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REPRESENTATION OF DARIUS THE GREAT IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates how Darius, the ancient Persian, Achaemenidian emperor has been represented in different sources- Western as well as non-Western from ancient times to date. The sources range from the ancient times works like Behistun inscription to 16th and 17th centuries literary and non-literary works. Many centuries have elapsed since Darius' time, but he still haunts our minds owing to his exemplary regime in the ancient Persia. The researchers have attempted to reveal varied aspects of Darius, the great as they have been portrayed in different literary and non-literary sources. Through this investigatory process, the paper helps the readers understand Darius's multifaceted personality and his historical deeds due to which Darius is known as great.

INTRODUCTION:

Persia has been one of the five great empires – Macedonian, Median, Persian, Roman and Assyrian- since classical periods. The literary and non-literary works of different periods have represented the Achaemenid Persia as a prestigious and glorious empire due to the mighty rulers like Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius and their exemplary governments. Particularly, the Achaemenid Persia and the Achaemenid kings have been “the major focus of interest” (Masood, 2012, p.7) in the early modern English period. It has been even more familiar to English readers than the Safavid Persia due to its references in the Bible and its romantic past (MacLean & Matar, 2011, p.14). There is no doubt that Cyrus was the founder of Achaemenid Persia but Darius further played his role in strengthening the image of Persia as a glorious empire. Like Cyrus and

Cambyes, Darius was equally familiar to the early modern English readers. Early English Books Online (EEBO) gives clear evidence of the popularity of the Achaemenid rulers among the English readers of the period. Out of 2968 records of the varied works, it shows 16815 matches of the word Darius that allude to the fact that Oriental figures were pervasive and popular in the literary and non-literary works of early modern English period.

Representation of Darius in Literary and Non-Literary Works:

The principal source for the life of Darius, the great is his own inscription that is known as the Behistun. The Behistun inscription is written on the Mount Behistun that is situated in Kermanshah, Iran. It is written in three different languages: Babylonian, Elamite and Old Persian. The inscription is a significant record of Darius' life, his career, his ancestors and pedigree. As James E. Bowick (2010) argues that "Perhaps no other source in the ancient world proclaims the voice of Darius louder than the great trilingual inscription at Behistun" (p. 24). It gives an account of how different Persian war lords tried to capitalize on the gap that came in the wake of the deaths of Cyrus, the Great and Cambyes II, how he gained the crown after dethroning the fake monarch Smerdis or Bardiya and took on a series of rebellion and suppressed them successfully. The inscription also reveals that Zoroastrianism was ancient religion of Achaemenid or pre-Safavid Persia. That is why, Darius pays his homage to the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda for granting him victory. As Maras (2009) observes that "The Behistun relief depicts the focal figure of heroic ruler Darius receiving a device from the elevated, hovering symbol of Ahura Mazda to whom he raises his hand in formal salute" (p.61). The inscription on Darius' tombstone further confirms this fact which is in the praise of Ahura Mazda who created the universe and made Darius a great king. This inscription also reveals Darius' Persian identity as he is described a son of an Achaemenian, a Persian (Mitchel, 2015).

Darius I, commonly known as Darius the Great, was the third king of Achaemenid Empire whose rule lasted from 522-486 BCE. He was son of Hystaspes who a noble courtier and an officer in Cyrus' army was. A magi, an imposture with the name of Smerdis occupied the throne after the death of Smerdis or Bardiya, the brother of Cambyes. Darius killed that imposture with the help of Gobryas and finally became king of Persia. Darius uses the name of Gaumata for this magi in the Behistun inscription. As G. G. Cameron (1960) observes that Darius in Column 1, section 14 of *Behistun* "enumerates those items which the magian Gaumata had taken from the Persian people and which the great king restored to them" (p.63). He did not at first gain general recognition but had to impose his rule by force. His assassination of Bardiya was followed, particularly in the eastern provinces, by widespread revolts, which threatened to disrupt the empire. Darius asserted his position as emperor by force, taking his armies throughout the empire, suppressing each revolt individually. The most notable of all the revolts is the Babylonian revolt which was led by Nebuchadnezzar III. The Babylonians rebelled against Darius because they considered him "a usurper who had no legitimate title to the throne" (Jacob Abbot, 2009, p.157). This revolt occurred when Otanes had taken a large amount of the army out of Babylon to aid Darius in suppressing other revolts.

