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Gordāfarid of *Šāh-nāma*, the woman, who revolutionized the *naqqāli* tradition

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Abstract: *Šāh-nāma of Firdowsī and the naqqāli tradition are two distinctive traditions of Iran. Šāh-nāma, an epic that tells the story of pre-Islamic Iran, focuses on a heroic narrative. The naqqāli's distinctive feature, against the background of other oral traditions, is the combination of heroic and religious narrative in order to spread Shiism in a way that is interesting to the audience. Ferdowsī's work and the naqqāli tradition represent two periods in Iran's history and its traditions and culture. These periods are separated by the Islamic invasion and the fall of the Sasanid dynasty. Despite some ideological differences, the Šāh-nāma was for a number of centuries one of the sources for naqqāli and from the early period of the Pahlavi dynasty became its main focus. The article briefly discusses the naqqāli tradition, Šāh-nāma of Firdowsī and the relationship between the two. It also introduces the figure of Gordāfarid, daughter of Gaždaham, who, being the heroine of the Persian national epic, became the inspiration for a revolutionary change in the naqqāli tradition – the first naqqāl woman.*

Key words: History, pre-Islamic Iran, Gordāfarid, *Šāh-nāma*, *naqqāli* tradition, oral tradition, Ferdowsī

Introduction

Iran, as one of the oldest existing civilizations, has a long and rich tradition. One of its elements is the oral tradition, which had its heyday during the Parthian period, where *gōsān* (minstrels) were an integral part of the daily life of both the lower and higher classes. It is from this long cycle of traditions that the *naqqāli*, which is the focus of this article, emerged. According to Kimiko Yamamoto, an authority on the study of this type of oral tradition, "*Naqqâli* is an Iranian storytelling tradition in which heroic and religious narratives are transmitted in spoken and written form".[1]

Two elements of this definition draw particular attention, namely the use of the adjectives 'heroic' and 'religious' in relation to narratives. This is because it reveals

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[1] Yamamoto, 2010: 240; see also Marzolph, 2015.

to us two features that clearly distinguish the *naqqāli* throughout the cycle of Iranian oral tradition. It also combines two strong cultural heritages – the heroic, dating back to pre-Islamic Iran, and the religious, produced in the period after the Islamic conquest in 651 C.A. In the current *naqqāli*, links to the heroic tradition are found mainly through the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī.[2] Writing her landmark dissertation for *naqqāli* research, Mary Ellen Page made it clear that: "The material narrated today by the storyteller derives primarily from the Iranian national legend. The source used by all storytellers today is the 11th century national epic, the *Shāhnāma* of Ferdowsi."[3] Of course, Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* need not be and is not the only source for *naqqāl*, or storytellers, but from the beginning of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) until now it has been their main inspiration.

The nature of the *naqqāli* thus clearly indicates to us heroic inspirations. The *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī, which is a heroic epic, is therefore an excellent source for information about the exciting, thrilling adventures of the kings and heroes of Persian mythology and history. These heroes also include one heroine, Gordāfarid, who stands out among the other women described in the epic.[4] For Gordāfarid, daughter of Gaždaham, is a female warrior who stood up to fight as an equal against one of the mightiest young heroes described in *Šāh-nāma*, Sohrāb.[5] Her courage, honor and decisiveness in action became an inspiration to many Iranian women, including Fatemeh Habibizad, the first woman to become a professional *naqqāl*. Today Fatemeh Habibizad is known by the stage name Gordāfarid.[6]

To understand the importance of the emergence of the female *naqqāl* and the role of the literary heroine in her emergence, we must first define what the *naqqāli* is as a cultural phenomenon, what Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* is, and who Gordāfarid herself was.

Naqqāli tradition

It is assumed that *naqqāli* emerged in oral tradition during the early period of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736). Storytellers were divided into seven groups, which had their own distinct characteristics. All of the groups were characterized by combining religious and heroic elements in order to interest the listener, capture his or her attention and at the same time convey informative, religious content.[7] One of these groups was precisely the *naqqāl*, who, with the advent of the first coffee houses during

[2] Doostkhah, 2001; Rubanovich, 2012; 2013.
[3] Page, 1977: 21.
[4] On the women in the *Šāh-nāma*, see Omidsalar & Omidsalar, 2001; Bakhshandeh Zahmati, 2011; Khaleghi-Motlagh & Pīrnaẓar, 2012; Jafari, 2014; Bagheri & Mirzaeyan, 2014; Mozafari & Siyanat, 2016; Loveimi, 2016; Elaheh Rahmanian & Ashrafzadeh, 2020.
[5] *Šāh-nāma*, 2007: 191-3; Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2002; Szklarz, 2017; Skupniewicz & Maksymiuk, 2019.
[6] Talebi, 2009: 52.
[7] Nasri Ashrafi, 2004: 165-6.

