

Infanticide as Instructing Ethics in “Rostam and Sohrab”

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Abstract

The present paper investigates the story of “Rostam and Sohrab” by Abolghasem Ferdowsi – the poet of the fourth century. This paper aims to demonstrate the relationship between infanticide by the major character of this work, Rostam, and ethical dilemmas in the light of Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of responsibility and depicts how instructing ethics will appear in the act of infanticide by him. Therefore, this paper shows how infanticide despite of being indecent is considered as an ethical dead in specific circumstances.

Key words: Infanticide; Responsibility; Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

It is normally thought that infanticide is considered to be common in various societies. According to the first article of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly sanctioned in 1989): “An infant is every human under eighteen who needs legal support.” (Zeraat, 1386, no. 50) Infanticide has severe emotional and psychological effects. Therefore, many stories are created based upon that among which the story of “Rostam

and Sohrab” by Abol alghasem Ferdowsi is investigated in the present paper. Strikingly different works are generated in relation to this story. Each tried to remove some of the ambiguities. Although infanticide is mentioned in some of the works, none has specifically decoded it.

In connection with the story of “Rostam and Sohrab”, it can be said that this story is one of the most painful and doleful stories of Shahnameh. Abol alghasem Ferdowsi depicts the dead story of the young Sohrab who is killed by his father due to the war with Rostam. Numerous works has also been created about this happening. Each has been criticized this issue from different angles.

The present study attempts to investigate the act of infanticide by the main character of this work in the realm of ethics from Emmanuel Levinas’s point of view, one of the most important moral philosophers of the twentieth century who is less known in Iran. According to Levinas, “Ethics is paying attention to Others’ right and this is not of ontology, for this has a meaning beyond ontology” (Levinas, 2006, p. 46).

This shows for Levinas unlike Heidegger, existence is prior to ontology. Levinas points to the fact that “The ethical relation to the Other is ‘something beyond ontology’ not ‘a part of ontology’” (*The same*, p. 46). Therefore, the relation between the same and the Other can be considered as the key concept in Levinas’s philosophy. In fact, Levinas believes that “In the first relation to the Other, I is always called to the Other, to whom I is held hostage by an unlimited responsibility; for the Other always come first. Therefore, violence may exist in any dialectical relation – kinship relation – to the Other in which the Other is reduced to the same” (Levinas, 1969, p. 58). In other words, he sometimes considers violence as a necessary part of ethics. The present paper tries to investigate the relationship between infanticide by the major character of this work and ethical dilemmas from Levinas’s view.

METHOD

The present study is based upon focusing on Ferdowsi's epic story, "Rostam and Sohrab", in the glare of Emmanuel Levinas's concept of responsibility. Having brought some lines from Shahnameh as witness, this study tries to represent how the hero murders his child consciously as well as how this infanticide can be considered as an ethical deed and the real and imagined virtues and values of heroines despite of its marks of social taboo.

DISCUSSION

The sense of responsibility appears in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh. In order to analyze this sense of responsibility, investigation of the mournful story of "Rostam and Sohrab", one of the magnificent as well as the deepest tragedies of Shahnameh, seems to be necessary. But what is the starting motivation of this war? Whether Sohrab's ambitiousness and foolishness causes him to campaign? Is it possible to consider Rostam as an unwise stubborn who is surrendered to destiny? Does his deed (infanticide) an accident?

Rostam is the best character created by Ferdowsi. He is not only the sign of power but he is a collection of thought and wisdom, strength and courage, patience and dedication, brilliance and solid logic. He is an ideal example of Ferdowsi. He is the sole representative of the Iranian masses who embodies the best pearls of people in the community. He is a unity of contrasting pearls. He has Goudarz and elderly wisdom; Gyv's heroic and keen following of rituals; Bahram's intrepidity, patriotic, and self-sacrifice; Sohrab's amazingly strength and Siavash's tenderness. If each of them is the god of his own special pearls, Rostam is the god of gods and the holder of all pearls. Sohrab is Rostam's son. Although Sohrab's true essence is in his courage and youth, he is not dismissed of wisdom altogether (Sagheb far, 1348, p. 1).

But there is always one question: what is Rostam's motivation to do such an act (infanticide)? Does Rostam have no other choice but to kill his own child? In fact, Sohrab's youth leads him to resist old traditions. This is not only a struggle between a father and a son but also a struggle between past and future as well as following traditions and breaking with traditions. Perhaps if Rostam and Sohrab knew each other, the story won't lead to such a tragedy. But it cannot be said with certainty that if they knew each other, such a disaster won't happen. "When it becomes apparent that the enemy is your child, you have only two choices: either to kill your child knowingly or to ignore your promises and responsibilities. Selection between these two ways is difficult. The way Rostam chooses is self-deceptive and escapes from the fact that Sohrab is his son. Rostam tries not to divulge this secret and thereby to deceive himself" (*The same*, p. 3).

