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The Image of Khosrow II in Historical and Literary Traditions: A Comparative-Typological Analysis of the Interpretations of Ferdowsi, Nezāmi, and Alisher Navoi

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a comparative-typological analysis of the image of Khosrow II Parvēz (590-628), the last great king of the Sasanian dynasty, as it appears across four distinct scholarly and literary traditions. The relevance of the study lies in the fact that a single historical figure acquires entirely different meanings within modern historiography, positivist-philological Persian scholarship, the Persian-Tajik romantic epic tradition, and the Turkic Sufi-didactic epic tradition. The aim of the study is to trace the transformation of the image of Khosrow on the basis of J. Howard-Johnston's historical analysis, Z. Zand and R. Zarrinkub's philological study comparing the Šāh-nāma with early Islamic histories, P. Orsatti's encyclopedic article on Neẓāmi's romance, and Alisher Navoi's poem 'Farhād va Širin.' The research relies on comparative-typological and intertextual methods of analysis. The results show that the image of Khosrow appears as a tragic, two-sided figure in historiography, as a partly idealized hero in Ferdowsi (for political reasons), as an ambivalent lover-king capable of moral maturation in Neẓāmi, and, in Navoi, as a negative, lust-driven rival stripped of his central heroic status. It is concluded that Navoi's displacement of Khosrow from the center of the narrative in his Khamsa *is not a mere literary choice, but a vivid manifestation of classical Turkic literature asserting its own independent system of values against the model of Persian court literature.*

Keywords: Khosrow II Parvēz, Shirin, Farhad, Ferdowsi, Šāh-nāma, Neẓāmi Ganjavi, Alisher Navoi, Khamsa, image transformation, historiographical methodology, javāb tradition, true and metaphorical love.

INTRODUCTION

Khosrow II Parvēz (590-628) is not only a major political and military figure in the history of the Middle East, but also one of the most frequently reworked images in Persian, Turkic, and, to some extent, Arabic literary traditions. The events associated with his name – the overthrow of his father Hormozd IV, the rebellion of Bahrām Čōbin, his flight to Byzantium, his love story with Shirin, the twenty-four-year war with Rome, and finally his overthrow and execution at the hands of his own son Qobād Šērōē – first took shape within the historiographical-chronicle tradition, then in Ferdowsi's Šāh-nāma, subsequently within the Persian-Tajik romantic epic genre (Neẓāmi Ganjavi and his "respondents"), and finally underwent significant transformation of both form and content in Alisher Navoi's Khamsa.

The purpose of this article is to trace the four-stage transformation of the image of Khosrow on the basis of J. Howard-Johnston's modern historical analysis [2], Z. Zand & R. Zarrinkub's philological-positivist study comparing the Šāh-nāma with early Islamic histories [7: 85-111], P. Orsatti's encyclopedic article on Neẓāmi's romance and its imitations [6], and Alisher Navoi's poem ‘Farhād va Širin’ [3]. Such a comparative-typological approach corresponds to the "image evolution" or "intertextual transformation" methodology widely used in PhD research and makes it possible to clearly demonstrate how a single historical figure performs entirely different functions within historiographical, romantic-literary, and Sufi-didactic value systems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Four groups of sources were selected as the material for this study: 1) J. Howard-Johnston's historical-academic article

"Ḵosrow II" (Encyclopaedia Iranica) [2]; 2) Z. Zand & R. Zarrinkub's philological-positivist study comparing Ferdowsi's account of the beginning of Šērōē's reign in the Šāh-nāma with early Islamic Arabic-Persian histories [7: 85-111]; 3) P. Orsatti's encyclopedic article on Neẓāmi Ganjavi's poem 'Ḵosrow o Širin' and its imitations (*Encyclopaedia Iranica*) [6]; and 4) Alisher Navoi's poem 'Farhād va Širin' (1484), part of his *Khamsa* [3].

The methodology of the study is based on the principles of comparative-typological and intertextual analysis. First, the image of Khosrow in each source was analyzed separately: his moral evaluation, his place within the plot, and the artistic-ideological devices employed by the author were identified. The four interpretations were then compared with one another, and the transformation chain of the image – from historiography, through Ferdowsi and Neẓāmi, to Navoi – was reconstructed. Particular attention was paid to identifying how radically the image of Khosrow in Navoi's poem differs from the other three traditions; for this purpose, the manner in which Navoi employs the javāb tradition, along with his compositional and ideological-philosophical (Sufi) views, was examined separately.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The historical image of Khosrow II

According to Howard-Johnston's analysis, Khosrow II is neither a purely "evil" nor a purely "great" king, but a two-sided, tragic figure: on the one hand, he is the person directly responsible for the destruction of the old world order of the Near East; on the other, he is the great ruler who very nearly succeeded in restoring the glory of the Achaemenid era [2]. The researcher juxtaposes three independent source traditions (the official Sasanian, the Roman-Byzantine, and the Armenian), using their "relative independence and mutual consistency" as evidence, while consistently taking into account the overt or covert bias of each source [2]. Khosrow's downfall is interpreted not as a personal tragedy, but as the result of a systemic crisis: the overstretching of military resources, discontent among the internal elite, and his

autocratic style of rule together led to his overthrow and execution by his own son Qobād Šērōē in 628 [2].

