Randwick International of Social Sciences (RISS) Journal
Vol. 7, No.4, October 2026 | Page: 193-200
ISSN Online: 2722-5674 - **ISSN Print**: 2722-5666
https://www.randwickresearch.com/index.php/rissj

The Reflection of National Identity in the Ferdowsi's Shahnameh

DOI: *https://doi.org/10.47175/rissj.v7i4.1344*

| Ehsanullah Mushfeq[1] | Besmillah Daqiq[2] |

[1] *Associate Professor at Faculty of Language and Literature of Takhar* University, Afghanistan

[2]*Assistant professor at English Department of Language and Literature Faculty at Takhar University,* Afghanistan

[1]*Mushfeq.AF@gmail.com*
[2]*besmillahraqiq@gmail.com*

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

ABSTRACT
Ferdowsi stands as one of the cornerstones of Persian poetry, and his Shahnameh is widely regarded as one of the most significant literary and cultural works associated with the national identity of Persian-speaking people. Drawing on both Iranian cultural heritage and Islamic traditions, the Shahnameh provides an important literary space in which these historical and cultural dimensions intersect. This study aims to examine the major indicators of national identity represented in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh and to analyze how the epic contributes to the preservation and transmission of Persian cultural identity.The study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach based on library research and textual analysis. Selected narratives, characters, themes, religious references, historical representations, and linguistic features of the Shahnameh were analyzed according to three principal categories: religion, history, and Persian language. The findings demonstrate that these three elements constitute closely interconnected dimensions of national identity in the Shahnameh. Religion provides a moral and spiritual framework through concepts such as divine authority, justice, morality, piety, loyalty, and the struggle between good and evil. Historical narratives preserve collective memory through stories of kings, heroes, national struggles, and cultural continuity. Persian language functions both as a medium of literary expression and as a repository through which historical memories, religious beliefs, ethical principles, and cultural traditions are transmitted across generations. The study concludes that the Shahnameh functions not merely as an epic literary work but also as an important repository and transmitter of Persian cultural and national identity.

KEYWORDS
History; religion; Persian Language; Shahnameh; Ferdowsi; national identity.

INTRODUCTION

Ferdowsi's immortal work, the *Shahnameh*, is not only one of the greatest literary masterpieces in the history of Persian literature but also a significant cultural and social document. It narrates the mythological, legendary, and historical traditions associated with Iran and provides an extensive representation of the values, beliefs, aspirations, struggles, and cultural memories of Persian-speaking peoples. Through its narratives of kings and heroes, religious traditions, moral teachings, national struggles, and Persian literary expression, the *Shahnameh* has played an important role in the preservation and transmission of cultural identity.

National identity refers to the collection of characteristics, cultures, languages, traditions, historical memories, and values through which members of a community understand their collective belonging. Among the major components commonly associated with national identity are history, religion, and language. These elements connect individuals with a shared cultural heritage and provide a framework through which communities understand their past, values, and continuity.

The *Shahnameh* is particularly significant in this regard because it brings together historical memory, religious traditions, cultural values, and Persian language within a single extensive literary narrative. Its importance therefore extends beyond the literary representation of individual heroes and kings. The epic provides a framework through which cultural memories and values can be transmitted from one generation to another. The Shahnameh has long been recognized as an important literary expression of Iranian national identity because it preserves collective narratives, historical traditions, and cultural memories that connect Persian-speaking communities with their shared past (Encyclopaedia Iranica, n.d.).

The present study examines the representation of national identity in the *Shahnameh* through three major dimensions: religion, history, and Persian language. It argues that these dimensions should not be understood as independent elements. Rather, they are mutually reinforcing components of a broader cultural identity: religion provides moral and spiritual values, history provides collective memory, and Persian provides the linguistic medium through which these values and memories are preserved and transmitted.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical research approach based on library research and textual analysis. The approach was selected because the primary purpose of the study is to identify, describe, and interpret the ways in which national identity is represented in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. Rather than collecting numerical data from respondents, the study examines literary, historical, religious, and linguistic evidence contained in the text and interprets its relationship to national identity.

The study adopts a textual-analysis design in which selected passages, narratives, characters, themes, and linguistic features of the *Shahnameh* are examined according to three predetermined analytical categories: religion, history, and Persian language. These categories correspond to the central argument of the study that national identity among Persian-speaking peoples is expressed through shared religious values, historical memory, and linguistic-cultural heritage.

The analysis is therefore both descriptive and interpretive. At the descriptive level, the study identifies relevant representations in the *Shahnameh*. At the analytical level, these representations are interpreted in relation to the formation, preservation, and transmission of Persian-speaking peoples' cultural and national identity.

