

Feminist Criticism of the Story of Homay Chehrzad's Kingdom in Shahnameh

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Abstract—Feminism is a movement for the defense of women's rights and eliminating racial discrimination of all kinds and also it causes the women to be present in community like men. The aim of this kind of critique is that women present a definition of their own state and save themselves from the dominance of men. Also, this critique engages in women's issues in literary texts and studies a literary work either in terms of its author's sex or female characters existing in that work. In this paper, we try to study the feminist critique of Homay Chehrzad Kingdom story in Shahnameh Ferdowsi in terms of female characters created in the story. The results of this study are obtained according to the content analysis. The conducted results show that although women have been respected in the story but there is still cases of oppression and humiliation of men towards them. On the other hand, existence of the second wave of feminism which emphasizes on the masculine traits and characteristics and examples of the third wave, which is the incidence of maternal sentiment, is evident in this story.

Index Terms—Ferdowsi, Shahnameh, Homay Chehrzad, feminism, feminist criticism

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a school which considers feminine characteristics superior to those of men, and introduces males as the factor blamed for the inferiority of women. Feminist criticism is a method which studies literary texts, its duty being the examination of how women are represented in literature (meqdadi, 1999, p. 554). Guerin argues that A feminist critique believes that previous criticisms should be revised since they have been based on the masculine views of affairs. It accredits literary criticism only if it includes feminine awareness (Guerin *al*, 2006, P. 243).

In this study, the story of Homay's reign, among others, is chosen for feminist criticism, introducing feminism briefly, then critiquing the story from a feminist point of view. A work is examined on the basis of the author, i.e. whether they are male or female, or the characters in feminist criticism. The story has been studied from the aspect of the female characters since the author is a man, deprived of a feminine written language. The anti-feminist cases in the text, first, have been mentioned then the ones in line with feminist ideas. Mehry Talkhabi's *Shahnameh and Feminism* is among one of the most important works in the field in which a feminist criticism of Shahnameh has been presented as well as feminist ideas, and a patriarchal and matriarchal government. It should be mentioned that the fifth chapter of Shahnameh, Khaleghi's version is the basis for the study.

II. FEMINISM

Feminism is a French term which has been rendered in Persian as 'zangerayi' (womanism), denoting, in particular, to all the theoretical and practical activities done so far since the 19th century in European-American countries for the women's rights (rasekh, 2000, P. 108)

Feminist criticism tries to bring into spotlight the women who have played a key role in human life and its development, but who have been ignored in patriarchal literature (talkhabi, 2005, P. 90).

The pioneer in feminist criticism is Virginia Woolf who, in *A Room of One's Own*, attempted to disclose the cultural, economic, and educational inabilities of a patriarchal society which suppresses women's creative abilities. That is why the work is deemed as the point of departure for feminist criticism (emami, 1998, P. 285).

Feminism History

Human Rights, a movement whose ideas included providing support for the inalienable rights of human beings, emerged since the 17th century. Until the 19th century most of its ideas revolved around the secondary view of women (tohidi, 2000, P. 82), after which new thoughts about the rights of humans, especially those of women, bringing a three-main-stage movement called 'Feminism' into the fore:

The first wave of feminist criticism was formed due to women's demand for economic, social, and political reforms, and their right to vote inspired by civil rights movements which considered men to be beings opposed to women, and males and family the factors responsible for all the calamities cast upon women (selden and videson, 1998, P. 257).

Focusing excessively on social and political participation, the second wave of feminism followed the extremism of the first in bringing up the issue of women's freedom, on the basis of which women were required to show manly traits in order to express themselves. As opposed to these movements, i.e. the first and the second one, an anti-feminist movement was formed with the aim of battling against the ones who believe the women should have masculine identity, insisting on women's traditional roles and the maternal sanctity. Feminism was criticized as a movement opposed to this holy role, leading to the fact that women felt the dominant feminism not representing their interests and demands. This, on the one hand, could pave the way for the advent of a range of feminists, and on the other hand, lead a part of feminism which puts the blame for its weak social status on the male verbal domination into trying to demolish male-oriented speech. This, in turn, raised the third feminist wave (moshirzadeh, 2002, Pp. 341-348) which tried to give women a dignity in harmony with their human nature bringing up the importance of motherhood and emotional behavior expression.

