When Literature and Religion Intertwine: Rostam as a Pre-Historic Iranian Hero or the Shi'itic Missionary?

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Abstract This article aims to show how Rostam, the legendary hero of Iranian mythology, have witnessed ideological alterations in the formation of Persian epic, *Shahnameh.* Among different oral and written *Shahnamehs*, this paper focuses on *Asadi Shahnameh* written during the 14th or 15th century. Though he is a pre-Islamic hero, Rostam and his tasks are changed to fit the ideological purposes of the poet's time and place. A century later, under the influence of the state religion of Safavid Dynasty (1501–1736), Iranian pre-Islamic values underwent the process of Shi'itization. Scarcity of literature regarding the interpretation of *Asadi Shahnameh* and the unique position of this text in the realm of Persian epic are the reasons for our choice of scrutiny. In *Asadi Shahnameh* Rostam is both a national hero and a Shi'ite missionary. By meticulous textual and historical analysis, this article shows how Asadi unites seemingly rival subjects like Islam with Zoroastrianism, philosophy with religion, and heroism with mysticism. It is concluded that Asadi's Rostam is the Shi'ite-Mystic version of Iranians' popular hero who helps the cause of Shi'itic messianism and performs missionary tasks in both philosophic and practical levels. Although the epic hero is not Shia, the literary text recasts him as the covert representative of the emerging and developing ideology of its time.

Key words *Asadi Shahnameh*; Rostam; Islam; Zoroastrianism; Philosophy (of Illuminationism)

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Introduction

In the 16th century as the Safavid Dynasty (1501–1736) succeeded to the throne, Shi'ite branch of Islam gained political power and became the religion of the overwhelming majority of Iranians. This popularization of Shi'ism is rooted in Safavi's ideological clash with Ottomans who knew themselves as the Sunni descendants of Abbasid Caliphate. During the interregnum, many manifestations of Iranian values and even its pre-Islamic cultural content underwent the process of Shi'itization due to the influence of the state religion. The literature of this period, especially epic, is mirroring the realization of this trend. No trend exists in vacuum. The ideological backdrop of this inclination is built in pre-Safavid era that is the focus of our study.

Considering the vast scope of this article, this paper scrutinizes one version of *Shahnameh* in the apex of pre-Safavid Shi'itic development called *Asadi Shahnameh*. Probably written by Asadi and available only in handwritten manuscripts, it dates back to the 14th or 15th century containing 23,183 couplets (Soltani Gord Faramarzi 15-17; Ghaemi, "Critical Introduction" 105-131). Thought it falls within the remit of national epics, its religious, especially Shi'ite content, proves *Asadi Shahnameh* as the best example of Shi'itization of national hero. Epics play an influential role in forming and remaking national heroes (Miller 214-15). In *Asadi Shahnameh*, Rostam, the pre-Islamic hero serves as an emblem of

Shi'ite ideology for two reasons. First, the text belongs to the period when Shi'ism started to develop phenomenally and its ideology gained power. Second, it is the most recent and the longest epic in Persian classic literature that portrays the turning point in the history of Iranian hero. This article attempts to examine the Shi'itization process that Rostam, the Iranian epic hero, undergoes. Rostam has a multi-millennia background in Iran's social and cultural life and has interwoven himself into the fabric of national identity.

The significance of an in-depth examination of *Asadi Shahnameh* is double-fold. Firstly, the genre, literary, historical, and socio-political aspects of the work need much attention because of the unique role this epic plays in connecting literature with religion. Secondly, the small bulk of literature available on this topic necessitates this research. *Asadi Shahnameh* relays strong ideological implications 500 years before the modern developments of Iranian Shi'itic government in 20st century. The formation of the concept of *Velayat-e Faghih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), and Shi'itic political legitimacy in contemporary Iran rely heavily on *Asadi Shahnameh*'s ideological implications.

In this paper, first Rostam's backdrop and origins are discussed from prehistorical accounts to his presence in the most recent epics. Then the ideological metamorphosis of the national hero is analyzed to answer the following questions. Why did Shi'ism decide to create an Islamic version of the non-Islamic, national hero, Rostam? What devices and methods were employed to fulfill this aim? Finally, we reached the conclusion that *Asadi Shahnameh* is a canonical text that has intermeshed Shi'ism, Sufism and Iranian identity in epic genre. It is important to mention that though the focus of this article is *Asadi Shahnameh* we are benefitting from continuous comparisons between the Rostam in the most famous *Shahnameh*, written by Ferdowsi (977- 1010) and the Rostam the most recent *Shahnameh*, titled as *Asadi Shahnameh* (14th- 15th c.).

