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Rostam's Fight with the White Dīv in the Context of the Primeval Myth of the "Rain Shaman". Theory of Polish Researcher Maria Składankowa

Joanna Szklarz¹ 

Abstract

In the 1980s, Polish researcher Maria Składankowa promoted in her publications a theory stating that the representatives of the Sistani family described in Ferdowsi's Šāh-nāma were reflections of the rainy and sunny steppe shamans. The four main representatives of this lineage were said to alternately represent these particular shamans beginning with the primordial and rainy shaman personified by Sam and ending with the solar shaman in the form of Sohrab. Another rain shaman according to Składankowa was to be Rostam. This article aims to introduce Składankowa's theory to the international research community and to subject it to verification. The battle between Rostam and White Dīv, which was the seventh trial in Rostam's cycle of seven trials, was used for verification. This is a clash between two national heroes and the circumstances of this battle blur the boundaries between what is commonly understood as good and as evil. Thus, this is an example that perfectly demonstrates Składankowa's theory of rejecting religious notions of good and evil and focusing on the primeval connection between man and nature when it was man's greatest ally and enemy. Neither Rostam nor White Dīv, according to Składankowa's theory, are therefore completely good or completely evil, like any element of nature, which can be a life-giving or destructive force. Identified with good forces, the sun warms the earth and causes vegetation but can also cause drought and the death that follows. Identified with evil forces, rain can cause floods, but without it, vegetation will die. There is no absolute good or absolute evil in nature. Nor is there one in the battling Rostam and White Dīv. Ferdusi's description of this combat in Šāh-nāma clearly goes back to this primeval myth leaving the story universal.

Keywords: Ferdowsi, Šāh-nāma, Rostam, White Dīv, Myth, Rain Shaman.

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Introduction

Looking at *Šāh-nāma. The Book of Kings* by Firdowsī one cannot escape the impression that it is one of the most influential works of world literature. The influence of this monumental epic reached not only across vast geographic areas, but also through its history of more than a thousand years (date of completion of the work 1010) (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2012). Divided into three parts (mythical, heroic, and historical), the *Šāh-nāma* has provided insight into the history of pre-Islamic Iran and its culture for ten centuries. It has also become an object of interest to researchers around the world, including Poland. One of the most prominent researchers of this epic as well as of the entire Iranian culture was Maria Składankowa (1931-2017), who in her publications promotes the theory that the representatives of the Sistan family are the counterparts of the sun and rain shamans, whose traces can be found in the culture of the Indo-European community. She thus reveals the unusually long persistence of certain myths, which is due to their original core, woven from the most primal human connection with nature. Składankowa's works have not yet been published in foreign languages, nevertheless her theory is extremely interesting and worth showing to the international research community. The purpose of my article is to introduce Składankowa's theory and its verification on the basis of Rostam's struggle with the White Div. The topic of this struggle was already covered by me in an article published in the context of good and evil in monotheistic religions (Szklarz, 2017). In the current article, I will skip this aspect by focusing solely on the mythical layer and Składankowa's theory.

In the article, I will also use the works of other Polish researchers to show

the context of the research on which Składankowa relied.

The theory finds strong connotations between the Scythian origins of the Sistani lineage, the myths of that culture and how Rostam and his relatives in the direct line are depicted in *Šāh-nāma*. Rudāba, who comes from the Zahāk lineage, is said to be not only a biological mother of Rostam but also a symbolic mother in Rostam's initiation ritual myth (Składankowa: 1989; 192-93) and the cycle of Rostam's Seven Fasts itself is a clear reference to the seven cycles of the moon of the summer months (Składankowa: 1989; 198-200). Rostam himself, as Składankowa emphasizes in her argument, is repeatedly referred to as a dragon, who is a symbol of the steppe rain shaman and even walks under a dragon banner (Składankowa: 1989; 193). Thus, he is a perfect reflection of the symbolism of the rain shaman.

