

A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE REVISITING PERSIANS NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SAFAVIDS FOLKTALES

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The rise of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736) in Persia has had a profound impact on the lives of Iranians. The Safavids established the first Iranian national government after Islam, a government that subsequently helped Iranian identity to take new forms. The authors develop a discussion concerning the customs and common interests of Iranians that are central to the construction of national identity as they are portrayed in oral folktales about Shah Abbas (1582-1629). The identity components that are identified and examined by the authors in approximately one hundred and fifty tales persist as fundamental features of Iranian identity, bar a few alterations regarding modern Iranians. Because of their frequency, sustenance and richness in quantity, the Safavid folktales have subconsciously played a significant role in representing a pattern for modern Iranians' national identity. In sum, this paper seeks to find a link between folktales and the construction of national identity, particularly on the Iranian plateau.

Keywords: national identity, the Safavids, folktales, Storytelling, Shiite Muslim.

Vzpon dinastije Safavidov (1501–1736) v Perziji je globoko vplival na življenje Irancev. Safavidi so ustanovili prvo iransko nacionalno vlado, ki je prispevala, da je iranska identiteta dobila nove oblike. V tem članku so obravnavane navade in skupni interesi Irancev, kakor se kažejo v ustnem izročilu ljudskih pripovedi, povezanih s šahom Avvasom (1582–1629) in so osrednjega pomena v graditvi iranske nacionalne identitete. Sestavine identitete so izluščene in obravnavane iz gradiva 150 pripovedi. Z nekaj spremembami, ki se nanašajo na sodobne Irance, so ostale temeljne poteze iranske identitete. Zaradi pogostnosti, vsebine in bogastva so bile safavidске pripovedi nezavedno pomembne za vzorec sodobne identitete Irancev. Prispevek se torej osredinja na vez med ljudskimi pripovedmi in graditvijo nacionalne identitete, zlasti na Iranskem višavju.

Ključne besede: nacionalna identiteta, Safavidi, ljudske pripovedi, pripovedovanje, šiitski muslimani.

INTRODUCTION

When Farsi Dari was established as the official language of Persia in the 10th century AD, most stories were narrated in this language. Despite the fact that Arabic, Turkish, Mongol, Russian, English, and even French words have been introduced into Farsi over time, as the official language Farsi has, *in toto*, remained one of the central components of Persian national identity. The existence of plenty of tales in Farsi across a vast geographical area extending from India to the farthest borders of the Ottoman Empire is evidence of the role that Farsi has been playing in the process of identification.

Themes found in the tales written in Farsi from the very first centuries after the conquest of Persia by Muslim Arabs in AD 636 still revolved around a pre-Islamic Persian heritage. Many history books were written in this semi-colonial era with conspicuous reactionary nationalistic narratives in their introductory texts. However, the most important and persisting efforts to build up a national identity were made through the

writing of epic poems. This trend was principally initiated by Abul Ghasem Ferdusi, who wrote *Shahnameh* in verse the 10th century AD.

Although the epic poems narrated in *Shahnameh* were mainly based on folktales, Firdausi's literary dexterity in writing *Shahnameh* influenced countless poets and writers in the generations that followed. Imitating the style and stories of *Shahnameh* was a way to resist intrusive identities. However, when Turks and Mongols dominated Persia, attention turned from nationalistic epic poems to versified stories and historical narratives that told of invasive tribes and of the misery experienced during their rule over the land.

The rise of the Safavids in the early decades of the 16th century had a profound and unprecedented impact on the art of storytelling in Persia. Determined opposition of the state to poets and storytellers resulted in their migration to far-flung lands. Their resettlement led to the expansion of Farsi to other regions, especially to India; in addition, it also led to the introduction of other nations' stories and styles to Persian literature. In this period, some of the ancient Indian masterpieces such as *Ramayana and Mahabharata* and *Hir and Ranjha* were either modified or translated into Farsi. In addition, religious policies of the Safavids brought about the downfall of national epics and gradually replaced them with religious ones.¹ The main goals of the typical heroes in such stories were to convert other nations and to transform their traditions. The antagonists that "religious" heroes – who were not necessarily virtuous – would encounter in these stories were generally depicted as enemies of the Safavid accredited religion and political system.

