# Review Article

# One Epos and Some Ruckus: In Search of Lost Sources of the *Shāhnāme*

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**Abstract**

Mohl, an early editor and translator of the *Shāhnāme*, began the discussion on Ferdowsi's sources in the *Shāhnāme* in 1878. From that time until now, it has been one of main issues of discussion among experts on the *Shāhnāme* and Iranian culture. One can find various theories on Ferdowsi's sources in the numerous works and articles which are published ever so often. One of the latest works in this field is Kumiko Yamamoto's book *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry.*

In the present article, first, various theories about Ferdowsi's sources are classified in three groups with reference to their proponents, and then each of these theories is critically and briefly analysed. After a detailed introduction to Kumiko Yamamoto's work, it is evaluated in view of the different theories proposed for the sources of the *Shāhnāme*. The present author favours the theory of both oral and written sources in the genesis of the *Shāhnāme*, and, in light of this, some strengths as well as weaknesses of this work are discussed in this extended review.

## Background

In the Qajar period, under the reign of Nāṣer al-Din Shāh (1848–1896), Mohl (1878), an early editor and translator of the *Shāhnāme*, started doing methodological research about the sources of this book.[1] In his preface, even though he mentioned two types of sources, oral and written, he implicitly took a stand for oral sources. However, he started an interesting, long and, of course, important discussion, full of commotion. After some time, questioning Mohl's view, Nöldeke (1920: 62) claimed that the *Shāhnāme* was based only on one written source, most likely the book of Abu Manṣur ʿAbd al-Razzāq, i.e. the *Shāhnāme-ye manṣur*, of which only the preface remained.[2] Minorsky (1964: 260–73), Taqizāde (1921: 17–33, 1362) and Qazvini (1363: 20) followed Nöldeke and supported his theory. Following the theory of a written source, de Blois (1992: 122–124; 1998) added that Ferdowsi used more than one such source for his work. On the other hand, Mary Boyce (1957: 36; 2002) demonstrated the role of oral tradition in the transmission of the national legend and its influence on the Middle and New Persian epics.

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[1] Sincere thanks to Carina Jahani for comments on an earlier version of this review.
[2] The Persian version of this preface was edited and published by Qazvini (1363: 30–90) and its English translation was published by Minorsky (1964: 260–73).

From that time until now, the fire of this discussion has lived on and remained. Its flame has sometimes been very low, as if it was a clear and obvious matter that needed no further discussion or research; and sometimes it was so bright and shiny that researchers have assumed it definitely to be their task to write something about this important matter. After the publication of Lord's (especially 1960, 1991) and Parry's research (1971) about the oral storytelling tradition and poetry in Homer's works and also on oral traditions of the Slavonic peoples, some scholars applied their findings to the case of Ferdowsi's sources. This brought forth a new discussion about the sources of the *Shāhnāme*. After that, we constantly find new articles and books in this case trying to prove one of the above outlined views. Therefore, it is safe to state that the discussion is still alive.

In fact, these scholars can be divided into three groups according to their opinions on the sources of the *Shāhnāme*. The first group consists of those scholars who advocate a written source, mainly the Sassanian *Khwatāynāmag* through Abu Manṣuri's *Shāhnāme*. From this group we can mention Khāleqi Moṭlaq (1372; 1998; 1381; 2009)[3] and Omidsālār who, in an interview (published in Ruyāni, 1386: 32), declared: "Ferdowsi had Abu Manṣuri's *prose Shāhnāme* in front of himself and his art was that he changed it into verse as simply as he could".

The second group are the supporters of oral sources who hold the narrations of ancient minstrels, named Gōsān, and storytellers in the early Islamic period to be the main source of the *Shāhnāme*. Boyce (1957; 2002), Davidson (1994; 2000),  and Davis (1996; 1999) can be placed in this group. Among them, Davidson (1994; 2000) attempted to interpret the *Shāhnāme* as an oral composition; Ferdowsi, according to her view, not only inherited the older Iranian oral tradition, but also as an oral poet re-created new Persian oral poetry.[4]

Finally, in the third group, we can see the scholars such as Ṣafā (1333; 1374) and Bahār (1374) who take the middle way and believe that Ferdowsi used both written and oral sources. According to this view, the old, rich, and popular tradition of oral storytelling, performed by narrators, was prevalent among all Indo-Europeans, especially the Aryan tribes that inhabited the Iranian plateau. For a very long time, this tradition had preserved and transmitted ancient Iranian myths, fictions, and epic legends, as well as historical events. Most probably, even some religious texts, such as the *Avesta*, were also preserved and transmitted in the same way. In each period, the oral storytellers have had different names, e.g. *gōsān, xonyāgar, mohaddes̱, naqqāl, pahlavān, ‘āsheq*. After the wider spread of writing, some of those narrations were written down.

