

## REFLECTION OF FATE IN EPIC -MYTHOLOGICAL HEROES: BEOWULF AND RUSTAM

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the effect of fate on epic-mythological heroes in the west and east societies. This research also investigates to determine the archetypal form and function of two epic works from two different literatures and societies that the texts meaning are shaped by cultural and psychological myths. The mythological basic forms of epic heroes made concrete by recurring images, symbols, and patterns of "fate" aspect which may include motifs such as the 'quest' in the recognizable characters and their conflicts as individual symbols which can be extendable to old and modern society. The discussion of proposed materials and hypothesis are outlined through Hero-Archetype Method then the fate and its effective factors are highlighted finally death justified and detailed. A universal form is recognized in the traits of epic-mythological heroes in the selected epic characters e.g. Beowulf (British Literature) and Rustam (Persian Literature). Death is the end of fate and destiny. In conclusion, the results confirm no escape exists from the fate and its involved characters even epic-mythological ones.

**Keywords:** Myth, Epic, Fate, Hero, Society, Beowulf, Rustam

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## 1. Introduction

Fate is the development of events outside a person's control, regarded as predetermined by a supernatural power. (Oxford Dictionary, 2013) Fate in term means sentence and the eternal judgment which arises directly from the will of God and no authority rises from man side.

According to Greek mythology, the Fates have the subtle but awesome power of deciding a man's destiny. They assign a man to good or evil. Their most obvious choice is choosing how long a man lives. There are three Fates. Clotho, the spinner, who spins the thread of life. Lachesis, the measurer, who chooses the lot in life one will have and measures off how long it is to be. Atropos, she who cannot be turned, who at death with her shears cuts the thread of life. The Fates are old and predate the gods. It is not entirely clear how far their power extends. It is possible that they determine the fate of the gods as well. In any case, not even the most powerful is willing to trifle with them.

The belief in fate existed among Aryans<sup>1</sup> and they referred the fate to supernatural forces. Such this belief can be found in the variety of religions and God e.g. Zurvanism, Mazdyasna(after Zoroastrian) , Mithraism (Razi,2005) The existence of a God can be observed in most ancient cultures and literature which pose a connection with death and time. Whether in west or east, time is considered as super power<sup>2</sup>. (Gozashti et al., 2009) e.g. Zurvan<sup>3</sup> appeared as the God of infinite (Zaehner, 1955) time in Iran on the other hand Chronos is the god of time in Greece. Zurvan is also the god of destiny, light and darkness in Indo-Iranian and Greco-Roman religion of Mithraism. The Middle Persian name derives from Avestan zurvan-, "time" or "old age"(Zaehner,2008) In fact, Zurvan emerged as a God which creates good and evil forces in the universe.( Akbari Mafakher,2008)

An epic hero is a main character in an epic whose legendary or heroic actions are central to his/her culture, race, or nation. (21<sup>st</sup> century Lexicon, 2014)

The main character in an epic poem--typically one who embodies the values of his or her culture. For instance, Odysseus is the epic hero in the Greek epic called The Odyssey--in which he embodies the cleverness and fast-thinking Greek culture admired. Aeneas is the epic hero in the Roman epic The Aeneid--in which he embodies the pietas, patriotism, and the four cardinal virtues the Romans admired. If we stretch the term epic more broadly beyond the strict confines of the Greco-Roman tradition, we might read Beowulf as loosely as an epic hero of Beowulf and

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Aryan" has been replaced in most cases by the terms "Indo-Iranian" and "Indo-European", and "Aryan" is now mostly limited to its appearance in the term "Indo-Aryan" for Indic languages and their speakers (Encyclopædia Britannica,2014)

<sup>2</sup> .Note: It can be claimed the first selected Godness was the God of Time by people.

<sup>3</sup> Note: The history of believing in Zurvan refers ton .to Achaemenian Dynasty but its roots arise from religious concepts before Zarathustra.

