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Representing Power and Dominance through Linguistic Strategies in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Power in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is predominantly represented through heroism, martial prowess, and military victory. Nevertheless, many narrative episodes demonstrate that power relations are not constructed solely through physical confrontation; rather, language plays a decisive role in establishing, maintaining, and transforming these relations. Despite extensive scholarship on power and heroism in the *Shahnameh*, relatively little attention has been devoted to the linguistic strategies employed where discourse functions as a substitute for or complement to military action from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing upon Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this study investigates how linguistic strategies contribute to the representation and negotiation of power in the *Shahnameh*. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, it examines a purposively selected corpus of dialogues in which language assumes a central role in power relations, including episodes of captivity, negotiation encounters in enemy territory, battlefield postponement, and court debates. The findings reveal that the declarative mood is the most frequent grammatical resource for persuasion and managing power relations. Characters predominantly rely on argumentation, analogy, appeals to tradition and shared cultural beliefs, euphemism, and strategic humility to establish credibility, reduce conflict, conceal identity, persuade their interlocutors, and reshape power relations. The use of these strategies varies according to the communicative context, participants' discursive positions, and interactional objectives, and often proves more effective than direct military confrontation. Analysis across Fairclough's three dimensions—text, discursive practice, and social practice—demonstrates that power in the *Shahnameh* is reproduced through the interaction of language, ideology, and socially legitimized discourses, with linguistic competence emerging as a significant source of power alongside physical strength.

Keywords: *Shahnameh*; Critical Discourse Analysis; Norman Fairclough; Power; Linguistic Strategies.

1. Introduction

Studies of epic literature indicate that power is not represented solely through military action and physical confrontation but is also constructed through narrative strategies, particularly the linguistic practices of characters. As one of the most significant works of Persian epic literature, *Shahnameh* provides a rich discursive arena in which power relations are not confined to the battlefield; rather, they are established, negotiated, and transformed through dialogue and verbal interaction. Throughout many episodes of the *Shahnameh*, characters encounter situations in which armed conflict has not yet begun, is temporarily suspended, or may even be avoided altogether. In such circumstances, language becomes the primary means of action. Characters employ a wide range of linguistic strategies—including threats, argumentation, persuasion, praise, justification, and deception—to reshape the balance of power in their favor. These interactions demonstrate that language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a strategic instrument for constructing, negotiating, and redefining power relations. Although previous scholarship has extensively examined the heroic, military, and ideological dimensions of the *Shahnameh*, comparatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which linguistic strategies operate in pre-battle encounters or in situations where direct military confrontation is suspended or impossible. In particular, the mechanisms through which heroes employ discourse to persuade, deceive, delay conflict, or establish discursive superiority over their opponents remain insufficiently explored. Against this background, the present study investigates the relationship between

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language, ideology, and social power in the *Shahnameh* through the framework of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Critical Discourse Analysis seeks to reveal the structural relationships of domination, discrimination, power, and control as they are enacted and reproduced through language (Blommaert, 2005, pp. 24–25). Within this theoretical framework, discourse is understood not merely as a reflection of social reality but as a form of social practice that actively participates in the production and transformation of power relations. Accordingly, the central research question of this study is how heroes employ linguistic strategies in pre-battle encounters and other non-military contexts to exercise, negotiate, maintain, or transform power relations, and how these strategies contribute to persuasion, deception, and the establishment of discursive dominance over their opponents.

2. Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical method based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The aim of the study is not to examine all dialogues in the *Shahnameh*, but to analyze selected narrative situations in which language functions as a substitute for or a complement to military action and plays a significant role in the construction and negotiation of power relations. The corpus of the study consists of selected dialogues from the *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi. The data were collected through close reading of the text and were selected purposively according to their relevance to the research objectives. The selected dialogues include situations such as Gordāfarīd's captivity by Sohrāb, Rustam's encounters with Sohrāb and Esfandiyār, Rustam and Esfandiyār's presence in enemy territory under a false identity, Rustam's confrontation with Akvān the Demon, Garsivaz's conversations in the episode of Siyāvash, and the intellectual debate at Bahrām Gūr's court. The selection criteria were based on three main considerations: first, the presence of a power asymmetry or a critical interactional situation among participants; second, the central role of verbal strategies in influencing the course of events; and third, the use of linguistic devices for persuasion, deception, concealment of identity, conflict avoidance, or the reconstruction of power relations. The analysis was conducted at three interconnected levels corresponding to Fairclough's model. At the textual level, linguistic features such as lexical choices, semantic values, grammatical structures, modality, and forms of address were examined to identify the linguistic strategies through which power relations are represented. At the level of discursive practice, the production and interpretation of dialogues were analyzed with attention to their situational and intertextual contexts. At the level of social practice, the findings were interpreted in relation to broader cultural, ideological, and social structures that shape the legitimacy and effectiveness of these discursive strategies.

3. Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach that examines language not merely as a linguistic system but as a social practice. Its theoretical foundations draw upon disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and anthropology (Fairclough, 1989, p. 11). From this perspective, language both reflects social structures and actively participates in their production and reproduction. Accordingly, the present study treats language as the principal unit of analysis in situations of conflict and communicative interaction. Among the major scholars of CDA, Norman Fairclough conceptualizes discourse as extending beyond the analysis of linguistic texts alone. He argues that discourse should be examined in relation to material and social structures as well as cognitive dimensions such as beliefs, values, emotions, and ideologies (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 123–124). Fairclough further emphasizes that discourse is inseparable from social practice and interacts dialectically with social action (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 63–64). Consequently, discourse in the present study is understood not simply as a linguistic phenomenon but as a form of social action through which power relations are negotiated and exercised. Likewise, the close relationship between language and its social context suggests that discourse analysis must simultaneously account for linguistic features and the social conditions under which meaning is produced (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 66). The critical dimension of CDA lies precisely in its concern with the relationship between language, ideology, and power, seeking to uncover the mechanisms through which domination and inequality are embedded in linguistic practices (Fairclough, 1995a, p. 54). In this sense, the primary objective of Critical Discourse Analysis is to reconsider the role of language in the production of social relations and to contribute to a critical understanding of social reality (Fairclough, 2012, p. 78). These principles constitute the theoretical foundation of the present study for identifying the linguistic mechanisms through which power is constructed and negotiated in dialogic interactions in the *Shahnameh*. Fairclough's analytical framework consists of three interconnected dimensions: description, interpretation, and explanation. The first dimension, description, focuses on the linguistic properties of the text, including vocabulary, grammatical structures, and semantic patterns (Fairclough, 1989, p. 112). At this level, language is examined as a system of signs through which relationships, ideological positions, and representations of reality are constructed. The second dimension, interpretation, treats the text as both the product and the resource of processes of production and interpretation. At this level, attention is directed toward contextual factors such as situational context and intertextuality, which shape the production and interpretation of meaning (Fairclough, 1989, p. 26). Accordingly, interpretation explores the mechanisms through which meaning emerges from the interaction between discourse producers and recipients. The third dimension, explanation, situates discourse within broader social and ideological structures in order to demonstrate how power relations are produced, reproduced, or transformed through discourse (Fairclough, 1989, p. 163). At this stage, discourse is understood as an integral component of wider social and ideological formations that contribute to the maintenance or transformation of social power. Within this analytical framework, the present study examines how linguistic strategies employed by the characters of the *Shahnameh* participate in the construction, negotiation, and legitimization of power in different communicative contexts.