The three feminist waves, therefore, can be summarized as follows: the first waves believes in the equality of men and women, the second one is extremist, and have faith only in women, and the third totally denies the separation of men and women (meqdadi, 1999, P. 556).

III. WOMEN'S ROLES IN SHAHNAMEH

Women in Shahnameh fall into two categories: the women who have not taken any responsibilities outside home, taking such roles as mothers, wives, etc., and the ones assuming responsibilities as queens, generalissimos, treasurers, nursemaids, etc (sarami, 1994, P. 835). into which Homay can be included.

In Shahnameh, essentially, the status and dignity of those women are valued who are in harmony with social norms, and who adhere to the faith and rites of the time criticizing, on the contrary, the ones whose thoughts and acts are in contrast to the society's natural course of affairs, and the those who break the norms and disagree with the moral and religious principles of society (mohazzab, 1995, Pp. 19-20).

As to the wives of the plutocrats and the kings in the historical era of Shahnameh to which Homay belongs, they enjoy perfect rights, while the women belonging to the other social classes, especially women within the community are deprived of opportunities having few rights (ibid, p. 17).

Homay in Shahnameh and Other Works

Homay is the name of the Kianian Queen. She was the daughter, wife, and the princess of Esfandiar's son, Bahman, who was put on the throne according to her father's will, promoting justice. Giving birth to a boy, she pretended that her baby was dead for fear of losing the throne, gave him to a nursemaid to be take care of, putting him and letting him go on the Euphrates River in a wooden box together with gold and ruby after he was eight months old. A washerman who had recently lost his child took the box out of the water to his house. He and his wife named the child Darab, meaning the one who has been taken from water. Darab grew up. He was fairly fond of riding and archery. The washerman used the jewels inside the box to raise him. Becoming a sturdy young man, he made his parents, i.e. the washerman and his wife, tell him who his real parents were.

Intimidated by Darab, the washerman's wife narrates the story of the box, making him prepare a sword, a shield, and a horse, at the service of the region's border guard. Invading Iran borders by Romans, Homay makes Reshnavad in charge of the army preparation. Darab joins the army as well. The battle brings victory for Iran by his valor. Reshnavad seeks the truth about Darab, discovers it in what the washerman and his wife reveal, and presents it to Homay who calls Darab to the court, puts him on the throne on a special day, and shows regret as to her past deeds (dabirsiyaqi, 1991, Pp. 54-57).

Homay's story has been narrated in such works as *Bondaheshn*, *DarabNameh*, *TarikheBal'ami*, *BahmanNameh*, etc. in different accounts, as well as in Shahnameh. For instance, "in *TarikheBal'ami* the same story has been cited with a little difference, in which Homay puts the baby in a coffin, and let it go on a river until it reaches a miller who fosters him. Homay, some years later, becomes aware of the fact and calls the miller, giving him presents" (rastgarfasayi, 1990, p. 375) or in *BahmanNameh*, in which Homay is portrayed as the king of Egypt's daughter and Bahman's wife. In *Creation and History* by Moghaddasi, the small difference with that of Shahnameh is that Homay gives the baby to a flock of seamen, but the ship sinks and the baby is the only one who survives. A washerman takes the baby out of water fostering him (ibid, p. 374).

IV. FEMINIST CRITICISM OF THE STORY OF HOMAY CHEHRZAD'S KINGDOM

In the story of Hoday's reign, which we are going to critique here, women's presence is stronger to the extent which the pivotal role is assumed by a woman since their role is a minor one in the literature of the past. It should be noted, that women are on focus and worthwhile sometimes, though humiliated and unfairly treated at other times in the story. In the feminist criticism of the story we are first to cite the misogynistic cases, then to mention the feminist ones critiquing them.