Although the content and structures of the stories written in this period were far less mature than the ones written in earlier ages, the number of stories reached an unparalleled level. This was due not such much to the Safavid kings, who condemned storytelling on religious grounds, but to the support that poets and storytellers received from non-Persian kings and governors, who were primarily Indian. Moreover, the outburst of translated works from neighboring languages was another factor that encouraged the increase in stories. Many tales were either adopted or fully translated into Persian, primarily from Indian languages as well as from Turkish and Uzbek.

The Safavids enriched Persian national identity, and after centuries of dislocation, due primarily to the rise of many regional governments on the Persian Plateau, this land witnessed a rather stable geographical and religious integrity. Given that almost all ethnic groups in this region had a common historical background with similar traditions as well as close literary and artistic legacies, the Safavids paved the way for the establishment of a vast and independent 'Persia' with a relatively distinctive identity.²

¹ It also should be noted that Firdausi previously paid tribute to this genre in "Rustam and Esfandiar".

² Some of the common literary legacies are Ferdusi's epics, lyrical versified stories by Nezami Ganjavi, mystical poetry by Hafiz, poems and narratives by Sa'di, versified social criticism by Obeyd Zakani, and dozens of other Persian literary masterpieces, which are widely read by Iranians.

STORYTELLING AND THE SAFAVIDS

Studies of the Persian prose and poetry show that folktales were employed not only for entertaining and escapist purposes but also for communicating complex issues to ordinary and less literate people. Storytelling has been considered a significant part of Persian society's national culture, and many historians, e.g. Reza Shabani (2003: 105), correctly argue that folktales have been appropriated into various fields of study. Most historians, mystics, philosophers and poets were conscious of the role that storytelling can play in conveying their thoughts. The oldest existing manuscripts that date from the Sassanid dynasty (AD 224-651) and Persian texts on any subject, e.g. history, philosophy, ethics, politics, etc. have enjoyed the narrative device. For instance, *The History of Bal'ami* (11th century AD) contains 139 stories about kings and prophets. The narrative device often utilized in non-fictional books is that of overtly introducing a lesson, be it moral, philosophical or otherwise. However, there is no doubt that story-books such as *A Thousand and One Days* as well as dozens of other folktales and legends incorporate a narrative device more conspicuously and dexterously than the former groups. An analysis of the function of tales in different ages can help us to understand identity components in a new light.

Stories were hardly kept in written form but instead were handed down through the generations by word of mouth. Storytelling in Persia went through numerous ups and downs and was hybridized with cultures of many neighboring tribes. The Safavids, who succeeded in founding the first Shiite state in Persia and in uniting different tribes in the region, opposed storytelling on religious grounds. Roger Savory (1993) claims that the art of poetry declined during the Safavid period when the Safavids frowned on storytelling. The opposition of the state to the spread of some tales due to their supposed blasphemous content held back the growth of national stories³; instead, *Ayyari* stories that focused on Robin-Hood-esque protagonists as well as religious and even sentimental stories increased in number.

Nevertheless, the structures of ancient national stories were not abandoned altogether. Witty storytellers, in order to escape from the *fatwa* that prohibited storytelling and also in order to avoid charges of heresy, would depict chivalrous heroes in their epics and lyrical stories as Muslims. Furthermore, to appease religious people, they sometimes cleverly had the non-Muslim antagonists of their stories converted to Islam. However, it is notable that Safavid religious scholars were not entirely unanimous in dismissing the art of storytelling. One of the most important religious scholars of this era was *Sheik Bahai*. Zarinkub (1995) discusses some of his stories, which are replete with subtle satires on a variety of subjects. *Bahai* employed storytelling to convey his philosophical and religious messages.

³ Although stories with nationalistic sentiments were scarce, cheap heroic stories and adaptation from ancient national symbols were popular among the people.

