

## Invulnerability in Shahnameh and the Song of the Nibelungen

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**Abstract:** This paper is concerned with the theme of invulnerability in Iranian and German mythology, especially in two remarkable works of literature, Shahnameh and the Song of the Nibelungen. Myths and legends are in fact the beliefs and ventures of different nations in previous ages. Legends deal with subjects such as gods, the creation of the world and the mankind, and so on. The theme of invulnerability is a major one amongst legends. This paper tries to discuss the similarities and differences of this theme in two aforesaid immortal epics. Such research on the similarities and differences of literary works will be presented as a comparative literature.

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### Introduction

Epic is among the eldest literary forms and is only visible in the literature and culture of the people with old history and ancient myth. Undoubtedly, “Shahnameh is the best and most remarkable epic poetry in the literature of the world that deals with heroic deeds” (Kazazi1372:188).

Epic poetry, in its oral form, has existed among nations since old ages, and has been passed on to later generations, describing them as a nation. Such epics are replete with “signs of civilization and manifestations of the spirit and ideology of a nation in a certain century during their periods of life usually referred to as the heroic ages” (Safa1374:26).

Any classical literature has its own certain epical works in which there are some mythological, fictional, and factual elements inspired by the history of that nation. It is not possible to study the ancient German and Iranian mythologies without exploring their two remarkable treasures, Shahnameh and the Song of the Nibelungen.

Since these two literary works are subset of Indo-European languages from linguistic and cultural perspective and according to the language kinship theory, there are similarities between them, which can be observed by slight comparison. As mentioned before, such a comparison falls into the comparative literature. The comparative literature is concerned with the study and comparison of literary features, elements, and factors arisen from various cultural backgrounds. It also explores the relationship between literary works from different perspectives. Obviously, studying an attribute such as invulnerability within the framework of comparative literature can best describe the attitude of various nations towards that topic as well as emphasizing the importance of mythological heroes in different cultures.

For this purpose, this paper is initially going to briefly define the concept of comparative literature, and providing concise information regarding both epics, it tries to study and analyze the gift of invulnerability. Then, it is going to scrutinize the similarities and differences of the role of invulnerable characters in both literary works in detail. Ultimately, this paper seeks to examine the potential influence of these epics on each other with providing evidences.

### Comparative Literature

Comparative Literature means the knowledge of more than one national language and literature, and/or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of literature.

Comparative Literature has intrinsically a content and form which facilitate the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature and it has a history that substantiated this content and form. It often deals with the relationship between two countries or authors of two different nationalities, or between one author and a foreign country. “Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences, (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression.”(Remak 1961:3).

The field of comparative literature is so vast, and the perspectives from which it can be viewed are so different. Susan Bassnett (1993) contends that most of the scholars who have travelled "towards it from different points of departure" (1) have not come

to meet at a definite point. This has given rise to numerous contrasting perspectives.

This research falls into the category of German comparative literature.” Two categories of genetic comparison (der Genetische Vergleich) and typological comparison (der Typologische Vergleich) can be distinguished in German comparative literature” (Zymner/ Holter 2013:10).

In genetic comparison, literary influences, relationships, and exchanges between different nations are studied. In other words, it is concerned with direct and indirect influences of poets and writers and literary works of different nations on each other, in order to discover a kind of relationship between various literary cultures and explain the interactions between them.

In typological comparison, the similarities and differences of literary masterpieces of the world are studied regardless of their potential influences on each other. In this form of comparative study, literary writers and poets, literary genres and trends, and narrative devices such as subjects, themes, imagery etc. are compared and their similarities and differences are discussed. Such studies aim to discover the common cultural and literary features and identify the differences in order to achieve a better understanding of other cultures and literary traditions so as to respect their values and create a common understanding and friendship among different nations. This perspective may be defined as observing the reflection of one’s own culture and literature in other cultures and literary traditions.

In this paper, the motif or theme of invulnerability will be explored and studied from both genetic and typological viewpoints i.e. in terms of mutual influences on each other, and their similarities and differences.

### **Shahnameh and the Song of the Nibelungen**

Since both abovementioned epics stem from the Indo-European culture, it is very likely that they are going to have similarities and differences from different aspects. Many articles and academic papers have discussed one of these remarkable epics, but unfortunately they have been rarely compared and contrasted with each other. In both epics, invulnerability is a major and mysterious theme. Shahnameh and the Song of the Nibelungen are the most renowned Persian and German literary masterpieces. Both of these literary works can be categorized as heroic epics. These epics indicate universality of both these nations. Shahnameh was composed by Ferdowsi in Persian in 980 A.D.; it contains more than 60 thousand artfully composed verses. Shahnameh addresses to the creation of the universe and the development of the Persian civilization. Generally speaking, Shahnameh has been

composed of three chapters: mythological stories, heroic stories, and historical narratives. Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh is not only of high and unique importance in Persian literature but it is also regarded as an everlasting prominent work of literature across the world.

