



**Gender, Monstrosity and Nationalism: A Comparative Study of Two
Plays by Bahram Beyzaie with the Legend of Zahhak
in *The Shahnameh***

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Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Gender Studies

GEMMA – Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies



2014



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Mobility: University of Granada
University Institute for Women's Studies

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2014

Abstracts

Abstract in English

This thesis explores two plays written by Bahram Beyzaie, the contemporary Iranian Playwright. The plays are titled *Azhdabak* (1959) and *The Thousand First Night* (2003). Both plays are based on the myth of Zakhak which appears in *The Shahnameh* or *The Book of Kings*, the classic book of Persian epic poetry in the eleventh century. The purpose of this study is to discover how the playwright has managed to offer a subversive and a feminist reading of *The Shahnameh* version of the legend Zakhak and has thus given voice to the characters that were silent in *The Shahnameh*. To analyze these plays, Beyzaie's theory on the connection between the Zakhak legend and *The Thousand and One Nights* was critical. In addition, I used theories on storytelling and also theories on monsters.

As a minor inquiry, I also explored the traditional Iranian art of Naghali or dramatic storytelling which is a solo performance associated with the recitation and performance of *The Shahnameh*. The purpose of this minor investigation was to analyze two performances by two women one performing the Zakhak from *The Shahnameh* and one performing *The Thousand and First Night*. In this analysis I attempted to foreground the possibilities of a feminist reading of the texts.

Abstract in Spanish:

Esta tesis explora dos obras teatrales escritas por Bahram Beyzaie, dramaturgo iraní contemporáneo. Estas obras se titulan *Azhdahak* (1959) y *La milésima primera noche* (*The Thousand First Night*) (2003). Ambas obras están basadas en el mito de Zakhak que aparece en el *Shahnameh* o *El libro de los reyes*, el libro clásico de la poesía épica persa en el siglo XI. El propósito de este estudio es descubrir cómo el dramaturgo ha logrado ofrecer una lectura subversiva y feminista de la versión del *Shahnameh* de la leyenda de Zakhak y ha así dado voz a personajes que no la tenían en el *Shahnameh*. Para analizar estas obras fue crítica la teoría de Beyzaie sobre la conexión entre la leyenda de Zakhak y *Las mil y una noches*. Asimismo, he usado teorías de narración y también teoría sobre monstruos.

Como una indagación secundaria, también he explorado el arte tradicional iraní del *Naghali* o narración dramática que es una actuación individual asociada con la recitación y representación del *Shahnameh*. La intención de esta indagación secundaria era analizar dos representaciones por parte de dos mujeres. Una interpretando el Zakhak del *Shahnameh* y la otra interpretando *Las mil y una noches*. En este análisis, mi intención fue hacer énfasis en las posibilidades de una lectura feminista de los textos.

Dedication

To the loving heart of my Mom

And the encouraging presence of my dad

Acknowledgments

There are a number of people without whom this thesis would not be possible. I owe great thanks to my supervisor, Professor Jasmina Lukic, whose presence was priceless throughout the process. I am indebted not only to her academic generosity, but also to her exceptional patience, care and support for me since the very beginning. I am vastly thankful to my second supervisor, Professor Adelina Sanchez, who provided me with invaluable sources and comments and supported me through my difficult time alone in the city.

My sincere gratitude goes to Dr. Saeed Talajooy, a long time teacher and friend, for his priceless comments and the resources that he generously provided me with, within the shortest time possible in spite of his tight schedule. To him I owe a great deal of the academic path I have chosen. My especial thanks go to Mr. Hamid Amjad who, kindly and in almost no time, provided me with almost any source I asked for on Bahram Beyzaie. I am also immensely grateful to Dr. Mahmoud Omidsalar, *Shahnameh* expert, and Dr. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet who instantly provided me with their articles and books when I could not access them online.

I cannot be grateful enough to Mahmoud, Negar and Ramin Bozorgmehr, Shohreh Nikoo, Tina Hamidi, Jean Campbell, and Janet Garret who patiently supported me from miles away and were there for me any time of day or night that I needed them. And finally, it will be an attempt in vain to try to find words to thank my selfless friend, Sahar Modares Mousavi, who has spent every single day of the process of this research with me in the past two years, read every page that I have written and stayed with me through all the ups and downs; my deep gratitude goes to her partner and our friend, Hossein Akbarzadegan, who made this possible for us.

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Introduction

This research aims at drawing an analogy between the legend of the monster king Zahhak¹ in the famous Persian book of epic poetry, *The Shahnameh* (1010 AD) and two major adaptations of this legend written by Baharam Beyzaie, *Azhdahak* (1959) and *The Thousand and First Night* (2003). The purpose of this analogy is to study how Beyzaie's two modern plays have managed to put forward a subversive feminist reading of the legend of Zahhak through giving voice to the marginalized characters of *The Shahnameh* version of the legend. In this study I have also considered a brief focus on the performative aspect of the legend of Zahhak both as in the epic and the play versions. For this purpose I will draw a comparison between two performances by two women with the aim to uncover how these performances have offered a feminist reading of the texts.

The Shahnameh or *The Book of Kings*,² as translated into English, is an epic poem of extraordinary length (50,000 lines) written by Abolghasem Ferdowsi (940-1020 AD) in the span of almost 35 years, which recounts stories of kings of Iran before Islam. As Beyzaie in an interview points out, *The Book of Kings*, in most of its legends, either ignores the presence of women, or refers to them only as auxiliary to male heroes (Amjad, 2013). The story of Zahhak is not an exception. However, it is not only the female voice which is forced to the periphery in this legend; in fact, we rarely hear the voice of the monster Zahhak himself.

The legend of the monster king Zahhak is one of the most frequently recounted tales of *The Shahnameh* in different cultural, artistic, and political occasions at least in the recent history of Iran if not long before that. In order to avoid assuming continuity to the interpretations of this legend since

¹ Since the legend of Zahhak comprises about 500 lines of *The Shahnameh*, in order not to take much space, I have enclosed a one page summary of the story as an appendix to this thesis.

² To avoid repetition I will interchangeably use the Persian and the English names of the book throughout this thesis.

it was written, in this study I focus on the major line of interpretation of this legend since the beginning of the twentieth century, the era after the Constitutional Revolution in 1905 when the discourse of nationalism was prominent (Ansari, 2012).

The dominant interpretation of the story of Zakhak since the constitutional era has been a nationalist one (Ansari 2012), in which Zakhak has always stayed in his role of the vicious Arab tyrant who kills two young men every night and thus depletes Iran of its male force. He is confronted by Fereydun- who overthrows him by the end of the story- or the blacksmith Kaveh, the head of the protest which helps Fereydun come to throne. On different occasions where the Zakhak legend was used, these three figures have generally assumed the same roles as they did in *The Shabanmeh*. As the only king of Iran with an Arab origin, Zakhak, has thus appeared to be the symbol of tyranny imposed on Iranians from outside- particularly the Arab tyranny in the time of Caliphs- and confronting him was considered an admired act of nationalism. In this major line of interpretation of the story, neither is there any trace of the two women, Shahrnaz and Arnavaz whom Zakhak marries after conquering Iran, nor do we ever see Zakhak himself as anything but an evil monster destroying Iran. Bahram Beyzaie, however, proposed an altogether different way of looking at this legend in his plays.

Bahram Beyzaie who started his career as a playwright in the 1950s has been famous for his subversive way of treating myths and folklore tales in his works. Besides writing plays, he has also worked and published as a researcher³. His book titled *Hezar Afsan Kojast?* (2013) or *Where is The Thousand Tales?* is the result of his many years of research on the legend of Zakhak and its connection with an ancient Persian book entitled *The Thousand Tales* which, he argues, based on historical evidence, to be the older Persian version of what was later translated to Arabic and entitled

³ To learn more about Beyzaie's life and works refer to Talajooy's "Beyzaie's Formation, Forms and Themes" (2013a) which offers a brief but comprehensive article on Beyzaie.

One Thousand and One Nights and still later known in its English title as *The Arabian Nights*. In his research he argues that ancient storytellers have always been women. He particularly notices the presence of two women storytellers who appear in different documents through which he traces the transformation of a major basic plot which later came to be known as the fundamental plot of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. In this fundamental plot the two female storytellers- called Shahrzad and Dinazad in today's version of the book- manage to influence a king through their stories and stop him from cruelty and thus save the nation.

According to Beyzaie the older version of the Zahhak legend, unlike the canonized version appearing in *The Shahnameh*, had these two female storytellers as the major characters in the story. It is through this interweaving of the fundamental plot of *The Thousand Tales* and *Zahhak*, that *The Thousand and First Night* is born. The first scene of this play features Shahrnaz and Arnavaz as the storytellers who recount one thousand tales to the monster king Zahhak for one thousand nights. *The Thousand and First Night*, though, is not Beyzaie's only adaptation of the legend of Zahhak. *Azhdahak* is another adaptation of the same story which places the monster Zahhak in the center. Azhdahak or Zahhak, the protagonist of this play, is not a cruel king but a victim of cruelty whose protests against the tyrant dictator leads to his becoming a "monster". In this play Beyzaie challenges the notion of the monster as an evil being.

This thesis is divided into three main body chapters. In the first chapter, I will present a brief historical look at *The Shahnameh* and the context in which it was written to clarify how and why it came to be connected with nation formation. Then I will focus more on the nationalist interpretations of the legend of Zahhak since the beginning of the twentieth century to provide the grounds for understating the context in which Beyzaie wrote the two plays. I will also delve into more details on the connections he makes between *The Thousand Tales*, *One Thousand and One Nights*,

and Zahhak. I will end the chapter with a brief introduction to the performative art of Naghali associated with the performance of the legends of *The Shahnameh* to prepare for more detail on the topic appearing in the following chapter.

In the second body chapter I will examine Beyzaie's *The Thousand and First Night*. In spite of the chronological order in which the two plays are written (*Azhdabak* was written much earlier in 1959), I analyze *The Thousand and First Night* first because, as I will discuss in more detail later, this order suits better my purpose which is the development of the character of Zahhak through the female storytellers this order is more suitable. I believe the voice given to women in this play becomes part of the master plot which is borrowed from *The Thousand Tales* and thus it can be connected to the process of the transformation of the monster which happens in the other play *Azhdabak* in spite of its earlier publication. In this chapter I will enter into more details about the performative art of Naghali traditionally exclusive to men. I will study the performances by two women; one performing the tales of *The Shahnameh* as a traditional Naghal and the other performing the first scene of Beyzaie's *The Thousand and First Night*. My attempt will be to depict the feminist readings that these women offer to the texts they are performing in spite of the differences in their performances.

The third chapter of the body will be dedicated to the process of transformation of the monster Zahhak in the play *Azhdabak*. I will try to depict how Beyzaie has seen the events of the legend of Zahhak from a different angle, from the monster's point of view. In this chapter I will benefit from theories on monsters and monstrosity and my aim will be to see how not only Zahhak as a monster but the notion of monstrosity is subverted in *Azhdabak* and how the monster in this play, as Jeffery Jerome Cohen (1999) remarks, becomes a source of creation not a cause of evil.

As one of the most renowned researchers on *The Shahnameh*, Mahmood Omidzalar (2003), mentions in his article on the women of *The Shahnameh* that research on this topic has been very scarce and

those which exist do not dive deep in the analysis of these characters. I believe Beyzaie's adaptations of the legend of Zakhak are two instances which have managed to present, as he himself points out, a deeper look at the "unwritten parts" of *The Shahnameh* (Amjad, 2013); not only about two of the most important but ignored women of *The Book of Kings*, but also about the character of the monster king himself who has also been pushed to periphery through demonization.

There have been several analyses of Baharam Beyzaie's plays, particularly by famous researchers and experts in the area of drama and theater such as Dr. Saeed Talajooy or the playwrights Naghameh Samini and Hamid Amjad. However, I did not encounter any research which follows the evolution of the monster with the help of the women in these particular plays and in the order that I have proposed in this study.

In addition, my attempt in this study is also to connect the traditional performance of Naghali with the story of Zakhak as it appears in *The Shahnameh* and its adaptations by Beyzaie. With this, I hope to add a minor, but in my opinion, significant to the studies done on the marginalized characters of *The Shahnameh*, the way Beyzaie has succeeded to vocalize them and the potentials that the performative arts related to these texts can propose for a feminist reading of these texts.

Chapter One: *The Shahnameh*, Zahhak Story and its Interpretations

Introduction

To be able to understand and analyze *Azhdahak* and *The Thousand and First Night* the two plays by Beyzaie, it is necessary to know the story of Zahhak on which these two plays were based, its context and the context and the reasons for which this story was canonized. The story of Zahhak has had many different implications particularly in recent years. I am going to focus on its impact on both nationalist and feminist discussions. To do this I will first briefly review the background in which *The Shahnameh* itself was written and then move to the legend of Zahhak, and how it was received in the modern Iran in whose context Beyzaie wrote these two plays. By modern Iran I mean the beginning of the 20th century, since the Constitutional Revolution (1905) is considered by many scholars as the rough start of the birth of the modern Iran and a time when nationalist tendencies became the incentive for a “renewed interest” in *The Shahnameh* and its connection with Iran’s pre-Islamic past (Dabiri, 2010). My attempt will be to show how in almost all of the nationalist interpretations of Zahhak and *The Shahnameh*, women are totally ignored in spite of their presence in the stories. This, I hope, should help understand the significance of the plays written by Beyzaie as rare works in which not only women are gaining voice in the discourse of nationalism, but the story of Zahhak and the monster king himself are looked upon from a different angle as well.

The Historiography

To be able to understand the tales of *The Shahnameh* and particularly the tale of Zahhak, one must first know briefly about the time in which it was written. In his introduction to the translation of *The Shahnameh*, Dick Davis(2006) argues that Ferdowsi, the author of *The Shahnameh*, lived in a “time of transition” when it was possible to record the end of an era and have a perspective of the beginning

of another in the history of Iran. In addition since *Shahnameh* was written approximately half way between the beginning of the recorded history of Iran and today it can also give the modern reader a view of this transition (Davis, 2006).

The Arab conquest happened towards the end of the seventh century about two hundred years before Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* was written, the two-hundred-year which was called by one of the most respectable contemporary historians *The Two Hundred Years of Silence* (Zarrinkoub, 1999). Even though some disagreed⁴, yet many were of the same opinion⁵ with Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob that the fall of the Sassanid dynasty and the Arab invasion was about to bring the Persian civilization to the verge of disappearance⁶. Not all historians share the same view on the introduction of Islam to Iran. Nevertheless, according to this same discourse, it was *The Shahnameh* which revived the Persian language and along with it the Persian civilization.

