

The Shahnameh on the Silver Screen

Traces of Ferdowsi's Epic in Game of Thrones: Influence or Coincidence?

An Interview with Beatriz Salas, Translator of the Shahnameh into Spanish

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Throughout history, great epics have inspired modern storytelling. Game of Thrones, with its epic narratives, bloody battles, and tragic heroes, bears remarkable similarities to Ferdowsi's Shahnameh. But did this globally popular series consciously draw on Iranian mythology, or are these similarities coincidental? In this article, we explore the hidden connections between these two enduring works.

Dr. Beatriz Cristina Salas, a distinguished professor and researcher of Spanish language and literature, has successfully completed the first-ever full translation of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, the national epic of Iran, into Spanish.

This monumental work has been published in seven volumes, granting access to this masterpiece of Persian literature to over 600 million Spanish-speaking readers worldwide.

With several decades of academic experience in Iran, Dr. Salas completed her studies at the Sorbonne University in Paris and later taught Spanish language and literature for many years at the University of Tehran and Islamic Azad University. She describes her translation of the Shahnameh—the result of years of meticulous research and collaboration with renowned textual scholars and editors—as “an experience of mysticism.”

Q1. What qualities make the Shahnameh a lasting masterpiece of world literature?

I spent 32 years working in education and teaching at the university level. I believe one of the most important features of the Shahnameh is its emphasis on education. Large portions of the epic encourage all people—especially the youth—to seek knowledge. Knowledge, which acts as a pillar of society, is a universal concept.

From a philosophical perspective, the Shahnameh is a true treasure. The Bozorgmehr section, in particular, is the most philosophical part and is filled with wisdom. As you know, philosophy is highly valued in Europe; it is considered a precious jewel. Thinkers such as Schopenhauer, or Baltasar Gracián in Spain, have adopted this philosophical outlook from the Shahnameh.

Another element that makes the Shahnameh enduring is its reference to fundamental concepts such as Good and Evil—concepts that are also emphasized in Zoroastrian teachings. Every child, regardless of language, ethnicity, or gender, understands these two concepts from around the age of seven, and the Shahnameh draws heavily on them.

Q2. How did the Shahnameh reach Europe in the past, and why did it not become widely known?

If we look back, we see that the Shahnameh reached Spain through Muslim influence. In fact, a copy exists in the Royal Library of Madrid. Unfortunately, after the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain in 1492, almost all manuscripts were burned. Spain, being a Catholic country, decided to destroy all non-Catholic books. Only eight books were hidden and thus spared from destruction, and the Shahnameh was one of them.

That day is considered a dark day in the history of Spain, and even in world history, because a vast number of books on medicine, history, philosophy, and geography were destroyed. These books had been brought to Spain by Muslims—mostly Iranians—at a time when Spain was considered the gateway to Europe and the Renaissance.

So, we know that the Shahnameh had reached Europe during that period, but why was it not widely recognized? One main reason is the epic's immense length. Another reason is that it was in Persian. Perhaps if it had been translated into Arabic or Latin, it would have gained much more popularity among ordinary people.

Q3. Can we say that the Shahnameh was a source of inspiration for Western writers and philosophers?

One indication that the Shahnameh was a reference for adaptation is the works that have survived from that period. For example, Baltasar Gracián, a well-known Spanish Jesuit in his time, wrote a book in the 16th century, centuries after the Shahnameh, which closely resembles Bozorgmehr's teachings.

It contains short maxims and advice about what is good and bad, how to perform tasks successfully in life, and how to live better among people. These statements are strikingly similar to Bozorgmehr's words when the king would consult him on how to manage different affairs.

It seems that Baltasar Gracián read the Shahnameh, and then Schopenhauer drew inspiration from him. As you know, Schopenhauer is very famous among contemporary philosophers, and people recognize him, but the original source of these philosophical ideas—the Shahnameh—has remained obscure.

Drawing inspiration from a great work is not wrong. Indeed, we read various works, draw

ideas, and create something new. This is the correct approach, and I do not deny it. However, failing to mention Ferdowsi and acknowledge the work being borrowed is not appropriate.

Q4. Why are you confident that Baltasar Gracián was influenced by the Shahnameh?

I can say with certainty that Baltasar Gracián studied the Shahnameh, because he had a close, wealthy friend who provided him with a well-equipped library. The foundational ideas of his work were taken from the Shahnameh.

He delivered sermons during the France-Spain wars, and during his speeches, the town square would fill with people eager to listen, earning him the title 'Father of Victory.'

How could a priest, without any military experience, become so skilled in delivering war-related speeches? We see such speeches repeatedly in the Shahnameh.

Q5. How did this translation project begin?

It is better to start from the very beginning of the project. It was Ferdowsi Day, and a meeting was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with Spanish-speaking ambassadors in Iran. UNESCO had suggested that there was no Spanish edition of the Shahnameh.