The most famous work to appear by this process, the Sassanian *Khwatāynāmag,* was composed in western Iran with religious and political intentions. In the Islamic

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[3]  Khāleqi Moṭlaq supports a written source of the Shāhnāme. In his various works, especially the latest one, i.e. Az Shāhnāme ta Khodāynāme (2009) he points to some of the books which were written before Ferdowsi as direct and indirect sources of the Shāhnāme. In this book, he, with a peremptory tone, wants to close the door on any further research in this field.
[4]  As Hanaway (2008: 106) has pointed out, although Komiko has used an analytical method derived from the excellent work done by Gaillard (1987) on the prose romance Samak-e ‘Ayyār, she has also been influenced by Lord and Parry's theory.

period, probably with patriotic motives, this book was translated into Persian as the Abu Manṣuri's *Shāhnāme,* and shortly after Ferdowsi used it for the *Shāhnāme.* An important neglected point is that the writing down of those narrations did not cause the extinction of this popular and important tradition. Thus it continued up to the time of Ferdowsi and he borrowed widely from it. Moreover, most of the later eposes and mythological-fictional works in the Islamic era have been formed under the influence of this oral tradition. It is obviously clear that writing and versifying them in the *Shāhnāme* and other epic and fictional works did not annihilate this important and popular tradition.[5] Even down to the present day, before the wider spread of mass media, especially radio and television, the tradition of oral storytelling was commonly encountered.[6]

Among the latest efforts to answer the question about the sources of the *Shāhnāme* is Kumiko Yamamoto's book, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry.* Kumiko Yamamoto has a PhD (2000) in Persian literature and Iranian studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. The book is based on her doctoral dissertation supervised by Philip G. Kreyenbroek. Now she is an independent researcher on Persian literature specializing in Persian epics and oral studies. She has written on the storytelling tradition (*naqqāli*) for the forthcoming *New History of Persian literature.*

## Introduction to the book

Yamamoto believes that the question whether Ferdowsi used oral or written sources for the *Shāhnāme,* which still dominates academic discussion, has already been answered and that further research in this matter is fruitless. It seems, according to her, that this issue cannot be proved with certainty in the absence of the relevant information on the textual tradition of the *Shāhnāme*; none of the potential written intermediate sources between the *Khwatāynāmag* – a hypothetical source of the *Shāhnāme* and other related works – and the *Shāhnāme* itself have been preserved down to the present. Therefore, the main aim of Yamamoto's book is to determine how the oral tradition interacted with the written one in the emergence of the *Shāhnāme.* It is not her intention to argue that the *Shāhnāme* is an oral epic because much evidence and strong reasons suggest that we are faced with a written and literary epic. Nonetheless, she maintains, it is questionable to pursue the traditional approach of arguing for written sources, because none of the primary texts have survived. This approach has, moreover, kept many from recognizing other aspects of the *Shāhnāme,* notably its stylistic and formal characteristics, which theories of oral composition may help to explain: e.g., recurring story motifs, formulaic expressions, and particular plot structures of stories of the *Shāhnāme.* Thus, Yamamoto wants to recognize the *Shāhnāme* as a written epic strongly influenced by oral tradition.

This work, as she maintains, will not deal with whether Ferdowsi used written or oral sources, but rather how oral tradition interacted indirectly with writing in the

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[5]  See more about these three groups, in Hassanābādi (1386; 1387).
[6]  When the writer of this paper was a child, he was personally present at some storytellers' gatherings in Mashhad, Khorāsān.

genesis of the *Shāhnāme*. The main question, as she claims, addressed in this book is therefore the broader one of the role and the influence of oral tradition in the early written Persian epics (Yamamoto 2003: xix). To find the truth about the sources of Ferdowsi's work, she believes that instead of relying on external evidence, we should rely on the *Shāhnāme* itself.

There are some references to both types of sources, oral and written, in the *Shāhnāme*. Phrases such as *I heard* (شنیدم), and *it is narrated* (روایت کردند) refer to oral sources, and at the same time phrases such as *I saw or read in a book* (برخواند از گفته باستان) or *someone read from the ancient book* (در کتاب خواندم/دیدم) clearly refer to written sources. Yamamoto's purpose, of course, is to search deeply in both the surface and the deep structures of the *Shāhnāme* (in a non-linguistic sense), and to make comparison with the structure of stories narrated by storytellers and minstrels.

