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Literary Arts

E-ISSN: 2322-3448

Document Type: Research Paper

Vol. 16, Issue 2, No.47, Summer 2024, pp. 27-36

Received: 19/02/2024 Accepted: 22/04/2024

## An Analytical Overview of Alexander's Epic (*Iskandarnāme*) in Persian Literature

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### Abstract

In works revolving around the life of Alexander, the characterization of Alexander is marked by exaggerations and contradictions, as if we are faced with two distinct Alexanders; a wise, just, and prophet-like figure, and a detested, tyrannical oppressor. Conducted by the library method, the present study investigates the description and qualitative content analysis of famous Persian Alexander Epic (*Iskandarnāme*). While briefly introducing existing Alexander Epics, the study explores the characterization of Alexander besides comparing various texts of the same genre. The analysis reveals that in most of these works, Alexander assumes a mythical, legendary, and sacred persona. In some works, such as Nizami's *Iskandarnāme*, Alexander is identified with Dhu al-Qarnayn, while in the mystical works of Jami and Amir Khosrow, he takes on an orphic character. In some works, like *Darab Nameh*, references to Alexander's weaknesses are more or less hinted at. Nevertheless, overall, he is depicted as a just and wise monarch, and in some instances, a prophetic figure. Regarding Alexander's ethnicity, there is no consensus in these works. Among these, two narratives are more noteworthy: some, like Nizami, consider him of Iranian descent, while others view him as from the lineage of the Greek hero Philip.

**Keywords:** Alexander, Alexander Epic (*Iskandarnāme*), Nizami, Ferdowsi.

### 1. Introduction

The term "Alexander Epic" (*Iskandarnāme*) refers to the works composed around the life of Alexander throughout history, either in verse or in prose. Alexander, a historical figure, has been portrayed in various ways in these works. However, there are also works described as "Alexander Epic" that do not have any connection to Alexander's life.

Alexander's life has been intertwined with various wonders, making his life a myth and turning him into a mythical figure. The story of Alexander has traveled from Roman and Syriac sources to Arabic and then to Persian literary works. It seems that Alexander's appearance and presence in each of these works differ from others. These differences are sometimes significant and prominent, and sometimes the poet or writer has imitated to the extent of making minimal differences in the work. In these narratives, the character of Alexander is sometimes portrayed as a scholar and mystic, and sometimes as a prophet or king. His ethnicity is Iranian in one narrative and Greek in another.

Besides their literary value, these works seem to have paramount importance and potential for examination in terms of historical narrative and content. Therefore, the current study has attempted to elucidate these points. First, a brief overview of the poetic and prosaic Alexander Epics in Persian literature is provided, followed by an exploration of the differences and similarities among these various narratives. Furthermore, noteworthy aspects of character portrayal in these works are examined.

#### 1-1. Research Background

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Jafari, S., & Hajitabar, H. (2024). Analytical Overview of Alexander Epics (*Iskandarnāme*) in Persian Literature. *Literary Arts*, 16 (2), 27-36.



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10.22108/LIAR.2024.140673.2358

A bunch of studies have been conducted on Alexander Epics. Fathali Abbaskoohi (2020) focused on cognitive style analysis of Alexander Epic in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and Nizami's Alexander epic in his Ph.D. dissertation. Mosalman (2017) studied the transtextual relationship of Nizami's Alexander Epic with the Ayyine-Sekandari (the Alexander mirror) of Amir Khosrow Dehlavi as the topic of his master's thesis, and Sheykh (2017) addressed the folklore aspects of Alexander epic in the *Tazkirat al-Awliyā* of Attar in his master's thesis. Moreover, GholamhosseinZadeh et al. (2008) in their paper critically analyzed the interpretations of the Alexander Epic by Nizami Ganjavi, while Abedi et al. (2011) studied intertextual relationships in the prosaic Alexander Epic (Ferdowsi, Nizami, and Amir Khosrow). Abbasi (2016) explored the arcitextual relationships (lengthwise and generically) of poetic Alexander Epics (Ferdowsi, Nizami, and Amir Khosrow), and Bina et al. (2019) in their research titled "Critical Analysis of the Language of Heroism and its Relation to Imagery in Three Works: Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Nizami's *Iskandarnāme*, and *Khāwarannāme Khosrow*" delved into this subject.

### 1-2. Research Methodology

The present study is library-based, utilizing a descriptive-analytical approach. It relies on data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The data were collected through the observation and study of library sources. The focus is on describing, analyzing, and drawing conclusions from the meanings and concepts found in various narratives about Alexander's life, aiming at identifying the differences and similarities among existing Alexander Epics and exploring how Alexander's character is portrayed mythically in terms of behavior and worldview in these works.

## 2. Research Findings

An intriguing aspect of Alexander's Epics is the diverse attention they receive from various nations and cultures, even those with not-so-friendly relations with Alexander, sometimes facing invasions and violations from him. The research question is: Why has the life of Alexander captured the attention of poets and writers to such an extent, considering the presence of other world-conquering leaders like Genghis Khan, Cyrus, Timur, etc.?

One distinguishing factor setting Alexander apart is his philosophical and wise inclinations. In literary works, Alexander is often referred to as a disciple of Aristotle, searching for lost wisdom. This is the key difference between Alexander and other conquerors like Genghis Mongol, who often came from tribal backgrounds with limited exposure to culture and civilization. Alexander's philosophical nature provides a substantial platform for poets or writers to express wisdom alongside his heroic persona. In many Alexander Epics, a blend of epic and educational literature is evident. When the Alexander story is placed within an epic work like *Shahnameh*, the heroic character of Alexander is preserved while simultaneously maintaining his Greek philosophical aspect, a pattern consistent in other Alexander Epic such as Nizami's *Iskandarnāme*.