the reign of Shah Abbas I (1588-1629), specialized in telling their stories in these very places.[8] Cafes in this period were places where aristocrats, poets, and people of the arts gathered. They "became established as a cultural center in urban areas".[9] However, they did not limit their performances to these elite venues. They also showed their art in open public spaces, where, standing on a stool and using props in the form of a stick and a colorful sheet, they told stories.[10] This quickly made *naqqāls* an elite group that could be joined after a long, demanding period of study with a master. This privilege, however, was reserved exclusively for men.

The beginning of the 16th century is the period that scholars accept as the beginning of the *naqqāli* tradition as we know. It should be remembered, however, that the emergence of this tradition did not occur suddenly; rather, it emerged from a long-term process. Yamamoto raises the possibility of the institutionalization of *naqqāli* earlier, namely during the Timurid pariod (1370-1507) citing Kashefi's argument that "tales about historical personages and marvels were common thems".[11] Note, however, that the oral tradition in Iran extends well beyond the 14th century, and Mary Boyce even reports "it seems that Iranian poetry remained oral down to the conquest".[12] But did the earlier traditions have exactly the characteristics of *naqqāli*, where elements of heroic narrative were combined with religious narrative? Boyce, an undisputed authority on the study of Iran's oral tradition, states that religious poetry existed in the Sasanid era alongside entertainment poetry, although mainly in Manichaeism, not Zoroastrianism.[13] Thus, she separates religious poetry from other types of poetry, the various forms of which were practiced by the *gōsān*.

The nature and role of *gōsān* in Iran's cultural history is worth emphasizing here:

> "The cumulative evidence suggests that the *gōsān* played a considerable part in the life of the Parthians and their neighbours, down to late in the Sasanian epoch: entertainer of king and commoner, privileged at court and popular with people; present at the graveside and at the feast; eulogist, satirist, story-teller, musician; recorder of past achievements, and commentator of his own times."[14]

[8] Page 1977: 25; Yamamoto, 2010: 240-5; Emami, 2016; Yamamoto, 2021.
[9] Yamamoto, 2000: 41.
[10] Floor , 2005: 100.
[11] Yamamoto, 2010: 244.
[12] Boyce, 1957: 32.
[13] Boyce, 1957: 33.
[14] Boyce, 1957: 17-8.

Gōsān thus participated in every element of Iranian daily life. They were a versatile group whose main medium of communication was the spoken word. [15] Specialization and the ability to choose in which venues a *gōsān* would perform probably occurred only after he had reached a certain status. Undoubtedly, talent also mattered here, as it was what allowed the *gōsān* to stand out from the background of the choristers, as she also points out.[16]

The history of *naqqāli* is divided into two major eras: pre-Islamic, and Islamic, because the Islamisation of Iran required that *naqqāli* conform to Islamic values.[17] Indeed, *naqqāli*, which combined elements of poetry, music and storytelling, was an ideal tool to satisfy the sense of aesthetics in the early post-Islamic period, when these arts were banned. This prohibition, at least in theory, should have stopped their development, yet some forms of this narrative survived, both in the traditions of Iranian nomads and in the courts of the Islamic caliphs and emirs. Over time, they were adapted to the needs of spreading the new faith.[18]

It is therefore safe to assume that the *naqqāli* emerged from the rich oral tradition of Iran during the first period of the Safavid dynasty. Its distinguishing features were its elite performance venues, the coffee houses, which are still inextricably associated with *naqqāli* today. It was also the addition of religious elements to the heroic tales to offset the overly entertaining nature that was incompatible with the religious ideology of the new dynasty.

The overly religious nature of the *naqqāli*, in turn, became unsuitable for the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), which promoted a modernist, Western-modeled lifestyle. During this period, too, Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* became the main pillar around which the Pahlavi built their narrative of pride in Persia's rich pre-Islamic history.