Moses as the epic hero of Exodus e.g. Rustam as a great epic-hero in shahnameh, Persian epic.(Literary Terms and Definitions,2014)

The principal objective is to investigate the effect of fate on epic-mythic heroes in the west and east literature. This study also attempts to evaluate the archetypal form and function of two ancient literature with a focus on the texts meaning which shaped by cultural and psychological myths. Fate is examined as cultural belief in literature. A proposed hypothesis is no escape from fate and density in epic.

Beowulf and Rustam are selected as mythic-epic heroes in present study. Both heroes belong to ancient literature from west (Britain) and east (Persia) respectively. Further, their epic expression and fame continues up to today world then they became symbolic characters in cultural and literary values. The role of fate in epic works is considerable because the fate tied with people's culture in the society. Thus, the frequency of fate usage in the literary works increased during medieval era particularly in epic genre.

This paper is organized as follows. First, epic heroes are studied in details. The characteristics of these epic-mythic heroes are evaluated. The effect of the fate on these heroes then justified and the detailed methodology described. The results are discussed next, followed by the literary, cultural, and psychological mythology are highlighted. The limitations of this research are outlined and future research directions are provided in conclusion.

## 2. Discussion

Beowulf is a legendary Geatish hero and kills monsters and dragons (Figure.1) and later turned king in the epic poem named after him, one of the oldest surviving pieces of literature in the English language. Beowulf is the conventional title (Robinson,2001) of an Old English epic poem consisting of 3182 alliterative long lines, set in Scandinavia, commonly cited as one of the most important works of Anglo-Saxon literature to the fact that it is the oldest surviving epic poem of Old English and also the earliest vernacular English literature<sup>4</sup>. (2014) The full poem survives in the manuscript known as the Nowell Codex, located in the British Library. Written in England, its composition by an anonymous Anglo-Saxon poet[a] is dated between the 8th (Tolkien, 1958; Heatt, 1983) and the early 11th century. (Chase,1997)In 1731, the manuscript was badly damaged by a fire that swept through Ashburnham House in London that had a collection of medieval manuscripts assembled by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton. The poem's existence for its first seven centuries or so made no impression on writers and scholars, and besides a brief mention in a 1705 catalogue by Humfrey Wanley it was not studied until the end of the 18th century, and not published in its entirety until Johan Bülow funded the 1815 Latin translation, prepared by the Icelandic-Danish scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin. (Mitchell and Robinson, 2001) After a heated debate with Thorkelin, Bülow offered to support a new translation by N.F.S. Grundtvig — this time into Danish. The result, Bjovalfs Drape (1820), was the first

<sup>4</sup> <http://historymedren.about.com/od/beowulf/p/beowulf.htm> Retrieved 15 July 2014

modern language translation of Beowulf. In the poem, Beowulf, a hero of the Geats in Scandinavia, comes to the aid of Hroðgar, the king of the Danes, whose mead hall (in Heorot) has been under attack by a monster known as Grendel. After Beowulf slays him, Grendel's mother attacks the hall and is then also defeated. Victorious, Beowulf goes home to Geatland in Sweden and later becomes king of the Geats. After a period of fifty years has passed, Beowulf defeats a dragon, but is fatally wounded in the battle. After his death, his attendants bury him in a tumulus, a burial mound, in Geatland.



Fig.1. Beowulf is killing a dragon

Rustam is the epic hero of the story who fights evils, monsters, and dragons (Figure.2), Rustam is a part of the Persian epic of Shahnameh in Persian mythology, and son of Zal and Rudaba. In some ways, the position of Rustam in the historical tradition is parallel to that of Surena (Bivar, 1983), the hero of the Battle of Carrhae. Rustam was always represented as the mightiest of Iranian paladins (warriors), and the atmosphere of the episodes in which he features is strongly reminiscent of the Arsacid period. He was immortalized by the 10th-century poet Ferdowsi of Tus in the Shahnameh or Epic of Kings, which contain pre-Islamic folklore and history. In Persian mythology, Rustam is an epic hero in Persian epic of Shahnameh. He received the chance to be appeared as great Iranian paladin in shahnameh and became immortal in the mythological world.

