

Aesthetic and Symbolic Analysis of the Manuscript Illustration Alexander the Great (Sikandar) in Conversation with WakWak Tree (Talking Tree) in Shahnameh Demot

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Abstract

Combining Persian miniature and literature together has been influential in the recent decades. Illustrated Shahnameh Demot (Book of Kings, Great Persian Epic), which is known as the most valuable illustrated artwork in the first Tabriz school, is considered to be the special style of Persian Illustration or Miniature during Mughal Ilkhanid era, taking advantage of interaction between literature and painting. This article attempts to examine artistic and visual qualities of the illustration “Alexander the Great (Sikandar) in conversation with WakWak tree” in Ilkhanid era. A descriptive-analytic approach is used to investigate the interaction between literature and illustration. The research results indicated that the tree is a concept existing beyond human mind, and that it is embodied through symbolism. In Shahnameh, WakWak tree or Talking tree is a symbolic tree where Alexander is in conversation with WakWak tree and the tree foresees his future. As the art is always influenced by the ideology underscoring the era, it could be alleged that mythological thought has been influential in the artistic structure of illustration, and it has been turned into an aesthetic language that has led to the reflection of the evolution of poetry in the illustration. In this illustration, by the adept composition of the debates raised, Ilkhanid illustrator subtly abducts the image from the heart of poetry, and intertwines his capabilities and potentials with words of poetry, such that visual symbolism and color, in keeping with the themes of Shahnameh, are some of the most important features embodied in the elements underlying the illustration.

Keywords: WakWak Tree; Shahnameh Demot; Persian Miniature; Ilkhani Era; Aesthetics; Symbolism

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1. Introduction

One of the works remaining from Ilkhanid era is “*Shahnameh Demot*”, that dates back to Mughal Ilkhanate (The Ilkhanate, is also spelled Il-khanate as a breakaway state of the Mughal Empire, which was ruled by the Mughal house of Hulagu). *Shahnameh Demot* is the oldest and one of the most magnificent illustrated *Shahnamehs* (Book of Kings) which is remained from the ancient days. The manuscript was composed in honor of Sultan Bin Ali Al Owais, who was one of Al-e Jalaye princes. Al-e Jalaye and Al-e Muzaffar ruled in southwestern Iran. Out of the manuscript illustrations in the book that were adorned by the beautiful Naskh script, only a few folios have survived. *Shahnameh Demot* was preserved in Golestan library until the era of Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar, but it was taken out of the country due to the unrest and the unstable situation underlying the era, and one of the antique dealers in Paris was able to become its owner. Some pages from the illustration were sold separately, and the folios lacking illustrations were destroyed. Only seventy two folios of this illustrated manuscript have survived in the museums of the world. *Shahnameh Demot* was composed following the Seljuk school, as the earliest school of manuscript illustration in Post-Islamic Iran.

The book dates back to the era of Moghul Ilkhanate who founded the school of Mongolian (Tabriz 1) within the period of the 7th, 13th, and 14th century AD. One of the illustrations present in the book portrays the image of Alexander the Great and WakWak tree (i.e. talking tree). Alexander converses with the tree and the tree foresees his future. WakWak tree is a symbolic representation of some ancient concepts and notions. In the illustrations depicted in the book, the beholder can see the coalescence of Pre-Mongol Persian and Mesopotamia traditions with the traditions of the Far East. In some cases, one has superiority over the other and can represent a portrayal of the climax of Ilkhanid painting. In *Shahnameh Demot*, although Chinese elements can be seen in the illustrations, experimentation in landscape portrayal, and blending the sights and integrating them with the national spirit has paved the way for the liberation of outside influences. Generally, realizing that ordinary language is unable to convey genuine experiences, the poet inevitably takes advantage of bizarre, cryptic, symbolic, and mythological language in order to convey emotions and sensations. In the field of symbolic expression and imagery, sometimes icons and symbols turn into humans and sometimes humans transform into icons and symbols. Then, a kind of pantheism is created in which a sense of man's identification with plants and nature in light of symbolism is manifested. For example, tree acts as the genuine reflection of man and his deepest aspirations. The allegoric image can generate countless codes that can be expanded in numerous branches, and come into existence within the context of mythology, arts, and various civilizations. Delving into the imagination realm contributes to the main sources of human history in which the image of sacred trees can bewitch and charm the eyes. The trees include the holy tree, tree of life, talking tree, and WakWak tree as a tree with human and animal fruits. Therefore, the current article seeks to find answers to the following questions:

How the characteristics of *Shahnameh*'s literature in “*Shahnameh Damut*” have appeared in visual elements of the illustration “Alexander the Great in conversing with talking tree”? What would be the visual and artistic relation of this work with the manuscript illustration art in the Ilkhanid era? How have “WakWak tree (talking tree)” motifs in terms of aesthetics, semiotics, and mythical concepts been presented in *Shahnameh Demot*?

2. Literature Review

A number of researchers have considered different aspects of Ilkhanid illustrations. Accordingly, in an article entitled “Wak principle in Persian painting”, Azhand Yaeghub (2009) analyzes the emergence and formation of different types of Wak paintings, especially their presence in Persian manuscript illuminations. Rabii Somaye (2012) in his master's thesis entitled “A review of Wak's decorative motifs in decorative art” concludes that ever since the sixth century, these motifs have been represented as an important decorative motif in the works created in Muslim countries. In an article entitled “Image and concepts of talking tree on handmade rugs”, Mahla Takhty (2012) examines the illustration of talking tree on hand-made rugs in different periods. In an article entitled “Sacred tree, WakWak tree, and the trend of formation”, Alireza Taheri (2012) discusses the talking tree and the formation of Wak motifs”. Reza Asl Najafi Fard (2013) has authored an article entitled “Brief history of Persian-Islamic illustration in different eras of Persian art”, and presented it to the art centre of Zanjan Province. In this contribution, different post-Islamic schools which have emerged in Iran are reviewed, one of which is the first Tabriz school or Mongolian school, relevant to Ilkhanid era, and of the most renowned books in this period is *Shahnameh* Demot. There is also a thesis by Akram Jannati (2015) called “Illusionism in the motifs of Persian rugs with a focus on talking tree”. Relying on a library study, the current descriptive-analytical research seeks to analyze the content and structure of an illustration taken from *Shahnameh* Demot, and also to present an analysis of the ambience underlying the work and its visual elements, based on some complementary issues such as Ilkhanid era (Tabriz school), *Shahnameh* Demot, WakWak tree, and Alexander the Great.

2.1. WakWak or Talking Tree

Talking tree is one of the sacred trees with deep roots in mythology of the Oriental and Western nations. This imaginary and mythical tree grows on an island called “Wak Wak.” The tree has human-shaped fruit, which after the fruits are ripened or when the wind blows, the sound of “Wak Wak” can be heard. The fruits on the tree speak the same way as humans. The stories regarding the trees are the origin of the motifs which emerged in the artistic works created in the Oriental lands such as Persia, China, and India, and also in the medieval era in Europe (Taheri, 2012). The coalescence of animals and humans with plants and trees may stem from the belief that birds and animals that settled or appeared among the foliage and flowers of the trees communicate with the tree components. Howling sound of wind and the production of inaudible sounds create an illusion of the trees' potential to speak. These imaginations can act as the source of inspiration for imaginary legends and tales, and on the other hand, they also affect the artist's creative mind.

2.2. WakWak Tree Built upon Different Expressions

WakWak tree has been given different terms, including ‘vaghvagh’, ‘vagvag’, etc. In Persian dictionaries, the term “WakWak” is referred to a mythical and illusionary tree that blossoms at dawn and fades at the evening, and it is narrated that its fruit is in the form of talking humans and other animals (Khalaf Tabrizi, 1684). In *Dehkhoda* Persian dictionary, it is said that “WakWak” is a tree with the ability to speak (Dehkhoda, 1995). In *Amid* Persian dictionary, “vagvag” is a legendary tree with human-like fruits that emits human-like sounds. In another form, in a book entitled “*Al-Hayvan*” (Jahez 9th century AD), the relevant tree is expressed in the form of “WakWak”, representing the creation of animals and women who are hung from head on the trees.