The art of storytelling, after a short downturn at the beginning of the Safavid dynasty, began to flourish, especially after Shah Abbas I (1582-1629) ascended the throne. The rise of storytelling was due to other reasons as well. It is well known storytelling was considered to be a profession and that storytellers were often patronized by the rulers of Persia, India, and Deccan. In addition, storytellers would narrate stories in friendly social gatherings. To do so, they would compile various interesting stories, which as a result helped to enrich the archive of folktales. The rising popularity of coffee-houses and the development of coffee-house arts such as rhapsody, murals, dance and role-playing also contributed to the rise of storytelling in this period.

SHAH ABBAS, THE EMBLEM OF AUTHORITY IN SAFAVID FOLKTALES

Analyzing Shah Abbas's ascension to the throne⁴ and the continuation of his sovereignty in the context of Max Weber's notions of "power" and "authority" reveals that at first, Shah Abbas had to forcefully dethrone his own father in order to gain "power". Immediately after having his sovereignty accepted by the Sages of the royal court, Shah Abbas placed himself in the traditional ruling position of Persian society and then gradually sought to achieve "authority" and to develop his charisma in order to complement his initial "power". In the first years of his reign, before his lucky stars began to shine, ordinary people did not consider him to be a figure with attributes beyond those of his ancestors. However, people's minds and feelings wove the magical aura of 'authority' around Shah Abbas when he defeated the Uzbeks, when he retrieved the western and south-western lands from the Ottomans, and when he overcame the Portuguese in the Persian Gulf. His behavior was exaggerated in folktales, and all the ugliness of his deeds was wiped out.

For this reason, Shah Abbas commissioned more narratives about himself⁵ than any other figure in the collective memory of the common people. He is the only king who in almost all his stories has been depicted as a "good" character⁶ whose will and

⁴ Most of the oral folktales center on Shah Abbas.

⁵ In the Center of Folklore Studies, which is the richest documental center (of oral folktales) in Iran, there have registered one hundred and fifty tales about Shah Abbas. There are 30 registered tales for Alexander of Macedonia, eleven for Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi, seven for Nasereddin Shah, five for Karim Khan, and four apiece for Ardeshir Babakan and Chengiz Khan. There are less than three tales registered for each of the following figures: Cyrus, Shapour, Napoleon, Malekshah Saljuqi, Fatali Shah Qajar, Anushiravan, Shah Sultan Hussein Safavi, Shah Ismail Safavi, Bahram Goor, Teymur Lang, Muhammad Kharazmshah and Buzarjomehr. However, these numbers do not imply deny that other tales may exist in other centers or that some tales may still not be recorded.

⁶ Most of the tales narrated about Alexander reproach his deeds. On the contrary, although Shah Abbas has slightly been criticized in a few cases, none of the tales presents him in a wicked light.

wit was second only to that of God. The reign of this victorious king was an exceptional period and the history of Persia has never witnessed a more influential king.⁷

Interestingly enough, one can discern in the words of the narrators that the common people in general did not ask, bar a few exceptions, for any rights beyond those set for them in the traditional political system of the monarchy. Furthermore, the themes of some of these stories point to the disenfranchisement of people to decide for their own lives. From the narrators' perspective, the shah's power is unlimited and his will can be opposed only by the will of God revealed in the form of divine Providence. The only way that anyone could ever change the destiny that the shah has determined for him is through the help of Providence. Moreover, it is important to note that in this society, the government intrudes into the most private matters of ordinary people. Although there are signs of social freedom in this society, although people live rather happily, and although the shah supports the poor and the oppressed, destiny and providence are at the core of this paradoxically both liberal and God-centered society. Furthermore, in the society portrayed in these folktales, spiritual insight and mysticism have no place, while a scientific and philosophical outlook on the world prevails.

Nonetheless, elements of despotism such as the denigration of people, insecurity and instability are generally not well depicted in the stories that represent the state of society under Shah Abbas's reign. Cannibals, highwaymen, and greedy viziers are all punished by the Shah Abbas. Furthermore, characters from the lower classes come into direct conflict with the shah, and sometimes, with the help of Providence, these characters manage to force their wills on the shah at the end. However, Shah Abbas's dignity and reverence are always preserved, and he is the most authoritative character throughout stories.