Rustam is an Iranian free hero who fights to save glorious ideals such as freedom, honesty, chivalry, justice, patriotism. He is a complete hero in an epic and possesses an ideal human although he suffers from human flaws. (Bivar, 1983)





Fig.2. Rustam Slaying The Dragon by Adel Adili

### 2.1. Characteristics of Epic Hero

There are certain characteristics of epic hero<sup>5</sup>. An epic hero:

- a. excels in skill, strength, and courage
- b. succeeds in war and adventure
- c. Values honor and glory
- d. Usually has a guide
- e. Battles demons or monsters
- f. Is generous to his followers but ruthless to enemies
- g. Is a man of action
- h. Accepts challenges and sometimes invites problems
- i. Sometimes make rash decisions and takes unnecessary risks
- j. Meets monsters and temptations
- k. Encounters women who tempt him
- l. Descends into darkness (often the underworld)
- m. Achieves his goal

### 2.2. Effects of the fate on epic-mythic heroes: Beowulf and Rustam

Beowulf and Rustam live successfully and proudly but they also undergo their bitter destiny, unhappy fate like common people.

### The story of Rustam and Esfandiar

<sup>5</sup> <http://quizlet.com/12321584/13-characteristics-of-an-epic-hero-flash-cards/> Accessed:12 July,2014

Esfandiar is an Iranian hero and an invulnerable prince. He is the son of Goshtasb, the Kiani king. Goshtasb promises to leave him the crown if he wins the battle. After that Goshtasb promises him the throne if Esfandiar spreads Zoroastrianism in the world and brings infidels into this religion. Esfandiar spreads Zoroastrianism all over the world, but again Goshtasb fails to carry out his promise. He not only does not bestow the crown upon him but also orders to jail him in Gunbadan fortress because a person called "Gorazm" speaks ill about Esfandiar. Arjasp attacks Iran. Goshtasp is unable to confront him, therefore, he asks Esfandiar, who is imprisoned, to stand against Turanians, and he accepts. After defeating them, Esfandiar goes to Royin fortress according to the Kayanian king's wish. He rescues his sisters who had been imprisoned there. He takes a lot of risks to save them and passes the Seven Trials, but once again the king reneges on his promise and resorts to another trick. Goshtasp asks Esfandiar to go to Zabol and bring Rostam bound. Esfandiar rejects at first but accepts after discussing it with his father and prepares himself to go to Zabolestan.

Rostam warned him repeatedly not to fight in Zabolestan, but he refrains and finally war breaks out between them. Rostam becomes wounded and helpless. Zal, Rostam's father, asks Simurgh to help him and Simurgh shows Rostam how to kill Esfandiar, and teaches him how to make an arrow to hit the eyes of Esfandiar, his weak spot but suggest not to do that and tries make him cancel the battle. If these words do not work, you can continue the flight. On the other hand, Zal (Rostam's father) and Simurgh (benevolent and mythical flying creature) both warned Rostam if he kills Esfandiar, he will be destroyed after that. (Fig.3)



**Fig.3.** Simurgh is advising Rostam about his battle with Esfandiar

Although, Rostam received this warm and he knew his fate and destiny in the end but he could not admit the shame of dragging captivity and saved his dignity. However, Esfandiar is killed by Rostam. (Fig.4)



Fig.3. Battle of Rostam and Esfandiar

Below lines remark how the Simurgh succored Rostam in his battle with Esfandiar:

This fosterling of bane. Aim at his eyes,  
 Straight, with both hands as one that worshippeth  
 The tamarisk, and Destiny will bear  
 The arrow thither straight. He will be blinded,  
 And fortune rage at him."  
 Then the Simurgh,  
 Embracing Zal as woof embraceth warp  
 In bidding him farewell, took flight content,  
 While Rostam, when he saw her in the air,  
 Took order to prepare a goodly fire,  
 And straightened out thereby the tamarisk wood.  
 He fitted arrow-heads upon the shaft,  
 And fixed the feathers to the finished haft

The fate which was warned by Simurgh to Rostam happened to him; eventually, Rostam was killed by Shaghad (his step-brother) after killing Esfandiar.