Myth is a part of the culture, a cultural text (Żółkiewski, 1998: 29), the existence of which is inherent in every civilization. It is the first answer to fundamental questions about the origin of man and the purpose of his existence, about the origin of the state, the existence of gods, and ancient kings. They are the essence of the answers to the questions of who we are and where we came from as humans and as a nation. They are the ones that give national identity and build the culture of subsequent generations around them. Every nation and community has its own myths "Mit bowiem jest rodzajem utartej ścieżki; po niej myśl biegnie w sposób naturalny, koleiną, w którą raz wpadłszy, z trudem najwyższym jedynie może się wyrwać."¹ (Składankowa, 1989:

¹ "For myth is a kind of beaten path; along it, thought runs naturally, a rut into which, having once fallen, it can only break free with su-

5) Many myths are so old that it is impossible to trace their origins. We can only trace them further into the past until all traces are blurred in the darkness of the uncharted times.

Deciphering a myth is a challenge for the researcher because each myth is filled with allegories whose meaning has been lost by the passage of time and the researcher can only move in the realm of symbols and codes. *Šāh-nāma*, as a text that is both a chronicle of events and a poetic work referring to a reality familiar to the viewer, uses a system of cultural signs understandable to an Iranian living in the 11th century. (Składankowa 2015: 8). Thus, the reading and interpretation of such an old text may clearly differ between researchers due to the adopted research context. In this article, I will analyze the battle between Rostam and White Div in the heroic section of the Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* and its participants.

Myth, historical truth and *licentia poetica*

Šāh-nāma embraces the myths of Iran as part of the chronicle describing the history of the nation. It thus affirms the importance of their existence for the continuity of traditions and the explanation of certain historical phenomena. Oscillating between historical fact, historical legend, and a pure mythical layer, Ferdowsi has created a work that is intriguing but also rich in research material for subsequent generations, whose interpretation may differ significantly. The poet neatly juggles between the historical knowledge available to him, oral messages on the edge of folk tales and poetry, mythology, and his own creative invention. Ferdowsi's work, then, is a neat blend of what was considered fact with works of a more artistic nature. This was preme difficulty." All translations from Polish are made by me, unless otherwise indicated.

neatly summarized by the Polish translator of *Šāh-nāma*, Władysław Dulęba, in the preface to the extensive translation of this poem into Polish:

Należy tu jednak podkreślić od razu, że żaden z tych rodzajów nie występuje nigdy w czystej postaci. Zawsze tu mamy zespolenie pierwiastków mitu i historii, tej sprawiedliwej, przez wieki tradycji przefiltrowanej historii, która powiada nam o przeszłości więcej nieraz niż owa "prawdziwa", dobrze przez naukowców przebadana. A przy tym żadnej relacji nie pozostawia Ferdousi bez swego poetyckiego komentarza.¹ (Dulęba 1981: 10).

We encounter a similar problem to distinguish between historical truth and fiction when trying to determine the truthfulness of a character's existence or to attribute his name to a historical figure. And here again Dulęba poetically summarizes: "...postaciom historycznym dorobiono cechy nadprzyrodzone, bohaterów mitów przykuto do trudów i niedoli ziemskich. Dlatego też tak trudno nam ich dzisiaj rozróżnić – jak mak od popiołu."² (Dulęba 1981: 11). Składankowa adds that Ferdowsi's *The Persian Book of Kings* "wyrosła z najstarszych i najtrwałszych tradycji Irańczyków; jej nowopierski kształt jest wynikiem wielowiekowego

¹ "It should be emphasized here at once, however, that none of these types ever occurs in pure form. Here we always have a fusion of the elements of myth and history, that just, through centuries of tradition filtered history, which tells us more about the past sometimes than the «true», well studied by scientists. And at the same time, no account is left by Ferdousi without his poetic commentary."