"One of the noteworthy achievements of combining the genres of epic and educational literature is their complementarity. The foundation of epic literature (*Sharaf Nameh*) is often devoted to willpower, while educational literature (*Iqbal Nameh*) is based on reason and knowledge. Epic literature focuses on the externality (handling national affairs), whereas educational literature insists on the internality (ethical concepts). The ultimate purpose of both literary genres is to establish peace and tranquility: one externally (on the physical level) and the other internally (on the psychological level) to lay the groundwork for the desired virtuous city (Utopia) according to Nizami Ganjavi's vision" (Tayefi & Yaseri, 2020, p. 37).

Another distinguishing factor for Alexander is his remarkable conquests at a young age. The span between his rise to power and his death covers approximately 35 years, making his victories at a young age and his relatively short life period vague, enigmatic, and astonishing. As Afshar explains:

"Alexander, due to his rapid conquests, instilled fear and awe in the hearts of people worldwide from an early age, earning fame to the extent that peculiar stories and strange beliefs circulated about him. These stories became so widespread that they were even associated with breaking norms from his birth, and his name was linked with saints and prophets. Over the centuries and among various nations with different local colors and flavors, Alexander took on a desirable appearance and demeanor in every language and region, aligning with the mental inclinations of the inhabitants of that territory" (2010, p. 46).

In fact, the early death of Alexander at a young age can be another reason why various nations, including those with no favorable memories of his invasions, might view him positively.

"These rapid and unexpected victories echoed so loudly in the ancient world that their reverberations are still heard in the space of eras and ages. Despite the hastiness and brevity of the event-maker's life, his effects lingered in the civilization and culture of the ancient world, leading to the swift transformation of his life story into a realm of fascinating myths on the tongue of the storytellers. Tales and narratives about him became widespread, and biographies in prose and poetry emerged" (Safa, 1991, p. 469).

Another reason is the association of Alexander with the defeats of various nations, including Iranians, providing an opportunity to highlight his name as an Iranian conqueror in compensating for those losses.

In Iranian culture, there are two narrative traditions about Alexander that are contradictory to each other. In one, Alexander is depicted as a just and wise king, a prophet-like figure with a shining reputation. In the other, he is cursed and damned. The Alexander Epics, both in prose and verse, form collections that primarily narrate the life of Alexander. The primary source of these narratives is

the Alexander Romance, attributed to the contemporary philosopher-historian Callisthenes and dating back to around 200 AD. In Iranian narrative tradition, the influence of the Alexander Romance is evident in various storylines, including Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Tarsusi's *Darab Nameh*, and Nizami's *Khamsa* (Vashaghani Farahani, 2017, p. 1).

The story of Alexander has also been highlighted in popular/folk literature. "Folk literature is a part of the people's culture conveying imaginations, emotions, aspirations, and various thoughts from one generation to another, reflecting the aesthetic and ethical standards of each period of the life of a nation" (Zaviri, 2003, p. 71).

The attention of different nations and groups to the story of Alexander's life led to the formation of diverse, new, and in some cases contradictory narratives, which were narrated orally and by narration among different ethnic groups. After some time, these stories found their way into Persian literature and were welcomed by a range of poets and writers.

"Several centuries after the death of Alexander, stories about him emerged, and... this story was translated into living languages of that time, including Persian, and... these translations, in turn, became the source of creating influential works in the Iranian language and literature. The first time the fame of this legend compelled a skillful speaker like Ferdowsi to put it into verse. Following him, the wise Ganjavi artist (Nizami) did the same, and after them, other renowned poets such as Amir Khosrow Dehlavi, Jami, Khwaju Kermani, Hatefi, and several others imitated the style of Ferdowsi, addressing the Alexander Epics or other stories in the same manner and thus leaving behind unique and valuable works in the literature of this ancient land" (Safavi, 1985, p. 262).

Callisthenes was the first-person and one of the closest individuals to Alexander, who, after Alexander's death, blended his life story with exaggerations and adventurous tales, narrating his life in an exaggerated manner in writing. Although having significant differences from the historical life of Alexander and his real character, perhaps due to historical precedence, this work became the foundation for many Alexander Epics created throughout history by various individuals worldwide.

"The oldest surviving example of an Alexander Epic, written between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries Hijri (12-14 AD), is a manuscript incomplete at its beginning, middle, and end. This work regards Alexander as the same as Dhu al-Qarnayn and considers him the half-brother of Darab, who marries Roshanak, Darab's daughter. Alexander is portrayed as a world-conquering man determined and aimless, enslaved by lust and in turmoil to obtain women. In this work, the image of Alexander as a smiling man with multiple wives is vividly presented, reflecting the famous concept of a great kingship (this is the same narrative known as the Pseudo Callisthenes)" (Sanadgol, 2017, p. 11).

In Persian literature, there are various Alexander Epics narrating the life of Alexander. Some of these works, such as Nizami's Alexander Epic, are more prominent, for which many imitators have emerged. However, prior to Nizami, Ferdowsi versified the story of Alexander in *Shahnameh*. Some researchers have studied the source of the traditions related to Alexander. Many of them believe that the fake Callisthenes narrative, Syriac sources, the *Qur'an*, the Arabic legend of Dhul-Qarnain, and to some extent Iranian sources played a role in the formation of these narratives. They demonstrate the evolution and transformation of these narratives. According to them, Persian Alexander Epics have preserved the main lines of the Pseudo Callisthenes' narrative but portrayed Alexander as a wise, virtuous, and faithful ruler under the influence of Islamic tradition. Referring to *Shahnameh*, Nizami's *Khamsa*, and other narrated Alexander Epics, she emphasizes the diversity of these narratives. Finally, they highlight Tarsusi's Alexander Epic, indicating that the latter narrative has undergone such changes that it is difficult to relate it to the original Pseudo Callisthenes' narrative (Vashaghani Farahani, 2017, p. 9).

