



## Gender Dynamics in the *Shahnameh*: Analyzing the Status and Agency of Women in Persian Epic Literature

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### Abstract

The *Shahnameh*, an influential work of Persian literature holds profound cultural and literary significance. It not only preserves the ancient history and heritage of Persia but also serves as a cornerstone of Persian identity and nationalism. Through its rich narratives and vivid character portrayals, the *Shahnameh* provides deep insights into the values, beliefs, and social structures of ancient Persian society. A particularly notable aspect of the *Shahnameh* is its depiction of women, which reflects the complexities of their roles within a patriarchal framework, highlighting their strengths, vulnerabilities, and the societal constraints they face. Accordingly, this paper will examine the status of women depicted in the *Shahnameh*, analyzing how their roles and portrayals vary across its three main narrative sections: the Mythical Age, the Heroic Age, and the Historical Age. This examination is essential for understanding the gender dynamics and cultural attitudes of ancient Persia, offering valuable perspectives on the historical evolution of gender roles in the society.

**KeyWords:** *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi, Epic literature, Female agency, Gender roles



## 1. Introduction

The *Shahnameh*, or *The Book of Kings*, written by Ferdowsi in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, stands as the national epic of Iran and has become a cornerstone of Iranian cultural heritage. The *Shahnameh* recounts the pre-Islamic history of Persia, spanning from the creation of the world to the Arab conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, through the reigns of approximately fifty rulers, both kings and queens. This vast work, consisting of about 5000 to 6000 couplets, intricately weaves together themes of power, ethics, heroism, fate, and patriotism, depicting the saga of Iran and its rulers, noble families, and heroic champions (Davidson 148; Lewis 1).

Drawing from a blend of pre-existing oral and written sources, Ferdowsi organized the poem chronologically by the reigns of various monarchs. The *Shahnameh* is not merely a royal chronicle; it is a monumental work of Persian epic literature and illustrates the enduring legacy of Iran's past and its influence on subsequent literary traditions. It captures the essence of Iran's cultural heritage, intertwining tales of heroism, adventure, and moral lessons that reflect the societal values of the time (Davis 67). Through its narratives, the *Shahnameh* not only delves into the lives of noble rulers, valiant warriors, and loyal ministers, but also showcases the intricate relationships and dynamics that shaped the Iranian civilization.

Moreover, the epic provides invaluable insights into the status of women throughout history, revealing how gender roles and perceptions evolved within the context of Persian culture. In the *Shahnameh*, female characters are portrayed with varying degrees of complexity, as they navigate personal and political challenges. While some are depicted with strength and agency, others confront significant constraints and limitations. Their stories, infused with themes of love, loyalty, and defiance, provide valuable insights into the gender dynamics and cultural values of ancient Persia. The intricate relationships and moral dilemmas faced by these women highlight their significant roles within the epic's events and reflect broader societal attitudes toward gender roles (Ashrafzadeh 60).

Accordingly, this paper seeks to investigate the representation of female characters in the *Shahnameh* and examine how their interactions within the narrative display the complexities of their roles. By analyzing these portrayals, this paper aims to uncover the varied ways in which women's statuses and functions are depicted across different sections of the epic. This examination will contribute to a better understanding of the *Shahnameh*, offering insights into the status of women and the interplay between gender dynamics and societal structures in ancient Persian society.

## 2. Discussion

For a work purportedly dealing largely with warfare, martial heroism, and dynastic concerns \_traditionally assigned in Ferdowsi's period to the public masculine world\_ the *Shahnameh* contains a surprisingly large and diverse cast of female characters. Despite expectations that women would occupy minor or non-existent roles, over fifty named women appear in the poem. These women are portrayed with significant depth and complexity, taking on roles that range from noble queens and loving mothers to cunning strategists and brave warriors. This diversity underscores the *Shahnameh's* depth in portraying women not just as passive figures but as active participants in the narrative, each with unique challenges and contributions (Davis 67).