Shahnameh is a book which invites the people to the highest human status in all its mundaneness and no quality of life has been ignored in it; youth and oldness, femininity and masculinity, felicity and misery, love and hate, wisdom and ignorance have all been mentioned in their appropriate places. It is the book of humanity, and most especially the book of Iran; which all Iranians have kept close to themselves and busied themselves reading it so as not to fall into an untimely sleep, and even if they did so, the dream would not be a disturbed one. (Eslami nodoushan 1385:16).

Shahnameh which is composed of more than 60 thousand verses is approximately seven times longer than the Song of the Nibelungen. Goethe admires Ferdowsi, the great Persian poet, in his various articles and manuscripts and especially in his West-Eastern Diwan. He regards Shahnameh as a universal historical epic. Platen, and Ruckert, each managed to translate only a certain part of Shahnameh into German. Like Shahnameh, the Song of the Nibelungen is an ancient narration. German people regard this ancient literary masterpiece as a national epic. This epic is a mixture of the Germans’ narratives and stories of chevaliers’ knighthood.

“The Song of the Nibelungen has been assumedly composed around 1200 A.D. by an anonymous author based on oral fables which had been passed on to later generations”(Bahr 1987:167).

This epic contains two sections, 39 parts, and approximately 2400 quatrain stanzas. (Borries 1991:156-165).

This epic is divided into two sections which are almost identical in length: the story of Siegfried, and the story of Kriemhild. This epic contains several main incidents. These main incidents are so contextually interrelated that none of them can be overlooked. This paper will investigate the theme of invulnerability in both Shahnameh and the Song of the Nibelungen as well as their potential influence on one another.

### **The Lives of Esfandiar and Siegfried**

In Shahnameh, Esfandiar is depicted as a dutiful, resourceful, patriotic, and obedient hero. He is the son of King Goshtasb and the only invulnerable Iranian hero. Esfandiar asks his father for the throne, but his authoritarian father refuses to give up his power and thus, sends Esfandiar to numerous wars. Goshtasb breaks his promise for the last time and avoids passing the crown to Esfandiar. He finds an

excuse for dispatching Esfandiar to the war with Rostam and orders him to bring Rostam with tied hands to his presence.

If you desire the throne and crown,  
Gather your army and move towards Sistan.

Tie up the hands of Rostam once you reach there.

And bring him back to me with tied hands.  
(Ferdwosi 1382:266/6).

Esfandiar, gripped by his lust for power, refuses his mother's, Katayoon, advice to dissuade him from the battle with Rostam. He goes to Zabol with his army. Rostam is surprised when he learns about the arrival of Esfandiar and his intention, yet he visits him. The most prominent feature of the story of "Rostam and Esfandiar" is the powerful imagery that Ferdowsi employs while describing the scenes of the battle. He narrates the scenes of the battle and one-on-one combat so artfully that the reader feels he is witnessing them rather than reading about them. In this regard, Dr. Sirius Shamisa (1375) states that "Ferdowsi's narration in Shahnameh is visual and dramatic. He does not speak about the scene of the battle with the enemy, but he shows that scene to the reader" (10).

The well-built body, kind face, and wise words of Rostam amaze Esfandiar. Rostam, the great and manly hero of Shahnameh considers both fighting with Esfandiar and surrendering to him inappropriate and faces a dilemma:

If I let him tie up my hands and take me as a captive.

Or if I proudly fight him and harm him.

In both cases, I have committed a despicable act.

Something terrible and out of our traditions.  
(Ferdwosi 1382:267/6).

In lack of any other alternatives, he chooses to fight with Esfandiar. Ultimately, an asymmetrical warfare starts between the two heroes, because unlike Esfandiar, Rostam is a vulnerable human being. Initially, Rostam sustains many injuries from Esfandiar but Simorgh assists him by healing his injuries and reminds him of the vulnerability of Esfandiar's eyes. Simorgh advises Rostam to build an arrow out of tamarix wood and plant it in his enemy's eye. Rostam does so and Esfandiar collapses on the ground with bleeding eyes. Rostam is the first one to mourn beside him while he is struggling with death and Esfandiar entrusts Rostam with the upbringing of his son, Bahman. Iranians mourn and weep for Esfandiar and blame Goshtasb for his death. "Not only Esfandiar, Katayoon, Pashtoon, Zaal, and Rostam, but everyone considers Goshtasb to be responsible for his son's death" (Meskoob 1389:17-18).

