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THE SYMBOLISM OF BAHRAM GOR'S DRAGON-SLAYING IN HAFT  
PEYKAR AND THE STORY'S REFLECTION IN KAMĀL UD-DĪN  
BEHZĀD'S PAINTINGS

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### **Abstract**

Haft Peykar is One of Nezami Ganjavi's most prominent works. It is a symbolic one and each of its stories and scenes can be interpreted and deciphered in different ways. One of the most important stories among them is Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying, which has a considerable presence in Iranian visual arts, including painting. The present research aims to study and decipher the symbols used in this mysterious story, as we believe there are still ambiguous points that can be clarified through more accurate studies. To find them, the following questions have been raised: What are the secrets and mysteries behind the story of Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying? What are the characteristics of the reflection of Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying story in Iranian painting? The illustration of Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying story is consistent with the poetry images in Haft Peykar, but it seems that the symbols and mysteries that lie in the hidden layers of this story are not found in the paintings drawn according to this story.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The story of Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying is one of the symbolic stories in Persian literature. Although Ferdowsi has already given a complete description of this battle in his Shahnameh, again, it is beautifully constructed and processed in Nezami's Haft Peykar. To briefly compare these two stories, while, Ferdowsi pays much attention to the historical and epic aspects of the story Nezami notices the secrets and mysteries hidden behind the story, a discovery that causes human perfection and awakening of society. In fact,

Nezami does not want to repeat what someone else has said, but he tries to express a mysterious story through symbolization so that he can create a masterpiece out of a regular story. In addition to symbols, Nezami utilizes various literary tools from analogy to metaphor, to decorate and beautify this old story. Thus, this story has been years subject to different paintings.

Therefore, this article raises the following questions: 2 What are the secrets and mysteries hidden behind the story of Bahram Gor Dragon Slaying? What are the characteristics of the reflection of Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying story in Iranian painting? The present research has been done in the field of Iranian literature and painting and aims to decipher the story of Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying in Nezami's Haft Peykar. First, 'Bahram Gor' and 'dragon' topics have been studied separately in history, mythology, and symbolism. Then, after studying the story of Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying in Haft Peykar, its symbolism has been studied.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Haft Peykar is One of Nezami Ganjavi's most prominent works. It is a symbolic Masnavi<sup>1</sup> and each of its stories and scenes can be interpreted and deciphered in different ways. One of the most important stories among them is Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying, which has a considerable presence in Iranian visual arts, including painting. Each painter has drawn the scenes of this story based on their perceptions and what they thought is of more importance. Therefore, not every point of this story has been regarded by the painters. The descriptions made by Nezami in Haft Peykar and also the various reflections according to only one story and their characteristics have been the main problem of this research.

### **RESEARCH PURPOSES**

After explaining some related concepts, the present research's initial aim is to study and decipher the symbols used in Nezami's poems. The final goal though is to indicate the main features in the paintings so that we can learn what points of the story have been especially regarded or ignored by the painters and how they have illustrated these points through their works.

### **IMPORTANCE AND NECESSITY OF RESEARCH**

This research is an interdisciplinary one and contains literary, historical, mythological, and artistic studies and findings. These studies can be utilized in the fields mentioned as we believe there are still numerous ambiguous points in those fields which require to be clarified through more accurate studies and this research is meant to take some step towards answering those questions.

### **BACKGROUND**

Much research has been done about Nezami Ganjavi in general, and his Haft Peykar in particular. Among them, there is Michael Berry's "Interpretations of Nezami's Haft Peykar" which is included useful information on Nezami's poetry. There is another book which has been written by Zahra Mehrabzade named "Musk on silk". In this research, Mehrabzadeh has analyzed and also

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<sup>1</sup>A kind of poem written in rhyming couplets.

symbolized Haft Peykar. Also, Gholaminejad and others in a study entitled “A comparative study of Bahram’s character in Shahnameh and Haft Peykar” have compared the story of Bahram Gor in form of two collections, and in some parts, they have deciphered and symbolized the story. In the present research, an attempt has been made to decode and interpret a part of this magnificent Masnavi, which is related to Bahram Gor’s life.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research has been done using the descriptive-analytical method, and the method of data collection is the ‘library’ type. First of all, we have scrutinized reference books in the fields of literature, mythology, and painting. Next, we have studied authentic detailed resources (secondary ones) to find more matters around the related topics. Then, the contents found have been organized logically and the analysis has been done according to the researcher’s findings.