For instance, one prominent character is Pourandokht, who ascends the throne following the death of her father. Despite the conventional expectations of her time, Pourandokht governs with a focus on justice and benevolence. As noted in the verse, she promises:

I will not have  
 The people scattered, and I will enrich  
 The poor with treasure that they may not bide  
 In their distress. God grant that in the world  
 There may be none aggrieved because his pain  
 Is my calamity. I will expel  
 Foes from the realm and walk in royal ways. (Ferdowsi 9: 57)

Her leadership not only includes seeking revenge for her father's murder but also ensuring the welfare of her people during her brief but impactful reign. Pourandokht's actions reveal her significant role in both political and personal spheres, earning her a respected legacy.

In contrast to the magnificent situation of Pourandokht, there is the story of Jarireh, which is perhaps the most tragic tale of the whole epic. Jarireh, the daughter of Piran Viseh, becomes the first wife of Siavash when he takes refuge in Turan. Their marriage, meant to ease Siavash's loneliness and bring honor to Jarireh's family, is short-lived as Siavash soon marries Afrasiab's daughter for political reasons and moves to China. Left behind, Jarireh gives birth to their son and stays loyal to her husband's memory. Jarireh's tale is marked by profound tragedy. Her life is characterized by loss, including the death of her husband and son and she is the only character in the Heroic Age who dies by committing suicide. This tragic dimension underscores her vulnerability and the harsh realities faced by women in the epic.

Manizheh provides another example of female diversity in the *Shahnameh*. As Afrasiab's daughter, her love for Bizhan leads her to heroic acts of devotion: "Now when a day and night had passed she came/ with lamentations to the pit, and made/ a passage large enough to pass one hand/ Thereafter when the sun rose o'er the hills/ she used to gather food at every door/ by day-long wanderings and pass it through/ the crevice to Bizhan, and weep" (Ferdowsi 3: 310). Her determination to assist Bizhan despite her perilous position underscores her loyalty and bravery. Manizheh's actions demonstrate her significant impact on the plot, and her ultimate fate reflects the high stakes and emotional depth of her character.

Unlike Manizheh, who embodies virtue and unwavering loyalty, Sudabeh is portrayed as a scheming and ambitious figure whose actions create major conflicts in the *Shahnameh*. Her efforts to seduce Siyavash and the subsequent accusations drive significant portions of the plot. Her manipulative behavior and its consequences are vividly described: "Sudaba wailed and wept before [Shah], tore/ her hair, and told him: 'Siyawush approached/ my throne. He caught me in his arms...'" (Ferdowsi 2: 211). In the epic, Sudabeh plays a crucial role as one of the epic's primary antagonists. She is introduced as the wife of King Kavus and becomes central to the story through her actions and motivations, which significantly impact the plot.

As illustrated by these examples, the *Shahnameh* features a diverse range of female characters, each with unique traits and roles. Pourandokht, for instance, is portrayed as a noble and virtuous leader, demonstrating strength and influence. In contrast, Jarireh's story reveals her





tragedy and the constraints imposed upon women's lives. Sudabeh stands out as a scheming character whose deceit leads to significant conflicts. Conversely, Manizeh represents virtue and unwavering loyalty, sharply contrasting with Sudabeh's treachery. These diverse portrayals underscore the multifaceted nature of female roles in the *Shahnameh*, illustrating different dimensions of strength, loyalty, and influence.

In terms of the portrayal of women, the *Shahnameh* unfolds in three distinct parts, each offering varying levels of depth and significance. The Mythical Age, the earliest segment, presents a brief account of creation and early kingship, with women primarily occupying traditional and domestic roles. In contrast, the Heroic Age offers a more nuanced depiction, highlighting notable female figures such as Rudabeh and Gordafarid who exhibit considerable strength and agency, engaging actively in both personal and political spheres. Finally, the Historical Age shifts toward a more factual recounting of Sasanian history and the Arab conquest. This part aligns with a period focusing on political and historical events where the roles of women become more restraint (Shirody and Ghanbks 178).

### 2.1. The Mythical Age

The Mythical Age of the *Shahnameh* serves as the foundational narrative, setting the stage for the epic's exploration of Persian heritage. This initial section, though relatively brief, introduces key figures and events that establish the mythological and cultural context of ancient Persia. The portrayal of women in this era is particularly noteworthy, as it reflects both their symbolic and practical roles within the mythic framework (Khosravi 583). For instance, Arnavaz and Shahrnaz play a significant role in driving the narrative forward and unfolding key events. Initially introduced as the sisters of Jamshid, a legendary king, they are captured by Zahhak and forced to marry him. When Zahhak has a nightmare about his downfall, it is Arnavaz who suggests bringing experts in astrology and witchcraft to the court to interpret the dream and help him find a solution.