In her introduction, the author maintains that in order to recognize the role of oral tradition in the genesis of the *Shāhnāme* and other written epics, she will review the spread and transmission of Iranian national legends, beginning from antiquity and ending with the written epic tradition. Ancient material was synthesized and recast into a new literary form intended for a Muslim audience.

In order to fully recognize both what Ferdowsi inherited and what he himself created, it is necessary to understand the process in which both written and oral traditions played a part in transmitting the national legend. Up to now, the written tradition, i.e. the *Shāhnāme* itself, has been studied extensively. However hardly any studies have been made about the oral tradition as of yet. Yamamoto therefore intends to concentrate on the role of oral tradition in the predominantly written environment in which the *Shāhnāme* was composed or compiled. After this introduction, she proceeds to present a brief history of the discussion about Ferdowsi's sources.

The first chapter deals with the technical nature of oral tradition and its methodological problems as well as the roots and the sources of the *Shāhnāme*. Since the inquiry into the background of the *Shāhnāme* has reached an impasse, another line of approach can be used which is, in fact, more useful and helpful, It is actually time, she says, to shift our attention from the background of the *Shāhnāme* to its actual characteristics and to its influence on later Persian literature. This new perspective will enable us to concentrate on specific features of the *Shāhnāme*, some of which may be explained by the factors of oral tradition and folklore as Rypka has suggested (Yamamoto 2003: 8). She has also reviewed the Oral Formulaic Theory (OFT),[7] one of the key theories about oral literature. In the rest of this chapter, she briefly introduces this theory and some of its criteria, claiming that

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[7] The Oral Formulaic Theory (OFT) began with Parry's studies on the Homeric works and became widely known with the publication of Lord's The Singer of Tales in 1960. In this book, Lord expanded Parry's unfinished study with an emphasis on South Slavic oral poetry. According to this approach, a set of tests were proposed to determine the orality of a work. These tests had been applied to as many as 150 separate epic traditions. Some of what scholars had once considered "defects" of the *Shāhnāme* (e.g., repetition of phrases, scenes, and episodes) were, in fact, positive signs of orality (for more information, see Foley 1985; 1988; 1990).

the *Shāhnāme* has many features that can be reviewed from the point of view of this theory.

In the second chapter, beginning with a brief explanation of the Oral Performance Model and of *naqqāli* (Iranian oral storytelling), the author seeks to explore the universe of *naqqāli*: its historical background, its formal features, audience, and environment (a coffee house, a naqqāl, a disciple, and the people), and the manner of its performance. The narrative material was generally drawn from the Persian epics like *Shāhnāme*, *Garshāsp-nāme*, *Farāmarz-nāme*, *Borzu-nāme*, *Bahman-nāme*, *Jahāngir-nāme*, *Sām-nāme*, *Khāvarān-nāme*, *Rostam-nāme*, and *Mokhtār-nāme* or from the romances like *Abu-Moslem-nāme*, *Dārāb-nāme-ye Tarsusi*, *Hamze-nāme*, *Samak-e ʿAyyār*, *Eskandar-nāme*, *Dārāb-nāme-ye Biqami*, *Hoseyn-e Kord-e Shabestari*, and *Amir Arsalān*. She then proposes an Oral Performance Model (OPM) and a set of criteria for explaining the possible influence of oral tradition on written text. This forms the basis of her Oral Performance Model in which she focuses on the influence of oral tradition on written records. Then, referring to a ṭumār (more or less complete notes used by the storyteller at a performance) and its structure, she has reviewed an oral narrative, Zariri's *Dāstān-e Rostam va Sohrāb: Revāyat-e naqqālān*[8] (The story of Rostam and Sohrab: the storyteller's narrative), as an Oral Performance Model. In this analysis, she applies some formal and thematic criteria based on various features of oral performance, which she claims have been obtained from some samples of *naqqāli* performances.

In chapter three, based on some evidence from *Tārikh-e Beyhaqi*, the author has shown that in the Ghaznavid period, poets, musicians, minstrels, and storytellers had an important position at the court. Among them, the role of storytellers was the most important, due to their access to the private quarters of the princes – which poets and minstrels did not have. Yamamoto therefore provides a historical framework of the role of naqqāli in the Ghaznavid period. After that, and before applying the Oral Performance Model to the *Shāhnāme*, she proposes the possibility of indirect influence of oral tradition on the *Shāhnāme* based on internal and external evidence provided from the *Shāhnāme*. She quotes Ferdowsi's statements about his sources, oral or written, and shows their distribution in a table, together with a list of the names of the different kings mentioned in the *Shāhnāme* (Yamamoto 2003: 68–73). At the end of this chapter, she concludes that Ferdowsi was at once both a transmitter and an evaluator of ancient traditions, which he preserved in written form. Ferdowsi's dual perspective on the traditions is most discernible in the stories of the Rostam cycle, where he sought to incorporate popular, and perhaps oral, stories into his work (Yamamoto 2003: 80)