The Origins of Rostam's Character: Pre-*Shahnameh*, *Shahnameh* and Shi'ite Age

In Middle Persian language, Rostam was called Rot-Stakhmak or Rot-Stakhm/ Rot-Stahm meaning "raging and flowing river" which brings to mind his strength, sturdiness, and valorous spirit. The same meaning is discernible in his title *Tahamtan*, meaning indestructible, unique, colossal, and powerful. Rostam enters the realm of written Persian epic first in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (10th- 11th c.). He is the Sistani hero of the son of Zāal and Rudabeh and "the most well-known hero of Iranian national epics" (Khaleghi 487). Many resemblances between Rostam and Kresāspa, the ancient Persian hero in *Avesta*, are found. In the collection of

Zoroastrian religious text of *Avesta*, Kresāspa was titled as Naire-manah with the last name Sāma. He is the most famous hero in *Avesta* and other Zoroastrian texts. Later, Rostam, the Sistani hero, is associated with him by changing the title and the last name to Kresāspa's namesakes; Rostam chooses 'Nariman' instead of 'Naire-manah' and 'Sāam' instead of 'Sāma'. Both Nariman and Sāam play an important role in Rostam's lineage since Nariman is Rostam's great grandfather and Sāam, Zāal's father, is Rostam's grandfather. Thus, many of Garshāsp's heroisms in *Shahnameh* and other Persian epics are attributed to Nariman, Sāam and particularly Rostam (Khatibi 400, 411-412).

Similarities between Kresāspa and Rostam's heroic actions which were first pointed out by Marquart (643) and followed up by other researchers (Hüsing 172-73, 213; Herzfeld 54-75; Wikander 163; Molé 129) led historians to hypothesize that these two characters might be, in fact, the same person. This hypothesis, however, was disapproved (Christensen 134; Henning 465-487; Sarkarati 118-148). The reason for the formation of this hypothesis was that Rostam had performed most of Garshāsp's heroic actions. The lack of family relationship between Rostam and Garshāsp as well as the absence of Rostam's name in *Avesta* and other Zoroastrian texts, has led some scholars to claim that Rostam's name was deliberately omitted from religious texts (Von Spiegel 126), a claim that is disputed later (Safa, *Epic Poetry* 563-64). Some critics have attempted to trace Rostam's historical origins in the Arsacid Age and among Parthian princes (Safa, *Epic Poetry* 563-69; Koyaji 9-162). This claim is also refutable based on older, fragmentary sources that narrate the deeds of Rostam in Soqdian texts. The oldest Soqdian source about Rostam is a manuscript in Khotani-Soqdian language discovered in Dunhuang (Gharib 44-53; Sims-Williams 54-61). This Soqdian text appears to have been a fragment from Rostam's *Haft Khaan*, Seven Feats, or a separate story (Zarshenas 5-94). Differences between this ancient narrative and Ferdowsi's account of Rostam indicate that different versions of the legends about this Persian-Scythian hero have existed in the Eastern part of the Pre-Islamic Iran (Azarpay 6-95). It must be mentioned that Bu Mansoori, Masoodi Maroozi and Abu Shakur Balkhi have penned older versions of *Shahnameh* before Ferdowsi's magnum opus, but their works did not survive.

Nöldeke believes that the story of Rostam belongs to the local Scythian literary tradition of the opulent city of Zarang in Sistan, a province in Southeastern Iran (*Essay in the Outline* 10). However, the ubiquitous presence of this hero from China's East Turkestan to the Soqdian and non-Soqdian graffiti in the ruins of Varakhsha palaces (5th - 6th c.), in Samarkand and Panjikant in contemporary Tajikistan, indicate that the story of Rostam is not limited to a particular region

since it has been as extensive as the Scythian culture. Considering the absence of Rostam chronicles in *Pahlavi Narratives*, Arabic and Persian writings, Khaleghi Motlagh presumes that most of the stories of Rostam in *Shahnameh* have not existed in the Pahlavi *Xwadāynāmag* (Book of King Gods) (*Flowers of Ancient Pains* 66-67). Critics believe that Rostam has found his way into Ferdowsi's narrative through a book compiled by a Zoroastrian priest named Āzadsarv either directly or via an intermediary source. Āzadsarv's source could have originated in Scythian or Soqdian languages (Khaleghi Motlagh, *Flowers of Ancient Pains* 66-67). Books about Scythian leaders such *Peykaār* and *Saboksarān* mentioned by Mas'udi (1: 265) as well as oral sources could have been possible bases for Rostam's narratives.

Therefore, Rostam, originally the warrior in nomadic Scythian traditions, has gradually found his way into the mythologies and epic narratives of a feudalist division of the Parthian Empire (247 BC-224 AD). During the Sassanids (224-651) and the Islamic era, Rostam as a 'non-Zoroastrian', yet not anti-Zoroastrian figure, builds his lineage with ancient Persian heroes such as Garshāsb, the great dragon slayer, and the grandfather of Rostam. Though in Zoroastrian scriptures, Rostam is punished for murdering Prince Esfandiyār, Ferdowsi's heroic depiction of Rostam, had an influential role in changing the image of Rostam. From then on, he became the emblem of national hero in Persian culture and literature.

Ferdowsi has had a fundamental role in underscoring Rostam in Iranian literature and culture. Ferdowsi adds stories to Rostam's life that were not present in *Life of the Kings* translated from Xwadāynāmags. Xwadāynāmags, or Books of the Kings, were chronicles of the Sassanid period which were translated in Iran's Islamic period as *Siyar al-mulûk* during the 8th century. Including Ibn al-Muqaffa's *Siyar al-mulûk*, Xwadāynāmags are retitled as *The Art of Ruling* in Arabic chronicles. Later, after the 8th century, they are re-translated and entered Persian literature as *Shahnameh* (Khaleghi Motlagh, "Rostam" 490). Though Ferdowsi models Rostam after Xwadāynāmags' hero, the story of Rostam's *Seven Feats* and *Rostam and Sohrab* are basically his innovations.

