

The Status and Legal Agency of Women in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh: A Moral and Legal Analysis of Epic Narratives

Dr. Elara V. Roshan 

Department of Iranian Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

Prof. Arash M. Fardad 

Faculty of Humanities, University of Central Asia, Dushanbe, Tajikistan

ABSTRACT

Background: Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, a monumental epic of Persian culture, is often viewed as a historical and mythological account. However, its narratives also offer a profound reflection on social structures, particularly the status of women. This study moves beyond a simple character analysis to perform a moral and legal examination of women's roles and agency within the epic, contrasting these portrayals with both pre-Islamic and early Islamic cultural and legal frameworks.

Methods: This review synthesizes a comprehensive analysis of key female characters and their interactions with legal and social norms within the *Shahnameh*. It uses a qualitative, text-based approach, drawing upon specific verses and episodes to illustrate women's power, limitations, and legal standing. The article integrates insights from historical, legal, and literary sources on ancient and medieval Iranian culture to provide context for Ferdowsi's depiction of women. **Results:** The analysis reveals a complex and often contradictory portrayal of women's status. While some women, such as Tahmineh and Sindokht, exhibit remarkable agency and political influence, others are subjected to patriarchal norms and legal subordination. Key findings indicate that women's legal standing was often tied to their societal role (e.g., mother, princess, or sorceress) rather than a uniform legal code. The article identifies a critical gap in the literature regarding the specific legal mechanisms that governed women's lives as depicted by Ferdowsi. **Discussion:** The study argues that Ferdowsi's portrayal of women, while often romanticized, provides a moral critique of both the social constraints and the exceptional freedoms afforded to women in the epic's historical context. The narratives highlight a tension between idealized female virtues and their lived reality, suggesting that the concept of "women's rights" was not a static legal principle but a fluid construct shaped by power, lineage, and circumstance. This analysis concludes that a deeper legal and moral inquiry into the text is essential for a more nuanced understanding of gender roles in this period.

KEYWORDS: Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, Women's Status, Legal Agency, Persian Epic, Moral Analysis, Gender Studies, Iranian Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

Abu'l-Qasim Ferdowsi, a revered Persian poet, completed his magnum opus, the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), around 1010 CE. This epic stands as a cornerstone of Persian literature, not only for its poetic grandeur but also for its profound role in preserving the history, mythology, and cultural identity of Iran [18]. Spanning over 50,000 rhyming couplets, the *Shahnameh* chronicles the mythical and historical past of Iran, from the creation of the world to the Arab conquest in the 7th century. While its primary focus is on the exploits of kings and heroes—figures like Rostam, Siavash, and Sohrab—the epic is also a rich tapestry of societal values, moral codes, and legal norms that governed the lives of its

characters. Within this complex narrative, the portrayal of women is particularly compelling. They are not merely passive figures but powerful queens, wise counselors, fierce warriors, and tragic mothers who shape the course of events and challenge the patriarchal structures of their time.

Problem Statement and Research Gap

Extensive scholarship on the *Shahnameh* has explored its literary, historical, and mythological dimensions [3, 7, 12, 16]. Scholars have meticulously analyzed its narratives, character archetypes, and linguistic artistry. However, a significant gap remains in a comprehensive, dedicated

analysis of the legal and moral frameworks governing women's lives as depicted within the epic. While numerous studies touch upon the roles of female characters, they often do so through a purely literary lens, focusing on their emotional or symbolic significance rather than their actual agency within the legal and social codes presented by Ferdowsi. This approach overlooks the nuanced ways in which the epic reflects, critiques, and even challenges the legal standing of women in ancient Iranian society [19]. This study aims to address this gap by moving beyond a simple literary analysis to perform a moral and legal examination of women's status in the *Shahnameh*, providing a more complete understanding of their roles, rights, and limitations as reflected in the narrative.

Aims and Objectives

The primary objective of this article is to conduct a detailed moral and legal analysis of women's status in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. To achieve this, the following specific objectives have been established:

- To analyze the portrayal of women's status and legal awareness through an examination of key female characters.
- To identify and discuss how the roles of these characters reflect or challenge the legal and moral norms of their time.
- To explore specific legal mechanisms, such as those related to marriage, succession, and political power, that define women's agency within the epic's narrative.
- To offer a new perspective on the *Shahnameh* by integrating legal and moral theories with a close textual analysis.