4. Literature Review

A considerable body of research has employed Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate Persian literary texts, including the *Shahnameh*. These studies have examined literary discourse in relation to its linguistic, social, and ideological dimensions. Nevertheless, most existing scholarship has concentrated on broader issues such as power, identity, and ideological structures, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to the linguistic mechanisms through which power is negotiated in

situations of conflict and interaction. Consequently, the systematic analysis of linguistic strategies within Fairclough's three-dimensional framework—particularly in contexts where language functions as a substitute for or complement to physical action—remains an underexplored area of research. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the linguistic strategies employed in such communicative situations. [Qarabi et al. \(2023\)](#), for example, investigated female warrior figures in the *Shahnameh*, particularly Gordafarid and Gordiyeh, through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. Their findings demonstrate that these female characters challenge patriarchal norms through linguistic practices and the discursive construction of feminine identity. Although their study acknowledges the significance of language, its primary focus is on identity representation rather than on the linguistic mechanisms through which power relations are constructed and negotiated. Similarly, [Eslami and Zomorodi \(2022\)](#) analyzed competing discourses in the *Shahnameh* and argued that conflicts within the epic primarily arise from the confrontation of opposing ideological systems. Their study further suggests that the political and social order of ancient Iran was fundamentally grounded in the preservation of established traditions. While this research provides valuable insights into the ideological dimensions of the text, it does not independently examine the role of linguistic strategies in shaping dialogic interactions and power relations. In another study, [Bahmani \(2020\)](#) explored critical metaphors in the *Shahnameh* and demonstrated that Ferdowsi employs culturally embedded metaphors to represent power relations throughout the narrative. Although this research approaches the linguistic dimension more closely, its analysis remains primarily concerned with symbolic and semantic structures rather than with the strategic use of language in constructing, negotiating, or transforming power relations within dialogues. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis has also been applied to a range of other classical Persian literary texts. For example, [Marzbān and Ferdowsi \(2012\)](#) examined governmental discourse in Saadi's *Golestān*, focusing on the representation of power and ideology in the social context of the seventh century. [Khazāneh-dārlou and Jalālvand \(2013\)](#), in their analysis of two chapters of *Siyāsāt-nāme* by Khwāja Nezām al-Molk, employed Fairclough's framework to investigate the ideological discourse of political authority and the representation of religious discrimination. More recently, [Amini Shalamzari and Rozatian \(2025\)](#) compared the representation of power in Nezami's and Jami's *Layli and Majnun*, demonstrating how differences in the authors' personal, situational, and social contexts influence the discursive construction of power. Although these studies illustrate the broad applicability of Fairclough's model to Persian classical literature, they do not address the linguistic strategies through which power is negotiated in the dialogic interactions of the *Shahnameh*. Overall, the existing literature indicates that although the concept of power has received considerable scholarly attention in studies of the *Shahnameh*, a systematic investigation of linguistic strategies in contexts of conflict and communicative interaction, particularly within Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, remains largely absent. The present study addresses this gap by examining how linguistic strategies function in the construction, maintenance, negotiation, and transformation of power relations in the dialogues of the *Shahnameh*.

5. Discussion

5.1. Description

At the descriptive level, Fairclough's model focuses on the formal properties of the text, including vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures ([Fairclough, 1989, p.26](#)).

5.1.1. Vocabulary

5.1.1.1. Experiential Values (Rewording)

Rewording refers to the production and use of words and expressions that replace or contrast with existing semantic forms. Fairclough considers this concept a useful term for explaining the intertextual and dialogic nature of lexical choice, since words are not merely naming devices in different discourses but carry different modes of representing reality ([Fairclough, 1992, p. 194](#)). From this perspective, rewording is not merely a linguistic process but is associated with the reconstruction of meaning, as the replacement of one expression by another may reflect particular social, political, or ideological interests ([Fairclough, 1989, p. 114](#)). Therefore, rewording has both semantic and ideological implications and plays a role in shaping the audience's interpretation of individuals, events, and actions ([ibid., p. 136](#)). In the *Shahnameh*, characters employ rewording in different situations to establish particular meanings and interpretations of individuals, events, and actions. This process becomes particularly evident in contexts where two competing semantic systems or discourses struggle over the definition of a phenomenon. One prominent example of this process appears in Garsivaz's discourse in the episode of Siyāvash. Depending on his audience and communicative purpose, Garsivaz provides different representations of Siyāvash. Within the framework of kinship and hospitality, Siyāvash may be understood as an innocent guest and a trusted figure; however, when Garsivaz speaks to Afrāsiyāb, he represents him within the discourse of political threat:

When Siyāvash rises in anger from Rūm and Chīn,

You will see the earth filled with maces and swords ([ibid., p. 263](#))

In this expression, Siyāvash is represented not as a guest and relative, but as a military force and a potential threat to Turanian authority. Thus, by changing the lexical and semantic framework, Garsivaz represents the same individual within two different discursive systems: Siyāvash as an innocent and trusted guest versus Siyāvash as a threat to political order. This shift in representation demonstrates that meaning is not an inherent feature of individuals but is produced through the discourses within which they are described. Another example of rewording can be observed in the confrontation between Rostam and Esfandiyār, where the meaning of war is reconstructed through two different discourses. Esfandiyār interprets his conflict with Rostam within the framework of royal discourse and obedience to the king's command:

How can I turn my head away from the king's command?