From around 660 AD when the Arabs conquered Iran until 750 AD when the Abbasid dynasty of Caliphs came to power in Baghdad, there were many revolts against Arab rule in different parts of Iran. The Abbasid, however, were kinder and more attentive to the Persian civilization; but it was in the tenth century that *The Shahnameh* was written, when the Abbasid were gradually weakened and the Buyid dynasty in the West and the Samanid in the East of Iran- where Ferdowsi lived- were coming to power. Both of these dynasties claimed that they had descended from the pre-Islamic Sassanid and thus through encouraging the creation, collection and protection of literature on Persian kings before Islam, they attempted to establish a link between themselves and the history that they claimed to descend from (Davis, 2006). In this effort to distinguish themselves from the

⁴ Refer to *The Poetics and Politics of The Shahnameh* (Omidasalar, 2011)

⁵ Khaleghi Motlagh, the most famous editor of *The Shahnameh*, compares *The Shahnameh* to a bridge between the Iran before and the Iran after Islam, a bridge which stopped the enormous harm to the Iranian culture. In another instance he adds that *The Shahnameh* tied together the rope of Iranian nationality which was almost worn out. (Afshar, 2001, p. 127)

⁶ Later in his life Zarrinkoob said he was too young and too passionate at the time when he had written the book *The Two Hundred Years of Silence*

Arab Caliphs, according to Davis, the Samanid promoted the ancient Iranian culture and supported Persian literature. They even changed the court language from Arabic to Persian. This interest in Persian literature and history first by the Abbasid and then by the Samanid, obviously, paved the way to the composition of several books on the kings of Iran one of which is Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. However, this book is not the only one of its kind. Shah-nameh literally means book of kings and it was a title given to any book written on the lives of kings. *The Shahnameh*, as Ferdowsi himself writes, is the versified version of one of the most important books of kings written in prose called *The Shahnameh of Abu-Mansoor* whose text is lost.

The Shahnameh covers a wide span of the lives of the mythical and historical kings and heroes of Iran. But its uniqueness lies in that, unlike many written accounts on the history of the time, which tried to present a combination of the Islamic and the ancient Persian legends and creation myths, *The Shahnameh*, is only dealing with the ancient Persian cosmology and this makes it stand out among others as formative literature.

***Shahnameh* and the Idea of a Nation**

Any Iranian, from any class of society or any status, based on their situation, owes a great deal of their nationality to Ferdowsi.⁷

The Shahnameh tales on the history of Iran connect this book to the formation of Iran as a nation and Iranian-ness as identity. Even though several Western scholars- like Edward Browne- consider eighteenth century the time when Iran started to be recognized as a country, in her book on the formation of Iranian identity, Kashani-Sabet (1999) traces the idea of nationality to much further back in history than the eighteenth century. In her argument among the many sources, she draws

⁷ from a letter written by Mohammad Ghazvini to Hassan Taghizadeh, two editors of *The Shahnameh* on the occasion of building a tomb for Ferdowsi in the ceremony of the anniversary of his one thousandth birthday in the city of Toos in 1924 (Afshar, 2001, p. 124) (my translation).

upon *The Shahnameh* as well pointing out the fact that as far back as the tenth century, the idea of Iran and Iranian-ness existed in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*⁸. Both Kashani-Sabet and Ansari (2012) argue that, in spite of the fact that the meaning of the word "Iranian" was fluid and did not stay the same all the while, the notion of "Iranian" as a people existed much further back than the Western experts on the Middle East suggest. Parvaneh Pourshariati (2008) in her book on the fall of the Sassanid dynasty names *The Shahnameh* as the most important and in some cases the only reference on Iran of that time. All the mentioned scholars and many more consider *The Shahnameh* as one of the sources which played some role in the formation of what we call Iran today and thus an important point of reference in the discourse of nationalism.

***Shahnameh* and the Iran after the Constitutional Era**

According to Omidsalar (2011) *The Shahnameh* started to be regarded as an important book about one hundred years after it was composed⁹. Since then it has influenced many thinkers and writers. However, it is an attempt in vain to try to force a notion of continuity into the spectrum of many different interpretations and implications of this book since it was written. I am therefore, limiting my study to a particular period in Iran, the constitutional era, and will be focusing on how and why *The Shahnameh* and the particular story of Zahhak were canonized in the years after the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 as a myth with nationalist tendencies; I will then try to find any traces of women and female characters in this story within the nationalist propaganda.

In his *Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, Ali Ansari (2012) has provided a detailed account of the instances when *The Shahnameh* and its stories were used after the constitutional revolution by the popular media. According to him *The Shahnameh* tales and the book itself have been utilized

⁸ e.g. چو ایران نباشد تن من مباد/بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد Let my body perish if there is no Iran/ Let there [then] be no body alive in this land (my translation)

⁹ On this topic also refer to "The *Shahnameh* between the Samanids and The Ghaznavids" (Dabiri, 2010)

abundantly as the symbol of nationalism and “Iranian-ness” in the 20th century. As Ansari puts, for Iranians, “Cyrus founded the Iranian monarchy, Darius ordered Iranian politics, Ardeshir Papagan renewed the Iranian state, Zoroaster founded the ancient Iranian religion and Ferdowsi restored (revived) the Iranian nation”(p. 36). Among the tales of *The Shabanemb* which have received the most attention since the constitutional Revolution, the story of Zahhak has been exceptionally in the highlight of nationalist discourse because it depicts distinctively a foreign demon king against the Persian Nation.

Generally speaking, since the constitutional revolution the legend of Zahhak has been traditionally read in two major and diametrically opposed ways in neither of which is any footprint of the female characters in this story. In the traditional reading Zahhak is seen as cruel and tyrannical, as the monster king from an Arab descent. This reading is mostly based on the fact that “Ferdowsi used a post-Islamic version that deliberately associated Zahhak with Arab codes for political purposes” (Talajooy, 2013b, p. 700). This point of view which sees Zahhak or Dahhak as “the evil foreigner” and the “quintessential symbol of injustice”(Pourshariati, 2008, p. 354), usually puts Zahhak, the Arab invader, against Kaveh, the Persian blacksmith who rises against Zahhak in *The Shahnameh* version. Women have no particular role in this interpretation. The significance, the popularity and the prevalence of this traditional reading of Zahhak is reflected in the title “Kaveh” chosen by one of the first newspapers published after the Constitutional Revolution. As Ansari and Saeedi point out, the fact that Zahhak was an Arab prince and “the epitome of the thoroughly foreign, alien king” and the fact that this was already established through the popularity of *The Shahnameh* in the minds of people made it easy for modern nationalists to find “the other” in the Arab and thus to define the nation against it (2012, p. 58).

This view was shared and perpetuated by many nationalists and was known to be so effective that it was used at least twice by the Persian channel of BBC radio. Once during the Second World War Hitler was compared to Zakhak to reinforce the image on an “other” in the mind of nationalist Iranians by resorting to a local and familiar tale (Hanif, 2003; "*The Shabnameh* and Propaganda of World War II," 2013).

In local literature as well, according to Hanif, one hundred and eleven plays were written on the basis of *The Shabnameh* tales from the Constitutional Revolution until about ten years after the 1979 revolution; thirteen percent of which has been plays written on the story of Zakhak alone; the legend of Zakhak, after Rostam and Sohrab and Bijan and Manijeh, occupies the third place on the list of the adaptations of popular *Shabnameh* legends. These stories have mostly reproduced the same old interpretation of the legend of Zakhak and the presence of women has either been rare or non-existent.

There is, however, a second interpretation that reads the myth of Zakhak from an entirely different point of view but still ignores the position of women in this legend. This view which was famously proposed and promoted by the famous Iranian poet, Ahmad Shamlou, in his lecture in the University of California Berkeley, in 1990, viewed Zakhak as a revolutionist who managed to overthrow the society which Jamshid, the king of Persia before him, established based on classes. According to Ansari, Shamlou’s view was the first to undermine “the traditional narrative understanding” which regarded Zakhak as the Arab monster king and it succeeded in “effectively reversing the heroes and the villains” of this legend (2012, p. 16)¹⁰.

¹⁰ Later Shamlou’s interpretation was both received as a suitable incentive for the leftist revolutionist and also criticized harshly by literary scholars. Refer to Abshenasan (2006) or to Ansari. His interpretation also had a different implication. In the context of the Islamic revolution, if Jamshid was the Shah of Iran before the revolution, then it would be obvious who Zakhak would be (Ansari). This and many other instances in the

As Ansari points out, the importance of this interpretation lied even more in the fact that the national myths continued to be used in spite of the Islamization of the country and the force for the predominance of whatever was Islamic and the marginalization of whatever was nationalist. Even though the political authorities did not realize in the beginning the potential that existed in *The Shahnameh*, yet popular attention toward this epic and its tales was growing. Literature began to be written on *The Shahnameh*, “ranging from chivalry to women and the world beyond” (Ansari, p. 255). However, there is no clear research done on the number of adaptations of *The Shahnameh*, apart from the one written by Hanif, which covers up to ten years after the revolution and puts together three different sources before his own article.

Ansari does not point out that long before Shamlou’s interpretation in 1990, Baharam Beyzaie had already offered a subversive reading of the legend of Zakhak. His short play from 1959 called *Azhdahak*, sees Zakhak, neither as a tyrant nor as a revolutionist but as a victim of tyranny. Many years after this deconstructive image of the monster Zakhak, in 2003 Beyzaie finally gave rise to the voice of the women in *The Shahnameh*. By then these two plays by Beyzaie had managed to verbalize both the monster and the women of the legend of Zakhak. However, before exploring Beyzaie’s writings let us have a look at the studies done on the female characters in *The Book of Kings*.

Women in *The Shahnameh*

In his introduction to his translation of *The Shahnameh*, Davis says that *The Shahnameh* was written in a time of transition. Interestingly enough, Mahmood Omidshaher associates this transition with the presence of women and femininity in general, in many of the legends of *The Shahnameh* and particularly in the story of Zakhak (2003). To move from one stage to another, Omidshaher says, the interpretation of the stories of *The Shahnameh* put this book in the list of the books which would signal out the opposition movement to the government.

hero of the story needs the support and the presence of a feminine element, whether a female character or an entity which can be regarded symbolically as feminine. Regarding both Davis and Omidasalar's points of view, in my opinion, it is with the help of the feminine presence in *The Shahnameh* that Ferdowsi is able to write an epic which reflects a time of transition. However, this focus on women is not frequently seen in interpretations or adaptations of *The Shahnameh* tales.

In spite of the extraordinary length of *The Shahnameh*, as Omidasalar himself remarks in his article, the research done on the women of *The Shahnameh* is meager and the very few studies on this topic are mostly descriptive. Dr. Khaleghi Motlagh's famous book on the women of *The Shahnameh* (2012) which was written based on his PhD thesis and offers a detailed account of female characters in *The Shahnameh* does not set as its goal any profound analysis of these characters. Apart from a few books and articles such as *Roodabeh and Soudabeh: The Political and Moral Portrait of Woman in The Shahnameh* by Paknia (2010), and the article by Omidasalar mentioned above and several university theses and papers, most other works published in Iranian journals or by Iranian publication houses inside the country on the female characters of *The Shahnameh* assume the traditional way of looking at the women of *The Book of Kings* as only supplementary to male heroes and consider *The Shahnameh* a book which promotes women because it portrays their chastity and faithfulness and depicts them as sacrificial to their husbands, sons and land (Mohammad Najari, 2012). The absence of critical feminist studies on the female characters of this book is quite obvious, even though because of the number of female characters present in its stories, this book has a strong potential to be studied and examined through more modern feminist theories. In the particular case of the story of Zakhak, analysis and adaptations are usually concerned with the male characters, depicting Zakhak as the evil force in different contexts and Kaveh or Fereydun, depending on the context, as the leaders of the opposition. Female characters in the story are almost always ignored, except for Fereydun's mother (Mohammad Najari, 2012).

Omidasalar's article on the women of *The Shahnameh* is one of the deepest analyses. It contains a section on femininity in the story of Zakhak, and it proposes a different way of looking at this story. However, even though Omidasalar offers a detailed analysis of the feminine presence in the story of Zakhak, it still recalls Najmabadi's statement "male bonding is mediated through the figure of woman." (1997, p. 442). In his article, Omidasalar, unwillingly and arguably, reminds us that the feminine presence in *The Shahnameh* is used to construct the male nationalist discourse. In the figure of the cow, the river, even the mother, Faranak, who gives birth to the hero, Fereydun, the woman is simply present to help the male character with his "transition" from one stage to another; she functions as a facilitator and a bridge, as an assistant and as auxiliary but not as a thinker and an active participant.

Faranak, mother to the hero Fereydun, is the one female character in the story of Zakhak, that is most frequently recalled and discussed because she mothers the hero who saves the nation from the tyranny of Zakhak. Shahnaz and Arnavaz, Jamshid's daughters, who marry Zakhak first and Fereydun later, are rarely talked about. Omidasalar, associates them with an important role and argues that it is through marriage to these two women that both the villain Zakhak and the hero Fereydun, obtain *farr* or Divine Excellence¹¹ and legitimize their reign over Iran. However, even Omidasalar does not linger on the image of these two women. In his article, he does not use their names and refers to them as sisters or daughters of Jamshid, the king before Zakhak.

Gholam Hossein Saedi's play, *Zakhak* (1998)¹² is one of the very rare instances in which Shahnaz and Arnavaz are given voice to speak for themselves. But in his play they do not go further than two shivering sisters who are manipulated by the tyrant. The main characters who plot the events are the

¹¹ As we know, Iranian kings were assumed to be endowed with the divine royal glory (*farr*) and to be human representatives of Mithra/Mehr on the earth (Amjad, interview, 733).

¹² The play was actually written in 1976 but the first date of publication registered for it in Iran National Library is 1998 about twelve years after Saedi's death in Paris, when Iran was experiencing the less radical more liberal cabinet of Rafsanjani, which was a bit less strict with nationalist literature.

cook, Zahhak himself and Jamshid. However, this play was a step towards depicting female characters in the story of Zahhak. In the literature that is collected and among those that I had access to and the plays staged in Tehran, there was no version of the legend of Zahhak in which the women in the story had any prominent role.

In 2003 finally Beyzaie wrote and staged an adaptation of this story, called *The Thousand and First Night*, which had a completely different look at the story of Zahhak. In spite of the title, the play is not a rereading of the famous *One Thousand and One Nights*, but a play about its history and roots (Samini 2013) which follows the strategies of narration used by Shahrzad and Donyazad in *The One Thousand and One Nights*. It imitates the labyrinth of narration or the “narrative within narrative” style of the *One Thousand and One Nights* (Samini, 2013).