Scope and Limitations

This study is not intended to be a definitive legal history of women in ancient Iran, as the *Shahnameh* is a work of epic poetry and not a legal treatise. The analysis of "legal" and "moral" frameworks is therefore based on interpretations of the epic's internal logic and the societal norms it depicts. The research focuses on a selection of key female characters and narrative arcs that provide the most insight into women's legal and social standing.

Organization of the Article

This article is structured in the IMRaD format. Following this introduction, the Methods section details the research design and analytical framework. The Results section presents a thematic analysis of the roles and legal agency of women as portrayed in the epic. The Discussion section compares these findings with historical and cultural contexts

and addresses the limitations of the study. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the key findings and suggests directions for future research.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive research design. The primary source of data is the critical edition of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* [9], which is analyzed through close reading and textual interpretation. The approach is thematic, focusing on identifying recurring patterns, themes, and motifs related to women's status, legal rights, and moral agency within the epic's narrative.

Data Collection

The primary data for this study is derived directly from the text of the *Shahnameh*, focusing on the stories of prominent female characters such as Sindokht, Tahmineh, Gordafarid, and Sudabeh. These narratives were selected because they explicitly highlight instances of women exercising power, negotiating legal contracts (e.g., marriage), or challenging societal norms. Secondary data is drawn from the provided reference list, including historical texts on the Sassanid and Achaemenid periods [4, 5, 7, 10, 16], as well as cultural and religious studies on the region [6, 13, 14, 19]. These sources are used to provide the necessary historical and cultural context for interpreting the epic's content and to support the moral and legal analysis.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by a comparative framework, contrasting the portrayal of women in the *Shahnameh* with what is known about pre-Islamic Iranian cultures, particularly under the Sassanids [4, 5], and early Islamic societies [6]. The study also draws on the insights of modern scholars who have written on the topic of women's rights in Aryan culture [19] and the historical context of the Tajiks [2, 3]. By applying this multi-layered approach, the study aims to reveal the complexities of Ferdowsi's narrative and its connection to both mythological tradition and historical reality. The analysis will be guided by the provided references, weaving in their specific insights throughout the paper.

RESULTS

Women in Power: Queens and Political Figures

The *Shahnameh* presents a fascinating paradox in its depiction of women's power. While the epic is dominated by male figures, it also features powerful female characters who wield significant political influence and, in some cases, even rule. The most notable example is **Sindokht**, the mother of Rudabeh and the Queen of Kabul. When Rostam arrives to marry Rudabeh, Sindokht is the one who masterfully navigates the political minefield. She acts as a shrewd diplomat, negotiating with Rostam to prevent war and secure the consent of the powerful king, Manuchehr. Her legal and moral authority is unquestioned within her domain. She is not a subordinate figure but a key political agent whose intelligence and diplomatic skills are essential to a peaceful resolution. This narrative demonstrates that a woman's influence was not always confined to the domestic sphere; in certain contexts, it could extend to the highest levels of political power and legal negotiation.

Similarly, the warrior **Gordafarid** stands as an exemplar of female prowess. She defends a fortress against Sohrab and engages him in a fierce one-on-one combat. While she ultimately concedes defeat, her physical strength and tactical skill are celebrated, not diminished, by the male characters. This portrayal challenges the notion of women as weak or helpless, presenting them instead as capable of military and strategic brilliance.

Legal Frameworks for Marriage and Family

The epic's narratives on marriage reveal a complex interplay of personal will, social convention, and legal authority. The story of **Rostam and Tahmineh** is particularly insightful. Their union is a mixture of a romantic encounter and a legally binding agreement. Tahmineh, a princess, takes the initiative to approach Rostam. The marriage is then formalized with the consent of her father, the king. Crucially, the legitimacy of their son, Sohrab, is established through this union. Tahmineh's role in this episode is not passive; she is an active participant who secures her lineage's connection to the legendary hero. The legal recognition of their marriage, albeit unconventional, is central to the entire narrative arc.

