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Investigating and Identifying the Roots of Iranian Thought in Arabic Sources with Reference to the *Shahnameh*: A Case Study of Muwallad Proverbs and Arabic Sources

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Abstract

This study investigates the intellectual and cultural interconnections between the Persian and Arabic literary traditions during the early Islamic centuries, focusing on the identification of Iranian ethical and sapiential elements in Arabic sources. A significant portion of Iran's cultural heritage was assimilated into Arabic texts under the label of Muwallad (generated/non-native) proverbs, often obscuring their original identity. Conversely, Ferdowsi's Shahnameh preserves these thoughts within a coherent, native Iranian framework. Utilizing a comparative-analytical framework, this research juxtaposes over thirty Arabic Muwallad proverbs and maxims against the sapiential themes of the Shahnameh. The findings indicate a profound structural and conceptual alignment between the two corpuses, demonstrating that Arabic sources can serve as a viable medium for reconstructing the historical and moral identity of Iranian thought from the 4th to the 6th

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centuries AH. Key thematic areas—such as prudence, systemic corruption, and inherent danger—reveal direct textual lineages, proving that many Muwallad proverbs are Arabicized reflections of pre-Islamic Persian wisdom.

Keywords: *Muwallad proverbs in Arabic and Persian; Muwallad proverbs and Iranian thought; the Shahnameh and Muwallad proverbs; Muwallad proverbs in Arabic sources.*

1. Introduction and Problem Statement

The cultural and linguistic interactions between Persians and Arabs during the golden age of the Abbasid Caliphate led to a deep integration of ethical and sapiential heritages. One of the most challenging areas in classical Arabic lexicography is the classification of Muwallad proverbs—sayings that emerged post-classical era, often carrying non-Arabic conceptual roots (Ibn Manzur, 1990). While compilers like Al-Maydani recorded these proverbs in collections such as Majma' al-Amthal, their primary cultural origins were frequently lost or genericized. Iranian scholars and administrators operating within the Abbasid administration served as the main conduits for this cultural transmission (Zaydan, 2012). Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, acting as a monumental repository of pre-Islamic Iranian didactic literature, offers a unique comparative baseline. The fundamental problem addressed by this study is the lack of a systematic comparative framework to decode these Muwallad attributions and trace them back to their authentic Iranian roots.

2. Literature Review

Comparative studies between Persian and Arabic wisdom literature have historically focused on direct translations, such as Ibn al-Muqaffa's translation of Kalila wa Dimna (Tarzi, 2015). Scholars like Tafazzoli (1997) have examined the transmission of Middle Persian Andarz (didactic texts) into Arabic ethical treatises (e.g., Ibn Miskawayh's Javidan Kherad). Furthermore, the structural adaptation of proverbs has been explored by studies emphasizing the stylistic shift from Persian poetic meters to Arabic prose (Sabzianpour, 2011). However, the specific category of Muwallad proverbs in major Arabic anthologies remains underrepresented. Prior research has often treated these proverbs as indigenous Abbasid developments rather than cross-cultural adaptations. This study fills this gap by systematically aligning the Muwallad corpus with the thematic structures of the Shahnameh.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive-analytical and comparative methodology, structured through the following systematic phases:

Data Extraction and Corpus Selection: A targeted corpus of over thirty Arabic Muwallad proverbs was compiled from classical lexicons and anthologies (primarily Al-Maydani's Majma' al-Amthal and Ibn Manzur's Lisan al-Arab). Concurrently, corresponding thematic sections and sapiential verses from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh were indexed.

Structural and Semantic Alignment: The extracted proverbs and verses were analyzed based on three comparative parameters: semantic equivalence (shared moral message), structural/metaphorical alignment (similarity in imagery, such as the source of water or handling venomous creatures), and historical-genealogical tracing (linking the Arabic maxims to Middle Persian precursors like the Andarz of Adurbad).

Triangulation: To ensure academic rigor, the comparative data were cross-referenced with early Islamic ethical texts (e.g., Ibn Miskawayh) that explicitly attribute specific philosophical remarks to Iranian historical figures (such as Kisra or Bozorgmehr), thereby validating the direction of cultural transmission.

4. Results

The analysis of the comparative data yields the following answers to the primary research questions:

How do Arabic sources complete and prove the Iranian nature of the thoughts reflected in Ferdowsi's work? The existence of identical conceptual structures in Arabic Muwallad proverbs—frequently attributed to "Kisra" (the Persian King) or recorded as foreign maxims—acts as external historical validation. For instance, the proverb "Al-kadaru min ra's al-'ayn" (Water is turbid at the source) structurally mirrors Ferdowsi's specific moral metaphors regarding systemic corruption. By capturing these Persian concepts in early Arabic registers, these sources document the widespread oral and written presence of Iranian wisdom before and during the composition of the Shahnameh.

In what ways have Arabic sources utilized Iranian intellectual traditions? Arabic sources utilized Iranian traditions through semantic translation, metaphorical adaptation, and structural assimilation. Complex Middle Persian ethical concepts were compressed into concise Arabic proverbs (e.g., the transition of complex counsel on

kinship into the Muwallad proverb "Al-khirqatu min al-shuqqah", which matches Ferdowsi's "sleeve and shirt" metaphor). This indicates that Arabic compilers preserved the cognitive framework of Iranian wisdom while tailoring it to the rhetorical tastes of the Arabic-speaking public.

Do Persian sources provide sufficient evidence to authenticate the identity of maxims found in Arabic texts? Yes, Persian texts—specifically the Shahnameh alongside Middle Persian Andarz literature—provide key contextual evidence. The explicit warnings against handling dangerous creatures (such as dragons or snakes) found in both Ferdowsi's poetry and Arabic Muwallad proverbs are traced directly to the Andarz of Adurbad. The thematic and structural continuity in Persian literature serves as a "smoking gun" that confirms the Iranian pedigree of these otherwise unattributed Arabic maxims.

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