

The Situation of Women in Sasanian Iran: Reflections on the Story of Bahrām Gōr and his Mistress

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Abstract

The concept of history of which the Zoroastrian priests and their secretaries were in charge in the Sasanian period was different from what is known as history nowadays. History was a means of education, glorification of kings, and preservation of the social order. Acts, myths, and legends were intertwined in historical accounts. Thus, historians were in a privileged position to modify history in favour of its educational aims, or even to make history more impressive by using rhetorical and figurative language such as metaphors and hyperboles.

It is commonly believed that the situation of women in Iran in the Sasanian era had improved more significantly than that in the rest of the world, and that the women were better treated than in all previous epochs of Iran's history. But there is a story about the king Bahrām Gōr that testifies to tyranny and injustice towards women. It is a hunting story where Bahrām Gōr cruelly causes the death of one of his mistresses, who was in his company. This story has been told and re-interpreted in, e.g., Ferdousi's *Shāhnāme* and Ṣa'ālebi's *Ghorar al-siyar*. This essay will study the situation of women in Sasanian Iran based on Bahrām Gōr's story.

Keywords: Bahrām Gōr, Ferdousi, *Shāhnāme*, Moqaddasi, Ṣa'ālebi, Sasanian history, Iranian historiography, situation of women

Introduction

Little evidence and few documents are available on ancient Iran, and it is thus impossible to draw a complete picture of the situation of women in that society.¹ There are two main, and strongly opposing, views about the status of women in ancient Iran. 'Alavi (1380: 9–11) holds that in ancient Iran, women were highly esteemed and that a woman was considered as a full member of the family. She was active in all the affairs and business of married life, equal to her husband. 'Alavi further claims that as Iran's history progressed, the situation of women improved along with their social position, so that in the Sasanian epoch, for instance, some reforms were made in favour of women in contrast to the Arsacid period.

Contrary to this, there is another hypothesis whose followers believe that a matriarchy flourished in the pre-Indo-European period, but that after the immigration of the Aryans and their settlement on the Iranian plateau, the matriarchal system declined and was replaced by a rough, patriarchal structure in which the women were isolated, marginalized, and commodified (Mazdāpur 1383: 87).

In support of the view that the Sasanian society was a harsh patriarchy, the purpose of the present essay is to exemplify the oppression of women in that society by

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analysing a story recorded in a number of Persian literary works claiming to reflect Sasanian history.² Furthermore, the article will demonstrate how this story was re-interpreted in order to be acceptable at the time when the literary work was produced, several centuries after the alleged incident.

The Iranian view of documenting history

The concept of history of which the Zoroastrian priests and their secretaries were in charge in the Sasanian period was different from what is known as history nowadays. History was a means of education, glorification of the kings and preservation of the social order. Hence, facts, myths, and legends were intertwined in historical accounts. Thus, historians were in a privileged position to modify history in favour of its educational aims, or even to make history more impressive by using rhetorical and figurative language such as metaphors and hyperboles.

The Persian national epos *Shāhnāme*, composed by Ferdousi, is a mirror that reflects the behaviour and deeds of the Iranians over the course of centuries. This great epos portrays the nation's temperament and is a monument to the culture and lifestyle of the Iranians throughout history. *Shāhnāme* is a tangible world, like the empirical world in which we now live, described in a way appropriate for its own age, which also includes aspects of its predecessors' customs and conventions ('Alavi 1380: 36). Although *Shāhnāme* embraces miscellaneous mythical and heroic elements, Ferdousi's aim was not to create a mere collection of narrations and myths, but to versify Iran's history based on old narratives. From this perspective, *Shāhnāme* should be considered as a historical epos (Ḥariri 1365: 95).

Nevertheless, the pre-Islamic Iranians' methods of historiography, of analysing and recording history, are obviously different from what are called historiography and historical criticism in the West. First, history and historiography in pre-Islamic Iran were deeply influenced by Zoroastrianism, which provides the ethical and intellectual basis for conceptualizing history. This emphasizes human behaviour and deed. It makes the behaviour meaningful, and therefore worthy of being recorded and kept in memory. Societies are managed by kings whose legitimacy is appraised by Ahura Mazda's favour (*farrah*), which supports the "good" king's reign.