### **DRAGON-SLAYING IN IRANIAN MYTHOLOGY**

“Man creates a deadly battle between strange animals and imaginary heroes and heroines. This is the root of the knights ‘battle with the dragon or the sons of the gods’ war with their fathers. Thus, these battles symbolically represent the spiritual crises of human beings during their evolution. On the way towards perfection, man always creates the image of a superman (god or hero) who depicts his future progress and, through it, embodies the kind and nature of power he seeks to achieve. In this way, it always has a clear mirror of future power and progress in front of him” (Sattari, 1973: 23).

Throughout history, mankind has shown many unknown threats and dangers in form of myths and various symbols. One of these threats is from a fictional and terrifying creature called “dragon”; “The cruelty and horror of the dragon inevitably create stories in which the goal is to kill the dragon by the heroic warriors. Some believed that the dragon would not die except by the sun and the moon, which is an allusion to the passage of time. Some consider the struggle of elephants, leopards, and millipedes against dragons as a symbol for the struggle of natural beings (except humans) with dragons, while others have attributed the struggle with dragons to heroes and saints. That they also have their special weapons and methods” (Rastegar Fasaee, 2000: 181)

In most cultures and myths, the battle with the dragon is seen. The theme of these battles is the same in many cases. “When Hercules was eight months old, he squeezed the two big snakes that had been cradled to kill him so much that they suffocated, and once again, in adulthood, he killed a legendary dragon. Oedipus, king of Thebes, also killed a dragon-shaped monster. Siegfried also became invincible in the German epic Nibelung Lyd by slaying a dragon and immersing himself into its blood” (Mutahdin, 1371: 729).

The older form of dragon-slaying can be seen in “Vadha”. There, too, Indra, the god of war and victory, overcomes Werther, the terrible dragon that caused the world to dry up. “For a long time, in Iranian and Indian mythology, dragon-slaying has been the greatest event in which gods and heroes have

played a role. In other words, the confrontation between heroes and dragons is a central theme in world mythology” (Rastegar Fasaei, 2000: 184).

The myth of the confrontation between the hero and the dragon can be an interpretation of the confrontation of thousands of contradictory and dual realities of life and the universe as well as the human mind. The confrontation of light and darkness, satiety and hunger, youth and old age, justice and oppression, humanity and savagery, freedom and servitude, and finally the most glorious hero: life and the most frightening dragon: death. Bahman Sarkarati considers the subject of “Hero and Slaying the Dragon” as an archetype that exists not only in Indo-European myths but also in the myths of primitive peoples with a different appearance; “According to Jung, dragon-slaying is an ancient symbol that originates from the collective human subconscious” (Sarkarati, 1999: 44). Elsewhere, Jung sees dragon-slaying as a form of self-confidence and childhood. Shahrokh Meskoob also considers this battle as the battle of the hero with the force of the rebellious instinct of man, which is eventually defeated by the hero (Dara, 2007: 58). In Persian mythology, the dragon is a manifestation of evil, impurity, and demonic power, and slaying it has a religious message. In Iranian mythology, dragon-slaying is one of the duties of heroes and gods.

### **THE SYMBOLISM OF “BAHRAM GOR”<sup>2</sup>**

“Bahram Gor”, who appears in the mythical period of Iran, finds the characteristics of gods. First of all, he revives and perfects the characteristics of Vera Thorghneh<sup>3</sup> “He is not just an earthly king, but a hero in the traditional sense of epics. In other words, he is often a demigod or embodying a divine soul in the human body. As Mircha Elpadeh states, global myths tend to turn the multiple complexities of the actors of history into prominent patterns of heroic deeds that are sanctified by myth. In this way, Ferdowsi and later Nezami, through various images in their works, reveal faces of ancient Iranian gods which are hidden under the mask of Bahram Gor” (Bari, 2006: 77)

Bahram loves hunting. He is the enemy of wild animals. Predatory animals are symbols of evil and demonic forces for the hero and must be eliminated. He learned this custom from ancient civilizations. “Gilgamesh” squeezes the lions’ throats. Enkidu, Gilgamesh’s friend, slays an angry cow. His battle against predators is like his battle with the rebellious and unknown forces that each dominates a part of his soul. This battle is a test of self-improvement that leads to perfection.