Darius felt that the Babylonian had taken advantage of him and deceived him, which resulted in Darius gathering up of a large army and marching to Babylon. At Babylon, Darius was met with closed gates and a series of defences to keep him and his armies out of Babylon. For one and half years, Darius and his armies were unable to capture Babylon. He had attempted many tricks and strategies, even copying the method that Cyrus the Great had utilized when he had captured Babylon. However, the situation changed in favour of Darius when one of the mules of Zopyrus foaled. At the time, it was believed to be a great miracle, an impossible thing and an act of God. Following this, a plan was created for Zopyrus to pretend to be a deserter to enter the Babylonian camp and gain the trust of the Babylonians. The plan was successful and the Persians eventually surrounded the city and were able to conquer the rebels. As this plan was designed and executed by Zopyrus, Darius was so pleased with him after the fall of Babylon that he bestowed upon Zopyrus many honours and rewards (Jacob Abbot, 2009).

A major event in Darius' life was his expedition to punish Athens and Eretria and subjugate Greece. He made his empire larger by vanquishing Thrace and Macedon, and occupying Scythia. He also arranged his empire, by splitting it into provinces and placing governors to rule over it. Having restored internal order in the empire, Darius undertook a number of campaigns for the purpose of strengthening his frontiers and checking the incursions of the nomadic tribes. In 519 BC, he attacked the Scythians in east of the Caspian Sea and a few years later conquered the Indus Valley. In 513, after subduing the eastern Thrace and the Getae, he crossed the Danube River into European Scythia, but the Scythian nomads devastated the country as they retreated from him, and he was forced, for lack of supplies, to abandon the campaign. That is why Sykes (1933) opines that it was an insane expedition and expiring effort of a frantic despot (p.547). The conquest of Greece was a logical step to protect Persian rule over the Greeks of Asia Minor from the interference of their European kinsmen. According to Herodotus, Darius, before the Scythian campaign, had sent ships to explore the Greek coasts, but he took no military action until 499 BC, when Athens and Eretria supported an Ionian revolt against Persian rule.

He was also a great statesman and organizer. Darius thoroughly revised the Persian system of administration and the legal code. His revisions of the legal code revolved around laws of evidence, slave sales, deposits, bribery, and assault. The time of conquests had come to an end; the wars which Darius undertook only served the purpose of gaining strong natural frontiers for the empire and keeping down the barbarous tribes on its borders. Thus Darius subjugated the wild nations of the Pontic and Armenian mountains, and extended the Persian dominion to the Caucasus; for the same reasons he fought against the Saka and other Iranian tribes, as well as the mysterious Turanians from beyond the Oxus. In the process of these campaigns, Darius made military reforms such as introducing conscription, pay for soldiers and military trainings. He also made changes in the army and navy. But, mainly it was the systematic division and organization of Persia into proper and well governed satrapies in his empire that made Darius, the true successor of the great Cyrus. He divided the Persian Empire into twenty provinces, each under the supervision of a governor or satrap. The satrap position was usually hereditary and largely

autonomous, allowing each province its own distinct laws, traditions, and elite class. Every region, however, was responsible for paying the tribute to the emperor in the form of gold, silver, jewels or livestock. Each satrapy also had an independent financial controller, an independent military coordinator as well as the satrap, who controlled administration and the law. All three probably reported directly to the king. This more evenly distributed power within the satrapy had lowered the chance of revolt. Darius also increased the bureaucracy of the empire, with many scribes employed to provide records of the administration. As Jacob Abbot (2009) comments that Darius “devoted a great deal of thought and of time to the work of arranging, in a distinct and systematic manner, the division of his dominions into provinces, and to regulating precisely the amount of tribute to be required of each, and the modes of collecting it”(P.118).