Women were refrained from education and participation in social and economic issues since they were considered inferior and the second sex in the ancient past. They had no will of their own, in a way that the decision on marriage was solely in the hands of a girl's parents, as is the case when Esfandiar's father, Bahman, marries his own daughter at will:

پدر در پذیرفتش از نیکویی بر آن دین که خوانی همی پهلوی
همای دل افروز تابنده ماه چنان بد که آستان آمد ز شاه
(فردوسی، 1386، 483)

Hoday's father, Bahman, married Hoday, because of her beauty on the basis of Pahlavi faith

Ironically, cute, pretty Hoday got pregnant by the King (her father)

(ferdowsi, 2007, P. 483)

These lines, especially the first one, show that Bahman marries his own daughter for her beauty, but no word is seen as to Hoday's consent or dissent. As it was mentioned, there are different accounts of Hoday, some of which denote her dissent against marrying her father. Feminists think of men as beings against women, and consider them as the causes of the whole misfortunes cast upon women (pakniya and mardaha, 2009, P. 86). It is also cited in *Gender Dominance* that feminists considered paternal power and patriarchal system as the greatest factor for women's inferiority which might explain why Hoday turns out to be Bahman's wife. According to what follows below, thus, Bahman's marrying Hoday is a case of unfair treatment of a woman:

چنین گفت این پاک تن چهر زار به گیتی فراوان نبودست شاد
(فردوسی، 1386، 483)

Bahman said that Hoday the pretty had not been happy in her life (her life had not been successful)

(ferdowsi, 2007, P. 483)

Referring, also, to what comes in *DarabNameh*, Hoday "felt nostalgic one night. The nursemaid turned her face saying 'Why do you look nostalgic?' 'My father injured me, removing the seal [between my legs]' said Hoday, 'Nobody knows the secret affair but God. I'm afraid of conceiving a child since it's been a month I've not seen my menstruation. I fear people's sarcasm and intimidation. They might be suspicious saying how an unmarried girl can give birth to a boy (tarsusi, 1975, P. 10).' Hoday, apparently, was forced to sleep with her own father, having no will and choice of her own. But as to her marrying her own father in *Shahnameh*, the marriage "is of an incestuous one to which grandees were inclined in order to retain race and remain pure" (hejazi, 1992, P. 214), something being practiced as a Pahlavi custom even if it were against a girl's will.

The humiliating attitude of the time toward women, and forcing them as to marriage, in particular, even caused some women in *Shahnameh* to consider themselves humble and a being dependent on men whom they thought as superior as well. The following lines attest this in which more stress is put on having a son. It is the father's death that brings humiliation to children, not the mother's:

که یزدان پسر داد و نشناختم به آب فرات اندر انداختم
به بازویش بر بستم این هم گهر پسر خوار شد چون بمرشد پدر
(فردوسی، 1386، 508)

God has granted me a son, and I did not appreciate him, letting him go on the Euphrates River, with a gem fastened on his arm. A boy is humiliated when his father dies

(ferdowsi, 2007, P. 508)

Also, "Crowning her son, Darab, Hoday apologizes to him since she has refused him her motherly affection, letting him go alone on the water since his first months of life" (sarami, 1994, P. 695).

پدر مرده و شاه بی رای زن جوانی و گنج آمد و رای زن
که جز تخت هرگز میادت نشست اگر بد کند زو مگیر آن به دست
(فردوسی، 1386: 510)

Hoday said to Darab "I was young and I had imperfect logic of women. The temptation for throne had deceived me. Your father had died, and the king had no counselor,

Do not blame me if I was wrong. Kingdom only deserves you"

(ferdowsi, 2007, P. 510)

Women were humiliated by men, and even by their own children as well as the humble attitude they had of themselves. Darab intimidates the washerman's wife by sword and humiliates her to tell the truth in spite of all the years of toil she had tolerated for his bringing up as a mother:

چنان بد که یک روز گازر برفت به خانه سویی رود یازید و تفت
در خانه را تنگ دارا بیست بیامد به شمشیر یازید دست
به زن گفت کژی و تاروی مجوی هر آنچست بر رسم سخن راست گوی
(همان: 510)

One day the washerman headed for the river.

