



Alexander and Alestria

By Shan Sa
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Introduction

Abused by his father, King Philip, who loved and hated his beauty; shadowed by his mother, the mystical and overbearing Queen Olympias; educated by Aristotle who wanted him to be a wise philosopher of Macedonia, Alexander develops a complex character. He becomes a brutal warrior, a pitiless strategist, and a poet longing for the world's wonders. Meanwhile, in the remote steppes of Siberia, an abandoned girl grows up among the wild mares, then adopted by the queen of the Amazons—the tribe of female warriors who dominates a wild world of snow and volcano. As a future queen, the young girl is trained to hate men and to fight against all invaders.

In the course of his great conquest of Asia, Alexander first meets the stunning Alestria on the battlefield. Surprised to find that his adversary is a woman, he is instantly smitten by the fierce queen. Dazzled by his strength, she decides to kidnap him and make him her "wife." At last, this legendary king—renowned for his beauty and love of men—has found his equal. And at last, this indomitable young woman has found a reason to leave her tribe. Their love, deeply passionate and problematic, evolves against an exotic backdrop of warfare and political turmoil, sweeps from antique Greece to Egypt, across the ancient Iraq and Iran, unto the mysterious kingdoms of India.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the meaning of fire in ancient civilizations, both Western and Eastern. In the novel, "fire" is a celebration of life, a secret of invincibility, and a destructive terror. How does this symbol help characterize Alexander the Great as both a warrior and a philosopher?
2. Zoroastrianism describes the world as a conflict between truth and order on the one hand and falsehood and chaos on the other. Discuss similarities and differences between this religion and Christianity.
3. In the novel, the military conquests of Alexander the Great are also an attempt to build a "global economy." During a secret meeting with Alexander, Oibares, head of the Persian merchants, offers his support and asks Alexander to lead his army eastwards in order to open a safe and free trading route to India. In other chapters, told through the eyes of the Amazons, markets, caravans, and military camps are described as wandering economic centers. Discuss the different forms of economic life during this period of history.
4. The river is a sacred symbol for the Amazons. When they grow older and lose their strength for hunting and fighting, they leave the tribe and let themselves die naturally on a riverbank. Discuss why the river or water became the central element of the nomad culture.
5. In contrast to the Greek and Persian civilizations, the Amazons are nomads who live by specific nomad rules. Unlike the authoritarian king of Macedonia and the all-powerful Persian emperor, the Amazon queen is only a decision maker who gathers the views of her tribal members before issuing the final order. Compare the Amazon's regime with other ancient political systems described in the novel and discuss how it differs.
6. The Amazons wander throughout the Asian steppes. They are orphan girls adopted by the Amazon elders. In what ways do memories of their childhoods and tribal education dominate their adult life? How do the struggles for survival in the wilderness impact their relationships with men? In what way do freedom and equality matter to an Amazon?
7. The encounter between Alexander and Alestria is also a clash of two traditions. Identify the point at which you feel Alestria suffers in her transforming from a wild warrior to a woman and how much she feels uncomfortable with being the queen of Asia.
8. How does Alexander bring political and social change to Greece and Persia? Does he bring the West and the East closer to each other? Discuss the extent of the social and cultural improvement after his passing. In what ways did Greek philosophies change Persian society and Persian refinements improve the Greek lifestyle? How does the confrontation of two administrations—Alexander and his military-democratic regime and Darius and his Persian bureaucracy, one of the oldest in the world—become the key issue in Alexander's victory over an empire ten thousand times vaster than his own?
9. Discuss Shan Sa's poetic prose style and the extent to which it suits the tone and content of the book. How does her choice of a first person perspective from three narrators—Alexander, Alestria, and Ania—allow her to show the reader the different points of view of each historical or fictional figure? How would this book be different if written in the third person?

About the Author

Shan Sa was born in Beijing, began writing at the age of seven, and had her first poems, essays, and stories published at the age of eight. In 1990 she moved to Paris, where she learned French, studied philosophy, and worked for the famous painter Balthus. In 2001 her novel *The Girl Who Played Go* won the Goncourt Prize and earned critical acclaim worldwide. Shan Sa is also a celebrated painter with prominent exhibitions in Paris, New York, and Shanghai.