### 2-1. Narrated Alexander Epics

From the second half of the 19th century, little by little, knowledge such as social sciences, philology, cultural anthropology, etc. expanded, as a result of which attention to the knowledge of the common people and folklore culture began to expand, and the attention of researchers was drawn to the art and literature of the common people. In this regard, popular literature in Iran was also taken into consideration.

"Iranian folklore, in addition to its literary and artistic dimensions, is a vast source of primary information about the people's way of life, getting readers and researchers familiar with various aspects of contemporary society, such as beliefs, superstitions, values and anti-values, social classes, occupations, administrative and social systems, ethical principles, etc. Narrated Alexander Epics are among these works. In Iran, numerous Alexander Epics in prose and verse have been produced from the late fourth century Hijri until the Safavid era" (Zolfaghari et al., 2013, p. 35).

**News of Alexander:** This work was written in the late fourth century Hijri but details about the author and the exact year of composition are not available since the initial pages of the book are missing. However, in the book, Sultan Mahmud is mentioned as the past king (Amire Mazi), indicating that the book was probably written shortly after Sultan Mahmud's death. This work serves as the foundation for all subsequent Alexander Epics throughout history.

**Darab Nameh:** Tarsusi's *Darab Nameh* is one of the long narrative folklore stories written in the sixth century Hijri, including the story of the life of Darab, the Kianid king, Bahman, his daughter Hoday, and Alexander the Roman (Macedonian). Alexander is one of the main kings in the book, and his adventurous exploits are described in more than half of the book.

"The character of Alexander in Tarsusi's *Darab Nameh* has a fundamental difference from Alexander in other Persian literary Alexander Epics, such as *Shahnameh*, *Sharaf Nameh*, and *Iqbal Nameh*, i.e. there is no mention of that powerful and wise king in

Persian literature. In *Darab Nameh*, we encounter various tricks removing the sanctity, divine wisdom, and independence from this mythical king in order to present a different face of him in the public imagination" (Amanat & Hasanli, 2018, p. 173).

**Alexander Epic of the Pseudo Callisthenes' Narrative:** This Alexander Epic was narrated between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries Hijri, and its author is Abdolkafiebne Abialbarekat. The story structure mainly revolves around Alexander's military campaigns and conquests. The role of women is prominent in this book. In this narrative, elements from other books, such as *Shahnameh*, *Bakhtiyar Nameh*, *Sorkh Bot*, and *Kheng Bot* are used. Nizami also considered this book in his own *Alexander Epic*. This book praises Iranians. The prose of the book is simple and mixed with folk legends. The portrayal of Alexander in this book is Iranian, noble, and prophet-like, reflecting a Muslim and prayerful image.

**Middle Eastern Alexander Epic:** Baqi Mohammad Ibn Maulana Yusuf narrated this Alexander Epic in 1926, recently came into our possession, and was published in two volumes by Ismaeili in 2013. In this narrative, Alexander appears with a prophetic and Sufi-like demeanor, taking on the form of a perfect human. The presence of mystics is noticeable in this book, but it is not as pronounced as Manuchehr Khan's narrative. The influence of Ibn Hesam Khosfi's *Khavaran Nameh* and Tarsusi's *Darab Nameh* in the writer's mind is evident. The book includes various stories of Alexander's birth, encountering Zal and his children, entering the land of the elephant-eared people, battling a dragon, Alexander's journey to Morocco/West, and the Castle of Maris, concluding with Alexander's death.

**Seven-Volume Alexander Epic:** It is a sly and detailed narrative in seven volumes by Molana Manuchehr Khan Hakim, known as Alexander Shast Kalle (sixty-head), written during the Safavid era. This book has a somewhat prosaic nature. According to this narrative, Darab Ibn Darab, one of Bahman's sons and Alexander's brother (Dhu al-Qarnayn), was in Iran for fourteen years. Ultimately, he was killed by his ministers, and Alexander ascended to the throne, initiating his adventures. He conquered the king of India, converting him to Islam. The story has a military structure and involves Alexander's battles with fairies, breaking enchantments, and the prosaic tricks of that era.

## 2-2. Versified Alexander Epics

**Shahnameh:** The narrative of Alexander in *Shahnameh* appears to have originated from the Pseudo Callisthenes' *Alexander Epic*, presenting both positive and negative aspects of him. The positive portrayal may have been to compensate for the humiliation of Iranian defeats, but in the negative aspect, the poet consistently questions Alexander's lineage and race, reflecting a form of protest. Alexander attacked Iran during Darab's reign and then continued his conquests worldwide. He seeks the elixir of life but fails, and after fourteen years of ruling, he departs from the world in Babylon. Ferdowsi, while narrating Alexander's story, also conveys wise teachings within the story.