Darab closed the door of the house tightly, took his sword,
intimidating the washerman's wife into telling him the truth about his real parents.
(ibid, p. 510)

The above lines show that the women of lower social ranks enjoyed lower esteem and were humiliated in this period according to the cultural set of the society. The same attitude is seen even in the royal court where court women enjoyed more esteem than those of the rest of the society. Bahman's son, Sasan, considers Hoday's reign shameful and leaves the country since he cannot stand her supremacy over himself:

چو ساسان شنید این سخن خیره شد ز گفتار بهمن دلش تیره شد
به سه روز و دو شب به سان پلنگ از ایران به مرزی دگر شد ز ننگ
(همان: 484)

When Bahman said that Hoday was the queen-to-be, Hoday's brother, Sasan, was sullen with his father's statement, leaving the country in three days in a rush.
(ibid, p. 484)

It should be mentioned, however, that the feminist aspect of the event (Hoday's supremacy over Sasan for ruling the country) overarches the misogynistic one, i.e. humiliating women and considering their reign shameful.

According to the fact that the image of women, i.e. whether their roles are primary or secondary, is of great importance in feminist criticism, we face three female characters: the nursemaid, the washerman's wife, and Hoday. There can be seen no name of the nursemaid except in few lines. Washerwoman has no specific name and is present in the whole story under the same title, likely because she belongs to the ordinary women of the society, hence enjoying few rights compared to the royal ones and plutocrats. Her minor role in the story may be another reason for that. A name is, however, assigned to Hoday in spite of the fact that she is of plutocrats and plays the major role in the story.

Shahnameh's stories have taken place in different societies and eras, having different values as to, and attitudes toward women. Some women enjoy liberty and power, which indicates their high value and status, whereas those of non-plutocratic ranks have different lives, views, and values. While Ferdowsi deems women worthy of esteem, he also makes men superior in some cases (motamedi, 2009, P. 83) like the following line in which he equates having a son with happiness and goodness:

نهانی پسر زاد و با کس نگفت همی داشت آن نیکویی در نهفت
(فردوسی، 1386: 488)

Hoday gave birth to a boy in secret, hiding this happy event (having a son) from other people.
(ferdowsi, 2007, P. 488)

Our purpose, here, is not to portray Ferdowsi as feminist or misogynist. Pessimistic views of women are not typical of the epic poem or Ferdowsi's will. Instead, it was the culture of the past which affected the way he saw women (sahami, 1994, p. 699). He, as a sage, a genius, and a liberal in a patriarchal society to which he had to adapt himself, would not have contained these women and the feminist view of them in Shahnameh if he had not had the liberty typical of him (talkhabi, 2005, P. 94).

The cases mentioned are mostly misogynistic, not being much in line with feminist aims, since feminism seeks equality between men and women, or in some cases the superiority of women over men. In contrast to feminist views, it has been seen, in the cases identified, that men are superior to women. Men have women under their control in most cases, and treat them however they like. Later in the paper, however, it has been attempted to deal with the lines in which feminist ideas are reflected.

In the feminist criticism of the story, Bahman's giving throne to Hoday while having a son, Sasan, indicates the preference of women over men, which is a feminist principle, as well as Bahman's intense love for Hoday. It is obvious that "feminism tries to change the humiliating views toward women in a way that all women find themselves not 'unimportant Others', but worthwhile human beings who have the same rights as men do. Feminists believe that women should have a definition of themselves, challenging for their right to express themselves in politics, society, education, and art" (bressler, 2007, P. 200), as it is the case with the following lines in which a woman's reign, the equal rights between men and women, and women's presence in politics and society are shown:

همای آمد و تاج بر سر نهاد یکی راه و آیین دیگر نهاد
سپه را همه سر به سر بار داد در گنج بگشاد و دینار داد
(فردوسی، 1386: 487)

Hoday changed the manner when she became the queen. She gave all the troops time to visit her, and granted them money and presents profusely
(ferdowsi, 2007, P. 487)

This equality, of course, is seen in different places in the story:

سپر دم بدو تاج و تخت بلند همان لشکر و گنج با ارجمند
ولیعهد من او بود در جهان همان کس کزو زاید اندر نهان
اگر دختر آید برش گر پسر ورا باشد این تاج و تخت و کمر
(همان: 484-483)

Bahman said "I gave the throne to Hoday.