The kings are society's guardians and legislators, and the founders of social structures. History is the account of their performance: records of the wars, monarchic discourses, the structures they establish, the social and political events of their age, and their ethical and intellectual position. As assumed in religious circles, where the actual historiographers were to be found, history is not only seen in retrospect, but also as embracing the future. The idea that the general pattern of history has been determined since the beginning of creation has probably caused the relative absence of historical criticism in Iranian historiography. History was not considered a spring for quenching the thirst of truth seekers, but as

² For further studies on the situation of women in pre-Islamic Iran, see e.g. Sattāri 1373, Barāhani 1363, and Ḥasanābādi 1381.

having a principally didactic and ethical aim. In the Sasanid epoch, the purpose of history was to maintain and develop the prevalent ethical standards as well as to deepen religious and national concepts.

The historiographers generally emerged from the “secretary” class who were closely related to the clergy and the privileged aristocratic classes; in other words, the secretaries were in their service. They promulgated the thoughts of those classes and defended their interests. History was the medium for teaching stability and unity in society. It was utilized to support the nation’s common heritage and to propagate idealism. Hence, not only was a historian a biased scholar, but he was also both the protector and the propagator of the social, ethical, and political values by which the Sasanid governors and elite were revered. To accomplish its social mission, history should be persuasive and interesting to read. Thus, the Sasanid historians incorporated myths and legends in their historiography in order to fulfil a common cultural purpose.

Figurative devices like metaphor, metonymy, simile, and hyperbole were sometimes employed to elevate the impressiveness of the narrations, while noxious or redundant details were easily distorted or omitted from the narratives. In this kind of historiography, folk tales did not confront any serious obstacles on their way to being added to the historical realm with the same value as historical events. In fact, these folk tales were seen as accounts of historical events (Yarshater 1983: 367–369). It is thus clear that a historian had the privilege to add or omit historical events, and historicize what he himself or the Sasanian establishment believed in, and that there was a purpose behind such distortions.

The aim of this relatively long introduction is to argue that the story to follow must not be regarded as an example of something notorious or abnormal at the time. On the contrary, it was implicitly valued because it actually reveals the society’s moral standards. Furthermore, it was attributed to a king, who was not to be blamed in historical accounts of this kind. Whether or not it ever happened is not the issue; the important thing is that it reflects the prevalent ethical standards. Thus, if the historians had ever doubted its positive impact, they would have omitted it immediately. We should also bear in mind that Ferdousi, Ṣa‘ālebi and others (see below) have just retold earlier narrations, and especially Ferdousi, famous for his integrity, is known for not distorting his sources, although he might not agree with some of them.

The story of Bahrām Gōr and his mistress

Bahrām (Vahrām) V, known as Bahrām Gōr, was the son of Yazdgird I. When a child, he was sent to Al-Hirah to be educated by No‘man, son of Mundhir, who was the approved governor of the region. No‘man undertook Bahrām’s training and brought him up willingly. Al-Hirah belonged to the Sasanian domain, and its ruler was appointed by the Iranian king. The reason for sending away his son was that, after Bahrām’s birth, his father was notified by the astrologers that his son would not ascend to the throne unless he was brought up in another land. Hence, Yazdgird despatched his son to Al-Hirah, and there he was trained skilfully in the fields of horse-

manship, hunting, philosophy, and literature. While still a young prince, he demonstrated great physical strength and agility (Yarshater 1983: 381).

Few of the Sasanian kings were as popular as Bahrām V. He was benevolent to all people, and often exempted his subjects from part of the taxes to be paid. Numerous stories have been narrated regarding his prowess in battles with the northern tribes and Byzantium, his love affairs, and his hunting skills. These narratives, which are stylistically similar to Münchhausen's tales, were not only used in literature, but also employed in the patterns of carpets, curtains, and other textiles for centuries. There are even some existing silver cups on which Bahrām's hunting scenes are depicted. (Christensen 1936: 271).

Ṣa'ālebi (1372: 313–14) writes that one day, after finishing his education, Bahrām asked Mundhir to complete his benevolence towards him by providing him with the pleasure of flirting with beautiful minstrels and girls in order to achieve perfect joy. Glad of Bahrām's confidence in him and their relationship, Mundhir sent some beautiful, well-tempered, and exquisite girls to him. Mundhir also gave him *carte blanche* to drink and relish the girls. Thus, Bahrām enjoyed all the joys and passions of youth.