“Neglect it not but seek a remedy  
 ... Call both the archmages and astrologers\_  
 The wisest of each realm\_ and tell them all.  
 See if the hand that threateneth thy life  
 Is that of fairy, div, or man. This known  
 Act vigorously; quail not before thy foes.”  
 The lady's counsel pleased the Shah. (Ferdowsi 1: 148)

At the end of Zahhak's reign, following Kaveh's uprising, Arnavaz and Shahrnaz aid Fereyduin in locating and capturing Zahhak, contributing to his victory and rise to power. They later marry Fereyduin, becoming mothers to his sons—Shahrnaz to Tur and Salm, and Arnavaz to Iraj—thereby playing a key role in the epic's unfolding events and setting the stage for future conflicts.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that although Arnavaz and Shahrnaz are depicted as resilient and wise figures in the Mythical Age, their roles are largely domestic in nature. Their significant contributions to the epic, including their involvement in the downfall of Zahhak and their positions in Fereyduin's court, do not extend beyond the confines of traditional female roles (Pierce 362). They are recognized primarily through their relationships to prominent male



figures: as the sisters of Jamshid, the wives of Zakhak, and later as the wives of Fereydun. Their most notable influence is also seen in their roles as mothers to figures like Salm, Tur, and Iraj. Despite their substantial contributions within the narrative, their impact is largely confined to traditional domestic spheres. Their wisdom and resilience are acknowledged, yet their influence remains restricted to their familial and marital roles, highlighting the limitations placed on female characters regardless of their remarkable achievements.

## 2.2. The Heroic Age

In the Heroic Age of the *Shahnameh*, the depiction of women showcases a diverse range of characters who have significant roles in the epic's narratives. This period, extending from Manuchehr's reign until the conquest of Alexander the Great, is marked by the intertwining of myth and legend. Women in this age, although occasionally overshadowed by their male counterparts, are portrayed with remarkable depth, contributing to the narrative through their strength, intelligence, and influence on key events (Loveimi 47)

One of the most prominent female characters in this period is Rudabeh, whose romance with Zal is one of the central love stories in the *Shahnameh*. Rudabeh's character is depicted with a blend of beauty, wisdom, and agency. Her willingness to defy her father's orders to be with Zal, a man from an enemy tribe, highlights her courage and independence. In response to the court's suggestions for more suitable matches,

[Rudabeh] shrieked at them,  
 With frowns that shut her eyes, exclaiming:  
 “Ye strive in vain: it booteth not to hear.  
 If to some star I lost my heart, could I  
 Find any satisfaction in the moon?  
 ... I want not Caesar or Faghfur of Chin,  
 Or any of the princelings of Iran:  
 Zal, son of Sam, is tall enough for me  
 And lion-like in shoulder, neck, and arm;  
 For whether people call him old or young  
 To me he giveth peace of soul and mind.” (Ferdowsi 1: 262)

This romance not only underscores the theme of love transcending boundaries but also showcases Rudabeh's significant role in the lineage of heroes, as she becomes the mother of Rostam, the greatest hero of the *Shahnameh*. Rudabeh's portrayal is a testament to the resilience of women, as she supports Zal through various trials and tribulations. Her character embodies the virtues of loyalty and steadfastness, making her an essential figure in the heroic narratives of the *Shahnameh*.

Another important female character from this period is Gordafarid, who, despite her relatively short role, leaves a significant mark on the narrative. Known for her courage and cunning, Gordafarid defies expectations by disguising herself in armor to fight Sohrab: “A woman like some valiant cavalier/ was she and ever famous in the fight./ Her name was Gurdafarid, and none as yet/ had seen her match” (Ferdowsi 2: 132). Her encounter with Sohrab



highlights her bravery and strategic acumen, especially when she uses her wits to manipulate the situation, saying:

O warrior!  
 Midst warriors a lion! Two hosts watch  
 Our prowess with the mace and scimitar  
 And now that I have shown my face and hair  
 The troops will say: 'He sent the dust-clouds flying  
 And all to fight a girl!' (Ferdowsi 2: 133-134)

Despite being a character of lesser prominence compared to figures like Pourandokht or Sudabeh, Gordafarid's intelligence and tactical skills make her an essential player in the narrative, illustrating the multifaceted roles women can occupy.