The suspended women consistently emit the voice of the tree unless they are detached from the tree, leading to silence and death (Fig. 1).

In the geographic book “The Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam” (Pishabouri, 982), regarding vaghvagh, it is said that the tree is a Chinese tree similar to almond and cucumber trees, with the fruits resembling a man's face. When the fruits of the tree come to fruition, some voices similar to vagh vagh can be heard several times (Anonymous, 1967).



Fig 1 Manuscript, Al-Bolahan, WakWak tree with human fruits hung from head and bulbs blooming with human beings. (Source: www.androphilia.tumblr.com)

2.3. Mythical Analysis of WakWak Tree

Presentation of the talking tree in fairy tales has several versions. According to one of them, the exotic tree, whose branches carry the heads of the sons of Adam is located on a remote island. At the time of sunrise and sunset, they scream “WakWak” and sing religious melodies conducted by the creator of the universe. According to the creators of these legends, this tree with a full body of a woman and voice of WakWak is an omen, and the story is narrated in marvelous Hindi books.

2.4. Reflection of Talking Tree in Shahnameh Ferdowsi

Literary and epic narratives and poems in Shahnameh Ferdowsi are a blend of facts and fiction that were highly appreciated by kings, scholars, and historians, and have been illustrated by Iranian artists in different ways and at different times. Ferdowsi’s reference to talking tree in Shahnameh is a testimony to how deep-rooted this myth is for Iranians. Ferdowsi in Shahnameh dramatized the

myth of talking tree and Alexander the Great. In *Shahnameh*, “Talking Tree” is renamed as “Gouya Derakht” (Eloquent Tree), and is located at the end of the world. The tree trunk is composed of both man and woman, and its fruits have heads that can predict the future (Taheri et al., 2011).

3. Analysis of Alexander’s Conversation with Talking Tree in *Shahnameh*

One of the narratives and epic poems of *Shahnameh* Demot is the visual masterpiece of Alexander the Great in conversation with the Talking Tree. In this beautiful illustration depicted in *Shahnameh*, dating back to Ilkhanid era, the tree narrates Alexander’s fate. In the scene, the Talking Tree is represented by human and animal heads, and among the animal heads, the heads of dogs, antelopes, foxes, and rabbits are observed. Narrating the Talking Tree story, Ferdowsi states that Alexander on his journey reaches a city whose people speak of a wonderful and exotic tree grown in the form of two (male/female) talking trees. The male speaks during the day and the female talks during the night. Alexander and his companions seek to visit the tree, and as the sunset approaches, the king hears human-like voices among the trees, and he becomes perplexed and asks the translator what the tree recites, and why does it murmur so strangely? The translator replies that the tree says that the kingdom will soon come to an end that we should leave, which makes the king embarrassed. In the middle of the night, another tree speaks; Alexander asks, ‘what it is saying?’ The translator answers that the tree says: ‘Why there is so much suffering in the world, and why are you so zealous to conquer the world and kill people?! Someday you are destined to forsake the kingdom and you will lose all the grandeur of your reign’ (Dehkhoda, 1995).

4. Analysis of Talking Tree from the Perspective of Myths and Artworks

One of the main manifestations of myths is works of art. No matter if these works have been eternal because of their mythical content, or if myths have been eternal due to the presence in the works that deserve eternality, the elements present in myths and artistic works can be analyzed individually or collectively. The notion that the tree can generate humans was embodied in some cultures in the form of men hung from trees or suspended among the tree foliage or branches as fruits. Of course, the notion of human procreation of the tree also led to the birth of various animals. Real animals such as goats, lions, snakes, and mythical creatures like dragons and demons, along with a variety of birds were also born from the trees known as Talking Tree in fictional and folk literature and art.