In contrast, other narratives show the dark side of patriarchal control. While the *Shahnameh* idealizes romantic love, it also showcases arranged marriages and those dictated by political convenience. This dichotomy highlights that a woman's consent, while valued, was often secondary to a family's or a kingdom's political interests. The epic does not provide a clear legal code for inheritance or property rights for women. Instead, it implies that these matters were largely governed by custom, with property and title typically passing through the male line. However, women could influence these decisions through their male relatives, showcasing a form of indirect power.

Moral Agency and Social Subordination

Ferdowsi's portrayal of women's moral agency is perhaps the most nuanced aspect of the epic. Characters like **Sudabeh**, the queen who attempts to seduce her stepson Siavash, embody a powerful but destructive form of agency. Her actions are driven by passion and desire, but they lead to a moral and political catastrophe. While her character is undeniably negative, her story serves as a moral critique of uncontrolled desire and the abuse of power. Her tragic end is a cautionary tale, illustrating the consequences of a woman's actions when they deviate from societal norms.

On the other hand, the wisdom of women is often a source of moral guidance. Figures like the mother of King Fereydun provide wise counsel to their sons, guiding them toward virtuous and just rule. This dual portrayal—of women as both a source of moral corruption and ethical wisdom—demonstrates that Ferdowsi saw women not as a single archetype but as complex moral agents capable of both great good and great harm. This complexity is a key insight of the epic: women are not passive subjects but active participants in the moral drama of the world. Their legal standing is often a reflection of their moral actions and their social roles.

Women as Agents of Change and Conflict

Women in the *Shahnameh* are frequently the catalysts for major historical events, whether through their cunning, their beauty, or their wisdom. The story of **Rudabeh** is a prime example. Her love for Rostam is the driving force behind the most famous hero's birth and the epic's central narrative. Without her defiance of her father's wishes and her determination to marry the hero, the story would not have unfolded as it did. Similarly, the wisdom of **Farangis**, the mother of Kai Khosrow, is essential in securing her son's right to the throne. Her counsel and actions are instrumental in a major transition of power.

These women's actions, whether political or personal, highlight a fundamental tension within the epic. While they often operate within patriarchal systems, they possess a remarkable ability to influence, guide, and even subvert those systems. The epic suggests that while legal frameworks may have formally subordinated women, their personal agency and social influence were immense.

DISCUSSION

The Ambiguity of Women's Status in the *Shahnameh*

The results of this analysis reveal a central ambiguity in the portrayal of women's status in the *Shahnameh*. As noted by Rashid, the status of women in Aryan culture was based on a combination of respect and patriarchal structure [19]. This

dualism is evident throughout the epic. Women are respected as mothers and are often celebrated for their wisdom and beauty. Yet, their legal and social power is not uniform. The status of a queen like Sindokht is vastly different from that of a common woman, whose voice is largely absent from the narrative. As Saidzoda notes, Ferdowsi was not just a poet of a historical message but also of a cultural one, and this cultural message includes a nuanced, if idealized, view of women's roles [18].

A key insight is that a woman's legal standing in the *Shahnameh* was not based on a universal legal code but was fluid and largely tied to her specific social role, lineage, and personal character. Queens and princesses had access to power through their familial connections, while women from other social strata were often relegated to a more submissive position.

Moral and Ethical Considerations

The *Shahnameh* functions as a moral and ethical treatise, and its portrayal of women is central to this function. Women often serve as moral mirrors for the society. Their loyalty, wisdom, and strength are celebrated as virtues essential for a just kingdom, while their treachery, deceit, and vanity are shown to lead to chaos and ruin. This narrative device suggests that Ferdowsi viewed women as essential moral agents, whose actions had a significant impact on the ethical well-being of the kingdom. The epic's depiction of women's suffering and strength provides a powerful critique of the social constraints and injustices they faced. It raises questions about the balance between duty and desire, personal agency and social expectation.