In the fourth chapter, the author's aim is to apply the Oral Performance Model to one of the stories of the *Shāhnāme* (the story of Rostam in the reign of Keykhosrou) and thus to develop the OPM and apply it to a written text. She begins with the episode of Forud and ends when Keykhosrou killes Afrasiyāb and Garsivaz. By applying formal criteria of OPM to the story, she explains how it can be divided into suc-

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[8] For his complete biography and this work, see: Doostkhāh (2003).

cessive parts.[9] Then she applies thematic criteria of OPM to determine to what ex-
tent these divisions can affect the thematic structure of the stories. She finds some or
several repetitions and two major digressions. One of the obvious repetitions is
found in the stories where Tus is sent to fight with Afrasiyāb to avenge Syāvosh,
where everything, for the most part, goes the same way until Rostam arrives. Other
repetitions are found in the story of Keykhosrou in Gang-Behesht and in Gang-
Dezh. The digressions, as Yamamoto maintains, are the stories of Akvān-Div and of
Bizhan and Manizhe, where there seems to be no organic connection with Keykhos-
rou's war with Afrasiyāb, the central theme of the section. She holds that these repe-
titions and digressions can be seen as signs of influence from oral tradition and can
be explained by OPM as well.

After comparing this part of the *Shāhnāme* with the same narrative in Ṭabari and
Saʿālebi, Yamamoto divides this section of the *Shāhnāme* into several parts and, al-
though she holds that the formal criteria do not apply so much in this section, she
analyses its parts based on the formal and thematic criteria. She claims that by ap-
plying such criteria to this story one can determine the extent of the influence of oral
tradition on its structure. After this, she concludes that this story is strongly influ-
enced by oral tradition, or perhaps that Ferdowsi even based it wholly on oral tradi-
tion. The results of the Oral Performance Model appear to indicate that Ferdowsi
may have used oral performances conducted in a form comparable to naqqāli  as his
sources in composing some parts of the *Shāhnāme* but, in spite of this, she holds that
Ferdowsi's work is worthy of appreciation.

In the last chapter, Yamamoto argues that if oral tradition played a role in the gen-
esis of the *Shāhnāme*, as she tried to prove in the previous chapters, the question
arises as to whether it continued to be influential in later epics. To find an answer,
after providing some explanations about later epics, she applies the same model to
the *Garshāsp-nāme* of Asadi. Then she deals with the influence of the *Shāhnāme* in
the formation of later epics or secondary epics, based on their poets' understanding
of the *Shāhnāme*. Of course she frequently emphasizes that although the compilers
of later epics have constantly paid attention to Ferdowsi, and the later epics have
been created under the influence of the *Shāhnāme* and its success, those authors,
contrary to common opinion, do not merely imitate or reproduce the *Shāhnāme*. As
a result, these later epics have their own characteristics of style, motifs, and content,
which means that they must be redefined as a different genre. One of the most im-
portant differences is that the later epics are not necessarily concerned with the na-
tional tradition. They focus not on kings, but on heroes of the Sistani tradition,
which is different from the national legend. Furthermore, the shift from kings to
heroes is accompanied by structural and generic changes in the epics. In this, Asadi,
the author of the *Garshāsp-nāme*, is the first. Therefore, after a general introduction
to the *Garshāsp-nāme*, the author tries to apply OPM to one of its stories to deter-
mine the extent of influence of the *Shāhnāme* on the *Garshāsp-nāme* as well as the
degree of similarity and difference between them. In addition, she tries to evaluate

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[9]  Apparently, the basis of this division, in addition to the linkage of content, is the possibility of perform-
ance at one gathering by a naqqāl (storyteller).

the influence of oral performance on the *Garshāsp-nāme*, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In her short conclusion, the author emphasizes again that this study has sought to clarify the role of oral tradition in the development of the Persian written epic tradition. In order to accomplish this, Yamamoto's perspective has shifted from the origin of the *Shāhnāme* – the issue in which everything is examined except the text in question – to the characteristics and structure of the text itself. She holds that this study is an attempt to understand to what extent the epic poets' understanding of the nature of heroic stories was shaped by storytelling; and to answer the question, she has proposed an alternative approach to the study of oral tradition. She holds that what ultimately distinguishes oral literature from written literature is the factor of "performance", and therefore she has paid particular attention to the *naqqāli* performance, and has proposed a set of criteria for determining the influence of oral tradition on written epics. Such criteria are, in this study, called the "Oral Performance Model" including formal and thematic criteria (Yamamoto 2003: 140). Her final remark is that the influence of oral tradition on Persian epics was pervasive but indirect; Ferdowsi was not a *naqqāl* himself. In some parts of the *Shāhnāme*, such as the stories of Rostam, one can see characteristics ultimately derived from the requirements of oral performance; afterwards these characteristics became integral elements of the new genre of written epic poetry as can be seen in the later epics.