**Nizami's Alexander Epic:** Nizami's Alexander Epic is divided into two parts: *Sharaf Nameh* and *Iqbal Nameh*. Nizami incorporates stories from Jewish, Christian, and Pahlavi traditions into his narrative. The portrayal of Alexander in *Sharaf Nameh* is similar to that in *Shahnameh*, where Alexander is identified with Dhu al-Qarnayn, striving to expand the divine religion. In *Iqbal Nameh*, compared to *Sharaf Nameh*, there is a reduction in epic and narrative features, and Alexander is presented more as a ruling philosopher. Consequently, the audience is confronted with a multitude of philosophical and wise content.

**Ayyine-Sekandari (The Alexander Mirror):** Amir Khosrow Dehlavi wrote *Ayyine-Sekandari*, consisting of 405 verses. In parts of the story, we witness the dominance of mystical aspects. In this book, Alexander embarks on a journey through seven valleys of knowledge. Along this path, he benefits from the hidden assistance of figures like Khidr and Elijah. Overall, the work is a concise piece that combines epic, lyric, and educational literature.

**Kherad Nameh Iskandari (The Wisdom Book of Alexander):** The Masnavi of *Kherad Nameh Iskandari* was composed in the year 890 AH (1485 CE) in poetic form. Jami dedicated this didactic work to Sultan Hussein Bayqara, encompassing philosophical and juridical matters spoken through the voices of Greek wise men, addressing Alexander. What sets Jami's *Iskandarnāme* apart from other works about Alexander is its lack of focus on the life and events of Alexander. Instead, it addresses allegorical subjects, aiming at creating an educational work. In this book, Alexander is depicted as a virtuous and wise individual, with his most prominent characteristic being his keen interest in science and knowledge.

**"Sad-e Sekandari" (The Dam of Alexander):** Amir Alisher Navoi composed this work in poetic form, in a similar meter (Motaghareb). The collection is divided into various sections and chapters, such as justice, kingship, heart, etc., each accompanied by stories framed as Aristotle's questions and answers. It consists of 16 wisdoms. In *Sad-e Sekandari*, Alexander is portrayed as a wise, just, and thoughtful ruler engaged in the pursuit of knowledge; he is not a prophet, nor is he seeking the elixir of life. Instead, he is exploring the mysteries of the world, delving into the depths of the earth and seas.

**"Naseri Kermani's Iskandarnāme":** This book was written between 1298 and 1300 Hijri (1879 to 1883 CE). During its time, it gained considerable fame. In this *Iskandarnāme*, Alexander is described as the offspring of the Kianian dynasty and a virtuous ruler. Parts of the book praise his scholarly endeavors. According to the narrative of the book, Alexander invades Iran, engages in numerous battles, and in the final moments of his life, advises his associates to appoint his son, Alexanderus, as his successor. However, after his death, his son refuses to accept this role, opting for seclusion.

## 2-3. The Lineage of Alexander:

Ferdowsi introduces Alexander as Iranian in lineage, belonging to the dynasty of Kianians. Darab marries Nahid, the daughter of Philip the Roman, and later, due to the foul smell of the bride's mouth, he returns her to her father without knowing she is pregnant. Philip accepts his granddaughter, raising her well, and she becomes a skillful warrior. Darab marries again and has a son named Darab, who later becomes the king of Iran. Over time, a war ensues between Alexander, now the king of Rome, and Darab. During this series of battles, Alexander successfully defeats the Iranian army, and Darab is killed.

In *Shahnameh*, Alexander is presented as a disciple of Aristotle.

“According to Ferdowsi's narrative, Alexander is the son of Darab, the Iranian king, and Nahid, the daughter of Philip, the Caesar of Rome. In this way, he is related to the ancient Iranian kings (Kianians). Ferdowsi has mentioned Alexander's pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and chivalry, portraying him as someone connected to the unseen world, akin to prophets” (Ranjbar & Ebrahimi, 2013, pp. 84-85).

In the Pseudo *Callisthenes Alexander Romance*, Alexander is portrayed as purely Iranian. He is the grandson of Bahman and the son of Darab. After attacking Rome, Darab brings the country under his control. He marries the daughter of Philip, the king of Rome. Similar to Ferdowsi's narrative, due to the foul smell of the bride's mouth, he returns her to her father while she is pregnant. Alexander is raised by his grandfather, becoming his heir. Astrologers predict, “This boy will conquer the East and the West, wander the entire world, and bring all the kings under his rule, and no king will be able to resist him” (Afshar, 2010, p. 46). He battles Darab, the king of Iran, and ultimately defeats him.

Nizami presents Alexander as Greek. Philip, the ruler of Rome, finds Alexander abandoned during a hunting trip, and since his mother has died, he adopts him as his son, making him his heir. “In this work, Alexander is not of Iranian descent but the son of an ascetic woman. It should be noted that Nizami has delved into many details in the Alexander Romance despite some similarities with other works. In this work, Alexander is portrayed as a conqueror, a prophet, and a sage, appearing with a meaningful countenance. According to German orientalist Christoph Bürgel, in this work, Alexander is not the ideal king of Iranian tradition but the ideal leader of the Platonic city” (Ranjbar & Ebrahimi, 2013, p. 86). However, in another narrative, Nizami considers Alexander of genuine Iranian descent, finally dismissing both initial accounts as futile and asserting Alexander's true son of Philip, with his lineage as Esau, the son of Isaac.

In his Alexander Epic, Naseri, like Nizami, does not acknowledge Alexander's Iranian descent and introduces him as the son of Philip and the disciple of Aristotle. On the contrary, Amir Khosrow considers Alexander the son of Philip, who later ascends to the throne. Jami's narrative, similar to Nizami's, believes that Philip, in his old age, has a son named Alexander, whom he places with Aristotle to become knowledgeable and skilled. At the age of seven, he is declared the heir. Also, in *Darab Nameh*, there is a reference to the story of his mother's foul mouth odor. In the Middle Eastern Alexander Romance, the reason for Darab marrying the daughter of Philip, the Roman emperor, is peace between the two countries; however, due to the girl's fondness for cats and her unpleasant breath, she is returned to her father, even though she is pregnant. Later, Alexander is born, and he becomes the king of Rome.