Moreover, Tahmineh's story is a moving tale intertwined with themes of love, destiny, and tragedy. When Rostam, the great hero, arrives in Samangan after losing his horse, he is welcomed by the king and given lodging. That night, Tahmineh, the king's daughter, visits Rostam and professes her deep admiration and love for him. Tahmineh has heard of Rostam's legendary feats and is captivated by him:

Such are the tales of thee that I have heard!  
 Oft have I bit my lips in wonderment  
 And longed to see thy shoulders, neck, and breast.  
 And now if thou wilt have me I am thine  
 I who was never seen by fowl or fish. (Ferdowsi 2: 124)

They marry with the king's blessing and following their union, Tahmineh gives birth to a son, whom they name Sohrab. In the *Shahnameh*, Tahmineh's role is marked by both her proactive and loving nature, as she defies norms to unite with Rostam and later raises Sohrab with the anticipation of him inheriting his father's heroic qualities. Her story, while demonstrating her strength and commitment, also foreshadows the tragedy that will unfold, as Sohrab's fate becomes a central and sorrowful element of the epic.

Farangis, the eldest daughter of Afrasiab, is another prominent character in the *Shahnameh*. Despite her Turanian origins, Farangis plays an important role in the narrative through her marriage to Siyavash, the saintly prince of Iran. She becomes his second and favored wife, and together they have a son named Kai Khosrow. Farangis's loyalty to her husband's Iranian kingdom is evident in her actions throughout the epic. After Siyavash's tragic death, she demonstrates unwavering commitment to his legacy by supporting her son, Kai Khosrow, in his quest to gather an Iranian army and seek revenge for his father's murder:

They put the saddles on their steeds,  
 Those fleet and famous steeds, while Farangis  
 Assumed the helmet, and all three departed  
 Like wind and eagerly toward Iran,  
 But secretly and taking all precautions. (Ferdowsi 2: 377)





Farangis's actions in mobilizing her son and aiding his mission reflect her deep devotion and resilience. Her role emphasizes the complex interplay between personal allegiance and national identity, as she straddles her loyalty to both her Turanian heritage and her commitment to the Iranian cause. Farangis's story illustrates the depth of her character, showing how she navigates her dual heritage to honor her late husband's legacy and secure justice for her family.

These characters, along with Sudabeh, Jarireh, Manizeh, Sindokht, Humay Chehrzad, and many others, vividly illustrate the multifaceted nature of women during the Heroic Age of the *Shahnameh*. Each character embodies a range of attributes and plays distinct roles in the narrative, from the virtuous and loyal Farangis to the scheming and ambitious Sudabeh. Notably, women in the Heroic Age display a remarkable level of agency and independence compared to those in the previous part. Characters such as Manizheh, Rudabeh, and Tahmineh assert their own desires and make significant decisions that impact the course of the epic. Even though their autonomy is still constrained by societal norms, these women often act with greater self-determination and influence than their counterparts in the Mythical Age. This era showcases a dynamic shift where female characters, while still operating within patriarchal constraints, exhibit a stronger presence and play more active roles in shaping their destinies and the narrative.

### 2.3. The Historical Age

The Historical Age in the *Shahnameh* shifts focus to a more documented and historical narrative, beginning with a brief mention of the Arsacid dynasty. This period follows the history of Alexander the Great and precedes the rise of Ardashir I, the founder of the Sasanian Empire. The text provides a detailed and accurate account of Sasanian history, highlighting the significant events and rulers of this era. The portrayal of the fall of the Sassanids and the subsequent Arab conquest is depicted with a romanticized lens, adding a dramatic and emotional depth to the historical recounting. This period reflects a transition from myth and legend to more historical documentation, capturing the grandeur and decline of one of Persia's most renowned empires. (Sharifpour and Ehsani 251)

In the third part of the *Shahnameh*, the depiction of women also undergoes a notable transformation compared to the earlier sections of the poem. While the second half of the *Shahnameh* features independent and assertive women, the historical section portrays women primarily as subservient adjuncts to men. In the Historical Age, women who attempt to act independently often face implicit disapproval or fail to achieve their objectives. This shift in the portrayal of women may reflect the actual societal norms of the Sasanian period, where women were more secluded from public affairs and had limited control over their own lives (Davis 90).