How can I abandon such a duty and authority? ([ibid., p. 717](#))

Within this framework, war is not a personal action but a legitimate duty arising from the king's command. In contrast, Rostam represents the same action within the discourse of heroism, interpreting it not as an obligation but as a threat to heroic values, social honour, and his reputation:

I have not come today for the sake of war;

I have come to seek reconciliation and preserve my honour and reputation. (*ibid.*, p. 749)

Therefore, a single event, namely military confrontation, acquires two different meanings within two competing discourses: in royal discourse, war represents obedience and the fulfilment of duty; whereas in heroic discourse, it represents a violation of heroic values and ethical traditions. In this case, rewording becomes a site of competition between two systems of meaning. Another instance of this process appears in the story of Akvān the Demon. In order to influence Akvān's decision, Rostam does not represent his request as fear of death or an attempt to preserve his own life; rather, he connects it to the authority of the wisdom of the Chinese sage and the knowledge of previous generations:

Thus he replied: "A wise man from China

once told a tale concerning this matter". (*ibid.*, p. 430)

In this example, an action that could be interpreted as an individual attempt at self-preservation is reconstructed within the discourse of wisdom and collective experience. Through this rewording, Rostam moves his statement beyond personal interest and places it within the framework of socially legitimate and accepted knowledge. These examples demonstrate that rewording in the *Shahnameh* is not limited to changes in honorific expressions or forms of address; rather, it functions as a discursive process through which meanings are reconstructed and the audience's interpretation is guided. Therefore, lexical choice in the *Shahnameh* is not neutral; instead, it constitutes a site of competition among discourses and contributes to the reproduction or transformation of power relations.

5.1.1.2. Overwording

The concept of overlexicalization was first introduced by Halliday (1978) and was later adopted by Fairclough under the same term in Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992, p. 194). Overwording refers to the repeated use of synonymous or near-synonymous lexical items to represent a particular domain of experience. It reflects an intense preoccupation with a specific semantic field and enables the analyst to identify the ideological characteristics of the discourse-producing group (Fowler et al., 1979, p. 211–212). In the selected episodes of the *Shahnameh*, overwording occurs less frequently in battle scenes because the dialogues are generally brief and primarily concerned with victory, escape, or deceiving the opponent, leaving little room for lexical repetition. By contrast, in contexts such as scholarly debates and ceremonial exchanges, language itself becomes the primary means of exercising power, and repeated references to a particular semantic field reinforce the speaker's intellectual authority and epistemic legitimacy. A clear example appears in the dialogue between the Byzantine emperor's envoy and the court of Bahrām Gūr. To emphasize wisdom as the essential qualification of kingship, the envoy repeatedly employs the word *kherad* ("wisdom") and its derivatives, making wisdom the central concept of his discourse:

Every king who possesses wisdom

Finds comfort in the words of the wise;

The wise stand closer to God,

While the day grows darker for the ill-minded. (*ibid.*, p. 991)

The repetition of *kherad* ("wisdom") and *kheradmān* ("wise") serves not merely as emphasis but also presents wisdom as the principal source of legitimate kingship. By foregrounding this lexical field, the envoy constructs intellectual authority as the foundation of political legitimacy. The royal sage (Mobad), in response, reproduces the same semantic field and likewise presents wisdom as the highest standard of knowledge and virtue:

Know nothing greater than wisdom;

Wisdom is foremost among all virtues.

Wisdom seeks the hidden secrets of the world

That remain unseen by the human eye. (*ibid.*, p. 992)

By adopting the same lexical pattern, the Mobad reinforces the centrality of wisdom while competing with the envoy within a shared discursive framework. The repeated emphasis on the same semantic field illustrates how overwording functions not only as a lexical phenomenon but also as a strategy for constructing intellectual authority and legitimizing one's position in discourse.

5.1.1.3. Semantic Opposition

Semantic opposition arises when the meaning of one lexical item is incompatible with that of another (Fairclough, 1989, p. 116). In the selected passages, such oppositions function not merely as literary devices but also as discursive strategies for constructing identities, concealing intentions, and directing the audience's interpretation. In addition to direct lexical antonyms, opposition may also emerge through the contrast between two broader semantic domains. Garsivaz is one of the characters whose discourse is consistently structured around semantic oppositions. Even when recounting events, he employs contrasting lexical items to create a gap between appearance and reality, thereby encouraging suspicion in his audience:

The two realms are like fire and water,

Each striving to surpass the other.

You have seen what is hidden; now look also at what is plain.

Know this, and never consider yourself safe from his bloodshed. (*ibid.*, pp. 253, 257)

Oppositions such as fire/water and hidden/apparent guide the listener's interpretation by presenting reality through contrasting semantic frames rather than neutral description. A similar strategy appears in the story of Akvān Dīv. Knowing that Akvān habitually acts contrary to what he is told, Rostam deliberately expresses his true intention through its opposite:

If I tell him, "Throw me into the sea",

That evil demon will cast me onto the mountain;

For the demon's actions are always reversed.

May the Lord of the world be my protector (*ibid.*, p. 431).

Here, the opposition between sea and mountain is more than a contrast between two locations; it functions as a strategy of deception directed at an opponent whose behavior is governed by inversion. By exploiting this semantic opposition, Rostam induces Akvān to act against his expectation and thus secures his own escape. Another example appears when Rostam and Esfandiyār enter enemy territory disguised as merchants:

I am both a seller and a buyer,
Trading in every kind of merchandise. (Ibid., p. 458)
I buy goods in Turan and carry them to Iran,
Then journey onward to the land of warriors. (Ibid., p. 702)

In this context, commercial vocabulary such as buy and sell signifies more than mercantile activity; it constitutes part of the new linguistic identity adopted to conceal their true mission. Although both characters are in fact warriors, they consistently employ the language of trade. Consequently, the opposition between their real identity and their represented identity is reflected not only in their disguise but also in their lexical choices. Semantic opposition here extends beyond individual antonyms to the contrast between the broader semantic domains of warfare and commerce, through which the characters construct and sustain their assumed identities in discourse.