## Review

Considering the *Shāhnāme* as a written epic, Yamamoto tries to clarify the concept of oral tradition and evaluate its role in written tradition. Therefore, she first tries to specify the elements of oral tradition, and then to extract them through a *ṭumār-e naqqāl*,[10] and after that, to demonstrate them in the *Shāhnāme*, as the greatest sample of written tradition and in the *Garshāsp-nāme*, a later epic. By doing so, she wants to increase our knowledge of oral tradition and cast new light on this less studied point of Iranian culture. Based on *naqqāli* as a living sample of Iranian oral tradition in heroic stories, the work demonstrates some formal and stylistic aspects of oral performance and reveals the ways by which oral performance influenced the structure of written texts. Due to the shortage of estimable works about *naqqāli*, Yamamoto's description and analysis of this tradition is very important and useful, and it may be relevant to both oralists and Iranists. The author's approach is to shift the attention from Ferdowsi's sources to certain specific features of the *Shāhnāme* itself to determine what role oral transmission might have played in its formation. She reviews the Oral Formulaic Theory developed by Lord and Parry and Propp's theory of function in Russian fairy tales (1968) and other formalist approaches, while she herself knows that Lord and Parry believed that oral and written tradition are mutually exclusive and cannot coexist in the same text. In order to gain knowledge about probable features of oral tradition, she has noticed Iranian *naqqāli* and

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[10] The *ṭumār-e naqqāl* (the scroll of a storyteller) is a more or less complete story text, a kind of manuscript transmitted from master to disciple and used as notes to aid the memory in the oral performance.

has tried to obtain an example for the Oral Performance Model. By doing so, she has defined two groups of criteria: formal criteria for dividing the text into successive parts, and thematic criteria, which explain how these divisions can be influential in the thematic organization of the text. These criteria, according to her, are based on evidence from the *ṭumārs* (see fn. 9), which are used in the process of traditional oral storytelling. By reviewing the *naqqāli*'s narratives, she divides them into differ-ent parts such as chapter and episode according to main motifs and narrative de-vices. In the episode divisions, she considers narrative markers, which are generally used to indicate a shift of focus, such as:

از آن/این جانب، از آن/این روی on one/the other hand
اما بشنو از but listen from
اما چند کلام عرض کنیم از but we state some words about
حال باید دانست که now it must be known that

and temporal markers which signal a temporal sequence of events or internal divi-sions of an event or action, such as:

که در آن وقت at the time when
آن گاه then
ناگاه suddenly
چو When
از آن پس afterwards

She then divides each of them into subsets. She believes that Oral Performance Model (OPM) can reflect the orality of written epics. She reconstructs the OPM with these criteria for determining the influence of oral tradition on written narrative. By applying this model to the *Shāhnāme* and the *Garshāsp-nāme*, she tries to investi-gate the general or overall influence of pre-existing oral tradition on written story texts and to assess the extent of this influence. In fact, this study demonstrates the complex process whereby orality interacts with written tradition in the genesis of the *Shāhnāme* and the *Garshāsp-nāme*. In both cases, the explanation is somewhat over-ambitious and it seems that Yamamoto wants to make up for deficiencies in the OPM when it is applied to a written text by quoting numerous examples.

In her book, Yamamoto has shown that the *Shāhnāme* is an important text that we can use to examine the theories of epic compilation and the interaction of folklore and literature. With this description of the *Shāhnāme*, it is clear in advance that she, following Lord and Parry, will be a proponent of oral sources for the *Shāhnāme*. In addition, she criticizes the earlier approaches to the epic, in particular Davidson's re-cent efforts, in her two latest works *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings* (1994) and *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Literature* (2000), which have applied the Oral Formulaic Theory to the work of Ferdowsi to an extreme de-gree. This criticism is itself very admirable. In fact, Yamamoto disapproves of Davidson's view that the *Shāhnāme* has come into being as part of an oral tradition, a view which, also in my opinion, rests on a series of assumptions that cannot be supported by the *Shāhnāme*. She finds that Davidson has not paid enough attention to the internal evidence within the *Shāhnāme* (Yamamoto 2003: 66–67).