In the Song of the Nibelungen, Siegfried is a strong and invulnerable hero. He is the son of King Sigmund and Siglinde who has grown up in Zanten. As a knight, his parents have raised him to become a conscientious, responsible, and brave young cavalier. When he decides to reach his legendary beloved, he goes to the court of King Gunther despite his parents' objection. Once he realizes that his only way for being close to Kriemhild is being close to the king, he bravely goes to King Gunther's aid in battles. He even assists Gunther for reaching princess Brunhild. Years later, trying to prove the gallantness of her husband, Kriemhild reveals the secret of Siegfried and Gunther when Brunhild calls Siegfried a mere attendant and Gunther the king. To prove her claim, she uses Brunhild's ring and belt as evidence and thus it becomes clear that instead of Gunther, Siegfried—who was concealed under an invisible cloak—had defeated the opponent during the challenges arranged by Brunhild for those who wanted to marry her. Thus, Brunhild entrusts one of her braver warriors with the mission of murdering Siegfried to take her revenge. (Das Nibelungenlied 1967).

#### **Invulnerability**

Invulnerability refers to the condition in which the person possesses a robust body which sustains no harm from any weapon. In another sense, invulnerability may refer to one's capability to be above all others. Humans are all equal as long as they can harm and destroy each other. If someone comes about who receives no harm from any fatal assault, he goes beyond all others and thus qualifies for being an unrivaled hero; a state which has been among the psychological desires of the mankind.

The idea of invulnerability dates back to ancient times. It manifests the human desire for being immune to harms and avoiding death so as to achieve immortality. Immortality is a desire which has always intrigued mankind as a way of avoiding death. Immortality, as the highest human desire, has led mankind to create legends about the concept of immortal life. (Yahaghi 1375:219).

Mankind achieved his old desire of immortality by the help of his heroes, legends, and myths which were the creations of his own mind. "Humans have always had a desire for eternal bodily existence and capability; not a bodily existence which may be defeated by any illness or unexpected and unknown trick of life at any moment. Imaginative people manifest their desire for eternity in heroes such as Esfandiar" (Meskoob 1389:28).

One who has access to the source of life shall never die. On the one hand, an invulnerable hero is immortal. He will remain young forever and senility shall never affect him regardless of time, conditions, and experiences. On the other hand, a dignified and

heroic death and departure from life is his ultimate fate. Essentially, the concept of invulnerability is looking for an immortal human being. While aware of his mortality, the mankind resisted death by creating invulnerable heroes in myths. Thus, the stories of invulnerable heroes are in fact mankind's desire for immortality. However, as the mankind lost its hope in earthly immortality, he resorted to the immortality of the names of invulnerable heroes and satisfied his thirst for enjoying an everlasting life.

Achilles the warrior is one of the most ancient and notable invulnerable heroes who departs the earthly life with a tragic and heroic death. This invulnerability is the dream of the mankind, yet there is no way for us to avoid death. This is the undeniable reality of human existence. Sustaining harms and vulnerability is an attribute of the mankind. The concept of invulnerability has always been intriguing and controversial, and even today; there are heroes such as Superman who are supposed to be invulnerable and has flying capability. In the world of literature, we encounter characters such as Esfandiar in *Shahnameh*, Siegfried in the *Song of the Nibelungen*, and Achilles in Greek mythology that have such a gift. Meanwhile, a certain part of body always remains vulnerable for some reason and the deadly stab can penetrate through this part of the body. The other perspective is that the quality of invulnerability is rendered ineffective only when the enemy employs a certain type of weapon or acts under special circumstances. "Neither Esfandiar nor other invulnerable characters such as Achilles, Samson, Siegfried ever manage to avoid their death" (Meskoob 1389:29).

As mentioned before, the theme of invulnerability can be observed in both *Shahnameh* and the *Song of the Nibelungen*, and two mythological heroes Esfandiar and Siegfried are introduced as invulnerable warriors in possession of superhuman powers. This paper is concerned with the comparative study of these two heroes and explores the similarities and differences of this theme through a fundamental comparison.

#### **Similarities and Differences of the Theme of Invulnerability in Achilles, Esfandiar, and Siegfried**

In the Persian literature, the vulnerable part of Esfandiar's body is his eyes, because he had kept them closed while receiving ablution in the holy water. Based on an ancient myth, Zoroaster the prophet orders Esfandiar to have an ablution in a well with holy water, and thus he becomes invulnerable except in the eyes.

Siegfried is also an invulnerable character, but not by the virtue of any holy water or blaze, but by the blood of the dragon which he has slain. He bathes

in dragon's blood and becomes immune to any harm and only a spot between his shoulders which had been covered by a saffron leaf during the bath remains vulnerable. (Borries 1991:17).