Ferdowsi elevates Rostam's reputation by additional narratives summarized in two techniques. Firstly, he sympathizes with Rostam where he errs, like the accounts of killing Prince Esfandyiār and his son Sohrab. Secondly, he depicts an independent, noble character who does not bow to tyrants such as Kavoos even if his life is at stake. Rostam does not have any servants or bodyguards, and he goes to hunting and battle only with Rakhsh, his devoted steed. The noble spirit of Rostam, his dignity, audacity against the kings and the disdain for the royal throne place him in the heart of the Iranian audience. He is the Prince of Sistan, but he never

seeks the throne despite Zāal's longevity. His humane personality and superhuman characteristics brought his enduring fame and popularity in Iranian culture. The great Sunnite mystical poet of the 13th century, Rumi (1207-1273), who stood at the pinnacle of the Ash'ari faith (a branch of Sunnism with close affinity with Shi'ism), places Rostam alongside Ali. Ali Ibn Abi Taleb, the fourth Sunni caliph and the first Shi'ite Imam, is considered as the paragon of the complete human (Rumi, *Collection of Mystical Poetry*, Book I, 1: 3721-3772). When Rumi is frustrated by his contemporaries, he seeks help from Rostam and Ali: "I am anguished by these weak-minded companions/ I want God's Lion (Imam Ali's title) and Rostam-e Dastan (Rostam's title)" (*Collected Poetry of Shams*, Sonnet 441).

Now that the origins of Rostam has been discussed, Rumi's analogy between Rostam and Ali builds the foundation of the next step in this paper that is the analysis of the Shi'itization of the Persian pre-Islamic epic hero in the era of Shia expansion. Rostam's religious inclinations are studied from three perspectives: first, his ideological role as a Shi'itic missionary in both philosophic and practical level, second, his devotion to Shi'itic messianism and third, his position as a mystical hero in *Asadi Shahnameh*.

Rostam, the Shi'itic Missionary

One of the main ideological aspects of Asadi's Rostam, who is by no means related to Ferdowsi's creation, is his role as a Shi'itic missionary. Ferdowsi's Rostam is a pious man but he does not advocate any religion. Even during the reign of Vishtaspa when Zoroastrianism gains power, Rostam does not convert to this new religion though he pays tribute to it. In his combat against Esfandiyār, the Zoroastrian hero, he swears to the Iranian prophet Zoroaster, Zoroastrianism and its religious scripture — *Avesta*. Nevertheless, Asadi's Rostam is the combination of Sufi monotheism and Shi'itic approach which the Sufi Shi'ism of the 14th to 16th centuries represents. In *Asadi Shahnameh,* Rostam is the ideological ambassador who acts as both a philosophical missionary and a practical missionary to propagate the dominating religion of the story.

Philosophical Missionary: When Illuminationism is Taught

It is important to mention that since Asadi tries to be faithful to basic historical facts, like Rostam's existence long before the birth of Islam, he is not directly using the word "Islam" or "Muslim" when he describes Rostam. Yet, the predominance of names like Mohammad and Ali leaves no doubt that by "the religion" he means Islam.

Asadi's Rostam is a missionary and in contrast to Ferdowsi's Rostam who has never appeared as a clergy, Asadi's Rostam has played the role of a missionary in several instances so as to represent the religious wisdom intended by the poet. One of the best examples of Rostam's ideological realizations is his religious debate with King Solomon in Jerusalem. Contrary to other narrations in which Rostam fights against Demons and Imam Ali, in *Asadi Shahnameh*, Rostam appears not as a warrior but as a prudent ambassador. This is Asadi's portrayal of Iranians' religiosity. In the debate, King Solomon questions the beliefs of Iranians collectively. Rostam is successful in convincing Solomon when he asks questions regarding epistemology, the purpose of genesis, the reason behind the sky's curvature structure, the human soul, and finally the origin of human destination and the fate (*Asadi Shahnameh* 995-96). One can draw analogy between Rostam's response and the philosophy of Illuminationism introduced by Sohravardi (1154-1191), the 12th century Persian philosopher (Butterworth 336-400).

In Solomon's palace, after an introduction to Iranians' battle against idolatry, including his own heroic deeds, Rostam admits the veracity of all religious scripture (*Asadi Shahnameh* 1009-1012). Asadi shows that while confronting with one of the most influential and the wisest Jew prophet, Iranians are equipped with wisdom and power during the negotiation. In response to Solomon's questions about genesis and destiny, Rostam is not only a missionary but also an Iranian-Islamic philosopher who blends Shi'itic Sufism with Zoroastrianism. Rostam recites the thoughts of Iranian mystics such as Hafiz (14th century) who believes that the beginning of genesis is synonymous with *Tajalli* or Unity of Appearance (Sonnet no. 125).

