
Female writers and the millennial myths of *Shāhnāme* in Iranian children's literature 1990-2000

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To cite this article:

Maryam Jalali. Female Writers and the Millennial Myths of *Shāhnāme* in Iranian Children's Literature 1990-2000. *Education Journal*.

Special Issue: Gender, Peace and Education. Vol. 4, No. 1-1, 2015, pp. 1-5. doi: 10.11648/j.edu.s.2015040101.11

Abstract: Iranian myths in children's literature are the reflection of believers and principles of different groups and they are used as literary and artistic treasure house within the framework of children's books. By using this method, a child cannot be taught directly while communication with the previous world acquaints with cultural history of epic literature and national myth. Nowadays most of the myths and mythical creatures are with adopting of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* (940-1020) and these are entered in children's stories. This article uses 10 years of children's literature that was written by women and which adopts mythical stories.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Female Writers, Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*, Identity

1. Introduction

A good book respects a child's intelligence, his pride, his dignity, and most of all his individuality and his capacity to become. *Jean Karl, From Childhood to Childhood (Seuling, 2004:3)*.

Literature is the mirror which reflects the mind, inner feelings and the known and unknown needs of humans. Thus children as members of society have right to choose their own literature. Books for children to learn and to read as their own choice are available in a various categories such as history, science, biography, and fiction with different beginning reader levels.

Stuart Hannabuss says "Both children and adult literature derive historically from a common cultural pool of folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, the ingredients of oral tradition and folklore" (Hunt, 1998:419). Meanwhile, some of the children's stories come from the ancient literature and mythical stories of Persia. Writing for children is not an easy job. Indeed to be the authors of children's books needs to have a good understanding of children's literature and be keen observers of the world around them.

Iranian authors have provided an analysis for children through choosing the ancient stories and recreating those stories again with a particular method which attracted the society very well. By this viewpoint, that children's literature is divided into two groups as "formal" and "informal"

literature, the "formal" one is related to works that address their children and teens and the "informal" relates to the works that are not written for children but they can read and understand these also ;Therefore Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* as one of the national classic works of language and Persian literature is the most influential human science source in formal literature of children in Persian language.

Ferdowsi (940-1020), one of the greatest ancient Persian poets, and one of the "100 most influential writers of all time" (Luebering, 2010: 42-45) tells stories in form of poetry. His work is widely read in his original language across the Persian-speaking world. "*Shāhnāme* is one of the Persian literature masterpieces" (Yahaghi, 1996:75) and some of its stories had been adapted by male and female writers for children in Iran.

Despite the fact that the rewritten stories have a common theme, each writing has its particular ingenuity; and this proves that "novelty recentness of theme doesn't have main role in literary creativity" (Samoyault, 2001:55); and As if on the leather skin or a sheet of an old paper, a text sets on the other text and causes a new rewriting (Durvy, 2001:131).

2. Rewritten Myths of *Shāhnāme* for Children by Iranian Women from 1990-2000

Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* is one of the major epic classic,

national and cultural works of Persian literature and is also regarded by some scholars as the most influential human and educational source in Iran and the world (Mahvan, 2012: 1). This book is considered as one of the origins of Iranian children's literature and greatly affects their identity. From one point, Iranian children are exceedingly exposed to lots of overseas stories, films and music and from another point; children are less in touch with their own rich Iranian cultural and national background. This subject has caused children to face cultural and national problems because they are adopted with the similar overseas instances and might not look for the prominent examples inside their own country. Conclusively, it directs children to separate from their own culture and national identity from their childhood. Getting acquainted with foreign cultures and not knowing their own national culture makes them face problems with their families, and causes moral, societal and cultural problems that are very harmful. However, the truth is that some of the main applications of literature are for enjoyment and amusement, presenting and valuing the cultural heritage and giving a positive outlook toward the identity of culture. A group of Iranian female authors have tried to cite and rewrite the stories of *Shāhnāme*. We are engaged with four elements in one work cited from *Shāhnāme* by a female writer for the groups of children and adolescents:

- A. Does the rewriter use feminine literature in rewriting?
- B. How can the child communicate with the text?
- C. What is the purpose of choosing such a text for the child?
- D. What does the story give to children?

Shāhnāme mythical fictions which are rewritten by women in Iran during ten years have been collected in this research. According to the researches, eleven mythical themes entered from *Shāhnāme*'s stories to the children's book. Considering rewritten *Shāhnāme* in children and teens books during the last 50 years has indicated that 178 children and teens books are allocated to rewriting mythical stories of *Shāhnāme*.