Overall, it can be stated that two main perspectives on Alexander's ethnicity are prevalent among Iranian poets and writers. The first viewpoint considers Alexander as Iranian. Alexander's invasion of Iran had extensive effects on the culture, society, language, and overall civilization of the Iranians. The impact of this invasion and Alexander's role was significant enough that some poets and writers felt compelled to portray him as Iranian. Consequently, they constructed a saintly and virtuous image for him, infused with an ideology and belief in Iranian identity. The second perspective considers Alexander as Greek; however, while acknowledging his historical, religious, mythological, and literary aspects, they highlight the captivating tales and myths of his life. They present him as a just ruler, occasionally portrayed as a mystic, who liberated regions from oppression, extending from Europe to India.

#### 2-4. Alexander's Characterization

Ferdowsi, in his portrayal of Alexander, has a somewhat hostile view, and a profound examination of his depiction reveals historical similarities between the real Alexander and the one depicted in *Shahnameh*. Nevertheless, Ferdowsi's narrative, despite recognizing Alexander's Iranian lineage, portrays him as a greedy and covetous individual. Despite this, Ferdowsi admires Alexander's wisdom. “Ferdowsi has hinted at Alexander's education, wisdom, and bravery, and in some places, he describes him as someone in contact with the unknown world and presents his image as a prophet” (Ranjbar & Ebrahimi, 2013, p. 85).

The characterization of Alexander in Nizami's work holds a significantly high-level position. In Nizami's narrative, Alexander is portrayed as a powerful and virtuous figure, a fearless warrior, an unparalleled philosopher, and a sincere prophet. Nizami's Alexander is a courageous hero, a philosopher without equals, and a genuine prophet. However, none of these traits align with the historical figure of Alexander and are just the creations of Nizami's imagination. In contrast to Ferdowsi, Nizami delves deeply into the character of Alexander, depicting him as a just, far-sighted, and wise ruler. In Nizami's portrayal, Alexander is portrayed as a peace-loving and forward-thinking ruler.

“Throughout Nizami's work, Alexander is portrayed as an intelligent individual not considering himself useless from the perspective of the wise. He is both a warrior and a lover of leisure, with opinions on justice and a generous ruler. In Nizami's words, Alexander is mostly portrayed in a positive light, highlighting his endeavors. For example, when he goes to Egypt after the war with the Indians, he is depicted as tirelessly working to develop and expand the cities everywhere” (Mirhashemi et al., 2021, p. 23).

In Nizami's narrative, Alexander is considered a sacred figure often considered as Dhu al-Qarnayn.

In Tarsusi's book, Alexander's character noticeably differs from other Alexander Epics. While he is initially introduced as a wise, ideal, and virtuous king like in other books, the unfolding events present contradictory concepts to these traits in the reader's mind. After ascending to power, Alexander adopts a negative behavior toward his mentor Aristotle, to the extent of being cursed and damned by him. There is a particular arrogance in Alexander that leads him to disregard the guidance of others.

"This is precisely the situation seen in the *Alexander Epic of Pseudo Callisthenes*. Alexander is an absolute ruler and other characters merely play the role of obedient subjects; for instance, Aristotle, the wise and great teacher of Alexander, is just a simple obedient one before Alexander, playing the role of cattle very well" (Amanatpour & Hasanli, 2018, p. 168).

In other Alexander Epics, Alexander is the main and powerful character of the story. However, in Tarsusi's book, other powerful characters such as Puran Dokht take center stage, overshadowing Alexander's character in terms of cunning and strength. The Callisthenes' Alexander Epic is replete with exaggerations and hyperbole in describing Alexander's virtues. In this narrative, Alexander is depicted as a saintly worshiper, seeking the expansion of justice. In this tale, Alexander is portrayed as a world traveler, ruler, empire-builder, intelligent, just, and benevolent.

"The narrative structure comprises the conquests, battles, and wars of Alexander, along with sub-stories, tales, meetings with ascetics, and intrigue and conspiracies of women. The presence of women in this narrative is highly noticeable. In this narrative, Alexander uses women as a means to achieve his goals and objectives. Alexander, through marriage to women, attains his goal of spreading Islam. Women serve as a means to save Alexander and his army from prisons, conspiracies, and deceit of their enemies, etc. Alexander's face in this narrative is the image of a victorious and heralded commander. He is considered a Muslim, i.e., a monotheist, a prayerful person, a prophet, and a genuinely Persian individual" (Sanadgol, 2017, pp. 13-14).

"In Naseri's *Alexander Epic*, the poet's mind and language are influenced by the works of past scholars especially Nizami Ganjavi, who initiated and created poetic works about Alexander. In these references, one can see a mythical and historical image of Alexander, mostly depicted as a prophetic, virtuous, wise, knowledgeable, conqueror, and reformer figure. However, beneath these depictions, sometimes the tyrannical and destructive aspects of Alexander become apparent, particularly in the context of burning the Persepolis. This is the first poetic Alexander Epic implying it and this cannot be anything other than influenced by the fresh Iranian approach to scientific advancements, which had been embraced and processed by poets and writers amid the translated works" (Kharazmi & Ghanbari Naniz, 2018, p. 144).