² "...historical figures were given supernatural traits, the heroes of myths were chained to earthly hardships and miseries. That is why it is so difficult for us today to distinguish them - like poppy from ash."

procesu przetwarzania tradycji narodowej, cykliczacji starych podań i legend o bohaterach i układania ich w takiej kolejności, by przybrały kształt kroniki.” (Składankowa, 1995: 121). These “old legends and legends of heroes” have seeped into human consciousness to such an extent that only the appearance of Es-kandar (historically Alexander of Macedonia) begins the third, historical part of the epic, which is still not completely faithful to historical facts. The earlier parts of the Šāh-nāma i.e. the mythical and heroic are almost entirely Ferdowsi’s own composition with respect and a high degree of faithfulness based on long-established oral tradition (Machalski, 1970: 14) and his own imagination.

Składankowa exploring the mythical layer of Šāh-nāma went back to Scythian times and even the culture of the Indo-European community. It was in Scythian myths that she saw the origins of the prototypes for the members of the Sistan family (Składankowa, 1983: 188-189, Składankowa, 2015: 24-25). Rostam as a symbolic and mythical hero is supposed to have its roots even earlier, in the transitional period between hunter-gatherer and pastoral cultures. Echoes of his persona can even be found in the culture of the Eastern Slavs. Składankowa argues that “nie wydaje się rezultatem prostego przekształcenia fonetycznego czy błędu nazywanie słowiańskiego odpowiednika Rustama niekiedy Jarosławem czy Jarosławem – bo z latem (*jar*) ten typ bohatera jest związany”² (Składankowa, 1983:

196). Rostam’s connection to summer also comes through the person of his father, Zāl, sometimes identified with the god Mithra. In Šāh-nāma Esfandiār speaks of Rostam’s father in these words: “I have heard that Zal is a magician, that he streaks out his hands toward the sun, and in his mantic fury he surpasses all other magicians...” (Ferdowsi, 2007: 411). So he is like a priest, a sorcerer, or - reaching back to the nomadic period - a shaman who performs rituals. Abandoned by his father Sam, the infant was raised by the simorǧ, a mythical fiery bird (Ferdowsi, 2007: 63-64), which gave him another characteristic placing him in the zone of symbolism of light, sun, fire and summer. Rostam, through his father, also has some ties to the simorǧ. It was her magic feather that helped him come into the world during a difficult confinement (Ferdowsi, 2007: 104-106), and it healed his and Rakhsh’s wounds suffered during the battle with Esfandiār (Ferdowsi, 2007: 405-410).

According to Składankowa, the main representatives of the Sistan lineage alternately represent two types of shamans inherent in the steppe tribes of Southwest Asia. One type is the solar type identified with light, day, sun, life, goodness, and the bird (simorǧ). The other is the rain type standing in opposition and associated with darkness, night, the moon, death, and the dragon. The former group unquestionably includes Zāl. His grandson, Sohrāb, also possesses similar characteristics and can easily be counted among the light shamans (Szklarz, 2018: 103). Thus, the group of dark rain shamans will include Sam and Rostam, characters who are more primal, as if arising from unpredictable nature itself (Składankowa, 1983: 92-96).

phonetic transformation or an error to call the Slavic equivalent of Rustam sometimes Jarosław or Jarosław - because with summer (*jar*) this type of hero is associated”

¹ grew out of the oldest and most enduring traditions of the Iranian people; its New Persian shape is the result of a centuries-long process of processing national traditions, cycling old tales and legends about heroes and arranging them in such an order as to take the shape of a chronicle.”

² “it does not seem to be the result of a simple

On the subject of Rostam's dark legacy

The focus of this article is on Rostam, a hero who, despite his strong ties to the sun, is nevertheless a rain shaman. He owes this to his mother's heritage. Rudāba was, after all, a descendant of Zahāk, a king who underwent literal demonization (Firdowsi, 2007: 11). While in monotheistic religions where the duality of good and evil is a given, in tribal traditions linked primarily to nature, this boundary is blurred. One can confidently agree with the statement that "Charakter deszczowego szamana mógł wiązać się ze smoczą symboliką, tak jak w wypadku czarnych szamanów Azji Północnej oraz planetników południowej Słowiańszczyzny, którzy walcząc ze żmijami powietrznymi sami występują jako żmijowie." (Składankowa, 1989: 193). It is the heritage of Zahāk's blood that makes Rostam a hero strong enough to face the demon that defeated the army of Iran and its king, Kay Kāvus. Krasnowolska concludes Składankowa's theory: "...she perceives the alternating sequence of «good» and «bad» characters in the story as the trace of the year's primitive division in two contrasted parts: summer belonging to Jamšid and winter to Zohāk, or to their functional counterparts." (Krasnowolska, 1998: 91). Składankowa finds in them a clear connection with "dark shamanism" placed in opposition to "light shamanism" (represented by Rustam's father, Zāl), which are antagonistic only in appearance, since both aspects represented by them are necessary for the proper functioning of nature.