The play is composed of three episodes and in each episode two women play the main roles; the scenes follow a sort of a chronological order. The first scene which is the one I will be exploring in this study, is a rereading of the story of Zahhak in which Shahrnaz and Arnavaz are the major plotters of the downfall of Zahhak; the story of this scene happens at the time of the Zahhak story in *The Shahnameh*, that is, in the same mythological time that *The Shahnameh* uses. In his book *Where is The Thousand Tales?* (2013), Beyzaei himself connects the characters of Shahrnaz and Arnavaz to Shahrzad and Dinazad¹³ of *The One Thousand and One Nights*. In both versions, he argues, they try and save a nation; in the first through saving one woman every night, and in the second by saving a young man. The second scene happens in the time of the Arab conquest, when two women are trying to save the Persian version of the book called *The Thousand Tales* (*Hezar Afsan* in Persian) from the Arab ruler while the translator of the book from Persian to Arabic, who is husband to one of the

¹³ In her book *Liberating Shahrzad*, Susan Gauch says that without Dinazad’s presence Shahrzad would never be able to “deploy the power of her stories” her presence “legitimizes” Shahrzad’s voice. Arnavaz plays the same role in *The Thousand and First Night* and although I do not separate them in here, in the play Shahrnaz refers to her sister as the performer of her stories. Nevertheless, Arnavaz and Dinazad are as much under the threat of being killed by the kings as their sisters are and their presence carries the same weight (2007, p. 81).

women and brother to the other is tortured and killed in the prisons of the Caliphs in Baghdad. The third scene is happening in a more modern Iran where the two women are trying to educate a man about the right of women to education¹⁴. As said before the first scene of this play is an adaptation of the canonized version of the legend of Zahhak in *The Shahnameh*. I will go into more detail in the next two chapters.

Beyzaie, *Azhdahak* and *The Thousand and First Night*

Bahram Beyzaei is one of the most distinguished playwrights in Iran and a prominent researcher in the field of the theatre, both modern and traditional play writing. His *Theater in Iran* was the only available published source on the history of theater in Iran for a long time and was and still is taught at universities inside Iran. Beyzaie is well known for his exceptional skill in merging myths and ancient tales with modern and contemporary discourses (Amjad, 2013; Samini, 2013).

Some of Beyzaei's famous plays are based on stories from *The Shahnameh*. He does not simply turn the epic characters into refined characters suitable for drama, nor does he content himself to writing dialogues for personages of *The Shahnameh*. He goes beyond these in his works and instead of rewriting the stories he writes, in his own words, "the unwritten parts of *The Shahnameh*" (Amjad, 2013, p. 722). It is thus that he manages to recreate the voices and the characters that are ignored or marginalized in *The Shahnameh*.

Among the marginalized voices of course are the voices of women. In an interview with Amjad, Beyzaie argues that *The Shahnameh* like its preceding works, ignores the role of women and women are used in this book only to highlight the male heroes and their abilities. He considers the roles, characters and dialogues of women among the "unwritten parts" of *The Shahnameh* which he

¹⁴ The play has been translated to English by Saeed Talajooy but has not been published yet.

endeavors to write (Amjad, 2013, p. 728). Beyzaie marks two particularly important instances in *The Shahnameh* where the flow of the story is cut when it comes to women being captivated by a new king. Once in the story of the hero Jamasp and another time in the tale of the monster king Zahhak. In both instances *The Shahnameh* prefers to keep silent where it comes to women suffering. Their account of their nights and days of staying as slaves is removed and replaced immediately by the account of heroes and their wars (Beyzaei, 2013, p. 198).

In *Where is The Thousand Tales?*, Beyzaie argues that *The Shahnameh* ignores female suffering because it is a book which recounts heroic acts. The account of women and their suffering appearing in such a book would only cause “shame” to the hero and his heroic spirit and it is this feeling of shame that has convinced the writer(s) to delete these parts from the stories or present women as if they willingly submit to the conqueror (Beyzaei, 2013, p. 200). In other words, heroic deeds could not be considered as grand if the hero ignored a woman’s suffering. So the stories were twisted, and the women were silenced, in order for the male heroes’ achievements to stay justified and admired. However, In writing the unwritten parts of *The Shahnameh*, and in offering women the position of the protagonists, Beyzaie has created heroes out of Shahrnaz and Arnavaz the women of the legend of Zahhak.

Apart from writing two adaptations on the story of Zahhak, Beyzaie has delivered lectures and published research on the history and the roots of the tale and particularly on the female characters of the story which he connects to Shahrzad and Dinazad of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. In *Where Is The Thousand Tales?* (2013), Beyzaie presents the result of many years of research on *The One Thousand and One Nights* or *Hezar Afsan* [*The Thousand Tales*]. He presents historical documents which prove that before *The One Thousand and One Nights* was translated into Arabic, it was a Persian tale

entitled *Hezar Afsan*. In his interview with Amjad, he considers Zakhak as one of the possible folklore sources for *Hezar Afsan*.

I am not in a position to evaluate a researcher's study on the legend of Zakhak and its connection with *One Thousand and One Nights*, nor is this the subject of this study. What I am partly concerned with in this study is what implications this connection can have for the feminist reading of the play *The Thousand and First Night* that I am foregrounding as the main perspective here. As Samini puts it rightly "*One Thousand and One Nights* is a book in which narration equals life; and the absence of narration results in death" (2013, p. 740); Susan Gauch also refers to Shahrzad as the resisting political face¹⁵. The fact that Beyzaie considers the narrators, the storytellers, the saviors as female is a significant subversion in roles.

In *The Shahnameh* version of Zakhak tale, two cooks manage to enter the king's kitchen. From the two young men whose brains are to be fed to Zakhak's snakes, they save one and send him away, and mix the brain of the other with that of a sheep and serve to Zakhak's snakes. In *The Thousand Tales*, Shahrzad and her sister Dinazad save one woman every night at the risk of their own lives. As Beyzaie states in an interview with Amjad, rather than the brain, "it is the product of Shahrzad's brain- [one story for every night]- that alleviates the pain and resentment of the king every night" (Amjad, 735). In the same interview, Beyzaie considers "cooking the mind of an inexperienced and raw man of power"¹⁶ (p.735), that is, Shahrzad in *One Thousand and One Nights*, a euphemistic transformation of the cooking of the brains in the story of Zakhak.

In *Where is the Thousand Tales* Beyzaie goes a step further and not only connects the two male cooks of *The Shahnameh* version of Zakhak story to Shahrzad and Donyazad but also argues that these two

¹⁵ It should be noted of course that in her book Susan Gauch considers Shahrzad as belonging to the Arab Middle Ages; nevertheless the role of Shahrzad as "a voice for presumably silent women" in cinema and literature is also what she emphasizes (p.6).

¹⁶ My translation

cooks who are presented as male in *The Shahnameh* were female in earlier versions. The two cooks, like the two women, stay in the shadows and are not talked about. They do not go further than the kitchen. Although not said, or written anywhere, it seems like the cooks are in some unity with Shahrnaz and Arnavaz and they try to bring about freedom. So according to Beyzaie in some earlier version the cooks and the women were actually one and the same.

Beyzaie reminds us with evidence that there are many instances of gender change in ancient tales and it is conceivable for *The Shahnameh* as a male centered epic to have changed the gender of the women who came to of Zakhak's court as the cooks, and later plotted his downfall, from female to male (2013, p.152). What is of significance in the complex web that Beyzaie weaves with the help of historical documents and literary texts, is that the connection between *The Thousand and One Nights'* women Shahrzad and Dinazad, the cooks and the female characters of Zakhak legend enables him to not only give voices to Shahrnaz and Arnavaz who are silenced in *The Shahnameh* but also renders them with the important role of storytellers whose significance in the feminist perspective of this study will be discussed in the following chapter.

However, Shahrnaz and Arnavaz in the Zakhak story are not the only characters in this tale who are given voice and prominence in Beyzaie's work *The Thousand and First Night*. As mentioned before Beyzaie has written another play on the tale of the monster king Zakhak. In *Azhdahak*, there are no women present. However, in this play, Beyzaie speaks for the demon king himself. We see the story from the stand point of Zakhak this time who is not a tyrant any more but himself a victim of tyranny.

I believe, even though *Azhdahak* is written chronologically earlier than *The Thousand and First Night*, yet seating the two plays together and studying the role of women and the monster together in these two plays can reveal certain points. Even though both plays have been individually studied before,

their juxtaposition in terms of their success in vocalizing the initially and traditionally marginalized characters is a new perspective offered in this study. In this juxtaposition one might be able to claim that, arguably, the plot of *One Thousand and One Nights* or the master plot of *The Thousand Tales*, where Shahrzad manages to eventually change the king's mind through her storytelling skills, is what governs these two plays. In the 60s when Beyzaie wrote *Azhdabak*, the issue of women was not yet a topic which troubled him, but later he found out that women's suffering is also an unwritten part in *The Shahnameh*. I will discuss this point by the end of the third chapter. Beyzaie's works have performative aspects as well and since they are written on *The Shahnameh*, I believe that they can be connected to the Iranian traditional performance of the so called Naghali or dramatic storytelling which has long been associated with Ferdowsi's book. I will explain the art of Naghali in more detail later.

Beyzaie, Naghali and Women Naghals¹⁷

A lot has been written about Naghali although it is a practice which is on the verge of disappearance, at least from the public arena where it was born and where it belonged. In his *Theater in Iran*, Beyzaie defines the tradition of Naghali as generally "the narration/ recitation of an event or a story, in poetry or in prose, accompanied with movements, gestures and proper eloquence before an audience." He adds that "The movements and inspiring theatrical gestures of the Naghal help the audience see him as impersonating the characters of the story (p. 65)".

The oldest document on Naghali after Islam entered Iran is one written by an Ibn Nadim in which he refers to the time of the Sassanid and also to Alexander who kept the tradition of oral story telling. Among the sources which were recited, Ibn Nadim refers to *The Thousand Tales* which, as

¹⁷ In Persian, Naghali with an "i" in the end is the art of dramatic storytelling and Naghal without the "i", is the person/ the storyteller who performs this art.

already mentioned, Beyzaie has referred to as the older version of *One Thousand and One Nights* (Mahjoob, 1991).

On how *The Shahnameh* came to be associated with storytelling and particularly with the art of Naghali which was generally used for recitation of any legend and existed long before *The Shahnameh*, Beyzaie (2012) says that when the movement against Arabic language, the language of power, was encouraged by the Samanid in Ferdowsi's time, Naghals were motivated to recite tales from the ancient Iran which could defy the Arab rulers and the Arabic language; among the sources they had available *The Shahnameh* was a proper one because it was a collection of tales of kings of ancient Persia before Islam and thus before Arab rulers and was written in Farsi and not in Arabic.

Whether this point of origin is exact or not does not concern this study; what concerns this study is that since the beginning of the Constitutional era, in the revival of nationalist tendencies, Naghali had already been established as an entertaining art associated with *The Shahnameh* which brought the complex verses and complicated poetic language of the book among the public and with the help of the dramatic performance of the Naghals made the stories of *The Shahnameh* accessible to lay people as well as the more educated. In fact since the Safavid time (1501 to 1722) public places had become the space for performing Naghali (Mahjoob, 1991). In the beginning of the twentieth century it was mostly the coffee houses where the Naghals would perform the stories of *The Shahnameh*. The “modern” Naghals were so much merged with the coffee houses that as Mahjoob says “it is impossible to imagine a Naghal without a coffee house where he ends his story one day only to start it the next” (1991, p. 197).

It is not difficult to imagine that coffee houses were places where men gathered to spend their time after work and to socialize and to update one another on the news. As Mary Ellen Page (1979) observed in the seventies when Naghali was still in practice the audience could reach two hundred.

But it is equally easy to understand that in such places women were not welcome. In fact still nowadays coffee houses in Tehran are not very welcoming to women even though they do not openly refuse them. It is, thus, no surprise that the art of Naghali should have remained in men's possession for long.

However, the threat of disappearance of this art, in spite of being unfortunate, has probably been a point of blessing as well. In light of this threat to Naghali in recent years Naghali has been the focus of more attention, and has been considered as an art rather than a popular performance for the audience in coffee houses, places which themselves are disappearing due to the appearance of televisions, radio, internet and all the media.

Even though this recent change has affected the environment and the atmosphere in which Naghali developed, thus taking away many of the elements previously associated with it, it has also opened new possibilities with new media. At the same time it has given way to academic studies which has resulted in articles and theses in art departments of universities; on the whole one can say that Naghali has been viewed recently from a more artistic and academic angle. In my opinion, this tendency has paved the way for women to enter the realm not as performers- at least not in the beginning -but rather as researchers and artists and later as performers and Naghals as well.

However, the question is what this physical presence of a woman Naghal in already male dominated spaces can offer to a feminist reading of *The Shahnameh* or for that matter a feminist analysis of the plays by Beyzaie written on *The Shahnameh*. In her trip to Iran in the 70s, Mary-ellen Page observed an interesting point about the tradition of Naghali. She noticed that even though these performances were based on *The Shahnameh* and are perceived by the audience as tales from *The Shahnameh*, they are in fact based on what is called a "tumar" or -as translated in English- "scroll" written by the Naghal himself. Interestingly this "tumar" was not more than a page which was an outline of the story and

the details of the performance actually depended on the storyteller and his art of Naghali. Even more interestingly, she observed that the “tumar” allowed the Naghal “a great deal of variation” (1979, p. 201) which allowed some stories to be entirely different from the account presented in *The Shahnameh*. She has recounted examples where in fact, the Naghal re-created his own version of the story which is only ascribed to *The Shahnameh*. This puts forward the possibility for each individual Naghal to have his own version of the stories of *The Book of Kings*. One can, but, easily observe the enormous potential of change that Naghali thus offers the Naghal. It might, arguably, be said that Beyzaie has, in a way, written his own “tumar” on the story of Zahhak.

In light of this particular kind of dramatic performance associated with a male dominated nationalist epic as *The Shahnameh*- which as earlier observed, ignores women and their sufferings- can Naghali thus open a window to change? Can we consider the plays written by Beyzaie as his “tumars” and can we consider him as a Naghal? What if his plays are performed in the manner of Naghali by one female performer similar to the way *The Shahnameh* is performed by a solitary storyteller or Naghal? Can we call that woman performer a Naghal? If so, how does this modern Naghali performed on a modern text /“tumar” bring forward a feminist reading? Even though this is a very broad question indeed which requires an entirely separate study of its own, yet I intend to attend to it very briefly in this study more in the hope of creating an incentive for myself or any other reader or researcher for some further studies later.

The idea occurred to me when I saw a solo dramatic performance by an Iranian actress in March 2013 not of *The Shahnameh* or of the story of Zahhak, but of the first scene of *The Thousand and First Night* by Bahram Beyzaie. Parallel to this short performance I stumbled upon a young female Naghali master who is the first official female Naghal in Iran. She performs the stories of *The Shahnameh* on the “tumar”s written either by herself or the masters she has learned the art from.

Later in this study I will briefly discuss the similarities and difference between these performances of the modern readings of *The Shahnameh* and of *The Shahnameh* itself by two different women; one a professional actress and one a traditional Naghal. I will attempt to explore how these performances can also offer a feminist reading of the texts.