From this category, 33 mythical stories with different themes were rewritten from 1990 to 2000, among them four themes were selected by Iranian women writers for children.

Here we mention the myths which were rewritten by women writers separately.

2.1. *Haftkhāne Rostam (the Seven Labors of Rostam)*

It is stated in the chapter of *KeiKāvoos* kingdom and his trip to *Māzandarān*.

- a) Killing the lion.
- b) *Rostam* passed desert.
- c) *Rostam* killed a dragon.
- d) *Rostam* killed a witch.
- e) *Rostam* defeated *AulādGhandi*.
- f) *Rostam* killed the demon *Arjang*.
- g) *Rostam* killed the *White demon*.

So there are some stories about the childhood of Rostam. Such as these books: *Afsanehayee az Shāhnāme* [*Tales from Shāhnāme*] (Khodajoo, 1992); *Ghesehaye Shāhnāme*

[*Shāhnāme*'s stories] (Salehi, 1997); *Kodakiye Rostam* [*Rostam's childhood*] (Salehi, 1998); *Ghesehaye Shāhnāme* (1) [*Shāhnāme*'s stories part 1] (Sasani, 1990); *Rostam Dastān* [*Rostam son's Dastān*] (Sayyar, 1995).

As the writer of the story is a woman, a new aspect of discussion is put into practice; there is no sexism in Persian construction and it is recommended to rely on the content of text to discover the feminine emotions. The masculine feeling has been inevitably projected in this story. At first, it looked that we'd better use the literature of both genders. Then, regarding the priority to the subject of the story in plotting the social identity, it is judged that the writer doesn't intend to start following the direction of writing based on gender separation in grammar. What is the purpose of choosing such a text for the child? In this text, the character of Rostam has been chosen by two epic and mythical approaches throughout the ancient literature of Iran. The epic approach adopted to reflect the heroic features and the mythical one selected to find the story and to add the imaginative element to the epic features of this character. Then, the text of the story has been rewritten according to the reading audience of children's physical and mental personalities.

How can the child communicate with the text? In a general evaluation, from one view point, the rewriter applies motifs close to the children's and adolescents' desires and ideals and she also finishes the story with a memorable and acceptable ending matched with their thoughts. From another view point, she follows harmony in writing style and preserves the literal values of the text; as a result, all these can greatly create an influential and delightful work for children.

And what does the story give to children? 1. Introducing Rostam, character of *Shāhnāme*, and his striving, the author tries to promote a national identity in Iranian children. 2. Producing intrepidity in children and teens by preparing the fighting and triumph atmosphere. 3. Producing feeling of endeavor in order to reach child's goal.

2.2. *Zāl (Albino) and Simorgh [Phoenix]*

Sām had a wife in *Sistān* (an old province in Iran). She gave birth to an albino son named *Zāl*. *Sām* considered this a scandal and commanded the innocent child be left stealthily at the top of a mountain so that he would die. *Simorgh* the phoenix was looking for food found the child and took him to its nest. *Simorgh*'s chick's nurtured love for the child and *Simorgh* raised him to be a brave young man who returned from the mountain. *Sām* heard the news and this made him sad. Wise people told *Sām* to ask forgiveness for his previous deed. He felt regretful and sent group to look for the child. They failed to climb *Alborz Mountain*. *Zāl* hid himself in shame. *Simorgh* heard his moan and gave *Zāl* its feathers and told him, "whenever you need me, burn one of the feathers and I will come to help you". Then *Simorgh* took him to his father and *Sām* saw his son. There are other books Such as: *Farzande Simorgh* [*Phoenix's child*] (Salehi, 2000); *Afsanehayee az Shāhnāme* [*Tales from Shāhnāme*] (Khodajoo, 1992).

Has the author utilized feminine literature to rewrite this

story? The deep structure of this story chiefly focuses on a motherly character that did not like her husband separates her albino son from her. She argues with her husband on keeping and bringing her child up. Her belief in her child is proved in this story when the capabilities, talents and abilities of her son, *Zāl*, are obvious after his finding and entering into human society. In fact, this attitude rejects the dominant concept over the Iranian culture and history that a married woman is a mother not an ordinary person with the ability to love. Interestingly, *Simorgh* is the bird who rises *Zāl* and has a motherly feeling towards the child and supports *Zāl* in his difficulties until the day *Simorgh* dies. This feeling is later expressed in the most vital and famous medical idea in *Shāhnāme* as defining *Rudabeh* delivering *Rostam* and because the baby (*Rostam*) is big, *Simorgh* orders to split *Rudabeh*'s flank to give birth to *Rostam*. This is the only story that has absorbed the essence of the rewriter's womanly literature to itself.