In the story of Amir Khosrow, the mystical aspect of Alexander's character is more prominent, with the poet focusing more on expanding the mystical meanings in Alexander's tale. Alexander in this story finds a spiritual image, passing through dangerous paths with the help of Khidr, Elijah, and Sraosha. He undergoes seven stages of mysticism: seeking, love, detachment, knowledge, and astonishment, both in the desert and the sea, ultimately reaching the stage of annihilation. In the Middle Eastern Alexander Epic, the path of mysticism and spiritual journey is indeed an integral part of Alexander's character, traversed from the beginning of his journey. In this book, Alexander moves towards goodness, a direct and just path, and, in a way, becomes an exemplar of virtues from a spiritual and mystical perspective. The narrative portrays Alexander as a prophet-like and Sufi figure, appearing as a complete human being, even giving him the title of "Hazrat" (a term for respected figures in Islam), and presenting him with a more complete face and a perfect guide according to the German scholar Christoph Bürgel who has corrected the narrative. The mention of the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) at the beginning of the book, before the start of Alexander's story, is a narrative technique employed to enhance credibility and authenticity, even though there may be apparent contradictions and complexities in this narrative. Moreover, it is noteworthy that this story is indirectly narrated through the words of Gabriel and then the Prophet, adding to its depth and significance (Ismaeili, 2013, p. 145).

Also, in the narrative of Manuchehr Khan, Alexander is described as "an unparalleled hero, a valiant warrior, a pure-hearted young man, and a righteous prophet, appointed by the ancient prophets. His mission is to eradicate disbelief from the realm of existence, and spread and elevate the word of truth and the religion of Islam" (Mahjoub, 2005, p. 73). The mystical and Sufi journey of Alexander is one dimension of his character in Jami's work.

"The clear and subtle point is that Jami strives to depict a man of greatness and power, like Alexander, who conquered from the East to the West, in the field of mysticism. He aims to teach the essence of gnosis, guiding towards a figure proud above the heavens and coquettish beyond the stars" (Afshar, 1964, p. 169).

He strives to attain a level of faith and heartfelt assurance. However, understanding the mystical aspects and spiritual states is possible only for those who themselves have acquired such qualifications, both in the practical and theoretical domains, as characters exhibit different styles in their behaviors. Alexander's style and approach in Jami's works deviate from the historical personality of Alexander. These works are noteworthy in terms of characterization. The evolution of Alexander's character from the damned to the blessed is crucial. The basis for changing the perspective on Alexander's character in these works can be traced back to the pseudo narrative of Callisthenes, which, for the first time, intertwined the story of Alexander's life and his character with imagination and myth, eventually transforming him into a prominent and enduring figure in the works of poets like Nizami and Ferdowsi.

As mentioned, Nizami, regardless of Alexander's race, places him as the main and prominent spiritual, religious, and worldly figure

in his epic, portraying him as a model and an ancient symbol within his poem. In many works related to Alexander's life, this type of perspective predominates. For example, in the quest for the elixir of life, exploring various aspects, the influence of the mythical essence in these works regarding Alexander's character is evident. However, in some works, a somewhat realistic view competes with the idealistic approach. For instance, Tarsusi considers the historical image of Alexander and refrains from exaggeration and hyperbole in depicting him, challenging his dominance, ability, and power in various ways.

### 2-5. Various Narratives of the Alexander Story

**Ferdowsi:** Ferdowsi does not delve into the details of Alexander's life, as he, like Nizami and his followers, did not create a separate work called Alexander Epic. However, throughout his epic saga, he also addresses the story of Alexander, especially his death, to convey moral lessons and admonitions. Alexander undergoes training in Aristotelian philosophy from the beginning and, after ascending the throne, practices generosity, not imposing taxes on the people for five years. As time passes, he engages in a war with Dara, the king of Iran, and emerges victorious through betrayal by two of Dara's associates. However, after the war, he adopts a chivalrous behavior, goes to Dara's bed, and avenges the traitors. Following Dara's will, Alexander then proposes to marry his daughter, Roshanak. He also goes to war against Kid, the king of Pōrus, and defeats him. Subsequently, Alexander sets out towards the Kaaba and encounters one of the descendants of Hazrat Ismail (PBUH), who welcomes him. Crossing the seas of the East, Ethiopia, and the land of the elephant-eared people, Alexander heads towards the West. He seeks the Fountain of Life in the land of the West and goes through the stages with the companionship of Khidr. However, in the end, he remains deprived of drinking from the Fountain of Life. Alexander rules for about fourteen years in *Shahnameh* and eventually returns to his homeland, where he dies. Alexander's death serves as a document for expressing wisdom and providing instructive lessons for the poet. Nizami, the sage, refers to the reason for composing the Alexander epic in *Sharaf Nameh* as a dream vision he had during his nap, where he observed himself in the process of handpicking dates, inspiring him to write a new poem. Nizami introduces Alexander as a wise king with a prophetic character, attributing the invention of the mirror to him. Besides, "in addressing himself, he criticizes certain aspects of his contemporary society, highlighting the disorder and injustice of his time. One of the reasons for the lack of logical order of his articles is the injustice and disorder of his time" (Zarrinkoob, 2007, p. 44).

Nizami thoroughly describes the story of Haoma (the elixir), also addressed in *Shahnameh* and *Ayyine-Sekandari*. In general, Nizami's Alexander Epic is more detailed and intricate compared to other Alexander Epics, possibly due to the use of scientific, philosophical, and astronomical terms, etc.

