

Manifestations of Popular and Folkloric Culture in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*

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Article Info (221-250)		ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article	Shahnameh, without exaggeration or speculation, without any fabrication or deception, is the epitome of Iranian culture; it is an inexhaustible and boundless sea where the waves of millennia, with their tales and narratives, majestic as mountains, interweave. These waves emerge from the depths and dark corners of history, illuminating the expanses of time and connecting our past to the present and our present to the future. Shahnameh is a bridge over the currents of time, a link unbroken that continuously binds predecessors to successors. Through this renowned epic, we can understand the essence and foundation of Iranian history and culture – a history and culture profound and enduring, serving as the base and pretext for every Iranian's pride. Indeed, without Shahnameh, we could not be what we are, and like other tribes and lineages, we would be lost and forgotten in the shadows of the sprawling history and the winds of oblivion. In this research, the author adopts a descriptive-analytical method to investigate the cultural, geographical, and historical aspects of Shahnameh. The aim is to utilize primary and reliable written sources, both old and new, and to draw upon the valuable theories of experts in the field to examine these aspects in detail.	
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Introduction

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings) stands as a monumental epic in Persian literature, transcending mere royal historiography to embody the socio-cultural, mythological, and ethical identity of Greater Iran and the wider Aryan civilizational sphere. While conventional literary scholarship often foregrounds the epic's political conflicts and heroic chivalry, the text fundamentally preserves ancestral customs, communal ethos, oral traditions, and socio-cultural practices.

This study addresses the necessity of systematically exploring the manifestations of popular and folkloric culture (*Farhang-e Mardomi*) within the *Shahnameh*. It specifically investigates how everyday life, ethical worldviews, statecraft, ritual mourning, hospitality, and communal festivities are intertwined with the geographical and historical continuum across its mythical, heroic, and historical epochs. Furthermore, the study highlights the regional geographical grounding of the epic, noting that a substantial portion of the heroic narrative takes place in territories corresponding to present-day Afghanistan (e.g., Zabul, Kabul, Balkh, Samangan, and Nimruz).

Method

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research methodology rooted in textual and thematic cultural analysis. Using classical primary sources (including the text of the *Shahnameh* and historical-mythological treatises) alongside modern Iranological and sociological perspectives, the data was gathered through library-based research.

The analytical procedure involves:

١. Identifying and classifying textual references to customary practices, rituals, and socio-spatial representations.
٢. Contextualizing these elements across the three recognized eras of the epic (mythical, heroic/Kayanian, and historical/Sasanian).

۳. Systematically categorizing folk motifs into institutional, ritual, seasonal, and behavioral dimensions.

Results

The analytical findings reveal that popular culture in the *Shahnameh* functions as a comprehensive repository of socio-cultural life:

- **Epic Geography and Historical Continuum:** Out of nearly ninety-nine distinct geographical and political entities recorded in the epic, forty-eight correspond directly to contemporary Afghan geography, demonstrating that the heroic cycle is deeply anchored in Eastern Iranian lands. The historical narrative structures the folk consciousness from mythical genesis (Keyumars) and anti-tyrannical resistance (Zahhak and Kaveh) to the rise of Zoroastrianism in Balkh and the historical Sasanian era.
- **Rituals of Life, Music, and Governance:** The epic codifies social ethics through didactic counsel (*Andarz*), minstrel traditions (*Rameshgaran*), and chivalric governance models emphasizing righteousness over deceit.
- **Rites of Passage and Social Etiquette:** Mourning rituals (*Ayin-e Sougvari*) depict deeply rooted communal grief expressions—such as *Khelvat/Kheymah-e Sougvar*, *Porseh*, and weeping rituals (*Gageriv*) seen in the tragedies of Siyavash, Sohrab, and Foroud. Similarly, hospitality (*Ayin-e Paziraei*) is governed by precise communal conventions of welcoming, lavish banqueting (*Khwan*), and formal wine consumption.
- **National Festivals and Seasonal Calendars:** The text documents major folk and religious festivals, including *Mehregan* (celebrating truth and victory over tyranny), *Nowruz* (cosmic renewal and equinox), *Sadeh* (the discovery of fire under Hushang), *Chaharshanbe Suri* (fire-purification motifs linked to Siyavash's ordeal), *Azargan*, and *Shab-e Yalda* (the winter solstice), highlighting ancient astronomical and ethical heritage.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the *Shahnameh* is fundamentally a living encyclopedia of Iranian and Central Asian folk culture rather than merely an elite courtly chronicle. Ferdowsi preserved the intangible cultural heritage, ethical values, and collective memory of the populace against historical erasure and tyranny. By integrating folk rites, seasonal celebrations, and moral philosophy across its vast geographical landscape, the *Shahnameh* continues to serve as an enduring cultural bond, bridging historical regional identities and offering vital pedagogical insights into the shared heritage of the Persian-speaking world.