Foreword

By: Azar Nafisi

I have two books in front of me. One is the galley for Dick Davis’s *Shahnameh, The Persian Book of Kings;* the other is a much thinner book, designed for young readers and on its cover, above a Persian miniature painting of men on horses, is written in Persian: *Selections from Shahnameh,* by Ahmad Nafisi. In his introduction to this selection, my father mentioned that the idea for this book goes back to the time he started telling stories from Persia’s classical literature, beginning with Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh,* to my brother’ and me when we were no more than three or four years old and later to our children. My father always insisted that Persians basically did not have a home, except in their literature, especially their poetry. This country, our country, he would say, has been attacked and invaded numerous times, and each time, when Persians had lost their sense of their own history, culture and language, they found their poets as the true guardians of their true home. Citing the poet Ferdowsi and how, after the Arab invasion of Persia, he rescued and redefined his nation’s identity and culture through writing the epic of Persian mythology and history in his *Book of Kings,* my father would say, We have no other home but this, pointing to the invisible book, this, he would repeat is our home, always, for you and your brother, and your children and your children’s children.

Thus it was that like so many other Persian children my brother and I and later our children grew up with the *Shahnameh* and in the kingdom of imagination our father had created for us. Rostam, Tahmineh, Seyavash, Bizhan and the other fictional characters in Ferdowsi’s stories because our brothers and sisters, cousins and neighbors. Ferdowsi’s devoted readers throughout the centuries rewarded him by creating their own legends around him. When I was a married woman with children of my own, my father, in the same manner he used when I was a small child, would tell my children of the conflict between the noble poet Ferdowsi and the fickle king, Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi. Dick Davis gives us the factual historical account, but we heard the popular one, the one that like the stories in the *Shahnameh,* while more akin to myth, revealed an important truth.

According to this version, Sultan Mahmud assigns *Shahnameh* to Ferdowsi, for which he promises to pay the poet a gold coin for every line. The king, as it seems to be the way with many rules, does not fulfill his promises. Instead, he sends the poet silver coins, which Ferdowsi, despite his dire poverty, refuses. The king, finally realizing the worth of the poet, repents of his behavior and travels to the city of Tus to console the poet. He is too late: as his procession enters the main gate to the city it encounters another procession leaving the same gate with Ferdowsi’s coffin. Implied in this legend, as in *Shahnameh* itself, is the truth that in the struggle between the poet and the king, the latter might win this world but to the former belongs the glory that comes with the conquest of that most absolute of all tyrants, time. Nearly a thousand years have passed, my father would say, the tone of marvel never missing from his voice, and we remember the king mainly because we remember the poet. It is the poet, he would declare who is the final victor.

After the victory of the Islamic revolution, and especially during the years of the Iran-Iraq war, I took refuge in Persian poetry and literature when we would gather each week with a group of friends to read the classics of Persian literature with the well-known writer Houshang Golshiri. That was when I paid more attention not just to the stories but also to the miraculous language and poetry of *Shahnameh,* realizing that the poetry seemed so unobtrusive and supportive of the stories not because Ferdowsi was a lesser poet and a better storyteller but because he was so skilled a poet that the poetry became the story.

I realized then how right my father had been. For Persians, *Shahnameh* is like their identity papers, their conclusive evidence that they have lived. Against the brutality of time and politics, against the threat of constant invasions and destructions imposed on them by enemies alien and domestic, against a reality they had little or no control over, they created magnificent monuments in words, they reasserted both their own worth and the best achievements of mankind through a work like *Shahnameh,* the golden thread that links one Persian to the other, connecting the past to the present.

Now we have to be grateful to Dick Davis for weaving this golden thread into the fabric of another language. In his translation of these selections from *Shahnameh* he conveys the unique poetic texture of Ferdowsi’s great epic. Yet we do not appreciate *Shahnameh* only for its Persianness, but also because it shapes and articulates those aspects of Persian culture that transcend time and space, defying limitations of history, ethnicity, nationality and even culture. This book, like literary classics, captures and articulates passions, urges, aspirations, betrayals, joys and anguish that are shared by all individuals no matter where they live and what language they speak. Ultimately, the English-speaking reader will be drawn to this book not only because it represents the best of Persian culture, but also because of its essential humanness. Reading *Shahnameh* will lead them to the amazing and yet inevitable discovery that celebrating our differences would have no meaning or substance if we did not simultaneously recognize our common humanity, our enduring connections and relations.

And because of this universal appeal the readers of this marvelous new English rendition of the *Shahnameh* can now experience with the readers before them from different cultures and nationalities the truth of the poet’s prophecy when he wrote:

*I’ve reached the end of this great history*

*And all the land will fill with talk of me*

*I shall not die, these seeds I’ve sown will save*

*My name and reputation from the grave,*

*And men of sense and wisdom will proclaim,*

*When I have gone, my praises and my fame.*