The theory of *Tajalli*, which has a close connection with Sohravardi's philosophy of Illuminationism, discusses the function and responsibility of *Farrah* (Charisma/ Devine Light) in Khosravani *Hikmat* (Wisdom). Illuminationism elaborates on the relationship between *Farrah*, Public Guidance, and *Bakht* (Fate). Public Guidance is reached through *Pārsai* (Devotion and Piety) with the ultimate aim that *Nür Esfahabod* (Command of Light) can encompass and win the world (Sohravardi 83-107). In Sohravardi's philosophy, the world is nothing but light and the universe is nothing but *Ishraq* (Intuition/ Light of Intuition). Whatever comes into being is a manifestation of light and human is no exception. Human can become the source of bounty and generosity since s/he can both enlighten the universe and turn into light.

The philosophy of Illuminationism is rooted in Iran's prehistoric mythology; *Farrah* (Devine Light) was always possessed by Mïtra (Ïzad Mehr), Goddess of Sun, Light and Love, who can bestow it upon someone or take it away. Thus,

Bakht (Fate) is transferred to a person through *Farrah* (*Avesta*, Mehr Yasht 108-111). Kingship *Farrah* will leave any king if he ever sins. Shah-Mobad, the senior priest, blesses people and nature's fate with the light of *Farrah*. If the king loses his *Farrah*, his land and his people will lose Shah-Mobad and Mïtra's blessing as well (*Avesta*, Zamyadisht 69-74). Rostam provides a symbolic representation of *Tajalli* in universe: out of the Light source, *Fayyāz* (Treasure of Light and Sun or Sohravardi's the "Light of Lights"), *Feyzān* (the Emission of Light) shines on human; as a result, the bountiful human shines the light back to the world. That is how fate and the portion of this sacred heavenly source are distributed among all creatures.

> When the sun of *Tajalli* rose
> On all creatures of the world, this light shone
> The world is illuminated with this leadership's light
> You see the trace wherever you caste your eyes
> Through this light, boundless rations and nourishment provides
> Thousands of livings with love and lives. (*Asadi Shahnameh* 1018-20)

Emphasis on the symbolic sanctity of the sun is an important point in Rostam and Solomon's dialectic debate. Since Asadi has always kept in mind the Persian Goddess of Sun, Light and Love, Mïtra, sun plays a crucial rule in this religio-philosophical part of the narrative. In order to prove the existence of God, King Solomon asks questions about the nature of creation (*Asadi Shahnameh* 992). In response, the Iranian hero mentions that the sun sits on the throne of the sky so that everything in the universe is protected. Furthermore, Asadi's knowledge of Avestan scriptures is reflected in Rostam's words when he claims that Mïtra patrolled in the sky with ten thousand pairs of eyes to protect God's creatures (*Avesta*, Yasna, Yasn 3, 1 and 5). Rostam also mentions the role of sun as fate's lamp which is comparable to the shining of *Farrah* (Light) in Zoroastrian Philosophy and *Feyzān* (the Emission of Light) in the philosophy of Illuminationism (*Asadi Shahnameh* 1015-16).

In another section, Asadi adds the commemoration of Prophet Mohammad by mentioning the greatness of his role in the establishment of the universe represented in "Mohammadian Light." The belief in Mohamamdian Light that connected the Illuminationism mysticism to Shi'ism manifested itself in the Shi'itic writing 14th and 15th centuries; it covers a wide range including philosophy, literature and the other art forms. With Asadi's explicit reference to "Light,"the influence of Sohravardi's Illuminationism becomes obvious:

The Sun, the Moon, Saturn, and the moving wheel of the sky
From the surface of the Earth to the Seventh Sky
All created from Mohammad's Light
He who is the key to religion's lock. (*Asadi Shahnameh* 3330-31)

In this period, while emphasizing the belief in Mohammadian Light, original Shia sources cite narratives that in addition to proving Mohammadian Light, they argue for its all-encompassing quality (Majlesi 1: 97, 4: 198, 16: 403 and 18: 360). In some chronicles, the union of Ali and Mohammad's Light is mentioned to the extent that some prophetic narratives read, "God hath created me [Mohammad] and Ali from one single light" (Sadouq, *Al-amali* 236). In *Asadi Shahnameh*, the mystical belief of Mohammadian Light is intertwined with the Shia belief of *Shafa'at* and the process of becoming Alawite. Alawite or Twelver School, a sect in Shia whose followers believe in twelve Imams, is closely linked to *Shafa'at* or Intercession in the Judgment Day since Alawite believe that Imams' intervention can pardon some sins committed by human. Simurgh, the Persian mystical bird, represents the Emission of Light from the Ultimate Good. While Zāal and Simurgh are united, Rostam swears on this divine Light and consciously connects the Mohammadisan Light to the Light of Ali's face.

I swear to the rein of King Solomon
To the Light of Mohamed, the prophet of human
I swear to his cousin Ali
Merciful he is like a bountiful sea . . .
When facing the light of his face, how insignificant is the sun. (*Asadi Shahnameh* 14103-7)