This text aims in introducing two mythical characters (*Simorgh* and *Zāl*) through the ancient literature of Iran. The mythical approach of this story activates the imagination among children and adolescents.

How can the children communicate with the text? The white-haired baby gradually forgets the bitter experience of taking away from his mother and he gets the motherly kindness and affection from a mythical and unreal creature called *Simorgh*. Some believe that rewriting this story is not suitable for children because they may put themselves in place of *Zāl* and distrust in their parents.

And what does the story give to children? 1. Suggesting that the best parents are not necessarily the real ones. 2. Stating about the returning of a child to his family the author makes a national identity among the Iranian children and teens. 3. Also the Author has paid a good attention in improving the child imaginary power with the aid of Iranian-mythical creature, in other words *Simorgh* as *Zāl*'s mother.

2.3. *Demon Akvān (the Bogeyman which Fight with Rostam)*

Demon Akvān was a yellow and foul dragon that hurt cattlemen and animals in plain, and eventually was killed by *Rostam*. Such as this book: *Ghesehayeh Shāhnāme*(2) [*Shāhnāme's stories part 2*](Sasani,1991), *Rostam Dastān* [*Rostam son's Dastān*] (Sayyar, 1995).

Has the author employed feminine literature to rewrite this story? At first sight, it seems that there has been given a good consideration to the manly sense as describing one of the battles of *Rostam*, the Iranian hero, and his fighting with the sinister devil, but the details of the story specify that the story explains the wicked spirit and the devil rather than *Rostam*'s courage. So, the rewriter did not mean to make the manly bravery prominent, in fact, she just attempted to represent evil and good and turn out the dire nature of the devil.

What is the purpose of choosing such texts for the child? Two mythical stories (the devil and *Rostam*) have been singled out among the ancient texts of Iran. The author's

mythical approach of this story activates the imagination element of children and adolescents and makes them fight against wickedness.

How can the child communicate with the text? Fighting against an imaginary creature not existing in the real world not only supplies a situation in which the child can put himself in place of the characters but also promotes his sense of self confidence in fighting against disorders. Both being imaginary and preserving the literal values of the text have turned this story into an affective and enjoyable one for children of all age.

And what does the story give to children? 1. Introducing courage and fighting of the mythical man of Iran, i.e. *Rostam* the author makes the national identity among the Iranian children. 2. Introducing legendary creature as a symbol of asperity and using brain and mind to perish it.

2.4. *Zahhāk*

There was a king in Arabian land named *Mardās* who was *Zahhāk*'s father. *Mardās* was a just and pious man who was thrown into well by his obdurate son. *Zahhāk* came to Iran and got along with the devil and asked demiurge to tell him every desire. Then devil kissed on *Zahhāk*'s shoulders and suddenly disappeared. After a while two black snakes grew out of devil's kisses. To satiate the snakes, *Zahhāk* fed them brains of two Iranian youths every night. He oppressed a lot but eventually was defeated by *Feridun*. Such as these books: *Zahhāk bandeye Eblis*[*Zahhāk, servant's evil*](Salehi,1998); *Dāstānhāye Shāhnāme*[*Shāhnāme's stories*] (Mehrabani,1996).

Has the rewriter utilized womanly literature to rewrite this story? In this story, the author tries to present the wickedness of oppression, inequality and brutality, violence and maltreatment, slavery and limitation through story delicacies. In this story, fighting takes place among men and challenges patriarchy and any kind of men's aggressiveness over women (*Arnavāz* and *Shahnavāz*) and any type of social and lawful mechanism dominating and humiliating women and destroying their human rights.

And what is the purpose of choosing such a text for the child? In this story, the mythical characters (*Feridun* and *Zahhāk*) have been introduced from the ancient texts of Iran. Fighting against wickedness is one of the indirect targets of this story. The approach of this story is to activate the child's imagination and make him fight against wickedness.

