

## Studying the Concept of Dragon in Iranian Ancient Culture

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**Abstract:** Throughout the history, language of signs and symbols was a sort of common explanation between cultures and religions. It is the language of signs and symbols which connects different cultures in various regions of the world to each other. Iranian pure culture which is among greatest and oldest civilizations of the world, has been expressed through plenty of symbolic concepts. Therefore, Iranian art is a symbolic one. The study of symbols, especially those ones which had durations in art works and literary books of scholars and in poems of poets through many centuries, helps us to know about the aspects and elegances of our national culture and history. This research studies the dragon symbol and corresponding concepts in Iranian culture. It analyses this symbol in ancient Iranian art and literary works and post Islam area. It also studies this symbol in lexicons, Avesta, Shahnameh and Holly Quran. It seeks to find the answers for these questions: Does dragon have old records in the art and culture of this land? What meanings did the dragon symbol have in Iranian art and culture? Findings indicated that dragon symbol was among old symbols of antique area and it had durations in Iranian art and art works of post-Islam. From a conceptual and symbolic view, dragon had a devilish and diabolical concept and was known as a destructive force. The results indicated that in Iranian cultural, artistic and literary works dragon was a negative symbol and was standing against common people.

**Key words:** Symbol, dragon, Iran, Quran, Avesta, Shahnameh

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### INTRODUCTION

Symbols have been the clear language of Iranian art. Various symbols in Iranian arts have been among the ways of durability of these works. Symbols are signs which have vast meanings and various forms and expressions. Their meaning is much in attention and symbolic works are those artistic ones which have a symbolic concept.

Symbols have had an intimate relation with art in this land and they are being considered among sensible features of art of the land. To be symbolic is the main and sensible feature of Iranian art. In addition, to symbolic form of pre-Islam Iranian art, symbols are also used in Iranian art after Islam. There are numerous applications of symbols in architectural works of Persepolis, Sassanid works, miniature and other Iranian art works.

We have tried to study margins of miniatures in Divan of Jami. These margins added to the value of this manuscript and turned it into an immanent work.

The main question here is to know what the position of symbols in Iranian history and culture was. In other way by choosing four important symbols, "dragon, Simurgh, lion and horse" among numerous Iranian symbols, we tried to answer a main question that how far do the symbols root? Were they periodical or permanent

in Iranian history and culture? Regarding their own artistic positions what sensations and cultural emanations carried out or transferred by them to other generations throughout history? There are other questions need considerations, regarding the conceptual role of each of these quadruplet symbols in Iranian artistic and literary works (Pakbaz, 2002).

This research was done in library methods and field studies. There were referrals to Golestan Museum Palace, Hozeh Honari Library, Library of Teachers Training University, Library of University of Islamic Art of Tabriz, Zaka's House Library, etc.

### THE CONCEPT OF SYMBOL AND MYTH

"Morphologically the word myth has the same roots with historia which means history and story. Myth includes a holy and factual story or narration which happened in an eternity time and symbolically, it is a sort of allegory to the quality of the creator".

The expression "symbol" which in Persian is translated to "icon", generally means a "sign" and an indication from an object or issue that induces another object or issue" (Khosravifar and Chitsazan, 2011). This concept in Dekhoda's Lexicon was defined as "icon,

representative and emerger” in Amid’s Dictionary as “icon, front and representative” and in Moein’s Dictionary as “sign, icon and emanation”. To define symbol, it could be said that: a symbol is something which is used instead of something else and is a sign of it and imply that thing. In each society existing cultures have them main role in formation of symbols in that society. Therefore, they might carry different meanings in different societies. Thus, it might be said that most of symbols have relative concepts (Khosravifar and Chitsazan, 2011).

## DRAGON

In Jahangiry’s Dictionary dragon is defined in four major definitions:

- First, a snake, so big and giant. Because of being gigantic it is always in plural form
- Second, it is brave, valiant and angry
- Third, Ferdosi in his Shahnameh defines dragon as ruthless kings, mostly and especially for Zahak
- Fourth, a giant flag or banner”

Also, mythologically dragon is an amazing-body creature which is both a bird and a crawler. It is mostly depicted with wings of an eagle, paws of a lion, tail of a snake and a fiery breath. In Avesta language, dragon is called Azi in Pahlavi Az in Sanskrit Ahi and in Persian language it is called Azhi, Azhdar and Azhidahak. It is being said that dragon is like a stern and strict guard or like a lion it is the symbol of devil and evil attitudes. Actually, dragon is the guard of hidden treasures and to reach them, it is as an enemy which must be defeated. (Shovaliyeh, 2008).