"Nizami's style is based on justice, sweetness of words, precision of meaning, and tenderness of imagination. The explicit craftsmanship is apparent in his poetry, and it is evident that he not only adheres to the gift of eloquence but also appreciates and refines it. The complexity and emphasis that he himself has in his brief and concise verbal advice are indicative of his own approach, occasionally making his speech intricate and challenging while diminishing its kindness and impact. Additionally, insistence on providing descriptions and embellishing scenes at times causes a disruption in the unity and general narrative of the story, leading to a loss of coherence in the expression and overall structure of the tale" (Zarrinkoob, 1999, p. 319).

*Iqbal Nameh*, like most Nizami's works, begins with the prayer of the Lord and the call of the Prophet of Islam, and stories such as the legend of Archimedes with the Chinese maid, the legend of Mary the Coptiyeh, the legend of Khorasani and deceiving the Caliph and Zulqarnain to know Alexander, his story with Shaban Dana and his relationship with Socrates Or it includes the conversation of the sage of India with him and seven other sages and intellectually refers to ancient Greek ideas and practical wisdom.

"*Iqbal Nameh*, the second book of Alexander's Epic is a philosophical-mystical Masnavi where the world-conquering Alexander appears as a prophet. In this spiritual journey, he reaches the land of the benevolent and the poet's final view on the life of a knowledgeable and perfect human is expressed. It is, in fact, the Utopia contemplated by him since his youth" (Servatian, 2006, p. 51).

In summary, it can be stated that Nizami introduces Alexander as a prophet who, in *Sharaf Nameh*, delves into his achievements. In *Iqbal Nameh*, Nizami goes beyond this and emphasizes the spiritual dimension of Alexander's character.

Nizami "combines the two halves of the book to portray a wise Platonic ruler merging with an Eastern prophet from the lineage of Abraham in the form of the Macedonian conqueror, illustrating a mysterious unity between the ruler and the sage, and between prophecy and governance" (Zarrinkoob, 2007, p. 170).

In the Middle Eastern Alexander Epic, what stands out more than anything else is the exploration of dreams, magic, and sorcery. The author's religious biases are evident, and his religious beliefs are fully manifested in this work. The mythical wars of Alexander also play a prominent role in the overall narrative; for instance, Alexander's wars with the elephant-eared people, the bugbear creatures, magicians, demons, cannibals, magical shahbal, a one-legged being, and others enhance the significance of the work from the perspective of fantasy literature. In this narrative, the presence of sly creatures is also observed, less pronounced compared to Manuchehr Khan's narrative. Alexander aims to spread the Islamic religion and embarks on military campaigns worldwide, meeting Khidr and reaching Mount Qaf. The life story of Alexander in this book is thoroughly intertwined with mythology and magic, presenting the audience with a mythical-magical narrative with no historical documentation. In Manuchehr Khan Hakim's narrative, the story is presented in a colloquial manner, addressing a general audience, and this approach to simplicity can be considered a positive aspect of the book. The story often encounters exaggerated embellishments, and for this reason, this book, like the narrative of the Middle East,

fundamentally differs from other accounts of Alexander. It leans more towards storytelling rather than delving into the historical aspects of Alexander's life. "The Iranian color and gloss are highly pronounced in this book. The occupation of Iran by Alexander in this book aligns with *Shahnameh* and Nizami's Alexander Epic. However, after that, it diverges into the realm of fantasy, describing the sly deeds, magical acts, and strange and miraculous events in imaginary places. In this tale, many characters play roles that have no precedent in other Alexander Epics. Moreover, Alexander is considered the same Dhu al-Qarnayn in this book, and the roles of his mystics, such as "Master of the Breeze (Nasim)", are very pronounced. The Breeze assists Alexander in overcoming his enemies with bravery, agility, and numerous feats. It seems that Alexander is an excuse for narrating entertaining adventures to the point that the book's title could be changed to "*Nasim Nameh*" (Kheyrkhah, 2018, p. 155). In Amir Khosrow's *Ayyine-Sekandari*, he begins with a short eulogy and then proceeds to the main story. The notable feature of Alexander in *Ayyine-Sekandari* is receiving revelations and assistance through receiving hidden inspirations and establishing a connection with Sraosha. Sraosha appears to him in the war with the Chinese and gives him the good news of victory, then, reveals the command of God to move towards the Gog and Magog Mountain to him. With Sraosha's assistance, he initiates his maritime journey and continues it for eighteen years. Amir Khosrow's narrative revolves around the astrolabe and the making of Alexander's mirror. Unlike Nizami, he does not consider Alexander the inventor of the mirror but attributes its origin to China. In the end, Alexander appoints his son, Alexanderus (Alexander IV), as his successor; however, Alexanderus refuses. At the end of his life, Alexander instructs the nobles of his court to undertake three tasks: a) Grant his son Alexanderus the pledge of allegiance, b) After his death, remove his hand from the coffin, meaning that Alexander, who ruled the world, departed empty-handed from the world, becoming a lesson for others, c) Third, bury him in Alexandria, which he himself founded (Rajabi, 2009, p. 46).

"Indeed, the narrative world of *Darab Nameh* has woven numerous adventures and events into its narrative. Gradually, based on a plausible plot, Alexander's authority and glory diminish. Moreover, a weak characterization of Alexander is presented, and the creation of powerful characters like Puran Dokht, who cast shadows over Alexander's authority, results in the restoration of the Iranian throne and sovereignty from this Greek conqueror in the fictional world of *Darab Nameh*. In this Iranian folk tale, instead of direct confrontation with Alexander and cursing him, Iranian colloquial methods have been utilized. Through storytelling techniques, indirectly, the legendary power of Alexander is nullified, portraying him as an empty and cursed figure in action" (Amantpour & Hasanli, 2018, pp. 173-174).