Data and Source Selection

The primary source of data is Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, particularly its narratives, characters, historical accounts, religious references, ethical teachings, and linguistic dimensions. The *Shahnameh* was selected because it combines mythology, history, religion, cultural traditions, ethical values, and Persian literary expression.

Secondary sources include scholarly works on Ferdowsi, the *Shahnameh*, Iranian and Islamic cultural history, Persian literature, religion, and national identity. These sources were used to contextualize and interpret the textual evidence.

The selection of textual data was purposive rather than random. Passages and episodes were selected when they directly represented one or more of the following analytical categories:

1. **Religion:** references to God, religious belief, morality, justice, piety, good and evil, Islamic values, and pre-Islamic religious traditions.
2. **History:** historical memory, kings and heroes, national struggles, Iranian dynasties, historical continuity, and narratives connecting different periods of Iranian history.
3. **Persian language:** the preservation, promotion, literary development, cultural transmission, and identity-forming function of Persian.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through systematic reading and examination of the *Shahnameh* and relevant scholarly sources. The process consisted of four stages. First, the researchers conducted repeated readings of the *Shahnameh* to identify passages and narratives related to national identity. Second, relevant textual evidence was extracted and classified under the three analytical categories of religion, history, and Persian language. Third, the selected evidence was compared with relevant scholarly interpretations concerning Ferdowsi, the *Shahnameh*, Persian cultural history, and national identity. Finally, the classified material was interpreted thematically to determine how each component contributes to the construction and preservation of national identity.The study therefore does not treat individual passages in isolation. Instead, recurring themes and patterns across the text were examined to establish how religion, historical memory, and Persian language collectively function as identity-forming elements.

Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis followed three major stages: identification, categorization, and interpretation.During the identification stage, relevant passages, narratives, characters, and linguistic expressions were identified in the primary and secondary sources. During categorization, the identified material was organized into three major themes: religion as an identity component, history as an identity component, and Persian language as an identity component.During interpretation, the evidence within each category was examined to determine its contribution to national identity. Religious references were analyzed in terms of moral and spiritual values; historical narratives were examined as mechanisms for preserving collective memory; and Persian linguistic features were examined as mechanisms of cultural continuity and transmission.

RESULTS AND DICUSSION

The textual analysis produced three major findings corresponding to the principal research objectives: religion, history, and Persian language constitute interconnected components of national identity in the *Shahnameh*. Rather than functioning independently, these components reinforce one another. Religion provides a moral and spiritual framework, history provides collective memory, and Persian provides the linguistic medium through which cultural memory and values are preserved and transmitted.

Religion as a Component of National Identity

The findings demonstrate that religion is a significant dimension of national identity in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. Religious values are expressed through references to God, divine order, justice, morality, piety, knowledge, loyalty, and the struggle between good and evil. Religion in the epic is therefore not limited to explicit theological references; it is

embedded within the moral characterization of heroes and rulers and within the broader understanding of legitimate individual and social behavior.

Religion is defined as a system of divine teachings that guides human beings away from tyranny, violence, falsehood, and immoral behavior and encourages truthfulness, justice, altruism, and other virtues (Ali Khani, 2023: 78). This understanding corresponds closely with the moral dimension of religion represented in the *Shahnameh*.

The analysis further demonstrates that the religious dimension of the epic reflects both pre-Islamic Iranian traditions and Islamic values. Ferdowsi was familiar with Persian literary and cultural traditions associated with pre-Islamic Iran. His familiarity with Middle Persian (Pahlavi), the literary language associated with Zoroastrian traditions, provided an important cultural background for the representation of ancient Iranian traditions in the epic (Bertels, 2007: 267). Early narratives involving figures such as Keyumars, Hushang, and other Pishdadian kings contain elements associated with the religious and cultural traditions of ancient Iran. Concepts of goodness, truth, the opposition between good and evil, and the struggle against destructive forces are prominent within these narratives.

At the same time, the *Shahnameh* contains significant Islamic moral and theological elements. The work begins with praise of God and repeatedly emphasizes divine authority, justice, knowledge, moral responsibility, loyalty, and righteousness. Thus, the religious dimension of the epic brings together different historical layers of Iranian cultural memory.

The importance of religion becomes particularly visible in the characterization of heroes and rulers. Courage, justice, loyalty, wisdom, and resistance to injustice are not presented merely as political or personal qualities; they are connected with a broader moral order. Characters and rulers are consequently evaluated according to their relationship with justice, truth, loyalty, and legitimate authority.