Šāh-nāma of Ferdowsī

The selection of the *Šāh-nāma* by Ferdowsī by the Pahlavids was no accident. This monumental poetic work of 50,000 'distichs', written between about 975-976 and 1010, was created as a chronicle of Iran from the first man, Keyumars, until the fall of the Sasanid dynasty. Mahmūd Ghaznawī (998-1030), a young prince at the time, in the wave of the Persian renaissance,[19] fascinated by the history and culture of a powerful empire that had ceased to exist 300 years earlier, commissioned the writing of a chronicle of Persia. In his *Introduction*, Davis even suggests that Ferdowsī lived in the perfect time to write this chronicle, "a little earlier or later and one cannot

[15] Boyce, 1957: 18: "is sometimes an object of emulation, sometimes a despised frequenter of taverns and bawdy-houses; sometimes a solitary singer and mucisian, and sometimes one of a group, singing or performing on a variety of instruments.
[16] Boyce, 1957: 18.
[17] Najm, 2011: 43-9; Galehdaran & Pourzarrin, 2019; Sheshgelani, 2021: 11-13.
[18] Nasri Ashrafi, 2004: 164-7.
[19] Frye, 1955; Harter, 2016.

imagine his poem coming into existence in just such an emphatic and culturally redefining form."[20] This work was undertaken by Abu Mansur Daqiqi (born after 933, died 977), an outstanding poet of the era. Before his death, Daqiqi managed to write only 1,000 verses, which were used in his work by his successor, Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsī Tusi (940-1019/1025). For Ferdowsī, who did not have a position at the court at the time, this was an excellent career opportunity. Anna Krasnowolska reports that he was prompted to undertake the work by one of the dignitaries of Tus. Thanks to his work on the poem, Ferdowsī could gain the interest and patronage of the emir and his court and also immortal fame with posterity. Such a promise may have been a strong motivation for the aspiring poet to create a monumental work, which he succeeded in doing. The 50,000 couplets poem is an epic recounting the adventures, including war, love and political adventures of heroes and kings.[21]

Today, the *Šāh-nāma* is unanimously assessed by scholars around the world as one of the most outstanding works of world literature but above all a treasure trove of Iran's heritage.[22]

The relationship between Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* and the *naqqāli* tradition

The *naqqāli* tradition took shape 500 years after Ferdowsī wrote the *Šāh-nāma*. His work at that time was already a recognized and popular text, as evidenced by the richly decorated manuscripts that have survived to this day. Suffice it to mention here that the collections of the British Museum in London include, among others: an illustrations from Shiraz, dating from the first half of the 15th century, depicting 'Rustam slaying his son Suhrab' [BM, inv. 1948,1009,0.51] and 'Bijan's battle with Farud' [BM, inv. 1948,1009,0.50] or manuscript from Gilan provinces depicting 'Kay Khusrau and Fariburz' [BM, inv. 1992,0507,0.1] and many others, e.g. 68 miniatures in the manuscript produced in Astarabad (17th century) at the Fitzwilliam Museum [FM, Ms 311]. There are many more similar collections around the world.

The nature of *Šāh-nāma*, however, did not fully meet the needs of the *naqqāls* repertoire. The purpose of this tradition was to spread information about the life of the Prophet and other tales with religious and educational overtones[23] in an interesting way. The *Šāh-nāma*, on the other hand, recounted the history of Iran before the Islamic period. It was a chronicle extolling the proud Persian empire that existed before the birth of the Prophet. In the Safavid dynasty, for which the religious aspect was so important, the glorification of the period before the Islamic conquest was as unwelcome as the glorification of the religious aspect during the Pahlavi period. A careful *naqqāl* therefore had to choose the material on which he worked judiciously. This is

[20] Davis, 2007: 16.
[21] Krasnowolska, 2004: 23-4.
[22] Abdullaeva & Melville, 2010; Lewis, 2015.
[23] Yamamoto, 2000: 41.

not to say that *Šāh-nāma* was excluded from the repertoire of *naqqāls*, only that its participation was noticeably less at the time than in the period since the 1920s.

As mentioned earlier, the progressive Pahlavi dynasty shifted its attention to its pre-Islamic heritage. Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* took center stage politically. As Davis notes

> "The Pahlavi kings […] were particularly interested in emphasizing Iran's pre-Islamic past as the ultimate source of Persian civilization, and to this end they assiduously promoted the study of Ferdowsi's poem, as it takes exactly this past as its subject matter."[24]

Willem M. Floor in his definition emphasizes the heroic overtones of *naqqāli* storytelling, drawing on real history, myths and legends, but omits the religious element. Instead, he highlights the form of the narrative, which can be prose as well as poetic, and the theatricality of the performance itself intended to immerse the audience in the presented world of ancient Iran.[25] The theatricality of *naqqāli* performances is also emphasized by Hossein Vaez Kashefi. Rhetoric, narrating, screen reading and even wrestling and fighting are also used in this form of storytelling, distinguishing it from keeping a different, static form where the storyteller sits on a carpet.[26] This dynamism is ideal for conveying the heroic nature of texts like *Šāh-nāma*. Floor also notes that the connection between the *naqqāli* and the Ferdowsī epic created a separate group called the *Šāh-nāma* Readers.[27]

The cultural shift away from the religious regime also allowed for some changes in attitudes toward the role of women in society. Women began to attend universities and were not ordered to cover their heads, which can be clearly seen in the recordings of that period.[28] In the wave of strong cultural and social changes, however, some things remained exclusive for man. The *naqqāli* tradition falls into this group.

