Introduction

The epic, in the classical formulation of the three genres, referred exclusively to the "poetic epic." It was of course in verse, rather lengthy and tended to be episodic. It dealt in elevated language with heroic figures (human heroes and deities) whose exploits affected whole civilizations or even, by implication, the whole of mankind. Its lengthiness was properly a response to the magnitude of the subject material (Martin 9). Within the original sense of the term, critics tend to distinguish between primary (traditional) and secondary (literary) epics, while some scholars speak of tertiary epic as well. Primary epics are direct expressions of the culture they depict, composed orally for performance before an audience. Among these are the Iliad and Odyssey that the Greeks ascribed to Homer; the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf; the French Chanson de Roland and the Spanish Poema del Cid in the twelfth century; and the thirteenth-century German epic Nibelungenlied. Secondary epics are written compositions that use the primary form as a model. Of this kind is Virgil's Latin poem the Aeneid, which later served as the chief model for Milton's literary epic Paradise Lost. Abrams believes that, “The literary epic is certainly the most ambitious of poetic enterprises, making immense demands on a poet's knowledge, invention, and skill to sustain the scope, grandeur, and authority of a poem that tends to encompass the world of its day and a large portion of its learning” (77).

Regarding categorization of the Persian epic Shah Nameh as primary or secondary, there is an ongoing controversy among scholars which returns to the sources of Shah Nameh. Ferdowsi's epic is probably based on an earlier prose version which itself was based on a much older source Khvatay- Namak, that reached back to Sassanid dynasty. There is also without doubt a strong influence of oral literature since the style of the Shah Nameh shows characteristics of both written and oral literature (Shamisa 57). In this regard John Miles Foley holds that “the much-discussed Persian national epic called the Shahnama, apparently reached its present canonical form through the work of a poet named Ferdowsi but which certainly owes an enormous debt to prior and contemporary oral traditions” (206). As Ulrich Marzolph observes,

…the relationship between written and oral tradition is further complicated by the fact that the oral performers of the Shahnama-recitations often employed as a written medium
small booklets or rolls of paper (tumar). These tumars did not contain a text to be recited verbatim but rather supplied a comprehensive outline to be memorized (282).

In the prologue of some stories, Ferdowsi declares that he has heard this story from a dihghan or says that he narrates the story from the name-ye bastan (an old source).

**Significance of the Study**

Certain patterns and themes are present in all epics of the world. These constitute the normative and definitive features of the genre. Most epics reflect these common features. Yet, every genre contains within it the possibility of destabilizing or transgression of the norms. Only then can generic borders be extended. There have therefore emerged through the ages many epic types in poetry and prose which illustrate the exploration of new structure, style and content. This dissertation, by tracing the history of the genre and then focusing on two epics from Asia, will make an effort to understand the ways the epics Ramayana and Shah Nameh share and reflect common features of the genre and at the same time manifest particularities of the their socio-cultural contexts and literary traditions which distinguish them.

Thus, this dissertation attempts to investigate two enormous poetic texts of world literature: Ramayana and Shah Nameh. The first one, the Ramayana is one of the few great epics of ancient India (Buck and Nooten xiii). The story of Rama is ranked as one of the most popular stories of India and South Asia and forms an important part of the Hindu canon (smṛti), considered to be itihāsa (Datta 1753). Thus the importance of Ramayana is not limited just to its literary features but functions as a fundamental part of Hinduism. Ramayana is one of the sacred books of the subcontinent illustrating Hindu ethics. This important aspect leads Hindus to learn the epic as a holy book from their childhood. Holding such respect, Hindus believe that reading or hearing of Ramayana blesses the reader or listener. Traditionally, the Ramayana is attributed to the Sanskrit poet Srimad Valmiki but the story of Rama has a great diversity and along with this version there are hundreds of other tellings and renderings of the story of Rama in India, Southeast Asia, and beyond. Frank E. Reynolds states that even “in the history and literature of religions few stories have been told as many different ways as the story of Rama” (50). However this Sanskrit version of Ramayana, dating to approximately the 5th to 4th century B.C is known to be “the most extensive early literary treatment of the life of Rama”. Asserting of this, in her
introduction to *Many Ramayanas*, Paula Richman writes:

Many later Ramayana authors explicitly refer to it either as an authoritative source or as a telling with which they disagree. For centuries it has been regarded as the most prestigious Ramayana text in many Indian circles. It has also drawn the most attention from western scholars (5).