**Dragon in Avesta:** Dragon is an Azhi which in Avesta comes with the word Dahak. Azhidahak is a combination of Azhi+Dahak, it means a biting dragon and a harmful one = Zahak. In Avesta, dragon is among devil creatures. After the creation of the first country by Ahouramazda which was Aria Vinch, Ahriman created a snake (dragon) which was a powered-pow creature and a harmful one. Then, Fereidoun killed it. A three-snout dragon, three-headed, six-eyed evil of lying, the most powerful lie which was made by devil and. In Avesta dragon was mentioned as a destructor and an eraser of the folk. “His name is among stupid-minded ones, it is a devil phenomenon. Azhi in Avesta and Ahi in Sanskrit mean snake mostly Azhi comes with the word “dahak” and their combination Azhidahak in Iranian mythology is Zahak. It is used as snake and dragon”. Azhidahak is a predatory devil and it is the most powerful creature



Fig. 1: Dragon in Avesta

made by devil to destruct and erase folks and people. A three-snout, three-headed and six-eyed devil with variety of agilities (ibid, 10, Labyrinths of Mysteries) (Fig. 1).

Dragon is being equaled to Zahak and in Avesta, Zahak is the most specified dragon like human. Indeed, he is a hideous and terrible dragon, who likes his brother in vadaha (Visho Rupeii) steals three cow’s heads. Unification of dragon with Zahak (the tyrant king in Avesta) recalls Zahak’s long oppression which caused him to turn into a devil a dragon and adapt his characteristic with the tyrant mood of dragon. His shoulders were places of growing for dragons and snakes which feed from the brain of human beings. In Avesta, Fereydoun was mentioned as a dragon killer who fights with Zahak’s three-headed dragon. Fereydoun’s dragon killing power accompanies his sorcery and medical talents. This enables him to transfer himself into a form of a dragon and test his children.

**Dragon in Shahnameh:** In Shahnameh dragon-shouldered is an expression for Zahak (snake-shouldered): we will not please Zahak. That dirty foul dragon-shouldered man. In Shahnameh, dragon is a symbol of uncleanness and foulness (a creature that stops the water from spreading). It was considered as one of devil forces and the enemy of Creation. It says, “Once, Zahak presented one hundred horses, one thousand cows and ten thousand sheep to Nahid and requested her to vent the earth from people and populations. This was his perpetual wish”. Ferdousi considers killing a dragon as a social duty and a Godly issue and presents dragon killer heroes as a benefactor savior” (Fig. 2).

Against dragon’s “evil force” there was always is benefactor and heroic force to vanish this devil

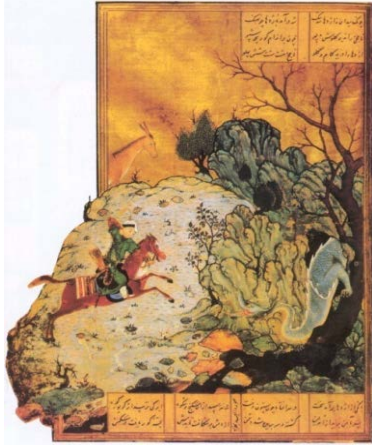


Fig. 2: Dragon in Shahnameh

phenomenon. Dragon killing was common in myths. This hero and benefactor force was always a Godly and national man, who with his divine forces could defeat the dragon and worship the God after his victory”. “Fight of heroes with dragon is for the benefactor for people and helping them which both are among divine features” (Ibid, 133, dragon in Myths) Victorious hero in Babylon is called Mardook in Greece as Zeus and Apollo and in Iran as Fereydoun, Saam, Rostam. Rostam in third phase goes to fight with dragon and Isfandiyar kills dragon in Touran. Dragon killing icons are earthy models of solar eclipse and lunar eclipse, myths from drought and dominance of the Winter.

In Shahnameh and other mythological and literary works, dragon is a devil like and wicked and cranky creature. It is sometimes hidden and sometimes revealed and sometimes appears in other different faces: sometimes a half-human and half-snake face and sometimes in face of other animals and another time as winds”.

You can find dragons in various faces in Shahnameh and other prose and poetry texts: cow-like dragon, worm-like dragon, wolf-like dragon and human-like dragon. Zahahk is the most specific human-like dragon, whose name was linked with dragon. In many mythological texts, know him as the dragon itself”. The dragon as an icon of a volcano: the corresponding dragon in all Shahnameh, Avesta and other sources is the volcanic mountain.

**Dragon in verses and stories:** Since, dragon is the symbol of devil and evil, Quran also knows Satan with such characteristics. In Holly Quran, dragon has the titles of a snake. In Quran, it talks about the Adam and Eve story and their repulsion from heaven, it talks of two of their enemies. Tabari history narrates this story as “because



Fig. 3: Islamic mysticism dragon

they committed sins and The God repulsed them from Paradise and withhold his blessings and welfare from them. Then, they descended to earth with their two enemies satan and sanke and rod of mooses: in Quran, verse 107 of A’araf and verse 69 of Taha, it talks about dragon and rod of mooses. “Then, mooses threw his rod and suddenly, certainly and undoubtedly it became a dragon”. (A’araf) “then, we commanded he to throw what he had in his right hand as you throw it would become a dragon to swallow the creatures of magicians” and “then mooses threw his rod on the earth. It became a dragon and swallowed all magic of the magicians” (Taha).