### 3. Findings and Results

Fate in epic stories possesses an important role in Shahnameh and Beowulf. The epic heroes endeavor to encounter their imminent fate or escape this fate in spite of their awareness and authority on their own fate. However, their attempts lead to other incidents which have already



been marked. Despite of epic stories and Greek tragedies, Gods sometimes come in the middle of battle and human lives to reach their own wants but the fate goes forward through the story elements and heroes' works in Shahnameh. Perdition and foreseeing by astrologists enter the stories in the best way in Shahnameh and the spirit of the stories can be shaped along with fate. Fate covers the realistic eyes of epic heroes then the heroes steps into altar and trap into the tragedy thus, inability of human being versus fate picture effectively. (Mehraji and Bahrami Rahnama, 2010)

Rustam and Beowulf have all features of idealist heroes; however, they are not free from human weaknesses. Their victory in the battles is indebted wisdom, power, glory and divine quality (Far (r)). Farr equals fate. ( Fakhre eslam and Arabiani,2010) Whoever gains Farr, will obtain glory and kingship.

The remarkable elements of glory, courage, fame, kingship, fate and God are observed in Beowulf even in Rustam. Beowulf was from Anglo-Saxons who lived in and ruled England from the fifth century AD until the Norman Conquest. They were a people who valued courage and leadership. They lived under kings who were "keepers of gold" and were guarded by their loyal thanes (knights). They were a Pagan culture until the Normandy conquistadors came. They believed in fate and believed the only way to live forever was if a man had fame. In the Anglo-Saxon book, Beowulf, there was a combination of many different people. The characters in Beowulf are defined by their status. Their status was in form of their fame and accomplishments. Beowulf was a very famous warrior, who sails to the Danes to kill a monster who is murdering their people. Beowulf kills Grendel, Grendel's mother and a dragon throughout the entirety of the story.

The dragon (Fig.5) is the poem's most potent symbol, embodying the idea of wyrd, or fate which imbues the story with an atmosphere of doom and death. Whereas Beowulf is essentially invulnerable to Grendel and his mother, he is in danger from the beginning against the dragon.



Fig.5.Dragon in Beowulf



As Beowulf feels his own death approaching, the dragon emerges from the earth, creating the feeling that the inevitable clash will result in Beowulf's death. The poet emphasizes Beowulf's reluctance to meet death, to "give ground like that and go / unwillingly to inhabit another home / in a place beyond" (Beowulf, 2588–2590). This poetic evocation of death as constituting movement from one realm to another—from the earthly realm to the spiritual one—reveals the influence of Christian ideology on the generally pagan Beowulf. It is also poignant from the perspective of the warrior ethos, in which leaving one's homeland, the anchor of one's entire identity, is a very serious and significant undertaking. On the other side, Simurgh (Fig.6) in shahanameh is symbol of fate because she is only way to let Rustam know about his final destiny. In the battle of Rustam and Esfandiar, Simurgh told Rustam as follows:

Said the Simurgh to him: "I will declare

In love to thee the secret of the sky

Whoe'er shall shed that hero's blood will be

Himself pursued by fortune. Furthermore

Throughout his life he will abide in travail,

Find no escape therefrom, and lose his treasures,

Be luckless in this world and afterward

In pain and anguish. If thou art content

With this, and present triumph o'er thy foe,

I will reveal to thee this night a wonder,

And bar for thee the lip from evil words."

"I am content," he said to her, "and now

Say what thou wilt. We leave the world behind

As our memorial and pass away,

And there is nothing left of any man ,

Save the report of him. If I shall die

With fair fame all is well with me, but fame

I must have for the body is for death."



