

The Analysis of Religious and Political Iconology of the Miniature Depiction of Mi'raj from Nizami's *Khamasa*, Commissioned by Shah Tahmasp

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Introduction

Mi'raj is recognized as a significant theme within Islamic culture and has been depicted repeatedly by various miniaturists. This study concentrates on the esteemed illustration of Mohammad's Mi'raj based on Nizami's *Khamasa*, commissioned by Shah Tahmasp, attributed to Tabriz School during the Safavid period, and created by Sultan Mohammed, a notable miniaturist associated with the Safavid court. This miniature operates as a narrative text that conveys meaningful messages to its viewers. Rather than merely reflecting visual aspects of reality, the miniaturist approaches their work from an elevated perspective to generate deeper meanings. Essentially, before being rendered visually by the miniaturist, a miniature is shaped by his beliefs and convictions, resulting in a unique expression characterized by specific colors and symbols. The individual and societal perspectives of the miniaturist significantly influence their mode of expression.

Research Method

Iconology serves to reconstruct an entire program or context and includes multiple texts situated within an environment encompassing artistic and cultural contexts (Adams, 2008: 51). Regardless of how superficial or insignificant an image may appear, it inherently contains meanings that are subject to interpretation (Durand, 1992: 19-20). This study examines the miniature in question through an iconological method applied in three distinct stages. The first stage involves a descriptive pre-iconographic analysis that addresses primary meanings, tangible forms, visual details, and a descriptive critique of the miniatures. The second stage focuses on iconographic analysis aimed at uncovering secondary or conventional meanings by aligning the literary text with the corresponding miniatures. Finally, in the iconological stage accompanied by interpretative efforts the themes, concepts, and symbols represented in the miniature are thoroughly analyzed.

Research Findings

Nizami's *The Khamasa*, commissioned by Shah Tahmasp and compiled within the Tabriz school, is cataloged under number "or.2265" at the British Library. This manuscript comprises 808 pages made from small royal-sized paper and encompasses all five poetic works by Nizami. The Tabriz miniaturist school during the Safavid era is influenced by three artistic traditions: the Turkmen school in Tabriz, the Herat school (associated with Turkmen commerce in Shiraz), and lesser-known schools from Samarkand across the Seyhun River (Robinson, 2011: 50). A century after this

miniature was created by Sultan Mohammed, it underwent restoration by Mohammad Zaman during the reign of Suleiman I in Persia; this restoration reveals deeper meanings inherent within the miniature (Sims, 2002: 82). Sultan Mohammed employed minimal gilding in this artwork; his restrained decoration allowed ample space for depicting gestures and movements. Conversely, swirling white clouds and abundant wild golden flames serve as striking decorative elements within the composition. The miniaturist incorporated visual elements absent from the literary text itself, namely a crown (attributed to Mohammad Zaman), a fiery cup, fruits, clouds, and golden vessels. The analysis of the interplay between the literary text and Mohammad's *Mi'raj* miniature indicates that both Sultan Mohammed and the restorer, Mohammad Zaman, were not entirely faithful to Nizami's original text; they frequently omitted descriptions concerning the Prophet's presence within divine realms and related events while neglecting certain themes as well as animate and inanimate elements. It can be concluded that non-living themes and elements were integrated into the miniature to fulfill specific objectives set by the miniaturist. Notably, an angel is depicted offering a ring to Mohammad the Prophet within this miniature; this ring, in a critic's view, may symbolize succession or Imamate. The ring held by the angel serves as one of the several visual and thematic symbols associated with Shia' culture. Additionally, depicting a crown in an angel's hands as it approaches Mohammad who gazes back at viewers with a subtly ironic smile underscores both royal sanctity and divine favor bestowed upon him through this crown. Furthermore, this portrayal reflects Mohammad Zaman's critical perspective on the governance of Suleiman I; he regarded Suleiman as unworthy of royal authority while bestowing it instead upon a prophet characterized by true meritocracy, justice, and piety. Thus, within this miniature context, the crown emerges as a symbol of rightful kingship.

Conclusion

The iconological analysis of *Mi'raj* miniature depicting Mohammad the Prophet indicates that it does not adhere strictly to Nizami's literary text; instead, it significantly omits various descriptions related to the Prophet's presence in the celestial realm and associated events. It can be concluded that Sultan Mohammed concentrated on spiritual themes, whereas Mohammad Zaman articulated a critical viewpoint regarding prevailing social, political, cultural, and religious conditions. A closer examination of Mohammad Zaman's restoration efforts, including his addition of an angel who gazed intently at viewers while presenting a crown to the Prophet, occurred during the rule of Suleiman I in Persia; a time characterized by social injustice, corruption, and courtly betrayal.

This context is reflected in Mohammad Zaman's work; among all the angels surrounding Mohammad, one specifically gazes knowingly at the audience with a smile. This portrayal suggests that Mohammad Zaman may have represented himself holding a crown, an added inanimate element within the artwork. Notably, this angel is depicted in motion as it presents the crown to Mohammad. The implication is that the miniaturist consider Mohammad's character as the one who deserves kingship as well as taking refuge in, a suitable model for governance during the reign of Suleiman I. The results of this study demonstrate that this miniature emerges from spiritual and religious perspectives prevalent at its time of creation and is deeply rooted in Islamic wisdom traditions. Additionally, cultural influences and social customs from the Safavid period as well as prevalent visual elements within miniature art concerning clothing and character depictions have significantly shaped its creation. Sultan Mohammed was influenced by this mystical perspective when crafting his work; concurrently, Mohammad Zaman's restoration was informed by tumultuous political and social circumstances. Ultimately, this miniature reflects a confluence of its creator's political, social, spiritual, and religious viewpoints that stem from both societal conditions and philosophical beliefs characteristic of that era.

Keywords: religion, politics, Mi'raj of Muhammad the Prophet, Mohammad Zaman, sultan Mohammed, *Khamsa* of Shah Tahmasp, iconology.