian. He eschewed words drawn from the Arabic language which had by his time infiltrated the Persian language following the Arab conquest of Persia in the 7th century. He did this to preserve and purify the Persian language. It is believed that the main reason the modern Persian language today mirrors the language of the *Shahname* is due to Firdausi (Yousefi, 1969 & Safa, 2002). In fact the *Shahname* prescribes the modern Persian language. The *Shahname* is the mold which produced the bases of contemporary Persian language. This paper aims to focus on selected aspects of the language of the *Shahname* and its significance as the blueprint for the modern Persian language. Many Persian experts believe that studying the *Shahname* is a prerequisite to achieving mastery of the Persian language. Therefore this study proposes that the *Shahname* of Firdausi is a valuable resource for those seeking to be familiar with Persian language and literature.

**Keywords:** The *Shahname*, Firdausi, Persian language.

### 1. Introduction

The *Shahname* (Persian: شاهنامه) (other spellings are *Shahnameh*, *Shahnama*, and *Shah-Nama* (is a huge poetic opus composed by the Persian poet "Firdausi" (another spelling is Ferdowsi) around 1000 AD. The *Shahname* narrates the historical and mythical background of Iran starting from the creation of the world up to the Islamic conquest of Iran in the 7th century. It took Firdausi 35 years to complete the *Shahname*. It comprised more than 50,000 rhymed couplets, making it more than three times the length of Homer's *Iliad*, and more than twelve times the length of the German *Nibelungenlied*. The *Shahname* consists of two parts, the first part is the mythological part and it centres on legendary Persian heroes and kings. The second part narrates from the death of Rostam, the national hero of Iran in the *Shahname*, and presents highly romanticized accounts of historical figures such as Darius the Great and Alexander the Great.

A unique place has been given to Firdausi in Persian history because for Persians, with the *Shahname* he had breathed the life back into and revived the cultural traditions of the people and its language. The *Shahname* is regarded as an essential element in invigorating the Persian language. His *Shahname* is the masterpiece which permits much of the tongue to be codified and thus to continue to exist intact. Firdausi, in this respect, is superior to Khayyam (1048-1131), Hafiz (c.1325-1390), Nizami (1141-1209), and other prominent Persian literary figures in his influence on the Persian language and culture. Thus it is noted in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

The Persians regard Firdausi as the greatest of their poets. For nearly a thousand years they have continued to read and to listen to recitations from his masterwork, the *Shah-nameh*, in which the Persian national epic found its final and enduring form. Though written about 1,000 years ago, this work is as intelligible to the average, modern Iranian as the King James version of the Bible is to a

---

<sup>+</sup> Corresponding author: msph\_bahraman@yahoo.com

modern English-speaker. The language, based as the poem is on a Dari original, is pure Persian with only the slightest admixture of Arabic.

The *Shahname* is the book which, after the invasion of the Arabs in 642 A.D. and their inevitable influence, reawakens the cultural identity of Iranian people (Dick, 2006). The epic and its consequent impact, exemplifies the continued resilient capacity of the Persian language in enriching and refining itself through cultural encounters. With the strokes of his pen Firdausi affected the redress of Persian acculturation by the Arabs. If Firdausi had not set his mind on the *Shahname*, Iran's national identity through the ages would have been sidelined and even lost. In chiseled script on Firdausi's tomb near Tous you can read the line: Let not this body live if there is no Iran.

## 2. Significance of the *Shahname*

Firdausi is noted for his skills with words. Shafiee Kadkani (2009) acknowledges Firdausi's mastery of the Persian language in the harmonious combinations of language and inspirations – Firdausi's – and historical contents. Most of his works would attest to how he combined his mastery of the language with fundamental human themes and it is this that makes the *Shahname* a piece of work that will endure for all time. Someone familiar with the early days of Persian literature and the *Shahname* can readily comprehend the foundation beneath which much of more modern Persian literature is based. As for his style, whether in the fantastic elements demanded by the epic or in the gracefulness of his descriptions of everyday life, Firdausi appears to excel at describing and explaining facts or sentiments in a clear, concise manner. His style is firm but eloquent, never giving into baseless extremes (cited in encyclopedia of World Biography, 2005-2006). See the following example for his style:

Persian: دو ابرو کمان و دو گیسو کمند      به بالا به کردار سرو بلند

Transliteration: do abroo kamaano do gisoo boland

Gloss: [this] [eyebrows] [curved like an archer's bow] [Ø] [ringlets] [hung like nooses]

Transliteration: be baalaa be kerdaare sarve boland

Gloss: [in] [stature] [as] [as] [cypress] [elegant]

Translation: "This beauty's eyebrows curved like an archer's bow, and her ringlets hung like nooses to snare the unwary; in stature she was as elegant as a cypress tree".

There are three similes (کمان، کمند و سرو) in this example which are aimed at enhancing the fame beauty of Tahmineh, the wife of Rostam (the hero). The facial beauty of Tahmineh is highlighted by her eyebrows and hair. These have been metaphorically equated to weaponry, i.e. the "bow" and the "nooses". Her height and stature is imposed by the "cypress". In this two lines Firdausi has retained the historical contents: wife of national hero, strength, power, warlike through words which in the first instance would not give the image of graceful beauty, i.e. "bow" and "nooses". The "bow" is arched, and slender, and strong, a weapon for "deceptive violence". In its arched slenderness, it is also an elegant and beautiful piece of workmanship. The "nooses" can snuff the life of some unwitting person just as beauty can too.

Persian literature in general and the *Shahname* in particular is considered among the best works in the world. Persian literature is regarded to be one of the four chief corpuses of world literature by Goethe in the 19th century. Being inspired by Persian literature, Goethe wrote his well-known *West-Eastern Divan* (Wiesehofer, 2001). Saint-Beuve too regarded the *Shahname* as among the world masterpieces. He is quoted to have announced, "If we could realize that great works such as the *Shahname* exists in the world, we would not become so much proud of our own works in such a silly manner" (cited by Motakef, 2011).

## 3. Themes of *Shahname*

The *Shahname* takes on vast themes: the burdens of power and the hardships of the powerless, the nature of justice and government, the longing for glory and the bitterness of defeat. Most of the greatness of the *Shahname* rests in its treatment of these themes. Ethics is often of intense concerns of Persian poetry. This ethical emphasis is at least partially a legacy of the ancient wisdom literature of the Middle East literature: what to do, how to live, etc. Ethical issues, implanted within the *Shahname's* narratives, continue their vitality although invariably in different forms, in today's Persian culture. The cry for justice is one that is constantly repeated throughout Firdausi's poem. Advice on how one should act is frequently given by kings

on their death beds to their sons, and many reigns begin with ethical homilies and promises of just government. The *Shahname* is among other things a mirror for princes, and the notion of poetry as a vehicle for instruction and advice is one that became a commonplace of Persian culture (Dick, 2011). Thus, the *Shahname* is current for today's Iran too.

#### 4. The *Shahname* and Persian language

Persian literature is rich with such masterpieces as those of the *Divan* of Hafiz, the *Masnavi* of Mowlavi, and both the *Bustan* and *Golestan* of Sa'di. However no other literary work comes up with such a profound effect on the Persian language as that of the *Shahname*. For would-be or novice Persian poets, studying the *Shahname* is a necessity to attaining mastery of the Persian language. References to the *Shahname* are abounding in many poetic works. To many Persians, Firdausi's role in the formation of the Persian language and literature is akin to that of Pushkin for the Russians, of Goethe for the Germans, and of Shakespeare for the English and the English speaking world.