The analysis therefore indicates that religion contributes to national identity primarily through continuity and shared moral values rather than merely through religious affiliation. The coexistence of Iranian religious traditions and Islamic values creates a broader cultural continuum within which different historical periods can be represented as part of a shared heritage.

The *Shahnameh* can therefore be understood as an important source for examining the religious and cultural identity of Persian-speaking peoples. Through its narratives, Ferdowsi connects faith, morality, cultural memory, and national identity across historical periods (Ali Khani, 2023: 78).

The religious dimension of the Shahnameh is complex, combining reflections on divine authority and moral order with representations of Iran's pre-Islamic cultural traditions. This complexity suggests that religion in the epic should be examined in its literary and historical contexts (Davis, 2015).

History as Components of National Identity

The second major finding demonstrates that historical memory constitutes a central mechanism through which the *Shahnameh* constructs and preserves national identity.

History represents the experiences, actions, struggles, and cultural practices through which communities understand their collective past. For national identity, historical memory is particularly important because it creates a sense of continuity between generations. The *Shahnameh* performs this function through its extensive narrative of kings, heroes, conflicts, dynasties, victories, defeats, and national struggles. Although the Shahnameh contains accounts of historical figures and dynasties, it should also be understood as an epic literary narrative rather than a strictly factual chronicle. Its significance lies partly in the way literature organizes and transmits collective memories of the Iranian past (Omidsalar & Daryaee, 2000).

The epic represents a comprehensive literary account of Iranian myths, cultural traditions, and historical memory, much of which Ferdowsi helped preserve and transmit to subsequent generations (MansourianSorkh-Geryeh, 2009: 79). Its narratives extend from mythological periods through successive generations of kings and heroes and into the Sasanian period. Through this extensive narrative framework, later generations are connected with an imagined and remembered common past.

Historical and legendary figures are particularly important in this process. Characters such as Kay Khosrow, Rustam, and Sohrab function beyond their individual narratives. They become cultural symbols through which values such as courage, loyalty, sacrifice, honor, and belonging are communicated. Their stories consequently contribute to the construction of a shared cultural memory.

National struggles constitute another important aspect of the historical dimension of identity. Many narratives involve conflict, resistance, injustice, foreign threats, and the defense of the homeland. These narratives create a common framework through which collective belonging and resistance are represented.

History and religion are also closely interconnected. Religious traditions, particularly those associated with ancient Iranian culture, are embedded within historical narratives. Consequently, historical memory in the *Shahnameh* simultaneously preserves cultural, religious, moral, and political dimensions of identity.

The historical narratives also provide opportunities for social and moral reflection. Through stories of rulers, heroes, conflicts, and political failures, Ferdowsi presents examples of justice and injustice, wisdom and foolishness, loyalty and betrayal, and legitimate and illegitimate rule. History therefore functions not simply as a record of the past but as a moral, cultural, and symbolic resource (Parvin, 2022: 125).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the *Shahnameh* functions as a repository of collective historical memory. Through the preservation of shared narratives, characters, struggles, and cultural traditions, it connects later generations with an extensive cultural past and contributes to the continuity of Persian cultural identity.

Persian Language as a Component of National Identity

The third finding demonstrates that Persian language is a fundamental component of national and cultural identity in the *Shahnameh*. Persian is not merely the medium through which Ferdowsi communicates his stories; it is itself a repository of cultural memory and a means through which historical, religious, ethical, and literary traditions are transmitted.Persian has served as an important language of literary, intellectual, religious, philosophical, and cultural expression across a broad geographical area. Its literary heritage includes the works of major poets and scholars such as Ferdowsi, Nezami, Rumi, Saadi, Hafez, Farabi, Al-Biruni, Avicenna (IbnSina), Nasrallah Monshi, and AruziSamarqandi.Among these figures, Ferdowsi's role in the preservation and promotion of Persian is particularly significant. Through the composition of the *Shahnameh* in Persian, he demonstrated that the language could serve as a powerful literary medium for expressing complex historical, philosophical, ethical, and human ideas.Historical and literary discussions of the *Shahnameh* emphasize its role in the continuity of Persian literary culture. Through the epic, Ferdowsi transmitted cultural elements, beliefs, myths, and religious, ethical, and historical teachings to subsequent generations, thereby strengthening cultural continuity (MansourianSorkh-Geryeh, 2009: p.78).

