

## The Status of Women in *Shahnameh*

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### Abstract

Firdausi's *Shahnameh* is the oldest mythological Iranian epic book. Like many other literary books, the women's status has been referred to in this book also. By pointing out a few verses of *Shahnameh*, some critics accused Firdausi of having misogynistic attitudes toward women. By precisely referring to the stories and verses of *Shahnameh*, the present research aims to challenge this negative claim.

Firdausi's *Shahnameh* has sixty thousand verses and there are negative attitudes to women in only a few of them which are often mentioned by warriors and associated with military affairs. There are many other stories in *Shahnameh* in which the women's greatness and goodness are admired.

**Keywords:** *Shahnameh*, Firdausi, woman, misogynist, status of women

### Firdausi's *Shahnameh*

There are numerous theories about the creation of man - "in Egyptian mythology, the man was created from the clay, straw or mud of the Nile river which had dried out in the sun's rays. In Iranian, Chinese, Jewish, Assyrian and Mesopotamian mythologies, it is mentioned that man was created from clay and soil. On the other hand, in countless mythological narratives the creation of man is attributed to a couple of male and female personages. In Indian mythology, the human species will continue to survive due to a twin brother and sister named Yemeh and Yemi." [1]

According to the contents of Hashan, paragraph of Kiumarz, the first man or prototype was created by Ahura Mazda. For thirty years, he spent his life in the mountains and at death, his sperm descended out and was purified by the sun's rays. It was kept and protected in the soil. After forty years, a plant intermixed out of that sperm in the form of two sprouts then it was

grown out of the ground in one sweet day of October. Then they transformed into two human shapes that were similar in stature and face, the male one was called "Misheh" and the female one was called "Mishaneh." [2]

In the introduction of the Rig Veda, according to the Indian mythology it is also mentioned that the first couple "Yama and Yami" came from paradise. [3]

In the book Balaami's history, as well as the other mystical books, the story of Adam's creation is mentioned. The famous story of Azriel who took a handful of soil to the sky is beautifully narrated in Mersadal –ebad book. After Adam's creation, God created Eve from Adam's side to comfort and relax him: "When Adam opened his eyes, he saw Eve sitting on the bed bedside him. He asked her who thou were. Eve replied: I'm your couple. God brought me out of your side to rest your heart". [4]

The creation of man in the Semitic narratives is different from the mythological ones, and these differences can be seen in the works of poets and writers too. In this section, the status of women will be examined in Shahnameh: The origin of the word woman "in Avesta is Jeni 1, in the ancient India Jani 2 and in Pahlavi zojeh which is against the word man and it means the female sex." [5]

### **Woman in *Shahnameh***

The biggest misconceptions that have been said about Shahnameh are related to Firdausi's idea about Women. It was said that Shahnameh was an anti-woman book and Firdausi was against women. Of course it is just a vulgar consideration, since throughout this book, the opposite is true. [6]

Shahnameh is representative of the best. It is a set with single link and unity, and all its components contribute in this respect. [7]

Firdausi is a man of faith, a person who is committed to his work. The influence of Islam and Quran is very clear in his verses: everyone who does righteous work whether man or woman, while believing in God, he would live a clean life – paradise ". [8]

If the child is a good religious one

It is not important to be male or female [9]

Firdausi emphasized this principle that both women and men are human. He then viewed them philosophically and mentioned that both of them could progress or fall in their lives. He

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did not either close the ways of perfection for either of them or consider them as absolute winners or intrinsic saints. But he reminded us of the ability and talent of two divergent trends of badness and goodness in both man and woman. [10]

Serami believes that: "based on his epic heroes, Firdausi described women in positive or negative tones, but what is undeniable is that generally in an epic, the woman is considered as uncompleted human." [11]

And this particular attitude to women is not peculiar either to epic or Firdausi. This cynical view toward women is a kind of humanistic cultural standpoint that belonged to the past era....

Firdausi, like all the other ancient thinkers has been influenced by the impact of economic, political, and social pressure as well as cultural beliefs of his time.

Women have been deprived of their rights from the past up to the present. Due to his adaptation of the adverse circumstances of his time, Firdausi was forced to accept such unwanted evil habits and characteristics about women.

By looking at the introduction of the book titled Bijan and Manijeh, it will clearly be seen that Firdausi had friendly and supportive views about women, the image that he had represented about his wife has shown his point of view about women's dignity. Firdausi introduced her as: a compassionate partner, a beautiful tree, a kind idol and .....which is indicative of his deep belief in the goodness of women

I was powerful in a closed place to do my best,

It was all due to the presence of my sweetheart wife

In a loud voice I ordered that kind idol to bring me some candles

She went out of the garden to prepare them

Before going, she told me wasn't it better to sleep in a dark night like this

Than searching for the candles?

