



Extended Abstract

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Newly-Discovered Evidence on the Meaning and Usage of "Bulbul" in Persian Narrative Texts

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Introduction

Ferdowsi, in the introduction to the story of Rostam and Esfandiar in *Shahnameh*, identifies "bulbul" (literary meaning the nightingale) as the narrator of Esfandiar's tale, and in one of the verses of this introduction, he states:

I heard a story from bulbul
that recounted the words of the ancients.

Some commentators of the *Shahnameh* have considered bulbul to be the same as the bird known for its beautiful song; however, for the first time, Jalal Khaleqi-Motlagh (1993) proposed a hypothesis that bulbul may not be the bird, but a title for a narrator who has reached a level of mastery in storytelling (Khaleqi-Motlagh, 2009: 54). The researcher aims in this article to examine the process and trajectory of this theory and to add new evidence to the previous testimonies.

Research Methodology, Background, and Objectives

Jalal Khaleqi-Motlagh, in an exploration of the book *The Flower of Ancient Pains* (2009, first published in 1993), for the first time raises the question of whether "bulbul" could be the name or title of the narrators of the story; but he cautiously writes, "for now, it is only a plausible guess, but it is not certain" (Khaleqi-Motlagh, 2009: 451). Akbar Nahvi, in an article titled "A Look at the Methods of Referencing Sources in the *Shahnameh*" (2005), introduces the documented biography of one of the bulbuls who recite *Shahnameh* in Iran for the first time. Farzad Qayemi, in an article titled "Analysis of the Historical Development of Poets-Narrators and the Role of Oral Tradition in the Narratives of Heroes in Iran" (2013), and Sajad Aydinlu in the book *The Book of Kings* (2022) present some reasons supporting the idea that "bulbul" is the name of the narrators of *Shahnameh*. Nevertheless, there are one or two other pieces of evidence that demonstrate this Bulbul was a descriptor or title of the narrators and reciters of *Shahnameh*, which have persisted until recent times. This study employs a descriptive-analytical method, and based on library resources, the necessary materials have been extracted and discussed after evaluation.

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Discussion

Ibn Nadeem (*Al-Fahrist*, Zakhaw edition: 313) mentions a legendary book titled *The Book of the Bulbul* (Khalighi-Motlaq, 2009: 36). It can be inferred that this legendary book also narrates stories from the perspective of the nightingale narrator.

In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, there is another verse that strengthens this assumption. In the story of Kay Khosrow, the king calls for the musicians:

He brought and summoned the musicians
from the song of the bulbul, he was mesmerized.

(Ferdowsi, 1386, Vol. 3: 18)

Sajjad Aydinlu, in his commentary on this verse, writes: "It is likely that the title or attribute of bulbul was given to the musician of Kay Khosrow's court" (Aydinlu, 2022: 897), who, like other bulbuls and gusans, also had a beautiful voice.

"Bowra, in his book, reports on an epic singer from Uzbekistan named Ergash Juman bulbul, noting that his father Juman earned the title bulbul due to his great fame in this art" (Bowra, 1952: 371-372).

Some researchers have added: "Another bulbul can be mentioned in Samarkand, who is engaged in herding in Qara Gol and has a bulbul lineage named Desharman bulbul. In the Caucasus, even today, great singers and masters are referred to as bulbul. Additionally, the lineage of the bulbul can be traced as far as Poland" (Farzin, 2006: 124-125; cited from: Kestler, 1982: 193-194).

In India, particularly among Persians and Muslims, it has been customary to refer to poets and musicians as "bulbul". "Among the narrators of *Shahnameh* and the storytellers of epic tales, including the narrators of the story of 'Amir Hamza, the Lord of the Moon' in Pakistan, we also encounter names such as 'Agha Bulbul,' 'Khalifa Bulbul,' and so on" (Lakhani et al., 2007: 365-366 and 665). In a manuscript of the book *Maftūh al-Qulūb*, whose author has compiled some verses from Hafez's *Divan*, there is mention of an individual named "Hafez Bulbul Babari," who was both a musician and whose son was a memorizer of the Quran and knowledgeable in music (see: Haravi, 989 AH: folio 68).

Akbar Nahvi also refers to the life of one of these bulbul figures: "Mawlana Faghan al-Din Bulbul grew up and acquired skills and arts in the capital city of Isfahan. He cannot escape from two just witnesses: one is his blackness and the other is the name Bulbul. He reads *Shahnameh* very well and follows the teachings of Mawlana Ali Reza Tabrizi" (Nahvi, 2005: 56; quoted from: Qazi Ahmad Qomi, 1987: 41). Abdolali Dastgheib (born 1931) a critic and translator from Shiraz, says in a conversation with this researcher: "Bulbul was a job or profession. It existed until recently. Originally, such a person was someone refined, a good reciter, and a social entertainer who had memorized some literary and historical texts and was somewhat familiar with folk tales. I myself had seen two bulbuls. One in Shiraz and one in Firuzabad. They were called 'bulbul.' The Shirazi bulbul was a well-dressed man of average height. He recited poetry and told stories, made jokes, and entertained at gatherings. He was also very quick-witted. There were two or three other bulbuls in Shiraz, but I had only seen this one. In Firuzabad, there was also a man named Mr. Firuzabadi who was the elder of the region." (Dastgheib, December 25, 2023: conversation with the author)

Conclusion

For the first time, Jalal Khaleqi-Motlagh proposes a hypothesis that this bulbul could be a title for a narrator who has reached a master level in storytelling. Another verse in the story of Kay Khosrow from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* strengthens this hypothesis. Bura, in his book, reports on an epic reciter from Uzbekistan named Ergash Juman Bulbul. In India, it was also common to refer to poets and musicians as "bulbul." In Kashmir, even among the elegists who recounted the events of Karbala in poetry, the title of bulbul existed.

In Pakistan, we also encounter names such as "Agha Bulbul," "Khalifa Bulbul," and so on. Even among the storytellers of Muslim Kosovo and the narrators of ethnic epics in Serbia, there were individuals known by the title Bulbul. This researcher has added newly discovered evidence to previous findings in this article. One piece of evidence is that in a manuscript of the book *Maftūh al-Qulūb*, there is mention of an individual named "Hafez Bulbul Babari," who was involved in music, singing, and vocal performance. Another piece of evidence is the biography of one of the Bulbuls known for reciting *Shahnameh*, named Maulana Faghan al-Din Bulbul, who was a *Shahnameh* reciter, which serves as further proof of this claim. Thirdly, Abdul Ali Dashtgheib confirms that bulbul was a profession or art

that existed until recently. It is a very old tradition that has gradually transformed into a semi-literary and semi-performative occupation.

Keywords: bulbul, narrator, Rostam and Esfandiar, *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi, bards

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