According to the narrators, society is prosperous, and any existing poor people are assisted by Shah Abbas. He is always ready to defend the exploited. If there are any instances of inequity occurring on his lands or if any of his subjects starves, the shah feels it himself and chokes on his food. Then Shah Abbas, knowing the reason for his choking, puts on dervish clothes and, having filled his special bowl with kingly food and drink, sets off into the city to offer aid or feed the poor.

There is no doubt that while some groups greatly benefited from his deeds, there were also some who opposed him in order to reach their own legitimate or illegitimate goals. Reviewing certain incidents recorded in historical texts or fictional tales, the cruelty of the Safavid king is revealed⁸. The critics of his lifestyle point out the many

⁷ Although Nadir Shah could retrieve the national integrity that which was lost during the reign of Shah Sultan Hussein, he did not attain the same status as Shah Abbas in the cultural memory of Iranians.

⁸ Don Garcia De Silva Figuera, Spain's ambassador to Shah Abbas' court, in his *Travelogue* (9-327) explains the heartbreaking selection of women and girls by Shah Abbas to be taken to his harem in the meantime of during his visit to a bazaar, an event that which marks the cruelty and unquestionable power of the Safavid kings. Iskandar Beyg Torkaman in his book *Alame Araye Abbas*, in which he writes about Shah Abbas's manners, introduces him as a person with contradictory characteristics (p1107).

flaws in Shah Abbas's character. However, we do not intend to examine him and his age from an ethical point of view. However, it is noteworthy that narrators have to a great extent recounted only the positive aspects of his life.

COLLECTIVE BELIEFS AND TRADITIONS AMONG THE PERSIANS

The study of tales related to the lives of the Safavid sultans shows that society under their reign had plenty of cultural commonalities. Although it was a patriarchal society, there were many women who made progress and found their ways into the royal court. Social status was traditionally determined according to one's family connections, and many people climb up the ladder meretriciously. Faith in God's supremacy and the unconditional preeminence of Providence played significant roles in forming Persian identity. This society had a high regard for work and a disdain for laziness. While it was a religious society, people were very superficial about religious matters and blindly accepted all that the clergymen told them. Moreover, society was highly tolerant of followers of other religions or of strangers who did not follow Islam. There were however signs of anti-Semitism to some extent. The society reflected in these narratives adhered to religious and national traditions. Pilgrimages to Mecca, Karbala and Mashhad were very common. Praying for the dead before burial, reading the Koran by graves, and the wearing of the Chador by women form the backdrop of these stories.

The story "Shah Abbas and the Cannibals"⁹ portrays the normalcy of polygamy in addition to stressing the significance and vitality of learning crafts. In addition, the story of "Shah Abbas and the Jew"¹⁰ relates how the shah learns a craft in addition to his political vocations. In this story, the shah falls in love with a rural girl. He woos the girl, but her father decrees that he would let them marry only if the shah learns a craft. The king learns carpet-weaving and finally marries the girl. Later, the craft also saves his life when he is trapped by a Jew who cooks broth out of Muslims' bodies. The shah saves his own life by weaving a carpet for the Jew. The presence of the Jew and the negative view accorded to Jews by narrators is a reflection of the ideology of the age. However, contrary to the portrayal of Jews in folktales, the followers of Moses have lived in a relatively secure atmosphere in Persia, according to evidence found in government documents.

As has been noted above, faith in Providence and destiny was strong among people according to these tales. In "Shah Abbas and the Cotton-Beater"¹¹, Shah Abbas, as in many other tales of this period, leaves the palace disguised as a dervish, and walks

⁹ Narrated by Turan Sarkarzade, Abadan of Khuzestan, Iran, dated c. 1974, Centre of Folklore Studies affiliated to IRIB Research Centre.

¹⁰ Narrated by Zahra Mansuri, Zaran of Kerman, Iran, dated c. 1972 (Ibid.).