5. Analysis of Illustration

Seljuk era has been considered in examining the early illustrations of Talking Trees. In this era, the predecessors applied motifs in artistic media. Seljuks’ lifestyle was tribal and nomadic and closely interlinked with nature. Humans, animals, and other natural manifestations such as flowers, mountains, trees, etc., were considered by Seljuk artists as tangible and justified manifestations. Seljuks sought to reflect these elements in the artistic works ranging from textiles to architectural designs. Since Seljuk era onwards, artistic decoration and ornamentations found broader applications. Humans and animals, along with flowers and plants, found pleasant motifs, and idealistically found their way into decorative artistic terminology (Azhand, 2009).

At the time of Ilkhanid dynasty, with the introduction of Chinese elements into Persian painting, the paintings were depicted with special features. This contributed to the formal expression of clouds and mountains, clothing decorations, and accuracy in details, all of which can be also observed in Alexander scene. In this illustration, while acknowledging adoption of new elements

which can give a new insight into his works, the artist has mixed the elements with traditional Persian painting in such a way that it would be difficult to discriminate them from the fabric of traditional art. In fact, new elements are incorporated in Persian style in a way that it does not impair the continuity of the Persian illustration art. Animals and humans are fused and combined in a manner in which they are intermingled and synchronized with the tree parts. Wind wrapping and inaudible sound create an image of trees' potential to speak. These illusions can be sources of inspiration for myths and legendary tales, and on the other hand, they can influence artists' critical depiction of them. This stage is a representation of artists' lofty intellectual status and the most important measure to evaluate art works at the higher level, it also incorporates combinations of shapes, colors, textures, and coordination of them with one another.

Most of the outstanding works created in human history have been more successful at this stage than other works. The composition of a work reflects the artist's capability to express their thoughts, points of view, and unique outlooks. Achieving a harmonious fusion and a unified composition is the result of scientific and practical experiences in the field of art. Grasping the intended meaning in a visual phrase depends largely on the type of composition (Donis, 2006). Structural differences between various subjects can be seen in illustration compositions. Unlike epic paintings, in mystical ones, there is no trace of good and evil, thus the forms applied lack contradiction. The application of these forms in the latent geometry of a work can contribute to softening the ambience and unification of illustration. Helical compositions can be further observed in these works, and simplicity and purity are two major features of these works. These elements are applied in the illustrations in such a way that they can infuse peace and stability, and such peace and stability are created in different ways. The main theme and key elements of the illustrations are normally emerged in square frames to underline peace and stability. The signs present in these paintings prove the presence of the square. Subject differences in the effective combination of the paintings play an effective role, and restrict the artist to select visual elements of form, texture, and color. Human life heavily depends on the presence of plants. Symbols and signs of such presence can be observed in mythical narratives and a variety of magical rites, religious rituals, religious and national celebrations, and civilization manifestations (monuments, visual arts, decorative objects or objects of everyday life) (Fazeli et al., 2013). From the perspective of Ferdowsi, there is an unconscious continuity between the tree and the story. In the illustration "Alexander and WakWak Tree", there is a symbolic tree in Shahnameh that Alexander converses with, and the tree foresees the king's future. Shahnameh's Talking Tree has two foundations, including masculinity and femininity that foresee Alexander's death. The tree's verbalization originates from ancient people's animistic beliefs. They believe that, like humans, a tree is a living organism, which possesses consciousness and understanding. Thus, from their perspective, tree's ability to speak was not queer or amazing. This animism can also be seen in other elements of nature. Mythical Chinese people believe that ancient cypress trees can speak (Dariush, 2013). In Fig 2, the depiction of twisted and knotted trunk of a tree, and carefully drawn plants and organs of horses borrow from the elements of Chinese art. In all the works of this period until the arrival of the School of Isfahan, a kind of mobility and movement could be observed surrounding the illustration elements. Mobility and movement, as two elements emanated from Chinese art (injected into traditional Persian art), can be observed in the illustration in the movement of the horse's feet, and the rhythm and form of the leaves. According to Fig 3, the figures depicted have resemblance to the Mongol figures, and some expressionless faces present in the illustrations, with certain exaggerated movements in the past illustrations, have more or less survived. However, scenes have become spatially broader. Backgrounds may not always have the appropriate scale for events, but they effectively carry the