Khosrow in Ferdowsi's Šāh-nāma: two opposing historiographical assessments

Although Ferdowsi devotes six times as much space to Khosrow as to Ardašir I, the founder of the dynasty, he almost entirely omits the great twenty-four-year war with Rome, focusing instead on the love story of Khosrow & Shirin [1]. Howard-Johnston regards this as Ferdowsi's deliberate "surgery" – a strategy of separating Khosrow's downfall from the Roman military campaign and attributing it instead to the intrigue of two disaffected officials – and attributes this to the poet's fear of offending his patron, Maḥmud of Ghazna [2]. In contrast, Zand & Zarrinkub (2018) compare Ferdowsi's account of this very episode with early Islamic Arabic-Persian histories and demonstrate that the poet achieves a high degree of factual accuracy, directly criticizing Howard-Johnston for an insufficient familiarity with the *Šāh-nāma* [7: 85-111]. The two scholars' positions are not entirely contradictory: Howard-Johnston analyzes the poet's strategic selection of material [2], while Zand analyzes the philological accuracy within the material selected [7: 85-111] – in other words, Ferdowsi is simultaneously a "selective" and a "precise" historian.

The image in Neẓāmi's "Ḵosrow o Širin"

According to Orsatti's analysis, Neẓāmi's poem touches on the historical background only briefly, since the poet's main focus is the love relationship [6]. Khosrow's image in Neẓāmi is ambivalent: he genuinely loves Shirin, yet is pleasure-seeking, indecisive, and prone to breaking his promises – he repeatedly avoids Shirin's demand for a lawful marriage, marries Maryam, the daughter of the Roman emperor, and later marries the slave-girl Šakar [5]. Only after many years of trial and suffering does the mature Khosrow become capable of a love worthy of Shirin [5]. One of Orsatti's key observations concerns the existence of two opposing traditions surrounding the image of Shirin (a Caucasian-Armenian Christian tradition, and the official

Sasanian tradition transmitted through the Khwadāy-nāmag to Ferdowsi, which is negative); although Neẓāmi follows the former, traces of the latter remain in his poem [6]. A similar ambivalence characterizes the image of Khosrow himself: he is neither purely positive nor purely negative, but a morally complex character capable of maturation [5; 6].

Khosrow in Alisher Navoi's 'Farhād va Širin': A ruler displaced from the center

Although Alisher Navoi's poem 'Farhād va Širin,' completed in 1484, is ostensibly created as a *javāb* (response) to Neẓāmi's poem [5], it is fundamentally different in character: the figure of Farhad, who in Neẓāmi plays only a secondary role as the engineer who cuts a canal through the mountain [5], becomes the central hero of Navoi's poem, while Khosrow is stripped of his central status and turned into a secondary, largely negative rival [3].

This structural inversion is connected to two ideological goals pursued by Navoi. First, from a Sufi-philosophical perspective, the image of Farhad advances the idea of true love (*haqīqī ʿ išq*) – a mystical love leading to divine truth, in which the self is entirely forgotten – while Khosrow is constructed as the opposing pole, representing metaphorical, worldly desire (*majāzī ʿ išq*) and the ambition for royal power [3]. Farhad's love is pure, selfless devotion, making no claim to dominion or possession, whereas Khosrow's "love" is invariably intertwined with force, cunning, and the use of state resources [3]. Second, as an emir and vizier at the court of Sultan Ḥusayn Bāyqarā, Navoi paid particular attention to questions of social and political justice; Khosrow's overthrow and murder by his own son Šērōē is perceived, within Navoi's tradition, as just punishment – retribution for tyranny and lust [3].

Third, at the compositional level: in Neẓāmi, Farhad dies in the middle of the story, and the poem continues with Khosrow's marriage to Shirin [5]; in Navoi, by contrast, Farhad's death is the emotional and compositional climax of the poem, while Khosrow's fate is compressed and presented as an epilogue whose primary function is to deliver a moral conclusion [3].

Where Neẓāmi's poem relies on the model "the king triumphs, but only after attaining maturity" [5], Navoi's poem is built on the model "the true lover perishes, yet achieves spiritual victory, while the king falls victim to his own desire" [3]. Finally, in his treatise *Mu□ākamat al-Lughatayn*, Navoi set himself the task of demonstrating that the Turkic language possessed expressive capacities equal to those of Persian [4]; in this sense, the displacement of Khosrow from the center of the narrative was an assertion of a Turkic-Sufi system of values in opposition to the model of Persian court literature [3; 4].

Comparative-typological analysis: the transformation chain
Placing the four interpretations side by side reveals a gradual "moral narrowing" of the image of Khosrow. In modern historiography he is a two-sided, complex, tragic political figure – a non-evaluative explanation [2]; in Ferdowsi, a hero partly idealized for political reasons, yet precisely rendered within the episodes selected [1; 2; 7: 85-111]; in Neẓāmi, a psychologically credible, ambivalent hero capable of moral maturation [5; 6]; and in Navoi, a static, lust-driven negative character, incapable from beginning to end of choosing rightly between power and love, whose downfall is presented not as a reward but as a punishment [3]. The principal factor explaining this transformation chain is the difference between each author's generic requirements, conditions of patronage, and ideological purpose.

CONCLUSIONS

Tracing the path of Khosrow II's image from historiography through Ferdowsi and Neẓāmi to Navoi demonstrates that a single historical figure can perform entirely different artistic and ideological functions within different genres, languages, and value systems. This observation opens up at least three promising directions for further PhD research: 1) a deeper analysis of Navoi's images of Farhad and Khosrow from the standpoint of Sufi philosophy (true versus metaphorical love, the stages of the mystical path) [3; 4]; 2) a theoretical grounding of how radically Navoi's response differs from the Persian *javāb* tradition – the

difference between a simple plot variation and the complete reconstruction of a value system [3; 5]; and 3) applying Zand & Zarrinkub's dichotomy of the "selective historian" versus the "precise historian" to Navoi as well [7: 85-111].

In conclusion, Alisher Navoi's decision in ‘Farhād va Širin’ to strip Khosrow of his central heroic status and turn him into the negative pole of the conflict between love and power is not a mere literary choice, but a vivid demonstration of classical Turkic literature asserting its own independent system of values against the model of Persian court literature [3].

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