

A Different Reading of The Conflict Between “Old” and “New” in Persian and Greek myths: A Critique of Barahani’s “Male History”

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Reza Barahani(1984), in his “Male History”, focuses on the murder of son by father, in Ferdowsi’s Rostam and Sohrab, in the canonical epic of Shahnameh. He, thence, juxtaposes it to father’s murder by son, in Sophocles’ “Oedipus Rex”, to conclude that in oriental culture, it is always the “New” that is sacrificed by the hands of the “Old”, whereas in western culture it is the contrary. Barahani furthers the cause stating that this is the underlying rationale for the Western world’s advancements and East’s, or rather, Iran’s devolution. The present paper attempts to explore a few substantial questions in this respect: 1. Which western (Greek) hero seems most appropriately fit as counterpart for Rostam? 2. Are there remarkable examples of filicide (killing one’s children) in Greek literature, too? 3. If so, what would be the theoretical and social consequences of overlooking such examples, and attributing filicide solely to the east? 4. Could the presence of filicide in both eastern and western literature serve to reveal some indispensable virile feature of the hero figure, no matter where it originates from? Answering these questions will, most readily, lead the quester to the greatest Greek epic hero, Hercules, the legendary savior of Greece, who unwittingly murdered his three young sons, and his wife, too. Probing further into mythical aspects of Rostam and Hercules, such as their infantile extraordinary power, even from the cradle, will leave no doubt that they should make the fittest counterparts. Rostam and Hercules, both, struggle through life to fight off threats against the throne and their people, never even once, thinking of taking possession of the crown for themselves. Accordingly, the reliability of Barahani’s analogy between Rostam and Oedipus will be disputed. Such an analogy stereotypes eastern culture and literature, representing it as coarse, barbaric, even cannibalistic, as compared with the west’s “much more refined manners”. The findings of this study show that the filicide archetype is not restricted to Persian literature or oriental culture, but, rather, it seems to be an essential aspect of the virile hero, in the west, too. Thus, in

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stereotyping the east, and representing it as constantly at war with novelties and innovations, there will arise the problem of ignoring other aspects at both ends.

2. Methodology

The present paper is qualitative in nature. It aims to probe into the nature and impact of misrepresentations of Persian literature and its social, theoretical consequences, using Edward Said (1978) and Gerald Vizenor's (1994) theories of orientalism and simulation, respectively, as the methods of analysis. Vizenor defines "simulation" as the postindian's alternative, in postmodern time, in the form of humorous stories, when the real history is absent (1994: 1978). A purposeful sampling of Greek tragedies, including Euripides' *Medea* and *Hercules*, as well as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, has been used in order to present examples of filicide predominant over parricide in Greek classics- hence, the omnipresence of filicide in literatures of both east and west.

3. Discussion

This paper initially focuses on Barahani's strict dichotomizing of the "orient" versus the "west" in "The Male History", where Oedipus' parricide has been highlighted, even disregarding his father's attempt at annihilating him as a baby, (as opposite to Rustam). Thence, it explores in more details the correspondence between Hercules and Rustam, both of whom have committed filicide unwittingly. They are both at the service of a not too kind king, undergoing a series of ordeals, all of which seem next to impossible. Rustam fulfills seven tasks, a symbolic number, while Hercules has to go through twelve. Wrestling with a lion and defeating it is not the only challenging ordeal they both fulfill, but there are others, too, needing more wit. Hercules, despite all his fondness for his sons, as the consequence of a fit of madness sent to him by Hera, out of jealousy over Zeus' offspring of other women, slaughters his three young sons, as well as his wife, Megara, mistaking them for enemy troops. In the case of Rustam, his son, Sohrab, does show up to him as an enemy warrior, and father comes to identify son, in all regret, only after the latter is fatally wounded by him. Here the ungrateful king, who owes his throne and life to him, does not offer him the reviving potion "nooshdaroo" in proper time. As it is clearly observed, the filicide in both Greek and Persian heroes has been committed unconsciously, hence possible implication of an indispensable, virile feature in both as the hero figure. The coinage of the term "herstory" by Robin Morgan in 1970, in her monumental edition of *Sisterhood is Powerful*, as a revolt against the male history in the west, is another evidence that the issue has been a global problem, over ages.

The present paper, then, examines the tragedy of *Medea* by Euripides, where the protagonist, Medea, kills her two young sons, as revenge from her disloyal husband. A scene most disgusted by its contemporary Greek audience, and only

justifiable to them as she was a foreigner (barbaric) in their land, coming from Asia. However, Barahani reads it as a case of Greek gender indiscrimination. This article, as well, briefly hints at Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia, sacrificed by father, in order to cause favorable winds to set off for the sack of Troy, as another example in Greek classics for filicide.

The paper, finally, applies Said's and Vizenor's theories to the aforementioned gaps in "The Male History" to find how such rigid dichotomies of the "orient" and the west would lead to a justification of the latter's political, even military assaults, while ruining the dignity and assertiveness needful among the citizens of the east, especially its intelligentsia.

4. Conclusion

Representing "oriental" or Persian literature in a stereotypical manner, in enmity with all novelties, as stated in "The Male History" results in its restrictive, dichotomous categorization with the west. Thus, various dimensions of the two ends, east and west, will, most likely, be overlooked. This leads to a distorted, misrepresented image of the oppressed culture, which, in turn, will deprive the intellectuals, as well as the citizens, of their essential assertiveness. The intelligentsia of the "orient" will, thence, more readily give way to whatever intellectual diet is offered them from outside, thinking they do not have the sufficient, needful capability of innovating theories of their own. Hence, paving the way for further failures.

Key Words: Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex", Euripides "Hercules", Rostam and Sohrab, Barahani, "Male History", "Orientalism", Said.

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