In *Tajāreb al-Omam* (1373: 220, also quoted in *Shāhnāme*, vol. 5, 253) we read:

Bahrām said: I ask you to buy me two concubines for my sexual pleasure and for listening to their songs, and I wish them to bear my children. So, Mundhir purchased four beautiful singing bondmaids and bestowed them on Bahrām. Thereafter, Bahrām spent much time on indulgence.

Bahrām Gōr was very adept at archery and hunting, and he was a sybaritic man of pleasure, so that "he had shared his days with love, elation, music, hunting and playing" (Ṣa'ālebi 1372: 313). Christensen (1936: 272) holds that "plein de vigueur et de force vitale lui-même, Vahrām exhortait tout le monde à jouir de la vie". Apparently it was customary that kings were accompanied by women, minstrels, and bondmaids when hunting in order to increase their pleasure. The matter can be observed by the scenes depicted on cups, coins, and other remaining artefacts from that age. For instance, the patterns of Tāq-e Bostān (Arch of Garden) depict Khosrou Parviz's hunting park and five rows of attendants. The upper part of the rock carving shows a boat in which many women are sitting clapping hands and singing. In the midst of the relief, the king, standing in the leading boat, is drawing a bow, and a woman is playing the harp at his right hand. Behind this boat, there is another boat full of female harpists. ('Alavi 1388: 64) In another carving at Tāq-e Bostān, the king is depicted at the top and his horse is ready to jump in pursuit of the prey, while rows of women, some standing in respect, and some playing instruments, are carved behind the king. (Christensen 1936: 463)

Probably this custom was first established by Bahrām Gōr, for such scenes were not recorded or seen before him. There is an engraved cup in the Ermitage museum in St. Petersburg on which Bahrām V, recognizable by his crown, is sitting on a camel with his young mistress in tandem. The different heights of the figures shows their social classes as the king and a woman. (Christensen 1936: 271). In *Ghorar al-siyar*, there is evidence that Bahrām Gōr invented this way of hunting: "one day

he [Bahrām Gōr] decided to experience all pleasures such as hunting, wine, minstrelsy, and concubines simultaneously. Therefore, he mounted the best female camel and placed his minstrel Āzādvar in tandem. They left for hunting carrying a wine goatskin and a golden cup” (Ṣa‘ālebi 1372: 313).

The event I will focus on occurred on one of these hunting occasions. Whether or not it actually took place is not the main issue. The important conclusion we can draw is that this account was regarded as important enough and of such high educational value that it was recorded in several historiographic works. Furthermore, as Nöldeke (1879: 90) also points out, this story reveals a picture of an ideal Iranian hero-king, who killed his beloved mistress without any discomfort of conscience because she had not approved of his shooting skills.

The event can be summarized as follows:

One day Bahrām Gōr, accompanied by one of his mistresses, sat on a camel and went hunting while his mistress, probably named Āzādvar, sat with him in tandem. The mistress asked the king coquettishly to change a male gazelle into a female, and a female one into a male, using his arrows. Then the king shot two arrows at the female gazelle so that the arrows penetrated her head like two antlers; and then he shot a two-headed arrow striking the antlers of a male gazelle, so that both of the antlers were detached from the head. The maker of the cup has engraved this arrow in a particular way, as a crescent. (Christensen 1936: 271–272)

Yarshater (1983: 381–382) narrates the event in another way:

In another instance, dared by a female companion, he proposed to “sew” together the ear and foot of a deer with an arrow. First, he shot an arrow, which barely touched the deer’s ear. When the deer then scratched its ear, he left fly another arrow, which “sewed” its foot and ear together.

None of these two sources mentions how the incident ended and the reason for this omission is unknown. Ferdousi, in his *Shāhnāme*, which is apparently well known for its originality and the authenticity of its textual sources, narrates the event and its aftermath (Ferdousi 1363: 255–56) similarly to Moqaddasi (1381: 516), but with different interpretations. According to Moqaddasi’s version, after his successful performance, Bahrām threw the girl off the horse. “You examined me hard, and you intended to divulge my weakness” said Bahrām. Then he killed her. The same narrative was recorded by Ṣa‘ālebi (1372: 313), but its end differs from the previous narration:

Having finished such an ostentatious feat of archery, he [Bahrām Gōr] dropped the girl under the camel’s legs in wrath. “You wished to mortify me with your excessive wants,” cried Bahrām, muttering imprecations. The girl was squashed beneath the camel’s legs, and her recovery was very slow, while some narrations claim that she died in that cruel way.