Yamamoto's book is constructive in that it introduces a new approach to the

*Shāhnāme* and produces a consistent and systematic analysis of its stylistic features. It is also critical of previous approaches to the *Shāhnāme*. In addition, such findings about the *Shāhnāme* can increase our perception and understanding of later epics which, known as imitations of the *Shāhnāme*, have generally been neglected from a theoretical perspective. Although the compilers of later epics have viewed the *Shāhnāme* as a model, at the same time they have been the best critics of the *Shāhnāme* and the neglect of them is indeed a problem. To make up for this important neglect, Yamamoto has examined the *Garshāsp-nāme* and tried to apply her model to this work too. Thus, she has reviewed how it diverges from the *Shāhnāme*. She has paid particular attention to the differences in element, which are related to oral tradition in these secondary epics.

Consistency, as Venetis (2006) maintains in his review, is one of the distinctive features of Yamamoto's work in terms of applying a useful transliteration system in her text, footnotes, and bibliography. She is also consistent in her arguments and general analysis of her topic. However, I find her strong stance in favour of oral sources of the *Shāhnāme* questionable. There is, of course, no evidence at hand, which refers to the Abu Manṣuri's *Shāhnāme* as the only direct source for the *Shāhnāme*; although it probably has been the latter's most important written source. It certainly seems that Ferdowsi has used several other sources as well, many of which have now been lost. Due to the complete loss of Abu Manṣuri's *Shāhnāme*, apart from its preface, as well as its main source, the Sassanian *Khwatāynāmag* and the Arabic translation of the latter by Ebn-e Moqaffaʿ, to determine the *Shāhnāme*'s sources with certainty is not only difficult but seemingly impossible. Of course, we know that before the compilation of the Sassanian *Khwatāynāmag*, Iranian historical legends and epic narratives were orally transmitted by storytellers. There is no evidence for the destruction of this way of transmission; on the contrary, there is clear evidence that this tradition was alive until not only the time of Ferdowsi, but also until recent times especially in the east of Iran, the homeland of this oral tradition.[11] It seems that Ferdowsi, in writing of the *Shāhnāme*, had access to both types of sources: a large number of written historical-epic works and a multitude of oral heroic-fictional narratives. These two types of sources will have provided a large and probably confused mass of mythological, heroic, and historical information in a narrative form. They were full of numerous characters and episodes, and many non-epic elements such as magic, demons, jinnees, and fairies, which could be both confusing and puzzling. We may consider *Haft Lashkar* (Afshāri & Madāyeni 1377), which is based on oral narratives and thus can represent the characteristics of oral tradition, as a sample of what can have reached the hands of Ferdowsi.

Above all, the most important thing not considered by Yamamoto is Ferdowsi's lofty purpose with his work, and his complete confidence in it. If we do not take that into consideration, we will obviously do him an injustice. Ferdowsi had a deep belief in this purpose, along with a marvellous talent for understanding his time, a great mastery of the Persian language, proficiency in poetry, a correct knowledge of epic poetry and its characteristics, etc. Helped by all of this, he made a perfect selec-

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[11] For more information, see Hassanābādi (1386).

tion among those numerous chaotic oral or written narratives and with a poetic spirit, set them to serve his patriotic aim.  In the *Shāhnāme*, there are many references implicitly referring to both oral and written sources of the work, but the most direct one is this verse which refers both to "heard", i.e. oral, and "seen", i.e. written information, in this case a lack of such information about the Arsacid dynasty.

نه در نامهی خسروان دیدهام          ازیرا به جز نام نشنیدهام

(*Shāhnāme*, 2005, vol. 6, p. 139, l. 83)
Because I have heard nothing except their names
Nor have I seen (anything about them) in the book of the kings

After the *Shāhnāme*, the later written epics were not only strongly influenced by it, but it can even be said that, from the viewpoint of stylistic characteristics and linguistic-literary features, their writers imitated it. In other words, the *Shāhnāme*'s greatness and popularity and Ferdowsi's mastery caused all of the epic poets to follow it so closely that one can even find some of the *Shāhnāme*'s phrases and hemistiches in their works. In addition, although it is in the *naqqāli* tradition that we find out what the *Shāhnāme*'s stories were like in popular and oral versions, it is also true that afterwards the *naqqāli* tradition versions were derived from the *Shāhnāme*. The *naqqāli* tradition now at hand is not the pre-Ferdowsi tradition. In fact, we have few sources for the stories in the *Shāhnāme* that predate Ferdowsi's version.  Thus, the epic and heroic stories of *naqqāl*s cannot have remained free from influence and imitation of the *Shāhnāme*. In fact, those stylistic characteristics, which Yamamoto has extracted from the stories of the *naqqāl*s and on which she has based her argument to prove orality in the *Shāhnāme*, are indeed derived from the *Shāhnāme*.