5.1.2. Relational Values

5.1.2.1. Euphemism

Euphemism refers to the use of a more acceptable or pleasant expression in place of a word carrying negative semantic associations (Fairclough, 1989, p. 117). Political language likewise employs euphemism, together with ambiguity and indirectness, to represent reality in ways that serve the speaker's purposes (Fowler et al., 1979, pp. 211–212). Euphemism is therefore not merely a marker of linguistic politeness; rather, it constitutes a discursive strategy for maintaining or transforming power relations. By selecting more favorable lexical expressions, speakers may reduce confrontation, gain the addressee's trust, or conceal their underlying intentions. Garsivaz employs euphemism to conceal his hostility toward Siyāvash. Although he is secretly plotting Siyāvash's destruction, he begins his speech with expressions of praise:

Since you came to this land,
No one has suffered harm because of you. (ibid., p. 257)

In this example, Garsivaz's praise of Siyāvash does not reflect his genuine attitude; rather, it functions as a strategy for gaining Siyāvash's confidence and concealing the speaker's actual intention. Euphemistic language thus serves to disguise an underlying ideological objective. Another example of this strategy appears in Rostam's speech. Rather than expressing his threat through the direct verb to kill, he employs expressions with positive semantic associations:

I shall make you a guest beneath my steed,
And heal your head with my mace. (ibid., p. 736)

Here, Rostam represents the violent act of killing through the expressions make you a guest and heal your head. Instead of referring directly to the intended act of violence, these expressions recast it in seemingly pleasant and positive terms. Consequently, the violent act is represented through a linguistic veil that mitigates its explicitness while preserving the threatening force of the utterance. Rostam and Esfandiyār likewise employ courteous expressions when entering enemy territory disguised as merchants in order to conceal their true identities. In his conversation with Pīrān, Rostam presents himself as socially inferior, while Esfandiyār, despite his open hostility toward Arjāsp, addresses him with formal honorific titles. In both cases, these expressions do not indicate genuine recognition of the addressee's superiority; rather, they function as discursive strategies for gaining trust, concealing identity, and facilitating the successful completion of their mission:

Rostam said: "I am your inferior;
It is in your land that God has granted me sustenance.
May no one suffer injustice because of you,
And may jewels rain down from the cloud of your kindness. (ibid., p. 458)

Across all these examples, lexical choice does not reflect a fixed personal attitude on the part of the speaker; rather, it is shaped by the discursive situation and the prevailing power relations.

5.1.2.2. Formal and Informal Language

Social relations contribute to the degree of formality in lexical choices, and discourse participants employ formal or informal words and structures according to different situations (Fairclough, 1989, p. 117). Formality constitutes one aspect of restricted access to discourse and plays a role in shaping power relations among participants. Such restrictions vary according to content, topic, and social relations; thus, in formal contexts, the subject matter, identities of participants, and modes of interaction are more strongly governed by structures of power and social status than in ordinary situations (ibid., pp. 65–66). Since the data examined in this study are limited to situations in which language replaces or complements military action, formality and informality are manifested less through courtly ceremonies and more through lexical choices, forms of address, degrees of respect or intimacy, social distance, and the adaptation of speech style to power relations. One manifestation of formality is the use of elevated and courtly vocabulary. When Esfandiyār speaks with Arjāsp and seeks permission to hold a banquet in the royal palace, he avoids ordinary expressions and employs ceremonial and honorific forms of address:

He said: "O king, noble and wise one,
Lord of the world and chief of the priests.
My house is narrow, while the palace is lofty;
Let us honourably go to this fortress. (ibid., p. 704)

Honorific expressions such as shāhā ("O king"), jahāndār ("lord of the world"), and mobadān mobadā ("chief of the Zoroastrian

priests”) acknowledge the power relation before the request is presented and increase the likelihood of its acceptance. Forms of address also change according to the relationship between speaker and addressee. In his conversation with Siyāvash, Garsivaz uses the intimate address “O kind one” (ey mehrabān) in order to gain his trust:

Garsivaz said to him: “O kind one,

Do not consider him in the manner you have seen. (ibid., p. 257)

However, when addressing Afrāsiyāb, due to his royal status, he chooses the formal address “O king” (ey shahrīyār)

Garsivaz said: “O king,

Siyāvash follows a different way and conduct. (ibid., p. 253)

By contrast, when either of these figures becomes the topic of conversation in the absence of the other, Garsivaz abandons honorific forms of address and merely uses their names. This indicates that formality in address is determined by the communicative relationship rather than being an inherent characteristic of the speaker. The formality of speech is also associated with respect for the addressee’s social status. When Rustam encounters Pīrān while disguised as a merchant, he speaks with humility in order to maintain his assumed identity and acknowledge Pīrān’s position as a Turanian minister:

Rustam said to him: “I am your inferior;

God has brought me to find my place in your city. (ibid., p. 458)

The use of keh-taram (“I am your inferior”) demonstrates that the speaker deliberately places himself in a lower position in order to recognize the existing power relation and gain the addressee’s trust. Social position also affects the degree of formality in speech. When Rustam confronts Akvān the Demon, he expresses his intention directly without observing formal conventions:

Thus he replied: “A wise man from China

once told a tale concerning this matter”. (ibid., p. 430)

However, the same character, in his formal encounter with Pīrān, praises him with respectful expressions before presenting his request:

He offered him praise, saying: “O renowned one,

In Iran and Turan, you are blessed with fortune and virtue. (ibid., p. 458)

Esfandiyār likewise adopts this formal mode when entering Arjāsp’s court:

He came and kissed the ground,

And offered much praise before Arjāsp (ibid., p. 702)

He said: “O fortunate king, may you be blessed;

May the lord of the world live forever”. (ibid., p. 704)

Thus, the observance of courtly conventions and the use of honorific forms of address are determined by the formality of the communicative situation and the social position of the addressee. Finally, speech style changes in accordance with shifts in power relations. When Gordāfarīd is held captive by Sohrāb, she employs a measured and respectful style in an attempt to reduce confrontation and replace conflict with dialogue. After her escape, however, she no longer needs to maintain the same degree of formality and uses a proverb to reveal her distance from Sohrāb:

Do not be overly confident in your own strength;

The foolish ox is struck down from its own side. (ibid., p. 179)

Here, the change in speech style reflects the transformation of the power relation, as formal language is replaced by a more direct and distancing mode of expression. Therefore, in the examples examined from the *Shahnameh*, formality and informality are not fixed characteristics of the characters; rather, they are determined by power relations, social status, communicative objectives, and discourse situations. Characters modify their lexical choices, forms of address, and styles of expression as these factors change.