In Islamic stories, dragon has two different faces, sometimes as an enemy creature and sometimes as a divine creature. In addition in Islamic mysticism dragon is mentioned as an excellent allegory. The first face of dragon in Islamic stories is related to heaven snake which aims the devil and causes Adam and Eve to eat the fruit or wheat and then, they are repulsed from the paradise”. However in mystic stories and narrations, sometimes dragon is an expression and allegory of obscenities or hell creatures and represents the sufferings of the guilty and the limbo. Moreover, sometimes it indicates the greatness of Sufi scholars. Abu Hamed Mohammad Ghazali in Elixir of Happiness, regarding the grave suffering and its representation as a dragon, writes; “the Prophet said: the suffering for the unbeliever in grave includes ninety nine dragons to be dominant on him, until doomsday. In addition insightful people have seen these dragons with their own eyes. This dragon is a combination of self traits and the number of his heads is as the number of his bad deeds. His nature is of love of the world and then, the heads are driven as the number of those bad deeds (Fig. 3).



Fig. 4: Dragon in other nations

**Dragon in other nations:** “In fictions all over the world but China, where dragon is a peaceful creature, it is a symbol of filthy and foul forces. It stops water from spreading and wants to immerge sun and moon. Therefore, to save the world, he must be erased. This concept of dragon as a main source of devil force and an enemy maker is abundant in religions and literatures” (Fig. 4).

“In West, dragon is generally a symbol of devil and evil. In East, especially in China where he has an ancient ancestry, he is considered as a benefactor creature” (Hall, 2011).

“In literatures of nations, dragon is a symbol of authority, crisis, cloud, oppression injustice, drought, rainlessness, enmity of truth, idolatry, ignorance, piracy, sea, rain and water”.

“In Japanese mythology dragon (snake) wants a sacrifice”. In Chinese mythology, dragon is a guard of pearl which is a symbol of kinship treasure”. “In China in a story related to DiAng area, so called pearl story and also in zig-fraid’s myth, it is being declared that the treasure being guarded by dragon is immortality”.

However in Chinese and Celt culture, “dragon as a heavens power, creative and moderator is naturally a symbol of emperor” (Mazandarani, 1998).

Symbolic expression of Iranian art concepts has helped to the expression and spreading of Iranian literature, poetry and mythology. Iranian concepts and mythology are absorbable in different miniature books and in carpets figures and symbolic concepts of Iranian carpets. Thus, two examples of symbolic concepts of dragon are given in Fig. 5.



Fig. 5: Symbolic concepts of dragon

## CONCLUSION

In every society, arts and cultures are expressions of people’s views, believes and attitudes. Expressing these concepts in different and mutual languages like symbols and myths is popular. Iranian culture is an expression of people’s traditions, costumes and believes. Symbolic language has helped to the expression of valuable national and religious concepts in Iran. Various symbolic languages were popular between people which its common examples are in inscriptions. Among them are concepts like lotus, animal concepts like lion, dragon, horse, etc. In other words, miniatures of inscriptions had a great role in transfer of these concepts to recent generations. Working on these concepts helps to more understanding and growth of Iranian cultural bases.

Meanwhile, we have tried to study pictorial concept of dragon in Iranian culture. Dragon symbol is among old ones which had great status is post-Islamic area of Iranian art. It was also applied in inscriptions. According to resources, dragon is like a strict guard or as a symbol of evil and satanic attitudes. In fact, dragon is the guard of hidden treasures. To reach these treasures, dragon is an enemy which must be defeated. In Avesta, dragon is among evil creatures. It has satanic and evil concepts and is known as a destructive and eraser force. In Shahnameh, dragon is the symbol of filth and impurity (He stops water from spreading) and is among main enemies of the creation. This concept in Shahnameh and other literary works is as an evil and satanic being and emanates in various faces. Sometimes in face of a half-human and half-snake and the other time as other animals and sometimes emanates in the wind.

In addition in religious sources dragon is a symbol of devil and evil as he has such qualities in Holly Quran. In Quran, it talks about the Adam and Eve story and their repulsion from heaven; it talks of two of their enemies. Tabari history narrates a story that since they committed sins and the God repulsed them from paradise and



Fig. 6: Cultural work dragon in Iran



Fig. 8: Literary works dragon in Iran



Fig. 7: Artistic works dragon in Iran

withhold his blessings and welfare from them. Then, they descended to earth with their two enemies satan and snake.

Finally, it must be said that in Iranian cultural, artistic and literary works dragon always has a negative symbol and stands against the folk and people (Fig. 6-8).

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