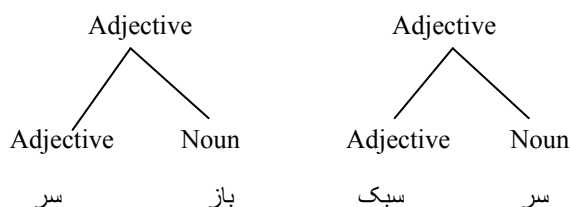
Firdausi went to inordinate lengths to eschew words came from the Arabic language which had more and more entered the Persian language subsequent to the Arab conquest of Persia in the 7th century. His conscious and political language planning was way ahead of modern sociolinguistics and it was his attempt at purifying and preserving the Persian language he was familiar with (Yousefi, 1969). The *Shahname* is the board for his language games. In place of an Arabic borrowed word, he used a suitable Persian alternative. Like modern science fiction writer, he "created" words for his stories. Not unlike the modern science fiction writer, his narratives are not truly fiction. Linguistically the *Shahname's* contributions are: a. Compound words b. Domesticating Arabic words and c. Brevity of words and sentences

##### 4.1 Compound words

Firdausi employs 9000 words the *Shahname*. The *Shahname* has more than 50000 lines and by the criteria of English verse, they are very long lines. Each line has twenty two syllables and thus it is slightly longer than a heroic couplet (Davis, 2006). One of the properties of Persian language in creating words is its special power in combination, that is two or more words are jointed to form new compounds words (Fromkin, 2005). This is akin to modern English 'desk' + 'top' = 'desktop', the terminology in computer science. In Persian, a limitless number of words can be built by these types of combinations. This very productive source of new terms has been well documented in languages like English and German (Yule, 2010). In Arabic various words are created by derivation, but in Persian a huge number of words are created by combining noun, adjective and verb root. Derivation in the Persian language, at the time of Firdausi was not practiced as commonly as in the Arabic language. Firdausi discovered this and as it is natural to the Persian language, albeit not very common, applied it in his creation of the *Shahname*. Firdausi has unveiled and sanctioned this feature of the Persian language a unique and it is a valuable morphological tool. The following examples are presented to see how Firdausi has put together words to create various and beautiful compounds:

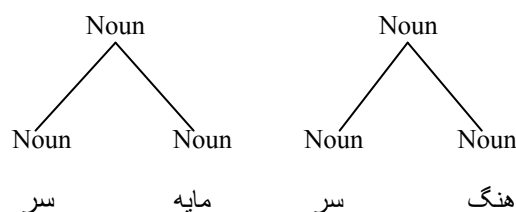
سر (head) + باز (open) = سرباز (soldier)

سبک (light) + سر (head) = سبکسر (stupid)

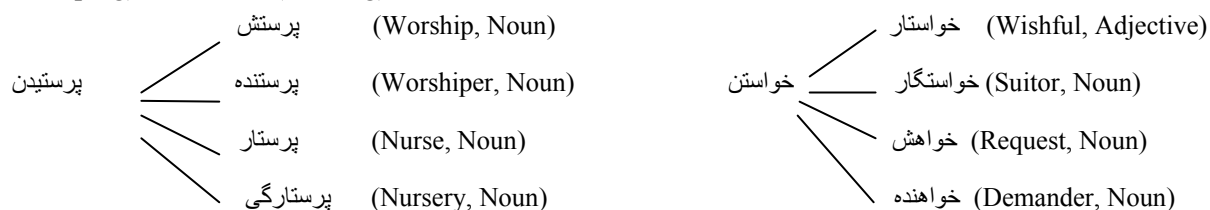


سر (head) + مایه (source) = سرمایه (capital)

سر (head) + هنگ (regiment) = سرهنگ (colonel)



Although compounds have been vastly employed by Firdausi, *Shahname*'s words have been enriched by derivation from gerund. The following examples show the words derived from two gerunds پرستیدن (worshiping) and خواستن (wanting):



## 4.2 Domesticating Arabic words

Another lesson given by the *Shahname* is using Arabic words based on Persian morphological rules.

It should be added here that since the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century, the Persian-speaking world was dominated by Arabic. But Firdausi's choice of vocabulary for the *Shahname* kept the number of Arabic words to an absolute minimum. Firdausi consciously avoided Arabic words, because he felt them to be unsuitable to the subject of his poem that is related to ancient Iran. It would be somewhat ironical as a Persian to glorify Persians and all things Persians in the tongue of the conqueror. Firdausi went to great lengths to avoid any words drawn from the Arabic language.