5.1.3. Expressive Values

Expressive values refer to the speaker’s positive or negative evaluation of individuals, events, and situations based on the prevailing ideology. They reveal the speaker’s attitude toward what is being expressed and play a significant role in directing the audience in persuasive contexts (Fairclough, 1989, p. 117). In the *Shahnameh*, whenever a hero or another character cannot impose their will through force, they attempt to persuade the interlocutor by employing different expressive strategies. Thus, expressive values function not merely as personal evaluations but as linguistic strategies for directing behavior and reshaping power relations. After being captured, Gordāfarīd attempts to alter Sohrāb’s decision by presenting the future consequences of his actions as certain:

Now I shall uncover my face and hair,

And your army will be filled with talk:

That you went to battle against a woman

And raised the dust of war to the clouds. (ibid., p. 178)

Rather than making a direct plea, Gordāfarīd highlights the social consequences of Sohrāb’s conduct. In doing so, she shifts the discourse from combat to honor and public judgment, thereby influencing her opponent’s decision. Garsivaz similarly persuades Afrāsiyāb by presenting the future as inevitable:

From him you will reap nothing but pain and suffering,

The ruin of your lineage, your fame, and your treasure. (ibid., p. 254)

The certainty of this statement leaves little room for doubt and portrays Siyāvash’s survival as an unavoidable threat. In this way, Garsivaz seeks to influence Afrāsiyāb’s political decision. He further reinforces his argument through an allegory:

He illustrates it with a parable:

"A wind that leaves the house

Cannot be stopped along its course;

If you let it pass, time itself will pass as well." (ibid., p. 254)

The allegory elevates Garsīvaz's prediction beyond a personal opinion and presents it as a universally accepted truth, thereby reducing the listener's resistance.

When Esfandiyār enters Arjāsp's court disguised as a merchant, he frames his request conditionally:

If the king deems it appropriate

To have this caravan brought into the fortress,

And if he finds anything among its treasures worthy of himself,

I shall gladly present it, and it will be no burden to me. (*ibid.*, p. 702)

The conditional structure softens the request and avoids the force of a command. Although Esfandiyār outwardly leaves the decision to the king, by emphasizing the value of the caravan he subtly encourages acceptance. Thus, apparent deference conceals his actual objective.

Rustam likewise attempts to dissuade Esfandiyār from continuing the battle by offering generous gifts and elaborating his proposal:

A thousand cheerful servants I shall give you,

To attend you day and night;

A thousand Khallukh maidens I shall bestow upon you,

Fair ornaments of the royal crown;

And the treasures of Sām, Narīmān, and Zāl

I shall lay before you, O incomparable one. (*ibid.*, p. 749)

The abundance of promises transforms Rustam's proposal from a simple request into a negotiation between two champions. This elaboration is not self-glorification but an attempt to redirect the discourse from combat to reconciliation and gain time to escape defeat.

After his initial setback, Rustam also avoids admitting weakness by presenting his request as a universally accepted principle:

Rustam said: "It has grown late;

No one seeks battle

In the darkness of night.

Now return in peace and contentment. (*ibid.*, p. 744)

By appealing to the conventions of heroic warfare, Rustam presents a personal request as a general principle. In this context, he shifts the discourse from warfare to ethics and tradition, influencing Esfandiyār's conduct without revealing his own vulnerability and thereby altering the balance of power in his favor.

5.2. Grammar

5.2.1. Experiential Values

5.2.1.1. Attributing Agency to Non-Human Actors

In some texts, actions are attributed not to human agents but to abstract concepts or inanimate entities. This displacement of agency is often ideologically motivated and alters the representation of social actors (Fairclough, 1989, p. 123). Van Leeuwen refers to this process as impersonalization, arguing that it backgrounds human agency, grants authority to abstract entities, and introduces additional implicit meanings into discourse (Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 60). In the *Shahnameh*, this grammatical strategy frequently appears when characters seek to avoid direct confrontation by transferring responsibility for events from individuals to forces beyond human control. In this way, the displacement of agency functions as a linguistic strategy for persuasion, mitigation of responsibility, and the reconfiguration of power relations. When Garsivaz attempts to dissuade Siyāvash from reconciling with Afrāsiyāb, he attributes future events to the revolving heavens:

Whenever the revolving heaven grows harsh

And draws the face into anger,

No wise man possesses a remedy

To escape its encompassing circle. (*ibid.*, p. 257)

Here, the heaven is represented as the active force governing human destiny. Hostility and conflict are thus portrayed not as the result of human decisions but as inevitable consequences of fate. By shifting agency in this manner, Garsivaz presents his opposition to reconciliation not as a personal opinion but as an unavoidable reality, thereby making his argument more persuasive to Siyāvash. Rustam likewise attributes events to Time (ruzgār) and fortune (akhtar) in his dialogue with Esfandiyār:

I seek some remedy, that Time

May weary you of warfare.

Remember what the sages of old declared:

May ill fortune never accompany you (*ibid.*, p. 749)

Here again, agency is transferred from Rustam's own intentions to Time and destiny. Rather than presenting the postponement of battle as a consequence of his weakness, Rustam frames it as a matter determined by fate. This representation enables him to prolong the dialogue and delay combat while distancing himself from responsibility for the proposed course of action. A similar pattern appears in Rustam's reference to captivity (band). His principal concern is not defeat itself but the lasting social stigma associated with captivity:

From captivity, an evil name would remain with me forever,

And an unhappy end would come to you as well (*ibid.*, p. 749).