Rustam is a positive hero, unlike his

father, however, he is not a completely good hero. He makes mistakes and pays for them. He lets himself be carried away by anger and pride and suffers the consequences. He is more human than his father, who is a luminous, practically perfect hero. Despite his superhuman size and superhuman strength, he is more like an ordinary man struggling with his inner darkness. Rostam is a hero who is neither white nor black, completely good or evil. A hero who is needed in the given times.

On the subject of the White Dīv

In *Key Kavus's War Against the Demons of Mazanderan* chapter when Iranian troops ravage the land they have invaded, the White Dīv is summoned by the king of Mazanderan to help. He is the only hope of saving the people of that kingdom (Ferdousi, 2007, 148). Using sorcery along with his powerful army, the White Dīv defeats the army of Kay Kāvus and takes the blinded king and his soldiers captive. In *The Seven Trials of Rostam* series, he will become the final, main opponent of the son of Zāl, the "seventh trial." He will ultimately die at the hands of the Persian hero.

Looking at the participants in the deadly combat between the White Dīv and Rostam from the perspective of good and evil, Rostam, the hero of Iran stands on the side of good, the White Dīv represents evil (Szklarz, 2017). After all, Rostam is Iran's greatest heroes and, as such, had to stand on the good side. However, the very war that Kay Kāvus waged against Mazanderan was not a justifiable war (Elgavish, 2008: 37-38; Szklarz, 2022). Kay Kāvus invaded a peaceful country for the sake of satisfying his own ambition. The depiction of right and wrong blurs in the face of an unprovoked invasion, even if the attacking side is "our" side, as in the

¹ "The nature of the rain shaman may have been related to dragon symbolism, as in the case of the black shamans of North Asia and the fawns of southern Slavonia, who, when fighting air vipers, appear as vipers themselves."

case of Šāh-nāma it is Iran's troops. Kay Kāvus is warned by his vassals, including Zāl, not to undertake this expedition:

Forget the conquest of Mazanderan,
No king has ever thought of such a plan.
These chieftains are your subjects, but like you
They are the slaves of God in all they do.
Don't shed their noble blood, or out of greed
Plant in the ground ambition's evil seed,
Because it grows into a tree whose roots
And lofty branches nourish loathsome fruits

(Ferdowsi, 2007: 146).

King's military defeat is a testament that this war had no sanctification from the Creator. Kay Kāvus' hubris was punished at the hands of the White Dīv. In such a reading of the expedition, the White Dīv can be seen as a positive character, a hero who rushes to the rescue of his king and his subjects without delay, who achieves a daring victory over the invading armies, and takes the foreign troops captive. These are undoubtedly the qualities of a positive hero.

Yet dīv itself as a species is viewed negatively in Iranian culture. In her research, Zahra Faridany-Akhavan describes the devas, the very concept of the dīv as a supernatural being, evil by nature because it comes from Ahriman, is not denied by the author¹. Given the Zoroastrian background dīv are:

DĒW (demon) in the Pahlavi books. The concept of the dēw (invariably written with the Aram. ideogram ŠDYA, more often in the pl. ŠDYA'n', often to be translated "demons" even in the sg.) was central to the theology and ritual of Zoroastrianism; as Émile Benveniste (p. 41) first observed, the term vi.daēva- ("rejecting the daēvas") qualified the faithful Zoroastrian with the same force

as mazdayasna- ("Mazdā worshiper") and zaraθuštri- (Zoroastrian). Rejection of the dēws is linked to Zoroaster's reform, and, as personifications of every imaginable evil, they are mentioned throughout Zoroastrian religious books. (Williams, 1994)