Darius is often renowned above all as being a great financier. In comparison to his predecessors, Cyrus and Cambyses, Darius improved the revenue collecting system of Persia. While Cyrus and Cambyses received the donations from the people of different provinces and in return treated them kindly, Darius initiated a regular system of collecting taxes from his satrapies. He fixed the coinage and introduced the gold coinage that was named as the gold daric and the silver coin that was known as the siglos. These coins had Darius figure on them which makes him the first ruler in the world “who realized unique propagandistic possibility offered by coinage” (Vargyas, 1999, p. 261). The gold daric was used for interstates commerce and siglos was used for intrastate commerce. (ibid, pp.247-267). He tried to develop the commerce of the empire, and sent an expedition down the Kabul and the Indus, led by the Carian captain Scylax of Caryanda, who explored the Indian Ocean from the mouth of the Indus to Suez. During his reign, the population increased and industries flourished in towns. Persia under Darius had connections with Carthage, and his emissaries explored the shores of Sicily and Italy. At the same time, he attempted to gain the goodwill of the subject nations, and for this purpose promoted the aims of their priests. He allowed the Jews to build the Temple of Jerusalem. In Egypt his name appears on the temples which he built in Memphis and the Great Oasis. In the Egyptian traditions, he is considered as one of the great benefactors and lawgivers of the country. Weights and measures were standardised but often they still operated side by side with their Egyptian or Babylonian counterparts. This would have been a boon for merchants and traders as trade would now have been far simpler. Not only this, Darius also introduced the proper road system by building the Royal Road from Sardes to Susa. The purpose was to collect necessary information from the far-off satrapies and to crush the revolts if the need arises. This upgraded communication and administration networks converted Persia into a rich and business friendly state and subsequently made it easy and possible for the succeeding emperors of the Achaemenid dynasty to rule Persia for many years in the future. Thus, it was Darius who strengthened the roots of Achaemenid dynasty because of judicious and prudent decisions.

Many building projects were initiated during the reign of Darius, with the largest being the building of Persepolis, “the Metropolitan and chief city of Persia” (Grogan, 2014, p. 218). Pasargadae was too well associated with the previous dynasty of Cyrus and Cambyses and so Darius sought a new capital. The city

would have walls sixty feet high and thirty-three feet thick and would be an enormous engineering undertaking. Darius' tomb was cut into a rock face not far from the city. He dug a canal from the Nile to Suez, and, as the fragments of a hieroglyphic inscription found there show, his ships sailed from the Nile through the Red Sea by Saba to Persia. Darius also commissioned the extensive road network that was built all over the country.

Darius in the Behistun inscription appears as a fervent believer in the monotheistic religion of Zoroaster. He continued the process of religious tolerance to his subjects, which had been important parts of the reigns of Cyrus and Cambyses. Darius himself was completely monotheistic since in royal inscriptions, Ahuramazda is the only god mentioned by name. But, time and again he is mentioned worshipping, funding or giving 'lip-service' to various pantheons of gods. This was important as the majority of the empire's inhabitants were polytheists. Also like many other Persian Kings he was also against slavery. For example, all the workers who did labour work at the Persepolis site and other sites were paid which was revolutionary at the time. Like his predecessors, he continued the human rights policies and their continuity may also be seen in the future Persian kings.

About 512 BC Darius undertook a war against the Scythians. A great army crossed the Bosphorus, subjugated eastern Thrace, and crossed the Danube. The purpose of this war can only have been to attack the nomadic tribes in the rear and thus to secure peace on the northern frontier of the empire. Yet the whole plan was based upon an incorrect geographical assumption; a common one in that era, and repeated by Alexander the Great and the Macedonians who believed that on the Hindu Kush (which they called the Caucasus Indicus) and on the shores of the Jaxartes (which they called Tanais, i.e., the River Don) they were quite near to the Black Sea. Of course the expedition undertaken on these grounds could only prove a failure; having advanced for some weeks into the Russian steppes, Darius was forced to return. The details given by Herodotus (according to him, Darius had reached the Volga) are quite fantastic; and the account which Darius himself had given on a tablet, which was added to his great inscription in Behistun, is destroyed with the exception of a few words.