The anonymous author of *Tajāreb al-Omam* (1373: 222–223) does not mention the innocent girl’s death, although he splits the story into two parts:

There was a very dear mistress of Bahrām Gōr whose name was Āzādvar. Bahrām took her hunting, and she practised minstrelsy en route while sitting on Bahrām's horse in tandem. One day, Bahrām, accompanied by Āzādvar, came across a gazelle. "Where do you wish my arrow strike on its body?" asked the king. "I wish you to couple its head to its leg," said Āzādvar. Bahrām drew his bow and struck the gazelle's forehead. Another arrow coupled its leg and head while the gazelle was scratching its forehead. Then he threw the girl off the horse wrathfully, although he loved her very much, because the king would have been humiliated if he had failed to fulfil what she wanted.

Once again, he and a concubine went hunting. A male and a female antelope appeared. "How would you like me to shoot? Where should the arrow strike?", he asked the concubine, "I will be pleased if you change the male into a female and vice versa," she replied. So Bahrām shot two arrows at the female antelope's forehead and it appeared like a male. Then he aimed at the male antelope's antlers and shot two arrows, so that both of them came off. Sending back the concubine to the palace immediately, he swore never to go hunting accompanied by women again.

Most of the sources referred to recount that the great Sasanian monarch brutally killed an innocent girl, who was his mistress and had spent much time with him, by throwing her under the camel's legs, merely on account of a demand which the king himself had persuaded the girl to make.

It must be assumed that such events indeed took place in the Sasanian period, and not only did they not subvert the High monarchy, but they also testified in a positive way to His Majesty's severity and harshness. The preservation of such narratives of cruel scenes, whether done by the Sasanian historians or the narrators of the Islamic period, was evidence of the monarch's severity, and served to intimidate those who were either his adversaries or disobedient to him. So, according to the truism of history and historiography of the Sasanian period, this event ought to have been expunged from history if it had detracted from the king's reputation – not just Bahrām Gōr's reputation, but rather the reputation of the monarchy. Such deletions have taken place in a range of historical records, like, for example, the records about Yazdgird I and his elder son, Shāpur. Bahrām Gōr's father, Yazdgird I aroused the dissatisfaction of the priests and elites, and they, in spite of being aware of the atrocity of regicide in Iranian culture, murdered him in a remote part of Khurasan, attributing his death to his horse. There was also a total silence in historiography about the alleged murder of his elder son. He was, furthermore, called "the Wicked" while non-Iranian sources present him as a benefactor.

It is also interesting to note the testimonies about reactions to Bahrām Gōr's murder of Āzādvar. Ṣa'ālebi records that when Mundhir, the king of Hira, where Bahām Gōr had been raised, was informed about the event, he prayed for God's blessings upon Bahrām and protection from all harm. He also commanded the royal painters to draw Bahrām, the minstrel girl, the female camel, the antelope, and the way the event had occurred on the wall of the feast hall of Khawarnaq Palace (1372: 313–14). This shows that the king's act was approved of.

Now I wish to focus on four authors who have mentioned this event in their books. First, we should know the intention of their literary works. Doubtlessly, these

authors were either Sho‘ubi,³ or influenced by Sho‘ubi thought; and their intention in writing their books was first of all to preserve the Iranian culture and history, which were gradually being forgotten, along with rekindling the Iranians’ injured nationalism, and secondly, to remind the Arabs of the history of Iranian culture and civilization. The Arabs called the Iranians “Ajam”, meaning non-Arabs, and they were proud of their new religion Islam, but ashamed of the custom of entombing their daughters alive. Obviously, these authors reacted to Bahrām’s killing of his mistress, since it would put a blemish on the Iranians to show that they had also committed such cruelties to women as the Arabs were known to have done.

Among these authors, Ṣa‘ālebi only ambiguously refers to the death of the mistress. According to this account, Bahrām dropped the girl under the camel’s legs and cried “You wished to mortify me with your excessive wants,” muttering imprecations. The girl was squashed beneath the camel’s legs, and her recovery was very slow. Ṣa‘ālebi also note that some narrations claim that she died in that cruel way (1372: 313).