Robert P. Goldman general editor of a new English translation of Valmiki’s Ramayana, says: “Few works of literature produced in any place at any time have been as popular, influential, imitated, and successful as the great and ancient Sanskrit epic poem, the Valmiki Ramayana” (x). Valmiki’s *Ramayana* has been arranged into six books or kanda, and was originally a 24,000 couplet-long epic poem.

The second epic discussed in this dissertation, *Shah Nameh* (The Book of Kings) is ‘The Crown Jewel of Persian literature’. *Shah Nameh* has been a source of inspiration for countless artists for almost 10 centuries and its influence on culture can not be overestimated. *Shah Nameh* is an encyclopedia of Iranian traditions and customs, where it gives to the readers, fruitful knowledge and perspicuous image of Persia's ancient. Ethics, rites, ceremonies, sports, events, values, myths and histories, arts, jobs, geographical places and cities, ... can be inferred of the book(Sarrami 1993). Also it reflects ancient religions by tracing the history of Zoroastrian religion from its beginnings up to the defeat of the last Zoroastrian king by Arab conquerors. At the same time, it reflects Islamic principles and values, ethical beliefs and admiration of virtue, referring Ferdowsi is a Muslim who has a strong belief to Prophet Mohammad and his family (Ahl-e Beit). *Shah Nameh* recounts myths and history of Persia, beginning with the creation of the world and the introduction of the arts of civilization (fire, cooking, metallurgy, law) to the Aryans and ends with the Arab conquest of Persia. The work is not precisely chronological, but there is a general movement through time. The *Shah Nameh* has 62 stories, 990 chapters, and some 60,000 rhyming couplets, making it more than three times the length of Homer's *Iliad*, and more than twelve times the length of the German *Nibelungenlied*. It took Ferdowsi 30 years to compile *Shah Nameh*, who started his composition in the Samanid era in 977 A.D and completed it around 1010 A.D. during the Ghaznavid. Of the principal and highest importance of *Shah Nameh*, is the impact of the epic on Persian language. All Persian scholars are unanimous in its agreement that *Shah Nameh* has played a major role in reviving of this language after the Islamic conquest of Persia, and subsequent influence of Arabic language.
Ramayana and Shah Nameh however belong to two ancient civilizations of the East. They are expressions of the culture they depict. Ramayana as an impressive monument of poetry glorified traditional Indian virtues and tell us of the heroes, gods and goddesses of India. Shah Nameh reflects Persia's history, cultural values, ancient religion (Zoroastrianism) and ethno-national history of Iran.

Review of Literature and Relevant Topics

A good number of studies have already been done about the epic in general and about Ramayana and Shah Nameh in particular. Much has, therefore, already been said (and much more, no doubt, will go on to be said) on this subject. In the area of comparative epic studies also a long list of researches already exists, but they are almost all Eurocentric and their main focus is on epics of the West. Therefore this research proposes to conduct a comparative study between two great sources of the East. The attempt is to explore the implications of parallels and contrasts between two epics. The following books include some useful and relevant topics for addressing the research problem. For example, Epic Grandeur: Toward a Comparative Poetics of the Epic by Masaki Mori (1997) divides the study into two parts. The first part, consisting of three chapters, offers a comparative poetics of the epic. It presents a number of views on the nature of the genre by critics such as Plato, Aristotle, Vico, Schiller, Nietzsche, Lukâcs, Hegel, and Bakhtin before focusing on the three elements which Mori considers essential to the definition of epic. It also discusses transformations of traditional epic, including Milton's denunciation of martial virtue in Paradise Lost and the grand narrative told from the perspective of the vanquished in the medieval Japanese Tale of the Heike. Homer And The Nibelungenlied: Comparative Studies In Epic written by Bernard Fenik (1986) is another genuinely useful book about narrative shaping in the epic. He begins by grappling with the issue of epic diction, which is part of the dilemma of all theories of reading. His primary emphasis in this book is on similarities in structure among many different works and not on the peculiarities of narrative technique that separate them from each other. Epic Interactions: Perspectives on Homer, Virgil, and the Epic Tradition edited by M. J. Clarke, B. G. F. Currie and R. O. A. M. Lyne (2006) is a collection of essays investigating the vibrancy of the classical epic tradition. The book considers the uses made by writers at widely different times and places of the literary form to explore the author’s place in literary and cultural history. The book’s tripartite structure considers ‘epic
interactions’ first within ancient Greek literature (Chs. 1–4), within Latin literature (Chs. 5–8) and in the vernacular literatures of medieval, renaissance and modern Europe (Chs. 9–11). A Companion To Ancient Epic edited by John Miles Foley (2005) is another collection of essays. The essay on Shah Nameh discusses some parallels between Persian epic and Iliad. Dean A Miller’s comprehensive book titled The Epic Hero (2000) studies the hero in almost all notable heroic poetries and traces the epic pattern of ‘hero’s son is killed by his father’ to Persian epic Shah Nameh. Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia (1991) edited by Paula Richman includes some comprehensive essays about different versions and the multivocal nature of the Ramayana and is considered as one of the basic references on Ramayana studies. Richman's compilation provides a nice set of lenses to the great epic. The Morphology of the Tales of Shah Nameh written by Ghadam Ali Sarrami (1993) is a useful sourcebook about the Persian epic from different points of view.