Comparison with Historical and Cultural Contexts

The *Shahnameh*'s depiction of women is not a mere fantasy; it reflects and idealizes historical and cultural traditions. As Ghafurov details, the history of the Tajiks, and by extension, the broader Persian culture, is deeply rooted in a blend of ancient traditions [3]. Ferdowsi's epic, written after the Arab conquest and the spread of Islam, serves to preserve a sense of pre-Islamic identity. The epic's portrayal of strong, independent women like Tahmineh and Sindokht can be seen as a reflection of pre-Islamic traditions, where women sometimes held greater political and social sway, as documented by Christensen in his work on the Sassanids [4, 5] and Dyakonov on the Medians [7].

However, the epic also incorporates elements of a patriarchal structure that became more rigid over time. The tension between the heroic women of the past and the more constrained roles of women in the poet's own time creates a fascinating dynamic. This echoes the sentiment in the modern era, where leaders like Emomali Rahmon have spoken on the importance of respecting and upholding

women's status in society, a value with deep historical roots [1]. The insights of scholars on ancient cultures [10, 14, 17] and religious texts like the Holy Qur'an [6] and Avesta [10] provide a broad context, showing how Ferdowsi's work stands at the intersection of various cultural and religious traditions, synthesizing and sometimes reinterpreting their views on gender roles.

A Comparative Analysis with Zoroastrian and Ancient Persian Legal Texts

While Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is an epic of grand poetic vision, its narratives are deeply rooted in historical memory and cultural tradition. A full understanding of its portrayal of women requires a comparative analysis with the legal and social norms of ancient Iranian societies, particularly those of the Zoroastrian faith and the Achaemenid and Sassanid empires. This comparison reveals that Ferdowsi's depictions are not merely flights of fancy but often reflect a romanticized, and at times critical, engagement with the historical legal standing of women.

Zoroastrianism, the pre-Islamic religion of Iran, is a critical starting point for this analysis. The *Avesta*, the primary sacred text of Zoroastrianism [10], while not a legal code in the modern sense, provides significant insight into the moral and social expectations placed upon women. The emphasis in the *Avesta* is on the sanctity of the family and the woman's role as a moral and religious pillar of the household. A woman's standing was intimately connected to her role as a wife and mother, and her primary legal and social function was to continue the family line. Marriage was a religious duty and a legal contract, and a woman's legal rights were often negotiated through her dower and the terms of the marriage contract. The epic's portrayal of women like Tahmineh, whose entire worth is tied to her lineage and the birth of a male heir, is associated with this ancient emphasis on fertility and succession. Tahmineh's legal recognition and her power within the narrative are directly dependent on her successful union with Rostam and the birth of their son, Sohrab. Her agency is ultimately not for her own benefit, but for the continuation of a heroic male lineage.

This religious framework found its full legal expression in the Sassanid period, which is extensively documented by scholars like Christensen [4, 5]. Christensen's work on Sassanid Iran reveals a complex legal system with distinct rights and limitations for women. For instance, women could own property, but their rights were often contingent on their marital status. A married woman's property was managed by her husband, though it remained legally hers. Divorce was possible for women, but under specific and limited circumstances. The *Shahnameh* reflects these complexities in its portrayal of royal marriages and their political implications. The marriage of Rudabeh and Rostam, for example, is not a simple love story but a legally charged

political event. The consent and negotiation between their families, mediated by the shrewd Sindokht, underscores that even in the epic's legendary past, women's unions were legal contracts with massive political ramifications. Sindokht's ability to act as a legal and diplomatic agent in this scenario is particularly telling. It suggests that while most women may have been legally subordinated, a powerful noblewoman with the backing of her husband or son could exercise considerable political and legal authority.

This perspective is also supported by ancient Greek and Roman accounts of Persian customs. Diodorus Siculus, for example, in his *Bibliotheca Historica*, provides an external view of Persian society [8]. While these accounts can be biased, they often note the unique status of Persian queens and noblewomen who wielded significant influence behind the throne. This aligns perfectly with Ferdowsi's depiction of women like Sindokht and Farangis, who use their wisdom and position to guide their male counterparts, often saving them from their own folly. Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* also offers glimpses into the political influence of Persian queens and mothers, reinforcing the notion that women in the upper echelons of society were not passive figures [15]. Ferdowsi's work, therefore, can be seen as an internal, idealized narrative that validates these external accounts. The heroism of Gordafarid, who fights with the strength of a man, is not an anomaly but an embodiment of the potential for female prowess that existed, even if rarely actualized, in ancient Iranian culture.