Having firmly stablished the Shi'itization of Rostam, now Asadi addresses his audience directly and justifies his own Shi'itic beliefs. He asks for Imam Ali's intercession for his sins and the wrongdoing of his readers. He considers resorting to "The Alawite Light" until the rise of the last savior of Shia, Imam Mahdi, as a strategy for human salvation (*Asadi Shahnameh* 14108-14112). For Asadi, the establishment of the universe and *Tajalli* (Unity of Appearance) depends on the continued radiation of the "Alawite Light" (*Asadi Shahnameh* 19959-19964). This Shia reading of Sohravardi's Illuminationism considers the formation of the universe as the radiation of a single light which is represented in Ali and Mohammad. Rostam provides an interpretation of the nature of creation relying on the relationship

between *Tajalli* and the original sin of the creatures — especially the angels like Satan — in the story of the creation. Rostam claims that *Jabaroot* (Divine Wisdom) is a mirror which reflects the real position of each creature; it has been determined in *Azal* (the Pre-creation State), but with their rebellion and transgressions, considered as the original sin, God's creatures have lost their path (*Asadi Shahnameh* 1024-25). Therefore, God created humankind from the most inferior element, clay, so that the heavens and the angels bow not to his/her worthless body, but to the divine spirit that has been incarnated into it. For the same reason the sky is concave, in the constant position of obeisance, bowing to God's creation. According to Rostam's interpretation, the angels' conceit was the reason that God put an earthly creature above them to cure them of their arrogance and lead them toward repentance (*Asadi Shahnameh* 1025-27). This interpretation has close affinity with Malāmati Sufism that was popular during the 13th and 15th centuries (Geoffroy 67, 87-98; Schimmel 87). Rostam ascribes Devine Logos or God's name to *Tajalli* which is the basis of human's intuitive knowledge about the "Light of Lights" and the reason for human eloquence; thus, for Asadi the rhetoric ability and grandeur of speech is assumed to be the manifestation of Alawite-Mohammadian Light planted in human since *Azal* (*Asadi Shahnameh* 1030-31).

The Practical Missionary: When Polytheism is Challenged

After cementing the theoretical framework of Shi'itic ideology with complicated philosophy of Sohravardi's Illuminationism and Persian mythology, Asadi portrays Rostam as a practical missionary. The best example of this dimension can be seen in Rostam and Kariman's travel accounts of the East. Kariman is Borzoo's son and Rostam's grandson and their relationship reminds the reader of the popular Quartic story of young Prophet Moses and wise Prophet Khidr, a sage who was granted foresight and secret knowledge by God (*The Quran,* Al-Kahf 18: 60-82). Asadi has chosen an imaginary place called Achin that brings the name of China (*Chin*) to the mind of the Persian reader. Readers in Asadi's era associate China with fabulously artistic sculptures, exoticism, richness and farness; for Asadi, China is so uncanny and inaccessible that even Arabs have failed to conquer (*Asadi Shahnameh* 9420-9430).

The affluent city of Achin has a speaking idol called al-Lat that represents Asadi's anachronism, albeit justifiable because of its symbolic significance. Al-Lat is the name of a famous idol in Mecca that was destroyed when Arabs converted to Islam after the Battle of Tabuk in the 7th century (Tabari 46; *The Quran,* Al-Asra 17:73). After the conquest of the Achin, Ghidar, the old chamberlain of the

idol, brings al-Lat's head to the court of Shahbāl, the king of Achin. The king asks, "Who has done this?" and Ghidar responds, "Ask the idol's head!" (*Asadi Shahnameh* 9441-9451). This is the reminder of another Quranic story narrating Abraham's demolition of idols and holding the biggest idol responsible for his own transgression because the idol was carrying the ax; by this incident, Abraham proves the insignificance of idols to confirm monotheism (*The Quran* Al-Anbiya 21: 51 - 69). Rostam scoffs and says, "How a thing that is so easily broken into pieces could think or speak!?/ [. . .] The God who has created existence and nonexistence and has given life to human out of four contradictory elements is observing and He is aware of everything" (*Asadi Shahnameh* 9441-9472).

For Asadi, not only is Rostam a national hero, but also he excels Abrahamic prophets in advocating religious doctrines. Abraham exploits Socratic irony so that the audience will come to the right answer by series of question regarding the ineffectiveness of their idols, however, Rostam even overdoes Abraham when he responds himself that an idol is not capable of taking actions. Rostam, like an eloquent orator, initiates a discussion about God and monotheism that sound thought provoking for Shahbāl (*Asadi Shahnameh* 9471-9488). He also becomes aware of the king's conspiracy to poison him, but he does not retaliate. Ashamed, Shahbāl throws his crown on the ground in front of Rostam and converts to Islam; his people follow his example and accept Islam (*Asadi Shahnameh* 9489-9527). Instead of being thrown into the fire like Abraham, Rostam is treated with respect and the people of Achin accept Rostam's monotheistic views and destroy the rest of the idols. Rostam's power and tact is also outshining the prophets' diplomacy. King Solomon, who represents the perfection of Jewish supremacy, needs Rostam's help to put the demon in chains. That is how Asadi defines Iranian version of Islam: a religion that conquers the hearts rather than the lands.

After conquering the polytheistic land of Achin, Rostam defeats the King of Badakhshān who is worshiped by its people. In the conquest of Badakhshān, Rostam meets a decent young man, Bahram, the son of the King of Badakhshān. He orders his soldiers to untie Bahram; then, like a "spiritual father," he engages in a conversation with him regarding the creator of the universe. He addresses Bahram as his "son" and "the man of pure heart" (*Asadi Shahnameh* 9796-9801). Rostam's convivial behavior, kindness and arguments about the existence of one God shines a light in the heart of Bahram. He shuns the idols and becomes a Muslim by confessing that God is one and Mohammad is the prophet (*Asadi Shahnameh* 9796-9901). This ritual in *Asadi Shahnameh* is very similar to Islamic tradition of convert, *Shahadatayn,* which is the declaration of God's oneness (*Tawhid*) and the

acceptance of Mohammad as His prophet.