For instance, Gordiyeh is one of the important characters in the Historical Age of the epic. She is the sister of the warrior Bahram Chubineh, who rebels against both King Hormozd and Khosrow Parviz. In the narrative, Gordiyeh is depicted with notable depth and individuality. She passionately argues against her brother's rebellion:



O shrewd, ambitious chief! If I  
 Say much thou wilt not hear me but display  
 Ill-temper and ill-nature. Call to mind  
 The saying of the aphorist of Balkh:  
 ‘when any one shall truth from hiding bring,  
 And tell thy faults, truth is a bitter thing.’  
 Think not to waste thy country for thou hast  
 Thy share of earth. (Ferdowsi 8: 221)

Despite her strong and persuasive arguments, her advice is disregarded, and she retreats in despair, highlighting her limited power in a male-dominated society. Gordiyeh's inability to change the course of events or save her brother from his eventual downfall underscores the constrained role of women in this age of the epic. Ultimately, she becomes one of the many women in Khosrow Parviz's harem, her earlier significance reduced despite her initial assertiveness and intelligence.

Conversely, Shirin's character in the third part of the *Shahnameh* shows a different side of female power. In contrast to Gordiyeh, Shirin does have some control over her fate, but her story is marked by intense court intrigue and severe challenges. Because of her absolute influence over Khosrow Parviz, she faces accusations of impurity and witchcraft. And her character is tainted by her actions, including the poisoning of her rival Maryam:

Thenceforth the greatness of the Shah increased  
 And what had been a moon became a sun.  
 His days were spent with Caesar's daughter; she  
 Was chief within his bower. Because of her  
 Shirin was sore, her cheeks were ever wan  
 With envy till at last she gave her bane,  
 And Caesar's lovely daughter ceased to be. (Ferdowsi 8: 389)

This transition from earlier heroines like Manizeh and Rudabeh, who could assert their agency more freely, to Shirin's more troubled path underscores a broader change in the epic's depiction of female power. In the Heroic Age, women like Manizeh and Rudabeh could act independently and influence their destinies with relative freedom. However, by Shirin's time, women's roles become more constrained, and achieving status often requires navigating complex and morally ambiguous situations. Shirin's need to eliminate her rival to secure her place in Khosrow Parviz's harem highlights how women's power increasingly comes with significant challenges and moral compromises.

Despite the generally subservient roles of women, a few female rulers emerge in the Historical Age of the *Shahnameh*. These rulers, such as Queen Pourandokht, are depicted with a degree of embarrassment and skepticism by the poet: “Tis but crude policy when women rule” (Ferdowsi 9:56). However, historical accounts suggest that Pourandokht's rule was marked by





justice and fairness, even if it was short and uneventful. The contrast between the poet's skepticism and the historical accounts of her rule highlights a dramatic change in the status of women at the end of the Sasanian era, suggesting a period where traditional gender roles were both challenged and reinforced.

Furthermore, the contrasting depiction of Pourandokht with earlier female rulers like Humay Chehrzad shows a significant shift in the *Shahnameh's* narrative approach to female leadership. In the Heroic Age, characters like Humay Chehrzad were portrayed with a degree of respect and admiration, reflecting their active roles and abilities. However, by the time of Pourandokht in the Historical Age, the portrayal of women in power becomes more complicated. This shift highlights a growing concern about gender roles and the legitimacy of women in positions of authority. The changing portrayal underscores a period of transition, revealing a more ambivalent stance toward female rulers and their roles in governance.

In fact, the story of Azadeh in the Historical Age of the *shahnameh* highlights the dangers of transgressing the conventional gender roles. The story of Azadeh begins when she is invited by King Bahram to join him on a hunting expedition. During the hunt, Azadeh challenges Bahram with seemingly impossible tasks: to transform a female gazelle into a male, a male into a female, and to pin the leg of one gazelle to its ear. Some sources suggest that her challenges were designed to prevent the king from successfully killing the animals. Despite the difficulty of the tasks, Bahram manages to complete them; he uses his arrows to alter the appearance of the gazelles, making the male look like a female and the female look as though it has horns. However, rather than appreciating Bahram's skill, Azadeh accuses him of being aided by demons. Her accusation infuriates Bahram, leading him to trample her to death with his horse.