Having doubt about killing your own child is apparently a way of suffer all over. The fate puts him in dilemma and makes it difficult for him to choose. This

can be realized from Rostam's reactions to events. For example, Kai kawous sends Rostam a message through Gyv for the fear of Sohrab's attack and calls him "The sole supporter of Persia", "The restorer of Hamaveran", and "The conqueror of Mazinderan" (Atkinson, 1369, p. 129) and asks him in his letter:

When thou shalt receive this letter,
Stay not to speak the word that hangeth upon thy lips;
And if thou bearest roses in thy hands,
Stop not to smell them, but haste thee to help us in our need.
(*The same*, p. 398)

Rostam has never refused to accept the commands of kings. But "Rostam is now in doubt for the first time. Actually, he is in doubt in such a time when Iran is exposed to an unrivalled and valiant hero. He had to hurry up and go rather than recalling his child" (Sagheb far, 1348, p. 2).

To me Tahmineh bore her only child,
That was a boy but he is yet an infant.
(Atkinson, 1369, p. 370)

Rostam keeps himself busy with wine-drinking and wasting time.

Stay with me a day and rest,
And water thy lips that are parched.
Rapt by the witchery of the melting strain,
No thought of Kia kawous touch'd his swimming brain.
(*The same*, p. 371)

His drunkenness is different from previous ones. "His intoxication is always healthy and full of joy. Although Rostam rarely seeks refuge in wine by way of sorrow, his drunkenness this time indicates the drunkenness of a sad hero who tries to free himself from thought in order that gods perhaps come to his help and Sohrab dies spontaneously" (Sagheb far, 1348, p. 3). Rostam's reply to Kai kawous who is angry at him is as such:

Devouring fire; thy latest actions still
Outdo the past in baseness. Go, thyself,
When wrath inflames my heart, who is Kawous?
Why should I be trapped, what is Tous?
And the world is subject unto me and Rakhsh is my throne,
And my sword is my seal, and my helmet my crown.
I get very annoyed by him; I am not his servant,
To the Almighty power alone I bend.
(Atkinson, 1369, p. 130)

Although this is not for the first time that Rostam is offended by the king, he makes such a bold expression for the first time. He repudiates king's commands, tradition, and his mother country and reacts severely and unwisely before king's logical anger. Therefore, Rostam's behaviour should have another motivation. The same factor which persuades him to slackness, running away from encounter with Sohrab, causes him to be violent.

The first night that Iranian army camps against Sohrab's troops, Rostam asks the king to allow him to go to Sohrab's camp in secret. It is impossible to consider his action as a kind of espionage and realizing the enemy's

plans, for he always despises such things throughout his heroic life. "The fact is that the father's affection towards his son causes Rostam to go to Sohrab's camp overnight" (Vakily, 1384, p. 192). In the day of combat, Rostam does his best to dissuade from battle. "In the arranged day, exactly before the start of fight, the father's affection causes him to speak with Sohrab gently and advice him far from others in order to prevent him from others in order to prevent him from fighting" (Pashai, 1389, p. 40).

The time Rostam understands that he cannot convince Sohrab, he tells him: "Wait and see me at war. These sea and mountain have seen what I had done. The star is my witness, you guy. I pity you, and I don't want to kill you. You aren't like Iranians. I didn't see a person like you in Iran" (Vakily, 1384, p. 217). Sohrab's heart begins to shudder by hearing the story of Rostam's previous valour as if he knows his father and bends his heart on him and hums in his conversation with Human:

My mother's tokens shine conspicuous here,
And all the proofs my heart demands appear;
I think this is Rostam,
No one is born like him in the world.
It behoveth me not to combat him,
Shall I, O grief! Provoke my father's rage.
(Atkinson, 1369, pp. 397-8)

And he tells Rostam:
It seemeth unto me that thou art none other than Rostam,
If thou art of the illustrious Neriman-breed;
Then let thy generous ardour equal mine,
And kindly say with whom I now connected.

(The same, p. 398)

Is it now possible to consider Rostam as an unwise person who despite of all these plain evidence, which one is enough to for him to know his son, is unable to recognize Sohrab? But Rostam replies:

Rostam replith as such: I'm not Rostam,
For he is a hero, and I am a servant.

(The same, p. 136)

Finally Sohrab is killed by Rostam in combat. This is for the first time throughout history that a person has to have such a painful choice between his child and family on the one hand and his country and social promises on the other hand. As it is mentioned earlier, Rostam is a patriotic hero who has never left off his ideal traditions and was never negligent in keeping them. In fact, Rostam feels responsible for his countrymen, rituals, and

heroic promises obstinately, who suppresses his father's sentiment immediately, and who kills his son whom had come to break Iranian traditions.

FINDINGS

Sohrab's death by Rostam stems from the sense of responsibility. Rostam lived in fourth century. He, in regard to temporal and local circumstances as well as taboos existed in the society, respects to people and their values. Rostam is considered as a patriotic hero who follows his promises and rituals and never breaks them. Now how he can surrender to his son's ambitiousness. For this time, Sohrab wants to break traditions with ease and overthrow Kai kawous and simply taint his ancestors' fame and inheritance. Rostam's pain is nation's pain and his heroic promises. Therefore, not only should he fight against his son, but also try to prevail over him. According to Levinas's view, ethics is to be responsible for the Other than I. This suggests that in order to be responsible it is necessary to get out of the being that I myself is and move to the Other's being. As a conclusion, I am for the Other and the Other is prior to me. So being for the Other means being responsible for him. Finally, this can be concluded that infanticide by the main character of this story – Rostam – is an ethical deed based upon Emmanuel Levinas's view.

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