Chapter Two: Elements of Subversion: *The Thousand and First*

Night vs. Zahhak

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the three ends of a triangle which I believe can help understand how Beyzaie has managed to verbalize the women in the story of Zahhak, and to give voice to the monster king himself. These three angles are *The Shahnameh*, on which his two plays, discussed in this study, are based, the art of Naghali, which comprises the basis of the performative aspect to his plays as well as that of *The Shahnameh*, and lastly the master plot of *The Thousand Tales*¹⁸. As discussed before, in my opinion, similar to a Naghal, Beyzaie has written his own “tumar” [scroll] of *The Shahnameh*-version of the Zahhak story. In so doing he has drawn on the master plot of *The Thousand Tales* in which two female storytellers manage to bring about fundamental change to the character of the king who has set to sleep with one woman every night and kill her in the morning. Beyzaie has used the master plot to his benefit. In making a connection between the mostly male centered Zahhak story in *The Shahnameh*, and *The Thousand Tales* whose plot is based on the creative power of female storytellers he has managed to bring female voice back to the story¹⁹ in his play *The Thousand and First Night*.

¹⁸ It is of course to be remembered that the master plot of *The Thousand Tales* or (in Persian) *Hezar Afsan* is the same as that of *The One Thousand and One Nights*. There are two women who manage to transform the cruelty in a king through storytelling and thus to save a nation. It is also to be noted that Arnavaz is modelled on Dinazad or the second woman/sister who is not the main narrator but an assistant to the narrator. In this play Arnavaz is more the performer of Sharnaz’s stories. Hereafter I am only using the title *The Thousand Tales* here simply because, as discussed earlier, Beyzaie considers this tale to be the basis and an older version of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

¹⁹ I use “bring back” because as explained in the first chapter, Beyzaie believes the Zahhak story to be the older version of *The Thousand Tales* and for that matter the older version of *One Thousand and One Nights*. However, the version appearing in *The Shahnameh*, he argues, has observed the usual strategies of nationalist epics and thus has altered the gender of the female story tellers who save a woman every night to male cooks who save a man every day.

However, in the first scene of *The Thousand and First Night*- which is based on the story of Zakhak- unlike *The Thousand Tales*, the king does not undergo any change in character. By the end of this scene the monster king Zakhak, unlike the Shahryar of *The Thousand Tales*, is almost as malicious and vicious as he was in the beginning in spite of the efforts of the story tellers Shahrnaz and Arnavaz. If one studies all the three scenes in this play, however, one will find out that in the third scene the male character in that particular scene *does* change indeed in response to the efforts of his educated wife. Nonetheless, as explained in chapter one, my intention in this study is to focus on the story of Zakhak. Apart from the first scene, the next two scenes of *The Thousand and First Night* are not dealing directly with this particular legend. They are happening in different time periods from the first scene and have totally different characters from the story of Zakhak. I therefore chose to limit myself to the examination of the first scene of this play studying it along with Beyzaie's other play on Zakhak, *Azhdabak*, which can provide me with the opportunity to focus on the story of Zakhak and his transformation. Thus, from here on I will refer to the first scene of *The Thousand and First Night* as *The Thousand and First Night* only to facilitate reading and writing about it. After dealing with *The Thousand and First Night* in this chapter I will move to see how the master plot of *The Thousand Tales* has been used for the vocalization of women and the subversion of the notion of monster as an evil begetting entity and eventually to the change in the character of the monster king.

In this comparison between *The Thousand and First Night* and *The Shahnameh* version of Zakhak legend, I will try to discover what grounds the play offers for a feminist interpretation which can bring to surface the parts uncovered by *The Shahnameh* due to its more traditional, patriarchal readings as an epic with nationalist inclinations.

Epic versus Drama

The first remarkable change between the story appearing in *The Shahnameh* and *The Thousand and First Night*, which helps the understanding of how the play succeeds in giving voice to the marginalized, is the transformation of genres from the epic version of Zakhak in *The Shahnameh* to the dramatic form of *The Thousand and First Night*. This change in genres, in my opinion, has facilitated the possibility of a different reading.

According to Walter Benjamin (1977) epic and drama are forms of storytelling²⁰; that is, they both originated in an oral tradition. This, in my opinion, creates the inherent potential - in both genres - for the existence of individual “voice”. However, the question is whose voice in each of these two genres is used to tell the same tale? In changing from epic to drama, the story changes point of view from an omniscient ever glorious storyteller whose focus is on wars and heroes on the epic scale, to characters who talk for themselves in the genre of drama whose basis is the dialogue and where epic events and heroic actions do not have central importance. As Keith Sanger (2001) states, drama puts words in the mouths of the characters and thus gives them the power to speak. Unlike the epic heroes who follow a predestined line of heroic tales based on ever older versions, the drama characters are endowed with the ability to think and to decide for themselves; drama provides them with agency; in other words, the supernatural scale and events of epic changes to more realistic characters and events in drama (Sanger, 2001).

It is this potentiality of drama that Beyzaie has used as a tool to give voice to the silenced characters of *The Shahnameh*. Among the marginalized characters in the classic tale there are two women, two sisters, Shahnaz and Arnavaz, the daughters of the previous king of Iran who is killed by Zakhak. After killing their father, Zakhak, the monster king, marries both sisters and thus earns himself legitimacy to the throne (Beyzaie, 2013). These two women have almost no say in the old tale. Apart from the two instances when they are referred to by Ferdowsi and once when they advise Zakhak

²⁰ See also Todorov’s article on genres (1976) and *Language of Drama* (2001).

regarding his nightmare, they are not only almost non-existent in the old legend, but even in those few scenes that they do appear, they are held accomplice to the monster king's crimes. My statement here, though, is not to prove that Beyzaie has only given voice to these two women of the classic legend in his modern adaptation *The Thousand and First Night* since he obviously has done so. I would like to study the weight these voices give the story in altering the nationalist patriarchal narrative of *The Shahnameh* and opening a perspective for a feminist reading.

In the article on genres, Todorov and Berrong mention that “[g]enres, like any other institution, reveal the constitutive traits of the society to which they belong” (1976, p. 163). As discussed in the first chapter the epic characteristics were those which were in the spot light in the beginning of the twentieth century when the Constitutional era urged for more nationalist voices in the media while the modern Iran was being formed. But how does Beyzaie use the possibilities of drama as a genre to reveal the constitutive traits of the time in which he is writing his version of the legend, approximately a hundred years after the Constitutional revolution?

Whereas drama endows characters with agency, epic gives voice to heroic actions performed only by heroes at the expense of marginalizing certain characters and silencing certain voices. Drama has no such claims; it thus can restore the unheard voices back on the stage. It consequently creates “real person” as against the “larger than life” heroes of the epic²¹. According to Downes (1988) “A real person is a theoretical entity for his interpreters, to which they assign those intentions that make sense of what he does. A character in drama is an analogy of a person and is interpreted in the same way (quoted in (Bennison, 1998, p. 68)). As Downes suggests, characterization “involves the manifestation of inner states, desires, motives, intentions, beliefs through action, including speech acts”.

²¹Regarding the thousand years of Zakhak's and before that Jamshid and later the hero Fereydun who all live long lives based on Northrop Fry's categorizing of characters, they are among mythical characters since they are superior men in “kind” (Frye & Denham, 1957, pp. 33-34)

Considering this, the choice of drama for the reconstruction of the story of Zakhak seems to have been a suitable tool to bring women back to the story of Zakhak and endow them with agency. In writing the play, Beyzaie has created “real person[s]” out of the marginalized characters in the epic, and the tool of drama has enabled him to give individual voices to the “inner states, desires, motives” of the characters that were not given space to talk in the epic.

In the Zakhak legend in *The Shahnameh* there are several occasions in which women could have been given voice but it rarely happens that they talk. Two important instances which Beyzaie points out in his interview (2013) as well are firstly when Zakhak attacks Iran, conquers the throne of Jamshid and marries his two daughters; secondly, when Fereydun, the Iranian hero, defeats Zakhak, recaptures the throne and similarly to Zakhak, marries the two daughters of Jamshid. As Beyzaie points out when one reaches these parts of the story, one only naturally expects, in both instances, for women to start recounting the stories of their time passed in slavery: the days and nights spent with men whom they did not choose to wed but to whose bed they were forced. But in both instances the story is cut short right then, the women are left with no lines to speak and the reader with no knowledge of what happens to these women.

Shahrnaz and Arnavaz; the Storytellers

The Thousand and First Night begins with Shahrnaz’s voice who is asking her sister to help her finish the series of stories they have been recounting to the uncouth ears of their husband, the monster king Zakhak who has been put to sleep for one thousand nights by these stories of his seemingly obedient wives. However, the story of the thousand and first night seems strangely unfamiliar to Zakhak’s ears and moreover, even though this tale, his wives promise, is going to be about him, to his surprise, it has not been carved “into the mountains” as it is customary of Zakhak and the kings before him to have always carved the history of their victories in the mountains (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 9).

At this point in the play one cannot help but see that the play is going to introduce a version of a story which was not carved in the, arguably, patriarchal mountains of a nationalist epic familiar to most ears and particularly maneuvered upon since the beginning of the twentieth century. The play is going to present the audience with a story previously hidden in the dark corners of *The Shahnameh* and presently recounted through Shahrnaz and Arnavaz who are only reclaiming their already established roles as female story tellers in *The Thousand Tales* on which the fundamental plot of this play is based. Similar to *The Thousand Tales*, where Shahrzad and Dinazad were the storytellers, in *The Thousand and First Night* Shahrnaz and Arnavaz assume these roles.

In *The Shahnameh* Shahrnaz and Arnavaz are depicted as not capable of thinking or even deciding for themselves. They seem to be only capable of following Zakhak, the monster king, who has killed their father (the king of Iran) by cutting him in half with a saw. It is hard to believe, as Talajooy rightly puts, that these two women, who are princesses and are brought up in the court of Jamshid, who are capable of endowing legitimacy to Zakhak's rule over Iran and thus rendering him kingship, are so easily tricked by a monster king into being his accomplices in the crime of killing young men from their own country and feeding them to Zakhak's snakes (2013b, p. 702). *The Shahnameh* does away with this by simply claiming that they were under the spell of Zakhak.

Divine Excellence:

According to ancient sources such as Avesta, the ancient Zoroastrian scripture, The Divine Excellence or *Farr Izadi* is the supernatural authority bestowed to the kings of Iran. The Divine Excellence passes from one king to the next and provides them with the divine authority to rule the land. When Jamshid turns away from gods and is thus deprived of this heavenly gift because of his pride, it is not explicitly articulated in *The Shahnameh* if anybody else carries *farr* thereafter (Talajooy, 2013). However, Omidsalar (2003), in his article on the women of *Shahnameh*, and Talajooy, in his

article on Beyzaie's play, argue that the Divine Excellence is transferred to the daughters of Jamshid and that is precisely why not only Zakhak but also Fereydun, who overthrows Zakhak, marry these two women. It is through them that this divine authority is transmitted to the future kings and it is thus that the first thing that both Zakhak and Fereydun do after conquering the throne is to marry Shahrnaz and Arnavaz.

Unlike the Shahrnaz and Arnavaz in *The Shahnameh* who seem ignorant of this fact and who are said to marry Zakhak because they fall under his spell, in *The Thousand and First Night* the sisters are not only aware of their power, but agree to the marriage and to the transmission of *farr* willingly to Zakhak because they have a grand plot in mind. They leave their safe and secret hiding place and present themselves to the monster king to save the country and people and this they do in spite of the Grand Priest's advice and Arnavaz's worry that they will be judged by people as "partners of oppression" as they agree to surrender their own bodies to their enemy:

Arnavaz: Do you not heed my sister that if we are taken by force, we will be seen as one of the oppressed, and if we go willingly, as partners of oppression? (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 7)

They consent to this marriage knowing that they will be blamed by future generations for staining their and their father's name in sleeping with the enemy, yet they freely accept the consequences to prepare for the grand action:

Shahrnaz: Listen, my sister—if that beast becomes aware of our spite, and learns that we are seeking a way to flee, when we are caught by force, we will be at his mercy and the slaves of his suspicion. He will assign spies and interrogators to us and we will be helpless. So let him assume we are enthralled by him (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 9).

When in another instance, later, Shahrnaz reveals to Zakhak:

We became your wives to diminish the burden of your tyranny on the world, and tell you that there is also justice and bounty in the world (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 11),

we realize that the two women storytellers, now as drama characters, unlike the passive role they had in *The Shabanemb* are endowed with agency in that they act out their own “decisions and desires”. What is even more significant is that along with saving the country, they take this action in the hope that they might change this monster king, like Shahrzad and Dinazad of *The Thousand Tales*. Their decision and desire is not to kill the monster king but to change his tyrant personality. When Arnavaz asks, in frustration, “My sister, how is it possible to transform a demonic man who does not discern good from evil with a plan?” Shahrnaz answers: “With toil and resolution, my sister” (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 10). It is thus that the play reveals its fundamental plot as that of *The Thousand Tales*. The readers discover that they are facing two plots interwoven; the plot of Zakhak as it appeared in *The Shahnameh* and the plot of *The Thousand Tales*. One is thus curious to know if the king in this story, like the Shahryar of *The Thousand Tales*, will surrender to change. And if he does or does not what implications can it have for the women and the monster? In other words what significance can it have for a feminist subversive analysis of the play?

The Zakhak of the *The Thousand and First Night*, as said before, undergoes some change but not a great deal. The changes we observe here are completed in *Azhdahak*.

Brain vs Brain

Shahrnaz: We will deal with that. We use our female insight to put his magic to sleep; we will teach him humanity. (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 15).

The snakes grown on Zakhak’s shoulders bite his head if they are not fed the brains of two young men every night. The snakes are reported to have never asked for a female brain! In no version of

Zahhak story are they fed with female brains. Why are women's lives and brains spared? Do women have no brain according to *The Shahnameh*? Or are their brains not worthy of the monster king's body to be fed to his snakes? Or is the land deplete of women? Or is Zahhak too kind to women to be able to kill them to serve their brains to his snakes? And many other questions on why women are excluded have always occupied my mind when studying this story. *The Thousand and First Night* answers this question by deconstructing the meaning of "brain".

At some point in the play Shahrnaz says:

We will deal with that. We use our female insight to put his magic to sleep; we will teach him humanity. I will use my *brain* in place of the second youth. Each night I will make something up to distract him (p. 15)(Italic is mine).

Although Shahrnaz and Arnavaz's brains remain physically intact in the story both in *The Shahnameh* and in *The Thousand and First Night*, in the latter Shahrnaz is aware that her brain is being put into use to feed Zahhak's brain with stories which entertain him in order for one young man's life to be saved in the kitchen meanwhile. Every night while the sisters are busy telling stories and acting them out for Zahhak, they manage to divert the monster king's attention from the kitchen where one of the two young men, whose brains are supposed to be prepared for the snakes, is set free secretly, while the other brain is mixed with that of a sheep and, to make all these appear normal, the chef, following Shahrnaz's previous orders fakes a painful scream for the second man who is released secretly and sent away; as nights go by, these young men gather together and form an army against the monster king to overthrow him by the end of the play. All the while Shahrnaz is aware that unlike men's dead brains which are cooked and fed to keep Zahhak's snakes alive every night, her brain and her sister's are ever more alive. When she says "I will use my brain in place of the second

youth” she actually offers her creativity, her power of telling and producing stories to save a nation and to transform a man.