heroes' powerful body, and the figures are still located in the most of the image ambience. Undoubtedly, the illustrators of Shahnameh Demot are indebted to Ferdowsi's poetry in achieving such an epic expression. According to Basel Gary, "The powerful illustration style, is the aftermath of the inherent conflict between Persian culture and the skills acquired from Chinese art tradition" (Pakbaz, 2001). In the illustrations, among the elements of visual arts, the scripts play a major role in the emotional expression and display of the images. In the form of ghalamgiri, outlining, and thickening the scripts, the scripts can underscore the prominence and consistency of peripheral images. In Shahnameh Demot, more than any other illustrated manuscript in Ilkhanid era, the emotional state of the figures in the illustrations is represented. The margins of hills and rocks are depicted with soft curvature.



Fig 2 Alexander the Great in Conversation with WakWak Tree, an illustration derived from Shahnameh Demot, 1330-1340 AD; Ilkhanid dynasty, watercolor, ink & gold on paper; Freer Gallery in Washington.
(Source: www.freergallery.com)



Fig 3 a) Alexander the Great in Conversation with Wak Wak Tree b) Portrait of Emperor Shenzong (r. 1067–1085) by anonymous song artist. c) A hanging-scroll portrait painting of Emperor Taizu of song (r. 960–976), founder of the Song dynasty, painted by an anonymous song artist.

(Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor_Shenzong_of_Song)

What attracts the attention more than anything in this illustration is the arrangement and layout of the elements by the illustrator in a helical composition or labyrinth motion, and in a smooth and non-angular form. At the initial point of spiral movement from the inner part of the main subject, Alexander and his horse start to move, and then the movement finds an angular proceeding to the

other elements of the illustration, and the movement finally leads to the form of the Talking Tree and its roots in the soil. In helical composition, eye's movement is constantly directed towards the elements as a whole. In this regard, by arranging the helical form-based elements, the illustrator creates a powerful symbol of the concept of life that could be expressive of the progression and cycle of life. This visual expression acknowledges the fundamental subject matter of Shahnameh poetry. In terms of composition and landscape painting, the illustrators extended the scope of experimentations, and blew a new national spirit into their works. The form and the arrangement of horses in the illustration have an alternating rhythm. By implementing this rhythm, the artist takes advantage of the appeasing quality of its created space. Additionally, by creating an iterative space along with variations in the forms of the horses, the fatigue of the visual features of the illustration is reduced, and such space is harmoniously exploited. In the scene portrayed in the illustration, human and animal figures are closely connected to the context and to the environment. The concept of the scene determines the position of each individual, their physical gaits, and face gestures, in a way that the image immediately becomes comprehensible (Parham, 2008).

In terms of lighting, the illustration has an all-round lighting. Color is one of the most basic elements in the area of the Persian illustration art that can deepen and enrich different aspects of a work. Color can visually affect human spirit and soul, and can act as a means to transmit significations and associations. In terms of emotional expression, the color is one of the most powerful visual elements. In addition, color can strongly evoke symbolic significations. Based on the associations between the colors and their juxtapositions, a work of art can be interpreted in terms of subjective significations. For example, Alexander's white horse, as a critical element, is painted with a white color to find a tangible form along with Alexander's attire color. Alexander's penetrating status, as the core visual element of the illustration, can be represented by the color red. Notably, Alexander's companions and their horses are painted with grayish-like brown and cream tonality coloring, and have the same tonality as the ambience in such a way to highlight the status of Alexander the Great and his prominent role in terms of visual subjectivity. Furthermore, color coordination and harmony can contribute to greater tranquility, delicacy, and tenderness in the image. Notably, the colors applied in Ilkhanid illustration are influenced by former Persian traditions, and Mongolian and Chinese practices, in such a way that only some parts of the images are painted and some other parts are left colorless, and less diverse hues are often used. In contrast, in another group of manuscript illustrations, the traces of coloring dating back to Manichaeism and Seljuk periods can be observed. The variety of colors used in the period is more limited than the previous era, and the colors applied are mainly brown, ocher, yellow, and pale blue. Although in some illustrations the colors applied include red, green, and orange, the prominence of brown colors can be further highlighted.