Some of the formal and thematic criteria Yamamoto refers to might be found in both oral and literary tradition. What is written and what is oral? How can we define as oral a phrase or a motif that is attested in a text probably written centuries before the oral tradition? How can we prove that this oral criterion is indeed oral, when we do not have the actual paradigms of storytelling from that period? The characteristics of the *Shāhnāme* may well instead have been transferred to the *naqqāli* tradition, and the *Shāhnāme* is the first place where we can see these formal and thematic features, since there is nothing available of the pre-Ferdowsi oral tradition and its features. So, to extract these features from a later tradition than the *Shāhnāme*, to prove the influence of orality on a prior written tradition, i.e. the *Shāhnāme*, as Yamamoto does, does not appear to be logical and reasonable. On the other hand, is the empirical approach of contemporary storytelling processes a safe guide to use retrospectively when studying classic Persian literature? This point always seems to be at stake in works about the oral and/or literary character of a text. Yet Yamamoto in her analysis does not address this issue adequately. However, as Elton Gay (2006) also notes, Yamamoto's book offers an important approach for reading the *Shāhnāme* and understanding the relationship between oral tradition and literary tradition.

The author has dedicated a part of the book to reviewing the storytelling in the Gaznavid court based on *Tārikh-e Beyhaqi*, thus illustrating the importance of storytelling in its historical context, which is very useful. Yamamoto has paid specific at-

tention to the structural topics of the *Shāhnāme* and the *Garshāsp-nāme*. If she had reviewed the historical and political features of the time which resulted in the gene-sis of such a great work as the *Shāhnāme*, her achievement would have been more useful and more comprehensive. It would also have been useful if she had paid at-tention to storytelling in the early Islamic period, to how the pre-Islamic Iranian na-tional legends were preserved in the *Shāhnāme* and Persian secondary epics, and to how they interacted with other cultural and political frameworks in Arabic and Turkish. Even in making a broader assessment about the storytelling in the Gaznavid court, as Venetis maintains (2006), these points could be more useful and practical.

One of the most important differences between the *Shāhnāme*, and other Persian fictional works, whether epic or non-epic, whether written or oral, is the difference in motivation of their authors, which directly or indirectly originates from the social and political conditions of the time. One of the most important incentives, perhaps Ferdowsi's main motive in composing the *Shāhnāme*, as far as we know, was a po-litical-national (patriotic) motivation, which the later epic-fiction authors as well as oral tradition storytellers did not share. Such a motivation is very important but Yamamoto, as Aquil (2004) also maintains, has not noticed this important matter and the political features of the time that influenced Ferdowsi's decision to write the *Shāhnāme*. This was a time of foreign intervention, after the Arab invasion, and when Turkish dynasties were established in eastern Iran. Even though these Turks managed to end the Arab power and influence in this area, they were inattentive to Iranian heroic and epic stories, and, were considered as aliens and enemies by the Iranians. The research in this field, i.e. the political and social issues of the time as well as Ferdowsi's purpose when he versified the *Shāhnāme,* is not directly related to Yamamoto's research, but these factors have caused differences between the *Shāhnāme* and other Persian literary works, and could effectively explain some un-solved issues.

One of the faults of the Oral Composition Theory is that it disregards written as-pects of a text. This is a serious failing when studying the *Shāhnāme* because literary techniques and written devices, to various degrees, are clearly visible in this epic. It seems that the way of investigation and analysis of written epics, especially the *Shāhnāme* is completely different and totally separated from that of oral tradition, and that each of them requires its own specific methodology. Although one may be able to find some common features in both of them, they belong to two entirely dif-ferent traditions. These differences can be seen in terms of their authors, their audi-ences, and their ways of narration. Moreover, as it was said above, the most impor-tant difference is the aims of their authors. Apparently, Lord and Parry were aware of these differences and, as Yamamoto herself says, they believed that oral and writ-ten traditions conflict with each other and cannot be gathered in a single work.