This is the grand plot for which they consent to the marriage and this is how the fundamental plot of *The Thousand Tales* functions here. Shahrnaz of *The Thousand and First Night*, like Shahrzad of *The Thousand Tales*, puts her life at risk to tell stories. Her creative power of storytelling does not only change the destiny of a nation and the cruelty in a man’s heart but it also alters the way the story of Zakhak has long been interpreted ignoring the presence of women and the possibility of a change in the monster.

The twist that the play gives to the epic poem, functions as if one has drawn the curtain off a scene and has managed to observe the back stage of a performed story. Women who had no voice in the traditional tale are actually the creators of the famous epic story whose actors are mainly men, villains and heroes both. In other words one could imagine that the legend that we have long read as the story of Zakhak in the epic poetry book of *The Shahnameh*, could actually be only what has been written and performed by men while women were the real directors and puppeteers behind the scene.

All in all, the drama of Zakhak by Beyzaie subverts at least three conventional notions. The role of women in *The Shahnameh* stories, particularly their role in the story of Zakhak, the traditional way of seeing *The Shahnameh* version of the story which has been abundantly used since the constitutional revolution for nationalist purposes and finally as we shall see in more details the monster king Zakhak, or more generally the notion of monster as an evil being. I will only briefly treat this topic in the following section.

Zahhak: How is the Villain Treated?

Even though women are treated in an entirely different manner in the two accounts of the Zahhak legend, yet the way the two works treat the monster king Zahhak is more or less the same. In both versions Zahhak is the villain of the story. In both, his snakes devour the male population of the land; in neither, does he feel any regret for what is happening and in neither does he change, apparently. Nevertheless, a more careful reading can shed light on darker corners which might have held some unexpected surprise. The few minor differences between the character of Zahhak in *The Shahnameh* and in Beyzaie's play might seem trivial but can go a long way.

In *The Shahnameh* Zahhak is referred to as a stranger, a foreigner who comes from the land of the Tazi or the Arabs. He is referred to by different titles as “the Arab monarch”, “the Arab” or assuming “the Arab crown”, and the Iranians tired of the tyranny of Jamshid go to seek him in Arabia. His Arab origins are referred to and emphasized in various instances in the epic poem. This is the one particular characteristic with which Zahhak has been referred to- as discussed at length in the first chapter- in the nationalist debates of the beginning of the twentieth century in Iran.

In *The Thousand and First Night*, however, he is referred to by Shahrnaz as a cousin; a cousin who is related to Shahrnaz and Arnavaz through his mother who was their aunt. Shahrnaz addresses him as “the son of my father's sister” (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 5). On another occasion Sharnaz talks more clearly about Zahhak's relation to themselves: “My kin, Zahhak, the son of Jamshid's sister from a foreigner” (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 12) and Arnavaz addresses him as: “Oh! My close kin, Zahhak, the son of my father's sister, say, did you not send night informers and day guards to seek us, for your own bed?” (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 8).

This difference, although trivial, can make an impact on the interpretation of the modern version. Readers who are already familiar with the traditional interpretation of the story do not expect Zahhak, the monstrous blood-thirsty Arab king, who is depleting Iran from its youth, to be in any

way related to Iran. But *The Thousand and First Night* claims that he is. He is not a foreigner and not only that, he is even a “close kin” and, in that respect, he is not anymore an outsider. He is one of what we might term as “us”. In this Zahhak resembles more the Shahryar of *The Thousand Tales*. In his research on *The Thousand Tales* Beyzaie confirms this resemblance by arguing that in the older versions of the story of Zahhak on which *The Thousand Tales* was also based, the dragon and the dragon slayer, the king and the killer were the same (2013). The Shahryar of *The Thousand Tales* with the help of the storyteller Shahrzad manages to bring to surface his better self.

The nationalist readings of the Zahhak story assume the monster king to be an Arab prince and the story of Zahhak as one of the instances when *The Shahnameh* is defending Persians against Arabs who attacked Iran and were a threat to the integrity of the country. *The Thousand and First Night* is not based on such an assumption. In *The Thousand and First Night* Zahhak is as much an Iranian king as Jamshid before him and Fereydun after him are; only he is a monster king what Jamshid and Fereydun are not. But it is precisely his monstrosity that is targeted by the storytellers. In *The Thousand and First Night*, unlike *The Shahnameh*, Zahhak is neither confronting Jamshid, nor Freydun, nor is he defeated by an army of young men at the door of his palace. He is facing two women, two female storytellers and it is to *their* stories that he surrenders; it is in their confrontation that the rereading of the myth happens. Shahrnaz and Arnavaz bring the monster home; they make the reader/audience see a monster who has long been seen as an intruder, an outsider, a foreigner, an Arab, as an insider, a king, a cousin, a kin an Iranian. It is in this way that the strangeness and foreignness of monstrosity turns into a familiar element which resides at home. Shahrnaz and Arnavaz not only meet this monster face to face but for the first time since the constitutional era, they even urge us to confront him. It is thus that this play can be a proper introduction to an entirely subverted concept of monstrosity in *Azhdabak*, the other play on Zahhak by Beyzaie.

An element which has often been ignored in analyzing Beyzaie's adaptation of Zakhak story is the existence of snakes and how their presence differs in the play from that of *The Shahnameh*. Even though I did not find any article to have noticed this point of divergence in the two versions of the tale of Zakhak, or in any other modern version of the text, yet to me the presence of snakes seems to be a significant step in understanding the change that the women manage to bring about in Zakhak's personality. This, of course, is a point which requires deeper study but a brief hint can help the focus of this section.

The snakes can be significant in several ways. They are the creatures whose addition to Zakhak's body has transformed him into a monster. They are the ones for whose sake Zakhak kills two young men every night. And among all the creatures that they could have been, they are snakes with all the implications of snakes. On the phallic symbolism of the snakes, and the three ce-phal-lic monster symbol of excessive masculinity- which is not the concern of this study- both Omidsalar (2003) and Beyzaei (2013) have already written a few pages although I believe this topic requires deeper and more extensive research; enough for me to say here that the snakes can be studied from several different perspectives.

I am going to study them from an entirely different angle as those mentioned above; I am going to regard them as agents of change and transformation of the monster king. A careful reading would depict that *The Shahnameh* treats the snakes in an almost similar manner to the way it treats women; that is, it simply ignores them. They are not given any voice; they are not affected by any outside stimuli; they do not respond to anything but eating or not eating the brains of men, an act which can calm or enrage them:

Each night two youths of high or lowly birth/ Were taken to the palace by the cook, Who having slaughtered them took out their brains/ To feed the snakes and ease the monarch's anguish (Warner & Warner, 1905, p. 146)

In *The Thousand and First Night*, though, there are several occasions when the snakes seem to be given personality or even agency. The first time we notice Shahrnaz and Arnavaz talking about the snakes is when they wake Zakhak up and Shahrnaz calms Arnavaz by telling her not to worry; the snakes are asleep:

Arnavaz: I have butterflies in my stomach—no—my heart is leaping!

Shahrnaz: The snakes are sleeping. Arnavaz—and we're awake. Come—you are his wife! (p. 3)

From this fearful approach, however, we are moved through the play noticing that the wives of Zakhak have somehow bonded with the snakes. In a scene where Zakhak is boasting about going to bed with the two beautiful “silver bodied” sisters not knowing which to choose to benefit the most, Shahrnaz surprises Zakhak by saying that it was not him who was sleeping with them but actually his snakes:

Shahrnaz: You did not get the most out of it, Zakhak, your snakes did. ...When you slept, your snakes kept eyeing me or ogling the pure body of my sister! It was so that we thought they might sting to get rid of you, Zakhak.(p. 17)

And Arnavaz adds: “Every night when you fell asleep, your snakes embraced us.” (p. 17)

Further, they tell Zakhak that “their venom turned into honey in our palates.” Although the reader tends to read this as one of Shahrnaz’s clever tricks to arouse jealousy in Zakhak towards his snakes and thus to benefit from this disintegration in his personality, yet towards the end of the play we

observe that there might be some truth in what she says, and that the two sisters have gone much further in their plans than even we readers seem to have noticed.

Zahhak: [Ordering the snakes.] Now is the time, the time for retribution! Turn them into ash! Ashes under my feet! But I already see myself mourning in despair in the ashes of the fire that burns these two beauties. [Confused.] My snakes, what is wrong with you? [Terrified.] Why do they not obey me? (Beyzaei, 2003, p. 18)

The human-like behavior of the snakes in this scene frightens Zahhak. Their intentional disobedience stands against the fact that they are extensions of his body. He expects them to obey his order just like his hands and legs do but they seem to have grown into independent personalities who have preferences of their own. They *prefer* to obey Shahrnaz and Arnavaz and not the body to which they apparently belong; they seem to be in possession of “decision and desire” just like any other drama character.

The turning point comes when the snakes eventually refuse to let Zahhak kill his wives. This scene asserts the snakes’ presence in *The Thousand and First Night* as different from their almost non-presence in *The Shahnameh*. In this scene which is also the last scene this adaptation of the legend, Zahhak who realizes his time has come and that his palace is surrounded by an army of the young men who are now back to take revenge on him, decides to kill the sisters. What happens demonstrates the fact that the sisters were not entirely playing tricks when they told Zahhak that his snakes were in love with them.

Zahhak: [Snatching his sword.] I will not say it when killing you! You who brought a thousand and one children for capturing me! [His hands fall back/ are drawn back.] Oh— why does my magic have no effect on you? Did you really allure and trick my snakes? Yes, I

should be afraid of my own snakes because though they were once with me, they are no longer so! (p. 21)

The snakes decide not to allow Zakhak to kill the women. In effect, they decide *for* Zakhak, they possess Zakhak and manipulate him. They, once again, show human attributes. They save the women. The complexity of the image that we face in the body of Zakhak is interesting. His monstrous body seems to be on the verge of transformation. The snakes which are extensions of his own body and elements of his monstrosity simultaneously belong to and disown him. By the end of the play, unlike the Zakhak of *The Shahnameh* whose character stays almost the same as when the story began, his snakes seem to have undergone a change which has provided them with agency. But can one separate the snakes from the body to which the snakes belong? If Zakhak's snakes are changed what can this tell the audience about Zakhak himself?

The snakes have listened to Shahrnaz and Arnavaz's stories for one thousand nights. They seem by the end of the play not only to be in love with these two women but to be willing and able to protect them from the monster king. What has the transforming power of storytelling and creativity of the storytellers done to these creatures? At the very least it seems to have endowed them with an awareness which resembles human beings

The transformation of snakes is a proof that Beyzaie's female characters have done more than only plotting the downfall of the villain of the story. They seem to have been capable of getting through to him by taming his snakes. In *Where Is The Thousand Takes?* Beyzaie writes:

Undoubtedly, in basic mythology of ancient rituals, where the dragon and the hero stood against each other and slavery and freedom were clearly divided and followed each other, each of the two fell in a separate space. However, in the basic legend of *The Thousand Tales* where the king who rules the land is the same person who destroyed it and slavery and

fertility and reproduction happen at the same time, the legends which end in slaying the dragon are merged with those which are in praise of wisdom and love and they cannot be separated (2013, p.192).

Similarly, in this version of the story the dragon and the dragon slayer cannot be separated as black and white. In other words, if the snakes seem to have changed, there can be some hope that Zakhak himself has undergone some change as well. It can thus be argued that Zakhak, the monster king, is not depicted all together as evil because even though he appears to be a flat character, his snakes seem to be dynamic in that they have come to possess human attributes through listening to stories of Shahrnaz and Arnavaz. The perplexity that Zakhak faces in the end of this scene in terms of not knowing himself from his snakes, can be marked as the beginning of a change manifesting itself through questioning the separation of his own self from his snakes.

However, to see more of metamorphosis in Zakhak which can as well subvert the traditional meaning of monstrosity, *Az̄hedehak*, offers a step further. It suggests listening to Zakhak's story as told by himself not by an omniscient story teller not even by his wives. The next chapter will deal with this version of the story.

The Performance: Naghali or Dramatic Storytelling

Under certain conditions, a story can be a more powerful critical force than a theoretical analysis (Disch, 1993, p. 665).

According to Walter Benjamin, in spite of their differences, epic and drama have something in common; they both descend from the oral tradition; they are both forms of storytelling (1977, p. 362). In Iran, theatre and dramatic art did not exist in the form they existed in the West and this was

mostly due to religious reasons (Beyzaei, 2012)²². According to Beyzaie, reciting stories (Ghavali) accompanied by music was a practice which existed before Islam; however, with the prohibition of music after Islam, the storytellers were left with plain stories, and thus to make their stories interesting to the audience they improved their art of storytelling by acting out the stories. This could not be undermining to religious laws in any ways and that is, very briefly, how Naghali came to be (Beyzaei, 2012). Needless to say this form of storytelling was an art exclusive to men since it was performed in the open space or in coffee houses were mostly men gathered to watch.

The first Naghali recorded in documents after Islam dates back to two hundred years after Islam entered Iran. By almost the same time, however, for reasons explained in the previous chapter this kind of dramatic performance began to be used for performing stories which were connected to ancient Iranian legends recounting the Persian kings before Islam.

The Shahnameh proved to be a comprehensive collection of stories about the ancient kings. The relationship was a mutual one; as *The Shahnameh* provided a source for storytellers, the art of dramatic storytelling or Naghali, in return, became the tool for the stories of *The Shahnameh* to be known first in the courts of the time where the entertainment was usually performed for the king and his circle. Naghali stayed mostly as a court entertainment until as mentioned in the previous chapter the Safavid dynasty came to throne. It was then that Naghali started to be performed in local coffee houses and thus accessible to people²³. Thus, even though dramatic arts did not develop much, on account of religious prohibitions, it can be argued that Naghali became the dramatic performance that joined epic and drama/modern theatre in Iran.

²² Hamid Amjad has an interesting article on two of Bahram Beyzaie's works in which he argues how Iranian dramatic art, unlike the Greek drama, has not been founded on dialogue but on monologue and that is why genres such as Naghali have developed which are essentially monologues and not dialogues (Amjad, 2007). This I believe, can be seen as much a lack as a privilege particularly in transmitting feminist readings of the text in performances; which of course requires a separate study.

²³ *The Shahnameh* mixed with stories of Shiite Imams was actually one of the ways to spread Shiism among people.

An important element in Naghali was the body of the Naghal. Clearly in the absence of music, voice played a prominent role; however, according to Beyzie, body was as important because it was through the movements of the body that this performance assumed a dramatic tone and differentiated itself from lectures and sermons (Beyzaei, 2012). Walter Benjamin points out the importance of the body in storytelling as well:

With these words, soul, eye, and hand are brought into connection. Interacting with one another, they determine a practice... Storytelling in its sensory aspect is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways its gestures trained by work. (Benjamin, 1977, p. 377)

In Naghali, too, the storyteller goes further than simply recounting the story; he does what Benjamin calls the coordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand and the words; in other words, he embodies the characters of the story by not only using his voice but his body as well. Thus, one of the differences between Naghali and a play performed on the stage is that Naghali is a solo act of storytelling.

