

Ferdowsi, the Reviver of Persian Language.

The United Nations cultural body (UNESCO) has named the year 2010 as 1000th anniversary of the composition of The Shahnameh, the renowned national epic of the Persian-speaking world which has been traditionally a source of honour and a manifestation of ancestral identity to the Iranian people and nations such as Tajikistan and Afghanistan who have loyally stuck to their lingual and cultural background after separation from Iran.

The Shahnameh is the result of 30 years of unyielding and steadfast endeavor by the master of Persian literature, Hakim Abulqasim Ferdowsi who is known to the Iranian people and the Persian speaking nations as the reviver of Persian language. Iranians owe to Ferdowsi the survival and fortification of their language and that is why Ferdowsi is considered to be the most prominent Persian poet of all times, even though there are disputes between the scholars who believe that Ferdowsis work, in a literary and formational context, cannot be compared to those of Hafiz, Sadi, Rumi and Rudaki as the nature of Ferdowsis work is essentially different from what other notable Persian poets have brought into existence; however, to the majority of scholars, researchers and literary experts, The Shahnameh, regardless of its format and content, features because of its remarkable contribution to the culture of Iran and the historical identity of Iranian people.

It is widely believed that Ferdowsi started the composition of The Shahnameh when he was 30 years old. According to his own poetry, Ferdowsi invested more than 30 years on the foundation of The Shahnameh to preserve the heritage of Persian language.

The Shahnameh is a mythical, 30,000-distich poetic opus which is dedicated to the history of ancient Iran. The content of The Shahnameh can be divided into three main sections: the mythical age, the heroic age and the historical age. In the mythical age, Ferdowsi demonstrates his adherence to the moral and ethical values by praising and eulogizing the Almighty God whom he considers, thanks to his Muslim background and monotheistic mindset, the sole creator of the universe and only initiator of the life. He starts his poetic oration in the name of God.

In the name of the Lord of both wisdom and mind,

To nothing sublimer can thought be applied

Then he comes to admire the Almighty God and his extensive, endless power:

The first thing needful for thee is to know

The sum of primal elements which He,

Who maketh all things, made from naught to show

The greatness of His own supremacy

Ferdowsi then continues by telling the story of Kayumars who is legendarily believed to be the first human being descended on Earth, having been endowed with the celestial grace of the Almighty God, which he calls "Farr".

In the mythical division, Ferdowsi describes the accounts of two legendary kingdoms in Iran which the holy texts of Zoroastrians, including Avesta, include some references to: Pishdadian Dynasty in which 11 emperors ruled, and the Kayanian Dynasty. The heroic age of The Shahnameh comprises the greater part of the work, including the account of Manuchehr until the conquest of Iran by Alexander the Great. The famous story of Seven Labours of Rostam and the death of Siavash fall under the heroic category of The Shahnameh.

The stories of Arsacids and Sassanid dynasties which are retold briefly belong to the historical age of The Shahnameh where Ferdowsi demonstrates his power of artistic historiography dexterously.

The Shahnameh has been translated in more than 40 languages and exists in the worlds largest libraries in miscellaneous, luxurious versions. The Bayasanghori Shahnameh which is an illuminated manuscript of the work being kept in the Tehrans Golestan Palace has been listed in the UNESCOs Memory of the World Register of cultural heritage items.

As a literary masterpiece, The Shahnameh has played a vital role in recording the antiquity of Iranian culture, preserving the heritage of Persian poetry, purifying the Persian language and ensuring its independence from the other languages. Ferdowsi inspired several poets who attempted to surmount his unparalleled rhetoric several years after his demise; however, the history of Persian poetry hasnt proofed any poet to be of greater eminence, competence and reputation than Ferdowsi up to now.

The British orientalist, surgeon and artist James Atkinson was the first to introduce an English translation of The Shahnameh in 1832. Atkinson was a multilingual surgeon who served many years as the Assistant Surgeon in the Bengal service of Honorable East India Company. He was completely fluent in Persian and that would give him the precious opportunity to make an acquaintance with the most noteworthy masterpieces of Persian literature. He first made an abridged translation of Rustam and Sohrab story of The Shahnameh in 1814 and then completed his free translation in 1829 which was published in 1832 and won him an Oriental Translation Fund gold medal the same year.

Oriental Translation Fund was established in 1828 as a part of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Irelands efforts to further "the investigation of subjects connected with and for the encouragement of science, literature and the arts in relation to Asia."

A British poet named Matthew Arnold who was a cultural critic and school inspector and at the same time, a close friend of William Wordsworth, published another abridged translation of Rustam and Sohrab tragedy in 1853.

In 1925, the brothers Arthur & Edmond Warner published a complete, 9-volume translation which paved the ground for the further acquaintance of the English readers with The Shahnameh.

Germans were also among the pioneers of translating The Shahnameh into European languages. In a speech dated September 27, 1934, the renowned German Iranologist and orientalist Hans Heinrich Schaeder elaborately explained the efforts made by the Germans to introduce Ferdowsi and The Shahnameh to the international community.

In his speech titled "Firdosi und die Deutschen", Schaeder called the year 1819 a pivotal juncture in the course of Germans familiarity with the oriental culture. Along with the publication of new Deutsch translations of Hafiz and Rumi, the renowned German writer Johann Joseph completed his translation of The Shahnameh in this year which received great welcome with the German readers.

According to Schaeder, The Shahnameh had a great impact on the German orientalists and inspired many scholars to conduct exploratory researches about Ferdowsi. The other credible translation of The Shahnameh belonged to the German poet and historian of literature, Adolf Friedrich von Schack whose version was published in 1851. Friedrich Rückerts translation was also published after his death in 1866.

However, the French also played a fundamental role in bringing into the light the exquisiteness of Ferdowsis masterpiece. They contributed to the familiarization of Europeans with The Shahnameh predominantly and translated the epic opus of Ferdowsi several times. The volume of researches done by the French orientalists about The Shahnameh and Ferdowsi is indispensably noteworthy.

In 1826, the French government assigned the mission of translating The Shahnameh to Jules Mohl, the renowned French orientalist and philosopher. He astonishingly dedicated 40 years of his life to the translation of The Shahnameh and accomplished the mission up to his death in 1876. He reviewed several partly-translated versions and even sought the help of Iranian scholars in interpreting the oratory of Ferdowsi. The first volume of his translation came out in 1838 with a well-researched preamble he had written on it. This preamble is said to be one of the most reliable introductions on Ferdowsi and his works in French language.

Anyway, one millennium has passed since the composition of The Shahnameh by Hakim Ferdowsi and every Persian-speaking citizen knows well that the magnificence and majesty of this Muslim, Iranian poet cannot be erased from the pages of worlds cultural memory. Millions of words and sentences do not suffice to introduce and interpret Ferdowsi. He passed away physically, but he rejuvenated the Iranian identity and perpetuated his name until the subsistence of the world:

I am deathless, I am the eternal lord

For I have spread the seed of the Word

By Kouros Ziabari