Fig.6.Simurgh

In fact, fate is a principal element in epic, Heroes and great characters play important roles hence a supernatural force should be used for tightening epic heroes. Then, fate is the most powerful force in epic. All epic heroes defeat fate. (Mehraki and Bahrami Rahnama, 2010) Every time Beowulf receives more fame and more glory by killing dragon. Beowulf became a king. He was a great king who received honor and loyalty from his men. Although, during the fight with the dragon Beowulf's men run away and as a result Beowulf dies. The original book of Beowulf claims that Beowulf had fate against him in his last battle against the dragon, but also says that Beowulf had Christian morals. By having two conflicting religions (paganism and Christianity) it makes the story more interesting. This book is composed of four main characteristics: fame, kingship, fate, and God, which play essential roles throughout the book. In Beowulf, the Anglo-Saxons longed for fame. To them fame meant immortality. For example, the narrator says, "But Beowulf longing only for fame, leaped into battle" (Raffel 1529). To Beowulf the only reason to risk his life is a battle, is so he can have his moments of fame, hence immortality. Even if a character gains fame, they will always be fighting to receive more. After Beowulf becomes king one of his servants says, "Beloved Beowulf, remember how a man boasted, once, that nothing in the world would ever destroy the fame: you fight to keep in now, be strong and brave, my noble king, protecting life and fame together" (Beowulf, 2586). So even though Beowulf had fame, he had to keep fighting and being successful in order to protect and keep his fame. Once an Anglo-Saxon had enough fame his name was known throughout the world. The narrator explains this by saying, "Now the Lord of all life, Ruler of glory, blessed them with a prince, Beowulf, whose power and fame soon spread throughout the world" (Beowulf,16). Beowulf had accumulated so much fame that throughout the world people knew of him and his accomplishments. Fame was so very important to the Anglo-Saxon's that they would give up their lives and the lives of others

if only to receive it for a minute. All human's fate end to death, the only thing keeps a man immortal is fame. Heroes can be immortal through their fame for fighting against evil.

The Anglo-Saxon's beliefs were Pagan. They didn't believe in a god, they thought when a man die he/she is just dead. They believe that they cannot control their own fate. In Beowulf, they say, "Fate will unwind as it must" (Beowulf, 455). Fate will go however it wants, if it is the fate to be eaten by a monster, then nothing a man can do will change that. They believe that fate saves lives. Ongetho had been stabbed in the head, but "fate let him recover, live on" (Beowulf, 2975-2977). Ongetho should have died right then, but fate had other plans for him. In this story the scop speaks of fate as a person or a thing. "Fate has swept our race away, taken warriors in their strength and led them to death that was waiting" (Beowulf,2184-2816). He spoke of fate as a noun, he says that fate is responsible for death.

The time that this story was originally told was of the Anglo-Saxons, who didn't believe in God. However the original author of this book was Christian and lent many of his Christian thoughts to this book. For example the book says about Grendal, "By God punished forever for crime for Abel's death" (Beowulf, 107). The author is referring to a part in the Christian's bible where Cain had killed his brother Abel. Even Beowulf, who was supposed to be a pagan, had Christian morals. The scop says, "Beowulf's sorrow beat at his heart; he accused himself of breaking God's law" (Beowulf, 2327-2329). Beowulf was an Anglo-Saxon pagan, so why would it matter to him what "God's laws" were? This book has conflicting beliefs, at one point they say fate is in control of everything and in another, God is in control. When they were pagan and then they converted to Christianity in both periods, they were submissive to fate. In pagan status, they believe the end of all density is death and no one can do anything against it. As they became Christian, they believe their fate is under the control of God and they are unable to do versus their fate. The story of Beowulf and Rustam are composed of four main character traits: fame, kingship, fate and God. The characters are based on their ratio of these four traits. Fame was highly desired for the need of the epic heroes' want to live forever. For Beowulf, kingship was the bases of the community; if they had a terrible king they will have terrible living conditions. For Rustam, Kingship is not the matter, nation and their freedom is his final end. Fate played a role in everything the Anglo-Saxons ever did, be it a battle or what they were going to have for dinner.