The performer or the Naghal, would speak for all characters of the particular legend of his choice from *The Shahnameh*. Apart from the body movements, he would accompany his performance with paintings of the book which could be painted on the wall of the coffee house or on huge pieces of cloths or he could simply act them out using no props. Coffee houses provided Naghali with another function as well; an event for socializing. It brought people together to not only watch and listen to but afterwards talk about and maybe imitate the ways of the kings and of the heroes as well as the enemies of their home land.

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the performance of a Naghal, at least in the twentieth century, does not follow the exact verses of *The Shahnameh* (Page, 1979). Every Naghal (storyteller)

writes down his own scroll or ““tumar”” on the basis of which he performs. In this “tumar” which is not more than a page or two, the Naghal includes observations which are not referred to in *The Shahnameh*. Page (1979) says that in this role the Naghal is more or less a teacher and a master as well who does not only perform the verses of *The Shahnameh*, but in some cases freely changes the stories or “corrects” what he considers as “unjust” or advises the hero of the tale to do differently, or points out the errors that the hero commits. The changes are sometimes fundamental and affect the entire plot of the tale which appeared in *The Shahnameh*. In so doing the Naghal always considers the “needs” of the audience and what he perceives his audience would enjoy listening to.

Almost all the conditions in which Naghali is performed prohibits women from entering its domain as performers even sometimes as audience. If the performance took place in the space outside there could be women and children among the audience but a coffee house has never been a friendly space for women. A coffee house is a male dominated space where men usually gather to drink and smoke and joke and rest and then go home to their wives and children. A woman’s presence in a traditional coffee house even in a modern Tehran in some particular quarters of the city can still be frowned upon. Not only the space but also the focus on the body and the voice, the gestures, the rash movements, the threatening shouts of the Naghal impersonating warriors, villains, and drunkards requires a male body which is permitted to move freely and is not chained by limitations defined for a female body in a social male dominated religious space, that is, most probably in a coffee house somewhere in an Islamic Iran. Above all, Naghal occupies a position of power; as already said, the position not only of the storyteller and story performer, but also as a teacher, an advisor, a master, a leader who teaches life lessons to the audience, corrects the errors and leads them to the right path. Can a patriarchal society accept a female body in such a powerful position?

Beyzaie argues that the oldest storytellers have always been female (2013). *The Thousand Tales*, which Beyzaie claims to be the older version of *The Thousand and One Nights* and a variation of an older Zakhak story, features Shahrzad and her sister as storytellers, teachers and advisors and finally as transformers, the very roles that modern women are prohibited from in Naghali. The women of *The Thousand and First Night* reclaim this position for the legend of Zakhak; Shahrnaz the storyteller, and Arnavaz the performer create, perform and transform.

So, what if a female body, with all the limitations imposed on her in modern Iran, occupies the apparently invincible male space of Naghali? What feminist implications can it have? Will this female Naghal be simply repeating the patriarchal notions already present in *The Shahnameh*, or will she in spite of (or maybe on account of) the limitations offer the audience a feminist ““tumar””, this time, both written and performed by a woman?

Mojdeh Shamsaei: The Actress, the Sisters, the Wives, the Snake-man, or the Storyteller?

Even though the practice of Naghali, in its traditional form, has almost died out from its public space due to cultural and political reasons referred to in the previous chapter, it has gradually come to be known as a cultural heritage more or less. There is still a long way for this art to be known among the educated and a lot can still be written on it; nevertheless, in academia art and humanities students have started to be attracted to this performance.

It was through this medium, that is, the academia, that Fatemeh Habibzadi came to know the art of Naghali, started research on it and finally became the first publically announced female Naghal in Iran who received her diploma from a master of nagahli- who was a man of course- and herself became the first female master in Naghali. There are of course several other famous female Naghals. I chose to write about Habibzadi because the short documentary broadcasted by BBC on her and

her work is accessible to everybody and this makes my argument here easier to grasp. Fatemeh Habibizadi has not only been given the title of Naghal, but also been given the nick name Gordafarid after one of the few female warriors of *The Shahnameh*. Learning the art of Naghali of course was not possible in any academic space when Habibizadi started her quest. Following the tradition, she had to go to several masters, who were all men, and ask them to accept her as their student and apprentice. Habibizadi's story is full of the hardships a woman can suffer as the only female student of Naghali who was rejected for long by many Naghali masters, also as a Naghal some of whose performances are still canceled by the government on account of her being a woman, or as a female researcher whose presence was frequently frowned upon in male dominated spaces where Naghali was performed.

Unlike Habibizadi, Mojdeh Shamsaie is an actress who, like many other female actresses, has learned her job at the university and has worked with famous directors; she has been one of the bests but has not been the only one in her job and has not faced the limitations that Habibizadi has gone through since in Iran women have no limitations in studying acting and becoming actresses. Although these two women have two different professions and thus their performances are placed under two different categories of professional acting and Naghali, in my opinion, a comparison between the two performances from a feminist perspective is possible and can lead us to learn that in spite of the differences both these women's performances can contribute a great deal to a feminist research.

As said before Shamsaie is not a traditional naghal, that is, she does not limit herself to solo performances of *The Shahnameh* stories, yet in March 2013 she performed a solo act of the first scene of *The Thousand and First Night* and I believe that her performance is very close to what we know as Naghali in several ways. Firstly, this performance is a one person show in which the actress/ the Naghal/ the storyteller benefits from her body and voice to embody all the characters of the play.

Secondly, the topic of the performance, as already described in this chapter, is related to *The Shahnameh* because it is a modern adaptation of the legend of Zakhak.

Even though these two women are performing two different versions of the Zakhak legend, their works, one quite directly, the other maybe more indirectly, connect them to a book of epic poetry which has been known, at least since the constitutional era, as associated with patriarchal and nationalist tendencies. In my opinion both of these women offer their own re-reading of texts which have been written by men in their performance.

The malleability of the art of Naghali, the potential it offers for change through the flexibility of “tumar”s written by Naghals themselves, the presence of a body which conquers the text; the significance of the solitary performer who not only impersonates all of the roles in the story through her corporeality, but also asserts herself as the storyteller and thus assumes the authority to the stage; the company of an audience who, watching a Naghali, are aware that they are not merely spectators of a show but are the addressee of a preacher, a teacher, an advisor- the role bestowed to the Naghal by the tradition of Naghali as discussed-; all of these factors I believe offer a powerful tool for women Naghals and storytellers of stories written by men to reclaim their position as Shahrzad of *The Thousand Tales*. When encountering these performances these stories if they are patriarchal- like *The Shahnameh*- would have to lay their claims at the feet of this overwhelming powerful female performance, and if not, they would joyfully these women reclaiming their position as storytellers.

Significant to my focus particularly in the next chapter, is that in impersonating the personages of both *The Thousand and First Night* and *The Shahnameh* version of Zakhak these two women naturally personify not only the female characters but also the male characters and in particular the monster king Zakhak. They use their voices, their hands, their bodies even though in different manners; Shamsaie sitting at a desk with the text spread before her and Habibizadi standing up right.

Habibizadi is presenting herself as a traditional Naghal, while Shamsaie is a modern actress who performs on stage; nevertheless, they both use the capabilities of their bodies and voices to impersonate all the characters of the text.

However, there are significant differences between the two performances as well which encourage a separate study of in an altogether distinct research from this one. It is worth paying attention to the differences between the two performances of the two texts before arriving to the common point in Habibizadi's and Shamsaie's work which is significant to this study. For one thing, traditional Naghali gives Habibizadi much more freedom and flexibility because, as a Naghal, it is she who writes her own "tumar"/scroll based on which she performs. Whereas, Shamsaie, in her Naghali-like performance, is required to stick to the text and she is supervised by a director who in this case is also the writer of the text. Besides, Habibizadi, as a Naghal, can perform and traditionally should perform her stories in public places, parks, and coffee houses before an audience which can be from any class of society with any level of education. Shamsaie, however- in this particular performance which I have chosen for this study- is performing before a limited number of academic educated audiences at Stanford University. In addition, Habibizadi has to be veiled in these public spaces in Iran. It is not only her female body, but her veiled female body which impersonates both men and women; kings and warriors; in this she also takes a step past the limitation to how a veiled female body is regulated in the Islamic Iran. All these points of divergence require deep study which would, in both cases, uncover many significant points for feminist readings of the texts they are performing and of the performance itself. However, the focus of this study is on the potentials that similarities of these two performances offer for a feminist analysis.

Even though it seems that Naghali offers more freedom to the performer in general, in this particular case where Shamsaie's performance gets close Naghali, in my opinion, both women

manage to go beyond their texts. In performing Shahrnaz and Arnavaz along with the monster Zakhak, Shahmsaei and Habibizadi manage to dismantle a few socially, culturally and biologically constructed binaries; they manage to blur the borders between the male and the female, the Iranian and the Arab, and last but not least the self and the other. They, thus, offer, in their female bodies, the embodiment not only of women, whose voices are silenced in the epic, but even of the snakes and the man, and the hybrid of snake and man, that is, the monster Zakhak, who was and is regarded- in both the classical version and the modern play as well as in the traditional and modern interpretations- as the other and the enemy. These women performers embody both the friend and the foe, and in this they realize a merging of the “good” and the “evil” of the stories they perform in addition to the transformation process itself and thus their performances introduce us to an even more complex reading of the story; to female narrators who manage to transcend the texts that they are performing by stepping up on the stage as storytellers who create their own versions of stories in blending the previously demarcated domains in their performing body. It is thus that, in my opinion, the monster king Zakhak, and along with it the notion of monstrosity, undergo a metamorphosis in the bodies of these women storytellers. They melt and mix and transform the so called monstrous and the so called good. I will continue to trace the deconstruction of the monster king Zakhak and the notion of monstrosity in Beyzaie’s other play *Azhdahak*, in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Azhdahak the Monster

Introduction

“They [monsters] ask us why we have created them” (Cohen, 1996, p. 20)

Azhdahak is a dramatic piece written in 1959 by Beyzaie based on the legend of the monster king Zahhak in *The Shahnameh*. Beyzaie in this play has created the form of “barkhani” or recitation which was used to perform religious plays before *The Shahnameh* was written. Thus this piece is a combination of poetic narration and dramatic monologue (Talajooy, 2013b). In his *Where is The Thousand Tales?*, Beyzaie traces the roots of many of *The Shahnameh* legends in *The Avesta*, the ancient Zoroastrian scriptures, which was created long before *The Shahnameh* was composed by Ferdowsi in the end of the tenth century. In *Azhdahak* Beyzaie changes the names of characters to their ancient way of pronunciations recorded in *The Avesta*, hence the name Azhdahak instead of Zahhak which is actually the older Zoroastrian name which is later Arabicized and changed to Zahhak. Azhdahak from the root “Azhdaha” means dragon but according to Beyzaie (2013), and also as we will see later in this play, Azhdahak can also mean the dragon slayer which can add to the complexity of this monster’s hybridity as he combines in his name the dragon and the dragon slayer both; this very much hints at the multi-layeredness of the the notion of monstrosity. Balazadeh also mentions that since dragon is the symbol of drought, dragon slaying is a reference to dominating dryness(Balazadeh).

It looks as if through moving the play further back in time from the time of *The Shahnameh* and establishing the setting in some ancient time²⁴ the audience is offered a window to what could have

²⁴ As any other myth the myths included in *The Shahnameh* were not created by Ferdowsi from scratch; he collected them from other older sources and of course changed some parts; traces of the legend of Zahhak, specifically, can be followed in *The Avesta* and Beyzaie has referred to these traces in his *Hezar Afsan Kojast? Where is The Thousand Tales?*.

happened to Azhdahak/ Zakhak before he became canonized in *The Shahnameh*. In this, the play resembles *The Thousand and First Night* where, similarly, the time of the first scene is a mythic time. It is thus that the audience is capable of seeing Zakhak story before it was transcribed by Ferdowsi in *The Shahnameh*. In both cases this technique has been used to draw a picture that depicts in the center the characters that would later be pushed to the margins in *The Book of Kings*. In *Azhdahak* the marginalized character is the monster king himself on account of his monstrification.

Azhdahak and The Thousand and First Night

As said before, the reason I have chosen this play to study in juxtaposition with *The Thousand and First Night* is that these two plays together give voice to the marginalized characters and, through this voice, transform and deconstruct the monster and the notion of monstrosity. I am going to search for how Beyzaie has managed to offer an alternative reading different from the traditional interpretation which has been the dominant interpretation of this legend at least since the beginning of the twentieth century. As elaborated in the first chapter, according this major line of interpretation, Zakhak, the Arab prince in *The Shahnameh*, represents the Arab invasion in the 7th century AD. However, this reading appears to be a naive reading which proposes a binary of good and evil in which Zakhak has always stayed and always will remain evil on account of his monstrous body and his nationality who represents Arabs as evil invaders and thereby Iranians as innocent victims. This interpretation, though, was proper for the nationalist discourse prominent in the constitutional era and afterwards when Iran was being established as a modern country and was trying to shake off the foreign influence especially the Arab influence for reasons briefly attended to in the first chapter.

However, a more complicated understanding of this legend which does not simply divide the story into the two sides of good and evil was eventually proposed by Beyzaie in his two plays. In

Azhdabak he has alternated the image of the monster of the legend that previously represented cruelty of a monster king. I argued in the previous chapter that once women were given voice in *The Thousand and First Night*, their storytelling techniques transformed the snakes growing on Zakhak's shoulders to the point that the snakes assumed human attributes in response to the thousand nights of listening to Shahrnaz and Arnavaz's stories. In my opinion studying *Azhdabak* following *The Thousand and First Night* completes the cycle of transformation of the monster and furthers our understanding of monstrosity.

Even though Zakhak of *Azhdabak* is still depicted as a monster in body with two snakes growing on his shoulders, yet as Talajooy points out, in *Azhdabak*, "Zakhak is not a dehumanized embodiment of cruelty trapped by Eblis [the Devil] into cannibalism" anymore. In this play Zakhak's monstrosity helps us see his marginalization and thus open our eyes to a different layer to the story of Zakhak in *The Shahnameh*.

***Azhdabak*: a Beginning to an End**

The Shahnameh version of the story of Zakhak ends with the over throwing of the monster king Zakhak by Fereydun, the grand child of Jamshid the grand king of Iran; Fereydun is ordered by the oracle or Soroush not to kill Zakhak but to chain him to Mount Damavand to be eternally tormented by his own snakes. This scene is precisely where Beyzaie starts his play; that is, where *The Shahnameh* version ends, *Azhdabak* begins. It is thus that the play opens what was previously considered a closure to the legend of Zakhak. This technique in itself is significant because it not only puts forth a new beginning and thus an alternative reading, but also creates suspension in that the reader who knows the legend would be curious to know what is going to happen after the point where *The Shahnameh* end the legend of Zakhak.