The Gordāfarid of *Šāh-nāma* and the revolution in the *naqqāli* tradition

This brings us to the phenomenon of the female *naqqāl*, which is unique at this point. The first female *naqqāl* is known by the name Gordāfarid, which she adopted after one of the side characters of Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma*.

The literary Gordāfarid is the daughter of Gaždaham, the castellan of the White Fortress (Dež-e Sepid), who played a brief but significant role in the epic.

[24] Davis, 2007: 32-3.
[25] Floor, 2005: 93.
[26] Kashefi, 1971: 280.
[27] Floor, 2005: 99.
[28] Yeganeh, 1993; Nikpour, 2022.

Although she appears on only a few pages, "She plays a daringly martial role in the tragic episode of Rostam and Sohrāb".[29] This extremely brave and proud warrior woman, seeing the ignominious defeat of the Iranian hero, Hajir, suffered at the hands of the Turanian young army commander, clad in armor rode onto the battlefield on horseback and challenged the victor to battle. Ferdowsī illustrates this as follows:

> "With not a moment's delay she dressed herself in a knight's armor, gathered her hair beneath a Rumi helmet, and rode out from the fortress, a lion eager for battle. She roared at the enemy's ranks, «Where are your heroes, your warriors, your tried and tested chieftains?»"[30]

The fierce battle ended with her losing and in the final stage of the duel

> "Sohrab bore down on her again and snatched her helmet from her head; her hair streamed out, and her face shone like splendid sun"[31]

which revealed her identity as a woman. The scene primarily shows a strong woman freed from the pressure of social conventions. Gordāfarid is not a woman subordinated to the role of lover, wife, mother, or even politician[32] but a warrior playing a central role in the heroic narrative. "She is a heroine admired for her courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities"[33] which further overlap with the set of typical Iranian women described in *Šāh-nāma*. This creates a character who "excels the society in terms of values".[34] The position of a woman until the end of the Sasanid era, although varying depending on the ruling dynasty or the period in question was simply different than in Islam, which is clearly patriarchal.[35] While it is difficult to determine how much Islamic patriarchy influenced Ferdowsī himself and his work,[36] we do know that Gordāfarid is a unique figure in *Šāh-nāma*. Although she is juxtaposed with Gordiya (Kurdiyah), the intelligent, educated and learned warrior, sister of Bahram Chobin[37] as "unparalleled examples of brave and fearless women",[38] the uniqueness of female warrior from White Fortress is reflected in her influence on the women of Iran in the 20th and 21st centuries. The daughter of Gaždaham is thus a representative of liberated women who bears the traits of historical figures such

[29] Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2002.
[30] *Šāh-nāma*, 2007: 191.
[31] *Šāh-nāma*, 2007: 192.
[32] Loveimi, 2016.
[33] Habibi & Toloei-Azar, 2021: 3127.
[34] Habibi & Toloei-Azar, 2021: 3126.
[35] Brosius, 2016; Maksymiuk, 2019a; 2019b.
[36] Szklarz, 2017: 11.
[37] Ṭabarī, 998; Haeri, 2004: 82-3.
[38] Habibi & Toloei-Azar, 2021: 3126.

as Artemisia, the general of the Persian fleet, described by Herodotus,[39] and a certain mythical idea reflecting the goddess Anahita.[40] Thus, it reveals what an Iranian woman can or could be, whose social role is not imposed through religious doctrine or deep-rooted tradition.

Preserving certain traditions is important, especially when dealing with a tradition that goes back as far as the *naqqāli*. Introducing changes to it will always involve some discussion of their legitimacy. Revolutionary changes will involve even more controversy, and allowing a woman to study and perform as a *naqqāl* was just such a change.