¹¹ Narrated by Seyyed Mahmud Tabatabaie, Aghda village of Ardakan of Yazd, Iran, dated c.1974 (Ibid.).

into Isfahan's bazaar. There he encounters a cotton-beater that, not aware of the King's presence, shouts "beat, beat, he is coming" while the shah is passing by. Shah Abbas, delighted by his words, decides to give him a brass plate that has some jewels embedded in it. The cotton-beater, not knowing about the jewels, sells the plate at a low price. He does the same thing with the second plate. Finally, the shah gives the man a third one and lets him know about the content of the third plate. Other versions of this folktale seem to point out the importance of Providence and fate because at the end, Shah Abbas cannot defeat Providence. The cotton-beater or any other person who the king tries to help goes his own way, disregarding what the king desires.

"Shah Abbas and the Eastern Princess"¹² is among those tales about these kings that are richer in structure. This story has done remarkably well with creating conflicts and with reaching a final denouement. In this tale, an eastern princess turns into a star every Friday night for three years, and, descending on the cemetery of Isfahan, asks the reciters of the Koran to recite a few verses for her. The girl would not reveal her mystery unless a number of stages were passed. Eventually, Shah Abbas succeeds in accomplishing them. A friendly relationship with far-eastern people, frequent recitation of the Koran over graves, and the metamorphosis of a girl into a star are among the motifs that recur in other stories and that form part of the cultural heritage of modern Iranians.

The story entitled "Shah Abbas Becomes Happy"¹³ indicates the shah's sympathy for his subjects while also portraying part of Persians' sense of identity during the Safavid period. In this story, the shah says, "I feel happy during Chahar Shanbe Souri and Shabe Chelle [two of national ceremonies that are still widely held in Persia] because I eat and drink the same thing that everyone, poor and rich, has in these nights." This manifests how deeply ancient customs are seated in Persian national consciousness.

"Shah Abbas and the Rhapsodist"¹⁴ is a narrative about the prosperity of coffee-houses during the Safavid period. The rhapsodists that worked in these coffee houses were so important that, as it happens for one of them in this story, they could even enter the royal court and become the shah's special rhapsodist.

There are presumably many common grounds concerning interests and customs as they are narrated in stories from the Safavid, late Qajarid (1795-1925) and Pahlavid (1925-1979) eras. These traditions have so strongly survived the passing of the ages that it is almost impossible draw a clear-cut distinction between the fundamental structures of the present age and that of the Safavids.

¹² Narrated by Hossein Shojai, Shahdad of Kerman, reported by Shams Ibrahimzadeh, Iran, dated c. 1969 (Ibid.).

¹³ Narrated by Jafar Kazimzadeh Shahanaghi, Khuy, Iran, dated c. 1973 (Ibid.).

¹⁴ Narrated by Habibullah Ahmadi, Gholpayegan of Isfahan, Iran, reported by Seyfollah Ahmadi, dated c. 1972 (Ibid.).

THE INFLUENCE OF SAFAVID FOLKTALES ON PERSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

The study of Safavid folktales indicates that many rituals and beliefs that became commonplace during the Safavid period have continued to the present day. Although there are plenty of documents concerning the art of storytelling in the history of Persia, it seems that one of its most important subgenres – rhapsody – flourished particularly during the reign of Shah Ismail. Shah Ismail's primary aim was to spread the principles of Shiism. Apparently, Shah Ismail appointed seventeen groups to propagate the Shiite sect of Islam. Among the different methods used to propagate the Shiite sect, particularly popular was the relating of stories laden with Shiite teachings in social gatherings such as *Zour Khaneh* – which are traditional sports clubs – and coffee-houses. Rhapsodists, who are often portrayed in Safavid stories, were among those seventeen groups. Before the Safavids, the rhapsodists used to narrate stories that centered on national themes; however, they were later instructed to highlight religious motifs.

Coffee-houses were also among the most noticeable leitmotifs in Safavid folktales. In many of the Safavid stories, the shah would go to a coffee-house or the protagonist would start to work in one of them. In such places, dancers, rhapsodists, jugglers and poets usually perform their arts. Today's *Zour Khaneh* and coffee-houses, which are similar in design and purpose to their Safavid prototypes, are still open in many cities in Iran, and some arts such as rhapsody and recitation of poetry are often performed there.