### **THE SYMBOLISM OF “DRAGON” IN PERSIAN LITERATURE**

According to Kobachi, the author of the book “Foundations of Iranian Myth and Epic”, a ‘dragon’ is a sign of ‘enmity’ and ‘demon possession’. In ancient Persian mythology, the dragon is associated with the legend of Zahak Mardush. The equating of the dragon with Zahak, the tyrant king in Avesta and later narrations, is reminiscent of Zahak’s long oppression. “This offspring

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<sup>2</sup>Bahram V (420-440 AD) was the name of one of the well-known kings of the Sassanid period. He was the son of Yazdgerd I (399-420 AD) who was famous for his goodness and benevolence.

<sup>3</sup>God of Victory

of the human soul, that is full of his desire for destruction, decides to extinguish the sacred fire, but the hero Jamshid prevents it from doing so. Then the dragon takes revenge on him by kidnapping Jamshid's daughters and cuts Jamshid in two with a saw. The sweetness of this victory, however, is not long enough, because Fereydoun, with the help of Kaveh Ahangar, frees Jamshid's daughters and imprisons the dragon on Damavand Mountain. The dragon will remain in Damavand prison until the end of world history. At that time, it will invade the world again and devour one-third of the world's creatures and damage things like fire, water, and plants, and finally, Garshasb - who is resurrected - will kill it "(Hinels, 2006: 154).

Dragons in the historical-mythological narratives of Iran are evil animals that contaminate lands with filth and death. These wild creatures, that live at the foot of high mountains, deep seas, or mysterious groves, invade men and kidnap the king's wives and daughters and make them their own. At this time, heroes such as Goshtasb, Esfandiar, and Rostam fight these dragons and try to kill them.

"In Persian literature, the dragon is often described as a giant lizard with some fiery exhale (originally in Avestan, it's the name of a three-headed snake). In epic narratives and folktales, the dragon is a manifestation of calamity, drought, and evil, and the hero restores blessings and comfort to people by saying it" (Pakbaz, 2006: 968). Also, in Persian folk literature, 'dragon' is associated with eclipses and it is believed that the cause of this event is a dragon that wants to swallow the moon or the sun. In the book "Alley", written by Shamlou, it is stated that dreaming of a dragon is a sign of having a great enemy (Shamlou, 1998: 401).

In Persian poetry, the dragon is sometimes used to create allegories and metaphors to express mental and emotional states. For example, in Shahnameh, a dragon is used in senses like the sky, bad luck, sword, wolf, fire, fun, pleasure, etc.

In Persian mystical poetry, various manifestations of the dragon are seen, which are sometimes positive and sometimes have a negative meaning. The dragon is a symbol of the rebellious and powerful ego. The dragon is the best symbol for depicting human selfishness, which is "fiery, roaring, insatiable, and has dwelt within man and dominated all human existence." Only the training by some wise mystical guidance and mastering human instincts can lead to its control" (Mutahdin, 1993: 722).

Attar states in an anecdote in "Manteq al-Tair": / The jealousy and anger that is in you / Only men (mystical guides) can see / There is a swamp full of dragons in you / But you are unaware and you have set them free / You spend day and night raising them...(Attar, 1993: 164)

In Persian poetry, the dragon is sometimes a symbol for the "times". This dragon (the times) constantly has an open mouth, and man - knowingly or unknowingly - suffers from its damage. All the cries and pains from the times

are due to the cruelty of this ruthless dragon. Abd al-Rahman Jami, a poet, and mystic of the tenth century AH complains about the times as follows:

Times are like a curvy dragon / constantly seeking to harass us / we are caught in its maze / how can we get rid of it... (Jami, 2007: 737).

The dragon is also a symbol for "love" in Persian poetry; a burning, terrifying, and purifying love; "We must face it with courage and give our lives for it, because this manner of death is a romantic one, and leads mystical connection to God (Vesal). Attar considers the story of Hallaj as a real example of this type of love (Mutahdin, 1992:722).