Although European Greece was intimately connected with the coasts of Asia Minor, and the opposing parties in the Greek towns were continually soliciting his intervention, Darius did not meddle with their affairs. The Persian wars were begun by the Greeks themselves. The support which Athens and Eretria gave to the rebellious Ionians and Carians made their punishment inevitable as soon as the rebellion had been put down. But the first expedition that of Mardonius, failed on the cliffs of Mount Athos (492 BC), and the army which was led into Attica by Datis in 490 BC was beaten at the Battle of Marathon. Before Darius had finished his preparations for a third expedition an insurrection broke out in Egypt (486 BC). In the next year Darius died, probably in October 485 BC, after a reign of thirty-six years. Commenting on the greatness of Darius, Jacob Abbot (2009) narrates that Darius was a mighty ruler of nearly half the world and the world looked at him with wonder and awe (p.286).

The references of Darius exist in many literary, religious and history works. It is due to frequent and varied allusions, Darius seems a factual cum fictional figure. The first and foremost reference of Darius is available in the Behistun inscription that has been discussed in the beginning. The next significant reference is that of Greek historian, Herodotus. Herodotus' *The Histories* is a seminal work that provides information about Darius. Herodotus has portrayed the Persians and their emperors in the stereotypical manner of Aeschylus. Aeschylus in his play *The Persians* has depicted the Persians as weak, emotional, effeminate and coward. Herodotus seems to follow the tone set by Aeschylus in his work. Like Aeschylus, Herodotus has also has represented the Persians as transgressors, soft and weak. Herodotus narrates that Darius ruled Persia effectively for thirty-six years and he crushed all rebellions successfully during his reign. Darius married Attosa who was the daughter of Cyrus, the Great. Herodotus shows a considerable development in Darius' character. In the beginning, Darius is portrayed as a cheater, a cowardly fellow and a transgressor who breaks the tombs of the Babylonian kings. Later on, Darius is shown a clever person who used his intelligence and skill to become a great ruler of Persia and ruled successfully for more than thirty years. Despite being a great emperor, Herodotus shows Darius as man of flesh and blood and vulnerable like other human beings.

Among the classical sources related to the information about Darius, the third significant source is *The Book of Ezra-Nehemiah*. The book represents Persians and their emperors in a positive light. It narrates how the Jews return to Babylon during the reign of Cyrus, construct the temple during the reign of Darius and build the walls during the reign of Artaxerxes. As Albertz (2003) notes that "The Persian emperor who supported the return of the exiles and the reconstruction of their homeland was Darius" (p. 374). Darius favoured the Jews by allowing them not only to construct the temple but also generously granted funds for this purpose. It is due to these facts the book of Ezra-Nehemiah gives great honour and respect to the ancient Persian kings and especially to Darius, the great as a builder of the Jewish temple in Babylon. As James E. Bowic (2010) notes that the book describes Darius "as an exalted king" (p.121) of Persia. Despite the references of Darius' generous acts towards the Jews, the book explicitly mentions that the building of the temple actually is an act of Yahweh who communicated his will to the prophets Jeremeiah, Haggai and Zechariah who subsequently passed it to the people (ibid). Among the three main ancient resources, the Behistun inscription represents Darius as a mighty king who rules due to the special grace of Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian God. If he succeeded in crushing the rebellions, it was also because of special blessings of Ahura Mazda. Similarly, Herodotus' *The Histories* represents Darius not only as a great emperor but as a tender human with many vulnerabilities. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah portrays Darius a gracious king who permitted to construct the Jewish temple. But basically, this happened due to Yahweh. Therefore, it is Yahweh's project.