Focusing more on tradition and folklore, we find a slightly different definition of these creatures:

DĪV (demon, monster, fiend), often confused with gūl (orge, ghoul) and jinn in both folk and literary traditions (Massé, *Croyances*, pp. 352-53; Qazvīnī, pp. 383-95), expresses not only the idea of "demon," but also that of "ogre," "giant," and even "Satan." The translators of Ṭabarī's commentary render the Arabic eblīs, (Satan) as dīv (I, p. 32, II, pp. 307, 446, 461, 471, 543, III, p. 551), while at the same time translating Arabic jinn into Persian dīv or parī. This indicates a confusion between the notions of jinn and gūl on the one hand, and dīv and parī on the other (Ṭabarī, II, pp. 458, 543, III, p. 552). The same confusion is found in the Šāh-nāma, where not only every demon, but also eblīs is sometimes called dīv rather than ahrīman (II, ed. Khaleghi, pp. 50-51, 95).² (Omidsalar, 1995)

White Dīv, however, is an exception to this characteristic. Just as Rostam is not a fully "white" character, for he carries inherited traits of evil from his mother's lineage, the White Dīv is not unequivocally evil, for he possesses good traits. Contrary to the general characterization of the genre, White Dīv is honorable, and the cruelty of his vindictiveness leaves room for discussion, as he responds to the unprovoked invasion of the Iranian king and the cruelty of their troops has

¹ Zahra Faridany-Akhavan *Shahnameh Stories: Introduction to Dīvs*, <https://www.academia.edu/video/Gkxx6k>

² Omidsalar M. (1995), *Dīv*: [w:] "Encyclopaedia Iranica." Vol. VII, Fasc. 4, pp. 428-431.

the hallmarks of punishment appropriate to the crime. The White Dīv inflicts the following punishment: "The Persian king and his army will never look on the bright sun and moon again. I have not killed them, but only that they will know how pain differs from pleasure. They will die slowly, groaning in despair, and no one will pay any attention to their complaints." (Ferdowsi, 2007, 149). His words are not emotional. They are not full of cursing and hatred, which we can see in the earlier statements of Kay Kāvus ready to slaughter the entire population of Mazanderan (Ferdowsi, 2007: 146, 148) His behavior is prudent, like the behavior of a sage who can coldly assess the situation and draw appropriate conclusions. Thus, it is difficult to regard the White Dīv's orders as malicious and vindictive, or impulsive. The White Dīv thus possesses qualities in opposition to those of its species. On the contrary, he appears to us as a noble character who, if he had not belonged to the tribe of divs, could have been a positive hero of the epic.

Clash of national heroes - the fight between Rostam and White Dīv

Kay Kāvus' expedition to Mazanderan took a tragic turn. The king and his knights were blinded and taken prisoner by the formidable Mazanderan commander, White Dīv. Rostam, an Iranian hero from the lineage of heroes, was secretly summoned by his king for help. Only this young, daring hero could save the defeated ruler.

This is the context of the battle, which is Rostam's seventh trial in the Seven Trials series. The most difficult trial and the only one that caused the young man's fear of defeat and death. "If I survive today, I shall live forever" (Ferdowsi, 2007: 162) the Iranian hero said to himself. Literally, a few sentences earlier the author had written: "Rostam's heart was

filled with fear, and he thought that this might be one situation from which he would not escape." (Ferdowsi, 2007: 161). Indeed, Rostam's opponent was not an ordinary, average demon but the White Dīv, who defeated the army of Iran and imprisoned its king and the first moment when Rostam saw him in the cave of the mountain could indeed fill him with terror.

He rubbed his eyes and peered into the pit's darkness, and made out a mountain there, hiding the pit behind its bulk. It was the color of night, its hair was white like snow, and the world seemed to filled with its statue and breadth. It moved on Rostam like a black mountain, wearing an iron helmet, its arms protected by iron armor (Ferdowsi, 2007: 161).

