

Complete Silence

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In *The Shahnameh*, Abolqasem Ferdowsi portrays a female character feminist critical analysis. The female character can be found in the beginning of the story, and she could easily be overlooked due to her submissive and passive demeanor. Ferdowsi reveals in Princess Nahid's character the customs of conformity in relation to women in *The Shahnameh*. The book of kings reveals the power differences between men and women, specifically King Derab and Princess Nahid, in a society where women did not have a voice to make decisions, but they were expected to submit and obey the men who reigned in authority over them.

One way Ferdowsi demonstrates voiceless women in a society dominated by men is revealed in Princess Nahid merely being an object to King Derab: "One night this lovely moon, arrayed in jewels and scents, lay sleeping beside the king. Suddenly she signed deeply, and the king turned his head away, offended by the smell of her breath. This bad odor sickened him, and he frowned, wondering what could be done about it" (963). The text describes a beautiful woman lying next to King Derab. Her beauty is significant in this feminist analysis because it is easily overlooked in place of her role as a woman. She has no voice. The text does not say Nahid and Derab had sweet conversation while lying in the bed. She is just lying beside him as art, something for him to look upon. She is simply a common pleasure for a king. Besides, it is of great expectation that the king would have the best pick of the litter, both as his lovely bride and as his concubines. As he relished in his wine, daily live performances, and concubines, King Derab also relished over Princess Nahid. The king enjoyed her gorgeous

image, but he was quickly turned off by the bad odor of her breath. Male or female, we all may have experienced some form of bad breath, especially the bad breath that is well known as "morning breath." But is someone's spouse or significant other breath so bad that they could reject them? Nahid did not have the power or authority to express herself according to the text. She was to simply be beautiful for King Derab.

In addition, Ferdowsi demonstrates voiceless women in a society dominated by men is Nahid did not give consent for the doctor to examine her. The medical advice was solely considered and decided by Derab, who was the owner and husband of Nahid: "He sent knowledgeable doctors to her, one who was especially expert was able to find a remedy" (963). Derab sent for the best doctors to cure Nahid's bad breath. The medical issue that Nahid was dealing with was cosmetic, so it was not a necessity, but apparently to King Derab it was. The text explains the herb that could cure Nahid's bad breath: "There is an herb that burns the palate, which they call Sekandar in Greece, and he rubbed this against the roof of her mouth" (963). There was an herb available to treat Nahid's beautifying issue. But Nahid did not give consent for the doctor to administer the herb. Her consent was not essential considering she was property of her husband, Derab. Nahid was uncomfortable with the herb: "She wept a few tears and her face turned as red as brocade, because it burned her mouth, but the ugly smell was gone" (963). The herb was painful to Nahid. The text reveals her complete conformism during the entire process. The text does not say that anybody consoled her or asked how she

felt or if she was okay. She endured the pain it cost her to make the bad odor go away. She endured not only in pain from the herb Sekandar, but she suffered inwardly due to the root of the matter, conformity.

Moreover, Ferdowsi demonstrates voiceless women in a society dominated by men is because Princess Nahid was not sufficient for King Derab, and he lost love for her, but she was also in complete silence about her pregnancy. As a result, he sent her back home to her father while expecting. Nahid's breath is now sweet for King Derab, so he should be satisfied with his bride: "But although this beautiful women's breath was now as sweet as musk, the king no longer felt love for her. His heart had grown cold toward his bride, and he sent her back to Filqus. The princess grieved, because she was pregnant, but she told no one of this" (963). The king was not satisfied with his bride even after her condition was cured. Her breath now had a sweet aroma, yet it still was not enough for him. In addition, Princess Nahid's powerless position is in her silence about her pregnancy. She is carrying King Derab's baby, and she grieves in silence. She grieves not because the king treats her as his property, but because she was pregnant by him. Perhaps she would rather have been pregnant by anyone but him. Conceivably this silence was her strength. Consider what life would have looked like for her if she revealed her pregnancy to the king. The power men had over men allowed King Derab to reject Princess Nahid because she was insufficient to him, and he sent her back to her father pregnant as a single mother.