She is the queen after me, but the throne belongs to her future child, whether a boy or a girl".

(ibid, pp. 483-484)

In these lines the equality between men and women is perfectly evident since Bahman deems his children worthy of throne, whether male or female.

The second wave of feminism which entailed women to show manly traits and give up the feminine capabilities and emotions is seen in the story to the extent that giving up her motherly affection, Homay lets her baby go on the water and claims that he is dead:

| | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| چنان شاه شاخ برومند را | نهائي بدو داد فرزند را |
| چنين گفت کان پاك زاده بمرد | كسي كو ز فرزند او نام برد |
| همي بود بر تخت پيروز و شاد | همان تاج شاهي به سر بر نهاد |

(همان: 488)

Homay gave Darab to a nursemaid in secret,
telling everyone who asked him about her baby that he was dead.

Then she sat on the throne feeling happy and successful.

(ibid, p. 488)

Another case of this wave is to use manly tongue and demeanor by women, which is seen in some places in the story. The most prominent example of this language is Homay's tone in commanding as a queen which is totally manly and decisive, in a way that the reader of the lines assumes the commands to be given by a man if s/he knows nothing of the course of events beforehand:

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| دل بدسگالان ما كنده باد | كه اين تاج و اين تخت فرخنده باد |
| مبيناد كس رنج و تيمار ما! | همه نيكويي باد كردار ما |
| نيازش به رنج تن خویش بود | توانگر كنيم آنكه درویش بود |
| نداريم از آن نيكويها به رنج! | مهان جهان را كه دارند گنج |

(همان: 488-478)

Homay told the gathering "Happy this ruling! May our enemies be defeated,
our acts be all good, our harm inflict no one.

We will make the poor wealthy,
and run not the well-off into trouble".

(ibid, pp. 478-488)

As to demeanor, Homay behaves like a man in some cases, and performs successfully the acts related to her ruling just as firmly as a man does, a sign of which is manifested where Homay steps out of the palace, stands at a place where troops march before her, and deals with the country affairs in a manly grandeur, competence and contrivance:

| | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| خود و مرزبانان پاكيزه راي | بيامد ز كاخ همايون هماي |
| تن و نام ديوانها بشمرد | بدان تا سپه پيش او بگذرد |

(همان: 498)

Homay stepped out of the palace with her entourage,
standing on a place so that the troops could march before her, and handle the country affairs.

(ibid, p. 498)

Given the above lines, we can see that in spite of the misogynistic view according to which "women are less logical and more sentimental they are, thus, made just for such domestic chores as caring for their husbands and children; therefore, drawing them to the social life arena and its management which require reason and decisiveness and making them away from their main responsibilities at home is against to the law of nature" (pakniya and mardih, 2009, P. 34), women, also, can enter into politics and efficiently and successfully handle the responsibilities. They even can overcome their emotions to such an extent that they can ignore motherly affections in order to achieve noble aims (e.g. ruling), just like the way Homay, setting aside her emotions, lets her baby go on the water.

But the feminist criticism of the story stresses the third wave, i.e. showing feminine emotions and capabilities as well as the second wave. All three female characters of the story possess motherly affection which has been depicted in different ways, such as the mother's affection as producing milk in her breasts, the affection of the washerman's wife to Darab realized in the attempts she makes to bring him up like a competent and sympathetic nurse, and the scene when Homay sees her son, in which profuse motherly affection exists:

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| ز پستان مادر ببالود شير | چو ديد آن بر و چهره ي دلپذير |
| (فردوسي، 1386: 498) | |
| سرشكش ز مژگان به رخ برچكيد | چو آن نامه برخواند و گوهر ببيد |
| (همان: 508) | |
| هماي آمد از دور و بردش نماز | چو آمد به نزديك ايوان فراز |
| فروريخت از ديده خون بر كنار | برافشانند آن گوهر شاهوار |
| ببوسيد و ببوسد رویش به چنگ | مرو را گرفتش در آغوش تنگ |
| (همان: 509) | |
| بيرورد چنان كه فرزند خویش | زن گازر او را چو پيوند خویش |
| (همان: 492) | |

Seeing her handsome son after many years again, Hoday produced milk in her breasts because of the affection she felt as a mother.