The unknown author of *Tajāreb al-Omam*, probably assisted by ‘Abdollah Ebn-e Moqaffa’, as supposed by the editors (1373: 12), has divided the story of the event into two parts in both of which Bahrām is successful, but there is no mention of any killing of the mistress, perhaps because of the Sho‘ubi influence in this work. However, in one of the parts, the scene where the girl is thrown off the camel by Bahrām is mentioned, and at the end of both stories Bahrām decides never again to go hunting accompanied by women. It is also written that Bahrām was irritated by the mistress’s strange request (1373: 322–323). Since the narrations and events in *Tajāreb al-Omam* are the same as in the other three sources, even in their details, it is unlikely that their ends would differ considerably. Therefore, the sole conclusion to be drawn is that the ending, i.e., the murder of the mistress, has been distorted or even deleted. The author’s intention could have been to give a more favourable picture of pre-Islamic Iranian culture.

In his *Āfarinesh va Tārikh*, Moqaddasi respects the authenticity of the event and mentions the murder at the end of the story. However, he somehow tries to justify Bahrām’s cruelty by writing “I swear by God that this event is impossible, unless it were a mere accident” (1381: 516).

But how does the highly esteemed poet, Ferdousi, whose nationalism and authenticity have never been questioned, and both of which he has proved, react to this event? He was sure that the story would pave the way for Turkish and Arab mistreatment of Iranians. On the other hand, deleting the story was not congruent with his integrity. He was more attentive than Moqaddasi who first told the story, but at the end swore that it must have been fictitious or accidental. It was obvious to Ferdousi that Bahrām had slain this innocent girl heinously, since he himself had urged the girl to dare him in hunting. In order to justify Bahrām, Ferdousi tried to attribute an insulting behaviour to the girl, to show that this caused her death, not the strange request. So, he describes how, having fulfilled the girl’s demand triumphantly, Bahrām asked her:

³ For more information on the Sho‘ubiye movement, see Momtāhen (1385).

Oh moon-face, how was it?
 Āzāde poured out a brook of tears.
 She answered the king: this is not boldness
 You are not a man, you are a madman.
 (*Shāhnāme*, vol. 5, 256).

So, Bahrām's reaction to such contempt would appear reasonable.

From the horse smote her Bahrām's hand
 Pushed down was she, fell over the land.
 He passed the camel on the beauty's body,
 Weltered her chest, her hand, harp bloody...
 Beneath the camel's legs she was slain,
 With no lass he went hunting again.
 (*Shāhnāme*, vol. 5, 256).

The mistress first intended to mortify the king by demanding such a strange thing, but Bahrām understood her intention:

If I failed to please thy request / would in shame my character rest
 (*Shāhnāme*, vol. 5, 256).

When the mistress observed his success, she thus, according to Ferdousi, began insulting and reproaching him. As a result of such imprudent behaviour, she deserved death, i.e., what she received by Bahrām's hand.

Conclusions

The issue under discussion is not whether the event described above actually happened or not. The important point is that this story has been recorded as an honourable act of Bahrām Gōr's. We can thus conclude that what Bahrām Gōr did to Āzādvar was not only culturally acceptable but also laudable. This story, as well as other accounts of mistreatment of women in the Sasanid era, indicates the low value of women and the oppression they faced in pre-Islamic Iran.

In fact, this picture was so ugly that writers in early Islamic times, such as Ferdousi and Moqaddasi, felt it impossible to retell the story without adding some justification and interpretation of this evil act, in order to save face for the Iranians in the eyes of the Arabs. Moqaddasi, as Shafi'i argues, is the first person who interpreted the transcendental myths in the age of reason (in Bahār 1381: 373). Ferdousi actually frequently interpreted the stories he re-told, and writes in justification:

Do not assume it is a lie or a legend
 The world's way is not the same to the end.
 From it, what is of the reason, thou gain,
 Secret and symbol art what remain.
 (*Shāhnāme*, vol. 3, 136)

Ferdousi thus persuades the reader to interpret the story. Focusing on the reason for Ferdousi's and Moqaddasi's particular interpretations and justifications is in itself an interesting study. This subject has, to a certain degree, been dealt with in a sep-

arate article in Persian (see Ḥasanābādi 1386 where Moqaddasi is discussed), but more remains to be done in this area.

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