The identity-forming function of Persian is particularly visible in Ferdowsi's own representation of his linguistic achievement:

> When this popular book has come to an end چو این نامور نامه آمد به بُن
> My words will spread across the world.ز من روی کشور شود پُر سخُن

>I have made the world like paradise with my speechجهـان کردهام از سـخن چون بهشـت
> No one sowed betterseeds of wordsthan this. ازین بیش تخم سـخن کس نکـشــت
> The built palaces may crumple and fall بنــاهــای آ بــاد گــردد خــراب
>By the rain and sun's shining call.ز باران و از تا بش آ فتاب
> For thirty years, I labored hardبسی رنـج بـردم در ایـن سـال سی
> To give the Persian language a renewed lifeعجم زنده کردم بدین پارسی
> Whoever has wisdom, faith and insightهرآنکس که دارد هش و رای و دین
> Will praise me after I have left from their sights.پـس از مـرگ بر مـن کنـد آ فـر یـن
> I will not die, for I livethrough my word نمیرم از این پس که من زنده ام
>The seeds of my words across lands are heardکه تخم سخن را پراگنده ام

These verses are particularly significant for understanding the relationship between language and cultural identity. Ferdowsi presents literary language as a means of achieving cultural continuity beyond the physical life of an individual. His statement that he will continue to live through his words reflects the relationship between language, literary memory, and cultural survival.In the *Shahnameh*, therefore, Persian functions not only as a medium for storytelling and legends but also as an important mechanism of cultural transmission. Through Persian, Ferdowsi transmitted myths, historical narratives, religious ideas, ethical principles, and cultural values to subsequent generations.The findings also indicate that Persian functions as a symbol of cultural continuity and resilience. Its literary use enabled cultural traditions to be preserved and disseminated across geographically and politically diverse Persian-speaking communities. Persian consequently operates simultaneously as a language, cultural repository, identity marker, and identity-maintenance mechanism.As Parvin (2022: 125) argues, Persian poetry and literature have contributed to cultural connection and have served as vehicles for transmitting moral, political, and cultural ideas. Persian literature has therefore played an important role in maintaining cultural continuity beyond particular political boundaries.Overall, the findings demonstrate that Persian in the *Shahnameh* is both the medium and substance of cultural identity. Through his literary achievement, Ferdowsi transformed Persian into a powerful means for preserving historical memory, cultural values, and collective identity.

The findings of this study demonstrate that Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* constructs and preserves national identity through three closely interconnected elements: religion, history, and Persian language. Rather than functioning independently, these elements reinforce one another and collectively provide a cultural framework through which Persian-speaking communities understand their shared heritage, values, and continuity.

Religion and National Identity

The findings indicate that religion contributes to national identity primarily through a shared system of moral and spiritual values. The *Shahnameh* does not simply present religious references as isolated theological statements. Instead, religious concepts are incorporated into narratives concerning rulers, heroes, justice, morality, loyalty, knowledge, and the struggle between good and evil.This finding is significant because it demonstrates that religion in the *Shahnameh* operates at both individual and collective levels. At the individual level, characters are evaluated according to virtues such as courage, loyalty, justice, wisdom, and moral responsibility. At the collective level, these values provide a cultural framework through which appropriate social and political behavior can be understood. The coexistence of pre-Islamic Iranian religious traditions and Islamic values is particularly important. Rather than representing identity as belonging exclusively to one historical religious period, the *Shahnameh* creates a long cultural continuum in which earlier Iranian traditions and later Islamic values become part of a broader historical and cultural narrative.Therefore, the findings suggest that religion

contributes to national identity through cultural and moral continuity rather than merely through religious affiliation. The religious dimension of the *Shahnameh* helps connect different historical periods within a broader cultural identity.

History and Collective Memory

The findings concerning history demonstrate that national identity depends heavily on collective memory. The *Shahnameh* preserves stories of kings, heroes, conflicts, victories, defeats, social values, and historical transitions. These narratives provide later generations with access to a remembered common past.This is significant because national identity requires more than geographical or political boundaries. It also depends upon a sense of shared historical experience. Through characters such as Rustam, Sohrab, and Kay Khosrow and through narratives of national struggle, the *Shahnameh* provides cultural symbols around which collective memory can be organized.The results further show that history in the *Shahnameh* is not presented merely as a chronological record. Historical and legendary narratives communicate moral and cultural values. Stories of rulers and heroes provide examples of justice, courage, loyalty, wisdom, sacrifice, betrayal, and resistance. Consequently, the historical dimension of national identity is simultaneously educational, moral, cultural, and symbolic.This finding helps explain why the *Shahnameh* can function as more than a literary narrative. It serves as a repository of collective memory and provides a narrative framework through which later generations can understand cultural origins and continuity (MansourianSorkh-Geryeh, 2009: 79).