The ambassador from Venezuela said that he knew someone who could undertake this task. At that time, I was working in the cultural section of the embassy. He proposed the idea of the translation to me, and I promised to translate a portion of it.

Q6. Why did you choose the French version of the Shahnameh for your translation?

I reviewed the English translation, which was partly in verse and partly in prose. It was a good translation, but it did not suit my style.

Because of my studies at the Sorbonne University in France, I was fully familiar with the French language, so I turned to the French version. I particularly liked Jules Mohl's translation. I felt that people could understand it very easily.

Even for native Persian speakers, the poetry of the Shahnameh can be somewhat difficult. Jules Mohl's version was fluent, entirely in prose, and faithfully translated everything in the original text, while remaining very readable.

I should also mention that my husband, Mr. Rafi Rafi, is from Khorasan. This also encouraged me to feel that the project was feasible.

Q7. How did the translation and publication process of the Spanish edition proceed?

The translation began based on the French edition. Since I was not a full-time translator and had university work as well, the embassy gave me one year to complete the task.

After one year, the first edition was published. It was a very formal and expensive edition, intended as a gift from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on special occasions.

However, funding for subsequent editions ran out. I was eager to continue the translation because I wanted Spanish-speaking audiences to become familiar with this prestigious work. But I was told that continuing the translation would be my responsibility. A colleague told me that he would present my work abroad.

I began the second volume, but at the same time, the economy collapsed, and COVID19-spread, which prolonged the project. Meanwhile, I also gave lectures and appeared on television programs to introduce the Shahnameh. Despite all the challenges, seven volumes were eventually published.

Today, most of my work involves giving lectures abroad to introduce the Shahnameh. I enjoy this work because I understand the magnitude of Ferdowsi's achievement. Truly, how many individuals like Ferdowsi will the world ever see?

Q8. What role has the Shahnameh played in introducing Iranian culture and art to the world?

I must say that, beyond the Shahnameh, Iran has contributed other arts and sciences to the world. For example, mosque designs were inspired by the palaces of the Sassanian kings. If you visit southern Spain, you will notice buildings and spaces that strongly resemble Isfahan.

Iran has contributed a great deal to the world, but unfortunately, it is often attributed to the Arabs. Of course, it was the Arabs who transmitted it, but the roots are Iranian.

Q9. How did you preserve the authenticity of the text while making it understandable for non- Persian audiences?

I should add that without the embassy's support, this work would not have been possible. I translated five pages a day because translating more would compromise quality.

During the translation process, I tried to correct several cultural nuances that I felt were not adequately conveyed in the French version and did not fully express the essence of the text.

As a result, I believe the Spanish version is effective and conveys the concepts as they should be.

Q9. Do you have any memorable reactions from foreign audiences that were particularly impactful?

I once had a session to introduce the Shahnameh in South America. There were people of various ethnicities: Black, Indigenous, White, and mixed- race. During the session, an Indigenous man asked me to read a passage. I opened the book at random, and it was Siavash's farewell to his horse. Every one was stunned.

When I finished reading and looked up, I saw that everyone was in tears, because in their culture, horses are very important. They were fascinated and grateful. The Indigenous man gifted me a book of Aztec poetry. The Indigenous peoples had been there 500 years before the Spanish and had composed such beautiful poetry.

Q10. Do you plan to translate other works of Persian literature?

At present, I do not know, because I have been contacted for another project: a -30hour program to introduce the Shahnameh to South American countries. If I were to translate another work, it would probably not be a classical work, as it would be too heavy. Translating the Shahnameh took ten years, with each volume taking about a year. Classical works like Hafez and Saadi have been translated; perhaps I will turn to a contemporary work next.

Q11. How do you think mythological stories can be used in future cinematic productions?

There is great potential in original ideas; use your own culture. Of course, you are accustomed to this culture. From the beginning, you have grown up surrounded by beautiful Iranian carpets with intricate pomegranate and citrus motifs.

But for someone born and raised outside Iran, like me, Iranian carpets, art, music, and literature are visually, spiritually, and aurally striking. You have a lot to offer Europe, which is relatively young culturally. Iranians also have exceptional talent in these areas due to their rich cultural heritage.

I remember asking my students to write poetry in Spanish. Although they initially resisted and said it was impossible, in the end, they produced beautiful poems. Seeing this, I felt it was a genetic talent that all Iranians potentially possess. Many of my students were admitted to prestigious universities abroad with these poetry booklets.

Q12. Do you believe Game of Thrones was inspired by Ferdowsi's Shahnameh? What similarities or signs of adaptation do you see in the series?

The first part of the Shahnameh has tremendous cinematic potential; it is even suitable for

animation. When fire appears in the story, we encounter an archetype. I studied in a Catholic school called 'Sacred Heart of Jesus' as a child; its symbol was a heart full of fire. The image that stayed with me from childhood is a red, burning heart representing endless love. Later, I realized this meaning aligns with Zoroastrian views: some think Iranians worship fire, but in reality, fire symbolizes divine love and immortality. These archetypal concepts have strong cinematic adaptation potential.