Nasiri has laid the foundation of his Alexander Epic more on moral lessons and admonitions. The poet's goal is to present a wise narrative of Alexander's life, which can be considered an explicit imitation of Nizami's work with some additions to certain parts of the story. This book, written between 1298 and 1300 Hijri, reflects the complaints from the oppressive rulers of the time in some sections. Nasiri's distinct narrative about the burning of the Persepolis by Alexander largely denies his Iranian lineage.

This book is not consistent and unified in its narrative and exhibits contradictions and inconsistencies in various sections. For instance,

"The tale of a person who asks Alexander to marry many women to have numerous offspring and give each country a son, and Alexander responds that a good son is fine but better than that is a good name. He gained nothing but infamy for himself by burning the Persepolis. On the other hand, although Alexander condemns becoming subordinate to women, in previous tales, the poet portrayed his companionship with a beloved who was the cause of burning the Persepolis" (Kharazmi & Ghanbari Naniz, 2018, p. 138).

In Jami's narrative, Alexander ascends to the throne after the death of Philip and cries out for justice. He requests a book of wisdom from the scholars of his time, including many sages like Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Hippocrates, and more, and Jami addresses all these elements in his work. Then, Alexander embarks on world conquest from China to the West. Jami, after recounting Alexander's worldly affairs, narrates his spiritual and mystical states, like his encounter with an angel during his sea journey, serving as a pretext to express mystical and wise points by the poet.

"This entire poem is masterfully laden with these elevated meanings, noble concepts, and valuable thoughts; particularly, at the end of the poem, the emergence of the sign of death in Alexander, writing a letter to his mother, the famous story of the ten wise men's advice and lamentation on the coffin of that king in Alexandria, the condolences of five sages, and Aristotle's condolences to Alexander's mother, each justified by specific reasons and quoting verses may lead to excessive elongation of the story and weariness for the honorable listeners" (Afshar, 1964, p. 169).

In the narrative of Callisthenes, Alexander, after defeating Darab, marries the daughter of the King of Kashmir. Subsequently, he travels to numerous cities, including India, Oman, Mecca, Kashmir, Yemen, China, Andalusia, and Egypt. He engages in battles with bugbear creatures, cannibals, and demons, seeking the elixir of life in the darkness. He travels to the land of fairies and marries the Queen of the Women's Utopia, and the story continues with Alexander's confrontation with Arsalan Khan and Yaqut, the cousin of the Queen of the Women's Utopia.

Each of these stories depicting Alexander's life has taken shape within different cultural and historical contexts, naturally resulting in variations in narratives and tales. For instance, in comparison, Nizami's *Iskandarnāme* lacks the characteristics of a complete epic, whereas Ferdowsi's portrayal of Alexander in *Shahnameh* stands as a prime example of a comprehensive historical epic. Given Nizami's poetic style, his Alexander Epic Book takes on the scent and flavor of literature and feasting, with concepts such as ideals,

longing, hope, expectation, scent, passion, pleasure, and regret being the poet's focus and he utilizes his special language and interpretations to express these concepts. Meanwhile, in Ferdowsi's work, the heavy shadow of epic and combat is keenly felt in the Alexander story. These distinctions, arising from stylistic differences among poets and cultural and environmental disparities, are also noticeable in other Alexander Epics. For instance, in Manuchehr Khan Hakim's Alexander Epic Book, shaped during the Safavid period when cultural weakness in society was evident, we encounter various vulgarities and insults in the text. Additionally, the presence of Arabic and Turkish words alongside pretentious titles and epithets has led to weariness and aversion in this work.

In the mystical narrative of Alexander's life, we encounter a different aspect of storytelling. Furthermore, there are other narratives intertwining the story of Alexander's life with discussions related to divination/sly deeds, revelations, or magical elements such as sorcery and enchantments, distinguishing them from other narratives.

### 3. Results

Throughout history, various works have been created about Alexander's life, which have become famous as Alexander Epics. These works are generally accompanied by the poets and writers' imaginative interventions regarding Alexander and his life events. Examining these stories from different aspects such as narrative style, character portrayal, realism, etc., leads to a deeper and better understanding of the poets and writers' narratives, imaginations, and thoughts in this cultural and literary context throughout the history of literature. The tradition of writing Alexander Epics begins with Ferdowsi in Persian literature; but becomes conventional with Nizami and finds numerous imitators later on. In most of these works, Alexander assumes a mythical, legendary, and sacred character. In some works, like Nizami's Alexander Epic, Alexander is identified with Dhu al-Qarnayn, or in the works of Jami and Amir Khosrow, he takes on a mystical aspect. In certain works, like *Darab Nameh*, there are more or less veiled references to Alexander's weaknesses. However, overall, he is depicted in these works as a just and wise king and, in some cases, even as a prophetic figure. Regarding Alexander's ethnicity, there is no consensus in these works. Some, like Nizami, consider him of Iranian descent, while others view him as Greek, from the lineage of Philip. Another notable aspect is that these Alexander Epics encompass various events and the presence of different characters, each contributing to the development of events and diverse behaviors in the storyline of these works; for instance, the character of Puran Dokht in *Darab Nameh*, who possesses relative superiority compared to Alexander, or the companionship of Khidr, Sraosha, and Elijah with Alexander in some of these works, all contributing to portraying Alexander not only with a historical and epic aspect but also with a mystical dimension.

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