I told my idol, I couldn't sleep tonight,

Bring me some candles as light as the sun [12]

Javanshir described Firdausi's views about women as this: "Firdausi admired women with the most excellent and commendable traits. He had repeatedly expressed his love to his wife who

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helped him to compose Shahnameh during the battle. Every time he had an opportunity, he praised his wife. The famous women of Shahnameh such as Faranak, Roudabeh, Syndokht, Gordafarid, Jaryreh, Tahmineh and the others were all outstanding examples of beauty, wisdom, bravery and chastity. They were their husbands' friends and everywhere they felt appropriate, these brave women fought on the battlefield alone. After Faranak's husband death in the battle, she insisted on fighting against Zahak to the end. When the Iranian battalions were afraid of Sohrab, Gordafarid went to the front and attacked. After Siyawash's victory, Jaryrah put all the fort on fire, frightened the horses off, and eventually committed suicide to avoid falling into the enemies' hands. The wise and kind Katayun remained with her son, Esfandiar, to the end and fought against Goshtaseb for his authoritarianism and vulgarism. Syndokht, Roudabeh's mother and Mehrab's wife was unique in wisdom and prudence. She was in charge to face Sam and negotiate with him and solve the problems in a right way." [13]

In every part of Shahnameh, Firdausi portrayed good traits for women and this is worthy of praise. Features such as good brave women, beautiful women and so on are a few evidences that can be seen in the following examples:

1-The dignified and modest woman: The dignified and modest woman told him that he was a good man, there were many people in this village with different hearts. [14]

2-Good chastity woman: Good children will be borne by a good chastity woman from Bahman's race. [15]

3-The virtuous woman: The virtuous woman said that she not only had a husband but also was pregnant too. [16]

4-The beautiful woman: The beautiful woman answered him that they respected and needed their king to rule in their country- Iran. [17]

5-The stable woman: The stable girl talked behind the curtains and said "May my majesty have a long successful happy life." [18]

6-The postwoman: The postwoman delivered the letter and remembered all brave men's letters. [

Hamidian also pointed out Firdausi's views about women like this "the only important preferred criteria about children is their gentility, not their sexes as being sons and daughters. It is clear that this conclusion is theoretical and it appears to be true with the criteria of reason and wisdom. There are also several cases in Shahnameh that the women got humiliated against men.... Naturally, the idea is derived from that patriarchal society, including Firdausi era, too." [20]

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In Firdausi's idea, a woman has her own real status. She could be a smart faithful expert or she could be cranky and do ugly deeds since she is a human.

In the world, just look for and propose a pious woman as your bride

The bad one will cause trouble and pain. [21]

The word woman is used nearly three hundred times in Shahnameh. [22] Dabir Siyaghi states that thirty-two women were named and mentioned in Shahnameh, some of them were very famous and had some important roles, for example, Roudabeh, Tahmineh, Gordafarid, Sudabeh, and so on. In his other division, he believes: "The mass of women mentioned either by their names or anonymous are divided into several groups in Shahnameh:

A) The Princesses who belonged to the Royal family, such as Homa Chereh Azad, Puran Dokht ... and some who married the king were taken the official title of the Queens such as Katayoon Kaiser, Sudabeh and so on.

B) The second group are from rich families or peasants – some who married kings such as Siyawash's mother, Keykavos' wife, Gordieyh and so on.

C) The third group are from worshipers, servants, and nannies who learned how to be good servants, to worship and obey their masters, such as the miller's wife - Darab's trainer. [23]

### **The Women's features in Shahnameh**

Shahnameh's women are mostly loyal, honest and interested in their husbands and their lives "A Woman's role in Shahnameh as a wife, lover and mistress. In all three, she had an effective social role. With the exception of Sudabeh who is the embodiment of a harlot woman, the other women had characters which expressed their femininity. [24] From Firdausi's point of view, woman must possess three characteristics that is beautifully quoted in Shahnameh:

There are three things that will make a woman unique.

Her piousness, giving birth to a son, and covering her hair [25]

Three things are good for women

These things make them beautiful

One of them is about her modesty

She is the beauty of her husband's house

The second one, is her ability to bear a son

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She enlarges the population of her husband's family

The third one is related to her appearance

The ability to cover her hair (have hijab)

As it was mentioned before, the women's loyalty as one of their characteristics was admired by Firdausi. He introduced the women as loyal beings and this loyalty will sometimes lead to the protection of their country and its people:

It was told her that you are the lady

You are the protection both to Iran and China

An iron mountain cannot move you from your standing

You guide the strong in the right manhood manner

You are mentally more awake than a wise man

You are mentally more alert than a commander

All of us are lower than you, you are the commander

This is you whose view and treaty are superior to us [26]