Indeed, Game of Thrones shows clear inspiration from the Shahnameh. Many characters owe their origins to Ferdowsi's epic. The very title, Game of Thrones, reminds one of Bozorgmehr's story in the Shahnameh, where chess, invented by the Indians, was sent to Iran without the rules. Bozorgmehr cleverly deciphered the rules.

Similarly, Game of Thrones is essentially a game of power—this is the first conceptual link.

Although George R. R. Martin cites Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and England's civil wars as his sources, Shahnameh-like threads are clearly visible. Martin's work is not a copy, but the question is why Ferdowsi's contribution is ignored, especially when the signs of adaptation are so prominent.

Another clear sign is the depiction of the struggle between good and evil. While this theme exists in world literature, the version in Game of Thrones has deep Zoroastrian roots: Good and Evil are fundamentally opposed.

In terms of characterization, the Stark family closely resembles Rostam's lineage: courageous, virtuous, resilient against tyranny, and ready to sacrifice for the homeland, but uninterested in power and rulership. Jon Snow's tragic end mirrors Rostam's bravery, another notable correspondence.

The series' music, composed by Iranian Ramin Djawadi, has clear Persian roots. The repeated appearance of the number seven—seven houses, seven kingdoms—reflects ancient Iranian sacred symbolism. In the Shahnameh, seven kings rule different regions, such as Iran, China, and Egypt.

Each house in Game of Thrones has a banner with an animal; for example, the Stark banner shows a gray wolf, reminiscent of Afrasiab's banner in the Shahnameh, a black flag with a wolf. Rostam's banner is purple; each Iranian dynasty has its own banner.

The sacred tree in Game of Thrones, which Bran Stark uses to see past and future, recalls the Tree of Life in Alexander's story in the Shahnameh, which speaks differently by day and night. Alexander asks it about his fate and hears of his impending death. This story exhibits magical realism, so talking trees feel natural within the narrative.

When Jaime Lannister's hand is cut off, it is a tragic scene, but compare it with Bahram's

hand being cut in the Shahnameh. Bahram returns to the battlefield to retrieve his whip, despite his family's objections and even when offered another whip. He responds, 'My name and honor are written upon it; it is shameful if it falls into the enemy's hands.' The tension this creates in the audience is far stronger than the hand-cutting scene in the series. This demonstrates the Shahnameh's universal and timeless impact.

The famous Wall in Game of Thrones is also inspired by the wall of Gog and Magog in the Shahnameh. In both accounts, this wall is built to protect against demonic creatures.

In the Shahnameh, during Alexander's journey to the East, he arrives at a pure city whose people complain about the dangerous tribe of Gog and Magog—a people with terrifying faces and countless numbers who threaten their lives. Alexander comes to their aid, and with the help of soldiers and craftsmen, he builds a massive iron wall to block their entry. This wall, constructed with fire and metals, symbolizes human determination to resist destructive forces—just like the Wall in Game of Thrones, which is erected to defend against the undead and supernatural threats.

In both works, the wall serves as a boundary between order and chaos, and as a shield against darkness.

Furthermore, the role of the advisor is highly significant. Just as Bozorgmehr in the Shahnameh is a wise

In Rostam's Fourth Labor, the sorceress first appears beautiful, but when Rostam binds her with a rope, she turns into an old, frightening woman. This parallels Melisandre in Game of Thrones, who also eventually appears as an old woman. The scene of Rostam throwing the rope and the sorceress changing her face mirrors Melisandre removing her necklace and transforming into an old woman, confirming the conceptual link.

Even the name of the chief librarian in the series, Sam, closely resembles Sam, the hero in the Shahnameh. In the series finale, Sam introduces a book called A Song of Ice and Fire, which narrates the kings and battles—in essence, the Book of Kings, or the Shahnameh.

In the Shahnameh, Zal, Sam's son, has white hair from childhood, similar to the Targaryens' silver hair.

The dragon in Game of Thrones may reflect the Simorgh, a mythological guide in the Shahnameh.

Ultimately, instead of merely praising technology or special effects, we must recognize the depth of storytelling and character development in the Shahnameh. It is a work that can, should, and deserves to be introduced to the world because its stories still speak from the depths of time to our present hearts.

Q13. How are women depicted in the Shahnameh, and how does this compare with Western literature?

When reading Ferdowsi's poetry, even his complaints about encouragement without financial support and the copying of his verses in the process of creating the Shahnameh are beautiful and inspiring. This rich heritage can foster talented generations.

The Shahnameh treats religion inclusively and is very open in this regard. Women are far ahead of their time. For example, Manizheh rescues her beloved. In European and Spanish literature, a woman who breaks the law slightly would be killed, like Juliet in Romeo and Juliet or Lencina in Spanish works. But in the Shahnameh, she is given another chance. The king tells Bijan that the woman loves him and will not be killed, supporting their marriage. This demonstrates humanity at a very high level.