Furthermore, to identify the power Derab has over his wife Nahid, one must research the customs relating to marriage during the period The Shahnameh was written. Who determined the order of marriage for a girl, when she may wed, and who she may wed? In *Women in The Shahnameh: Their History and Social Status within the Framework of Ancient and Medieval Sources*, Djalal Khaleghi Motlagh re-

veals marriage customs during the period when The Shahnameh was written: "Once a girl reached maturity, it was considered her father's right and obligation to find a pious man for her to marry" (108). Arranged marriages were and still are traditional in many cultures. What was considered the age of maturity for a female to marry? Unfortunately, The Shahnameh, does not leave any direct insight to the legal age of marriage for woman and man (107). The legal age for girls to marry during the period The Shahnameh was written, was just before their sweet sixteenth birthday. Iran plays a major role in The Shahnameh because Ferdowsi wrote The Shahnameh under the Iranian Sponsorship (Ferdowsi 961). Motlagh continues as he answers the question of the permissible age requirement for marriage: "However, one does not know how old they really were. The right age for a girl to marry in ancient Iran was 15 years, according to Vendidad, 14:15" (107). According to the Iranian laws during the period The Shahnameh was written, Princess Nahid was considered an adult. Notwithstanding the laws of the ancient time, it would be considered abuse in modern law for a 15-year-old girl to be required to marry. Additionally, Nahid's father, Filqus was a major influence as an authoritative role over her. Filqus arranged for her to marry King Derab, which highly could have been against Nahid's will. The text does not give any indication that she ever put up a fight or if she was pleased with the union or not. Nahid remains true to her character. She simply did as she was told in obedience to the men in her life, and it started with her father. Nahid's undeniable obedience is an example in The Shahnameh, which was ruled by men. It is evident that she was trained to be voiceless without a fight.

Equally important, there was a power struggle between Nahid's father, King Filqus and King Darab. The Shahnameh reveals within its work a society dominated by men. Marriage required the father's permission, but were

Darab and Nahid in love with each other? According to their tradition, love has very little to do with marriage. Perhaps there was a greater motive at hand for the marriage of King Darab and Princess Nahid. In *The Shah-Namah* of Fardusi, Alexander Rogers unfolds the story of the two kings, Darab and Filqus:

At that time one Filkus was king of Rum, an ally of the king of Rus (Russia). Being informed by him that Darab was leading an army against him, he assembles an army at Amuriyah and advances. In three days two battles take place, and on the fourth day Filkus and his army take to flight, and the former's wife and children are taken prisoners, a part of the army only escaping to Amuriyah. Peace is now made with Filkus, who gives Darab his daughter Nahid in marriage. (Rogers 352-353)

The two kings, Derab and Filkus were in a battle. King Filkus was defeated by King Derab. In order for Filkus to live peacefully, he had to give his beautiful daughter to Derab as a valuable prize that Derab won. Metaphorically speaking, Princess Nahid was to King Derab a trophy, which explains how King Derab handled her. He marveled over Princess Nahid's beauty so much that he polished her, and he lifted her up on a pedestal. When King Derab recognized she no longer fit his shelf as a trophy prize, he tossed her away. The purpose of their union explains why Princess Nahid was treated like property by King Derab. She was goods to him; a causality of war. Nevertheless,

Nahid remained voiceless to the men who had dominance over her even in the transaction of being turned over by her very own father to King Derab.

Nahid was a perfect example of women of her time in *The Shahnameh*. When one reads the first few paragraphs of *The Shahnameh*, as found in *The Norton Anthology World of Literature* textbook, they could very likely miss the character and role of Nahid and what she was trained and accustomed to. Very quickly a reader can simply see Nahid's beauty and miss her disposition. Nahid was educated at a very tender age to be a woman of conformity and passiveness. Women in *The Shahnameh* lived during an unsurpassable time frame. They were oppressed, and they were disadvantaged, yet they had no remedy. A person without a voice is simply one who does not matter to society. Women in *The Shahnameh*, as seen above, were treated as welcome mats. Men stomped, dusted, and brushed their feet upon them, and kept going. The feelings, thoughts and or concerns of the women were not of deliberation to these men. Princess Nahid was simply there to give pleasure, cook, clean, and bear children. So Nahid was used as a causality of war. So what if the Sekandar herb caused Nahid great pain. So what if Nahid was depressed due to carrying a dishonorable and unworthy king's child. Her thoughts and concerns went unnoticed simply because she was a woman and she was to stay in the place of subservience.

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