

HAMID DABASHI:

*The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature.*

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This is a wide-ranging study of the *Shahnameh* in the light of postcolonial debate. It is the result of many years of teaching the Persian epic to students from various cultural backgrounds at Columbia University. Hamid Dabashi's main aim in this book is to show that the *Shahnameh* should be read and enjoyed for what it is – one of the world's great works of epic literature – and not discussed in terms of Eurocentric theories of "World Literature".

As a point of reference, Dabashi employs two modern books written by established authorities in the field of World Literature: David Quint's *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (1993) and Franco Moretti's *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Márquez* (1996). There are numerous references to other theoretical works written in the post-colonial languages of English, French, and German. In these, non-European epics such as the *Shahnameh*, or the Indian and Chinese epics, are not even mentioned. Writing, paradoxically, in the most widespread postcolonial language, Dabashi observes "what they generically theorize, we can, with the very same English, dethorize, meaning what they universalize we must particularize, epistemically dethrone" (p. 19).

In five chapters Dabashi examines the history of the *Shahnameh*, from its early pre-Islamic oral and written sources to the history of its composition and reception. Each chapter starts with the synopsis of a major episode in the poem (Kaveh and the usurper king Zahhak, Rostam and Sohrab, Rostam and Esfandiar, Sayavash and Sudabeh, etc.). These are then discussed convincingly within the framework of the whole epic. Dabashi argues successfully that the three phases of the *Shahnameh*, the mythic, heroic, and historical, fuse together seamlessly, each being dependent on the others. Superficially, the stories use the same motifs as Homeric or Virgilian epic, such as fratricide, filicide, patricide, etc.; there are also passionate love stories which present the nature and traumas of humanity. The *Shahnameh* is shown to differ from the views expressed by scholars of World Literature. It is neither a defeatist nor a triumphalist epic. In fact, Dabashi argues, its inner emotions and ethical lessons are more akin to Shakespearean plays such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

Chapters 4 and 5 are entitled "Epics and empires" and "Empires fall, nations rise". Dabashi traces the *Shahnameh*'s history from its very beginning, from the Samanids (819–999) and the Ghaznavids (977–1186) to the Mughals (1526–1857). It was equally important to the Safavids (1501–1736) and the Ottomans (1299–1923). Many illustrated manuscripts of the *Shahnameh* were produced in the Muslim Empires. These, Dabashi argues, "offered political legitimacy to the Persianate empires" (p. 31). The Houghton *Shahnameh* is seen as an allegory of how fragmented and destructive the history of the *Shahnameh* has been. This destruction and abuse of a highly valued work of literature is most noticeable in the colonial period of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries, when greater Iran was fragmented by the colonial powers and smaller nations were established. Thus the *Shahnameh* became a symbol of nationhood under the Pahlavis and, ironically, it was a major force behind Iran's Constitutional Revolution (1906–11). The history of the *Shahnameh* is one of being "used and abused" (p. 101). It has

resisted colonial and postcolonial nation-building and has emerged from these traumatic events to assert its place in the world, not pleading to be accepted into a flawed Eurocentric theory of World Literature. As a modern epic, unlike Moretti's theory that some modern European epics reflect "the European will to power" (p. 177), the *Shahnameh* has been appropriated by distinguished contemporary Iranian writers and poets to fight power and imperialism.

In several pages of polemic Dabashi attacks the Eurocentric and North American theorists of Comparative and thus World Literature who seem ignorant of the great non-European epics. To them World Literature consists only of European literary works. The *Shahnameh*, however:

became worldly in the context of worldly empires. With the collapse of those empires, it has lost that worldliness and yet has not gained its presence in the world in which we read it today. Against the dignity and mighty heritage of its origin, it has been relegated to the ghetto of "Third World Literature", and thus its historic and innate worldliness has been taken away from it. Repositioning it in the context of its current world habitat requires a constant attention to its fragmentation, nationalist fetishization, its overpoliticization, and therefore the epistemic violence launched against its poetic power and epochal endurance (p. 181).

Being also a film critic, Dabashi asserts that the *Shahnameh* is comparable to modern cinematic epics; its central traumatic events have ensured its survival and its enduring relevance as a major work of world literature as opposed to the "World Literature" of the Eurocentric theorists. The *Shahnameh*'s survival has come through its powerful poetic narrative, its dramatic tendencies, its ethical content and above all its *adab* (which Dabashi translates as "literary humanism"), as well as its *sokhan* (*logos*). Ferdowsi opens his epic with "*Beh Nam-e Khodavand-e Jan-o Kherad*" as it is quoted on the title page of the introduction to this book and translated as "In the Name of the God of Soul and Reason".

The book is handsomely produced. On the title page of each chapter a beautiful miniature painting is reproduced in black and white, with the transliteration and translation of an apt quotation from the *Shahnameh*. This book adds great value to the already considerable body of work on the poem and will ensure the place of the *Shahnameh* in today's troubled world more understandable both to the Persian speaker and to others who read it in translation. It has certainly provoked this reader to want to go back to the original Persian and read it anew.

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