As mentioned, the first female *naqqāli* became Fatemeh Habibizad, who:

> "[…] through thirteen years of research, meticulous collection of narratives, and patiently following the footsteps of old masters of this ancient dramatic art. Gordafarid has come a long way in challenging conventional social norms that consider naqqali as being an art form performed by men and for men in public places such as coffeehouses."[41]

The documentary made by Hadi Afarideh (in 2007) *The Story of Gordafarid* depicts the path that Fatemeh Habibizad took to become the first female professional storyteller. This documentary also attempts to answer the question of why it was only at the end of the 20th century that a woman was given the chance to be *naqqāl*. In the documentary, Fatemeh Habibizad carries out a conversation with her master, Morshed Torabi:

> F: Sir, is it possible for a woman to become a Naqal?
> T: Sure it is.
> F: Have we ever had a female Naqal in our history?
> T: We had Belgheis
> F: Alright
> T: She'd wear a chador around her waist and with a cane in her hand…
> F: Where?
> T: At this neighbourhood… but she didn't do Naqali.[42]

Belgheis read stories to people, she was a storyteller but not a *naqqāl*. She was not admitted to this exclusive group, which caused grief for the old masters who see the tradition to which they devoted almost their entire lives in decline. Master Mohammad Maddahi said that since women were able to give birth to and raise the greatest heroes like Rustam, they themselves must have been exceptional. Both historically and

[39] Hdt. VII.99.1-3; Munson, 1988.
[40] Rahmanian & Ashrafzadeh, 2019.
[41] Gordafarid (Fatemeh Habibizad), 2015.
[42] Afarideh, 2007.

currently, men have limited women's opportunities for advancement by shutting them out of certain professions and *naqqāli* was one of them. Belghais, mentioned earlier by Master Turabi, is also mentioned now with a certain sense of regret. Both masters believed that she was a woman of immense talent, but she was not a *naqqāli*, could not be one, because "we used to keep woman out of the scene, as a result of some stubbornness or jealousy we might have had."[43]

Perhaps this sense of grievance was a factor in the old masters' decision to defy tradition forbidding women from entering their hermetic profession. It was talent, passion and respect for the *naqqāl* tradition that became the chief determinant for achieving the rank of master regardless of gender. Master Turabi's decision to choose Fatemeh Habibizad from among his students was controversial, but her work and her performance on stage have been recognized. Fatemeh Habibizad recalls that some *naqqāli* have begun to compare her to the literary Gordāfarid's: "they told me that I had set foot on the battlegrounds of Shahnameh in Gordāfarid's manner."[44] For a young woman entering a professional group consisting solely of men, this was a compliment. Quoting Habibizad: "In Ferdowsī's *Shahnameh*, Gordāfarid's is a very wise and intelligent girl, whose reasoning always takes over her feelings."[45]

Here we can ask a question: without the literary prototype of a strong, independent woman who had the courage to stand up to a man, could the first *naqqāl* woman have existed? Without her as a reference, would it have been possible to make this revolutionary change?

Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* has been an inspiration to young men for a thousand years, showing them the valor and courage of the heroes described in it. But in this book is also a strong heroin, Gordāfarid, daughter of Gaždaham. A young woman from end of the 20th century, who boldly stepped into a tradition that no woman had access to, where the heroic narrative is so clearly intertwined with the religious one, crossed some previously impassable boundaries. She acted like her literary role model, a woman who, disregarding her own safety, stood up for the honor of Iran.

[43] Afarideh, 2007.
[44] Afarideh, 2007.
[45] Afarideh, 2007.

Conclusions

Established in the 16th century, the *naqqāli* tradition is characterized by two narratives, i.e. heroic and religious. The purpose of its separation was to spread Shiism in Iran. From their early days, the *naqqāl* used the heroic themes of Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma*. During the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty, whose policies were associated with emphasizing Iran's pre-Islamic heritage, the links between the *naqqāli* tradition and *Šāh-nāma* became much stronger. Similarly, *Šāh-nāma'*s influence on society itself. Pahlavi's political narrative opened society to a pre-Islamic model of the Iranian woman, more socially liberated than the women of Islamic Iran.

Of the epic's many interesting heroines, one found a special place in the reception. She was Gordāfarid, daughter of Gaždaham, who, in addition to the array of qualities inherent in most women in *Šāh-nāma*, also possessed the skills and courage to face a man on the battlefield. Gordāfarid thus became a symbol of the Iranian woman – strong, liberated, boldly entering a world previously available only to men.

The gender exclusivity of the *naqqāli* tradition had long been recognized by masters, but none dared to oppose it. It wasn't until Master Turabi in the late 20th century that he took on as a disciple a young woman whose courage, passion and determination resembled the qualities of the Gordāfarid of *Šāh-nāma*. Fatmeh Habibizad, thanks to her steadfastness, became the first female *naqqāl* and took her name after a woman who boldly crossed the socially accepted boundaries of female exclusion.

Fig. 1. Gordāfarid fights Sohrāb. *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī, 1606/7 CE, Herat; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession Number: 13.228.16. Folio 95r. detail [Public Domain: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/446550]

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