Among the classical religious sources, one source that has been occluded by the Greco-Roman historians is *the Book of Daniel*. *The Book of Daniel* tends to complicate the character of Darius by arguing that Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Mede were the names of one and the same king. However, Coolless (1992)

disagrees with this view and argues that the Book of Daniel has merged the two identities “in order to have the predictions of the prophets fulfilled” (p. 126). Similarly, the historians have also mentioned Darius III along with Darius I. Darius III was “the tenth Great King” (Brant, 2015) of ancient Persia. Nevertheless, he was a man of low origin. Charles (2016) after the deep study of Greco-Roman authors’ works related to Darius III argues that Darius III was a slave before his accession and his former name was Codomannus. To Xenophon, all subjects including the brother of a king in Persia considered themselves as the slaves of their master, the King. Therefore, Darius III was a slave in that sense. According to Strabo and Diodorus, Bagoas, a eunuch, killed the former king Arses and helped Darius to become the king. Jane Grogan (2014) alluding to Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander* and William Alexander’s play *The Tragedy of Darius* mentions Alexander’s kind treatment of Darius’ “womenfolk on the eve of his conquest of the Persian empire” (p. 67). If this is true, then there seems no difference between Darius and Darius III.

There are many narratives regarding the fight between Darius and Alexander. In most of these fights, there is celebration of Alexander’s victory and Darius’ defeat. Most of the classical works seem to exalt Alexander and have described Darius with the designation of “the one who was defeated by Alexander” (Pierre Brant, 2015, p.6). One painting named *The Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander* shows Alexander’s gracious attitude towards Darius’ mother, sister and wife who are war captives. Plutarch in *The Fortune of Alexander* talks about the undoubted victory of Alexander. Though the European-Western writers have described Darius as valiant, generous, beloved of his people yet they have shown Darius inferior to Alexander who is dubbed as hero. Almost all western writers have shown ambivalent attitude towards Darius. Some have represented him totally in a negative light. For example, Niebuhr (1856) has dubbed Darius as an Asiatic despot and Oriental tyrant and the decadence of Achaemenid period has been compared with the decadence of the Ottoman Empire. The fights clearly represent Alexander as a paragon of all virtues who excels his adversary Darius in all matters. Darius has been depicted as a weak and cowardly king who leaves the royal ladies at the mercy of a conqueror. Aeschylus’ *The Persians* is a famous Greek tragedy that revolves round the story of Darius’ son Xerxes’ invasion of the Greeks. Xerxes wishes to take the revenge of his father, Darius by defeating the Greeks but meets the disastrous end. When Xerxes’ mother and Darius’ wife, Attosa receives the news of defeat of the Persian army in the Battle of Salamis, she asks the chorus of the Persian old men to summon Darius’ ghost to guide them in this state of disaster and ruin. The ghost of Darius appears and rebukes Xerxes’ hubris in invading the Greeks, his hasty decision of constructing the bridge over Hellespont and future defeat of the Persians in the Battle of Plataea. The play evinces the celebration of the Greek victory and the shameful defeat of the Persians.

The Arabo-Persian writers have also talked about the battles between Alexander as Iskandar and Darius as Dara. The most important work in this regard is Firdowsi’s *The Book of Kings or Shah-nameh* in which the author has narrated the battles between the two and finally their reconciliation. In *the History of Al-Tabari*, Al-Tabari has also narrated the story of Darius and Alexander, the great. According to Al-Tabari, the war between Darius and Alexander started over the

issue of Alexander's refusal to pay the annual tribute that his father, King Filfus (Philip) sent to Darius. This made Darius angry and subsequently there was a war between the two. Two men of his own guard stabbed Darius and caused his death. Before his death, Darius requested Alexander to take revenge from his murders and marry his daughter, Roxane. Alexander agreed to both and, in this way, became the ruler of both the states (Gad, 2016). C. P. Cavafy, the Greek poet, in his historical poem *Darius* describes how Phernazes, a poet, tries to write an epic poem on the ancient Persian emperor Darius, the son of Hystaspes. Phernazes tries to imagine and capture Darius' feelings when he became the king of Persia:

He must analyse
The sentiments that Darius must have had:
May be arrogance and drunkenness; but no-rather
Like an understanding of the vanity of grandeurs.

At the end, the poet concludes that Darius must have felt arrogance and drunkenness when he ascended to the throne of Persia.