Like the same storyline in Achin and Badakhshān, the human inhabitants of the land of Samāvāt unanimously decide to believe in God and Mohammad. That is why Rostam and Kariman destroy the chamber of idols in Samāvāt. Rostam's power of propagating Islam is not limited to human beings. Asadi goes so far that even demons are converted to Islam upon hearing about or witnessing Rostam's deeds. After the conquest of a citadel located on the peak of Samāvāt where endocannibalist demons fatten human to eat them, Rostam spares the lives of the demons who survive the battle; they repent of bad deeds and convert to Islam (*Asadi Shahnameh* 9034-9050).

It seems that Asadi's Rostam is the representation of all Iranian ideals in different scopes. In the national realm, Rostam proves to be a national hero who conquers the land and the heart of the people in Achin, Badakhshān and Samāvāt. As for his capability in advocating religion, Rostam's power of discourse excels Abrahamic prophets. Ideology, imagination and national pride permeates so far in *Asadi Shahnameh* that even endocannibalist demons convert to Islam.

Despite some instances of anachronism in *Asadi Shahnameh*, the poet was careful about the historical precedence of Rostam to the rise of Islam. Though Rostam's actions are echoing Islamic rituals, if "Islam" is explicitly mentioned, it is only in the voice of Asadi as the narrator not in the words of Rostam. The proceeding epis, composed after the 18th century, failed to preserve the basic historical chain of events. Asadi does not explicitly declare that Rostam is a Shia Muslim. However, he propagates the dominant ideology of Shia Islam in his time, blends it with the philosophy of Illuminationism, Sufism and the culture of forgiveness and tolerance in practical level.

Shi'itic Messianism: When the Savior is Recreated

In *Asadi Shahnameh*, the link between Shia ideology and Asadi's characters like Rostam, Zāal and Kay Khosrow is so strong that Shia Messianism is woven into the plot of the story. The destiny of Kay Khosrow and its affinity with Zoroastrian Messianism has paved the way for Shia ideology to replace the Zoroastrian savior, *Saoshyant*, with Shia Messiah, *Mahdi*. Indeed, this replacement was not initiated by Asadi's epic. In Pahlavi literature, Kay Khosrow disappears at the end of his reign with the order of Ahuramazda, Zoroastrian God, so that he can reappear in the Last Day of World in Gang Citadel (Dadgi 137). According to Avestan narratives, this sacred building is erected by Siavash and is brought down from the sky to earth by Kay Khosrow (Dadgi 138) so that the last battle between good and evil begins from this citadel.

In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh,* which is to some extent de-Zoroastrianized, Kay Khosrow simply disappears with no promise of return. However, in Zoroastrian texts, after centuries of occultation, Kay Khosrow is one of the immortals who, upon sitting on the throne in Gang Citadel, helps Saoshyant in the last war at the dawn of resurrection (*Dēnkard*, Book 7, 1:38-39 and Book 9, 23: 1-6; *Minoo-ye Kherad* 46-47; *Pahlavi Narratives* 60). Therefore, from the 13th century onward, during the period of Shia development, the belief in the existence of a savior has gained momentum and the analogy between the return of Zoroastrian Kay Khosrow and Shia savior was drawn. Sacred Zoroastrian places called Šāzand, meaning "the King is [always] alive,"are the best examples for the integration of Zoroastrianism and Shi'ism. Šāzand, the name of a city in the current map of Iran's Markazi Province, is said to contain labyrinthine caverns where Kay Khosrow is hidden along with other immortals. This place later becomes a religious site for Shia Muslims who believed that Šāzand's residents are associated with Imam Mahdi (Dahgan 1329; Ghaemi, "Textual Analysis of Solomon's Position" 117-136). According to the tales of Shia storytellers, Kay Khosrow and six of his loyal entourages have survived in a cave so that they can fight alongside Mahdi when he reappears to save the world (Anjavi Shirazi 2: 160, 259, and 2: 267-297; 3: 179-180).

Shi'itization of this Zoroastrian subject is not limited to Kay Khosrow and it has encompassed Rostam as the national hero of Iranians as well. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* ends in Shaghad's well when Rostam realizes that he is betrayed and his loyal steed, Rakhsh, is dead (Ferdowsi 451-461). Ferdowsi's narrative is connected to Shia's belief in the existence of sacred wells, such as Jamkaran Well in Iran and Samara Well in Iraq, where Imam Mahdi communicates with his people (Qomi 491). According to the tales of Shia storytellers, Rostam is not dead and he will be resurrected in Shaghad's well by the rise of Shia Messiah Mahdi, the 12th Shi'ite Imam. In that day, summoned by God, Rostam will come out of the well to be the first and the only commander-in-chief of Mahdi in the apocalypse to fight against evil opponents (Anjavi 2: 156). According to other narratives, Rostam will share this role with Kay Khosrow (Anjavi 2:109).