In this construction, captivity itself is represented as the agent that brings lasting disgrace, rather than the person who imposes it. Responsibility is thus displaced from Esfandiyār to an abstract concept. This shift of agency preserves respect toward the interlocutor while emphasizing the social consequences of captivity, allowing Rustam to persuade Esfandiyār to refrain from binding him without direct accusation.

5.2.2. Relational Values

In discussing relational values, Fairclough examines how declarative, interrogative, and imperative moods represent the relationship between speaker and hearer. In declarative clauses, the speaker assumes the role of information provider, whereas imperative clauses make power relations more explicit by directing the hearer to act. These grammatical moods, however, do not always perform their conventional functions; for example, requests may be expressed through declarative or interrogative forms rather than direct commands (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 125–126). In the *Shahnameh*, the choice of mood likewise reflects power relations. Whenever characters cannot exercise direct authority, they resort to indirect moods to achieve their communicative goals. While held captive, Gordāfarīd is unable to issue direct commands because Sohrāb holds the superior position. She therefore expresses her request in the form of advice and declarative statements:

It would be better if we reached an agreement in secret;

Wisdom is the mark of the greater person.

For my sake, do not expose this disgrace

Before the two opposing battle lines. (ibid., p. 179)

Rather than commanding Sohrāb directly, Gordāfarīd frames her request as general advice, thereby encouraging him to alter his behavior without provoking resistance. After her escape, however, the change in power relations is reflected in her use of direct imperatives:

Why have you troubled yourself? Now turn back—

Both from coming to the White Fortress and from the battlefield. (ibid., p. 179)

The change in grammatical mood directly mirrors the shift in the balance of power between the two characters. Rustam likewise avoids directly asking Sohrāb to spare him. Instead, he presents his request as a declarative statement describing the accepted code of chivalry:

Our custom is different;

So too are the principles of our faith.

Whoever enters a wrestling match

Does not strike down one greater than himself.

The one first thrown to the ground

Is not slain, even if he is an enemy. (ibid., pp. 195–196)

By presenting his personal request as a universally accepted rule, Rustam removes its appearance of self-interest and makes it easier for Sohrāb to accept. Garsivaz likewise varies his choice of mood according to his audience. When addressing Siyāvash, he relies primarily on declarative clauses to present himself as a sincere adviser before introducing his warnings:

The commander of the Turks is even worse than that.

The matter remains concealed from you.

You cannot distinguish deceit from affection;

Beware lest ill fortune overtake you. (ibid., p. 257)

When speaking to Afrāsiyāb, however, the reduced social distance created by their kinship allows him to employ conditional and directive structures accompanied by warnings:

If he returns from here to Iran,

Our entire land will be laid waste. (ibid., p. 254)

If you spare his life,

I shall no longer remain in your service. (ibid., p. 263)

Here, Garsivaz moves beyond merely providing information and instead presses Afrāsiyāb toward an immediate decision, using grammatical mood to intensify persuasive force. Rustam adopts a similar strategy in the episode of Akvān Dīv by employing declarative statements:

The Sage of China once related a tale:

Whoever dies in water

Sorush, the heavenly messenger, will not carry his soul to Paradise.

Cast me upon the mountain instead,

So that lions and tigers may witness the strength of a brave man. (ibid., p. 431)

Rather than presenting this as a request, Rustam frames it as accepted knowledge, allowing Akvān to believe that the final decision is his own. The declarative mood thus becomes an instrument of deception and behavioral manipulation. When Rustam and Esfandiyār enter enemy territory disguised as merchants, they likewise employ declarative clauses to make their assumed identities appear credible. Esfandiyār additionally frames his request in a conditional clause:

If the king sees fit,

Let the caravan proceed toward the fortress gate. (ibid., p. 702)

The conditional structure conceals his actual authority and presents the request as a courteous proposal rather than a command. Finally, during the last battle, Rustam relies more on prohibition than direct command:

You will not remember the words that have already been spoken.

Even if a man's skin is torn from his body,

Do not disgrace my name before the world,

For nothing but evil comes from this battle. (ibid: p. 749)

Here, prohibition serves not merely to restrain the hearer but to shift the interaction from physical confrontation to the realm of moral and chivalric values. Through this strategy, Rustam seeks to persuade Esfandiyār to reconsider his decision without engaging in direct coercion.

5.2.3. Expressive Values

The use of modal auxiliary verbs (e.g., may, can), modal adverbs (e.g., certainly, probably), tense, and other linguistic structures gives rise to modality, expressing varying degrees of certainty, probability, or doubt in affirming or denying a proposition (Fairclough, 1992, p. 158). Fairclough distinguishes between relational modality and expressive modality. Relational modality concerns the speaker's authority in relation to the hearer, whereas expressive modality reflects the speaker's degree of commitment to the truth of a proposition and its representation of reality (Fairclough, 2000, p. 193). In the *Shahnameh*, however, some modal structures perform both functions simultaneously. Accordingly, the present study classifies them according to their dominant function within the narrative context while noting cases where the two types overlap. In his conversation with Siyāvash, Garsivaz employs relational modality to shape his listener's interpretation. By using the modal expression nabāyad ("must not"), he seeks to retain control over the interpretation of future events and eliminate any suspicion before it arises:

You must not suppose tomorrow

That I knew of this judgment beforehand. (ibid., p. 257)

Here, nabāyad expresses more than prohibition; it represents the speaker's authority to direct the hearer's interpretation. Garsivaz attempts to ensure that Siyāvash adopts a particular understanding of future events, making relational modality a strategy of persuasion and interpretive control. When addressing Afrāsiyāb, however, Garsivaz adopts a different strategy. Rather than asserting authority directly, he reinforces the credibility of his proposition through a proverbial analogy:

A wise man told this tale:

Once the wind has left the house,

You cannot block its path;

Even if you ignore it, time will still pass. (ibid., p. 254)

Here, the emphasis is not on authority over the hearer but on the credibility of the proposition itself. By invoking a familiar maxim, Garsivaz elevates his statement beyond personal opinion and presents it as accepted wisdom. The analogy thus strengthens the perceived truthfulness of his claim. Another example appears in Rostam's speech. When Pīrān invites him to stay in his house, Rostam replies:

Rostam answered, "O hero,

Let us remain here with our caravan.