The *Shahnameh*'s portrayal of women also stands in contrast to the historical realities of the period immediately following the Arab conquest. The historian Tabari, in his *History*, documents the socio-political changes that reshaped the region after the fall of the Sassanid Empire [16]. While Ferdowsi wrote at a time when Islamic law had been established for centuries, his work deliberately looks back to the pre-Islamic past. This retrospective gaze allows him to present a version of women's status that is, in many ways, a moral commentary on the present. The epic's strong, independent, and sometimes politically astute women can be seen as an idealized memory of a bygone era. They represent a cultural and legal ideal that the poet may have felt was being lost or diminished in his own time.

The insights of Avazova and Ghafurov further contextualize this argument [2, 3]. Their work on pre-Islamic Tajik culture suggests that women held a respected, though clearly defined, position within society. This respect was often tied to their role in the family and their moral influence, which is a recurring theme in the *Shahnameh*. The epic's moral framework, where a woman's virtue or vice can directly affects the fate of an entire kingdom, reflects a deep-seated cultural belief in the ethical power of the female gender. As a result, the "legal" standing of women in the *Shahnameh* is not a simple matter of rights and regulations, but is a complex tapestry woven from a blend of historical fact, cultural

memory, and moral idealization. Ferdowsi's epic, therefore, is associated with an enduring respect for women's roles in Iranian culture, even in the face of significant social and political change. It is an argument that while their legal rights may have shifted over time, their moral agency and social influence remained a constant and powerful force.

The narratives in the *Shahnameh* consistently highlight a tension between a woman's personal will and her societal obligation. This is a moral dilemma at the heart of the epic that has legal implications. For example, the tragic fate of Sudabeh, who is executed for her treachery, is not just a moral judgment but a legal punishment [11]. Her story serves as a legal-moral precedent, demonstrating that even a queen could not act with impunity when her actions threatened the moral and social order. In this way, the epic's legal code is not written down but is revealed through the consequences of the characters' actions. This is a key insight: the legal awareness of a woman in the *Shahnameh* is a reflection of her understanding of and adherence to a societal moral code.

Limitations of the Study

A primary limitation of this study is the inherent subjectivity of textual interpretation. The *Shahnameh* is a work of literary art, and its meanings are open to a variety of interpretations. While this analysis is grounded in specific textual evidence and contextualized by historical sources, it remains a scholarly interpretation rather than a factual historical record. Furthermore, the epic's focus on kings, heroes, and the nobility means that the experiences of ordinary women are largely absent. This limits the scope of the analysis to the upper echelons of society.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could benefit from a more direct comparison of the *Shahnameh*'s female characters with those in other world epics, such as the *Iliad* or the *Mahabharata*, to identify cross-cultural patterns and divergences in the portrayal of women. Additionally, a focused legal study could attempt to identify specific pre-Islamic legal principles or customs related to women's rights and responsibilities that may have been reflected, either directly or indirectly, in Ferdowsi's narrative. This would require a detailed examination of sources such as the *Avesta* and other ancient legal codes.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

In conclusion, this moral and legal analysis of women's status in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* demonstrates that the epic

offers a far more complex and nuanced portrayal than a simple literary reading suggests. Women in the *Shahnameh* are not a monolithic group but are depicted as individuals with varying degrees of agency, influence, and legal standing. This study has shown that their roles, while often subject to patriarchal norms, are also central to the epic's political, social, and moral fabric. The analysis highlights that a woman's power was often tied to her lineage, her wit, and her ability to navigate the complex social landscape, rather than a codified legal system.

The epic is associated with both a historical reflection and a moral commentary. It romanticizes the strength of its female characters while simultaneously critiquing the social and moral failings that led to their suffering. By integrating legal and ethical frameworks, this study provides a richer and more complete understanding of Ferdowsi's masterpiece, confirming its enduring relevance as a source of cultural, historical, and moral insight.

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