Another question is how the child can communicate with the text. Fighting with an imaginary creature not only supplies a situation in which the child can put himself in place of the characters but also develops his sense of self confidence. Being imaginary and preserving the literal values of the text all have turned this story into an effective and enjoyable one for children.

What does the story give to children? 1. Introducing cruelty and badness and encouraging fighting with him. 2. Making national identity in Iranian children by explaining about *kāveh*'s victory story who is *Feridun* representative against Arab *Zahhāk*. 3. Reminding of keeping health of thought; keeping health of thought from outsider attack (the

snakes growing on *Zahhāk's* shoulder have eaten young people's brains). Here the author tries to make a national identity in Iranian children.

If we consider two kinds of identity such as the individual and the social one for people in a society, the social identity is the affection of people in the society for common tasks which causes correlation and unity. (Tavasoli and Ghasemi, 2004: 2). One of the most expansive parts of the social identity is the national identity which exists in all social administrations. (Hajiani, 1999: 196). At the same time the national identity makes some parts of the individual identity (Razazifar, 1999: 103).

Here we are talking about identity because in all the rewritten stories of *Shāhnāme*'s myths the female authors are trying to fortify the national identity and teach the behavioral issues indirectly to Iranian children and teens by selecting the above mentioned stories. The task of Iranian women' is to support's Smith belief in which the national identity is reproducing the values, customs, and myths that can lead to nation's distinctiveness (Smith, 2001: 30). In fact the issue which is in common in these stories is that the female writers use rewritten *Shāhnāme* method for reviving the national identity in their rewriting notes for children.

3. What is the Reason for Emphasizing on the National Identity in Rewritten Stories

Assertion about national identity in rewritten stories of *Shāhnāme* by Iranian female writers is justified on the grounds of two approaches; writer-oriented approach and addressee-oriented approach.

3.1. Writer-Oriented Approach

The first reason is that the writers with a racial outlook prefer to convey this feeling to succeeding generations with ancient stories. It should be mentioned that in a survey in which one hundred girls are asked about marriage with non-native men, eighty- nine girls out of one hundred answered that they preferred to marry an Iranian one and their decision for this was told that they took this simultaneously since they are Iranian. Herein the Author proclaims the identity of Iran in a good manner. It is a national desire of most women to marry with the own countrymen, because of the bravery displayed by ancient Iranian, this has given the Iranian women and girls confidence to get married with their own countrymen.

Another vital point that focuses among female authors' rewritten of these stories is that it is ignoring some parts of national identity of women in Iranian vulgar culture. Iranian women, while rewriting these kinds of stories introducing some sort of their own identity, in their work itself.

3.2. Addressee-Oriented Approach

One of the other issues that cause the female writers make

the national identity through their outstanding rewriting works and these stories is echoing in Iranian children and teens.

On the basis of this subject some parts of the educational system in Iran also planned in forming this national identity in their children's curriculum. The fact that almost about one third of Iranian teens are at the risk of vacillation and identity crisis (Lotfabadi and Noruzi, 2003:32) as the exigency of performing such a plan in rewriting of *Shāhnāme*'s stories for children and literature becomes obvious.

4. Conclusion

As conclusion *Shāhnāme* includes historical, heroic, legendary stories of Iran as a national and ancient work which goes back more than one thousand years. It has been rewritten and made appropriate for children for several times. The Iranian women authors chose four stories of this book and rewrote them for children between 1990 and 2000. With the help of rewriting of these stories they succeeded in making them appropriate for children and teens level, women try indirectly make the national identity such as fighting for living, behavior, knowing how to communicate and rejecting violence. The reason for emphasizing the national identity in rewritten books is related to both writer and reader. This comes from the needs of the rewriters and the readers to have strong national identity. Rewriting is a kind of flourishing and compensating the weak points in their national identity. When citing aims at giving identity to children in order to make them familiar with their customs and culture, world view, the mythical history of ancient Iran, *Shāhnāme* and Iranian values, literature is considered as a branch of art presenting individually and socially a trend of children's and adolescents' social recognition that it happens automatically for children in the community. Thus, all components related to a writing including: rewriter, text, audience and the text message all are equally serve literature's purpose. In this type of literature, the manly or feminine literature does not matter anymore. Moreover, language is a device to retell the story. Therefore, the rewriter's thoughts are transmitted into actions from her/or his unconscious and is reflected in the text. It seems that this occurrence spontaneously occurs and adopt a style is not the topic of discussion.

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