During this period, Persians became emotionally attached to some Shiite Imams more than others. Although reverence to Imam Ali, Imam Reza and Imam Mahdi, three saintly figures of Shiism, have roots that extend back for centuries, the Shiite spirit of the Safavid government deepened laymen's attention to these three figures more than any other religious leader. Shah Abbas many times as an act of religious devotion went on pilgrimages from Isfahan to Mashhad on foot to visit Imam Reza's grave. Furthermore, Shah Abbas had a royal stamp which read "Dog of Imam Reza." The devotion to these three Imams not only is reflected in the folktales of this period but it has persisted, even stronger than before, as a symbol of Iranian Shiite religion in modern post-revolutionary era.

Despite the fact that the mourning for Imam Hossein, the third Shiite Imam, began long before the Safavid era, the elaborate religious rites and processions in his memory developed during this very period. Many similar ceremonies, the annual commemoration of great religious men, the *Fatebeh* oblatory – which is the praying for the dead at their graves – and even some ceremonies that have intensified the religious schism between Shiites and Sunnis were sometimes narrated in these folktales. These rituals and ceremonies are still held in many parts of Iran.

One of the upshots of the Safavid religious policy was a decline in the popularity of national epics. They instead endeavored to bring religious epics to the fore. In addition, religious melodies that accompanied this genre became popular during this period. For example, *Chavosh Khani*, which is a set of religious poems recited to see off or welcome a pilgrim, and other forms of recitation of elegies or praise in narrative or non-narrative forms for religious figures were either invented or became more fashionable during this period.

When the Safavids rose to power, Persia began to stand against the Uzbek and Ottoman Sunni governments. Since then, religious rivalries between Shiites and Sunnis began to intensify alongside the political conflicts between the three governments. These religious tensions unfold as the backdrop of some folktales. For instance, protagonists in tales such as *Iskandar Nameh* and *One Thousand and One Days* aimed at converting non-Muslims into Islam. Shiite evangelical enthusiasm portrayed in such works is practiced nowadays more passionately than before.

Although there is no direct reference to the collective world-view of all Persians, reading between the lines of the tales that portray conflicts between Safavids and their enemies reveals that narrators have not considered non-Aryan racial ethnicity for Persians. Moreover, save for the stories that are recorded in the area of Azerbaijan and in the Azeri language, all stories are in Farsi. Furthermore, the common historical heritage of Persians can be seen in the narrators and their special attention to Persian cultural and literary works of Persian canonical poets such as Ferdusi, Khayyam, Attar, Sanai, Sa'adi, Hafiz, Molavi, Nezami and Obeyd Zakani.

Moreover, from the narrators' point of view, the only legitimate political system is a monarchy and there is no alternative to the traditional absolute right of the king and the subjugation of other people to his will. The shah possesses an overarching power that is only second to Providence. This power, however, does not restrict social freedom. In sum, the shah is the ultimate spiritual guide and has an aura of holiness in people's eyes.

From the Safavid perspective reflected in the biased representation of many of these tales, only Shiites are true Muslims. In these stories, Shiism is introduced as the nation's widely practiced religion. Sunnis and Jews are disdainfully looked upon in some oral folktales. However, in other tales, Muslims and followers of other religions may freely hold their national and religious ceremonies. Some national traditions such as *Norooz* (New Year's Day), *Sizdabedar* (outdoor gathering in the thirteen day of spring), and *Shabe Chele* (the celebration of the longest night of the year) have been part of Persian culture for thousands of years and also recur in Safavid stories. Existing strong ties between national traditions and religious principles – such as the reciting of prayers in national ceremonies – were most likely strengthened during the Safavid period. Most of the discussions concerning customs and traditions in the context of Safavid folktales either began or became popular during this period. The Safavid dy-

nasty in this way made a great attempt to form a distinctly Persian culture that is at the same time also Muslim. These customs have become so deeply ingrained in the minds of Persians that even after five centuries, nearly all of them are still practiced by the modern inhabitants of this land.