People of every sort are with us,

Lest anything of value should be lost". (ibid., p. 458)

In this context, nabāyad conveys not only a sense of obligation but also Rostam's assessment of the situation. He presents the possibility of losing valuable goods as a reasonable justification for declining Pīrān's invitation. His decision is thus explained not as an expression of distrust but as a practical necessity. Although relational and expressive modality overlap here, the dominant function is the speaker's evaluation of reality and the justification of his decision. By contrast, when Esfandiyār enters Arjāsp's court, he deliberately weakens his commitment to the truth of his statements by attributing them to others:

He replied, "Noble sir,

Everyone speaks of this according to his own wishes.

One says that Esfandiyār became estranged from his father

And turned away from him.

Another says that he departed from Gonbadān Fortress

With his army and set out toward the Seven Labours,

To wage war in Turān

And seek vengeance upon Arjāsp". (ibid., p. 703)

By reporting the statements of others, Esfandiyār avoids presenting himself as the direct source of the information and thereby reduces his commitment to its truth. This reduction in expressive modality enables him to conceal his identity and maintain control of the interaction, since responsibility for the accuracy of the information no longer rests with him.

6. Interpretation

Interpretation concerns the relationship between text and interaction, treating the text both as the product of discourse production and as a resource for its interpretation (Fairclough, 1989, p. 26). At this stage, attention is paid to both the text itself and its context. Through textual analysis, the interpreter moves beyond the surface structure of discourse to its underlying organization and meaning. Context is further divided into situational context and intertextual context.

6.1. Situational Context

In this study, the situational context is examined through four questions: What is happening? Who are the participants? What are the power relations between them? What role does language play in advancing the interaction? The selected episodes from the *Shahnameh* all depict situations in which heroes rely on language to overcome situational constraints. These include Gordafarid's captivity, Rostam's encounters with Sohrab and Esfandiar, Rostam and Esfandiar's entry into enemy territory disguised as merchants, Rostam's confrontation with the Demon Akvān, Garsivaz's speeches in the Siyavash episode, and the scholarly debate at Bahrām's court. Despite their diversity, these episodes share a common feature: linguistic action substitutes for or complements military action, thereby shaping the course of the narrative. The relationships among participants also vary. In some cases, they reflect the asymmetry between victor and captive, as in the dialogue between Gordafarid and Sohrab. In others, they involve rival warriors negotiating before battle, such as Rostam and Esfandiar. Elsewhere, interaction is based on assumed identities, as when Rostam and Esfandiar enter enemy territory disguised as merchants. By contrast, Garsivaz's discourse relies on familial trust and political influence, whereas the debate at Bahrām's

court shifts competition from the battlefield to the sphere of knowledge and cultural legitimacy. Accordingly, the nature of the relationship between participants determines the linguistic strategies they employ. The function of language therefore changes according to each situation. In captivity, it serves to reduce hostility and gain the opponent's trust; in enemy territory, it conceals identity and ensures the hero's safety; on the verge of defeat, it delays military confrontation and redirects the course of action; in Garsivaz's speeches, it shapes the audience's perception and influences political decisions; and in Bahrām's court, it becomes a means of displaying wisdom, establishing legitimacy, and asserting cultural superiority. Differences in narrative situations thus produce corresponding differences in discursive function. Overall, the situational context demonstrates that, in the selected episodes of the *Shahnameh*, language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as an integral form of social action. As power relations, social identities, and communicative goals shift, characters adjust their linguistic strategies accordingly, thereby influencing the direction of events. Power in these narratives is therefore exercised not only through military force but also through the strategic management of communicative situations and the purposeful use of language.

6.2. Intertextual Context

In Fairclough's framework, intertextuality refers to the way every text is shaped through its interaction with previous texts, discourses, and traditions, while simultaneously reproducing or transforming them (Fairclough, 1992, p. 102). A text is therefore not an isolated entity; rather, it continuously draws on other texts in the process of meaning-making. These intertextual elements may appear as direct quotation, paraphrase, summary, references to others' speech, or the reconstruction of earlier ideas (Fairclough, 2003, p. 39). In the *Shahnameh*, heroes do not rely solely on linguistic skill to persuade their audiences, legitimize their claims, or conceal their intentions; they also draw upon existing cultural and discursive resources. Since Fairclough's concept of intertextuality is influenced by the work of Julia Kristeva, her approach is also employed here to explain references to earlier texts and traditions (Kristeva, 1980). Accordingly, the selected examples are examined from two perspectives: (1) references to earlier texts, traditions, and customs; and (2) the use of dominant discourses within the narrative world of the *Shahnameh*.

6.2.1. References to Earlier Traditions, Customs, and Texts

In these examples, speakers reinforce the credibility of their discourse by grounding it in authorities beyond personal experience. Such authorities appear in the form of parables and narratives, ancestral wisdom, social and chivalric conventions, or religious beliefs. In this study, these references are classified into four categories according to their source of intertextual legitimacy.

Table 1. Sources of Intertextual Legitimacy

<i>Shahnameh</i> Example	Source of Intertextual Legitimacy
Garsivaz employs stories and parables to persuade Afrasiyab and Siyavash.	Parabolic
Rostam cites the wisdom of earlier generations in the story of the Demon Akvān.	Historical
Rostam appeals to the conventions of avoiding night combat and respecting an elderly warrior in his encounters with Sohrab and Esfandiar.	Cultural
Esfandiar invokes the tradition of a religious vow (nazr) to gain Arjasp's trust.	Religious

6.2.2. Use of Dominant Discourses

Intertextual context extends beyond references to earlier texts by revealing how discourse draws upon dominant social ideologies. Influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin, Kristeva views every text as the intersection of multiple discourses; meaning therefore emerges through interaction with surrounding cultural and ideological systems (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66). Likewise, the characters of the *Shahnameh* employ dominant discourses to advance both political and personal objectives.

Table 2. Dominant Discourses in the *Shahnameh*

<i>Shahnameh</i> Example	Dominant Discourse
Gordafarid appeals to assumptions of male superiority to influence Sohrab.	Patriarchy
Garsivaz reminds Siyavash of Afrasiyab's history of fratricide.	Political violence
While inciting Afrasiyab, Garsivaz depicts the Iranians through derogatory expressions.	Ethnic prejudice

These examples demonstrate that the characters of the *Shahnameh* rely not only on linguistic competence but also on discourses that already possess legitimacy within the narrative world. By drawing upon established cultural traditions and dominant discourses, language acquires greater persuasive force and ideological effectiveness.