Zurvanism is one of the ancient religions in Iran which affect Persian literature particularly Epic genre. Zurvanism is a religion based on absolute power of fate. In Zurvanian ideology, fate is an absolute ruler. Life begins with God's want and Zuravan has full control on the destiny. (Dolatabadi,2000) In such this world, human wishes destroy and the wisdom of such this world has to admit everything by nature and forget wishing any change.(Khalili,2005) However, time and fate deities are personifications of time, often in the sense of human lifetime and human fate, in polytheistic religions. In monotheism, Time can still be personified, as in Father Time in European folklore or Zurvan in Persian (Zoroastrian) tradition. In the book of Ecclesiastes in the

Hebrew Bible, the terms `iddan "time" vs. zēman "season" expresses a contrast similar to that of Greek Chronos vs. Kairos.

Although the protagonist, Rostam in shahnameh, received warn and was aware of his fate after killing Esfandiar, he could not change his fate. Fate belief in Zurvan is highlighted specially in the battle of Rostam and Esfandiar. Rostam admitted his destiny intentionally and steered to the death. This is the painful epic which a man sacrifices himself wisely for immortality. (Meskob, 1963) The same trend appears in the battle of Beowulf and Grendel. Beowulf received a warn of failed destiny via old king but he could not take old king's advice and he had to admit his known fate, death.(Fig.7) Death emerges in any fate even for epic-mythic heroes' such as Beowulf and Rostam in Greek mythology and Persian mythology.



Fig.7. Death sence of Beowulf after killing dragon

In Persian mythology, believing in Death is also one of the many beliefs of Zurvan. Zurvan, as the ultimate source of the fate of the world, has ordained the law and order of all matters and there is no way of escaping those general principles. There is a beginning and ending for every phenomenon and should be passed through the specified path and reach the final destination. Such orders are also applicable to human beings.

Death is the end point of every life. The manifestation of death in Shahnameh is quite synonymous with those evidenced in Zurvan doctrine to the extent that the invalidity of the world and carpe diem has been discussed in Shahnameh.

Christianity was what the characters in this story based their morals on, even though the original story had nothing to do with God. The society today still lives on most of these same characteristics. In the society today fame is the highest of goals, we as a society put fame and being known above decency and morals. The king (president) is usually looked upon to give out rewards and orders as the kings in the time of the Anglo-Saxons. A country is also divided up between atheist (modern day pagans) and Christians. We have become a country whose heroes are no longer the people who are courageous or even a decent person. The heroes have become the people who have achieved fame and even fortune. The heroes no longer have to make a



difference in the world. The heroes only have to act in a few movies or play a good game of football or baseball. To Rustam in Persian epic, kingship is not the goal but humanism and patriotism are the ends; however, fame is still a core both epic-mythic heroes: Rustam and Beowulf. As a result, all features and function of selected epic heroes are extraordinary and supernatural. The peculiarity of national epic requires such these qualities for a hero. The researcher recommended examining "Mono-myth in Epic Genre" in the future study.

#### 4. Conclusion

Fate is the general traditions and infrangible laws which rule over people. The impact of these traditions is final and infrangible on people's happiness and misery. The results of present paper confirm no escape exists from the fate and its involved characters even for epic-mythological ones. These heroes know that they cannot change their fate which leads to death but they attempt to be immortal by their fame of glory, courage, and kingship. Some ways exist to become aware of their fate including warning from a wise character, dreaming, foreseeing, etc.

An important point should be noted: In spite of people are aware of their own fate or they have been aware of it, e.g. Simorgh's warn to Rustam and King Hrothgar's warn to Beowulf, they can't fight against their destiny.

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