Asadi reinforces the relationship between Zoroastrianism and Shi'ism when he introduces Spring of Kowthar in his epic. Kowthar is where Prophet Mohammad has promised to meet with devoted Muslims in Paradise (Sadouq, *Al-eteghadat* 1: 65). In *Asadi Shahnameh*, in a moment of revelation, after Kay Khosrow finishes his prayers, Soroush the archangel of God gives him a mystic and spiritual wine from the Spring of Kowthar in Paradise; he promises Kay Khosrow to become one of the companions of the last prophet (*Asadi Shahnameh* 21842-5). Since Rostam and

Zāal have both visited King Solomon, Asadi gives both of them a role in delivering the ideology of the last Abrahamic religion. In *Asadi Shahnameh*, Solomon reveals to Zāal the promise of the last prophet, Mohammad, and the coming Savior, Mahdi. Upon Solomon's verdict, until the arrival of the Savior, Zāal will be the sovereign of Persia as well as the king of beasts and fairies after Solomon's death (*Asadi Shahnameh* 15628-15634). That is how Asadi cleverly justifies the longevity of Zāal's reigning. The rest of the message is a Shi'ite manifesto: it reveals that Mohammad's prophetship ends in his sons' succession, *Velayat*, and continues to the age when the last successor, Mahdi, rises again (*Asadi Shahnameh* 15602-15604). Asadi explicitly calls Ali the Imam of Imams and he has thus admitted to the issue of *Velayat* or Spiritual Leadership and divine succession.

Solomon's message determines Iranian Shi'itic mission. It must be mentioned that the most important message of the story is given to Zāal, the father and the guide of Rostam, because he represents the divine wisdom of the epic world. Furthermore, not only Zāal and Solomon's blessedness but also the close friendship between Iranian Muslims and Jews is highlighted in Asadi's account. Affected by the discourse dominating the poet's age, Asadi claims that Zāal's action bears witness that Iranians had been aware of the prophet and the leadership of his successors even before his emergence (*Asadi Shahnameh* 15637-15640). Now the Shi'ite ideology becomes clear when Asadi relies on Imamyieh Faith, the Shi'ites who believe in twelve Imams and *Mahdavyiat*, the coming of Mahdi the Savior. To consolidate the discourse of Mahdavyiat, Solomon announced to Zāal and Rostam that Mahdi is the Imam in occultation but it is promised that he rises to deliver justice with the help of Kay Khosrow, as the king of seven realms and Savior's ally (*Asadi Shahnameh* 15813-15817).

Rostam, the Mystic Hero

Religious epics, *Naghali* or storytelling scrolls, and oral epic prose such as *Rostam Namehs*, *The Book of Rostam*, have been in the scene from the composition of *Asadi Shahnameh,* around the 14th century, until the dawn of Qajar Dynasty in the early 20th century Iran. As mentioned before, the amalgamation of religious epics and mysticism was one of the cultural tenets of Shi'ism in the 14th century, although mysticism was faded as Shia jurisprudence prevailed. Nevertheless, Asadi's Rostam is shaped in an age where Shi'ism is still closely associated with mysticism. Therefore, some heroic tasks in *Asadi Shahnameh* are similar to mystic deeds.

In order to find and slay the White Demon, *Div-e Sepid*, and save King Kavus, Ferdowsi's Rostam would perform seven labors that could be taken as the hero's

rituals of initiation (Ferdowsi 63-65). Asadi's Rostam, too, has seven labors, but these seven labors are transformed into seven valleys of mystical meditation. This part of *Asadi Shahnameh* is represented in two sets of labors: passing through Ghāf Mount and reaching the land of Seven Perspectives, *Haft Manzar*.

The first Seven Labors of Rostam in *Asadi Shahnameh* constitutes passing through Ghāf Mount to find Ifrit Demon. Rostam has to pass through foggy imaginary lands and surmount strange obstacles to capture Ifrit. Ghāf in Persian is an ambiguous letter that is synonymous with X in English. In Persian literature, Ghāf Mount is an imaginary place, situated beyond geographical borders, passing through which symbolizes initiation into the road of perfection. The same passage or ascent to Ghāf Mount is mentioned by Attar, the 12th century Persian poet and theoretician of Sufism, in *Mantiq-al-Teyr* (*The Conference of the Birds*). Many birds initiate a perilous journey to reach Simurgh who resides in Mount Ghāf. After passing through seven valleys or stages, they reach Simurgh, the symbol of God and perfection. Similarly, the journey to Ghāf is a rite of initiation for Asadi's Rostam. The role of Simurgh as a guide or archetypal wise old man, *Murshid*, assisting Rostam through the mysterious labors, is similar to that of *Hod Hod*, Hoopoe, in Attar's *Conference of the Birds*.

Rostam's second sets of Seven Labors is passing through the land of Seven Perspective, *Haft Manzar*. After the battle of the Eight Armies is over, some of Rostam's grandchildren are held captive in a mysterious citadel by Simāb, the Silver-faced Sorceress. Anybody who attempts to save them is caught and after that the citadel vanishes in a fearsome storm so that nobody knows the ways to enter or exit. Commanded by Soroush, the king dispatches Rostam to the mountains.