In the above verses, that is a part of the story of Gordiyeh, it could be seen that a woman can guide the warriors too. She can even be wiser than men, and the men admired her superiority and obeyed her commands:

She was told: oh, the heroine, your commands will empower our lineage and committee [27]

The best descriptions that Firdausi used to define women were "modesty and gentle" which are the symbols of being chaste and sweet-tempered. [28] There are some famous women in *Shahnameh* such as Faranak, Syndokht, Roudabeh, Tahmineh, Jaryreh, Farangis, Katayoon, Roxanne, and Alexander's mother whose thoughts, insights and behaviors have been the enunciation of their abilities as being the best mothers. [29] "Among These mothers Faranak, Syndokht, Jaryreh, Farangis, and Katayoon have more motherhood emotions than others and Jaryreh is the most softhearted of all. After her beloved son's death, this distressed mother, Jaryreh, committed suicide next to her son's body. Her suicide is more painful than Shirin's suicide. Committing suicide is the result of loving each other and the inability to bear the lover's separation". [30] With a little care and attention in *Shahnameh*, it will be clear that Firdausi described women from different angles, the most brilliant women's aspect which he portrayed

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was their motherhood aspect. In many different places of Shahnameh, Firdausi admired women for the mother hood and training abilities.

As it was stated, Firdausi was a pro-women and advocated them "whenever there is a sick detriment chant melody against women, he tries to compensate it elsewhere for the benefit of women". [31]

In his book, Safa writes: "the women of Shahnameh have specific characteristics, above all, are kindness, loyalty and high human and motherhood emotions." [32]

Rashid Yassami also writes: "Despite the differences that cause each of the woman to have a particular character, some common traits can noticeably be seen among all of them .The three common attributes are: Courage and bravery, loyalty and stability, and engagement in courtship." [33]

### **Negative attitudes to women in Shahnameh**

Here are some examples of pessimism about women in Shahnameh:

1-Women cannot keep any secrets:

Esfandiari told his mother to keep this piece of clever advice

Do not say your secrets to any woman

Or you will rehear it again in the street [34]

The clever people advised him

Not to consult and tell any secret to the women [35]

2-You will have a prolonged life if you live without any women:

A young man will become a hunchback

Because of the women's various behavior [36]

3- The woman is a guilty creature:

What kind of knowledge can I learn in the king's seraglio?

When do women guide our way? [37]

4-Women cannot be good enough to be consulted about governmental affairs:

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There was a girl whose name was Puran

Since she was married to the king, all the governmental affairs would have been done unskillfully [38]

To tell you the truth in reality

There are many shortcomings in women's works [39]

5- Leaving the women with the following attribute is necessary:

Look for a pious wife only

A bad manner wife will destroy your life. [40]

Positive attitude about women in Shahnameh

1-woman will bless the house:

In the introduction of the story of Bijan and Manijeh, Firdausi mentioned this point ironically:

When I escaped from the harsh time

There was a kind person waiting for me at home. [41]

Or:

The beautiful woman, increase the knowledge

At the time of the injury, she can be the medicine

The young man –whether a king or a hero- after marriage will reach to calmness

This is the women who take care of the religion

They guide their husbands to do good things [42]

2-A true wife is one who looks for her husband's consent

The best women are those whose husbands are always happy. [43]

3-Marriage is the best thing one can do

God created everything in pairs to increase the world

Lonely things cannot add anything to the world

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If you don't have a couple in this world,  
Your capabilities will be hidden  
Your children will glorify your name  
After your death, your son will cause your name alive  
Rostam is Zal's son and Zal is Sam's son [44]  
4- Woman's loyalty will lead to her salvation:

In the story of Bizhan and Manizheh, at the time that Manizheh looked after him next to the well, this is a clear symbol of a wife's loyalty to her husband.

Manizheh was sitting next to a well  
Sitting without any shoes embarrassingly [45]

Firdausi's wife accompanied him in the composing of the story of Bizhan and Manizheh. Firdausi mentioned this point implicitly:

I told my nice partner that you beautiful idol  
Read the story and increase your kindness [46]  
What can I say about women's purity and piety?  
They not only relieve our sadness but also are good advisors [47]  
If your wife is a pious one and also an advisor  
She will be your treasure  
Especially if she is a tall woman  
With beautiful dark long hair  
Wise, intelligent, virtuous and shyness  
She talks softly and gently [48]

## **Conclusion**

According to the points mentioned above, it can be admitted that while the reflecting of the patriarchal society in *Shahnameh* is observable and Firdausi was not unaffected by the

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society of his day, he was one of the women's supporters and considered them as complementary pieces of the puzzles in the universe and also as comforting partners.

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