The play starts with the scene where Zahhak or Azhdahak, chained to mountains, begins to recount his tale of his encounter with King Jamshid who is called Yama here following his older Avestan name. This very first scene enables the reader to hear a voice which was repressed in *The Shahnameh*. The change in point of view changes the perspective; and the change from epic to drama as explained in the previous chapter endows the character with more authority and agency²⁵.

Interestingly enough the play begins with Azhdahak's cry; he tells us that "before I shouted my sky scraping shout" the city at his feet was sleeping; the suppressed voice in him has turned into a shout²⁶. From where he is chained, that is, on top of mount Damavand, Azhdahak witnesses that the sound of his cry hits the further land like a "lash on the shoulders of the sleeping city." The image he depicts here, we will see later, is a foreshadowing of what happens to himself and turns him into a monster. He continues to tell us that he used to be an ordinary man, a farmer and even an honored farmer of the land who "slayed the three headed dragon of drought and made rivers flow from springs." According to Beyzaei, in ancient Iran agricultural society, the dragon slayer was the savior because he would restore life and fertility to land by putting an end to drought which was compared to a three headed dragon (Beyzaie, 2013). We see, thus, Azhdahak, for the first time, as not a negative figure, not a destroyer but a savior of this land.

²⁵ I have already explained this change in genre and how it impacts the flow of the story and the construction of characters in the previous chapter. However, for any further studies in this regard please refer to *Exploring the Language of Drama* (Culpeper, Short, & Verdonk, 2002), *Storytelling and Drama* (Bowles, 2010) and *Language of Drama* (Sanger, 2000).

²⁶ Even though there is no space for this discussion yet, I thought it is worth mentioning here that this voice which is turned into a shout can be also looked at from the angle that Jasbir K. Puar considers when discussing the queer terrorist. This voice of the suicide bomber which is the roar of the bomb stands against heteronormativity which has inherent in itself the concepts of nation and citizenship; the shout of Azhdahak here is supposed to awaken the homogenized city that Yama has created. Both Azhdahak and Puar's Queer terrorist, thus, go against the state practices of control and surveillance. In his *Of Giants* (1999), Cohen, too, associates the term monster with the anti-identity in the term queer.

The monstrous Azhdahak in chain and in pain now clearly remembers his past when he was not a monster and was living a life in this land until the day when Yama the King²⁷ arrives and kills Azhdahak's father just to see "if his blood is a deeper red than the red wine he was drinking." As I will point out later as well, Azhdahak is not depicted here as essentially or always already a monstrous character with evil nature while in *The Shahnameh* Zakhak is presented as the Arab prince with evil nature from the start. The major subversion, though, happens in this scene when it is not Yama who is killed by Zakhak or Azhdahak, neither is it Zakhak who kills his own father, but it is Yama who murders Azhdahak's father and immediately after that orders Azhdahak to be lashed severely before the eyes of his fellow citizens on account of his protest against the murder of his father. This subversion in roles of the oppressed and the oppressor has given birth to an alternative reading. The image that Azhdahak provides of his body crushing under the strokes of the whip clarifies this change in roles:

And I saw a long serpent like lash with a mouth wide open towards me, and a man with the lash in his fist [...] and the lash in his claws scraped a black line across the sky [...] and the lash coiled and curled like a snake and people watched in fear; and the lash came down; blood; and in coming down there was fire in a thousand veins; and so there was the lash and the body and the body under the lash (Beyzaei, 1959, p. 5).

Following this day, Azhdahak is in agonizing pain all through the night; the pain which "sought a way out [of the body]" finally materializes on his shoulders²⁸:

²⁷ Yama is the Avestan name for Jamshid who appears in the story of Zakhak as the king of kings of Iran who is killed by Zakhak. It is one of his descendants, Fereydun, who later overthrows Zakhak and chains him to the mountains.

²⁸ It is worth noticing the symbolism of shoulders here as the part of the body that both in English and Persian is the part associated with responsibility and the burden of life. It renders more meaning to the pain that Zakhak is tolerating in that his shoulders cannot take the burden anymore as it is so heavy that they rebel.

Suddenly I coiled and curled [in pain] and shook my whole body and my body shook; and I went inside me; and then from me, from the abyss in my existence, with a sharp scream and wrath two snakes, roaring and growling emerged (Beyzaei, 1959, p. 6).

What, in my opinion, can also be significant is that the lash is compared to a snake in shape; it is depicted as “serpent like”. Cohen in his *Monster Theory* mentions that “any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body” (1996, p. 7); the alterity inscribed on Zakhak’s body, by Jamshid or King Yama is the snake which is pictured as, figuratively, transmitted to the body of Zakhak through the serpent like lash that scourges Azhdahak shoulders’ and turns him into a monster. This is of course in connection with the materialization of this “alterity” on the body of Azhdahak; a deeper meaning regarding the nature of this alterity will be unfolded as the play unfolds itself.

After the serpent-like lash which scraped the sky falls upon the body of Zakhak and causes his body to give birth to two snakes on his shoulders he goes on to describe the snakes as “one red and one black which were blood and pain and I looked at me and tears fell [from my eyes] as this was the snake of hatred”. If as Shildrick says “monstrous difference is a matter of cultural production”(2001, p. 13), then in these series of scenes we are witnessing the birth of a monster, the process through which King Yama or the culture he could be representing produces a monster by repressing Zakhak and in so doing he justifies, as we will observe in later scenes, the imprisoning of Azhdahak. In this way the evil associated with Zakhak in *The Shahnameh* can be seen as not essential to the body of Zakhak anymore; he can be regarded as not born with an evil nature- as Ferdowsi recounts- which begets evil, but is turned into a monster by the very people who have written the history and the legends against him.

In his *Monster Theory* Cohen says that representing a culture as monstrous “justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic” (1996, p. 7); the act of repressing Azhdahak and turning him into a monster by the King of Iran justifies the association of all evil with what Azhdahak or Zahhak is representative of. *The Shahnameh* introduces Zahhak, as an Arab prince, coming from an Arab descent, representing as evil force from outside, a cruel foreigner, who is the subject of blame for what happens to Iran later in the story, that is, the depletion of the land of its young men. This is also the line of interpretation that is used by nationalists- as explained in chapter one- since the beginning of the twenty century.

Let us not forget that in giving birth to the snakes, Zahhak’s body is assuming a female role as well; as a point of origin, a source of creation, this body, now, is a blend of genders which crosses the borders between male and female. It deviates, at least in shape, from the standard male body, and thus approaches the transgressive female body. At the same that this transformation establishes “the normativity of the Self” (Braidotti, 1994: 64) for Yama the king, and thus the power to “other” Zahhak, it also provides Zahhak’s body with the privilege of more fluidity on whose consequences I will elaborate in more details later.

Naturally, with this ab-norm-al body, Azhdahak is not accepted in his own land, so he leaves with the hope that he might find refuge in other lands which he never does. He passes many lands, “the land of the blind and the land of the silent” and in each he tries to find acceptance and tolerance for his monstrous body and for his snakes. In this search for a new home, at some point he realizes that he has in fact surrendered to the tyranny of Yama; that he has escaped: “have I escaped? Why have I escaped?” He decides to return to his city.²⁹

²⁹ Many of the theories on immigration, exile and “home” and transnationality, I think, are relevant to this scene. The fact that he is expelled from his own land unwillingly justified by his monstrosity and later his coming to awareness of his own situation looking for home in different lands and returning to his land where nobody recognizes him and he

Azhdahak returns to his land and finds people agitated and in agony from the tyranny of Yama. He does not recognize anybody and nobody recognizes him. He is advised by a chain hanging from nowhere “which is closer to you than yourself” to go to Yama’s palace for he shall know what is going to pass next. At the foot of Yama’s high and unconquerable castle he stands and realizes that he is standing on a piece of land which was his once. Yama’s frighteningly tall castle has grown in his land, replacing the trees whose roots are now dried. On the top of this castle, whose magnitude makes Azhdahak look “small and trivial”, Yama is standing. Azhdahak shouts and the castle turns to see him at its foot and from the top of the castle Yama looks down.

When Azhdahak asks Yama to kill him as he cannot fight Yama single handedly and he cannot bear the sight of his fellow citizens in agony under Yama’s tyrannical reign, Yama informs him that it is foreseen in the oracle that as soon as he kills Azhdahak his own life will come to an end. Referring back to the legend of Zahhak in *The Shahnameh*, we need to remember that as mentioned before, Zahhak is ordered by the oracle not to be killed but to be chained to mountains. Repetition of the same image here could be alluding to the everlasting presence of fears and anxieties that is materialized in the monstrification of Zahhak. In her article on monsters Braidotti (1994) refers to the monstrification of women by patriarchy in order to repress them because they produce horror as they deviate the norm. However, she goes on to add that what we are scared of, the monster, is within us “dwells at the heart of the matter” (1994, p. 243); she further comments that the mechanism of a patriarchal society then has been to create itself from the figure of woman and for that matter of all that deviated its white masculine norm by monstrifying her into an “other”.

does not recognize anyone, can have political implications especially in a time when Iran is one of the most notorious countries for brain drain and intellectual exile and also regarding the huge number of political prisoners “chained” like Azhdahak. However, since this can be the subject of an entirely different study in its own, it would suffice, I think, to refer the readers to Ansari’s *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (2012) and Omidshafar’s *The Poetics and Politics of Iran’s National Epic, The Shahnameh* (2011) which view *The Book of Kings* from a more political angle.

What Braidotti argues, as she says, is a strategy that is applied to anything that we would like to estrange ourselves from; anything that can be an object of “horror”. If following what Braidotti says, we assume that Iranian nationalist tendencies have been to repress the fear of the foreigner- here specifically of the Arab- within us then it is only natural that the nationalist literature in media should stick to this interpretation of the Zahhak legend which regards Zahhak as inherently and essentially evil and impossible to transform- unlike the king of *The Thousand Tales* who eventually surrenders to the female storytellers³⁰.

Yama’s reaction when meeting Azhdahak for this second time is one of repulsion. At the sight of Azhdahak’s snakes he grimaces: “what are those grown on your shoulders? Our fathers would call the like of you Div [monster]. Go away! May there not be a word said about you and may I never hear about you again.”

The term “div” meaning monster in Persian, similar to its English equivalent, etymologically can allude to a double paradoxical meaning. Dīvs, have their roots in the Zoroastrian word for evil and are associated with the dark and are demons against the light; however, “div” is also related to the term deus or dieu which is connected to the divine (Nazer, 1991; Saeedi Tabatabai, 2012)³¹. The Latin roots of the word ‘monster’ as Shildrick puts it are also rich referring to “both monstrare – to show, and monere – to warn” (2001, p. 12). The existence of conflicting meanings of the marvelous

³⁰ In many of today’s texts we still tend to associate the people in power presently with the figure of Zahhak. I am not passing any judgment as whether this opinion is right or wrong; however, I am proposing that the practice of self-alienation and “othering” will prevent us from casting a critical look at ourselves and considering ourselves as part of the events in the country.

³¹ Mirzaye Nazer in his article mentions that the Old Avestan term daēuua comes from Sanskrit root deva meaning god. He traces the term back to the time when Zarathustra came out as a prophet and this term was then associated with Indian gods presumably because Iranians and Indians, which were one, were at the time in war and separated from each other eventually. The roots of this term are also explained in Encyclopedia Iranica (in English) under the two entries “DĒW”(Williams, 1994) and “DAIVA” (Herrenschmidt & Kellens, 1993).

and the repulsive in both Persian and Latin shows that in both languages the word monster creates a mixture which as Shildrick mentions cannot be “separated entirely from the nature of man himself” (p. 16); for, even though the marvelous is usually attached to “us” and the repulsive to the “other”, yet the juxtaposition of these meanings in one word confirms “the external manifestation of the sinner within” (p. 17) all humans. Yama, for that matter, cannot escape Azhdahak; he cannot kill him; neither in this play nor in *The Shahnameh* is Azhdahak’s life put to an end, for if he dies whoever is against him also dies; the lives of both sides are interdependent, in other words, the “good” and the “evil” cannot exist independent of each other. For Fereydun or Jamshid to exist, there must exist a Zahhak.

After meeting with Yama, Azhdahak, who cannot even die now, is forced to witness the attack of the fatal storm to his land. The castle stays safe but people after this storm turn into moving dead bodies who do not even discern the “chain”- which I presume to be the symbol of harsh tyranny-ruling over them. Azhdahak tries to talk them into protest and to help them realize the tyranny under which they are “living”, but all this to no avail. Their ears are deaf and there is no look in their eyes.

The monologue delivered by Yama after the storm and after Azhdahak’s futile attempt in awakening people, is an interesting one:

I have brought you signs from the heavens; the sign of rewards which go to good deeds. And it is presaged in these signs that a man will appear to you who is hideous and from a serpent descent and your brains will be his food. His tongue is with poison, an unremitting poison, and his speech is [black] magic or yet more deceitful than that. I have brought you signs from heavens; signs of gold scrapes, and signs of black lashes! In these signs it passes

that in every word spoken there are two hidden sides, which are similar like two seas, and are far like two seas!

In this monologue which is addressed to the people of the city there are several interesting points. The most important to my argument is Yama's attempt to keep the binary oppositions: "in every spoken word, there are two hidden sides". In so doing, I believe, he is trying to protect the status quo which he has constructed in order to position himself in the "good" end of the dichotomy here. In creating the binary opposition, Yama creates only two positions; one in him, the self, the "norm" and one in the "other" Azhdahak, the abnormal, the monster; he, thus, facilitates the job of condemning Azhdahak and accusing him of "magic" and "deceit" and scaring people of the snake man who is going to devour their brains while none of that has happened. Thus he justifies his right to the oracle too; by positioning himself against the "magic" of the monster Zakhak which is deceitful and evil in this binary opposition, *he* is the one who has access to divine magic and who can award the "good deeds". Yama uses the power he has attained through this dichotomy to turn the oracle against Azhdahak. It is thus that people follow his orders in the next scene and chain Azhdahak.

However, like any monster, Azhdahak is "a mixed category", he "resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition"(Cohen, 1996, p. 6); he questions dichotomous thinking and demands a system which appreciates "polyphony" where there is "resistance to integration" (p. 6). It is not merely Zakhak's corporeal features, but also his "refusal to participate in the classificatory³² order of things", I think, that makes Zakhak a monster. And this is why he is not dead and cannot be put to death. Because of its "ontological liminality" and the impossibility, thereof, to be pinned in any particular identity, the monster creates a "third term that problematizes the clash of extremes"

³² This term is used by Cohen himself and as far as I understand it means an order forced from outside to categorize people; a monster according to him cannot be put into such order.

(Cohen, 1996, p. 6) and it is on the basis of this “third term” that a different reading of the legend of Zahhak in *The Shahnameh* has been created in this play. The Azhdahak which appears in this play is different from the monster/ Div created by Ferdowsi. He does not give in to the dichotomous construction of the nationalist interpretation of the legend of *The Shahnameh*. He cannot be as easily pinned into the side of the evil or the side of the good/norm(al). He comes from a third space which was conceived but was not conceivable at the time of Ferdowsi; for, just as Saeedi mentions, poets had not yet “tapped into human brain or the phenomenology of existence” at that time to be able to see the multiple sides to the monster and the monstrous. This shows how the modern critical tools can reveal the complexity of works of art.