From all the myths, stories, and legends about the dragon, it is understood that this mythical creature has long been a symbol of power, violence, and horror. The hero or killer of the dragon has to fight the dragon with all his might. The result of such a horrific confrontation is the victory of the hero, or in other words, reaching the stage of perfection. "The dragon can be a symbol for the obstacles that hinder the human movement in life. Including mental complexities, family problems, and imaginary horrors ... "(Emami, 2001: 160).

"To discover the bright, true and wonderful world of the unconscious, man must destroy the dragon of deception and the charms and dependencies of the conscious lives so that he can enter the cave or his unconscious" (Ibid: 161). The dragon is the benchmark for distinguishing determined people from weak people. The hero or the "seeker for truth" goes into the cave to find the treasure of his existence and fights the ruthless dragon and wins.

Royal treasures are inhabited by dragons / the human soul owns the treasure and it is the rebellious instinct of man (dragon) that sits on the treasure (Motahedin, 1992: 730).

### **BAHRAM GOR'S DRAGON-SLAYING IN HAFT PEYKAR**

This story is told specially and differently by Nezami in Haft Peykar. According to Nezami Ganjavi, Bahram went after a zebra to hunt it. The zebra reached a cave. Bahram saw a sleeping dragon in the cave. The dragon had eaten the zebra's baby. Bahram gave up hunting that zebra. He wondered what fate had brought him there. Zebra asked Bahram to take revenge on the dragon for slaying his child. Hence, Bahram put a two-pronged arrow in the bow and threw it at the dragon. One arrow hit the dragon's eye and blinded it, and the other arrow hit its throat and its throat was torn. Bahram split the zebra from mouth to tail with an arrow and found the baby zebra in the dragon's belly. He prostrated and thanked God that he had succeeded in slaying the dragon (picture 1)

The arrow fired by Bahram tore the dragon / A loud cry came from the dragon and fell to the ground like a tree / The king (Bahram) was never afraid when he heard that cry, because the cloud is never afraid of the majesty of the mountain / Bahram beheaded the devil because the enemy must be beheaded / He split the dragon from mouth to tail and found a baby zebra in its belly (Nezami, 2012: 133).

The zebra noticed that Bahram was about to leave for the Goran plain, so returned and crawled into the cave. Bahram noticed it and entered the cave with difficulty to catch it. To thank Bahram for killing the dragon, the zebra showed the location of the treasure to Bahram. Then, Bahram left the cave to continue on his way. An hour later, his troops followed him. Bahram sent his soldiers into the cave to load the treasure. Thus, Bahram received his reward.

Bahram's fight against the dragon has many symbols and signs in Iranian culture and myth. Bahram is both a national hero and also has the name of one of the Avestan gods; "Vererthraghna" which means "the slayer of the dragon Vererthraghna".

Bahram slays the dragon and rescues the baby zebra in its belly, and the reward for all his courage and bravery is the treasure buried in the cave. The cave is a symbol for the 'inner self' or the 'original self'. In the Near East, the cave, like the womb, symbolizes origin and rebirth; where the return to the initial stage takes place before leaving the world. A cave is like an alchemical furnace. It is the spiritual center of the great world (the human soul in mysticism). In the cave, the soul becomes internal and returns to its original essence (Knight, 2006: 337). At the end of the story, Bahram is no longer a hunter, but some 'treasure' that has realized its pure nature.

"The swallowed young man and baby zebra can be considered a symbol for the human soul and the dragon can be considered a symbol of the world that devours man and he must save himself from it" (Gholaminejad: 2007: 130). Michael A. Barry says in his book: The dragon that Bahram fights against in 'Haft Peykar' is nothing but the injustice that has swallowed the country and blinded the king. Nezami Ganjavi creates this story to show the corruption in the country so that in the end, he points out that what the dragon is devoured and must be removed from his throat is the special nature of the hero or his hidden soul (Barry, 2006: 83).