Though numerous studies already exist, there haven’t been satisfactory comparative studies on two Eastern epics from an Eastern/Asian perspective. It seems they are incomplete in some way. To my knowledge, few studies have been done on Shah Nameh and Iliad and Odyssey, but till now no comparative study exists for Shah Name and Ramayana. Therefore this research is the first in the subject.

Aims and Objectives

This research proposes to conduct a comparative study of the two great heroic poetries of the East. The aim is generally to explore the implications of parallels and contrasts between two epics. The discussion will consider the common structures and patterns of the epics to understand how the world of epic in East is close yet far from each other. Due to the belief that ‘culture and history of a nation or race is often reflected in an epic, the research also aims at creating mutual understanding and respect for the two cultures.

My interest, therefore, is twofold: to uncover similarities in themes, structures and style between two authors not primarily associated together, and to examine the criteria usually applied in comparative studies. The research will have a worthy objective: to redefine epic from a global perspective, and to point towards what such a genre might look like in the multicultural future.
Research Questions

This research will attempt to acquire answers to the following questions:

1. Considering the distance between lands, is it possible to base the epic of different nations or tribes on similar and common structures?

2. To what extent do common characteristics exist between the two and if any why so?

3. Are the features of an epic relevant to its geographical environment?

4. Do any similar characteristics exist between the Indian and Persian epic?

5. To what extent has the formation of new cultures and geographical environment impact in the behavioral changes among the common Indian and Persian epic characters?

Methodology

My approach for the proposed research has been analytic and comparative poetics. The attempt of my argument is to trace parallels and contrasts between the two epic poems: Ramayana and Shah Nameh. Through this comparative research, I try to understand their similarities and differences in terms of content, structure, language and style. This research includes the study of the data gathered from different sources on aspects like mythology, etymology, stylistic features as well as the content and semantic features.

Chapter Plan

This research is planned to proceed as follows: The introductory section offers the framework of the study and is followed by five chapters. Chapter I titled “Epic as a Genre” discusses the genre and its different forms in Persian and Indian in terms of the specifications and features of the epic form. Chapter II on “Tracing The Epic Through The Ages” considers the ancient to medieval to modern transformations of the genre. We know that epics are of national significance in the sense that they embody the history and ideals of a nation and there are many kinds of epics to be found worldwide. Since it is difficult to discuss all epics in their details, this chapter will review some of them based on the dates of their composition, such as Iliad and Odyssey the Greek epics, Gilgamesh the Sumerian epic, and Virgil’s Aeneid in Latin as ancient epics; medieval epics such as the old English epic Beowulf, French epic The Song of Roland, the
German epic *Nibelungenlied* and the great Italian epic *Divine Comedy*; modern epics such as the 18th-century works of Richard Blackmore, the epic poems of the 19th-century author Walter Scott, and the late 20th-century *Omeros* by Nobel Prize winning author Derek Walcott. Chapter III focuses on Ferdowski’s *Shah Nameh*. The Iranian epic tradition has its roots in the general Indo-European epic tradition, and has been closely identified with the Iranian people and embodies the history, the ideals, and the values of the Iranian nation. Chapter IV is devoted to the Indian epic *Ramayana*. While the story of Rama has great diversity, the Sanskrit text ascribed to Valmiki is base for this work. The Synopsis of the epic, its language and style, main characters, variations of *Ramayana*, Persian versions of the *Ramayana*, and eventually its impact on art and culture have been discussed in this chapter. Chapter V offers a comparative study of *Shah Nameh* and *Ramayana* as the main research argument of the dissertation. The Conclusion is open-ended. It tries to weave the threads of the arguments and indicates avenues for further work on the subject.
**Works Cited**