Rostam is an ascetic who, through truth, performs Seven Labors, each level of which belongs to one of the celestial bodies, *Aflāk*. Each Labor necessitates Rostam to enter a house that has its own obstacles, situations and fearsome creatures with a king who is similar to the god of that celestial body in mythology (*Asadi Shahnameh* 22096-22762). The setting of the first Labor is silver associated with the Moon. The second house belongs to Mercury in the Solar System; it is white and is made of mercury. The third Labor is crimson, made of copper and belongs to Venus where people are bewitched with music and songs. The fourth Labor, belonging to the Sun, is golden with high emerald arch. The fifth, belonging to Mars, is made of steel covered with an army of riders in red with crimson banners. The sixth, belonging to Jupiter, is yellow and made of tin. Finally, the seventh is made of lead and is pitch black, "darker than all the sorrows of the world," since belongs to Saturn (*Asadi Shahnameh* 22760).

The old righteous resident in a temple in Ghāf Mount accompanies Rostam. The name of this wise old man is Borhan, meaning 'reasoning' and his nationality is Greek. *Asadi Shahnameh* builds upon the previous knowledge in Persian literature where Greece is associated with the land of philosophy, logic and wisdom (Venetis 158). This image goes back to the legacy of the King of Persia, Anushirvan in the 6th century who introduced many Greek ideas into his kingdom. Later in the 8th and 9th centuries after the Arab conquest of Hellenized areas like Syria and Egypt, all Muslims, including Iranians became familiar with Greek ideas. The popularity of Greek philosophies found its peak in the late 9th century by the construction of Baghdad's *Bayt al-Hikma*, House of Wisdom, where the translation of all of Greek, Persian and Syriac works were supported (Lyons 55-77).

Borhan has been the master of Phillip the Wise and his knowledge surpassed any sorcery (*Asadi Shahnameh* 21913-21990). Phillip the Wise is Philip II of Macedonia, King of Babylon, who has found its way into Persian literature through fake legends in *Iskandarnameh* (Alexander's Accounts) where the myths of Alexander the Great are narrated. Thus, Borhan is the guide to the path, the old sage, *Murshid*, and the symbol of "active reasoning" (*Asadi Shahnameh* 21999).

Borhan describes Haft Manzar Garden as a "nonexistent manifestation" (*Asadi Shahnameh* 21964). If Rostam succumbs to fear, this manifestation destroys him but if he stays bold, the manifestation is destroyed. This challenge is a test to the ascetic's faith and courage. The last request of Borhan is that Rostam buries him in the vault if he returns triumphant. The "master" (*Morād*) dies when the "disciple" (*Morid*) reaches perfection because disciple is now a "perfect human being" and a sage (*Asadi Shahnameh* 22001). After the seventh house, Rostam reaches Sorceress Simāb's palace and takes her life. At dawn, there is no trace of Haft Manzar Palace, its insurmountable walls and its residents, the khans and houries in Simāb's land. At the end of the Seven Labor, Rostam becomes a perfect Murshid. Saman Khan, son of the Chinese king, who is among the liberated captives of the Haft Manzar is so mesmerized by Rostam's personality that he converts to Islam (*Asadi Shahnameh* 23050). What is noteworthy here is that in Iranian epics, China is a neighbor of Turan and is thus always geopolitically important. Turan always plots to ruin the peaceful relationship between Iran and China. Therefore, the conversion of Chinese King to Islam is doubly important because China becomes the international and religious ally of Iran.

Conclusion

Rostam is a prehistoric character with Scythian origins who became known as

the example of an unmatched warrior in the class-based structure and federative culture of the Parthians. After the disintegration of Abbasid Caliphate by the Mongols (1258 A.D), Shia Islam initially grows as a social movement and with the establishment of the Safavid government (1501-1721) it becomes an instrument for seizing and maintaining power and a means to substantiate the legitimacy of kings. *Asadi Shahnameh* belongs to the development of pre-Safavid Shia Islam. Following the collapse of the empire of Abbasid Caliphate, there was room for rapid growth of Shia faith which, until then, had only served as a religious minority or a political opposition against the dominant ideology. Until the 12th century, Shia Islam was more like a politico-religious position and from the 13th century onwards, it gradually developed into a social movement. Later in the 16th and 17th centuries, with the seizing of power by the Safavids, particularly due to their ideological confrontation with the Ottoman Sunni Turks, Shia became a dominant ideology and political religion. The rapid spread of Shia Islam throughout Iran became possible with the convergence of this ideology towards two basic cultural elements: ancient Persian civilization and mysticism. This feature was extremely attractive in the Middle Ages in the Islamic civilization for both the elite and the mob of Iranian society. In *Asadi Shahnameh* Rostam is the Shi'ite-Mystic version of Iranians' popular hero. Although he is not a Shia, he is the covert representative of the emerging and developing Shia ideology.

Four centuries after the arrival of Islam in Iran, Ferdowsi penned the most enduring epic, *Shahnameh,* the book of the dreams of a nation defeated by Arabs. In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh,* Rostam was transformed into a monotheist, liberal and strong hero who not only was pardoned for his errors, killing Sohrab and Prince Esfandiyār, but also became the main protagonist of the book because of his role as a savior of Iran in an age when Iran was in dire need of a hero. After Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* gains preeminence, Rostam becomes a national hero and transforms into a Superhuman in Iranian culture. In this regard, Rostam is a unique character who embodies the history of ideological developments and circulation of power in Iran's last two thousand years.

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