The narrative traditions of each nation are different from those of other nations. Thus, theories and methods applied to Homer's poems or the south Slavic oral tradi-tions are not readily applicable in the case of the Iranian epic tradition. For a more correct judgment and proper achievement, Yamamoto would have had to take the whole *Shāhnāme* into account, as well as many oral performances and *ṭumār*s, but

she has reviewed only one section of the *Shāhnāme* and just one *ṭumār*. Her Oral Performance Model is based on very little direct evidence, which is a fundamental weakness, of which, however, the author is aware. It is based on only one published *ṭumār*, Zariri's *Dastān-e Rostam va Sohrāb: revāyat-e naqqālān* (1369), which was all she had at her disposal at the time of writing.

On the other hand, because the oral traditions have so far usually not been written down (i.e. there are very few *ṭumār*s which present the full oral narration), a study of the kind Yamamoto undertakes is a very difficult project. Nevertheless, Yamamoto could have paid more attention to unpublished *ṭumār*s. As Hanaway (2008) maintains, the *ṭumār*s in manuscript form contain interesting information that Yamamoto has missed since it was missing in the published version of the *ṭumār* which Yamamoto has used, for example, handwritten narrative markers related to the mode of narration, or the special arrangement given to the story by the storytellers. It is no secret that *ṭumār*s can provide us with important information beyond the words written on the page, and the manuscript of *Dastān-e Rostam va Sohrāb* is a good example of this. Facsimiles of only two pages are provided, but each page has marginal notes in the author's hand within a frame around the main text block. Page 41 (showing the final page of the story) has five sectional sub-headings in the margin, with no obvious place marked in the text for them to be inserted. In the published version, four of these five headings have been inserted into the printed text (which ends before the place for the fifth heading) (Zariri 1369:369–371). Exactly where to insert these headings was a decision of the editor, not the author, and can therefore be questioned. There are also blank spaces in the middle of sentences in the *ṭumār*, which are sometimes followed by what could be a temporal or narrative marker, but sometimes not, and in the latter cases, it is difficult to see what the function of these gaps could be. Finally, a small symbol is used to mark the divisions between *miṣra'*s and *bayt*s in the lines of verse. The editor has inserted much punctuations (commas, periods, exclamation marks, question marks) and paragraph indentation that are not in the original. If all this is evident from two pages, more would surely appear with a careful scrutiny of the entire manuscript.

As the author has compared the oral *naqqāli* tradition to the written *Shāhnāme* and has found some similarities in phrases and structure in both traditions, she should also compare the *Shāhnāme* with some written Pahlavi texts prior to or contemporary with the *Shāhnāme* to find some probable common features between them.[12] It is clear that the *Shāhnāme* reflects both oral and written characteristics. Thus, any attempt to limit the text to one of these two and to prove that it is based on only one type of source is condemned to failure and reduces the magnitude of Ferdowsi. The logical result of such an approach would be that Ferdowsi was either a professional storyteller without any esteemed goal or a poet whose only achievement was to versify already written narrations.[13]

There are also some points to mention about Yamamoto's final bibliography. She

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[12] Akbarzāde (1379), of course, has done such a study of the historical part of the *Shāhnāme* and has achieved some interesting results.

[13] For more discussion, see Hassanābādi (1387).

has frequently used books which generally advocate oral sources of the *Shāhnāme* and confirm her theory such as the works of Mahjub (1383), Davis (1992; 1996), and Davidson (1994; 2000), while ignoring some useful works, such as Khāleqi Moṭlaq's important and critical studies (1372; 1377; 1381; 2009), which are not included in her bibliography. The most important and strange thing is that we cannot see any references to the books of Bahār (1374), who was also an advocate of the oral transmission of Iranian epic materials. This is a fundamental weakness of her study.[14]

## Conclusion

By writing the *Shāhnāme*, Ferdowsi became one of the founders of the Persian literary language and, at the same time, he is a protector of Iranian culture and civilization. The *Shāhnāme* has an important place in any study of comparative epics or theories of epic composition, as well as in the studies of comparative mythology and interaction of oral and literate cultures. From this viewpoint, Yamamoto's book must be appreciated due to the fact that it introduces a new approach to reading the *Shāhnāme* and offers a comprehensive and systematic sample for analysing stylistic features of this Iranian epic.

As Venetis (2006) notes, it may also be viewed as a useful contribution to the scholarly debate about the oral or literary origins of the *Shāhnāme* and an important introductory work to the study of later epics that were heavily influenced by Ferdowsi's work. One hopes it will stimulate further analysis in this important and largely unexplored field of Persian literature.

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[14] In my opinion, any study in the field of the *Shāhnāme* and other Iranian epics would be incomplete without reference to the scholarly works of Khāleqi Moṭlaq and Bahār.

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