Persian Language and Cultural Continuity

The findings regarding Persian language are especially significant because language provides the material means through which religion, history, and cultural values are transmitted.The *Shahnameh* demonstrates that language is not simply a neutral instrument. Ferdowsi's decision to compose a monumental literary work in Persian contributed to the preservation and prestige of Persian and enabled cultural materials to be transmitted across generations. Through the epic, Persian becomes a vehicle for historical memory, moral values, religious concepts, and cultural traditions.The significance of this finding becomes clearer when Persian is considered together with the other two components. Without language, historical memories would be more difficult to transmit; without language, religious and ethical values embedded in literary traditions would be less effectively preserved. Persian therefore operates as the connecting mechanism between historical memory and cultural values.This interpretation is consistent with the role attributed to Persian in the preservation of Persianate literary and cultural traditions. The *Shahnameh* helped demonstrate the capacity of Persian to express complex cultural, ethical, philosophical, and historical ideas, while its literary form enabled these ideas to remain accessible across generations.The findings consequently support the interpretation that language is both an identity marker and an identity-maintenance mechanism. Persian does not merely describe Persian cultural identity; it actively participates in preserving and transmitting it.

Recent research suggests that the Shahnameh continues to influence discussions of national identity among different Iranian religious and cultural communities, illustrating how literary heritage can acquire meanings beyond its original historical context (Beidollahkhani, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the reflection of national identity in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* through three principal dimensions: religion, history, and Persian language. The findings

demonstrate that the epic is not merely a collection of heroic and mythological narratives but also an important literary repository of cultural memory and identity.The first finding demonstrates that religion contributes to national identity through shared moral and spiritual values. The *Shahnameh* incorporates concepts such as divine authority, justice, morality, knowledge, loyalty, courage, and the struggle between good and evil. The coexistence of pre-Islamic Iranian traditions and Islamic values further establishes a sense of cultural continuity across historical periods.The second finding demonstrates that historical memory constitutes a central mechanism of identity formation. Through narratives of kings, heroes, national struggles, conflicts, and cultural transitions, the *Shahnameh* connects later generations with a shared cultural past. Figures such as Rustam, Sohrab, and Kay Khosrow function as cultural symbols through which values of courage, loyalty, sacrifice, honor, and belonging are transmitted.The third finding demonstrates that Persian language functions as both a cultural repository and an instrument of identity maintenance. Through his composition of the *Shahnameh* in Persian, Ferdowsi preserved and promoted a language capable of transmitting historical, religious, ethical, philosophical, and literary traditions. Persian consequently serves as a medium through which collective memory and cultural values are transmitted across generations.

Taken together, the findings show that religion, history, and Persian language cannot be treated as isolated components. They operate as mutually reinforcing dimensions of cultural identity. Religion provides moral and spiritual values, history preserves collective memory, and Persian provides the linguistic medium through which those values and memories survive.

Thus, the *Shahnameh* can be understood as an important literary and cultural document through which Persian-speaking communities have preserved aspects of their historical memory, cultural heritage, moral values, and linguistic identity. Its significance continues to extend beyond its literary form because it provides a framework for understanding the relationship between cultural memory, language, religion, and collective identity.

REFERENCES

Ali Khani, A. A. (2023). Religion and nationalism in Iran: From conflict to convergence. *National Studies Quarterly*, *24*(1).

Bertels, Y. E. (2007). *History of Persian-Tajik literature* (C. Izadi, Trans.). Zowar.

Beidollahkhani, A. (2024). Myth and epic as a non-religious revival of national identity: The role of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh in the development of secular national identity among Iranian minorities; studying Persian Twitter. *National Identities*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2024.2372597

Davis, D. (2015). Religion in the Shahnameh. *Iranian Studies, 48*(3), 337–348. https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2014.1000621

Encyclopaedia Iranica. (n.d.). *Šāh-nāma*. https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sah-nama/

Khaleghi-Motlagh, D. (1999). Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qāsem i. Life. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ferdowsi-i/

MansourianSorkh-Geryeh, H. (2009). National identity and cultural renaissance in the *Shahnameh*. *National Studies Quarterly, 10*(2).

Parvin, N. (2022). The link between ancient Iranian cultural elements and politics in the *Shahnameh*. *National Studies Quarterly, 23*(2).

Omidsalar, M., & Daryaee, T. (2000). Šāh-nāma i. The Šāh-nāma as a historical source. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sah-nama/i-historical-source/

The Holy Quran.