Texture is a visual element that can play an important role in evoking the significations and meanings. The main contributor to context is the element of point and line. The quality of applying the two elements is effective in the tenderness or roughness of the context. In addition, in the *ghalamgiri* (the terms specifically applied to Persian miniature) part, lines are created either prominently or vaguely, and can influence the quality of the texture. In a work of art, type of texture and the resulting sensation can create different concepts. Consistent with the subject matter and influenced by themes, this element can affect the illustration's ambience. The application of turquoise blue background is a relic of Manichaeism and Seljuks illustration tradition. In the illustration, the sky is monochrome, and the harmonic colors and the sky's simple ambience create a spiritual state of peace and tranquility. There are different images of this conformation that can be

observed in manuscripts such as “An Illustration of Alexander alongside Talking Tree” created in Shiraz school (Fig 4).



Fig 4 The manuscript dating back to 1430 AD, School of Shiraz, Alexander the Great in conversation with WakWak tree, belong to Dalian library. (Source: www.badesaba.tunbir.com) (2016)

6. Conclusion

There are always notions beyond the human mind, which in order to embody them, man prefers to recourse to symbolism, and tree is one of these concepts. In general, tree symbolizes the living and vibrant nature of the universe, as well as its recurrent growth, fertility, development, and also the eternal, immortal and everlasting life. Through delving into the imagination world, man can fathom the original realms of human history. In such a mesmerizing realm, the image of the sacred tree can bewitch the eyes of any beholder. Trees such as the holly tree, the tree of life, WakWak Tree, and vaghvagh tree are the trees that carry human-like fruits. In general, the narrations regarding WakWak Tree have two different aspects. Some of the narrations address the concept of the Island of WakWak, and regard the tree as part of the features relevant to the island, and some other narrations underline the tree itself. The artworks known “WAKs” were manifested in various ways in Persian art works concurrent with the arrival of the tribes from Central Asia into Persian territory, and in the 12th century AD and the Seljuk era. In addition, since the 14th century AD, the Waks gradually transformed into one of the fundamental aspects of Persian painting. The most important narrative present in Persian literature regarding WakWak Tree is “Alexander’s Conversation with the WakWak Tree” which is also reflected in *Shahnameh Ferdowsi*. Illustrated *Shahnameh Demot* is one of the most valuable illustration artworks created in the Second Tabriz School by Persian artists under the rule of Mongul Ilkhanid. Given the fact that manuscript illumination and illustration was highly appreciated and sponsored by the kings of the time, the illustrations portrayed in the book are the climax of the development of Persian illustration and miniature in the Ilkhanid era. The results obtained from the current research show that this precious Persian traditional illustration pays much attention and care in depicting human emotions in illustration, and can be considered a completely new breakthrough. The illustration represents

Alexander's arrival to the end of the world where WakWak Tree is depicted carrying heads of women, men, and animals. The composition style in the illustration and the arrangement of its visual elements including shape, color, and texture are influenced by the underlying subject matter. The illustration's composition evokes stability and equilibrium, and the illustrator has sought to refer to the intended theme, using different associations and evocations. In the form of myth and symbolism, the illustrator presents a portrayal of the artistic ambience, underscoring the period alongside the themes which underline the epic and mystical subjects hidden in Shahnameh. In general, the illustration of WakWak Tree is loyal to two realms. Firstly, the book whose text is portrayed and illustrated by the illustration; Secondly, WakWak Tree, which is portrayed using symbolic animal- and human-like images, and its painting style is a coalescence of the Seljuk and Ilkhanid era, with the preservation of the identity of the illustration traditions dating back to that era and location.

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