Zahra Mehrabzadeh in her book 'Musk on Silk' gives another interpretation of Bahram Gor's dragon-slaying. She says the baby zebra that Bahram saved from the dragon's belly could be Bahram himself. Because he is a young man who is still captive to the dragon of rebellious instincts and he is a brave human being who gets rid of that dragon with the guidance of a female animal (Mehrabzadeh, 2005: 71).

At the end of the story of "Haft Peykar", Bahram Gor enters the cave following a zebra, and after that, smoke rises from the cave and no trace of Bahram remains. Bahman Sarkarati believes that as a result of slaying the dragon, the hero is harmed, which is also a 'mythical' theme, and here Bahram is caught. Inder loses his manhood after slaying Werther. It is stated in Shahnameh that Sam's armor collapses due to the strength of the dragon's venom and his body becomes naked. The hero loses his immortality by slaying the dragon. Other examples are the deaths of Rostam and Esfandiar, who are great dragon slayers of Shahnameh (Dara, 2007: 59).

### **THE REFLECTIONS OF THE STORY IN BEHZAD'S PAINTINGS**

This beautiful and thought-provoking story is the subject of painters in different historical and artistic periods of Iran. In illustrating this story, painters have often paid attention to the descriptions by Ferdowsi Tusi in *Shahnameh*, and few drawings have been depicted according to 'Haft Peykar' and we intend to briefly analyze two of them painted by the Iranian painter Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād, which are painted one in 899 AH and another in 901 AH.

In this part, first, we are going to point out the painting's specific characteristics and then, we will mention some of the descriptions from the story which are ignored by the painters and, paying attention to them would have made the scene somehow more informative and attractive.

#### **THE FORMER PAINTING'S FEATURES**

'This painting is imaginative; Bahram Gor is attacking the dragon with a bow and arrow far from the dragon, and his horse is screaming in fear, and the dragon, which is leaning on a tree in a "jumping" state, makes the battle even more difficult. The varied and calm colors and shades of the rocks look natural.

The use of warm gray as a background and various and contrasting and pure colors in a harmonious way on the background of the work is one of the features of Behzad's works (Keyvani, 2003: 105).

In this picture, the background of the painting is the 'natural environment'. The ground surface is flat and decorated with delicate and scattered shrubs and small grass patterns. The rocks at the top of the painting are drawn with more elegance and emphasis. The drawing of the hills is simple and its gray and purple color has become a little warmer which has been affected by the space above it, the golden sky, and this has created a relationship between the earth and the sky (Ibid: 105).

At the top of the painting, a zebra can be seen. Bahram Gor enters the cave in pursuit of it and attacks the dragon to save the baby zebra.

#### **THE LATTER PAINTING'S FEATURES**

Behzad once again painted this scene in 901 AH (Picture 2). At first glance, the color scheme of this painting is the same as before, but with a few changes. Here, too, the background of the painting is the natural environment. The background color is yellowish and devoid of shrubs and grass. In this painting, too, Behzad pays special attention to the details of the environment described by Nezami. This time, the painter has added the Bahram's corps to the scene. The dragon's color is different from the previous painting; almost the same as the rocks'.

#### **HE PAINTINGS' OVERLOOKED POINTS**

But there are still clues in Nezami Ganjavi's poems that could have helped to depict this story more accurately through the paintings; Such as the features that have been mentioned for the dragon: a mountain of curvy bitumen, the



description of the baby zebra in the dragon's belly, and the description of the entrance of the cave that is not seen in Behzad's painting.



**Fig. 1.** Battle of Bahram Gor with the dragon, by Behzad, Khamseh Nezami, Herat school, ninth century AH, Source: (Gary, 2006, 204).



**Fig. 2.** Bahram Gor's victory with the dragon, by Behzad, Khamseh Nezami, Herat school, ninth century AH, source: (www.bl.uk).

## CONCLUSION

The dragon-slaying of Bahram Gor has been the subject of many painters. This scene has been painted in two works by Kamaluddin Behzad who has been well able to draw the scenes described by Nezami. But there are clues in Nezami Ganjavi's poems that could have helped to depict this story more accurately through the paintings; Such as the features that have been mentioned about the dragon: a mountain of curvy bitumen, the description of

the baby zebra in the dragon's belly, and the description of the entrance of the cave that is not seen in Behzad's painting.

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