Finally, Achilles is the eldest and most renowned invulnerable character from Greek mythology. Achilles is the main character of Homer's *Iliad*. His mother, Thetis the sea nymph, makes him invulnerable by bathing him in the holy water of the river Styx. Consequently, his entire body becomes invulnerable except for his heels which were in his mother's grip during the ablution, and later become his weakness. There is also another story about Achilles and how he became invulnerable. Since his mother is an immortal goddess, she decides to make her son, Achilles, immortal too. Therefore, without his father notice, she puts him inside a holy fire during the nights, and heals the injuries during the days. (Schwab 1974:240).

Achilles finally dies during the Trojan Wars by an arrow which Paris shoots at his heel.

The important point is that all three aforementioned heroes are vulnerable despite their apparent invulnerability, and this finally leads to their death. In other words, mortality of the invulnerable character symbolizes the weaknesses of human beings. Heels of the Greek Achilles, eyes of the Iranian Esfandiar, and shoulders of the German Siegfried are common manifestation of human vulnerability against death, just as their invulnerability is a common manifestation of the human desire for invincibility against nature.

Both two heroes, who are studied here, die because of a plant. Siegfried becomes vulnerable because of a saffron leaf as a saffron leaf covers a spot between his shoulders while he is bathing in dragon blood and that point remains vulnerable. Esfandiar also dies because of the tamarix tree, a strong plant which can even be watered with brine. Rostam is informed about the Esfandiar's vulnerability secret by Simorgh, the Iranian mythological bird. While receiving ablution in the holy water, Esfandiar closes his eyes in fear. Thus, the young hero warrior dies by an arrow made of tamarix wood which is released from Rostam's bow and penetrates through his eye.

#### **Further Similarities and Differences between Esfandiar and Siegfried**

- Both heroes possess a superhuman power and come from royal families. They are also famous and popular in many lands for their heroic deeds.

- Both of them possess extraordinary capabilities which are beyond ordinary people. Each of them has his own specific talents. Their invulnerability and high self-confidence come not

only from their physical powers but also from their strong will and faith.

- Both heroes have unique horses which are bred and trained with special care and endeavor. Esfandiar's horse is called Siah, and Siegfried's horse is named Grani.

- Esfandiar is after the throne to rule his land, yet Siegfried does not ask for such a thing from his father.

- Siegfried acts as a servant to Gunther to earn Kriemhild's love. Similarly, Esfandiar serves his father, the king, in the hope of receiving the throne and crown from his father.

- Siegfried and Esfandiar are both well-experienced in fighting, and have fought on numerous occasions in their lives.

- Both Esfandiar and Siegfried are kind and hospitable human beings, but like all good characters, they die at young age.

- Esfandiar dies during a battle against Rostam who is the greatest and most powerful heroes in Shahnameh. Siegfried, on the other hand, is killed by Hagen who is one of the strongest heroes in the Song of the Nibelungen, during what is pretended to be a hunting ceremony, rather than a real battle.

- Siegfried is killed by the undesired and unintentional consequences of his own deeds, while Esfandiar knowingly chooses to fight with Rostam and is finally killed by him.

- Invulnerable heroes, Esfandiar and Siegfried, are both killed because of deceit, treachery, lies, and their lust for power and both epics come to overwhelmingly tragic ends.

### **The Inspiring Epic**

The most difficult point in the comparative analysis of these epics, is not finding their similarities and differences, but is choosing the more inspiring one. The question is which of these epics with the theme of invulnerability has affected the other one.

Zoroaster, the prophet, bathes Esfandiar in the holy water. Thetis the sea nymph bathes her son Achilles in the holy water of the river Styx so as to make him invulnerable. Unlike Esfandiar and Achilles, Siegfried does not become invulnerable by the virtue of any holy water, but becomes immune to all injuries by bathing in dragoon blood. Thus, it becomes clear that the quality of invulnerability in Esfandiar and Siegfried is hardly influenced by each other, as the holy water and dragoon blood have nothing in common.

These two epics have been composed at different times. Thus, by comparing their time of composition and finding the prior one, we may be able to determine the true source of inspiration. As mentioned before, Shahnameh composed in 980 A.D. is more ancient than the Song of the Nibelungen composed between 1198 and 1024. Achilles, the well-known Greek mythological hero, can be pointed out as the source of inspiration for other invulnerable heroes in the literature of the world, because it was created in the second half of the eighth century B.C. by Homer the renowned Greek poets within historical-mythological stories of Trojan. Therefore, it is revealed that as far as epic's influence is concerned, the influence of Homer's Iliad on both Shahnameh and the Song of the Nibelungen is obvious.

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