Azadeh's story provides a stark commentary on gender roles and the consequences of defying them. As a musician who intrudes into the traditionally male domain of hunting, Azadeh challenges established gender norms. Her demands during the hunt reflect her presumption to influence and test the king's abilities. This intrusion into a male-dominated space, coupled with the subsequent humiliation she causes Bahram, leads to her brutal death. Azadeh's fate underscores the rigid gender expectations of the time: women were expected to remain in the domestic spheres and avoid overstepping boundaries set by societal norms. Her actions are perceived as a direct threat to male authority and dignity, and her severe punishment highlights the intolerance for women who challenge these roles.

Overall, the third part of the *Shahnameh* reveals a significant shift toward a more patriarchal portrayal of women compared to earlier sections of the epic. In this segment, women's roles become more restricted and subservient, reflecting a societal view where their independence is often met with failure or disapproval. This change is evident in the characters' experiences, such as Shirin, who, despite her significant influence over Khosrow Parviz, must navigate intense court politics and moral ambiguity to secure her position. This shift in representation can be seen as reflecting the historical realities of the time. As the *Shahnameh* progresses, the epic mirrors the evolving cultural norms that increasingly constrained women's



roles and agency. Ferdowsi's portrayal of women during this period highlights the complex interplay between the narrative's depiction of gender dynamics and the broader societal attitudes of his time. The contrast between the more empowered female figures in earlier parts of the *Shahnameh* and the more constrained roles in the later sections underscores the changing perceptions of gender and power within the epic's context.

### 3. Conclusion

The *Shahnameh* presents a diverse collection of narratives showcasing female characters in a variety of roles and positions. Its portrayal of women across the three sections\_ mythical, heroic, and historical\_ provides a unique depiction that reflects both their strengths and the limitations imposed by societal norms. The stories offer a detailed look at how women navigate their societal positions, highlighting their achievements while also addressing the constraints they face. Through this multifaceted portrayal, the epic provides a comprehensive view of women's contributions to the epic's broader narrative and to the cultural and historical context of their time.

The Mythical Age of the *Shahnameh* serves as the foundation for the epic, setting the stage for the epic's mythological and cultural context within ancient Persia. Women in this era, including figures like Arnavaz and Shahnaz, are shown to have both symbolic and practical significance. However, despite their important contributions, their roles are mostly domestic, centered around their duties as wives and mothers rather than as independent characters. While their influence is notable, it remains limited to traditional female roles within the domestic sphere.

The Heroic Age of the *Shahnameh* continues to explore women's roles, presenting characters who, despite the constraints imposed by societal expectations, exhibit remarkable courage, intelligence, and influence. In this section, women often play crucial roles in the dramatic events of the epic, showing that their contributions are essential to the unfolding of the narrative. These women challenge traditional notions of passivity, demonstrating that they can be powerful agents of change and critical players in the epic's most significant moments. Their presence as active participants in the heroic struggles displays their ability to impact the course of events despite the prevailing gender norms.

In the Historical Age of the *Shahnameh*, there is a notable shift toward a more patriarchal portrayal of women compared to the previous sections of the epic. In this segment, women's roles become increasingly restricted and subservient, mirroring a societal view where their independence is often met with challenges and disapproval. Ferdowsi's depiction of women in this period highlights the changing dynamics of gender and power, contrasting sharply with the more empowered female figures seen in earlier sections. This transition reflects the historical realities of the time, as the *Shahnameh* adapts to the evolving cultural norms that increasingly limit women's roles and autonomy.



Overall, the *Shahnameh* offers a rich and complex portrayal of women, illustrating how they navigate and sometimes transcend the constraints of their societal roles. This varied depiction underscores both the recognition of women's strengths and the persistent challenges they face, providing a profound commentary on their place and power within the epic's historical and cultural context. It highlights the multifaceted nature of women's experiences and contributions, offering a thoughtful exploration of their roles and significance throughout different periods of its narrative.





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