Unwittingly, Firdausi was constrained by the influence of Arabic in the Persian language. He could not do away with loanwords, which were by then commonly used by the people and experts in his time. In accordance to Persian morphological rule, the loanwords are combined with Persian elements (prefix and suffix). This restriction, in fact domesticated the Arabic words, made them more intelligible and easy for the Persian readers.

Table1. The domestication of Arabic words

Arabic Element	Persian Element (Suffix)	Word
بخيل ( stingy)	ی (Noun maker suffix meaning state of being)	بخیلی (Stinginess)
وفا (faith)	دار (Adjective maker suffix meaning full of)	وفا دار (Faithful)
تدبير (tact)	ساز (Adjective maker suffix meaning full of)	تدبير ساز (Tactful)
خدمت (service)	گر (Adjective maker suffix meaning state of being)	خدمتگر (Assistant)

## 4.3 Brevity of words and sentences

The Persian language by its very nature tends to use short words, i.e. there are more monosyllable and disyllable words employed in Persian language than trisyllable and polysyllable words. This brevity in words is also seen in the sentences. Short sentences are not only used in daily conversations but also in writing. These two characteristics, i.e. brevity in words and sentences are obvious in the *Shahname*. The following example is provided to depict the way Firdausi has created a lot of meanings through a few words in his poetry:

Persian: به نام خداوند جان و خرد کزین برتر اندیشه بر نگذرد

Transliteration: be name khodavande jan va kherad

Gloss: [in] [name] [Lord] [wisdom] [and] [mind]

Transliteration: kazin bartar andishe bar nazarad

Gloss: [To nothing] [sublimar] [thought] [be] [applied]

Translation: IN the name of the Lord of both wisdom and mind, To nothing sublimer can thought be applied.

## 5. Conclusion

Firdausi is seen as a national Iranian hero who re-ignited pride in Iranian culture and literature. He is accredited as the one who underlines the Persian language as a language of beauty and sophistication. It is believed the main reason that the Modern Persian language today is very similar to the language of Firdausi's time is due to the Firdausi's *Shahname*. To many Persian scholars, Persian and non Persians, the *Shahname*

has brought about a lasting and profound cultural and linguistic influence. It is to the *Shahname* that one can refer to know about the past for all things Persians and it is to the *Shahname* that one can resort to that could aid in the evolution of all things Persians. Although it should be taken exclusively of other works, the *Shahname* is a repository of all things Persians. A more detailed analysis of the *Shahname* will show that substantial knowledge of this work of Firdausi is essential for a complete and well grounded education in Persian language and literature.

## 6. References

- [1] D. Davis, *The Shahnameh and Persian poetry*, Retrieved: 20 November, 2011 from: <http://www.savepasargad.com>.The Shahnameh and Persian poetry.
- [2] D. Davis. *Shahnameh, The Persian Book of Kings*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- [3] Encyclopedia Britanica online Academic Edition, Ferdowsi, Retrieved: 10 December 2011 from: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/204578/Ferdowsi>.
- [4] V. Fromkin, R. Rodman, and N. Hyams. *An Introduction to Language*. Thomson Heinle, 2007.
- [5] T. Gale. *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Thomson, 2005-2006.
- [6] F. Motakef. Iranian art and poetry in the works of European poets, Retrieved: 12 October 2011 from: [http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/articles/iranian\\_poetry\\_european\\_poets.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/articles/iranian_poetry_european_poets.php).
- [7] Z. Safa. *Literary history of Iran*. Tehran: Ghoghhus Publication, 2002.
- [8] M. Shafiee Kadkani. *Figurative Language in Persian Poetry*, Tehran: Agah publication. 2009.
- [9] J. Wiesehofer, *Ancient Persia*, Tauris, 2001.
- [10] G. Yousefi, *Notes on current prose*, Tehran: Zavar, 1969.
- [11] G. Yule, *The Study of Language* (4th edition).Oxford University Press, 2010.