CONCLUSION

The Safavids were not the only dynasty that made attempts to build up a collective identity based on their ideology; however, the uniqueness of this monarchical lineage lies in their success in reinventing Persian national identity according to Shiite religious beliefs. Storytelling was an instrument in the hands of the government to propagate their ideology. Although many poets and writers had to immigrate from Persia to escape harsh religious restrictions, this era gave impetus to a remarkable rise in the number of stories. Although the literature produced in this era was not qualitatively as rich as before, it was successful in molding the collective identity of a nation for centuries to come. Many national ceremonies such as the New Year's Day, many sites for social gatherings like coffee-houses, and many religious rites such as mourning for the third Shiite Imam were systematically disseminated in this period. Although Persian history, like a patchwork, has the mark of every dynasty on it, the Safavids undoubtedly played one of the most pivotal parts in deciding the color and shape of this medley.

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PO POTI SPOMINA
PERZIJSKA NACIONALNA IDENTITETA V SAFAVIDSKIH LJUDSKIH
PRIPOVEDIH

Dinastija Safavidov (1501–1736) si je zelo prizadevala obogatiti perzijsko nacionalno identiteto in po stoletjih razpok utrditi obširno in neodvisno »Perzijo« z razmeroma razločljivo identiteto. Ob tem je vzpon Safavidov globoko in neponovljivo vplival na umetnost pripovedovanja na tem območju. Po eni strani je nasprotje med državo ter pesniki in pripovedovalci povzročilo izselitev slednjih v daljne dežele. Njihova preselitev je pripeljala do širitve Perzijcev v druge dežele, zlasti v Indijo, in tudi do vključevanja zgodb in slogov drugih narodov v perzijsko književnost. Na drugi strani pa je verska politika Safavidov povzročila propad narodne epike. Namesto nje je v umetnost pripovedovanja vstopilo versko pripovedništvo.

Zgodbe tistega časa povezuje nekaj skupnih tematskih značilnosti. Najprej lahko v njih spoznamo, da preprosto ljudstvo na splošno ni zahtevalo ničesar prek meja tistega, kar je predvidel tradicionalni politični sistem. Drugič, teme nekaterih pripovedi kažejo, da so bili prikrajšani za možnost, da odločajo o svojem življenju. Tretjič, z gledišča pripovedovalcev, šahova moč je bila neomejena in njegova volja pa, takoj za božjo, se je razkrivala v obliki božje previdnosti. Četrtrič, če je kdo sploh mogel spremeniti usodo, ki mu jo je bil namenil šah, je bilo to mogoče s pomočjo previdnosti. Petič, v tej družbi oblast posega v najzasebnejše reči navadnih ljudi. Kljub znakom družbene svobode sta usoda in previdnost, paradokсно, strženi tako liberalne kakor teokratske družbe. Kakor koli, šahovo dostojanstvo in ugled sta ohranjena in šah je v zgodbah najavtoritativnejši lik.

Množica živih nacionalnih izročil, ki je še široko razširjena v sodobnem Iranu, izvira prav iz safavidskega obdobja. Tako so se, npr., pod Safavidi Perzijci postopoma navezovali na šiitske imame, kar je še vedno pogosto. Poleg tega so številni podobni obredi, ki so krepili verski razhod med šiitskimi in sunitskimi ločinami, pogosto snov pripovedi. Danes so ti rituali razširjeni marsikod po Iranu. Nekatera izročila, npr. praznovanja norooz (novoletni dan), sizdabedar (zbiranje na prostem na trinajsti pomladni dan), shabe-chele (praznovanje najdaljše noči v letu), so bila del perzijske kulture na tisoče let in se opazno pojavljajo v safavidskih zgodbah. Tudi močne vezi, ki so se ustvarile med nacionalnimi tradicijami in verskimi načeli, npr. molitve ob nacionalnih praznovanjih, so se najverjetneje okrepile prav pod Safavidi. Skoraj vse šege in izročila, o katerih pripovedujejo safavidske zgodbe, so se utrdile v tistem času. S tem je dinastija Safavidov skušala ustvariti posebno perzijsko kulturo.

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Excursion. Sečovlje Salina Natural Park in Slovenian Istria, 27. 9. 2009 (GNI ZRC SAZU Archive).



Excursion. Welcome at Tona's House in Slovenian Istria, 27. 9. 2009 (GNI ZRC SAZU Archive).