The majestic and intimidating appearance of the demon, however, did not stop the young hero from completing his mission. At stake was not only his life and his honor but the freedom and sight of his king. Rostam attacked immediately using his sword. He had the advantage of surprise and the time of day (noon), which was the demons' time of rest. Although "The force of his blow severed a leg at the thigh" (Ferdowsi, 2007: 162) the demon counter-attacked. Both opponents knew that this was a fight to the death, so it was extremely fierce. Soon, however, victory belonged to Rostam, and "the world seemed like a sea of blood." (Ferdowsi, 2007: 162).

Rostam's victory over White Dīv became a turning point not only for the fame of the young hero, but also for the fate of the entire war. Kay Kāvus was saved and Mazanderan, the land of demons and mages, was defeated. In the clash of two national heroes, the winner was the one whose ally was God (Ferdowsi, 2007: 161).

The two heroes of the battle have much in common. They are described as

formidable giants. Both possess superhuman strength. White Dīv is a supernatural being, and Rostam's birth was also accompanied by a supernatural factor as described earlier. So, in a duel, two warriors of similar stature, similar position, social function, and the confidence of their ruler clash. The White Dīv already has an established position and reputation, of which he is well aware. Fighting a battle with an Iranian youngster, he thought: "Even if I escape from the clutches of this dragon, with a leg severed and my skin lacerated, I shall have no authority left in Mazanderan with either the nobility or their subjects." (Firdowsi, 2007: 162) White Dīv is also palpably older, and more prudent, with his behavior clearly indicating a certain wisdom resulting from age. This is emphasized by Faridany-Akhavan, pointing out that in certain illustrations White Dīv is shown with the qualities of a sage, and his name is taken not from his skin color, but from the color of his fur, which is a sign of wisdom¹ (Faridany-Akhavan,²). Rostam, meanwhile, is just beginning his adulthood. The seven trials are the beginning of his journey to becoming Iran's greatest hero. He is impulsive, reckless, and inexperienced. He also believes very strongly in his own strength and invincibility. He even exudes his youthful bravado. And he ultimately defeats the older, more experienced White Dīv. Just as summer overcomes winter.

¹ The examples she gives are "The White Div blinds Key Kavus" from the Šāh-nāma of Shah Esmā'il II from 1576 and "The White Div blinds Key Kavus" from 1587.

² Faridany-Akhavan: *Shahnameh Stories: The Seven Labours of Rostam; Haft Khān e Rostam: The Invasion of Māzandarān* <https://www.academia.edu/video/1qMBd1>

Conclusion

Reading a myth as a cultural text due to the evolution of language and semantics is a difficult task. The clues we consider appropriate may not be in line with the original intention of the creator. After all, myth evolves, absorbs elements of foreign cultures into itself, and itself becomes an element absorbed by foreign cultures. The reading of a myth is therefore often linked to the context in which the reader places the material under study.

Składankowa's theory of the Sistani lineage as representatives of the "sun" and "rain shamans" is just one possible interpretation. However, it is intriguing, rich, provides a starting point for further research in this context and, above all, is valid, as confirmed by my analysis of Rostam's struggle with the White Dīv. Rostam clearly bears the serpentine (dragon) qualities of a steppe rain shaman. Because of his origin, among other things, he is clearly connoted with a dragon. However, he is a positive figure, a hero who saves the honor of Iran and its ruler and in the future will become the greatest hero known in Iranian culture. He is like an element of nature, neutral in his nature but determined by his actions and the effects they produce.

The rain shaman is a relic of nomadic tribal culture. Rostam, whose lineage came from Sistan, whose roots we can easily trace back to the Scythian civilization, is the last of this type of hero in Šāh-nāma. The Sistan family disappears with the end of the heroic part. The historical part that follows is already dedicated not to those rooted in a mysterious past shrouded in myth, but takes on the hallmarks of an actual chronicle dedicated to historically confirmed kings.

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