William Alexander, the early modern playwright, has also created a play *The Tragedy of Darius* that represents the story of the ancient Persian emperor, Darius, the great. The play depicts the story of a Persian emperor who is an arrogant and a haughty person. He boasts "I scorne to grant a greater man than I" (1. 48). His pride makes him think that he is "the king of kings and kinsman of the Gods" (1. 16-17). While considering himself as a mighty monarch, he demands a tribute from Philip, the King of Macedonia and calls Philip's son, Alexander as "his servant" and "a mad boy" (ibid, 18). Subsequently, his pride causes his fall and the loss of everything that he possessed and enjoyed earlier. Darius' mother, wife and daughter are made captives who are given great respect by Alexander despite their status of war captives. Darius offers a huge pile of gold, more than the gold of Macedonia, as a ransom to Alexander who rejects the offer. In the end, it is transpired that the two traitors of Darius, Bessus and Nabarzanes, kill Darius with their darts in a chariot.

The playwright presents a different picture of the role and responsibilities of a king through the characters of King Darius and Alexander, the great. Darius is portrayed as an arrogant and undisciplined king in contrast to Alexander who is depicted as civilized and compassionate king. For an instance, he refuses to get gold from Darius as ransom and utters:

True magnanimity doth ravish hearts (2. 344).

Alexander's magnanimity is not confined to words but his deeds also speak volume of his magnanimity. After defeating Darius, Darius' mother, wife and daughter become war captives. But, Alexander treats them kindly and addresses Darius' mother as mother and grants all requests of the members of Darius' family. Parmenio, the lieutenant of Macedonian army, informs Alexander: Let us entombe great Darius like a king (2. 478).

The Story of King Darius, 1565 is an interlude. It is an anonymous play whose material has been taken from the third book of Esdras (McCutchan, 1958, p.

408). It revolves round the character of King Darius who is arguing “with the learned people of his time on what is the strongest force in the world: wine, women or the king” (Masood, 2012, p. 25). The play represents Darius as a benevolent and kind king. Furthermore, like *The Book of Ezra-Nehemiah*, the anonymous playwright has depicted him a builder of Jewish temple. John Crowne’s the play *Darius King of Persia a Tragedy As it is acted by Their Majesties Servant (1688)*. It is rooted in the socio-historical conditions of the period as it alludes to the contemporary politics of the period. It was performed in the presence of James II and was meant a sort of message to both his friends and enemies. (Canfield, 1985, p. 254). Putting aside the topical allusions, the play delineates the story of King Darius who is deserted by his own friends and guards. He is imprisoned and chained. When Bessus, Viceroy of Bactria and Nabarzanes, Viceroy of Hircania, the two traitors, come to the prison to kill Darius, he utters:

A King; a Persian King, chain’d by his Slaves?
 The Slaves he once so favour’d and so lov’d (p.63).
 Before his death, Darius prophesies that
 All Kings and Gods
 Will be the Ministers of my Revenge’
 And execute what e’re my Blood commands (p. 65).

The play shows how Alexander and his army treats him and his family kindly. Like most of other literary works, this play also exalts Alexander as a noble and gracious king. Darius says to Polystratus, the Macedonian Gentleman, that he is dying in deep debt to his king, Alexander for his kind treatment. In most of the works both literary and non-literary, there is praise and celebration of Alexander’s victory over Darius. Alexander has been represented as a model that seems to appeal to the Western mind due to his magnanimity and his temperate treatment of Darius’ family.

CONCLUSION:

There is no doubt that Darius became famous as an Achaemenid king because of his wise administration and construction projects. As an administrator, Darius played pivotal role in strengthening and organizing Persia that was in topsy-turvy both financially and administratively before his reign. Despite the fact that most of the Western sources have represented Darius as an inferior opponent of Alexander, these sources, however, seem to pay glowing tribute to Darius’ prudence, his autobiographical effort in the form of Behistun inscription, his skills and strategies as a great leader and warrior, his deep interest in building projects in Persia, his contribution to introduce a proper legal system and, above all, his religious tolerance. Consequently, it is because of such great qualities, Darius keeps on haunting the minds of Western and Eastern people alike.

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