The play finally ends in the beginning where Azhdahak/Zahhak is chained to Mount Damavand to live for as long as Yama lives. In this version of the legend of Zahhak, Azhdahak/Zahhak never kills Yama/ Jamshid,- since he is an Iranian himself- he never conquers Iran, and never feeds the snakes with people’s brains. Azhdahak/Zahhak is a victim of tyranny and tyrannical re-writing of ‘history’. And the cyclical plot of this play emphasizes the endlessness of this process which can be repeated forever in history and in us³³.

Why Monsters?

In reply to his own question which I opened this chapter with, as to why monsters are created Cohen himself answers:

These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race,

³³ Talajooy briefly writes on the political implications of this play pointing out that this play challenges “the diktats of the royalist nationalism of the Pahlavi period (1925–79) which promoted the monarchical models of ancient Persian empires for building a modern state” (2013b, p. 698).

gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression (1996, p. 20).

Azhdahak thus manages to use the multi-layeredness of the monster to reevaluate a previously flat character and endow him with multiple roles rather than the flat always evil character appearing in *The Shahnameh*. The Zahhak of *Azhdahak* assumes the roles of the oppressed, the marginalized, the savior, the dragon slayer, and the protestor. It is this fluid nature of the monster and the monstrous, the fact that it “cannot be confined to the place of the other;” but can arouse “always the contradictory responses of denial and recognition, disgust and empathy, exclusion and identification” (Shildrick, 2001, p. 17) that enables Beyzaie to write a piece which subverts the major interpretation of the legend of Zahhak and of the monster himself.

It is this creature that the women of *The Thousand and First Night*, the Shahrzad and Dinazad of *The Thousand Tales* or *One Thousand One Nights* are facing. They are facing a monster; a complex creature of multiple layers which cannot be limited to a single nationalist interpretation of the early twentieth century Iran, but can be and will be transformed. The genderless body of this monster not only universalizes the change that he undergoes but also changes the role of the female storytellers as again auxiliary to men. Cohen considers monsters “not reducible to some pure state of male identity...because his body functions as a disavowed point of origin [that] shares more with the feminine, and specifically with the maternal, than his excessively male form might suggest” (Cohen, *Of Giants* XIII).

The body of Zahhak is both male and female. He is excessively masculine with the two snakes as emblematic of phallus which make him a tri-cephalic monster. At the same time, it is this apparently excessive male body which, as said before, gives birth to snakes on his shoulders and for that matter to the monster and consequently to the “other”. Regardless of the causes mentioned in the legend in

The Shahnameh or in Beyzaie's *Azhedehak*, still Zakhak's body is a source of creation which renders his monstrous body with feminine element. In fact, this body is the creator and the created in one.

To this body the storytellers have been telling their stories in an endless cycle of "thousand" tales, for "thousand" nights, always, not only hopeful, but simply assured of an imminent change; for, a monster, as an ever changing multi layered notion, cannot be constructed unless it is deconstructed repeatedly, and their stories eventually do deconstruct him as we witness a different Zakhak in *Azhdahak*. A monster can neither be fixed in the position of self nor in the "other". As soon as it is fixed, it loses its function; it is not a monster anymore; it is turned to normal. It is, thus, precisely the monstrosity, that is, the fluidity of Zakhak, that renders the storytellers and their stories the potential to change.

In confronting the monster what we need "is a redefinition of what we have learned to recognize as being the structure and aims of human subjectivity in its relationship to difference to the 'other'" (Braidotti 244). That is what, in my opinion, Beyzaie has managed to do in his *Azhdahak*. He manages to offer this redefinition and to make the readers ponder on what has so far been defined as the major interpretation of the monster king Zakhak and has thus determined their relationship to the "other". By changing the definition, Beyzaie has managed to offer a new relationship with the "other", a relationship which is not any more based on hatred but on sympathy and understanding of what we previously thought to be monstrous and evil.

Conclusion

This thesis was written to explore two plays, by Baharam Beyzaie- *The Thousand and First Night* (2003) and *Azhdahak* (1959) - that is, two different adaptations of the story of Zakhak which appears in the Iranian book of epic poetry *The Shahnameh*. The purpose of this analysis was to find out the ways and tools by which the writer succeeded in giving voice to characters that were previously marginalized in *The Shahnameh* and in the interpretations of this *Shahnameh* legend. These characters were mainly the monster king Zakhak and Shahrnaz and Arnavaz the two women of the legend who barely show their faces in *The Shahnameh* version of the tale.

In the process of writing this thesis, I came across a solo performance of the first scene of *The Thousand and First Night*, released very recently, by a famous Iranian actress. Since the performance, in my opinion, resembled the traditional Iranian dramatic performance or dramatic storytelling, Naghali- an art associated with recitations of the stories of *The Shahnameh*- I was encouraged to add a minor query to the main issue of investigation in this thesis; I thus attempted to find out the role of women performers in presenting a feminist reading both of Beyzaie's modern play *The Thousand and First Night* and of *The Shahnameh*. I was curious to know if these women could be considered the creators of yet another version of the legend of Zakhak created by the performers in their performances.

While striving to find answers to these questions, I realized that this exploration would be lacking a great deal of insight if I chose to ignore Beyzaie's own research on *The Shahnameh* and particularly on the legend of Zakhak as he is not only a playwright but also a researcher engaging himself with both myth and dramatic art. He is rightly called by Amjad as the "teller of stories untold" ; to find the unwritten parts of the myths, he has been studying and publishing since his youth. Two of his books

would be impossible to ignore for the purposes of answering the questions of this study. His book on theater in Iran explores the art of Naghali or storytelling and his *Where is The Thousand Tales?* is the result of his search for the roots of the legends of *The Shahnameh*, and the famous *One Thousand and One Nights*.

The sources I explored along with a close reading of the texts of the plays and the legend helped me realize that Beyzaie has benefitted from several strategies in the plays in order to vocalize the personages who were pushed to the periphery in the epic. With the help of an alternation in genre from epic to drama, he has changed the “larger than life” characters of the epic to the “real person” of drama who can talk for themselves. Through dialogue and conversation drama characters are shaped, characters that have no voice in *The Shahnameh* where the omniscient voice of an epic storyteller has silenced certain characters whose presence does not contribute to the heroic events. The voice of women which are drowned in the shouts of male warriors, are given speech and agency through the tool of drama.

Beyzaie uses yet another more significant tool to give voice to the characters and that is where studying his research on myths and their roots helped me understand both re-readings of Zahhak better. The connection between the fundamental plot of *The Thousand Tales* (or what came to be known later as *One Thousand and One Nights*) and the story of Zahhak the monster king helped Beyzaie to present the characters of Shahrnaz and Arnavaz as the storytellers who tell one thousand tales for one thousand nights to the king in order to save their land and nation from the tyranny of the king. Shahrnaz and Arnavaz, the women who were silenced in *The Shahnameh* become the storytellers who shape and move forward the plot of *The Thousand and First Night* with their last, that is, their thousand and first story. It is thus that the marginalized female characters of *The Shahnameh* are brought to center.

The character of the monster king Zahhak, unlike the king of *The Thousand Tales*, does not undergo much change in *The Thousand and First Night*; nevertheless, in *Azhdabak* this cycle is completed³⁴. In this play we face a monster whose voice was also silenced in the dominant interpretations of the legend of Zahhak. Beyzaie manages to give voice to the monster by subverting the roles. In *Azhdabak* Zahhak is a monster but is not demonized anymore. He turns into a monster under repression and torture of a tyrant. It is the brutality of the king of Iran whipped on his body which grows the snakes on his shoulders which cannot take the unbearable load anymore. The change in roles and the change in point of view going hand in hand with the change in genre from epic to drama help us see the legend and the monster from an alternative angle.

In this subversive reading *Azhdabak* not only deconstructs the monster Zahhak but in a larger scale subverts the notion of the monstrous. To analyze the notion of monstrosity, I mainly used theories by Cohen (1996 and 1999), Shildrick (2001) and Braidotti (1994). *Azhdabak* yields itself very easily to these theories. The monstrous in *Azhdabak* is not synonymous with the evil; it is a deviation from norm; a mechanism to create an “other” in order to justify a norm, a self and to excuse the violence and the injustice.

The monster in *Azhdabak* depicts that the monstrous is actually a source of creation; it breaks the boundaries and goes against the binary oppositions good and evil of male and female of self and other. The body of this monster transcends the binaries of gender; this monstrous “ab-nrom-al” body with its excessive phallic symbolism of the snakes is as much a male as it is a females. It gives birth to the very elements which provide it with excess in masculinity, it bears the monster; it is a source of creation and thus a drive for change. In juxtaposing the Zahhak of *Azhdabak* and the Zahhak of *The Thousand and First Night*, I was able to come up with the realization of the

³⁴ I have already explained in the introduction that for the purpose of the overarching question of this study which involves the transformation of the monster through the storytellers’ stories, I decided to study these two plays in an opposite order of their chronological publication.

fundamental plot of *The Thousand Tales*. The stories that the women of *The Thousand and First Night* tell, finally leads to a change in the figure of monster and a realization of the deconstructive ever mutable monster of Azhdahak. Similar to *The Thousand Tales*, in juxtaposition of these two plays, the storytellers manage to transform the listener.

The analysis adopts an even more complicated meaning when it comes to women performers who embody this monster. Their female, occasionally veiled body of the Naghal, in the solo performance of Naghali opens up so many issues to be discussed. Their impersonation of both male and female characters of the stories- of the play and the epic- not only trespasses the gender line, but causes the unification of the binaries in their physical bodies this time; the blurring of lines; and the blend of the good and evil and the combination of genders, the king and the monster and even more interestingly the storyteller and the story itself and thus the birth of a new reading were the points that, due to limitations, I only touched upon in this thesis and they certainly require deeper study.

In writing this thesis I was aware of my being an educated middle class woman has imposed certain limitations on the scope of what I would be writing. As a woman who has been brought up in a home with educated parents who have had nationalist tendencies I certainly had more exposure to nationalist literature and the discourse around it. I am aware that I have been brought with certain prejudices which I hope to have overcome in the process of writing this thesis but of which some traces might have been left in my writing which I might not be aware of.

Also since this is research done outside Iran and the topic study is related to Iran, I did not have access to certain sources and people whose presence would help refine the thesis. I had, instead, access to other literature which I have used in this study. Nevertheless, a study on the same topic inside Iran would also be intriguing especially in that it can provide the opportunity for the

researcher to have direct contact with female performers or Naghals who perform in a space where they have to be veiled.

The female Naghal's presence in a space previously occupied by men storytellers raises issues which I would like to continue working in future research. A thorough study on the role of female Naghals offering a feminist reading to the audience can open many possibilities for a more female centered reading of *The Shahnameh*, which has long been regarded as a book promoting patriarchy through focusing mainly on male warrior.

Another very important topic that is seriously worth being investigated by the researchers is the role of women and female characters not only in *The Shahnameh*, which has been very rarely studied, but also on the interpretations or adaptations of the legends of *The Shahnameh*. *Shahnameh* legends have been frequently used in different occasion particularly to support the nationalist discourse in the media. Even though Ali Ansari's *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, has done a thorough job in this case, it has not dealt with the presence or absence of women and female characters from such discourses based on legends of *The Shahnameh*.

In this study I partly explored Beyzaie's way of regarding female characters in his plays. From the time when he wrote the play *Azhdahak* in 1959 until when he wrote *The Thousand and First Night* in 2003 and when he directed the solo performance of Mojdeh Shamsaie in 2013, his way of treating female characters in particular and gender and gender relations, in general, have undergone an interesting evolution which I would very much like to study further.

Finally, as said before, studies on monsters or Divs of *The Shahnameh* specifically from a gender point of view are very rare. Both *The Shahnameh* and the Persian folklore are abundant with monsters and demons. Nevertheless, they have rarely been studied from a subversive gender point of view. Monster theories can help not only understand the deeper layers to these stories but even I believe

they can be an initiative to the interdisciplinary field of Peace Studies with a focus on gender. Iran has always been and still is in a controversial political situation because of its geopolitical status. Opening the door of monstrosity to folk stories similar to Zakhak which present nationalist tendencies and clashes between cultures and countries can de-familiarize the monster and present it as an emblem of change of change instead of an omen of evil and this it can contribute to a more peaceful understanding of the motifs with which these stories were written.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. A Brief Summary of the Story of Zakhak as It Appears in *The Shahnameh*

Zakhak is a prince; son of an Arab king. He is deceived by Iblis (Arabic word for the Devil) into killing his own father and seizing his throne. He thus becomes a king and a killer at the same time. After deceiving him into patricide, Iblis appears once again in the image of a skillful cook to be employed in King Zakhak's kitchen. He cooks for the newly crowned king and when the king grows a liking for him, Iblis asks for a small favor: to kiss the king's shoulders. Zakhak agrees. Immediately after Iblis kisses the king's shoulders, two black snakes grow on the spots and Iblis vanishes right away. The snakes cannot be removed; as soon as any of them is cut off another grows back. Iblis appears again and this time in the guise of an expert physician who prescribes the only remedy to keep the snakes calm: to feed them with brains of young men every day; one for each.

At about the same time, Jamshid, the king of Persia, turns away from gods and starts to torture people. People suffer so much under his rule that they are ready to submit their land to a new ruler so they go to seek Zakhak who is famous to be strong, and Zakhak seizes the moment. He overthrows Jamshid, marries both of his daughters, Shahrnaz and Arnavaz, and thus becomes officially the king of Persia. Now a monster and a king, in an even more abundant land, he has the power and the means to provide for the snakes on his shoulders. So following Iblis' advice every night two young men of Persia are killed for their brains to be fed to the snakes. In a successful attempt, though, two cooks manage to enter the palace to work as cooks of the palace; they carry out their plot which is to kill one man out of the two and mix the brain with that of a sheep and set the other man free. Their plan works. Zakhak's rule continues in this way for one thousand years during which time the country falls into ruins and people suffer from poverty and misery. During this time, however, the released young men get together and form an army against Zakhak. Kaveh, a blacksmith, in revenge of his sons starts a protest against Zakhak and even devises his own flag to

lead the protest. He eventually gives the flag to Fereydin- a grandson to Jamshid, the previous king of Iran- and helps him to lead the army of young men. With the help of suffering people, Fereydun leads the revolution and removes Zahhak from power, but, following Soroosh, the Voice of the Heavens, he does not murder the monster, and instead chains him to the Alborz Mountains to be forever tormented by his snakes. Fereydun, too, marries Jamshid's daughters when he conquers the throne.

Appendix 2. The You Tube link to Mojdeh Shamsaie's Performance (refer to the 22nd minute)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7Ts13OvrQQ>

Appendix 3. The You Tube link to the BBC movie on Fatemeh Habibizadi, the Female Naghal

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSrZ-Jmx7Qw&hd=1>