(ferdowsi, 2007, P. 497)

Hoday burst into tears when she received the letter from Rashnavad (the commander of her army) together with the gem fastened on his son's arm.

(ibid, p. 508)

Hoday bowed before Darab when he came to the royal court. Throwing jewels on him, she was moved to bloody tears. She took him in her arms kissing.

(ibid, p. 509)

The washerman's wife loved and raised Darab as if he was her real child

(ibid, p. 492)

A woman knows better than a man how to love since God has placed love and affection in her very existence. The universe is run by affection as well because love is more efficient than hate (maknon and sanepoor, 1995, P. 12). A woman's job is to love, give hope, educate, tolerate, and be patient. In feminists' view showing motherly affection, also, is the best way for a woman's representation in the society.

There have been many authors producing significant works. Female writers, basically, have defended women's rights by nature whereas male authors have often humiliated them. Some men, however, have deemed them worthy of esteem though they have, sometimes, considered women inferior to men, among whom is Ferdowsi, who depicts many women possessing special ranks and status in *Shahnameh* though he displays some women as hateful.

Shahnameh's women are grouped into white, black, and grey ones in *Shahnameh and Feminism*. The first group contains women who defend and support their families and children, are at their husbands' service, and live the way the society expects of them. Black women are in contrast to the white ones, and represent evil. The last group, containing the most important women in *Shahnameh*, comprises the ones who are human more than they are women. They do not insult women's characters, and are true display of a woman; feminism, therefore, stresses them as much as it can (talkhabi, 2005, Pp. 103-104). Hoday, who is placed in the gray women's group "is a woman of excellence. She does not forget herself for the love of her son. She tries not to deceive herself because of her womanhood. She is frank with herself" (ibid, p. 207).

Ferdowsi, consciously, wisely, and decisively, considers women superior and worthy of praise. *Shahnameh's* women love the culture of their country. They are brave in expressing their thoughts and behaving the way in which they believe, are dedicated, loyal to their husbands, provident, aware, and thoughtful (kusakabe, 2003, P. 171) just like the way the washerman's wife is depicted with innocence and providence in the following lines:

| | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| سخن گفت هرگونه با کدخدای | چنان بد که روزی زن پاک رای |
| که باشد بدین دانشت رهنمون؟ | که این گویان را چه سازی کنون؟ |
| (فردوسی، 1386: 492) | |
| یکی پاک با شرم پر مایه ای | بیایورد آزاده تر دایه ای |
| (همان: 488) | |

One day, the washerman's thoughtful wife told her husband "What are you going to do with these jewels? Whom are you going to ask for advice?"

(ferdowsi, 2007, P. 492)

Hoday ordered that an innocent, modest, and liberal nursemaid, one of a noble of family be responsible for raising her child.

(ibid, p. 488)

V. CONCLUSION

In the feminist criticism of the story of Hoday, we encounter three female characters, i.e. Hoday, who is the main character and of plutocrats, the washerman's wife who is placed at low levels of the society, and the nursemaid whose presence is much vaguer than the other two.

In the story of Hoday's reign, in which the main role is given to a woman, Ferdowsi has placed men superior to women in some cases though he deeply respects women, the reason of which may be either the effect of the dominant culture of the society on him, or Ferdowsi's adherence to what has happened in narrating the course of events since the story belongs to the historic era of *Shahnameh*.

The second wave of feminism according to which women were required to give up their feminine capabilities, adopting masculine traits is fully represented in the central character of the story, Hoday, who casts her child off in order to maintain power. Some signs of the third wave – according to which motherly affection and feminine feelings are a need – can be seen at the end of the story, however, where Hoday visits Darab. As to the other characters, the third wave dominates, especially about the washerman's wife who fosters Darab like her own child.

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