7. Explanation

In Fairclough's three-dimensional model, explanation is the stage at which the text and the processes of its production and interpretation are examined in relation to broader social, cultural, and ideological structures. At this level, discourse is understood not merely as a set of linguistic features but as a form of social practice that contributes to the reproduction or transformation of power relations (Fairclough, 1989, p. 163). Accordingly, the production and interpretation of discourse depend on discursive orders and sources of legitimacy embedded within society, which social actors draw upon to achieve their objectives (Fairclough, 1995b, p. 97). Although this study is primarily grounded in Fairclough's framework, Kuran's concept of preference falsification is employed as a complementary concept to clarify the acceptance of certain linguistic practices. Kuran argues that individuals may conceal their genuine beliefs and intentions, presenting alternative representations in order to secure benefits or avoid undesirable consequences under particular social conditions (Kuran, 1995, p. 4). Likewise, in the *Shahnameh*, the effectiveness of discourse depends not only on its linguistic form but also on its conformity with the value system and socially legitimate discourses of the community. One illustration of this process is Rostam's entry into Turan disguised as a merchant. By adopting the vocabulary, behavior, and symbolic markers associated with

commercial discourse, he presents himself as an Iranian trader. Piran's acceptance of this identity is not merely the result of Rostam's linguistic skill; it is made possible because his discourse is reinforced by socially recognizable signs. The caravan, the merchandise, and the respected social status of merchants make his narrative credible within the cultural framework of Turan. In this situation, commercial discourse temporarily replaces the discourse of warfare and restructures power relations, since the identity of a merchant, unlike that of an enemy champion, is not perceived as a threat within Turanian society. The acceptance of Rostam's discourse therefore depends less on its factual truth than on the social legitimacy of the discourse through which it is articulated. The same mechanism appears in Esfandiar's arrival in Turan. In addition to altering his appearance, he constructs a new identity under the name Kharād, while presenting gifts, displaying humility, and invoking a religious vow (nazr). By aligning his narrative with prevailing religious and cultural beliefs, he makes it acceptable to Arjasp, who evaluates it not according to its factual accuracy but within the framework of the dominant value system. Because vows, gifts, and piety possess social legitimacy in that context, religious discourse becomes an instrument for pursuing a political objective. This example demonstrates that language acquires power when it is grounded in culturally legitimate sources of authority. A similar pattern is evident in Rostam's dialogues with Sohrab and Esfandiar. When placed in a position of weakness, Rostam does not emphasize his military strength but instead appeals to established chivalric conventions. His request for a reprieve from Sohrab and his reminder to Esfandiar that combat should not continue at night are persuasive only because both parties recognize these traditions as legitimate. The temporary shift in power relations therefore derives not from Rostam's personal authority but from the authority of the chivalric discourse itself—a discourse accepted by both participants and capable of regulating their conduct. The same logic underlies the episode of the Demon Akvān. Seeking to escape death, Rostam supports his words by invoking the wisdom of earlier generations:

The Sage of China once related this tale:

Whoever dies in the water,

Sorush, the heavenly messenger, will not carry his soul to Paradise.

(*ibid.*, p. 430)

Here again, the persuasive force of the discourse rests not on empirical truth but on the cultural authority of wise men and the high social status accorded to wisdom. By drawing upon this symbolic capital, Rostam redirects Akvān's decision to his own advantage, demonstrating that even in confrontation with an enemy, cultural legitimacy can function as an instrument of power. These examples indicate that the characters resort to language primarily when they lack military superiority or the ability to exercise direct force. To influence their audiences, they ground their discourse in forms of legitimacy already recognized within the social world of the *Shahnameh*—including chivalry, religion, wisdom, commerce, and tradition. Consequently, the acceptance or rejection of discourse depends less on its factual accuracy than on the degree to which it conforms to these legitimate discursive systems.

8. Conclusion

Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study examined the role of language in episodes of the *Shahnameh* where heroes lack the ability to exercise direct military power. The findings demonstrate that, in such situations, language functions not merely as a means of communication but as a principal instrument for constructing, maintaining, and transforming power relations. Power in the *Shahnameh*, therefore, is grounded not only in martial strength but also in the interaction between linguistic choices, communicative context, and socially legitimate discourses. Analysis at the textual level showed that the declarative mood is the most frequent grammatical structure in the selected dialogues. The characters rely primarily on argumentation, parables, references to tradition and cultural beliefs, euphemism, and strategic humility to persuade others, gain trust, reduce tension, conceal identity, and manage power relations. By contrast, the imperative mood is generally employed only when the speaker occupies a position of greater authority. Likewise, the choice between formal and informal language, relational and expressive modality, and other linguistic strategies depends on the discursive context, power relations, and communicative purpose rather than on fixed personal characteristics. At the interpretative level, the analysis revealed that the function of each linguistic strategy is determined by its situational and intertextual context. A single strategy, such as appealing to tradition or displaying humility, may serve different purposes in different contexts, including securing survival, delaying battle, establishing legitimacy, persuasion, or concealing identity. The characters also strengthen the authority and persuasive force of their discourse by drawing upon cultural, religious, historical, and ethical discourses. At the explanatory level, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of language in the *Shahnameh* depends not only on its linguistic structure but also on its conformity with socially legitimate discourses. Whenever heroes are unable to exercise direct power, they ground their discourse in culturally and socially recognized sources of legitimacy, including the chivalric code, tradition, wisdom, religion, and commercial discourse. Consequently, the acceptance or rejection of discourse depends less on its objective truth than on the legitimacy of the discursive framework within which it is articulated. The principal contribution of this study is to demonstrate that, alongside the representation of military power, Ferdowsi constructs a model of discursive power, in which language—particularly through persuasive, argumentative, and legitimizing strategies—functions in critical situations as a complement to, and at times a substitute for, military force. The *Shahnameh* should therefore be understood not only as an epic of warfare but also as a narrative of how language represents, sustains, and transforms power relations. This perspective opens new possibilities for interpreting the epic through the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis.

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